

## **Swanson, John C. 2011. "About a Village" (Documentary Feature). 68 minutes.**

**Reviewed by Steven Jobbitt, Lakehead University**

The collective fate of ethnic Germans, or *Volksdeutsche*, in Eastern and Central Europe after World War II has long been a difficult and in some circles even taboo subject to broach. Often overlooked entirely in general texts about the war and its aftermath, the experiences of millions of people and their German-speaking communities have long been silenced and even conveniently forgotten by history. Given the nature of Nazi violence in this region, and the fact that a significant number of ethnic Germans openly embraced Hitler's vision of an expanded German empire in the east, it is perhaps no surprise that ethnic Germans in general—whether they supported the Nazis or not—were targeted for retribution, and that as many as twelve million of them (or more) fled or were expelled from their homes in the final stages of the war and during the chaotic and uncertain period that followed in its wake.

Resettled primarily in Germany and Austria, many of these forced migrants maintained enduring if complicated and often sentimental ties to their non-German "homelands." As historian and filmmaker John C. Swanson tells us in his documentary on a group of displaced ethnic Germans who were expelled from the village of Máriakéménd in Southern Hungary between 1944 and 1947, the question of "home," both as a physical location and perhaps more importantly as a defining feature of one's sense of self, is a question that has never faded, despite the fact that over seven decades have passed since these people were forced to leave. Documenting a trip in the mid 2000s of a busload of former Máriakéménders who have been making annual visits from Germany to their birth village in Hungary, Swanson provides us with a glimpse into the interconnected life histories and inner landscapes of a group of people who, despite the passage of time, have maintained an emotional connection to a place that still feels like home.

The story of Elsa Koch, who was born in 1935 and who left Máriakéménd at the age of nine, serves as the core narrative thread for Swanson's documentary. Like her companions (all of whom were children or adolescents at the end of the war), Elsa feels a deep connection to the village she was born in, not because her life in Germany had been difficult or unsatisfying, but because her birth village evokes generally happy memories, and served as an important emotional anchor for her life story, and thus also her identity. Recognizing the sentimental and even idealized elements of her own memories, Koch nevertheless feels a very real connection to Máriakéménd, stating that "the place where one's roots are has a magnetic pull... I feel at home there." When asked pointedly by Swanson where this nostalgia comes from, Koch admits that it is rooted in remembrances of "a sheltered childhood" and a "sense of protectedness and being cared for" that she had never felt since.



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Like her fellow travellers, Koch laments the fact that after 1944 she had to grow up quickly and that her transition to adulthood came early and violently. As she suggests, her expulsion from Máriakéménd coincided with the end of innocence, a transition marked not just by her physical relocation to a new country, but also by the fundamental disruption of her community and the intimate interpersonal relations that in large part constituted it. As Koch notes with an understandable melancholy: "our family was never the same again after Máriakéménd." The conviction that Máriakéménd is—or at least was—her "home" is clear. Mourning the memory of her beloved father alongside often exuberant remembrances of the village she had been born and partially grew up in, Koch invites the viewer into the world of her childhood, a world that, whether it was real or imagined, clearly remains central to her sense of self, and to her own understanding of her place in the world.

Swanson's delicate probing of the inner world of his subjects is a key strength of the film. As viewers, we are not only introduced to people who feel very strongly that they have "two homelands" (one in Hungary and one in Germany), but also are provided with intimate details about how these aging Máriakéménders remember and even "reconstruct" their former Hungarian home. Though memories of families and close friendships at school and in the community are central to the vignettes they relate, recollections of physical spaces, and especially their sensory experiences of them, are perhaps equally as important to the images that they reproduce, both individually and collectively. Indeed, the happy childhood memories of Máriakéménd are populated not only by people, but also by the sights, smells, and sounds of the village. One woman, for example, speaks of the smell of the school and her desire to "bottle it" for her brother, while Elsa reminisces about the forests surrounding the village, and the pleasant fragrance of the acacia trees. As imagined as Máriakéménd may on some level have been for these former residents, their memories nevertheless mingle with the "real" in vivid and deeply meaningful ways.

Though the story of Elsa and her ethnic German contemporaries is the central focus of the film, we are also introduced to some ethnic Hungarians who shared Máriakéménd with their Swabian [*Schwab*] neighbors until the end of the war, and also hear from a Hungarian man who, having been born in Slovakia, was himself expelled with his family and entire community from his home town and resettled in Máriakéménd after the expulsion of the Germans was completed. The intersection of these deeply personal and often painful stories is of particular value to viewers keen on examining this complex and ultimately tragic episode of history from the point of view of those whose lives were fundamentally transformed by it. What emerges from the overlapping stories of daily life in Máriakéménd is a picture of a once harmonious and very pleasant village that started coming apart at the seams only in 1938-1939 when the German national socialist *Volksbund* party was established and began organizing the German inhabitants. Running parallel with memories of the Holocaust and the ethnic divisions that very quickly came to define life in the village during the war and its aftermath is the unspoken but underlying feeling—or even conviction—that it didn't have to be this way, and that what transpired in Máriakéménd and throughout Europe more generally in the middle of the twentieth century was not just tragic, but fundamentally unjust. Like Elsa, who is left to ponder all that she had lost as a result of the war and her expulsion from Hungary, the viewer is left asking: "Why did this injustice have to happen?"

As a specialist of Central European history who is fluent in both German and Hungarian, Swanson is well-positioned to tell the story of Máriakéménd and its former ethnic German inhabitants, and he does so with admirable balance and with careful attention not only to the complex historical details of the war and its aftermath, but also to the lived experiences and ultimately also the emotional dispositions of his main subjects. The result is a critical but empathetic telling of the interconnected life histories of otherwise ordinary people who were children and adolescents during the war, and who found themselves quite literally caught in the crosshairs of history. Importantly, the film neither romanticizes nor condemns its subjects, but rather introduces the viewer to the inner world of a group of people for whom a once-tranquil village in Southern Hungary remains "home." By letting his subjects speak for themselves, Swanson purposely leaves a number of questions open for interpretation and discussion. For example, did the Máriakéménd of their memories really exist as they remember it, or is it primarily an idealized inner landscape animated by happy images of a childhood brought to an abrupt end in 1944? Moreover, is this image of "home" something that each of the former Máriakéménders sustains on his or her own, or is it somehow dependent on, and perhaps even (re)produced by, the collective memory of a group whose members have maintained close ties with each other since their resettlement in Germany in the late 1940s? And what happens when we put a human face on this chapter of history? How, in other words, does a profoundly human story like the one Swanson tells force us to rethink the history of expulsions and forced migration after the war, not just in Hungary, but in Central and Eastern Europe more generally.

It is a shame that a film like this is not yet in distribution, and that to date it has only been shown at film festivals and pre-arranged screenings (primarily in the United States). One can only hope that it will be available to educators and scholars soon. Swanson's film would be an excellent resource for teachers interested not only in the history of this region, but also in the history of migration and ethnic cleansing more generally, and in the history of borderlands and identity-formation in diaspora communities. It is a story worth telling, primarily because of the questions it raises, and because of the life histories and individual experiences it gives us access to.