

## Sonja Walder life of a Cossack lady



In the days when the Cossacks were to be handed over by the British to the Russians, many chose to take their own lives in the waters of the Drava. Because I was also sick at the time, I too was destined to die in the river's swollen floodwaters. Frau Antonia Hanser, a woman from Lienz whose husband was away on military service and who already had three children to care for, witnessed my intended death. A Cossack woman begged her to take me and save me from this act of despair.

Frau Hanser took me into her home, cured my dysentery, and nursed me back to health. As I was completely lice-ridden and neglected, my hair had to be cut very short. After three months at Schlossgasse No. 1, she had to find a foster family for me—she hardly had enough to feed her own children. It was difficult to find anyone willing to take in a small, sick child.

Frau Hanser went shopping one day at the “Lamprecht” shop in the Schweizer- or Rosengasse, where Frau Rosina Walder, an employee at the Photo Egger studio, happened to be. The two women began talking, and Frau Hanser told her my story.

At the same time, Johann Köck, known as “Rieper” of Kartitsch, was a prisoner of war in Yugoslavia. He wrote to his wife Maria, asking her to do a good deed so that he might return home safely. Maria Köck learned from her sister Rosina in Lienz about what was happening to the Cossacks—and also about me. She wrote to her husband that she wanted to take me in, if he agreed. He did, and he returned home unharmed in November 1947.

Before Frau Rosina Walder brought me to Kartitsch by bicycle, I had been baptized Catholic with the name Sonja-Antonia. A doctor estimated my age by examining my teeth and set my date of birth as 3 June 1943.

Frau Hanser later spoke of another event: shortly after she had saved me, she noticed a note attached to the church door that read, “I would like to see my child once more!” After inquiring at the parish office, she was taken to a barrack in the Peggetz, where two Cossack women were staying. They recognized me immediately, and the younger woman was probably my mother. But we could not exchange any information because of the language barrier. It seems the name Sonja was spoken, but the encounter must have been deeply painful—surely a mother’s final farewell to her child.

In Kartitsch I gained two sisters, Marianna and Agnes. Before long, however, my new foster mother, Maria Köck, became seriously ill. Because of a heart condition she could no longer manage the hard work on the farm, and she went to the vicarage in Tristach to be cared for by her uncle, who was a priest. Many farmhands and maidservants worked on our farm during that time, and we children suffered from the absence of our mother and foster mother. After a brief improvement she returned to Kartitsch, and we nursed her until her death in 1964. Life was hard for us children; the work on the farm was heavy, and our mother was gravely ill.

Growing up, I often experienced that people in Kartitsch could not distinguish between Cossacks and Russians. Many men from the village had died in Russia, and so I frequently became the target of hostility. For many years I suffered from terrible nightmares.

In 1965 my foster father married a woman twenty-five years his junior, and all of us from his first marriage left home. In October 1966 I married my neighbor, Christian Walder, a carpenter and part-time farmer. We have three sons: Christian (born 1967), Stefan (1969), and Thomas (1971).