

# GOTTSCHER HOMELAND

## THE LOST CULTURAL HERITAGE

A film by Hermann Leustik and Uros Zavodnik

### IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS JUST AN IDEA

Hermann Leustik, the producer of the film, worked as a media expert at the University of Klagenfurt in Austria for 45 years. Since 1972, he worked in the institute's own video studio on a large number of film productions and, as a lecturer at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies, realised many film projects with students. For some years now, he has been working on the idea of making his own film.

He is of Gottscheer descent and wanted to make a film about his parents' homeland, the German language island "Gottschee". This language island, which has existed for over 600 years and was first populated around 1300, lies 60 km south of Slovenia's capital Ljubljana, directly on the Croatian border.

### THE BEGINNING OF GOTTSCHER CULTURE

At the beginning of the settlement, the area with a size of 850 km<sup>2</sup> was an empty primeval forest. The Counts of Ortenburg, an aristocratic dynasty from Upper Carinthia in Austria, had been granted this area as a fiefdom from the Patriarch of Aquileia (Italy). They settled inhabitants from Upper Carinthia and East Tyrol in this area who cleared and cultivated the barren land, a "karst" area, and built more than 150 villages there. Over the centuries, these settlers had to endure many strokes of fate, such as Turkish invasions, the plague, and the French wars. In order to make life in this area possible in the long term, Emperor Frederick III had issued the so-called "Hausierpatent" in 1492. This patent allowed the Gottscheer to trade their own produce and southern fruits door-to-door throughout the Habsburg Empire. Around 1870, a strong wave of emigration to America set in, as the barren country was no longer able to feed the rapidly growing population. As early as 1900,



the first Gottscheer clubs were founded in the United States, and by 1920, there were already more Gottscheer living in the USA than in Gottschee itself.

With the end of the First World War and the associated redistribution of Europe, hard times began for the Gottscheer in the new Slavic SHS state of Yugoslavia. The German language was banned, all German-speaking civil servants were dismissed, German schools were closed, German associations were dissolved, and their assets confiscated, among other things.

The Second World War eventually meant the end of the Gottscheer Lands. On the basis of a contract between Hitler and Mussolini, all Gottscheer (approx. 14,000 persons) were relocated to Lower Styria, 70 km east of Gottschee, in the winter of 1941/1942. At the end of the war, the Gottscheer were expelled from there. They fled to Austria, from where most of them emigrated to North America and to other continents from 1949 onwards. Today, most of the villages in the former Gottschee are either no longer there or lie in ruins. There is almost nothing there that to remind one of the former German inhabitants.

### A SPECIAL FEATURE OF THE GOTTSCHER IS THEIR LANGUAGE

A unique feature of the Gottscheer is their language. They preserved their "Gottscheabarischn", an Old High German language as it was spoken in other parts of Central Europe in the 16th century. Unfortunately, only a few Gottscheer speak this language today, since almost all of them who were born in the old homeland are already deceased. Most of their children did not speak Gottscheer with their parents and therefore did not learn the language. In the near future, it will only be available in digitally preserved form.

### PREPARATIONS FOR PRODUCTION

In the summer of 2013, Hermann Leustik made the critical decision to start producing the film. Professional production should take place at the University of Klagenfurt and students should be given the opportunity to accompany the production. The first task was to put together a production team.

Uros Zavodnik, the director of this film, is a former student of the institute who lives in Slovenia and has been working very successfully in the film industry since his graduation. The collaboration with Uros and his unique way of composing films has made the film what it is today.

It was clear from the beginning that the film should be made in the Gottscheer language and it was seen as a unique opportunity, even as a mission, to preserve the Gottscheer language in a film. As there has never been a film in the Gottscheer language before, this film was supposed to be the first and it will probably also be the last one.

For this, however, it was still necessary to find a person who would lead through the film in the Gottscheer language and to tell the story. The producer did not have to search for long, as Frank Mausser, the main protagonist, who was born in the village of Altlag in Gottschee before the relocation in 1938, quickly accepted. Frank Mausser speaks fluent Gottscheerisch, is a special connoisseur of the Gottscheer Land and carries the Gottschee homeland in his heart. This also gives a special touch to the film.





**RUINS SHAPE THE FILM**

The film begins on the ruins of Ortenburg Castle, from where the Gottscheer originate. The “grandfather”, Frank Mausser, tells Pia Maria Lipnik, his “granddaughter”, the story of Gottschee. The story begins with the first settlement, traces its gradual development, and tells of the later life in the beloved homeland. It is particularly difficult for him to tell her that in the end everything had turned to ruins again. Today, trees and bushes grow from these ruins, with much of the landscape already completely overgrown.

But he also tells his granddaughter what had happened to him after his escape and expulsion and what has remained of the Gottscheer people and their culture. She learns about the many Gottscheer clubs all over the world today, how they live and how they try to maintain and preserve the Gottscheer culture. In several scenes, for example when he stands in front of the tombstone of his grandparents in the cemetery of Altlag, he is close to tears when he tells her about his family. He tells her of his frequent visits to his home town and of his heavy heart every time he had to leave again.

**VALUABLE ARCHIVAL MATERIAL DELAYED COMPLETION**

Hermann Leustik, the producer, had succeeded in finding new material about the old homeland of Gottschee. In order to complete the history of the Gottscheer, these sources had to be included in the film. Among them were old 16mm film rolls. In 1936, the Gottscheer Association in Cleveland, USA, had decided to send the priest Josef Trapp to Europe for filming in Gotschee, so that the next generation in the USA could be shown what it looked like in Gottschee, the home of their ancestors. In June 1936, the priest travelled to almost 40 Gottscheer villages and filmed the country and its people. Herbert Fink, one of the protagonists, can be seen in the historic 16mm film in Neulag near the bowling alley, the same place where he talks about his birthplace in the film. Unfortunately, he passed away 14 days after the film premiere at the age of 85.



**NO BUDGET FOR RECORDING OVERSEAS**

Everybody was aware that a film about Gottschee without the involvement of the Gottscheer people in the USA would be incomplete. But there was no budget to fly overseas with a camera crew. By chance, Florian Semmler, the cameraman and editor of the film, was commissioned for a weekend in New York for another project. It was by coincidence that the Gottscheer Krankenunterstützungsverein, the oldest Gottscheer association in America, held its farmers ball at the Gottscheer Hall that same weekend. Florian Semmler visited it, filmed and interviewed participants and came home with excellent video material.

**THE FINAL**

In spring 2015, the film’s post-production was almost complete. Translations from several languages into the Gottscheer language were planned and the sound had to be synchronized in many places, as the film was to be produced entirely in the Gottscheer language.

At the end, the subtitles of the film were created, as the Gottscheer language is not well understood by everyone in the German-speaking world, not to mention foreign language audiences. For this reason, versions of the film were created with German, English, and Slovenian subtitles.

On 19 June 2015, the film team was truly rewarded for their extensive and tedious work. It had sent out invitations to the film’s premiere at the Wulfenia cinema in Klagenfurt. Half an hour before the premiere, all 430 seats were taken and most of the standing room was filled. More than 600 people were able to witness the premiere, with more than 100 people having to be turned away at the door due to lack of space.

The film team is delighted about this success.