

Review: “Children’s Long Journey”

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Mai Maddisson, comp., Priit Vesilind, ed. *When the Noise Had Ended: Geislingen’s DP Children Remember*. Woodsville, NH: Lakeshore Press, 2009. 245 pp. ISBN: 978-1-61539-531-6.

Two former Geislingen residents and childhood friends, the Estonian-born Australian medical doctor, Mai Maddisson, and the Estonian-born American writer and editor, Priit Vesilind, joined efforts to find out how their four-year childhood experiences in the Geislingen Displaced Persons’ camp influenced their lives. This was the beginning of a project which ended with the publication of this book, a compilation of thirty-three accounts of former Estonian child residents of the Displaced Persons camp in Geislingen, southwestern Germany. The personal stories of this book are supplemented by numerous photos: of the participants in the project both as children and as adults, of school events, of houses in Geislingen, and of the natural setting of the camp. These were donated to Mai Maddisson by the participants in the project and they complement well the stories of the Estonian camp children.

The DP camp in Geislingen sheltered thousands of Estonians and their children in the period 1945-1950. These unfortunate Estonians had to witness the Second World War and experience the loss of family members or the conscription of their loved ones into the German and Soviet Armies. The return of Estonia’s Soviet occupiers after the war prompted over 5,000 Estonian adults and their (roughly) 1,000 children to seek refuge in Geislingen. When the DP camp in Geislingen was closed in 1950, they had to move once again to find new lives in Sweden, England, the United States, Canada, and Australia. This book, however, does not purport to trace the complete history of the Geislingen camp; for instance, Maddisson did not interview former adult residents. She was more interested in the memories of the children who had to cope with the post-war reality and to build up their own identities while trying to enjoy their childhood in the DP camp. Maddisson was fascinated with these diverse child experiences and noted that “Each child’s journey was different. Each remembered it in a different way” (9).

One point this collection highlights is that the age of the children was an important factor in shaping their quite different experiences and memories of Geislingen. Some children reached the camp in their early or late teenage years and they had very vivid memories of the camp and its surroundings. These older children later recalled beautiful and detailed memories of their formative years in Geislingen. Jaan Päärson has never forgotten the good friendships, birthday

parties, or games at the local castle (88). Mall Timusk Blumfeld enjoyed reading his books, especially Karl May's *Winnetou*, borrowed from the nearby library (62). Ülle Sinka Ruben has unforgettable memories of her first pet, the sweet rabbit, Kapten (90), whereas Jaan Tabur fell in love for the first time in the camp (47). Mirjam Lind Lagus remembers the time in the camp "with fondness and deep gratitude towards all those who worked to provide us children with a normal life" (115). Some children, however, were much younger during their stay in the camp, and this shaped their memories in distinct ways. Mari-Liis Virkus (52) and Peep Aarne Vesilind (74) were six years old when they reached Geislingen. Ants Toi was a mere three years old (116) and Ell Tabur was less than two years old when she came to Geislingen (142). Tiiu Kera was born near Stuttgart along the way to the camp (160) and Marju Rink Abel was born in Geislingen in 1948 (182). These individuals now reflect more on the memories of their parents and siblings about the camp than on direct memories of their own.

In her conclusion to the collection, Maddisson notes the impact of these age differences on later memories and perceptions and classifies the Geislingen children into four groups: children born well before the Second World War who had some basis of comparison between good times of peace and bad times of war; children who started their lives during the war and, thus, had no concept of life in peace; children born in Geislingen or other DP camps who never witnessed the war or life without deprivation; and, lastly, children born in the host countries after their parents left the DP camps. These last three groups of children never had the same traumas and war experience as their parents and older siblings. Maddisson notes: "They had to make sense of something that to them could only be a fantasy" (213).

As some of the memories of those who were older children at the time suggest, the Geislingen camp is now looked on as a very positive experience for the DP children from Estonia. In their eyes, the camp put an end to wartime suffering, provided the setting for some of the best years of their childhood, and became a symbol of their hope for a better life in freedom. Prior to arriving at the DP camp refuge, many of the children experienced shocking events, such as witnessing death, war, and terrifying cruelty. As Jüri Linask observes in his recollection, "For such experiences children today receive therapeutic counseling" (36). He himself shares how he and his family walked 150 kilometers across Soviet-occupied Eastern Germany to reach freedom in Geislingen (39).

It is also interesting to note that these Estonian children kept very positive perceptions of the Germans even sixty years after the war. After the brutal treatment of Estonians by the Russians, the Germans were perceived as liberators in 1941. Helle Adams Kask exemplifies this Estonian attitude to the German occupation, noting that "The Germans were decent to us. They treated us like human beings, not like the Russians had" (18). One thing for which the

Geislingen children were apparently grateful was education. Despite the lack of school supplies and textbooks, as early as 1945 the DP camp pupils could attend a musical school or an Estonian technical college in the camp where their curriculum included Latin and Greek (32). In fact, Maddisson concludes, “Some found Canadian, Australian or American schools simple by comparison” (50). At least in part, the education in Geislingen helped many of these children to build up successful careers in their adopted homelands. A few examples demonstrate how much these DP children contributed to their countries. Jüri Linask became a researcher in biochemistry (41), Jaan Tabur became a U.S. aeronautical engineer (47), Kersti Totsas Linask became a professor in Cellular and Molecular Developmental Biology at the University of South Florida (157), while Imre Lipping received a Ph.D. from the University of Maryland and worked for more than twenty years in the U.S. Foreign Service (121). Numerous other former refugee children became teachers, U.S. state tax auditors, political scientists, graphic designers, musicians, artists, and librarians.

While the question of national identity and assimilation is not central or even mentioned in this book, it is easy for the reader to trace the relative attachment to Estonia of each participant in the book. Imre Lipping moved back to Estonia after his retirement from the U.S. Foreign Service (121), but most other Estonian refugees preferred to stay and assimilate into the culture of their new homelands. Now living in the United States, Mall Timusk states his choice explicitly, explaining that he visited Estonia numerous times and he enjoyed the western direction of the country despite what he considered to be an annoying Russian presence. And yet, he said, in the end, “I know my home is here. I am a New Yorker” (65).

The only minor flaw of the book, which could have been avoided, is that there are a number of phrases, song titles, and other words quoted directly in Estonian or German with no translation in English. However, the authors made an effort to translate at least some of the Estonian words into English, such as “Mudilased” - an Estonian word for little ones (9).

For those interested in the subject of oral history and memory, this book demonstrates once again the dangers of using oral history in isolation, due to the fallibility of human memory. Oral accounts, however, could give meaning to historical events and show how they shaped the personal life of each informant. The book also indicates an issue that each oral historian faces: how to determine who was a witness of a particular event and more importantly, who had first-hand experience, especially when one deals with children’s memories. Some of these children were in their late teens, yet others were not even born when their siblings left the DP camp and, thus, their experiences were shaped by their interpretation of their peers’ stories and memories.

Ultimately, this compilation of memories represents a number of distinct journeys taken by the Geislingen children. One was a spatial journey, which took them from their native Estonia to a German DP camp and later on as far away as Australia, the United States, and Canada. Another was an intellectual and developmental journey which had lasting impact on their lives. Finally, the book is also witness to a journey back in time, a journey which now sees thirty-three individuals return sixty years later to their bittersweet childhood memories in the Geislingen DP camp.