

When the Noise Had Ended: **Geislingen's DP Children Remember**

Compiled by Mai Maddisson

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Summary: The youngest victims of WWII search their memories to tell how they and their families escaped the Red Army to find refuge in a displaced persons' camp in post-war Germany – more than 60 years ago. Sometimes horrifying, often unflinchingly honest, their stories and intimate photographs offer glimpses of a brave but artificial world – through the eyes of the very small.

Surviving the end of World War II

Europe in the spring of 1945 was awash with more than seven million refugees. Many would go home again, but for those who had fled from newly occupied countries bordering the Soviet Union – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania among them – war's end meant exile from their homelands. To return would mean banishment to Siberia, even execution at Soviet hands.

Their bitter option was to remain in post-war Germany, which was divided into four "Occupation Zones" controlled by the Allies – Great Britain, France, the USSR, and the United States – until they could find countries willing to accept them. They were housed in temporary camps, and the largest camp of Estonians was established by the U.S. Army and UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency) in the American Zone, in a mid-sized town in the scenic Württemberg region of southwest Germany, Geislingen an der Steige.

Geislingen was the haven where the refugees could begin to heal from the terror of war. Many were burnt out, their nerves battered by their journeys.

Jüri Linask, a bio-chemist who now lives in Florida, is one of 33 former refugees who tells his story in "When the Noise Had Ended." Using the notes in his mother's diary, he describes her remarkable courage as she simply walked hundreds of kilometers through the war zone with four small sons while pushing a double pram for the baby and their belongings. His father had been stranded in Soviet-controlled Estonia when he missed the last boat from Tallinn. Jüri was five years old:

"We went with determination; I imagine also fear, along the crowded highway paralleling the tracks, along with Russian army caravans of American-made trucks, with released war prisoners... through Oberleutendorf, through Viesa to Brüix. Here we encountered horrors of revenge. Germans were being executed in the graveyard we passed. Ushered onto side streets, I

vividly recall platform wagons piled with bodies, dripping blood. I don't remember the German soldiers pulling them, nor them being pelted with stones and beaten with sticks. Soon we were advised to leave quickly and we did, as fast as possible with the elderly and small children.... Our direction now was over the Hertzgebirge Mountains on smaller roads, to distance us from Russian army caravans on the main roads. The mountain roads rose steeply, only to descend again."

The Linasks arrived in Geislingen in the summer of 1946, after nearly two years of jarring dislocations, separation, and bouts of disease.

More than 5,000 other Estonian exiles, including 1000 small children, passed through the Geislingen camp in five years, from 1945-1950. Many families had lost their men to the depredations of war; conscripted into the German or Soviet armies, they were either maimed or missing. Children of struggling families were tightly held by parents desperate to shield them from the austere conditions and realities around them. And yet, one of the realities was that the war was over; the noise had ended.

The Soviets sent "repatriation" officers to the Estonian and other Baltic refugee camps to recruit people back to the USSR; few would go.

Those who had managed to escape, after all, were those who had the will and the resources. They were determined to keep the Estonian spirit alive in exile. They quickly transformed Geislingen into a virtual Estonian village, organizing choirs, theater, sports, schools, church, crafts, and Scouts. The camp was blessed with doctors, teachers, actors, musicians, journalists, and politicians – as well as machinists, electricians, mechanics, foresters, and policemen, and a full nine Lutheran ministers.

Families often lived in single rooms in the houses of Germans who had been forcibly removed by the U.S. Army. Six or seven families shared bathrooms and kitchens. They survived on donations from UNRRA, the Red Cross, and CARE. Some fathers had jobs at the nearby U.S. Army post. Others worked in the forest cutting trees, or learned new vocations such as building and leather crafting.

This is the story of Geislingen's toddlers and grade-schoolers, who were intensively schooled in the values and culture of Estonia, even while their parents were camped in a hostile German town. Some were obsessively sheltered with a family's love, yet most were constantly exposed to the anxieties of their parents. Many were emotionally damaged by their untenable circumstances, others seemed unaffected.

When the Geislingen Estonians emigrated around the world, few of them kept in close contact, and the decades pulled them even further apart. Yet many of them, now in their 60s and 70s, remain nostalgic for Geislingen; for many of the "Mudilased," the little ones, this was the seat of their first and dearest childhood memories.

"I do not remember being hungry or unhappy in Geislingen," wrote Anne Jõulu, who now lives in Toronto, "and those days remain with me as the most enjoyable and happiest in my life."

The fact that Geislingen life wasn't always onerous gives these stories a different, yet no less valid face. "This book," says Dr. Martin Parsons, Director of the Research Centre for Evacuee and War Child Studies at the University of Reading, England, "makes a significant contribution to an area of war-child studies which is too often overlooked... that of the post-war displaced person."

How valid are the memories of children?

Some three years ago an Estonian-Australian family physician named Mai Maddisson was moved to more closely examine her childhood years in Geislingen camp. Her story is among the most gripping, one of recurring abuse as her mother pretended to the world around her that all was well, while grappling with her own shattered nerves. And yet, Mai tells of how her formative years in Geislingen were to give a meaning to her life for the rest of time.

Intrigued with the history and dynamics of this refugee population, she decided to try to re-connect with some of the children of Geislingen. After journeys to North America and Europe in 2003 and 2005 the concept blossomed into the possibility of a reunion of "Micro-Geislingenians" in Germany as well as a book of memoirs whose cumulative narrative might help explain or resolve bits and pieces of the exiled children's lives. To gauge interest in these projects, and gain the trust of those who might be wary or possibly hostile, Mai organized an on-going computer discussion group that culminated in a reunion in Germany. In September, 2008, 26 former camp children met for a long, emotional weekend in Geislingen. The book followed.

Mai sought out an old Geislingen playmate, Estonian-American Priit Vesilind, a retired writer and editor at *National Geographic* and author of other books on the Estonian experience. Other researchers and historians pitched in. Soon they had gathered 33 childhood memoirs, and more than 400 old photographs of Geislingen life.

Serious questions emerged as the material came together. Are the incomplete memories of children of real historical value? Yes, says Maddisson. They are indicators of mood, priority, and adjustment, particularly if left unedited. The answers to some questions about early personality formation, she emphasizes, are found in nuance, way of expression, word choice, and often by what is left out of a story. Thus the words and phrases in "When the Noise Had Ended" ring with authenticity.

Most of the Estonian children of Geislingen eventually emigrated from Germany and the camp was closed in 1950. Enriched by a large dose of Estonian culture, yet conscious of the sadness of war and the dislocation of their families, they grew up with the will to succeed in nations such as Australia, England, Canada, Sweden, and the United States. Many earned doctorates and other advanced degrees. Others, trained in construction and mechanics, became successful entrepreneurs. Some of the most successful and ardent of the émigré advocates for Estonian national freedom in the early 1990s were former Geislingen kids.

Among those contributing their stories are Tiiu Kera, retired major general in the U.S. Army, Imre Lipping, career American diplomat, Marju Rink Abel, head of the Estonian American National Council, designer Tiit Telmet, astronomer Valdar Oinas,

Toronto physician Ants Toi, as well as engineers, college professors, artists, an Australian cattle rancher, and a manufacturer of darts.

“When the Noise Had Ended” will be released in Münster, Germany, during the 2009 ESTO on June 26-30, as well as on July 7 in Tartu, Estonia, at a conference on the Baltic Diaspora. The book is published by Lakeshore Press of Woodsville, New Hampshire, and may be purchased from its website: lakeshorepressbooks.com.