




Maija Krūmiņa

[Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia]

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5008-9221>

The Memories of Displaced Children: Flight Experience in the Life Stories of Exiled Latvians

[Pamięć wysiedlonych dzieci: doświadczenie ucieczki w opowieściach o życiu ewakuowanych Łotyszów]

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Abstract

This article explores how Latvian children who were displaced during the Second World War came across their displacement and how they compose the narratives of this childhood experience. Their life story interviews have been preserved in the Latvian National Oral History Archive. Recorded testimonies convey the migration experience in an intense way by vividly depicting the psychological, emotional, and material circumstances that children faced and by revealing common themes relevant to them at the time of the displacement.

Abstrakt

Artykuł ukazuje, w jaki sposób łotewskie dzieci, przesiedlone w czasie II wojny światowej, doświadczyły wyjazdu i życia na obczyźnie, oraz to, w jaki sposób tworzą one narracje o tym doświadczeniu z dzieciństwa. Ich historie życia zarejestrowane zostały w wywiadach biograficznych, zarchiwizowanych w łotewskim Narodowym Archiwum Historii Mówionej. W świadectwach tych intensywnie wybijają się doświadczenie migracji, a także jej psychologiczne, emocjonalne i materialne okoliczności. Wywiady wskazują także na wspólne tematy, które były istotne dla tych osób w czasie wysiedlenia i pobytu poza krajem pochodzenia.

Keywords

life stories, memory, displaced children, childhood experience, Latvia, Second World War

Słowa kluczowe

historie życia, pamięć, przesiedlone dzieci, doświadczenia z dzieciństwa, Łotwa, II wojna światowa



Researchers of forced and voluntary migration frequently explore the ways in which the various markers of social difference such as gender and ethnicity interact with experiences of migration and mobility. However, until recently the voices of children in these studies were rarely heard, as they were usually seen in the context of the experiences of migrant families, rather than as active subjects *per se*.¹ Likewise, in studies that analyse people's abilities to cope with hardships and adversities during war, evacuation, and exodus, children are often positioned as in need of control and care or, conversely, as absent, and their voices and (embodied) experience has rarely been studied or taken seriously.²

Since the 1980s, listening to the 'voices of children' has not only become 'a powerful and pervasive mantra for activists and policy makers'³ but also the core interest for researchers of the so-called new social studies of childhood which is characterised as an interdisciplinary movement emerging simultaneously from sociology, social anthropology, developmental psychology, social geography, education, and social work and which presumes, among others, that children are autonomous subjects rather than members (or even possessions) of their family.⁴ The beginning of this movement is connected to the British and American anthropological tradition of positioning children as worthy of study in their own right, which started in the early 20th century. In response, in the 1970s European scholars representing various disciplines also advocated for the exploration of the voices of children as social actors, which led to the development of childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field aiming to position children as the subjects rather than the objects of research.⁵ The new social studies of childhood have an explicit interest in issues of structure versus agency,⁶ exploring the ways in which youthful lives are enabled and constrained in different contexts by doing participatory research with children. For researchers interested in the present, this implies children's active participation in any research that concerns them;

- 1 P.E. Hopkins, M. Hill, *Pre-Flight Experiences and Migration Stories: The Accounts of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children*, "Children's Geographies," vol. 6 (3/2008), p. 258.
- 2 M. Paksuniemi, K. Määttä, S. Uusiautti, *Childhood in the Shadow of War: Filled with Work and Play*, "Children's Geographies," vol. 13 (1/2015), p. 123.
- 3 A. James, *Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials*, "American Anthropologist," vol. 109 (2/2007), p. 262.
- 4 M. Freeman, S. Mathison, *Researching Children's Experiences*, New York-London 2009, p. 7.
- 5 D. Facca, B. Gladstone, G. Teachman, *Working the Limits of 'Giving Voice' to Children: A Critical Conceptual Review*, "International Journal of Qualitative Methods," vol. 19 (2020), p. 2.
- 6 Structure is the influence exerted by social beliefs and practices, while agency is the individual's ability to make their own choices and act independently.

for those interested in the past, meanwhile, this means looking at new sources (as opposed to documentary sources written by adults) such as photographs, objects, spaces, oral histories, memoirs, letters, etc.⁷

Within this context, historical researchers have only recently started to discover the specific ways in which children have experienced war and displacement;⁸ however, as noted by Anna Wylegała, most often this research has been focused on Jewish children.⁹ Important contributions in this field include the work of Susan R. Suleiman, who has suggested the term '1,5 generation' (child survivors of the Holocaust) as opposed to the first (Holocaust survivors) and the second, which consists of children who were born afterwards. As defined by Suleiman, the '1,5 generation' is characterised by their presence during the events but being too young to understand what was happening to them. Hence, their shared experience was premature bewilderment and helplessness, often accompanied by premature aging, as many members of this generation had to act like adults while still being children.¹⁰

A significant contribution to the field of children's experience during displacement is a collective monograph *Displaced Children in Russia and Eastern Europe, 1915–1953: Ideologies, Identities, Experiences* (Brill 2017) which address this issue as both state practice and social experience and examines it in relation to questions of ideology, spatiality, mobility, identity, and selfhood. In their research, most of the contributors to this book have attended closely to the words and voices of the displaced children themselves in order to reconstruct how these children viewed and understood their experience. Part of them also have engaged 'with the words and voices of adults who endured displacement as children and who, in their memoirs or interviews, offer unique insights not only into the subjective experience and longer-term impact of violent upheaval but also into the resiliency and

7 K. Moruzi, N. Musgrove, C. Pascoe Leahy, *Children's Voices from the Past: New Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Cham 2019, pp. 3–8.

8 There are various definitions of displacement, but most commonly this term refers to instances in which people have no choice but to move, either temporarily or permanently, within or across borders. As such, it is interchangeable with forced migration; i.e., 'a migratory movement which, although the drivers can be diverse, involves force, compulsion, or coercion'; International Organisation for Migration 2019, *Glossary on Migration*, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf (accessed: 18.10.2021).

9 A. Wylegała, *Child Migrants and Deportees from Poland and Ukraine After the Second World War: Experience and Memory*, "European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire," vol. 22 (2/2015), p. 292.

10 S.R. Suleiman, *The 1.5 Generation: Thinking About Child Survivors and the Holocaust*, "American Imago," vol. 59 (3/2002), p. 277.

ingenuity of humans in the midst and aftermath of the most terrible and tragic circumstances.¹¹

In a similar vein, in her research Anna Wylegała has analysed non-Jewish (Polish and Ukrainian) children's memories of post-Second World War deportations and how this childhood experience is reconstructed today in the biographical narratives of adults. Her insightful analysis shows that the experience of deportation or migration generally carries a different meaning for a child than for an adult and that 'the voices of terrified children still echo in the narratives of today's adult interviewees, speaking about their post-war experience.'¹²

Of course, the works mentioned here are not the only ones dealing with the issues of child displacement and the memories of these children; however, they testify to the fact that the perspectives of displaced children have only recently come to the attention of historical researchers and that the analysis of children's memories of displacement 'can be both challenging and rewarding.'¹³

This article intends to enrich the existing literature on the matter by offering the perspective of Latvian children displaced during the Second World War. The main research objective is to explore how these children experienced their displacement and how they compose the narratives of this childhood experience in their accounts registered more than 50 years after their displacement (life story interviews gathered in the Latvian National Oral History Archive).

In order to analyse memories, it should be acknowledged that although the term 'biographical memory' suggests that it comprises an individual's own experiences gathered in the course of his or her life, 'biographicity'¹⁴ also suggests a constant work on experiences which are undergoing (re)interpretation. Therefore, biographical memory refers not only to the images and events of the past stored in one's mind, but also to their versions determined by an individual course of life, as well as a wider social and cultural context.¹⁵ This is consistent with the classical works of Maurice Halbwachs, who argues that individuals

11 N. Baron (ed.), *Displaced Children in Russia and Eastern Europe, 1915–1953: Ideologies, Identities, Experiences*, Leiden–Boston 2017, p. 4.

12 A. Wylegała, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 293.

14 According to Peter Alheit, biographicity 'is the ability of the individual to shape that which is social self-referentially, and to place oneself in relation to society. Biographicity means that individuals can continually reinterpret their life in the contexts in which they experience it, and that they themselves experience these contexts as mouldable and shapeable'. U. Apitzsch, I. Siouti, *Biographical Analysis as an Interdisciplinary Research Perspective in the Field of Migration Studies*, Frankfurt am Main 2007, p. 5.

15 K. Kaźmierska, *Biography and Memory: The Generational Experience of the Shoah Survivors*, Boston 2012, p. 97.

bear not only their own autobiographical memory but also a collective memory that is passed along intergenerationally. Thus, the individual (autobiographical) memory is always rooted in the collective meanings, culture, and imagination of society and in the acts of representation and communication and multiple social and cultural codes of remembering are performed and reconciled, resisted, or rejected in a constant process of locating and relocating the subject in time, space, and meaning.¹⁶

In addition to the effects of collective memory, it also has to be acknowledged that the individual interprets his or her experiences to create a coherent whole out of them. From this point of view, what matters in a biography is not events or actions themselves, but their interpretation, aimed at validating biographical experience so that one could perceive it as both constant and processual.¹⁷

If speaking specifically about adult memories of childhood, it has been noted that they are often conceived in fragmented, dream-like images, characterised by complex indeterminate spatialities and temporalities.¹⁸ Furthermore, adult memories of events from early childhood may entail even more nonconscious and conscious inferences of details that 'scaffold' the few fragments that can be recalled or known, producing what appears to be a complex and detailed memory.¹⁹ Frequently, these nonconscious and conscious inferences may be related to the memories of parents that are transmitted to children in both direct and indirect ways. Hence, when they are unable to remember themselves or, especially, when telling their family history, adults recalling childhood tend to use their parents' memories as if they were their own.²⁰

By framing this study within these concepts, I will later focus on the analysis of displacement narratives of adults who were displaced from Latvia during the Second World War. By doing so, I will attempt to distinguish common threads and themes as well as differences and their causes which may (or may not) be explained by the social context of individual memories. However, before turning to this analysis, in the next two chapters I will provide broader historical context of Latvian refugees during the Second World War, their further fates as a community of exile, and the life story interviews used in this study.

16 E. Keightley, *Remembering Research: Memory and Methodology in the Social Sciences*, "International Journal of Social Research Methodology," vol. 13 (1/2010), p. 59.

17 K. Kaźmierska, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

18 N. Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

19 C. Wells, C. Morrison, M. Conway, *Adult Recollections of Childhood Memories: What Details Can be Recalled?*, "Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology," vol. 67 (7/2013), p. 1247.

20 N. Židek, 'Nobody Asked Me How I Felt': *Childhood Memories of Exile Among the Croatian Post-w2 Diaspora in Argentina*, "Contemporary Southeastern Europe," vol. 8 (1/2021), p. 17.

Latvian Refugees and the Latvian Exile Community

Beginning on June 17, 1940, the Red Army occupied Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. Sovietisation proceeded apace in all domains of life, as did the terror of the new regime against its perceived enemies: the clergy, intellectuals, artists, large landowners, shopkeepers, manufacturers, professionals, former members of the military, and government officials. The regime's brutality reached its peak on June 14, 1941, when thousands of Latvians, Estonians, and Lithuanians were deported to Siberia.²¹ A week after the deportations, German forces invaded the USSR, and within a matter of weeks all three Baltic countries were occupied by another totalitarian regime. However, this occupation was also not destined to last, as the successful winter attack of the Red Army of 1944 pushed German forces to the Estonian-Latvian border.

By this time, Nazi Germany had started the elaboration of detailed plans for the evacuation of Estonia and Latvia. Initially, it had planned to carry out the evacuation in Estonia and in the areas of Latvia north of the river Daugava, which would encompass about two million people. Such a plan was in line with the opinion of Alfred Rosenberg, the Reich's Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, that for important political reasons, the evacuation of all Latvians and Estonians is absolutely necessary.²² Although it was initially planned to settle the evacuees only in the western parts of Latvia (to the west of the Daugava), as well as in Lithuania, over time the idea of settling at least part of the evacuees on German territory was increasingly considered. As a result, on July 6, 1944, the German Ministry of the Interior approved the admission of 1.5 million Estonians and Latvians.²³ By this date, the evacuation plan for the Baltic states was fully prepared, and under normal circumstances, without pressure from the Red Army, it could be implemented within three to four weeks. In the case that total evacuation would not be possible, it intended to ensure the evacuation of all persons of both sexes who were fit for military or labour service.²⁴

Considering the rapid and unexpected movement of the Red Army, as well as the opposition of the German military leadership to the evacuation (the roads designated for its execution crossed the roads intended for the transport of the army), evacuation

21 Altogether, 15 424 persons were deported from Latvia, mainly entrepreneurs, politicians, the intelligentsia, and farmers. The inhabitants of Latvia had never witnessed terror of such scale, and the result was horror and shock, emotions reinforced by immediate rumours of a second wave of deportations. D. Bleiere, I. Butulis, I. Feldmanis, A. Stranga, [et al.], *History of Latvia*, Rīga 2014, pp. 247–259.

22 K. Kangeris, "Hitleriešu plāni Baltijas tautu evakuēšanai 1944. gadā," in: P. Krupņikovs (ed.) *Vācija un Baltija*, Rīga 1990, p. 130.

23 H. Strods, *Zem melnbrūnā zobena: Vācijas politika Latvijā 1939–1945*, Rīga 1994, p. 131.

24 K. Kangeris, "Hitleriešu plāni Baltijas tautu evakuēšanai 1944. gadā," in: P. Krupņikovs, *op. cit.*, pp. 132–134.

plans were carried out only partially and even chaotically; for example, there was almost no organised evacuation from Latgale, the easternmost region of Latvia. However, on many occasions, even when there were no evacuation orders or they came at the last minute, people left their homes on their own and headed in a westward direction. Initially, these refugee flows were heading to the central parts of Latvia, especially the capital city of Riga, but later they were redirected by the Germans to Kurzeme (the westernmost region of Latvia). The first largest ship transport organised by Germans for refugees departed from Riga on August 4,²⁵ but after the fall of Riga on October 13, 1944, such ships departed on a daily basis from the ports of Ventspils and Liepāja (in Kurzeme) and took refugees south to East Prussia or southwest into Germany. An alternate, although forbidden, route was by different kind of vessels and boats to Sweden (Gotland), which was geographically close and unscathed by war.

Many of those who fled from Latvia did so because they had collaborated with the Nazi regime while many more, having experienced the Soviet rule, chose to flee rather than endure a second Soviet occupation. The refugee movement included writers and intellectuals; members of nationalist political parties; army officers; factory and shop owners; large landowners and relatively well-off peasants; professionals (the employees of universities, schools, courts, etc.); families that had been given back by the Germans what Sovietisation had taken from them; women who had been left behind by their husbands or fathers who had been conscripted into the German army; the elderly who knew they could not survive another invasion; and parents who feared for the safety of their children in wartime conditions.²⁶ Notably, most of the refugees were only hoping to temporarily avoid danger and were convinced of a rapid return after the Soviet forces would be driven out of Latvia (many relied heavily on the help of Great Britain and the United States, as had happened during the First World War).

Those who arrived in Germany were housed in temporary barracks or farm outbuildings with other refugees from different parts of occupied Europe, where they remained, sometimes for weeks, until the Germans were able to relocate them in semi-permanent housings. Some, who had relatives, friends, or acquaintances in Germany, were fortunate to find living spaces where they could remain for months, some for the duration of the entire war.

During the last months of the war, many of the Latvian refugees once again tried to move westwards in order to escape the Red Army. In their attempts, they used every available means of transport and sometimes walked hundreds of kilome-

25 G. Saiva, *Latviešu bēgļi Dānijā: apcere par latviešu bēgļu gaitām pēc Otrā pasaules kara*, Rīga 2008, p. 14.

26 D. Nasaw, *The Last Million: Europe's Displaced Persons from World War to Cold War*, New York 2020, pp. 45-46.

tres on foot before reaching British or American (rarely French) zones of occupation. Even then, they could not have been sure that the borders would not suddenly change or that they would not be immediately transferred to the Soviets who regarded them as Soviet citizens, subject to immediate repatriation. Luckily for the Latvians, the Americans and British, having never recognised the annexation of the Baltic states, rejected the Soviet claims: on May 21, 1945, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower issued a directive stating that Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians should not be treated as Soviet citizens nor repatriated to the USSR except for on a voluntary basis.²⁷

After the war, the majority of the Latvian refugees were concentrated in displaced persons (DP) camps set up by Allied authorities, while some managed to find living place on their own. The most recent studies show that there were approximately 178,000 Latvians in the Allied zones of occupation in Germany,²⁸ while another five thousand found refuge in Sweden. Of those registered in camps, there were 15,817 administrators and bureaucrats, 15,533 from the agricultural sector, around 12,485 skilled workers (employed in manufacturing, construction, transportation, the postal service, etc.), 13,577 housewives, 984 associated with business and retail, nine hundred unskilled workers, approximately two thousand students, and around 15,000 secondary and elementary schoolchildren.²⁹ The children were mostly traveling with one or both of their parents or other relatives. Approximately four hundred children were evacuated from Latvian orphanages by the occupation institutions; they were accompanied by the orphanage staff.³⁰

Latvian DPs were only a small 'drop in the ocean' considering that there were approximately eight million displaced persons located in Germany after the war;³¹ however, if most of the DPs quickly and willingly returned home, Latvians along other Central and Eastern Europeans, whose countries were occupied by the Soviet Union or entered their sphere of influence, were unwilling or unable to return. As a result, after spending several years in DP camps, most Latvian refugees emigrated to the United States, Australia, Canada, and other countries.³²

27 *Ibidem*, p. 134.

28 K. Kangeris, *Evakuācija/bēgšana no Latvijas 1944. gadā: jauns novērtējums uz jaunās datu bāzes*, "Latvijas Vēstures institūta žurnāls," vol. 98 (1/2016), p. 111.

29 I. Gale-Carpenter, *Being Latvian in Exile: Folklore as Ideology*, Michigan 1989, p. 63.

30 J. Riekstiņš, *Latvijas bāreņi, kuri pazaudēja savu dzimteni*, Rīga 2015, pp. 1–10.

31 A. Holian, *Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism: Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, Ann Arbor 2011, p. 4.

32 Emigration started in 1947 and ended for the most part in 1951. Approximately 17,000 Latvians went to England, 20,000 to Australia, 19,000 to Canada, 45,000 to the United States, 5,000 to South America, and about 15,000 remained in Germany. D. Bleiere, I. Butulis, I. Feldmanis, A. Stranga [et al.], *op. cit.*, p. 422.

The time spent in the DP camps was relatively calm,³³ especially in contrast to the last months of the war. As such, it allowed for reflection upon and narrativisation of the recent experience through dialogues with oneself and others. Furthermore, the cultural discourse generated within the DP camps provided explanations to both to the camp administration and the Latvian refugee community itself for the reasons for choosing not to return to Soviet Latvia (the main emphasis was put on the atrocities committed by the Soviets during the occupation of 1940–1941).³⁴ As stated by Inta Gale-Carpenter, at this time an exile ideology³⁵ was formed, which became obvious when Latvian refugees departed to their new host countries: at that moment, they did not think of themselves as emigrants or refugees anymore, but as self-proclaimed *trimdinieki*; i.e., exiles with a common goal of fighting communism, working for the restoration of an independent Latvia, preserving Latvian culture abroad, and transmitting this culture to the future generations. Along with this common goal, Latvians in exile were united by memories of life in pre-war Latvia, leaving home and settling in their new host countries. These aspects allow them to be defined as a certain community of memories;³⁶ namely, a group of people whose members feel connected to each other because they are united by a common direct experience.³⁷

Over time, exile Latvians adapted to the new conditions and integrated, to varying degrees, into the societies of their host countries. Nevertheless, many of them did not forget the above-mentioned common goals, preserved their Latvian

- 33 The social and cultural life of Latvians in the camps was very active: they organised schools for the children, published newspapers and books, organised choir and theatre groups, etc.
- 34 S. Sebre, *Autobiographical Childhood Narratives: Processes of Remembering and Reconstructing*, University of New York 1992, pp. 193–195; a dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
- 35 I. Gale-Carpenter defines the ideology of exile as an organising principle, both personally and collectively; as that dimension of social experience in which meanings and values are produced and legitimated in order to make purposeful action possible. It arose in DP camps “as Latvians experienced the conflict between what in their view should have been and what was, and as they sought to make sense of their interrupted lives. [...] In generating exile as the organising principle of life in emigration, they recouped some of their losses. They regained the possibility of collective purpose and a reason to prosper in what for many had become a meaningless world.” I. Gale-Carpenter, *Being Latvian in Exile: Folklore as Ideology*, Michigan 1989, p. 269.
- 36 Within such communities, the ideas of the past are consolidated via institutional actions; e.g., education, public discourse, and elites’ activities; K. Kaźmierska, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
- 37 I. Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*, New Brunswick-London 1994, p. 47.

identity, and passed it on to the next generations. When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, exile was officially put to an end, as Latvians finally had the opportunity to return home. However, the scale of the potential return migration of Latvian exiles did not materialise anywhere near the volume that either the government of Latvia or the leaders of the exile community had anticipated. The research of Maija Hinkle has shown that the main reasons of this were practical in nature; for example, people were not willing or able to leave their families (many of the second and third generation exiles had married outside the Latvian community), while others worried that the health care system in Latvia was inadequate.

More complex reasons were the perception of not being accepted in Latvia and the cultural differences between Latvian and diaspora Latvians, including language, societal norms, manners, and value systems. As noted by Hinkle, in particular the older, formerly active members of the exile community found it the hardest to accept present-day Latvia, whereas the still active members devised various ways of participating in Latvian development while continuing to live in other countries.³⁸

Life Story Interviews of Exile Latvians

The Latvian National Oral History Archive (NOHA) contains more than 4,700 interviews and is one of the largest collections of oral history audio recordings in Latvia. Most of the NOHA's sources are life story interviews in which the narrators reveal a broader or narrower view of the course of their lifetimes, organising the narrative as they wish. In this way, the very structure of the story – the chosen composition, form, expression, and use of language – also carries information about the culture and society in which the narrator lives (in the case of exile Latvians, this means both the culture and society of their host country and of the exile community).³⁹

The Latvian diaspora in other countries became one of the first targets of life story research expeditions, and the NOHA houses numerous interviews recorded by diaspora Latvians themselves. For example, in order to document and study the experiences and lives of Latvian-Americans and their descendants, the Cultural Division of the American Latvian Association started an oral history project in 1997, which has produced several hundred interviews and is still ongoing. Thus, the NOHA has several collections devoted to the experience of exile/diaspora Latvians,⁴⁰ three of which were selected for this particular study:

38 M. Hinkle, *Latvian-Americans in the Post-Soviet Era: Cultural Factors on Return Migration in Oral History Interviews*, "Journal of Baltic Studies," vol. 37 (1/2006), p. 64.

39 M. Zirniņe, I. Garda-Rozenberga, *Oral History Studies in Latvia*, "Folklore Fellows Network," no. 49 (2016), p. 16.

40 The archive is organised into 53 collections corresponding to either geographic location, time frame, or researcher/interviewer.

- 1) The “Latvians in Norway” collection: 20 interviews recorded in 1993 and 1996 by Arta Savdona, a student of philology at the University of Latvia who at the time was studying in Norway;
- 2) The “Latvians in Great Britain” collection: 49 interviews recorded in field-works in Great Britain in 2009 and 2011 by the oral historians Māra Zirnīte and Edmunds Šūpulis;
- 3) The collection titled: “The American Latvian Association’s Oral History Project *Life-Story in Exile*”: 70 interviews recorded in the United States by oral historian Maija Hinkle and several volunteer interviewers.⁴¹

From these 139 interviews, 15 narrators were under the age of ten at the time of escape from Latvia (they were born between 1934 and 1940 in different parts of Latvia) and their interviews were subjected to in-depth analysis.⁴² At the time of recordings, none of the interviewees had repatriated to Latvia, although many of them had close connections with Latvia and had visited it one or more times (in some cases, this already happened in the time of the Soviet occupation⁴³).

Memories of Displacement

This study analyses the memories of people who were four to ten years old at the time of their flight from Latvia;⁴⁴ i.e., they are those who were ‘old enough to remember, but too young to understand.’⁴⁵ The fact that four years can be considered as a kind of boundary before which the ability to remember is very limited is confirmed by the memories of a woman who were three years old at the time:⁴⁶

- 41 This collection contains several hundred interviews, but for this study the first seventy entries (recorded in 1997–1999), plus one interview recorded in 2018, were used.
- 42 In one case, when three members of one family were interviewed, the interviews of the parents were analysed as well.
- 43 In the late 1950s, it became clear to the Soviet authorities that the planned mass repatriation of Soviet citizens would not take place. Accordingly, in 1959 the USSR’s embassies abroad received a secret order to stop the repatriation of former Soviet citizens and start issuing visas to them. This gave a means to Latvian exiles (among others) to visit Latvia. However, with the emergence of such an opportunity, the Soviet side’s goal of splitting the exile society was largely fulfilled, as there were sharply different views at all levels of exile community (organisations, church congregations, and even families) on whether this opportunity should be used. M. Krūmiņa, *Atgriešanās zaudētajā paradīzē: trimdas (diasporas) latviešu dzimtenes apciemojumi*, “Akadēmiskā Dzīve,” vol. 56 (2021), p. 63.
- 44 The upper age limit has been set to ten years in order to distinguish children’s experience from that of adolescents, i.e., those between 10 and 19 – as defined by the United Nations: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/adolescents/overview/> (accessed: 21.10.2021).
- 45 S.R. Suleiman, *op. cit.*, p. 283.
- 46 This respondent left Riga on a German ship together with her parents, brother, and grandmother (the date is not mentioned). Her father was an accountant, while her mother

In 1944, we got away, of course. I do not remember this myself. I was only three and a half years old when we left – first by train and then by ship through Poland to Germany. My memories of these first years of exile are very, very weak. I feel like they have been covered by a kind of fog. I have a couple of bad memories. I remember a funeral, I remember a drowned man... [...] So I have some memories, but not very nice ones.⁴⁷

As we can observe, the respondent explains her faded memories not only through the young age, but also through the possible consequences of trauma⁴⁸: perhaps the experience was so overwhelming that she excluded it from her memory ('it is covered by a fog'). The dramatic effect of the flight is evidenced by the only memory episode she recounts, as well as the fact that she does not share the others, 'not very nice ones' that seem to have remained vague in her memory.

By contrast, children who had reached the age of four have more detailed memories of that time and events, with some of them confidently stating: 'Oh, I remember our flight very well!'⁴⁹ On the one hand, it shows that at such an early age, even a small difference, even mere months, could have had an impact in creating lasting memories; on the other, individual factors must also be taken into account. However, this statement made in her life story by then four-year-old Arta⁵⁰ is confirmed when she briefly but in quite detail recalls events as, for example, leaving the Latvian shore:

was a housewife. Her father's relatives were deported to Siberia on June 14, 1941, and it was rumoured that the respondent's family would be deported as well. Thus, when the Red Army was approaching Riga, the family thought they had no choice as to leave Latvia.

47 National Oral History Archive (NOHA), sig. NOH-3400, Interview with Vija Hjuža recorded by Māra Zirņīte, London, 28.10.2009.

48 Trauma studies and memory studies constantly intersect each other due to an inherent affinity between their subjects: although not all memory is traumatic, trauma generally is described as a kind of memory. Traumatic memory is often described as a wound, a painful mark of the past that haunts and overwhelms the present. A. Traverso, M. Broderick, *Interrogating trauma: Towards a critical trauma Studies*, "Continuum," vol. 24 (1/2010), p. 5.

49 NOHA, sig. NOH-3401, Interview with Arta Svenne recorded by Māra Zirņīte, London, 02.11.2009.

50 The respondent's father was a magistrate; due to fear of the return of the Soviets, he sent his family (wife, four children, and mother) out of Latvia to live with a distant relative in Schwerin (he stayed because in August and September men under the age of forty-eight were allowed to evacuate only with special permissions). In October, the father managed to leave Latvia and joined his family. When the Red Army was approaching Schwerin, they moved to another region where they lived privately with local Germans. Afterwards, they were admitted in a DP camp.

I remember as we drove out of the Gulf of Riga, that my grandmother called my brother and me... it was sunset, a big red ball went into the sea; it slipped inside. And she told me: 'Look back at Latvia now, because we are leaving the Gulf of Riga, and maybe you will never come back.' And then we all started crying, of course. [*whispers*] I remember that.⁵¹

Arta depicts the moment of leaving in extremely emotional way, both by introducing direct speech (such a technique is usually used to increase the dramatic effect of the narrative⁵²) and by attributing patriotic feelings to all who were present ('we all started crying, of course'). On the one hand, such a detailed description seems to confirm how deeply this moment was embedded into the girl's memory, but on the other it suggests insights that the four-year-old child was unlikely to have at the time. Such an assumption is confirmed by the fact that none of the other children depict the moment of leaving Latvia in such an emotional way, if it is recalled at all (by contrast, such narratives are characteristic of adult refugees).

The only exception with a similar element of drama (including direct speech) is Austra's narrative: 'I know that my mother lifted my brother, held his hand, and said, "Look, son, this is your homeland, which I take away from you!" [...] I'm not really sure if I've been told this or I remember it.'⁵³ As the author herself admits that she is not sure about the authenticity of these memories, it seems that her mother's words of parting to the homeland belong to the family's common narrative of leaving Latvia, which has often been retold in such a way that it became part of the memories of all family members.

Returning to Arta's life story, her statement 'understandably, we all thought that we would all be home at Christmas'⁵⁴ is a vivid illustration of the polyphony of voices that can be heard in the adult narratives of childhood. As Anna Wylegała writes: 'when one looks at what is recalled today by the interviewee, it is possi-

51 NOHA, sig. NOH-3401, Interview with Arta Svenne.

52 S. Sebre, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

53 NOHA, sig. NOH-195, Interview with Austra Zariņa recorded by Arta Savdona in Oslo, 29.07.1993 and 01.11.1993. The respondent's father worked in textile factory. During the first Soviet occupation, he was arrested which convinced him that next time he will not survive. Thus, when the family (parents and three children) received an order to evacuate from Riga (October 1944), they left their apartment and boarded a refugee ship. In Germany they were transferred to Frankfurt on the Oder (father worked as tram driver, mother as conductor). When the Red Army was approaching (spring 1945), the family started to move in westward direction by trains and other means of transportation, until they reached a village in the Harz Mountains. There, they found shelter until the arrival of American soldiers.

54 NOHA, sig. NOH-3401, Interview with Arta Svenne.

ble to distinguish the voice of a child, who expresses emotions from the past, as well as the voice of the adult, who presents reflections from the contemporary interviewee's perspective.'⁵⁵ In the case of Arta, the above-mentioned statement seems very likely as the voice of the adult; at the same time, it must be acknowledged that such a presumption of a quick return was widespread among refugees and several other children also speak of it in their memories.

For example, one of the respondents recalled: 'I know there was hope. Oh, we'll be back for Christmas!';⁵⁶ meanwhile, a woman who was nine years old when escaping to Sweden remembered that at the beginning she and other refugee children had refused to learn Swedish because 'why should we learn Swedish if we will return soon!'⁵⁷ Such an experience not only affirms the widespread prevalence of beliefs about imminent return among refugees, but also that this belief was also transferred to the children.

Such an effect of the intergenerational transmission (in this particular case, transmitted fear) is evident also in another episode of Arta's story in which she describes how two Red Army soldiers invaded her family's accommodations in Germany: 'I was terrified of the Russians. When they came, my parents were not home; they had gone somewhere to look for food. I stayed under the bed and didn't come out until my parents came back.'⁵⁸ Thus, three canonical themes appear in Arta's displacement narrative: the dramatic moment when leaving the Latvian coast, the belief that refugees would be able to return home soon, and pronounced fears of the Russians.

Similar topics, as well as the same emotional attitude, can be found in the memories of another woman, Maija, who was six at the time, making her slightly older, although in this case the first dramatic moment is related to the moment when her parents had to choose between staying or leaving:

We all had experienced the first Soviet occupation, and my mother understood that it will not be easy for the pastors. And she said, 'I will not leave the girls with the Russians; I will leave!' So, my father had to make a very difficult decision. [...] Mom said: 'If you stay with your congregation, stay with them, but I'm leaving with the girls.' And he decided to go with us.⁵⁹

55 A. Wylegała, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

56 NOHA, sig. NOH-202, Interview with Bruno Brunovskis recorded by Arta Savdona in Spikkestad, Norway, 16.10.1993.

57 NOHA, sig. NOH-193, Interview with Astride Baardvik recorded by Arta Savdona in Oslo, 28.07.1993.

58 NOHA, sig. NOH-3401, Interview with Arta Svenne.

59 NOHA, sig. NOH-2725, Interview with Maija Hinkle recorded by Māra Zirnīte and Maija Krūmiņa in Riga, 07.07.2018. The respondent's father was a pastor; the family (parents and two daughters) lived in a countryside. With the Red Army approaching, they decided to evacuate, first to Riga, then via ship to Germany (October 1944). Other details are not provided.

In this case, too, the respondent uses direct speech, as a result of which the short episode acquires an emotionally saturated form. At the same time, it is quite possible that such a conversation between the parents took place in the absence of the children, and Maija ‘remembers’ this only from what her mother told her later. This assumption is partially confirmed by the fact that the author does not use the introductory words ‘I remember’ at the beginning of the narrative (typically for childhood memories, these words introduce personal memory episodes).

When describing leaving the Latvian shore, Maija remembers that everyone on the ship sang the Latvian national anthem, but this part of the narrative is emotionally very neutral. Maija’s memories of the Soviet occupation and that largely explain her family’s decision to leave Latvia are more dramatic:

I remember a recurring dream. We had an orchard behind the house, a large meadow behind it, and then there was a forest very far away. And I dreamt that huge flames were coming through that forest. [...] It was a dream I couldn’t wake up from. And the saying was that the Russians were coming. So those flames were those Russians.⁶⁰

By using more imaginative comparisons, this narrative also focuses on the huge and even irrational fear of the return of the Soviet authorities whose origin can be explained by the often-heard concerns of adults, the age of the children, and wartime conditions. As pointed out by researchers of child and adolescent psychology, war traumas can serve as a framing structure for normal developmental fears, so children who are normally afraid of certain animals or strangers can become afraid of enemies; in this case, the Russians: ‘In this sense, the war events may serve as metaphors or vehicles for the child to express normal developmental anxieties.’⁶¹

The narratives of other respondents whose life stories were analysed in this study were less emotionally coloured and canonical; however, they all provide an overview of their displacement with key moments and major events, as well as individual episodes that have been remembered due to some personal significance. As we are talking about childhood memories, the significance is associated with issues important for children that, in this case, can be divided into the following categories: games and toys, food and its supply, and feeling of fear and/or security.

60 *Ibidem*

61 P.S. Jensen, J. Shaw, *Children as Victims of War: Current Knowledge and Future Research Needs*, “Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry,” vol. 32 (4/1993), p. 703.

Games and Toys

The theme of games and toys is quite often remembered by the respondents; i.e., they remember some specific toy which had either been with them throughout the whole process of the flight or whose loss they lamented. Thus, for Austra, such memories are related to the moment when her family was preparing to leave their home:

My mom said: 'If we want to bring some toys, we have to carry them.' And I had a big doll, almost as big as myself. But she was heavy, with a porcelain head. And I didn't want to carry her. Mom said: 'If you don't want to carry her, then she must stay' - and put her on the chair at the door. So, I left that doll behind. And the last memory from our house is that I left my doll in the hallway on the chair and we went out the door.⁶²

In this case, the importance given to the doll and the audible remorse for leaving has allowed the episode of leaving the house to penetrate deep into the respondent's memory. Furthermore, it is this exact episode that serves as the crucial moment in Austra's displacement narrative, which in the memories of other refugees is often associated with the ship's departure from the coast of Latvia. Moreover, this narrative outlines the respondent's active position (she could decide the fate of the doll for herself) in contrast to the passive role that most often appears in descriptions of children's flight experiences because, understandably, at this age they submitted to adult leadership. At the same time, there are episodes in some life stories, where children, to the best of their ability, have shown resistance - not to adults close to them, but rather to the unacceptable or incomprehensible order of things.

An example of this can be found in the memories of Marita, who was seven years old at the time.⁶³ Marita remembers that while living in Germany, everyone had to use the Nazi greeting *Heil Hitler*, which she did not like to do. As her mother warned her that in the case of not obeying this rule, trouble could occur, Marita always crossed the street in such situations, thus avoiding behaviour which was unacceptable for her.⁶⁴

62 NOHA, sig. NOH-195, Interview with Austra Zariņa.

63 In 1944, the respondent's mother worked as a translator for the German administration. When the Red Army was approaching and the Germans were evacuating, they agreed to take the mother and her two children along (they left Cēsis on October 5, 1944). In Germany, they were joined by the respondent's father and grandmother who left Latvia separately. During the winter of 1944-1945, the family was transferred from one place to another, living in refugee camps and working for Germans (children were going to German schools). At the end of the war, they reached American occupation zone and were placed in a DP camp.

64 NOHA, sig. NOH-3405, Interview with Marita Grunts recorded by Māra Zirņīte, London, 30.10.2009.

Another woman's childhood memories also describe the 'loss' of a toy;⁶⁵ however, the mood of this narration is different:

We sailed from Riga to Königsberg. We were on one ship, but some of our luggage was on the other ship. And the other ship was sunk by the torpedoes. And there was my bear on that ship. I'm telling you; it was like my child would have died. [laughs] And I remember one woman, whose whole property sank to the bottom of the sea – she wanted to jump into the sea and screamed terribly.⁶⁶

The distance in time allows Sarmīte to remember this event and her own emotions with humour; at the same time, the short episode also shows that adults sometimes reacted very tragically to the loss of their material valuables.

Toys taken along were often lost or damaged during the flight, and many children did not have them at all. This, along with other aspects of refugees' lives, could have a negative impact on children's well-being, as it was one of the most striking evidence of how much refugees' lives differed from their happy, playful childhood in Latvia. As the following example shows, sometimes it was the lack of toys that marked the absence of normality that the child might not otherwise have felt to such an extent:

In that camp, I noticed for the first time that I did not have any toys, not one. And it seems to me that on the same day or the next day, my father somehow got me a wooden toy boat, a very primitive one. And that was the only toy for me then. It was a difficult experience; I remember it very well. The whole time there nothing was normal anymore; nothing was known anymore; people no longer spoke the language I understood.⁶⁷

This episode also highlights parents' attempts to restore a sense of normalcy in children and is largely in line with the observation of Merja Paskuniemi, who has analysed Finnish children's experiences in Swedish refugee camps during

65 The respondent's father was a wealthy factory owner, while the mother was a housewife (they had four children). During the Soviet occupation, an army general was living in their house and warned them of deportations. In the end of July 1944, the father sent his wife and children to Germany to live with family friends (they were accompanied by children's nanny). They lived there until the arrival of Americans and then moved to a DP camp. The father and some other relatives also left Latvia in October 1944, but he only joined the family in DP camp after the war had ended.

66 NOHA, sig. NMV-3440, Interview with Sarmīte Janovska recorded by Māra Zirņīte, Great Britain, 04.11.2009.

67 NOHA, sig. NOH-202, Interview with Bruno Brunovskis.

the Second World War and has observed that both toys and playtime were extremely important for children, as with their help they were able to divert their thoughts from the conditions of war and forced displacement.⁶⁸

The fact that their feelings could have been completely different in circumstances under which children had the opportunity to play (they had toys and/or the presence of other children) is described by another respondent:⁶⁹

We rode with our horse carts to the seashore for several days; it took a long time, and we slept in the barns. But we, children, did not understand the dreadfulness of this; we just played. I remember there were a lot of cherry trees in one house, and we were allowed to eat as many cherries as we wished. [...] So, we were having a great time. We walked and played by the seashore and swam.⁷⁰

This experience, if told by an adult refugee, would probably sound completely different, but from a child's perspective it recalls a peaceful holiday at a seaside resort. Without a doubt, the fact that in this case the refugee journey was relatively short also plays a role. However, the refugee children who arrived in Germany also remember playing around, sometimes in a very dangerous conditions or amidst the wartime chaos, by using their imagination and all the available objects. In addition, these memories also testify to the efforts of the parents to ease the difficult journey for their children not only physically but also mentally, for instance, by turning exhausting activities into games as recalled by Bruno:⁷¹

As I calculated later – we had walked around three hundred kilometres. After about one hundred kilometres, we bought some trolleys, so the last two hundred kilometres were very

68 M. Paksuniemi, *Finnish Refugee Children's Experiences of Swedish Refugee Camps During the Second World War*, "Migration Letters," vol. 12 (1/2015), pp. 32–33.

69 The respondent's father was the director of Forest Department of the Ministry of Agriculture. In the fall of 1944, he got permission to evacuate to Germany with his family, but instead they managed to negotiate a boat that took them to Gotland.

70 NOHA, sig. NOH-193, Interview with Astrīda Baardvik.

71 The respondent's parents were students who decided to leave Latvia because of the experience gained during 1940–1941 (many of their friends and relatives were arrested, killed, or deported). They started their refugee journey with a car from Madona (eastern Latvia) and finally reached Liepāja. Although they wanted to flee to Gotland, it was not possible, so they boarded German refugee ship (mid-October 1944). In Germany, they were transferred via different refugee camps until they reached Dresden, where they stayed until the British-American aerial bombing attack (February 13–15, 1945). After the bombings, they walked westwards for several hundred kilometres until reached Jena where they met other Latvians and were transferred to DP camp in British occupation zone.

interesting for me. I was sitting and imagining that my parents were horses. Sadly, I couldn't use the whip as it turned out that it was not allowed. But I was sitting in that trolley as some lord.⁷²

Food and its Supply

The appearance of this theme in the memories of children is most likely due to the fact that refugees, especially in Germany, often experienced food shortages, sometimes starvation. However, hunger is rarely mentioned in children's memories; instead, they remember episodes which are related to some special food or humorous events, such as the following:

My grandmother was very smart; she knew how to get something to eat. She had found some food that was called a delicacy there. And we ate, and we liked it all very much. The next day, she asks the saleswoman: 'But what is it?' It turned out that those were snails. And you see, our appetite was immediately suppressed.⁷³

Another rather humorous episode related to food can be found in Bruno's memories:

I remember this one occasion very well. Something had happened to some refugee's cart: a pig had been on those carts in a cage, and that cage had broken, and that pig had run out. And that pig had been shot by a German soldier because it was probably not easy to catch it. And then the pig was roasted on the spot; the soldiers were rejoicing, we were rejoicing, and the pig was eaten. I remember it very well - the fact that the pork was roasted on the fire.⁷⁴

It must be noted that Bruno's father also recalls this episode in his life story, but as a much less significant event.⁷⁵ This suggests that although the boy does not directly remember his feeling of hunger, he most likely felt a lack of food. This would explain why he so vividly remembers the few times he could enjoy the food, be it roasted pork or a slice of bread from another of his memories that his parents either do not remember at all or mention only in passing. Apparently, in this case the parents managed to protect their son from negative emotions and created a sense of security in him, despite the fact that their own lives at that time were overwhelmed with the question of survival.

This is also confirmed by Aina (the boy's mother), who recalled that the family had a very difficult time as refugees and 'once when we didn't get anything

72 NOHA, sig. NOH-202, Interview with Bruno Brunovskis.

73 NOHA, sig. NOH-3405, Interview with Marita Grunts.

74 NOHA, sig. NOH-202, Interview with Bruno Brunovskis.

75 NOHA, sig. NOH-190, Interview with Ginters Brunovskis recorded by Arta Savdona, Royken, Norway, 19.07.1993.

to eat properly all that was left from Bruno was bones and skin⁷⁶ – an issue that is not reflected in Bruno's own memories. However, the memories of other children quite often depict how difficult it was for parents to provide food for their families. Such a difference is most likely due to the fact that these children were usually older than five-year-old Bruno and therefore had a better understanding of the situation and were also involved in the supply of the food for themselves, as, for example, seven-year-old Austra:

The biggest worry of the time was finding food because there was nothing to get anywhere. We boiled porridge, and then I had to go to stand in the line for milk. And since my brother and I were children, we were each given a quarter of a litre of milk a day. And it had to be picked up every day. And that was my task – to go after the milk. Then I stood in the line for milk.⁷⁷

Feeling of Fear/Security

One of the themes which appears quite often in the narrative under discussion are the air raids which children experienced in Germany. However, in most cases these appear in the overall narrative only because related to an interesting detail not because they would be associated with fear or anxiety. For instance, Rūta, whose flight story is quite short, describes the following episode:⁷⁸

We spent about a week in Berlin. I remember that because the English were bombing Berlin and we spent every night in the shelters. And I remember that I went outside one morning and looked up. There were multi-storey houses, and one side of the house was bombed. And the porcelain baths were hanging one above the other. I had never seen such baths because we had a sauna at home. [laughs] What things children remember!⁷⁹

76 NOHA, sig. NOH-191, interview with Aina Brunovskis recorded by Arta Savdona, Royken, Norway, 20.07.1993.

77 NOHA, sig. NOH-195, Interview with Austra Zariņa.

78 The respondent's father was a farm owner who was mobilised in the Latvian Legion. The mother was living with their two children and grandparents on the family's farm in Trikāta (north-eastern Latvia). When the Red Army was approaching (August 14, 1944), they all fled with horse carts to Riga and boarded German refugee ship. Before leaving Trikāta, the local representative of the German administration gave them an address in Germany where they could look for shelter. It was a German village where they lived with locals until the end of war (the village was occupied by the British army). The father stayed in Latvia and was taken captive by the Red Army (the respondent met him in the 1980s when visiting Latvia for the first time).

79 NOHA, sig. NOH-3419, Interview with Rūta Bonnere recorded by Edmunds Šūpulis, Lutterworth, Great Britain, 01.11.2009.

Although Rūta claims that she remembers this week in Berlin because of the bombings, in fact they are mentioned only in connection with the surprising view of porcelain baths that has remained deep in her memory. Similarly, in the memories of the slightly older Jana,⁸⁰ the episode about hiding in a bomb shelter in Kemnitz is vividly recalled because it was the first time her mother had slapped her:

In Kemnitz, we were staying with a German lady who said that all of her sons have perished in war and we could do what we want, sleep whatever bed we want, and play with her children's toys. And that night, there was an air-raid again, and the sirens went off. We had to go to the basement, but my sister and I were just playing instead. And then I remember that she [mother] really slapped me. She had never hit us before. She slapped me because I didn't want to go to the basement.⁸¹

Apparently, the uncharacteristic behaviour of her mother had disturbed and affected the girl more than the dangers associated with air strikes. At the same time, such a reaction cannot be applied to all children, because for some of them the unusual noise and the unrest of the people around them caused great fear, as is depicted in the memories of Marita:

We had to go to the shelters, and then I was always terribly afraid. I remember my mother and my grandmother sitting with me in the basement, and I was standing next to my mother and holding her hand, shaking all the time.⁸²

However, this is almost the only case among the sources used, where this kind of fear is spoken of directly. Even Bruno, who experienced the most devastating airstrikes (in Berlin and Dresden), which he also describes in detail, assessed his own feelings of the time more like a dislike or unpleasant feeling, but not fear.⁸³

80 The respondent's father was a government official (in 1941, the family escaped deportation because they had been warned in advance) who was conscripted in German Army. When the Red Army was approaching Riga (October 1944), the mother and two daughters left for Liepāja where they boarded German refugee ship. Initially they arrived in Augsburg, where there were many other Latvians. As the Russians approached the town, the mother and both daughters run away with the help of two of the mother's friends. Furthermore, they travelled all together, fleeing the Red Army. They were twice saved by the Americans who brought them out of the Soviet occupation zone by trucks. Finally, they arrived at Heidelberg and were admitted in a DP camp.

81 NOHA, sig. NOH-3428, Interview with Jana Hale recorded by Edmunds Šūpulis, Great Britain, 28.10.2009.

82 NOHA, sig. NOH-3405, Interview with Marita Grunts.

83 NOHA, sig. NOH-202, Interview with Bruno Brunovskis.

The explanation for such a reaction and such memories is most likely found in the children's ability to adapt quickly and to accept as a norm what would seem shocking in peacetime, as well as the unconscious use of cognitive protection mechanisms to suppress feelings of fear at that time (or retrospectively).⁸⁴

Obviously, the suppression/silencing of emotions can also indicate trauma of which Māra's life story is an interesting example:⁸⁵ as a refugee, the six-year-old girl experienced the sinking of the ship "Wilhelm Gustloff"⁸⁶:

I remember my mother taking me in her arms and handing me to a man who put me in a life-boat. My brother had already disappeared. And I remember my mom standing there. That was the last time I saw my mom. [...] But I do not remember that I would be very upset. And I also don't remember that I would be terribly cold. But I remember we were sailing in that boat, and I saw the big waves on both sides.⁸⁷

On the one hand, the dramatic message, expressed in a completely neutral form, suggests that the experience was so shocking that Māra's mind was unable to understand or accept it, so it reacted by giving up any emotions (fear and sadness), thus protecting itself. At the same time, the author herself answers the direct question of whether this event was traumatic, as follows: 'I can't say that when I went through it, I felt that it was very traumatic. It was just as a fact. But it changed our lives a lot because I grew up without a mother'.⁸⁸ Such a statement can also be part of the suppression of emotions, which began at the time of the event and has continued throughout life, but perhaps Māra's young age, along with cognitive immaturity, plasticity, and adaptive abilities, was a decisive factor why she did not

84 Such an ability is mentioned in a study of children who had been exposed to moderate bombardment stress: it was found that they had developed a repressive cognitive style, for example, they had fewer sleep difficulties during war periods than nonexposed children; P.S. Jensen, J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 702.

85 The respondent's father was the director of a beer factory; in 1944 (the month is not mentioned), he sent his wife and two children out of Latvia to Gotenhafen (Gdynia), where they lived with his distant relatives until the Red Army's East Prussian offensive started in January 1945. The father also evacuated to Germany in the fall of 1944 but lived separately.

86 A German armed military transport ship, which was sunk on January 30, 1945, by a Soviet submarine in the Baltic Sea while evacuating German civilian refugees from East Prussia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Estonia. The dead numbered between six and nine thousand.

87 NOHA, sig. NOH-786, Interview with Māra Lipacis recorded by Dzidra Ziedonis and Gunta Harvey, Catskills, United States, 27.08.1998.

88 *Ibidem*.

feel anxiety and other negative emotions at the time.⁸⁹ This is partly confirmed by Māra's account of the experience of her older brother, who had separated from his mother and sister at the time of the incident, but miraculously escaped from the sinking ship: 'He said he was terrified of sinking. And that he prayed to God he wouldn't die. He was very, very worried and scared.'⁹⁰

As can be seen, the brother's feelings and memories of what happened were diametrically opposed, which, on the one hand, may be related to the individual's character traits, but on the other to the age difference. It is also possible that Māra's memories of the incident were influenced by later events: the happy reunion with her brother, who took care of both of their fates, and later with her father, whose presence was crucial in her understanding of the world ('Then I thought - I must not fear, my father is there to protect me from all that will happen.'⁹¹).

Bruno also emphasises the important role of the presence and behaviour of his parents (or other adults) in the sense of security of children of his age who were not able to adequately appreciate the situation, its causes, and its potential consequences: 'I think a child's fear depends on how the parents behave. If there were situations where I had to get to know if I should be scared or not, then I usually looked either at my dad or mom, and then I knew if I had to be scared or not. And they were quite cold-blooded then.'⁹²

Such self-observation is fully in line with researchers' recognition that an attachment relationship⁹³ plays a crucial role in how well children can cope with difficult conditions. Respectively, the process of interpretation and meaning-making of frightening situations, especially for young children, is characterised by a dynamic interaction in which the child sees the immediate response of his or her caregivers as a means of interpreting threats, as well as a source of confidence. Thus, in the process of a child's adjustment, the caregiver's ability to comfort the

89 Studies of child victims of war have found that children's response to stress is such that their behaviour disturbances appear to be less intense than might have been expected; P.S. Jensen, J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 698.

90 NOHA, sig. NOH-786, Interview with Māra Lipacis.

91 *Ibidem*.

92 NOHA, sig. NOH-202, Interview with Bruno Brunovskis.

93 As argued by John Bowlby, the founder of attachment theory, an individual's mental health is intimately tied to relationships with attachment figures who afford emotional support and physical protection. In attachment relationships, internal working models of self and other help members of an attachment dyad (parent and child, or adult couple) to anticipate, interpret, and guide interactions with partners; I. Bretherton, K.A. Munholland, "Internal Working Models in Attachment Relationships," in: J. Cassidy, P.R. Shaver (eds.), *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, New York 2008.

child and help him or her understand the frightening events is crucial: parents and other caregivers can act as a shield or, alternatively, complicate the child's stress resilience if they are unable to cope on their own.⁹⁴ In the context of displaced Latvian children, their memories show that they felt the greatest fear not in connection with some threatening events, but in situations when they were suddenly left without the presence of adults close to them, as, for example, recalled by Sarmīte:

And my whole family disappeared somewhere, and I was left alone. And I was thrown inside the window [into the wagon] on top of a pile of soldiers. Then I started crying. [...] Well, then two of the soldiers took me on their shoulders and pushed through that train until we found my family. And then, of course, I clung to my babysitter, and I was very happy. I remember that.⁹⁵

In general, among the sources used, even if it is not discussed as directly as in Bruno's life story, it is almost always understood that the adult accompanying the child served as a protective shield. The only exception is Jana who, summing up her feelings about the time of the flight, concludes that it was 'fear and frostbite, and also hunger in between, and my mother's fear - that's what I felt the most.'⁹⁶ However, there were other adults (two of her mother's friends) in the immediate vicinity of Jana who took care of her entire family. Consequently, even in this life story, the time of the flight, although associated with negative memories, are not represented as a traumatic experience, which is not actually mentioned by any of the authors of the sources used. On the contrary, even when childhood memories seem to be filled with potentially traumatic experiences as, for example, in Bruno's narrative about the experience of the Dresden bombing, he nevertheless concludes:

It [seeing corpses after the bombing] didn't really make much of an impression on me, because for months already I was used to everything being very different from what I've experienced before. Everything was new, but I was already used to everything being new. And then, in fact, with these people who were killed there - it was just another new thing. But I don't think I experienced it as something dramatic or anything like that.⁹⁷

Among other factors already discussed above (children's ability to adapt, parental support, etc.), this passage highlights that sometimes there were so many

94 T.S. Betancourt, K.T. Khan, *The Mental Health of Children Affected by Armed Conflict: Protective Processes and Pathways to Resilience*, "International Review of Psychiatry," vol. 20 (3/2008), pp. 321-322.

95 NOHA, sig. NMV-3440, Interview with Sarmīte Janovska.

96 NOHA, sig. NOH-3428, Interview with Jana Hale.

97 NOHA, sig. NOH-202, Interview with Bruno Brunovskis.

dramatic and dangerous episodes that one could get used to it and no longer consider it extraordinary and shocking. At the same time, such a narrative is certainly the result of both the author's personal characteristics and the fact that these events were discussed often by all family members⁹⁸:

In fact, it is a problem for my brother, because he was born after all this chaos [war]. And when we start talking about this issue, he almost feels like he's left out. Those war adventures are not part of him, and maybe he does not feel as a part of the family history. But we (my parents and I) often talk about those adventures, and these conversations always start completely spontaneously.⁹⁹

First, this quote explains why Bruno's memories of the refugee period, despite his young age, are so complete and detailed. Respectively, the frequent discussion could clearly contribute to the strengthening of memories, and the parents' explanations could also provide a greater understanding and thus allowed for a more complete narrative.

Second, discussing events and sharing emotions in a supportive environment is one of the ways that can help to overcome a traumatic experience. In the result, both the son and the father look at the events as an adventure and accordingly build their own narrative by highlighting lucky moments and humorous events and by describing the dramatic experience as something unusual but not shocking.

Thirdly, the quote also points out that members of the second generation of exiles may in some cases have felt alienated from family members who had a common flight experience.

Conclusion

The analysis of the memories of displaced Latvian children makes it possible to formulate several conclusions. Firstly, although these testimonies were told more than 50 years after the events, they nevertheless convey the displacement experience in an intense way by vividly depicting the psychological and emotional circumstances as well as material issues that children faced in the particular historical situation. Common themes relevant to children emerged: firstly, toys (or their absence), and games which could ease their experience in the unusual circumstances that lacked normalcy and structure.

Secondly, although children's displacement narratives (in contrast to those of adults) rarely include memories of hunger, they often recall specific situations related

98 Among the individual traits that help to understand why some children are less susceptible to the effects of war than others researchers include age, inborn coping style and capacity, level of cognitive development, pre-existing psychopathology, and temperament; P.S. Jensen, J. Shaw, *op. cit.*, p. 702.

99 NOHA, sig. NOH-202, Interview with Bruno Brunovskis.

to food and its supply, which indicates how important this issue was for most of the refugees.

Finally, fear often surfaced in childhood memories of displacement, most often when speaking about the Soviets, the bombings of German cities, and consequent hiding in bomb shelters and, what turned out to be the most frightening, when recalling situations, they found themselves to be left without their parents. All this confirmed that children's experience was inseparably linked to the actions and reactions of adults; however, it also revealed that they formed their own interpretation of this experience, which occasionally included elements of resilience and even hope and optimism, not just suffering and worries. These testimonies also point to the fact that the physically and emotionally difficult period of the flight may have been easier to endure for children because they, to quote one of the respondents, 'are like rubber dolls - if they have something to eat and if they feel safe, then there's nothing wrong with them.'¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, by analysing the childhood memories of displacement as a whole, it was possible, at least partially, to identify the discursive structures that provide a framework of significance for recollected experience and which in this case is rooted in the collective memory of the Latvian exile community. Researchers who have analysed exiles of other nationalities have noticed that 'when talking about specific historical and political events, children tend to reproduce the exact wording that can be found in the political speeches and writings of the first-generation exiles.'¹⁰¹ Such reproducing quite often became apparent when respondents described the reasons for their flight from Latvia (the Soviet regime and the Red Army) as well as leaving the Latvian shore. Most probably, the fact that most of these memories of potentially traumatic experience were recalled as a time which was unusual and alarming, but when 'nothing really wrong happened,' is also influenced by the effects of the collective memory practices of the Latvian exile community. Respectively, it was important for the displaced children that Latvian flight experience (and the lost homeland) was discussed and commemorated to in their families and in Latvian community (both in DP camps and after arriving in the new host countries) as it enabled this experience to become collective and less traumatic.

100 NOHA, sig. NOH-195, interview with Austra Zariņa.

101 N. Židek, *op. cit.*, p. 17.



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**Summary**

This article explores the memories of Latvian children who were displaced during the Second World War by analysing how they experienced this displacement and how they compose the narratives of this childhood experience recorded in life story interviews presented to the Latvian National Oral History Archive. Although these testimonies were given more than 50 years after the events, they nevertheless convey the displacement experience in an intense way by vividly depicting the psychological, emotional, and material circumstances that children faced in the particular historical situation and by revealing common themes relevant to the children at the time of the displacement (toys and games, food and its supply, and a sense of fear and/or security). It was also revealed that the displacement experience was most often recalled as an unusual and disturbing, but not traumatic. Most likely, this is a consequence of the collective memory practices of the Latvian exile community that enabled this experience to become collective and less traumatic.