

Translated excerpt

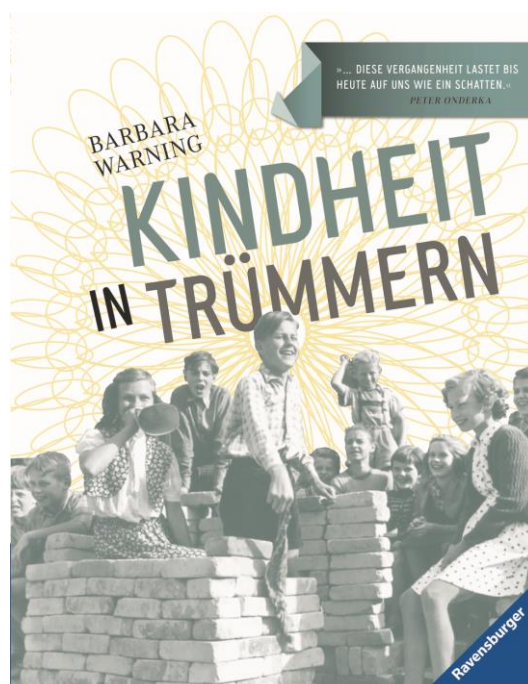
Barbara Warning
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Barbara Warning
Shattered Childhoods

Translated by Tammi Reichel



“We are the last ones. Interrogate us.”

Foreword by Barbara Warning

World War II ended seventy years ago in Europe. The war begun by the Germans left behind 55 million dead around the globe, 6 million of them murdered Jews, countless wounded and traumatized human beings, millions of homeless people, and a continent in ruins. Seventy years is a long time. The children being born in Germany are already the third post-war generation; these children take for granted freer, friendlier relations with their European neighbors. Waging war against them is unimaginable. So why should young Germans concern themselves with this long ago war?

The answer is that peace is not something to take for granted, but instead requires hard work against prejudices and dissociation. Because understanding how devastating war was is the only way we can avoid putting peace at jeopardy. Because our present is determined by our past.

It is the generation of grandparents whose childhoods and youths were strongly afflicted through the war. We must ask them questions as long as they can still tell us about these experiences, because the story of an individual's fate has more impact that any scholarly treatment of the post-war period ever could.

The word 'hunger' is abstract. What do ration books and an allotment of a thousand calories a day really mean? The true meaning of hunger is elucidated by a memory of my father's. As a young boy in 1946, he had just one birthday wish: an entire bread for himself. My grandmother could not fulfill this wish for him. There wasn't enough; he had to share.

The Germans started the war and committed atrocious transgressions. They were cursed for their wrongdoings. And so they experienced the revenge of the victors for the oppression and destruction that had been executed in the name of Germany. War always leads to brutalization and a blunting of human response to violence for everyone involved. A human life is of hardly any value in that situation. But mutual finger pointing and calculations of suffering and casualties are meaningless. That only leads to new accusations and injustices.

The repercussions for each individual are tremendous, and terrible. That is why the terror of the war and the laborious new beginning after the war's end must not be forgotten. With each person who remains silent, who is not questioned, a piece of the past is lost.

That is the impetus for the witnesses in this book to share their experiences as children and teenagers in the period between 1939 and 1955. Each of them has a very personal fate, and yet stands for millions who experienced similar things. It

would be presumptuous to claim that this collection is comprehensive, and yet the twenty-one survivors in this book offer a broad perspective on this period of time. Important places and moments during and after the war are represented. In order to understand the conditions immediately following the war's end, you have to know what these children experienced during wartime.

Children are always the victims of wars. They have to suffer its consequences without having a share in the blame. In the years during and after the war, millions of children experienced massive violence personally and all around them. But their traumatic experiences were rarely mentioned back then. It was all about rebuilding a ravished country, beginning a new life. Memories of the past were just a bother. When people looked back at all, their focus was usually on their own afflictions and the loss of the home they once knew.

The misdeeds of the Nazi era were suppressed. No one spoke of the persecution and murder of all the people who were considered inferior, whether it was Jews, Slavs or the handicapped. The concentration camps in which Jews, Sinti and Roma, Slavs, homosexuals, political opponents, Jehovah's witnesses, and many others suffered were not a topic of discussion. And when it did come up, then everything took place far, far away in the east, and supposedly no one knew anything about it at the time. But that was not the case. It happened everywhere, because the Nazi system had laid itself over the entire German Reich like a spider web.

But the horrors of the past cannot simply be repressed. For some, they were expressed in physical symptoms that began immediately after the war. Others, like my father, could cope with their war experiences quite well for a long time. Family and career were his main focus. It wasn't until he was elderly that the fears from his childhood reappeared. Suddenly he experienced terrifying nightmares about the war, and the images haunted him during the daytime, as well.

The trauma suffered by this generation also makes itself known in everyday life, however. Almost no one who starved during their childhood can throw away food. At our house, cheese rinds were shaved off paper-thin so that nothing edible landed in the garbage.

The mother of a friend is an excellent cook. She would never serve her family a ready-made meal. But her pantry is filled with canned food. She doesn't want to eat them, but she needs them to be comfortable. If there should ever be an emergency again, she has a supply and won't have to go hungry.

My mother had to write her homework around the edges of newspapers. When I threw away a piece of paper that hadn't been completely filled on both sides, she fished it out of the garbage can and shouted, "That's a complete waste. When I was your age, I would have been grateful for this." When a friend recently threw away a broken toaster, his mother thought he should keep it instead, because he might be

able to use it for replacement parts. He couldn't help but sigh, "Mama, the war is over."

Yes, the war ended seventy years ago, but that time must never be forgotten by the generation that has the good fortune to not have experienced and suffered through a war.

We are the last ones.
Interrogate us.
We are responsible.
We carry the file boxes
With our friends' warrants of arrest
Before us like a vendor's tray.
Research institutes ask us
For dead people's laundry lists,
Museums keep the bywords of our agony
Under glass like relics.
We, we who fritter away our time,
For understandable reasons,
Have become second-hand dealers of the incomprehensible.
Our destiny is under historical preservation.
Our best customer is the
Bad conscience of posterity.
Go ahead, help yourself.
We are the last ones.
Interrogate us.
We are responsible.

Hans Sahl

The accounts of the witnesses in this book are memories and warnings at the same time: wars must be prevented. Unfortunately they can happen anywhere, and do occur again and again. Because when times are hard, those who give simple answers to difficult questions, who seek to blame others, who exclude and discriminate against foreigners or supposed foreigners, come into power. We must take action and fight back at the very first signs, for — and this is also something learned from the Nazi era — once a terrorist regime is established, it takes heroic courage to challenge it. And only very few have that. That's why we must remember: "*Principiis obsta*. Beware of the beginnings. Never again war."

[pp 12-19]

Ilse Tamm

Escape Across the Baltic Sea

1934 – Born in Grundensee, East Prussia

1945 – Fled from East Prussia

1949 – Completed schooling

1950 – Home economics training

1951–54 – Apprenticeship in Seedorf administration

1954–60 – Employed in an administrative position

1963–78 – Typist working from home

1978–97 – Employed in an engineering firm

“Terrible things happened to other refugees from East Prussia. They were run over by Russian tanks, murdered, raped, kidnapped, froze during the trek or drowned in the Baltic Sea. We were spared all of that. We kept marching just ahead of the front and were never overtaken by the Russian troops, because my mother continuously urged us onward.”

Ilse Tamm was ten years old, her older sister Elli was thirteen, and their younger sister Toni nine when they reached Holstein, unscathed, after their three-month journey to escape East Prussia. This was primarily thanks to their mother’s determination. She drove her daughters unrelentingly forward. “Keep going!” Even when the children froze miserably in the bitter cold. “Keep going!” Even when their feet hurt so badly from hours of continuous marching that they could hardly go on. “Keep going!” Even when there was an opportunity to rest.

Their mother knew that the Russian army was advancing relentlessly. Every delay along the way increased the danger of being overrun by the front, after all. The Soviet troops were advancing at a rapid pace, and the German armed forces near the end of the war, exhausted and depleted, could hardly put up any resistance.

She didn’t hesitate to give up their every possession in order to move along as quickly as possible. They left behind their fully packed, heavy, cart right at the beginning of their trek, in East Prussia. The family continued on foot or by train. This made them faster and more flexible than they were with a horse and wagon. Even when their sole suitcase with their last few belongings disappeared in Swinemünde, she didn’t waste a single minute looking for it, but instead rushed to the train station with her daughters to catch what might be the last train departing toward the west.

Early evacuation

Ilse Tamm grew up on her parents’ farm in Grundensee in eastern Masuria, not far from the Russian border. The war did not reach this idyllic region until August 1944.

“That’s when the first German refugees trekked through our village. They came from what is now Belarus, trying to escape the approaching Soviet army with

their covered wagons and herds of cows. But we were children and didn't think anything of it."

Only in November 1944 were the people living in the village ordered to evacuate, because the advancing Soviet troops were quickly approaching the border. Ilse's mother quickly packed the hay cart and hitched the horses to it. The rest of the animals were let loose and left to their own devices. "Those were the orders. I remember the cows in the village bellowing in pain because no one was milking them anymore."

Her mother rode on the hay cart with her widowed father-in-law and her three daughters to Kronau, a town further west. There they were assigned to a small room that was not large enough for five people. So the grandfather remained in Kronau by himself. The mother and three daughters moved on until they reached her sister Ida, who lived a few villages further away on a farm. The family lived there until late January 1945, when Erich Koch, gauleiter of East Prussia, gave the belated order to evacuate. Koch followed Hitler's command to fight until the very last moment and not to yield any ground to the enemy. That resulted in death for thousands of people, because Soviet troops had already begun to take over East Prussia. Units of the Red Army had also passed East Prussia to the south and were marching toward Berlin. This effectively cut off land routes out of East Prussia; it was not possible to leave by land or train. For the entrapped people of East Prussia there was only one way out: the Baltic Sea.

Before they could reach the sea and escape, however, there was an enormous obstacle in their path: the Vistula Lagoon. This inland sea lies between the coast of East Prussia and the Vistula Spit, a very narrow peninsula. Ships only departed from the Baltic ports on the spit. The refugees would have to cross the lagoon in order to reach a ship.

Escape through snow and ice

"The evacuation order was given on the 20th of January. My father had written my mother that she should leave everything behind and come as quickly as possible to Nauen near Berlin, where he was stationed as a soldier. He already knew there was no hope for Germany."

Ilse's mother traveled with her three daughters back to Kronau, but the eighty year old grandfather didn't want to make the trek with them. He spoke Russian and felt that nothing would happen to him. The mother left the cart and horses with him. She didn't want to wait until an expedition formed; she just wanted to get out as fast as she could. The girls filled their backpacks with some food and clothes. Their mother packed the essentials into a backpack and two bags, and then they set off for the nearest train station.

"We walked through ice and snow. It was 25 degrees below zero. We wore thick socks and tall, laced boots, but we still froze and more than anything, we were scared. It got dark early and we could hear the thunder of canons all the time. The front wasn't far away."

The evening of January 22, the family was able to climb aboard a freight train. It was already overflowing with refugees. "There was straw in the train cars.

Crammed together, everyone squatted on a suitcase or other bag. There was a woman with a baby with us on the train. The baby screamed all night long. Riding in the dark train was strange and frightening to me.”

In the early morning hours, the train came to a stop. The refugees had to get out. They were supposed to walk to the next village. “I can still see the train tracks, the enormous field of snow, and the houses in the distance. We starting walking. Along the way people made little fires and burned documents. My mother did, too. Identification papers and anything else that had a swastika on it. We had to assume the train wasn’t continuing because the Russians were about to arrive. Then everyone was afraid they would get in trouble because of their papers. Suddenly we heard a loud bang. We looked back and were horrified: the train had been blown up. Wood and metal pieces flew through the air. Then we continued marching toward the village. There we were given something to drink, and immediately continued on our way.

We three sisters were already somewhat older. We could walk even if our legs hurt. But among the refugees were five and six year old children and some even younger. They couldn’t walk very far or had to be carried.”

Focus: Fear of the Russians

On October 21, 1944, the Soviet army occupied the East Prussian town of Nemmersdorf, which was one of the first towns inside German territory. When the Wehrmacht reentered the village, they found all the women and children had been gruesomely murdered. The Nazi propaganda used these crimes to fuel people’s fear of the Russians. In their panic, people tried to flee from the advancing Soviet troops. The Russian author Ilja Ehrenburg had previously written in an appeal to Soviet soldiers: *When you have killed a German, kill the next one – there is nothing better than German corpses.* As the Red Army occupied the eastern part of Germany, mass rapes and massacres took place. Thousands more were taken to forced labor camps in the Soviet Union.

There is a background to these crimes against German civilians, however. June 22, 1941 marked the beginning of the German attack of the Soviet Union. The campaign was a war of annihilation directed at what the Nazis called “Slavic subhumans.” Hundreds of thousands of Russian prisoners of war were abandoned to die of hunger or murdered in concentration camps. During the siege of Leningrad, a third of the city’s population starved or froze to death. If there was any suspicion that a village was harboring partisans, the villagers were rounded up in a barn or the church and set on fire. Of the total 55 million deaths resulting from World War II, over 20 million were Russians, including 7 million civilians.

The overland trek

After walking in the bitter cold for hours, they reached Heilsberg in the evening. The city was blacked out. It was already being fired on by Russian artillery. With loud booms the shots were fired and flew above the refugees’ heads. The night sky was

illuminated every time a building was hit. The girls stayed close to their mother. "Mami, what's going on? Mami, we can't go on anymore!"

But their mother did not stop. She wanted to leave the city behind just as fast as possible. At some point they found a place where they could spend the night in a school. Soldiers and refugees lay crowded next to each other on the bare floors. "We just lay down between people, just as we were. We got a kick once in a while, too, when someone rolled over in their sleep."

The next morning they moved onward. Long columns of wagons proceeded westward. Thousands of women, children, and elderly people were fleeing from their homes on heavily laden horse-drawn carts. Between them were lots of women struggling to push or pull strollers and children's wagons along the snowy roads. Many of the overloaded wagons got stuck in the snow. "It was difficult to get through. We wove our way through the crowds off to the side. Our mother went first and made a path for us. The three of us girls followed right behind her. I remember the chaos, the terrible cold, and my fear very well."

Across the frozen lagoon

The family was lucky in its misfortune: they were able to get a ride on military vehicles for a long stretch and nearly reached the Vistula Lagoon. And so, after two weeks traveling on foot, they reached the coast in early February. The lagoon was still frozen, but the weather had already started to warm up and an ankle-deep layer of melted ice water covered the ice. Would the ice hold? For Ilse's mother there was no question. They had to continue.

In columns the refugees moved onto the ice. People slipped and fell, horses slid. The ice cracked loudly and made noises that scared everyone. The girls scooted across the lagoon right next to their mother. On the enormous white expanse, the refugees were a good target for fighter planes. But it was a cloudy day, and gray clouds hung low over the sea. The planes had poor visibility, and so they were spared strafers. Other treks were attacked, the ice broke, and people, horses, and wagons sank into the ice-cold water. After six hours walking across the ice, at nightfall they reached the Vistula Spit, the narrow strip of land in the Baltic Sea. They wandered into the woods and made a fire.

"Our boots and stockings, the long underwear, our skirts and coats, everything was soaking wet and drenched with water. We tried to warm our frozen feet and legs by the fire and to dry our things. Everything steamed."

Reaching the harbor

During that night in the forest, they met Aunt Ida with her children. She had also been on the move for two weeks with her hay wagon. "We all continued on our way the next day. But with the cart she was slower than us. The wagons were heavy and their wooden wheels sank in the sand, making it difficult to move. We only found out much later that our aunt didn't make it to the west."

On the beach on the spit there was a sandy path where the wagons rode. Those on foot walked along the edge of the forest. "Suddenly I saw a soldier lying on

the ground by the forest. When I looked more closely I saw that he was dead. That was the first dead body I had ever seen. My heart was pounding. I ran to my mother, but was too scared to tell her anything. She couldn't understand why I didn't want to walk along the edge of the forest anymore."

Occasionally soldiers in horse-drawn panje wagons went by. They had rubber wheels that made them faster than the wooden wagons. Everyone and everything had to get out of their way. But the soldiers stopped and took the children with them. "We huddled together on the wagons; wounded soldiers lay in the back of them. The ride was bumpy and we swayed, and we had to be careful not to bump into the wounded men."

After several days more they reached Kahlberg. The front was just a bit further to the south by then. Now they couldn't go any further on foot. The only way out was by sea.

By boat to Danzig

Kahlberg was a small beach town on the Vistula Spit that had a harbor. The refugees were provided with food and drink there. The harbor could only accommodate small boats, which were immediately filled beyond their capacity. So people were given passes. Teenagers and individuals traveling alone were not allowed to leave; they were assigned to help take care of the refugees. The first to board were wounded soldiers, then women with children.

The refugees crowded onto the boats. They had hoped the overcrowded ships would take them far into the west, but they only went as far as Neufahrwasser, near Danzig (now Gdansk). There everyone had to get off again, because the boats returned to Kahlbert, where thousands of wounded soldiers and refugees were waiting for them.

Emergency confirmation

From Neufahrwasser, the family took a train, intending to ride to Berlin where their father was. But they did not get very far. Their short ride ended in Stolp (now Slupsk) in Pomerania. The route beyond the town was blocked, because the Russians were already there. The mother and her three daughters were stuck.

In Stolp they were housed in the pharmacy on the market square. "The four of us were assigned the office of the pharmacist, where there was of course no bed. So some straw was scattered on the floor and we were given wool blankets to wrap ourselves in."

They received food from an aid station at the market. There the girls' mother happened to hear that children could be confirmed *in extremis* in Stolp. Their mother signed up her oldest daughter, Elli. The pastor gave several hours of confirmation instruction, and then the confirmation was celebrated. The mother was even able to rustle up a cake for the occasion. But the front was drawing closer and closer.

"It was clear that it was only a matter of days before the city would be overtaken. So the shops opened and sold everything before the Russian soldiers came and plundered everything. Usually you could only buy things with ration coupons, but now we could buy anything we wanted. We had brought almost

nothing with us from East Prussia, so our mother bought clothes for us and a lovely confirmation dress for Elli. Since we hardly had any luggage with us, she also had to buy a suitcase to pack everything into.”

The thundering of artillery from the nearby front grew louder and louder in the city. Ilse’s mother had stayed in Stolp much longer than she had planned because of the confirmation. Now it was urgent that they move on. On March 5, the day after the confirmation ceremony, she left the city with her daughters. Just three days later, Stolp was occupied by the Red Army.

There was no way to move west or south by train or by foot anymore. Their only option was to flee across the sea. So they took a sightseeing train along the coast to Stolpmünde.

“When we were fleeing, as a ten-year-old child, I didn’t understand very much of what was happening around me. But the fact that something terrible was going on, I definitely grasped that, even then.”

— Ilse Tamm, September 23, 2011

Travel by boat

“At the harbor there was an enormous crowd of people waiting to get tickets for a ship. You couldn’t board without one. Night fell, but the endless line didn’t move at all. Nearby there were little changing cabins on the beach. Mami walked with us to one of those little huts to have a little protection during the night. It was so small that we just barely fit inside. We took turns, two sitting on the suitcase and the other two standing up leaning against the wall. It was bitterly cold. We were sick and coughed all night long. The next morning we went straight back to the harbor.

The gigantic crowd was still there. The first to be selected were the women with young children. But we were already older. Then it was pregnant women with children. Mami yelled out loud: “I’m pregnant and I have three children!” My mother was slim, but she had a little bit of a paunch. She stuck out her belly and moved to the front of the crowd with us. We got tickets and were allowed on board.

The ship was so big that it couldn’t enter the port. So we had to get into small boats. It rocked and swayed dreadfully. Then we got to the ship. Rope ladders hung down from above. We had to make our way from the swaying boat onto the rope ladder and then clamber up, hand over hand. When we got to the top, we were heaved on board. My heart was racing and I was terrified.

Once on the ship, we went to a large room. Along the sides were bunks, all of them stacked three high. Each family was assigned to a berth, but only for a few hours, and then we switched so that everyone had a chance to lie down. In the night the ship finally set off.

The Russians were already at the gates of Kolberg. When we sailed past them they shot at us. Sirens went off, the ship was blacked out, and every opening was shut tight. Then we ran into bad weather and stormy seas. We sat cooped up and crammed together in tight quarters. The adults got seasick first. The children tolerated it longer, but then we started throwing up, too. The smell alone was enough to make you sick. Finally the sea became calmer. We sisters got a berth and

could rest a little. Our mother sat on the suitcase the entire time. We sailed to Swinemünde (Swinoujście). There we had to get off the ship again and went into the town.”

The *Wilhelm Gustloff*

Soviet U boats torpedoed several refugee ships on the Baltic Sea in 1945. Those that took the greatest toll were the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* on January 30 with 9,000 dead, the *Steuben* on February 10 with 3,600 lives lost, and the *Goya* on April 16 with 6,600 lost at sea. By comparison, when the *Titanic* sank in 1912, 1,500 passengers died.

Last-minute rescue

As evening approached, word came that the ship would remain in the harbor, and children could go on board and sleep there. The town was overflowing with refugees and there was nowhere to stay overnight. The three sisters returned to the ship, while their mother stayed in town with their belongings. In the middle of the night she found out that a train was coming, after all. She left everything, ran to the ship, tore her daughters from their sleep and rushed back into town with them. In the chaos and crowds of people she couldn't find her luggage. But she didn't take time to look long, and ran with her three girls to the train station.

“The suitcase with all the lovely new things was gone. But my mother did the right thing. She could have said, ‘I'll let the children sleep. They're so exhausted. We'll take the next train tomorrow.’ Instead she went and got us. That saved our lives. Because I don't know if there were any more trains after that one. Two days later Swinemünde was destroyed by a bombing attack. The ship was sunk with all the refugees on board. There were so many dead and injured. We escaped that gruesome fate at the last minute.”

They climbed aboard a freight train headed west. They barely had any space, but that didn't matter. It was just important to keep going.

In their new home

The train brought them to the town of Parchim in Mecklenburg. “We had to go to a de-lousing facility. After almost two months on the run we were utterly filthy. We were sent to a shower room, young and old and lots of children. Then the water came from above. We got our clothes back later, disinfected.”

They were assigned a room. There they celebrated Ilse's eleventh birthday on the March 15th. Her mother even baked a birthday cake made of boiled potatoes mixed with a little flour and an egg. “It was not much, but as we did the confirmation, we were able to celebrate a little.”

Their stay did not last long, however, because a new wave of refugees was expected, and room had to be made for them. At the end of March, Ilse and her family climbed aboard a train to Hamburg. “In hindsight it was our great fortune that they sent us away. Because the Americans were the first to reach Mecklenburg, but they later handed that territory over to the Russians. That means we would have

ended up in the Soviet Zone in spite of everything, after we had traveled so far. Everything would have been in vain. But this way we ended up in the west.”

The train ride ended in Hamburg. “We children sat shaking with fear in the demolished main train station.” From Hamburg the refugees were transported by trucks to the villages in the surrounding area and distributed there. Ilse Tamm and her family were assigned a room with a farmer in Dithmarschen. “And that was the end of our odyssey.”

The Navy rescue mission

After the war, it was often said that in 1945 the main goal of the German Navy had been the rescue of millions of refugees via the Baltic Sea. In fact, Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz only made the rescue of refugees their top priority on May 6, just two days before the war ended. Until then, the needs of the Navy and other armed forces took priority in order to continue fighting the advance of the Red Army.

[pp. 42-53]

Lost Children

“I was found in late January 1945 on the road between Elbing and Marienburg. I was about three years old, wearing a dark blue coat and a blue knit cap with a white pompom. My mother called me Butzi. Does anyone know who I am?”

Even today, the tracing service of the German Red Cross maintains a list of people who do not know their names, where they come from, or to which family they once belonged. Hundreds of thousands of children became orphans during World War II. Their fathers were killed in battle, while their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts died in a hail of bombs, starved and froze, were unsuccessful when they tried to flee, or were murdered. Many children were lost in the infernos of burning cities or in the chaos of waves of refugees fleeing. For many, the search for their families continued for years.

The tracing service of the German Red Cross has been able to clarify the status of approximately 500,000 children since the end of the war. The organization works with a databank that has grown to include 50 million entries. Nonetheless, the fate of 1.3 million Germans remains unclear, among them 4,000 children.

It was especially difficult to figure out the origin of “foundlings,” children who were too young to remember their names, their birthdays, or an address. They were uncovered in rubble or spotted in ditches alongside roads by other refugees on the run and taken along. The tracing service had 33,000 foundlings in its records. The great majority were able to recover their identity over the years. But there are still 600 people who do not know who they are. They continue to live with an adopted name and approximate birth date.

A special group of war orphans were called “wolf children.” They had been separated from their families in East Prussia. Their relatives had either died or been imprisoned, or they lost each other as they fled. Even if they could find their way

back home, they had no way to support themselves, because the Soviet administration only gave food rations, already much too meager, to the working population. The children tried to feed themselves by begging, finding food in the cellars of houses destroyed by bombs, or from the garbage at the Soviet barracks. The Russians rounded up hundreds of wolf children and at first sheltered them in children's homes. Approximately 4,700 children were transported into the Soviet Zone in several transports.

Thousands of children entered the Baltic Soviet republics illegally, where they begged or worked for food. According to Soviet propaganda, these Germans were enemies of the state. Nonetheless, many families in Lithuania took in German children and protected them by declaring them to be their relatives. Many wolf children worked as cheap labor on farms. They could no longer go to school and started to forget their native language. In 1951, about 3,000 wolf children left Lithuania for the DDR.

Providing for the orphans in Germany was very difficult, because so many homes were destroyed in bombing attacks. There was hardly anything to use to generate heat, and due to the shortage of food, what they were given to eat was sparse indeed. With the assistance of the tracing service, many of the mothers of these lost children were reunited with them, or their missing fathers were released from prison and returned. But for many thousands of children, the war took everything: their family, their home, and even their identity.

[pp. 44-53]

Ursula Heller

A Wolf Child in Poland

1933 – Born in Osterode, East Prussia

1944 – Evacuated to West Prussia

1946 – Displaced to Mecklenburg

1947 – Moved to the British Zone

1951 – Completed schooling

1951–53 – Apprenticeship

1968–74 – Earned a degree in Religious Education

1973–1993 – Religion teacher

2012 – Died in Sylt

Ursula Heller liked to watch movies about catastrophes on television. She found them incredibly comforting, because in utterly hopeless situations, a strong hero appears and risks his own life to save the people in mortal danger. Her own childhood was a catastrophe film, except that no shining hero came to her rescue. At the age of twelve, she had to become a heroine herself to save herself and her two younger siblings.

The tragedy of her childhood began in 1944 in Insterburg, in East Prussia. Ursula Heller was the oldest of four siblings. Her brother Horst died that summer of diphtheria. On the day of his funeral her mother went into labor and had to go to the

hospital, leaving Ursula to bury her brother alone. The newborn baby boy died in heavy bombing of Insterburg in July 1944. "He suffocated in the air raid shelter. Then my mother just had three of us: me, my sister Ruth, she was eight, and Klaus, he was six. For me, the death of my brother was a prelude to every gruesome thing that happened to me later."

In the late summer, the family was evacuated from East Prussia and made its way to Riesenburg in West Prussia, where Ursula's grandmother was still living. "Back then everything was still organized. We could take our belongings with us. In Riesenburg we even celebrated Christmas. But on January 19, the Russians were already in the neighboring town. We had to flee."

Escape to Pomerania

Ursula's mother ran to the train station with her children and a few belongings. "A passenger train came. It was so full, people were even standing between the bumpers. Wounded soldiers pulled us in through the windows, because clusters of people hung on all the doors."

The train ride brought them to Dirschau, south of Danzig. After a few weeks they went another stage further and moved on to Köslin in Pomerania. "There we were unloaded because everyone said, 'The Russians won't come here, they won't cross the Vistula River, Hitler will make sure of it.' The way they worked us over with brainwashing is just unbelievable."

After two weeks, the front had advanced threateningly close and the family fled in a freight train. "We had to stand, but the wagons were packed so full that we couldn't fall down. The worst thing, though, was the bathroom situation. No one could get out. That was a stench, and the crying and screaming."

At first the train went southward. But there was already fighting there and the train was shot at. So the engineer turned the train around and headed north. Their journey by rail ended in March, just outside Kolberg.

The loss of her mother

The train could not enter the city, because the train station was already clogged with trains. Day and night the refugees in the train cars had to hold out. The snow was deep and it was icy cold. "There was no space to lie down. We slept sitting up and tried to keep each other warm. In our car a woman even gave birth." Any provisions people had brought along were quickly eaten up. In the first days the refugees could still get food in a nearby village.

"But after eight days, we couldn't get anything there anymore. Until then we hadn't dared to go further away from the train; it could have started moving any time. But now the hunger was so great that several women decided to walk along the tracks to Kolberg. There was a rumor that a baker there had baked all the flour he had before the Russians came. My mother was one of those who set off. We three children stayed in the train."

The Kolberg stronghold

The city on the coast of the Baltic Sea resisted the siege of Napoleonic troops in the early nineteenth century.

The Russians storm the train

“Mutti is gone. Everything is calm, quiet, and pleasant. I go out in the snow. Suddenly I see crouched, dark figures running. They’re too far away to recognize. First I think it’s people from the village, but they are Russian soldiers. They dig holes to set up the Stalin’s organ. They’re building the front line for Kolberg. For a moment everything is still so quiet. But then the Russians take over our train. They tear open the doors, screaming in Russian, take the women, grab the watches. Then we’re told we have to get out, the train is going to be blown up. I take an extra pair of shoes for each of us from our suitcase and stuff them in my siblings’ coat pockets. Then I take a knife with me and jump out. There’s a terrible commotion. The few men in the train, all of them are already old, are being beaten to death, and the women raped. If a woman tries to protect a young girl, she gets clubbed. There’s so much blood in the white snow.”

Wounded between the fronts

The survivors were driven into the nearby forest. Ursula followed with her siblings, but as slowly as possible. She was waiting for their mother. “I knew that we would be shot in the forest. I hoped that Mutti would come and get us soon, then we children wouldn’t have to die alone, but could all die together with her.”

The children were the end of the column. They passed a farm. Ursula went to the farm with her brother and sister. “I told the farmer’s wife, a young Polish woman, that we were waiting for our mother. She gave me a sugared raw egg.

Then the attack on Kolberg began. We were between the fronts. The bullets flew past our heads from both sides. The mother with the baby born in the train fled into an outbuilding. That shed was hit full on and the woman and her baby died horribly. Then the farmhouse collapsed, too. I was injured and had a big, deep wound on my leg. My siblings crept out of various corners. They were bloody, scraped up from head to toe. I took them by the hand and ran into the woods after the others.

When you could see a little bit of sky in the forest, it was fiery red. The people said it must be like this in hell. We had to go right past the Stalin organ. It was so loud that I lost my hearing. It only came back a few days later.”

Their new home: the corner of a room

The Russian soldiers forced the children to the next village. They were assigned a bed of straw in the corner of a room in a farmhouse. This is where they lived for a year and a half. In this extreme situation, everyone looked out for him or herself.

“That’s when I learned how horrible adults could be. We were defenseless children and they took the little we had away from us. When I was able to find something edible and shared it with my siblings, they tore it out of our hands. Then I hid things or buried them outside so they would be safe from them.”

The children repeatedly witnessed brutal rapes. “The Russian soldiers mainly came at night and raped the women viciously in front of our eyes. They didn’t have any consideration for us children. Nothing happened to me personally, because I was small and skinny and didn’t have any breasts yet. But the young girls who were

more physically developed than me were not spared. One night escaped German soldiers knocked on the door and begged for a place to stay and something to eat. The women just yelled, 'Get lost! You brought this misery on us!' And they didn't open the door.

Then one day we heard 'Woina kaputt, war kaputt.' The adults didn't believe the war was really over. They thought the soldiers would still come and free us and we could go home again. The adults were talking nonsense again.

After the war we learned what concentrations camps were, and what the German soldiers had done in Russia. The Russians who could speak German told us about it. We shouldn't be surprised by what was happening to us now, they always said, because we would have done the same to them, too."

Ursula Heller in Insterburg

Stalin's organ

The Red Army used multiple rocket launchers that could fire in rapid succession. Because the rockets were arranged like the pipes of an organ, the Germans called them Stalin's organs after the Soviet head of state and commander in chief, Joseph Stalin.

Wolf child in Poland

In the beginning, the farmer's wife occasionally gave the children something to eat, but soon she had nothing left. They searched abandoned houses outside the village for food.

"The people were afraid, because they had it bad when the Russians came. I had to constantly keep my ears open and be on the alert, too. Every day I had to think about and decide, where could we look for anything edible? Where is it dangerous, where are we safe? When do we need to turn around in order to be back in our room before dark? We lived just for that day. We never had any idea what would happen the next day."

The children were the only orphans in the village, but there were groups of youngsters roaming around in the forests. "We hid ourselves from them, because they were rougher and bigger than me, and some of them were mean. We were afraid they would beat us or steal from us."

Ursula and her siblings were outside all day long, scrounging or begging for anything they could eat. They had no one to give them anything. "I was a wolf child, even if we were in Pomerania and not in Lithuania. I developed certain strengths. The animal instincts in me came out. Because I had to deal with everything, with the weather, with animals, with plants, with other people. And I was only twelve years old, small and puny. I had to keep the younger ones together. I was responsible for them. I was their pseudo-mother and always reassured them. For their sake I had to tough it out in this adult role. In order to survive, I sometimes had to be strict, too: 'You two have to do what I say. If you don't, I'll run away from you.' I threatened that often. But I don't have a bad conscience about it. What was I supposed to do? I had

to have some tactic that worked, otherwise we wouldn't have made it. I saved them and they saved me. I often think that if I hadn't had responsibility for my siblings, I wouldn't have survived. I would have given up. It was just too much."

"At first I was deathly afraid all the time. But at some point you are ready to die, and when there's a new danger you just think, 'Good, now is the time. Now I must die.'"

— Ursula Heller / October 6, 2011

Gangrene, typhoid, and lice

There was neither ointment nor a bandage for the serious wound on Ursula's leg. Women advised her to place plantain leaves on it to heal the gangrene. In spring and summer she picked the leaves that grew along the edge of paths, and laid them on the wound. "I could have lost the leg if it had gone any deeper. With plantain I saved my leg."

Due to the terrible hygienic conditions, epidemics broke out. "We had alternating bouts of typhoid and dysentery. Once I had a near-death experience. I was unconscious or in a coma. The adults thought I was dead. They almost buried me alive. I hovered above myself, saw and heard everything going on, but couldn't do a thing. With my last energy I returned to life. Because I knew: You can't die, otherwise the little ones will soon be dead, too. The adults would have chased them out of the house to have our lovely corner for themselves."

Her younger brother became dangerously ill with typhoid and was moved to a house with other patients. "They didn't treat them there. They were just supposed to die. But I thought to myself, 'My brother is not going to die!' So she brought him food as often as she could. One time she got a sausage. She divided it into three and went to her brother.

"We weren't allowed to have any contact, because he was in quarantine. But we had to hand the piece of sausage directly to him, otherwise someone else would have taken it away from him. So we called, 'Klaus should come to the window.' He took a bite and said 'There are so many worms in it!' 'Yes,' I said, 'they taste good.' I had already seen that the sausage was full of maggots, but I thought he was so young he wouldn't notice. But he did. And ate the sausage anyway."

Every day the children spent hours removing lice from each other and crushing nits. "We were still full of lice, because we constantly got each other infested again."

"I owe my survival to nettles"

At twelve years of age, Ursula Heller didn't know which plants were edible. When the nettles grew in springtime, she saw that women were picking them. "We lived mainly on nettles. At least we had something in our stomachs."

The children also subsisted on dandelions and in summer and fall from fruit. They went into the fields and meadows and gathered whatever they could find. Occasionally they saw a hen. "We snatched the eggs out from under the hens' bottoms. Each egg we divided in thirds. We cracked it open and then ate it raw."

One day they found a plum tree full of ripe fruit. They took as many plums with them as they could carry. "We had far too many to eat all at once. I always handed out only a little bit to eat at a time, so we would have something for the following days. So I went to the farmer's wife and asked for some jars. She told me I should pour hot water over the plums. I had no idea how to make fruit keep longer. I hadn't grown up in the country. Our stores of plums went bad, they fermented. I cried bitterly. What's stayed with me from that time is a tremendous gratitude for everything edible. Every year in spring I pick nettles and eat them. I worship that plant like a relic, because I owe my life to it."

Shoes made of string

The three children's shoes were completely torn and tattered, and falling apart. Then Ursula found a ball of twine. She had learned some handcrafts in school. She asked the farmer's wife for a crochet needle, and then she crocheted the thin, white string into slippers for herself and her siblings. She used burlap for the soles, and attached them with the crochet needle. "That's how it was back then. No one helped me. I constantly had to figure things out, be creative about how I could use things. And then I had to be careful that the grown ups didn't just take away from me what I had made or found somewhere.

In 2003, I saw similar slippers in the Jewish Museum in Riga. Exactly the same kind of slippers I crocheted back then. And I just fell apart. I stood in front of the display case and cried so hard I couldn't breathe. I sobbed and sobbed and gasped for air. The people in my group couldn't understand what was wrong with me all of a sudden."

Help from the enemies

In the first months, Pomerania was occupied by Russian troops; then came the Polish military. The Russians didn't distribute any food, but when a soldier came across the children, he sometimes gave them some of his rations.

"They knew us and might have known that we were orphans. Russians like children, they were fond of us. So they gave us something from their pouch. Those were the nicest experiences of that entire time, when the Russians soldiers gave us little gifts of food. And when they played music, that made me very happy. They sung so beautifully. I still love the Russian songs today. I have no hatred toward the Russians. Later came the Poles. They didn't do anything to us children, either. They also helped us occasionally, giving us a portion of whatever they had to eat, maybe a thick slice of bread, for example. The three of us shared it. It was never much that they gave us, because they didn't have anything themselves. With the Germans, on the other hand, you couldn't count on them at all. Everyone just wanted to survive. Nothing else mattered to them. The only ones to help me were our enemies at the time."

Her only friend

When the Poles took possession of Pomerania, Ursula Heller had to work for the soldiers. It was her job to care for the horses belonging to the Polish regiment. "The

lead stallion always came up to me. He lowered his head. Then I stood up, hugged him, warmed myself on his neck, and told him all my troubles and everything that had happened. Riding horses and having them to care for was a great stroke of luck for me. It always stayed with me. I experienced this feeling of being rescued, being cared for, of warmth. That animal meant the world to me.”

Expulsion from Poland

In late summer 1946, Ursula was working in the fields. One day her younger sister came running and yelling, “The people are being taken to the train station, they’re all being sent away!” Ursula ran home. The Germans had to climb onto a hay cart. The Polish mayor of the town ordered the children, “You stay here!”

Ursula, however, did not want to stay there with her siblings and be the only Germans left. So she whispered to them, “We’re going, too. You have to hide yourselves. Go to the very front of the cart and crawl under the people’s legs. Then the mayor won’t see you.” Then she hid herself on the cart, too. That’s how they got to the train station.

“We had no idea where we were headed. No one told us anything. It could just as well have been Siberia.” But the ride in the open hay wagon was moving westward. In the train were not only former refugees from East Prussia, but also Pomeranians who were being expelled. The train stopped in Stettin.

“We stopped on a holding track. Then came the Poles. They didn’t even open the doors, just climbed right over our heads and started tearing luggage out from underneath people. Especially the Pomeranians, who still had their belongings with them. That was the next shock for me. Oh, my God, will this never end? Everyone was screaming, we were at our wits end. I couldn’t listen to it anymore. It’s so horrible.”

Mute in the orphanage

The siblings reached Pankow in the Soviet sector of Berlin. “We were registered and then brought to an orphanage in Criwitz, in Mecklenburg. They wrote down that my mother was dead. But I had told them that she was ‘missing’. Now I could hand over the responsibility for my siblings to someone else. I wasn’t in charge. I didn’t want to see or hear anything. I did nothing. I was exhausted, spent. And then I went mute. I just didn’t talk anymore. I don’t know what was wrong with me. It’s probably true, under tremendous pressure, you lose your ability to speak.”

The leader of the orphanage, called Aunt Anni, was afraid for the mute girl and took very special care of her. The doctor had ascertained that she had not grown during the long period of malnutrition. Ursula was too small and too weak to go to school. “And I didn’t speak, either, so what would I do in school?” But Aunt Anni tried everything to help Ursula. She sent her to the church choir. “I didn’t talk, but I sang. The beautiful music made me cry. I sang and cried, whole rivers.”

In one way the three siblings were different from all the other children in the orphanage: they were the only ones who had hair on their heads. “All of them were shaved bald because they had lice. We were the only ones allowed to keep our short

hair, because we hardly had any lice at all. We had worked hard for that, and now we were rewarded.”

In the orphanage, an epidemic of typhoid broke out. The siblings had already had typhoid and were probably immune to the disease. When several of the orphans died, Ursula was despondent. “I didn’t want to live anymore. I thought it’s not worth it, there’s no point. If things go on like this, what else will happen? The world has gone completely mad.”

The father finds his children

“Then one day we found our father again.” In spring 1947, a kitchen helper from the orphanage fled across the border with Holstein into the British Zone, and from there came to the transit camp in Bad Segeberg. Their father had been in that transit camp since his release from British captivity. He had hung notices around the camp: *I’m looking for my wife and three children*. The kitchen help saw the notice and told him that his children were in an orphanage, but she didn’t know anything about their mother.

The father immediately sent money and papers to Criwitz. After eight months, the children could finally leave the orphanage. They were supposed to depart via Friedland, but in Ilsenburg in the Harz Mountains they were detained by the Soviets for two weeks. “Supposedly the papers weren’t quite right anymore. We had to wait until my father sent new papers and more money. Only then did we make it to Friedland. There we were deloused, given train tickets, and were put on the train to Bad Segeberg.

We arrived in the camp and said who we were. ‘Ah, your father told us all about you, and in the meantime your mother is here, too.’ While we were being held in Ilsenburg, the Russians in Lübeck had released my mother on the border and she had also made her way to Bad Segeberg.

Her mother’s fate

“My mother was in Kolberg when the Russians came. Horrific things happened to her. First her two sons died, then she lost us. That was five children, gone. After Kolberg was occupied she was raped repeatedly and brutally. She didn’t want to live anymore and tried to take her own life. But female Russian officers found her and rescued her. They could speak a little German. They felt sorry for her because she had lost all her children, and so they took her in as their housekeeper. They worked in a so-called riding headquarters. My mother cooked, ironed, and cleaned for them. She did everything very well; their uniforms shone and gleamed. My mother had it good with the Russian women. They took good care of her. The women took her along to the sauna or the hairdresser. Because she had done such good work, in gratitude, they brought her to the border and even decked her out. They made two suitcases from scrap wood and packed them full, even bed linens they stuffed into them. Those were very valuable at the time. They carried everything to the border for her. She didn’t have any papers, that’s why she came to the camp in Bad Segeberg to be registered, and found my father there.”

Reunion with their parents

The children were brought to their parents as soon as they arrived in Bad Segeberg. They stood in the doorway waiting for them.

“My father is in the background. I only see my mother. She’s standing in the doorway and says simply, ‘Well, come in.’ Nothing more. And I think to myself, did you do something wrong? Would it have been better if we had died? Then I was miserable again and didn’t want to live.

My mother had traumas that no one can even imagine. In the following years she took care of us, but she wasn’t motherly anymore. She was broken. At the time I didn’t understand her. But I didn’t hate her; I was much too weak and depleted myself for that.

When we arrived, I was fourteen years old and weighed 27 kilos (60 pounds). For the summer I was sent to a sanatorium near the Baltic Sea. I was so puny, the doctor said, “This one’s going to wither away and die on us.’ But the woman who ran the home liked me. I was her little chick and had to eat as much as I could. And she nursed me back to life.”

The difficult new start

Soon they were four siblings again, because in December 1947 a baby sister was born. The post-war period was very difficult for the family. They were destitute. The father could not find work. “I received an education subsidy so that I could go to school. That’s what my parents used to pay the rent for our tiny apartment. Otherwise we would have landed back in a barrack.”

The refugees had another big problem: they were not welcome among the local population. “It was terrible. They avoided us. They didn’t know what we had experienced, and screamed at us, “You damned Polacks, what do you want here? Go home!”

Although Ursula hadn’t gone to school for two years, she was a very good student. Nonetheless, she had to leave school after junior high in order to find a trade and earn money for the family, because her father was still unemployed.

“There was an army of people without work. In 1954 there was a resettlement program, because Schleswig-Holstein was overflowing with refugees. My mother said they would move to North Rhine-Westphalia so my father could get work in a factory. I stayed alone in Bad Segeberg. After all, I was already twenty-one. And I was in the middle of taking exams and wanted to finish my training at all costs, because if I went somewhere else I would’ve had to start over from the beginning. And so our family was torn apart again. Those were just awful times.”