

Erika Berzins, born Engele.

Born in Dzelzava 1908.

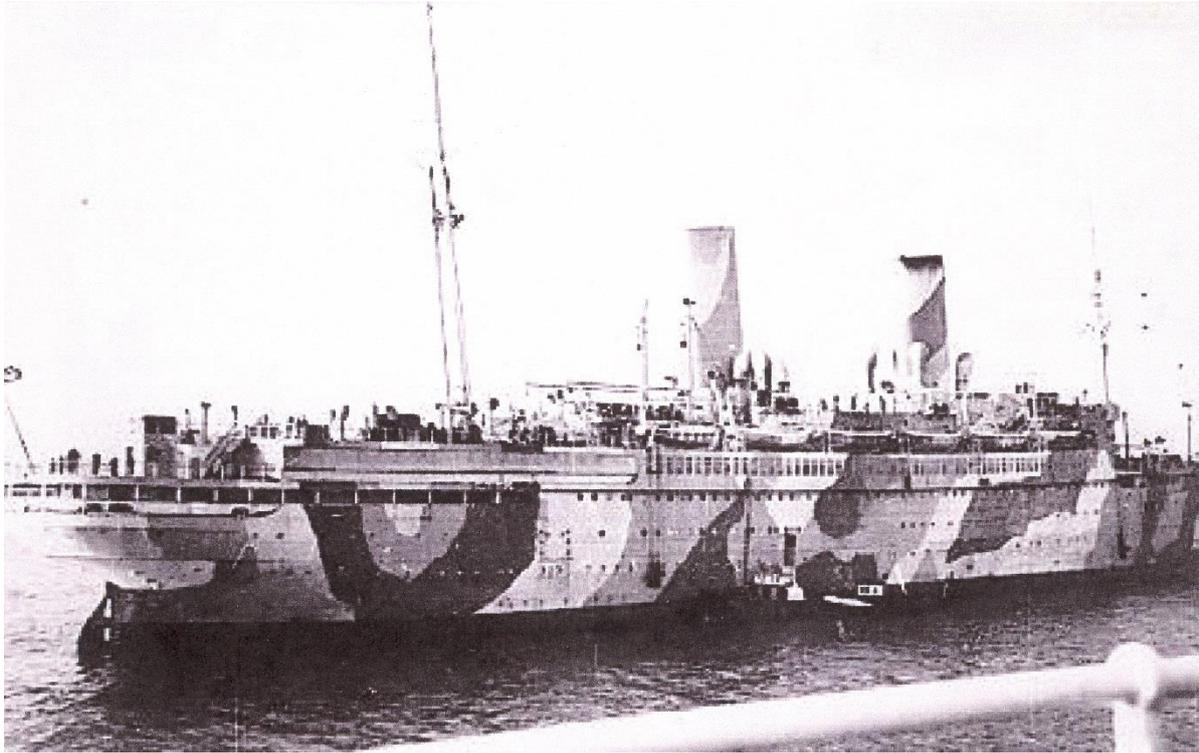
Written by Censis Andrejs Berzins, born in Riga in June 1944.

In the summer of 1944 the situation in Riga must have been marked with rising panic. The Germans were evacuating and there was chaos everywhere. Reports must have been arriving daily of Russian advances and soon they were within artillery range of the capital. Nevertheless, during this time Erika managed to get me christened in the Riga Dom church. My uncle, Cens, was present and probably my aunts, Milda and Gaida. Erika said there were holes in the roof of the church and the ceremony had to be conducted in a remote dry corner. I suspect that Erika's skill with German probably helped her to gain a permit to get out of Riga on the troop ship that was supposed to take the wounded back home, and to get the able-bodied soldiers back to rejoin units preparing for the defence of Berlin.

She says that all the sisters were supposed to take that ship out of Riga but that Vilma and Edite, and their mother, were unable to get to the port in time. She said that even at this late date the German authorities rewarded mothers who provided soldiers for the fatherland and she got a grant of 3000 Ostmarks for producing me. She was able to exchange these for real Deutschmarks when they got to Soest. All three sisters were married and not one of the husbands got on the ship. Gaida's husband, Eriks Aumeisters, was in the army and could not be contacted. He survived the war and lived to a ripe old age. Milda's taxi driver husband would have been available in Riga at the time. And Janis Berzins, my father, was in Aluksne several hundred miles away. Erika's two brothers, Karlis and Cens, were in the army too and nowhere near Riga. It is possible that Erika's German language skills and persistent nature helped them to get permits to board the ship. Perhaps pursers had to be bribed. Perhaps they were just lucky.

They boarded the ship, Steuben, at night to avoid being bombed by Soviet planes. They went in small rowing boats because the ship could not tie up at the wharf. They had to scramble up nets slung over the side and German sailors helped those with tiny babies and those who were too infirm to do the scrambling themselves.

The water of the Daugava was not deep enough to accommodate the vessel.



As you can see it was quite a large ship, about 17000 tonnes, and had been a luxury cruise ship before the war. As such it had all the usual features, a dance floor, restaurants, promenade decks, etc. However, none of these features was functioning. People were crammed together wherever space could be found. Erika and her sisters were given space on the dance floor and they were expected to sleep on piles of straw.

During the night the ship set sail to make as much progress as possible before first light, because during the daylight hours she would be a target for Soviet bombers. They suffered two attacks. Erika said she could hear the bombs exploding in the water around them and the noise of the anti aircraft guns from the ship. More periods of sheer terror for the people on board.

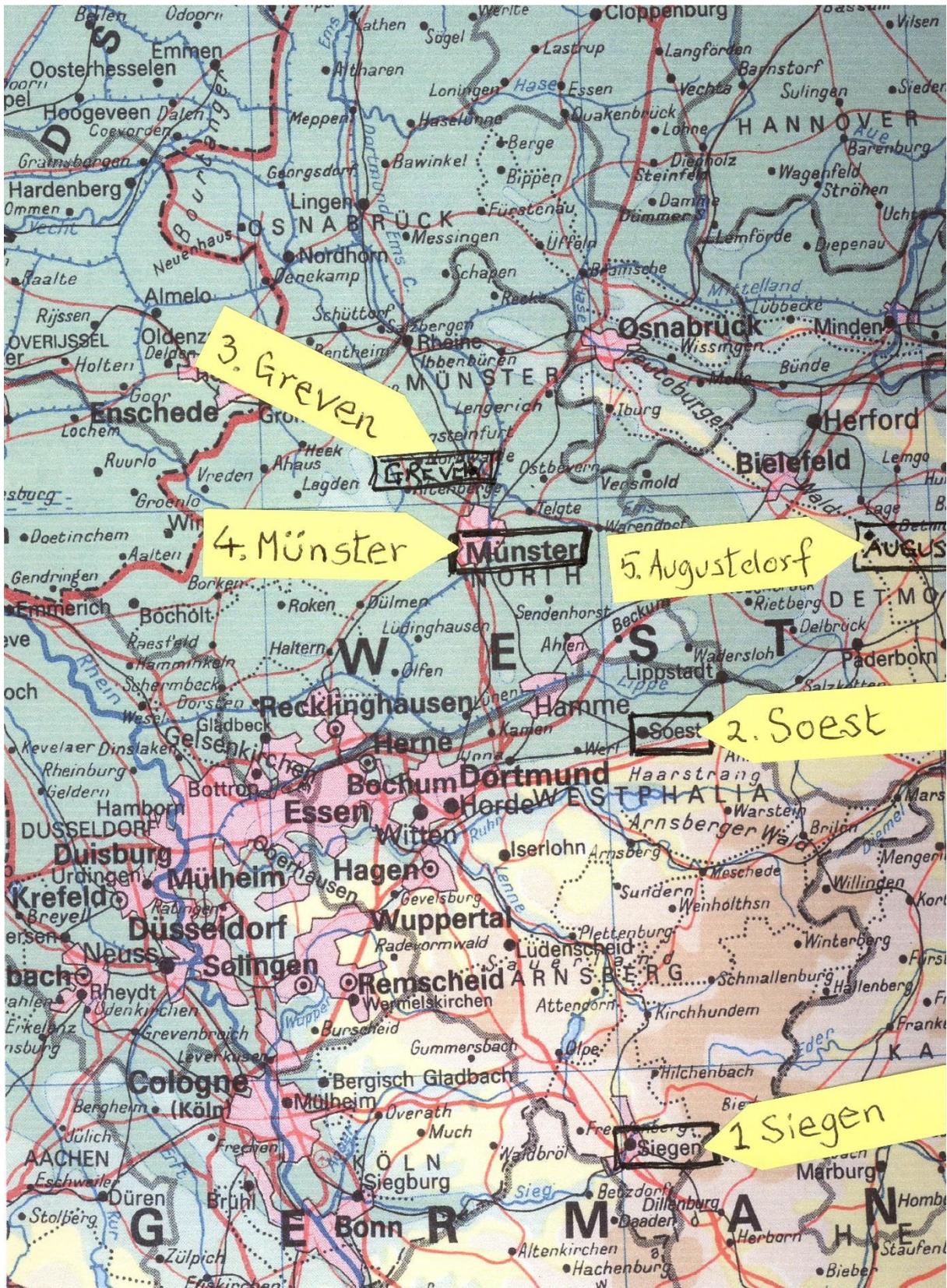


The journey probably took a couple of days and they landed in what is now called Gdynia because it is part of Poland, but was called Gotenhafen when it was part of Hitler's GrossDeutschland. The Polish navy did some exploration of the sea bed off their coast in recent years and found the wrecks of three German ships, the Wilhelm Gustloff, the Steuben and the Goya. They were all sunk by one Soviet submarine, S13, in the first two months of 1945. 9000 people died in the sinking of the Gustloff, the biggest maritime disaster ever, many times worse than the Titanic. The other ships had about 4 thousand people on board when they went down. So Erika was lucky to have made it to dry land after her voyage; a few months later and the S13 might have perfected its torpedoing skills.

Germany was now becoming a shambles. The influx from the east of refugees, evacuees and soldiers was causing a huge strain on their organisational abilities. By the late autumn of 1944 most German towns and cities had suffered years of intensive bombardment from the air and were in a seriously damaged state. Similarly, the road and rail networks were disrupted and routing traffic along them was difficult. It was quite obvious to most people that the war was lost, but, of course, this could not be admitted by the Nazis. Hitler insisted

that every man and boy fight to the very end, with some ferocious punishments being doled out to those who were seen as defeatists.

Erika said that they were given travel permits at Gotenhafen to take them to Dresden in the eastern part of Germany. She did not like the sound of that because it was not far enough away from the advancing Red Army, so she got them all on a different route which took them to Siegen, in the west.



They were sent to various transit camps which had been hastily created by people who were struggling with the scale of the problem. In Siegen they were billeted in a ruined factory for long enough for Gaida to send word of their new residence back to her brother in Latvia. He sent a brief letter back dated January, 1945.



They were in the Hercules manufacturing plant, or what was left of it. They slept on the floor of the factory and took shelter, usually at night in the deep caves which had been dug in the hillsides of the area, and which served as air raid shelters. The pattern was that the American planes would come during the day and drop bombs, and the British planes would come at night. Even though they were hiding deep into the hillsides, nevertheless, the shock waves of the explosives set off tremors which shook the earth and which caused collapses of the ceilings of the caves. Erika told of one family of Latvians who had fled with four generations of their members, and in one collapse the grandmother of the family was killed while the great grandmother survived. We later met this family in Bradford.

Food was a daily problem. There was no such thing as normal food production in Germany for the locals never mind for all these newcomers. Every day the sisters would take turns to stand in queues in the hope that some potatoes or some bread might be delivered. At one time the queue was disrupted by a daylight raid as planes came overhead spraying bullets wildly. One bullet went through a blanket that Erika had been holding. It must have been a total nightmare trying to feed a three month old baby, change nappies and keep warm. There were none of the conveniences that every parent today takes for granted in the care of little children. I was obviously being breastfed at this time but think of the strain that this would place on Erika's system. Later she said that she went out into the fields and plucked bunches of nettles in order to make a soup which was rich in iron because she was worried about how droopy I was becoming at one point. And, of course, being Latvians, they were

scouring the hedges and copses for berries and mushrooms with which to supplement the feeble amounts which they were managing to get when the queuing was over.

A stamp in her passport dates her in Soest on the 24th of October, 1944. The refugees were moved round in Army lorries from one camp to another. Transport was not available all the time and so people were kept waiting for hours and days after being told that they would be going to a better place elsewhere. The map above shows five of the places that we stayed in. Some stays were longer than others but the final one was in Augustdorf where we arrived probably in 1947. The actual end of the war brought a cessation of the bombing but the state of the country did not immediately improve. Soldiers were still in charge and they were not trained to manage such colossal displacements of population. They tried to sort the refugees by nationality or ethnic group while at the same time they were searching for Nazi war criminals. And the most serious threat that the Latvians had hanging over them was Stalin's demand that his citizens be returned to him. According to Soviet doctrine, all citizens of Latvia after the 1939 annexation were legally citizens of the USSR; the German invasion was only an interregnum. I found this to be current policy in 1990 when I applied for a visa to go to Latvia. The woman I spoke to on the phone at their embassy in London was clear that my nationality was that of a Soviet citizen in spite of my British passport. I began to worry that they would call me up for national service in the Red Army as soon as I landed in Moscow. Russians came to many of the camps where Balts, Poles, Belarussians and Ukrainians were housed and demanded that they return. They promised a wonderful life back at home and there were many who, having seen the wreckage that was Germany, opted to take the trains heading east. However, word did filter back about how these people were treated upon their arrival in the USSR; they were imprisoned as traitors, spies or simply members of the bourgeoisie, and the punishments were harsh; and the living conditions no better than in the west.

There are a few photographs of this period. This one is the first one of me ever taken.



You can see the ragged state of Erika here. She had left with only what she could carry and after the first few journeys even that had diminished to nothing more than she stood up in. I do note that I have boots on and gloves, possibly because of the generosity of some local Germans who took pity on the rabble arriving in their town. This would have been taken in 1945 probably in Siegen. Note the presence of the soldier in the background. They were the ones who controlled the issue of what rations were available. You can tell that this is a British soldier because all of the places we were sent to lay in the British Zone of control. Germany had been split into four zones and each of the major Allies was given an area to control. The British and French zones suffered because both countries had been so devastated by the war that they had little food or anything to spare for the refugees in Germany; those in the American zone were the most fortunate because they began to receive handouts from America's vast stockpiles of bounty. And the total losers were those in the Russian zone because they were all sent back to their homelands to face the penalties for having deserted and sided with the Germans.



This is another cheerful picture, probably taken on the same day. Dace is sitting down beside me. Behind us is an English soldier called Bill. After a poor start, soldiers were later encouraged to fraternise with the locals.



Another one of the same day. The hills and valleys suggest Siegen.



Here is Bill again. I am not happy.



Erika Berzins

Her sisters having found new husbands in Janis and Viktors, Erika, too, was on the lookout for a new husband. Many Latvians were doing this, pairing off after the disruption of the evacuation. They knew that the Iron Curtain had descended across Europe and they were not going to get back to their former lives or their former partners. Many of the husbands were soldiers from that part of the Latvian legion which had been withdrawn to northwest Germany in the winter of 1944. Among the men I saw at the camp in Augustdorf were many amputees. One summer day I was watching them play volleyball in the centre of the camp. They had stripped off to shorts and vests because of the heat, and I remember thinking that with all the missing limbs, each team of six players did not actually make a whole side. Nevertheless, these men rode bikes by hooking their false arm onto the handlebar, or by trailing their wooden leg out to one side while pedalling with the other. It helped that German bikes had a foot braking mechanism where you just pushed the pedal back a bit to apply the brake.

Thus Erika's choice was a little limited. There were several suitors but she rejected them all. They had character defects. If they had appeared on photographs with the two of us, they had to be cut off.



This one seems to have survived the cull.

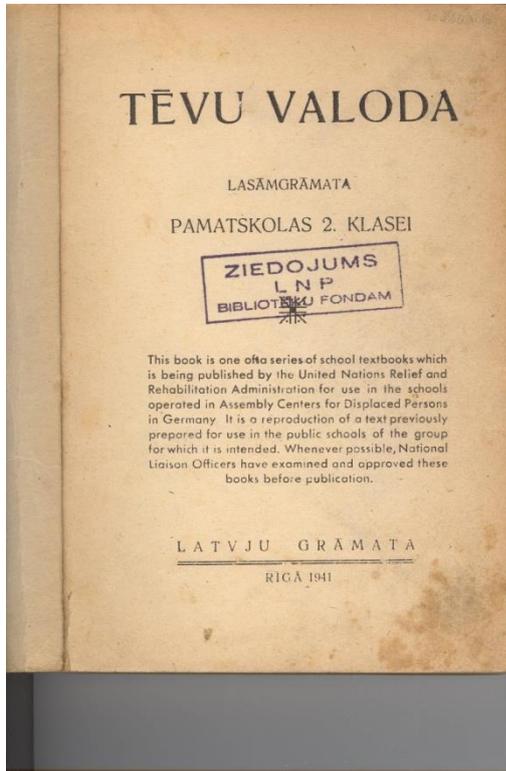


With no work, life in the camp was dull. There was a Latvian school which I attended but about which Erika was very critical.



I am the fourth from the left on the front row. This was the whole school. I remember being taught maths by the stern man above my right shoulder. Even at that age I could tell he was neurotic. Everything upset him and he was needlessly fierce even with us infants. But

materials for the school were hard to come by. Little paper, no ink, and no books. However, I did not know any better so it did not affect me. Anyway, Erika was teaching me to read and write at home. She had acquired a book which had been used in Latvia, Tevu Valoda, (Fathers' Tongue) which had been reprinted in Sweden with fuzzy type on woolly paper and with a black stripe across many pages. It had some line drawings and that was the basic text from which I learned. I still have the book.





VALODIŅA

ĀBECE UN PIRMĀ LASAMĀ
GRĀMATA



LATVIEŠU APGĀDS

„Slinkuma krusttēvs aizdenams tikai ar dzelzs pātāgu,” sacīja kalējs. „No nekā cita tas nebistas.”
 „Vai tev ir tāda pātāga?” prasīja māte.
 „Neesot, kalējs atbildēja.
 Nu tad lai nokalot.



Lai kalot vien tas, kam vajagot, — kalējs noteica. Šim esot citi darbi.

Nu māte beigās redzēja, ka nav labi, un sacīja, lai kalējs ņemot un mācot puiku otru trīs gadus pa savam prātam. Kalējs bija ar mieru un lika to tūlī otrā ritā pie darba.

Pamazām Jānis ieņēmas amatā un kādu dienu sāka kalt dzelzs pātāgu. Kad kāts līdz pusei bija gatavs, Slinkuma krusttēvs gultā piecēlās sēdus. Kad kāts pavisam bija gatavs, Slinkuma krusttēvs jau kājas nolika zemē, un kad puika sāka kalt auklu, vecais no kaltuves izgāja ārā. Beigās, kad pātāga bija gatava, Slinkuma krusttēvs nezin kur bija nozudis. Nu puika priecīgs tēvam izkala lemešus, cirvi un pakava naglas, mātei lielu sudraba saktu un atstāja kalēju dziedādams.

Blaumanis.

Sūdzības grāmata.

Kādam zemniekam vecos laikos kunga cūkas izrakušas tupeņus. Viņš gribējis pie paša ķēniņa sūdzēt, tādēļ ņēmis rakstīt sūdzības grāmatu. Paņēmis papīru un taisījis gluži mazus punktiņus, lielākus punktus un itin lielus traipekļus. Pa tām starpām ķēniņš



izgājis pastaigāties un nevilus sastapis zemnieku, kas patlaban šo grāmatu vēl rakstījis.

Ķēniņš vaicājis:

„Ko tu tur dari?”

„Rakstu ķēniņam grāmatu!”

Ķēniņš paskatījies, nevarējis nekā saprast: raibs vien pa papīru. Bet zemnieks izskaidrojās:

„Šie mazākie, sīkākie punktiņi ir kunga sivēniņi, tie lielākie ir kunga cūkas, bet šīs mazās mazās acītiņas ir mani tupeniņi, ko kunga cūkas izrakušas, un tad nu jūs paši varat saprast, kāds zaudējums man nodarīts. Tādēļ nesīšu sūdzības grāmatu ķēniņam.”

I had trouble with handwriting because the method in Latvia was to drill all children into writing cursive copperplate from the start. They even provided sheets of paper with lines drawn on them which were meant to guide your letter formation, leaning forward with high uppers and long downstrokes. I just could not do it. My results were horrible to behold.

But we had at least one outing to the nearby Hermann Denkmal.



This monument is not far from Augustdorf, just in the Teutoburg forest north of the camp. It celebrates the massacre of a Roman legion by Arminius, whom C19 German nationalists elevated to an archetypal German hero. One can imagine that he might be something of an embarrassment in post war Germany. I am second from the left on the front row. You can tell by the clothing that people were managing to dress themselves more reasonably, and the fact that several children have white clothes on suggests that it was possible to wash them effectively.

There was also a Sunday School which might have been funded by American churches.



I am the boy on the front row turning round while standing next to the girl who is crossing her legs and who looks like Ursula. Sunday school provided us with religious pictures, actually in colour, and a crudely duplicated magazine which had worthy words from some spiritual leader. The best thing was the puzzle page which had images concealed within a larger picture. You can see why I am so keen on more than one book for my granddaughters.

The Latvian community did try to break the tedium of life in the camp by trying to observe some of the notable dates of the Latvian calendar, like the midsummer fest. They also had a fancy dress occasion in which Erika dressed me as a Cossack.



You can see the ingenuity of the parents in creating these outfits, particularly when resources were so scarce. I was grumpy because I could not have a real gun, it was just an empty pouch, and, after all the horrible tales of Russians and their barbarism that we kept hearing, I was not that keen to be a Cossack. Perhaps Erika was limited in the material she had to play with.

These are some photos which give more idea of what the camp was like.



There were occasional efforts at entertainment and sometimes films were shown in the communal building but I have no clear memories of them. I do remember my first exposure to the works of Arthur Ridley of Dad's Army fame. There was a group of Latvian actors who must have got some funding to tour the camps with a variety of plays, including Shakespeare, but the one I remember was *The Ghost Train*, translated into Latvian. My mother and I were sitting about half way back in the hall on the end seats by the centre aisle. As the play went on, I left my seat and went closer to the stage to get a better view. Tension mounted in the drama and then the sound effect was heard of the approaching ghost train. I was scared and ran back up the aisle shouting, "Mummy, mummy." There was laughter in the audience which must have damaged the atmosphere the actors were striving for.



This is a painting of Augustdorf camp done by Evalds Dajevskis, an artist and set designer who must have been there when we were.

Another episode I remember was when the soldiers camped within yards of our barrack. We were used to long processions of lorries and tanks along the top road when they were going to the manoeuvre grounds or firing ranges, but on this day they turned off the road and came towards the top barrack, number 33, where we lived. There was a wood of pine trees in front of the hut and to the left and we were surprised to see the transports all go in among the trees. Obviously, we had to go out to watch. The soldiers set up tents, field kitchens, first aid stations, all of which was fascinating to watch and we the children crowded nearer and nearer to get a good view. Then the order must have been given to keep us out of the way and several soldiers came forward to push us back. We were very reluctant to move but these were adults and we had to obey. Then the soldiers went off to do their stuff in the trees and they left one of their number to keep guard. He was young and very pink faced. He looked uncomfortable standing on guard by himself at the edge of the wood. We, the boys, sensed the weakness and kept going closer and closer towards him. It was a game of dares. He did not react. We had heard them speaking to each other and the one sound which struck us as the most distinctive was w. It seemed to be everywhere, as they asked questions, obviously. "Where...,What...,Why.." So we used this sound back to the boy guard as we edged closer towards him. He shouted for us to keep back, but this cut no ice with us. It was fun to go up to him and say w w w. It was a great game. Then he lost it. He raised his rifle and fired over our heads. The sound roared and reverberated back from the hills around. Blue smoke hung in the air in front of him. We were terrified. This was serious. We fled in horror.

The parents came out of the barracks. Some other soldiers came out of the wood. There was much shouting, in German and Polish, and I suspect in English too, at the poor soldier who overreacted to a small bunch of six year olds with his Lee Enfield.

I was left to play on my own for much of the time especially when the weather was reasonable. In bad weather I was cooped up in the one room with my mother and that

cannot have been good for either of us. It did mean that I learnt to crochet and to knit because I used to watch what she was doing and wanted to have a go myself. There was little paper and pencils for drawing or colouring, and very little to read, so one had to find things outside to play with. These were mainly catapults and bows and arrows. I know I had a knife with which I scoured the wood by the barrack door for suitably shaped pieces of wood, and then cut them to shape. The main problem with catapults was the lack of suitable rubber. The best kind was the red strips which were used to seal jars, and if you had this then you could project your stones great distances and with devastating effect on any dogs in the vicinity. We also went for squirrels but they were very quick and managed to avoid our barrage of small stones. The kind of rubber that was more readily available was that used for knicker elastic. This was munitions for the desperate. You could not pull the elastic back very far and the strength of the twang when you let it fly was very limited. It was embarrassing if you were in the company of a boy who had the real thing.

But it was with my bow and arrow that I got into serious trouble. I had chosen a good piece of wood and bent my bow with stout string. I had found some very straight pieces of wood to use for arrows. I had spent ages shaping the arrows and sharpening the points. I was going to be a real killer. At that time we had chickens and they spent their time pecking away at the soil by the barrack door. They would make an ideal target. I held the bow horizontally, drew back the string and fired. The arrow, instead of going down towards the foundations of the barrack where the chickens were, flipped upwards and towards the window of an old lady with whom my mother was friendly at the time. Oh no. There was going to be broken glass! But no. I was saved that. The window was open and the arrow went flying into her room with some force. She appeared at the window immediately and spotted me before I could hide. She fetched my mother, and between them I was given the most severe dressing down ever. My bow was snapped, as were my reserve arrows which had been meant to get the other chickens. And I was confined to the room for ever, so it seemed.

From about 1947 people were getting restless and wanting to start new lives properly where they could earn a living and prepare for the future. America was the destination of choice because living standards were so good there and they allowed quite a lot of refugees into their country. Australia was also popular because it was so ready to accept newcomers. Other people ended up in South America. Gaida and Janis chose Australia and they were accepted because they were young and fit and likely to contribute to the country's prosperity. They left Augustdorf in 1948. Milda and Viktors went in 1950. And this was a pattern repeated throughout the camp. People wanted to get out of a situation where there seemed to be no future, where the hardships would just go on, and where everyone was dependent on the next handout from the agencies charged with feeding and clothing us.

Erika's problem was that she had had TB. This disqualified her from the status of able bodied worker and neither the US nor Australia would let her in. There was another way of getting into those countries; this required someone already there to guarantee to look after you when you arrived. Both her sisters were prepared to issue such a guarantee for her and it would have been possible for her to go to Australia in about 1951. She chose not to. The

relationship between the sisters had never been without its frictions and I would imagine that years of struggling with the poverty and near starvation of the various transit camps that we were sent through did not make things any easier. Milda spent about a year and half being a second mother to me and I shall always be deeply grateful to her memory for that, but, I suspect that Erika was keen to reclaim me when she finally got out of the sanatorium and this would involve rejecting Milda. Milda was also seven years her senior but her intellectual inferior; this might have been further cause for friction. Gaida she regarded as a flighty airhead who was only concerned for herself. Gaida was eight years younger and prettier than she was, and she was very happily married to Janis now. I think that she did not want to place herself in a position where she would be beholden to them, where she owed them so much that her independence might be affected. And, I suspect, she thought she could do better.

She advertised in a Latvian newspaper for a husband. Antons read the advert and replied. They arranged for him to invite her to England to marry her. He spent hours and hours composing every letter he ever wrote. He wrote in such a flowery and poetical style that I found it hard to maintain any interest at all when I tried to read what he had written. But this must have impressed Erika. She accepted the offer and started organising everything for the journey. I found a letter she wrote to him at the time.

seen the British consul and shown him her passport and other papers, and she has been told that it could be another month before she could travel. She is horrified by all the ruins and rubble in Dusseldorf and in every other place she has visited. She thinks that many of the people she sees there look very common, no better dressed than herself. But she hates the noise and crowding of the city. Like a beehive. She thinks her son will be disappointed at the delay and asks Antons to ring the Home Office and to try to persuade them to speed things up. She is not wanting to spend another winter in the camp, they lack footwear and heating.

The UK had always had a high reputation in Latvia even though they had received little help from London. It is significant that the Latvians desperately trapped in the Kurzeme pocket in 1945 clung on to rumours that the British were coming to save them. Along with France, the UK was one of the great powers from whom recognition was critical in the year of independence in 1918. So she must have had high hopes of what she would aspire to when she finally landed on these shores. I can imagine her thinking about her sisters' offers and saying to herself, I'll show them. Perhaps there were visions of a fine apartment in a stately English town with bowler hatted gentlemen parading down the street.