

# My Childhood in East Prussia

By *Werner Gitt*

## Carefree in Raineck

I was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1937 in Raineck<sup>1</sup> (District Ebenrode; what is now Russian *Nesterow*) in the North of East Prussia. The village had 133 inhabitants (as of 7<sup>th</sup> May 1939)<sup>2</sup> and was 15 kilometers from the border to Lithuania.

I never had a cradle. I lay in a washing basket under the trees in the garden of our 100 year old farmhouse. I grew up on my parents' farm without a care in the world. As far as I can remember, we used to have hot summers and cold winters with lots of snow. Sometimes, when it rained so much that the farmyard was flooded, I used to climb into the large feeding troughs and use them as boats on the 'farmyard lake'.

Next to the house was a field with a pond and I would often be found roaming around there. The pond provided drinking water for the cows, and ducks filtered the water, looking for anything edible. If I went to the pond in the summer, all the ducks would immediately flatter out of the water and waddle along behind me. They knew that as soon as we reached the farmyard, I would rush to corn store and come back loaded with corn for them. I became a real favorite with the ducks.

It was quite a different story with the chickens. Sometimes I would open the door of the chicken-coop after the chickens had settled down to sleep. When I called, "Hush, hush!" loudly into the coop all the chickens flew about wildly. I thought it was great fun but I don't think the chickens felt the same way. I guess I was a hen's nightmare!

In the winter there was often so much snow that snowdrifts formed huge mountains of snow in the farmyard. The snow would drive more and more snow from the fields through the gap between the barn and the two stables. Instead of leather shoes, I used to wear what we called 'Klomp', wooden clogs which my father made himself in his own well-equipped workshop. With these shoes my feet were always nice and warm, and when the snow started to pack I would have piles of snow, 10cm or higher, sticking to my wooden shoes.

I'm still touched when I remember my mother and how loving and caring she was. Whatever she had to do on the farm, I was always allowed to be with her. She had such a loving heart for everyone. Beggars and tramps would often come to our farm and no-one ever left without being given a decent meal. My mother sometimes even offered the tramps a place to sleep.

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<sup>1</sup> Before 1938, the East Prussian town names tended to be somewhat odd. People from many different districts and countries had come to settle in the area. Some fled persecution in their country of origin (e.g. the protestants from Salzburg in Austria or the Huguenots from France), more commercial motivations led others to buy cheap land in the area. In Gumbinnen, there were so many French immigrants that French became the official language for a while. As a result of all these diverse influences, a strange mixture of place names developed. Many of them sounded funny while others were impossible to spell if you had only heard the place name and not seen it written. My place of birth Raineck used to be called *Uszdeggen* (pronounced *Uschdegg*). Other examples (with their new names from 1938 in brackets): *Jodszeidszen* (*Altlingen*), *Jentkutkampen* (*Burgkampen*), *Packallnischken* (*Bergendorf*), *Schwirgallen* (*Eichhagen*), *Skrolienen* (*Buchenrode*), *Kiaulacken* (*Quellbruch*), *Groß Schurschienen* (*Moorgrund*), *Tublauken* (*Schweizerfelde*), *Brakupöhnen* (*Rosslinde*), *Warckallen* (*Rolofseck*).

<sup>2</sup> From *Georg Hermanowski: Ostpreußen Wegweiser durch ein unvergessenes Land*. Kraft-Verlag, Würzburg, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 1989, p. 317.

When my father came in from the fields and made himself comfortable in his favourite seat in the living room, I would rush to sit on his lap and he would tell me all sorts of stories. He always had time for me.

My father loved the life of a farmer. Later, he would often say how he used to fertilize the fields near the roads especially well in order to amaze passers-by. The turnips grown near the road were often so enormous that, today, I think they might have won a world record. My father loved to compare his turnips with the sacks of fertilizer which weighed 50 kg.

He kept up with the times and he was often the first in the village to have one of the newly developed farming machines. My grandfather was the complete opposite as far as buying new things was concerned. As we all used to live in the same house, there were always fierce discussions before anything was bought.

While modern farmers usually concentrate either on livestock or on the cultivation of cereals for economical reasons, in those days, a farm had a little bit of everything. We had horses, cows, pigs, sheep and all sorts of poultry: turkeys, geese, ducks and chickens. We grew different types of cereal and root crops. We also grew poppies for the well-known East Prussian poppy-seed cake. We milked the cows by hand, of course. When the animals had been seen to, they were driven out onto the fields until the evening. In the summer, there was always something to be done. But it was different in the winter. During the winter months, we only had the animals to look after and the machinery that needed repair so we had plenty of time to sit together in the evenings around the tiled stove.

In the countryside where we lived, everyone spoke 'Plattdeutsch', a low German dialect. When I started school in the summer 1943, I couldn't speak a word of High German.<sup>3</sup> The village school in Raineck was typical of the village schools of the time, in which all the children, from year 1 to 8, sat in the same classroom. The first years sat in the first two rows of benches on the left. The eighth class sat in the back row of benches on the

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<sup>3</sup> As East Prussian is my mother tongue, I translated Matthew 24 into East Prussian dialect as it no longer exists. I would like to include verses 35 to 51. (A note about pronunciation: there are several sounds which we do not have in High German and so it is difficult to write it down exactly. One example of this is "oa", a long sound like a mixture of 'o' and 'a', something like in the word 'nought'.)

35. De Himmel un de Eerd ware vargoane; obber miene Woord ware nich vargoane.

36. Obber äver dissem Dach un disse Stund weet keiner Bescheed, uck nich de Engel im Himmel un uck nich de Sähn; dat weet alleen de Voader.

37. So wie et sich tur Tied Noahs avjespählt had, so wart et uck sön, wenn de Mönsche Sähn kemmt.

38. Denn groad so wie de Mönsche doamals vaare groate Flut beschäftigt were möt äte, drinke, friee un sich friee loate böt hen to däm Dach, wo Noah önnne Arche jing

39. un op nuscht horchde, böt de Flut keem un se alle wejjeräte hett. So wart dat uck goane, wenn de Mönsche Sähn kemmt.

40. Denn ware zwei oppem Föld oarbeide, eener wart anjenoahme un där andere wart varloate ware.

41. Zwei Frues ware oppe Mähl moahle, eene wart anjenoahme un dä andere wart varloate ware.

42. Doarom bliewt woak, denn ju weete nich an wat farrem Dach jun Herr koame wart.

43. Dat kenn ju joa ensehne: Wenn een Husvoader wußd, to wat farre Stund önnne Nacht de Enbräker kemmt, denn nicht he joa woak bliewe un nich önnnet Hus enbräke loate.

44. Doarom sied uck ju oppem Damm! Denn de Mönsche Sähn kemmt to de Stund, wo ju awsolut nich möt räkene.

45. Nun sächt mie emoal: Wär ös där treie un kloage Knecht, däm de Herr äwer siene Lütüd stelle kann, dat he ännne to rechter Tied to äte jävt.

46. Sälüg ös jen Knecht, wenn sien Herr kemmt, un trefft äm so an, dat he dat jeroad deit.

47. Ganz jewöss, öck säg ju dat: He wart äm äwer alle siene Jieter doone.

48. Wenn obber jen böser Knecht bie sich sölwst denkt: Mien Herr kemmt noch lang nich.

49. un fangt an de andere Knechts oppem Hoff to schloage, ät un drinkt mööte Besoapene:

50. denn wart dissem Knecht sien Herr annem Dach koame, wo he nich möt räkene deit un to dä Stund, wo he nicht weet

51 un wart äm ön Steckte haue loate un äm sien Deel jäwe möt de Heichler. Doa wart sön Hule un Tähnjeklapper.

right and in between sat the other classes, all according to their ages. The teacher could only speak to one class at a time, unless he said something like, "Classes 3 to 6, please pay attention now!". The other children would read, do sums, talk or stare into space. My teacher, Mr Brehm taught in High German, but he accepted my answers in my 'Plattdeutsch' dialect. I must admit, I cannot remember whether the other children who started school with me used to speak High German or dialect.

When I started school, my brother Fritz, who was eight years older than me (b. 29 October 1929) had already finished at the Raineck 'center for education' and had started learning farming on our farm.

Our teacher was ahead of his times and had great teaching ability. As he soon realized that my musical talents were somewhat underdeveloped, he didn't even make me learn the texts of the songs so as not to damage my 'musical sensibilities' in any way. As a result, I used to make up my own melodies when the whole class used to sing together and, as I didn't know the words either, I would just make them up. I was just as individual when it came to collecting herbs. I picked anything, in the belief it could just happen to be the herb we were looking for. I can't remember my offering ever having been rejected.

As well as having us children in his charge, our teacher owned a small piece of land and a cow. I'm sure it was meant to be for our own good when he got us to help carry out small tasks on his land. After all, life's not just theory but about putting things into practice. When the strawberries were ripe, he would get us to pick them. While he was busy doing something else, his pupils would help themselves to the delicious fruit. Had he forgotten what his own youth had been like or had he simply underestimated our unrestrainable appetite? Whatever it was, his 'thanks' were quite severe when he saw the pitiful harvest.

Although the war had already been going on for four years by the time I started school, as far as I was concerned, the East Prussian countryside lived at complete peace. And yet there was something new: in school, we were always collecting something or other. If it wasn't herbs, then it was rags or animal bones. I was amazed at what could be made use of. One day, before I had started school, my brother's class and a few others had been asked to collect bones. My mother had collected some for him but he had forgotten to take them, so she asked me to take them to school for him. Off I went, walked straight into the classroom and up to the teacher's desk where I put the bag of bones down with the words, "I've brought Fritz's bones". I had no idea why the whole classroom started laughing hysterically.

Spring and early summer was the time for relatives to come and visit. Most of our relatives could travel to and fro on one day with their horse and cart. We didn't live very far apart. The climax of their visit was a rich meal at lunchtime which included several traditional roasts. Ah yes, the food was good in East Prussia! The dessert was followed by a couple of glasses of good schnapps to aid the digestion. Then, while my parents showed our visitors the fields and they all praised the state of the corn, it was my turn. I went from one seat to the next, emptying what was left in the glasses! Who knows whether I started to sway or whether it was training in East Prussian steadfastness!

Up until this point, I had enjoyed a wonderful carefree childhood in this rural farming community. But this was soon to change.

The young farmers had already been called up and most of the farms were being run by the women and older men. Because my father was especially good with his hands, and it was well known that he could carry out repairs on farming machinery, electric installations, pumps, etc. we was voted in as local head farmer and was given the status

'uk'('unabkömmlich', indispensable). This 'uk' status meant that he would not be called up for military service as long as he helped the other farmers and so secured the existence of the farming community.

At that time, it was dangerous to express anything even slightly critical of the Nazi regime, and this was something my father wasn't always careful about. One day, one of the farm hands from a neighboring farm reported my father with the words, "Gitt is not politically reliable". Not long afterwards, a party representative turned up at our farm to check whether this was true. On arrival he greeted my father loudly with, "Heil Hitler!" To which my father replied "I'm not Hitler!" "That's it then!" the representative replied. Just a few days later my father lost his 'uk' status and was called up. He was sent to Preußisch-Holland in East Prussia for a brief period of military training and was then sent to France to serve in the coastal guard near St Nazaire. In hindsight, it was a blessing. In St Nazaire there was absolutely no fighting during the whole war, so he never had to fire a single shot. Had he stayed in East Prussia, he would have almost certainly ended up fighting in the 'Volkssturm' (German territorial army) and almost all of these men died in the war, as did my uncle Franz, my aunt Lina's husband.

### Fleeing from the Red Army

By October 1944, the Red Army had advanced as far as the East Prussian border.<sup>4</sup> It was time for us to flee. I was seven years old at the time and had just started the second year at the village school. Unlike the other farmers in our village who fled with a horse and cart, my mother decided to leave for Altlingen (12 km west of Gumbinnen), where her half-sister Lina had a farm. My maternal grandfather (Friedrich Girod)<sup>5</sup> who lived with us, converted a harvest wagon into a wagon which we could use to flee in, using the linen transport tape from our reaper-binder (forerunner of the modern combine harvester) to form a pointy roof over the wagon. For me, leaving with a horse and cart was a great adventure. I had no idea of the danger we were in. The five of us – my mother, my grandfather, my brother Fritz, our domestic servant Meta and I – stayed in Altlingen for a few weeks until, on 20<sup>th</sup> October, we set off again, this time with our relatives from Altlingen<sup>6</sup>. After two or three days<sup>7</sup>, we reached Gerdauen and waited there for about ten days, in the hope that we would be able to return home soon. However, the Red Army continued to advance and so we had to flee further to south East Prussia. We arrived in Peterswalde<sup>8</sup> in early November and were billeted in the house of a single teacher, Miss Troyka. The village of Peterswalde had 688 inhabitants<sup>9</sup> and lay 18 km south of Osterode. We stayed here and I went to school, with Miss Troyka as my teacher. We were just waiting to be able to go home again. I can remember Christmas 1944 very well. We had a Christmas tree and plenty of goose legs which Aunt Lina had brought. The meat had been preserved in bottles and was an important part of the provisions we needed for the flight. We left Altlingen in such a rush that we forgot to take

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<sup>4</sup> On 16<sup>th</sup> October 1944, Red Army soldiers first crossed the borders of the German Reich in the Rominter Heide (Romint Moor).

<sup>5</sup> My grandfather Friedrich Girod (b. 11.12.1865 in Bibehlen in East Prussia, d. 30.10.1945 in Osterode, East Prussia) was a descendent of Ludwig Girod (great-grandfather). Ludwig Girod came to East Prussia along with two brothers who had fled France (or French-speaking Switzerland?) probably because they were Huguenots.

<sup>6</sup> My aunt Lina Riek, my uncle Franz Riek, another aunt Marie Bischoff and my cousin Rena Schmidtke. Aunt Marie (1882-1962) knew lots of songs off by heart. Later on the island Föhr, when I was able to read and write, I asked her to dictate all 16 verses of the German Christmas Carol "Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her" to me, which she could recite by heart.

<sup>7</sup> In hindsight, I am no longer able to date some things exactly, but usually within a day or two.

<sup>8</sup> Peterswalde is about 180 km from Altlingen. The distances are all taken from a detailed map of East Prussia and indicate the distance as the crow flies.

<sup>9</sup> Georg Hermanowski, p. 388.

the meat out of the chimney niche. We had already reached the next village when we realized and Rena had to go back to get this important supply.

The official announcements were usually read out to the village inhabitants by an elderly man on his bike. He would cycle through the village, stopping every few houses to ring his bell. The people in the houses would then open their windows and he would shout, in his monotonous voice, "Official Announcement!". Then he would read the announcement from a piece of paper. On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1945 it was different. It was between –25 and –30°C.<sup>10</sup> The man was in a terrible rush. His announcement was concise: "The Russians are coming! Every man for himself!" Everyone rushed to escape. We put our few belongings in the two wagons harnessed the horses and set off westwards for Deutsch-Eylau. I was suffering from a fever at the time and they stowed me in the wagon, feather blanket and all. My mother took one wagon, my aunt the other. My uncle Franz had been called up early December and died in the 'Volkssturm' along with most of the other men.

We couldn't go very fast, as the roads were soon full of people fleeing for their lives. We spent the first night in a hall in one of the villages, but the following nights we had to sleep in the wagons. These were open at the sides and it was freezing cold. My aunt Marie's finger froze one day. After some time, it went black and then fell off.

Every now and then, pieces of the grenades would fall on our wagon and, no doubt, they could have proved fatal. But none of us was injured. The Red Army stopped the trek before we reached one of the bigger towns. The Russians went from one wagon to the next. They called my fifteen year old brother Fritz down. What was going to happen to him? We were petrified. Over night, we had become outlaws. We had no rights at all and they could do anything they liked with us. After a while, my mother went to the Russian commanding officer to pick my brother up. She was told he would be sent back tomorrow. That was a lie – he never came back. Maybe they shot him because they believed he was a member of the Hitler Youth.

One set of horses was stolen, so we went back to Peterswalde with only one wagon. We arrived on 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> January 1945<sup>11</sup>. We moved into the house next to Miss Troyka, an empty farmhouse. In this village and on the way there, we were confronted with horror and destruction: dead people and dead horses were lying at the side of the roads, houses had been burnt down. It was a horrific time. The Soviet dictator Stalin had allowed his soldiers to do anything they wanted for seven whole days. Robbery, looting and rape were the order of the day<sup>12</sup>. The soldiers were after watches and boots in particular. Everyone was petrified if a Russian entered the house.

One day, yet another Russian came to our house and angrily demanded our watches. We'd lost our watches a long time ago and my aunt told him as much. The Russian pointed his gun at us and shouted, "Watch – or I shoot!" I am still amazed at they way my aunt bravely said, "Then shoot!". It convinced him that he wasn't going to find anything of worth with us and he didn't shoot.

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<sup>10</sup> My aunt Lina provided most of the exact details for my account. I noted all the details on a visit to her house on the island Föhr. Thanks to her excellent memory, my cousin Rena was able to add further details.

Rena(te) Schlesiger, née Schmidtke (b. 31.07.1929 in Altlingen, still living in Wyk on the island Föhr)

Lina Riek, née Girod, widowed Schmidtke (b. 17.12.1897 in Raineck, d. 24.08.1972 in Wyk, Föhr)

<sup>11</sup> There were two reasons for going back to Peterswalde: The Red Army were moving westwards and so it would not have been advisory to follow the Front. The second reason was that we still clung to the slim hope that Fritz would be released and if that were the case, he would surely come to Peterswalde looking for us.

<sup>12</sup> According to a study carried out by the Federal Archive Office, there were 3,300 scenes of violent crime against the inhabitants of the German Eastern regions. It is estimated that 1.4 million women were raped (Source: GEO, 11/2004, p. 120).

It wasn't until February that the pressure eased a little. The main body of the army had gone further west and there were far fewer Russians than at the beginning of the invasion. One day, a Russian soldier went from house to house and ordered the inhabitants to go to the village square. Not thinking anything was wrong, most people left their houses because we thought that they would be sharing out something to eat, or that they were going to give instructions as to what was going to happen now we were under occupation. Soon we – my mother, her sister Lina, Meta and I – were part of a long queue. Rena had been taken away by some Russian officers a couple of days before to cook in their headquarters. The queue moved past the headquarters and suddenly we saw Rena on the steps with a Russian soldier. Rena's mother, my aunt Lina was pulled out of the queue and taken into the house. Rena begged the Russians to take my mother into the house as well, but they refused, saying, "One is enough!". Now we knew: whatever was going to happen, it wasn't going to be pleasant.

When we arrived at the village square, all the women who were fit enough to work were separated out. We children were taken from our mothers by force, no matter how we clung to them. How awful it was to be separated from our mothers! We didn't know that we would never see our mothers again. When they had picked out about ten children, they would choose a woman from the crowd and say, "You, mother for all!" Unfortunately my mother was not selected to mother one of the groups. Along with the other women, including Meta, the soldiers made my mother walk towards the next village. Never before had I experienced something as awful as that. My mother had been taken away from me in such a brutal way. What was going to happen next? After the convoy had moved far enough away, I ran down the village road to my aunt.

Although the whole exercise had been so barbaric, we still hoped that maybe the women had been taken away to work for a short period. Every day, we would look out of the window, expecting my mother to return<sup>13</sup>. After a few weeks our hope began to fade until, eventually, it died completely. No-one ever came back and we knew they must have been deported to Russia. Years later we heard from an eyewitness that my mother died in April in the Ukraine. She died in the arms of this eyewitness with the words, "Whatever is going to happen to my little Werner?"

We spent the summer of 1945 – my aunts Lina and Marie, my Grandfather and I – in the house next to Miss Troyka. Rena had been taken away in March to the Schmückwalde estate which was about 6 km away and had already been turned into a collective farm. She was forced to do heavy labor there in the mill. In the summer, my grandfather built a two-wheeler handcart with a load area of 2 x 2 m. His idea was to use it to go back to Raineck (as the crow flies 160 km), but it never came to that. In fact, it ended up being put to much more disturbing use: Four Russian lorries used to drive through the village on a regular basis and we were always somewhat suspicious. One day, a father and his grown-up daughter went out to the field to dig potatoes out of the hoard (we used to keep the potatoes in a hole in the ground, covered with straw and earth), when the lorries drove past. They both had such a fright that they ran away across the field. That proved to be the greatest mistake they could have made, as the Russians believed that anyone seen running away was a partisan. The lorries stopped and a Russian driver shot them. My grandfather's handcart was used to take the bodies away. It did seem strange to us that, from then on, only three lorries drove through the village.

Without knowing it, another boy and I found ourselves in a similarly dangerous situation some time later. We were playing in the village street when we suddenly saw a Russian rider come around the corner. Terrified, we ran as fast as we could, first to 'our' farm but

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<sup>13</sup>My mother: Emma Gitt, nee Girod (b. 20.07.1902 in Raineck, d. April 1945 in Ukraine).

My father: Hermann Gitt (b. 06.06.1901 in Seekampen, East Prussia, d. 23.01.1974 in Hohenlimburg, Westfalen).

then towards our neighbor's farm. We scrambled under a wooden fence and ran to the cemetery. We hid between the gravestones and bushes until we thought it was safe to come out again. When I got home, my aunt told me that the rider had come to the house. He was very angry and looked everywhere for us. If he had found us, we probably would have been shot on the spot as suspicious partisans. I had no idea how close to death I had come.

Another day, a lorry stopped right in front of Miss Troyka's house and a Russian ran into the house to ask the way. She thought he was going to rape her and swallowed the poison she had lying ready to hand in case something like that ever happened. As she didn't die straightaway, my aunt tried to save her by giving her an emetic. But she refused any help. She no longer had the strength to live on in these crazy, hopeless times.

In those months, we lived from what was on the farm: corn and potatoes. Fortunately, we also had wood for heating. But as we did not have any matches, we had to keep the fire burning all the time. Late at night, we used to put a briquette in the fire and waited until it started to glow. Then we put ash over it and rekindled the embers on the next morning.

As the summer went on more people came to 'our' farm. A Polish woman with five children moved in with us. They were exiles, too. They had come from the east of Poland which had been annexed off to the Soviet Union. As a result, the southern part of East Prussia was given to the Poles as the country of Poland was moved further westwards.<sup>14</sup> The Polish woman spoke German well and I remember her as being very friendly.

## Expelled

In October 1945, the Poles began expelling the German population. On 29<sup>th</sup> October 1945, a cart took us to a place near the train station in Osterode, where many more Germans had also been taken. We spent the night out in the open air, sleeping on the cobbled yard of a corn storehouse. My grandfather died the next morning and we had to leave his body behind, without having the time to bury him. Our train was ready and waiting to take us westwards – a train made up of cattle wagons. Of the five of us who had left Raineck in October 1945, I was the only one left. Was something going to happen to me next?

There was a strict rule as to what we were allowed to take with us: only what we could carry. Most people had several sets of underwear on and, if possible, two shirts. Our hand luggage for four people consisted of a bucket used for keeping jam in, in which we had put the last of our belongings (knives, forks, etc).

The journey was exhausting and it took ten long days with many long stops, before we finally arrived in a completely devastated Berlin. The journey remains in my memory like a nightmare. Lots of elderly people died on the journey due to the cold and because

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<sup>14</sup> On 28.11.1943, the "Big Three", ruler of the Kremlin J. Stalin, American President F. D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister W. Churchill withdrew to the council of war at the Teheran Conference to discuss Poland's future. Roosevelt was ill and went to bed early. Stalin wanted to keep the east Polish provinces which he had annexed at the beginning of the war in agreement with Hitler. Churchill had nothing against Stalin's robbery, and thus carelessly made a decision that would affect the inhabitants of East Prussia, Silesia and Pomerania. He suggested that the Poles be compensated for the loss of their provinces in the east by giving them the German provinces east of the River Oder. At the time, nine million Germans lived in the provinces east of the Rivers Oder and Neiße. Churchill believed that, at least logistically, moving the Germans should not prove too much of a problem. "I shall have to discuss the moral side of the problem with my own nation." (Source: Flucht und Vertreibung, GEO No. 11, November 2004, p. 102-142)

there was no-one there to look after them. We would open the door of the wagon and throw the corpses out. We were also attacked by Poles looking for something to steal from us although, by this time, we really had absolutely nothing left for anyone to steal. From Berlin, we were taken via Rostock to Sanitz (16 km east of Rostock) where we were put up with a family there.

Sometimes, when the train stopped, the women would go across the fields looking for something to eat (e.g. turnips), as we were given nothing to eat or drink during the whole journey. Sometimes the women went quite a way from the train and one dramatic situation is burned in my memory. Some of the women had gone so far across the fields that we couldn't see them any more. Suddenly, without any prior warning, the train started to move. The women didn't make it back in time. The relatives of those missing were very worried, of course. Would they ever see each other again? What could be done? I remember that they prayed the Lord's Prayer. After we had been in Sanitz for several days, we received the news that the women had been picked up by a later train. Thank God!

### **Föhr – the End of our Journey**

My cousin Waldemar (b. 25<sup>th</sup> March 1925) was injured as a soldier and had been treated in a hospital in Bark. While we were in Sanitz, we heard that he had found a job with a farmer in a small village near Bad Segeberg (Schleswig-Holstein). That was good news. As families were allowed to be united, we were given the chance of leaving the Soviet Zone. Very soon a train was provided which was to take us and several other families to the West. However, we didn't end up in Bad Segeberg but on the North Sea coast. Near Lübeck we had a short break. Everyone had to get off the train and go into a semicircular corrugated metal barrack. These barracks were called 'Nissen huts' and were used for delousing. Thickly covered in white powder, we were allowed to get back into the train which steamed off towards Niebüll. Wherever that may be! We had no idea! When we arrived there, we were told, "All onto the narrow-gauge train!" We were so worked up! Without the slightest idea where we were going, we all obeyed. After a while we arrived in Dagebüll. But that was still not our final destination. Now we were told, "All out! And on the ship next!" What was happening to us landlubbers! We all followed the order quickly because no-one wanted to get left behind. The ship had already begun to move away from the mole and set sail for the island of Föhr, when we suddenly realized that we had forgotten the bucket with the last of our belongings in the narrow-gauge train. On 24<sup>th</sup> (or 25<sup>th</sup>) January 1946 we arrived in Wyk on Föhr: we owned nothing but the clothes on our backs, but at least we had escaped with our lives.

In Wyk, we were put up with a very old couple on the south beach. They owned a large shop for colonial wares in the Oster-Street. Apart from us, a number of other refugee families had been billeted in their house, so that they only had a small attic room left for us. It didn't have a window but it did have a small skylight which let in enough light to let us know whether it was day or night. The clearest memory for me in these months was HUNGER – never-ending hunger. When we first arrived, we used to go to the spa rooms where they made soup for the refugees. Soup is a slight exaggeration because you could count yourself lucky if you had a tiny bit of potato in the soup, let alone any fat. My aunt once said with a smile, "Two eyes gaze into the soup and one little eye gazes back". She meant the tiny spot of fat in the soup. By the time we had walked all the way back home, the soup was long forgotten and my stomach was grumbling again.

In Wyk I finally started to go to school again. In order for the teachers to gauge my abilities and put me in the right class, I had to read a particular text. After more than a year



of involuntary 'holidays', the test did not go very well and, at the age of nine, I was sent back to start again with the first years. I was able to catch up again easily later, though.

Since February 1945 I was presumed to be an orphan. My mother had been deported; we hadn't had news of my father for years. It became more and more probable that my father had died in the war. But then something unbelievable happened: My aunt received a very unusual letter from a distant relative in Bochum. How it all came about is nothing short of a miracle, as far as I am concerned.

At the end of the war, my father was taken as a French prisoner of war. He had no idea what had happened to his family. Once a month, the prisoners were allowed to write a letter to someone in Germany. They were given a piece of paper, a little bit like a form, with just a few lines to write their message on. The French always checked the contents of the letters. As almost all our relatives lived in East Prussia, my father wrote letters to them there. However, as he never had a reply and didn't know where we had gone in the meantime, he stopped writing. I can't imagine what it must have been like for him to have been cut off from everyone like that! For him there were just two alternatives as to what might have happened: either we had been killed by the Red Army in East Prussia, or we had been able to flee in time and were now somewhere in West Germany. But if we had managed to flee, where could we be?

One night, my father had a dream: in the dream, he met a distant relative who had moved to the Rhineland several years before the war. In this dream, they met after they hadn't seen each other for years and when they said goodbye, this relative said to my father, "Hermann, come and visit me!" My father said he would and then he asked the most important question, "But where do you live? I don't know your address!" The relative replied clearly, "In Bochum, Dorstener Street 134a." My father woke up, put the light on and wrote down the address he had just heard in his dream. He told the other prisoners who woke up when he put the light on about his dream. They laughed at him because he took it so seriously and insisted that he was going to write a letter to that address the next day. What a surprise! It wasn't long before he received a reply, confirming that the address he'd dreamt was exactly right. Via this distant uncle, my father got into contact with my aunt Lina in Wyk, on Föhr. My father was to hear the most awful news: almost the whole family was dead: only little Werner was left. Deep shock and sorrow was mingled with joy and relief at the fact at least the youngest had survived.

I was ecstatic to hear that my father was still alive. I can still remember jumping around for joy outside when I heard the news. I could hardly believe that I was no longer an orphan but that my father was still alive. After all the awful things that had happened, at last there was something to be glad about: I was not the only survivor. I had a father. I had someone I belonged to. My life had taken a surprising turn for the better. There was light at the end of the tunnel.

When my father was released in Spring 1947, he headed off for the estate of Wensin (District Bad Segeberg). His elder brother Fritz had managed to flee with a horse and cart from East Prussia to Schleswig-Holstein. Not long after that he came to Föhr to get me. We couldn't have known what time he would arrive, otherwise I would have been at the jetty hours beforehand. I will never forget how we met in the hall of the house. By chance, I was on my way upstairs, when my father spoke to me, without recognizing me, "Tell me, does Mrs Riek live here?" I recognized him straight away, didn't answer his question and said in our low German dialect, "Papa, don't you know me?" We hadn't seen each other for such a long time that he didn't recognize me. I cannot describe how it felt to be held by a loving father after we had been apart for so long.

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Writing about all these things so long after it all happened, I realize that I was often in danger – but God saved me and protected me. I am amazed and thank my Lord for carrying me and leading me all through my life. I find the third verse of one of the most famous German hymns “Lobe den Herrn” (“Praise the Lord”) very moving and always sing it with all my heart:

Praise to the Lord  
Who has made you beautifully and fine,  
Who gave you health,  
Who has led you so lovingly;  
In what great trouble  
Has our merciful God  
Spread his wings over you.

My father’s return was the greatest gift I could have hoped for after all the horrific things that happened during the war. My father married again and I was part of a family once again. The fact that I had such a good education is down to my father and stepmother, who was also very good to me. I have written about what happened after that in my book “Questions I have always wanted to ask”<sup>15</sup>, and so I will close my account at this point.

## **A Leap into 1990**

One day I received a phone call from someone I didn’t know. He told me that he was born in the Soviet Union and had studied there. He was German but his spoken and written Russian was perfect. He had phoned to tell me that he had read some of my books and wanted to know whether I could imagine going to the former Soviet Union to hold some lectures. “I can translate for you,” he said. I asked for some time to think it over. In the days that followed, I kept asking myself whether I could travel to a country whose people were responsible for so many awful things that I had happened to me. Finally, the battle in my mind was won by the words which Jesus had spoken. In the Lord’s Prayer, he taught us, “And forgive us our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us” (Matt. 6:12). Jesus also said, “Love your enemies!” In East Prussia, the Russians were our enemies. They took my mother and my brother away from me. As well as being told to forgive, Jesus commands us to love our enemies. My heart was torn apart in this tension. In his command to spread the good news in Mark 16:15, Jesus doesn’t exclude any nations, but says explicitly, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation!” Could I deny this command?

When I spoke to the man again some time later, I agreed to go. Our first trip was to Moscow in May 1991, where, for ten days, we preached the gospel in a range of different places (e.g. at a teacher training college, technical colleges, hospitals, a factory and a barracks). God gave us many open hearts and I was surprised to see how many were prepared to make a personal decision for Jesus. Who is this man that God brought into my life? His name is Dr. Harry Tröster and up until 2004 he worked in the development department for Daimler Chrysler. Since then we have traveled to Eastern Europe and beyond almost once a year. We have been to Moscow several times, but we have also been to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan twice, to Belarus and to the northern province of East Prussia (now Russian) and to Poland. Every time we went, we met some lovely people. I could fill many books with accounts of what we experienced in the former So-

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<sup>15</sup> Werner Gitt, Questions I have always wanted to ask, CLV Bielefeld, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1998, pp. 177-186.

viet Union. Today, I consider all the campaigns we carried out in Eastern Europe to have been a blessed part of God's guidance in my life. The following 14 accounts are a testimony to the grace of God.

### A Leap into 2005

In May 2005, Zbyszek Ko\_ak invited us to hold a series of lectures in Poland<sup>16</sup>. He had arranged a tour for us, visiting Posen, Elbing, Osterode, Danzig and Marienburg. I mentioned that I would like to see Peterswalde (Pietrzwa\_d in Polish) again, as it was only 20 km away from the hotel we were staying in in Osterode (Ostroda in Polish). For me this village is the saddest place (see pages 64-65). The most awful childhood memories are rooted in this place in former East Prussia: the invasion of the Red Army, my mother being deported, being expelled without having the slightest idea where we would end up. Before I didn't know what war meant. In 1945 in this very place, I became an eye-witness of the brutality and horror that war unleashes.

On Sunday, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2005, I preached a sermon in the Baptist Church in Osterode. In the afternoon, Henryk Machs took us in the car to Peterswalde. Would I recognize anything? 60 years are a long time. First of all, we drove along the only village road in order to find some orientation. On the way back, I noticed an old farmhouse. The red brick house at the roadside was the house I had lived in before we were expelled. As I began to take photographs of the house from all different angles, an old man<sup>17</sup> came out to see why his house was such a point of interest. With our interpreter Henryk Mach we could explain everything quickly. I told him that we had lived in this house until October 1945 and that a Polish woman had come with a number of children in the summer of 1945. I used to play with the children and they taught me enough Polish to get along with them. Then he told us, "There were three sons and two daughters. I married one of the girls. We had a good marriage but three years ago my wife moved 300 meters down the road (with which he meant she was now in the cemetery)." I asked about his mother-in-law whom I remembered as being quite a corpulent woman. "Oh yes," he said, and as he lifted his arms to show how large she had been, he added, "taka maszyna," (pronounced: tacka mashinna) with which he meant, she was quite a 'machine'. Now I knew we'd found the right house. He lived alone on the farm which he could no longer run because he was too old. As we said goodbye to this friendly old man, we gave him three Christian books in Polish.

The village square, the scene of the deportation of the women, doesn't exist any more. Houses have been built on it. The road the women took out of the village is still there because it is the connecting road to the next village. For others the path may have invited them to take a walk, underneath the fresh leaves of the trees on the side of the road, past the rape and cereal fields, spreading the fragrance of Spring. But not for me. I found extremely distressing. This was where my mother started off on an agonizing journey through snow and ice in February 1945. This was where the road to death began. None of the Polish inhabitants of the village had seen what had happened. It was later that the village had become their home. They hadn't seen the awful things that I had seen and which I would never be able to forget.

On that evening, we had a meeting in the castle in Osterode. At the end of the meeting, a man gave his life to Jesus. He had also experienced much pain as a young man. He had been in four different Nazi labor camps in which he had been forced to work during

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<sup>16</sup> Trip from 17<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> May. Accompanied by Marion Gitt, Gunda and Gerhard Perteck. Henryk Mach from Bielsko-Bia\_a (South Poland) translated all the lectures at the Universities Posen, Elbing and Danzig and in the churches in the five cities we visited.

<sup>17</sup> Henryk Wozniak (b. 1931), Pietrzwa\_d # 8.

the war. He showed me a deep scar on his leg which he had from the work there. Isn't it strange that God should use a German to lead him to Christ?

On the next morning, we had a Radio interview on the regional radio station 'Radio Mazurky'. The reporter told my interpreter that he had never heard so much about the origin of life and life after death in such a short time. After the interview, I wanted to see the train station in Osterode. That was the train station where we got in the train that was to take us to the West in October 1945. It was from here that we began our journey into a completely uncertain future. Now, here I was again, after 60 years, standing at this fateful place where all hope had been lost all those years ago. I felt that I had arrived again at the beginning of the circle where it had all begun. I saw the last 60 years in my mind's eye. What had happened between then and now: my education in school, university, starting a family, profession finding faith in Jesus Christ. God had a new path for me and had given me eternal hope. How strange how it all fitted together. How I had been invited to come to Osterode. I had come to tell the people who lived in here now the good news. Who can understand the ways of God? Our God is so great!

**Note: The Text is written in American English.**

**The dates are written in British English; 23.09.2005 means 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2005**