

Interview with Roswitha S.

By Johanna Strunge

Roswitha S. was born in Upper-Silesia in 1943 as the youngest child of eight. When she was half a year old, her father was called up into the army and was later reported as missing in action. In 1945 two-year-old Roswitha experienced the escape towards west. Today Roswitha is a psychotherapist and lives in the German federal state of Hesse.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1990-0323-501
Foto: Blaschka | Januar 1945

A family from Upper-Silesia waiting in the freezing cold for a cart to go West
(Photo: Bundesarchiv, photo 183-1990-0323-501 / CC-BY-SA 3.0)

Which route did your family take to escape from Silesia?

We lived in a village in Upper-Silesia near the city Opole. In 1945 my mother decided to flee to Berlin. She took her eight children, one buggy and two handcarts with her and left her hometown. We had to walk long distances, we even crossed the Sudeten mountains by foot. Only a few times we were able to catch a train. As I was a toddler

at that time, my family told me later that our escape route had been very complicated. Rumours reached us frequently telling that the Red Army would be close. We had to change our route several times because of that. When we finally reached Berlin, we could not stay as planned. The city was already full of refugees and nobody would give us ration cards for food. That is why we had to travel further on. Due to an illness my mother received when we arrived in the city of Halle we settled down there.

You have been a toddler during the escape but you talked a lot with your mother and your older siblings when you have grown up. What marked your escape?

Our escape was an extreme situation – too little to eat, physical exertions, excessive demand and high risks. We constantly struggled with the question whether we found a place to sleep. When we were lucky and did find an abandoned house, we started to search for food. In the case of being lucky again, finding something seems to be edible, we still had to live in fear it could be about rat poison. The impact of this stress was recognizable in my mother's behaviour – she forgot the names of her children and instead only counted them from one to eight.

My older siblings had to take over a lot responsibilities during our getaway. There was the rule that our oldest sister had to look after the youngest child, which was me. The second oldest had to look after the second youngest, and so on. My eight- and ten-year-old siblings had to pull one of the handcarts. Because they were not able to do it properly, accidents happened. One time they could not hold the handcart anymore because the hill was too steep. They lost control and so the cart fell over. The younger children, who were sitting at the top of the cart – I cannot remember how many of us were sitting up there – fell down. As a result one of my sisters suffered from a concussion.

How would you define the first years in the city Halle, where you settled after the escape?

The struggle to survive went on. My mother collected and even stole fruits from the fields since many groceries were too expensive for us. Because as refugees we had no valuables, and trading with farmers (valuables against food) was not possible. To clothe her children, my mother became very inventive. She bought cheap absorbent cotton in the pharmacy, produced yarn out of it and coloured parts of it with blue ink. From the blue yarn she knitted pleated skirts, from the white yarn pullovers, underwear and swimwear. I remember that I always had an impression of the knitting pattern on my skin after sitting with this hard underwear on the school desk just as hard. I also remember the lack of any luxury – I got neither pocket money, nor a bicycle. In 1955 we had ice cream only twice a year, although it only cost ten pfennig.

The contact with the people from Halle was also quite difficult. Many approached us with prejudices, because we were a numerous family. They said about us, “they breed like rabbits”. Due to this negative attitude towards us, I never felt safe and wanted to prove that we are “decent” people. It was a huge pressure.

Were the experiences of war and escape a topic in your family?

They always were due to the fact that always when somebody rang at our door we thought “dad is coming home”. My mother who had longings for her homeland also attempted actively to establish contact with people who had to flee from Upper-Silesia like us. I remember being a teenager when my mother told us a lot about the time of war and escape. Well into old age she this issue touched her very emotionally. She was always crying during these conversations because of the sorrow we had suffered from.

Just before the Berlin wall was built in 1961 you escaped again. This time you fled from the German Democratic Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany. In which ways this second escape differed or resembled with the one in your childhood?

At the time of my second escape I was already 18 years old. That made a big difference – I experienced the escape much more consciously, but still there were things, which clearly repeated. For example in both cases I remember the strong feeling of insecurity, rootlessness and fear. As a toddler I could not express these feelings with words, but I still remember feeling these emotions. Also, in both cases we had to start all over again. Again we experienced rejection, but in a different manner. In the FRG many people thought, and even expressed their opinion loud that refugees are being treated too well.

As a psychotherapist, what do you think about the experiences children went through during escapes? How can children deal with them?

I am convinced that such experiences can strengthen people, but at the same time I know that for many refugees it takes a long time to cope with their traumata. Especially children have to be accompanied during this process. I am also convinced that children need secure places, support and good examples they can follow. For many parents, being this role model is difficult, as they are dealing with traumatic experiences themselves. In my case, my mother was still a role model for me, but when she got sick, she had to leave us on our own. Therefore, my 16-year-old sister took over the responsibility for all her siblings. You can easily imagine that this pushed her too hard. Especially in such situations, people are needed urgently, who are not involved. They have to provide safe places and show appreciation for these children in need.

The questions were asked by Johanna Strunge.