

Interview with Ausma Melbārde

By Agnija Vaska

Ausma Melbārde was deported from her home in Latvia in 1949 and was one of the thousands of children who were assigned to tough labour. Her family returned to Latvia only in 1957.

Agnija Vaska (AV): Would you please introduce yourself?

Ausma Melbārde (AM): My name is Ausma Melbārde (Avena). I was born on 17 April 1942. Now I am a pensioner and I look after my grandchildren.

AV: Where did you live? Did you have a household?

AM: We had our home called “Latas” in the Vietalva Pļaviņas region. I lived there until 25 March 1949. The household was not so big. We had seven cows, cattle, two horses, a harvester, a hay rake, stuff for the horses; our land was about 13 hectares.

AV: When did the expulsion happen?

AM: That black day – in the early morning of 25 March 1949, I still remember it very well.



Ausma at the age of 15. Courtesy of Ausma Melbārde.

AV: Can you tell me more about the morning of 25 March?

AM: It was before 5 o'clock in the morning, we all were still sleeping. Someone was knocking at the doors very loudly and hardly. My dad woke up and opened the doors. Two armed men with weapons came in and told us we were arrested. One of the men guarded the doors; the other walked around the room and told us we have to be ready to leave the house in two hours. He dropped everything from the closets and wardrobes on the floor and told we had to pack. Mum woke us up – me (7 years old), my brother Ēvalds (3 years) and my sister Maija (5 years and 7 months). We didn't know where they were going to transport us; I thought it was a bad dream.

AV: What did you take with you?

AM: The guards commanded us to take documents, clothes and food. We took some small bundles, not much - meat, a 10-litres milk can, a few clothes and 20 roubles, there was not much money at home. Mum was very worried, because she had to bake bread; she had made yeast the evening before. She begged them to allow her to finish the bread, but the man shouted on her – NO BREAD! My mum started to cry. Our 5-person-family left our home without a single piece of bread. We left with opened doors, the animals still in the cattle –shed and dog in the yard. We left everything in God’s arms.



Ausma’s brother Ēvalds. Courtesy of Ausma Melbārde.

AV: How did your long journey start?

AM: We left on a horse cart. It was a very gloomy day; the snow was melting, everything was wet outside: snow-break. It seemed like every tree was crying. When all families were assembled, they transported us from Vietalva to the Pļaviņas city. All guards were armed with weapons and we had to climb into cattle cars. Windows were covered by wood, just small lines were opened. There were wooden shelves inside and we had to sleep there. Old people groaned, there wasn’t enough space for them. It was impossible to escape. We had no idea where we were going, no one told us, but we said goodbye to Latvia, we didn’t know if we would ever come back.

AV: What was your destination?

AM: After one week of travelling, we finally stopped in Taiga. Everyone had to go outside of the train to pee, but the guards stood behind us with guns. For those who couldn’t come out of the train there was a hole in the train. The strongest men had



Ausma’s family’s home in Siberia. Courtesy of Ausma Melbārde.

to bring out the dead people and they were left in the forest in Taiga. We travelled for

around two more weeks and finally reached our destination, because there was no railway anymore: the town of Asino in the Tomsk region.

AV: Where did you live in Tomsk?

AM: We lived in barracks and slept in bunk beds. It was very cold there, the rooms were like chambers. People who couldn't walk anymore had to wear white t-shirts, they soon died. Many people suffered from dysentery, because they were drinking tidewater. My little 3-year-old brother Ēvalds got ill as well. Afterwards he didn't walk for half a year and he fell behind in growth.

AV: What about work? What kind of jobs children had to do being in exile?

AM: In winter, every child who went to school had to prepare 12 stacks of firewood. We had to saw the firewood off, to chop it and to heap it in the forest. In summer, we had to do various jobs. For instance, I had to herd pigs, to weed the furrows of flax in the fields; in autumn, I had to pick up the harvest and bind sheaves. After the harvest, we had to walk around the field and glean up spikes of wheat. In the evening guards checked if we didn't gather grains in our pockets, but usually we ate them in the field secretly.



„Every child who went to school had to prepare 12 stacks of firewood.“ Drawing by Rasa Goštautaitė

AV: How was school in Siberia? Was that possible?

AM: The school wasn't far from our home. I started in the first grade. In my class, there were four Latvian girls, the others were Russians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians – in total 20-30 pupils. It was a 7-year school. Studies were in Russian. There was no electricity; we used paraffin lamps and ink bottles to write. I didn't finish all seven classes there, because we went back to Latvia. In Latvia I started to study at the Russian school in Pļaviņas. I knew the Latvian language very badly; I couldn't write a word in Latvian, I was kicked



out of school. Then in the other school I studied the Latvian language the whole winter and I got a 3 in this subject.

AV: When were you released and could come back to Latvia?

AM: In Siberia, Dad always told us: “Our daddy Stalin will die and we will be released.” It happened exactly what our dad said. After Stalin died in 1953 we got the permission to return to Latvia although we were already signed to stay for our whole life. Our family was released in 1956 in December. First of all, dad wrote the letter “New lives” to chairman Pabērzs, who promised us one small room in his home. We returned in 1957, at the end of February.



Manual training lesson in Siberia. Courtesy of Ausma Melbārde.

AV: What were your first feelings back home?

AM: After eight years, we primarily ate a tasty lunch in the canteen and got dainties like sprats. That especially remained in my memory. Mum and dad got ill because of their tough work in Siberia and my sister and I started to work at a very young age, we had to take care of our little brothers. The childhood of my sister and mine, our school years and youth were ruined. Dad used to say: “You’ll see kids, you’ll live in an independent and free Latvia!” Mum and dad left us early. My father died from gangrene in 1969, my mother in died 1986 from other diseases.

AV: Thank you very much for the interview.

The interview with Ausma Melbārde was conducted by Agnija Vaska. All pictures are courtesy of Ausma Melbārde.