

Something we Take for Granted

By Rasa Goštautaitė



Lithuanian school children in Siberia, 1943. Source: Sibiro Alma Mater.

Continuing their education became the main goal for many school aged children, who had been deported to Siberia. Many deported children were unable to attend school right away due to various reasons. For instance, some children did not have even a single school in the area and others had to help their parents by working and earning money. Another major factor was the lack of school appliances and the language barrier. However, the latter was the least significant, as children would quickly learn the Russian language and master its difficult grammar.

The desire to study

Albina Ožeraiytė-Stašaitienė, who, together with her family, was deported in 1948 at the age of 15 to Irkutsk area, could not continue her studies straight away. In the area, was only a primary school and the other nearest school was 100 kilometers away in Ulsojas. In 1950, two additional grades were opened in the local school (5th and 6th). Albina, together with other 3 Lithuanian girls, decided to join the 6th grade, although they were already 17 years old.



Albina (right) with her parents and brothers in front of their barrack, 1949.
Source: Sibiro Alma Mater.

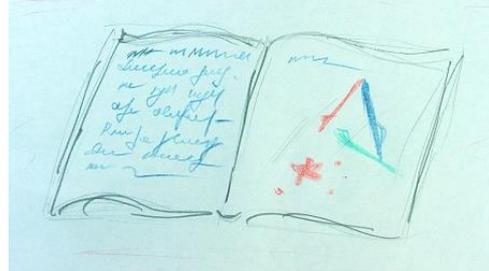
She recalls her first assignments and months at school: “It seemed to us that we already knew Russian, but when it came to studying literature and history in Russian, it was difficult. The hardest part was to study Russian grammar. Our first dictations were graded one (in the system from 1 to 5).” In 1952, Albina was allowed to go to Ulsojas to study until the 8th grade. Afterwards, she finished her studies in a medical school.

Long years of waiting

Albina’s story is similar to other stories. **Adelbertas Nedzelskis**, who before the deportation, finished the 7th grade and could not continue his studies until 1955. Then, after 7 years, he again joined the 7th grade. He remembers: “I did not know that it will take 7 long years until I will again sit at the school desk and hold a book. All those years, during the lunch break or while waiting for the train, which had to take us from the forest back to the village, we would talk about the future and guess, if we would ever be allowed to study again. The desire to study was huge. An impetus, which later motivated me and helped me to study.”

Lack of equipment

Some children could not go to school, because they simply did not have adequate clothes or shoes. Stationary, like pens and paper was another issue. Schoolbooks were difficult to find, too. Romualdas Baltutis, who was deported at the age of 8 in 1941 to Tenga village, not far from Mongolia's border, remembers: "I brought a newspaper to school, on which I planned to write during the lessons. Instead of ink I had a big bottle of beetroot juice and a duck's feather with an acute end as well as a piece of boiled potato to glue the edge of the newspaper. [...] I found the middle part of a geography's schoolbook in the trash (the only book which I had during the three years of study). Both, 3rd and 4th grades I finished poorly (the average – 2). [...] In order to mock me, she (the teacher) would ask why I wrote so ugly with a duck's feather."



"I found in the trash the middle part of a geography's schoolbook." Drawing by Rasa Goštautaitė.

Conclusion

I guess we all have lived through the moments when we did not want to go to school. The children mentioned in this article, on the contrary, desperately desired to go to school. Education served as a window to a better life for many of these children, as a possible escape from oppression. Parents as well played a crucial role in motivating their children. They praised education and kept it as one of their greatest values. Albina's father's words always followed her and motivated her: "Everything what we have acquired with our hard work, was taken from us. The only thing, which they could not take is education, therefore, seek for it as much as you can and you will not be inferior to others." Through all the difficulties and obstacles they managed to achieve their desired education. Moreover, many continued their studies in institutions for higher education and became professors, doctors and teachers.

Source:

Baltutis, Romualdas (ed.), Sibiro Alma Mater. Post Scriptum, Šiauliai: Šiauliai University, 2009.