

“I am a War Baby”

Inga Zomber-Eschke – A German child of war

By Nadja Grintzewitsch

On Saturday, 8 August 2015, 18 young Europeans and three facilitators had the possibility to talk with Inga Zomber née Eschke, who was two years old when her parent’s home in Berlin-Borsigwalde was destroyed during an air-raid. This marked the beginning of a long-lasting odyssey through three different countries, accompanied by escape, hunger and fatherlessness.

“When the bomb hit our house, it burned for six days, nothing was left. It was an American phosphor bomb,” Inga recalls. On that fateful day in 1943, little Inga and her mother were on the way to visit her grandmother, so that they luckily were not harmed. “We were alive, but we only had the clothes that we wore on our bodies.” The loss of their home cut her parents to the quick. They had worked hard to build the house. “I am a war baby. I was born very late, my mother was already 32 years old. I think it is because my parents had to save a lot of money to make their dream – the house – come true.”



Inga Zomber, née Eschke, talking with some of the participants, Berlin 2015. Source: Karolina Kaleta, Koerber Foundation.

Homeless, but not alone

Inga was born in 1941, four years after her parents got married. She grew up as an only child. Her mother Irmgard was a foreign language secretary for English and French. She worked at the Borsig factory in Borsigwalde, where they produced locomotives. Inga’s father was an architect. During WWII, he had to fight for the German Wehrmacht and was taken prisoner by the Soviets at the end of the war. After the destruction of their house, Inga and her mother lived at her grandparents’ home in Stolpe-Süd for a while. This is the point where Inga’s first memories start.

Bonzo and the teddy bear

Inga remembers that one day, the dog Bonzo came with a teddy bear in his mouth which he probably found in a ruin or on the street. “My mother was scared to death because she thought that it was a dead animal. But I was very happy because I haven’t had any toys since the bombardment of our house.” The teddy bear had to sit near the window of the dairy for a while, in case that somebody would recognize it. After four long weeks, Inga could finally keep the teddy. “I took him everywhere. But I don’t know where he’s got to. Probably he was lost during our escape from Lissa.”



The stations of Inga's childhood: Berlin-Borsigwalde, Stolpe, Lissa/Leszno, Meerholz in Hesse, as well as Epalinges, Airolo and Brugg in Switzerland. Source: Samantha Bornheim, Agency for Education.

The flight from the Soviets

Lissa, now Leszno in Poland, was the second station Inga had to move to. In the course of the bombings, some German families from bombed regions were evacuated to the so-called Reichsgau Wartheland, likewise Inga and her family. The local population there, many of them Jews, already had been expelled from this region (and deported to camps) in the years before. Inga's family didn't stay for a long time in Leszno. Already in January 1945, the Reichsgau Wartheland with the towns of Poznan and Leszno was evacuated from the approaching Soviet Army. “Everybody was scared of the Russians, especially the women”, Inga recalls. “They told terrible things in the newspapers.” The Nazi propaganda machine under the rule of Joseph Goebbels did its best to depict the Soviets as vicious beasts with no compassion.¹

¹ For German women, the rumors sadly often turned into truth. In Berlin alone, at least 110,000 women were raped by Soviet soldiers between spring and autumn 1945. Source: Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries, Schweigen und schmerzhaftes Fragen, in: Die Zeit (22 March 2015).

Inga's family artefact

Until today, Inga possesses a blanket that saved her life during the flight from the Red Army. “It was warm and cozy, we were so glad to have it with us”, recalls Inga. Her family fled on a horse-drawn carriage in the deep of winter. The flight lasted three days and three nights. “Despite the blanket, I got some frostbites. One can still see the scars on my cheek.” The blanket not only survived the escape from the Red Army and the end of the war but also the turbulent postwar years. Shortly before the expropriation of her grandparents' house in GDR times, the blanket came back into the possession of her parents.



Inga Zomber-Eschke and her family artefact: The blanket that saved her life in January 1945. Source: Karolina Kaleta, Koerber Foundation.

Mother and daughter ended up in a small village in Hesse, where they had to live in poverty. Her maternal relatives who lived there were not very accommodating. Although they were quite rich (they possessed estates and a rubber factory), they didn't want to take care of their poor relatives. Even the care packets from her uncle Joseph were ransacked. Mother and daughter lived in a room which the local pastor had provided them. Inga had to beg for food while her mother picked blueberries and chopped timber in the woods. “I didn't even have shoes, I went to school in slippers”, Inga recalls.

The next station: Switzerland

In 1949, malnourished Inga and her mother decided to go with a “Kinderzug” (children's train) to Switzerland. These transports were organized by the Red Cross and

financed by private donations. Between 1946 and 1955, more than 44,000 German children had the possibility to stay up to six months in Swiss families. For unknown reasons, Inga's mother managed to travel together with her. For three years, they stayed in Switzerland. Inga went to different schools there. "First, we were in Epalinges, where I had to learn French. Then we moved to Airolo where I learned a bit of Italian. Finally, we ended up in Brugg, in the German-speaking part of Switzerland."

1952: Return to Berlin

One day, Inga and Irmgard got message from their father and husband. Kurt Eschke had been deported to a Gulag first, but was sent to Moscow afterwards. There, as an architect, he had to help building the Moscow subway, a prestigious object for Stalin. Now, he was released.

After three years in Switzerland, Inga and her mother finally returned to Berlin. "I did not recognize that man, it was a strange situation", Inga recalls. "I also had problems in school. I could only speak *Switzerdütsch* (Swiss-German). The other pupils made fun of me. As fast as I could, I learned the Berlin dialect."



Inga Zomber-Eschke in the Agency of Education, Berlin, August 2015.
Source: Karolina Kaleta, Koerber Foundation.

Only the beginning

Her return to Berlin was by no means the last travel station in Inga's life. After finishing grammar school, she became a travel agent for Hapag Lloyd, even though her father wanted her to become a technical drawer. Travelling became her business and passion. During a stay in Paris in 1962, she met an American citizen and decided to move to the United States. There, they got married. Inga stayed in contact with her family in Berlin-West (FRG) and Stolpe-Süd (GDR), even though the latter was not that easy during the period of the Cold War. After the reunification of Germany, Inga regularly visited her parents in Berlin. Since the death of her grandmother, a communist family lived in the former dairy in Stolpe-Süd. "I promised my mother to get the house of my grandparents back – and that's what I did." Years later, the heritage of her grandparents was restituted. Inga now lives half a year in the house of her grandparents, half a year in the United States.



Inga Zomber-Eschke with the participants and the facilitators of the seminar “Children of War” in Berlin-Kreuzberg, August 2015. Source: Johanna Strunge, Agency for Education.

Struggle with identity

Back in Berlin, August 2015. The participants ask lots of questions after the talk. We are going to the rivers bank in Kreuzberg for one last photo. “Do you feel more American or more German now?” suddenly asks one of the participants. Inga reflects a few seconds upon the question. “I guess I’m more American now, although I do not have the American citizenship”, she answers and smiles. “But I’m planning to apply for it, as next time, in November 2016, I want to go to the polls in the United States. I want to support Hillary Clinton.” Since the reunification, Inga never missed the polls in Germany.