

# CHILDHOOD IN EXILE

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## ABSTRACT

### **Childhood in Exile<sup>2</sup>**

Slovenian historiography has to a large degree ignored children and childhood. This disregard seems unjustified, since the lives of young people offer us valuable and often alternative insights into various periods of Slovenian history. The author synthesizes the phenomenon of the wartime exile of Slovenes to neighbouring countries and illustrates it using children's experiences. Research of children's experiences of war and exile reflects both the dynamics of wartime migration and the consequences in the Slovenian cultural area.

The paper on children's experiences of exile is placed in the socio-historical context of the Second World War. In terms of methodology it uses a combination of classical historical methodology and oral history; it is based on the relevant historical literature, an analysis of historical materials from throughout the entire post-war era, and various oral testimonies obtained from people in their later years.

KEY WORDS: childhood, exiles, Second World War, testimony, memoirs

## IZVLEČEK

### **Otroštvo v izgnanstvu**

Slovensko zgodovino pisje je zgodovino otrok in otroštva v veliki meri zapostavilo. Prezrtje se zdi neutemeljeno, saj življenja mladih ponujajo dragocen in pogosto alternativen vpogled v različna obdobja slovenske zgodovine. Avtorica sintetizira fenomen medvojnega izganjanja Slovencev v sosednje države in ga prikazuje skozi otroške izkušnje. Raziskava o otroških izkušnjah vojne in izgonov obenem zrcali medvojno migracijsko dinamiko in njene posledice v slovenskem prostoru.

Prispevek o otroških izkušnjah izgnanstva je umeščen v socialno-zgodovinski prikaz druge svetovne vojne. Metodološko prepleta klasično zgodovinsko metodo z metodo ustne zgodovine; temelji na relevantni zgodovinski literaturi, analizi spominskih gradiv, ki je nastajala celotno povojno obdobje, in nekaterih ustnih pričevanj, pridobljenih v zadnjih letih.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: otroštvo, izgnanci, druga svetovna vojna, pričevanja, spomini

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## EXILES AND TESTIMONIES

There are a large number of testimonies and memoirs about the wartime exile of Slovenes, which however have been used as a source for only a very small number of historical treatises. The writings of Slovenia's leading historian of the Second World War, Dr. Tone Ferenc, which give a detailed explanation of the historical context and the phenomenon of exile itself, demonstrate a thorough familiarity with the wartime circumstances and the exiles. There are only a few collections of memoirs, exhibitions and other events connected with the study of exiles which could elude his erudite knowledge of the exile of Slovenes. However, I detect in it a lack of certain perspectives, which in my opinion was in fact caused by his own personal experience of the war and his research style, in which he paid less attention to non-classical historical methods. In any case, a topic as sensitive as that of a tragic and above all conflicted historical period such as the Second World War needs time in order to obtain the objectivity that allows us to recognise the hidden shades of the phenomenon in question.

We can partially arrive at a more complete account of the phenomenon of exile by taking account of other research perspectives – I chose to focus on *childhood memories* of exile, which were revealed to me through various historical materials and oral testimonies. These memories are to a certain extent contaminated by the perspectives of adults on the exile period, but they also often contain elements that are specific to the experience of children. The perspectives of exiled children on the period of exile are less ideologically weighted than those of their parents, and are even perhaps slightly adventuresome. The testimonies which relate stories of the experiences and responses of children to the exile period tell us that their exile experiences were more varied and multifaceted than they would appear at first glance. The testimony of Ivanka Kerin Sterle, who was forced into exile in Germany with her family from the Posavje village of Črešnjsice near Cerklje at the end of 1941, when she was 11 years old, demonstrates a clearly ambivalent attitude towards exile.

Despite the fact that I was still a girl, I felt my parents' pain. But we children also experienced something else. We were delighted by the trip by bus and train, since we had never had the opportunity to travel, except taking our cart out to the fields. (Šetinc 1993: 285)

Despite the fact that it is impossible to generalize about exile owing to the exceptional variety of fates and emotions associated with it, her testimony nevertheless instils doubts about the exclusive characterization of exile as suffering and painful. I in no way want to state that people did not experience exile as painful, tragic and in certain places horrendous; quite the opposite. However, I believe that the exile period has to be understood in a more balanced manner, since during the wartime period difficulties were accompanied by love, fear by rapture and joy, work by play, and scarcity by moments of plenty. How otherwise can we explain the fact that some of the exiles did not return home after the war,

but remained in the country of exile, got married, created families? How can we explain the many smiling faces in photographs of people in exile? These were the moments which led me to begin looking at this undoubtedly difficult period through the prism of vitality. In order to justify such a conceptualization of exile, I believe that the best approach is to consistently trace individuals' entire lives. The intimate valuation of the exile period undoubtedly occurred through comparisons of everyday life during peacetime with life during the war, and was at the same time also coloured by prism of childhood and youth.

The context of the stories naturally changes with respect to the time of the telling. Remembrance has to be understood as a process which in all cases depends on the circumstances in which people are remembering or talking about a certain event or time. Memoirs and testimonies from exceptional wartime circumstances are often conditioned, burdened with socio-political issues; these elements had a significant effect on the experience and valuation of exile. In the context of their wartime experiences, exiles usually presented themselves as victims, since in that extremely strained atmosphere it was unacceptable that anyone had not suffered during the war – as long as they were not on the side of the oppressors. The multifacetedness of experiences of exile was silenced after the war through the systematic selection of sources. Testimonies about exile were also strongly affected by the fact that for a long time exiles were viewed as second-class citizens in comparison with fighters in the National Struggle for Liberation. With the distance of time and the changes in the political situation, which finally gave exiles the chance to be recognized as war victims, the need arose to reevaluate the experiences of exiles.

A similar principle can be seen in children's conceptualizations of exile. If we include in the debate a collection of children's essays about their exile experiences written from 1944 onward, we cannot overlook the editors' tendencies when making the selections; the suffering of the children described therein was emphasized in the context of the "great uprising and heroic struggle" of the National Struggle for Liberation (Ribičič 1980: 157). The later testimonies reflect less uniform and at the same time more considered memories of childhood experiences and viewpoints, but in them as well we can detect the more or less concealed presence of political and ideological tendencies. Thus even in the case of exile, children were – as has so often been the case – frequently used as a context which triggers strong emotional reactions in order to support the message of a certain social elite.

## **CHILDREN IN THE ADULT HALLUCINATION OF WAR**

The exiling of people during the Second World War occurred in practically every Slovenian town, regardless of the occupying authority. The exiling was the result of various circumstances and mechanisms, and was manifested in an exceptionally wide range of forced migrations which oscillated between internment in strictly controlled concentration camps and moving to sound living quarters. It was fuelled by the occupier's imperialist appetites, i.e. ideas about the national consolidation of the German (and partially also Hun-

garian and Italian) lands, the wish to establish occupying authorities as quickly as possible, a belief in the need for preventive ideological purges, reprisals and terrorist measures etc.

These measures also directly or indirectly involved children; many were exiled along with their parents, or were separated from them and sent abroad with other children, or remained at home and spent the war years as orphans. Many children lost their nearest relations due to exile, either through death due to exhaustion and disease (as often occurred in the camps) or due to reprisal measures (for instance as a consequence of the mass shootings in Kragujevac and Kraljevo, where several dozen Slovenes who had been exiled there were killed). The family context, which determines to the greatest extent the child's experience of exile and the intimate placement of their exile experiences, is in my opinion the most essential, and I believe that it requires special attention; but, as becomes evident from certain testimonies, even this is not always decisive; family relations are complex, and some of them demonstrated a high degree of restrictiveness and discomfort. The temporary or permanent absence of the close social network, which is well described in the book *Ilegalčki* (Illegals), was usually traumatic for children (Štrajnar 2004), although I encountered testimonies which form an interesting complement to this assertion.

The neighbours moved out on 1<sup>st</sup> of November. It was awful for everybody, they were crying, yelling. We were really good neighbours. They wrote from the camp that they were doing fine, and I asked Father to arrange it so that we could follow them. Our neighbours were living there well, they sent parcels from Germany; I got my first overcoat from them from Germany. (Simikič 2000: 278)

Despite the tendency to classify exiles according to their destination, which is to a certain extent justified, we should point out once more that the experiences of victims of exile are first of all unique. All evaluations of the fate of exiles, including those of children, depend on a complex of external, objective factors, on the community in which the child lived and grew up and last but not least on their intimate confrontation with the situation. The child's perspective also determined the structure of this paper: the chapters are divided with respect to exiles' family circumstances, and at the same time attempt to describe the general characteristics in the place of exile.

## **INTO EXILE WITH THE FAMILY**

As can be seen from the testimonies, the most traumatic experience for exiled children is not the exile per se, but separation from or loss of parents and relatives. If only the parents were exiled, the destruction of the family affected all of its members, and particularly the emotional development of children. The exiling of an entire family was therefore a significantly mitigating circumstance for all of its members.

Owing to the blurriness of the dividing lines between forced and voluntary exile (Lucassen 1999: 11), we can also classify as exiles the cases of refugees who fled due to

an increased sense of threat. In its initial stages, the Second World War triggered a turbulent disorganized movement of people and particularly families, whose vectors were moving in all directions. All of these displacements, which occurred in a relatively small area and which according to estimates involved a quite large number of people, are poorly researched and appear mainly only in historical sources.

I remember it like it was yesterday. One afternoon I was lying in the hay and I heard Mother and Father saying that we would have to leave. It was already winter, because I remember it being cold. They thought that we should get up early in the morning and head towards Telče, where we had a vineyard and a cottage. And in fact we went. That morning, it was very early, we left. Father, Mother and my father's brother put the most important things on the cart. They yoked up the oxen and we left. We had to leave everything else there, because we had nowhere else to put it. We took some food and clothes. We untied the livestock and set them free, since we didn't know when we would be coming back. [...] On Christmas Day in 1941 we moved to Kočevje. We got a small house there, more of a barracks, where we lived, and some leased land so that we could cultivate it. Well, pretty soon afterwards, at the beginning of 1942, they arrested Father and took him away. And then we saw Father every once in a while, when we could go visit him. And they took my older brother too. He had to perform forced labour. He dug anti-tank trenches somewhere near Ribnica. It was awful. Mother was completely alone, without Father and without her oldest son.<sup>3</sup>

The children who were exiled with their families to Serbia, where around 7000 Slovenes had been exiled by the autumn of 1941, were in a relatively favourable position. The exiled families often moved near settlements where a lot of Slovenes had lived before the war, mainly economic migrants, refugees from fascist Primorska etc. (Šetinc 1993: 143–144). These exiles lived with the families of wealthy Serbs, with acquaintances or in abandoned houses. Their biggest problem was general scarcity, since “due to the occupation and the general chaos, and the ineffectiveness of the Serbian authorities and the terrible black market, even many educated Serbs and their families were living at the edge of survival” (Ingolič 1992: 5). Children were left with parents, peers and friends, the schools were not open regularly, and there was no forced labour.

That was the beginning of our new life, which some got used to sooner, and some later. We young ones had the least difficulties with it, since we quickly formed contacts with the local youth, and our local teacher Branko in particular meant a lot to us during that time. We had the evenings to ourselves. We usually met in the schoolyard, sat in a circle and talked and sang. Slovenian songs were a comfort to us. At that time the Slovenian colony in Vevčane received three new members. After a few months of living in the village, our paths went their separate ways. Some people

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<sup>3</sup> Transcribed text from an interview conducted for a seminar in 2009 by student Sabina Zabasu for an elective class entitled History of Everyday Life with Prof. Marta Verginella.

stayed and looked for lowly jobs; others went to larger towns and began to arrange new homes. Employment was the main factor guiding our paths and decisions. Our family found a new niche for itself in Belgrade. (Šetinc 1993: 237)

According to reports, approximately 10,000 people were exiled to the Independent State of Croatia; they included many families, but the number of children among them is not known. They lived either with local families or in homes abandoned by Serbs and Jews (Borovnik 1998: 10–12). A few hundred Slovenes had tragic experiences at Ustaše concentration camps, particularly the complex at Jasenovac. The brunt of the Ustaše repression was aimed at (Orthodox) Serbs, Jews and Roma, but there are horrendous accounts of the fates of Slovenian internees. Psychologist and poet Rado Palir, who endured four years of exile in Novska, Croatia starting when he was a year and a half old, gives a moving account of his experiences. When he was five he lost both parents, who were killed at the Jasenovac concentration camp due to suspicion of being involved in the National Struggle for Liberation.

My early childhood was just a huge nightmare, a huge trauma, full of unspeakable horror and the wonder of a child's soul about how this was at all possible, in addition to ineradicable and inexpressible feelings of guilt – what had we done that we, our family, had to bear such misfortune...

If you ask the older townspeople in my hometown of Šentjur what I was like as a child, they will probably tell you that I was basically a pitiable child: terribly uncertain, introverted, dreamy, somehow not present and living in my own world, silent, a loner, untrustworthy, overly sensitive, full of feelings of insufficiency or even of being an outcast, in short – 'strange'. I even stood out from the norm on the level of the body: I was extremely, even disturbingly nervous: I bit my nails, pulled out my hair, and up until the middle of my college years in Ljubljana, all the way into my adulthood, a decade and a half after our exile, my hands shook so much that I always spilled a good part of the liquid from a full glass if I picked it up in my hands... I suffered a great deal because of this and avoided people, even children. After all I have experienced and suffered I know today that there is probably no greater sin on earth than to rob a child of a happy, carefree and peaceful childhood [...] (Borovnik 1998: 196).

Entire families also moved with their children to the territory of the Hungarian occupiers in Prekmurje, whose exile is the least researched of all three occupying forces in Slovenian historiography. The Hungarian authorities exiled in particular educated people and Slovene immigrants from Primorska, who had moved to Prekmurje after 1918 (Fujs 1997). The majority were exiled from the country during the first months of the war, the majority to the Independent State of Croatia, while some were interned at labour camps in Hungary.

My family lived in Lendava for fourteen years between the First and Second World

Wars. Mainly families of civil servants from all over Slovenia settled here. A lot of refugees from Primorska and Benečija also found a haven here. Most of them worked in agriculture. During the Second World War they were all subject to the coup by the occupying authority, so that they were either taken to Hungary or forced to leave the country under duress. Our family of five escaped with a few other Lendava families to Koprivnica in Croatia, where we stayed to the end of the war. (Šetinc 1993: 340)

## **IN THE CAMPS – BETWEEN BARBED WIRE AND GAMES**

The largest numbers of Slovene exiles were interned on the territory of the Third Reich. In the name of the ethnic consolidation of the German population and in order to simplify their military and administrative strategies, the German authorities planned to unite the German minorities outside the Reich (e.g. South Tyrol, Bessarabia, Bukovina, Kočevsko) with the rest of the Germans. In order to implement this plan it was necessary to remove populations which did not conform to the criterion of German minority or “capable of being re-Germanified”. Fortunately, they were unable to complete the planned ambitious removal of between 220 and 260 thousand Slovenes from the German occupied zone (especially from border areas such as Posavje and Obsotelje), but nevertheless more than 10,000 children were taken to Germany.

Slovene children were not usually brought to concentration camps – unless they were born there. They were usually brought with their parents to smaller labour camps throughout the Third Reich. Movement was limited in these camps, but they were sometimes allowed out. Children were given various tasks and sent to various schools depending on their abilities. From the testimonies it can be seen that in addition to their work, these children had quite a bit of free time, although conditions differed from camp to camp.

I would say that it was terrible, but it was worse for parents and older people, who were more aware of it than we were. I was a little more aware of it, but for instance Anica or Francek, what did they know? They were just kids. The other thing was that there were about 400 of us kids at the camp in Uršula, and that was enough for every game. You can always find time for these kinds of things, right?<sup>4</sup>

Bad things happened to numerous Slovene children in Italian concentration camps which accepted families (Gombač 1997: 389–394). The deportation of Slovene families from the Italian occupied zone was much more poorly thought out than in Germany. In April 1942 because of the Partisan movement, not just “bandits” but also their families living in the Ljubljana area fell into the disfavour of the Italian authority. The authority

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<sup>4</sup> Edited transcript of an interview with Ivan Živič of Globoko near Krško, who was exiled to Silesia with his mother, grandfather, two sisters and brother at the end of October 1941. The interview was conducted in 2010 by his niece Špela Fekonja for an elective class entitled History of Everyday Life with Prof. Marta Verginella.

intended to let the rebellious elements gradually calm down and did not use them for forced labour (Ferenc 2000: 13–15).

Therefore several thousand children (under 15) were living in unsustainable existential conditions in Italian concentration camps. The housing infrastructure at the Rab camp e.g. consisted only of tents; the people were directly exposed to cold, fevers, flooding, and the Bora, a strong local wind. Their opportunities for survival were diminished by meagre rations, a lack of water, poor hygienic conditions, infectious diseases and parasites. The health conditions were particularly terrible for infants, small children and the elderly. The children were not required to work; they had so to speak more time than they knew what to do with, and during the summer they were even taken to the coast every day under supervision (Ferenc 2000: 21–30). In October 1942 the Italian authorities took mothers and children from Rab to Gonars, Moniga and in lesser numbers to other camps, from which they began to release them in the spring of 1943.

On the second day they took us to the tents, which were already full of our neighbours. There was a high wire fence around us and we couldn't go anywhere. My younger brother cried a lot. He was thirsty, but we had no water. We suffered from terrible thirst. They counted us and sent our father somewhere else. All the men were together. He only came to see us once in a while. We were always very happy at those times. But he was very hungry. Every day his face grew more sallow. When he left, my mother and I cried. We were scared that he would die like so many others. We were also very sad because the lice stung and bit us. My father had a lot of them too. (Ribičič 1980: 27)

The register of internees in a publication about the concentration camp at Sarvar, which was the Hungarian concentration camp with the largest number of Slovenes, includes nearly 600 family members, mostly with surnames typical of Primorska, who were interned in the lower Lendava area in the summer of 1942. Approximately a third of them were children. The relatively late arrival of the majority of the Slovenes was their salvation, as the living, hygiene and food conditions at the camp had improved significantly in comparison with 1941 (Valenčič 1992).

The sight of the camp stunned me. A barbed wire fence around 3 metres high with armed guards next to it, on the inside old dark abandoned buildings, and among them tattered and wretched beings. Members of the concentration camp staff – mostly retired gendarmes – were waiting for us at the gate. In the courtyard they let us go so that at the gate each one of us was entered separately in a separate register. The beatings gradually got worse. The former gendarmes understood their old jobs well. By slapping us, screaming at us and kicking us, they wanted to show us right at the gate that from then on we were totally without rights, that in fact we were no longer people, just numbers with no meaning.

The first to enter was Alojz Vidmar and his family from Kamovec. He was assigned number 7573. The last was Zdravko Budin, a five-year-old child from Benica with



number 8147. When they had counted all of us and gathered us in the courtyard, they herded us into the sixth barracks, which from then on was called the “Slovene barracks” (Valenčič 1992: 19).

## STOLEN CHILDREN

As the most touching chapter in the history of the Slovene exiles in the Second World War are considered the so-called “stolen children”. Around 600 Slovene children under the age of 18 were forcibly separated from families which had collaborated or sympathized with the Partisan movement, and taken to Germany. Their older family members and parents were shot as hostages or sent to concentration camps.

I am from Paška vas. In 1942 the Germans took my father and shot him in Maribor in May of the same year. In 1942 they also moved us together with our mother. First they took us to the assembly camp in Celje. They took Mother to Auschwitz, and separated us children alphabetically for transport. They even deported children in baskets. I was in the first transport, and we stopped in Saldenburg near Passau. We lived there until '44, because my mother was released from Auschwitz in '44. The most mothers and other relatives died in the first few months, because it was very bad. We were really lucky that Mother survived.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the so-called stolen children were taken to a special VoMi<sup>6</sup> camp for minors, where they became part of the labour force, usually for unskilled work in factories or as a source of labour for nearby farmers. Children over 14 were assigned heavier work, while the younger ones helped with the cleaning, washing up, cooking, carrying sand or coal, picking potatoes etc. The food and accommodations conditions varied from camp to camp and also from account to account; some people place a heavy emphasis on the scarcity and food, while others barely mention food. The short daily diary entries of Slavko Preložnik of Vojnik give us an interesting insight into everyday life in a children's concentration camp. His father was shot, and his mother died in Auschwitz. He and his brother and sister were taken to a camp in Germany, where his days were filled with work, school and play. Slavko's style is fairly documentary, so it is interesting to note what he chose to write about.

19.–26. VII. 1943

We brought coal, and loaded it into the cellar. In the afternoon we bathed in the stream. The leader of the Hitlerjugend went with the soldiers. We received a new

<sup>5</sup> From an interview with Mrs M.A. from a seminar paper entitled *Ukradeni otroci* (Stolen Children), written by Urška Verbič in 2009 for an elective class entitled History of Everyday Life with Prof. Marta Verginella.

<sup>6</sup> *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (Main Welfare Office for Ethnic Germans), an NSDAP agency which oversaw the interests of ethnic Germans living outside the Third Reich.

leader, who is a lot stricter than the last one. During the night there was an air raid siren. As always, we picked up the leaflets that they throw from the planes. We collected a lot of them.

6.–17. IX. 1943

There was another air raid during the night. We have class. We loaded another wagon of coal into the cellar. We played football with the Germans again. We wiped them out. The score was 9:2 in our favour. We saw and split wood. We continued to prepare firewood for the next few days. We have military drill. We pick potatoes at the farms.

18. IX. 1943

Today we went to the cinema in Amberg. We walked around the town as much as we wanted. (Terčak 1973: 325)

Infants and young children who satisfied various criteria were subjected to the Nazi *Lebensborn* programme,<sup>7</sup> which gave them a new German identity and entered them in a Germanisation programme. Some of these children were adopted by SS families (Terčak 1973: 425–439). Elica Acman was separated from her parents when she was two months old, and the separation from her mother and life in an unknown children's concentration camp were so traumatic for her that it affected her development. At the age of three “she couldn't walk, or even talk, she drank only milk and that only from a bottle. She constantly sucked on three fingers. According to the older girls, they always had to sleep tied to the beds” (Terčak 1973: 406). Her brother Ivan Acman, who was barely 14 months old when he was separated from his parents, returned to his birthplace of Šmihel only in 1947 after a long court battle, as he had been adopted during the war.

These events, which were so fateful for our family and for me, I can't remember. I can't remember Mother and Father either. According to what others have told me, I was in a boys' home for around a year. I was taken from the boys' home by Mrs Marga von Mann. Her, and her husband, who was a high-ranking officer in the German Army, I remember well.

When I came home, I was six years old. I spoke only German, and didn't understand my mother tongue. The teacher in Šmihel above Mozir at that time, Mr Rakun, who spoke German well, helped me in all kinds of ways. In a short time I became totally accustomed to the local circumstances and after that I advanced at the Šmihel school. My father was shot as a hostage by the Germans at the Stari Pisker prison in Celje, and Mother died in the Auschwitz concentration camp. My sister Elica and I were left alone (Terčak 1973: 409–410).

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<sup>7</sup> Lebensborn, a far-reaching Nazi organization led by Himmler, which in addition to providing financial assistance and land to the wives of SS officers was also in charge of orphans and for child relocation programmes. Its basic purpose was to promote the development of individuals who corresponded to Nazi racial and eugenic criteria. Children were collected from several occupied areas, particularly Poland, the Czech lands, Bosnia etc.

## IN CONCLUSION

The testimonies of exiled children fill in a missing piece in the mosaic not just of the history of exiles, but of the entire period of the Second World War. They contribute to a broader palette of reality, which with some distance from the unquestionably horrible war period is shown to be more dynamic and colourful. One should always bear in mind that the historical background in exiles' accounts is often shown only in fragments and that the foreground of their stories are their experiences and those of their closest relatives. At times the time-lines of their narratives seem to be at odds with the official historical explanations or with generally accepted and established ideas, and indicate discrepancies. But these are entirely credible grey areas, which come to light due to the huge diversity of subjective experiences and interpretations of a certain period or event.

The forcible and often also violent wresting of people from their home environments usually had a significant impact on children. Despite the fact that the mere fact of exile, i.e. leaving home involuntarily, was usually stressful, tragic and painful, this was not necessarily the case for life in exile. Many people experienced a certain freedom in exile, learned a new language, met new people, made new friends and got a taste of living abroad etc. If we read the memoirs of exiled children closely, we can also see that they sometimes recognized the otherwise strict, cruel, enemy occupiers as saviours, that life in exile could be more pleasant than life at home, that the teachers at the German schools were sometimes described as friendlier and more interesting than those at home etc. In some cases the exiles had better lives in the material and even social sense than they had had at home before the war, and some of them even remained in the land of exile after the war. These parts of the accounts lay heavy on our hearts and give us the impetus as researchers to doubt black and white representations of the past.

For the majority of people, including children, the period of exile was a traumatic one. In this context we cannot forget that for the great majority of people – I am thinking mainly of Slovenia – the entire war period as such was supremely traumatic. Often the most painful moment for exiles was returning home, where in the euphoric atmosphere of the end of the war they came back to damaged or destroyed property and dead or missing relatives, friends and acquaintances.

At the end of the maelstrom of war, the fate of exile from Slovenian lands was suffered by people of German, Italian and Hungarian extraction and people who were in one way or another in conflict with the new authorities – and children were also among the victims of these measures. The hundred-year presence of “foreign” ethnic groups on the territory of present-day Slovenia was cut off by force, in numerous towns systematically. The demonization of Nazis was omnipresent in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and was applied to the entire German nation; a similar fate to those of the “enemy nations” also befell numerous Italians and Hungarians in Slovenia, as well as several thousand Slovenes branded as “traitors”, including approximately a thousand children. After so much suffering during the war, the society was fanaticized and needed

to find a scapegoat. But the search for the guilty parties did not end the vicious circle of injustice – for some communities it had only just begun.

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## POVZETEK

### OTROŠTVO V IZGNANSTVU

Urška Strle

Otroški spomini na izgnanstvo so do določene mere kontaminirani z dominantnimi pogledi na dobo, pogosto pa vsebujejo tudi elemente, ki so jih sodobne perspektive težje razkrile. Perspektiva izgnanih otrok na dobo izgnanstva je v primerjavi z njihovimi starši navadno manj ideološko obremenjena, manj dovzetna za tesnoba občutja glede negotove prihodnosti in morda celo nekoliko avanturistična. Res pa je, da se kontekst pripovedi razlikuje tudi glede na čas pripovedovanja – med vojno, neposredno po vojni, v 90. letih, danes. Vsekakor je treba spominjanje jemati kot proces, ki je nujno in vsakokrat odvisen od okoliščin, v katerem se ljudje določenega dogodka ali obdobja spominjajo oziroma o njem pripovedujejo.

Kljub temu da je pričevanja posameznikov zaradi izjemne raznolikosti izkušenj in občutij glede izgnanstva nemogoče posploševati, nekatera izmed njih vendarle vzbudijo dvom o izključno trpečem in bolečem doživljanju izgnanstva. S tem nikakor ne želim trditi, da izgnanstva posamezniki niso doživljali kot bolečega, tragičnega in mestoma tudi grozljivega, nasprotno. Vendar menim, da je čas izгона treba razumeti bolj uravnoteženo, saj so ljudje v vojni dobi ob tesnobah doživljali tudi ljubezen, ob strahu tudi vznesenost in veselje, ob pomanjkanju tudi trenutke izobilja. Kako si sicer lahko razložimo dejstvo, da se del izgnancev po vojni ni vrnil domov, ampak se je v deželi izгона ustalil, se poročil, si ustvaril družino? Kako si lahko razložimo nemalo veselih obrazov na fotografijah izgnancev v izgnanstvu? To so bili ključni momenti, ki so zbudili mojo radovednost, ko sem začela preučevati pričujočo tematiko, in me napeljala na to, da začnem na nedvomno težko dobo gledati skozi prizmo življenjskosti. Za utemeljitev takšne konceptualizacije izgnanstva menim, da je najbolj konsistentno pogledati globlje v predvojni čas in zasledovati celotno posameznikovo življenje. Intimno vrednotenje dobe izgnanstva je nedvomno

potekalo ob primerjavah mirnodobnega vsakdana z življenjem v času vojne. Zato so – ne glede na veliko časovno distanco in tendenco po pozitivnem filtriranju spomina – zame posebej dragocena nedavna pričevanja nekdanjih otrok – izgnancev, saj lahko ponudijo bogatejše vpoglede na nekatere pojave.