



MY STORY: A REFUGEE IN WAR TIME EUROPE

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Born July 7, 1915 in Leesi, Estonia

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Introduction by Carl Rosse

According to UNHCR estimates, around one million Middle Eastern refugees have arrived in Europe since 2015 seeking sanctuary in various parts of Europe. The large number of displaced persons from the Middle East, now living in Europe, evokes historical memories of a time 70 years ago when millions of persons were also left residing in a foreign country. Many countries generously opened their doors to take in these European refugees and they went on to lead productive lives in their new countries. With Europe currently facing another refugee crisis, I believe that my mother's memoirs of being a refugee during World War Two and after is resonant in depicting the refugee experience.

Her story is a personal account that is representative of the experience of many displaced persons. Initially, she makes a decision to flee her home land, Estonia, for better or for worse. She is 29 years old with two young children. She is alone and she does not know the fate of her husband, as to whether he is dead or alive. She is fearful and anxious. Her decision to flee leads her to be thrust into further unsafe situations which test her survival skills in a time of war. Perceived temporary safe havens in Poland and East Germany in the last months of the war prove illusory, as she is continually thrown back into danger. Her memories of this time are valuable because they give us an insight into the psychology of refugees, who by their vulnerable situation, are constantly making calculations as to what they have to do in order to survive, and for their children to have a future. She survives and keeps her children alive, and then succeeds in gaining entry to a refugee camp in West Germany. After living for 5 years in various refugee camps around Hanover, West Germany, the ending to her story is a relatively happy one, but not without further trials. She is finally accepted by the Australian Government as part of a post war "populate or perish" humanitarian program. She is offered permanent residency in Australia, after she completes a period of indentured work in the country.

In a wider context to this story, by June 1946, she was one of thirty two thousand Estonians who lived in the various displaced persons camps. These Estonians saw themselves as Stalin's victims and fully deserving of refugee status. However, the attitude of the Western Governments was more ambivalent to their predicament. This view alternated between seeing them as victims of Soviet repression but also of being Hitler's henchmen during the war. A minority of Estonians fought with the Russians to defeat Hitler, but most saw the German occupation of 1941 -1944 as a lesser evil to the brutal Russian occupation in 1940 -1941. This was used by the Germans to conscript a large number of Estonian men in 1944, as part of their defense against Russian forces. These men believed their actions were a means to achieve a greater chance of independence for Estonia, rather than fighting for the defense of Fascism. However this story is not about men who fought but of a female refugee caught up in the tragedy of fighting and war, relying on her wits and the kindness of strangers. This is her story. This is her life.

Table of Contents

Chapter One	To Stay or to Go?	1
Chapter Two	Temporary Sanctuary in Poland	5
Chapter Three	Frantic Flight to Germany	10
Chapter Four	War Arrives Once More	14
Chapter Five	Trapped in East Germany	21
Chapter Six	Plan to Get to the West	27
Chapter Seven	Life as a Displaced Person	32
Chapter Eight	A New Life in Australia	42
Chapter Nine	Reflection on My Life in Old Age	48

Chapter One

To Stay or To Go

I'm now 75 years old. Looking back over my life, I feel that part of my personality reflects a yearning for change and not to remain still. All my life I feel that a part of me has been looking for change and something new. This characteristic seems to have brought me, as fate would have it, to a faraway place from Estonia, to my adopted country, Australia. Here in Australia, all the signs of nature that I was used to in my childhood are reversed. In Estonia when the winds blew, they were from the north and icy cold. Here, however, when the northern winds of Perth blow, they are hot. So hot, that they bring back childhood memories of me being in the sauna at the back of my childhood home. Going to the backyard sauna was an integral part of my childhood. Yet this common experience in Estonia was not generally known in Australia when I first arrived all those years ago. Many things that I took for granted in Europe, did not apply in Australia. The bewilderment of confronting the new, I now know, is all part of the refugee experience.

When I arrived in Australia over forty years ago, it was after an interminably long sea trip halfway across the world and I was left wondering at the time if I would ever return to my homeland, Estonia. Years later with modern air travel, the huge distance between these two countries has shrunk. This has enabled me to visit Estonia on several occasions since 1980. Something I am grateful for. Now that I am old, I do not want to travel overseas anymore. Staying at home is best. However, I thought I'd write about my adventures as a refugee during and after World War Two. By recording my memories, I hope that Estonians and others can read about those who left Estonia all that time ago and who will now eventually die far from their homeland.

Where to start? Let me take you back to September 1944. My home land was now full of alarmed civilians, as Stalin's communist army approached the capital city of Tallinn from the east. This was a terribly alarming time for me as well. A time when human life seemed to have little or no value. Everyone in Tallinn was lacking information about what was unfolding and they were justifiably scared. I also had no knowledge about the fate of my husband and the father of my children, Bruno. I felt very alone. The Russian communist government, who occupied the country briefly in 1940 to 1941, did so much destruction to our community in such a short time back then. In 1944, German troops, bolstered by Estonian conscripts, had kept a Russian offensive at bay on the Estonian border at Narva for 6 months. Now that the war front had been breached the German army was in full retreat, leaving via the seaport of Tallinn. The Soviet air force had also bombed Tallinn in March 1944 as part of their initial offensive against the occupying German army, killing 500 civilians and leaving

25,000 homeless. These experiences fueled the anxiety and fear which swept amongst Estonians at this time. Ultimately, this widespread fear would lead me leaving Tallinn and my loved homeland.

I did not have enough food stored away for myself and for my two children. Living in a city environment like Tallinn, food rations were now difficult to obtain. When my food supplies ended, I asked myself what now. I repeated this over and over through my mind. For the past two days we heard the sound of gunfire in the distance and we now stayed away from the windows in our houses fearing artillery bombing. As the Russian army approached the city, public transport in the city was no longer operating. As there were no more trains or trams going on their daily business, the streets of Tallinn were eerily empty. I asked myself: where can I go? I felt that there was no hope for me in staying where I was.

My dear older sister, Hilda, had already fled Tallinn to go to Leesi with her children. Leesi was a small village in Estonia, 60 kilometres from Tallinn, and the location of our family home and my birthplace. However Hilda's husband Albert, was still in town. Albert was a very good person who always helped me when I needed help in the past. I thought that the only survival route for my family was to leave Estonia. I knew that a number of German ships in the port were taking wounded German soldiers back to Germany. I thought it was possible that they would also take Estonian refugees as well. Albert agreed to help me by escorting me on my way to the harbour. As I made my way to his place, I noticed that the few people in the street would make only furtive eye contact with me and each other. The fear in their eyes reinforced my own fears. Fear and uncertainty. What now? What to do and where to go?

So, after stopping at Albert's house, we made our way to the harbour. Albert helped me with my two children Krista and Tiido and the few belongings I was able to pack. That day is etched in my mind, September 20, 1944, as it was Krista's 1st birthday. I thought to myself that Krista had such a hard time for her first year of life, living in poverty and wartime. Now, instead of celebrating her birthday, we were embarking fearfully to an unknown future. My son, Tiido was 2 years and 9 months old at the time. I remember Tiido as a well-developed, lively boy for his age. Yet his liveliness now concerned me, as he ran around innocent of his surroundings and as to what was happening in our country. Recently, whenever I would lose sight of him, I feared that he would meet danger.

When we got to the port, I noticed a lot of other people were already camped there. We now waited and waited for the rest of the afternoon. The evening arrived, but we

still waited for a ship that would allow us to leave the war zone. Then a Red Cross hospital ship, the Moero, was sighted in the harbour. The ship was primarily meant to evacuate wounded soldiers and medical staff, but we were told that there would still be some room available for civilian refugees. One German officer approached me sitting on the dock and asked me how many packages we had with us. I replied we did not have much luggage and I felt because of this response by me, he said we would be allowed to board this ship tonight. I was delighted at this news.

He was a good person and he helped us carry my suitcase along the quayside in preparation of boarding the ship. The Moero looked to be a beautiful clean ship, with large red crosses painted on the sides, and a flag with a red cross on the mast. It had not yet reached the side of the quay, but was standing a small distance away in the middle of the harbour. I noticed it was now eight in the evening and we still had to wait. Then a bigger ship came right alongside the quay. The name of this ship was the Lapland. Immediately a number of people waiting on the quay for the Moero, some with massive amounts of luggage, started to rush towards this ship as they thought they may have a better chance of boarding this vessel. I, with my children, joined the rush and plunged along with the crowd towards this larger ship. I did not have as much luggage as many in the queue. All my valuables were under a small mattress in the baby carriage Krista sat on. I also carried a small suitcase with Tiido on my shoulders. I remember he was crying and confused as we hurried towards the Lapland. We arrived at this large ship in a rush but again we were forced to wait as we were told by German officials that we were not allowed to board until 10 pm.

Estonians are generally reserved in showing their feelings. That evening I stood alone for the next two hours, feeling somewhat helpless with my two little children, as more and more people who did not have children made their way to the side of the ship. As 10 o'clock approached, there was a slight panic to get on to the boat as it was thought that the ship may not have room for everyone. No one wanted to stay behind. Everyone fought for themselves to be first in the queue. People with big wooden boxes and large suitcases jostled in the throng around us. My only tactic was to cry out to gain the attention of the ship's crew. Fortunately for us, a ship's officer looking down on the crowd did notice me. Pointing directly at me and my children, he said: "No one gets on board until this young woman gets on the ship with her two children." This good person sent two sailors from the ship to carry my belongings onto the ship. One rejected the pram which contained my valuables and took Krista in his arms, the other took my heavy suitcase. I was left holding my briefcase and a handbag while holding Tiido with my other hand. The people in the queue gave way to us as ordered, so we finally got on board after waiting for all these hours. Later in my life, I learnt that in wartime, waiting for 5 hours is not such a big deal. I remember that the Lapland was certainly a big ship, with many levels. I followed the sailor who was carrying Krista down a number of steep stairs to the

bottom part of the ship. There were wooden bunk beds for us to sleep on. I dropped my meagre belongings on to one of them but my mind was still whirling with many thoughts. Leaving my country and facing an uncertain future, I now realised that I was even ignorant as to exactly what our final destination was going to be in Germany. I said a quiet prayer about my plight to calm me.

I did not make any friendships or strike up any conversation on this ship that night. Everyone was silent, lost in their own concerns and having no time for conversing with others. The Lapland actually remained in the harbor all night, along with all the other ships in the convoy, including the hospital ship, the Moero. At four a.m. the next morning, some more refugees were taken aboard and the Lapland finally left the harbor at five am. As we left, we looked behind to say goodbye to the receding city of Tallinn while shedding a tear or two. My last memory of Tallinn was of a city dimly lit by incandescent light and covered by a thin layer of smoke. I learnt later that Tallinn was occupied by Russian troops the next day. As we sailed off into the Baltic Sea, the ship's crew handed out life jackets to those on board. Those people who were closer to the crew got their hands on beautiful new life jackets. For a woman with young children at the back of the throng, the only vests left to be dispensed were tatty with the cuffs insecure. I accepted these jackets passively but I did not put them on myself or my children. The sea was now rolling in high waves, and I thought that Krista was so small; she would not survive anyway if the ship got into trouble. I could not help thinking of the prospect that my little children would disappear before me in the cold depths of the Baltic Sea. All I could do was pray to God that morning. Hold and protect us Lord, I fervently repeated.

Chapter Two

Temporary Sanctuary in Poland

Once the ship made its way further into the Baltic Sea along the Latvian coast, we now noticed Russian air force planes approach the ship. I saw that the Lapland had 2 or 3 anti - aircraft guns on board to try and repel the planes who were now launching torpedoes to sink our convoy. Luckily our ship was not hit, perhaps thanks to the anti- aircraft fire. However, the Moero, being a Red Cross ship did not have any guns on board. It was hit at 11 am and within an hour sank to the bottom of the Baltic Sea. I was taken back by this as I knew that there was an international agreement that Red Cross vessels were not to be attacked. This was not observed by the Russians. The Moero, carrying a total of 1,155 people comprising Estonian refugees and wounded German soldiers, now lay at the bottom of the Baltic Sea with a total of 637 dead. Our ship took on some of the survivors from the Moero. I noticed there were no children amongst these survivors. When I saw all this unfold, I thought about how the life and destiny of a person is so randomly guided. I could have been on that Red Cross ship. I was glad at this hour that my life and my children's life did not end that day drowned in a stormy sea. I now had some faith and hope, that maybe we will once again feel the ground under our feet. We were still alive.

The rest of the journey was event free and I now felt safe. In all, the naval retreat operation by the Germans in Estonia was successful with approximately 50,000 German soldiers and 20,000 Estonian refugees leaving the country. We arrived at Gotenhafen Harbor (now the Polish port of Gdynia) in the western part of Poland the following morning. From there we were helped to board a train with many wagons, on our way to Berlin via what was known as the Wilhelmshagen Passageway. Wilhelmshagen was a very large transit camp in the south eastern suburbs of Berlin, populated with people from all over Europe. The camp was divided into two main parts divided on ethnic grounds. We were placed in the part of the camp for nationalities such as Italians, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. The other part of the camp, inferior in living conditions, was for Poles, Russians and Yugoslavs. Both camps were bounded by a high barbed wire fence. In order to leave the camp you required an identity document giving permission to travel outside. Luckily, I got a residency permit on the second day of my stay, allowing me to leave the camp for visiting other parts of Berlin. It was soon after my arrival that a kindergarten was organized for families with young children within the camp. Those who went to work outside the camp had to leave their children behind. I managed to become employed as a nursery worker in this kindergarten. I was delighted with this arrangement as I was able to be with my children during the day. However, my happiness about this bit of luck was muted by the fact that Krista's health had now deteriorated further. Back

in Estonia, she had some health problems but now living in the quite basic conditions in the camp with a poor diet and the autumn cold of Berlin, she was really not well.

It was in the Wilhelmshagen camp that I met another Estonian woman, Aliide Leesment, who also had two children like me. Her two young boys were Martin, 6 years old and Henn, 3 years old. She was to become my good friend and my valuable ally for the remainder of the war. While in the camp, I also learnt that Berlin had a welfare support centre for mothers and children. I went there with Aliide to get advice and assistance about how we could get out of the camp because, by now, Berlin was often bombed by the Allies. When this occurred, we had to go to the bomb shelter on a regular basis, causing great disruption to our lives. At the Welfare Centre, we found out that there was an Estonian working there and we hoped that he would help us get out of Berlin. His wife had been a church minister in Estonia before the War. She was one of the first people that the Russians arrested during their occupation in 1940 - 41. After this, he decided to flee to Germany. Unfortunately, I no longer remember his name, but I remember he struck me as being quite cute. He visited us on a number of occasions inside the camp and I welcomed his friendly support at the time. Eventually, he managed to arrange for us to leave the camp in Berlin. In all there were 22 Estonians in the refugee camp. 9 single adults were assigned accommodation in Western Germany. Older Estonians and single mothers with children, 13 people in all, were assigned to live in a former Polish mansion, Wonsen manor. This manor was now being used as a place for German soldiers on rest and recreation. It was located in Graudenz (now the Polish town of Grudziadz) about 120 km north of Warsaw. We were not to know at the time that his kindness and support would soon put us back in the middle of the war.

If I'm not mistaken, it was the 22nd October 1944, after a month of living in the Berlin camp that we arrived at the Graudenz Station. I remember we traveled on an overnight train from Berlin and I recall it was a fairly comfortable trip. It seemed to me that the Germans took good care of mothers and children on public transport. On all the trains operating in this time, there was a separate wagon "Für Mütter und Kinder", with soft seats and more space. At the Graudenz station, we were told to wait for a bus that was supposed to take us to the mansion. After waiting an hour, a vehicle appeared to take us to this historic building on a beautiful sunny October morning. As we travelled through the countryside on this autumn morning, with the trees shedding their golden and red leaves, traversing through small valleys and kinks in the road, I recall this pleasant trip with some clarity.

I must say that I was surprised about how well we were received at the mansion. Each family got a beautiful furnished room. In the first month, a servant attended to our bed linen and our rooms were cleaned regularly. I noted that the staff were all

local Polish men and women. We ate in a large dining room and we felt like guests at a plush hotel. I well remember Christmas in the Wonsen Manor. In the large dining room, there was a beautiful Christmas tree fully decorated, and for dinner, there was a goose, browned oven potatoes and tomatoes. In addition there were cookies and bottles of wine at the bottom of the Christmas tree. My son, Tiido had turned 3 years old a week earlier. I was particularly proud of Tiido that day. One of the children in our group refused (or was too shy) to sing a verse of "Oh Christmas Tree" when asked by the adults in the room. Tiido, when asked, sang boldly: "Oh tannenbaum, oh tannenbaum, wie grunne you deine blätter ...". For this, he was rewarded with an extra big bag of sweets and I was congratulated by all on having such a great son.

After that lovely Christmas, I remember things changed very quickly. The winter cold became more intense. I was not to know that the pleasant times we had experienced at the end of 1944 would soon be over. The beginning of 1945 in January saw snow drifts already reaching halfway up the house. More ominously, the war had caught up with us again. On January 12, the main Soviet offensive against the German army commenced to the east of Warsaw, sweeping on an extremely north south wide front. As we received news of the quickly advancing Russian front, we concluded it was time for us to retreat westwards again. For the past two and a half months, we had a quiet peaceful life. Now, we felt we had no choice but to leave Graudenz and be on the run again. In winter when the thermometer now showed -20 Centigrade, we knew that this was going to be tough but it had to be done. So, our group of 13 women and children joined the local German population to try and travel west by horse and cart. A group of German men harnessed two horses to each large cart. These carts were covered with tarpaulin and I was reminded of those films we saw about pioneers travelling west in America during the 19th century.

There we were waiting in the cold, anxious to leave as quickly as possible. Our group was comprised of my friend, Aliide Leesment with her two sons, myself with my two children, Thea Simm from Tartu with her two sons and a little daughter (who was a year older than Krista) plus her sick mother. In addition, there was Mrs Maisaar with her old mother, who I remember was around 70 years old. The older people and the children were allowed to sit inside the carriage. The younger women had to sit outside in the front of the cart with the driver. As we departed, the roads were covered by snow and the chassis of the cart soon became bogged frequently. As the horses were not able to pull the cart out of the slush, I and the other younger women had to get off the cart and push. We had made only 10 km westwards on our arduous journey, when a German soldier on horseback came up to our cart and announced that we should not proceed in this direction. The Russian military was advancing so quickly in a pincer movement that they would soon be already in front of us. The road west that we planned to exit Poland from was now cut off. We had no

choice but to turn the horses and carriage around and head back to Wonsen Manor. At least we were safe there for the time being. We got back in the evening, dejected.

The next day, I asked the manager of Wonsen Manor to let us have one horse, a trolley and a driver to take our group of Estonians to the station at Graudenz. Our plan was to take a train heading west to Germany and leave the war behind. The manager was a good man and he acceded to our request but only in a partial manner. He told the driver to take us only to the nearest main road and from there, we would have to get a further lift to the railway station. He stated that there were a lot of German army trucks retreating westwards on this highway and they could pick us up. The assigned Polish driver led us to the snow bound highway as he was directed. When we got to the side of the road, I remember him laughing at us, commenting that with the Russians coming, the tables are now turned and it will be different that the Germans have lost the war. He was keen to see the Germans (and us) leaving Graudenz. I knew that the Polish people were less apprehensive about the advancing Russian army than us as they had been treated badly by the Germans. In my time in Graudenz, I noticed many places with signs - "Hünden und Polen eintritt verboten" (entry to dogs and Poles is prohibited). What an insult to be treated like dogs in your own homeland. The Polish people suffered greatly from the Germans, just like we Estonians were badly treated by the Russians. I did not take his remark badly. We shared that common bond of being ordinary civilians caught in a widespread conflict where your treatment is determined by your ethnicity. In these times, however, I was more concerned about my fate and the welfare of my children. I looked at Krista. She was still not in good health despite the relatively good conditions of Wonsen manor. Whenever I put her down on the floor, she just sat there passively. She did not even have a proper winter jacket to keep her warm. As such, I had to carry her in my lap. Luckily for me, Tiido was still relatively healthy and had only suffered from an occasional cold.

When the driver pushed us off the cart onto the main road, he quickly turned around and headed back to the manor. We became very anxious as to our plight. What to do now? How could we find our way west? We soon found that the German military trucks passing by in full retreat did not stop for us. We also saw that we were not the only refugees on the road. I presumed that the German Army wanted to move their troops quickly in retreat and they were not going to slow down to take on any civilians. With no other options, Aliide and I decided to explore our surroundings. The children and older people stayed by the side of the road, as we walked along the highway. We soon arrived at a home in a local vineyard. We went inside and observed that only a little bit of food was left behind by the fleeing German household. Then I noticed there were still a good supply of vodka in the cellar. I had a 3-litre empty water bottle with me. I filled the bottle up with vodka. Going outside, we then spotted some caravans to the side of the property. As we went over to the

caravans, we were greeted by some men who presumably were the drivers. After a quick discussion, they promised us to take all of our group to the Graudenz station in exchange for the vodka that I stole. Aliide and I jumped for joy to think that our little group was now able to get out of Poland after all.

When we arrived at the railway station, we saw it was already under the command of the retreating German army. Not surprising there was already a lot of people gathered at the station, hoping to escape from the Russian army. Luckily for us, the commanding German officer issued an order to the station staff that mothers and children were allowed to board the waiting carriages first. We took advantage of our priority and we quickly got on board a waiting train. Again I found myself fleeing from war, Tiido hanging on to my neck, Krista on my lap. I was holding a backpack and my briefcase, with all my other belongings left behind at the station. I consoled myself that in my backpack, there was some food (bread and ham) that I had exchanged that day for some of Krista's winter clothes to a pregnant Polish woman.

Chapter Three

Frantic Flight to Germany

As it turned out, we had to take a succession of various trains to get back to Germany. In all, this extended journey took us close to 3 weeks. Each day the train would stop at an official rest and recovery spot. This stop allowed us to wash ourselves and recover from travelling during the day. These rest places were also staffed by friendly helpful volunteers. They fed us hot soup, which was very welcome. Most of the other refugees on the train were ethnic Germans, but here nestled amongst the Germans were 13 Estonians. I must say that we were treated reasonably well given the wartime conditions. However, Krista was still sick and Thea Simmi's old mother was now suffering frostbite on her toes. However, we always consoled ourselves that we were all still alive. When we crossed the Oder River, which marks the German border, the train stopped in a number of successive small towns in northern Germany. Each time, the last wagon would be unloaded from the train and the occupants of the carriage were assigned to be settled in that particular town.

As our turn came to be the last wagon offloaded, we found out we were assigned to the town of Stavenhagen. It was a small town located in Mecklenburg, over 200 kilometres north of Berlin. I thought that the process of our arrival in the town was handled well. Station staff were waiting for us, along with nursing sisters as well as volunteers from the Hitler Youth. They led us to a large room at the Town Hall. It was warm inside the hall and we were given hot soup and coffee straightaway. Doctors were also present to help those who needed medical attention. We slept there that night and in the morning, at nine o'clock sharp, accommodation was offered to us by local families in the town. This process was coordinated by a city official. This officer shouted out loudly each offer for accommodation, for example: "Platz für eine Mutter and zwei Kinder" (a unit for a mother and two children). When I heard this, I raised my hand and cried: "Ich hier, ich hier. Ich habe zwei kinder!" (Me, me I have two children). Then they immediately gave me the address of the offered apartment. It was on Hitler Street, House number 10. A young volunteer came up to us and escorted us to our new apartment. It turned out it was part of a large house owned by a local merchant, Otto Bruhn. It was now February 5, 1945 and I felt safe once again.

Our apartment was on the second floor, a large beautiful bedroom and kitchen, for us to use as I saw fit. On the lower floor of the house, was Mr Bruhn's clothing business. Mr and Mrs Bruhn lived on the second floor as well, in another part of the building. They were very nice and friendly. I remember my first day there very well. There were carpets on the floor in the bedroom, a large bed with warm duvets. For

little Krista, there was a white-colored baby bed, even a hot water bottle, to fend off the cold. Under the bed was a large box with toys, even though poor Krista was so sick that she was not capable of playing with them. Going over to the kitchen, I was surprised when I saw various kitchen appliances on the kitchen table. Also, I noticed that the kitchen table was covered with food: Krakow and German sausages, honey, sugar, whole cream butter, apples, bread, a cup of warm milk and a hot steam coffee pot. Heaven. The fire box in front of the cooker was also full of briquettes and wood. I could not hide my feelings of joy when I finally sat down on the kitchen chair that morning. We had hardly eaten for the past three weeks of arduous travel and now there was so much food. I could eat as much as I wanted.

Mr Bruhn brought me a warm woolen sweater to protect me from the cold. He was also worried about Krista needing medical attention. When I asked him what I had to pay for the accommodation, he replied that the apartment was free. Through Mr Bruhn's sponsorship, we also received food rations available to all the other German citizens in Stavenhagen. Unfortunately, my good fortune was not matched for all of our Estonian group. Mrs Maisaar and her elderly mother had the disadvantage of not knowing much German. They were eventually provided with beds at a local aged care centre. But after only one day, her elderly mother deteriorated so much in health that she was taken to the local hospital. She died the next day on February 7, 1945. Mrs Maisaar thought that her mother may have been injected with morphine by hospital staff to hasten her death. I don't know whether this was true but this did not help her cause. I thought that she was now showing signs of distress about her situation and she was beginning to sound irrational in thought.

Despite it being war time, her mother was given a proper burial and our small party attended the funeral. I remember that also in attendance to our small group of Estonians, were 2 local men who drove the horses for the hearse as well as the female town hall official who had organized the funeral. When we began to move away from the funeral, after the coffin was lowered into the grave, Mrs Maisaar lost her composure and was now acting quite irrationally. I remember that my friend, Aliide rebuked her and said, "Shame on you, for carrying on like this publically". She urged Mrs Maisaar to remain solemn at her mother's funeral. "You were her only child and your mother raised and cared for you. She deserves better than this". After the funeral, Mrs. Maisaar was not happy with her circumstances. She continued to live in the middle of the town at the aged care centre but every morning, at 9 o'clock, she came over to Hitler Street to see me. She often complained to me of being hungry due to the poor quality of the food provided at the centre. As such, she invariably asked me to provide her with a meal whenever she visited. My recollection of our conversations was tainted by her quiriness. She came from the town of Narva, a part of Estonia which is on the Russian border. She spoke Estonian, but her conversation was often littered with many Russian-language words which made

things a little bit hard for me to understand. For example, she confused the word alarm clock in Estonian with the Russian word, bottle. I've met so many people in my lifetime, but so far, I have not met another person quite like her. You could say she was odd.

I also remember one more thing about Mrs Maisaar. My memory goes back in time to when we on that long train journey from Graudenz in Poland to come to Stavenhagen. I remember we were waiting at a railway station midway on our journey. For several hours we waited at this station for another train that was believed to be coming from Danzig. We heard that this train was going straight on to Berlin. We were excited as we were hoping to then meet up with other Estonians in Berlin. However, I remember Mrs Maisaar telling her mother as we waited at the station: "You cannot come with me, you have to stay here." We felt so sorry for the old woman over hearing this. Here was an old sick woman in wartime Germany and now she was being told by her daughter to stay behind all alone. She did not speak German. How could she survive? I did what I could for her by writing a letter in German, explaining who she was and a little about her situation and I gave it to her. She could give it to someone on our departure. Hopefully, against the odds, she would be taken somewhere safe.

When the Danzig to Berlin train finally approached the station, we noticed Mrs Maisaar's cold blue lips tremble with fear. She started mumbling a prayer about her plight. However, to our surprise, the train did not stop at the station. It was so full of people, many were hanging on the doors and others were perched on the roof of the wagons. It hurtled past our platform. Later I was told that people were so desperate to leave Poland that 3 children were supposedly trampled to death at Danzig Station due to the stampede to get on board. We were very disappointed at seeing the Berlin train disappear into the horizon, but I could see this old sick woman smile at the thought that she was now not going to remain alone on this cold railway station. It seemed that her mumbled prayer was answered after all. Alas, as it turned out, she was not to survive for that much longer, dying soon after at the end of our train journey.

Later on the same day, at five o'clock in the afternoon, we now heard that there was a military freight train also heading west coming into the station. Apparently, there was room for us to get on board. The freight train, when it did arrive, was carrying various military equipment, including a number of large ammunition boxes. It was confirmed by station staff that we would be allowed to get on the train. Again, a problem with Mrs Maisaar arose with our group boarding the train. We were immediately assisted into a high freight wagon that was not completely full with the military equipment. We clambered on and sat closely together in a huddle close to

these boxes in order to keep warm. However, Mrs Maisaar and her mother were still not on the train and there was now not much room left in this wagon. Some of these large heavy boxes would have to be rearranged to make room for them. Mrs Maisaar began shouting at the soldiers in Estonian but since she didn't speak German, the assisting soldiers became confused as to what she was on about. Of course, we asked the soldiers in German to let them in by making room for them. The soldiers complied with our wishes, despite them having to move a number of heavy boxes. When the wagon doors were finally re-opened to let them in, given what had transpired earlier at the station, I was somewhat amused to see that this old sick woman found the strength to clamber on faster than her 45-year-old daughter. She was not going to be left behind this time.

Another anecdote I have about Mrs Maisaar was to observe that, despite living in the Stavenhagen's aged care home where she got free lodging and food, she never bothered to help or do any work there. One day in March, I remember a town official approached me to assist as an interpreter for a formal interview with Mrs Maisaar. Town officials wanted her to understand that in wartime Germany, you must contribute in some way in order to eat and get free lodging. So they took me to the Police station to talk about these things with her. I did my best as an interpreter but she continued to tell them that she did not completely understand what she was being told. Given that others in our group like Mrs Simm worked, despite having the care of 3 children and her 72-year-old mother, I was not happy with Mrs Maisaar's attitude. But what can you do?

Chapter Four

War Arrives Once More

I remember clearly my last day in Stavenhagen. It was now the 28th of April 1945 and the advancing Russian troops were getting very close to the town. I did not know at the time that the war was going to end very soon. (I now know that Berlin fell to the Russians on May 2nd and an unconditional surrender was signed by the Germans on May 7th). I went to the local bakery in the morning that day as I thought if we have to flee once more, I needed to stock up on some food. There was already a crowd of locals present when I arrived at the bakery, presumably with the same plan as myself. When my turn came in the queue, the baker put a sign in front of my nose with the words, no bread for foreigners today. I asked him in German, do not the children of foreigners also need to eat? He replied, "It is not my business to worry about you and your family". I was surprised by this as I was treated well previously.

When I returned to Mr Bruhn's house empty handed, I came to the conclusion I would have to try and leave once more. I started packing things for my journey, when Mr. Bruhn came into our room. He said that I should not leave, "It will be fine. Stay with us as we are not going anywhere". However he did not persuade me. I have always been stubborn about following through on my own opinions, be they good or bad. I thanked Mr Bruhn for all his hospitality and for the time that we shared together. He added that we can always come back to his house if necessary. I went with my children to the Town Hall Square. Here, we waited for military vehicles to take those who wanted to flee to the west. We did not have much luggage with us. I had a little bit of food in my backpack and some clothes in wrapped up pillow cases.

We waited for the transportation in the Town Hall Square until about 10 o'clock in the evening. I was joined by the other Estonians, my friend Aliide with her two sons (Mart 6 and Henn 3), Mrs Simm with her mother and 3 children and of course, Mrs Maisaar. As we started to climb into a covered lorry, Mrs Simm and her family were told they could not board with us. The driver would not take them because the vehicle was already full of refugees. Mrs Simm was apparently singled out as she had extra luggage with her. This was a time of war and refugees with extra suitcases were low priority. I reminded myself to remain strong as my children's lives depended on my survival. I was one of 20 people now sitting on a wooden floor in a covered military lorry, silent and anxious for the trip to start. Again the question arose for me, where are we going? I was not sure. We eventually set off but after travelling for a couple of hours in the night, the vehicle stopped in a forest just off the highway. The driver turned around and told us that our journey was over. He had decided it was futile to flee and he was no longer willing to go any further. Instead, we would stay

inside the vehicle in the woods to wait for the Russian advancing army. He said: "The war is coming to an end very soon and we will stay here until this occurs. All is lost."

Our group, three Estonian women and their children, were not happy with this plan. We did not want to wait with the Germans in the truck for the Russians to arrive. We had a discussion amongst ourselves and decided to get out of the forest by foot so we could get back to the highway in the morning. We walked for a few hours during the night. As usual I carried Krista while slowly trudging through the forest. In the morning, we reached a crossroad where we planned to wait for a passing truck. The only thing of value we had was a supply of cigarettes issued to us in Stavenhagen through our German ration card. Because we were all non-smokers, we were able to stockpile enough to potentially use as a bribe to help secure our passage. When one vehicle stopped for us, we offered cigarettes to the driver to take us to the west. However our situation did not improve when we discovered, by listening in to his conversation with someone else, that he was so tired of the war that he planned to deceive us by taking the cigarettes and taking us to the Russians instead. We left the car quickly to again be standing on this wide road, hoping for a miracle. Our situation seemed hopeless.

I prayed again for God to help us again in this difficult hour and help was forthcoming. My ear caught the sound of a few words spoken in Estonian that came from a deep muddy ditch by the side of the road. The roundabout on the road, where we stood, was now relatively quiet and devoid of other people. I was intrigued as to who could be speaking Estonian in this isolated spot. I concentrated hard so as to listen intently to the words spoken. I recognised that the words being spoken were of a familiar children's story in Estonia. I mentioned it to my friend Aliide nearby. She was quick to tell me that if there are Estonian children here, their parents must be also close by. We approached the children camped in the ditch and asked about the whereabouts of their parents. The children then led us to a hostel just off the road on the edge of the forest. This was where their parents lived. This hostel was operating as an emergency "aliens" camp in the woods. We found out there were more than a hundred people living here in fairly rough conditions, including a small number of Estonians. Apparently, it seemed there was only one local staff person responsible for running the camp.

When we entered the camp grounds, we were struck by the rundown nature of the hostel. The floor of the main hostel hall was covered entirely by dirty sleeping bags. They looked so filthy that my first thought was that they would certainly be covered with lice. There were people of all different nationalities at the camp, Poles, Belorussians, Rumanians, Latvians and Lithuanians as well as some Estonians. Aliide and I were standing there wondering if we should stay here despite the poor

conditions. Then we spotted a shed just outside the hall and approached the lone German supervisor nearby. We asked him for the use of two makeshift beds that we saw were in the shed. He was a friendly man and helped us get the beds from the shed and bring them into the hall. He appeared to be strangely calm and seemed not to be too worried about his circumstances. So, there we prepared to stay the night in this hostel, resting on two beds in the middle of the hall, amongst the others sleeping on the floor. We were like two small islands in a sea of dirty sleeping bags.

We sat on our beds resting for quite a few hours and I remember, in this time, hearing a number of Russian planes flying directly over our camp. I also noticed that there was no glass left in the majority of windows in the hall. However I did see that there was some glass left in one window near the entrance to the hall. This allowed some light to come in to the hall during the last hours of daylight. Suddenly, there was a piercing noise and I realised we were going to be hit by a bomb. I remember the bomb caused this particular glass window to shatter, the pieces falling as shards amongst the various pieces of our roof tumbling down on us. We immediately jumped off our beds and squeezed right under the metal frames for protection. Others ran out of the hall looking for protection wherever they could. Pretty soon, most people had left the hall in fear of being bombed again. Aliide and I, grabbing our children, decided to follow the others out into the yard. Mrs. Maisaar as usual brought up the rear in trying to hide under a tree. Aliide and I now decided to leave the camp straight away and try to find somewhere safer to shelter from the bombings.

Soon we were back on the road not knowing what to do. Around 6pm, we spotted a German soldier on a motorcycle. He was assisting local Germans civilians fleeing into the forest to avoid the bombing of their houses. We went up to him asking what to do and where could we go. He turned out to be a kind person. We learnt he had previously served in the German occupation army in Estonia and had some affection for Estonians in his time spent there. He led us to a house which had served as a temporary local supply depot for the German armed forces. Inside there was a bountiful supply of cigarettes, alcohol and other rations that were to be distributed to German soldiers. He hoped we would survive and told us to take what we needed as the German soldiers were now in full retreat and these supplies would only be taken by the advancing Russian forces. Then he got on his motorcycle and drove off. We soon lost sight of him and we were alone. Again we were beholden to the kindness of a stranger.

We entered the house where we discovered that the front room still contained many useful goods: rice, macaroni, and supplies of pens and paper. As we looked around further inside the house, we heard the sounds of battle in the distance. We decided

to hide in the basement for the night. Fortunately for us, we also found bottles of French wine and a supply of cigarettes in the house. I unfurled my empty pillowcase and filled it with the cigarettes. Aliide took a position in the corner of the basement floor but did not take any of the supplies herself. We quickly fell asleep. In the early morning, the sound of bombing and warfare was no longer heard. We came out of our basement haven and went outside and back to the main road curious to see what was happening. What we saw alarmed us greatly. We now saw a long line of Russian tanks rolling down the road and I remember making eye contact with the tank commanders sitting high on the tanks as they passed. The front line of the war had caught up with us again. We were now very frightened. The memory of this particular morning still causes me to have an emotional response even as I write these words.

We felt we now had no choice but to go back to the alien camp that we fled yesterday. At least we could be there with other people and we would have some minimal protection from the elements. Eventually we arrived back at the camp and soon after, we were again lying on our beds in the camp hall. But this time the wind whistled through the top of the bombed open roof, offering less protection from the darkening skies. We were now worried that the weather was to become more inclement and we wondered whether we had made the right choice in returning. The weather did hold off however and it was not that long before many of the other camp residents returned. However, as they returned, their arms were now full of new possessions. The camp residents had obviously looted the empty farm houses in the morning after the residents had fled into the forest during the evening. Mrs. Maisaar had also returned to the camp with the others. She had managed to steal a fine large wool eiderdown from one of the empty German houses. She smiled about her good fortune in acquiring such a valuable possession. She told me that she had always wanted to have such an item and now at this terrible time, she had got her wish.

That evening a number of Russian infantry soldiers arrived at the camp. Many were very drunk, presumably having looted the supplies of alcohol that were left in the deserted farm houses. I was now very worried about my predicament. It was not long after they arrived that the vandalism started outside the hall. The drunken soldiers smashed electrical equipment in the camp and were taking potshots at the outside light fittings. We went outside briefly to see what was going on. We were shocked to see the lifeless body of the German camp supervisor on the ground. I remembered his calm disposition the previous day when he had assisted us with our beds and now he was dead. His corpse was surrounded by drunken Russian soldiers who were urinating on him and cursing at his dead body. It seemed they thought his death was a joke. We returned inside the hall terrified.

There was an older Estonian couple, in their 60's that were sleeping next to Aliide. They came from Saaremaa in Estonia and appeared to be a polite and honest couple. Aliide, being an astute woman, knew what her fate might be later in the night given the conduct of these drunken soldiers. She asked if she could sleep hidden between them that night and they agreed to this request. Her children, Henn and Martin were left to sleep in her bed by themselves. By now, the hall was dark and the drunk soldiers came in to the hall to claim various women as their war prize. Women were to be taken out of the hall by these soldiers and were forced to lie on the slightly wet grass in the damp night air. I heard later that a queue of drunk men waited their turn to have sex with these unfortunate women. In the dark, I listened to their cries coming from outside, fearful of my own plight.

Suddenly a Russian soldier stood in front of my bed, pointing his torch at me and my children. He grabbed my shoulders and said, "Come on. It is good" in his rough German. My children were so scared that they did not make a sound. I said to them: "Please shout and scream hard, otherwise this fearful man will take your mother away." However, despite my plea, they remained quiet and did not make a peep. Then I pinched my children so hard that they began to scream and cry. Luckily, my tactic worked. I heard a loud Russian-speaking voice shout in the darkness. It was a Russian army officer. He scolded the soldier, "Why are you bothering this woman with children, when you can take a single woman instead. Leave her alone." The soldier started to reluctantly turn away. He hesitated before turning around and gave me a slight whack with his gun to my neck. However, he did move on, as ordered by the officer. After what had just happened, I was now so frightened that I was visibly shaking. My body was covered in sweat.

After a while, another drunk Russian soldier came to my bed. He was holding a large candle to his face. I noticed that he had a large growth on his face and he seemed to be around 40 years old. He did not appear to be as aggressive as the first soldier. He sat down on the edge of my bed and started to ask me questions in Russian. He asked, "Where did I come from and where is my husband, and how did I get to be here alone with my children". Luckily I knew some Russian from my younger days in Estonia. I then told him a lie in order to get his sympathy. I replied that my husband had enlisted in the Russian army in Estonia, and as you can see, I was taken by the Germans against my will to come to Germany. At this information, he then took a picture out of his pocket. It was a picture of his wife and three children. He then began to curse about this tragic war, he cried a little, and then passed out drunk on my bed. For the remainder of the night, several Russian soldiers passed by, but when they saw this man already in my bed lying on top of me, they continued on without touching me.

In the morning, when my unwelcome visitor awoke, I saw that he was a relatively civil man and he left without further incident. He, and his fellow soldiers, were ordered by their commander to move out of the camp fairly quickly that morning. I was left to thank God for sending this man to my bed. I had escaped a very ugly experience that many other women in the hall had to endure. It seems that Mrs. Maisaar was also left in peace that night. Apparently, this was due the fact that she was wearing a wool beanie on her head that covered her hair. Combined with her slightly masculine features, the soldiers, in the semi darkness, apparently thought that she was a man and left her alone. Aliide was also safe as her ploy to hide between the old couple had worked and she was not seen by them in the dark. I went outside that morning to see that many women were not as lucky as myself. Many were traumatised by their experiences during the night and they were now in a distraught state. Some were potentially suicidal. I remember Aliide stayed with one woman for a long time, so as to comfort her but also to ensure that she did not try anything stupid. All of us were now afraid of the forthcoming days and nights because of what had happened the previous night.

However, it turned out that all the Russian troops had indeed moved on from the area and they did not return. For those civilians who were still hiding in the forest, there was still some danger. Low flying Russian planes continued to fly over their heads with machine guns firing sporadically at them whilst they were crouching on the forest floor. But by the afternoon, these air raids had also ceased. Those who survived the strafing by the planes, now came out of the woods gingerly, and slowly made their way back to their homes. It was so sad to see them return to their homes and see that their houses had been ransacked. I also observed that on returning, the locals invariably placed a blanket or sheet out their windows to represent a white flag of surrender. The war was over and they were now the occupied and not the occupiers. The looting of the German people was sad to see but I was more horrified by the fact that the Russian soldiers were now allowed to rape women at will. We learnt later that the Russian High Command allowed their soldiers to rape German women as the prize of war. However, this authority did not extend to rape women of other nationalities. Would this command be obeyed by the soldiers and protect us?

For now, it seemed that relative peace had returned to the intern camp. A Russian soldier was assigned to take over the management of this camp. However, where previously, food was available in the kitchen for camp inmates, we were now told that you should look after yourself. Daily food could not be guaranteed for the residents, he said. These comments caused me to decide that I could not stay here for the long term and I had to find a way to move on. I also remember that on the third day of this new regime, a group of Russians entered the camp with the purpose of stealing any valuables from the camp residents. One of them pulled my wedding ring from my finger. I did not have much more of value anyway. Mrs. Maisaar was also accosted

by one Russian to hand over a pendant in which she had placed a small portrait of her husband under the glass. The looter stood in front of her, extended out a hand, saying "Hand it over". Mrs. Maisaar responded in German, "No, no, this my husband". The Russian ignored her plea, grabbed the pendant and put it into a bag and moved on. When I saw this, I said: "You come from Narva near the Russian border and you told me that you know some Russian. Why did you not reply in Russian to try and stop this" She did not reply. This woman continued to confuse me. I also remember that it was on this day, that the body of the German caretaker killed on that fateful night, was finally taken away.

As the days passed, I continued to think about how to get out of the camp. I finally formulated a plan that I thought was feasible. Near the hostel there was a large residence, a manor house, which now housed French prisoners of war, before their repatriation to France. I had made fleeting contact with them previously, but now I concluded they would be useful in my plan to leave the camp. I came to the conclusion that if I was to leave, I should do it soon. The Russian commander of the camp had stated to me that the long term plan of the occupying forces was to empty the camp. All of us would eventually be put on a freight train back to Russia. From there, decisions would be made as to whether we could return to our respective homelands. Aliide and I had no interest in undertaking such a long journey under poor conditions. I was most concerned that Krista, being so sick, could die during such a train trip. I figured out that I would be better off staying in Germany somewhere, anywhere. Even if Krista died, I could at least get her properly buried. That was my state of mind at this time.

Chapter Five

Trapped in East Germany

Aliide and I began to work on the details of our plan to leave the camp. We figured out that we needed a carriage to carry our children and to house our food supplies for our transport out of the camp. I still had the stolen cigarettes hidden in my pillow case for use as possible barter. I now went out and got, or rather to be blunt, stole various food items around the camp. I then arranged for the French prisoners of war to craft a large wooden box, and to affix long wooden rafts to its side, so that we could have our carriage. They obliged and I thanked them for their work and gave them my cigarettes as a reward for their work. Next morning, I fixed some abandoned pram wheels to the body of the cart. Krista and Tiido could sit inside the box and, of course, we could store our supplies there as well. Aliide managed to get a hand wheel so we could steer the cart. We were ready to be on our way the next day. I was already in bed with my children that evening when Aliide came in with a chain attached to the cart. She locked it to the iron rail to the bed so nobody could steal it. I was wondering how she managed to get the chain but I didn't get a response from her.

In the morning, we optimistically commenced our journey out of the camp. We did not know exactly where we were heading, apart from a broad plan to go in a westerly direction. Mrs. Maisaar, with whom we had been with for such a long time, waved us goodbye. There were also a small group of Estonians and Latvians to see us off. The Latvians laughed at us and predicted we could not possibly get any further than 5 kilometres down the road before having to return in failure. In fact, they were wrong. We managed to travel around 25 kilometers that day. How this happened was due to a little bit of luck. Early on in our travels down the road we met two Serbians. It seemed they had managed to rob some horses and a carriage from the fleeing Germans and they were now surviving as best as they could on the road. They took us to their horse drawn carriage and invited us to get on board. They tied our trolley behind the carriage and we managed to now ride in style for the rest of the day. When it was starting to get dark, they took us to an abandoned German manor house for the night. Of course, we presumed that the Serbs would have wanted us to pay in kind for their help. So, as they went to put their horses away in the stables and attend to them for the night, we took the opportunity to take our trolley and children and quickly disappear along a side road. We were thinking that if we could get far enough away, they would not search for us when they discovered we had done a runner.

We travelled for around 5 km down this side road before eventually arriving at a small village in the evening. Aliide came up with the idea that we could ask to stay in

this village for a while in return for working as cooks. Our initial concern was finding a suitable place to live. We were told by a local that we had to ask the local Russian commander for an apartment. We managed to locate him and he allocated us one room with a kitchen inside a dilapidated schoolhouse. It turned out that this fellow was a former Russian prisoner of war to the Germans. He was now in charge of this village. I noticed his German was fairly poor, but he was friendly to us. I was still slightly suspicious of him despite his friendliness. When I began to go to our allocated room with my children with some bedding, he offered to help me even though I didn't need such help. He eventually left. When we were finally alone in our new habitat, we took our clothes off, washed ourselves and our children with warm water. We had managed to have this little luxury on this night because someone had left a large copper cauldron in the kitchen and it was still connected to the water supply. However, for the rest of our accommodation, we saw there was no furniture available to us, no beds, a table or a chair. I also noticed that outside our room there was a large pond in the garden as well as some empty rabbit cages. We put straw on the floor in an effort to make ourselves as comfortable as we could and we put on nightshirts and went to bed.

As we were falling asleep, I heard the sound of thunder and saw the flash of lightning through a window. A storm was coming and I was so glad that we were dry and warm inside this room rather than being outside on such a night. I also heard some noises and moans coming from quarters near the schoolhouse. I gathered that these quarters now housed German POW's, held under the control of some Russian soldiers. I also presumed by these moans that these German prisoners of war were now physically weak through deprivation, cold and a lack of food. I just managed to fall asleep despite these noises when I heard the sound of a rifle banging on the front door. Aliide and I got up from the floor and quickly put on our coats. Filled with fear and anxiety, we wondered what's going to happen now. Aliide was bolder than I was and she opened the door. She assumed that whoever it was, they would break the door down anyway. Two men rushed into the room. I stood in the middle of the dark kitchen but the men had torches and I could now see who they were. One was a Russian officer and the other was a sergeant. I assumed they were in charge of the German prisoners next door. Aliide turned around to me and stated, "Because of our children, we have to give them what they want, because if they kill us, what will happen to our children". She then went to the bedroom, where the children still slept blissfully unaware of what was happening. They were so tired that they had not woken with all this ruckus around them. I remained in the kitchen area, standing still and not daring to move. I then decided to shout out "Niet-niet!" (No no). The sergeant took the gun off his shoulder and aimed it straight at my forehead. I was now really worried. Aliide returned to the kitchen and we started to plead with the men to leave us alone. We did not know that much Russian but we hoped that the Russians would know some German. Aliide blurted out in German: "Listen to your

Commanders, you should know that by Russian martial law you can only rape German women, not us. Bother them, not us”.

I am afraid to say that she may have known that in a nearby room in the schoolhouse, was a German woman with her two daughters, around 18 to 20 years old. The officer was angry with us but he decided to leave us alone. They left our rooms, presumably to go to the room with the German women. We felt we had no choice but to leave straight away despite the rainy night. We made some temporary covers for our cart so as the children would at least remain dry on our night journey. Still shivering with fear and desperation, we commenced to go out into the stormy night. Just as I was about to go, I got a shock. While lightning flashed in the sky, Aliide knelt down to the ground and stretched out her hands to heaven and entreated, "Beloved God, kill me through your lightning about what I just did." I was afraid that God would listen to her. What will happen to me if she dies? Am I to be left alone with four children to look after? That thought was rapidly put out of my mind and we set off, not knowing where we were going. Luckily for us, Aliide was not struck by lightning that night despite her feelings of guilt, and by the morning, the weather had changed for the better. It was now a calm and sunny morning. Dejected, we decided we had no choice but to head back to Stavenhagen, the town we originally left in the first place. On our long journey back to the town, we fortunately met some German prisoners of war marching along the road under Russian guard. They gave us exact directions on how we could get back to Stavenhagen.

So here I was returning to the place where I started this whole terrifying adventure. This time I returned having a clearer firsthand view of the war. Where before I had resisted Mr Bruhn's invitation to stay, I now considered, in hindsight, this was probably my best option. This thought lingered in my mind for a while as I pulled our cart along the road back to Stavenhagen. During the afternoon I became more pessimistic about my situation and now held out little hope that I would be allowed to get my former apartment back. I thought I should still try and see if this was possible. When we finally arrived in Stavenhagen, I went directly to the house where I had lived before. I met Mr Bruhn at the door of his house. He greeted me warmly and he told me what had happened when the Russians had arrived in the town. His wife was unfortunately arrested. Their business downstairs was looted and in their upstairs apartment, cherished furniture items and mirrors were smashed. He told me that my former accommodation was now occupied by his sister and her little daughter. They had left their own house near the river Oder, so they could be with their brother. I thanked Mr Bruhn for his past kindness and moved on in my search to find some new accommodation.

As I proceeded towards the town hall, I noticed that there was now a large number of banners hanging from the various buildings in Stavenhagen. These banners contained various slogans praising the Soviet Union, Communism and Stalin. Aliide

went into the town hall accommodation office in the city while I remained with the children, out on the street. She came back with the good news that we were both allocated apartments in the city. I found out that I was assigned 2 rooms in a hotel. It turned out that the living room there had a stove and it was large and spacious. It also had a window which allowed plenty of light into the room. The bedroom was less impressive but both rooms were furnished. The kitchen contained cooking utensils and had decent kitchen shelves. The family who had originally lived there had apparently fled to Denmark to avoid being trapped in East Germany. The hotel supervisor was a small woman and very talkative, by the name of Mrs Schroeder. I enjoyed practicing my German with her to improve my language skills. There was also a vegetable garden out the back. I thought that this accommodation would suit us well. It was better than I had anticipated.

However, Krista's health was still a worry and not improving. I visited a German doctor to check about what I could do to help her get better. Naturally, he got paid by me in cigarettes, as we were again receiving cigarette ration cards. The doctor recommended that Krista be provided nutritious food and fresh air. Where could I get nutritious food? The advice by the doctor was so general, I thought it wasn't that helpful. However I used my last ration of cigarettes in exchange for some fruit and vegetables from a farm worker. How else could we get decent food? Aliide and I decided we would have to try and find work to get better rations. We planned it such that when I was working on any specific day, she would be home with our four children. Then when she was working, I would be at home with them. We found out that each morning, people could go to the Town Hall Square at 8:00 am, where a supervisor from the labor office nominated people for various jobs. When we turned up the following morning, some in the waiting crowd were allocated work on farms, but we were assigned to work in a sugar depot.

Our job was to put sugar into large bags to be sent back to Russia. The Soviet Union had imposed war reparations on Germany once the war was over. This policy meant that various food stuffs were packed in Germany to be sent to Russia to feed the people back there. Sugar was packed in Stavenhagen and then put on trains to be sent to Russia. We thought this would be a useful job for us, as we planned to secretly steal some sugar for ourselves to take home. We could either use it ourselves or we could possibly exchange it for some vegetables, or so we thought. We were also told that workers would also be paid 500 gm of minced horse meat a day. At five o'clock, when our work ended, our cunning plan was put in jeopardy when we saw two Russian soldiers at the front door. Their job was to frisk the women with their hands to see that they were not taking sugar home. On my first day at work, I was not aware of this trap. I had sewed small bags together the previous night for the purpose of stealing some sugar. Now, I got caught by the guards when they frisked me. They confiscated my sugar bags and warned me that the next time

this happened, they would send me to the command post for punishment. That evening, I felt so sad that the children did not get any sugar. However, in time, I learnt more subtle ways to steal the sugar.

Despite my work allowing us some extra food rations, Krista was still weak and sick. In fact, we all suffered some form of malnutrition now due to the fresh food shortages. Aliide was always full of ideas as to how we could get some fresh produce. One of her ideas was to get our hands on a cow, so we could get fresh milk. Aliide knew that I worked as a milk maid as a teenager and therefore knew how to milk a cow. She also knew that the Russians were confiscating cows from local farmers to be used by the occupying force and eventually to be sent back to Russia. We could ask for a cow that would be otherwise sent to Russia, she reasoned. In these unsettled times, who would notice? We did actually pluck up the courage to approach a Russian commander about getting a cow. To our surprise, his answer was yes, but he added that this would only happen if Aliide was willing to sleep with him. I looked at my companion. Aliide did not blink. Then he laughed and we realised he was joking with us. He added, "Nyet, ona staraya", meaning that he considered that Aliide was too old to make it worthwhile for him. So we did not get our cow.

There were many nights, before going to sleep, I visualised my death and eventual gravesite in the Stavenhagen Cemetery. My thoughts often returned to the memories of that day when I first arrived in Stavenhagen, when I attended the funeral of Mrs. Maisaar's mother. Would this be my destiny? I started to think about leaving Stavenhagen again. Aliide, listening to my fears, said, "You have to go back to Estonia if this is the only way to keep Krista alive." I thought about what she said for days, perhaps for as long as a week or so. Krista's situation was not improving. Finally, one morning I decided to go to the Russian Command office in town, which was located in the Town Hall. I wanted to talk about the options available to me on returning to Estonia. My Russian was limited, but fortunately there was a young Russian soldier there who could act as an interpreter. When I entered the main office, the commander was sitting in a leather armchair behind a large desk. I remember he spoke to me in German with a strong Russian accent. I told him about my situation. He said that it was possible for me to leave Stavenhagen by train. However, if I wanted to return to Estonia, I can only do this by first going to a Russian camp. I had to stay in such a holding camp before any decisions about my return to Estonia are considered by the authorities. I asked if I could take food supplies with me on this long journey, as otherwise we could die. He answered no. The trains will stop in various settlements on the way and you have to get food for yourself near the station, or just steal it. This sounded too risky a plan for me and not what I wanted to hear. I went home disconsolate.

I decided to reluctantly remain in Stavenhagen. However, over the next few weeks, our quality of life was steadily deteriorating. We also had our passports regularly checked by Russian soldiers as we made our way around town. The food situation became worse. Certain foods listed on our ration card were no longer available at the stores. The frequent food shortages also led to long queues and a lot of waiting. I remember waiting for a long time in a queue for some milk, when I suddenly passed out. I now realised that I was getting physically weaker. Then I thought of a new idea on how to get back to Estonia. I reasoned that if I could get to Rostock, (a large city around 100 kilometres to the north of us near the Baltic Sea), I may be able to convince an official to let us get on a ship back to Riga or Tallinn. I knew that there was a large refugee camp in Rostock where we could possibly stay until our sea passage could be arranged. I reasoned that this ship journey would be much shorter and safer than a train to Russia. I decided to act on my plan.

Chapter Six

Plan to Get to the West

I left the children with Aliide and proceeded to the railway station. I remember waiting for a few hours in the morning before a train to Rostock arrived at the station. The train was so full with people already hanging on to the doors due to the carriages being full. I looked around to see that I was one of 4 people waiting at the station, 3 women and a man. We had no choice but to climb onto the roof of the train. We sat like dolls on the roof not daring to move. In this part of Germany, the railway track passes under many bridges. So every time the train approached a bridge as we travelled north, the man at the front cried out loudly for us to duck and we all threw ourselves prostrate onto the roof of the train while spreading our arms. Riding on the roof, our other routine task was to avoid the sparks and smoke which emanated from the coal chimney of the locomotive.

By the evening the train finally arrived in Rostock and I spent the night at the station house. The next morning I went looking for the Russian command post in Rostock. I was able to find the office fairly quickly and repeated, through an interpreter, about my story about my family and my desire to get on a ship to Riga or Tallinn. The answer to me, by the commander, was again in the negative. All refugees must travel by train through Russia, where they will be processed at a holding camp. This process would determine which refugees could go home to their homeland and those who could not. However, I did manage to receive a written permit from him in order for me to stay temporarily at the nearby refugee camp. The camp was fenced with barbed wire and guards were stationed at the gate. To my surprise, one of the guards was wearing the logo of a familiar school in Tallinn on his uniform. It turned out he was from Tallinn, Estonia and was now conscripted as a camp guard in the Russian army. I spoke to him in Estonian and I showed him my newly acquired permit. I was allowed entry into the camp with a welcoming smile. The refugee camp was a former POW camp and contained many barracks over a large area. Fortunately, I met a Yugoslavian man who could speak German. He was a friendly man and we chatted as we walked past line after line of these barracks. At each one, we stopped and shouted out whether there were any Estonians inside who wished to return to their homeland. No one answered me. The only Estonian I met in the camp was a young woman, a Dolores Kimberg from Tallinn. Her parents were now dead, having drowned in the Baltic Sea on the sea passage out to Germany.

Many of the barracks inside this large camp were quite filthy but just outside of the barbed wire fence area were two smaller outlying barracks that seemed cleaner. A group of Latvians resided there. They had been brought forcibly to this camp. I was surprised to hear this since I did not know of any refugees in Stavenhagen being

subject to forcible transfer. I sadly remember meeting one of the Latvians, called Suri. He had severe pulmonary tuberculosis and as I talked to him I wondered whether he would live much longer. I surmised he probably would never be able to get home. These kind Latvians also offered me a cup of tea and a sandwich to eat and were sympathetic to my situation. However, one of the group, a woman in her forties, a high school teacher I believe, began to scold me. She said: "Have you gone astray in your thinking? You came here from Estonia to escape the Russians, and now you want to go back to Russia voluntarily. We were forcibly brought here and subject to staying here against our will. You are still able to move around. Go to Berlin and from there go on to West Germany. Use this time to get to Berlin so you can be protected by English troops there. With the help of others, you may still get out of the Russian zone". I owe this woman my heartfelt thanks for her sensible advice. Heaven knows how her life turned out. I hoped that she did survive and that she got back to Latvia.

I returned to the station that night with the positive thought that I might be able to get to the West after all. However, no trains were running at night time. I had to just wait and sit until the morning. A number of people were already sleeping on the floor of the waiting room by the time I arrived. On the second floor of the station house, a group of Russian officers and some women were having a drunken party. I sat upright in a chair in the waiting room when some Russian soldiers came down to look for more women to join their party. Two of them came over to me and they invited me upstairs for a drink. I said to them in Estonian: "Go to hell". I was taken back a bit when they laughed: "Damn, it's a bloody Estonian". They had understood what I said but they were not to be put off that easily. Another Russian came over and introduced himself as coming from Leningrad. I said, "If you do not leave me alone, I'll go straight to the commanding officer and complain to him about your behavior." This was enough of a rebuke for them to leave unsuccessful in their aim.

On the way back to Stavenhagen, I again found myself on the roof of the train. I was wearing a blue woolen dress, but after the journey had finished, I noticed several burn holes in the dress. Cinders from the locomotive had caused the damage to my dress and I cursed my circumstances. I arrived home late in the evening and I was cold and tired. I immediately told Aliide about what had happened in Rostock and that I was now determined to get to Berlin as soon as possible. My hope was to somehow get through to the English zone of Berlin and then onto West Germany. Aliide did not answer straightaway. It was frustrating to me as I valued her opinion. Eventually she told me: "Go ahead and write to me, then I'll come with the boys later." Her sons, Mart and Henn were healthy, but Krista was still weak.

A week later I managed to travel to Berlin on a train. Krista and Tiit once again stayed with Aliide. I left Stavenhagen in the morning, but I did not arrive in Berlin until the next morning. The lengthy journey was partly due to the fact that at this time after the war, trains did not travel at night. All the passengers on the train had to sit down at a station house halfway along the journey for the night, before commencing the trip again in the morning. Anyway, I did arrive in Berlin in the morning without any further complication. I was able to wash and to freshen up a little at the station before getting on the U-Bahn to the English Zone Command in Berlin. I did not know how to speak English at all, but I hoped it would not go against me. When I arrived at the English command post, two soldiers greeted me at the entrance of the headquarters. I showed them my alien's passport and said I wanted to speak an interpreter. One guard sent me to an interpreter without too much fuss. This interpreter was a German person and I showed him my alien's passport given to me when I first arrived in Berlin back in September 1944.

The interpreter then sent me to an upper floor where the repatriation office in Berlin was located. I entered the room and saw two Argentinean gentlemen already sitting in the waiting area. I went up to the reception desk where an officer asked me what I wanted. Fortunately for me, this man was a Dutchman and could speak fluent German. I started with my story that I had already rehearsed the previous night, "I am a poor woman from Estonia with two small children, I live in the Russian zone and my daughter is very sick, there are food shortages and there is no medical assistance. My sister lives in the English zone in Hanover. If I could get there, it would be a great help for us. If I was united with my sister we could both work part time and provide support for each other." This officer was sympathetic to my story and agreeable to my request. He told me: "I'll write a certificate pass right away. Come with your children to the Berlin Ruhleben camp, where you will be able to be taken across to the English Zone in West Germany. This camp is in the hands of the British army and you will get protection. But come straightaway, do not waste time," he stressed. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. One of the Argentinian men, then approached the desk to tell his story. I grabbed him before he could get to the desk and hugged him a couple of times and cried out, "Ich bin so froh, ich bin so glücklich!" (I am so happy. I am so happy). Everyone in the office smiled at me. Delighted, I ran down the stairs into the street.

It was a beautiful autumn day in Berlin that day and I had another idea as part of my plan for a better life. I had a piece of leather which I thought I could sell on the black market. I got this piece of leather from Mrs. Maisaar back in April. At this time, the black market in Berlin was in a park close to the famous Brandenburg Gate. The Germans sold clothes, footwear and other stuff to the occupying Russians there. I went to the park quickly. I got out my piece of leather, put it over my arm and walked slowly around the park. Soon two Russians came over to me. I remember that they

were wearing woolen waistcoats. I showed them my strip of leather and said, "Make Beautiful Boots". One Russian took my piece of leather from me and measured it on his leg, then he said: "Njet, it is not big enough to make boots". I said spontaneously that it would be a good price. Now he was interested and asked how much. I said 400 marks. He did not start haggling but instead took 500 marks out of his pocket and gave it to me. I said I did not have any change to give him. Then he spotted a fridge towel in my briefcase. He grabbed it and walked off, pleased with the goods. I was also happy and glad that everything had gone so well.

I then went straightaway to a children's toy shop, which was located in the basement of a dilapidated house. With my money, I bought gifts of wooden toys for each of the children. Now it was high time to get back to the Stettiner Bahnhof so I could tell everyone the good news back in Stavenhagen. I managed to get to the train in time but after we travelled a few hours on the train, it stopped at a small station that I did not recognise. Nobody on the train knew what was happening. The Russian station master did not seem to have any answers and could not tell me when we would continue our trip. A couple of German women who were sitting near me said to me, "Let's get a warm soup from the station cafe, because we were all famished. I asked if we have time to do this and was assured by them that there was. We hopped off the train and got a bowl of warm soup each. We were just on the way back to the train when we saw that it was now moving off. We were now in a desperate situation. The German women ran towards the train in panic as one of them had left a young child alone on the train. My briefcase with the wooden toys was also on the train. Fortunately I had my wallet with me. I did not have much money in the wallet. However, most importantly, the written permission enabling me to go to the English Ruhlerben camp with my children was in my wallet. I clutched my wallet, knowing it was still my ticket for freedom. I also remember my wallet was a gift given to me when I was a teenager by a local widow who owned a large farm near our family home. It was made of quality leather and was inscribed with a silver monogram. It was now the only thing I had that was to remind me of the happy times before the war back in Estonia. Memories flashed before my eyes of being a young woman again. I had a job. I was a secretary in a local community group. I loved being part of that group. We organized courses in knitting, cooking and gardening and we put on plays. I was young and loved acting. It was a beautiful time for me.

But I digress. Let me take you back to the Berlin train trip. When the departing train disappeared from my sight in the dappled shade of the forest, I stood at the station for a long time. What now? I concluded I had no choice but to walk along the railway line. How long would I have to walk? I had no idea. I was walking for at least a couple of hours along the railway line, when I suddenly saw a railway trolley car (used for rail repairs) coming towards me. I stopped walking and I saw three men sitting on the trolley and when they were right in front of me, one cried out: "Jump!" I

ran towards them and they helped me jump onto the trolley. It turned out they were going to Stavenhagen. It seems that they had left Stavenhagen in the morning to check the state of the railway line track up to 25 km away from town. They were now returning in the afternoon. After a while it started to get dark and the temperature began to drop. One of the men put a coat over my shoulders as it got colder. We arrived at Stavenhagen in the dark at 7 o'clock in the evening. I thanked God once more for protecting me.

Chapter Seven

Life as a Displaced Person

When I arrived back at my apartment, I spoke to Aliide about all of my adventures and, of course, how I received written permission to go to Berlin with my children and then go on to the English zone. I told Aliide that if she came with her children, they would certainly be given permission as well. We left Stavenhagen on a Saturday afternoon, to start our journey to Berlin. Again, the train was full of people but we offered some of our belongings to a group of Russians for a spot on the train. Aliide did the negotiations with the Russians and they eventually agreed to give us their places in the carriage. When we arrived in Berlin, we were worried about how to make our way to the Ruhleben camp from the Berlin Station. In the end, we managed to get there with some help from passing pedestrians who provided the directions. The reception at the camp for us was very welcoming. English soldiers helped us to our rooms. From there we were sent to shower. Then we went to the dining room, and waiting for us was a rich food buffet. The buffet was divided into two parts: one for foreigners and one for the English. The cooking utensils were slightly different to what I was used to. However this was of minor interest as we ate for the first time, meat dishes on porcelain plates. It was heaven. On Sunday, a lot of journalists from a number of foreign newspapers, interviewed us and photographed us inside the camp. Krista attracted a fair deal of attention from the photographers. She was so cute despite her ill health. I guessed they wanted to highlight the humanitarian nature of the camp.

On Monday morning, Aliide made her way to the English headquarters optimistic that she would also get her permit to go to the English zone in Hanover. However, she was denied permission. I was perplexed. I asked why. She was told that the Russians had recently found out that the English Command were helping Baltic refugees at Ruhleben. The Russians were now demanding that the pact between the victorious Allies be kept. Namely, refugees be returned to their original homeland. Of course, this did not mean Estonia. Rather, it meant the Soviet Union as Estonia was now part of the USSR. Aliide said that she had no alternative but to go to Russian command headquarters and give herself up to their care. She could not go back to Stavenhagen as she had given up the right for her apartment, and our larger belongings had been distributed to others. So we hugged each other, our faces knitted together in grief, as tears rolled down our cheeks. An English officer in the camp noticed us. He asked us why we are crying. Aliide knew some English and told him about her situation. This officer led us to the camp commander, and she repeated her circumstances to him. He listened to her tale intently, and at the end, surprisingly decided to show some mercy. He issued a D.P. Card (Displaced Person) to her on the spot. With this card, she could now remain amongst us. He warned Aliide not to talk about what had just happened, as under current orders she was not

allowed to be issued one. When Aliide came back to our room with the news, we hugged each other for joy.

We left the Ruhleben camp two days later on Wednesday. We were part of a larger group of Baltic refugees that were now being taken to the English zone in Hanover. We learnt later that we were the last group to do so, as the Camp Commander was directed by the English government not to aggravate the Russians and to keep to the conditions of the Yalta agreement. Afterwards, no refugees from Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania were accepted at Ruhleben. The post war cooperation pact with the Russians was to be observed by the English. We were taken to Hanover in a convoy of about ten trucks. English soldiers provided an escort on motorcycles, travelling in front and behind our convoy. There were only 15 Estonians with more Latvians and Lithuanians in the convoy. We were the only Estonians with children. When we left the Russian zone and entered West Germany, we all spontaneously cried out aloud "Hurrah". Our hopes had come true. Although we were still heading towards an unknown future, optimism reigned in our group. No longer would we be subject to having to report every month to the Russian authorities in Stavenhagen to have them stamp our temporary papers and suffer terrible food shortages. Goodbye to a life based on fear.

Our truck journey of about 275 kilometres took us to the Lehrte Displaced Persons camp, 17 kilometres east of Hanover. This camp was a former SS camp. The barracks had cement floors and there were no proper ceilings and very cold. There were 8 beds in each room. When I saw these dwellings I was greatly distressed. Krista was a sick child, and after my optimism of finally being in West Germany, I thought such arrangements were unacceptable for her. Aliide came with me to the main office in the camp as she had studied English in school and was able to speak some English. She asked the commander for better dwellings because of the fact that we had small children. We were allocated better rooms soon after the interview. I got one with a nice wooden floor, more comfortable with a large window. The sun shone from this window and warmed us up on cold mornings. The next day, I took Krista to visit the camp's military officer, who was Canadian. On seeing Krista, the doctor sent Krista to the Celle Hospital by ambulance. The down side was that it was about 50 kilometres from our camp. We were now separated.

Aliide, with her sons, left the Lehrte camp soon after. She was transferred to another camp called Uchte, 90 kilometres away, because her brother was already living there. It seemed that conditions were better for refugees in this camp. In Uchte, refugees could live in confiscated detached houses in the local village. It was in the American zone of post war West Germany. There was also a large camp called Geislingen in the American zone that had many Estonians. Aliide's brother came

over to our camp and helped Aliide move. It was a good thing that she could be with family members in a nice apartment. There were quite a lot of Estonians in the Uchte camp and there was even an Estonian language primary and secondary school. I remember a Pastor Kiisk at the camp, who combined duties of being a school teacher during the week and being a pastor on Sundays, so religious services could be held in the Estonian language. Aliide got a position in the personnel section at the camp. She had experience working in this area for the Tartu county council before the war. I remember visiting them and saw that their living conditions were very good.

So, I was now without my close friend and alone (with Tiido) in the Lehrte camp during Christmas 1945. Krista was still in the Celle hospital recuperating. I visited her as often as I could. In 1946, many people left this camp to go to Argentina, Brazil and Australia. Some went to Sweden. However, our small group of Estonians was moved on to a new camp called Burgdorf. It was a large camp mostly populated by Ukrainians and Russians, but we were given three beautiful wooden blocks for shelter - one for an office and two for living. We were physically separated from the Russian camp inmates by a wide road but a pedestrian underpass connected us to the main camp. I remember becoming friendly with the driver assigned to us for transport. He was an Estonian, Mr. Elias and his wife, was a Ukranian doctor but she spoke passable Estonian. Later, I learnt they went to the United States, where Mrs. Elias was able to practice as a doctor in New York. In this small Estonian section of the camp, there were eight children of school age. Initially, they went to the local primary school. On the initiative of Mr Elias, we commenced a small Estonian-language school in the camp. I became a school teacher in the school and taught children the science of the earth, history and, of course, reading and writing in the Estonian language. I got a small amount of money for my teaching, and the food rations were more generous for those who worked. However, teaching was not easy for me, because we did not have any relevant study books or other materials. With my teaching inexperience, I had to improvise in many of the lessons.

Krista remained in the Celle's children's hospital for two months before I could bring her back to the camp with me. However, she was not with me for that long in the camp before she got a high fever and became very sick again. I had to send her back to Lehrte's hospital immediately. It was then discovered that my little daughter was suffering from tuberculosis. The chief doctor at the hospital told me that Krista had to immediately go to the Bad Rehburg sanatorium to be treated as an isolation patient. I then travelled with Krista the 60 kilometres journey to Bad Rehburg, west of Hanover. There she was put in a special bed, and I was told she would possibly have to lay there day and night for weeks, months or even years. She was then just three years old. At first, I was advised that her hospital stay would be for around 8-10 months, but she ended up staying there for over two years. She was now very weak,

and I was struck by her gaunt appearance. Her body was only skin and bone and her hair was shaved. Some children in the ward died there while Krista was in hospital. But at least she finally recovered. It was very difficult logistically for me to visit Krista because I had to travel west to the city of Hannover via a long-distance train and then transfer to a narrow-gauge local train to Bad Rehburg for the rest of the journey further west of Hanover. When I did arrive at the sanatorium I had to speak to her in German because she had now forgotten the Estonian language as the staff of the hospital only spoke German.

During those long train journeys to visit Krista, I sometimes thought of my early life in Estonia as a little girl when I was about the same age as my daughter. It was just after World War One and Estonia had recently declared its independence from Russia. I was born in 1915, the second youngest of 6 children. Now that the war had finished, there was an air of optimism in Estonia. I especially remembered, with some fondness, feeling safe at home in our small village, listening to my father's stories of visiting St Petersburg as a young man. He would describe in detail the grandeur of the Tsar's palace and I listened with great interest to his many stories of the Russian royal family. It was like a fairy tale to a young country girl like me. My father was a seaman in his younger life, so he spent a lot of time at sea travelling extensively. He regularly traveled to Tallinn and also to Helsinki in Finland across the Baltic gulf. I remember my father as a large, brown-eyed man with curly hair. I remember he was also a strong man who kept his word and wanted the best for my mother, Leena. However, he did not tolerate those who changed their minds or who vacillated. Everything he said he meant.

I also remembered hearing stories from others about my how my father and mother met. When my mother Leena was still 19 years old, she became acquainted with my father, Jaan. He was about 5 and a half years older than her. They met at the local church on a Sunday morning after he came back from one of his visits to St Petersburg. However, there was a complication to their soon budding romance as there was also another young man in the local area, Augustus, who was keen on Leena. Augustus was a local farmer, who was reputed to be gentle with a good sense of humour. He was a bit younger than my father, around the same age as Leena. They had been together at school and their childhood homes were also close by. They shared a common childhood and a certain closeness connecting them in their teenage years, so it was expected that they would eventually marry. However, it seemed that Leena had begun to fall in love with Jaan. Her friendship with Augustus was now under strain. Some months after they first met, Jaan said to Leena "Instead of marrying Augustus, marry me. Let's go to Tallinn. We will open a store and we will be shopkeepers. We will start a new life". Leena asked for some time to reflect on this proposition and after a few weeks decided that it was indeed an

opportunity for a new life. And so her answer was yes, I will marry you, Jaan. Augustus was left very sad and frustrated with this news.

But Leena and Jaan did not get to Tallinn to become shopkeepers. Jaan had made his bold plans to go to the city based on his modest savings at the time and his expected future earnings in the fish trade. But now the world was rapidly changing. The Russian Empire had started to collapse after the first decade of the twentieth century. In the period leading up to World War One, Estonia as part of the Russian Empire, was now experiencing a period of hyperinflation. Therefore, Jaan's savings were now nearly worthless and his plans for a future life in Tallinn were dashed. My parents were to remain in the small village of Leesi for the rest of their lives.

Given they were not going to Tallinn, Jaan decided to run his own fish business at home and he constructed a smoke house on his property at Leesi. Our house was right on the Baltic Sea so it was easy for him to buy fish wholesale from fisherman coming back to shore. He then processed them in his smoke ovens using peppercorns for flavouring his smoked fish. It was a family business and we children would help at times. He also employed some women on a casual basis when things got busy. Jaan then travelled to various villages and towns in the region, selling his smoked fish to storekeepers. There were no cars in those days, so all the goods were loaded onto a horse cart, with my father often away for 4-5 days at a time, selling his fish. Yet, despite his constant absence, our lives as young children were happy enough. I remember we played a lot in the large yard surrounding our house and explored in the forest adjoining our property. In summer, we sailed in the nearby sea.

When I was 8 years old, it was decided that I join my older sisters at school. The Estonian education system was based on children having their early schooling being done at home by the parents. At around the age of eight, formal schooling commenced. The local schoolteacher had to register all these new students as being ready for formal schooling, by them having a basic level of literacy and numeracy. I remember the teacher, Mr Kleesment asking me, "Can you read? I will test you". When I finished reading the assigned book for the reading test, Mr Kleesment touched my head and said. "Very good. You can read. You can now come to school". I remember that it was October 1, 1923, and I was thrilled to be told that I was now going to school with my older sisters. However, after a month or so, my enjoyment of schooling was rudely interrupted. My brother, Voldemar, six years older than me, had been trying to catch a fox for some time in the nearby forest. It was now November, and the weather was becoming cold and snowy but he finally succeeded in his aim. As a 14 year old, my brother was very excited when he came into the house to show off his prize, the captured fox. However, the fox quickly got away from

him inside the house and started to cause mayhem. In the ensuing panic, I was badly scratched on the legs and forearms by the fox frantically trying to get outside. Unfortunately these wounds became severely infected. Eventually, my teacher, Mr Kleesment noticed the infected scratches when I continued to go to school. He sent me home and said he would not allow me to come back until the scratches had disappeared. He provided a letter to my father urging him to get me to a doctor for an ointment to smear on my skin. However, the wounds took a long time to heal and I subsequently missed a couple of months of my first year of school. I was stuck at home over the winter.

During 1924, I settled back into school comfortably enough and life was back to normal. Unfortunately, towards the end of the year, my mother, Leena, was now ill and coughing all the time, despite being only 44 years old. She was not getting better and I was becoming increasingly concerned for her. My father was not at home, as he was on one of his business trips selling his fish. My older sister Hilda had got married to her husband, Albert, a few months earlier and she was no longer living at home. However, she had returned to the family home as she was very concerned about our mother. Hilda had just celebrated her 21st birthday 2 days earlier. All of the other children now joined Hilda as we formed a circle around my mother lying in bed, clearly distressed. I have a clear memory of my mother's last deep breath and I realised that she was no longer with us. Straightaway, Hilda said to me. "Run to your uncles house and tell him that our mother is dead." In my panic, I forgot to put on my shoes and I flew out of the house, still in my woolen stockings, and ran down the street to my uncle's house in the village. I called out: "My mother is dead, our mother is dead!" Then I immediately came back home and started crying in sorrow. It was a tragic day that Easter (April 1925) when my mother died. I was 9 years old.

Hilda then put on her coat and walked to the store where her husband, Albert, worked, seeking advice as to what needed to be done as our father was not around. I remember our uncle Jüri and Albert coming quite quickly to our house to help with contacting the local doctor and making the necessary arrangements. I also remember that Hilda, who had studied to be a seamstress, sewed a new dress for my dead mother to wear for the funeral. Eventually my father returned in time to be at the funeral. I still visualise my mother's coffin being raised by the pall bearers up to the horse-drawn hearse and relive that long walk from our house to the local graveyard, the last resting place of my beloved mother. As it turned out, Leena's life was not as rosy as she expected when she first said yes to Jaan's proposal of a life as a shopkeeper, 24 years ago. She was only 8 days short of her 45th birthday when she died of pneumonia. For me at home, life was now not so carefree. My elder sister, Aliide, now aged 18 years old, was in charge while my father was away with his job. I remember that my brother, Voldemar, was allowed to do what he liked

while I was assigned daily chores by my older sisters. The youngest in the family, Heine, at 7 years old, was exempt from work, being the baby of the family.

A couple of years later after Leena's death, Augustus visited us at our home around Christmas time. Augustus had already married another woman after Leena had married my father. As I was growing up, I remember I began to hear gossip in the village that Augustus' life was not that happy as his marriage had its problems. That night at our home, Augustus, drank a lot of our home-brewed beer and then suddenly erupted with anger. I was present in the house when, in his drunken state, Augustus sprang up and grabbed my father's chest, shaking him and blaming him for Leena's death. I began crying at this scene unfolding before me. My father was the larger man but he refused to fight back against Augustus. In the end, we, the children, pulled the drunk Augustus off my father and forced him down on to a bed and sat on his chest until he calmed down. I did not have further contact with Augustus again.

These were the memories that stood out most clearly from my early childhood. My father managed to live for another 17 years after my mother died, passing away in early 1942 at 67 years of age. It was at a time when once again war in Europe had so rudely interrupted people's lives. At least he managed to see me get married the year before and be alive when my son, Tiido, was born. Over 4 years later, here was I in a refugee camp in Germany, thinking it was now unlikely that I would see Estonia again. After a few months of those long train trips to Krista's sanatorium from the Burgorf camp, I had plenty of time for reminiscing but I decided that it was impractical to continue where I was. I should go to another camp within the city of Hannover, so I could be closer to my daughter.

I did some research and found out that the Hannover city precincts now had two camps housing a total of 300 hundred Estonians— a larger camp housing 200 people while the smaller one housed 100 people. I decided to travel to the smaller camp located at Pisuhäanna to see if there was any room for me there. It was originally a place where many camp residents from all over Europe had been brought to work in Germany during the war. The Barracks were built in stone but the rooms, although somewhat small, were still quite pleasant with wooden floors. In each room there was a small radiator so I did not have to feel the cold. I liked what I saw in Pisuhanna and it had the advantage of being right in Hannover City and thereby closer to Krista.

The Estonian camp representative, Waldemar Pihlap, was originally from Valga, Estonia near the Latvian border. He struck me as a very polite and friendly gentleman who gave me a very good impression of living in the camp. Mr. Pihlap told

me that I would be welcome to come to the Pisuhänna camp, as one room had indeed become vacant due to an Estonian family recently moving to England. I was very happy about his invitation. I immediately went back to the Burgdorf camp and told the authorities there about my decision to move. Mr. Elias was a little angry about my decision as he was losing one of his teachers at the Estonian school, but that did not change my mind. I had to do what was best for me and my family. A week later I moved to Hannover to reside at the Pisuhänna camp.

I was assigned a nice room within a larger house and close to the camp office. The house also had a nursery room, a kitchen and a storage room for food rations. In the camp of Pisuhänna, I soon obtained a position as secretary to the staff at the camp office. The former secretary in that position, Mrs. Lootsmaa, left the camp because she went to Sweden to marry the son of a local bishop, Mr. Kopp. I remember that the Pisuhänna camp was at Botfelder Strasse 63 in Hannover and that as well as Estonians, there were some Baltic Germans and Latvians also living at the camp. It was also at this camp where I met my future husband, Karl Lembit Rosse. His job in the camp was to order and distribute goods used by residents in the camp. As he was in charge of distributing food rations, he had an important role in keeping people happy. Karl lived in the same building as me while most other inhabitants lived in other houses scattered throughout the campus. I also remember that the Estonian men in the camp built a recreation room for themselves that was heated. Life in Pisuhänna was good, I thought.

My initial host at the camp, Waldemar Pihlap, proved to be an excellent leader within the camp. He was fluent in German, a graduate from the University of Tartu, Faculty of Economics, and a real gentleman who was helpful to all. He was also very good to me. My written German was not that good, but as a secretary, I had to write proofs for the camp residents when they needed documents from the German authorities. Waldemar wrote sample pro forma texts in German ready for me to use. I kept them on my desk and when needed, I wrote the specific details of names, dates and addresses into the relevant pro forma. It saved me a lot of time and I was able to do my work efficiently. As a secretary, I also had to accept messages sent in English and translate them to Estonian and then put them on a notice board in the corridor for camp residents to read. However, in terms of English language proficiency, Waldemar and I were both at a similar level, not that proficient. When a phone call in English came from the main office, it was more difficult for me to understand everything that was being said than when someone is speaking to you directly in person. The written reports which came in English were easier to handle. We took them to the UNROS office and slowly worked through their meaning and intent together before translating them to Estonian.

It was at this time that Karl Rosse and I became good friends and I also benefited from this friendship as he gave me more heating fuel during the winter. Karl was single and around my age and he looked after me in the camp. As it turned out, it was not too long before Karl decided to go to the United States. Before leaving the camp, he told me: "You can tell everyone that we are officially engaged." We had previously discussed the possibility of him being accepted as an immigrant by the United States. The plan was once he was in America and established, he said he would send me official immigrant papers to the US on a prospective bride entry. Karl did not forget me when he left for New York. We remained in contact and he sent me money and packages of some small luxuries in his new life in New York. Also, I remember while we were still in Germany, Karl went to visit Krista in the sanatorium, and he was generally kind to my children.

After Karl left for the US, the lives of refugees in the various displaced camps in West Germany began to change. The Marshall Economic Plan for Europe was being carried out through the generosity of the United States. Life was starting to become more normal in Germany. The Deutschmark was now accepted as a common currency in West Germany, so there was no longer a ration economy in the camp. It was now necessary to buy goods just like ordinary citizens with money earned as part of a wage. For example, I received 500 DM per month, 100 of which was extra to my wage as part of a general family allowance. Those who did not work, received unemployment benefits from the Hanover municipality and older people now received a small pension. Shortly after all this was happening, Waldemar Pihlap also decided to go to the United States. He had also been a very good friend to me during the time I lived in Pisuhäanna. Was I in love with him? I am not sure, but he was also certainly special to me. I had never met a person like him. When he was leaving Hanover to go the United States, I went with him to the local train station. Then, as he was leaving on the train, Waldemar put in my hand a beautiful silver bracelet that was made many years ago by the monks of the Pomerä monastery in southern Estonia. It contained many silver chains depicting Estonia's southern Setu folk culture. Waldemar had taken it with him on leaving Estonia and originally, it was a necklace. He had it made it into two bracelets and now he had given one to me on his departure. I was touched by his present to me.

Many of the camp residents had now been able to migrate to other countries and the camp was now rapidly reducing in size. As a single mother, I had less options. By now our camp office was shut down causing me to lose my job. I started to get welfare money from the city but my monthly unemployment benefit was only DM 100. Krista was now at home with me but she still had to wear a strong leather strap with metal strips around her body so as to keep her chest and spine intact. She was showing signs of recovery but walking was still very difficult for her. I was left wondering again what my future held for me. Then one night I was shocked when

Waldemar appeared at my door, days after he had supposedly left for the United States. To my knowledge, he should have been on a boat crossing the Atlantic and on his way to America. I asked him for an explanation. He said he had got to the camp at Bremerhaven ready for his sea voyage to America when he decided he needed to stop and think about what he was doing. Now he had returned and declared his love for me. He said he did not want to leave me and wanted me to follow him to America. We made love that night, overcome with emotion. We were both very sad, even as we clasped each other's bodies. We subsequently sat on the bed and talked sadly all night. I said he had to go to America to begin a new life and let's see what happens. He left the following morning to once again leave for New York. Waldemar was the first man in my life to express his love for me so beautifully and articulately. I will remember that night and treasure that memory for the rest of my life.

Unfortunately, things did not work out that well for Waldemar. He wrote to me from America, expressing his frustration with his new life as an American immigrant. Waldemar, who was fluent in many languages and a university graduate and academic, now worked as a cleaner at a New York Hospital. He transported patients from one ward to another and washed the floors of the hospital. His bosses were not sympathetic towards him and his wages were low. The American dream was proving elusive for him. Coincidentally, Waldemar also managed to meet my future husband, Karl Rosse while in New York. Karl had found work at a Welfare Centre in Harlem as a kitchen hand. Karl also told me in his letters, that he did not like it there, and again stating his wage was very low, making it hard for him to save money. In fact at one stage, Karl and Waldemar took a double room together, paying quite a bit of rent for it. However for a supposed double room, Waldemar told me that if one of them is standing up in the room and doing something, then the other person must remain in their bed, so small was this so called double room. Later, Waldemar told me he got a better place behind a single store but life was still fairly difficult for him. One year later, I was shocked to hear that he died of a heart attack, alone, a stranger in New York. He was only 54 years old. Life can be cruel.

Chapter Eight

A New Life in Australia

Soon after I heard of Waldemar's death, I met a Canadian Immigration Officer in Hanover, who checked out possible destinations for me to move out of the camp. He asked me why I did not want to go to Australia. I replied that I did not know about Australia and I had just assumed that various western countries do not want to accept a single mother with two children. He told me that Australia has a migrant scheme that would accept me under set conditions of a two year contract for indentured work in return for permanent residency. He promised to arrange things with Australian authorities to obtain such a two-year contract for me. He kept his promise and within a month we were accepted to go to Australia. We boarded a large American troop ship named the General Hersey at the port of Bremenhaven on the 9th of October 1950. I wrote to Karl while on the ship that I am now on my way to Australia with my children. Krista and I suffered some seasickness on the journey along with many others on the boat. It took 24 days to get to Australia and we arrived at Fremantle Harbor in West Australia on November 2, 1950. I calculated that we had lived in Germany for over 6 years, and now another part of my post war life was starting. I was now 35 years old.

In Fremantle, we were greeted by a group of women who gave complementary sweet oranges to everyone on the ship and then we quickly herded to the railway station. I noticed that the train left the city precincts quite quickly and we were soon in strange dry bush that was foreign to me. We arrived at a migrant camp in Northam, a small town, approximately 100 kilometres from Fremantle. I noticed there were boards set up inside the camp which would list the names of incoming camp residents. I happened to go to a table where names were being written on a board by an Estonian woman, Aino Reinmaa. As it turned out, this chance meeting was the start of a lifetime friendship in Australia. Aino became my future son's godmother and she was a trusted advisor to me on how to cope with living in a strange country. Aino was a widow like me with one son named Pearu. He is now a sound engineer living in Tasmania. Her husband, was an Estonian flight officer, Mr Terts. He was killed in the war. Aino married a second time to another Estonian at the Northam camp. This happened with other young refugees who arrived as singles and left the camp as couples.

I must admit was disappointed as we were introduced to our new accommodation in Northam. It was not what I expected. The military barracks in Northam were quite primitive. Each family was assigned one room. Laundry facilities were located outside under a roof but had no walls. Toilet facilities were out in the yard with a fair walk to get there from your room. I sighed when I first inspected the toilets - a row of

wooden seats with holes and a large steel can underneath. I looked down and I could see small worms crawling inside the large pile of poo. It was the beginning of November and it already seemed quite hot. One was able to smell the latrines some distance away as summer approached. Little black flies (aggressive flies) were constantly clinging to my eyes in summer, causing great frustration. My first reaction to Australia was that I had made a huge mistake in accepting to come here. I was disappointed in Australia. We have never lived under such conditions, I thought. In Germany, during the war, we lived much better. I began to cry at my plight.

I remember there were about 20 Estonians on board the General Hersey when we arrive at Fremantle. Several of them traveled east immediately to Melbourne or Adelaide, as they had relatives or acquaintances already waiting for them in those cities. I did not have any such friends or relatives in Australia, so I thought I was stuck with remaining in Northam. On the third day of my stay at the camp, I was told that I should go to the office about getting a job, as part of my immigration contract. After the interview, I was assigned to a job as a waitress in the dining hall of the camp. There was already an Estonian working there, Elli Sepp. We got on well and we are still friends many years later. I remember that she had one daughter so we had a common bond of both being single mothers.

After working for a couple of weeks in the dining hall, I thought it wasn't too bad a job. I received my first paycheck. I remember the amount was not much but it was enough for the purchase of some basic goods. I gradually got used to my situation in the next few months, but I can say I was still not that happy about being in Australia. My mood changed for the worse when I was told that this camp employment would not remain forever and everyone should start finding jobs outside the camp. I was advised that I should look at putting my children voluntarily into an orphanage, so it would be easier for me to find and keep a job being a single mother. As I was not a permanent resident until I satisfied the two year qualifying residency period, I was not entitled to any welfare benefits until November 1952. Of course, in 1951, there was also no child care available for working mothers in Australia. This "advice" put me in a panic. In addition, there were few welfare benefits for single mothers in Australia, even on becoming a permanent resident. How would I survive in the long term?

For the past six years, the future of my children was central to my being and I was not going to give up their care now. I wrote about my dire situation to Karl in New York and asked if I could come to America with my children to be with him. He was now working as a live-in gardener for a rich man in Scarsdale, New York. I quickly received an answer from Karl. He wrote that I have no way of getting to America because I'm no longer labelled by US Immigration Officials as a Displaced Person as

I was already accepted by Australia under their program. As I had already found a home in Australia. Karl suggested that he was willing to come to Perth to be with us. If we got married straightaway and he found employment, I would not be forced to work simply to survive. I could continue to have my children with me. Karl then got on a Greyhound bus in New York to travel to California and from there caught a ship named the Pioneer Gulf to Sydney. From Sydney, he took a train, via Melbourne, to come to Perth. It was quite a long trip. Just the train journey lasted six days and he eventually arrived in Perth on October 23, 1951, and we got married on October 28th. We were married by the local Lutheran pastor, a Latvian man called Mr. Kampe. The ceremony was held at his home and the service was in German. This was because German was a common language understandable to all of the people at the service. This quick marriage was because we wanted to rent somewhere as quickly as possible but I did not want to live as a de facto couple. This was the start of a more independent life for me and I was no longer reliant on decisions made for me by immigration officials.

Karl had managed to save some money in his more recent job in the US and he immediately bought a building plot for us so we could build our own house. This piece of land was on the major road leading out of Perth, the Great Eastern Highway. It was about 20 kilometres from Perth and about 3 kilometres away from the outer suburban town of Midland. Many migrants were building homes on vacant land in this area called Bellevue. On this block of land, there was already a rundown building with a laundry and a shower room but it was not really habitable. There was already water connected to the block. We rented a large caravan that was to become our living quarters while Karl built a blue stone house. At first only half the house was finished - a large kitchen, one bedroom, hallway and a bathroom. We were so glad when we moved into the house as we were so cramped inside the caravan. The main thing was there was no need to pay rent. It was a poorly built house but it was ours.

Karl got a job nearby in Midland at the Railway Maintenance Yards (Workshops) as a metal worker in Western Australia's State Railways. He stayed in this job until his untimely death, many years later. I managed to get a job as a seamstress/laundress at Guildford Grammar, a private school for boys. The school has a large boarding population with students mostly coming from rural areas but there were even some boys from Asia, such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore. It was an expensive private school, as only rich people could send their sons there. I worked there in the sewing room. Catharine Young, a Scottish woman who had already worked there for a long time, helped me in the job. She was a likeable person and helped me improve my English pronunciation. Our work was to maintain the boy's uniforms, underwear and socks at the boarding school. The laundry was brought out each morning and we had to make sure everything was fine and then place the clothing in the closet for

each boy, along a long corridor. It was easy and enjoyable work. I worked there from 9 am to 3 pm. Lunch was also provided by the school. I only worked there until the end of September 1952 as I was now six months pregnant and I felt a bit awkward working there with the boys while having a ballooning stomach.

My third child, Carl was born on December 29, 1952. Initially, I was told by the doctors, he was due before Christmas. When I arrived at the hospital in labour after Christmas, they asked, "Where have you been?" I replied, sorry, but this event could not be planned to the day. When Carl was born, we still lived in only half the house. The rest of the house was still to be built. My husband, Karl, was a relatively small man, and construction work was quite difficult for him, and he had not much experience in hard physical work. I remember how his hands were bloody from lifting heavy bluestone blocks one on top of each other. This work was done after he finished doing his job at the railways during the week and then on his day off on Sundays. In the evenings, he only had time for a little talk, and to drink some vodka before bedtime. It was easier for me at that time. I was 37 years old but I knew something about being a mother. We grew a vegetable garden in the backyard and therefore had some fresh food. One thing I did not get used to at all was that the toilet was outside the house. Many toilets at this time were outside in Australia and serviced by the night man who carried away the contents on a sewage cart. As we were on the edge of a large tract of rural land, we often had snakes, goannas and blue tongue lizards visit us in the back yard. I still remember having to go to the toilet after dark and being wary of meeting such reptiles as you are trying to do your business.

It was a great pleasure to me that Krista's health now began to get better in Australia. Lots of sunshine, fresh fruit in season and relatively good food was the best treatment for her. Krista and Tiido both now went to the local school, Bellevue Primary School. They had difficulties with English at first, but they eventually coped. Tiido suffered because his abbreviated first name was Tiit. In English, this name caused much mirth as it sounded like teat or breast nipple and his surname, Kokk, sounded like cock (slang for penis). Boys would be constantly asking his name and when he replied, they would howl with laughter. Once, the head teacher called me to the school to ask if we could give him another name. I did not know that my son's name was so rude in English. Therefore, Tiido now chose an English name of Terry (Terence) Cook. Krista did not want a name change for her surname, telling me that she would eventually marry and therefore get another name anyway. She did marry but it was quite a bit later than she may have imagined. In the meantime, she pronounced her name as Kukk.

In 1955, the West Australian Government bought our plot of land (and basic house) due to a proposed future widening of the highway. The state government was quite generous with their compulsory payment and paid £ 2,300, which was decent money at this time. For this amount of money, Karl bought two adjacent blocks, each ¼ acre in size. He planned the construction of a three bedroom house on one plot and paid for the services of fellow Estonians who were proper carpenters. He also worked as a building labourer on the house and again he worked hard doing two jobs. This left money over for the cultivation of fruit trees and vegetables on the other block. In all, Karl planted 28 vine shrubs as well as an orchard of almond, apple, pear, plum, orange and citrus trees. In summer, he grew an extensive vegetable garden of tomatoes, capsicums, pumpkin, cucumbers, water melon and rock melon. As well, there was a large chicken coop in the back of the two blocks of land. This meant that our weekly family food bill was reduced and Karl even made some money selling excess fruit and vegetables to local greengrocers. He loved working there in the evenings after work and also on Saturdays and Sundays. My memories of him at this time was of sitting under the large plum tree, constantly smoking a cigarette while admiring his agricultural work.

Our new house was also built closer to the local railway station and was a quieter area away from the main road. It was also closer to the primary school and life was looking up. Living in the same street, there were a number of Estonian families. Carl went to school as soon as he turned 5-years old as he was a fairly bright child. We spoke Estonian at home but Carl quickly learned English and over the years, replied to us in English and was beginning to lose his Estonian language. As soon as Carl went to school, I went to work again. This time I managed to find work at the Royal Perth Hospital as a kitchen hand. Life became easier and there was no shortage of basics. We were able to buy furnishings for the house but a TV was still too expensive. I told Karl that we might be able to buy a car like our other Estonian friends. He only laughed at this suggestion and said, "It's not up to you to decide". I was still young and healthy and I was willing to learn how to drive. Karl never did get a car. He continued to ride his bike to work and going out on social occasions as a family, we took the train and taxis.

My work at the Royal Perth hospital began at 7 am and finished at 3 pm. Our residence was over 20 km away from the hospital and I usually traveled into the city by train, but on Sunday mornings there was no early train service in Perth. So I went to work on Sundays on my bicycle. At that time, the roads were empty and it was so beautiful to ride in the early morning. When I arrived at the hospital, the co-workers did not realize that I had been on such a long bike trip. Returning home, I put the bicycle on the train and got home with little trouble. These were less crowded times and the roads in Perth are now overwhelmed by cars. It is different now with separate bike trails to roads and it is compulsory for helmets to be worn

I was now 43 years old and continued to work happily throughout 1958 at the hospital while Carl was in school. I then noticed that my period was very late. I thought that this may be due to an early onset of change of life. I talked to my teenage daughter, Krista who was still in high school and she advised me to see a doctor. When I went to the doctor, he told me that I was pregnant and had been for a few months now. This was a big surprise for me and my husband, a not very pleasant surprise. I already had three children and was not seeking to have any more children, given my age. At the same time, we thought with Carl everything turned out well. Our Carl was a healthy and smart child. Perhaps any future baby will also be OK. I could not work at the hospital long after the discovery of my pregnancy. I became quite sick in the latter stage of my pregnancy. My blood pressure was high and the doctor put me in the hospital for an intended short period while I stabilised. When this hospital stay continued with me not getting better, it was decided by the medical staff to bring on my child's early birth.

When I went into labour at the hospital, I had an out of body experience. I saw my body climbing up from the bed and I flew out of the room. With beautiful music playing, stars shone and I saw my body ascend to the sky. I woke up abruptly to see a doctor and a midwife peering down at me and they were shaking my body. The doctor said, "Thank God, she's come around". The birth began in the evening, but it was morning now. However when Martin was born, I noticed he was so passive. He was placed in a humidicrib and he did not cry and he had difficulty breathing. Other women in the ward were whispering about me. Martin did not develop as an infant as you would expect. He was already two years old when he first took a few steps. He was subsequently diagnosed as having Downs Syndrome. I now realised that at 44 years of age my life had permanently changed once again. I would be caring for Martin for the rest of my life.

Chapter Nine

Reflection on My Life in Old Age

As I write these memoirs, over 31 years have passed since Martin was born in 1959 and there is now just the two of us living in my house at Bellevue. My husband, Karl passed away a number of years ago. My three older children have grown up and have their own families now. Estonia is in the process of gaining independence from the USSR, fifty years on from their incorporation into the Soviet Union during the war. Of my original family in Estonia, my four sisters and a brother, I am the only one still alive. I was the second youngest in the family. My only brother, Volli, died in a Siberian prison camp before Christmas in 1941 during the war. An older sister, Aliide, was murdered in July 1946 in Tallinn by criminals. My two other older sisters, Hilda and Leida died of natural causes some years ago in 1975 and my younger sister, Heine, only passed away a year ago. I, of course, have a number of nieces and nephews still living in Estonia. I have met them and enjoyed their company and they are my connection to my homeland of Estonia.

In all this time, life with Martin has been tough at times, especially when he got run over at a pedestrian crossing and suffered multiple fractures of his legs. Yet he is a loving son and we now keep each other company in my final years of life. It has also helped that over time, disability services have grown and developed in Perth, providing many useful services for our family. Martin was able to attend a special school in the region, with a pick up and drop off bus service provided each day. When he turned 18 years old, he became eligible for a Commonwealth disability pension. A similar bus service was provided for him at this time to attend a sheltered workshop where he is gainfully employed. Ongoing respite care at a local hostel has also been provided for me on a regular annual basis, allowing me to travel. I have returned to Estonia on a couple of occasions since 1980, as well as going on tours to New Zealand and Asia. When I think back, I have to admit that I have led an interesting life. I have not suffered any serious illness during my life. Although, I have high blood pressure and my heart is now giving me some problems, things have turned out relatively OK, considering I was contemplating my demise back in those dark days in East Germany at the end of World War Two. Even looking back to 1959 when Martin was born, I can see that things have generally worked out for my other three children in the past 31 years.

My son Terry was already physically mature for his age back in 1959 when he was 17 years old. While attending high school, he was more interested in girls than in school work and left school after year 10. He worked after school in his last year of schooling at the Midland Pharmacy. The business owner was very pleased with his work and he encouraged him to become a pharmacist. But Terry was more

interested in earning money, left school, and soon got a job as “a runner” in a car sales business. By now, Terry and Karl were not getting on and Terry was not happy with a stepdad telling him what to do. Terry left home soon after at the age of 18, together with his friend Mitchell, they traveled by train to Adelaide. Terry was married in Adelaide four years later and soon was the father of two children, Adam and Deborah. The family returned to Perth when Terry commenced his own business but the marriage did not last. He remained in Perth after the divorce and eventually married a very nice young widow, Maureen, who already had three young boys. I enjoy their continued company and support to this day.

Krista left school at year 10 a couple of years later and went on to be a state enrolled nurse. She also left home relatively early working in a number of rural hospitals in Western Australia. Prior to marriage, she traveled around the globe, in Europe, Asia, America, and worked in hospitals in several countries. She eventually married and has two lovely daughters, Lara and Sarah. Oh by the way, she did end up getting an English surname, marrying Brian Tyson. They now live next door to me. When my husband died, they were a young family struggling to save a deposit for a house. With my gift to them of the spare block of land next to my house, they were given a loan from the bank for the construction of a house. They were not as interested in maintaining an extensive garden/orchard over a hot summer, so Karl's pride and joy over all those years has now largely been lost. Yet, it is good that they are physically close to me and I enjoy seeing my grandchildren regularly. After my death, Terry and Krista have promised to take care of Martin and support his continued independent living in his own home. It is of great comfort to me that I need not worry about his future when I die.

Carl proved to be a very good student. He received a state scholarship for continuing his high school education in order to complete his matriculation. He also did well with his university entrance examinations, receiving a Commonwealth scholarship. He graduated from the Western Australian University earning an Honours degree in Chemistry. However, he disappointed his father, Karl, by not wanting to pursue a career in Science after all this study. Instead, he traveled to Melbourne by car to start a new life there. He did various jobs for a while in Melbourne before completing a Social Work Degree at Melbourne University. Carl now works in the Victorian Department of Community Services. He is also married to a lovely woman, Meg, and has two daughters, Emily and Virginia.

The death of my husband Karl happened 12 years ago on January 23, 1979. In fact, the cause of his death was that he took an overdose of sleeping pills. Before Christmas, his health deteriorated as he started getting the shakes and he was become increasingly agitated. At the time, he was still going to work but doctors wanted to do further tests as to his diagnosis. By Christmas, he took his usual 4

weeks holidays for the summer period. He became very fearful that he would become disabled and would have to eventually go to a nursing home. Just before he was due to return to work, after the summer break, he took his life. It was noon when I came home and I was greeted by my son Martin who was distraught as to why his father was lying down and unresponsive in the middle of the bedroom floor. Karl left me with a letter saying, "Be good to Martin, because he loves you very much." Looking back, he was probably suffering from the onset of Parkinson's disease. My son, Terry thinks it might have been due to prolonged exposure to lead as he was often asked to handle molten lead at his work. Now we will never know for sure.

I grieved for him at his untimely death. We ended up being married for 27 years and after all this time, we became used to each other. I reflected on that time in 1951, living alone in a strange country, when I pleaded with him by letter to get married. Yet, there is no doubt, we were different characters and our marriage was punctuated with quite a few arguments. There were times after those arguments, in the heat of anger, that I contemplated separation but I always ended up staying. One thing that marked our differences in outlook was that Karl found it hard to change and adapt in Australia. He did not want to talk about his life before the war, yet he was impaired by his war experience. I was frustrated by his resigned attitude to life. I always admired the "Aussie" way of having a go. After my husband's death in 1979 at the age of 63, I was able to gain some financial independence as I was able to go on to the aged pension straightaway. Fortunately, my aged pension was also supplemented by a smaller superannuation pension provided by the State Railways because of Karl's employment there for 27 years. I could now make my own decisions about my life. I finally learned how to drive and I bought a car. At my first attempt, I failed the practical test to get a driving license. Then I took another lesson, and this time, I got through. I also bought a piano and took music lessons. I always had the belief that you never stop learning in life. Even before Karl's death, I completed Adult Education Courses in Cake Decoration and Italian. I was part of the Estonian Women's Group in Perth and enjoyed going to the local Lutheran church.

So here I am, 75 years old, and like all grandmothers, I am hoping that the lives of my children and of my grandchildren will continue to be reasonably happy. From the rocky start of my new Australian life in that Northam camp, all that time ago, I am now happy. I recently read a book listing a number of biographies of pioneer women who settled in Western Australia in the early colonial days. What grave difficulties they had in coping with the harsh Australian environment when they first came from England to live here. I think that I share, in a small way, their experience in trying to make a new life in a strange country. I have now spent over half of my life living in Western Australia. Am I now an Aussie? All I know is that I am content to die in Perth, far away from Estonia. I now no longer believe that I made the biggest mistake of my life in coming here back in 1950.