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Childhood in the Memel Region

Abstract: *The designation 'Memel Territory' was coined in 1919 at the peace conference in Versailles, referring to the northern strip of East Prussia, bordered on the south by the Memel River and extending to the village of Nimmersatt (Nemirsatė) on the Baltic coast. Article 99 of the Treaty of Versailles in the end stipulated the cession of the Memel Territory from the German Reich. After the Lithuanian militia had achieved a fait accompli on January 15, 1923, the Entente Powers and Lithuania held tense negotiations that led to the Memel Convention of May 8, 1924. The Convention guaranteed Memelland extensive autonomy within the Republic of Lithuania. Between 1920 and 1937, Memel comprised a region with a German cultural and economic life; the autonomous authorities undertook no anti-Semitic measures whatsoever until 1937. Germany re-incorporated the Memel Territory on March 22, 1939 after forcing an ultimatum on the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Juozas Urbšys. In the region, the majority of the children received a good education. The only area where German, Lithuanian, and Jewish children encountered each other was in school. Children were very active in their leisure time – particularly in sports and in Scouts – regardless of their national affiliation. All the children in the region, Germans, Lithuanians, as well as Jews, were affected by the territorial conflicts and the war. These things unexpectedly and abruptly ended their childhood. This paper examines the memories of different children. It seeks to show that the majority of parents, regardless of their national and political background, tried to secure for their children an apolitical and protected childhood.*

Introduction

The paper that follows deals with the experiences of childhood in the German-Lithuanian border region. This was an area that lost its original national affiliation as a consequence of the First World War, being administered during the interwar period as having a minority status. The Memel Region (as did many other border regions in the 20th century) had a quite varied history. The designation 'Memel Territory' was coined in 1919 at the peace conference in Versailles, referring to the northern strip of East Prussia, bordered on the south by the Memel River and extending to the village of Nimmersatt (Nemirsatė) on the Baltic coast. Article 99 of the Treaty of Versailles in the end stipulated the cession of the Memel Territory from the German Reich. The territory had an area of 2,416 square kilometres and 141,000 inhabitants in 1919. After the Lithuanian militia had achieved a fait accompli on January 15, 1923, the entente powers and Lithuania held tense

negotiations that led to the Memel Convention of May 8, 1924. The Convention guaranteed Memelland extensive autonomy within the Republic of Lithuania.

Germany and Lithuania considered the situation temporary. Germany endeavoured to secure the territory's permanent repatriation; Lithuania, on the other hand, wanted to fully integrate the region into its state. Meanwhile, the city attracted new residents with the number of inhabitants growing rapidly. The steady influx of Lithuanian Jews underscored the economic and cultural gap between the Memel Territory and Lithuania.

For reasons of length, the following study is limited to just the time period of the 1930s. The focus will be on the recollections of various children living in the Memel Region during the interwar period. The recollections of persons have been chosen from those who were born in the period between 1920 and 1932 and who grew up in various social milieus.¹ Childhood in this region was experienced in many different ways and independently of one's social background. If in the village a 'childhood on the streets' was the most prevalent and characterized by its emphasis on unmonitored cliques and games, in the city an 'at home' form of childhood within the family was in the process of developing.² This development had the consequence that the children in the city were purposefully kept at a distance from political hot topics, while the children in the countryside were more likely to share in the experience of the tensions that were surfacing within the society and they consequently became witnesses of the surrounding events.

Sources and Research Position

The author himself has worked on the history of this area and conducted interviews with Memellanders in Lithuania during the period 1990–2001. Until now only life stories of the post-war period from these interviews have been published.³ Further examination of the interviews has shown that the interviewees idealized their pre-war period of childhood to a great extent. The author intended to show different designs of childhood in the country within a geographical context. The memories reported by eyewitnesses in the publication of Günter Uschtrin

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- 1 Jürgen Zinnecker, 'Kindheit und Jugend als pädagogische Moratorien: Zur Zivilisationsgeschichte der jüngeren Generation im 20. Jahrhundert,' in *Bildungsprozesse und Erziehungsverhältnisse im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Dietrich Benner and Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, Beiheft 42, 36–68 (Weinheim: Beltz, 2000), 38.
 - 2 *Ibid.*, 44.
 - 3 Ruth Kibelka, *Memellandbuch. Fünf Jahrzehnte Nachkriegsgeschichte*. 1. Aufl. (Berlin: Basisdruck 2002).

complete the existing sample quite well.⁴ However, the related interviews were again compared with other printed memories.⁵ The sources of the Jewish witnesses were raised in a project that the author carried out from 2001 to 2006 and also led to a publication.⁶ In the analysis, only memories submitted by witnesses who were born between 1920 and 1932 were included. Younger interviewee had no clear memories of the school in the bilingual Memel. In the two interview series mentioned, people born in the years 1904, 1910 and 1914 also participated, but no content has been included in the analysis. The oral history sources were of great importance, because through them facts could be stated for which there was no evidence to date. The history of Memel is now considered relatively well known; the aspect of childhood was illustrated but never analysed.⁷

Historical Background

Prior to the First World War, the slender region north of the Memel River was considered so unimportant that it had not even been designated with a name yet. It was closely affiliated with East Prussia and had comprised since 1871 the very northern tip of the German Reich. The residents in the area spoke several different

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- 4 Günter Uschtrin, *Wo liegt Coadjuthen? Die Geschichte eines ostpreußischen Kirchspiels im ehemaligen Memelland*, ed. Günter Uschtrin, 1., neue Ausg, 334–5 (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2011), 334.
 - 5 Hans Paltins, 'Wenn Lehrer Bajorat in den Graben fuhr... 'Erinnerungen an Deegeln und seine Schule. In: *Memeler Dampfboot*, 20.12.1972; Lachauer, Ulla: *Ostpreussische Lebensläufe*. (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1998) Jurkschat, Christine: *Brot und Salz. Das ungewöhnliche Schicksal eines jungen Mädchens : Erinnerungen*. (Norderstedt: Books on Demand GmbH 2005).
 - 6 Ruth Leiserwowitz, *Sabbatleuchter und Kriegerverein : Juden in der ostpreußisch-litauischen Grenzregion 1812–1942*. Osnabrück: fibre 2010 (Einzelveröffentlichungen des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Warschau / Deutsches Historisches Institut, Warschau).
 - 7 Vytautas Žalys, *Kova dėl identiteto: kodėl Lietuvai nesisekė Klaipėdoje tarp 1923–1939 m.–Ringen um Identität: Warum Litauen zwischen 1923 und 1939 im Memelgebiet keinen Erfolg hatte: Lüneburg: Nordostdeutsches Kulturwerk 1993* Tauber, Joachim (2001): *Das Memelgebiet (1919–1945) in der deutschen und litauischen Historiografie nach 1945*. In: *Nordost-Archiv. Zeitschrift für Regionalgeschichte NF X*, 11–44; Vareikis, Vyngantas (2001): *Memellander/Klaipėdiškiai Identity and German-Lithuanian Relations in Lithuania Minor in the Nine-teenth and Twentieth centuries*. In: *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas* (1–2), 7; Safronovas, Vasilijus; Nikžentaitis, Alvydas; Staliūnas, Darius; Čepaitienė, Rasa; Lopata, Raimundas; Valantiejus, Algimantas; Vareikis, Vyngantas et al.: *The Competition of Identity Ideologies in a City of South-Eastern Baltic Sea Region: The Case-Study of Klaipėda in the 20th Century*. (Klaipėda: Klaipėdos institutas, 2012).

languages, a common reality on the eastern edges of Prussia. On the other side of the border, Lithuania extended outward; it had been incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1795 and was generally referred to as Russian Lithuania. The Lithuanians on either side were different from one another in several ways. The Prussian Lithuanians were Protestant and used Gothic script. On the other side of the border, the Lithuanians attended Catholic churches and used Latin script. During the First World War, East Prussia was the only German region drawn directly into the suffering of the war. The Memel region also experienced the incursions of Russians and the carrying off of civilians. On February 16, 1918, an independent Lithuanian Republic was proclaimed in Vilnius. From the perspective of those in Germany, the situation seemed like this: in place of an economically important empire as its neighbour, there was now a small mini-state on the other side of the border that could not even be assigned to a political category and, moreover, it appeared to be totally unstable. East Prussia had suffered the loss of its economically powerful neighbour and consequently lost its role as an economic hub.

In the treaty of Versailles, without any consultation with the populace, the East Prussian region north of the Memel was separated from Germany with the justification that it was primarily Lithuanians who lived in the area. Thus tolled the hour of the birth of an artificial construct: Memelland (or the Memel region). The region was placed under French administration, which however represented an interim solution. In January 1923, the Republic of Lithuania occupied the neighbouring region and the French withdrew. The Allies thereupon issued in 1924 what was called the Memel Convention, which said that this region within the Republic of Lithuania must be afforded an autonomous status. From the perspective of international law, this convention served as the determinate constitutional basis for the territory. Simultaneously, a Memel Statute was put into effect, laying out the implementation of the convention. Minority rights in the area were to be guaranteed.

The Lithuanian government, when setting up the new administration, did not rely on the workforce in the region itself, but instead, brought along its own clerks. Memelland started to appear quite attractive to outsiders for economic reasons. Nevertheless, the city of Memel itself continued to have a predominantly German character. However, in an effort to reduce the percentage of Germans in the population, the Lithuanian government (among other things) promoted the settling of Jews there, who moved into the region in large numbers. The city attracted Lithuanian Jews. The living standard was higher and the Lithuanian policy of nationalization was less firmly enforced. In comparison with Germany, the Jews

also felt relatively safe after 1933 because there was no public antisemitism here, at least until 1938.

The city and the harbour prospered; however, farmers in the countryside had to struggle with enormous difficulties in selling their products. The Kaunas government had developed no real policy for incorporating the annexed territory; consequently, the dissatisfaction of the Memellanders grew. After Hitler came to power, the German-Lithuanian conflicts over Memelland intensified and formally a state of war existed in the region. After it ended, there were elections for a Memelland parliament, and these resulted in December 1938 in an overwhelming victory for the German list of candidates, with the consequence that Jews began to immediately flee from the region. On March 21, 1939, the Lithuanian foreign minister, Juozas Urbšys, was forced to sign a German ultimatum regarding the return of Memelland. Immediately after the re-incorporation of the region, the German government announced a law according to which any Memellanders who had become Lithuanian nationals on July 30, 1924, and who had their residence in the Memel Region or in Germany on March 22, 1939, received back their German citizenship. In this way, after the annexation, all the residents of the Memel Region again became Germans unless they opted by the end of the year to remain Lithuanian, pursuant to a regulation that the German and Lithuanian government had negotiated in that same year.

The Jews left the Memel area within a very short time. Many of them were killed in Lithuania in 1941–1943. Meanwhile, Lithuanians went back to Lithuania. The use of Lithuanian was forbidden in public. The Second World War started just six months later. In the Memel region population displacement was a process that closely intertwined the Nazi (forced evacuation of 1944) and Soviet practices of dealing with the population. First, the Germans had evacuated the city population of Memel. Nearly nobody returned after 1945. Therefore, after the war the city could be sovietised without much resistance. The rural population of the region was forced to leave later. More than 10,000 Memellanders began their return to the Memel region after the end of the war. The region officially became a part of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. Lithuanians and other Soviet citizens were settled here. About the population figures of the postwar period in the region there are only estimates. Borders of counties and districts were altered to erase the old regional border. Youth life was organized in the communist youth organization. Alternatively, youths met in church circles. The public use of German was not allowed. After the conclusion of an agreement between both German states and the

USSR in April 1958, a total of 6,156 persons left the region.⁸ After the relocation of a large part of the German population in 1958 to Germany, those Memellanders left behind began to conceal their identity.

Illustration 7: After 1933 Jews flee from Germany to Klaipeda. First came those who still have roots and relatives here. Fritz Marcuse, who then became a sport teacher at 'Bar Kochba' (in the centre), was one of them. Members of the local 'Bar Kochba' in 1937 on the sports field Society "Jews in East Prussia", Archive.



Language Policies

In response to the protest of the German government about the decision to cede the region to Lithuania, the Allies responded in a letter signed by George Clémenceau⁹ which contained the following passage:

The region has always been Lithuanian. The majority of the population is Lithuanian in terms of origin and language. The fact that large parts of the city of Memel itself are

8 LCVA [Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas =Lithuanian Central State Archive], F.R. – 754, Ap. 13, B. 693, L. 3–5.

9 George Clémenceau (1841–1929), French politician, 1917 Minister of War, 1917–20 Minister President who espoused harsh policies toward Germany at the peace conference of Versailles.

German does not justify keeping the entire region under German sovereignty, particularly because the harbour of Memel is Lithuania's only access to the sea.¹⁰

One can read from this passage that to the writer of the letter, the differences in language usage between the region's countryside and city were evidently clear. The political weightings in the border region were changing. Memel, as a political and economic centre of the disputed border region, played a significant role in the German-Lithuanian relationship and was for almost 20 years a focus of international attention.

The young Lithuanian took great efforts in the fields of culture and education. But in the aftermath of the coup of 1926, President Antanas Smetona gradually implemented an authoritarian regime and demanded a forced nationalization of all areas.

Germany and Lithuania both sought (in equal measure) to strengthen their influence in the region. The Jewish populace in the city of Memel, being the third largest, clearly profited (until 1938) from the state of affairs existing between these two national states. In the census conducted in 1924, 59,315 residents declared themselves to be German, 37,626 as Lithuanians, and over above this 34,337 as Memellanders.¹¹ In the interwar period, Lithuanian and German were on equal footing as official languages. The residents received Lithuanian passports with the addition 'Citizen of Memelland'.¹² Between 1924 and 1939, whoever worked in local administration or state-run institutions such as the railroad or the post office, had to send their children to a Lithuanian school. Through such a regulation, mixing of the languages and cultures in the region increased. In the countryside, both languages were already spoken anyway, but in Memel there were many who could not speak Lithuanian. At a practical level, how language was used in each family was quite varied. It can however be determined that the importance of ethnicity seldom played a role in constituting dissimilar childhoods.

10 Henry de Chambon, *La Lituanie moderne*, (Paris: Éditions de la Revue parlementaire 1933), 83. Further to this: Joachim Tauber, *Die deutsch-litauischen Beziehungen im 20. Jahrhundert*, Lüneburg 1993.

11 British Empire, France, Italy, Japan, and Lithuania. Convention concerning the Territory of Memel, signed at Paris, May 8, 1924. <http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/treaties/LNTSer/1924/194.pdf> (accessed June 2017 Valsonokas, *Klaipėdos problema*, 268.

12 At the same time a process took place in which citizens had to choose either Lithuanian or German nationality.

The School System

Children from the age of 6 to the age of 14 had to attend the school. There had always been compulsory school attendance in Memel. The elementary schools were institutions of the state. In addition, there were a few municipal and private schools.

In the city of Memel, in addition to a primary school and junior high school, there were two German secondary schools: for the young men there was the Luisen-Gymnasium and for the young women the Auguste-Victoria-Lyceum. Starting in 1923 there was also a Lithuanian gymnasium named Vytautasgymnasium, which in 1934 got a new and quite distinguished building. The elements of the school policies were determined by the Directorate of the Memelland Parliament in Memel and so were not directly subject to the government of Lithuania. The Lithuanian language, spoken and written, was a required subject in all the schools, but this subject was not taken particularly seriously by the parents (the Memel Germans as well as the Prussian-Lithuanians and the Jews).¹³

In December 1933, there was an order of the Governor of the Memel Territory in connection of the Lithuanian 'Law on the recruitment and employment of foreigners in the public service'. A large number of teachers who worked as German citizens in schools and public services had to leave now. At the same time, the governor handed over to the President of the Executive Board a list of teachers in schools of Lithuania, from which candidates could be chosen as a replacement.¹⁴ Thereby the Lithuanian influence would be enhanced at the schools. The expulsions of teachers also meant that the National Socialist influence barely reached the Memel students.

In 1936, after various pushbacks by the Directorate on the one side (in which the school consultant Kurmis was especially involved) and of the German-oriented Jews on the other side, a Jewish primary school (Tarbut) was established following the model of the school system quite widespread in Lithuania.¹⁵ *Tarbut*, the Hebrew word for culture, was a synonym for secular Zionist education. The language of instruction in these schools was Hebrew. In Coadjuthen, a large

13 Günter Uschtrin, 'Die Schulen in Coadjuthen während der Memellandzeit (1919–1939)', in *Wo liegt Coadjuthen? Die Geschichte eines ostpreußischen Kirchspiels im ehemaligen Memelland*, ed. Günter Uschtrin, 1., new edition, 334–5 (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2011), 334

14 *Memeler Dampfboot* vom 18. Dezember 1933, 2.

15 Lietuvos Valstybinis Archyvas [Lithuanian State Archive] LVA, F.378, Ap.3, B. 3426, 140 (17.4.1934).

church village on the border with Lithuania (representing here an example for the situation in the countryside), there was, as in other places in the region, a multi-level primary school for the children from age 6 to 14. After 1923, with German help and with the sponsorship of an association, a private secondary school was established which was to ease the path for gifted children to later gain admission to the German gymnasiums in Heydekrug and Memel (both requiring private tuition). In the 1930s, forceful attempts were initiated by the Lithuanian government to educate the children in the countryside into the Lithuanian cultural spirit. To this end, around 1935 a Lithuanian school in Coadjuthen was also opened, three years later also getting a new school building. A number of parents sent their children to it, because in Lithuanian schools there was no corporal punishment and because the pre-school Lithuanian kindergarten had a good reputation among the German parents. The Lithuanian teachers sought to persuade the German parents to send their children to this Lithuanian primary school.¹⁶ Both financially and materially, it was far better provided for than both of the two German schools.¹⁷ In spite of all the means at their disposal, the Lithuanian government was only somewhat able to reduce the influence of the German schools.

Childhood in the Village

In the region, there were numerous church villages where life was bustling. The inhabitants in the environs came to the weekly markets and to Sunday worship. The social position of the village residents could quickly be determined by considering the location of their residences. The most important personalities had their houses in the middle of the village; the poor lived on the periphery, frequently quite close to the forests. Among the well-to-do farmers was the Groeger family, whose daughter Erna Mehmert (nee Groeger, born in 1925) has left behind her recollections. The family of the school principal Hein likewise did so in the written experiences of their son Walter (born in 1924).

16 Walter Hein, 'Coadjuthen unter litauischer Besatzung: Ein Erlebnisbericht von Walter Hein, geb. 1924 in Coadjuthen,' in *Wo liegt Coadjuthen? Die Geschichte eines ostpreußischen Kirchspiels im ehemaligen Memelland*, ed. Günter Uschtrin, 1., new edition, 312–4 (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2011), 313.

17 Günter Uschtrin, 'Die Schulen in Coadjuthen während der Memellandzeit (1919–1939),' in *Wo liegt Coadjuthen? Die Geschichte eines ostpreußischen Kirchspiels im ehemaligen Memelland*, ed. Günter Uschtrin, 1., new edition, 334–5 (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2011), 335.

Erna Mehnert is able to recount: 'In Coadjuthen I am quite simply living out a carefree childhood, fully free and unencumbered. We are at home everywhere we go. For us children, every house of our friends and acquaintances was open to us from attic to cellar. We paraded happily around in clothes that we found in chests and suitcases in the attic. We do this, for example, at the uncles of my friend Mimi Hein (Franz Kestenus), who owns a brickworks and is also the director of the Lithuanian bank; at the Grigats, who ran a drugstore next to the house and whose daughter Ruth actually is a friend of my sister Lilo. The people there are generally very fond of children.'¹⁸ Disputes about language policies or experiences that had a political tone do not show up in their recollections, giving the sense that they did not leave behind any appreciable impressions.

However, significant in her recollection were the social differences that were prevalent in the village and that she came to know as a child. In this case she is able to report:

However, things are not going so well for everyone. Hedwig, the best student in the upper classes and who has a voice like a lark, lives outside the village in a cottage. We visit her once and are amazed at the in which she lives. Similarly, a later school friend of ours lives in great poverty and hardship. We find this out only when a visit is scheduled for us by the school, because she lost one of her sisters who stumbled into a threshing machine.¹⁹

There were in the village, however, other children who experienced a totally different childhood, such as Franz, a son of the Lithuanian family Gaupitis. In his recollections it says:

Born on April 7, 1932 in a mud-walled house with a straw roof, mud floors, and a hearth made of stone masonry; to say nothing of the furnishings: 1 table with chairs and 3 beds for 6 persons. The older siblings were already out of the house and worked for the farmer. [...] The owner of the house in which my seven siblings Emma, Georg, Martha, Fritz, Meta, Paul and I were born was the landlord Mitskus. My parents and some of my siblings had to do drudge work for him; for example, in springtime load up the manure and spread it on the fields.²⁰

Gaupitis lists other jobs such as planting potatoes and turnips, then harvesting grain as well as potatoes and turnips, and explains: 'This fieldwork was done yearly,

18 Erna Mehner, 'Erinnerungen an meine Kindheit in Coadjuthen,' in Uschtrin (Hg.) 2011, – Wo liegt Coadjuthen, 443.

19 Ibid., 440.

20 Franz Gaupitis, 'Meine Jugendjahr in Medischkehmen,' in Wo liegt Coadjuthen? Die Geschichte eines ostpreußischen Kirchspiels im ehemaligen Memelland, ed. Günter Uschtrin, 1., new edition, 465–8 (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2011), 465.

as so-called rent for the one large room in the mud-walled house.²¹ He explains this further:

By the time I was five years old, I also had to do some limited jobs; in the fall I herded up around 60 to 70 cows. In the early morning, the farmhands and maids who also had to work for the farmer took me (the whippersnapper) out to the meadow, about 7 to 8 kilometres distant from the village of Medischkehmen. Out there they left me alone with the animals. Sometimes when there was a thick fog, I could hardly see my hand in front of my face, while constantly walking back and forth in order to keep control of the cows. We had no shoes and in the early morning hours in autumn it was already getting mighty cold. That is why we used the opportunity to warm our feet in the puddles of warm urine from the cows; there simply was no other option back then.²²

Yet, he had even more responsibilities, describing them as follows:

I also had to work for the farmer named Spingies. In the morning, the farmhands put me up on top of the loaded manure wagon, the horse got a tap on its behind and off it went out into the field. The manure was spread there on the land that was going to be planted. Then I was put up on the empty wagon, the horse got a tap and it went back to the farmyard. That is how it went the whole day until evening.

I repeated this work until I was 8 years old, even though I started attending the Lithuanian school when I was 6. One could say that school was something taken care of on the side, for a couple hours; then I had to once again go back out to the field.²³

And just how did this activity fit in with going to school? Franz Gaupis tells the story:

As to my being enrolled in school this can be said: There weren't any candy cones or even school clothes, for my parents were poor and only a sown-together bag with a slate and a primer were hung on me. The farmer was the one who decided whether I attended the school classes. The work in the field came first.²⁴

Childhood in the City

In German dominated Memel, the Jews and the Lithuanians oriented themselves on the German way of doing things and to some extent attended German schools. Newly arriving families adapted their outward appearance as quickly as possible. Numerous photos from the time show that the city children in the interwar

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 466.

period were not distinguished from one another by their clothing or behaviour. We can take as representative recollections of Cherie Goren (born in 1925) and her older sister Fanny (born in 1922) (originally Sarah and Fanny Fleischmann). Cherie recounts:

My sister Fanny and I attended the German school. [...] When I arrived in the Lyceum, we spent a lot of time on the analysis of sentences. We also had a lot of geography in which we learned of what was Germany once upon time. After school I had to go to an apartment where two old, smelly, genteel ladies fallen on hard times helped children of all ages with their homework. I guess German schools were hard. We memorized Goethe and Schiller. We sang songs by Heinrich Heine. [...] A great portion of Jews identified with the Germans and their culture.²⁵

At that time it was not common for young girls and boys to be out and about alone in the city except for when they were involved in sports at their clubs. As a rule, in their free time, they were looked after by a nanny (referred to as *Fräulein*) and also accompanied to and collected from their sporting events. Cherie Goren recounts:

I had a group of little friends. We had a 'kranzchen' (literally a wreath but means here a circle of friends). Freulein served us hot chocolate and pastries in Meissen cups and we worked on our cross-stitch embroideries. Our parents were all friends. We all went to the German schools and spoke German at home.²⁶

This all sounds very idyllic and needs a commentary. Cherie and Fanny attended a secondary school, the Auguste Victoria Lyceum, where Jewish girls were a minority. The relationship between German and Jewish girls was quite relaxed because of the attitude of the teachers. The school consultant Kurmis kept a strict watch over the political activities of teachers in the German schools in Memel. Only in 1938 did the situation rapidly change. It can be summarized that the Lithuanian authorities prevented the secondary schools from becoming bastions of nationalism.

In a similar way to the children in the countryside, the children in the city primarily were aware of social differences among the children in their age groups. Among the Germans and the Jews that was likewise the case. There were always subtle boundaries between the Jews who had lived there a long time and those who were new arrivals. This is something that Cherie Goren also underscores:

There were Yiddish speaking girls in the Jewish section but we did not mix with the Ostjuden. My friends and I were embarrassed by their provincial looks, their clothes, and what we considered odd behaviour. How vain and self-important we were. When I was

25 Cherie Goren, *A Time To Keep: Grammy Cherie's Story*. (Merion Station, 1999), 12.

26 *Ibid.*, 16.

out walking with Freulein one day and stopped to talk to a little girl, Freulein insisted that 'those' people were dirty and examined my head for lice.²⁷

Free Time and Sports

Sports were an important element in the national self-image in those years and possessed a tremendous fascination for the older children and the teenagers. Even in the countryside there were sports enthusiasts and a few sports clubs.²⁸ In this regard, young people were very similar in the Memel region and in neighbouring Lithuania. However, it must be noted here that there were also political youth associations registered in Lithuania, which carried out sports activities. In the Memel region all kinds of political youth associations were forbidden because of the political tensions.²⁹ The Lithuanian Ministry of Education stopped the activities of some politically active youth associations in 1930.³⁰

The Jewish youth were involved in organizations just like the Germans and Lithuanians of the same age. Dora Rabinowitz (b. 1919) recalls, 'If the Betar had more enthusiastic and better leaders we went to Betar. If Hashomer was more interesting, and the holiday camp was nicer there we went to Hashomer for summer camp. It had no political significance to us.'³¹

Mike Rabinowitz (b.1922) played on the Luise Gymnasium's soccer team. He travelled with the team to Danzig in 1934 and then to Koenigsberg in 1936. At the time the others already were afraid to take him along and never called him by his last name. But they needed him to play for them. Then the atmosphere changed in the school. 'I had many good friends, but before we were about to take our final exams in the last year many turned their backs on me. Whether they were ashamed of me or they were afraid of me or they became Nazi through the Hitler Youth... I don't know. One friend remained true to me.'³²

In 1936, the year of the Olympics, sports suddenly became an even stronger expression of national allegiance. Cherie Goren recalls: 'The 1936 Olympics were very much in the news. I started to notice that the girls in my class were very blond

27 Ibid., 18.

28 Erna Mehner, 'Erinnerungen an meine Kindheit in Coadjuthen,' in *Uschtrin* (Hg.) 2011, [2011 – Wo liegt Coadjuthen, 438–43.

29 Ingrida Jakubavičienė, Lietuvos sporto rėmimo tradicijos XX a. 3–4 dešimtmečiuose. In: *Istorija. Lietuvos aukštųjų mokyklų mokslo darbai* (89, 2013), 20–30.; Biliūtė-Aleknavičienė 2004, 141.

30 Biliūtė-Aleknavičienė 2004, 141.

31 Dora Rabinowitz, *Yad Vashem Archives*, 03/7504.

32 Mike Rabinowitz, Interview with author, November 14, 1999 in Ramat Gan.

and athletic. There was much marching and singing of German songs about the 'Heimat' or Homeland.³³

Illustration 8: Inaugural assembly of the Betar in Memel 1927. Betar is a Jewish youth movement founded in 1923 in Riga. The name is short for 'Brit Yosef Trumpeldor'. Trumpeldor was a Jewish fighter who fell at Tel Hai fighting against a superior Arabic force. To the right, above the picture of Trumpeldor, is Dorothee Metlitzki, professor of English at Yale University Society "Jews in East Prussia", Archive.



Political Sentiments

The Schools Inspectorate regularly inspected the teachers, especially the German officials who were to be expelled in 1934. In this context, schoolchildren witnessed unforgettable scenes. Hans Paltins recalls:

Our previous teacher Bajorat could hardly speak Lithuanian. Therefore, he was very often and thoroughly inspected by the Lithuanian Board of Education, which appeared mostly accompanied by another officer. The men appeared without notice. So once they burst in on a geography lesson, and right in front of us children a vociferous debate took place as to why Bajorat let us learn in geography about Germany and not about Lithuania.

33 Ibid., 18.

The schools inspector took the map of Germany from the card holder, rolled it up and simply took it with him.³⁴

Walter Hein, the son of the German school principal in Coadjuthen, experienced his childhood quite attentively. Perhaps that was the result of his father having to concern himself with the political tensions of the time and indeed speaking about them at home. Hein recounts:

1935 was the year when the Neumann-Sass trial in Kaunas had just come to an end. This trial was conducted against Germans from Memelland who had become engaged in the pursuit of German interests -- so, it was a political trial. It resulted in four death sentences and also lengthy prison sentences for 85 Germans.³⁵

Some of the convicted persons were even from our village. Presumably that was the reason why a Lithuanian lancer squadron occupied our village for many years. At the time a state of war existed in the Memel Region now separated from the Reich even though self-administration had been guaranteed to the Germans. In 1934 I was ten years old and I can still remember how surprised the Coadjuthens were back then when the occupation of the village began. As young boys, we were playing football that very day when we suddenly heard a loud clatter of horse hooves on the cobblestones on the street coming from Laugallen going in the direction of the town square. We ran down the street after them and could see everything well: a whole lancer squadron on horseback, led by two officers and over 100 soldiers fully outfitted [...]. The officers used Naubur's inn, the soldiers took over the events hall that was part of the Martinus inn. The horses were sheltered in empty barns, with 25 in the stall of Pastor Strasdas. The chuck wagon was set up next to the bicycle shop in the yard of Westfals. For us kids, this was a reason to often stop by as the soldiers with their mess kits got their cabbage soup prepared in a large caldron by two cooks with a lot of cabbage and meat. When you went by there, you always got the strong smell of cabbage soup in your nose.³⁶

The political contextualization of this event may be something that perhaps the youngster became aware of at a later point. The young ones who 'often stopped by there' were surely more so attracted by how exotic the events were. And yet,

34 Paltins 1972.

35 The attempted rebellion against Lithuania could not be proved during the trial. Nevertheless, the death sentence was imposed, however not carried out. There were numerous protests against the verdicts. In the end, all those condemned were gradually let go.

36 Walter Hein, 'Coadjuthen unter litauischer Besatzung: Ein Erlebnisbericht von Walter Hein, geb. 1924 in Coadjuthen,' in *Wo liegt Coadjuthen? Die Geschichte eines ostpreußischen Kirchspiels im ehemaligen Memelland*, ed. Günter Uchtrin, 1., new edition, 312–4 (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2011), 312.

Walter Hein's description of an election gives a different impression. Here, despite being just 11 years old, he shows himself to be an active observer, as he reports:

1935 was the year of the elections to the Fifth Memelland Parliament. The polling place was in the school and on election day I got myself a spot over the entrance to the school and had a good view of everything from there. With still a half an hour before the opening of the polling place, the Germans and Lithuanians had gathered and the fear was there would be some unrest, which did in fact happen when the Lithuanians were the first ones allowed into the polling place. Then the door was locked, barring the Memellanders. There were loud protests and riots with shouts such as 'Lithuanians get out!' That went on for half an hour, and then I caught sight of the Lithuanian military with arms at the ready and with a lieutenant in the lead coming from the other side of the town square. All of a sudden, the lieutenant paused in place and demanded that the German Memellanders immediately leave the town square. That was clearly an obstruction of the election process. Loud yelling began -- but no one started moving away from the town square. I saw the soldiers fan out and move forward toward the Germans. They struck the Memellanders with their rifle butts. In an instant the town square was empty. The lieutenant ordered the soldiers to return to ranks and then withdraw. That happened and then in half an hour everything was quiet. The election could then proceed without problem. All this, however, really did not help the Lithuanians, because they lost the election by a huge margin: 94% of the population elected the German candidates.³⁷

We can assume that all people of all age groups in the village learned about what had happened. We find in no other recollections from children born between 1920 and 1932 (which have been reviewed for this piece) any references to the political trial mentioned above or to the elections of 1935 (or any other parliamentary elections before 1938). The report from Walter Hein gives a sense of the tensions that reigned in the region and what kind of mistrust of the official administration was present. In this context, an incident described by Cherie Goren appears in a quite different light:

I developed a following of about six boys. My two cousins, Peeps and Bubi were a year older than I. They each wanted to be my boyfriend and had fistfights to see who would walk next to me. There were also Norbert, Izzi, Manfred, and several more, I don't remember their names. [...] These boys were friends of my cousins, so we were all friends. We started a club. Because I had the best ideas, I was elected president. I was also the only girl. We called it the 'Black Hand'. It was a secret organization. We wrote each other letters in invisible ink, played pranks on people, and did harmless mischief. We made stink bombs, and left them in the movie house. One Friday I stole the chicken legs from our Shabat chicken, dipped them into chicken blood, and stamped some writing paper with them. We had a meeting the same afternoon and wrote letters of warning to some

37 Ibid., 313.

people signed ‘The Black Hand’ under the imprints of the bloody chicken claws and ‘Tutti Fleischmann, president.’ We mailed the letters to people at random. We had no stamps, so the post office opened them and called the police. [] One afternoon, while Mama was at the fish market again and Papa at the bridge club, two men came to our door and showed Freulein their secret police badges. They wanted to talk to Miss Tutti Fleischmann. A trembling Freulein produced me and sent the rest of the household for my parents. They took me into the living room, closed the door, and began to interrogate me. They must have felt pretty ridiculous at the sight of me, a puny eleven-year-old. If they did, they did not let on. They wanted to know the names of the members of my gang, but I stood my ground – I was not talking. My brother Butzer was hiding on top of the armoire behind the clock, again. Suddenly he piped up, ‘I know!’ and proceeded to name all of my friends. My terrified parents burst into the room. I think the police dropped the case. Nobody else was picked up. The story spread like wildfire through the town. I was labelled a wild tomboy. The girls were not allowed to play with me, including my cousin, Edith, Peep’s sister. We were all severely lectured about drawing the attention of the secret police. I was an outcast for a short while, until I became seriously ill and was redeemed.³⁸

This episode clearly shows the high level of political nervousness in the city to the degree that children’s letters were investigated.

Jewish Childhood

In the 1930s, the climate in the school changed. The German children got involved in German groups. While there would not have been the Hitler Youth yet, nevertheless the copycat effect was clearly present.³⁹ Jewish children banded together more closely and spent more of their free time together. Trudi Birger (born in 1927), who moved from Frankfurt am Main to Memel in 1933, recounts: ‘I cannot remember having experienced any kind of anti-Semitic incidents at school, even though there were only a few of us Jewish students. The teachers treated us fairly.’⁴⁰ Others, primarily the children of immigrant families during the interwar period, remember having sensed anti-Semitism as a child. They were not chosen as playmates and not invited to birthday parties.⁴¹ In November 1938, the days of Jewish childhood in Memel ended abruptly. Cherie Goren still remembers:

38 Goren, *A Time To Keep: Grammy Cherie’s Story*, 20.

39 Mike Rabinowitz, Interview with author, November 14, 1999 in Ramat Gan.

40 Trudi. Birger and Jeffrey M. Green, *Im Angesicht des Feuers: Wie ich der Hölle des Konzentrationslagers entkam* (München: Piper, 1990), 35.

41 Yad Vashem 03/7504 Interview Dora Love geb. Rabinowitz.

One night, we were told not to go out or near the windows. A German ship was in port and a demonstration was expected. Papa, who had many friends in high places, had been warned. We did not turn the lights on and sat in the dark. We did not have to wait long. We heard loud singing and marching. Hundreds of boots on the cobblestone street and hundreds of voices were singing the 'Horstwessel', a Nazi song, with verses: 'Jewish blood will spill from our sharp knives' and the German national anthem. As they came to our building they raised their fists and shouted 'Sieg Heil', the Nazi salute. We trembled as we peeked behind the closed drapes. They obviously knew where Jews lived. No police appeared. The band of storm troopers were allowed to roam the city, attack Jews and their properties, without any interference.⁴²

Her descriptions correspond with those of other children and teenagers who experienced the ending of the state of war in November 1938. Through that, the national socialist organizations gained the upper hand, whereas prior to that they only existed illegally in the region. In spite of that, Fanny and Sarah Fleischmann were sent off to school the following morning. In cities, it was seen as most unusual to keep the children home.

The next morning Fanny and I went to school as usual. The teacher entered the class with the Nazi salute, 'Heil Hitler!' The class jumped to their feet with arms raised and returned the salute. 'Heil Hitler!' echoed through the school. The Jewish children trembled. Nothing further needed to be said nor was anything ever explained to us. We just knew that we no longer belonged there. On the way home, I was attacked by several classmates. I was beaten and spit on. They called me 'Dirty Jew', but I was not seriously hurt.⁴³

The Fleischmann daughters (as were other Jewish children from Memel) were sent to relatives in Riga. Shortly after that, the family emigrated to the United States. The family of Mika and Dora Rabinowitz as well as the family of Trudi Birger fled to Lithuania where shortly after that the events of the war and the persecution caught up with them. Their childhood was irretrievably over.

Conclusion

The experiences of childhood in the cities and in the countryside during the inter-war period were essentially different. By and large it can be argued that childhood in the city of Memel was lived out in a significantly more protected way than in the countryside, although it should be noted that in the villages various models of childhood were manifested concurrently alongside one another. For one thing, the number of children in the urban families was smaller. For another, the children

42 Goren, *A Time To Keep: Grammy Cherie's Story*, 20.

43 *Ibid.*

in the cities had as a rule fewer household chores to do. In addition to this, the children in the city attended school on average longer and without interruption. Over and above that, one can observe an 'at homeness'⁴⁴ of urban childhood, which also led to the children being kept at a distance from political events and discussions. They were to dedicate themselves primarily to attending school as well as playtime and sports. One can conclude from this that being in the city afforded a longer childhood. And finally one can conclude that because of the changing political circumstances, for most of the children of the region, their childhood ended abruptly: for the Jewish children 1938; for the Lithuanian children 1939 when the region was separated off and re-incorporated into Germany, and for the German children when in 1944 they had to climb aboard a steamer to flee the area.

44 Jürgen Zinnecker, 'Kindheit und Jugend als pädagogische Moratorien: Zur Zivilisationsgeschichte der jüngeren Generation im 20. Jahrhundert,' in *Bildungsprozesse und Erziehungsverhältnisse im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Dietrich Benner and Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik, Beiheft* 42, 36–68 (Weinheim: Beltz, 2000), 44.

