

## A European odyssey. Older than East and West

**T**HE EXHIBITION WINDS its way through the room at the top of the Haus der Brandenburgischen-Preußischen Geschichte. Through apparently simple means – photographs and texts mounted on wooden trestles – one follows the life of “Anna”. The course of her life runs from childhood in Königsberg, through Erzgebirge, Potsdam, Berlin, and eventually ends up in Sweden. “The ruptures of the centuries are written in the biographies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the jerking progression, enormous and violent changes of place, life-threatening border transgressions”, Karl Schlögel wrote in his book *In Räume lesen wir die Zeit*. “A European Odyssey” addresses the same observation. War and ideology form the foundation for a condensed history of the movement of the individual through space and time. The central narrative is subjective, but it is free of political and moral reflections. “This person becomes like a pair of glasses. You can follow her, and I can also see that the visitors do just that. They carefully read all the texts in this room. I do not think they would have done so if we had given out general information about the children of Königsberg, or the so-called *Kinderlandsverschickungslager*”. So says Hanna Sjöberg, the artist who, together with Dorothea Bjelfvenstam, created the exhibition. It is Bjelfvenstam’s life, her memories, texts and photographs, which form the basis of the story.

**ANNA WAS ONE** of the last Königsberg children and grew up in her grandfather’s house. He was a priest and active opponent of anti-Semitism. Her father, a less successful writer in the circles around Thomas Mann, died early on: opposed to the war, he was conscripted into the German Army. In the autumn of 1944 Königsberg was in flames. Anna, 11 years old, accompanied her mother to the train station. She remembers smoke, screams, and confused masses of people. At the last minute, the child got on a train to a *Kinderlandsverschickungslager*. Anna was saved from the bombs and lived in a National Socialist camp for girls in the city of Oelsnitz, in Erzgebirge.

A few blurry pictures of girls lined up for roll call accompany the texts in this part of the story. They are written by the adult person behind the pseudonym, but the events are viewed through the eyes of a child. Parts of the story cannot be translated from German. “Die eiserne Ration” for example. This was a package of raisins and candy sugar that all camp children wore in a leather pouch around their neck. A symbolic last meal for the day when the war would catch up with them – but also: one of childhood’s forbidden fruits, encountered in any idyllic memoir. The children pinched some of the sweets, of course. The language becomes recognizable. But at the same time, the story attaches to specific places and identities that no longer exist.

**ANNA BECAME A *Hitlermädchen*.** Evidently, she was just sent away during the height of the war to a scout camp with fixed routines, bold women leaders, and Nazi overtones. When the war ended she was reunited with her mother and they settled in Potsdam, which became part of the eastern zone controlled by the Soviets. On the way there the child asked, “Mother, is it really true that Hitler was a very bad man?” In the shifts of the war, ideologies literally switched places with each other. And in the child’s imagination Stalin replaced Hitler as the friendly uncle at the top. In Potsdam, Anna and her mother learned Russian, and sought a foothold in a society that had not yet come to be. Anna’s figure embodies the apparent paradox: she goes from *Hitlermädchen* to the Free German Youth FDJ. The moral aspect seems, somewhat surprisingly, unnecessary. This is perhaps because Anna’s fate, in contrast to the narrator’s private charisma, is so manifestly universal. The war of the twentieth century drove children to and fro across various borders, squeezed between the winners and losers, away from parents. Far from all of them were reunited.

In Potsdam, Anna fell in love with a student who wore a white carnation – instead of a red one – on his lapel on the first of May. He was soon persecuted as an opponent of the regime and had difficulty even getting his college certificate. It was not long before the Communist regime also saw Anna as a problem. Together, the young couple moved from



Mother had said that Anna should write a letter to Daddy today. “Dear Dad! How are you? Are you at war? Where is the war? Are there any children? Winter will soon be here and then Grandpa will go sledding with me. For Christmas, I would like to have skis...”



The young BDM leaders, Lieselotte and Eva were responsible for the political education. Such that the children being good and faithful *Jungmädel* would soon get the scarf and the knot. For the Führer, people and the fatherland!



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\* The evacuation to the countryside of all German youths from areas at risk of aerial attack.

Potsdam to Nikolassee, from east to west. Anna did not want to live where people could not even go to school in peace, even though the war was over. Eventually, she decided on her own to leave Germany entirely.

The final part of the exhibition begins with Anna's life as an immigrant worker in Stockholm in the fifties, and ends nearly fifty years later. Anna served as a housekeeper during the compulsory years of service before she got her permanent residence permit. She married a Swedish man, a filmmaker, and had children. She received an education, worked as a translator of fiction and a teacher for Swedish schoolchildren. For those who read the material carefully, there are glimpses of GDR's international activities and relations to Sweden. Anna was a dedicated history teacher, who took her Swedish students on a class trip to Potsdam which they very much appreciated. Later she accepted a position for continued training in East Germany, paid by the state. Was she instrumentalized? The question is left open. What is clear is how the individual's movements across borders were politicized, even towards the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This of course also occurs today, but the boundaries have shifted.

**ON THE FINAL PHOTOGRAPHS**, Anna returns to today's Kaliningrad for the first time since 1944, now in the role of a translator. She has come full circle – and the work with the exhibition begins. "It's been a remarkable adventure", said Dorothea Bjelfvenstam and laughs. "The first thing I said to Hanna [Sjöberg] was that I did not want to be exposed. I do not like exhibiting myself, not even in private, and therefore I felt uncomfortable at first. Now I feel a tremendous distance, to the exhibition and to the process behind it. It is not about me, but about someone I hardly know anymore. It is a relief, and it also has something to do with Potsdam."

We have gathered in the Haus der Brandenburgischen-Preußischen Geschichte, it's been a few days since the exhibition opened. "A European Odyssey" has been shown both in Kaliningrad and in Oelsnitz-Erzgebirge. After Potsdam, the project will make a final stop in Stockholm, at Tensta Konsthall. The exhibition itself follows the path of Anna's migration, and changes shape somewhat depending on both the geographical space being dealt with, and as the actual space of the exhibition.

Here in Potsdam, there is more

material from that period of Anna's life. In addition, the story has grown, "multiplied" as Dorothea Bjelfvenstam says. Together with Sjöberg, she has managed to track down other people who were in the same camp from 1944 to 1945. The interviews with them are now part of the exhibits. The tentative talks and attempts to remember how it really was are powerful digressions in Anna's story. "The time in the camp in Oelsnitz was like a hole in my life. It was a significant turning point, when Hanna and I went there and visited the city's archives. We assumed that we would see something about the camp, since it had been located there. But we found nothing. And then we found a list, and on the list was my name. Aha, I thought, I have existed here."

Before working on the exhibition, she had always replied that she came from Potsdam, especially when people in Stockholm asked her. "It was so insanely cumbersome to explain: Königsberg, it doesn't exist anymore, and a *Kinderlandsverschickungslager*, what on Earth is that . . . it was much easier to say: I come from Potsdam, Berlin." And Hanna Sjöberg notes: "She is not East or West, she is older than that. It makes all the difference."

**IN "A EUROPEAN ODYSSEY"**, Dorothea Bjelfvenstam is both the author and the subject. But Anna and Dorothea are not the same person. It has been very important, both for Bjelfvenstam, in her private life, and for the artist, Sjöberg, who compares her roll to that of the director. The story has, despite the subjective tone, been impersonalized. A rigorous screening process lies behind the selection of texts and images. The personal dramas have been omitted, and with them the conclusions and lessons that the individual experiences. It is precisely this scarcity that opens up the story, allowing visitors to step inside Anna. One could also say that it elevates her story to art. ✖

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Anna wanted not only to explain German grammar, but also to give some idea of Germany. Tangible history. "What exactly is a border?" asked the Swedish youths on a school trip. They stayed overnight in Potsdam; met students from the GDR in East Berlin; after that, in West Berlin. "It's just like home here", they said, and were confused.

Student life in the fifties, in West Berlin. He got 80 Marks per month remuneration. After deduction of the rent, there was 30 DM left, which could be converted to East money in a shop in East Berlin at a rate of 1:5 in order to be able to shop in East Berlin. Anna earned a little money as an office assistant. Her mother brought turnips and potatoes from Potsdam. Issue: 10 Pennies: a Milkana cheese triangle or a cigarette? Hunger gets on one's nerves.

Anna tried odd temp jobs. As a guide for farmers from northern Sweden who wanted to go to Mallorca, business men on the ferry from Trelleborg to Sassnitz and Berlin. Hated office work. Accommodation in exchange for cleaning.

