CHAPTER 9

Ethnicity, Identity and Imaginings of Home in the Memoirs of Lithuanian Child Deportees, 1941–53

*Tomas Balkelis*

In exile, my friends from the deportation train and I are sitting not on class benches—we are digging salt in Siberian Usol [location of major salt mines]. The salt melts in the water, but not in our memory. It will never melt in the memory. […] The memory is stronger than a stone. Our memory is made of diamonds.

*Memoirs of Antanina Garmutė*

The displacement of children is a theme rarely examined in scholarly works on Soviet deportations. This can be partly explained by the fact that children, other than the homeless and those considered inveterately delinquent, were seldom a discrete target group for the Soviet repressive apparatus. Most often they were deported just because they were members of the families of ‘enemies of the socialist state’ (see the chapter by Kaznelson and Baron in this volume). Yet one of key premises of this chapter is that Soviet deported children should be viewed not only as ‘secondary’ victims of a totalitarian regime, nor merely as another voiceless sub-group, but as active and articulate social agents in their own right. My principal aim in this chapter, that investigates the fate of Lithuanian children in Soviet deportations, is not to present a ‘children’s martyrology,’ but to try to understand the complex specificities of children’s perceptions, experiences and actions by paying attention to their own voices.

But why study the forcibly displaced children separately from the parents with whom they were dispatched into exile? Can we understand the

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1 Published in Aldona Žemaitytė (ed.), *Amžinojo įšalo žemėje* [In the Frozen Land] (Vilnius: Vyturys, 1989), pp. 73–74.

Soviet deportations in some different way by focusing on the experiences, actions and testimonies of children instead of those of adults? For one thing, the experiences of children in exile were often different from those of their parents. While adults were subject to brutal collective labour obligations, their children—while most were also required to undertake forced labour—were sometimes afforded access to schools where they were to receive basic education and to undergo re-socialization as future citizens. The Soviet regime’s treatment of deported children throws light on its perceptions of the collective ‘other’ and the capacities of individuals at different life-stages to undergo reform and rehabilitation. Stalinist attitudes and policies towards deported children also starkly highlight points of confrontation between the regime’s pro-family discourse and its practices of social intervention, as well as between its welfare and penal policies.

In reality, when adult exiles became debilitated by the deportation transports and harsh conditions of exile, their children were often obliged to provide and care for them. In such circumstances, as many sources demonstrate, the children assumed ‘grown-up’ roles in the family not as somehow premature adults but as children. Secondly, therefore, the study of displaced children focuses attention on these subjects’ specific responses to deportation and the disciplinary structures of life in exile. Wittingly or not, children often tested the limits of the Soviet system by innovating their own particular forms of identity and adopting behavioural strategies that circumvented, subverted and exposed its ideological fallacies and administrative contradictions. Children’s accounts of life in exile show complex processes of identity-building that needs to be studied along experiences of other marginal groups. To paraphrase Katherine Jolluck, who wrote about women in Soviet exile, the testimonies of children can be read as stories of how they strove to create their private and familiar world under conditions of displacement.3 Significantly, unlike their adult relatives, displaced children had little or no experience of normal sedentary life. Their experience is made unique by the fact that their notions of themselves, homeland and society were formed in exile. Examining how the Soviet repressive system treated child deportees, as well as investigating their responses, can be an informative means of shedding light generally on the political system and its social consequences.

In the interwar period, Lithuania as an independent state had developed a strong political and ethnic identity of its own. After the Soviet Union’s 1940 invasion and occupation of the Baltic states, Moscow expended much energy

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