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Dissertation: Baltic Germans in the Wartheland 1939-1945. Personal accounts and experience of conflict(s).

### Historical context

After the invasion of Western Poland in 1939 the geopolitical situation has changed for many German groups. During the period of Weimar Republic all German communities abroad were called commonly *Auslandsdeutsche* or *Auslandsdeutschtum*. After 1933 Adolf Hitler and his apparatus spread the term *Volksdeutscher* which grew into political grievances: German minorities as integral part of the nation should be united<sup>1</sup>. Considerable mass population transfer started and revealed the plans of National Socialists. Baltic Germans (Balts) as first displaced group and the 'descendants of Baltic barons' at the end of 1939 arrived to newly created *Reichsgau Wartheland* (occupied Western Poland) and were to be the pioneers who would encourage other German groups to resettle. In 1940 *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* announced a somewhat competition (attracting with financial rewards) to write their *Erlebnisberichte* (it was communicated through a newspaper *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* from 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1940 and entitled: *Umsiedler – Erlebnisberichte gesucht*<sup>2</sup>). Balts were asked to write their resettlement experience in order to inspire (or persuade) other German communities to move to newly occupied territories.

Baltic Germans were a group of special circumstances in 1939 that:

- Had specific national identity as Balts (*Deutschbalten* and *Baltendeutsche*) and preserved for its people the German culture (for instance by actively working clubs and associations).
- In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century lost its privileged position (with fatal financial consequences) of a dominant class in Estonia and Latvia, but according to other views Baltic Germans kept their strong position in urban – industrial sector (still managing their own guilds, churches and schools<sup>3</sup>).
- Experienced a tragic contact with Bolshevism.

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<sup>1</sup> Sobczak Janusz, *Hitlerowskie przesiedlenia ludności niemieckiej w dobie II wojny światowej*, Poznan 1966, 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 281.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 138.

- In 1939 was awakened to Nazi created Heimat desire.
- Believed there was no alternative to forced migration in the Fall of 1939.
- In Polish occupied territories experienced the contact with other German groups.

## Sources

The research is carried out and is going to be written based on personal accounts: *Erlebnisberichte* from 1939-1945, field reports written by women from *NS-Frauenschaft* and recollections from after-war period. In the present work I am going to analyze texts that were composed either by Baltic Germans or by others about Baltic Germans during and after the Second World War (two times perspective insight: National Socialist period and post-war Germany).

## The aim of the work

Personal accounts of the Second World War are diverse documents that can be considered at many levels. Autobiographies (or ego-documents, bio-documents), letters, diaries, photographs and other individual compositions from that period of time illustrate the impact the war had on people and their way of understanding the conflict. Those noncombat memories<sup>4</sup> reveal the paths traveled by many individuals, families, groups or nations and show how their situation (life) was unprecedented changed.

By accessing individual and collective meanings, values and social knowledge it is going to be presented how the historical changes were understood and worked out by single individuals<sup>5</sup>. The work would examine a relationship between the event and the individual (including the gender perspective) which would give the answer to what made the author of a personal document to produce a description in a certain way. This also gives an opportunity to consider the every-day life of German minority in *Wartheland*: contacts with other German and non-German groups, social activities, schooling, professions, family life. Moreover, among others, the field of emotions is taken into account: the ways in which Baltic German community shaped its emotions, how feelings were experienced, expressed and interpreted in general. It also considers how the narrative was constructed. The content

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<sup>4</sup> 'Noncombat memories' is a term that Olivier Wieviorka used to stress the difference between the recollections of the Great War and the Second World War: *Wieviorka Olivier, Divided Memory. French Recollections of World War II from the Liberation to the Present*, Stanford California 2012, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Winfried Schulze, *Ego-Dokumente: Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte? Vorüberlegungen für die Tagung 'EGO-DOKUMENTE'*, in: Winfried Schulze (ed.), *Ego-Dokumente. Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte*, Berlin 1996, 13.

analysis intends to establish what was valuable, harmful and ignored by Balts and how they understood bonds between people and the relationship to the Third Reich.

#### State of research

Present work is a 'place' where different histories meet. Stories of autobiography intermingle with stories of emotions in a context of political history of the Second World War. Historiography concerning Baltic Germans is rich and presents many aspects from the beginning of their settlement (the Middle Ages) to the *Umsiedlung* to the Western occupied territories in 1939 and usually ends with resettlement in the beginning of the war. The history of Germans in Baltic lands is well documented<sup>6</sup> and there is also research concerning autobiographies of German women in Baltic lands 1800-1939<sup>7</sup>. History of Baltic German minority during the war is generally described together with other resettled German groups (e.x. *Wolhyniendeutsche*, *Bessarabiendeutsche*) and normally presents the facts about the number of relocated people, places of their destiny and several selected topics (ex. National Socialism, Paul Schiemann's views, Bolshevism<sup>8</sup>). Additionally there is a study of women from the Third Reich working as volunteers in Wartheland<sup>9</sup>. Recollections or biographies occur mostly as single works of certain Baltic Germans as authors and were written after the war<sup>10</sup>. Moreover historiography focuses on the terms of 'Heimat' (with its concepts of Identity, Modernity, Nation), 'losing the Heimat' and 'expulsion'<sup>11</sup> (with significant example of *Sudetendeutsche* in 1945).

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<sup>6</sup> Here, for example:

- Topij Andrzej, *Mniejszość niemiecka na Łotwie i w Estonii 1918-1939/41*, Bydgoszcz 1998.

- Garleff Michael, *Die baltischen Länder: Estland, Lettland, Litauen vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, Regensburg 2001.

- Hiden John, Housden Martyn, *Neighbours or Enemies? Germans, the Baltic and Beyond*, Amsterdam 2008.

- Saagpakk Maris, *Deutschbaltische Autobiographien als Dokumente des Zeit- und Selbstempfindens: vom Ende des 19.Jh bis zur Umsiedlung 1939*, Tallin 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Here the exhausted work by Anja Wilhelmi: *Lebenswelten von Frauen der deutschen Oberschicht im Baltikum (1800-1939). Eine Untersuchung anhand von Autobiografien*, in: *Veröffentlichungen des Nordost-Instituts* (2008), 10.

<sup>8</sup> For example: Garleff Michael (ed.), *Deutschbalten, Weimarer Republik und Drittes Reich*, 2 Bände. Böhlau, Köln, 2001, 2008 or issues of *Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums, Lüneburg (1927- )*.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey Elizabeth, *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization*, New Haven 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless there is an article discussing several ideas of Baltic Germans' autobiographies about the resettlement of 1939: Saagpakk Maris, *Die Umsiedlung in deutschbaltischen Autobiographien*, URL: <http://www.zfo-online.de/index.php/zfo/article/view/2795>.

<sup>11</sup> Here for example

- Blicke Peter, *Heimat. A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*, New York 2002.
- Applegate Celia, *A Nation of Provincials: the German Idea of Heimat*, Berkeley 1990

The field of Oral History serves complex examples too (whether interviewing the opponents of the Nazi system or 'direct' or 'indirect' perpetrators) and helps to find out the motivations behind writing personal recollections. Gabriele Rosenthal analyses the reasons of 'why do people talk' and concludes that there is a need for such accounts (*Biographische Notwendigkeit für Kriegserzählungen*) which occurs when the witnesses believe that their stories have a meaning. Another reason would be the social function of their descriptions and that would serve many countries the opportunity to deal with the Nazi past (*Normalisierung der Nazi-Vergangenheit*)<sup>12</sup>. There is also a postulate to try the challenge of integrating the history of emotions into other 'sort of histories': social, political and intellectual<sup>13</sup>.

To understand 'how the autobiography works' there is a view that respecting special period of time (like National-Socialist) should serve social communication of concrete environment. At the same time the meaning of the Form (how the text is written), which should be adequate to the events that it describes (*Form des Lebenserzählung*), is stressed. It is followed by the questions of how to 'portray' life remembering the importance of writing and historically underlining breakthroughs and catastrophes (*Umbrüche und Katastrophen*)<sup>14</sup>.

#### Method of analysis and theory commitment

Methodology of the examination of personal documents from Stalinist era (as another dictatorship) helps in content analysis of Baltic Germans' compositions. Although Stalinism is another kind of dictatorship, it shows that the individuals were restricted to the same (or very similar) boundaries. Research about Nationalism similarly to that concerning Stalinist era revolves around revisionism and the relationship between the *Mitläufer* (or *Aufsteiger*) and the System that offered career and social status to its people for political loyalty<sup>15</sup>. Inseparably there is an issue of imagination (vision, idea) of self-awareness (*Vorstellungen vom Selbstverständnis*) under dictatorship and conviction (*Überzeugung*) of

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<sup>12</sup> Gabriele Rosenthal, Erzählbarkeit, biographische Notwendigkeit und soziale Funktion von Kriegserzählungen. Zur Frage: Was wir gerne und leicht erzählt, in: BIOS – Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History, Hartewig Karin (ed.), Sonderheft 1993, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenwein Barbara, Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions, in: Passion in Context. International Journal for the History and Theory of Emotions, URL: [www.passionincontext/index.php?id=557](http://www.passionincontext/index.php?id=557), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Depkat Volker, Autobiographie und die soziale Konstruktion, in: Werner et al (ed.), Geschichte und Gesellschaft 29 (2003), 3 443f. Here author presents views of two autobiographers: Brecht and Friedensberg

<sup>15</sup> Hellbeck Jochen (ed.), Tagebuch aus Moskau 1931-1939, Munich 1996, 17.

people placed in the System. Finally the matter of reliability of the sources appears: one has to be constantly aware of censorship, self-censorship, writing under the pressure or control, fear of consequences for having written the truth. These were always present in everyday life of National-Socialism. Moreover content analysis of personal accounts aims to trace some of the reasons (roots) of National Socialist attitude.

The motivation of the authors is also taken into account. Similarly to diaries German recollections bear witness in which author presents himself as 'ordinary person' undergoing extraordinary events, shows his suffering in a way that the reader is offered to have an insight and understanding of it<sup>16</sup>. Since in most cases one particular event (resettlement and moving to new *Heimat*) is portrayed (but by many authors) it is possible to identify patterns of behavior and to see what kind of meanings did authors ascribe to the event and how rational it was for them<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Alaszewski Andy, *Using Daries for Social Research*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 2006. 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 37.