[This chapter of my autobiography is part of an expanding series available in the ‘My Story’ category on Rebane’s Ruminations (www.georgerebane.com). Chronologically this chapter follows ‘Surviving Augsburg Once More – 1945’ which takes the Rebane family from war’s end into their first DP camp, and then to Geislingen. The remainder of these sketches that pre- and post-date the Geislingen years include - ‘Christmas in Stettin – 1944’, ‘The Last Train from Stettin’, ‘1945 – The year Easter was cancelled’, ‘The War Ends in Liederberg’, ‘Surviving Augsburg Once More – 1945’, ‘Sixty years ago today – 4 May 1949’, ‘Christmas in 1949’. Other pieces in ‘My Story’ are posts of reminiscences and travels, including my first return to Estonia since leaving in 1944 during the war.]

Background

When WW2 ended in 1945 there were already over two million displaced persons (DPS) crowding what became known as West Germany – the part that USSR’s Red Army conquered was to be known as East Germany for the duration of the Cold War. Many more millions of DPs would escape to West Germany from communist dominated eastern Europe before the Iron Curtain fell in 1948, and the Soviets sealed the border between the free west and the enslaved east.

The small Rebane family - my father (Vello), my mother (Ellen), and I (Jüri) – was a part of that two million throng of wartime DPs who had escaped the Soviet gulag or worse by the slimmest of margins, and we counted ourselves to be the lucky ones (so far) in the aftermath of the world’s largest war ever. With Germany torn asunder from the war and millions of refugees and released prisoners of war wandering around the country trying to find their next meal and get their bearings, the Allied military had an enormous job on their hands to get the conquered country organized and functioning again.

Led by the United States, the Allies had anticipated the post-war refugee problem but grossly underestimated its actual magnitude. The western allies were still naïve about how people would respond to the prospect of living their lives under communist rule. They had no idea that people would fill westbound roads and railroad cars to overflowing with everything they could carry just to get out of the grip of the Red Army. In countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Balkans the informed classes knew that the USSR would never relinquish territory that the Red Army had ‘liberated’. So they came in the tens of millions (over 11M ethnic Germans living for generations in eastern Europe were among those seeking to get to West Germany), and at rates that historians and demographers have identified as the greatest migration of people in human history. (Here is a BBC account of it.)

The organization that the Allies had already set up during the war to handle this situation was called UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) which organized into
specialized units in America, ready to deploy to Europe as soon as the bullets stopped flying. And deploy they did with great vigor and enthusiasm into the logistical and bureaucratic maelstrom that was even more confused by the confluence of three Allied armies (US, British, and French), all trying to sort things out politically with the Red Army, all the while getting confused directions from their political leaderships. Germany was one huge historical mess that has now been documented by historians in books like Ben Shephard’s *The Long Road Home – The Aftermath of the Second World War*.

UNRRA started setting up camps to collect, care for, and process the millions of destitute refugees. These were appropriately called DP camps, which blossomed in all sizes by the hundreds in German cities, towns, and villages, any place where a roof could be put over people’s heads. Among other duties, UNRRA’s Unit 190 was given the job of setting up Geislingen (an der Steige) in the foothills of the Alps as a camp for Estonian DPs. Of the 75,000 (out of about one million) Estonians who managed to escape the Soviets, about 31,000 wound up in West Germany. And out of these, about 5,000 would be interred in the Geislingen DP Camp. That’s where my family wound up just before Christmas of 1945 (see the prelude to Geislingen in *‘Surviving Augsburg Once More – 1945’*).

Geislingen is a picturesque town located in a little river valley off the beaten path – about ten miles north of the autobahn between Munich and Stuttgart. The town had come through the war pretty much intact. Its main claim to fame was the WMF factory that made stainless steel flatware known around the world, and that factory had, of course, been converted to war production in the late 1930s. The town was also a kind of retreat and preferred place of residence for German officer families and privileged Nazi sympathizers. Hitler had subsidized some very nice
neighborhoods for such a loyal middle class, and built numerous single and multiplex residences on the hillsides overlooking the town (pictured below, looking north toward Rappenäcker).

UNRRA appropriated many of these buildings and had General Patton move the Germans out. They got 24 hours notice to get their personal effects out of their houses, but they had to leave all furniture, rugs, window coverings, and kitchen utensils for the incoming DPs. Given the way our room looked when we arrived on that snowy December night, the last part of the order was not fully complied with by the Germans, or the first Estonians in the camp did some room-to-room furniture moving from the yet unassigned rooms. The Rebanes were among that last tranche of DPs arriving in Geislingen.

UNRRA’s rule was that each family would live in one room that would serve as its living, dining, and sleeping quarters. The bathroom and kitchen were to be used communally. The room size was allocated to approximate 40 square feet of space for each family member. The three of us would then expect to get about 120 square feet. Our assigned room turned out to be about 10 by 13 feet (about 3 by 4 meters). That 130 square feet on the second floor of 173 Weingarten Strasse in the Rappenäcker quarter of Geislingen was to be our home for the next three and a half years. (see floor plan nearby)

Our building was a generous three story duplex built for two prosperous German families. In camp configuration the building wound up housing 14 Estonian families, 7 on each side that shared a kitchen and second floor bathroom. By
the beginning of 1946 the camp was at capacity, and things were starting to get organized. I should mention here that, given their history, Estonians are a people almost desperately steeped in their culture which prizes their language (literature), music, technology (education), and organization above other pursuits. So, much to the surprise of UNRRA officials, things got organized very quickly in the new year. Geislingen was to become the poster child of well-run DP camps, UNRRA pretty much gave us the freedom to run our own affairs.

UNRRA was not so fortunate with the other ethnicities that were being settled into their new quarters. In the chaos of 1946, culture was the trump card that determined the quality of life DPs of various nationalities were to enjoy in the coming years. This is not the place to detail the travails of other DP camps, but Ben Shephard does that well and extensively in his book. It turns out that the Balts (Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians) along with the educated Jewish classes fared the best during their internments. Lieutenant General Sir Fredrick Morgan, head of UNRRA’s displaced persons operations, had to sort out the whole mess. He kept a diary from which Shephard reports the following –

*When it came to the different DP groups, Morgan’s sympathies were clear. Like most British soldiers and relief workers in Germany, he felt a strong - almost racial – affinity with the “Balts”, the Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians. Of course, he knew whose side they had been on in the war, but he couldn’t go to a Baltic DP camp or eat one of those “exquisite” Estonian meals without feeling an instinctive sympathy for them. They were educated, well-dressed people, often middle class, many speaking perfect English, with their families intact. The men were handsome, their womenfolk blond and beautiful; their camps were clean, well-organized places run by the inmates’ elected representatives, with every available inch of space put to good use growing flowers and vegetables; their children were properly taught; the women produced beautiful textiles; and, to cap it all, their choirs sang brilliantly. The Balts, Morgan wrote, were “simply charming people”.*

**Life in the Camp – my memories**

And true to form, our camp quickly sprouted a newspaper, camp administrative office, and a post-office to send mail between the three DP camp neighborhoods in Geislingen. Soon we had a clinic, choirs (more than one of course), the obligatory Evangelical Lutheran church, theater, and a school system (K-12) for the 1,000 of us of school age (we were the *mudilased*, which translates approximately into munchkins). The camp was blessed in the number of people who arrived there as professionals, teachers, artists, technicians (my father was an electrician), etc. And among the first things we did was to set up co-ops to transfer knowledge, and start making things that could be sold. Whatever anyone wanted to learn, there was someone there who could serve as a mentor or instructor – everyone was a teacher, a student, or both.

My father taught electricity, electrical contracting, and theater lighting (he had also been the lighting engineer in the big Estonian national theater in Tallinn). Dad had always wanted to learn art handicrafts, and became an accomplished painter, tooled leather worker, silversmith, and intarsia (inlaid wood) artisan during his Geislingen years. He worked in an art co-op that made fancy things to exhibit at the US Army bases for GIs to buy and send home to their wives,
mothers, and girlfriends. This was the only source of hard cash for DPs who were not permitted to work in the recovering German economy.

My mother had a good singing voice, immediately joined a choir or two, and wanted to train her voice for opera (she was a mezzo soprano). And that she did from a voice teacher and concert pianist who was a Russian refugee posing as a Polish DP in an Estonian camp (but that’s another story). So throughout the tight quarters of the camp one could always hear someone practicing the piano, violin, or other instrument. Or, as in the case of my mom, practicing operatic scales and trills which drove some neighbors up the wall. (Her singing was memorialized by a family friend in the recently published When the Noise Had Ended – Geislingen’s DP Children Remember (2009), an account of the Geislingen years assembled by several DP families of that era. This book gives a detailed and expanded account of the Estonian experience during the war, in the DP camps, and immigration to new lands. I regret not having had the opportunity to contribute to the volume.) Geislingen became abuzz with thousands of formerly productive people now with time on their hands, time that everyone decided was not to be wasted. And time to also pick up new skills for an uncertain future which awaited all of us.

But educating their young was Job One in the camp, and I found myself attending kindergarten in the building next door where one of the rooms had been converted to a classroom. I remember we all sat in some kind of chairs around a big central table that had been cobbled together from scrounged lumber and covered with canvas. There we started learning the alphabet and to write with a pen (dipped into an inkwell). Actually, we were learning to read and write at the same time. Estonian kids have an advantage here because the language is phonetic, written with an alphabet of 24 letters, each of which says its own name when spoken. Once you learn your alphabet, you are instantly a beginning reader. How? By looking at a word and blending the sounds of its letters in sequence – the word then speaks itself recognizably, and the next time you just say it normally. Easy money.
(The above photo is a class picture of my second grade in 1948. I photographed it out of an old picture album my mom had assembled and annotated after we came to America. I’m the tall one in the back row staring at something more interesting. More of these pictures populate the When the Noise … volume.)

Kindergarten was taught in such small rooms distributed throughout the residential buildings of the camp. But the grades 1-12 were taught in a proper school building located in downtown Geislingen. The one we went to was a classic and very formidable three story stone building from the late 1800s that had also been appropriated by UNRRA. It had huge dark hallways with high ceilings and stone tiled floors. When we kids walked in, everyone became hushed and serious. The reverberant acoustics were such that if you dropped a pencil the echo didn’t die down for a couple of seconds or so. Normal walking was a very noisy process because most of the boys’ shoes had metal heel tabs nailed to them to make the shoes last longer, so we kind of tip-toed into class.

There were no discipline problems in school, that was unthinkable. Not only could the teacher rap your knuckles and embarrass you to pieces, but what if she sent you home with a note. My father was the incarnation of Odin, and I was religious enough not to mess with Odin. Also, there were no nonsensical subjects taught in that school. It was strictly reading, writing, and arithmetic with some practical skills thrown in like darning socks. I remember having to bring a couple of holey socks with needle, yarn, thimble, and a darning mushroom to school for several sessions on how to make your socks last longer.

We all carried our school materials in a backpack that was typical for European grade school students. In it were our Estonian books (already written, published, and printed, on essentially newsprint, right there in Geislingen), our slates, pen/pencil boxes, and a small bound notebook for writing important stuff in. Yes, I said slates. Every one of us had a slate in a wooden frame that was about as big as a letter sized sheet of paper. That meant that we also had our slate stylus and a rag to wipe the slate clean. We practiced our writing and did our arithmetic on slates just like kids had done for a couple of hundred years or so. The bad part about slates was that they always failed the drop test, and that got you in trouble with your teacher, then your parents.

Going to school was a lot of fun for the simple reason that we had to walk. From Rappenäcker to downtown was about a mile or so on city streets (see photo below, we lived at the yellow pin). We always walked with friends and did things that boys under ten tend to do when not closely supervised. In the winter, the whole way there and back may have been a moving snowball fight. But we had to be careful and show some decorum according to our parents. First, you did not want to slip and fall on your back. The school backpack cushioned your fall, but you never knew the fate of the goddammed slate in your pack. I remember more than once one of us falling and unpacking a cracked slate when we got to school. I was lucky enough not to break my slate when I went down, but it already had a cracked corner (I had a previously owned model) that I was planning to use as an excuse for further damage should the occasion require.

Second, our route to school was through the bigger German section of town. I remember my mom telling me not to act like a hooligan so that the Germans would think bad thoughts about the Estonians. (The Germans were already more than irked at having their houses confiscated...
and their town made into a prominent camp for foreign refugees. They probably felt that they were getting most of their come uppin’s after the war ended.)

As six and seven year olds we already went everywhere on our own, the long walk to school through the city was just one aspect of the trust our parents had in us and the freedoms that such trust engendered. (The above photo shows most of Geislingen. We lived at the yellow pin. City center was to the east and south of the big gray WMF factory.) That kind of trust was another characteristic shared by most cultures in those days, kids were all over the place unsupervised and on their own recognizance. And those years, starting when you were about five, became extremely formative as the world opened up for you. We coagulated easily into age groups that more or less stuck together. There were natural divisions at about age nine or ten, and again at around fourteen.

My mom and dad led very busy lives that did not involve me. Dad was always up early and had gone to work at the theater or the artists’ co-op by the time mom and I had breakfast in our room. We were able to do light cooking on an electric hotplate that rested on the ‘radiator shelf’, essentially a board that dad had rigged up on the room’s radiator that also served as a cooking space.

During the school months mom would see that I was properly dressed before I strapped on my backpack and disappeared out the door to meet my buddies on the street for the walk to school. Our clothes were, shall I say, varied and various. Everything was in short supply and mostly not available. Through UNRRA we got some second hand US Army clothes and blankets. My mother had become an expert seamstress during the war in Stettin under the tutelage of Tante Alvi (my great aunt). She could make any article of clothing out of literally any piece of cloth.
that she could get her hands on. Khaki shirts were modified into civilian models, trousers shortened or lengthened or made into skirts, blankets became overcoats, …, you get the idea.

With that skill and a manual sewing machine that dad was able to get somewhere and repair, my mom was always busy sewing something for us or for some other friend or family which brought in a little money or a bartered item. Surrounded by hordes of kids all growing like weeds, that was a fortunate little enterprise for the Rebanes.

Dad and a group of other men worked at the co-op making items (photo nearby) that could be sold to American GIs at Army bases that now dotted all of Germany. The new German deutschmark was considered funny money whose value was never known for certain. The only reliable hard currency was the American dollar, and its source was the American military. So with UNRRA’s permission, the co-op was able to set up art and handicraft exhibits at Army bases, do business with the GIs, and come home with hard cash money. This also called for dad being on the road a lot when they had built up enough new inventory to sell.

(I should here point out that due to the inevitable bureaucratic and political mess that UNRRA ultimately became, it was easier to start a new organization to take over the running of the DP camps and other refugee affairs in Europe than to fix UNRRA. This became the International Refugee Organization, and known simply as IRO, ‘ee-roh’. By 1947 it was in full operation and remained active until 1952.)

The bottom line from all those busy parents working, fulfilling themselves, and making do in institutionalized poverty was that we kids were let loose on the streets and the surrounding forest covered mountain sides (see Rappenäcker photo above that defined the main part of my play ar-
ea. Yellow pin marks our apartment house on Weingarten Strasse. The neighborhood above the railroad tracks was built during the last 40 years.). And did we ever take advantage of that freedom. During the summer months we bolted out of our families’ one room ‘apartments’ in the morning, and were not back home until the sun was low in the sky. The area over which we ranged was vast and we organized our own adventures that included everything from building forts on the mountain sides, to going on long ‘expeditions’ or ‘patrols’, to development projects that required some dodgy procurement practices best not visible to adults (war was always a vivid memory for us because we all had witnessed it up close and personal).

One big project was the building of our ‘atom bomb’ which took several days. The whole thing was contained in two huge flower pots strapped together with rope and electrical tape (from my dad’s toolbox). Inside were smaller pots and rocks and wires, and it was all packed solidly with clay and mud which made it so heavy that it took at least two of us to move the 3’x1.5’ ‘cylinder’. You see, we had to move it during its development phase in order to keep the project from being discovered by an adult who would instantly re-liberate the flower pots and put them back into their intended service. And, of course, in the end we had to move it to the test area after it was completed. Everybody knew that you didn’t just build an atom bomb and let it sit there, you had to test it like we saw in the newsreels that were periodically shown in our theater – the blast at White Sands NM made a big impression on seven-year-old boys.

I don’t remember how we came to select probably the worst location for our White Sands Proving Grounds. But on a nice sunny summer morning, after the adults had settled into their daily routines, we met in our development lab, expertly disguised as a garden shed behind one of the apartment houses, and three of the bigger of us hauled out the bomb. In fits and starts we got it up on the deck that also served as the roof to the neighboring house’s attached garage. We then managed to hoist the entire thing onto the deck railing for the countdown. From launch the bomb’s intended trajectory was for it to fall about 15 feet down, and impact in front of the garage door on the fancy flagstone driveway (the house must have belonged to some high Nazi muckety-muck), which also served as the pathway to the building’s main entrance behind which lived ten families.

Upon reflection, the test went well and according to plan, a plan which we quickly discovered was a bit abbreviated and not all that well thought through. On ‘zero count’ the bomb tumbled off the railing into space, and slowly turned before hitting the flagstones with a tremendous crash that was unexpectedly loud. But to the faces peering over the railing, it was the ‘explosion’ that was a thing of beauty and a wonder to behold. The pot shards and rocks and wet mud and wires pretty well covered a ten foot circle around ground zero with some lighter pieces flying considerably farther. All of us were grinning from ear to ear as we contemplated the results of an obviously successful accomplishment.

The celebration quickly ended when we saw an adult coming up from the street and again looked down at the mess we had created on the driveway. It occurred to all of us that our plan did not cover the post-explosion phase that was now upon us. So we did the logical thing that all boys in that situation would do - we ran like hell and hid in various places for the rest of the day, finally winding up together in our development lab where we were discovered and brought to account after our individual parents were duly notified. So ended my first engineering project.
More dangerous, perhaps sinister, adventures involved discoveries of war remains on the forested hills surrounding Geislingen. I will briefly mention one such incident where we came upon two German Panzers that had been abandoned in a hurry. All the hatches were still in the open position. Two of us immediately clambered up to the turret hatch, and I was the first one to leap into the turret followed quickly by my friend. I had seen a partly visible machine pistol lying on the floor underneath some metal flange. I grabbed it instantly and before I could even start inspecting it, my friend grabbed the barrel of the weapon and we started wrestling for its possession. That was super stupid since neither of us knew how to operate the pistol nor discover its status. The upshot of our little scuffle was that we field stripped the pistol into its two major components, the upper consisting of barrel and bolt, and the lower consisting of the grip, trigger, magazine housing, and hammer action. I had an iron grip on the lower. (The best I can remember it was a Mauser 712 Automatic Machine Pistol from the pictures I have seen since.)

With the gun in pieces we realized that we were probably in a place that we shouldn’t be. I don’t recall seeing whether there were still any tank shells in the turret’s ammunition magazines, but we quickly clambered out of the tank and hiked back home brandishing our very exciting booty. When we got back to town, both of us kept our parts of the gun in secret. I don’t recall that either of us told our parents about finding the weapon after we dutifully reported the discovery of the tanks.

Perhaps the most risky game that we all loved to play was simply called ‘Wheel’ (‘rattas’ in Estonian). It was played in the street with two goal lines that were approximately two hundred feet apart. The players divided into two equal sized teams – also involved was the embarrassing and stressful ritual of team captains choosing their teams from the available players – each player bringing with him the heaviest and longest wooden or metal pole he could handle. The play required the forceful throw of a wheel approximately 12 to 18 inches in diameter in the direction of the opposite team’s goal line. The defending team lined up between the thrower and their goal with their poles held in ready position perpendicular to the direction of the wheel’s travel. The best wheel was an old rusty steel wheelbarrow wheel.

The game started at ‘mid field’ with the best thrower (and usually the biggest kid on the side) doing the honors. The throw could be in any manner and direction that resulted in the wheel finally rolling normally toward the goal line. A bouncing throw directly at their strongest defender was usually the best, although sometimes the wheel was aimed at a spot manned by someone known to be of timid heart and/or low skill level. Needless to say, it was a deadly sport played with the pole as your only protective equipment. If the wheel would hit you in the head, you could easily have been dead meat.

Progress in the game was measured by the spot where the wheel was stopped or rolled out of bounds to one side or the other. The return throw would have to be launched from behind the spot where the wheel was stopped. In that way the game went back and forth on the street pretty much like our football’s line of scrimmage moving back and forth on the gridiron. Ultimately one side got close enough to the other’s goal line to bounce the wheel over it for a score. (You could not bounce the wheel higher than a defender’s head.)
With that in mind picture a group of seven to ten-year-olds lined up facing each other fiercely, shouting epithets, and brandishing their long cudgels, you can imagine how this blood sport was carried out. The strongest defenders always placed themselves in the front ranks with the weakest in the rear. The matter of one’s manhood was determined at every throw by how close the leading defenders lined up against the thrower. If it was too close, the thrower might just end your young life by bouncing the heavy steel wheel directly at you (it had to hit the ground before coming to the first defender). And if the leading rank lined up too far back, then they were taunted as being chicken by the offense, and would necessarily give up too much distance before stopping the wheel. It was not a game during which anyone became bored or inattentive – your life and limb depended on your attention, reflexes, and skill with your pole.

In the three plus years that I played the game, the worst injuries anyone suffered were bruises and cuts on their arms and legs. But we were in the minor league. The 11 to 14-year-olds suffered more serious cuts and lacerations. And the above 15-year-olds did not play Wheel very often because, with their strength and skill levels, the game became a contest of sequential mayhem more suited for the Roman Coliseum. Besides, the older kids had soccer and volleyball leagues. It was left to us fledglings to get out there in the dusk, and risk life and limb on a dusty street while staring into a setting sun out of which might come a steel wheel headed for your noggin. I wouldn’t have changed the adrenalin rush and exhilaration of that game for the world. Today all the players would definitely end up in juvenile hall after the first throw.

In the DP camp kids my age were always outside. It didn’t matter whether it was winter or summer, outside was where everything was happening for most of us. Everyone lived in tight quarters and in poor conditions – we didn’t even have a radio - being inside was the venue of last resort. There was literally very little to do. Inviting friends into your family’s single room was frowned on by parents, there was already little enough privacy without having other people’s children jostle for play space, and contribute to the noise in your shoe box.

My memories of being inside are limited to sleeping, the dinner meal, and doing homework. Outside of my grade school reader there wasn’t anything of interest to read, and reading for boys at that age wasn’t exactly high on the list of things to do. Mom did allow me to bring a friend in if we wanted to play chess, one of two board games (the other was the European version of Chinese checkers or ‘Trilma’) that I ever saw played. Regular checkers were considered too simple for ‘big kids’ over six to play, so we all learned to play chess as a rainy day activity. Besides, it was a popular game we saw grown-up men play. Dad gave me my first chess set when I turned six.

Since we were outside all over the neighborhood, when the sun started setting and moms were putting suppers on tables it was time to get the kids off the streets for the night. None of us had watches and our part of town did not have a public clock on the side of a building, so moms resorted to the hoary and ancient method of bellowing their kids’ names out of a convenient window when it was time to gather the flock. At about the same time in the evening we began to hear everyone’s name being called from all directions. Then games were ended and we all started heading home for family time. When these calls began filling the air, I was always one of the first to hotfoot it home. I definitely did not want my mother to call me while I was still with my friends.
If I didn’t get moving quickly enough when the calls started, soon a lyrical “Jüüüüüriiiiiiiii!!!” would ring out in a powerful soprano voice that sounded like the battle call of a Valkyrie from one of Wagner’s Ring operas. That distinctive call was known by everyone in Rappenäcker, or even everyone on the north side of Geislingen for all I knew. My smart aleck pals would then immediately start echoing loud imitations of mom in the high falsettos that only boys whose voices had yet to change could deliver. By that time I was running home while screaming “Coming!” so as to shut her up. I think mom enjoyed showing off her voice from our second story window that commanded Weingarten Strasse below, and no matter my response, she’d always let the neighborhood have one or two more of those Wagnerians for good measure.

Reflections

Yes, we kids covered a lot of ground in the environs of Geislingen. But we were also being exposed to a lot of culture – both Estonian and western. My father was quickly drafted into the performing artists circle, people who wanted to use the city’s theater venue, ‘given’ to the DPs by the US Army, as a vibrant performing arts center that would put our Estonian community on the map. As a professional electrician, contractor, and theater lighting engineer in Estonia, these credentials made him the perfect candidate to offer his services to the DP community. Soon after that involvement people saw his newly discovered talent as a painter, and he was talked into also being in charge of designing and building all the stage sets for the many theater productions to come.

Mom’s voice and sewing skills put her into the theater chorus and costume seamstress business. Soon, mom and dad were hobnobbing with some of Estonia’s more noted thespians and instrumentalists who wound up in Geislingen. There were lots of social engagements that now also involved both my parents. The fallout for me was that I was able to attend gratis every concert and every theater performance. In the three plus years I saw some impressive productions of musicals such as ‘Maritza’, ‘Victoria and Her Hussar’, and Shaw’s ‘Pygmalion’ along with many other live theater and concert performances. This was heady stuff for a kid under ten, and it made a serious dent in the kinds of music I have preferred during my adult years. The other benefit from my parents artsy-fartsy involvements was that I had more free time without adult supervision, either in our room or out with my pals.

Black markets and exotic foods …

Since everyone in the camp was dirt poor and the German economy was kaput, things financial and monetary were important to us even though we were formally wards of the United Nations. To enrich our diets and lives beyond the rations of black bread and canned beans, the generous Americans contributed their hard earned dollars to send CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe) packages to the millions of DPs in Europe. In 1946 these began arriving in Germany (where the program lasted until 1962) and were supposed to be distributed to both designated recipients and DPs in general.
What few people know is that those charitable efforts were corrupted somewhere along the line. The DPs in Geislingen (and presumably elsewhere in Europe) were able to get CARE packages primarily by buying them on the black market. And they were not cheap since they contained food items – mainly coffee, sugar, meats, and fats - that were scarce or simply not available in German stores, except those stores that also bought CARE packages with which they stocked their shelves.

I remember my father and one of his friends went in together to buy a CARE package which they split between our two families. I don’t recall the entire inventory of our share except that it included a six-pack of Coca-Cola and a can of spam. To this day I have no idea how the coke in glass bottles was part of the deal. But I do know that the beverage was consumed with great ceremony over a period of months. A guest or two were usually present when the next bottle was opened, its contents meticulously doled out, and drunk with some kind of schnapps or vodka. The little sips I got (it was not to be wasted on children) tasted like an elixir of the gods.

Similarly, when mom cut our can of spam into cubes and then fried them with potatoes and an onion, that dinner was heaven on earth. It screamed America at us, this was the kind of food we could have every day if we ever got to America. (I still enjoy spam to this day.) And then I was introduced to another delicacy from America.

By the age of eight I was already an accomplished baby sitter. My main customer was little Evi, one of the first Estonian babies born in Geislingen. Her mother had taught me how to feed, dress, and change Evi. Evi’s family lived right below us on the first floor (where they were treated to my mother’s endless voice exercises), and I was a very convenient baby sitter when both Evi’s parents needed to be out. One day as I arrived for a short babysitting stint, Evi’s mother and another lady were in the room enjoying some pretty gruesome looking stuff. I mean they were actually putting it in their mouths. I grimaced and asked them what they were eating.

They showed me a little jar that was full of the substance, and told me that it was a special delicacy from America that came in a CARE package. They said it was exactly what it looked like, processed baby poop. Then with twinkles in their eyes, both ladies explained that babies’ digestive systems were so clean and pure that all that was needed was to add a little sugar, and the result was this very tasty gunk that they then put in a jar. They offered me a spoonful but I wasn’t going to have any of it. After a while, I took the spoon and, with squinched up nose, smelled it. By this time the ladies were both starting to giggle as they kept eating the stuff with great relish.

I have no idea what made me finally do it, but I put a little bit of it in my mouth that was prepared for the taste of baby poop, the same stuff I had emptied out of Evi’s cloth diapers many a
time. And by first gush the slimy goop tasted exactly like I imagined baby poop would taste. Now the ladies couldn’t contain themselves as they looked at my face. Then my taste buds got reoriented, and the gunk started tasting real good. I finally demanded they tell me what I was eating. And that was my introduction to peanut butter.

CARE packages weren’t the only items that came to us through irregular channels. With the German economy in shambles, the provisional German government along with the UN tried to get commerce going with newly printed Deutschmarks that were backed by NOTHING, not even a reliable economy. To get people to use that fiat money, the government did what governments always try to do in that situation – they established price controls. The government set the prices people would pay for almost everything you could buy. But that always results in either shortage of goods, because the imposed prices don’t let the merchants cover all costs, or the start of a black market, or both.

As a result, during the Geislingen years both Germans and Estonians operated a lively black market for which the punishment was severe if you were caught. You had to know who was selling what from some hidden basement, attic, or apartment, or even from the back of a ‘normal store’. The Rebane family bought things regularly from the black market (I think that’s where dad got my great sled and steam engine) to supplement our bland, uninteresting, and sometimes meager camp food supply. To get us more variety and protein, my dad knew of a man on the next street in Rappenäcker who sold black market herrings out of a brine filled barrel hidden in the basement of their apartment house.

When it was time for herring, mom would give me some money, some sheets of old newspaper, and tell me to go to the black market man. I would walk down the street carrying the old newspapers that told every adult who saw me what my errand was all about. I’d knock on the man’s door, he’d open it, and acknowledge me with a grunt when he saw the newspaper. Then he’d lead me down a couple of flights of stairs to the dark and dirty basement where the coal and furnace were.

There in the corner was the infamous big barrel that told everyone within noseshot its identity. The barrel reached almost to my chest and had a big wooden lid on it. I would then cradle the newspaper in my hands and hold it out. He took off the lid as I peered into what to me was a horrible sight, whole dead herrings covered with big salt grains packed in a slimy mixture of salt water. ‘How many?’ and I’d say ‘Three’, and he’d reach in there with his hand, select three fish, and lay them on the newspaper. He put the lid back on the barrel, and I used that as the table on which to wrap the paper around the herrings. I gave him the money and he led me back upstairs where I left by the front door to the building clutching my smelly fish.

When I got home and gave the fish to mom, I immediately went into our communal bathroom to wash my hands, but I couldn’t wash off the smell which seemed to stick to me somewhere. Soon dad came home and mom put supper on the table. Three plates and a dish of something in the middle, some slices of black bread, margarine, and our protein.

Dad would go over to our radiator food shelf where the herring waited, unwrap the newspaper and bring our main course to the table. Each of us got an intact whole herring laid on our plate.
I recall the first time that it happened I just stared at the damn thing, and the herring just stared back at me, just like it had in the barrel.

While I was having the staring contest, my parents each grabbed their knife and fork, and with deft movements that would make a surgeon proud, had their herrings decapitated and gutted in a flash. The inedible parts were just pushed to one side of the plate – a severed fish head, and a pile of intestines and organs. Meanwhile, as I was still staring at my share of the evening’s booty, mom and dad dug into their meal, neatly peeling the salted raw fillets off the ribs with just a few bones still sticking to the meat. And I just kept staring.

Finally, dad asked, ‘What’s the matter, you not hungry?’ and showed me how and where to insert the knife to slit the herring’s belly and which way to pull all the guts out. That first time, I must have been all of six, I was ready to switch from staring to tossing my cookies. Instead, I told dad that I wasn’t all that hungry. He didn’t have a problem with that, and quickly took my gutted and headless herring, gave a filet to mom, and finished the rest. From then on I must have eaten more black bread on those nights.

The herring ceremony went on for over three years. One time I finally did decide to take a taste after having learned how to prepare my seafood before giving it to my parents. The awful taste of that salted raw herring convinced me that I didn’t ever want to eat anything that came out of the water – it was simply too gross, starvation was preferable. (Here I have to admit that my distaste for seafood had already got a good start at the age of four in Stettin when mom came home with a bucket of live writhing river eels that she then killed and cooked for supper. After looking into that bucket of slithering black snakes, I didn’t eat any of those things either."

And that’s how my love affair with seafood got off on the wrong foot until we came to America, and I was introduced to my first can of Star-Kist tuna, wow!

…and wounds needed mending

In these remembrances I have to bring up the psychological side of camp life, especially the mutual support that was freely available and given to those who bore the more intense internal scars. Almost no one today in the west remembers what real war is like. Today GIs come back from mid-eastern battlefields often suffering from such maladies as post-traumatic stress disorder. It is hard to compare their experiences with those suffered by civilians who were engaged for five years plus in episodes of flee, hide, scavenge, bluff, barricade, bomb shelters, and naked death right next to you. All of us had gone through these experiences, and today we would be prime candidates for maladies like PTSD.

People arrived in Geislingen, a foreign city in a foreign land, suffering from various levels of post-war shock that very often included the tragic loss of family members. In those days there were no teams of counselors who would descend into a DP camp, or anywhere for that matter, to help put lives back together. There was only the compelling resurgence of life and lives restarted, a resurgence that enveloped everyone. And those who needed extra attention were able to get it immediately from a neighbor or a newly found friend, a caregiver who knew firsthand what the care-receiver had gone through. Without any formal training, we counseled each other by word
and deed. The main message was that we were still alive and now it was time to start living again.

In my experience as a kid there was only one gentleman who really ‘went around the bend’ and wound up needing extended professional help. I never knew his exact story, but along with a considerable crowd, I witnessed his hoarse monologue from the roof of a car he had climbed on before he was coaxed down by his family. For the rest of us, adults and kids, we just sucked it up and went on. Years later in America I was made aware of several friends of our family whose post-trauma scars surfaced. One of those was my first girl playmate who had lost her father in the war. She wound up taking her own life as a teenager in Minnesota.

When such camp activities were considered in a larger context, it was remarkable how everyone was caught up in expanding their horizons. It seemed that everyone had hidden talents and readily improvable skills which had lain dormant during the workaday pre-war years, and in the battles to survive during the war years. The Geislingen DP camp became a complete community and a most interesting social experiment that deserves more study. It illustrated what 5,000 people could and would do when they didn’t have to pay for the basics of food and shelter. As a community we handled everything from garbage pick-up to putting on gala theatrical events. Geislingen became a showcase for UNRRA and IRO officials who were always coming by with VIPs to discover how we put in place and operated what today would be called ‘best practices’ in running a refugee camp.

According to historian Shephard, the overwhelming fraction of DP camps were the antithesis of Geislingen in which millions of refugees festered in conditions of desperation, lassitude, and even murderous criminal activities. These DPs arrived in the west, presented themselves to the authorities, and demanded to be taken care of without so much as lifting a finger to even clean their own living spaces. In Geislingen we were dimly aware of such problems since we dealt mainly with other Estonians in smaller (also well run) camps, and the American and British administrators of IRO. To be fair, I have to remind you again that the few camps dominated by upper class, educated Jews were run equal to Geislingen in every aspect.

Looking back on what were some of the common elements of well-run camps that provided for their inmates, all roads led back to their ethnic cultures. There was a strong correlation of success with cultures that promoted enterprise, individual responsibility, and capitalism. The worst camps were inhabited by DPs from lands with little personal freedoms and authoritarian command economies. These people literally did not know what to do when given their head by the IRO in the management of their camps. The rest of us seemed to know exactly how to organize and balance collective efforts with individual freedoms and enterprise.

(I have to add here that it was not only western culture, but any beneficial, nurturing, and productive culture that would yield the best possible quality of life in constrained or difficult environments. A perfect example of this is the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in camps such as at Manzanar in California’s high desert. The Japanese-Americans replicated the community formation process and operations exactly as had the Estonians in Geislingen. These American citizens were able to accomplish this in a harsher environment while suffering the ignominy their own country had brought down on them.)
Over the intervening years as we raised our own family, I thought a lot about my time in Geislingen. The main takeaway of how we all grew up in those years centers around the feelings of independence, self-reliance, parental trust, and the freedom we had. The world as far as the eye could see was ours to explore and conquer. Our parents, being consummate Europeans, instructed, chided, and admonished us to no end while we were in their presence, but once out the door … . When we were on our own, parents never came to solve our problems. Among ourselves we handled our own differences, and were fully responsible to our peers for the solutions we put in place. Lots of learning was going on in that process.

Yet none of us did anything that approached being wantonly reckless (testing atom bombs notwithstanding), vandalizing property, or generally going against the rules of polite society that our parents pounded into our heads. We had few toys, so we were constantly improvising and pretending and doing projects with whatever was available. And we had the whole world that we saw to do it in.

Make no mistake, we were not angels. We had our fights and formed into cliques and recognized pecking orders. But a common denominator was that we respected our elders and generally thought they were demi-gods. As a kid we always minded adults. There was no concept of ‘I don’t have to do what you tell me because you’re not my parent.’ In that sense we were raised by ‘the village’, our culture demanded that all adults correct a wayward child in their presence, and the kids were taught to mind adult authority (or else).

One reason, most certainly in my case, that we looked up to adults was our wartime experiences and memories of events that had happened just a short time ago. All of our families went through tremendously scary, always harrowing, and sometimes tragic episodes. We kids knew about fear, death, and unbelievable uncertainty. Things had happened around us and to us that we could not always properly frame or understand. And time after time those of us who made it to Geislingen had seen our parents and other adults make sense out of the chaos, show unforgettable courage, and somehow pull us through to see another day, and then yet another day. Adults were simply awesome. And my parents were even more awesome in what they had done and could do today - all of which I tried to see myself being able to duplicate someday, but didn’t then have a clue about how I could possibly learn all of the stuff they knew by the time I grew up.

Among the most remarkable and brave adults were the widows and single women whose husbands had been lost in the maelstrom or simply disappeared when separated by a simple errand or wrong decision. Single men were suspect during wartime. Both sides looked at them as shirkers or simple cannon fodder to be pressed into service at best, or at worst as deserters or traitors to be dealt with appropriately. The result was the same, a mother with her children would suddenly find herself alone, her man gone, and all decisions and efforts to survive crashing onto her shoulders alone. And every one of these single mothers in the camp, of whom there were so many, had handled indescribable hardships and had survived to bring their little flocks out to the other side.
I recall during the early years in America (1950-55) listening to my parents and other Estonians recount the DP camp years. In most ways, they saw our internment during those years as being a time of healing and redemption. The authorities had gathered us up in one place, put a roof over our heads, given us our daily bread (2,300 calories per person per day), and told us to stay put and peaceable, and handle our own affairs until they figured out what to do with us. And the Estonians of Geislingen did exactly that while forceful repatriation to the USSR was still on the table as the United States dickered with Joe Stalin about our fate. (Stalin did not want the Estonians, along with other refugees who had experienced the power and glory of Soviet communism, to be turned loose in the free world to spread the word. Uncle Joe wanted us in a Siberian gulag or dead.)

**We become immigrants**

But the world changed for us in the spring of 1948. It took three years and millions of escaping refugees from the east to convince Moscow that it was losing to the west the educated and productive people of their conquered countries — and that these same people would convince the rest of the world about life under international communism. What Churchill called the Iron Curtain rang down with the Red Army’s sudden isolation of the former capital of Germany that launched the famous Berlin airlift. Barbed wire, minefields, machine gun nests, and watchtowers went up quickly from the Baltic to the Balkans, there would be no more refugees from the east.

Along with millions of DPs in West Germany, the Estonians of Geislingen breathed easy for the first time since VE Day in 1945. We were now in the west to stay, and out of the clutches of the USSR. Soon we heard that several countries — among them the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, and Great Britain — were considering extending invitations to certain refugees to immigrate to their countries. Soon thereafter the US Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. Signed into law in June 1948, it “authorized for a limited period of time the admission into the United States of certain European displaced persons for permanent residence, and for other purposes after World War II.”

(The bill was signed by President Truman under protest mainly because it discriminated against the Jews and through clever language favored the Balts whose countries had been annexed by the USSR. In part, Truman’s signing statement said, “The bill requires that at least 40 percent of the displaced persons allowed to enter this country must come from areas which have been ‘de facto annexed by a foreign power.’ This guarantees a disproportionately high percentage of persons from particular areas. It would have been fairer to provide instead for the admission of persons in proportion to the numbers of each group in the displaced persons camps.

The bill reflects a singular lack of confidence by the Congress in the capacity and willingness of the people of the United States to extend a welcoming hand to the prospective immigrants. It contains many restrictive requirements, such as prior assurances of suitable employment and ‘safe and sanitary housing,’ unnecessarily complicated investigation of each applicant, and burdensome reports from individual immigrants. I regret that the Congress saw fit to impose such niggardly conditions.”)
The 1948 immigration law didn’t give Estonians a free pass – we still had to have a sponsored job in America, and survive “unnecessarily complicated investigations”, and submit “burdensome reports” that comprised a good part of the “niggardly conditions” immigrants had to satisfy – but it definitely graced us with a favorable quota. Later we discovered that there was an added health status codicil that became part of the law. My mother had a bad heart, a deformed valve that she got from a bout of rheumatic fever just before I was born. The leaky valve could be easily detected through a stethoscope. We were again on tenterhooks.

Other countries passed their own restrictive immigration laws to accept DPs, each having their own twists – some wanted agricultural workers and some wanted professionals and tradespeople with skills useful in a developed society. My father and the other heads of households started going over the immigration news, reports, and rumors that were as plentiful as mosquitoes on a humid summer night. In the evenings they met in each other’s small quarters, smoking, drinking schnapps and vodka while debating all the details that seemed to change every day.

I don’t exactly recall when I became interested in adult conversations, but it happened at an early age, most certainly before the war ended. When adults settled down to talk, I would grab my toys, rumple a nearby rug into a mountainous terrain, and play fantasy games of war and wizardry at their feet with chessmen ‘soldiers’ or whatever served. And I listened with as much understanding as I could muster, which was not very great at first. But the conversations always fascinated me because I’d try to predict what it would portend for our little family – would we stay here a little longer or would we pick up next week and be on our way again? All I had known was moving from place to place, none of which were really ours, home was where my parents were.

These intense conversations started in the summer of 1948 with the continuing news from Berlin that a new war between the USSR and the west could start any time, or we might be in for enough of a peace that would let us get out of Europe and the reach of Stalin. Every time the meeting was in our room, I was there with my toys and rumpled rug. Finally I sensed that my father was narrowing down the new home options for the Rebanes, it would be either France or America. I was in favor of America because that was the land of the invincible American GIs, the ‘Amis’, and more importantly, the land of cowboys like Roy Rogers. DP kids were occasionally shown cowboy films in the Geislingen theater. We didn’t understand a single spoken word, but the vivid stories on the big screen told themselves. All the boys my age wanted to live in a land like we saw that we were sure still existed.

Finally, my dad had a short talk with mom (the women had been having similar discussions) and it was decided that we would try to go to America, God willing that mom’s heart did not start acting up while we were being screened. Screening became a new Estonian word – phonetically ‘skiinimine’ – and everyone started assembling what few records they had from Estonia that had survived the war. Ours were sparse and centered on my parents’ marriage certificate which also had their places and dates of birth, and a certified copy of a provincial ledger page that stated I was the son of Vello and Ellen Rebane, and where and when I was born. The rest they would have to get from cross examining other Estonians, some of whom knew us back in Estonia.
Our applications for America were duly filed during the closing months of 1948, and we started the wait and see if we had made the cut and be admitted into the screening process. In the DP camp anticipation and hope were at a fever pitch during the 1948-49 winter. Every DP knew that the camp would be closed in a year or two at most (Geislingen DP camp was closed in 1951), and if you were not out of there, you would be thrown onto the limping German economy to fend for yourself while competing with a few million other refugees also looking for work. Tense moments in sports.

Sometime after the new year started we received word that the Rebanes were part of a DP cohort scheduled for an 8-10 week screening at a former Luftwaffe base in Ludwigsburg. When the time came we packed a couple of suitcases, lugged them to the train station, and boarded with other hopeful Estonians headed for our first screening. The 50 mile trip from Geislingen did not take long (see map), and before nightfall we were in a huge hall filled with Army field cots along with a few hundred other DPs who had arrived from all over Germany. Each cot had a couple of olive drab Army blankets, two sheets, and a thin pillow on it. The communal bathrooms were at one end of the huge building which turned out to be a gymnasium and auditorium. It was a bit chaotic that first night sorting things out, trying to remain modest while going to the bathroom and getting ready for bed.

The next day GIs with appropriate translators showed up to tell us the rules of the road for the screening process, how we were to live and eat, and the week’s schedule for the screening appointments. The schedules and name lists were posted in several languages on the bulletin boards that quickly drew mobs of people trying to find out where they were supposed to be on that big airbase in an hour or so. Lots of shouting, shoving, and cursing before the big hall emptied as we all made our way in a great hurry to then stand in the longest lines ever invented by humans. You see, the base was full of such ad hoc ‘residence halls’ into which thousands of DPs had converged in the last couple of days. Now we were all standing in lines.

I remember going with dad, standing in lines with absolutely nothing to do, and finally winding up in front of a GI and typewriter with a translator if the GI didn’t speak German. The questions and forms were endless as they pored into your childhood, life in Estonia, political affiliations, possible memberships in communist or Nazi organizations. And then there were the medical examinations during which they stuck all kinds of things into your various orifices. This process went on for days on end – look at the schedule board in the morning and then spend most of the day standing in one line after another.

Sleeping in a room with several hundred others was a new experience for everyone. The night sounds coming from all sides were beyond description, and included everything from simple fog horn snoring to distressed moaning and crying to shushed arguments between family members or strangers in neighboring cots. Very quickly a committee was formed to ask (demand?) that we be issued more blankets, rope, and lumber from which to construct privacy curtains between the families. And to a kid my size the big hall soon looked like a labyrinth of narrow streets and passages more at home in an Arabian casbah. Those improvements cut down the noise level at night, but introduced new sounds of intimate congress with which all DP camp kids had become familiar when the whole family lived for years in a single small room.
This screening process went on interminably, days melded together, and so did the weeks. The only punctuations in the routine were the heartbreaking ones when a family member was deemed ineligible for immigration because of health reasons or the discovery of some political, ideological, or misrepresented skill level foible in their past. The most tragic were the exclusions due to some health reason, no country wanted to import people who required extensive and expensive healthcare – chronically sick or disabled people who could not work were simply excluded, they were screened out.

Every couple of days or so we would hear of another family having been given the bad news during the course of their day’s interviews. People came back to the hall with that wasted look in their eyes, went to their private spaces, and simply cried. The most wrenching decisions were by those who received news that grandpa had spots on his lungs or whatever and could not immigrate, but the rest of the family was fine and could proceed with the screening. Do we go to America and leave grandpa behind, and hopefully send for him later?

This was the sword that hung over our own heads as each day dawned. Mom and the women stood in different lines during the medical examinations. On many days we were separated, dad and I never knew if we would walk into our blanketed area and find mom crying with the news that she could not go to America. I was nine years old and knew exactly what was happening and the portents of such a disaster. Every day it was swallow hard and keep on trucking as we saw another sad family depart in the morning with their suitcases while we searched for our appointments schedule at the bulletin board. The fate of such families was uncertain since they would inevitably lose their refugee DP status, and be told to move out of whatever camp they were living in.

After eight or more weeks of this nail biting routine, the Rebanes were among the survivors of the screening process. My mom’s heart had behaved itself on the fateful day when the stethoscope was applied, my father received a clean bill of health politically and was able to demonstrate that he really was a skilled electrician, and I must have looked promising enough not to sour the deal. We packed up and, with heads held high, took the train back to Geislingen – we were going to America!

Upon arrival back in camp there were the inevitable celebrations and sadesses. Many Estonians would be departing soon, and each had filled one or more important jobs or positions in the community. Now the exodus had started, and life in camp for those still remaining would become bleaker and less stimulating. The ‘Golden Years’, as many Estonian DPs would later think of the late 1940s, were over, and an uncertain future in a foreign land with unknown language and customs awaited everyone. It was time to get back ‘on the economy’, some economy somewhere.

We were told that we would soon receive orders to depart for Bremerhaven, the big German seaport on the North Sea coast. There we would be screened again for a shorter time, and if we still made the cut we would be on a ship to America. The DP camp took on a new spirit as the successfully screened families started packing their meager belongings and giving away stuff they had collected during their Geislingen years. My father had a lot of tools and handicraft materials (oil paints, brushes, easels, leathers, filigree silver, intarsia veneers, blank decorative plates and
boxes ready for inlaid wood, etc) which he could not take to America. At this time he still thought that he could establish himself as an artist or artisan in the new world.

Mom had her sewing machine and various bolts of cloth and materials that she had assembled for the clothes she was always making. I only had three important things to dispose of, and I knew exactly who would get each item. My treasures were my chess set, a miniature working steam engine, and a world class sled with an all steel frame and runners. Dad had given me each of those as Christmas presents. I have no idea how he managed to get the steam engine and the sled, they were exceptional and the envy of my friends.

Arriving in Geislingen I immediately hooked up with three steady pals – see photo l to r ‘Väike’ (small or short) Jüri, Peeter, Jaak, and me. Väike Jüri was short, and since we four always hung out together I quickly became known as Suur (big) Jüri to tell us apart. Jaak and Peeter got the sled and steam engine (I forget which got which), and Väike Jüri got the chess set because he didn’t have one.

Soon our orders to depart came, and our small one room home looked very bare and a little sad as we spent our last night there. We had to get up very early in the morning to go to the train station and catch a train headed for Frankfurt, and then on to Bremerhaven in northern Germany. We could only take with us one suitcase per person and a box/crate that measured no more than about 3’x2’x1.5’. Dad built a special box that would contain his minimal set of tools and examples of his extensive work product – tooled leather items, silver jewelry, inlaid wood articles, and a few small paintings. The rest of the volume was taken up with family photos and artifacts that had been dragged through the hellfires of war from Estonia, these reminders of home would never be left behind.

It had snowed during the night when we got up in the wee hours of that late winter morning. One of the family’s prized possessions was a sturdy pull wagon that was also an indispensable item in every German household (in Schwabisch German dialect it was called a ‘wegele’). People then walked long distances everywhere, and they had to carry heavy/bulky things, so a pull wagon was the obvious solution. I remember hauling my suitcase down the familiar staircase for the last time and helping dad muscle the big box and suitcases into our wegele. Looking back once more at 173 Weingarten Strasse, we trudged through the deserted snow covered streets of Geislingen to the train station. I think it was my mom who broke the silence noting that it was on another dark snowy night three and a half years before that the three of us had walked up hill the other way from the Geislingen train station.
When we got to the well-lit station with our wegele, dad went in to make sure that the train was on time and get directions on how our box would make its way to Bremerhaven, the suitcases would never leave our side. Then we unloaded the wegele, and after putting the box on a dolly, dad disappeared with it into the building. Mom and I stayed with the suitcases as the snow kept falling into the glaring light from the nearby lamppost. Other people were now arriving to catch the morning trains. Dad came back out and told us to follow him with our suitcases.

It then came to me that not only would we not be taking our wegele, we would leave it there, empty and forlorn under the lamppost. Dad told me not to worry, such a solid piece of practical equipment would soon find another good home. I think that was the first time I anthropomorphized an object, to me that wagon had developed a character, a personality, maybe even a soul, and we were abandoning it after all the good service it had given us. As I walked away with my suitcase, that well-worn wagon suddenly became the symbol for everything that we were leaving behind. Over the years I have returned many times to that snowy morning in 1949 to wonder what became of our little wegele.