

RASMA EKMANIS

‘Former Latvian Refugee Recalls How Her Family Escaped Soviet Mistreatment’

By Megan Trotter

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Rasma Ekmanis of Cookeville is a grandmother and retired teacher, but what many people don't know is that she spent much of her childhood on the run from Soviet invaders in her home country of Latvia.

A European country, Latvia is located on the Baltic Sea, below Sweden and Finland. During World War II, the Soviet Union sent an overwhelming number of troops into the small country of Latvia, causing the government to resign.

“In one night they deported 15,000 people,” Ekmanis said. “They just picked up people, including old people and children, put them in cattle cars and deported them to Siberia. It was horrendous. It's something that we all still remember.”



Rasma Ekmanis, a refugee who escaped possible torture and death in Latvia when she was just a child, displays her 72-year-old doll while standing in front of portraits of her family.

Five-year-old Ekmanis pushes her baby doll in a hand-made stroller. She still has the doll 72 years later.

Those who were captured and put into the cattle cars had a bleak trip before they arrived in Siberia – if they survived that long.

“There were 25 people to a (train) car, and they were closed so that nobody could open them,” Ekmanis said. “The cattle car had a small hole in it that was a toilet. And then once every other day or so it would stop someplace, but always in a forest so that nobody could dare escape and so that you could also bury the people who died.”

Ekmanis' father worked for the National Guard, while her mother worked for the government. Both types of people were at the top of the Soviet's list for removal.

“These people who were deported, they separated the families and told the women and children and old people, ‘Okay, when we get to where we're going, your husbands will join you.’ Well, they never saw their husbands again,” Ekmanis said. “The husbands went to the coal mines and they were sent to the forest to cut lumber. The women were sent to villages in Siberia and some of them had to dig holes in the ground to survive in.”

Luckily, Ekmanis' parents caught wind of what was going on. They took her, then nine years old, along with her 11-year-old sister and six-month-old brother to their grandparents' farm. When Ekmanis' parents returned for them and carried them away to the port city of Liepaja, it would be the last time the children would ever see their grandparents.

Even though they were able to correspond for a time, after a while, the letters started coming back. However, letters did get through to one of Ekmanis' aunts who was likewise married to a man in the National Guard. They found out that he had been captured and deported to Siberia, and Ekmanis' aunt was forced to officially divorce him. He was not able to return until 15 years later, when the couple married again. Ekmanis would later be able to read some of the letters her mother sent to her aunt at that time.

“Her letters were really interesting,” she said. “There were a lot of things that were marked out with a black marker because the Soviet government read everything. There were some lines that you couldn’t read.”

Once in the port of Liepaja, Ekmanis boarded a ship with her family and was taken to German-occupied Poland at a displaced person camp. As the Soviets kept advancing, Ekmanis and her family were moved further and further into German territories and finally into Germany itself.

“The Germans saved our lives,” Ekmanis said. “I realize what the Germans did to Jews and handicapped people, and they killed gypsies, but Germans took us to Germany. I almost hate to mention that to anybody because you’re suppose to hate the Germans.



Ekmanis and her family to America.

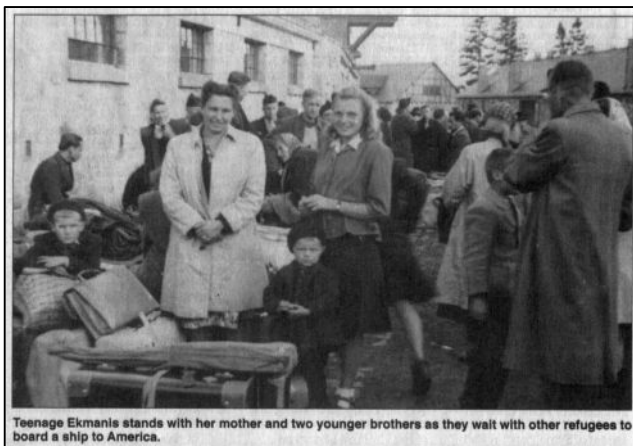
Even though she had been pulled from her home and was being passed from place to place with unfamiliar people, Ekmanis said she does not remember being afraid as a child.

“I remember feeling a sense of adventure because I was going to someplace I’d never been before, but I didn’t know why,” she said.

Ekmanis and her family ended up in Bavaria, a state of Germany, where they were taken into a school house in the village and given a meal she remembers as the best she had eaten in months. Germany farm families there took them in, where they stayed until the end of the war before being sent to a United Nations refugee camp at the German Air Base, where they formed their own miniature communities, complete with schools, boy and girl scouts, theatre troops and concerts. They lived here until 1949, when the immigration process started that would finally bring

However, before they could cross the sea, the family had to

undergo months of countless medical exams and interviews. At one point the family seemed to be days away from boarding the ship that would carry them to the United States, however a child in their shared room came down with scarlet fever and everyone had to be quarantined until the sickness had passed. After that came even more medical exams.



“I don’t know how much radiation I absorbed. You stood behind a screen and these plates, and they took x-rays. I’m sure I’m very radiated,” Ekmanis laughed.

Finally the family boarded an American troop ship after an uncomfortable 10-day journey, they finally arrived in the states. Because they were Lutheran, the Lutheran church in the states connected

them with a sponsor family in Wisconsin who was looking for a family to work on their farm. The next year Ekmanis' parents moved to another city to find employment, while Ekmanis and her sister stayed and lived in an old farm house to finish out their schooling, which had been very sporadic over the years. Ekmanis finished third grade in Latvia, sixth grade in Germany and when she got to America, the principal decided it was more important to put her with her age group than education level, so she went straight to ninth grade. This is a fun fact she enjoyed telling her students when she later became a high school teacher herself.

"I could honestly tell my students that I never went to 7th or 8th grade," she said with a smile.

After teaching special education in high school for more than 20 years, Ekmanis retired and substitute taught for a while before finally moving to Cookeville to be with family. She's been here for five years now.

"This just seems like an ideal place. I'm glad I'm here. I like it here," she said.

Ekmanis has gotten the chance to visit her old home in Latvia several times over the years. The first time was in 1982, when the country was still under the influence of Soviet Union. Ekmanis was able to visit extended family members, however their visit was treated with suspicion by the Soviet government.

"My cousins were so afraid. I didn't find out until years later that they had been called in by the secret police and interrogated about our visit," she said. "When we left (Latvia for the first time), our cousins were babies. My cousin, who has visited me here (in the states), said 'I told those people that I was a baby, I don't even remember you. But they kept asking questions and asking 'Why did they leave?'"

Here other trips were more pleasant after Latvia was restored to full independence in 1991. Two years ago she rented an apartment and stayed for a month, visiting all the places she frequented as a child before she had to flee. She looks forward to returning for another visit in the future.

"All the places I remember as a child are still the same, and it's just wonderful," she said. "We lived on the river. There were some huge rocks in the river and I remember we used to wade up to our necks to get to those rocks because we liked to play on them. But we didn't know how to swim.

"Nobody worried about it, and nobody drowned. And on the farm we did all sorts of crazy things. We rode the horses without saddles or anything, and the horse knew we didn't know anything (about riding) so they would go through bushes. I even tried to ride a cow," she laughed. "It was a very carefree life for us."

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