Rūta Matimaitytė
[Lithuanian Institute of History]
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4732-948X

From forgotten topic to memory activism: the case of the wolf children

DOI: 10.26774/wrhm.356
Submitted on: 1 October 2022
Accepted on: 15 October 2024
Published on: 29 November 2024
The work is original and has not been published elsewhere before.
Originally written in English.

Abstract
This article is based on an archive of personal interviews. Using the oral history method, more than 60 people who were or identified themselves as wolf children were interviewed. Using memory activism, the relationship between wolf children, commemoration days, and the Pagėgiai community is examined with the aim of integrating the memory of wolf children into regional memory.

Key words
wolf children, memory activism, Klaipeda (Memel) region, commemoration day, Pagėgiai

●●●●●●

Introduction

The mnemonic narrative of the wolf or hunger children's[1] migration and the memory of this event could be considered what the British anthropologist Paul Connerton described as humiliated silence.[2] Until the end of the Cold War, this memory did not exist as an official shared phenomenon of migration between Lithuania and Germany. While the westward population movement at the end of the Second World War is well-documented in Lithuanian historiography,[3] it took more than fifty years for the events of the post-war period to gain the right to be publicly acknowledged. In the case of East Prussia, however, the opposite process occurred – discussions about experiences of violence, famine, and forced immigration to Soviet Lithuania were only possible after the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the onset of democratization processes. During this period, memory gained the right to struggle for its voice and recognition of its experiences, similar to other

1 In this article, I will use the term *wolf children* or "East Prussian German children" to refer to the subjects of the study. The term *wolf children* was coined by German filmmaker Eberhard Fechner in 1991. The term *vokietukai* (little Germans) was used in Lithuanian collective memory until 1991. The film's success helped to establish the term "wolf children," which became the main concept defining the migration and experience of East Prussian children. As an alternative to the concept of wolf children, Christopher Spatz suggests *children of hunger*, which more precisely describes the experience of East Prussian children and their encounter with hunger. For more information about the concept of the children of hunger, see: Ch. Spatz, *Nur der himmel blieb derselbe: Ostpreussens Hungerkinder erzählen vom Überleben*, Hamburg 2016.

2 Paul Connerton described seven types of forgetting. One of these is the humiliated silence, which can be observed when there is an attempt to forget a brutal and violent narrative. For instance, after the Second World War, German historians did not write about the destruction of German cities caused by bombing and the rapes of women by Red Army soldiers. See P. Connerton, *Seven types of forgetting*, "Memory Studies", vol. 1 (2008), p. 67.

3 It is also worth noting that the Lithuanian Emigration Institute, located at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania, conducts research on Lithuanian migration to the West. The institute also publishes the academic journal OIKOS: "Lithuanian Migration and Diaspora Studies", which focuses on research related to Lithuanian migration and the diaspora. For more historiographical perspectives, see A. Eidintas, *Lietuvių kolumbai: lietuvių emigracijos istorijos apybraiža*, Vilnius 1993; E. Aleksandravičius, D. Kuizinienė, D. Dapkutė, *The Cultural Activities of Lithuanian Émigrés*, Vilnius 2002; D. Kuizinienė, *Lietuvių literatūrinis gyvenimas Vakarų Europoje 1945–1950 metais*, Vilnius, 2003; E. Aleksandravičius, *Karklo diegas. Lietuvių pasaulio istorija*, Vilnius 2013; T. Balkelis, V. Davoliūtė (eds.), *Population Displacement in Lithuania in the XXth Century: Experiences, Identities and Legacies*, Leiden–Boston, 2016; D. Cidzikaite, D. Stakė Anysas, L. Petrauskas Vanderstoep, *We Thought We'd Be Back Soon: 18 stories of refugees 1940–1944*, Vilnius 2017; T. Balkelis, *Population Displacement in Lithuania in the 20th Century: Experiences, Identities and Legacies*, "Journal of Baltic Studies", vol. 49 (2018), no. 2, pp. 265–267; V. Bartusevičius, *Vokietijos lietuviai 1950–1990*, Vilnius 2021; G. Milerytė-Japertienė, *Pasaulio dydžio Lietuva. Mūsų migracijos istorija*, Vilnius 2023; V. Stravinskienė, *Migruojantis Vilnius: 1915–1994*, Vilnius 2023.

repressed memory groups.[4] More research attention deserves to be paid to the exploration of the efforts made by groups seeking to bring back these memories to the collective memory. However, it is worth noting that despite the absence of the "wolf children" or "Little Germans" in the public memory, we can find mentions by individual Lithuanian writers.[5] The aforementioned works indicate that this memory did not entirely succumb to amnesia.

After 1990, researchers themselves, first and foremost, began to pay attention to reconstructing the migration narrative from former East Prussia to Soviet Lithuania. Ruth Leiserowitz used interviews with wolf children and archival material from Kaliningrad, Germany, and Lithuania to demonstrate that this migration was indeed a real historical event.[6] Furthermore, her work allowed the narratives of the wolf children themselves to become more authentic and facilitated their acceptance of their life story. Another historian, Christopher Spatz, devoted attention to the memory and identity of the wolf children. He precisely described the typology of their identity[7] and proposed a new term – children of hunger. The questions of how the wolf children feel about and remember the period of the Soviet conspiracy of silence,[8] and how society itself reacts to the awakening of memory still have not received scholarly attention.

In this article, I argue that it was only with the establishment of a dedicated Wolf Children Remembrance Day, 14 September, that a meaningful dialogue was initiated with the local community. By incorporating the Day of the Genocide of the Minorities of Lithuania into the Lithuanian calendar in 2006, the people of the Klaipėda region were able to establish a connection with the history of the German children from the Prussian region; however, the "wolf children" themselves did not acknowledge this date. Following the *Seimas* of the Republic of Lithuania's introduction of a new commemorative date – Wolf Children Remembrance Day – in 2024, a commemorative event at the Wolf Children memorial site facilitated

4 The concept of repressed memory is employed to depict groups that, due to an existing dominant narrative, are unable to exist in the public sphere.

5 I. Meras, *Žemė visada gyva*, Vilnius 1963; S. Geda, *Pėdos: Eilėraščiai*, Vilnius 1966; I. Meras, *Ant ko laikosi pasaulis*, Vilnius 1968.

6 R. Kibelka, *Vilko vaikai: kelias per Nemuną*, Vilnius 2000.

7 Christopher Spatz defines several types of wolf children to describe their fate: 1) the commuter who constantly moved between the Königsberg region and Lithuania; 2) pseudo-orphans whose mothers were still alive but were separated from their children due to external circumstances, and they still saw themselves as part of the mother–child community; 3) candidates for adoption who could be either travellers or pseudo-orphans by type or have already arrived in Lithuania from the Königsberg region as full orphans; 4) forced labourers who were first and foremost sheltered by Lithuanian villagers for economic reasons. See Ch. Spatz, *Ostpreussische Wolfskinder Erfahrungsräume und Identitäten in der deutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaft*, Osnabrück 2016.

8 R. Fivush, *Speaking silence: The social construction of silence in autobiographical and cultural narratives*, "Memory", vol. 18 (2010), pp. 88–98.

interaction between the wolf children and the community. This shift was influenced not only by the establishment of a dedicated remembrance day for the wolf children but also by the war in Ukraine, which prompted contemporaries among the wolf children to recall their experiences and sparked public interest in understanding the history of the wolf children.

In this article, I use memory activism as an analysis category. Researchers in the field of memory studies emphasize that one way to reintegrate a previously overlooked and uncomfortable past into collective memory is through a new theoretical approach – memory activism. As a starting point for the study of memory activism, Yifat Gutman's work on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict serves as a reference. Yifat Gutman defined memory activism as the strategic commemoration of a contested past beyond state channels, aimed at influencing public opinion and policy through memory practices and cultural elements, often, though not exclusively, for the purposes of reconciliation and democratic politics.[9] Researchers in the theoretical field of memory, Jenny Wüstenberg and Yifat Gutman, note that the specificity of memory activism – whether examining historical events or contemporary processes – is analysed not as institutional culture but rather as communicative memory. Thus, memory activism is regarded as a type of communicative memory.[10]

The theoretical field of memory studies gave hope that it may be possible to return to a collective memory complex and ambiguously perceived historical processes such as wars, genocides, and deportations, for they are often left in the margins of the collective memory. In this case, I will discuss the tool proposed by Ewa Gorska[11] – the significance of memory dates in the context of the narrative of the wolf children's history. It is important to note that the author of this article is also engaged in memory activism, actively promoting the remembrance of the wolf children through lectures and events including the wolf children commemoration day.

In exploring the relationships between wolf children, I used the method of interviews to uncover the wolf children community's connection with the Pagėgiai community. Employing the oral history method, I conducted semi-structured

9 Y. Gutman, Memory Activism: *Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel–Palestine*, Nashville 2017, p.1.

10 Y. Gutman, J. Wustenberg (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of memory activisim*, London–New York 2023, p. 8.

11 Ewa Górska proposed three main methods: 1) education system is one of the ways in which the collective and state memory is consolidated; therefore, one of the measures should be the creation of alternative and additional knowledge; 2) compilation of documentation and maps, creation of new places of memory through monuments, commemorative plaques, various commemorations; 3) importance of commemorations and rituals. Ewa Górska emphasizes the significance and importance of the new calendar of memory and days of remembrance in it as an alternative to the entrenched state narrative and the commemorations it offers. For example, see E. Górska, *Memory activism: methods of creation of alternative collective memory in former Yugoslavia and Israel*, "Maska", vol. 32 (2016), pp. 7–19.

interviews with more than 60 wolf children with the years 2017 and 2022. I conducted interviews in Lithuanian with individuals from Lithuania and Germany. The wolf children I interviewed in Germany had spent their entire Soviet-era lives in Lithuania and only moved to Germany after 1990. Among the interviewees in Lithuania, there were also individuals who had initially moved to Germany, but later returned to Lithuania, openly admitting that they had struggled to integrate in Germany due to a lack of German language skills and social support. A higher percentage of wolf children were interviewed in Lithuania compared to Germany, as some individuals in Germany declined to participate in the interviews for personal reasons, unwilling to recall their life history and share it with others. In Lithuania, the personal kinship relationship with the wolf children facilitated a greater openness within the community to share memories and experiences.

My interview participants were affiliated with the organisation "Edelweiss–Wolfskinder." The narrators were born between 1935 and 1942. In conducting a survey involving a comparable number of women and men, it was observed that women tend to provide more detailed accounts of their experiences compared to men of the same age. The majority of interviews were conducted in small towns and villages rather than in cities. This was influenced by the fact that the wolf children themselves, upon arriving in Lithuania, settled in the homes of Lithuanian farmer families and later chose to remain living predominantly in the same localities. This part of the community possessed a similar educational background, with a primary-school level education being prevalent. However, it should be noted that among the respondents, there were individuals who had not attended school. As a result, it was necessary to adapt the interview questions according to the educational background of the respondents.

In 2024, an interview was conducted with former long-time chairman of the Baltic Parliamentary Group, Wolfgang Freiherr von Stetten. The interview aimed to explore his motivations and political efforts in assisting the wolf children. Furthermore, the German approach to the issue of wolf children and the evolution of the situation from 1990 to the present day were also discussed. In addition, during the interview, a review was conducted of the archival documentation accumulated since 1990, which revealed that there had been attempts to implement the initiatives discussed during the conversation, but these initiatives had remained unrealized due to bureaucratic obstacles.

The interviews were analysed according to distinct thematic blocks: events prior to the onset of direct actions in East Prussia in 1944; the history of unsuccessful evacuations; famine and arrival in Lithuania; life in Lithuanian families; life during the Soviet era, and the period of Lithuania's regained independence in 1990. Special attention was given to the history of 1990, aiming to understand their emotions upon regaining the right to narrate their life stories and the quest

for relatives or attempts to emigrate back to Germany. After assessing the sensitivity of the topic and consulting with the research participants, the decision was taken that the final analysis and texts would incorporate either only the respondent's first name or their first name and surname; the choice would depend on which option the respondent gave their consent to.

From East Prussian children to the Little Germans

To better understand the memory of wolf children after 1990, it is necessary to go back to the end of the Second World War. When the Red Army invaded East Prussia in 1944, it treated the population, mainly the remaining elderly, women, and children, with extreme cruelty.[12] Children saw their mothers and grandmothers raped, and their bodies desecrated. The children, who were confronted with a very sadistic and brutal experience, had to find a way to both mourn the lost family member and deal with the burial. The wolf children remembered how they buried their immediate family members by themselves or with the help of strangers, digging holes with their own hands. Children living in the countryside would often throw the dead bodies into pigsties out of despair. Since a vast number of children were orphaned, some of them ended up in Soviet orphanages.[13] The conditions there were extremely poor, and many, seeing that their situation had not improved, left the orphanages and continued looking for ways to survive independently.

From 1946 onwards, when northeast Prussia joined the USSR to become the Kaliningrad region, there was a rapid decline in the German population there. People began dying from exhaustion, food shortages, and epidemics such as typhus.[14] The typhus infection that accompanied continuous famine greatly affected the psychological and mental wellbeing of the survivors of the Second World War. Records made by doctors and priests include descriptions of the psychological and physical suffering that people endured.[15] The starving people of the northeast Prussian region and their children ate livestock carrion and other waste in an attempt to stay alive: "When I got to Lithuania, the most important thing for me was that my stomach was full, and I had somewhere to sleep. I didn't think in terms of Lithuania being good or bad. What was important was that I got food and didn't need to eat potato peels or cats."[16]

Paradoxically, the Baltic States offered a safer haven and glimmer of hope for survival, particularly more hope of survival, especially Lithuania, which played a pivotal role in rescuing East Prussians from the grip of death and starvation. Their only chance at survival involved embarking on perilous journeys

12 R. Kibelka, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
13 *Ibidem*, p. 81.
14 Ch. Spatz, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
15 H. von Lehndorff, *Rytų Prūsijos dienoraštis. Gydytojo užrašai 1945–1947*, Vilnius 2021.
16 Animare Narrator; interview conducted on 18 February 2017 by the author in Tauragė.

via freight trains, on foot, or in horse-drawn wagons, all in the pursuit of new guardians who could provide them with sustenance and security. These journeys were fraught with danger, not only due to natural conditions but also because of the hazards faced by children hiding in freight trains. The railway militia frequently resorted to violence against these weakened, disease-ridden, and starving youngsters. One of the primary measures employed in combating illegal immigration was closely tied to the railway transport system: "And then we went on and reached Lithuania. And we were not welcome there. I came some three weeks later or maybe more. When we got out of the train, rumour had it that we shouldn't go to Kaunas, because they returned everyone from there. The militia would catch you at the railway station and drive you back again to East Prussia."[17]

Children had to face the reality that Lithuania, which they imagined to be a "bread and cake" country[18] was not safe for children because of the ongoing Soviet repressions against the population, including deportations, the ongoing guerrilla war, and collectivization. Until the start of the collectivization process in 1948, Lithuanian farmers had been able to offer work opportunities for the children.

It is important to emphasize that no separate institutions were established in Lithuania to address the issue of the Kaliningrad Germans. The Soviet bureaucratic institutions, such as the collection and distribution centres, children's rooms, and orphanages, did not work efficiently enough and had difficulty coping with the problems of both arriving immigrants and local unsupervised minors.[19] As a result, the situation of these children did not improve substantially following their entry into care institutions within Soviet Lithuania: "The children would be caught on the street. The food in the orphanage was very scarce; we wanted to eat. The only way out was to get out."[20]

The German children felt safer and less noticeable living in the countryside, thereby trying to avoid the issue of passports and compulsory registration.[21] While many wolf children left the Baltic states due to the forced eviction of Germans from Lithuania in 1950–1951,[22] the remaining ones created a life and a new identity in Soviet Lithuania. They felt that their memories might not have been welcomed by the Soviet system, and they tried to hide under a mask by lying

17 Interview conducted with Kristina Veprauskienė on 6 March 2018 in Kaunas.

18 The rumour among the starved children migrating between Lithuania and East Prussia had it that there was a hope of survival there. For example, see S. Gronau, *Vilko vaikai: klyksmas vaiduoklių mieste*, Kaunas 2017.

19 I. Balčiūnė, *Neprižiūrimų ir beglobių nepilnamečių problema ir jos sprendimas 1944–1954 metais Lietuvoje*, "Lietuvos istorijos studijos", vol. 47 (2021), pp. 82–98.

20 Interviewed conducted with Dora Flak on 25 January 2018 in Berlin.

21 R. Laukaitytė, *Pokaris Lietuvoje. Belaukiant išlaisvinimo*, Vilnius 2022, p. 252.

22 A.L. Arbušauskaitė, *"Kaliningrado vokiečių" klausimo išsprendimas (?): Lietuva, 1951– ieji metai*, "Antrojo pasaulinio karo pabaiga Rytų Prūsijoje: faktai ir istorinės įžvalgos", vol. 18 (2009), pp. 207–227.

about their true migration stories and their East Prussian German roots. Especially during the Stalin era, Lithuanian guardians asked the wolf children not to talk about their German past, as German children were considered a danger that could lead to the deportation of the entire family to Siberia. The result of this step taken by Lithuanian guardians was that a portion of the wolf children, especially the younger generation born between 1938 and 1944, forgot their native language and later experienced identity crises after Lithuanian independence in 1990.

During the Soviet era, the fate of the East Prussian children was remembered as that of "little Germans." During this time, writers used poems and novels to describe experiences and connect the fate of East Prussian German children to the process of migration. Instead of referring to East Prussia, they referred to Germany as the location of migration. This choice to avoid mentioning East Prussia or Germans may be related to the fact that they were frequently associated with the previous regime and were referred to as "fascist," or as "Prussians" but in a negative way.[23] Secondly, novels that mention German children focus on their experience of hunger and their appearance, which is portrayed mostly as a consequence of the Second World War: "The little German boy wore a long, tattered coat. The frayed sleeve constantly slipped over the potato, which he pushed aside with his lips before taking a bite. It seemed as if he was biting the sleeve itself. Beneath his thin military-style trousers, his dirty bare feet stuck out, toes spread apart, likely from the cold."[24]

In Soviet Lithuania, writers who depicted the experience of hunger contributed to a specific narrative. However, after Lithuania regained its independence in 1990, this narrative in public memory shifted. The focus on hunger evolved into a broader acknowledgment of the Red Army's crimes against East Prussian society, and these experiences became increasingly associated with the concept of wolf children. Although these works mentioned migration and the experiences of East Prussian German children in Soviet Lithuania, they did not have a significant impact on the children themselves or on society. The topic of German children remained in a period of silence during the Soviet era, though it did not fade into complete amnesia.

From Little Germans to Wolf Children

In Soviet Lithuania, awareness of wolf children began to emerge around 1988. During this period, newspapers such as "Gimtasis kraštas" started publishing advertisements. These advertisements provided brief biographical information about the individuals and the relatives they were seeking. In the context of Lithuanian history,

23 S. Kraniauskienė, S. Pocytė, R. Leiserowitz, I. Šutinienė, *Klaipėdos kraštas 1945–1960 m.: naujos visuomenės kūrimasis ir jo atspindžiai šeimųistorijose*, Klaipėda 2019, p. 321.

24 I. Meras, *Žemė visada gyva*, Vilnius 1963, p. 47.

this was the period when the *Sąjūdis* movement was established. According to Petras Biveinis and Algis Povilas Kasperavičius, the formation of *Sąjūdis* became a significant factor in encouraging ethnic minorities to unite into communities and organisations.[25] The first step in this regard was taken in 1991, when the wolf children established the "Edelweiss" organisation. Through the press, advertisements were distributed through various regional newspapers in the country, inviting orphans from East Prussia to join the organisation. Gradually, more people living in other Lithuanian towns and cities, such as Klaipėda, Kaunas, Šiauliai, Vilnius, and Marijampolė, joined the organisation. The primary purpose of establishing the organisation was mutual support. For these people, belonging to the community meant the opportunity to tell the story of their childhood trauma[26] for the first time and find family members lost at the end of the Second World War and during the post-war period. The chairwoman of the wolf children describes the primary objective of the organisation as follows:

> When gathered the community members had the opportunity to openly discuss their entire experience, pain, and events, sharing them aloud. Within families and among members, there had been no conversation about the experience. Children and grandchildren were unaware or skeptical of what their parents were recounting. Most believed that their parents were inventing or confusing their memories.[27]

The analysis of the interview with the long-standing chairwoman of the community revealed that the establishment of the community was particularly significant for the younger generation of wolf children who had fewer childhood memories from East Prussia: "The memories of younger children were unclear and highly fragmented. Being part of the community helped validate that their memories, although unclear, were not fabricated but genuine. This assisted them in affirming their identity."[28]

In cases where groups of people with repressed memory in Lithuania sought recognition, the wolf children's aspiration, with the support of the community, was to draw the attention of German society and advocate for Germany to take responsibility for their childhood traumatic experiences. In this case, although

25 P. Biveinis, A.P. Kasperavičius, *Tautiniai santykiai Lietuvoje 1988–1992 metais*, "Lietuvos istorijos studijos", vol. 20 (2007), p. 69.

26 The concept denotes an emotional or psychological injury suffered by an individual or generation as a result of traumatic experiences and events. Historical trauma response refers to the manifestation of emotions or actions arising from the experienced trauma. For example, see M. Sotero, *A Conceptual Model of Historical Trauma: Implications for Public Health Practice and Research*, "Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice", vol. 1 (2006), pp. 93–108.

27 Interview conducted with Luisė Kažukauskienė on 20 April 2017 in Vilnius.

28 *Ibidem*.

they migrated to Soviet Lithuania, they did not believe that Lithuania should assume responsibility for their immigration into the country. Since the establishment of the community, attention and recognition from Germany and politicians has been crucial for wolf children. The support and assistance provided by Wolfgang Freiherr von Stetten, the Chairman of the Baltic Parliamentary Group became particularly significant for the members of the community. Although he referred the issue to senior German politicians, the idea of wolf children having two citizenships – Lithuanian and German – was never implemented: "Personally, I approached the then President of Lithuania, Brazauskas, with a request for an exemption for wolf children to obtain dual citizenship due to historical circumstances. However, this request did not receive attention. There was a fear at that time that granting such an exemption would set a precedent for other groups as well."[29]

The support and political backing of Wolfgang von Stetten, as well as Ruth Leiserowitz's (born Kibelka) book, contributed to the release of the 1991 film "Wolfskinder," which played a significant role in establishing the term as the central concept for this phenomenon.[30] The community itself has also had an influence, as they added the term wolf children to the name "Edelweiss," thus forming forming the "Edelweiss-Wolfskinder" association. Among the members of the "Edelweiss–Wolfskinder" community, opinions varied regarding the name. Some individuals did not want their experiences to be associated with the wolf children, while others had no opinion on the matter. Still others sought explanations by linking their experiences to existing myths about Romulus and Remus, suggesting that they themselves had been foraging for food and survival in nature. In Lithuanian society, we can observe that the term has become established, replacing "little Germans." At the same time, the term itself has evolved into a form of memory activism, prompting society to try to understand this designation and to take an interest in the history of this group.

From the establishment of the memorial site to the narrative of suffering

One of the first initiatives planned by the new organisation was the establishment of a memorial site. The initial idea of the "Edelweiss" community in 1991 was to erect a temporary monument in Panemunė: "[...] which would bear an inscription indicating the number of children, women, and elderly individuals who had died of hunger or been killed in East Prussia during the post-war years."[31] Due to the circumstances of the political regime after 1990, wherein there was no opportunity to establish a place of memory within the Kaliningrad region, it remained

29 Interview conducted with Wolfgang Freiherr von Stetten on 12 August 2022 in Künzelsau.

30 Ch. Spatz, *Nur der Himmel blieb derselbe: Ostpreussens Hungerkinder erzählen vom Überleben*, Hamburg 2016, p. 255.

31 *"Edelweiss" steigiamojo suvažiavimo rezoliucija*, "Lietuvos Aidas", 26.09.1991, p. 7.

significant for the community members to have a monument closer to the border of the former East Prussia. However, instead of Panemunė, another location in Mikytai was chosen, where the wolf children themselves erected a cross in 1992.

Applying the oral history method and interviewing more than 60 wolf children about their relationship with the place of memory in Pagėgiai, it became clear that there is a myth among a part of the community. The myth narrates a story in which the burial of people from East Prussia at the end of the Second World War and in the post-war years occurred at the present site of the monument: "I personally did not witness it, but people spoke of transporting dead or semi-alive children in carts and burying them in a nearby trench."[32] As indicated in this excerpt from the interview, the candles burning near the monument are said to be in memory of the children of East Prussian Germans who are believed to be buried here: "With the community, we go to light candles and pray. Someone mentioned that East Prussian Germans are buried here."[33]

When asked about direct sources that could support these facts, most of the wolf children admitted that they had heard the story from others, and this helped explain the location of the current memorial place. During the research, it was concluded that this myth has spread among community members living in Tauragė. Upon analysing the interviews with the wolf children, it became apparent that the majority of children from the Tauragė region had not attended school or had only completed a few grades. Therefore, they needed a narrative that could explain the location of the monument.

The creation of a place of memory allowed the wolf children to collectively mourn the pain of lost families and to unite with each other over the same tragic experience. The loss of close family members, hunger and begging, and violence and coercion are part of the collective narrative of the community.[34] Most East Prussian children did not have the opportunity to say goodbye to their close family members who died of starvation, from various diseases such as typhus or were raped or sadistically killed. Often children suffering from hunger had to find a way to bury their family members on their own. During the interviews, they mentioned that they would dig a pit with their own hands or bury their loved ones in mass graves.

Thus, creating a new place of remembrance through the symbol of the cross made it possible to feel a connection with the graves of loved ones, which it would not otherwise be able to experience today: "All my relatives perished due to famine in East Prussia. We light candles at the monument and engage in prayer with

32 Interview conducted with Ella Karen Macik Matimaitienė on 18 January 2017 in Tauragė.

33 Interview conducted with Ona on 18 January 2017 in Lauksargiai.

34 See R. Matimaitytė, *Lupant vilko vaikų svogūną: Rytprūsių krašto vokiečių vaikų likimas ir atmintis Lietuvoje*, "Naujasis Židinys – Aidai", vol. 7 (2019), pp. 32–37.

members of the community. The ceremony was attended by evangelical and Catholic priests, who consecrated the monument."[35]

The memorial site has become a commemoration place for narrators. Commemorations and rituals are held at the memorial cross consecrated by priests of Protestant and Catholic denominations, indicating that half of the community became Catholic while the other half remained Protestant. Moreover, at each commemoration event, members light candles and lay flowers. In this way, they honour dead and lost family members from East Prussia. Thus, in this place of memory, people have the opportunity to express their pain, share the suffering they experienced and hope that they will be heard and understood by people with the same fate. Therefore, they organise meetings not for the local residents, but they rather maintain a conservative approach and hold these meetings for themselves, within an internal circle. Thus, this memorial was needed by the wolf children themselves to express their pain, but it was not intended for society to gain broader awareness about them. To sum up, it can be asserted that the creation of the memorial site was not an example of activism by the wolf children; rather, it was a means for them to express and discuss their traumatic experiences.

From a forgotten topic to memory activism

The relationship between the wolf children and the community of Pagėgiai can be analysed by examining two symbolic ruptures that took place in 2006 and 2021. In the first instance, 2006, the decision of the Lithuanian *Seimas* to establish the Day of Commemoration for the Victims of the Genocide in Lithuania Minor[36] was a further incentive to raise awareness of the wolf children topic in the border region. Following this declaration,[37] the publication of biographies wolf children and individual stories of children taken in by Lithuanian families in the Pagėgiai region became more frequent and significant in the regional media. The local press began to be more actively interested in the events of 1944 and the actions of the Red Army.[38]

The interest in the actions of the Red Army and the theme of the wolf children can be explained through the overarching historical narratives associated with

35 Interview conducted with Ingrid K. on 4 August 2022 in Šiauliai.

36 Official declaration by the Lithuanian Republic *Seimas*, https://eseimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.452270?jfwid=j4ag25ww [accessed: 14.10.2024].

37 But this assessment has received significant criticism and reactions from historians. For example, see H. Vitkus, *Mažasis Genocidas?, 1944 m. pabaigos-1945 m. įvykių Rytprūsiuose istorinis vertinimas*, "Kultūros barai", vol. 8/9 (2006), p. 19.

38 What significantly contributed to the changes in the population of the Klaipėda region was the mass flight toward the West on account of the approach of the Red Army in the second half of 1944. Although precise data and statistics on the exodus population are not available, it is estimated that from July 1944 until January 1945, about 80 percent of the local people could have left. For example, N. Kairiukšytė, *Klaipėdos krašto kaimo vietovių apgyvendinimas pokario metais*, in N. Vėlius, *Lietuvininkų kraštas*, Kaunas 1995, pp. 350–352.

the history of the events in the historical Klaipėda Region in 1944. On 16 October, following the proclamation of the Day of Commemoration for the Victims of Genocide in Lithuania Minor, a concerted effort was initiated to revive shared historical narratives concerning the Klaipėda Region and East Prussia. For instance, the creation of Kaliningrad was interpreted as a way to cover up crimes against the peaceful civilians of East Prussia.[39] The official commemoration date made it possible for the Pagėgiai community to connect with the subject of wolf children, establishing it as a mass and targeted extermination of the population and applying the legal concept of genocide.

The proclamation of this day as one to be commemorated and remembered has resulted in increased attention being focused on the memorial site within the municipality and the historical narrative of the wolf children. On 16 October, cultural workers from the municipality commenced organising commemorations, including candlelight vigils held at the monument. Despite this, the announcement of this commemorative date did not arouse uniform public interest, there were only isolated articles in the local press and occasional events on 16 October at the monument dedicated to wolf children. One of the reasons why the declaration of memorable dates in this case did not function as memory activism was the accentuation of a violent narrative. As emphasized by Anna Rigney, memory activism requires a focus on positive rather than violent narratives.[40]

The community attempted to commemorate 16 October as a memorial day at the monument dedicated to the wolf children; they did not receive any feedback or response from the wolf children, however. The failed communication between the Pagėgiai community and the wolf children can be explained by the different perceptions of responsibility regarding these traumatic events. For instance, in their narratives, the wolf children emphasize that their integration into the community was directed towards the recognition of their experiences in Germany. Meanwhile, the relationship with Lithuania is defined as follows:

> Lithuania did everything it could to help us. People, despite not having enough food themselves and fearing for their own safety, welcomed us. Later on, Lithuania was the first to pay compensation after the independence of 1990. Germany, on the other hand, is unwilling "to take responsibility for its children, even though we have seemingly atoned for the sins of our parents."[41]

39 *Nebėra dabar knygų, meilės, žvaigždžių*, "Šilainės kraštas", 14.10.2016, https://www.silaineskrastas.lt/kultura/silaines-sodas/nebera-dabar-knygu-meiles-zvaigzdziu/ [accessed: 14.10.2016].

40 A. Rigney, *Remembering Hope: Transnational activism beyond the traumatic*, "Memory studies", vol. 11 (3), (2018), p. 374.

41 Interview conducted with Luisė Kažukauskienė on 20 April 2017 in Vilnius.

When the wolf children attempted to seek recognition in Germany, the efforts of the Pagėgiai community to rekindle and bring relevance to the shared history on 16 October proved unsuccessful. The collective experience of the people in Klaipėda Region and the East Prussian wolf children in 1944 did not become a significant focal point for community cohesion. Despite the fact that in 2006 the memorial site did not establish any form of dialogue between the Pagėgiai community and the wolf children, in 2021 a new form of memory was created, manifested through sculpture.[42] With the growing relevance of the historical memory of wolf children in Lithuania and the appearance of the novel "Mano vardas – Marytė" by Alvydas Šlepikas, there was a need to create another place for a memorial in Pagėgiai municipality. A new sculpture – an angel – was erected on the initiative of the whole Pagėgiai community next to the already existing place of remembrance created by the wolf children. Similar to the attempt on 16 October 2016, the shared experience with East Prussia was brought to the forefront.

School pupils and their teachers are invited to commemorate 16 October, the day of the genocide in Lithuania Minor.[43] The history of the Red Army's invasion of Lithuania Minor is emphasized to the students. The creation of Soviet Kaliningrad is presented as an effort to hide crimes against humanity, colonise the region, and erase the German history of the area. After creating the new place of remembrance, the narrative of the Pagėgiai community was further developed, offering an interpretation of the history of the wolf children within the framework of the concept of genocide. The using of the concept of genocide and a violent narrative failed to attract greater attention to the memory site within the community.

From war to hope and official Wolf Children Commemoration Day

The relationship of Lithuanian society with the topic of wolf children, as well as the community of wolf children themselves, changed with the onset of the war in Ukraine. In interviews conducted after February 2022, the wolf children began to consider whether they wanted to publicly disclose their names; they started to speak about resurfacing memories of their childhood when the war began:

> Imagine you have small children or grandchildren, and a catastrophe occurs in your country, forcing them into a completely foreign land with an unfamiliar language and culture. They have nowhere to take refuge, nowhere to even cry. How might such children feel? These memories remain with them; they cannot be erased. When the war in Ukraine began, on the very first

42 It was given the name "A Sad Angel".

43 Spalio 16-oji - Mažosios Lietuvos gyventojų genocido diena, https://www.pagegiai.lt/?2596853797&fbclid=IwAR21gOZsQ0ZUqOIXmVige_i-YsYdiGY6osw099ktmgfa_Rx0e4J01I6Es5E [accessed: 14.10.2024].

> day, I saw those refugees on television, and those images were very familiar to me. The actions of the Russians are only the beginning of what they are capable of, as their methods of warfare remain unchanged: looting, arson, senseless killings, rapes, and the abduction of children.[44]

Lithuanian society began to seek answers regarding the behaviour of the Red Army in the history of the wolf children, while the experience of hunger became a secondary narrative. During this period, a book about the wolf children was translated from German into Lithuanian.[45] An example of memory activism can be seen in the private initiative of Liudas Puškorius, who commissioned the monument "Go to Lithuania, my little daughter, you will survive there" created by sculptor Kęstutis Keparutis. The memorial plaque at the monument, written in Lithuanian, German, and English, helps both individual visitors and groups learn about the history of the wolf children. Despite the emphasis on the actions of the Red Army, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the experiences of the wolf children were seen as a lesson to be understood, and they carried a sense of hope.

A significant change occurred in June 2024 when the *Seimas* of the Republic of Lithuania designated 14 September as Wolf Children Remembrance Day. This date was chosen because the first gathering of former East Prussian German children had taken place in Klaipėda on 14 September 1991. The selection of this commemorative date, linked to the events of the 1990s, was influenced by several key factors. One of these was the difficulty in finding a unifying date in the post-war history of the wolf children, while another was the desire to emphasize the context of 1990, when the survivors themselves began to testify about their experiences, which was associated with survival and a sense of positivity. For the wolf children themselves, this not only symbolized a remembrance of their experiences but also a tribute to the Lithuanian guardians who took in the German children:

> First of all, I would like to thank Lithuania. Back then, these children were not called wolf children but *vokietukai* [little Germans – R.M.]. They always found help and support from Lithuanians, ordinary Lithuanian people. Without any orders, without any instructions. In fact, there was an order not to help them, as they were considered fascists, even though they were just small children. Yet the Lithuanians always supported those children, and I believe that this day is meant to commemorate and highlight that Lithuanians, as a people, are very kind. They are believers, very good people who will always help someone in need, as the events of today also demonstrate.[46]

44 Interview conducted with Luisė Kažukauskienė on 29 August 2023 in Tauragė.
45 Ch. Hardingaus, *Vilko mergaitė*, Vilnius 2024.
46 Commission for the Historical Memory of the Struggles for Freedom and the State speech by wolf children leader Luise Kažukauskiene: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lJQfkcpGo8&t=1406s [accessed: 14.10.2024].

The commemoration event revealed that it is possible to connect the wolf children community with society. During the event held at the Wolf Children memorial site in Mikytai, rituals were re-enacted, with crosses blessed by Evangelical and Catholic priests. Moreover, the wolf children openly shared their stories with the public, and the local community expressed their belief that the wolf children had become part of the identity of the Klaipėda region. Although only 23 members remain in the "Edelweiss–Wolfskinder" community, the participation of their children and grandchildren in the commemoration signifies that this date will also become important for them, reinforcing their identity as descendants of the wolf children.

Conclusion

The memory of East Prussian German children has gone through different phases. In the post-war years, migration was concealed, and during the Soviet era in Lithuania, it became associated with the term *vokietukai* (little Germans), undergoing a process of silence, though not complete amnesia. With Lithuania's restoration of independence, this memory reawakened, leading to the formation of a community and the creation of a memorial site in Mikytai. For the *vokietukai*, who had become known as wolf children, the creation of this site offered a way to process their pain and was tied to a narrative of suffering. However, the establishment of the memorial site did not indicate a desire to initiate dialogue or share their history with the local community.

In 2006, after the Day of the Genocide of Minorities of Lithuania was officially recognized, the local community in the Pagėgiai region took the initiative to remember and commemorate the wolf children. Despite their efforts, including the erection of an angel sculpture dedicated to the wolf children, there was little engagement or participation from the wolf children themselves. A significant shift occurred with the onset of the war in Ukraine, when the *Seimas* of the Republic of Lithuania established an official remembrance day for the wolf children. This led both the wolf children and broader society to begin reflecting on their relationship with war and its consequences.

● ● ● ● ● ●

Bibliography

Arbušauskaitė A.L., *"Kaliningrado vokiečių" klausimo išsprendimas (?): Lietuva, 1951-ieji metai*, "Antrojo pasaulinio karo pabaiga Rytų Prūsijoje: faktai ir istorinės įžvalgos", vol. 18 (2009), pp. 207–230.

Balčiūnė I., *Neprižiūrimų ir beglobių nepilnamečių problema ir jos sprendimas 1944–1954 metais Lietuvoje*, "Lietuvos istorijos studijos", vol. 47 (2021), pp. 82–98.

Connerton P., *Seven types of forgetting*, "Memory studies", vol. 1 (2008), pp. 60–71.

Kairiukšytė N., *Klaipėdos krašto kaimo vietovių apgyvendinimas pokario metais*, in N. Vėlius, *Lietuvininkų kraštas*, Kaunas 1995, pp. 339–372.

Kraniauskienė S., Pocytė S., Leiserowitz R., Šutinienė I., *Klaipėdos kraštas 1945–1960 m.: naujos visuomenės kūrimasis ir jo atspindžiai šeimų istorijose*, Klaipėda 2019.

Krukauskienė E., Šutinienė I., Trinkūnienė I., Vosyliūtė A., *Socialinė atmintis: minėjimai ir užmarštys*, Vilnius 2003.

Fivush R., *Speaking silence: The social construction of silence in autobiographical and cultural narratives*, "Memory", vol. 18 (2010), pp. 89–98.

Hardingaus Ch., *Vilko mergaitė*, Vilnius 2024.

Gailienė D., *Ką jie mums padarė. Lietuvos gyvenimas traumų psichologijos žvilgsniu*, Vilnius 2021.

Geda S., *Pėdos: Eilėraščiai*, Vilnius 1966.

Górska E., *Memory activisim: methods of creation of alternative collective memory in former Yugoslavia and Israel*, "Maska", vol. 32 (2016), pp. 7–18.

Gronau S., *Vilko vaikai: klyksmas vaiduoklių mieste*, Kaunas 2017.

Gutman Y., *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel–Palestine*, Nashville 2017.

Gutman Y., Wustenberg J., *The Routledge Handbook of memory activism*, London–New York 2023.

Kibelka R., *Vilko vaikai: kelias per Nemuną*, Vilnius 2000.

Laukaitytė R., *Pokaris Lietuvoje. Belaukiant išlaisvinimo*, Vilnius 2022.

Lehndorff H., *Rytų Prūsijos dienoraštis. Gydytojo užrašai 1945–1947*, Vilnius 2021.

Matimaitytė R., *Lupant "vilko vaikų" svogūną. Rytprūsių krašto vokiečių vaikų likimas ir atmintis Lietuvoje*, "Naujasis Židinys – Aidai", vol. 7 (2019), pp. 32–37.

Meras I., *Žemė visada gyva*, Vilnius 1963.

Meras I., *Ant ko laikosi pasaulis*, Vilnius 1968.

Nora P., *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, "Representations", no. 26 (1989), pp. 7–24.

Rigney A., *Remembering Hope: Transnational activisim beyond the traumatic*, "Memory studies", vol. 11 (3) (2018), pp. 369–380.

Sotero M., *A Conceptual Model of Historical Trauma: Implications for Public Health Practice and Research*, "Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice", vol. 1 (2006), pp. 93–108.

Spatz Ch., *Ostpreußische Wolfskinder Erfahrungsräume und Identitäten in der deutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaft*, Osnabrück 2016.

Spatz Ch., *Nur der Himmel blieb derselbe: Ostpreussens Hungerkinder erzählen vom Überleben*, Hamburg 2016.

Šlepikas A., *Mano vardas – Marytė*, Vilnius 2012.

Vitkus H., *"Mažasis Genocidas?"1944 m. pabaigos – 1945 m. įvykių Rytprūsiuose istorinis vertinimas*, "Kultūros barai", vol. 8 /9 (2006), pp. 18–21.

●●●●●●

Summary

At the end of the Second World War, due to the failed evacuation, part of the population remained in the territory of northeastern East Prussia. The evacuation towards the West also resulted in encounters between civilians and the Red Army, which often led to violent actions. The situation was further complicated by the onset of famine, which forced many East Prussian residents to flee to Soviet Lithuania. In the Lithuanian collective memory, this migration became associated with the term *vokietukai* (little Germans). During the Soviet era, the history of this group remained largely silenced, although some individual authors mentioned their experiences in their works. After Lithuania regained its independence, former German children from the East Prussian region organised themselves and created a memorial site to preserve their memory. Until now, historiography has focused mainly on historical analysis, but the topics of commemorative dates, memorial practices, and the interaction between the wolf children community and Lithuanian society have been largely unexplored. This article demonstrates that it was only with the establishment of a dedicated commemorative day for the wolf children that a meaningful dialogue with the wider society was initiated.