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ESTONIAN ARTISTS IN THE GEISLINGEN DP CAMP, 1945–1950: ENDEL KÕKS AND AGATHE VEEBER

INTRODUCTION

The experiences of Estonian artists who lived and worked in the displaced persons (DP) camps in post-war Germany remain one of the least explored aspects of 20th century Estonian art history. Although research on Estonian exile culture has expanded considerably over the past few decades, it has focused primarily on literary and cultural history, while the everyday artistic practices of refugee artists and the sources documenting them have received comparatively little attention. One reason for this imbalance is the limited number of artworks and archive material that have survived from the immediate post-war years.

This article examines the correspondence of Endel Kõks (1912–1983) and Agathe Veeber (1901–1988), preserved in Estonian memory institutions,¹ as an important source for the study of post-war exile art. Their letters offer a rare insight into artistic practice, professional networks, and the everyday realities of exile during the years they

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12697/BJAH.2026.30.05>

1 Estonian Literary Museum, Art Museum of Estonia, Tartu Art Museum, etc.

spent in the Estonian DP camp at Geislingen. Rather than treating the correspondence simply as biographical evidence, the article uses it as a case study of artistic life in the Estonian DP camp at Geislingen, reconstructing the everyday practices of artists and the functioning of the wider refugee community.

Alongside the correspondence, the article also analyses the works created by Endel Kõks and Agathe Veeber during their years in Geislingen, tracing the themes that shaped their artistic responses to exile. This raises a broader question about the relationship between exile and artistic creativity. The philosopher Vilém Flusser has argued that exile, while often a profound personal crisis, can also become a source of creative renewal. In Flusser's view, the loss of one's homeland compels individuals to rethink both their identity and their relationship to the surrounding cultural environment, and it is precisely this continuous process of adaptation that can foster creative thinking.² Exile is therefore not simply a condition of loss or trauma, but also a prerequisite for critical and creative reflection. The exile becomes the 'other', both to themselves and to those around them. Living in exile thus means existing in a constant dialogue between one's past and one's new surroundings, continually negotiating meaning at the intersection of the familiar and the unfamiliar.³

The Second World War profoundly disrupted Estonian artistic life. Around one hundred Estonian artists were lost to the country for various reasons, approximately fifty of whom ended up in Germany.⁴ Given that there were only around two hundred professionally active artists in Estonia at the time,⁵ this represented a substantial proportion of the country's artistic community. Between 1945 and 1950, the DP camp at Geislingen developed into one of the largest

2 See Vilém Flusser, "Exile and Creativity", *Writings: Vilém Flusser*, ed. by Andreas Ströhl (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 104–105.

3 Ibid., 108–109.

4 The exact number of Estonian artists who reached Germany varies between sources. Many scholars rely on Endel Kõks's 1946 survey, according to which at least thirty-nine Estonian artists arrived in Germany. See Endel Kõks, "Kunst ja kunstnikud paguluses", *Kauge Kodu*, 6–7 (1946), 12 ff. Since Kõks did not yet have a complete overview at the time and the list of refugee artists has subsequently been expanded, the actual number was almost certainly higher. For a more comprehensive list of artists and art historians who left Estonia, see Kaalu Kirme, *Muusad ei vaikinud. Kunst Eestis 1941–1944* (Tallinn: Kunst, 2007), 266–267.

5 Ibid., 266.

centres of the Estonian refugee community,⁶ and it was there, at different moments, that both Endel Kõks and Agathe Veeber eventually settled.

The present study grew out of an exhibition titled *Wandering in the Storms of the World: Art Created in the Shadow of War. Geislingen 1944–Tartu 2024*, held at the University of Tartu Art Museum in 2024 (curated by Kadri Asmer and Ingrid Sahk). The exhibition first brought together many of the archival materials discussed in this article and provided the starting point for a more detailed investigation of the correspondence between Endel Kõks and Agathe Veeber. Marking the eightieth anniversary of the Great Escape⁷ of 1944, it brought into dialogue the work of three Estonian artists⁸ who were placed in Geislingen DP camp after the Second World War and five Ukrainian artists⁹ who came to Tartu after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Rather than presenting exile solely as a historical phenomenon, the exhibition explored it as a condition that shapes artistic practice across different generations and historical contexts. Despite the eighty years separating the two experiences, three strikingly similar themes emerged from the works of both groups: questions of national identity, engagement with a new environment and personal space, and broader existential concerns.

6 In October 1944, at least seventy-five Estonians were living in Geislingen, but their numbers increased steadily after the war, reaching nearly 4,100 by the spring of 1946. See Ferdinand Kool, *DP Kroonika: Eesti pagulased Saksamaal 1944–1951* (Lakewood, NJ: Estonian Archives in the United States, 1999), 249–250.

Geislingen developed into a kind of "mini-Estonia", with its own Estonian-language educational, cultural, and civic institutions. To accommodate the growing refugee population, houses in three districts of the town were requisitioned from local residents, together with their furnishings, a measure that inevitably gave rise to tensions between the Estonian refugees and the local German population.

7 The *Great Escape* refers to the mass flight of Estonians from the advancing Soviet forces in the summer and autumn of 1944. It is also commonly known as the *Boat Escape*, as most refugees fled across the Baltic Sea, often in small boats. Estimates vary, but the prevailing view is that around 80,000 Estonians left the country during the war, of whom approximately 6–9 percent lost their lives on the journey to the West. See, for example, Kaja Kumer-Haukanõmm, "1944. aasta suur põgenemine ja eliidi lahkumine Eestist", *Tuna* 4 (2014), 53.

8 Endel Kõks, Agathe Veeber, and Hans Tsirk.

9 Viktoria Berezina, Hanna Davõdova, Nadja Karpenkova, Martha Martovska, and Anna Ryazanova.



FIG. 1. ENDEL KÕKS IN GEISLINGEN, 1949. PHOTO: TARTU ART MUSEUM.

ENDEL KÕKS AND AGATHE VEEBER

Endel Kõks and Agathe Veeber belonged to the generation of Estonian artists whose artistic careers and personal lives were profoundly shaped by the Second World War and the experience of exile that followed. Both studied at the Pallas Art School¹⁰ in Tartu. Before the war, Kõks had established himself as one of the most distinctive painters of the younger generation, while Veeber had gained considerable recognition as a printmaker, exhibiting her work both in Estonia and internationally.

Neither artist reached exile by following the route taken by the majority of Estonian refugees in the autumn of 1944. Kõks was conscripted into the German army, wounded at the front, and taken to a military hospital near Danzig. Documents preserved in the Arolsen Archives show that, when beginning his new life in Germany, he denied any affiliation with military organisations.¹¹ This is hardly

¹⁰ Endel Kõks studied painting at the Pallas Art School between 1934 and 1940 and Agathe Veeber studied printmaking there between 1933 and 1938.

¹¹ Arolsen Archives, 32110000 157.196. Personal file of Koks, Endel, born 21 Apr 1919, Tartu.



FIG. 2. AGATHE VEEBER IN GERMANY AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR. PHOTO: KARL HINTZER, HERDER INSTITUTE.

surprising, since displaced persons entering the camps were subjected to screening procedures and physical examinations designed to detect evidence of service in the German armed forces. Anyone found to have served was liable to be excluded from the camp system.

Veeber had already left Estonia in the spring of 1944: her mother was killed during the Soviet bombing of Tallinn in March 1944, and her studio, located next to St Nicholas' Church, was destroyed. This appears to have been a decisive factor behind Veeber leaving Estonia. As early as the spring of 1944, she travelled to Vienna to continue her artistic training, taking with her a portfolio of prints – everything that had survived the fire.¹² By the end of the war she, too, had reached Germany and, with Estonia now under Soviet occupation, entered the network of displaced persons camps established by the Allied authorities, initially in Wiesbaden. The two artists arrived at the Estonian DP camp in Geislingen at different times: Kõks in 1945, and Veeber in the autumn of 1946, following the closure of the Wiesbaden camp.

¹² A. V., "Üks südaäine intervjuu. Naisgraafik Agaate Veeberi juures", *Eesti Post*, 1 July 1947, 4.

Despite the uncertainty of life in the camp, both artists remained remarkably active. Kõks quickly became one of the principal organisers of artistic life within the Estonian community. As the first chairman of the Estonian Visual Artists Centre (*Eesti Kujutavkunstnike Keskus*), founded in 1946, he organised exhibitions, taught drawing and painting courses, and worked tirelessly to create opportunities for fellow refugee artists to continue their professional practice. Veeber, meanwhile, devoted herself primarily to printmaking. She continued to pursue her own artistic practice, illustrated books, and took part in exhibitions whenever the opportunity arose, despite persistent material shortages and an uncertain future.

As events unfolded, Veeber emigrated to the United States in 1949, while Kõks and his wife Erika settled in Sweden the following year. Neither artist was ever able to return to their homeland, Estonia.

ESTONIAN ARTISTIC LIFE IN GEISLINGEN

After the end of the Second World War, the American occupation authorities concentrated foreign nationals in DP camps administered by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).¹³ As noted above, Geislingen an der Steige developed into the largest Estonian displaced persons (DP) camp in Germany and one of the principal centres of Estonian cultural life in exile between 1945 and 1950. It soon became known as the 'Estonian capital', with its own schools, voluntary associations, publishing houses, theatres, and a remarkably vibrant cultural life.

The visual arts also occupied a prominent place in the cultural life of the camp. The first major exhibition of Estonian art in exile opened in Geislingen as early as December 1945, followed by another large exhibition in the summer of 1946, which brought together twenty-six artists and nearly two hundred works. Around the same time, the Estonian Visual Artists Centre was established to bring together Estonian artists living in Germany, organise exhibitions, and promote Estonian art abroad. The association operated largely through its own

¹³ The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was responsible for administering the displaced persons (DP) camps and overseeing other key aspects of refugee administration, including repatriation and the screening procedures used to determine eligibility for DP status.



FIG. 3. VIEW OF GEISLINGEN, C. 1944–1945. PHOTO: KARL HINTZER, HERDER INSTITUTE.

initiative, seeking opportunities to sell artworks, establish contacts with galleries, and secure support for future exhibitions.¹⁴ (Fig. 4 ja 5)

The correspondence nevertheless makes it clear that the artists' situation was far from straightforward. In 1946, complaints were voiced that the camp administration regarded artists as little more than "useless freeloaders"¹⁵ and assigned them to the camp's most arduous manual labour. It was largely for this reason that the artists considered it essential to establish a professional organisation of their own that could represent their interests and create opportunities for them to continue working as artists.

Art education also played an important role in the life of the camp. In early 1946, drawing and painting courses were established in Geislingen. Informally known among camp residents as the "academy of art", they were initially intended for students from the Pallas Art School and the Tallinn State School of Applied Art whose studies had been interrupted by the war, but they soon expanded

¹⁴ See, for example, "Kunstnikud arutasid päevamuresid", *Eesti Post*, 13 August 1946, 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.



FIG. 4. ESTONIAN ART EXHIBITION IN GEISLINGEN, C. 1944–1945. PHOTO: KARL HINTZER, HERDER INSTITUTE.

beyond this original purpose. Initially, most of the classes were taught by Endel Kõks, later other teachers would be added (e.g. Agathe Veeber).

When the artists were forced to give up their studio in the spring of 1946, classes continued outdoors for a time: “Somewhere on the slopes of Schlosshalde, a shady *Privatweg* with five benches was discovered. ... On rainy days, work continued under the trees. When the artists themselves brought along another bench, passers-by remarked, ‘Ah, the Academy is expanding’.”¹⁶ A month later, new premises became available in the local secondary school, allowing the courses to continue under considerably better conditions.

Alongside the fine arts, courses in applied art were also offered. These proved particularly popular among the refugees for practical reasons, as they provided an opportunity to earn a living. In 1947, Endel Kõks wrote to the Estonian artist Karin Luts (1904–1993), who had settled in Sweden in 1944, saying that although interest in art had grown considerably, most people preferred applied art because it enabled them to sell their work and improve their

16 “Kunstijügrid Viie-Oru linnas”, *Eesti Post*, 5 July 1946, 5.



FIG. 5. ENDEL KÕKS. *CHASED*. 1949. OIL ON CANVAS. TARTU ART MUSEUM.

financial situation. “Applied art here consists of painting and pyrography on wooden plates, cigarette cases, boxes, and small containers,” wrote Kõks.¹⁷

Between 1945 and 1950, approximately fifty exhibitions featuring the work of Estonian artists were held in Germany.¹⁸ In addition to exhibitions organised within the DP camps themselves, Estonian artists participated in joint exhibitions alongside Baltic and other East European refugee artists, where particular emphasis was placed on presenting the distinct cultural identities of the Baltic states. These exhibitions served both artistic and political purposes: they fostered

17 Estonian Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum [EKM EKLA], F 349 m 100:21, 3/4 p. Endel Kõks to Karin Luts, 5 August 1947.

18 Tartu Art Museum’s archive [TKM, TA], f 3, n 6, s 262, 1.

international contact while at the same time affirming the continuity of Estonian culture in exile.

BEING AN ARTIST IN A DISPLACED PERSONS CAMP

In the post-war DP camps, refugees were provided with the basic necessities of life –accommodation, food, clothing, and medical care –, while in return they were expected to contribute to the daily running of the camp. Being an artist was not recognised as a profession, and creative work therefore brought no special privileges. As Endel Kõks later recalled, artists whose works were being exhibited and praised by critics could at the same time find themselves “assigned to loading coal or sorting rotting straw sacks”¹⁹. Art was regarded as a leisure pursuit rather than a profession, which meant that artists were neither entitled to studio space nor exempt from compulsory work duties.²⁰ As a result, artists lacked both the time to devote to their artworks and the necessary art supplies. Acquaintances could often help to acquire the latter, and a supply of cigarettes, which also served as currency at the time, could also come in handy. Because of this, artists who arrived in Geislingen initially worked independently and within the limits of their opportunities.

Nor did an artist’s profession offer any advantage when it came to resettlement beyond Germany. On the contrary, countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia gave preference to agricultural and industrial workers, prompting many refugees to change their stated occupation or retrain for a different profession. For example, Kõks had spent several years trying to find a way out of Germany. Since preference was given to manual labourers, he remarked with evident frustration in 1947: “Because of my profession and higher education, I am unsuitable for emigration. My brother tried to go to Canada as a coal miner, but failed because he had spent sixteen years at school.”²¹ By the beginning of 1950, little had changed and Kõks was still living in Germany. Writing about the possibility of emigrating to the United States, he observed: “As for my settling in America, that remains highly uncertain. At present, those who are

19 Endel Kõks, “Viis aastat eesti kunsti Saksamaal”, *Tulimuld*, 1 (1951), 69.

20 Kool, *DP Kroonika: Eesti pagulased Saksamaal 1944–1951*, 728.

21 EKM EKLA, F 349 m 100:21, 5/6 p. E. Kõks to K. Luts, 31 December 1947.

being resettled are people who are, or have registered themselves as, farmers. But I am an honest artist, so my turn would still be a long way off....”²²

The greatest challenge, however, was the working environment itself. In 1947, Endel Kõks described his living conditions in Geislingen as follows: “My wife and I live in an attic room with a floor area of 12.48 square metres, which also serves as my studio. ... In winter we are bitterly cold. ... As far as the distribution of supplies is concerned, my profession places me in the ninth category.”²³ It is worth noting that there were ten such categories in total, with the tenth comprising “everyone else”.²⁴

Agathe Veeber’s first years in exile were even more difficult. In the DP camp at Wiesbaden, she spent more than six months sharing a single room with ten other women. In the spring of 1946, she wrote to Kõks: “Unfortunately, I have not been able to work at all for more than six months, thanks to the Wiesbaden camp. ... Until February I lived in a room with ten other women; I was the eleventh. All I had was a bed. My inks and paper were stored underneath it, while my clothes hung on the wall beside it. ... I find the whole environment unbearable, and I simply cannot work there.”²⁵ In the same letter, Veeber expressed her hope of moving to Geislingen, where she might at last have a room of her own and be able to resume her artistic work.

The correspondence also reveals how directly material shortages affected the artists’ work. Faced with a lack of canvas and oil paints, Kõks increasingly turned to monotype and described his situation as follows: “Perhaps the following fact illustrates our working conditions: the approximately one hundred works of any value that I have produced during my stay here have all been painted on paper, from newspaper to writing paper. Officially, we have not received a single paintbrush or tube of paint, and there simply is no oil.”²⁶

As a printmaker, Veeber faced even greater challenges. Besides the shortage of paper and printing inks, she had to search for printing presses in different towns across Germany. In 1946, after yet another

22 EKM EKLA, F 349 m 100:21, 18/22 p. E. Kõks to K. Luts, 22 January 1950.

23 EKM EKLA, F 349 m 100:21, 1/1. E. Kõks to K. Luts, 4 May 1947.

24 Ibid.

25 TKM TA, f 3, nim 6, s 215, 19. Archive of Estonian Exile Artists: Agathe Veeber (1901–1988).

26 EKM EKLA, F 349 m 100:21, 1/1. E. Kõks to K. Luts, 4 May 1947.

unsuccessful attempt to print her plates, she wrote: “My spirits are very low and I am deeply worried about what is to become of me. ... It is almost impossible to obtain ink and paper. I do not know where I can print my work. The Estonian representatives have taken the worst possible attitude towards my efforts. What is the point of trying at all, and who needs art? For the time being I am still interested in everything, but I do not know how long that will last. I am afraid I shall sink into apathy again.”²⁷

Eventually, Veeber found an opportunity to print her work in Homburg, which led her to postpone leaving Wiesbaden until the camp was finally closed.²⁸ For her, the opportunity to continue working outweighed the poor living conditions. The problem of finding printing presses did not disappear after her move to Geislingen. Describing the situation in 1947, she wrote: “The technical side of things is difficult. I often have to travel to Stuttgart to make my prints. By chance, I recently found an address here as well, where I can occasionally print at a master’s workshop. Sometimes I also go to Göppingen. An artist in Ulm has offered to help me too, promising to speak to a printer who might be willing to print my work. ... It is difficult to obtain plates, and there are no acids to make etchings either.”²⁹

One positive aspect of exile in Germany was the opportunity it offered artists to engage with Western European art and art publications. For example, Kõks regularly visited exhibitions of Western European art and was particularly appreciative of the French occupation zone, where permits to visit exhibitions and publish art books were easier to obtain.³⁰ These encounters with Western European artistic developments had a lasting influence on the direction of his work.

The correspondence shows that being an artist in a DP camp meant constantly balancing creative ambition and material hardship, as well as having an uncertain future. It was under precisely these conditions that both Kõks and Veeber forged their post-war artistic identities and produced a significant part of their Geislingen-period oeuvre.

27 TKM TA, f 3, nim 6, s 215, 20. Archive of Estonian Exile Artists: Agathe Veeber (1901–1988).

28 TKM TA, f 3, n, 6, s 215, 21. A. Veeber to E. Kõks, 5 May 1946.

29 A. V., “Üks südaõine intervjuu. Naisgraafik Agaate Veeberi juures”, *Eesti Post*, 1 July 1947, 4.

30 EKM EKLA, F 349 m 100:21, 6/9. E. Kõks to K. Luts, 17 January 1948.

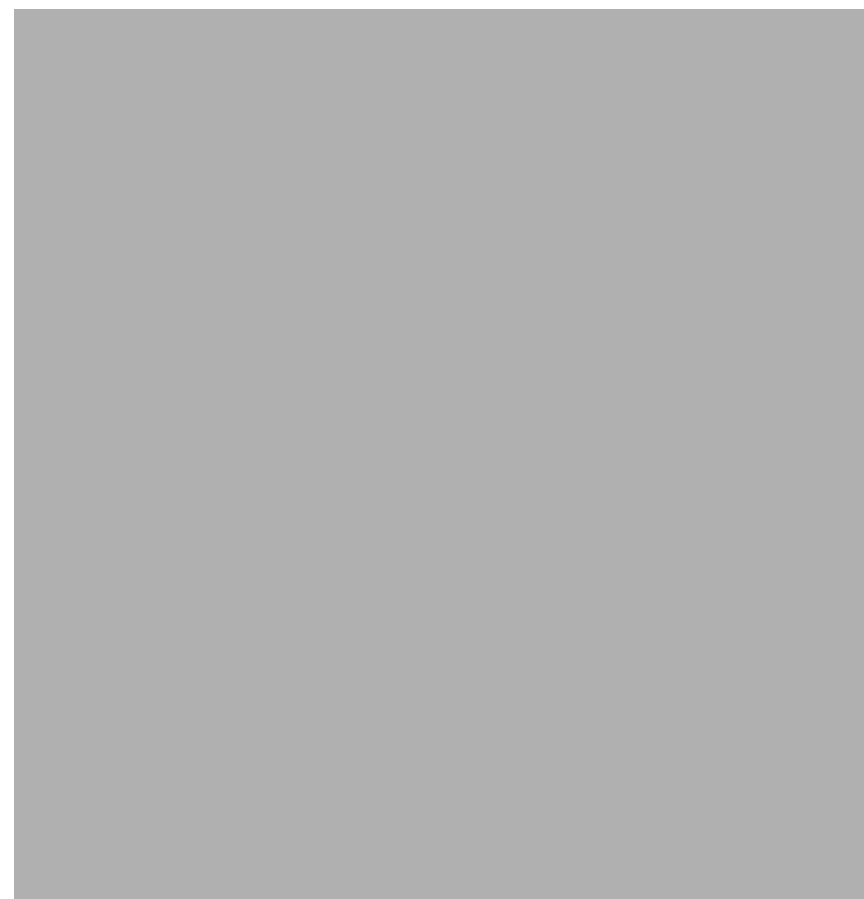


FIG. 6. ENDEL KÕKS. *REFUGEE ESCORT*. 1950. MONOTYPE. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

THE EXILE WORKS OF ENDEL KÕKS AND AGATHE VEEBER

Broadly speaking, three recurring themes can be identified in the work of Estonian artists in exile: the preservation of national identity, engagement with a new environment, and reflections on the everyday realities and psychological experience of exile.³¹

31 Art historian Triin Metsla reached similar conclusions in her master’s thesis: Triin Metsla, *Paguluse probleemid kunstiloomes. Eesti pagulaskunst Saksamaal aastatel 1945–1950*. MA thesis (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2018), 50.



FIG. 7. ENDEL KÕKS. *STILL LIFE*. 1946. MONOTYPE. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

Surprisingly, however, the experience of flight itself was depicted less often than might be expected. This is equally true of Endel Kõks's work from the Geislingen years, which largely continued the themes and formal explorations that had characterised his pre-war painting. Only a handful of works refer directly to exile, among them *Chased* ("Tagaaetu", 1949, oil on canvas, Tartu Art Museum) and *Refugee Escort* ("Põgenike saatja"³², 1950, monotype, private collection), in which the figure of the guardian angel functions less as a religious

32 Also "L'angelo accompagna i profughi".



FIG. 8. ENDEL KÕKS. *ARTISTS CLUB*. 1947. WATERCOLOUR. THE UNDER AND TUGLAS LITERATURE INSTITUTE.

symbol than as a metaphor for hope. The psychological complexity of exile can also be discerned, albeit more subtly, in the monotype *Sad Clowns* ("Kurva klounid", 1944, monotype, Art Museum of Estonia), produced shortly after Kõks arrived in Germany.

At the same time, the years in exile proved to be formative for Kõks's artistic development. Living in Germany gave him direct access to post-war Western European art, particularly French modernism, and these encounters found clear expression in his use of colour and form. A review of the 1946 exhibition in Baden-Baden even compared one of his interiors to the work of Henri Matisse, noting the strong influence of the French School.³³ The few surviving interior scenes appear to depict the artist's own living quarters. One such example is the monotype *Still Life* ("Vaikelu", 1946, Art Museum of Estonia), depicting Kõks's wife Erika.

Portraits and depictions of his circle of friends also occupy an important place in Kõks's work. Of particular significance is the

33 EKM EKLA, F 349 m 100:21, 6/9. E. Kõks to K. Luts, 17 January 1948.

painting *Artists Club* ("Kunstnerite klubi", 1947, watercolour, Under and Tuglas Literature Centre),³⁴ which captures the close-knit Estonian cultural circle that emerged in Geislingen and functions both as a group portrait and as a historical document of exile. As the writer Pedro Krusten (1897–1987) later recalled: "We refused to accept life as it was. We had to do something. We decided to kindle a small intellectual fire around which our spirits might be stirred into song. A group of friends founded a circle, deliberately giving it the rather nonsensical name the Artists Club."³⁵

The correspondence shows that, for Kõks, making art was far more than a professional occupation; it was a way of preserving his inner balance and his faith in the future. In 1948, he wrote to Karin Luts: "Yet I feel that I am beginning to come closer to whatever it is that truly lies within me. ... I have sometimes asked myself why one should make art at all ... but in the end I have always answered myself: why not? Is this work any more meaningless than everything else in this world?"³⁶

For Veeber, creative work was shaped above all by the limitations imposed by her materials. As a printmaker, she depended on printing presses, metal plates, and good-quality paper, all of which were exceptionally difficult to obtain in post-war Germany. Nevertheless, she continued to work with remarkable determination, travelling between different German towns in search of opportunities to print her work. Her letters make it clear that artistic practice was, above all, a matter of emotional survival. As she wrote to Kõks in 1946: "Believe me, Kõks, I suffer terribly when I cannot work. ... It is such a silly, empty, and foolish life as I have never known before."³⁷

This single sentence captures the experience of many of the artists living and working in Geislingen. In exile, art was more than a means of self-expression or a profession; it became a way of preserving both a professional identity and a sense of inner continuity at a time when

34 Painted by Kõks in 1947 as a birthday present for the language editor Aino Kosesson (1916–1994), the work depicts the artist himself and his wife Erika together with several leading figures from the Estonian cultural community in exile, including the poet Henrik Visnapuu (1890–1951) and the pianist and conductor Peeter Paul Lüdigi (1906–1983), among others.

35 Pedro Krusten, "Dokument arhiivi jaoks", *Kaugelviibija käekõrval* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2006), 55.

36 EKM EKLA, F 349 m 100:21, 6/9. E. Kõks to K. Luts, 17 January 1948.

37 TKM TA, f 3, nim 6, s 215, 18. Archive of Estonian Exile Artists: Agathe Veeber (1901–1988).



FIG. 9. AGATHE VEEBER. *READING*. 1946. LITHOGRAPH. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

the world artists had known had collapsed. The correspondence between Kõks and Veeber shows that creative work became one of their most important means of coming to terms with the experience of exile.

Despite the difficult circumstances, Agathe Veeber continued to work with remarkable determination and remained almost the only Estonian refugee artist in the DP camps in Germany to practise intaglio printmaking and lithography. A review of the Geislingen exhibition in 1946 observed that "there is only one name representing true printmaking, created from plate to press: Agathe Veeber."³⁸

38 Harald Parrest, "Eesti Kujutavkunsti Keskuse näituse Geislingenis 1.–8. detsembrini 1946", *Eesti Post*, 4 December 1946, 4.



FIG. 10. AGATHE VEEBER. *OPEN DOOR*. 1946. DRYPOINT. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

Alongside artist Eduard Wiiralt (1898–1954), her work was regarded as the finest example of Estonian printmaking in exile.³⁹

Despite the shortage of printing presses, paper, and other essential materials, Veeber produced around a dozen new drypoint prints and lithographs during her years in Germany.⁴⁰ Unlike the paintings of many refugee artists, most of these works have survived, making

39 Mall Jürma, “Pagulaskunstnike ‘Kunst ja Töö’. Dp-ide kunsti- ja rahvakunsti-näituselt Baden-Badenis”, *Eesti Rada*, 22 June 1946, 7.

40 In a 1947 interview, Veeber stated that she had produced ten works in exile. See A. V., “Üks südaõine intervjuu. Naisgraafik Agaate Veeberi juures,” *Eesti Post*, 1 July 1947, 4. A later handwritten list, however, records thirteen works, including several titles that have not survived or cannot presently be identified. See Art Museum of Estonia Archives, EKMA.32.2.31, l. 24–25, Agathe Veeber’s letters to Alice Lattik. It nevertheless appears that the majority of these works were produced between 1945 and 1946.

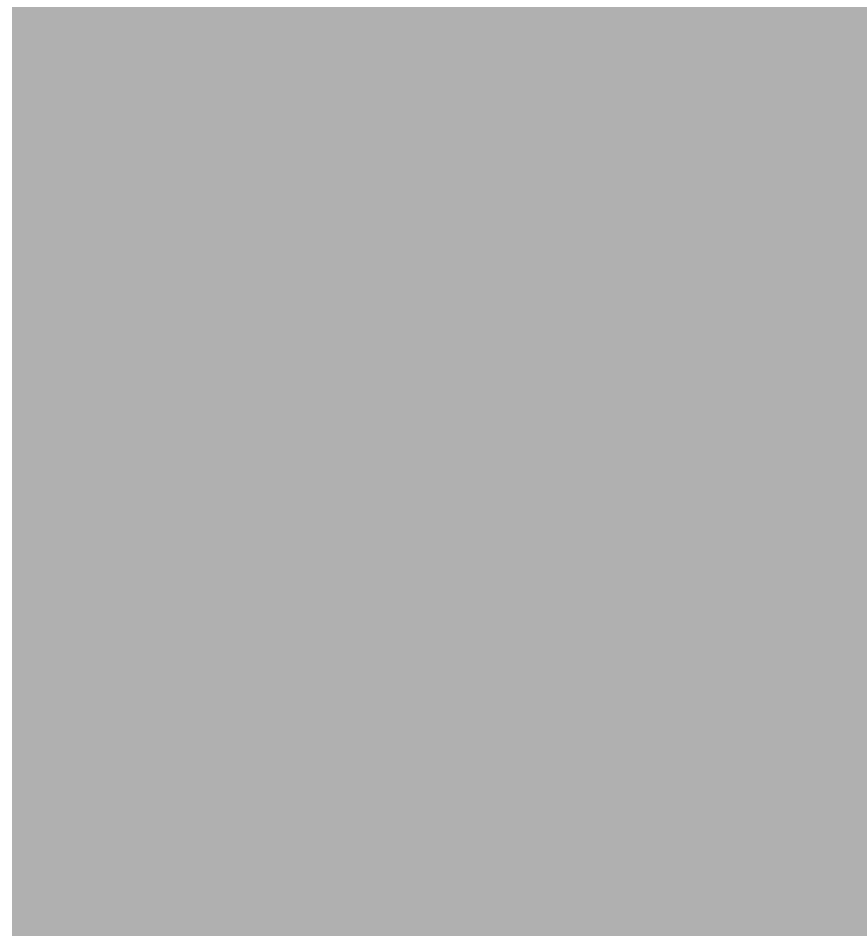


FIG. 11. AGATHE VEEBER. *GIRL IN NATIONAL DRESS*. 1946. LITHOGRAPH. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

it possible to gain a more complete picture of her work from the Geislingen period.

Looking back, graphic works such as *Reading*, *Interior*, *Open Door*, and *Visit/In the Sickbed* (“Lugemas”, 1946; “Interjäär”, 1947; “Avatud uks”, 1946; “Külaskäik/Haigevoodis”, 1946) are among the most poignant. Closely connected to the artist’s own living conditions in the DP camp, these quiet, sparsely furnished interiors combine autobiographical experience with a broader reflection on the loneliness and uncertainty of losing one’s homeland. At the same



FIG. 12. AGATHE VEEBER. BAVARIAN LANDSCAPE. 1946. DRYPOINT. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

time, Veeber produced numerous portraits and illustrations for books and journals published in exile, including Henrik Visnapuu's poetry collection *Mare Balticum* (1948), an edition of poems by Juhan Liiv (1949), and the journal *Kauge Kodu*.⁴¹ Looking back many years later, Endel Kõks regarded Veeber's ink drawings for Juhan Liiv's poems as the outstanding achievement of her years in Germany.⁴²

Motifs associated with the lost homeland appear relatively infrequently in Veeber's work, yet when they do, they carry considerable symbolic weight. The lithograph *Girl in National Dress* ("Tütarlaps rahvarõivais", 1946), together with her views of St

41 Henrik Visnapuu, *Mare Balticum* (Geislingen: [s.n.], 1948); Juhan Liiv, *Valitud luuletused* (Detmold: Kesa, 1949). Veeber later also illustrated Visnapuu's collected poems, published in Stockholm in 1964–1965.

42 Endel Kõks, "Agaate Veeber 80. Rahvusvahelise mainega eesti graafika esindaja", *Eesti Päevaleht* = *Estniska Dagbladet*, 25 February 1981, 5.

Nicholas' Church in Tallinn and the island of Ruhnu, expresses not so much a nostalgic longing for the past as the experience of losing one's homeland. As Endel Kõks later recalled, the motif of national costume initially served in exile art as "a painful memory from which it was not easy to free oneself"⁴³, before gradually finding a more natural place within the applied arts. *Girl in National Dress* also became highly popular among the Estonian exile community, leading to the production of several additional impressions.⁴⁴

At the same time, Veeber's work was by no means confined to memories of Estonia. Her German-period works, including *Bavarian Landscape* ("Baieri maastik", 1946, drypoint), reveal a keen interest in her new surroundings and reflect her determination to continue as a professional artist despite the circumstances of exile. The work she produced in Germany testifies both to her exceptional commitment to printmaking and to the way in which a deeply personal experience of displacement could be transformed into a broader meditation on the loss of home, loneliness, and resilience.

CONCLUSION

By 1949, artistic life in the Geislingen DP camp was already beginning to wind down as its residents prepared to resettle in new host countries. Between 1947 and 1951, most Estonians living in Germany emigrated to the United States, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Sweden.⁴⁵ In the same year, Endel Kõks wrote, "Our family, too, is beginning to scatter", adding that one artist had gone to the United States to work as a domestic servant, others had become farm workers, and another was working as a night watchman in a garage. "The rest are still waiting to see what fate has in store for them. Time will tell what I, too, shall end up doing. Until then, I shall keep trying to make my way by 'a different path'."⁴⁶ For Kõks, the different path meant remaining an artist, which he

43 Endel Kõks, "Eesti kujutav kunst Saksamaal 1945–1950", *Eesti saatusaastad: 4* (Stockholm: EMP, 1966), 169–178.

44 Anne Untera, Ulrika Jõemägi, *Tuntud, kuid siiski tundmatu: Agathe Veeber (1901–1988)* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuuseum, 2018), 67.

45 Jaak Kangilaski, "Eesti kunst paguluses (1944–1968)", *Eesti kunsti ajalugu: 6*, ed. and comp. by Jaak Kangilaski (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2013), 87.

46 EKM EKLA, F 347, m 2:23, 4/4 p. E. Kõks to R. Antik, 11 May 1949.

did. These remarks by him vividly illustrate a situation in which the continuation of a professional artistic career could no longer be taken for granted. The possibility of continuing to create depended not only on material resources and circumstance, but also on the artists' own perseverance.

The correspondence between Endel Kõks and Agathe Veeber shows that the years spent in Geislingen were not merely a period of recovery from war or of waiting for resettlement, but also an important phase in their artistic development. Their work was shaped not only by the loss of their homeland but increasingly by their new surroundings and by the determination to maintain their identity as professional artists under radically changed circumstances. At the same time, contact with Western European art opened up new artistic influences and played an important role in the formation of their post-war visual language.

KADRI ASMER, INGRID SAHK: ESTONIAN ARTISTS IN THE GEISLINGEN DP CAMP, 1945–1950: ENDEL KÕKS AND AGATHE VEEBER

KEYWORDS: ENDEL KÕKS; AGATHE VEEBER; GEISLINGEN DP CAMP; EXILE ART; REFUGEE ARTISTS

SUMMARY

This article examines the correspondence of the Estonian artists Endel Kõks (1912–1983) and Agathe Veeber (1901–1988) as a source for the study of artistic life in the Estonian displaced persons (DP) camp at Geislingen, Germany, between 1945 and 1950. While research on Estonian exile culture has traditionally focused on literature and intellectual history, the everyday practices of refugee artists have received considerably less attention. Drawing on previously unpublished correspondence preserved in Estonian archives, the article reconstructs the material conditions, professional networks, and creative aspirations that shaped the work of two artists living in post-war exile.

The correspondence reveals that artistic practice in the DP camps was conditioned by severe material shortages, uncertain prospects for resettlement, and the need to reconcile creative work with

the practical demands of everyday survival. At the same time, it demonstrates that exile was not merely a period of waiting or loss, but also one of artistic development. Both Kõks and Veeber continued to work actively, engaged with contemporary Western European art, and sought to maintain their professional identity despite displacement.

CV

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