



The Summertime of my Autumn
David Creedon

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For the elderly, it's not the prospect of living alone that concerns them,

but the fear of being forgotten

The devastation caused by emigration has left its mark on Latvia.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Latvian independence in 1991, life has totally changed. For a younger generation these changes along with accession to the European Union have brought opportunities and freedom that their parents never experienced.

The young, with no personnel experience of what things were like under the Soviet regime, find it hard to understand the hardships that their parents and grandparents endured. The older generations have lived through some turbulent times that have included independence, occupation, world war, cold war and independence again. In a new Latvia the traditional ways are now being consigned to history as bureaucrats in Brussels make decisions while the younger generations gravitate toward the bright lights of London, Dublin and Berlin.

Today the population of Latvia stands at approximately two million people. Since independence the country has experienced a population decline of 22% while government projected figures estimate the population may fall to 1.6 million by

2030. Since most emigrants are under 35 years of age the demographic of it's remaining population is ageing faster. The vanishing of a generation, in a mass exodus, to more affluent countries coupled with low fertility rates have left a vacuum from which it may take decades to recover

Driving through the dusty gravelly roads of the western borderland of Latvia you only sporadically encounter another vehicle. The devastation of rural communities has led to traditional skills, which for generations had been passed down from father to son, being lost and gone forever. Farms lie empty while equipment rusts and lands remain un-ploughed. There is a feeling of desolation and loneliness as, for mile after mile, abandoned homes crumble and decay and are reclaimed by nature. In time the only thing that will remain will be rocks.

The proportion of the population over 60 years is now at over 22 percent. For the elderly, it is not the prospect of living alone that concerns them, but the fear of being forgotten. They become less visible and to the community it may appear that they have no contribution to offer. In modern society where everything is disposable the opinions of older people can sometimes be dismissed as old fashioned and irrelevant.

Historians write about a country's history by conducting academic research and examining state papers, but for people who lived through these historic events, what is sometimes forgotten is how valuable their stories and perspectives are in understanding the past. Leafing through their photo albums, the memories of their youth come flooding back as if it were yesterday. For some, they just closed their eyes and replayed past events as if they were rewinding a scene from a film, while others didn't want to say anything as it seemed the weight of the past may be too traumatic to recall. For several there is nostalgia for what they described as Latvia's golden age while many were critical of the government and it's implementation of policies from Brussels.

The painful separation of family is a common thread that runs through Latvian history. Since independence the main discourse for Latvia has been about emigration, but during the Soviet occupation thousands were deported on cattle trains to Siberia and other parts of the USSR as the Soviets attempted to crush any nationalist resistance to their rule.

One man said; *The last time I saw my family was in 1941, when I got home they were all gone, I don't know where they went and I didn't even say goodbye. I was deported to Siberia and wasn't allowed back home until 1957. I'm not going to say anymore now as I don't want to be seen as a traitor.*

Hearing stories like this it was if the ghost of Josef Stalin still lingered and is reaching out from beyond the grave as a warning to those who speak out of turn. In their minds there is still a fear of what things were like and they share an anxiety over present day growing geopolitical tensions that also remind them of the past.

The harrowing partition of families can also be witnessed in empty homes that are scattered throughout the countryside, some stripped bare while others contain family possessions that have been left discarded. Toys that were once cherished are now cast aside as youngsters grow into adulthood and leave behind the playthings of a child as they depart for a better life. Scattered letters from sons and daughters apologizing for not been able to write more often and not being able to visit due to their own busy lives are all a reminder of how quickly a rural community can disappear.

For politicians, emigration can act as a safety valve and a solution to a growing unemployment problem. The departure lounge of Riga Airport is witness to the many thousands of young people who have left. The sight of mothers breaking down in tears as they say a long goodbye to loved ones, bears testimony to the many thousands who have left, some never to return.

Vecākopa audzi nomāc nevis apziņa, ka vecumdienas nāktos pavadīt vienānātnē, bet bailes, ka viņi varētu tikt aizmirsti

Postījums, ko Latvijai nodarījusi emigrācija, atstājis spēcīgu nospiedumu valsts vēsturē. Pēc Padomju Savienības sabrukšanas un Latvijas neatkarības atjaunošanas 1991.gadā, dzīve šeit krasi izmainījās. Jaunākai paaudzei šīs izmaiņas kopā ar Eiropas Savienības pieejamību atnesa iespējas un brīvību, ko viņu vecāki nekad nebija piedzīvojuši. Jauniešiem, kuriem nebija padomju režīma pieredzes, bija grūti saprast grūtības, kuras nācās izdzīvot viņu vecākiem un vecvecākiem. Neatkarība, okupācija, pasaules karš un vēlreiz neatkarība. Jaunajā Latvijā pēc neatkarības atgūšanas „pierastās” saimniekošanas tradīcijas tika nodotas vēsturei, jo lēmumus pieņem birokrātiskā Brisele, kamēr jaunā paaudze tiecas uz Londonas, Dublinas un Berlīnes spilgtajām gaismām.

Šobrīd Latvijā dzīvo aptuveni divi miljoni iedzīvotāju. Kopš neatkarības atgūšanas valsts ir piedzīvojusi iedzīvotāju skaita kritumu par 22% un valdība ir aprēķinājusi, ka šis skaitlis saruks līdz 1,6 miljoniem 2030. gadā. Tā kā lielākā daļa emigrējošo Latvijas iedzīvotāju ir jaunāki par 35 gadiem, sabiedrība strauji novecos.

Veselas paaudzes izzušana, jauniešiem emigrējot uz bagātākām valstīm, kā arī zemā dzimstība, atstāj tukšumu, un būs vajadzīgi gadu desmiti, lai tauta atjaunotos. Braucot pa putekļainiem grants ceļiem Latvijas rietumu pusē, jūs reti sastapsiet kādu automašīnu. Lauku iedzīvotāju skaita sarukšana ir novedusi pie tradicionālo amata prasmju panīkšanas, kas paudzēm ilgi tika nodotas no paaudzes uz paaudzi. Saimniecības stāv tukšas, darbarīki rūsē, un zeme paliek neaparta. Ir pamestības un vientilības sajūta, pamestās mājas sabrūk un aizaug. Pēc kāda laika paliks tikai akmeņi.

Iedzīvotāju īpatsvars Latvijā vecumā virs 60 gadiem pārsniedz 22 procentus. Vecākos cilvēkus neuztrauc doma par dzīvi vienātnē, bet gan ir bailes tikt aizmirstiem. Sabiedrībā viņi parādās un līdzdarbojas mazāk, un varētu likties, ka seniori vairs nespēj dot nekādu ieguldījumu. Modernā sabiedrībā, kur viss ir paredzēts vienreizējai lietošanai, vecāku cilvēku uzskati var tikt uztverti kā vecmodīgi un mazsvarīgi.

Vēsturnieki apraksta valsts vēsturi, balstoties uz akadēmiskiem pētījumiem, un valstisku dokumentu izpēti, bet ir cilvēki, kuri ir izdzīvojuši šos vēstures notikumus, un bieži tiek aizmirsts, cik

vērtīgi ir šie stāsti un viedokļi vēstures izpratnei. Šķirstot vecus foto albumus, atmiņas par viņu jaunību plūst atpakaļ, it kā tas būtu noticis tikai vakar. Daži aizver acis un izdzīvo pagātnes notikumus, kā no tikko skatītas filmas, daži savukārt nevēlējās teikt neko, un likās, ka pagātnes nasta ir bijusi pārāk sāpīga, lai to atsauktu atmiņā. Daži jūt nostalgiju viņu uztverē pēc Latvijas zelta laikiem, bet daudzi kritizē valdību un to, kā tiek ieviesta Briseles politika.

Sāpīgā tēma par ģimeņu izšķiršanu ir pavediens, kas caurvij Latvijas vēsturi. Kopš neatkarības atgūšanas viens no galvenajiem sarunu tematiem ir bijusi emigrācija, savukārt Padomju okupācijas gados šķiršanos un traģēdijas sagādāja izsūtījumi uz Sibīriju un citām PSRS vietām, kad Padomju vara mēģināja iznīcināt jebkuru nacionālistisku pretošanos režīmam.

Kāds vīrietis teica: Pēdējā reize, kad redzēju savu ģimeni, bija 1941. gads. Kad es atgriezos mājās, viņi visi jau bija prom; nezinu, kur viņi palika un es pat nespēju atvadīties. Mani izsūtīja uz Sibīriju un neļāva atgriezties līdz 1957. gadam. Es tagad vairs neko neteikšu, jo nevēlos tikt uzskatīts par nodevēju.

Dzirdot šādus stāstus, bija sajūta, ka Jozefa Staļina spoks ir tepat

kaut kur un mēģina no sava kapa izteikt brīdinājumu tiem, kas runā kaut ko lieku. Viņu prātos ir joprojām bailes no pagātnes, un viņus pārņem dusmas par mūsdienu ģeopolitisko saspīlējumu, kas arī atgādina pagātnes notikumus.

Par traģiskajiem ģimeņu izšķiršanas notikumiem liecina arī tukšās mājas, kas ir izkaisītas lauku ainavā; dažas ir pavisam sagruvušas, dažās vēl ir cilvēkiem piederošas lietas, kas turpat ir atstātas. Rotaļlietas, kas kādreiz ir bijušas ļoti dārgas, tagad kaut kur mētājās, jo jaunieši ir izauguši par pieaugušajiem, pametuši savas bērnības lietas un devušies „labākā” dzīvē. Izmētātas vēstules no dēliem un meitām, kas atvainojas par aizņemtību un par to, ka nav varējuši biežāk uzrakstīt un apciemot – tās visas ir liecības, cik ātri var izzust lauku iedzīvotāju sabiedrība.

Politiķi emigrāciju var uztvert kā drošības vārstu un bezdarbnieku problēmas risinājumu. Izlidošanas zāles Rīgas lidostā liecina par tūkstošiem jauniešu, kuri ir aizbraukuši. Nopūtas, kuras dzird no bēdu nomāktām mātēm, kad viņa ilgi atvadās no saviem mīļajiem, liecina par tiem tūkstošiem, kuri jau ir aizbraukuši un nekad neatgriezīsies.



Jānis Razgals (b.1939)

“My mother gave birth to me in a field just three months after war was declared. When the Germans arrived in 1941 they were respected by everyone as they dressed well and were more cultured. They always brought chocolate and other treats for the children”.

“My father was forcibly conscripted by the Nazi’s and was captured by the Red Army after the German defeat in the Courland Peninsula. From here he was brought to Pecli and marched to Skrunda where he was put on a train and sent to work in the gold mines of Russia, he didn’t return home until 1955”.

Jānis family originally came from Latgale and the house he now lives in was once owned by Germans. He is a qualified mechanic and during his time in the army he worked as a chauffeur. From time to time would drive officer’s wives to the beach. He is very much interested in history and hanging on his wall are portraits of historic people. It’s not that he admires them it’s just they all played a part in shaping Latvian history.

“After the war the Russians took almost everything and we had very little food. My mother worked on a Kolkhozy (Collective farm) where she milked cows. From time to time we were able to get milk and this was a big bonus. My school was seven kilometres away and there were five children in my class. I used to walk through the woods to get there, in winter we used candles to light our way and when we arrived our faces would be black.”.

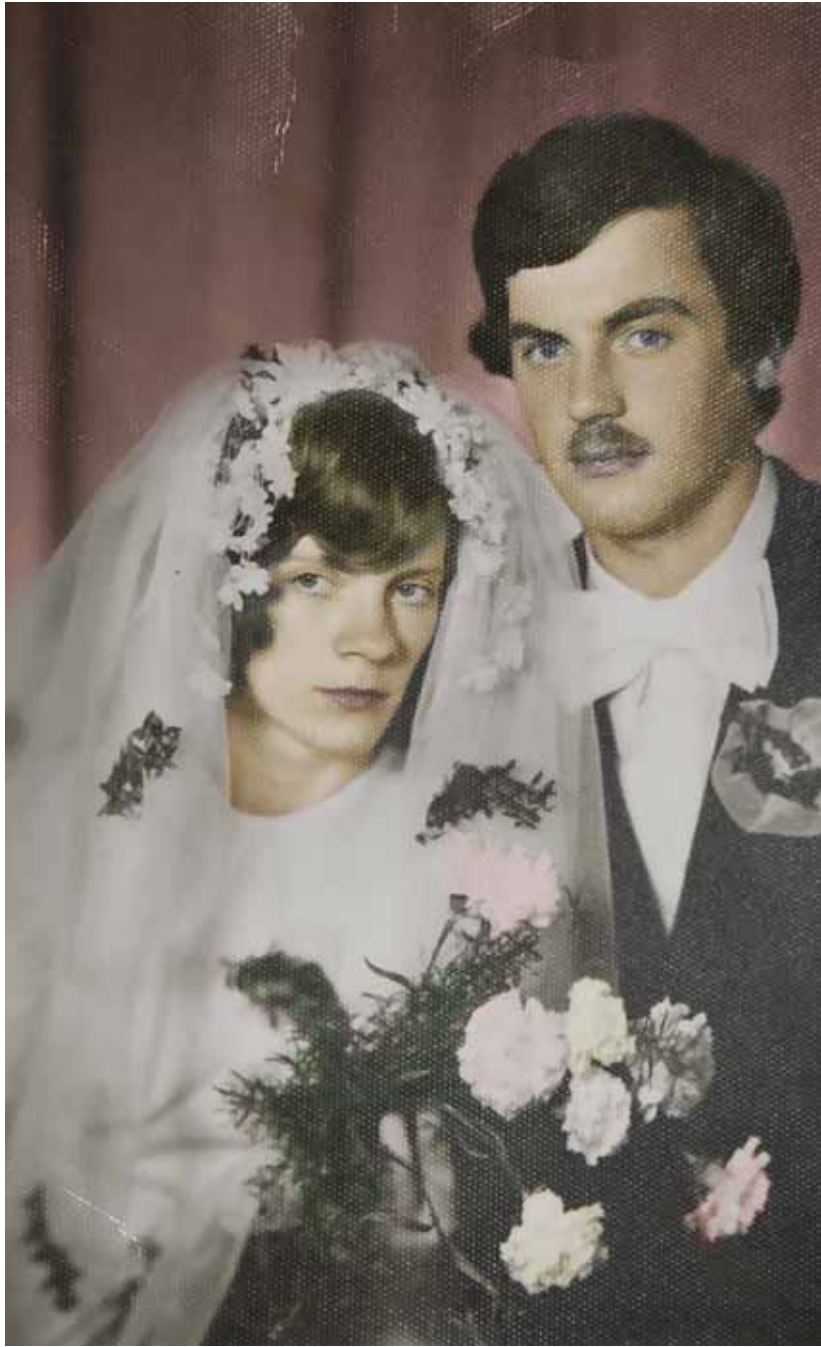




Andrejs Balandins (b. 1952), Skaidrīte Balandina (b. 1953)
Kuldigas Novads

Married in 1974 they are about to celebrate their ruby anniversary. They now live in his parents' home having returned to look after Andrejs ailing parents. The land on this small holding is now rented out as Andrejs is no longer capable of looking after it as he has a heart condition and requires constant medical attention. Even though he needs an operation to correct his heart problems it is unlikely that he will get it. Even so, both have a very positive outlook on life. He recalled being terrified on his first day at school because he was seen as an outsider as he was from the countryside. Later in life he worked as a mechanic and a chauffeur and lived in Kuldiga before returning to the family farm





Anita Ruke (b. 1955), Valdis Rukis (b. 1955)
Kuldigas Novads

Anita first met Valdis in Kindava when he visited her twin brother. She worked in a shop at the time and Valdis would call to see her regularly. She was 21 when they got married in Ventspils. In 1981 they bought the house they now live in and following the collapse of the Soviet Union they acquired the land around the house. They divorced in 1988 but eventually got back together in 2005 following the tragic death of their son. They grow vegetables only for their own use and do not make any money from the farm. Valdis gets casual work from time to time but it is hard to depend on this for a steady income.





Daina Kārklīņa (b. 1956)
Kuldīgas Novads

On a cold winter's morning in December 1979, Daina went to the shed to work not knowing the tragedy that was about to unfold. After completing her tasks she returned to her house to find it in darkness. When she entered the kitchen black smoke and heat came out to meet her. She ran back to the shed which was about two hundred metres away and called on her neighbours for help. They removed her three children Aiga, Andris and Mareks from their beds but by then it was too late. When the medics arrived they tried to resuscitate them but by then there was nothing they could do. "It was the worst day of my life and there is not a day goes by when I don't recall those terrible events". The tragedy put considerable strain on her marriage and eventually divorced her husband. Five years later she remarried and now has another three children.



Juris Alhasovs (b. 1945)

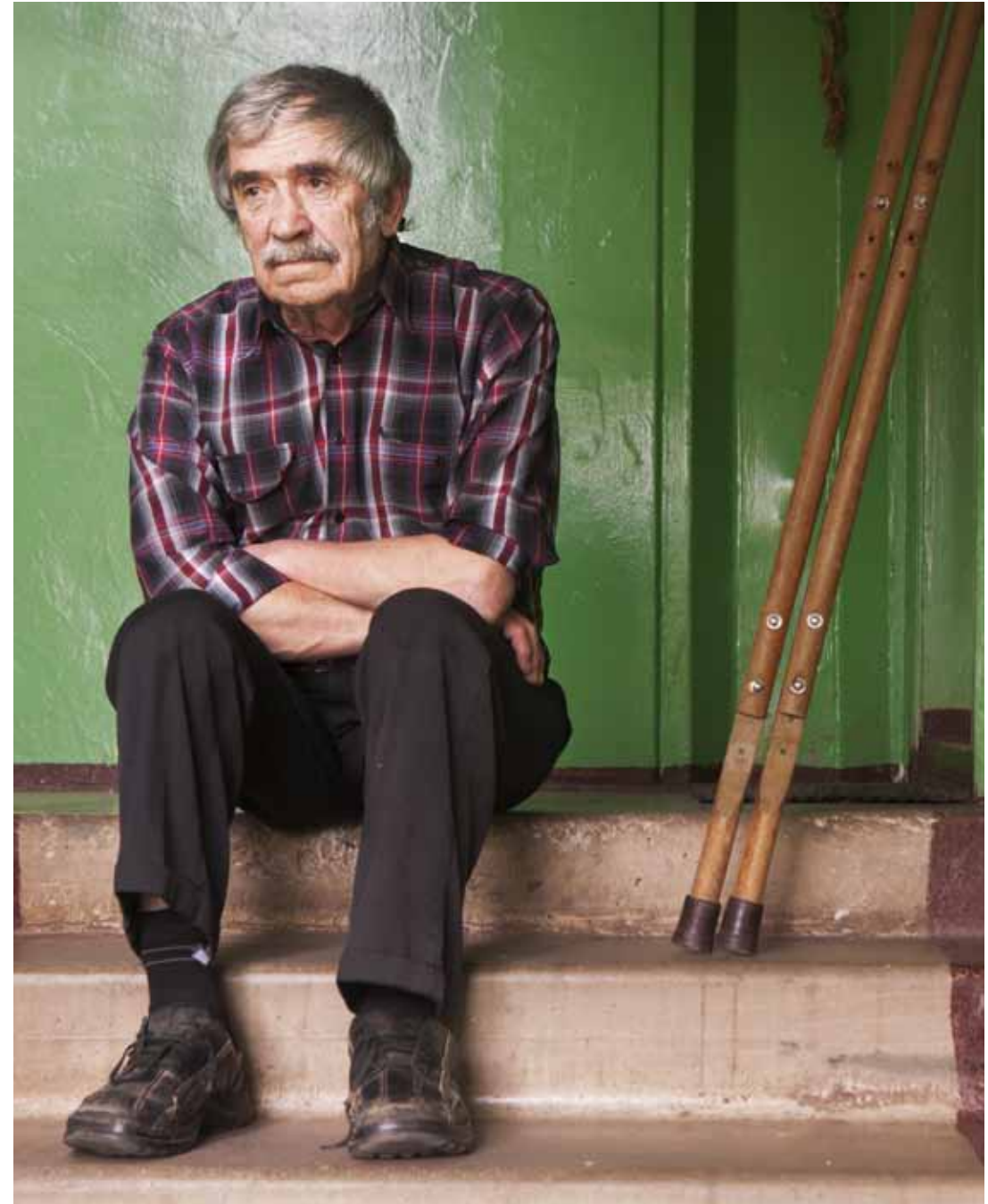
Juris' mother Velta was four months pregnant with him when she travelled on the roof of a train from Riga to Vilnius, Lithuania. She was born in 1925 in Zaube which is about 90 km from Riga. Her father and mother had a farm where they had ten cows and worked the land themselves. His mother describes the period 1934-1940 as Latvia's Golden Age. During the war, when she was eighteen, both she and her sister had to escape into the forest to hide from retreating German soldiers. Their farm was on the frontline and the Germans wanted to take young virgin women with them back to the Fatherland. When they returned to their house only two cows remained. Their horse was ill and Velta's father brought him to a vet at the nearby Red Army camp. After the horse had recovered her mother invited the vet Esed to their home for lunch. A friendship soon developed between Velta

and Esed of which her mother strongly disapproved. However, the friendship grew and they were married in January 1945 and then travelled to Lithuania where Juris was born. They stayed in Vilnius for six months before travelling to Dagestan. They stayed at her husband's village for about six years where she gave birth to another four children. They returned to Latvia because Juris had contracted Poliomyelitis and they felt he would get better treatment back in Latvia. Her husband died in 1990 and she now lives with her youngest daughter who recently suffered a stroke. Juris went to study in Saint Petersburg but had to give up his studies as an engineer because of his polio. When he returned to Latvia he worked in a factory. He never married and now lives in the same apartment complex as his mother.

Juris parents' Velta and Esed circa 1945



Juris as a young boy





Zenons Specius. (b. 1940)
Kuldigas Novads

Zenon's wife died in 1988 and he now lives alone. He spent twenty seven years hunting and his house is decorated with trophies from his trips. On his plot of land Zenon grows vegetables for his own use and also has a small orchard which produces more apples than he needs. He likes to travel and has just returned from a cruise. He also collects toys and has a large collection of toys from Kinder Eggs.



Biruta Gustovska (b. 1935)

Biruta was born in Limbaži, Vidzeme in 1935; she remembers that during the war her family hid fugitives. Biruta recalls how the Germans soldiers were very polite and well-mannered while the Russian army personnel were poorly educated and rude. “After the war the Russians took everything and turned our farm into a Kolkhozy (collective farm), which they named Rainbow. We had no freedom and people were always watching and reporting to the authorities, so you had to be careful”. Biruta’s great grandfather knew that the Russians would come for him; he knew that he and his family would be deported. In order to save his family he committed suicide, it was common in the district for people to take their own lives in order to protect their families.

Later on Biruta studied to become a teacher. During her time at college it was discovered by another student that when she was younger she had taken Lesvētibas, a sacred rite of her church. She reported her to the authorities and Biruta was convinced she would not be allowed to finish her degree, but after speaking to her tutor she was reassured that she would be able to complete her studies. Even though she was allowed to qualify there were consequences, as she was the only one of her class to be transferred outside the district. Biruta was sent to a small school on the Baltic in the Kurzeme district. This small school was located in a forbidden area close to the sea. As the Baltic Sea was a militarised zone it was off limits to the majority of the population. As a result her family or friends could not visit unless they got special permission from the authorities. “We didn’t celebrate Christmas as there was a fear we would be reported”. Following the Russian Revolution, celebrating Christmas was discouraged and it would be a serious matter if a public official were caught partaking in the practice.

Biruta stayed teaching for 14 years before leaving and getting married, she now lives in Kuldīgas Novads.

Biruta circa 1950





A spinning wheel in the loft of a house near Skrunda



Valdis Freimanis (b. 1953)

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union Valdis worked on a collective farm. After the Soviet occupation in 1940 land ownership of over 30 hectares was nationalised. According to Valdis collective farming was very stressful as the farm life was dictated by having to meet set quotas . After independence he took to dairy farming which he found too difficult. He say's " the problem now is that all the young people are leaving to Riga and abroad and there is nobody left to pass on skills too.



Margita Līcīte (b. 1950)

When she was young, Margita played a game in which she imagined travelling to different places. She remembers that she must have been about ten years old because she was aware that she could not cross the border.

“The young people today don’t know what it was like. I was lucky; I married an artist who was older than me. He was much more stable and stronger than I was and because of my young age I was glad he was there to guide me. His wisdom, broad mind and inner peace influenced me so much. We managed to create our own environment, atmosphere and lifestyle that was extremely different from normal people’s lives. It was of course possible because artists were very highly rated during Soviet times. We would often put on our old long playing Jazz records and pretend that we were in Paris. In our minds we were free but in reality we knew we could never cross the borderline of the Iron Curtain. It was not like we tried to escape the reality through music - but we built the world around us and we felt international. It was through jazz music, we subscribed to Domus and Vogue magazines from Italy and spent careless summers with our friends from an artistic background talking about art, literature, and refusing to live the depressing grey life we saw around us”.





Sabīne Norvaiša (b. 1932)

Sabīne lives alone now and has four children and eleven grandchildren. Three of them live nearby and help her, while her son Jānis has emigrated to Ireland and now lives in Cahir Co. Tipperary with his wife and two children. In a telephone conversation Jānis explained; “I came to Ireland to get a job and make money. I don’t think I will ever return to Latvia to live as my children are now settled here and go to school, Ireland is our home now”. It is estimated that in 2011 over thirty thousand Latvians were living in Ireland.

Nowadays, she said, you cannot really trust people. Sabine says her house was built in 1936 and originally was a house and office of the local wood keeper. During the war the house was used as an army hospital. Sabine moved into her home in 1956 and used to work as a vet.





Ilmārs Klucis (b. 1937), Rita Kluce (b. 1939)

This is going to be the first winter that Ilmars and his wife will stay in the house of his father. They both live in Riga and now commute to Skrunda. They have one son and a daughter who lives on Guernsey in the Channel Islands with her four children. They return to Latvia for three months every year. In 2011 Ilmars and Rita celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. They met at a sports summer festival for graduates of the professional technical schools, both of them were cyclists. Rita used to work in the chemical industry while Ilmārs worked with heavy machinery. The house was built in 1927 and belonged to his father who lived there until he died. They are presently renting out part of the house. Rita says; “the most important thing in life is to marry the right person, all other things are secondary”.





Jars of pickles on a shelf in a basement of a home near Skrunda.

Lūcija Cāzere (b. 1931)





Annas' second husband Ernest

Anna Blūma (b. 1939)

Anna was born close to the Lithuanian border into a large household. During the Second World War, German officers gave her family twenty-four hours to leave their home. Forced to move they found shelter in another house which caught fire and they became homeless again. Displaced by war and occupation they eventually came to live in Scrunda. After the war they had to do a lot of agricultural work in collective farms. When Anna was twenty she married her first husband who she was not in love with and had two children. She says it was a very hard time but improved. She went to work in a large restaurant in the area which was also a place of cultural activities. During this time her husband became jealous and subsequently became violent towards her. One of the musicians who played in the restaurant defended her from her husband. A while after that her husband moved in with another woman and they had a son together.

Anna divorced him and married Ernest the musician who helped her. Ernest was much older than her and was a self- taught musician who had lost one of his legs during the war. A nationalist, Ernest and his two brothers were arrested by the Soviets. His brothers were executed and he was deported to a Gulag in Siberia for nine years. After the fall of the Soviet Union Ernest received compensation of 800 Lat for the time he had spent in Siberia. Three days later two men armed with weapons came to their home and demanded the money. Both Ernest and Anna were attacked physically and within a couple of days Ernest died of his injuries.

Overall Anna does not have bad memories of her home but does not like to remember the suffering that she has experienced during her life. She finds it hard to work but realises that she must continue or she will die. She lives alone on her large farm and keeps some cattle; her son in law is reasonably able to run the farm now. Anna wanted to be photographed with her tomatoes which she loves tending.





Brigita Runika (b. 1949)

Brigita lives on a farm with her husband outside the town of Kuldīga. She has lived here for forty years and originally comes from Alsunga. She now cares for her 90 year old mother, as she did for her father who died three years ago. He died peacefully in her home, in his last days he still enjoyed the snow. On their farm they grow wheat and oats and sell milk products to their neighbours. Her husband fell off a horse when he was younger and it is only in the last number of years that the injury is causing him trouble.



An old Soviet designed vintage motorcycle with cart attached on the farm of Alfrēds Ūpis



Alfrēds Ūpis (b. 1953), Tamāra Ūpe (b. 1959)

Tamāra and Alfrēds believe the old people in Latvia have been forgotten by the government. With very little pension it's hard to make ends meet. They said that old people have been marginalised to benefit the elite. They now struggle to pay doctor's fees and other medical expenses and felt they were better treated under the Soviet system. The dreams they had when independence came have all been eroded and they face an uncertain future as there is a lack of services and benefits for old people.





Anna Lerha (b. 1929)

Anna works her farm on her own. She is now getting to the stage where she can't cope anymore. She says she will have to sell her cow in the autumn as its getting to hard for her to keep.





Lenas Catholic Church

Felikess Grickevics (b. 1954), Tatjana Sapko (b. 1953)

Felikess and Tatjana worked for a gypsy Baron in Riga for thirteen years and lived in a gypsy commune. When the Baron decided to move away they became unemployed and homeless. For one and a half years they moved around before a relative recommended they move to Lenas church commune in Skrunda. They have been there now for about two years. In January 2013 they got married but have been together for thirteen years. In the commune they do housekeeping and also act as caretaker for the church. The rules of the commune are very strict; members of the commune are not allowed to use electronic communication devices, watch television or movies and are allowed to listen to

Christian radio only. From time to time residents may be checked for substance abuse. A number of times a year they go on pilgrimage and have only recently returned from Medjugorje. When they arrived at the commune they were separated for four months. This was to prevent them cohabiting which would have been a breach of house rules. The commune house and land belong to the Latvian Catholic Church. The church was built in 1620 approximately and the house is for the priest and the people who work for the church. The commune was established in 2001 and has a steady through flow of residents.



Visvaldis Arturs Freibergs (b. 1941)


Visvaldis and his family have lived here in Pelci for the last thirty years. He keeps cattle on this small holding as well as some hens. During the Second World War the Germans used the small stone house as a dairy. Later on in Soviet times it was a place of temporary accommodation for local workers on the collective farm. His son has just finished high school and remains at home.



Zofija Guravska (b. 1922)

“I have selected the dress that I want to be buried in” says Zofija who is 91. She lives alone with her pet dog and keeps a small vegetable garden and some hens. The house she lives in belonged to her parents and she has lived all her life here. Her husband died twenty five years ago and they had been married for thirty two years. Her friends and family have been encouraging her to leave and live in a modern apartment but she refuses. Zofija says; “my parents, two brothers and my husband all died in this house so why should I move. I have lived here all my life and I know I haven’t much time left. What they don’t understand is I would much prefer to die in my home than somewhere strange. I have only gone outside the district once and that was to travel to Riga when I was a schoolgirl”. Her daughter lives nearby and works night shift in a bakery and she visits Zofija a couple of times a week.





The last burial in the old German cemetery in Kurmāle parish took place in 1939. Today the graveyard is largely forgotten except by a few local people. The headstones have been broken by falling trees and the cemetery is now overgrown and being reclaimed by nature. In October 1939 Germany signed an agreement with Latvia to facilitate the repatriation of the Baltic Germans. About 60,000 Latvian citizens of German extraction left Latvia and most never returned.

*Farewell ...
I will dream of you still as a baby,
Treading the earth with little strong toes,
The earth where already so many lie buried.
This song to my son, is come to its close.*

Pavel Antokolsky

Special thanks to assistant's

Dārta Legzdiņa
Anete Bertholde
Viktorija Eksta

Project Manager - Ilze Supe

Thanks also to

Christel Ooms
Julija Berkovica
Liana Ivete Benke
Uldis Pētersons
Artis Gustovskis
Kuldīga District Council
Kuldīga Artist Residence
International Summer School of Photography
Culture Ireland
Valsts Kultūrkapitāla Fonds

This project is supported by the Kuldīga Artist Residence programme in conjunction with Kuldīga District Council, the International Summer School of Photography, Valsts Kultūrkapitāla Fonds and Culture Ireland

Representation
Anzenberger Agency Vienna

www.davidcreedon.com



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