THE NEW LIFE OF LATVIANS IN AMERICA

LUKE KALNAJS

"I'm very sure my parents would never have returned to Latvia after [having] their three American children…and building their lives here…I remember my mother telling me the story (I must have been around ten many years after the fact) of when she and my father got all dressed up in their best clothes to go for their citizenship ceremony – it still chokes me up – they were so proud." – Liga Kalnajs

To start a discussion on Latvians in America, one must explain the reasons why they refer to themselves as American Latvians, rather than Latvian Americans. The former has more significance; it demonstrates the fact that they valued their ethnic identity over that of their host country. It also emphasizes the importance their refugee status played in how they defined themselves.[1] In this article, I examine the significance of Latvians' refugee experience and to what extent they assimilated into American culture while also trying to preserve their own traditions. Research on refugees from World War II has not been conducted to a greater extent until the last two or three decades, but recently study on the subject has been expanding. Displaced Latvians in particular have not been studied in depth until more recently, with the most comprehensive research coming out in the last few years. In what little research has been done on American Latvians, it is widely thought that there was a strong belief among the group that their stay in America was only temporary until Latvia gained its freedom. However, I argue that although they hoped this was true, most of them

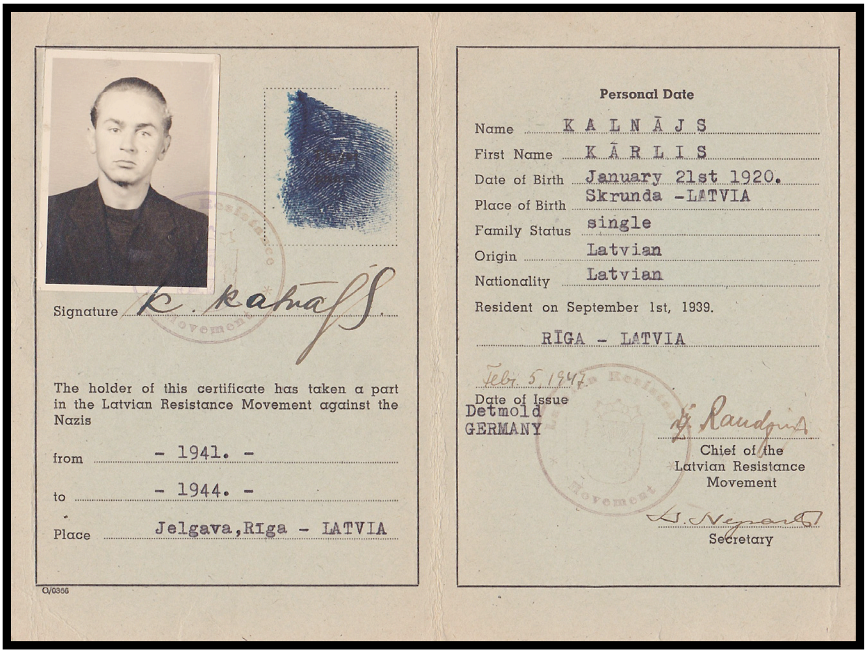
knew that it was an impossible dream. Not only had they experienced Soviet oppression and knew how hard it would be to remove them from their homeland, but they had also created new lives for themselves in America, as well as a distinct "Latvianness." By examining American Latvians' backgrounds, communities, and political beliefs, especially that of my own family, it becomes easier to understand why they would not have left America.

BACKGROUND

Examining the events during and following the Second World War helps explain why Latvians came to America and affords an opportunity to understand their values and political beliefs. Latvia is a small country on the Baltic Sea, with Russia bordering it to the East. Russia had a history of occupying Latvia. Formed after the First World War, in 1918, the first modern-day state of Latvia lasted until the Soviet Union re-occupied Latvia in 1940, following a secret agreement the Soviets made with Nazi Germany.[2]

During 1940, the Soviet Union subjected Latvia's social and political elite to imprisonment, deportation to labor camps or to Siberia, and execution. The horrors of 1940 were permanently engrained in Latvians' collective memory.[3] Because of this, many Latvians welcomed the Nazis as liberators when they invaded Latvia in 1941and removed the hated Communist regime. However, this relief was short lived. The Nazis remained in Latvia until 1944, and during this time they forced many Latvian males to serve in the Nazi army.[4] When the Soviets defeated the Nazis in 1944 and re-established Soviet Communist rule, between 200,000 and 240,000 (estimates vary) Latvians fled to the West for fear of persecution. Of these, about 45,000 would eventually end up in America.[5] This included my paternal grandparents, Karlis and Lucija. To understand

how intensely dramatic the invasion of their homeland would have been, imagine how the events of September 11, 2001, felt to Americans. However, instead of being able to start the healing and rebuilding process immediately, imagine waiting fifty years for it to begin.[6]



Signature K. Kalnajs

The holder of this certificate has taken a part in the Latvian Resistance Movement against the Nazis

from - 1941. -

to - 1944. -

Place Jelgava, Rīga - LATVIA

Personal Date

Name K A L N Ā J S

First Name K Ā R L I S

Date of Birth January 21st 1920.

Place of Birth Skrunda - LATVIA

Family Status single

Origin Latvian

Nationality Latvian

Resident on September 1st, 1939.

RĪGA - LATVIA

Febr. 5, 1947.

Date of Issue

Detmold

GERMANY

Chief of the Latvian Resistance Movement

Secretary

Figure 2: My Grandfather Karlis' Resistance Certification

My grandfather, Karlis, was a part of the Latvian resistance movement against the Nazis when they invaded. However, he was eventually one of the many Latvian males forcefully conscripted into the Nazi Army. The Nazis used the Latvian units on the front-line; they were seen as expendable, which prevented the Nazis from losing their more valuable German troops. During a battle, my grandfather took a piece of shrapnel through the cheek, and became an American prisoner of war. An American surgeon saved his life, operating by candlelight. Karlis faked a slow recovery, and when he was strong enough, he

walked out of the hospital and ended up in a Displaced Persons (DP) Camp in Germany, where he met, and eventually married, my grandmother, who had escaped from Soviet Latvia in a cattle car with her friend.[7] The fact that my grandfather was able to escape service in the Nazi Army would prove to be beneficial for my grandparents' attempt to come to America. The Latvians who had still been in the Nazi Army at the end of the war had a more difficult time trying to re-settle because many of the western countries were suspicious of their involvement with the Nazis.[8]

Figure 3: My grandfather Karlis sitting on his suitcases on his way to America

COMING TO AMERICA

America started accepting people from the DP camps in 1948, after the passage of the Displaced Persons Act, which allowed for the entrance of 200,000 DPs over the next two years. It was soon expanded to allow for the entrance of 400,000 DPs. In order to come to America, those in the DP camps needed to be sponsored by a person or organization in the United States who could provide them with a job and a place to live when they arrived. This ensured that they would not be a burden on US taxpayers.[9] My grandparents spent almost six years in their DP camp in Germany until 1950, when they were finally able to get a sponsor and come to America.[10] The communities that Latvians started in America often consisted of Latvians who had been in the same DP camps in Europe.[11]

Over 50% of the Latvian political and social elite became DPs after the war, because they had the most to fear if they returned to Soviet occupied Latvia.[12] In addition, the literacy rate among Latvians in America was close to 100%.[13] Although they were educated, when they came to America they usually had to take unskilled laborer jobs, in part due to the language barrier.[14] However, they were extremely grateful to have these jobs. Both of my grandparents were college educated in Latvia. My grandfather had taught orphan boys in Latvia, and he was studying theology at a university until the Soviets arrived in 1940 and decided it was not a valid subject. My grandmother taught English as a second language in the DP camp. When they came to America, my grandfather had a construction job lined up, which he was very grateful to have, and my grandmother was a maid for a few years.[15] An important value my dad and his sisters had instilled in them growing up was to never judge anyone by what they did for an occupation. One of the Latvians in their community had been a general in the Latvian Army, and

the rest of the community looked up to him. Nevertheless, he and his wife cleaned office buildings for a living in America.[16] Latvians like to assert the fact that while they often had to take unskilled jobs in the United States, many of them had the education to be white-collar workers. One story told about one family's grandfather demonstrates this:

> *Grandfather was a janitor in Ada, Ohio….at the university… But when the students at this place had math problems to solve, and he saw that they had problems, then he would help them out. And then word got around that the janitor knows more than many of the professors. And so he got the job and stayed at the university as a professor.*[17]

The Latvian community sponsored friends and families so they could come to America; Latvians usually tried to migrate in whole families when possible. This helped contribute to the creation of close-knit communities. My aunt's community was very active in trying to gain sponsorships for other Latvians to come to America.[18] This was also the case in Latvian American communities throughout the country.[19] There were several organizations that helped with the resettlement process for Latvians. One of these organizations was the Church World Service (CWS). An article from the *New York Times* in 1949 demonstrates its involvement, and the type of welcome that DPs often received. A Latvian minister identified a Latvian couple that had just gotten off the boat in America because their pins bore the letters CWS, and he greeted them in their native tongue. He helped guide them through customs and then took them to lunch before helping them board the train that would take them to their sponsor in Chicago.[20]

Latvians in America were bound together by the shared feeling that they were American Latvians, not Latvian Americas.[21] While they did accept many American values, they resisted assimilation into American culture and tried to preserve their own culture as much as possible. This was largely because of their belief that they would be the only Latvians left after the Soviet occupation, Russification (the Soviets' attempt to wipe out Latvian culture by imposing Russian culture), and political persecution.[22] This helps demonstrate the point that although American Latvians believed their stay in America was only temporary until their homeland became free, they knew that the Soviets were trying to wipe out their culture and that it would be an almost impossible task for Latvia to regain independence. They did not realistically think about going back to Latvia. My grandparents "…did not ever consider going back to Latvia, because it was not Latvia, but an occupied, oppressed communist state where Russians were trying to annihilate the Latvian culture."[23] The strong language used also demonstrates the deep animosity that American Latvians felt toward the Soviets. I believe that American Latvians valued the freedoms they enjoyed in American more than many Americans did. While many Americans tend to take their freedom for granted, American Latvians had experienced the oppression of the Soviets and knew what it was like to lose these freedoms.

My grandparents, just as countless other American Latvians, expressed this freedom in a number of ways. My grandparents "…were always involved in Latvian society here (church, school, old friends, etc.) and keeping the Latvian spirit alive, but they were extremely grateful to be in the United States and appreciated its freedoms immensely. I grew up very grateful to be able to say anything without being dragged off to Siberia."[24] Even

though they went to great lengths to preserve their culture, they were also proud Americans.

Figure 4: My Dad, his Two Sisters, and His Mother Dressed in Latvian Folk Outfits, Fall 1963

In general, American Latvian communities were very tight knit. Many in the Latvian communities were involved in a number of political, religious, and cultural organizations that existed on the local level. There was also a large umbrella organization, the American Latvian Association (ALA), which still exists today.[25] Another far-

reaching organization was the Latvian Young Women's Christian Association, which my grandmother joined while in the DP camp. My grandparents were very involved in their local Latvian organizations. The neighborhood that they lived in on Long Island was predominantly Latvian, with Latvians living in nine out of ten houses. The house that my aunt and her siblings grew up in was built by her father, along with the help of other Latvians that had various construction skills. [26] My grandparents would also help those just arriving to America. My aunt recalls Latvians staying at their house for a night or two, sleeping on a mattress in the living room, on their way to their new home. These were often friends of her parents from the DP camp.[27] This is just another demonstration of how the American Latvian community was able to unite. Many families also tried to keep in contact with their loved ones that remained in occupied Latvia. My aunt Baiba recalls her mother writing back home to her parents; they always knew when things were not going well there, even if there were no news reports, because they would not receive any letters from Latvia for long periods.[28]

Education was extremely important to Latvians, and Latvian schools for children were common throughout American Latvian communities. The school that my father and his sisters attended was at their church from nine in the morning to one in the afternoon on Saturdays.[29] My Aunt Baiba recalls, "When all the other kids were watching cartoons on Saturday morning, I was going to Latvian school." They studied Latvian geography, history, music, and literature, among other subjects. She joked that she knew more about Latvia than she could ever remember. In fact, she "learned more in Latvian school than [she] did in American school." In addition, she and her siblings only spoke Latvian growing up. She was the oldest, and as such she did not learn English until she went to public school.

The younger siblings would usually learn English from the eldest.[30]

One of the main ways Latvians tried to preserve their culture was through folk history and family stories. While the importance of folklore is not unique to Latvians, to them it was — and is — one of the most important tools for supporting their culture.[31] My Aunt Baiba emphasized the importance of folk stories and music for Latvians. There were many songs and stories that everyone in the Latvian community knew.[32] As a second generation American, I remember my dad telling me the story of Lāčplēsis, or "Bear Slayer." It is one of the most famous stories that every Latvian knows. Written by Andrejs Pumpurs in 1888, it was based on existing Latvian folklore and tells how Lāčplēsis, who was part man and part bear, fights a bear that attacked his chieftain and rips the bear apart with his bare hands. The story was meant to show Latvia's conquerors that their culture and history was important, and it was later applied to the Soviet occupation. I also remember being sung Latvian lullabies when I was a child, and I still know the words to them, even though I do not know what they mean. An example of one lullaby is "Aijā žūžū," which lacks a literal translation:

Aijā, žūžū, lāča bērnis, aijā žūžū
Pekaiņāmi, kājiņāmi, žūžūžū

When someone in the family has a birthday, we always sing the Latvian version of "Happy Birthday", in addition to the traditional American song. Family stories and history were also extremely important. My grandmother would constantly talk about Latvia with her children.[33] For most Latvians, these stories were told by grandparents or parents to their children and often came up spontaneously

in conversation.[34] In addition, American Latvians had a great appreciation for Latvian art. My Aunt Liga remembers every family having original Latvian artwork on their walls.[35]

Figure 5: Latvian Choir in Traditional Dress

There were many other American Latvian communities in the United States, with the largest in New York, California, Illinois, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. However, there were other enclaves that American Latvians lived in as well, including several in Michigan. The largest of these was in Kalamazoo, which was essentially started by one Latvian who had immigrated to America before the war. The church at which he was a Reverend played a major role in helping with sponsorships for Latvian DPs.[36] They formed a close community, just as the Latvians in my grandparents' neighborhood had. Latvians eventually started coming to Kalamazoo in large numbers, and began forming organizations. Folk history and emphasis on Latvian culture were just two of the

shared characteristics among all Latvian communities. Just as my aunts had in their community, there were summer camps, Latvian schools, community gatherings and events with folk dancing where they wore traditional Latvian folk clothing, and choirs that sang folk songs.[37] Overall, American Latvians invested a great amount in creating a wide variety of organizations, and they were extremely active and well organized in their cultural life. They had established a unique Latvianness in America, and although they wanted to see their homeland become free again, it would have been hard to uproot themselves from the lives they had created in the United States.

POLITICS AND ANTI-COMMUNISM

It should be evident from the discussion on why Latvians fled their country and became DPs as to why they shared such a deep hatred of the Russians and Communism. They had suffered at the hands of the Soviets and wanted others to know about the oppression of the Soviet system. The anti-communism of political refugees was much different than the American anti-communism and "McCarthyism" from the early years of the Cold War. This was due to the fact that the former was *ethnic* anti-communism. For many American Latvians, ethnic anti-communism was a major aspect of their experience in the United States. Its main focus was centered on three core elements. The first was to educate the world about the truths of communism, as they had experienced it. Secondly, it focused on their struggle to free their homeland. This was a main difference from American anti-communists because the politics that affected their home country concerned Latvians more than threats of communism inside America. The third element was the belief that all totalitarian regimes were similar, and they wanted to demonstrate the similarity between

Communism and Nazism.[38] Their ultimate political mission was to free Latvia from Soviet rule.

They used several major arguments to further their anti-communist ideas. One major argument they used for their anti-communism campaign was public opposition to Soviet colonialism as an attempt to show the threat the Soviet Union posed to freedom around the world.[39] They also developed the idea of a "Baltic Holocaust" by the Russians. They backed up this claim with factual evidence that the Soviet Union had arrested, deported to Gulag, or executed around 600,000 Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians since 1940.[40] There was also the concept of "captive nations," which included the nations that had lost their independence due to Soviet occupation.[41] Overall, there was often a strong anti-Russian element to their politics. My grandparents' view of the Vietnam War demonstrates the differences between American ideas of anti-communism and ethnic anti-communism. Initially, they had been very excited about Vietnam and saw it as a fight against communism, but as the war dragged on they realized the real politics, and quickly became critical of the United States and its anti-communist aims.[42]

The fact that so many American Latvians had been of the political and social elite helps explain why they were so organized in American politics. These individuals formed a government-in-exile to some degree, and helped direct the American Latvians' anti-communist strategies. They also saw themselves as the legitimate representatives and true voice of occupied Latvia. Their main goal was to ensure that the United States never changed its position on non-recognition of Latvia's incorporation into the Soviet Union.[43] Many members of the American Latvian society were also constantly engaged in a propaganda battle with the Soviets. During the 1950s, several American Latvians created the Committee to Free Latvia, which helped found the Assembly of Captive European Nations. Funded by the

Free Europe Committee, this organization was closely linked to the CIA.[44] American Latvian anti-communists skillfully used American politics to further their cause. They would lobby to get resolutions passed in Congress, such as one that would call on the president to bring up the freedom of the Baltic States to the United Nations. A meeting in 1950 of over 1,200 members of Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian social, religious, and patriotic groups called on the US government to help liberate their home countries.[45] They would also target the UN directly. However, after a few years it was clear to many American Latvians that although the United States and other western governments talked about the liberation of their homeland and other captive nations, they were not going to fulfill their promises.[46] Only time was going to tell if their homeland would ever be free again.

The fact that there was no homeland to return to was a major reason for American Latvians' attempts to retain their heritage. However, this also contributed to their assimilation into American society (however limited it was at first), because they knew they were here to stay. This caused surprisingly little tension, though. For the most part they were able to strike a healthy balance between the preservation of their own culture and assimilation into their new one. They were proud Latvians *and* proud Americans. Although they resisted assimilation at first, as time passed and the younger generation of American Latvians, such as my father and his sisters, came of age, they slowly became more and more American. Despite this, they always maintained a strong sense of Latvianness. Even though the only connection I have to Latvia is my grandparents, who passed away when I was young, I have always been extremely proud of my Latvian heritage. It is now clearer to me more than ever why I take so much pride in this—the story of Latvians in American has been an amazing success story. They overcame

incredible hardships to make a new life for themselves in America and set down the foundation for generations to come. American Latvians were and are a proud people that achieved great success in preserving their culture while also creating a new life for themselves. They were able to establish a unique Latvianness in their new country.

Some Latvians initially may have seen their lives here as temporary, but soon they came to the realization that going home was an impossible dream. They went to such great lengths to preserve their culture not only because they believed they might be the only Latvians left after the Soviet occupation of their country, but also because they knew they needed to establish strong communities with a strong cultural identity in their new country. They wanted to preserve what they could of their culture. When Latvia finally gained its independence in 1991, very few American Latvians returned home.[47] It is impossible to know if this may have been different had Latvia gained its freedom earlier, but I believe it would have needed to be gained within a decade of the Soviet occupation, and even then it would only have been the older generation. American Latvians had created new lives for themselves in America, and it would have almost been like uprooting themselves again. Latvians certainly would have celebrated their country's freedom and visited Latvia, as they did in 1991, but they had created a distinct Latvianness in America and they were here to stay. However, further research studying oral histories from American Latvians who grew up in America, with a focus on how they felt about returning to Latvia, would be immensely helpful in supporting this idea.

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[1] Ieva Zake, *American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 1.

[2] Ibid, 12.

[3] Ibid, 13.

[4] Ibid, 13.

[5] Maruta Karklis, Liga Streips, and Laimonis Streips, The Latvians in America: 1640-1973 (Dobbs Ferry: Oceana Publications, Inc, 1974), 32.

[6] Liga Kalnajs, e-mail message to author, April 6, 2011.

[7] Baiba Kalnajs, e-mail message and phone interview by author, April 2, 2011.

[8] Ieva Zake, *American Latvians,* 34.

[9] Karklis, Streips, and Streips, 33.

[10] Baiba Kalnajs.

[11] Meija, Silvija D., *Latvians in Michigan* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2005), 29-30.

[12] Ieva Zake, *American Latvians,* 33.

[13] Baiba Kalnajs.

[14] Karklis, Streips, and Streips, 33.

[15] Baiba Kalnajs.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Guntis Šmidchens, "Latvian Folk History and Family Stories in America," *Lituanus: Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 33, no. 3 (Fall 1987).

[18] Baiba Kalnajs.

[19] Silvija Meija, 27-28.

[20] Doris Greenberg, "Latvian DP Couple Get Welcome Here: Minister's Greeting in Native Tongue Is Typical of Care Awaiting Newcomers," *New York Times,* March 10, 1949.

[21] Ieva Zake, *American Latvians,* 37.

[22]Ibid, 1.

[23] Baiba Kalnajs.

[24] Baiba Kalnajs.

[25] Ieva Zake, 41.

[26] Baiba Kalnajs.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Laura Hilton, "Cultural Nationalism in Exile: The Case of Polish and Latvian Displaced Persons," *Historian* 71, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 296.

[32] Baiba Kalnajs.

[33] Ibid

[34] Guntis Šmidchens.

[35] Liga Kalnajs.

[36] Silvija Meija, 27-28.

[37] Ibid., 32-35.

[38] Ieva Zake, *American Latvians*, 51.

[39] Ibid., 55.

[40] Ibid, 59.

[41] Ieva Zake, *Anti-Communist Minorities in the U.S.: Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees* (New York: St. Martin's Press LLC, 2009), 139.

[42] Baiba Kalnajs

[43] Ieva Zake, *American Latvians,* 62.

[44] Ieva Zake, *Anti-Communist Minorities,* 139-140.

[45] "Freedom is Asked For Baltic Nations: Latvian, Estonian, Lithuanian Groups Appeal to Truman and Congress for Help," *New York Times*, November 19, 1950.

[46] Ieva Zake, *Anti-Communist Minorities,* 141.

[47] Silvija Meija, 60.