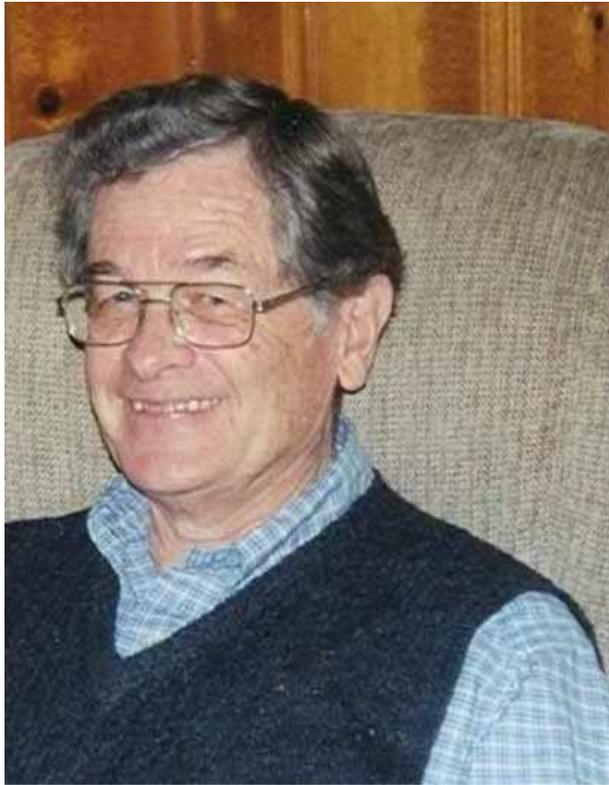


## **My Life Story**



**Ilga Vise**



**Sidney Vise, Life-Long Storykeeper**

## Acknowledgement

As we near the consummation of the Ethnic Life Stories Project, there is a flood of memories going back to the concept of the endeavor. The awareness was there that the project would lead to golden treasures. But I never imagined the treasures would overflow the storehouse. With every Story Teller, every Story Keeper, every visionary, every contributor, every reader, the influence and impact of the project has multiplied in riches. The growth continues to spill onward. As its outreach progresses, "boundaries" will continue to move forward into the lives of countless witnesses.

Very few of us are "Native Americans." People from around the world, who came seeking freedom and a new life for themselves and their families, have built up our country and communities. We are all individuals, the product of both our genetic makeup and our environment. We are indeed a nation of diversity.

Many of us are far removed from our ancestors who left behind the familiar to learn a new language, new customs, new political and social relationships. We take our status as Americans for granted. We sometimes forget to welcome the newcomer. We bypass the opportunity to ask about their origins and their own journey of courage.

But, wouldn't it be sad if we all spoke the same language, ate the same food, and there was no cultural diversity.

This project has left me with a tremendous debt of gratitude for so many. The almost overwhelming task the Story Keeper has, and the many hours of work and frustration to bring forth a story to be printed. I salute you.

To the Story Tellers, thank you for letting us share in your heart and soul. It is my prayer that some or many of the stories will influence many young persons to another level, to be enmeshed in the pursuit of learning of other cultures that make up our community and the world.

This has, indeed, been a project of "Many" for the Community. Thanks to the following who have played a role in helping to achieve the goal. The list is practically endless, first names only. You know who you are and what you did . . . sincere thanks to each of you:

Caroline, Charity, Charlotte, Bob, Dana, De Ann, Ed, Eric, Erman, Jim, Joha Oke, John K, John M, June, Kay, Kendall, Maria, Mark, Michelle, Myra, Norma, Pat, Rachel, Rob, Starr, Susan, Valerie, and special recognition to Jim Coombs, SMSU, Map Department.

Jim Mauldin  
Coordinator  
Ethnic Life Stories  
'01 '02 '03

**The Ethnic Life Stories Project....**

*...giving the Springfield community a window to its diversity through the life stories of ethnic elders.*

Liewe Se Storie Afrikaanse	Afrikaanse (2)
ŌSŌ GAY HĀY WŌ TAN	Apache
قصص من الحياة	Arabic (2)
Ga-no-du Ka-ne-he-lv-s-gi	Cherokee
自傳	Chinese (2)
Life Stories	English (5)
Histoires De Ma Vie	French (2)
Lebensgeschichten	German
סיפור חיים	Hebrew
Mayer rah-Khaan Knee-Hindi	Hindi
生きてきた道	Japanese
나의 살아온 이야기	Korean
STĀSTS DZĪVES	Latvian
ജീവിത കഥകൾ	Malayalam
OPOWIESC zZYCIA	Polish
Imanawangtanan Wawanaycasjas	Quechua
Povestea Vie Ţii Mele	Romanian
Жизненные истории	Russian
Historia De La Vida	Spanish (8)
പുഴയിൽ ജീവൻ	Thai
Kuwento Ng Aking Buhay	Tagalog
CHUY-N [©  Tjĩ	Vietnamese
געשיחטע פון מאן לעבען	Yiddish

# Birthplaces of the Storytellers

2001 2002 2003

Yohannan Abraham  
Pathanamthitta, Kerala, India

Janet Akaike - Toste  
Kofu, Japan

Tony Albuquerque  
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Martha Baker  
San Antonio, Texas

Grace Ballenger  
Shanghai, China

Ruth L.V. Burgess  
Poona (Pune), India

Sara Fajardo Calderon  
Guatemala City, Guatemala

Olga Codutti  
Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina

Claudine Arend Cox  
Boulay, France

Adalyn Cravens  
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Taj Farouki  
Wadi-Hunayn, Palestine

Malca Flasterstein  
Holon, Israel

Edgar Galinanes  
Mayaguez, Puerto Rico

Reynaldo Gumucio  
Cochabamba, Bolivia

John Hernandez  
San Antonio, Texas

Yung Hwang  
Okjong, Kyungnam, Korea

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London, England

Edward P. Ksara  
Tangier, Morocco

Hyman Lotven  
Kapulah, Russia

Regina Lotven  
Nancy, France

Sterling Macer  
Mason City, Iowa

Gwendolyn Marshall  
Jackson, Mississippi

Maria Michalczyk-Lillich  
Sandomierz, Poland

Edith F.L. Middleton  
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Thai Binh, Vietnam

Jorge Padron  
Pedro Betancourt-Matanza, Cuba

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Josefina S. Raborar  
Manila, Philippines

Juan Salazar  
Tuman, Peru

Eligio Sanchez  
Mexico City, Mexico

Tong Trithara  
Audhaya, Thailand

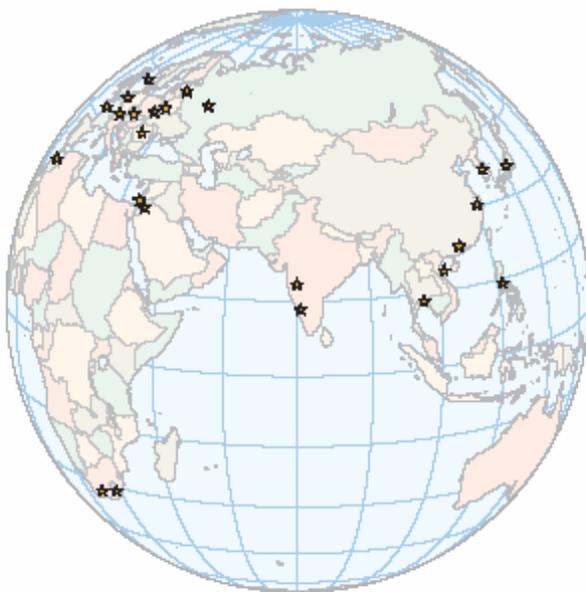
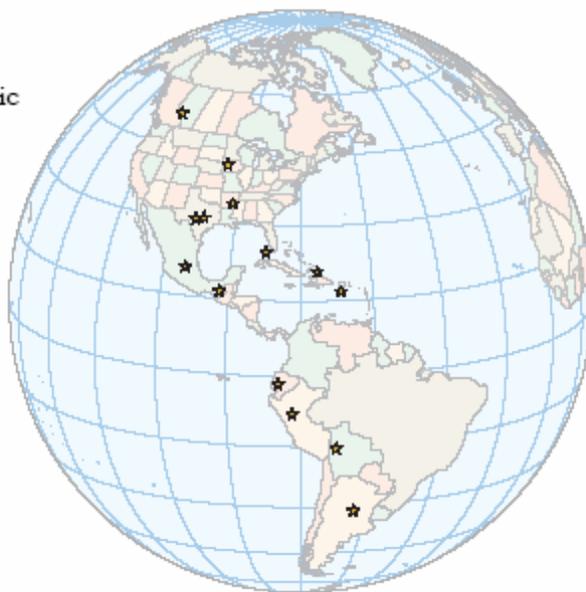
Cyril Vermooten  
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Nqaberie (Natal), South Africa

Ilga Vise  
Riga, Latvia

Hiltrud M. Webber  
Domnau, Germany

Tobby Yen  
Chung (Zhongshan), China





**FINLAND**

Turku

Helsinki

*Gulf of Finland*

*Baltic Sea*

Tallinn

**ESTONIA**

Parnu

Tartu

**RUSSIA**

Pskov

*Gulf of Riga*

Ventspils

*Venta River*

*Gauja River*

Cesis

Aluksne

Gulbene

**Riga**

Jurmala

*Daugava River*

**LATVIA**

Liepaja

Daugavpils

Siauliai

Panevezys

**LITHUANIA**

Klaipeda

*Nemunas River*

Sovietsk

Kaliningrad

**KALININGRAD (Russia)**

Kaunas

**Vilnius**

**BELARUS**

Minsk

Hrodna

**POLAND**

Olsztyn

Bialystok

Ilga Vise  
Riga, Latvia

## PERSONAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Jim Mauldin, the man with inexhaustible energy and a devotion to the Ethnic Life Stories project. His enthusiasm and persistence convinced me to participate. For that, I am grateful. The many hours and resources Jim has devoted to this effort cannot be calculated. For that, our community can be grateful.

My gratitude to June Huff for her dedication to the many details of this project and to Michael Fisher for his computer assistance in getting me started. Appreciation goes to Dr. Harvey Asher and William Garvin, of Drury University, for their help in locating books on the Holocaust that validated my memory of those events. Thanks to Jim Coombs, SMSU Map Library, for taking his time to produce an extra map to illustrate my family's trek across Poland and Germany.

The Latvian Institute, a non-profit organization, established to promote knowledge about Latvia abroad, gives permission to freely print and distribute information as long as it is cited as the source, (<http://www.latinst.lv/dainas.htm>). In my story about folk songs and national costumes, I referred to these pages.

A very special thanks to Dr. Barbara Wing, Chair of the Biology Department at Drury University, for her cheerful attitude, time and patience in scanning the photographs and producing the final layout. It would not have happened without her.

Most of all, thanks to my "life-long story keeper" and valued editor for forty-five years, my husband Sidney Vise. His encouragement and willingness to toil away, day after day, made revisiting my childhood and youth a rewarding experience. I could not have done it without him and he knows it!

## **DEDICATION**

“My Life Story” is dedicated:

To the memory of my parents, Janis and Brona, two individuals with remarkable courage who taught me much about life, perseverance and survival;

To our children, Silvia and David, who at an early age witnessed some of the Latvian customs as practiced by their grandparents;

To our son-in-law, John, and grandsons, Sam and Alex, so they can catch a glimpse of “Grammie’s” Latvian history and the traditions and learn how “Capa” became part of the story.

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## The Beginning

In my native country of Latvia, one of the most popular elements of the culture is the “name’s day” tradition. Each and every first name is assigned to a day on the yearly calendar. While your birthday may be celebrated privately or with family members, your “name’s day” will often inspire a wider range of people to send cards or bring you flowers and candy. My name, Ilga, is noted on September 8. It is a variation of Olga, a common Russian name, or the German Helga. Sometimes two middle names are given. Mine are Vera Veronika, in honor of my godmother. Our last name is hyphenated: Katais-Paeglis, not a common custom in Latvia. My Estonian born grandfather’s name was Otto Katais. After he moved to Latvia, people kept asking him what Katais meant. The Latvian translation is Paeglis, which means “juniper” in English. The use of all my names was rather cumbersome: Ilga Vera Veronika Katais-Paeglis. In everyday life, mercifully, it was shortened to Ilga Katais. Eventually, this presented problems with immigration and other identifications, since my last name appeared on documents in three different ways: Katais, Katais-Paeglis, or just Paeglis.

SEPTEMBRIS						
Pirmdiena	Otrdiena	Trešdiena	Ceturtdiena	Piektdiena	Sestdiena	Svaidiena
				1 ILMĀRE, ILUTA, AUSTRAVĀRE	2 ELIJA, LIZIETE, ZETE	3 BERTA, BELLA
4 DZINTARA, DZINTARS, DZINTARA	5 KLAUDIJA, PERSIJS, VAIDA	6 MAIGONIS, MAGNUS, MARIJUS	7 REGINA, ERMIŅE	8 ILGA	9 BRUNO, TELMA	10 JAKUBA, ALBERTIŅE
11 SIGNE, SIGNĀJA	12 ERNA, EVITA, EVA	13° IDA, IZABELLA	14 SANTA, SĀNUJA, SANTA, SANDA	15 SANDRA, SONDRA, GUNVALDIJA, GUNVARIJA	16 ĀJA, AŠKATE, DĀGE	17 VERA, VĀRA, VĀRIS
18 LIEĻMA, ELIJA, ALITA	19 VERNERIS, MUNTIS	20 GUNTRA, MARIANNA, GUNTARS	21° MOORIS, MATIJS, MARIJS	22 MĀRIE, MĀRIKA, MAGDARS	23 VĀGDA, VĒNERANDA, VENĻA	24 AGRIS, AGRITA
25 RODOLFS, RAULS	26 GUNDARS, KURTS, KNUTS	27° ĀDOLFS, IGONIS	28 SERGEJS, SVETLANA, LEJA	29 MIKELIS, MIKUS, MIHĀLS, MĪRS	30 ELNA, ELNA, MENARDA	

Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> is considered an unlucky date by many people. I maintain that it was a fortunate beginning for me on April 13 of 1934, when I arrived between two and three o’clock in the morning at a hospital in Riga, the capital city of the Republic of Latvia, commonly known as Latvia.

### *Latvia*

Located along the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, Latvia is one of the three Baltic Republics, the other two being Lithuania to the south, and Estonia to the north. Russia borders on the east, Belarus to the southeast. Sitka, Alaska, and the middle of Canada’s Hudson Bay, occupy approximately the same northern latitude as Latvia. Winters are dark and long, but during the cool, short summer, nearly 20 hours of sunlight brighten the longest day of the year. The Atlantic Ocean and the Baltic Sea moderate the climate and bring plenty of moisture throughout the year, with ample accumulation of snows. Spring arrives ever so gradually. Slowly, little rivulets begin to flow toward rivers, where ice turns dark and porous with each passing day. You know spring has arrived when the first

blossoms poke their heads through the snow and you see silky dots on the pussy willow branches.

The land area of Latvia (24,595 sq. miles) is less than half of Missouri's (69,697 sq. miles), and would fit into the southern half of the state, south of the Missouri River, with room to spare. A drive from Joplin to St. Louis would equal a trip across the whole country from west to east!

A continental glacier once covered this part of the world, leaving behind low-lying plains, marshes, hundreds of lakes, and rivers of all widths and lengths. Near its eastern boundary, a few uplands of less than 1,000 feet give the landscape a gently undulating surface.

Latvia's vegetation is diverse, consisting of several species of evergreens and numerous deciduous trees. Tall, stately pines grow along the shore of the Bay of Riga. During a storm, they sway and bend, but do not break. Before the days of steamer ships, they were sought after as masts for sailing ships. Inland, the pine forests spread a canopy above a lush moss carpet, dotted with mushrooms. The swooping branches of fir trees make you wish for Christmas candles on them. A legend claims that the Christmas tree custom originated from Latvian fir trees.

Maples add dazzling colors every autumn. I remember that my grandmother strung the leaves on a thread in long garlands and hung them in the pantry to dry. She arranged loaves of rye bread on these fragrant leaves before placing them in the coal oven to bake. The linden trees bloomed in the spring, and their tiny blossoms were gathered and dried, and brewed in a delicious tea. The birch trees were my favorites. The white bark sparkled in the distance as we approached my grandfather's farm. Seeing them filled me with anticipation about the upcoming visit. In early spring, the trees were tapped and the sap collected in buckets, yielding a slightly tart, clear juice. Almost tree size, bushes were chock-full with hazelnuts, which we gathered in the fall. Cranberry shrubs grew in the marshes. Jumping from one clump to the next lent excitement to berry picking, and blueberries were the sweetest. The rule for us children was that you could eat off the bush as much as you wanted, but once the berries were in the bucket—they had to stay there.

A perfusion of wild flowers grew along the road and in the fields: blue rye flowers, daisies, buttercups, sweet clover, and tiny chamomiles made into a calming tea. Throughout my life I have carried with me the memory of the forests, the taste of berries, and the enchanting scenes of the countryside.

### *Brief History of Latvia*

To understand Latvians and their devotion to their country, including mine, you have to know a little of our history. Beginning with the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Latvians have been ruled by foreigners, starting with the Germans (1201), the Swedes, the Poles, even our neighbors the Lithuanians, and the Russians. While Swedish rule was considered enlightened due to the value placed on education, one of the harshest periods began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Latvian territory became part of the Russian Empire. The German gentry, from the time of their arrival, had acquired large estates and held on to their power even under the Russians. They ruled over Latvian serfs, a bondage no better than slavery. During the

middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the serfs were freed and conditions improved. Nationalism was sweeping European nations and stirring a call for freedom and independence in Latvia.

That opportunity came at the end of World War I (1914-1918). With Russia and Germany exhausted, the Latvians seized the moment and declared independence on November 18, 1918. For another year the ragged and outnumbered Latvian freedom fighters, with the help of Estonians, battled the Russians. Finally, freedom was won.

The next twenty years were filled with exuberance and pride. At last, we were our own masters in our small corner of the world! The red-white-and-red Latvian flag, adopted in 1918, was displayed on every holiday, at every house.

According to some of the reading I have done about flag history, documentation indicates that it is one of the oldest flags in Europe, dating to 1279. A banner with those colors belonged to a castle in Cesis and was carried into combat against an Estonian tribe. Growing up, I heard several versions about the origin of the flag. A popular legend is that a brave Latvian clan leader was wounded in battle. His men placed him on a white sheet, and the part where his body lay remained white, while the edges were stained with his blood. He died and his men raised the bloody cloth and roared into battle, defeating the enemy. Whatever the true origin of the flag, I can say that it stirs deep patriotic emotions in every Latvian, particularly when the national anthem, "God bless Latvia, our beloved Fatherland," is sung.

The period from 1939 to 1945 in Latvia is very confusing for anyone trying to sort out the turmoil brought on by the Soviets and the Germans. These years impacted my family most dramatically and changed the course of our lives.

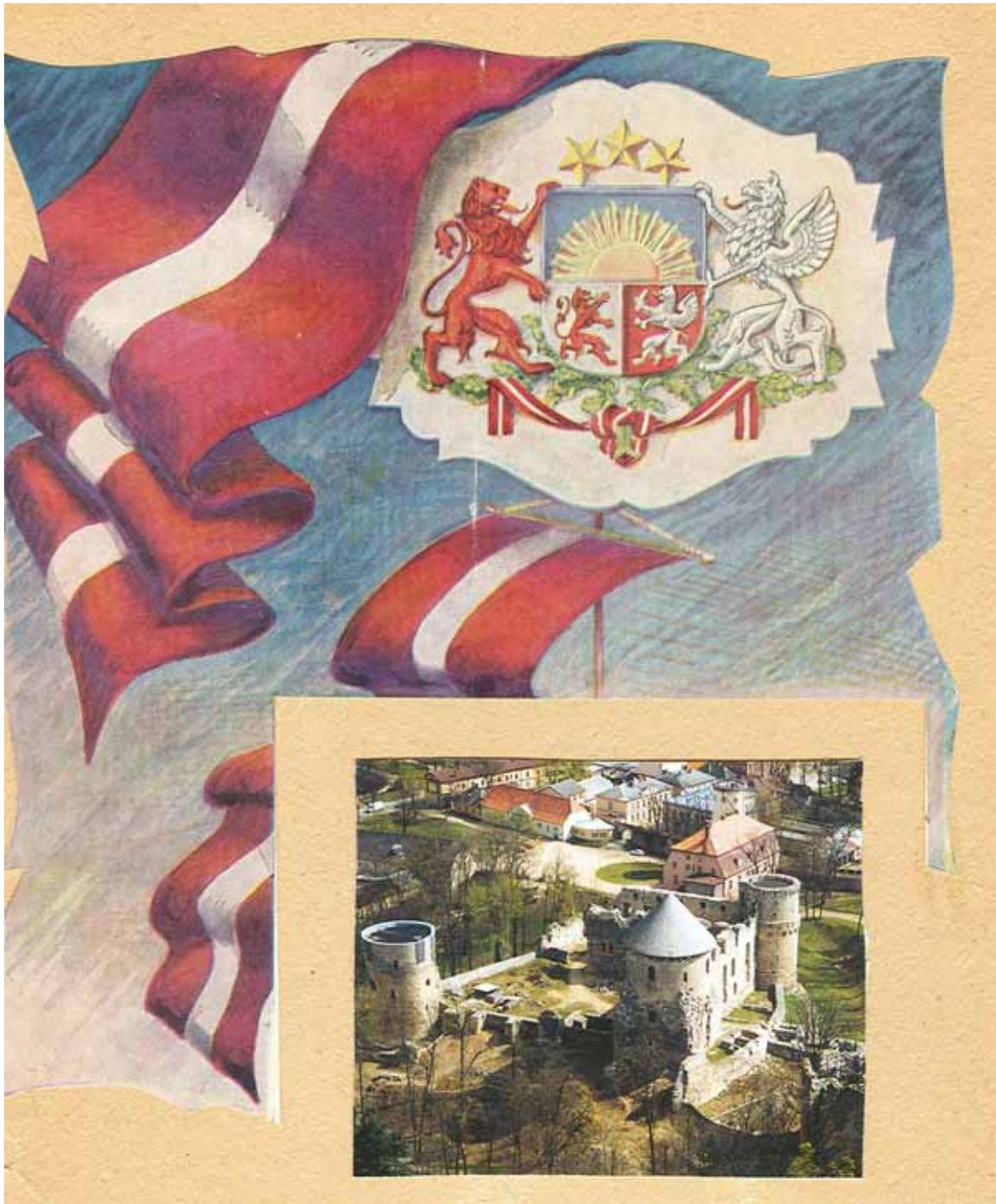
June, 1939: the Soviet Union established naval bases in Latvia.

June 17, 1940: the Soviet Union invaded Latvia.

July 1, 1941: the Germans "liberated" Latvia, as they attacked the Soviet Union.

Spring, 1945: the Soviet Union defeated the Germans, annexed Latvia, and designated it as one of the 15 Soviet Socialist Republics.

**The Latvian Flag and National Coat of Arms**



**The Castle of Cesis**

## Family History

My parents were barely into their teens when Latvia gained her independence in 1918. They had lived through the ravages of World War I.

My father, Janis Edgars Katais-Paeglis was born on June 9, 1905, close to the town of Aluksne, in the eastern region known as Vidzeme. The town is noteworthy due to Ernest Glueck, a German cleric who translated the Bible from German into Latvian (1689). He also founded the first school, thus establishing a tradition of education in the region.



**Front row (L to R): Janis, Augusts, Zenta, Alfons, Hermanis**

**Second row: Adolfs, Verners, Elmars**

Janis was the third son in a family of seven brothers and one sister. As a child, one of my favorite folk tales was about seven brothers and a sister. It was a magical fairy tale and made me think of my aunt and uncles as enchanted beings. They were fun-loving and mischievous, with beautiful voices, each one able to play several of the available instruments: a guitar, a violin, an accordion, a mandolin, and a zither. Every family get-together turned into a songfest, a Latvian national past-time.



Grandfather's farm was able to support the large family. Wheat, rye, oats, and barley grew in the fields. A large vegetable garden supplied daily meals, with potatoes, carrots,

and cabbage stored in the root cellar for the winter. A variety of animals lived on the farm and provided amusement for me on our visits. A horseback ride was a thrill, but my most memorable ride was on a pig. As father and some of my uncles inspected a huge sow and her piglets, he made a bet that she was big enough to ride. Midst laughter, father placed me on her back. Hanging on to the stiff bristles, and squealing along with the pig, I won the bet for my dad at the age of four.

Until my father was five, he mainly spoke Estonian. His paternal grandmother lived with them and took care of him. All of dad's siblings grew into adulthood bilingual. We children knew only Latvian, so it was bewildering to hear my uncles switch back and forth, especially if the subject was taboo for our age group.

Aluksne had a Gymnasium, equivalent to our high school. Father was the first in the family to go beyond the sixth grade, which was the norm in his day. Along with all the basic subjects, the study of languages was emphasized: Latin, French, Russian and his favorite, German, which he mastered thoroughly.

Opportunities were limited in the small town, so Janis left for Riga and enlisted in the Latvian Army/Air Force, which was viewed as a noble profession. The rigors and discipline of military life agreed with him and he rose to the Lieutenant rank, serving in the Air Force's communications division as a navigator. The planes he flew in were double-winged, propelled by a single engine, a far cry from today's jets and rockets.

An avid reader all his life, Janis kept up with the political developments in Europe. The center of attention was his when he returned to the farm, bringing the latest news from Riga and the world beyond. The news sparked a lively debate, as my uncles took different points of view, just for the sake of argument.

Collecting art works was such a passion with father that it sometimes took precedence over our everyday practical needs. His love of music was just as strong, and he often took us to concerts and opera performances. To sum up my father's personality, I would have to say that he was very sociable, was generous with his family and friends, and exuded boundless energy as he held forth on every topic!



**Vera, Sasha, Anna and Zenta**

My mother, Brona Zenta Vavere, was born on November 23, 1906, and was known throughout her life by her middle name. Her birthplace was near Daugaupils, a town close to the Belarus border. Many Russians lived in this part of Latvia. Early in her childhood she learned Russian, and spoke it fluently the rest of her life. She knew enough German to communicate about the necessities. Arriving in the States at the age of forty-five, without formal instruction, she mastered the English language admirably.

Zenta, too, came from a farming background. Her mother had married an older man, a widower with three children. The second family consisted of three daughters and a son, Zenta being the second oldest. Life on the farm was hard.

At an early age, children did daily chores of milking cows, feeding chickens, helping in the kitchen, and working along with adults at harvest time. Girls learned to spin wool, weave, knit, crochet, and the basics of dress making. Mother's formal education stopped with the sixth grade, yet she had a good mind and was a fast learner. At sixteen, she left for Riga to work as a maid in the home of a government official who served in the diplomatic corps. The job provided an opportunity to master the art of cooking fine foods, bake everything from rye bread to delicate pastries, acquire good manners, and learn how to run a household. A large portion of her wages was sent to her father in order to pay for the farm. Later on, Zenta worked in a tailor shop and became an accomplished seamstress.

Early in life, she became self-reliant. A strong faith in God gave her an inner strength and serenity that helped her through the difficult times. Zenta was witty and industrious, with a marvelous sense of humor and timing. Above all, she was a good listener. People who met her were taken with her quiet charm. And so was Janis, when their paths crossed in Riga in the later part of the 1920s.

### *Riga*

Riga was a dazzling place with majestic buildings, monuments, and wide boulevards filled with streetcars and buses. Young people from all over the country were moving to the capital city, including four of my father's brothers, as well as mother's younger brother and her youngest sister. Close knit family ties were maintained.

The city was founded in 1201 by German merchants, of the Hanseatic League, as they expanded trade around the Baltic Sea. They established a trading post on the eastern shore of the River Daugava. An old legend recounts how the merchants obtained their first property. The newcomers asked an elder of the Liv tribe, one of the ancestors of present day Latvians, for a piece of land the size of an oxhide in order to store their goods. The Liv chief agreed. The Germans then sliced the hide into thin strips, tied them together, and encircled a large portion of Daugava's shoreline.

Another tale described how the tribal people dealt with the arrival of Christianity. As the German priests christened them during the day, the clansmen returned to the Daugava River at night, and washed off the holy water, thus ridding themselves of the new religion.

Numerous tribes lived on the land long before the arrival of the Germans. Some historians estimate human settlement as far back as 4000 BC. Today's archeologists have dated artifacts from as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Trading routes have pulsed through Riga from Scandinavia to the Black Sea, as well as to the west, to markets as far as France. Riga has long been at the crossroads between Eastern and Western Europe. The location may have benefited its prosperity, but certainly not its safety.



Riga's coat of arms was officially approved in 1925, yet elements of the original design have been traced to documents as early as 1225. The two towers above a brick wall and gate symbolize the independence of the city. The two crossed keys of St. Peter denote the competition between the power of the first appointed Bishop of Riga and the Livonian Order, German knights who conquered the early Latvian tribes.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when Riga was governed by the Livonian Order, the cross appeared in the emblem above the two keys. The lion's head in the gateway symbolized the courage of the city dwellers.

The King of Sweden began his rule over Riga in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, adding a crown above the cross in 1660, plus the two large lions on either side, thus completing the design of Riga's coat of arms as we see it today.



Riga's skyline has been etched in my memory since early childhood. Looking from the western shore of the Daugava, numerous church spires grace the very heart of the city, known as Vecriga or Old Riga, or simply called Old Town, around which the city grew up.

The panorama begins with Rigas Pils, Riga Castle, which took several centuries to build, starting in the late 1200's. Since then it has undergone many changes, from its fortified walls and moats, to the present day complex of structures. It is the official residence of the president, and many government functions and ceremonies are held there. It also houses museums of Latvian and foreign art. As a little girl, I only thought of princes and princesses living in the round tower.

A short distance inland from Daugava River, the massive Dome Cathedral's spire can be seen. The foundation for the Cathedral dates back to 1211. During the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it became Lutheran and has been the center for the Latvian Lutheran Evangelical Church ever since. Everyone who visits the cathedral admires the magnificent organ (1884) and the stained glass windows. Surrounding the church is a large open area, Domas Laukums (Dome Square). During special celebrations this is the main meeting place for the citizens of Riga. Many architecturally significant buildings from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century surround the square. As a child I was fascinated by the statues that graced the portals, particularly the ones with no clothes on.

The next important feature along the Daugava is the City Council Square, which was the main marketplace during the Middle Ages. Along one side of the square are ancient structures that could have been constructed from gingerbread: the Riga Guild Hall and the Meldgalvju Nams, or House of the Blackheads Brotherhood. Our first apartment was located on a short side street just off this square. I remember the narrow stairs that led to the fourth floor, and a space with tiny windows. We lived there until I was four years old. It was destroyed during World War II.

St. Peter's Church is mentioned in history books as early as 1209. Construction of the cathedral stretched over several centuries, interrupted by fires and changes in building plans. The last phase of construction was completed in 1690, at the time with the highest wooden steeple in Europe. It is said that if you were in the tower during windy days, you could feel the sway of its structure. The church was completely destroyed during World War II, but rebuilt in 1968-1973 with a metallic tower, nearly twice as high as the original. Today, looking from its observation deck, you can clearly identify the round shape of the original walled city of the Middle Ages.

Three other structures have been etched in my childhood memory. The first one is the National Opera House. Built from 1860 to 1863, reminiscent of an ancient Greek temple, it is located in a park with beautiful gardens along the City Canal, just outside Old Riga. It was here, at the age of four, that I saw my first opera performance, Puccini's *La Boheme*.

The second building, sparkling like a jewel box, is the National Theater. It was here that Latvia's independence was proclaimed on November 18, 1918. A most magical play, based on a Latvian folk tale, unfolded on its stage and held me spellbound at my very first theater performance.

The focal point on the wide Brivibas (Freedom) Boulevard is the Freedom Monument. Built from the donations of private citizens, it was unveiled on November 18, 1935. The monument is the symbol of Latvia's independence and the long struggle for freedom from foreign powers. Starting with a massive base, ancient freedom fighters are depicted, as well as actual events from history, and everyday values of life. Directly above the engraved inscription "For Fatherland and Freedom," a woman holding a sword and shield represents Mother Latvia. The monument culminates into a graceful woman's form, holding in her outstretched arms, high above her head, three stars. She symbolizes Freedom and the three stars are the three main regions of Latvia: Kurzeme, Vidzeme, and Latgale. An honor guard is posted around the clock. People bring flowers and lay them at the base, thus honoring the ideals portrayed in the monument.

Today Riga, with nearly one million inhabitants, has been designated a UNESCO heritage city. It is a treasure house of architectural marvels, ranging in style from modified Baroque to Art Nouveau, with ornate decorations of animals, intricate designs, and human figures. Riga is the leading financial, industrial, and transportation center for the Baltic region, with rail lines connecting it to the rest of Europe and east into Russia.

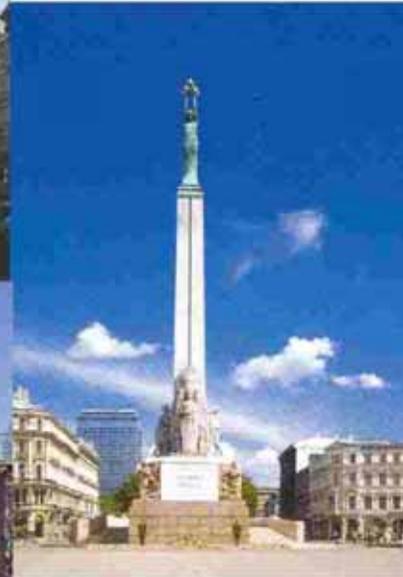
The population of the country is around 2.5 million. People from surrounding countries resided in Latvia before the Soviet takeover. After World War II an influx of the Russian speaking population increased dramatically, threatening to outnumber the Latvians. According to 1998 statistics, only slightly more than half of the inhabitants are Latvians. Russians, Belarussians, and Ukrainians account for 40%, with Poles, Lithuanians, and "others," adding up to slightly over 5%. A heavy concentration of the Russian speaking population resides in Riga. I have to admit to being taken aback, in June, 2000, as I heard Russian spoken everywhere on the city's streets.



**National Opera**



**National Theater**



**Freedom Monument**

### *Latvian Language*

After coming to the United States, one of the first purchases my father made was a painting by a Latvian artist. It was a familiar winter scene from Old Riga, with St. Peters Church in the background. An American friend commented on the beauty of the painting. As father struggled to express himself in English, our visitor asked if we spoke our native language at home. We assured him that we did. He advised us to switch to

English so we could learn it more quickly. We tried, but it felt so unnatural, that except for an occasional "OK," we went right back to Latvian.

The Latvian language is one of the oldest in Europe and belongs to the Baltic language group. The other two are Lithuanian, still spoken, and Prussian, which has died out. The Baltic group is a branch of the Indo-European language family from which most of Europe's languages evolved.

Some linguists refer to Latvian as archaic due to its very complex grammar. My American born husband maintains that, since the country was so small, the early Latvians compensated by making their language as complicated as possible! We use the same alphabet as the rest of Europe, except for extra markings to indicate long vowels and the softening of consonants. The alphabet is completely phonetic, each letter having a specific sound, without any exceptions. This facilitates the process of learning how to read. Being used to that system caused problems for me when learning English. I tried to pronounce each letter. Also, the Latvian language has no articles, appendages I find totally useless, so I still occasionally leave one out in my English.

When one considers the relatively small number of people who speak Latvian and its complexity, plus the fact that different foreign powers have ruled the country for centuries, it is amazing that it has survived into the present day.

### *Folk Songs*

Perhaps its survival is due in part to the strong Latvian traditions of oral history and the singing of folk songs. German traders noted in their journals the existence of Latvian folk songs as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 1800s, Krisjans Barons, a Latvian author and scholar, collected and recorded around 200,000 folk song texts and approximately 38,000 melodies and an additional 10,000 variations. The texts are called *Dainas* and are considered to be equivalent to Japan's haiku. This folk song tradition inspired a national love of poetry, not just to read now and then, but to express on many occasions, in birthday and name's day cards, or at the closing of a letter. A poem may speak about the beauty of nature, love of motherland, or wish you good fortune. It may be written by a well-known poet, or composed by the person who is sending the message.

Growing up in the days before television, and with few radios, I remember that the main form of entertainment was singing. When people gathered there was plenty of good food and strong ale, but above all, singing. Since my father and his brothers were natural born musicians, and loved playing the various instruments, they had a ready-made family band. Everyone knew the folk songs, and they were sung with gusto!

Folk songs covered every aspect of life. Many were joyful, ranging from birth, to courting and marriage. The loss of a loved one, or departure for war, expressed deep sadness not only with words but also with melancholy melodies. A song about an orphan always made me cry. The child was left in the shadow as the sun was setting. She called for her mother who was far away, unable to place her in the fading rays of the sun.

Many of the folksongs were about hard work under harsh taskmasters, others about yearning for freedom, and some expressed love for our native land. During the 1940

Soviet occupation of Latvia, many of these folk songs, along with our national anthem and other patriotic songs, were banned by the Communist regime.

The most exuberant singing of folksongs takes place on June 24<sup>th</sup>, when the name's day of Janis (John), or *Janu Diena* (John's Day) is celebrated. It comes close to the summer solstice and is observed in other northern countries as Midsummer Night. Janu Diena is a national holiday and in my early years was my favorite festival, perhaps because children were allowed to stay up all night, or as long as they could hold out, and join in the merriment with adults.

In the countryside, preparation for the festivities started weeks ahead. Special cheese, with caraway seeds, was prepared and beer brewed. The farmyards were swept clean and decorated with flowers. Everyone dressed up in a national costume, distinct to the region. Women wore flower wreaths, while men's were fashioned from supple oak branches. Torches were hoisted on tall poles, and bonfires lit up the farmyards. My grandfather's farm was near a small brook, in ever so gently rolling hills. At dusk, a group of revelers carrying torches streamed from one farm to the next. That magical sight remains locked my memory, with the mystical "Ligo! Ligo!" melody floating through the air and echoing across the fields. This refrain was repeated after each line. ("Sway, Sway!" is the closest translation I can offer.) It made you want to extend your arms and dance!

As a party of singers arrived at the neighbor's house, the visitors sang teasing verses that went something like this: "What a poor farmstead, Ligo! The roof is leaking, the gate is falling down, Ligo Ligo! The pigs are skinny. Oh, what a pitiful place, Ligo!" The host and his companions answered back: "Who are these who come to sing? Ligo! Hungry, dirty and in tatters, Ligo, Ligo! Without socks, without shoes. Ligo! Whose poor children are they? Ligo!" The banter of insults was exchanged for several more verses. Finally, the visitors claimed to be Janu berni (John's children). They were invited in and hosted with cheese and beer, and other delicacies. After a while a new group assembled, singing more songs, and continued on to the next farmhouse, repeating the ritual and the feasting. No one slept that night. If you did, you would be lazy, the mosquitoes would bite you, and you were in for a miserable year!

It was a special night for young people, with the watchful eyes of their elders turned the other way. According to an old belief, the woodland fern bloomed only on this particular night. If a couple went looking for it, and found the bloom, it meant that they were right for each other. Quite a few looked, I didn't know how many found it. I was way too young to look. Only when I was much older did I learn that there is no such thing as a fern bloom!

#### *Latvian Song Festival Tradition*

During the mid-1800's, there was renewed interest in Latvian history, traditions, and culture. This time period came to be known as the "national awakening". Significant works of literature and poetry were written, and the first Song Festival was organized in 1873. Choirs from all over the country practiced a set of folk songs. They converged on Riga, dressed in their traditional costumes, 1,003 singers and 30 instrumentalists. Newly

composed music was also performed, thus encouraging Latvian composers to produce new works.

From then on, songfests were held at seven- or ten-year intervals. Folk dance performances were added as well. The festivals continued throughout Latvia's period of independence (1918-39), with each consecutive staging bringing additional participants and more spectators. Songs from neighboring countries were also performed.

By 1939, Hitler's armies were on the march in Europe. The Soviet Union was pressuring Latvia to permit Russian naval bases in our ports, and demanding land concessions from Finland. Against this background of mounting tensions, a Song Festival was held in Riga. Even though I was only five years old, I felt apprehensive as I listened to adults voice their fears and sorrow that our country's short-lived independence was about to end. On the program was "Finlandia," the national anthem of Finland. As the melancholy strains filled the air, people wept in the stands. They were crying not only for Finland, but for Latvia as well.

During the nearly fifty years of Soviet occupation, the festival tradition was allowed to continue in order to show the world that the Republic of Soviet Socialist Latvia was free to maintain its national identity. However, some of the most beloved Latvian folk songs were banned, and only the ones approved by the Soviet government were performed. Mikhail Gorbachev's new policy of "openness," a loosening of Soviet control, resulted in the Singing Revolution of 1988. Latvians, Estonians, and Lithuanians formed a human chain across the three countries and sang the forbidden songs, and the quest for independence was renewed once again.

A friend of mine gave an eyewitness account of the most spectacular and emotional Song Festival of recent times, which took place June 30 to July 8, 1990. Latvian exiles from all over the world returned and swelled the ranks of performers to 35,438! The choir of over 20,000 singers was joined by 10,000 dancers. Ignoring the Soviet censorship, they sang and waved the original Latvian flag! A year later, on August 21, 1991, with the Communist system now in ruins, Latvia proclaimed full independence from the Soviet Union.

In the summer of 2000, my husband and I visited Riga, which I had not seen since I left with my parents at age ten. We had the good fortune to attend the Student Song and Dance festival. The sounds and sights of 10,000 singers and hundreds of dancers were truly spectacular. The participants ranged in age from pre-schoolers to late teens. The discipline and dedication of the young performers left us in awe. At the close of the concert the audience joined in, singing everyone's favorite, "Put Vejini." It asked the wind to blow and carry the boat back to Vidzeme, a region I knew so well. I felt a deep devotion for my native land and admiration for its citizens. Even though I love my adopted USA, I was proud of the beautiful folk songs and those who sang them, the enduring tradition that helped the Latvians to once again be independent and free from foreign domination.

### *National Designs*

Just as the folk songs and Song Festivals confirm the Latvian nation's uniqueness, so does the existence of mythology, national designs, and costumes.

According to scholars, evidence points to a significant body of mythology developed before the arrival of Christianity. It did not equal that of the Greeks, yet it told of many deities, minor gods, protectors of households, forest, fields, and animals. In return for the protection and favors granted, mortals offered food or flowers to ensure continued favors.

Most prominent was a god figure, personified by a frail old man, wandering through the countryside, stopping at a farmhouse to ask for some food and drink, or shelter for the night. Those who were kind to him were rewarded in some way, perhaps with extra coins in the purse or more bread on the shelf. One never knew if the stranger might turn out to be the fabled deity or just an old codger. Perhaps that accounts for the long held tradition of honoring the elderly.

Eventually, the growth of Christian ideology blurred the pagan beliefs without completely erasing them. The pre-Christian supernatural beings were represented with specific symbols, composed of fairly simple geometric designs, easy to recreate in everyday life with the materials at hand. These symbols are still in use today and are easily identified in numerous handcrafted items.



A triangle denotes God, the tip pointing to the sky, the sides extended over the earth, protecting those who live upon it.



The best known is the Sun symbol, in the shape of a stylized daisy. The sun, as giver of light and warmth, was considered the mother of all children. This symbol is used extensively in embroidery, wood carvings, jewelry, ceramics, and even kitchen implements, such as spoon handles.



A more complex design of half arch, with variations, represents the Moon, caretaker of all the stars, protector of travelers and soldiers.



The Star, either simple six-point or eight-point, is the third heavenly body used in Latvian designs. Those who study traditional designs have concluded that the Star was adopted from Finland around the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 1980s, as Latvians struggled to gain independence from the Soviet Union, the Star symbol was worn on a lapel and signaled a quest for freedom and passive resistance to the Soviet regime.

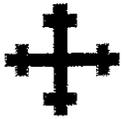


The needles-of-a-fir-tree sign is associated with Laima, the goddess of good fortune. Laima's presence at the time of birth protects the newborn.

Latvia's best known candy company is called Laima. High quality chocolates and candies are prized throughout the country and considered an appropriate gift for any occasion. A large clock, with Laima on it, has stood near the Freedom Monument since my early childhood and is still the best known meeting spot in Riga today. "I'll meet you by Laima's clock!" needs no other specification.



Straight lines, intersecting at forty-five degree angles, with the tips bent down, represent the deity "Jumis," protector of fields and harvests. Often it was placed above the roofs of cabins where grain and other household goods were stored.



A symmetrical cross with all sides being equal represents "Mara," a good household spirit. After Christianity was introduced in Latvia, the bottom spoke was lengthened and it became the traditional Christian cross.



One of the oldest signs, dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, represents thunder, or "Perkonis." Before World War II it was the favored design for men's shirts, mittens, and sashes. Years before the war, my mother embroidered a linen tablecloth in the traditional colors of red, blue, green, and yellow. Along with other signs, Perkonis was exquisitely stitched into the border. Then the world over it became known as Nazi Germany's swastika. After the Germans occupied Latvia, we never used the tablecloth again. How ironic that originally Perkonis represented energy and fire, good luck, and protection from everything evil.

These are just some of the major designs representing the deities of bygone days. As I grew up, I learned to combine these elements into more and more complex designs by drawing them on a squared paper. When I reached the fifth grade we were living in a

refugee camp in West Germany, supported by the United Nations. We were already taught handwork in my Latvian school, and in the sixth grade we were assigned to design and knit a pair of mittens, using at least three different colors of yarn. In the post war period yarn was not readily available. Mother and I unraveled a sweater I had outgrown and a pair of long wool stockings. Part of it mother dyed blue, thus giving me the three colors I needed.

### *National Costumes*

National costumes evolved over many centuries from the clothes worn daily while doing farm chores. They were made from available materials, primarily wool and linen.

Generations ago, the production of linen cloth was a time consuming process. Flax grew abundantly in Latvia's cool climate. After harvest, the plant was soaked in a pond or a lake, thrashed by hand, carded with a special comb and spun into raw fiber. Producing wool yarn was no less time consuming. Sometimes, when a handsomely woven piece of cloth was produced, considered too fine for farm work, it was fashioned instead into costumes to be worn on holidays, weddings, and other occasions.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the national costumes have become more and more elaborate. Today, they are recognized as outstanding examples of folk art due to their high quality of weaving, embroidery, and jewelry. Latvia's four major regions have distinct designs and colors, with a great deal of variation within each region.

A woman's costume consists of a long woven skirt, either striped, plaid, or a solid color, plus a long-sleeved blouse or a tunic, with some distinctive embroidery, and a woven belt or long sash, tied around the waist. In some regions, a vest and an apron are part of the ensemble. To give extra warmth, a large woolen scarf, or shawl, with finely embroidered border and fringe, is worn as the top layer.

Some type of head covering completes the costume. It can vary from a simple scarf to an elaborate hat, or tiara like crown, embroidered with extra ribbons and beads. For many occasions, a fresh flower wreath is the accepted adornment.

Silver and amber jewelry was prominent in the traditional costumes and still is today. Amber is the most common stone used in brooches, pins, and necklaces. Prehistoric pine resin, subjected to great pressure through thousands of years, yielded amber in different shades of milky white to rich honey yellows, to nearly dark brown hues. A piece is most highly valued if it contains a bug, or even a piece of primeval bark. The Baltic region has been known as the Amber Road due to the abundance and availability of this semiprecious stone. After a storm has passed, amber pieces can often be found washed up along the seashore.

During my childhood "pastalinis," similar to moccasins, were the most common costume footwear for women and men. Made from a piece of leather cut to fit the foot, they were gathered along the edges by leather laces and tied in crisscross fashion to the knees. Over time more sophisticated shoes and boots have replaced the pastalinas.

As a girl came into her teens, she was expected to demonstrate her handwork skills by creating a traditional dress of her region. We were living in Germany, in a refugee camp, when I became a teenager. The Latvians in the camp came from all parts of our country.

Some managed to bring their native costume with them. Our Girl Guide leader chose a costume from the western region of Latvia, called Nica. The reason for selecting Nica's



Costume from Nica



Central Latvia



Western Latvia

Ilga, Third from right in Nica costume 1947



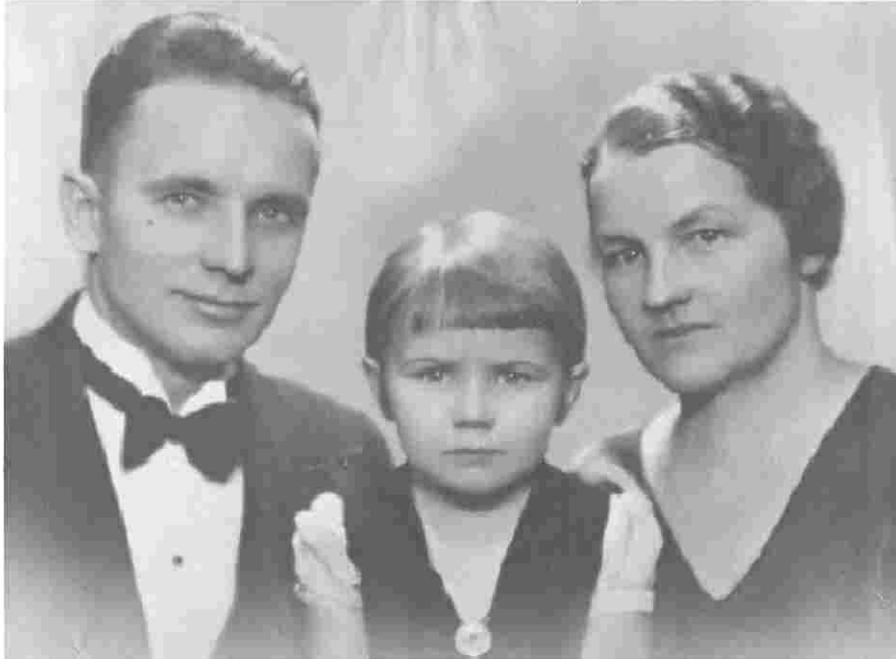
costume was that the three basic material colors were more easily obtainable than those of the plaids and stripes, representative of other parts of Latvia. It was a striking ensemble: a red skirt, white blouse, and gray vest. Sewn into the hemline was a rope, which gave the skirt a flare. A design in black yarn decorated the front of the gray vest. The full sleeved linen blouse, from shoulder to elbow, was stitched in fine red thread. A colorful crown with beads and ribbons completed the outfit. In the olden days, such a costume was passed down from one generation to the next. As I outgrew my native dress, I followed the same tradition and gave it to a younger girl, but not before I had danced many folk dances! Our Girl Guide and Boy Scout leaders organized a folk dance group and made sure that we had opportunities to perform at all kinds of events.

Through history, Latvian men's costumes were less colorful than those of women, yet showed considerable variation from region to region. They were influenced more by city-life and by soldier's uniforms, thus being more prone to change according to the fashions of each period. The most basic outfit consisted of a white linen or fine wool shirt, tucked into beige trousers, tied with a colorful belt. In some regions, vests or coats were worn. The length varied from today's sport coat look to ones that covered the knees. Black felt hats, not quite as tall as the Lincoln stove pipe, or summer's wide brim straw hats, topped off a well-dressed man.

During the refugee days, the boys who participated in our folk dance group made do with the basic outfit, with a traditional ribbon necktie to add a bit of color. As for learning crafts that were "men's work", such as pottery or jewelry making, the young men in our camp were limited due to lack of materials. They did become excellent woodcarvers and produced a variety of wood boxes decorated with the usual folk designs. Not to be outdone by the girls, who had yarn and sewing supplies, one young man learned to knit and produced a pair of mittens. He gave them to me as a gift.

### **Earliest Childhood Memories—Gulbene**

My earliest memories are a blur of packing, rushing to the railroad station, a train ride, a new town, smiling faces greeting us, an empty new house. The pattern repeated itself several times as we moved back and forth between Riga and Gulbene, and back again.



**December 1936**

Father's Air Force squadron was assigned to a base in Gulbene, in the northeast part of Latvia, close to his birthplace, and near the border with the Soviet Union. The name of the town, translated from German, was "Swan Town". I saw them swimming on the pond by the castle. It was not a large castle, but it was exquisite! Since the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the owners had always been Germans, either a bishop or a baron. The estate had been in the family for generations. It was a prime example of German land acquisition in Latvia. By the time we came to Gulbene, there were no more German barons and the castle was the property of the state.



**The Castle at Gulbene, 1938**

We lived in a rented house, on the edge of the airfield, a walking distance from the hangar and the barracks where father was stationed. Directly across the airfield was the town itself. My cousin, Richie, came to live with us that first summer and stayed for a year. His father (mother's brother) had died suddenly, leaving Richie and his mother in deep sorrow. Family members reasoned that the fresh air and the change would be good for Richie and would give his mother time to recover from her grief. That suited me fine, since I had a playmate. Three other boys lived down the street, the youngest was Richie's age. I was a nearly a year younger than all of them, and a girl! If I wanted to be part of the group, I had to play boys' games, mostly war games.



**1<sup>st</sup> row: Richie, Ilga  
2<sup>nd</sup> row: Valija, Janis  
and Zenta  
September 1937**

**Ilga in  
1937**



On Saturdays, farmers drove their buggies to town to sell produce, baked good, and other handmade items. People came to buy, visit, and exchange news of the day. At least once a year, the colorful Gypsy wagons arrived and stirred up excitement. The clan leader was a big man, with a black beard and a handlebar mustache, wearing a purple shirt and striped trousers. He complimented the ladies and kissed their hands, if they weren't fast enough to withdraw them. Wearing long skirts, dangling earrings, and multicolored scarves, the Gypsy women attracted everyone's attention. An invitation was extended to the local folk to attend an evening's performance at the edge of town, where they parked their wagons around a campfire. It was never a disappointment. Violins accompanied an accordion, as Gypsy women danced, beating a tambourine, while the leader passed his hat around to collect the money. Telling your fortune, either by cards or palm reading, called for extra payment. The locals warned mother to hang on to her purse, as the Gypsies were skilled pickpockets, liable to steal anything that wasn't carefully watched. As rumor had it, they even stole children. Richie and I were forbidden to ever take a ride with them. You can imagine my horror when Richie readily accepted a young girl's invitation to climb onto the wagon as they left town! "No, No! We have to ask mother!" I yelled, convinced I had saved Richie from a life with the Gypsies.

Our daily routine was by far less exciting. Mother tended a large garden, kept chickens, geese, a few goats, and lots of rabbits. Richie and I helped feed the animals and thought

of them as our pets. A problem arose when rabbit stew was served. I had become attached to the furry creatures.

My parents led an active social life. Father's buddies often gathered for a game of cards that lasted well into the night. Air force friends came to dinner and ended the evening with singing. Special events took place at the air base, which we attended dressed in our very best.

### *Three Days of Christmas*

Most of the family members on father's side gathered for the holidays at grandfather's farm. The week before Christmas was called the Silent Week. It was a trying time for the children. No rambunctious playing or running was allowed. We were expected to speak in quiet voices, as we awaited the birth of the Christ Child. A fir tree was selected and brought home from the forest, just a day or two before Christmas. Small, white, wax candles adorned the tree and were lit only for a brief time. The decorations consisted of cranberries strung on a long thread, pieces of candy wrapped in brightly colored paper with long streamers attached, traditional pepper/ginger cookies, and delicate star-shaped ornaments made from straw.

The day before Christmas Eve was "pirts," the Latvian word for sauna. Early in the afternoon, a fire was lit to heat the rocks that lined the bottom of the bathhouse. Along one side of the cabin were shelves, one above the other, wide enough to lie on. A fragrant aroma arose from the pine branches as they soaked in hot water. As cold water was poured over the sizzling rocks, great bursts of steam rose to the ceiling. The top shelf occupant received most of the heat. The women and children were first in line. This was one ritual I dreaded. Gasping for air, I couldn't wait till the torture was over. The men's turn was next. More wood was added to the fire, and after a while loud shouts and hollers were heard as some of my uncles, totally naked, finished off their bath with a roll in the snow.

If a misunderstanding had occurred between family members, it had to be resolved by Christmas Eve. Disagreements were settled with the neighbors so good will could prevail. The holy evening began with grandfather's reading from the Bible of the story of Christ's birth. Carols were sung as we sat around the tree, now glowing with candlelight. Children strained their ears and tried to stifle their excitement about who was to come, Old Man Christmas! A knock at the door signaled his arrival. Dressed in a big fur coat and a hat, he entered with a sack full of presents on his back, and birch switches tucked in his belt. Tension mounted as the Christmas Man inquired if anyone had misbehaved and needed spanking. The adults assured him that only good children lived here. He searched in his bag and called a name. Hearing mine, I wanted to snatch the present and run, but Christmas Man started to converse with me! Had I been a good girl? What had I prepared for this occasion? The custom called for each child to show what he or she had learned during the year: a poem, a song or dance, even a recitation of the multiplication tables. In a shaky voice, I recited a poem about a red breasted robin. It was such a relief and joy to receive that one present! Draping the empty bag over his shoulder, Christmas Man left, urging us to be good, and promising to return next year. Thoughtfully, Richie remarked that Christmas Man sounded like Uncle Verners, one of my dad's younger brothers.

The evening was far from over. After a scrumptious feast, the horses were hitched to a sleigh and everyone bundled up for a ride to midnight church service in town. Along with thousands of stars, a bright moon lit the way as we took a shortcut across the frozen lake. The Lutheran Church welcomed us with a warm candle glow and strains of organ music. "Silent Night, Holy Night" still lingered in my head as we started for home. The rhythmic beat of horse hoofs and muted sound of sleigh bells lulled me to sleep long before we got there.

December 25th was called First Christmas. It was a family time. Kids played with their new toys while the adults talked and joked. A toy gun was Richie's present. It shot a cork bullet, attached to a string. My gift was a doll. The first time Richie took aim he hit the doll right on the nose, flattening it! Above my wailing, mother used a needle to perform an operation that brought the nose back almost to its normal shape.

The next day was Second Christmas. Friends came to visit with treats, and were offered food as merriment continued throughout the day, well into the evening.

On the Third Christmas, grandfather called us together and said a short blessing as those who lived away prepared to leave. Even with several days of celebration, the long awaited holidays were over too soon. Few Christmases since have been as magical as those of my early childhood on grandfather's farm.

#### *Three Summers of Discontent (1939, 1940, 1941)*

By 1939 it had become customary for Richie to spend the summers with us. Besides the farm animals my mother kept, we also had a kitten and one pet white rabbit. At the start of Richie's visit, we welcomed Reksis, a German Shepherd puppy. Our happiness did not last through the whole summer. In August, sightings of a rabid dog wandering through our part of the town put everyone on an alert. On a sunny day, a neighbor from down the street shouted that the strange dog was approaching. Terrified, we watched from a window as he ambled down the street, streaks of foamy saliva dripping from his jaws.

Our arms and legs had nicks and scratches from roughhousing with our loveable puppy. What if he had been infected? Reksis was put to sleep, yet samples taken from his brain were inconclusive about the disease. Just to be safe, a series of rabies shots were ordered for Richie and me, thirty-six injections around our belly buttons. At first we were brave, but not for long. We sought a hiding place when we spotted the male Army nurse starting to cross the airfield. They found us without too much trouble, until the day Richie squeezed himself into the oven! The summer of 1939 had not been a good one at our house, and it proved even more traumatic for the rest of the country. A secret agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union, signed on August 23rd, called for the division of the Baltic countries between them, and allowed the Russians to establish naval and military bases in Latvia.

By the summer of 1940, Germany had occupied Poland. Apprehension was spreading among the Latvians. Still, daily life went on. In mid-June we were in Riga to visit relatives and replenish mother's sewing supplies. As mother shopped, all the church

bells began to toll. People rushed outside. An elderly gentleman fell to his knees in tears, exclaiming that this was the end our freedom, the end of our country. His voice was drowned out by a deafening clamor of roaring motors and iron chains against the cobblestone streets, as Russian tanks rolled into sight.

Under the Soviet occupation, the next twelve months came to be known as the Year of Terror, a Year of Silence. Latvians who had been in positions of leadership either in government, education, or civic organizations were arrested and imprisoned. Some just disappeared. Freedom of the press was gone, and only the Communist party line was published. Neighbors were encouraged to report on each other. Mistrust grew.

During the Soviet takeover, father was still serving in the Latvian Army/Air Force, stationed in Gulbene. Considering the size and military might of the USSR, resistance to the invasion would have been futile. The Latvian military personnel were given no choice as they were “counted over” into the Red Army, under Russian officers. Instruction in Communist doctrine was part of the process. My father, always the debater, challenged the Red commissar without realizing that he was putting himself in danger.

The summer of 1941 brought a complete news blackout by the Soviets, yet people knew that something big was in the offing. In the early part of June we were once again taking the train to Riga. Rows of freight cars lined the tracks in Gulbene and every station we passed on the way. Their small windows were fitted with steel bars. We arrived at Uncle Hermanis’ apartment in the late evening. After a prolonged knocking, he finally answered the door. He was very agitated. Did we not know what was happening? The NKVD (secret police) were rounding up people and taking them away. All night long, father and Hermanis watched by the window as black vans pulled up to adjacent apartment buildings and hauled people away. The date was June 14<sup>th</sup>. Years later, the Latvians came to commemorate this date as a Day of Mourning for the 35,000 victims of mass deportation to Siberia. We came very close to being a part of that statistic.

As we returned to Gulbene, Richie joined us for his summer vacation. Father reported to duty at the airbase and was placed on high alert, unable to leave the barracks. Hitler had broken the secret pact with Stalin and, on June 22nd, ordered his army to attack the Soviet Union. German forces rapidly raced across our borders on their way toward Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), about 300 miles to the northeast.

Before the Germans reached Gulbene, the elementary school principal rode his bicycle to warn mother to leave our house immediately. From school records, he knew that certain families were on a list to be deported by the Soviets. An earlier minor misunderstanding between mother and a Communist youth leader may have been the reason. Quickly, she gathered a basket full of freshly baked piragi (bacons rolls), a jug of apple cider, and some blankets. Her friend and next door neighbor, also an Air Force wife, and her three small boys joined us. Avoiding the main road, we hurried toward the surrounding woods. The next two weeks we spent in the forest, sleeping under pine trees at night, and constantly changing our location by day. Mother and her friend took turns bargaining for food at farmhouses along the forest’s edge. The fear that someone would report us to the Soviets was ever present.

A meeting with an unfriendly farmer made us seek safety deeper into the woods. One of the boys came down with the measles, so we did not make good progress before stopping for the night. Nestled against the stump of a fir tree, protected by the low spreading branches, we bedded down. It was a restless night. Dawn came early in the northern woods and the sound of footsteps traveled effortlessly. Through the morning haze, we sighted several Soviet soldiers walking in a dragnet formation. Just then, the sick boy coughed. His mother clamped her hand over his mouth as a soldier stopped close to our tree. I saw it all with a pounding heart. All of us were afraid to breathe. The soldier moved on.

For the next few days, we changed our site as often as we could. Richie and another one of the boys got the measles. My turn came next. Mother ventured out to look for food and heard that the Russians had withdrawn and the Germans were taking over Gulbene. We made our way back to town, stopping at a farm where mother knew the owner. To our great surprise, father was there! He had managed to escape from his Air Force unit shortly after being ordered to leave for the Soviet border. The father of the three boys had not been so lucky. We returned home where, in a darkened room, Richie and I recovered from the measles. Only then did we learn that our house had been searched a few hours after our escape into the woods.

### *School Days*

During the turbulent autumn of 1940, I started school in our small town of Gulbene. In those days, elementary schools consisted of Kindergarten through the sixth grade. In the larger cities, students began Kindergarten at age six and first grade at seven. After completion of the sixth grade, five years of gymnasium, equivalent to U.S. high school, was the standard. Many trade, vocational, and fine arts schools also existed. Only the top gymnasium students entered the University of Latvia, located in Riga.

Children attending small town and country schools had the option of waiting until seven to start Kindergarten. Many of them traveled long distances by horse and buggy, or a sled in winter, to reach the school. Given the time it took, plus the harsh winter weather, a practical compromise was reached so that, on weekdays, the students stayed in a dormitory adjacent to the main school building.

The closest elementary school to our house, on the edge of Gulbene, had a dormitory for the country kids, while the town children like myself walked home every day. At the age of six, I had the option of waiting a year before starting. Since I could read, mother asked me if I wanted to go anyway. I did not. But one day passing the school near the end of summer, I decided to explore the place. The principal was working in the building and invited me in. He knew my parents. Did I want to start school this fall? Yes, I did, and I knew all the necessary information for him to sign me up. For some reason, I never mentioned this encounter to my parents. A week before school was to begin, the principal checked with them to finalize my enrollment. Mother had to work very fast in order to finish sewing my school uniform: a dark blue dress, with a white collar, and a black apron.

Signing up for school had taken very little effort on my part, but getting into first grade proved otherwise. The Kindergarten and first grade teacher was a gentleman of about fifty. He oversaw five rows of desks and close to forty students. One row along the interior wall was designated for the Kindergartners, or the “ABCs,” as they were called. As the teacher called a name, he assigned a seat. He directed me to the “ABCs” row, but this was not where I wanted to be! Gathering up my courage, I announced that I could read! Lifting a book from his desk, he ordered me to do so. I could barely get my breath, but I read. The surprised look never left his face, as he pointed to a first grade desk in a row next to the windows. Only later did I realize that challenging a teacher was not the thing to do. He was always kind to me, though, other than smacking my knuckles with a ruler when I tried to write with my left hand.

*Return to Riga and Years of Turmoil (1941-1944)*

By early fall, 1941, we moved back to Riga. The chaos that followed the German takeover is hard to imagine for anyone living in a country that has not been occupied by a foreign power. Reprisals against those who had cooperated with the Communist regime were swiftly carried out. No retaliation was taken against father for his service in the Red Army, since he had been given no choice in the matter, and was now considered a deserter. Father was just a year past the age limit for induction into the German army. Yet, due to his German language skills and previous army training, he was assigned as a civilian support worker to a transport unit. His duties varied from translator to ammunition truck driver, an assignment that proved ever more dangerous as the Soviet planes increasingly targeted German supply lines.

During this period I attended a different school every year, even transferring in the middle of the third grade, resulting in my worst ever school experience. The tightly knit group of girls was not about to accept a newcomer into its midst. Adding to the difficulty was the introduction of German language study into the curriculum. I was frequently absent due to ear infections and other winter diseases. A caring teacher spent extra time with me, causing my antagonists to label me a teacher’s pet. My only consolation was Richie. The streetcar line I took from my school went right past his. Almost daily, he waited for me and we rode together part of the way home. His mother had remarried, cutting ties with his dad’s side of the family. This sudden separation was difficult for both of us, since we thought of each other as brother and sister, not just cousins.

The lightning fast German army we had originally witnessed had bogged down in the battle of Leningrad, which had started on July 10, 1941, and lasted for three years. Russian planes began to attack Riga, zeroing in on two parallel bridges over the Daugava River, and the railroad station. Our apartment was located close to both targets. The Germans positioned an anti-aircraft gun on the roof of the apartment building next to ours. The first time the gun thundered into action, the building shook down to its foundations. I was convinced a bomb had dropped directly on us and we were being buried in the basement where we had taken shelter.

In the Spring of 1943, with the ever-increasing Russian air raids, father rented a cottage on the outskirts of Riga. No children my age lived nearby. My tiny dog, Foxy, a Pomeranian breed who looked like a small fox, kept me company. I also had a cat and a

piglet, which became the family's favorite pet. In May my favorite aunt Anna had a baby girl, Erika. Mother and I spent lots of time with both of them, since my uncle Janis had been drafted by the Germans and was serving on the Eastern Front.

The predicted quick victory of the Germans turned into disaster. Their losses were mounting each month, and were tragically brought home to our family in February of 1944 when father's youngest brother, Adolfs, was killed in action. Before being drafted, he had attended the university and was a frequent visitor at our apartment. I liked having him around. Father and the rest of the family took his loss very hard.

As the spring of 1944 arrived, we decided that it would be best for Tante Anna, Erika, mother and me to move to a rented place in Jurmala, a resort town on the Bay of Riga, located about 20 miles from the capital city. When he could, father joined us on weekends. Mother often took the train to Riga to stand in lines for whatever food items were still available. Near the end of the summer, the low rumble of artillery guns was unmistakable, as the Soviet army advanced along the southern border of Latvia, burning a town only thirty kilometers away. In a near panic, we hurried back to Riga.

Father could not risk being captured by the Russians and planned to flee with the Germans. He was determined to take all of us with him, including Tante Anna and Erika. He requested permission from the German officer in charge to allow us to ride in the wood chip truck he had been driving. Due to the lack of petroleum, the Germans had designed a cylindrical, wood burning shaft, which produced steam that powered the engines. Father drove the truck that supplied wood chips for the whole unit. To carry the maximum load, the sides of the truck had been extended to about ten feet high, without a cover on top. Climbing up and down was not an easy task, especially for Tante Anna, who was almost eight months pregnant with her second baby.

By October 11, 1944, the Soviet forces were on the outskirts of Riga and the German unit prepared to leave. Everything on wheels was headed for the main bridge, toward the western shore of the Daugava River. The congestion was horrendous. As night came, so did more air attacks. We scrambled down from our perch on the wood chip truck and spent the night in the nearest air raid shelter. Tante Anna made a difficult choice. She would remain in Riga with Erika, in her own apartment, where she stood a better chance of surviving than on the road. With silent tears and hugs we said our very difficult good-byes.

Another night of shelling and bombing kept us pinned down in the shelter. The next day, we were very close to the bridge. As daylight faded, the dreaded Russian planes returned, dropping bombs, shattering glass, filling everything with a deafening noise, smoke and dust, and a burning smell. We crouched in doorways when no basements could be found. Around 8:00 we reached the bridge and inched across it, leaving behind the familiar skyline illuminated by fires and the explosions of heavy artillery. Years later, we learned that near midnight the Germans blew up the bridge in order to slow down the Soviet pursuit. The date was October 13, 1944, the day the Soviet Army captured Riga.

By chance, father's second youngest brother, Elmars, was serving with the same German transport unit. His wife and baby son were en route to the northwest tip of Latvia, where people were crossing the Baltic Sea to neutral Sweden in fishing boats with pilots braving the dangers of Russian submarines. Uncle Elmars escaped from his post, but not in time

to reach his wife at the designated meeting place. She and the son managed to get to Sweden and none of us ever saw them again.

The caravan continued westward toward the port of Liepaja. After father turned in the truck, his job with the German transportation group was over and we were left to find lodgings. For the moment, the front lines seemed far away. We dared to hope that perhaps the Germans would regroup and push back the Soviet troops. Maybe in a few weeks we would be able to return home to Riga.

Just a few kilometers from Liepaja, a farmer agreed to rent us a room. The house was quite small, without electricity or indoor plumbing. The owner let us stay in the cramped bedroom, while he and his wife slept in the living room/kitchen combination. The root cellar was located close to the house. Heavy beams formed the roof, and were covered by a thick layer of dirt, overgrown with grass. The meager supplies were stored there for the coming winter. It would also serve as a bomb shelter, should we need it.

The feeling of safety we had experienced when we first arrived didn't last long. By mid November, more and more German troops crowded around the farmhouse and filled the city of Liepaja. The Russian planes made bombing runs both day and night. German anti-aircraft guns rained shrapnel all around us as we dashed for the root cellar. Even more ominous were the constant reverberations of heavy guns that made the ground shake, and moved closer each day.

As December approached, it was clear that the Germans could not hold back the Red Army. The Russians had captured part of southern Lithuania, thus gaining access to the Baltic Sea, and cutting off all land routes to Germany. A sea voyage was the only option left. Daily, father went to speak with authorities, trying to obtain the proper papers that would guarantee a safe passage to the western part of Germany, well out of the Russian reach. Finally, he obtained the needed documents. German transport ships accepted a few civilians, providing there was space. The wait continued and so did our uneasiness. We had brought my dog, Foxy, with us this far, and none of us could bear to leave her behind. Mother sewed a large pocket for Foxy on the inside of my coat.

One day a storm blew in from the west, a good omen preventing the Russian planes from flying. The following day, December 10, 1944, as dusk fell and the wind subsided, we boarded the ship that would take us away from our homeland, only temporarily we thought. It was a restless night as we slept with our bundles and suitcases, huddled in a small storage area. A gray morning greeted us as we pulled past Pillau, now called Baltiysk, and moved into the port of Königsberg (Kaliningrad). Father was troubled, as he had expected to travel much further west to Lübeck.

A group of soldiers boarded the ship. We watched as the captain talked with them, frequently glancing in our direction. He told us that plans had changed, he was sailing back to Latvia, and we had to disembark here and now. The waiting truck would take us to a station and we would travel westward by train. The stone-faced soldiers with their guns joined us in the truck.

In the station, we were herded to a platform where other people were waiting, none of them German. More soldiers surrounded us. A high ranking SS officer appeared. Father approached him with passport and travel papers. He wanted to know where we were

going and why we were guarded by soldiers. Suddenly, another SS officer strode toward us. He was young, with an empty coat sleeve folded into his belt where the left arm should have been. Perhaps alerted by quick motions and clicking boots, Foxy jumped out of my coat pocket and barked loudly, nipping at the feet of the one-armed German. He whipped out his gun and pointed it at Foxy. In an instant, I fell on top of her, crying. Swearing loudly about “damned foreigners,” he ordered me to move or he would shoot both of us. Mother rushed to my side.

The older SS officer intervened and spoke quietly to the angry officer as he pointed to the travelers standing on the opposite platform. The commotion had attracted everyone's attention and people were watching with shocked looks on their faces. The out-of-control officer still waved his gun and argued, unable to calm down. It probably would have been a bad public relations move for an SS officer to shoot a child and a dog in front of everyone. The one-armed man stormed off, leaving all of us shaken and silent. A train pulled up and we were herded into the empty cars, accompanied by soldiers, all carrying guns.

I cannot remember how long we rode the train from Königsberg, maybe just a few hours. The name of the town we reached has been erased from my memory as well. It may have been Fischhausen. I only remember that the train stopped in a snowy countryside, close to an airfield, which was surrounded by a high barbwire fence. Several guards opened the gate, fortified with more barbwire. A large hangar loomed across the field. Single story barracks were spaced all around it. The soldiers ordered us to walk to the hangar. We passed a barracks, which was cornered off by more barbwire. Arms reached through the wire, women in raggedy clothes, hollow eyed and skeleton thin, begged to us for food. On their tattered coats was sewn the yellow Star of David. It was a horrific moment.

If anyone wondered what the future held, it was in front of us, written on the faces of those women. We were all captives, imprisoned under the rule of men with guns. What some people still may not know is that besides Jews, the Germans enslaved people from all parts of Eastern Europe: Poles, Lithuanians, Estonians, Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians, and Latvians. Thousands were victims, along with the millions of Jews, of what was to become known as the Holocaust. I have since learned that besides the most notorious concentration camps, there were as many as 15,000 forced labor camps. Our confinement lasted only a month, but it seemed so much longer. An incident, which I witnessed, has stayed with me vividly throughout my life. Several years ago I wrote about it and entitled it “Ice Flowers”.

## Ice Flowers

*Near Königsberg, East Prussia*

December 11, 1944

Tall wooden posts are strung with ugly barbwire in the flat, frozen landscape. Inside the barbwire fence, dreary long low barracks squat along the outer edge of an airfield. Guards in heavy coats, with tall collars and large winter hats, surround us. They keep their faces hidden. Their heavy leather boots crush the snow as they march. Rifles slung over their shoulders with deadly bayonets jab at the sky.

“There must be some mistake,” father says while holding his passport in a trembling hand. “I must speak to the Commandant. I have the proper papers! They guarantee a safe passage to the west, to Lübeck, not to Königsberg. This is too close to the Eastern Front!”

The Eastern Front? I often heard grown-ups talk about it in hushed voices. “Hitler’s armies are well equipped. The best in the world,” they had said. The Front was something far away, somewhere in the frozen vastness of Russia. Something dreadful. It always made me shudder.

In the surrounding crowd, an old man next to us leans toward my father and lowers his voice to a whisper: “The German Army is retreating. Confusion and bedlam are everywhere. What good are your papers?”

The German Commandant bellows: “You will form the ‘People’s Storm!’ You will help stem the Russian tide! Our mighty Army will repel the enemy. We will crush the sub-race to the East!”

The East? Aren’t we from the East? We are from Eastern Europe, where opposing armies have clashed and shattered everything in their paths.

“‘People’s Storm’?” mocks the old man in a quiet voice. “Look around you. What do you see? Women, children, and unfit men who were rejected from army duty, gathered from the last corners of Europe. We are not the Master Race. We’re foreigners, the left-overs. The ‘dispensables’.” The crowd around him starts to shift nervously away from him.

“This can’t be happening to us,” mother says in disbelief. Her eyes search other eyes as if seeking comfort from them. Clutching their bundles, women pull their children closer and stare vacantly. No one looks at my mother. I alone keep my eyes on her, fighting down a feeling of panic.

“Why are we being herded like cattle into these barracks?” mother’s voice rises above the hushed, subdued crowd.

“No talking, move along,” a guard shoves her suddenly with a rifle. Stunned, in numb silence my mother follows the orders and slowly moves toward the barracks along with others.

“Men, line up to the right!” orders the Commandant. “Women, children to the left! Move, move!” He parts the mass of bodies with undisputed might, his stripes and medals hanging from ribbons, attest to high rank, power, and valor.

With renewed courage, father tries to explain: “Herr Commandant, we are a family. My daughter and my wife, we want to stay together.”

“You will be together soon enough, even before sunrise,” an SS officer clamps his hand on father’s arm and forcefully shoves him to the other side. “You will be working together, starting tomorrow. Take these men away!” the officer orders the guards. The soldiers encircle the bewildered men and march them toward the far side of the airfield where more barracks squat near the fence.

Crude wooden bunk beds, four and five levels high, ascend to the ceiling. In endless rows they fill the barracks. Coarse burlap sacks are filled with straw and cover the wooden slats of each bed. A single bare light bulb swings from a wire. A strong stench of stale air overtakes us. The cement floor is rough and frigid, littered with straw and filth. The soldiers count us with the sharp tips of their rifles, order us, push us in a line next to each stack of bunks. Women flinch and retreat from each thrust of the rifles. They stare at the soldiers, uncomprehending and quivering.

“This is a nightmare, it can’t be real,” mother whispers. “These things don’t happen in civilized countries.”

December 15, 1944

Women and children shovel sand, mix limestone, add water, then pour cement into immense forms. Men lift the solid concrete blocks onto flat bed trucks. Father bravely approaches the Commandant and pleads with him: “She is only ten years old, it is too hard for her to shovel sand all day.”

“This is war time, you God-damned foreigners!” shouts the Commandant as his face turns red and his voice reaches hysterical levels. “We are building fortifications to defend our Father Land! These cement blocks will stop the Russian tanks. WE MUST STOP THE TANKS!”

In utter silence all eyes stare at him. No one moves.

“BACK TO WORK!” yells the Commandant with a quivering chin.

December 19, 1944

“Line up!” the guard calls in the darkness. I fumble for my boots, with aching arms and blisters on my hands and a raw burning in my throat. My head is on fire.

“She cannot work today. Please, can’t you see?” pleads mother. “She’s burning with fever. Let her stay in bed. She will behave.”

The guard hesitates, then nods. Why does mother have to beg the guard when I am sick? I do not understand. Weakly, I fall back on the straw sack.

Quickly, mother covers me with her blanket, tucks it around me and lets her hands rest on my shoulders. “Sleep, my dear,” her voice is choked. She lowers her head and I cannot

see her face. I do not cry. Yes, I will behave. Shivering in the cold room, I hear the foot steps retreating into the darkness as the "People's Storm" is marched off to mix and pour more blocks.

Suddenly and intensely, I long for my soft bed with its warm covers and my mother's soothing hand on my hot forehead. I hunger for the taste of her fresh baked rye bread with strawberry jam on it. I miss my house in Latvia. In my aloneness, I cry and fall asleep.

Matted eyelids. It's hard to open my eyes. They hurt. I breathe through my mouth in fast, shallow breaths. How long have I slept? A pale light filters through the frosted window pane and fills the barren, ugly room with softness. Slowly, I focus on the frosted pane and the crystal shapes of ice flowers with sharp-edged, jagged leaves. Only the center of the glass is clear of the icy blossoms, affording a small view to the outside. The luminous pink light grows stronger. Drawn to the light, I rise slowly and move to the window. I want to touch the fragile ice flowers, lean my hot head against them and feel their coldness. The ice flowers wilt and retreat from the heat of my forehead. With my cheek pressed against the pane, I feel the coolness drip down my face. Slowly, I rub my hands against the frosted glass, enlarging the opening. Dazed, I gaze through it and see the black barbed wire fence, the tall posts, and the sky turning blood red to the east. "The sun will rise soon," I try to comfort myself.

Far to the right, where the fence arches away from the barracks, I can see a clump of three figures, moving as one. Rhythmically, they come in a trot, trot, trot—then stop. The middle one moves slowly toward the ground, one from the side moves in front of it. What could they be doing, I wonder? With effort, I focus as they come closer. During the bitter cold of the night, a hard layer of ice has coated the snow. There are no foot prints on the snow. Trot, trot, trot. I can make out the shapes now: a woman with two soldiers on each side.

"Eins, zwei, drei! Halt!" the soldier calls out and the woman falls on her knees, then lies flat, and puts her face on the ice covered snow. The second soldier lifts his boot, steps on her head, and pushes her face through the icy crust of the snow. Up again, prodded with the butt of a gun, they move ever closer to where I stand, my face against the window and my hands held against the frosted pane.

"Eins, zwei, drei! Halt!" Now they are directly in front of my window and I see the woman clearly. She is a young girl, older than I, but still very young. Her tattered coat has the yellow "Star of David" sewn to it, the sign that identifies her as a Jew.

And one more time, the girl drops to her knees, slowly lies down on her stomach, and the soldier smashes her head into the glass-hard, ice-covered snow.

One of the soldiers senses that he is being watched. He jerks his head from side to side, his eyes dart here and there, finally toward the barracks window where I stand mesmerized, watching in horror. Our eyes meet. I hold his gaze, unable to avert my eyes nor move away. The soldier is young, not much older than the girl, blond and red-cheeked. He blinks, looks down at the girl, and back at me. Again, he blinks, and with a shudder seems to wake from the present, from the ritual of torture he has been conducting. His face softens. The girl remains on the ground, motionless. The second

solder raises the butt of his rifle to hit her, unaware of the change in his partner or my presence. Still looking at me, the first soldier extends his arm and restrains the other. I cannot hear what he is saying, but the second soldier glances around, his eyes searching, till he spots me at the window. Hesitantly, as if ashamed, he slowly nudges the girl with the tip of his boot. She struggles to her knees, steadying herself with her hands. As she lifts her head, her eyes slowly move up to the window where I stand—with my eyes wide, frozen in terror.

Dark curls dangle from her scarf, down along her cheeks, bleeding cheeks, where the hard ice has cut tiny gashes all around her face. The cuts ooze blood and encircle her face with bright red rivulets, slowly dripping down her forehead, cheeks and chin. Her eyes are large and dark as she looks into mine. In that infinitesimal split second, when our eyes meet and lock, I feel a bond between us, a kinship. She holds her lips tightly, only a small tremor passes over them, about to shake her determination not to cry, not to show her pain, not to be broken. Tears glisten in her eyes, her lips barely move and I feel she is saying “thank you,” even though I do not know her language, nor she mine.

“Don’t cry, girl”, I whisper to her. “They stopped—for now. We won. Just for now, we won.”

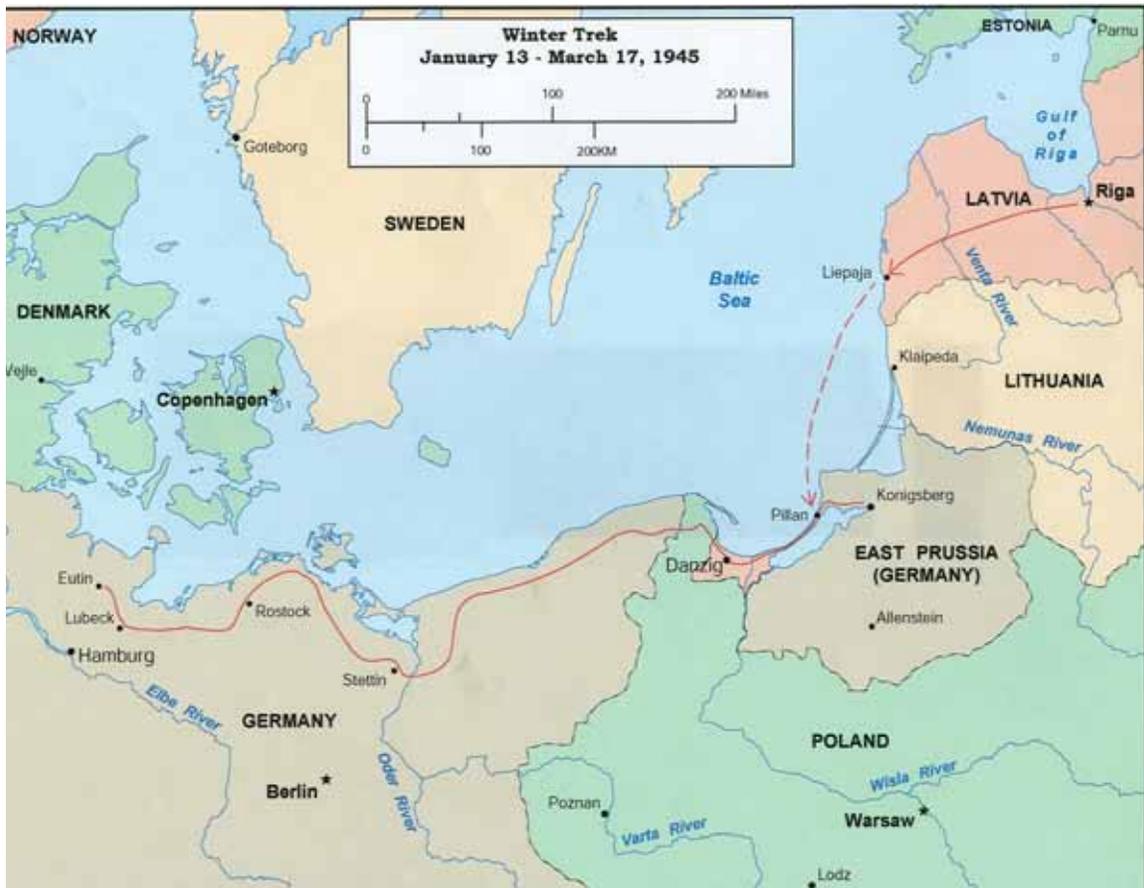
The soldiers order the girl to turn around and march her back toward the east, toward where the harsh, brilliant sun rises above the flat land. It illuminates the frozen ground and shines through the spiked barbwire fence, casting long shadows from the tall wooden posts.

The ice flowers have melted away where my hot hands have stayed against the frozen pane, thawing wide ovals on the glass. I know that the flowers will bloom again when the darkness of night returns. Sobs fill the empty barracks. They are my sobs.

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*January, 1945*

The New Year arrived. Off in the distance, the rumble of heavy guns grew more audible. The Jewish laborers, kept separate from us on the other side of the airfield, were loaded into the train and taken away. They were not coming back, the guard told father. Next we were ordered to pack our things and move into the buildings that had housed the Jews. In freezing temperatures, we were told to clean up the barracks. That night, we huddled together, wondering what would come next.



During the next few days, the guards seemed preoccupied. Some of the high ranking officers left with their bags. As the sun rose on January 13th, we were ordered to assemble outside the barracks. The German commander announced that we were free to go and he pointed toward the rising sun. Hurriedly, he jumped into a waiting car and drove off in the other direction.

For an instant, the crowd stood transfixed, then broke in all directions as people grabbed their things, some heading where the German had pointed. The Latvians we knew in the camp had left their homes because they feared for their lives under the Russians, just like father. No doubt, the Germans had treated us inhumanely, but the Soviet treatment

would be even worse. Father shouted for people to come back, away from the front lines. Some turned around, but others were too far away to hear him.

My father's thorough knowledge of geography guided us for the next two months. His ability to ask the right questions helped us to survive. He learned that our only option was to cross the inlet at Pillau and walk along the sand bar toward Dancig (Gdansk). Others chose the same route, including the retreating German Army. As we trudged toward Pillau, a blizzard overtook us. Father acquired a sled from a German farmer and we piled our suitcases on it. In the storm and crush of wagons, trucks, and people, we encountered a Latvian family of six from the labor camp. There were the parents, their three children ranging from 8 to 15, and the father's sister. None of them spoke German, so they asked to come with us. It was a difficult decision. It would be easier for just the three of us to travel, yet how could father turn down a Latvian family under these circumstances? They threw their belongings on our sled and helped pull it. The following night, father and Mr. Lacis caught an Army horse that had been turned out due to a skin disease. They also stole the front wheels off a German Army wagon, mounted the sled on top, and hammered additional boards to extend it, thus creating a two-wheel cart. Everything the two families had was placed on it and tied down with ropes. There was no room for passengers. The children found a spot along the sides of the cart, or behind it, took hold of a rope, and walked.

Traveling along the narrow strip of land, between the Baltic and the inland waterway, proved to be a grueling experience. Everyone was fleeing westward, civilians mixed in with the retreating German army. Low flying Russian planes took direct aim at the packed road, dropping bombs and firing machine guns on people who tried to get away. Many did not reach safety. In one small settlement, a German lady let us spend the night, one of the only two times we slept in a house during our two-month walk. Her two sons became very interested in Foxy. The next morning, Foxy had disappeared and so had the boys. During the month in the labor camp, we had managed to hide her and keep her. No amount of begging on my part could persuade father to stay and look for her. We had to move on. Many times, during the day, I wanted to turn back to look for my beloved dog. It broke my heart to lose her.

We reached Danzig (now Gdansk) exhausted. As we entered the city, German soldiers were recruiting men into a Volkssturme or "People's Front." It was a last ditch effort to create a militia, consisting of men too old to be drafted and boys in their late teens. Somehow, father managed to talk the soldiers into letting Mr. Lacis stay with us, as he was escorted by soldiers to the induction center. We waited till darkness descended, in the cold and falling snow. Father returned and announced that he was a full-fledged member of the Volkssturme! We had two choices. We could find a place for us to stay so that the men and our horse could report to the barracks in the morning, or we could start walking as fast and as long as we could. Unanimously, we said, "Let's walk!" I remember hanging on to the ropes of the cart, walking till I fell asleep, falling down, getting up, walking some more, and repeating the routine several times.

Past midnight, we reached the next town. A sliver of light shone from a covered window of one house. Father knocked. Inside, the family was holding a wake for their soldier son, who had been killed in western Latvia. Expressing his sympathy, father confided that we were Latvians. Without hesitation, they invited us into their home where candles

burned by the young man's photograph. While the family kept their sad vigil, we collapsed on the living room floor in total exhaustion. We had walked more than thirty miles that day.

The next month was a daily race to stay ahead of the advancing Russian army. As we left a town early in the morning, the Russians captured it by noon or that evening. At times, it seemed as if this were a race we could not win. The planes kept coming, bombing the road full of retreating army vehicles and refugees. There were casualties, both people and horses. Food was scarce. Some towns had soup kitchens to feed the refugees, a most welcome relief. Mother had dried a portion of the meager bread, full of sawdust, given to us in the labor camp. Those hard slices were lifesavers on our journey.

The checkpoints continued to pose a danger for us. Father learned that foreigners were still being rounded up. A plan was devised. Spotting a group of soldiers, father made sure he was the one to talk to them. Mr. Lacis pretended to be deaf. Mother or I would give brief answers if the soldiers came to our side of the cart. Tension built as we approached a checkpoint, yet we had to act calm and friendly, while assuring the interrogators that there was not a single foreigner among us. Later, we joked that, of course there were no foreigners among us--we all were Latvians!

A major Russian offensive was aimed toward the Baltic Sea, along the Oder River. We were still too far east of it. Every day we pushed ahead, walking in all kinds of weather, before our escape route was cut off. In some towns, a schoolhouse was turned into a temporary overnight haven, the floor covered with straw. Those were the good places. Mostly we slept in barns or stables. One shelter we would remember for a long time. We found it on February 8, 1945. Sleet had pelted us all day long. As darkness descended, only an open field, dotted with pear shaped haystacks, lined the road. How far to the next town? Even if we knew, we could not walk any more. Turning our horse into the wet field, we headed for the haystack farthest from the road. Selecting the leeward side, we burrowed through the soggy outer layer into the fragrant hay and slept.

A brilliant sun greeted us next morning and a meadowlark sang. We took it as a good omen and briefly felt rejuvenated. Yet the prolonged cold and lack of food was taking a toll on all of us. I suffered from almost constant dysentery. If one of the kids became ill, we got a ride on top of the cart. The youngest Lacis daughter and I had a high fever the night we crossed the Oder River, around two in the morning. We were the only ones on the road. One of the German guards, stationed on the bridge, remarked, "You have made it to safety!" What a feeling of relief! From the start of our trek to this point, we had walked close to 300 miles.

The productive province of Mecklenburg stretched before us. Winter was retreating. We slackened our pace. On a sunny day, in a wooded area, we heated water and took a sponge bath, the first one in nearly two months! We even washed our hair, now full of lice. Rostock was a picture postcard town, with a church steeple above the square, all tidy and neat. The fighting seemed far away. At another checkpoint, the soldiers were friendly. They offered us a place to stay and work on a farm. The Lacis family had been farmers and were tired of walking. We all were, and staying in one place sounded very tempting. After some thought, father concluded that if the Lacis family wanted to settle

here, fine, but we would continue toward the Danish border. Having come through so much together, our companions were not ready to split with us, so we walked on.

Our hardworking horse showed signs of strain and fatigue. Half-days and frequent rest stops were as much for her benefit as ours. Past Wismar, we headed for Lübeck, our original destination when we first boarded the ship in Latvia! The ancient city had sustained bomb damage. As if to remind us that the war was not over, the sound of an air raid siren made us scramble for cover. We feared the Allied air force much more than the Russian.

By the morning of March 17th, we were approximately fifteen miles west of Lübeck, and had slept soundly the night before in a sweet-scented hay barn, with our horse nearby. Unable to rise, with labored breathing, she lay on the ground, dying. None of us could hold back the tears. The feisty mare had saved our lives and now we could do nothing for her. The sympathetic German farmer offered to drive us to the nearest town, Eutin, where a refugee center had been set up. He would take care of our horse as well. Grateful for both offers, father gave him some of mother's silver teaspoons we had carried all the way from home. Our two-month trek of over 500 miles had come to an end.

Located between two lakes, Eutin is also called the City of Roses. Dating back to the Middle Ages, it has a picturesque town square and a cathedral. A schoolhouse had been converted into a refugee center and had plenty of room. Everything seemed calm and peaceful. The relief kitchen served food that was better than we had received on the road and there was plenty of it. The days were getting warmer. We savored our rest. An unexpected calamity struck: food poisoning. Several people became deathly ill, I among them. One lady died, leaving behind a daughter my age. For my parents these were the worst days of the war, as they watched me through long nights of high fever and delirium. It took weeks for me to get well again, even longer to regain my strength. Any thought of going on was dismissed.



### **Our famous Sled-Cart and Ilga, Spring 1946**

Father found a place for all nine of us. It was an old coach house, right on the shore of Lake Eutin. A house painter's shop was on the first floor. The second floor had one room with a small stove in it. Through the cracks in the floor we could watch the painters working below. An outhouse was located in the garden. Father got a job as a mechanic in a German auto garage. The rest of us stood in long lines. Often we were left empty handed when the store ran out of bread and other supplies.

On May 8, 1945, British army jeeps drove into Eutin's town square. The war was over! When the dividing boundary between East and West Germany was drawn, it was a chilling realization to see that we had escaped the Russians by only 36 miles. Had we succumbed to the temptation to settle in Mecklenburg, we would've fallen back under the Soviets.

### Teen Years in Refugee Camp, Eutin (1946-1950)

Toward the end of summer, 1945, the German Army barracks on the edge of the town were converted into a "Displaced Persons" camp. The "DPs," as we became known, were people who fled their homelands and did not want to return to live under Soviet occupation. The Lacis family moved into the new accommodations, but father refused. He had heard of incidents in the American sector where Russian trucks drove into a refugee camp, rounded up people, and took them away. After having walked across Poland and Germany, he said, he was not about to be hauled back like a pig to slaughter.

We remained in the coach house as a harsh winter of 1945-46 descended on war ruined Germany. Fuel and food shortages were common. Mother and I stayed in a near state of hibernation to conserve energy and quell hunger. Father continued to work at the auto garage and sometimes managed to bring home extra potatoes or bread, even horse meat on one occasion.

By Spring, no news of Russian raids on DP camps had been heard. The Lacis family gave glowing accounts of CARE packages, ample food, and even medical care. Father decided it was safe for us to move into the camp. I was thrilled! Finally, I would have Latvian friends. Due to Hitler's doctrine of hating foreigners, my encounters with German teenagers had been far from friendly.

Life in the camp's barracks was less than ideal. Several families lived in one room, partitioning off their space with blankets or cardboard boxes. Privacy was non-existent. Still, we were safe, had a place to sleep every night, and received three meals a day. The food was cooked in a large kitchen and served into whatever dish we had. For the first time, we tasted corn, peanut butter, and even experienced chewing gum.



The International Refugee Organization provided some of the basic clothing needs. Mother's sewing skills were put to good use as she constructed an outfit for me from two outgrown dresses. She designed a pattern for a winter coat, which she sewed by hand from an army blanket dyed

a dark blue color. The most unusual of her creations was a Christmas present for me, a nightgown. Father had acquired a large Nazi flag, made from a silky material. The red color was fashioned into the main part of the gown. The white collar and black cuffs came from the Nazi swastika in the center.



### *School*

The majority of the refugees in the camp were from Latvia, with around 165 school-age children. The need for an elementary school became obvious. People from various professions became our teachers. Math was taught by an engineer, history by a judge, geography by a former railroad administrator, and Latvian language by a well known author. Our English language instructor had actually trained to be a teacher. Before the war, she had studied in London, so we learned to speak with a British accent. These dedicated educators taught us with very few books and limited supplies. Paper was scarce and wastefulness was a disgrace. We were called on to answer questions, either standing at our desk, or writing our answers on the blackboard. I amused my classmates by using my left hand, then switching the chalk to the right as I reached the middle of the board. Nightly homework was the rule.

Often, the lights went off as maximum use of electricity blew the fuses. Father obtained a small generator from his former workplace, thus providing a reliable light. When the lights went out, my classmates crowded into our limited space in order to complete their assignments. I finished the fifth and sixth grades while living in refugee camp. Before we could graduate from the sixth grade, we had to take three comprehensive examinations. Two disciplines were standard, Latvian language and math/algebra. The third subject area varied each year. Geography was chosen for my class. Each of the three exams had both written and oral sections. It was a real ordeal, as we waited one by one, to be called in to answer the questions. Afterwards, we felt a great sense of accomplishment and pride for having survived it.

During the course of those two school years, there was considerable turnover in the student body. My closest girlfriends with whom I began school immigrated to different parts of the world. As some refugee camps were consolidated, new ones arrived.

### *Girl Guides and Boy Scouts*

During Latvia's period of independence, the Girl Guides and Boy Scouts were very popular organizations for youngsters. Guides and Scouts from those times became our dedicated leaders. They designed most ingenious "wide games," which called on us to use everything we had learned: Morse code, first aid, knot tying, just to mention a few. We camped and acquired outdoor skills. Our native handcrafts, songs, and dances were always an important component of our activities. I have been very grateful that our leaders devoted their time to us. They understood the importance of keeping youngsters involved in worthwhile activities. I cannot imagine how different the four years in the Eutin refugee camp would have been without them.



Friendships were formed, but being teenagers, we lost contact with each other. My friends immigrated to Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Great Britain, and the United States. It was a wonderful surprise when recently I reconnected with one of my Girl Guide friends, Maruta, after fifty years!

### **Girl Guides in Eutin, 1948**

### *Latvian Gymnasium*

After the completion of the sixth grade, the next five school-years were spent in Gymnasium. It combined elements of an American high school and a junior college. Neustadt, 20 miles from Eutin, was designated as a gymnasium location for Latvian students living in the British sector of northern Germany. The school's classrooms and dormitories were housed in a former German training center for naval and submarine officers, situated by the Baltic Sea.

The curriculum was set and you had to take the scheduled courses. As best as I can remember, I took Latvian literature and grammar, algebra, world history, geography, history of religion, Latin, German, and English. Some of the subjects extended over a two-year period and concluded with a comprehensive exam.

The daily school routine started with an early breakfast and classes till ten, followed by a British tea break with milk and sugar cubes! There were more classes till lunch, a short break, and classes into early afternoon, with a tea break at four, and free time till dinner. Study hall was held after dinner, with lights out by ten. On weekends there was ample free time to explore the town, swim in the Baltic Sea, or go for hikes. Often we took the train back to Eutin to visit our families.

*Last Year of Transition (1950-51)*

My studies were interrupted before the school-year was over. We were relocating close to father's place of employment, where he was once again working for an army transport unit, this time the British. Our new camp was located close to the Dutch border, situated in a pine forest. Previously, it had housed an insane asylum. Hitler had eliminated the most severe cases, and only those able to work in the surrounding fields were still living in part of the institution. Many jokes were made that the DPs were finally in the right place! Very few teenagers lived in the camp and no organized activities existed to occupy our time. The German economy was picking up and I looked for employment. After a back-breaking potato harvest, I worked in a cookie factory for several months. The New Year, 1951, brought news that the World Organization of Churches had a



sponsor for us. We were on our way to the United States of America.

The next two months were spent in Wentdorf, the last large transit camp in Germany, where all documents had to be rechecked, countless inoculations administered, "delousing" baths given, and x-rays taken to screen for tuberculosis.

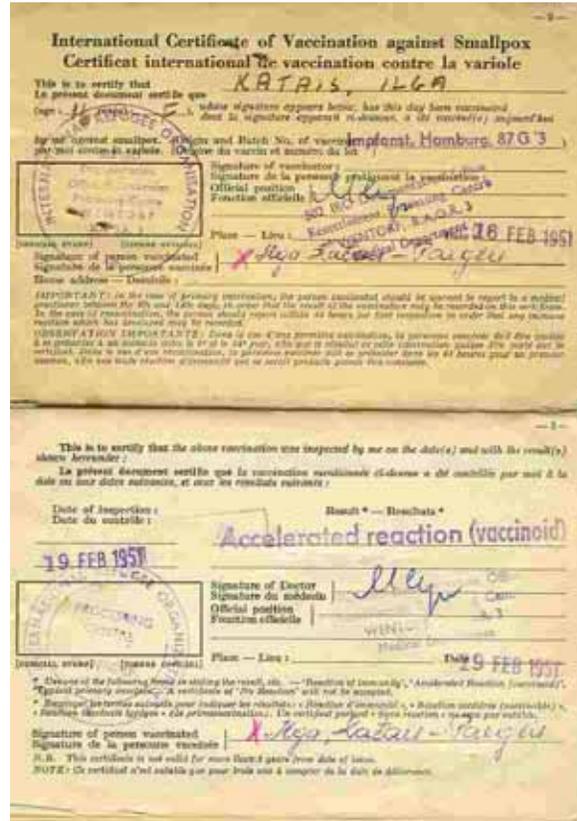
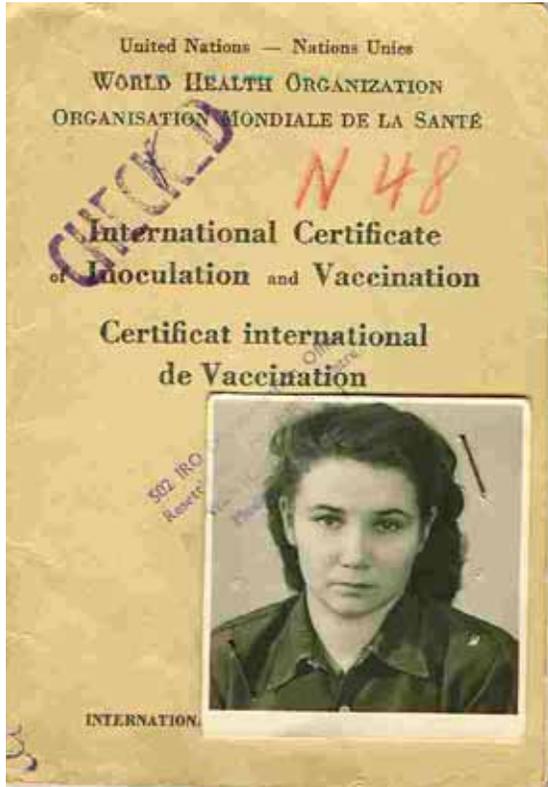
On March 16, 1951, we boarded the "General Sturgis" in Bremerhaven. In order to accommodate the maximum

number of people, men and women were lodged in separate quarters. The ship carried a skeleton crew. The passengers were assigned to perform the ship's daily maintenance and other chores. Father had finagled a typist job for me, never mind that I had never even sat at a typewriter. Looking at the cramped cubbyhole with no ventilation, I disappointed my father by refusing the job. I was assigned to be a server in a dining room for expectant mothers, children, and elderly passengers. At least I could get outside for fresh air between the meals.

On the designated hour of departure, everyone stood on the deck to bid good-bye to Europe, our homeland, and the life we had known. It was a solemn moment as the ship eased into the North Sea.

Serving the hungry passengers started out at a fast pace. By the third day, I regretted giving away the typist job. Then slowly things changed. The wind blew more and the ocean waves got higher. And higher. Soon a major north Atlantic storm was in full force. An old sailor told us that this was the worst he had seen in eleven years. Over the loudspeaker, the captain ordered everyone to the decks below. The storm intensified. Mother and I were on the very lowest level of the ship. She had been seasick for quite a while, and so were many others. The roll and pitch of the ship seemed out of control. A deafening sound and a shudder of the whole ship silenced the engines. I was sure we

were sinking. The ship sustained damage, a big crack starting from the top deck to the water line. The baggage was reloaded and a number of compartments sealed off.



On the tenth day of our voyage, a dark line appeared along the western horizon. The New World unfolded before us. Keeping our emotions to ourselves, we greeted the Statue of Liberty. As we disembarked, we received five dollars each and train tickets to Oak Lawn, Illinois. Father was stunned. He thought we would be staying in New York City. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, we arrived in Chicago and on to Oak Lawn. Members of the First Congregational Church greeted us with warm smiles, making us feel at home in one of the Sunday School rooms at the church. A couple rented their trailer to us where we lived for nearly a year. Our sponsors found jobs for my parents and a part time job in a hardware store for me, where I kept giving out quarters instead of nickels in change.



## Life in the United States

Oak Lawn did not have a high school of its own, so students attended Blue Island High School in a neighboring Chicago suburb. Three days after our arrival, I enrolled there. The most advanced German class was my favorite. Study hall was a revelation. Several teachers patrolled the large room while all sorts of social activities took place, none of which could be classified as studying. The half-year of Latvian gymnasium, plus these two months, were considered equivalent to a freshman year. My sophomore year was also spent at Blue Island. Overall, it was a good experience. I was learning English rapidly and making friends.

My junior year, I attended a brand new high school in Oak Lawn. Only the first three years were offered allowing seniors to finish where they had gone before. There were fewer students, smaller classes, and teachers who took a personal interest in their students. A geography teacher, a recent graduate of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, became my mentor. She encouraged me to take an entrance exam and apply to Northwestern after my junior year. With her help, I got a room in Chapin Hall, a cooperative dormitory, which was supported by the Women's Education Aid Association, a dedicated group of ladies who aided students who were in financial need.

Excited and eager, I began my college career in the fall of 1953. Deciding on a major proved difficult. Each course I took opened new possibilities. Unequivocally, I can say that I received a true liberal arts education. Geography and art courses were my favorites. My husband has joked that when I finally added up the credits earned, I discovered that I had majored in geography! Originally, I had hoped to work in the Foreign Service. A visit from a State Department representative nixed that idea. It was the height of the Cold War, and I could not receive security clearance because all my relatives lived behind the Iron Curtain.

The friends you make in college you will keep for life, I was told. How true. They invited me into their homes, asked me to be a bridesmaid, and took me along on trips.



On the way to Atlanta, Georgia, with my friend, Bobbi, I noticed drinking fountains marked "White" and "Colored." I was curious as to what color water would spout from the fountain. There was more to learn about the United States than I had read in history books.

After graduating from Northwestern, my first job was with the Pure Oil Company, in downtown Chicago. I worked in the Executive Map Room, plotting oil wells on a wide strip that ran from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The offices of the president and numerous vice-presidents surrounded our work area. The company was prospecting for oil in several South American countries and I learned about the risks and expenses involved in finding oil.

The year after college was significant in another way. Sidney Richard Vise, a southern gentleman from Little Rock, AR, came into my life. He was a talented Master's degree student in piano at Northwestern. We attended free concerts at the university, and went to parties with friends. We also enjoyed the wide variety of cultural activities offered in Chicago: symphony concerts, plays, and special exhibits at the museums. Sidney earned my mother's approval by thoroughly enjoying her cooking. Father liked the fact that Sidney could play the piano and knew a lot about music, although it was too bad he wasn't Latvian.

When I first arrived in the States, I was unsure about my ability to learn English fast enough or well enough. Consequently, I thought my best option would be jobs that did not involve contact with the public. Now the language barrier had been removed and I discovered that I loved being with people. Plotting oil wells was definitely not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Considering the influences teachers had on my life, I set a new goal. In the fall of 1958, I enrolled at National-Louis University in Evanston, Illinois, to earn certification and a Master's degree in elementary education. To help defray my expenses, I became a live-in babysitter for a family with four children. This was a practical addition to my education.



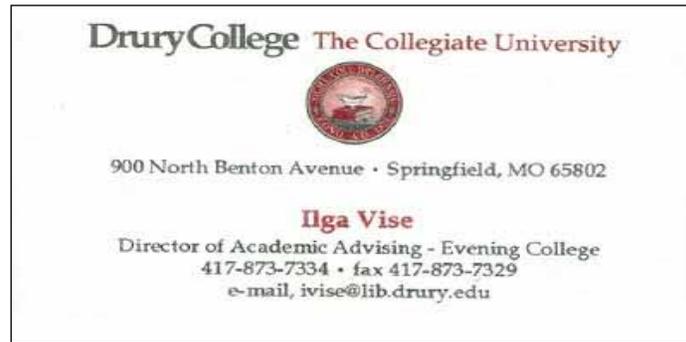
At the same time, Sidney took his first music faculty position at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, and we made plans for the future. On June 6, 1959, our wedding was held in the First Congregational Church of Oak Lawn, the same church that had sponsored my family and given us a new start in life. Sidney and I returned to Birmingham and I started my first teaching job at the Berry Elementary School. Thirty-nine first graders sat in my classroom, trying to understand the fast talking Yankee teacher. I slowed down, and to this day, I get a thrill remembering the face of the tiny girl who was the first to realize she had learned to read.

Sidney's next faculty position was at the College of the Ozarks near Branson, MO. Both of our children were born while we lived there, Silvia in 1962 and David in 1965. Today Silvia, her husband, John Fleitz, and sons Sam (age six) and Alex (age three) live in southwest Colorado, where she works as physical therapist. David makes his living as an optometrist with Lovelace Health Systems in Albuquerque, NM. Both children inherited considerable musical talent from their father. Silvia is an accomplished flutist, and David is a dynamic drummer, still playing in a rock band!



In 1965, Sidney was appointed to the music faculty at Drury University, where he taught for thirty-four years, fifteen of those serving as the department chair. Soon after our arrival, our friend Dorothy Padron told me that I would love Drury. Having moved so many times, I came to expect that there would always be another move, another place to explore and leave. But I did come to love Drury College, as it was then called, and the Drury Family. In 1967, I was offered a part-time position to teach a world geography course. It was an ideal setup while our children were small.

During the 1970's, in addition to my Drury assignment, the chairman of SMSU's geography department invited me to accept an adjunct appointment. Getting to know the faculty at both institutions was a great experience. Eventually, I had the opportunity to become a full-time employee at Drury, teaching in the Day School, and advising non-traditional students in the evening program, now called the College of Graduate and Continuing Studies. It was a very rewarding to watch students grow and reach the goals they had set for themselves. Drury's outstanding administration and my colleagues contributed to a most positive work environment. I consider myself a very lucky person to have worked there until my retirement in June of 1998. And, yes, I do love Drury and Springfield! Through the years, a most caring and considerate group of friends have lent support when we needed it, shared laughter, fun, and good food, and enriched our lives. What more can one ask?



**Left to right: David, John, Sam, Silvia, Sidney, Ilga, and Alex, November, 2002**

Our trip in the summer of 2000 came about due to a friendship we had developed with Eva, an outstanding young lady from Latvia. She was earning her MBA degree at SMSU. Being able to speak Latvian with her, and to share our common heritage, rekindled my yearning to visit the place of my birth. As we planned the trip, it seemed unreal that I could just get on the plane and arrive back in Riga. Sidney joked that, if it would make me feel better, he might arrange to drop me off in the western part of Germany so I could walk back!

Seeing the skyline of Riga stirred so many memories. The narrow cobblestone streets wound around familiar corners. I felt like hugging every old building. My little cousin, Erika, was a grown lady, and for the first time I met her sister, Ausma, the baby Tante Anna was expecting when we escaped without them. It was a wonderful and timely visit with my aunt as we celebrated her eighty-ninth birthday. She passed away the following year.

I am grateful for my rich heritage and proud of the Latvian people who have endured much, yet retained their language and culture, and fought to be free again. Having lived through times when freedom was taken away from us, I have cherished it every day, ever since we stepped ashore in this beautiful, wealthy land which I now call my country, the United States of America. No matter what part of the world we came from, all of us arrived here with hopes for a better future for our children, grandchildren, and ourselves. I firmly believe that when we treat each other with respect, honoring our differences and rejoicing in them, we will continue to live as a free people. And maybe, just maybe, future conflicts will be settled without bloodshed and war.



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