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Escape Narratives of World War Two Refugees from Latvia

Summary. At the end of World War II, approximately 170,000 Latvians found themselves in Displaced Persons camps in occupied Germany. During this period they formed an exile ideology and started to think of themselves not as emigrants or refugees but as self-proclaimed exiles. As the UN official policy and Soviet accusations intensified the need to justify one's actions, those versions of the escape narratives which served exile purposes the best were soon selected and developed into archetypical schemas. One group that offers a different perspective of escape narratives consists of those people who were youngsters at the time of escape: some of them took the flight to be an adventure. However, the majority of the ex-refugees depict the events of that time as tragic, regardless of their generation; this can be explained by the transferred perceptions and emotions which older refugees passed on to the following generations.

Keywords: World War Two, Latvian refugees, exile ideology, oral history.

World War Two generated a refugee movement unprecedented in 20th century Europe. Among the forty million people displaced during the war there were slave-laborers, prisoners of war, deportees, forced conscripts, forcibly expelled populations, and refugees fleeing the anticipated or experienced terror of the advancing Soviet invaders. A small part of this statistical mass, a relative “drop in the ocean,” as Paulis Lazda, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin put it, were those coming from the three Baltic States. The total loss of population in the Baltic States of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania from 1940 to 1949 was over 10 percent, and each of those hundreds of thousands were deprived of community, home, family, national culture, and life.¹

¹ Lazda, Paulis, “Baltic refugees – a drop in the ocean”, in *Baltic Refugees in Gotland in Photographs by David*

The purpose of this particular study is to analyze the narratives of the home-leaving and escape of a part of the World War Two refugee exodus, namely, those coming from Latvia, thus providing a deeper understanding of human suffering and tragedies beyond the cold statistics. The research is based on oral history sources from the Latvian National Oral History archive whose contents will be more closely discussed in the first section of the article.

Latvian National Oral History archive

The origin of the National Oral History (NOH) archive² is tied to the Latvian Culture Foundation (established in 1987) and its program “People’s archive” which started to collect oral and written reminiscences already at the end of the 1980s. Since 1992 the National Oral history project continues as a part of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia. At this moment the NOH archive consists of more than 4000 biographical interviews (mostly life story interviews³), recorded in audio cassettes or in digital form, and this number is increasing with every year. Interviews are recorded both in field-work expeditions and individually in different parts of Latvia and also abroad. The purpose is to supplement the archive with the experience of people coming from different regions, ethnicities, social classes, and occupations. The length of the interviews ranges from one to twenty hours (recorded in multiple sessions), but on average they are 1.5–3 hours long.

The information which one can find in these life-story interviews is extensive, because people are encouraged to remember their life from the first childhood memories up to the time of the interview, not only focusing on the most important life events, but describing each aspect of the life in as detailed a way as possible. More significantly, people are encouraged not to express accumulated knowledge about some historical events but to tell about their everyday life and to describe their feelings and emotions about both personal as well as state level issues. Consequently, these interviews can be used for a wide variety of historical studies: to research a particular historical period or single event, to analyze how a historical process affects people’s daily lives, to explore the history of a certain social group, and so forth.

Significant for any research project connected with the Latvian diaspora and also this particular study about Latvian refugees is the fact that one of the NOH project’s areas of study already since its creation has been Latvians living abroad (both exile Latvians from

Holmert. Rīga: Latvijas Universitātes Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts, 2015, 16.

² For more information about the NOH archive see www.dzivesstasts.lv/en/default.htm or Lifestory – Latvian Oral History Researchers Association’s Facebook page

³ The distinction between different kinds of biographical interviews is not plain but the most common conception of a life story interview is that of an interview where a person chooses to tell about his/her life as completely and honestly as possible, i.e., tell what the person remembers of it and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of an interview guided by another. By contrast, an oral history interview focuses on a specific aspect of a person’s life or on what someone remembers about a specific historical event, issue, time, or place. (*Handbook of interview research: context & method*, eds. G. F. Jaber, J. A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002, 125.)

World War Two and their descendants as well as emigrants who left Latvia after 1990). Accordingly, a quite large number of the archive's collections consist of interviews that were recorded with Latvians living in the USA, Great Britain, Sweden, Australia, Canada, Germany, and Norway. The further analysis is based on sources from the above-mentioned collections.

Formation of exile ideology

In the summer of 1944, when the Soviet army advanced into the territory of Latvia, German occupying forces⁴ decided to evacuate a majority of the Estonian and Latvian populations, thus giving many Latvians and Estonians an opportunity to flee to Germany. However, considering wartime conditions, especially the rapid and unexpected movement of the Red Army, German evacuation plans were carried out only partially and even chaotically. For example, there was almost no organized evacuation from Latgale – the easternmost region of Latvia located north of the Daugava River, while in the last days before the fall of the capital city Riga (October 13, 1944) people were being caught on the streets and taken to the ships without an opportunity to refuse the evacuation.⁵ However, despite the last example, it is not possible to strictly allege that German evacuation policy was the only and most crucial factor in the flight process. Indeed some of the refugees left their homes on German orders to evacuate, but many more decided to leave fearing wartime activity and a repetition of the 1940-41 Soviet terror. Altogether approximately 170 000 Latvians⁶ at the end of World War II had reached the Allied zones of occupation in Germany, where they lived in Displaced Persons (DP) camps for several years before moving to the USA, Great Britain, Australia, and other countries.

In the context of escape/refugee narratives, the years spent in DP camps were crucial, because during this period an exile ideology was formed among the refugees. As Latvian-American folklorist Inta Gale Carpenter has stated, ideology is that realm of social life in which people grasp reality by producing strategies for action and an attitude of commitment. Such an ideology is created when people strive to transform individual experience and private emotion into a public mood, which in turn can be mobilized to achieve stated goals.⁷ In the case of Latvian refugees, the end result of the formation of ideology become obvious when they departed to their new host countries, because at that moment they did not think of themselves as emigrants or refugees anymore, but as self-proclaimed *trimdnieki*, namely, exiles. Correspondingly, this newly formed ideology validated the way in which Latvian refugees thought of themselves, about their homeland, and about their future. Also, this ideology explained the Latvians' refusal to return to their homeland.

⁴ Latvia was occupied by Nazi Germany on July 10, 1941.

⁵ Kangeris, Kārlis, "Hitleriešu plāni Baltijas tautu evakuēšanai 1944. gadā", in *Vācija un Baltija*. Rīga: Avots, 1990, 130–136.

⁶ Kangeris, Kārlis, "Evacuation/flight of civilians from Latvia in 1944: A new evaluation on a new database", *Latvijas Vēstures institūta žurnāls* 1 (2016), 111.

⁷ Carpenter, Inta Gale, *Being Latvian in Exile: Folklore as Ideology*. Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 1989, 7–8.

After the end of the war, United Nation's agencies were pushing for the repatriation of refugees to their homelands and expecting justification from those who balked. At the same time the Soviet side was accusing all those who were not repatriating of war crimes, collaborationism etc. Among the displaced persons, these accusations intensified the need to justify one's actions and to present oneself in as self-evident terms as possible. In order to achieve this, Latvian refugees, in their dialogues with the authorities, began to simplify things and to emphasize those events that turned their experienced past into today's cause. As a result, people not only rethought their past experience but also recast it, in order to select those events which would most likely produce the desired results. In other words, some of the refugees' life episodes became etiological tales to explain and justify the need for asylum. In particular, those were the episodes of the atrocities of the Soviet occupation in 1940–1941 and the threat of reoccupation in 1944, which were depicted as the events that caused the departure of the refugees and prevented their return.⁸ Accordingly, it is not surprising that in their life-stories and particularly the stories of wartime exile Latvians were focusing great attention on the negative experience of the first Soviet occupation of Latvia, especially June 14, 1941, the date of the mass deportations which has gained symbolic importance as the core moment that indicated Soviet intentions, justified emigration, and explained exile.

The rethinking of the previous experience and retelling it did not occur only as a response to outside pressure. It was also necessary to understand the refugees' past in order to find their place in the new situation and to fit their memories into a meaningful biography. In this context, it becomes clear that the refugees' need to find as strong a justification as possible for leaving the homeland was necessary not only in order to convince the outside world, but also, and equally importantly, in order to explain their own fate to themselves. This was only possible if the past events were considered as right and necessary.

The rethinking and retelling of past experience continued after the DP period had ended, because it was important for the ex-refugees to explain who they are and why they are in the USA, Great Britain, or any other exile country. In this way memories of the trauma, during and after the war, and the loss of their homeland were experienced over and over again in the exile community. As the Estonian historian Aivar Jurgenson has stated, the information network created by exiles in the post-war world emphasized the tragedy of escape. Consequently, through this process those versions of the escape story which served exile purposes the best were soon selected and developed into archetypical schemas. Jurgenson also points out that in refugee communities the personal stories of wartime and escape were very often retold and compared to one another. That also led to reshaping them according to a general explanation, because in telling and listening to the stories one also learns what, and how, to remember and tell.⁹ As a result, commonalities developed among refugee stories, in point of view, in the images fashioned, the plots created, the themes employed, and even in the particular vocabulary used.¹⁰

⁸ Carpenter, *Being Latvian in Exile*, 106–134.

⁹ Jurgenson, Aivar, "Escape to the West in the memories of Estonians in Argentina: The historical, social and psychological context", *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* 14 (2009), 141–142.

¹⁰ Carpenter, *Being Latvian in Exile*, 1989, 206.

Escape narratives

One of the aspects of escape stories where we can see such commonalities are those depicting the reasons for leaving. As outlined at the beginning of the paper, there were cases when people were forced by German authorities to leave their homes or to get to the ships. However, this did not apply to the majority of refugees. Moreover, even if people were given an order to evacuate, they could disobey. For example, Skaidrīte Krūmiņa in her interview said: “We were given order to drive away from the home. ... The front-line was approaching. ... My grandmother and grandfather did not go, they remained at home. Grandfather was almost 90 years old and my grandmother was over 85. And they said: “What will be, will be. We are staying.” And so they stayed home. And our neighbor’s grandmother also stayed home. ... And nothing happened to them.”¹¹

In general, despite the official rhetoric of exile Latvians, namely, “we were forced out of Latvia” and “there were no alternatives to leaving,” which is apparently a part of the exile ideology and self-legitimatization, the Second World War refugees from Latvia and their actions can be viewed as voluntary, although the possibility of choice was very narrow. Namely, they could stay and take their chances – at first, to survive the war, later – to live through the Soviet regime which had already proved its ruthless nature, or they could flee abroad and take their chances there. The assumption that it was a voluntary choice is confirmed by the fact that the majority of the inhabitants of Latvia did not flee. Of course, there were those who wanted to escape, but did not manage to do so for various reasons, mainly because the Red Army out-ran them; still, the majority remained in their homes consciously, as we could see in the above-mentioned example.

The Latvian sociologist Baiba Bela has indicated that this choice was in large part determined by people’s values: firstly, the so-called basic values, of which life is the most important; secondly, social values such as security, justice, and independence; and thirdly – higher values, namely, freedom.¹² When listening to the life stories of the exile Latvians, it becomes clear that such an assessment corresponds to the escape stories. For example, Melita Martinova answered a direct question “But how did it happen that you decided to leave Latvia?” as follows: “Fear on the basis of what we had experienced. We left because my brother was murdered. All those executions and deportations. We saw that if the Russians are coming back, we wouldn’t stay alive. It would be very hard to escape them.”¹³ It is not possible to know if the prediction of her fate under Soviet regime would indeed come true, but it is clear that, based on her experience in the first Soviet occupation, her basic value – life – seemed threatened. Similarly, in most of the refugee life stories it is stressed that people felt that their lives were in danger after they had experienced arrests and disappearances during the year of Soviet rule, so when the time and opportunity came, they left.

¹¹ Lifestory interview with Skaidrīte Krūmiņa, *National Oral history archive* (below – NOH), 196.

¹² Bela, Baiba, “Exile as a catalyst for values”, in *Oral History: Migration and Local Identities*. Riga: Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Latvian Oral History Association “Dzīvesstāsts”, 2011, 12–13.

¹³ Lifestory interview with Melita Martinova, NOH-208.

Baiba Bela also points out that it is possible that for many refugees the need to save one's own life was the dominating factor in the beginning, but over time other values took on an ever growing importance. It happened because only those values were able to offer a deeper ideological validation of the need to become refugees and ensured the preservation of national identity and survival as an ethnic group.¹⁴ However, when analyzing particular life stories, it was evident that a majority of the respondents were pointing out the danger to their safety and lives and only rarely spoke of the other values as the main catalyst of the escape. One of the rare exceptions was Edīte Stromsvag, who does not talk about a threat to her own physical safety or the harsh experience of others when speaking about the period of the first Soviet occupation and her decision to leave Latvia. Instead, she stresses that the Soviet regime had a different value system than that of free, democratic Latvia where everyone could freely express his/her opinion. In her words: "What did I do? I kept silent. Before [the occupation] I was speaking as freely as I do now, but then I had to learn to keep quiet, because I was responsible for my mother. ... I was endangered because I couldn't predict how long I'd be able to be quiet, how long I'd be able to endure this. And what then? I would be deported to Siberia or there would be some other punishment."¹⁵

Despite the motivation and former decisions which people could have made about escaping, the actual moment of the departure most commonly was abrupt and harrowing, always related to unavoidable emotional stress, sometimes even hysteria. The last is described by Mirdza Andersone who pictured a vivid scene: "My mother did not want to go terribly and she was crying and saying that no, she won't go. And my father was sick, he had a fever and felt bad. And well – my brother is 9 years old and my sister 7 years younger than me, so they were little. But we had to pack our things in 2 hours. ... And so I was putting things in the suitcase, and my mother was pulling them out, shouting: "I do not need anything!"¹⁶ It should be noted that Andersone was 14 years old at the time, but at the moment acting more rationally than her mother whose emotions apparently took over her reason.

However, while speaking about the haste, emotional stress, and threats to their safety, people in their stories of escape often highlight one specific scene which marks the rupture between their previous life in Latvia and the unknown future abroad. For many refugees these memories are connected with the moment when their ship left the Latvian shore, as for example described by Arta Svenne: "And I remember how we were waiting for the ship and how we boarded. And then the ship started to slowly move along, and my father was running behind the ship and waving, and we were standing and looking at him."¹⁷ For others there is some other significant moment that has left an everlasting impression. Here's an excerpt from Ilonas Birzgaļes story of escape: "It was Sunday morning, and the road was all muddy. And behind the stone wall, on a small hill, there were the white church and some trees. And those women in their gorgeous national costumes – colorful skirts, checked shawls. They were going to the service. And you know, this view has remained [in

¹⁴ Bela, "Exile as a catalyst for values", 15.

¹⁵ Lifestory interview with Edīte Stromsvag, NOH-207.

¹⁶ Lifestory interview with Mirdza Andersone, NOH-192.

¹⁷ Lifestory interview with Arta Svenne, NOH-3401.

my memory] as the last beautiful view from the homeland.”¹⁸ It should be noted that people from the countryside, namely, farmers, are telling especially dramatic stories about their leaving home insofar as they had to leave the harvest of their hard work to an unknown destiny. As Valida Danenberg puts it: “All the fields were blooming – the neighbor’s and ours. It was harvest time when we left home. ... And as far as the eye could see, all the fields were wonderful. The crop was very good that year. We left in July. And, well, at that moment my heart was hurting terribly.”¹⁹

This excerpt outlines another aspect of the Latvian refugees’ escape narratives, namely, that they depict Latvia as the lost paradise. This corresponds to the words of Inta Gale Carpenter, who has stated that in contrast to other immigrants who sometimes report that they “never experienced a moment of their lives when they did not think of departure,” Latvians vividly make the point that they already lived in a “paradise.” Accordingly, in consequence of the war and subsequent flight they were exiled from “paradise,” instead of “being exiled to paradise,” as other refugees have expressed it.²⁰ Therefore, the narratives of the pre-war time, namely, the 20-year period of Latvia’s first independence, are usually very bright, highlighting the positive moments and depicting the overall atmosphere as highly comfortable and peaceful. Thus the stories of wartime are even more distinguishable as they depict the rapid rupture between peace and harmony earlier and the instability and uncertainty later.

Cross-generational perspective

The previous section showed the canonical scheme of escape that is common to majority of the escape narratives; however, biographical interviews provide some exceptions as well. One group that offers a different perspective on escape are those people who at the time of the exodus were youngsters; for some of them leaving home and going abroad seemed more like an adventure, not something undesirable and abhorrent. Accordingly, in their life stories these people do not interpret the events of the fleeing as tragically as the canonical reception of this would require. One such example from the interviews analyzed in this study involves Velta King, who at the time of the flight from Latvia was around 20 years old. First, she herself describes her feelings towards leaving by saying: “I left together with my parents. They had this one feeling when leaving Latvia, and I had another. In Latvia they left behind everything that they possessed, everything they had worked for. I had not earned anything yet. ... So I was going with my eyes wide open – I was enjoying my trip on the ship and in Danzig [Gdansk] – my first time in Danzig! I must say, my mother was crying, but not me, because it was all a big adventure for me.”²¹ Secondly, the narrative of the war and the escape is quite short and a comparatively insignificant episode of her whole life story, which also demonstrates that for her life perspective it

¹⁸ Lifestory interview with Ilona Birzgale, NOH-3420.

¹⁹ Lifestory interview with Valida Danenberg, NOH-56.

²⁰ Carpenter, *Being Latvian in Exile*, 163.

²¹ Lifestory interview with Velta Kinga, NOH-3425.

was not the life-changing moment as it was for most of the other refugees, who accordingly pay more attention to these memories in the context of their whole life.

However, this example is not suitable for generalizations, because, for example, another story of a youngster at that time, Dzidra Adamsone, testifies to completely different feelings when leaving Latvia: “I had a feeling that I belong to that land and that I don’t want to leave it. ... And when I was walking around those country roads, I was thinking – no, I won’t go away from Latvia.” Later she also says that she, 13 at the time, was ready to remain in Latvia without her mother who was determined to leave. However, the mother did not allow it, so Dzidra also became a refugee, but her escape narrative is completely in accord with the previously described refugee stories.

One of the reasons for the wide spread of the canonical scheme of escape among refugees of all generations may be attributed to the transferred perceptions and emotions that older refugees passed on to the next generations. Obviously, it was natural that refugee children were curious and prodded their parents for explanations (which was one way of the cross-generational transmission), but it was also quite often that parents did not talk about their motives for leaving, the tragic events they had witnessed, and their internal struggles and fears. As for the question of why these issues were not discussed by some parents and their children later, when the children were already grown-up, Aivar Jurgenson proposed the hypothesis that in some exile families the experience of the escape was so traumatic that they did not talk about this period for years.²² Nonetheless, the cross-generational transmission could also be indirect, because already in DP camps refugee children had ample opportunities to overhear, surmise, and piece together the life events of the adults around them. The end result of the transmission of both ways was that even young children comprehended the injustice that had been done to refugees and the destruction that had been visited on Latvia.²³ That explains why the narratives of wartime and escape are quite similar in all age groups.

Conclusion

Overall, the analysis of life story interviews with diaspora Latvians (ex-refugees) showed that although each case of flight was unique, escape narratives are frequently composed following a certain scheme. This scheme was formed already right after the war when it was necessary for people affected by war to restructure and reconfigure their disrupted identities and to make sense of the present.²⁴ In addition, the study proved that detailed descriptions, individual nuances of emotions, and people’s perceptions of events found in oral history sources make it easier to understand the generalizations in which the flight process has been described in the historical literature.

²² Jurgenson, “Escape to the West in the memories of Estonians in Argentina...”, 139.

²³ Carpenter, *Being Latvian in Exile*, 114.

²⁴ Hickey, Gail, ““You’d stand in line to buy potato peelings””: German women’s memories of World War II”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 13 (2012), 89.

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- Lifestory interview with Arta Svenne, NOH-3401.
- Lifestory interview with Ilona Birzgale, NOH-3420.
- Lifestory interview with Velta Kinga, NOH-3425.

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ANTROJO PASAULINIO KARO PABĒGĒLIAI IŠ LATVIJOS: JŪ PABĒGIMO NARATYVAI

Santrauka. Pasibaigus Antrajam pasauliniam karui apie 170 tūkstančių latvių pateko į Vakarų sąjungininkų okupuotoje Vokietijoje įsteigtas pabėgėlių (angl. *displaced persons* – perkeltųjų asmenų) stovyklas. Per tą laikotarpį jie susikūrė savo egzilio ideologiją ir ėmė save laikyti ne emigrantais, bet egziliais ar tremtiniais. Dėl Jungtinių Tautų oficialiosios politikos ir sovietų kaltinimų atsirado būtinybė pateisinti savo veiksmus, tad tie pabėgimo naratyvai, kurie geriausiai atitiko egzilio tikslus, buvo greitai pasirinkti ir išplėtoti į archetipines schemas. Kiek kitoks pabėgimo naratyvas buvo grupės, kurią sudarė nepilnamečiai, dalis jų į pabėgimą žiūrėjo kaip į nuotykį. Vis dėlto dauguma pabėgėlių tų laikų įvykius laiko tragiškais, nepriklausomai nuo to, kuriai kartai jie priklausė. Iš to išplaukia, kad jie perėmė tuos matymo ir jutimo būdus, kuriuos vyresnieji pabėgėliai perdavė jaunesnėms kartoms.

Raktažodžiai: Antrasis pasaulinis karas, latvių pabėgėliai, egzilio ideologija, sakytinė istorija.