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## Where Do We Go From Here? Exploring the Shifts in Linguistic and Cultural Identities for Latvian-Americans

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Where Do We Go From Here? Exploring the Shifts in Linguistic and Cultural Identities for  
Latvian-Americans

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2017



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*Maija, Tētīm, Omammai un Opapam: Bez jums man nebūtu par ko rakstīt. Vārdos nekad nespēšu jums pateikties par latvisko dziesmu, valodu un garu, kas mani katru dienu iedvesmo.*

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*Kristīnai: tu jau zini.*

To Michele: thank you for asking the hard questions when I did not want to ask them myself. Thank you for your never-ending patience, support, and reassurance—it was an absolute privilege to work with you.

Finally, to the community who shaped me and has provided me with endless project topics: I hope I have captured at least a minuscule part of who and how we are.

*Paldies, paldies, paldies.*



## A (brief) political timeline of Latvia and its emigrants to America (1918-now)<sup>1</sup>

**Before World War II:** Latvian immigrants settled in the United States (primarily in coastal and Midwestern cities) in search of fortune, to escape the Russian army's draft, or to avoid political persecution around the time of the Latvian Revolution in 1905.

**November 18, 1918:** Latvia first declares independence from Imperial Russia. This date is celebrated as Latvia's Independence Day, especially in America.

**August 23, 1939:** Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union sign the "Molotov-Ribbentrop" (a non-aggression) pact, dividing countries of Eastern Europe into "spheres of influence" between the two powers, which granted them unofficial economic, military, and political control. The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) are among those given to the Soviet Union.

**By June of 1940,** the Soviet Union occupies Latvia completely by military force, and a new government is installed.

**July 1940:** Fraudulent elections are held for a pre-approved list of Communist candidates. The newly "elected" parliament drafts a petition to join the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

**August 5, 1940:** Latvia is officially annexed by the Soviet Union when it accepts the country's petition to join. Latvia becomes the 15th Republic of the Soviet Union.

**Starting June 14, 1941:** An estimated 30,000 Latvians (men, women, and entire families—anyone deemed to be an "enemy" of the Communist Party) are deported to Siberia to work in labor camps.

**July 1941:** Nazi troops enter Rīga, Latvia's capital, on the 1st, and by the 10th they have occupied all of Latvia's territory. Under Nazi control, Latvian Jews and Romani people, as well as any political opposition, continue to be deported.

**October 1944:** The Soviet Union retakes control of Latvia by military force, and the country remains a "Soviet Republic" until 1991. Many Latvians flee west to Germany to avoid living under Soviet rule.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the information of this timeline is from Andris Straumanis, "Latvian Americans," in Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America, ed. Rudolph J. Vecoli, et al. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1995), 2.

<sup>2</sup> "Soviet Occupation and Annexation of Latvia 1939-1940," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, last modified August 16, 2004, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/information-on-the-history-of-latvia/briefing-papers-of-the-museum-of-the-occupation-of-latvia/soviet-occupation-and-annexation-of-latvia-1939-1940>.

**1945-early 1950s:** Displaced Persons (DP) camps are established in the English, French, and American sectors of Germany (as well as in Austria and Italy), administered by allied authorities and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.<sup>3</sup> An estimated 240,000 Latvians are living in DP camps in Germany and Austria, with refugees from other Eastern European countries.

**1949-1951:** An estimated 40,000 Latvians immigrate to America and settle primarily in northeastern, midwestern, and west coastal cities.

**1951:** The Boston Latvian Lutheran Exile Church is founded in Brookline, MA.

**1952:** The American Latvian Youth Association (ALJA) is founded.

**July 1956:** The New York Latvian congregation purchases land in Elka Park, NY, which then becomes the site of annual Latvian summer camp sessions (*Nometne*).<sup>4</sup>

**1965:** The property of “Camp Lone Tree” in Three Rivers, MI, is acquired by a group of Latvian ministers in the Midwest and becomes *Latvian Center Garezers*, with Latvian summer camp and high school programs.<sup>5</sup>

**May 4, 1990:** A new declaration of independence is signed in Latvia. May 4th is recognized and celebrated as Latvia’s “second” Independence Day, though in America it is not as widely celebrated as November 18th.

**August 21, 1991:** A communist coup in Moscow fails, and Latvia’s independence is recognized internationally.

**July 2015:** *Latvian Center Garezers* celebrates its 50th year of operation.

**July 2016:** *Nometne* in New York celebrates its 60th year of operation.

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<sup>3</sup> "Displaced Persons," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005462>.

<sup>4</sup> "Nometnes vesture" [The History of Nometne], Nujorkas draudzes nometne Katskilu kalnos, accessed April 30, 2017, <http://www.katskilunometne.org/kas-ir-nometne-un-kdi-ir-ts-mri/nometnes-vsture>.

<sup>5</sup> "Vesture" [History], Latvian Center Garezers, accessed April 30, 2017, <http://garezers.org/par-mums/>.

## Preface

On one of my last days of winter break, my grandparents came over to my house to be interviewed. This is not the first time I have interviewed them for a school project—from family trees in elementary school to history essays in high school, the stories of how they traveled from Latvia to America are not new to me. When I asked them if I could interview them *again*, for yet *another* school project, they agreed, even though they could not imagine what more I could possibly need to know. We had finalized and re-finalized this date several times now; Maija (who I call by her first name, since it was hard for me to say the Latvian word for grandmother, *vecmamma*, when I was little) had her physical therapy appointment Friday morning, but was more than willing to miss it in order to make the twenty minute drive from their home to mine. I had reassured her this certainly was not necessary, and that we could just talk earlier in the day, so she called me that morning after breakfast to let me know they were on their way.

We sit at the dining room table, because it has become harder for them to get up from our couch in the living room. Harder chairs are better. We go over the “basic” details first. My grandfather, Ritvars, who I call Tētis (which actually means “dad”—I heard my mom call him that, so that became my name for him as well), fled war-torn Latvia to Germany in 1944. He, along with his brother, sister, and mother (his father had been deported to Siberia and they never heard from him again) left via boat from Liepāja, a port city on the southwestern coast.<sup>6</sup> First they arrived in Thūringen (Thuringia), and from there they were driven to Bavaria “with heavy GMC army cars.” From there a train took them to Augsburg, where the U.S. had founded a Displaced Persons (DP) camp.

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<sup>6</sup> They had to travel approximately 60 miles from their home in Saldus by horse and by foot.



Maija's story, with which I was less familiar, was a bit more complicated. Her family lived in Rīga, the country's capital, but during the summer she and her cousin Astra would work on a family friend's farm in the village of Iecava, about an hour south of Rīga. There was a big house on the property that German soldiers were using as an information center. In the summer of 1944, the German soldiers who had been staying there started to flee from the Soviet front, and they took the girls along with them to Rīga. Maija's mother, having been in a different area of the Zemgale region at the time, faced roadblocks from the Soviet troops who were traveling north from Lithuania. She did not make it back to Rīga in time to leave the country with her family, and nearly fifteen years would pass before she would be reunited with Maija (married and pregnant with her first child) in America. Maija fled Rīga with her aunt's family, and they took a boat from Ventspils, a northwestern port city. Her uncle had a friend's address in Bavaria, and the family lived and worked on his farm for a while. Maija, who knew German, remembers that it was hard to understand the Bavarian dialect, and that she worked as a *pienpāraudze*, one who oversaw the delivery of the farm's milk. Eventually, she made it to the DP camp in Augsburg as well.

Both Maija and Tētis spent about five years in Germany. The *dīpīši*<sup>7</sup> who were teachers founded temporary schools that the children could attend; Maija was able to continue her high school studies and Tētis was able to continue going to middle school. They participated in various extracurricular activities, such as scouting, and were able to celebrate Latvian holidays and customs like *Jāņi*, the summer solstice. In 1949, Maija's sponsor<sup>8</sup>, an American Lutheran

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<sup>7</sup> Slang for DP's

<sup>8</sup> It was mandatory for immigrants to America to have approved "sponsors," who would ensure work and a place of residence for those sponsored.

pastor in Massachusetts, was approved, and on November 23, 1949 she boarded the *USAT General C. H. Muir* in Bremerhaven. Nine days later, on December 2nd, she arrived in Boston. At twenty-one years old, Maija traveled to America alone. She was later able to “call over” a different cousin, Valda, from Augsburg, and later her mother from Latvia, by acting as their sponsor. Within a year of Maija, Tētis’ sponsor, Uncle John (a Latvian who had immigrated before World War II) was approved, and with his family he also took the *General Muir* out of Bremerhaven. They sailed to New York City, however, and then took a train to Boston. It was completely by chance that both Maija and Tētis’ sponsors lived in the Boston area. Around this time (the 1950s), Tētis tells me, the Latvian community in Boston started to “bustle.” The Latvian Lutheran churches, some of which were founded by the *veclatvieši* (“old Latvians”) who had immigrated before World War II, were instrumental in providing Latvians in America with places to socialize. Maija and Tētis were both involved in the Boston Latvian theater group, and frequently attended events, concerts, and parties held by the *Amerikas latviešu tautiskā savienība*<sup>9</sup> (ALTS). It was at one of these parties that they met (though Tētis is sure they were familiar to each other from DP camp days, while Maija assures me, laughing, that she had no idea who he was), and “*Nu!*”<sup>10</sup>—that’s how it all started.

They got married in 1955, had their first child (my aunt Gundega) in 1960, and my *mamma*, Lolita, was born two years later. At home, they spoke Latvian, and Mamma tells me this was something she “never thought much about... That’s just how it was. It was natural.” From kindergarten to eighth grade, she spent every Saturday at the Boston Latvian School, where she

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<sup>9</sup> The most literal translation would be the “American Latvian Folk Union.” However, “cultural” seems more fitting. “Folk” here is being used in the sense of “folk dances” or any other “cultural” elements.

<sup>10</sup> “Well!”

remembers having a “very strict” teacher and having to work hard, even though “no one wanted to go to school on a Saturday.” She spent her summers going to the Latvian summer camp in the Catskill mountains of New York<sup>11</sup> (“*Nometne*”) and to Latvian girl scout camps (Tētis was a very involved scout leader). She graduated from the Latvian high school program, *Beverīna*, in rural Pennsylvania (which has since closed). She met my father, Andrejs, through the Boston Latvian folk dancing group. They got married in 1990, and I was born in 1995.

For her, raising me and my younger brother Krišjānis to speak Latvian “was never a question” either. “It just wasn’t.” I grew up speaking the language at home, and was frequently reminded by *papa* who would hold up his thumb and index finger in the shape of an L if I lapsed into English. (It was either this, or my parents would tell us that “They don’t understand English at home.”) Krišs and I spent our Saturdays at the Boston Latvian School, memorizing which noun endings are used for which case, the names of the biggest lakes and rivers in Latvia, which groups of people invaded Latvia when, and the words to countless *tautas dziesmas*.<sup>12</sup> We spent our summers at *Nometne*, and when we were old enough, we continued at *Garezera vasaras vidusskola* (GVV), the summer high school program in rural Michigan at Latvian Center Garezers.

This project is part ethnography, part family history. In an attempt to make sense of this impressive but unusual phenomenon—that the institutions my grandparents’ generation established in an attempt to salvage and maintain their cultural identities are still flourishing two generations later—I am looking to the past to understand the present and the implications the

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<sup>11</sup> This was and continues to be the most widely attended Latvian summer camp in the Northeast. There is also Latvian Center Garezers, in Michigan, and *Kursa*, in Washington.

<sup>12</sup> Folk songs

present might have for the future. This project is about them—my grandparents’ generation and my parents’—as much as it is about my friends, my brother, and me. In an attempt to understand the community which has played such a formative role in my upbringing, I am attempting to understand myself. *Nu*, here it is.



Maija (second from right) and her cousin Valda (far left) celebrating the summer solstice (*Jāņi*) at the DP camp in Augsburg, c. 1948.



Mamma (left) and two of her best friends, Sandra and Vizma, graduating from the Latvian high school *Beverīna* in PA, 1978.



Me (and my classmate, Kārlis, whose grandparents are friends with mine) speaking at my Latvian summer high school graduation from *Garezera Vasaras Vidusskola* (GVV) in MI, 2012.



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## Introduction

Latvia, a small country of about two million inhabitants<sup>13</sup>, is located in northeastern Europe on the Baltic Sea and is bordered by Estonia, Russia, Belarus, and Lithuania. Its only official language is Latvian: a Baltic Indo-European language that is exclusively related to Lithuanian. The two distinct groups of Latvian immigrants to the United States were those who came prior to World War II (called *veclatvieši*, or “Old Latvians”), and those who came after World War II had begun. Although it is difficult to determine exactly how many *veclatvieši* emigrated (in part because the U.S. census considered Latvians, Lithuanians, and Russians in the same ethnic category until 1930<sup>14</sup>), it is estimated that about 4,300 Latvians came before 1900, and about 16,000 came between the years 1900-1936. During World War II, many Latvians fled to western Europe, especially Germany and Austria, in fear of the Soviet Union’s imminent illegal occupation of Latvia, and an estimated 240,000 people (nearly a tenth of the country’s population at the time) ended up in Displaced Persons’ (“DP”) camps, predominantly in Germany. Andris Skreija, in an unpublished thesis, estimates that 40,000 Latvian immigrants arrived to the U.S. between 1949-1951. For many of this second wave (including all four of my grandparents<sup>15</sup>), this move was not meant to be permanent; they considered themselves to be *trimdas latvieši*—Latvians in exile—who would eventually return to Latvia once it gained independence.

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<sup>13</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Latvia," in The World Factbook, accessed April 24, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lg.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Straumanis, "Latvian Americans," in Gale Encyclopedia, 2:870.

<sup>15</sup> Herberts (*Opaps*) and Ruta (*Omamma*), my paternal grandparents, also fled Latvia during WWII and ended up in Boston via DP camps in Germany.



“I think we all had that feeling,” Tētis (my maternal grandfather) explains, “that when the war ends, the Russians would move back to Russia and the Baltic countries would be freed, then we would go back. We wouldn't have gone to America; we would have gone back.” This moment that everyone was waiting for, however, did not come as soon as they expected. “When the Soviet Union collapsed [in 1991], we were already in America. And many years had passed. And we already had families. And children.” Sure, they could have returned forty-seven years later, once Latvia had declared its independence. Tētis acknowledges this. “But now, understand this, we have our entire family and close relatives here. And children. Your mom lives here.” Maija, mostly quiet until now, interjects: “—your mom is American.” Tētis continues:

Your mom is American, she lives here. If we were to go back, then all of the ties with our relatives—our close relatives would stay here. And then how would it be for us? We would miss them. *Nu*, I had cousins there, but that's not your family. We probably wouldn't feel as good there. It would be hard for us to feel at home there. It's not like we would go back to Latvia and go back to the same house... and keep on living like we did. Of course that wouldn't have happened.

I then ask if there was some sort of collective decision-making that occurred within the Boston Latvian community, or perhaps even more broadly. Maija assures me that this was very much an individual, family-based decision. Without any sort of communal deciding whether or not to stay, the majority of people just... did. At this point, I start pressing them for an answer that I am not sure exists: “But surely, you must have still had some hope of returning...” I guess I was expecting there to be some sort of concrete, defining realization when they decided: “No, it's too late. There's no way we're going back now,” but apparently there wasn't. Maybe that hope just gradually diminished over time, as their new lives—as immigrants, then as a married couple, then as parents, and then, even later, as grandparents—took shape. With each passing day, I

suppose, they just had more reasons to stay. “What about now, almost 60 years later?” I ask. “*Tagad vairs nē.*”<sup>16</sup> They have been back a few times since 1991, and they have met relatives that remained in Latvia. Tētis received a new, valid Latvian passport. Yet even with that, a defining, concrete document that is an objective representation of his belonging to this place, he tells me that in the times that he has been back, he somehow did not quite fit in. For a place that I grew up calling *tēvzeme*<sup>17</sup>, my grandparents do not even consider it home anymore.

Home is here, in America, where almost 91,000 people claim Latvian ancestry.<sup>18</sup> The place where members of their generation (if the *veclatvieši* had not already) founded churches, Latvian language schools, Latvian girl and boy scout troops, summer camps, folk dancing groups, folklore collectives, song and dance festivals—in total, more than five hundred Latvian organizations in the United States (Hinkle 2006, 5 in Malinovskis 2009). Even though they had made it out from behind the Iron Curtain, Latvian immigrants in America nevertheless felt the pressure of maintaining their Latvian cultural identity, and even felt it twofold: from “Russification” in Latvia, and “Americanization” now that they were in the U.S. These programs, from the start, were to provide complete cultural and linguistic immersion; “*Runāsim latviski!*”<sup>19</sup> was the driving force behind them, and it was “as much a political statement as an expression of cultural preservation” (Straumanis 1995, 872). It is this relationship between

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<sup>16</sup> “Not anymore.”

<sup>17</sup> Lit. “fatherland”

<sup>18</sup> United State Census Bureau, 2006-2010 American Community Survey, accessed April 24, 2017, [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_10\\_SF4\\_B01003&prodType=table](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_SF4_B01003&prodType=table).

<sup>19</sup> “Let’s speak Latvian!”

cultural (and ethnic) identity and linguistic identity—and the perception of this relationship as felt by three generations—that this project explores and attempts to articulate.

*Method and literature overview*

Because I am an active member of the group I am writing about, my research was a continuous exercise of balancing participation with observation. My fieldwork was multi-sited: I spent two weeks at the Latvian Lutheran Church Camp (*Nometne*) in Elka Park, New York, as an employee; I attended *Rudens Svētki*, or “Fall Fest,” which coincided with an American Latvian Youth Association (ALJA) board meeting on *Nometne*’s property; I attended ALJA’s annual conference (*kongress*) in Columbus, Ohio; I also attended two more ALJA board meetings (in Seattle, Washington, and Boston, Massachusetts). I interviewed twenty-nine informants either in person or through video-chatting. I analyzed uses of digital technology, specifically photographs posted to the social media application Instagram<sup>20</sup>, and administered an anonymous survey exclusively using the social media site Facebook. While I attended *kongress*, I experimented with other participatory methods, free-listing and pile sorting (Weller and Romney 1988), in attempt to see how my peers conceptualize their Latvian identities. Though they were not as informative as I had hoped, the exercises did confirm my assumptions of what my generation associates with being Latvian: Latvian culture, language, friends, celebrations, organizations, and institutions were on the majority of lists. These elements are ultimately what frame this project.

First I define how I am utilizing the terms “language ideology” and “language shift,” as these are intricately connected to Latvian-American ethnic identity, which is discussed in Chapter One. By using theories of ethnicity, I argue that by considering us an ethnic group, as

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<sup>20</sup> This analysis was inspired by consulting texts regarding symbolism. See: Douglas (2002), Ortner (1973), and Turner (1987).

opposed to just a cultural or “interest” group, we see that it is a sense of primordiality that binds Latvian-Americans to one another, and we see why the Latvian language is such a strong marker of identity. Chapter Two discusses the ways in which Latvian-Americans participate as active constructors of identity and community, and how those ways are changing across generations. This chapter is informed by anthropological theories of online and digital media. I located some articles studying Baltic identity outside of Europe, the most influential being Jānis Priedkalns’ survey (1983, 1990) administered to young Latvian-Australians. I modeled my online survey after his, the results of which are discussed in Chapter Three. In general, texts of linguistic anthropology have informed the way I analyze communicative events and the way I analyze the role of language in this community.<sup>21</sup> I am especially conscious of the terms I have decided to use to describe groups of people and their identities. In Latvian, those of Latvian descent living in America are referred to as *Amerikas latvieši*, or “America’s Latvians.” This term warrants analysis. Although it sounds awkward in English, it is accurate: for those of us born and raised in the U.S., one could argue that we are Latvians who “belong to” America. This might even be an accurate way to describe my grandparents and their generation; they are Latvians who are American citizens and have made this their home. For the sake of convenience, though, and because many members of this identity group use the term to describe themselves, I use “Latvian-American” as the primary descriptor of these people.

I have also struggled with choosing a term to accurately describe my grandparents’, parents’, and even my own generations’ relationship to America. Many of my grandparents’ generation, those who immigrated during World War II, considered themselves *trimdas latvieši*—

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<sup>21</sup> See: Bonvillain (2000) and Saville-Troike (2003).

Latvians in exile. (The Boston Latvian church, for example, is technically the “Boston Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Exile Congregation.”) At what point did they stop living in exile and become just “immigrants”? Is it still a diaspora if there is no intention of returning to the “homeland”? These are questions I wrestled, and continue to wrestle, with, and for which I ultimately have no definitive answer. For the purpose of this project, “Latvian-Americans,” with specific clarifications when needed, achieves what I am attempting to convey.

As this is, in part, a discussion of language and linguistic identity, I purposefully intersperse Latvian words, with translations and explanations in footnotes. It is representative not only of the way I think and speak, but the way many of my younger informants speak. I have personally transcribed and translated my interviews, and in cases where the italicized Latvian is *not* a code-switch, it is because I considered the Latvian meaning significant or “untranslatable” enough to not gloss it. The way I think and speak is partly generational, but because this a personal project, my language that might seem informal at times is a conscious choice to accurately convey my exchanges with my informants as well as my internal dialogue.

Approaching this project as part family history and part ethnography, especially as one of a community of which I am member, I was never *not* participating. Throughout this process I have considered myself a “vulnerable observer,” which according to anthropologist Ruth Behar, allows “the exposure of the self who is also a spectator...to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to” (Behar 1995, 14). As much as I can offer because of my insiderness, this also means my stakes are higher, because “a boring self-revelation, one that fails to move the reader, is more than embarrassing; it is humiliating” (Behar 1995, 13). One of the more profound

realizations—one that I later realized was actually propelling this project—came while interviewing my grandparents.

While discussing the importance of speaking Latvian in America, Tētis tells me: “I think [your brother’s] children won’t speak Latvian. As for your kids... maybe they’ll speak a little bit.” He says this so straightforwardly, assertively. I am shocked. Not once had I considered the possibility of *not* teaching my children Latvian. I had always thought it was “never a question,” just as my grandparents had thought in the 1960s when their daughters were born, and just as my parents had thought thirty years later. I tense up. I stumble over my next sentence to continue the interview, trying my best not to sound too defensive.

I have thought about this moment often since it happened. What was the point of memorizing all of those rivers, past presidents, the situations in which you need to use the genitive case (even though no one uses it correctly anymore anyway), and so many *tautas dziesmas*, if not to teach my children? I could not imagine why he thought this if I had spent my entire childhood going to Latvian schools and camps, and now my young adulthood has been spent working there. While I do consider myself more active in the Latvian community than my brother (and this is probably what indicates to Tētis that Krišs and other younger Latvian-Americans are more “American”), I always assumed my nieces and nephews would grow up speaking Latvian with my own children. When I ask Krišs if he has thought about teaching his future children how to speak Latvian, he tells me

I mean, I'm disappointed in myself for not trying harder to keep practicing [the language], because it's gotten pretty sloppy, but I still want to teach my kids everything I could possibly know and send them to camps and stuff because it is something that defined me. It's my identity and I want my kids to have something as sacred and valuable as that too.

Even though Krišs' behavior might index assimilation into American mainstream to our grandfather, he still considers his *latvietība*<sup>22</sup> to be a defining part of his personhood, and wants to pass this “sacred” part of his identity to his children. What he also acknowledges is that effort is required to maintain it, especially the language.

For us, attending Latvian school was not inconvenient; it was only a fifteen minute car ride to Brookline. The choice was also always made for us: if we wanted to attend a birthday party, it had to be after Latvian school. Krišs could not join any soccer teams whose practices or games took place on Saturday mornings or afternoons. For others, convenience and a desire to participate in sports or other extracurriculars took precedent. My friend Nicole, for example, lived an hour and a half away from her closest Latvian school, and could not imagine forgoing soccer practice on Saturdays for an extra day of school. Natalie, similarly, lived forty-five minutes away from Brookline and her weekends were filled with dance competitions and Catholic school. Both girls' fathers are not Latvian, and as Natalie points out, “[her father] has a culture too. Why can't the children be equally divided between the two cultures?...How do you balance it?” Navigating this precarious balancing act requires one to sometimes prioritize one identity over the other, and for all young Latvians, their linguistic identity is decided for them, depending on which identity their parent(s) prioritizes. Both Nicole and Natalie, who do not speak Latvian fluently, still consider themselves Latvians, though, which means that speaking is not a prerequisite for participation—the opposite of what I was taught growing up.

*Language ideology and language shift: a “problem of generations”?*

I inherited certain language ideologies—or “sets of beliefs about language articulated by

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<sup>22</sup> Latvian-ness

users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979, 193 in Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, 57)— as a Latvian speaker. I was taught by my parents, my grandparents, and the schools and camps I attended not just what is considered “good” or “correct” Latvian, but that Latvian can be an “[emblem] of social, intellectual, or moral worth” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, 61): to be a good Latvian is to speak Latvian well. I hate to admit that as a child, when I attended *Nometne*, friends and I considered those who attended the non-speaking session (such as Nicole and Natalie) “less” Latvian than we are. At the time, I was convinced that language was a diacritical feature of *latvietība*, and that for *latvietība* to be sustained, the language must also be sustained. In the course of my undergraduate anthropology work, and in the course of this project especially, I have changed my mind. Through this project, I hope to explain how Latvian-American children and youth are experiencing a different sociolinguistic environment—and a shift in linguistic ideology—from that of the previous two generations, especially if we are experiencing a significant language shift.

One of the consequences of this language shift, a “sociolinguistic phenomenon involving a failure of intergenerational transmission of a declining language” (Henne-Ochoa and Bauman 2005, 128) is that my children might not speak Latvian, according to Tētis. The shift, according to him, is only to occur when my brother and I have children, considering he was able to transmit Latvian to his daughters, and then my parents were able to transmit it to me and my brother. Annette Schmidt, who writes about Australian Aboriginal language shift, argues that “[r]egardless of the varying time spans of the language shift process, a common feature of most language shift situations is that each generation has considerably less language knowledge than



the preceding one to transmit to their own children” (Schmidt 1990, 117 in Suslak 2009, 201).

Tētis’ way of explaining this is that “scientists and researches have acknowledged that no matter which country you come from, that by the third generation, it [all] ends. That’s assimilation.

[It’s] a natural process. Inescapable, whether you like it or not.” Maija reminds me that Krišs and I are the third generation. Tētis matter-of-factly states: “And with you it ends.” Maija chuckles; I starts getting nervous, even a little annoyed. I try to keep my voice neutral: “But we don’t know that yet!” What I really mean to say is, “We’re better than that.”

Anthropologist Daniel Suslak writes that language shift, from the perspective of speakers, can be considered to be a case of sociologist Karl Mannheim’s “problem of generations”: when “people experience historical change in terms of discontinuous generational groups and see the most salient differences between one generational group and the next as evidence of generation gaps,” even though historical change is continuous (Mannheim 1952 in Suslak 2009, 202).

Suslak explains that for Mannheim, a generational group is a “sociocultural phenomenon, in which members experience a “sense of belonging to a greater or lesser degree and they would share a zeitgeist—a sense of their place in history.” Therefore, these generational groups have significant historical agency, as they choose how to respond to the efforts of previous generations and then ultimately influence future ones (Suslak 2009, 202). My mom identifies feeling this historical agency, now that her generation is the one responsible to “cultivate and push forward the teaching” in Latvian schools and camps. She explains that “the way [they] teach [us] and the reasons why [they] do it and how [they] do it are a little different than [when they were growing up],” because they are responding to the efforts of the previous generation, whose perspective and motive were inherently different because they were immigrants from Latvia. My generation,

then, is starting to respond to our parents' efforts, experiencing and acting upon our own historical agency, which is discussed in Chapter Two.

These perceived differences between generations is what Tētis identifies as indicative of a change in *latvietība* in America. When I ask my grandparents about possible differences between my generation and my mom's or theirs, Tētis tells me: "When I observe and see and read about your generation, let's say, I get the impression that your generation is held together more by the fact that you have the same roots, the same beginning somewhere. A past. But today you're different." This confuses me. "Different how?" I ask.

I think you are more at home, [that you've] more naturally grown into an American culture and environment. I at least get the feeling that you feel very comfortable in an American setting and society. That's natural, right? And that *latvietība* is just somehow coming along from somewhere... For some more, some less... [Y]ou live and feel comfortable here.

According to Tētis, young Latvian-Americans are held together by "a sense of [our] place in history," that is, our Latvian roots. However, this "comfort," a result of natural enculturation, is a defining characteristic of my generation. It is this comfortable "American-ness" that motivates us to attend more "American" events, as opposed to Latvian ones. It is not without reason that we feel so comfortable: the majority of Latvian-American adults are white, middle-class, and college-educated. We are comfortable as Americans, and for many of us our racial and socioeconomic privileges also allow us to comfortably express our *latvietība* if, when, and how we choose to do so. This comfort, which grows with each generation, according to Tētis, is what will *not* motivate us to teach our future children how to speak Latvian.

I later ask Mamma if she has noticed any differences between how she remembers growing up Latvian and what she has seen from my own and Krišs' experiences. She tells me,

“Yeah, subtle differences...I can’t tell you what the reasons for those [subtle differences] are. I think one reason is that the generation that leads you and teaches you is different than the generation that...[did that for me].” I keep badgering her to give me a concrete difference she has seen, and she tells me, “I think the distance is bigger...between you and you and your *saites*<sup>23</sup> with your ancestors is bigger than the *saites* that I have with my ancestors. So with time, there’s more dilution, maybe? But again, that might be more subtle today, at least in what I see. At least in the environment that you’ve grown up in... it’s not as homogenous.”

“What isn’t as homogenous?”

“Your *latviskā vide*<sup>24</sup>.”

“Meaning...?”

“Ugh Ariāna, I can’t explain this...” She is exasperated now. “You’ve grown up together and you learn and you go to *nometne* with more Latvians who maybe don’t have Latvian as their first language, or maybe they don’t have strong Latvian [language] at all. Maybe they have parents who are in a ‘mixed marriage’...” She means the members of her *latviskā vide* were more similar to each other than members of my generation—in terms of marriage, race, and language ability.

Members of my generation are, in fact, aware of these generational differences articulated by my grandfather and my mother, especially the growing “distance” from our Latvian ancestry and increasing “dilution” or heterogeneity. Twenty-three year-old Nicole, who does not speak much Latvian, but attended Heritage Camp at *Nometne* throughout her childhood, presents me with a list of difficult, hypothetical questions she is already considering: “So our generation...

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<sup>23</sup> Ties

<sup>24</sup> “Latvian environment,” more so in the sense of “Latvian community”

we're about to enter relationships, marriage, kids, and life... Are your kids going to speak Latvian? Are they not going to speak Latvian? Are you going to marry an American? Or are you going to marry a Latvian? What's going to happen?" She identifies us as the generation that is the direct result of these choices already having been made and then asks, "What happens when we become further extended, and you guys start become further extended?" She is not only asking what the future holds for us as a cultural group when we start becoming "further extended" from our direct links to Latvia, but suggests a concrete divide between "us" and "them"—those of us who speak Latvian, and those who do not. Yet despite her lack of language ability, Nicole nevertheless feels a sense of responsibility to maintain *latvietība* as well—something felt acutely by young Latvian-Americans.

#### *Generational senses of responsibility*

When I interviewed some of the campers at *Nometne*, I learned just how active these children are "in the construction of language ideologies and conceptions of sociolinguistic organization" (Henne-Ochoa and Bauman 2015, 129); they are very much aware and continue to perpetuate the idea that speaking Latvian is indicative of *being* Latvian. They also articulated an immense sense of responsibility to this language and cultural identity; and this does not correspond with Tētis' prediction of a massive language shift. When I asked the oldest group why *latvietība* is important, it became clear that for these young teenagers—who have never known the country of Latvia as anything but independent—the responsibility of *latvietība* and the Latvian language is a matter of life and death. Edgars, a thirteen year-old, tells me: "I feel like if we don't pass on the Latvian language, or just *latvietība*, then the whole *tauta*<sup>25</sup> can die

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<sup>25</sup> This word can mean nation, people, country, or nationality, and it is not particularly clear how the children at *Nometne* have come to understand this word.

out. Because it's a place, but when the world is so big, and we are such a small place, [we can be] more powerful in that small *tauta*." His friend Kalvis is already thinking about generational continuity, and even has a sense of the Russification of the language and culture in Latvia today:

It's important that my son or daughter know that Latvia isn't just a country where there are Latvians and they speak Russian... Latvians have fought for about 100 years to speak Latvian. [...] You can speak the language, but if you don't understand that Latvia and the people of Latvia [have a] *tauta*, then Latvia is already dead.

Solvita, another one of their friends, who is also already thinking about the future, adds: "Being a Latvian is a very big part of my life, everything is based on that. And I think that it would kind of be unfair if my children didn't even get to understand that or be part of that. *It is my life*." This starkly echoes what my brother told me about valuing his *latvietība*. For Solvita, being Latvian is an all-consuming, total state of being. It *is* her life, not just a part of it, and not just something she feels exclusively in *Nometne*. The boys, Edgars and Kalvis, are "interpreting and conceptualizing the sociolinguistic conditions of their ancestral language" (Henne-Ochoa and Bauman 2015, 130) as rooted in *tauta*: an ambiguous nation-country-people-place. When Edgars says that it is a "small place," not only is he acknowledging the small size of the Latvian nation-state, but also demonstrates an awareness that the Latvian people, regardless of their number outside of Latvia's borders, is a small enough group that extinction is possible. For him, passing on, or transmitting *latvietība*, whether through language or other means, is crucial to survival. Kalvis simultaneously articulates that it is this awareness of a *tauta* that is the cornerstone for Latvia—the country's—existence. What he does, though, is invoke a generational obligation. Solvita does this too. They are already, at thirteen, thinking ahead to what they, as Latvians, will teach their Latvian children.

Furthermore, they not only think about what they will teach their children when the time comes, but they feel it as a moral obligation. The perpetuation of *latvietība*, then, especially through language maintenance, “is understood by some to be a matter of morality” (Henne-Ochoa and Bauman 2015, 130). The way these children conceptualize this obligation is not just forward-looking, but is also connected to the legacy of their grandparents, their most direct links to Latvia and *latvietība*. Edgars tells me: “I also feel like we’d let down our grandparents if we did not pass [it] on, because when it was Soviet Latvia, they still spoke Latvian. So I feel like we have to take this opportunity, while we have a free Latvia.” Solvita adds: “My grandpa who lives in Toronto, he and my grandma started a Latvian school [there]. I feel like I don’t need to do that big of a thing, but they have done so much, if I were to simply stop now... We are such a small country that we have to continue.” These adolescents are claiming belonging to Latvia itself, and they position themselves and their responsibilities to *latvietība* in relation to their grandparents, who have, in their eyes, sacrificed and done “so much” for the sake of preserving *latvietība*, the Latvian language, and the Latvian *tauta*. This moral obligation stems from a fear of disappointment, as well as an understanding of Latvia’s vulnerable position both historically and now. As second generation Latvian-Americans, we owe it not only to ourselves to keep the language and *latvietība* “alive”—we owe it to our grandparents as well. No one articulates this as emotionally as Kalvis:

My great-grandfather got a *Lāčplēsis* [award].<sup>26</sup> He fought, and my great-great-grandfather also fought. It’s like this: everyone fought for Latvia’s independence and Latvian language and Latvian *tauta* and Latvian songs... If we were to just stop - what does that mean? What did they do? Was that worth it for them? It was. But it’s only worth it if we really teach our children how to speak Latvian, because that’s something that Latvians have fought for for hundreds of years. And to not teach the Latvian language

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<sup>26</sup> The historically first and highest military honor you can receive in Latvia.

and to not [be a part of] the Latvian *tauta*, that's saying that Latvia isn't important to you. And that really can't be. Every country is important, every language in that country is important. To say that something [isn't important] that people have fought for, that people have died for, *tas tikai nav kārtīgi*.

Kalvis' entire response to me was in Latvian, but I have purposefully left this last phrase untranslated due to its emotional weight. This perfectly exemplifies a bilingual child utilizing (consciously or not) one of his languages due to a variance of “emotional load” - to “pack a more powerful ‘punch’” (Gonzalez 2001, 55) in one language or the other. The closest translation available would be “decent” as in, “He’s a really decent guy.” For a fourteen year-old, in this emotionally charged context, it is much more than that. He is invoking a sense of right and wrong. He is saying, “it just isn’t right” that a Latvian would consider Latvia, its language, or its *tauta* to be insignificant or unimportant; to do that would be genuinely morally indecent. By invoking a sense of historical continuity—the language is something that has been fought for “for hundreds of years”—Kalvis implies that we are held together by something much bigger than ourselves, which is discussed in the following chapter.

This same moral obligation has been instilled in me since I can remember: all four of my grandparents, Maija, Tētis, Opaps, and Omamma, risked and sacrificed so much in order to get to America, and put in so much effort in order to pass down the priceless gift of *latvietība* to my parents, from whom I was able to inherit it. As children, Latvian-Americans are socialized into a discourse of responsibility, and this responsibility is what consistently indexes *latvietība* across generations, no matter one’s language ability. When I ask Mamma what motivated her to participate in various demonstrations and protests regarding Latvia’s independence in the 1980s, she tells me:

I always grew up with the idea and the... belief, philosophy, *something*... that Latvia had been illegally occupied, and that we had to fight for Latvia to be free again... So I did all of the things that other [Latvians] were doing, and when I had the opportunity to participate, I felt that it was my responsibility— but I also wanted to do it, and [felt that] it was important.

One generation later, my friends and I, and even the adolescent campers, all feel that sense of responsibility, stemming from that ineffable “something,” that *latvietība* is worth fighting for— even though we have only ever known an independent Latvia. This cross-generational sense of responsibility is what motivates this project, and this is my attempt to make sense of that indescribable “something.”







Maija and her mother Alīda in Latvia, c. 1932.



Maija (left) working in Iecava, Latvia c. 1943.



Tētis (front right) next to his his sister Māra, with younger brother Agris, aunt Līna, uncle Vilis, and their mother Otilija in Latvia, c. 1938.





Maija's German passport given to her when she left Latvia in 1944. She was ill at the time this was taken.



Tētis' German passport picture, 1944.



Tētis (top right) and classmates at the DP camp in Augsburg, c. 1949.



Tētis in his scout uniform at the DP camp in Augsburg, 1949.



Tētis (middle) on the *General Muir* to America. c. 1949



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MANIFEST No. 19

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE  
(Rev. 1-4-49)

MANIFEST OF IN-BOUND PASSENGERS (ALIENS)

Class DP from Bremerhaven, 23rd Nov., 19 49  
(Part of embarkation)

ON USAT "GEN. MUIR" arriving at port of Boston, Mass., 19 49  
(Name of vessel) (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) DEC 2 1949

LINE No.	FAMILY NAME-GIVEN NAME DESTINATION IN UNITED STATES	AGE (Years)	SEX (F-M)	MAR- RIED OR SINGLE	TRAVEL DOC. No. NATIONALITY	NUMBER AND DESCRIPTION OF PIECES OF BAGGAGE	HEAD TAX COL- LECTED	THIS COLUMN FOR USE OF MASTER, SURGEON, AND U. S. OFFICERS
1	OLSAUSKAS Franas Box 203, Frankfort, Illinois	26	Ma	S	I-150058 Lith.		No	U-3a
2	ORKOWICZ Mendel 1026 E. 179th St., Bronx, N.Y.	51	Ma	Md	I-298984 Polish	517	No	U-3a
3	ORKOWICZ Maria 1026 E. 179th St., Bronx, N.Y.	36	F	Md	I-298983 Polish		No	U-3a
4	OSADGA Lubomyr 517 Mc Donald Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y.	19	Ma	S	I-285938 Polish	Class B	No	U-3a
5	OSINS Maija 81 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass.	21	F	S	I-285594 Latvian		No	U-3a
6	OSTAP Mychajlo 6 Holland St., Binghamton, N.Y.	24	Ma	S	I-262704 Polish		No	U-3a
7	OVCHYNNYK Mychaylo 4418 Central St., Detroit 10, Mich.	48	Ma	Md	I-266290 Russian		No	U-3a
8	OVCHYNNYK Sofia 4418 Central St., Detroit 10, Mich.	49	F	Md	I-266291 Russian		No	U-3a
9	OVCHYNNYK Motria Reed Farm Valley Cottage, N.Y.	54	F	W	I-273739 Russian		No	U-3a
10	OWTRACHT Emilia Rural Route 6, Bridgeton, N.J.	70	F	W	I-150187 Statal.		No	U-3a
11	OWTSCHINIKOW Georg Reed Farm, Valley Cottage, N.Y.	31	Ma	Md	I-288454 Statal.		No	U-3a
12	OWTSCHINIKOW Ewdokia Reed Farm, Valley Cottage, N.Y.	32	F	Md	I-288455 Statal.		No	U-3a
13	OWTSCHINIKOW Ludmila Reed Farm, Valley Cottage, N.Y.	5	F	S	I-288456 Statal.		No	U-3a
14	PAKUS Benjamin 404 South 8th St., Minneapolis, Minn.	20	Ma	S	I-283488 Polish	Class B	No	U-3a
15	PANCZUK Maria Berlin, Maryland	40	F	Md	I-262697 Rouman.		No	U-3a
16	PANCZUK Petro Berlin, Maryland	34	Ma	Md	I-262696 Polish		No	U-3a
17	PANCZUK Jaroslaw Berlin, Maryland	14	Ma	S	I-262695 Rouman.		No	U-3a
18	PARIS Olga 294 Morris Ave., Mountain Lakes, N.J.	32	F	S	I-278911 Eston.		No	U-3a
19	PASTORS Viktors 600 Schenck Ave., Brooklyn 7, N.Y.	31	Ma	Md	I-285828 Latvian		No	U-3a
20	PASTORS Mirdza 600 Schenck Ave., Brooklyn 7, N.Y.	28	F	Md	I-285829 Latvian		No	U-3a
21	PASTORS Skaidrite 600 Schenck Ave., Brooklyn 7, N.Y.	23m	F	S	I-285830 Latvian		No	U-3a
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U. S. DEPT. OF JUSTICE  
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Manifest of passengers of the *USAT General Muir*; Maija (Ošiņš) is no. 5 on the list.  
Courtesy of Ancestry.





Tētis (front) and Maija (back right) with member of the Boston folk dancing group, c. 1958.



Mamma (left) and her cousin Karmena (whose mother is Valda, the cousin Maija sponsored) in MA, c. 1970.



Mamma at a protest for Baltic independence in Boston, MA, c. 1985. Her sign reads “ANDROPOV [the General Secretary of the Soviet Union at the time] ROTS.”



Krišs and I ready to folk dance at the New England Folk Festival in Natick, MA, c. 2003. Karmena (pictured above) taught us folk dancing at Latvian school.





## Chapter One: “They are us”: Primordial Sentiment, Quasi-Kinship, and Ethnic Group Membership

It is hot and humid. On most days, Catskill summer weather beats Michigan summer weather, but not today. The big ventilation fans in the roof of *sarīkojumu zāle*<sup>27</sup> are not particularly useful and only add to the noise of exactly one hundred children’s voices chattering while Kristīna<sup>28</sup> and I decide how to wrap up today’s hour of *dziedāšana*<sup>29</sup>. We pick a folk song with a repetitive refrain to make it easier for the younger ones to sing along. I pull the lyrics up onto the screen, and we each wait with a hand in the air—*rokas augšā, mutes ciet!*<sup>30</sup>—until everyone quiets down. I announce that this will be our last song for the day. We get through it pretty quickly; I suspect everyone (ourselves included) is eager to get to *pusdienas*<sup>31</sup>. As soon as the last note is sung, I throw my hand up into the air before everyone scatters and remind the campers that anyone who is interested in soloing should come talk to us now. A handful of girls from the oldest two *mītnes*<sup>32</sup> approach us while everyone trickles out of *sarīkojumu zāle*, most of them are interested in the song we have designated as the one for the “bigger” kids. I jot down the names, relieved that there is interest at all. Two girls stay behind and volunteer to sing the first verses of “*Mana dziesma*”<sup>33</sup>, a well-known, sentimental pop song that we have planned to

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<sup>27</sup> Lit. “event hall.” This is the large structure where *dziedāšana* and other camp activities are held. There is a stage, two pianos, and it can seat approximately 200.

<sup>28</sup> Kristīna, my best friend and one of my key interlocutors for my project, co-taught *dziedāšana* with me. We met and became friends at this camp.

<sup>29</sup> Singing

<sup>30</sup> “Hands up, mouths shut!” This is the go-to gesture for counselors and teachers to restore order.

<sup>31</sup> Lunch

<sup>32</sup> Cabins

<sup>33</sup> Lit. “My song”

save as the grand finale of the concert; this one will definitely make the parents cry. We ask them to “audition” by singing the first few lines for us. They go back and forth for about a minute, debating who will sing which lines, and finally settle on the order. They each sing beautifully, if a little shakily, making nervous eye contact with us and each other. Kristīna and I beam the entire time. We give them the parts instantly, and they excitedly thank us and hurry out the door, walking side by side. In this moment I am relieved that the concert is coming together, I am impressed at how well the girls sang, and I am also overwhelmed with an emotion I cannot quite articulate, but I know Kristīna feels it too. We turn to look at each other, standing in silence for a moment. I’m pretty sure she has tears in her eyes. She tells me matter-of-factly, “Ariāna. *They are us.*”

This is not to say that either of us would have jumped at the opportunity to have a solo, had that option been presented to us when we were campers—these girls had remarkable confidence for thirteen year-olds. Even so, I imagine this is what our *dziedāšanas* teacher witnessed ten years ago when Kristīna and I brought our guitars to *Nometne*<sup>34</sup> for the first time: two bright-eyed campers who had become good friends by attending *Nometne*, sharing their love for music, this place, and each other. The sense of powerful continuity overwhelms me. I asked Kristīna to tell me what she remembered about that day, and she wrote: “To see two young girls bonding over the very same thing ten years after we found ourselves in the very same spot, more or less asking the same question, was a truly powerful moment for me... To say that in that moment, that everything had come full circle would be a giant understatement.” We are bound

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<sup>34</sup> Lit. “camp.” The official title of this summer camp is *Nujorkas draudzes nometne Katskiļu kalnos* (“The camp of the New York congregation in the Catskill Mountains”), but everyone familiar with it refers to the place itself as a proper noun, *Nometne*. Some historical information has been provided in the timeline found in pages i-ii.

not just to each other or those two campers, but to all Latvian-Americans through a powerful sense of primordial attachment.

*Primordial sentiment: the tie that binds*

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines a primordial attachment as

...one that stems from the ‘givens’ — or, more precisely, [...] assumed “givens” — of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community; speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbor, one’s fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation. But at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself...some attachments seem to flow more from a sense of natural... affinity than from social interaction. (Geertz 1973, 259-258)

Solvita, one of the fourteen year-old camper I interviewed<sup>35</sup>, alluded to this “given” connection herself: “You also know that when you come [to *Nometne*], you’ll have lots of friends. Because you meet all of these people but you already have like a bond because you are Latvians.” You might not know someone particularly well, or you might just be meeting them for the very first time, but there undoubtedly is the assumed given that if they are Latvian, there will always be some sort of “immediate contiguity.” This “natural affinity” has proven itself to me on several occasions (and I am confident, that if I were to ask my friends, they would have their own examples). Driving back to Bard from the American Latvian Youth Association’s conference (*kongress*) in November of 2016, which was held in Columbus, OH, we hit a deer. A little rattled,

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<sup>35</sup> During my two weeks at *Nometne*, I interviewed 21 children between the ages of 5-14. I broke them up into small groups, primarily by which *mītne* they lived in: 5 girls ages 5-6, 6 girls ages 7-10, 5 boys 10-12, and a mix of 2 boys and 3 girls 12-14. The interviews were conducted in private, separate spaces during the day’s *klusā stunda* (“quiet hour”) so as not to disturb anyone or miss any activities. The interviews lasted between 15-30 minutes.

but luckily completely safe, we pulled over, and called 911. With that call out of the way, we began calling and texting everyone we knew who was heading to the east coast from *kongress*; we knew we could depend on our friends to help us. Several friends were either already past our location, or taking a different route altogether, but nevertheless assured us that they were willing to turn around and pick us up if need be. We had options.

Incredibly, Līna, Andra, Inta, and Nicole happened to be on the same highway as we were, and within twenty minutes, they were pulled over behind us. Soon after the police officer arrived, took down our information, called a tow truck for us, and confirmed our fears: this (of course) was the middle of nowhere, with no 24-hour rental car companies. We loaded as many bags as we could into our friend's sedan and the police officer brought us to a nearby motel. Luckily, I got the one spot left in our friends' car, which was headed to New York. (The rest of the stranded group spent the night at the motel and rented a car first thing in the morning.) Within a few hours we made it to Andra and Inta's house in Monroe, about an hour south of Bard. The guest bedroom was already made up for me. In the morning, Andra and Inta's father offered to drive me all the way to Bard, even though I insisted that I could easily just take a train. He assured me it was not a problem, and later that morning I was back in Tivoli. I'm pretty sure he had not even known my name until that morning. The overpowering "coerciveness" that compelled our friends to wait with us on the side of I-87 and compelled Jānis to drive me back to Bard (and he genuinely did not seem to mind it) comes from simply *being* Latvian—it is the "unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself."

When interviewing my mom, I ask her (already knowing the answer) whether or not she is still friends with her Latvian school and camp classmates. "Yes," she says, "those are all my

closest friends.” She continues: “Let’s put it this way. I’m closer to my Latvian friends than my American friends. I have more Latvian friends than—I have more, close Latvian friends than American friends.” I then ask her to compare the two groups and quantify who she would consider herself closer to (unfair, I know, but I have done this myself. In middle and high school I had to reassure my “American” friends that I did not like them any less just because I excitedly ran off to Latvian camp every summer). After some careful consideration, Mamma finally tells me she thinks she is closer to her Latvian friends because she feels that they “live these parallel lives, these very collective, similar lives,” and that their “*latvietība* somehow puts them in a different place” than that which she shares with her American friends. This “different place” is not necessarily a physical one, but rather an emotional one, and it comes from the attachments that “seem to flow more from a sense of natural... affinity; from the “congruities” of having Latvian blood, speaking Latvian, and celebrating Latvian holidays and traditions. This natural affinity my mom feels with her Latvian friends is a sense of knowing how to *be*: how to be the child of Latvian immigrants, how to go to Latvian school and camps, how to raise your children speaking Latvian, how to send your children to the same school and camps you attended, and how to be the ones responsible for teaching and passing down *latvietība* to the next generation. All of this goes without saying, because her friends all know this too.

*Latvian-Americans as an ethnic group and its boundary maintenance*

Fredrik Barth, in his foundational text *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, explains that ethnic groups are “self-ascribed categories,” and that in an ethnic group, “the sharing of a common culture is generally given central importance” (Barth 1969, 10-11). It is not that ethnic distinction depends on the “absence of mobility” across boundaries, but that the distinctions are

maintained *despite* the permeability of those boundaries through processes of inclusion and exclusion (Barth 1969, 9-10.) The processes of inclusion or exclusion that Latvian-Americans utilize to distinguish themselves as a unique group are motivated by collective “[n]orms, beliefs, and values [that] are effective and have their own containing power only because they are the collective representations of a group and are backed by the pressure of that group” (Cohen 1974, xiii). This is what makes makes us a self-sustaining group.

The norm to go out of your way to help a Latvian you may not even know well, no matter the personal cost; the belief that if you go to a specifically Latvian place like *Nometne*, or *Garezers*, and do not know anyone, “you already have...a bond because you are Latvians”; the mutual understanding between Latvian friends that you somehow just *know* each other better, that there is more that can go unsaid because of your “parallel” lives—these are all representations of Latvian-Americans as an ethnic group, enactments of our solidarity, and are actively upheld across age groups.

Of particular relevance to this project is Solveiga Miežitis’ comparative study on active and non-active second generation Latvian youth in Canada (1990). When discussing their ethnic identity development, she explains that “ethnicity can be “specified in terms of two major dimensions, the objective and subjective” (Miežitis 1990, 259). Objective ethnicity is categorized by a linkage with ancestry, similar physical traits, language, and concrete cultural elements, while subjective ethnicity is categorized by “one’s awareness or consciousness of ethnic heritage as a source of identity,” and “provides the affective link between the past and one’s current self-definition.” Latvian-American identity is a combination of the two: many of us are blond-haired, blue-eyed with high cheekbones; as previously discussed, we highly value our grandparents as

our direct linkage to Latvia; and we still value Latvian music and folk dances (as shown in the survey results discussed in Chapter Three). My mom tells me she considers herself a *latviete* because “[she has] Latvian blood, because [she] was born from Latvians, [she has] the language, and [she has] she has the traditions and cultural things that belong to Latvia, to *latvietība*.” In addition to these “objective” ethnic markers, there are clearly intense, even “ineffable,” attitudes and feelings related to a Latvian-American’s sense of personhood, which provide the link between one’s objective ancestry and one’s current self-definition of being Latvian.

If “the persistence of ethnicity depends on the awareness and maintenance of boundaries” (Miezitis 1990, 259), then one of the most prominent boundary-markers is the Latvian language. Gloria Anzaldua, cited in Norma Gonzalez’s *I am My Language*, says, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (Anzaldua 1987, 59 in Gonzalez 2001, 71). One ten year-old at camp tells me enthusiastically, when I ask if it is important to them to speak Latvian, “Yes! It’s part of who we are... We are Latvians!” When I ask my mom what she thinks are the most important elements to sustain *latvietība* in America, the first thing she lists is language, because “it is a foundational principal that distinguishes people, or groups of people, from others.” Speaking Latvian is important in America because it distinguishes Latvians from other groups of people; it is what Barth would call a “diacritical feature” (Barth 1969, 14). When I ask my grandparents the same question, Tētis tells me,

*Nu*, the most important element is that we— it was understood that at home our family would speak Latvian. Our language is the Latvian language. We speak in English only to Americans and outside of our house and our family... I couldn't imagine that we would ever speak English at home. You come in through the door - “Here I speak Latvian.” When I go outside and meet my neighbors, then I speak English.



For Latvian-speaking Latvians, the ethnic language is relegated to “home and hearth”, while English is used for “out there” (Gonzalez 2001, 50). That is partly why places like *Nometne* and Latvian social events are so valued; it provides an opportunity to speak Latvian “out there.” Seven year-old Marta tells me she likes *Nometne* because “It’s a place where you can be [very Latvian]...and you can speak Latvian. It’s not like every day when you come home from school and only then can you speak Latvian. You can speak Latvian every day [here].” *Nometne* is a place where you can be Latvian because you can speak Latvian there, and vice-versa.

Sometimes immigrant communities start to adjust or integrate within their new, larger community, but Cohen explains that the reverse can also occur; that a group “adjusts to the new situation by reorganizing its own traditional customs, or by developing new customs under traditional symbols, using traditional norms and ideologies to enhance its distinctiveness within the contemporary situation” (Cohen 1974, xiv). My grandparents’ generation, uncertain of what the future held for Latvia at the time they left it, depended on the maintenance of the Latvian language (among other traditional customs) for their own personhood, and to keep themselves distinguished from the average American. They relied on programs of “community language planning” (Bonvillain 2000, 344), like Latvian schools and camps, to maintain and sustain the Latvian language in the US; and by sustaining the language they were sustaining the Latvian ethnic group.

It then follows that a loss of the Latvian language is indicative of a loss of the Latvian ethnicity. The process of assimilation is “natural,” and it is “escapable, whether you like it or not,” Tētis tells me. The relationship between ethnicity and assimilation is often assumed to be unilinear; the second generation (those born to immigrants) begins assimilating, and the third

generation even more so, until ethnicity disappears. In other words, with me “it ends.” But while studies have shown that in general, by the third generation most of the parental language knowledge has been lost (Bonvillain 2000, 344), (1) This is not true for my generation of Latvian-Americans,<sup>36</sup> and (2) If ethnicity can be subjective as much as it is objective, then “one may develop various patterns of identity maintenance in relation to one’s ethnic origin, while undergoing cultural assimilation through internalization of the overt and covert patterns of behaviour characteristic of the larger society” (Miezitis 1990, 260). Tētis sees me and my brother undergoing the seemingly inevitable cultural assimilation in America; that we feel “very comfortable in an American setting and society,” because we are internalizing behaviors characteristic of American society. He is not wrong—I feel more comfortable in America than I did when I lived in Latvia for five weeks—but we disagree on what this means for the perpetuity of our ethnic identity.

For many older Latvians (my grandparents’ generation) and Latvian-Americans (my parents’ generation), language ability is a big component of the “ethnic fictions” (Nagata 1974, 342) used to explain or justify comparisons between members of the Latvian-American community. I do not at all disagree that language is important in cultivating a sense of membership and belonging; I am incredibly grateful that I was taught to speak Latvian, and that is undoubtedly why I feel as included in the community as I do. However, to try to quantify someone’s *latvietība*, as more or less than another’s, or to correct someone’s identity as being *really* something else (i.e. I call myself a *latviete* but my grandparents might say, or at least think

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<sup>36</sup> Though there are significantly fewer speakers in my generation; more on this in Chapter Three.

that I am *really* an American with Latvian grandparents) is an attitude that is shifting within my generation to one less focused on language.

For young Latvian-Americans of my generation, “language differences need not in themselves be particularly divisive” (Geertz 1973, 262), even though language can and is used as a demarcation within an affinity group. This feeling of oneness, at least for our generation, applies whether or not one speaks fluent Latvian. Where language used to be a necessity for oneness, now this oneness exists whether or not language does. Kristīna (who speaks Latvian) and Natalie (who does not), picked up on this when we were chatting about my project:

Kristīna: ...[our grandparents’ generation], they came here and they had no idea if their language, their culture would even exist in a couple of years, [let alone] two generations later. And here we are: half of us have language, half of us don’t. But the fact that we are here, right now, in this place, doing what we’re doing—

Natalie: But that’s the beautiful thing... now, it’s at a place where we can be having a conversation in English, and knowing that we have the Latvian culture, that brings us together, you know what I mean? And it’s not just the language, and that is what’s significant, I think, about our generation.

“Knowing that we have the Latvian culture” is enough to bind us, even if language does not.

They—the non-speaking Latvians—are us, too. Knowing the “culture” and taking part in it provides one with “a feeling of corporate sentiment of oneness which makes those who are charged with it feel that they are kith and kin” (Ambedkar 1955, 11 in Geertz 1973, 260).

Though B. R. Ambedkar here is discussing a “linguistic state,” this theory of oneness is nevertheless relevant for Latvian-Americans. He elaborates this feeling of oneness as being “a double-edged feeling,” because it is simultaneously a feeling of “consciousness of kind” which “binds together those who have it so strongly that it overrides all [other] differences,” while also

being a “longing not to belong to any other group” (Ambedkar 1955, 11 in Geertz 1973, 260). Being Latvian really does override all differences. I have even said, “I probably wouldn’t be friends with so-and-so if they weren’t Latvian...” I might disagree with someone on political and social issues, and we might have vastly different interests and personalities, but knowing that we both share *latvietība* is enough of a similarity to feel connected. As one survey respondent explained, “[later in life] I realized that I was friends with people only because they were Latvian and not because we had similar interests.”

Perhaps the degree to which a Latvian-American feels each side of this doubleness depends on their linguistic identity, but this is not always the case. Kristīna tells me:

I have *brāleni* and *māsicas*<sup>37</sup> that don’t have *latviešu valoda*<sup>38</sup> but they so deeply identify with the *latviešu* identity. They say ‘Yeah, I’m Latvian. No, I don’t speak the language, but yes I’m Latvian.’ And they can tell you literally anything about our family lineage, history, why they’re exactly where they are right now, they just don’t have the language. They literally have everything I have minus the language.

There is a “quasi-kinship”—quasi because our relationships do not depend on known biological relationships, but rather a “notion of untraceable but yet sociologically real kinship” (Geertz 1973, 261-2)—that binds me and Kristīna, Kristīna and Natalie, and even me to Kristīna’s cousins, whom I have never met. It is why we spend hundreds of dollars traveling to Latvian events every year. It is why people are willing to turn around on one of the busiest travel weekends of the year to pick you up on the side of the highway. It exists regardless of language ability, and even regardless of your citizenship status in Latvia.

*Latvian ethnic identity and the choice of citizenship*

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<sup>37</sup> Cousins

<sup>38</sup> Latvian language

Maija and Tētis explained to me that by law, they had to be residents of the U.S. for at least five years before they could be granted citizenship, they both officially became naturalized American citizens in 1955. I asked them how they would identify themselves, now, in 2017—whether they consider themselves Latvians, Americans, Latvian-Americans, or American-Latvians. Maija, with only a slight pause, tells me: “I identify as a Latvian. If someone asks me, ‘Where are you from?’ I say, ‘I’m Latvian.’” Tētis elaborates a little more: “I see myself as a Latvian who lives in America, even though I’m also an American citizen.” I then ask if at any point that identity has shifted, if perhaps they felt “super American” when they were officially granted their citizenship. They both chuckle, and then in unison say no. Tētis explains: “For me it was a formality. I should add—we were in no rush to apply for citizenship after five years. We could have waited longer. But personally, I was worried that Russia, the Soviet Union, which now considered Latvia to be part of its territory, and Latvians as their citizens, that they would request that America deport us, for America to give us back to Russia. And that’s why I thought, *‘Drošs paliek drošs!’*<sup>39</sup> I’ll get my American citizenship, and if I have [that], then they won’t send me away.’ It was for safety [more than anything]...”

When I later ask my mom why, after Latvia regained independence in 1991, she had not yet applied to become a dual citizen, she chuckles a bit and admits that it is simply out of laziness, and that she “really [doesn’t] have a good reason.” She goes on to say that while Maija, Tētis, and her sister are still alive, she “won’t be going back<sup>40</sup> to Latvia [to live there],” so she

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<sup>39</sup> Lit. “Safe stays safe!”, an idiom for “Better safe than sorry!”

<sup>40</sup> I should point out that frequently, when Latvian-Americans discuss moving to Latvia, it is phrased as “going back” — even if they were not born there. I have chosen to not extrapolate this on a larger scale within this project, but it does show just how imbedded the idea of a “return to the homeland” is.

does not necessarily feel as if she needs the dual citizenship. Beyond this, she has not “really thought about [this] prospect.” After I keep prodding some more, I finally outright ask her: “You don’t see citizenship as a requirement to feel like a Latvian?” She tells me, “No, apparently I don’t since I haven’t done it yet and I consider myself a *latviete*, with or without citizenship. I was born here, after all.” Then when I if she identifies herself as Latvian, American-Latvian, a Latvian-American, a Latvian in America, or something else entirely, she reaffirms her previous response, saying:

I consider myself a *latviete*. I think if someone were to ask me how to “correctly”—whatever that means—identify myself, I would say that I am an *Amerikas latviete*<sup>41</sup>. [pause] Because... even though I have Latvian culture and on one hand I have a Latvian identity, I also very seriously accept that I am an American citizen and that I was born here and I respect the country in which I was born and grew up and live, because I think [one] has to do that too.

Kristīna, on the other hand, received her *personas kods*<sup>42</sup> three years ago and received her Latvian passport last summer while she was interning in Latvia. She tells me her choice to apply for her citizenship started as a practical one, because she knew from the first time she visited Latvia in May of 2014 that she would want to live there some day. “So I figured, why not just make it easier on myself and get my *pilsonība*<sup>43</sup>, because it’s my right anyway,” she tells me. The more she thought about it, though, the more she realized it was for emotional and symbolic reasons as well:

I can talk about being a *latviete* all I want, but now I have a physical piece of paper that proves that I am. And not that I really needed that validation, but it’s like an emotional

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<sup>41</sup> “America’s Latvian,” as mentioned in the introduction.

<sup>42</sup> Lit. “person’s code.” This is similar to a social security number, it is a unique number assigned to you that designates you as citizen of Latvia. You can have this without having a Latvian passport, but you need a Latvian passport in order to travel freely in the Schengen Area of the EU.

<sup>43</sup> Citizenship

kind of thing. When I received [my passport in Latvia]... I went outside and I was sitting at the bus stop... and I had my American passport in my right hand and my Latvian passport in my left hand and I was hysterically crying on that park bench. I guess in that moment... I could see both sides of myself... In my own head I know how much work my *vecmamma*<sup>44</sup> put into teaching me how to speak *latviski* and I know how much work I've put in to maintaining *latvietība*, and it's never in my mind been a question of "Am I actually a *latviete*?" I guess... now if I'm walking through the streets of Rīga<sup>45</sup> and someone says "Oh, you're not a real *latviete*," I can whip [my passport] out and say, "Actually, this says I am."... Just knowing that my grandparents came from a place, and they left not knowing if they would ever have it to go back to, and here we are two generations later, and I'm a citizen of that country.

Though I do not feel any less Latvian without a *personas kods* or a Latvian passport, I do plan on applying for one this summer. Like Kristīna, I have considered living in Latvia at some point in the future, and it would be practical to have that already taken care of. I also do find something definitive and symbolic in having a physical representation of my identity. Perhaps, now that I know just how malleable and open to questioning identity is, I want a safeguard in place if that moment of doubt ever does come. Of course, it might hold an entirely different meaning and value for me in the future.

For Latvian-Americans, it seems, "citizenship in a truly modern state has more and more become the most broadly negotiable claim to personal significance" (Geertz 1973, 258). Despite being naturalized American citizens for more than sixty years, Maija and Tētis consider themselves just that—American *citizens*, rather than Americans. They still are, and always will be, *latvieši*. Conversely, my mom does not need Latvian citizenship to feel—and *be*—a *latviete*. Neither do I. For Kristīna, she never questioned her *latvietība* and its legitimacy, but finds security in the fact that she has something concrete to rely on in case anyone ever does. For

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<sup>44</sup> Grandmother

<sup>45</sup> Latvia's capital

some, it may enhance their feeling of belonging, but Latvian citizenship is not required for Latvian-Americans to attain personhood within *latviešu sabiedrība*<sup>46</sup>. To borrow from Winland (2002), growing up in America has meant that ways of being Latvian “have been disciplined through the accessible and familiar language of ethnicity and identity production consistent with the cultural logics of citizenship and belonging in” the United States (705). That is, growing up in the “melting pot” of America, Latvian-American children have been encouraged to celebrate their heritage, even praised and admired for how “in touch” with it they are. It is precisely why the first graders at *Nometne* were so excited to go on and on about all that they share about *latvietība* at their “American” schools: we can feel and portray ourselves to be as Latvian as we want, regardless of our Latvian citizenship status.

This is all because ethnicity is a “variable” (Cohen 1974, xv), something dynamic, liable to change, and adaptable. Even though it is “ascribed in the sense that one cannot choose the ethnic group into which one is born...it is also achieved to the extent that the meaning it acquires for one’s total identity can also be a matter of choice” (Khilkanova and Khilkanov 2004, 88 in Malinovskis 2009). One cannot choose to be the child or grandchild of Latvian immigrants, but, as Aleksandra Malinovskis (a granddaughter of Latvian immigrants to the U.S.) says, “there is nothing innate in the Latvian ethnicity that causes one to speak the language or dance the folk dances. Those are a part of the choice” (Malinovskis 2009). The ways in which Latvian-Americans choose to participate in *latvietība*, just like the boundary markers of *latvietība* itself, are changing across generations.

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<sup>46</sup> Latvian society, community.







Kristīna (top right) and I (below her) singing in *Nometne's* concert as campers in Elka Park, NY, c. July 2002. Courtesy of Andra Pulins.



Kristīna and I teaching *dziedāšana* at *Nometne* in Elka Park, NY, July 2016. Courtesy of Jānis Štāls.



Campers and staff of the first session of *Nometne* in Elka Park, NY, July 2016. Courtesy of Jānis Štāls.



## Chapter Two: The (In)Formal Ways to Participate in Identity- and Community-Making

To operate successfully, Cohen writes, an ethnic group has to “develop basic organizational functions: distinctiveness [...]; communication; authority structure; decision-making procedure; ideology; and socialization” (Cohen 1974, xvii). During the interview with my grandparents, my grandmother explains that the maintaining of *latvietība* when she was younger was in large part due to the busyness of the Boston Latvian community and that, “Honestly, to hold on to your *latvietība* more, you had to attend these events—” Tētis interjects, adding that “you had to have this *iekšējā jušana*<sup>47</sup> or desire to be there and to hear these [concerts, theater performances]... These were Latvian things. You had to have the feeling that you needed to be there and learn about it and that you would feel good [being there].” Maija adds, “And there are people who maybe aren’t that interested in the music or the theater, but they *feel* that they have to attend; it doesn’t matter if they don’t necessarily understand or even enjoy it. They have a feeling that going there will help [them] maintain their *latvietība*.” This Barthian “inner feeling” is what they identify as the driving force to maintaining Latvian identity in America. This feeling is what motivated them to organize and socialize, and that is how you participated and proved that you were actively cultivating and maintaining *latvietība*.

Tētis later tells me that for my generation, he thinks maintaining *latvietība* is becoming less and less of a primary concern, because “[we’re] less interested in going to Latvian church, [we’re] less interested in going to Latvian events”; that we’d “rather go and enjoy an American event.” He attributes this to the previously mentioned inevitable assimilation. For them, attending formal events (like concerts, church services, and theater) hosted by formal

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<sup>47</sup> “Inner feeling”

organizations (like the American Latvian Cultural Union or a theater troupe) was a measure of how active a Latvian was in the community. While it is definitely true that church and more “formal” event attendance is lower for younger Latvian-Americans, I argue that we are still participating—only in more informal ways. When a group cannot organize itself along formal lines, Cohen explains, “the group will articulate its organization on informal lines, making use of kinship, friendship, ritual, ceremonial, and other symbolic activities that are implicit in what is known as style of life” (Cohen 1974, xvii). We organize events like *Rudens svētki*, *Jauniešu dienas*, Latvian tailgate weekends at universities, and annual ski trips to celebrate and build our kinships (whether quasi- or real), and incorporate ritual, ceremonial, and symbolic activities in the process. Young Latvians today are present at these events, parallel to our grandparents being present at theater productions and concerts decades ago. Younger Latvian-Americans’ perception of their own *latvietība* does not seem to be “secondary” to them at all—at least the ones I talked to (these are, after all, the ones “showing up”). In the case of Latvians in America, this group initially formed on formal lines, but has gradually developed more and more informal mechanisms of maintenance and organization; and because “few groups are wholly formal or wholly informal,” our position on this continuum is simply shifting more towards informal, at least for the time being (Cohen 1974, xviii).

#### *Participation in ALJA as formal participation*

This is not to say that young Latvian-Americans solely participate in the making of Latvian-ness through informal ways (though some do). Many are members of at least one formal organization: *Amerikas latviešu jaunatnes apvienība* (ALJA), or the American Latvian Youth Association, which is the largest organization representing young Latvian-Americans. Founded

by Ivars Avots in 1952, ALJA was created as a sister organization to the American Latvian Association (ALA, which was founded just one earlier). According to their website, the mission of ALJA is to gather young Latvians by organizing cultural and social events, to represent young Latvians' interests, and to sustain *latvietība* outside of Latvia by encouraging members to speak Latvian and by supporting learning and employment opportunities by providing scholarships.<sup>48</sup> ALJA members range from about 16 to 35 years old, making many of the current members second generation Latvian-Americans. Commonly, those currently involved in ALJA have one or both parents that used to be involved in ALJA as well.

ALJA has a *valde*, or board, made up of 13 positions<sup>49</sup>, which is voted in during ALJA's annual conference (*kongress*). I have been on the board for two years now, as one of the editors of *Vēja zvani*, the art and literary magazine, with Kristīna. The board meets quarterly, and it is in ALJA's statutes that we must meet at least once on the west coast, once in the midwest, and once on the east coast. This requires a large portion of ALJA's budget to be designated for travel compensation, but the purpose is symbolic: to show we as an organization represent young Latvian-Americans from all over the country.<sup>50</sup> I attended three *sēdes*<sup>51</sup> in the course of completing my research: the last one of 2016 took place at *Nometne*, in Elka Park, NY, and the first two of 2017 were in Seattle and Boston, respectively.

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<sup>48</sup> "Kas ir ALJA?" [What is ALJA?], alja.org, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.alja.org/kas-ir-alja/>.

<sup>49</sup> President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, Directors of Cultural Events, Director of Membership, Director of Information and Social Media, Directors of Marketing, the Editors of *ALJA Ziņas* (online newsletter/blog), the Editors of *Vēja Zvani* (art/literary magazine), Director of Educational Opportunities, the council members, and the Revision Committee.

<sup>50</sup> The south is not included, as the Latvian-American populations are concentrated in those three locations.

<sup>51</sup> Meetings

The meeting in October 2016 was our “retreat” *sēde*, as the fourth one always is. Provided we have met once in each of the required locations already, the fourth *sēde*’s location can be anywhere and is put up for a vote. Our stay for the weekend is also paid for, if it is in the budget. The majority voted to have it coincide with *Rudens svētki* (“Fall Fest”), which was happening at *Nometne*, so that we had reason to see many of our other friends that weekend. All of *valde* stayed at *Ezera māja*<sup>52</sup>, the house that sits on the lake and is home to the camp nurse during the summer. It can be rented out during the year (I have spent a New Year’s Eve or two there myself), as it has about eight bedrooms with multiple beds in each, a living room, a full kitchen, a dining room, three bathrooms, and even laundry hook-ups. I get in late Friday night with my friend Kiki (who I have known since our *Nometne* days), and spend the night catching up with friends (there were only a handful of unfamiliar faces out of about fifty people), many of whom I had not seen since the summer (Kristīna included).

The next morning, Kristīna and I are woken up by the president (Allie) and vice-president (Jana), who hop onto our beds and start chatting. Aldan, one of the event directors, straggles in while brushing his teeth. Smelling coffee from the kitchen, I eventually get dressed and make my way downstairs, where only a few people are sitting at the table in the dining room. We never really start on time. We are waiting on the treasurer, who eventually lumbers downstairs in his pajamas. When everyone finally has a bagel, coffee, or mimosa in hand, we start.

We do follow a standard protocol<sup>53</sup>: the secretary officially “opens” the meeting, and is the one who leads it. We all sit around the table (well, as much as we can), and take turns reading

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<sup>52</sup> Lit. “Lake house”

<sup>53</sup> For meeting protocol and observations, see Myers (1986).

through our list of *resolūcijas*,<sup>54</sup> discussing their status and progress. After *resolūcijas* are read, each position gives any updates since the last *sēde*. Though we do follow this “formal” procedure during a *sēde*, I have learned that it quickly devolves into a prolonged family meeting. People talk over each other and have side conversations with those sitting next to them, until usually Līna, the secretary, or Allie shut them up. People are often interrupted by others who (almost always) just want to share a personal anecdote related to whatever point is being discussed. We laugh at each other’s jokes, and we shush those who are having side conversations.

In a way, *sēdes* really do resemble a family reunion of sorts: we have *valdes* members who fly or drive in from Boston, New York, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, D.C., California, and even Canada. If we do not already know someone who has newly joined, we at least know of them, and these meetings only further strengthen our friendships with each other. The official part of the meeting usually takes around five hours, but then afterwards, the majority of people go out for dinner together and take time to explore whatever city we are in. The meeting extends beyond the few hours we designate to go over *resolūcijas* and *darbības punkti*<sup>55</sup>; the entire weekend is a *sēdes* weekend.

Since beginning my research, I have witnessed one of the most significant *resolūcijas* come to fruition. In October, when we had the last *sēde* of 2016, I was talking to Kristīna about the divide between speaking and non-speaking Latvians, and what we could do to change that. She told me:

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<sup>54</sup> Resolutions, or goals put forth for the organization as a whole during the previous year’s *kongress*.

<sup>55</sup> “Working points,” what *valdes* members must come prepared with to discuss at *sēdes*.



...[what if] we have this *pozīcija*<sup>56</sup> in *valde* that is like the liaison between [non-speaking Latvians] and *latviešu* speaking *valdes* members. So does that mean that we conduct all of our *valdes* meetings *angļu valodā*<sup>57</sup>? We can't exactly do that because this is the four times a year we get to come together and speak to each other *latviski*. But we are *Amerikas latviešu jaunatnes apvienība*, and that includes all of *Amerikas latviešu jaunieši*,<sup>58</sup> not just the ones who have the *valoda*.<sup>59</sup>

Again, like *Nometne*, ALJA events are places that privilege the Latvian language, which is part of what makes the organization itself so important. But Kristīna is right—as an organization, we claim to represent *all* young Latvian-Americans, not just the ones who can speak Latvian.

The following month, during the general assembly of kongress, Kristīna and Andra (the same one whose dad drove me back to Bard after the deer incident) put forth a *resolūcija* to elect a council member who “is interested and passionate about *latvietība*, but who grew up without the Latvian language. In this role they would disseminate information about Latvian events and create an open and accepting environment. With the help of the secretary or another *valdes* member, the *sēdes* minutes and any written news will be translated to English.” Nicole, who grew up going to the English speaking program at *Nometne* every summer, then worked there as a counselor, and who now helps organize informal weekend events like *Jauniešu dienas*<sup>60</sup>, was unanimously voted by everyone present at *pilnsapulce*<sup>61</sup> (between 40-50 people) to fill this position.

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<sup>56</sup> Position

<sup>57</sup> In English

<sup>58</sup> American Latvian youth

<sup>59</sup> Language

<sup>60</sup> Lit. “Youth days.” A weekend, usually in late winter, where many of us get together to participate in planned activities and just to spend time with one another.

<sup>61</sup> General assembly

The importance of her role was one of the main focuses of the two *sēdes* we have had so far in 2017. We have talked extensively about ways to promote inclusivity, because according to Nicole, “[non-speakers] are nervous about attending something knowing everyone speaks Latvian.” To start, ALJA has since started providing translations for all of its social media posts, articles that the online newsletter posts are getting translated, and several board members are working on translating the ALJA website. Tija, who is this year’s Director of Educational Opportunities (a position in which the primary job was to award various scholarships for members to attend certain cultural events or programs) has now been delegated with compiling Latvian language learning resources as well. So far, the question of which language to speak during *sēdes* has been a non-issue; we still conduct them primarily in Latvian, with someone translating for Nicole when she needs it.

Formal participation, then, *can* extend beyond one’s Latvian language ability. In fact, now more than ever, we as a collective and as a formal organization are advocating just how important that inclusion is. Ultimately, if the basis of ALJA as an organization is sociality, our quasi-kinship with each other (and even with Latvians who are not necessarily members), and this sense of familiarity exists regardless of language, then ALJA can continue to exist and sustain *latvietība* without being exclusive to Latvian speakers. Those of us on *valde* this year have been pushing Nicole to convince as many non-speaking friends as she can to attend the next *kongress* to have an even larger presence and say in what we do as an organization.

#### *ALJA kongress as invented tradition*

ALJA has been organizing an annual conference, called *kongress*, every year since its founding in 1952. Considering the first word of ALJA’s motto, *pulcināt*, means to assemble or

gather together, *kongress* is undoubtedly ALJA's most important event. The host city changes from year to year, and the upcoming location is voted on during the current *kongress*'s *pilnsapulce*. Major cities like New York, Chicago, and Boston have been repeated several times, but the scope of *kongress*'s past ranges from Lincoln, Nebraska to Phoenix, Arizona (and even to Toronto and Cabo San Lucas). The idea is (*usually*) to alternate between regions of the country, making it more convenient for Latvian-Americans of that area to attend (therefore compensating for a *kongress* being further away the previous year).

Planning a *kongress* is no small undertaking. I ask Kristīna, who was one of the two main organizers of last year's *kongress* in Columbus, Ohio, to give me a brief synopsis of the year-long process. The day after she returned home from Grand Rapids (where *kongress* was held in 2015), realizing what she had just signed herself up for, she immediately started driving around downtown Columbus looking at prospective hotels. Before she could book it though, she had to establish the organizing committee as a non-profit entity separate from ALJA, and set up a bank account in its name. Then came the budgeting (though, she admits, neither she nor Kristīne, the other organizer, had much experience in that), booking other venues for the nightly events, scheduling potential lecturers, logo and t-shirt designs, reaching out to donors, and setting up online payment accounts and emails so people could start signing up. She tells me, "I was pretty stressed the entire calendar year," considering she had a full course load at college on top of working full-time (she is also just bad at saying "no"). "I felt a pretty large sense of responsibility to not only put it on, but to make it successful... It was just a lot. [I] didn't really sleep a lot last year, but it's over." Nevertheless, she was glad she did it. She judged it to be a success: "Our turnout was good [130 attended]—I think we had thirty new members to ALJA—

[and] we profited for ALJA.” A good turnout, though, depends on the effort attendees are willing to make.

Attending *kongress* is a major investment, both in time and money, and attendees have to decide if the cost is worth it. Because of its ever-changing location, for some, especially younger high school and college students, it simply is not feasible. At seventeen, I saved the money for train tickets to and from New York City, as well as the cost of a hotel room (albeit split between as many of us as possible) and feeding myself in Manhattan for three nights, all on top of the participation fee (which is typically somewhere around \$120-\$150). Since then, I have also spent money for gas to drive to and from Grand Rapids, MI, and, most recently, a plane ticket to Columbus, OH. We are also traveling on one of the busiest (and most expensive) travel weekends of the year—Thanksgiving.<sup>62</sup>

On what is arguably the most American holiday (with the exception of the Fourth of July), young Latvian-Americans are spending time and money—and lots of it—to spend a family-centered holiday *away* from their families, sometimes several hundred miles away. While some Latvian parents may feel slightly sad that their child chooses not to come home for the holiday, they usually understand, because chances are, they did it too. I ask Kristīna if she has ever thought going to *kongress* was *not* worth it, and she does not have to think long before she says “no.” Besides the times they simply were not financially feasible, she says:

Now that I’ve planned one, it’s like I’m going to do everything in my power while I’m able to go to [them]. Because it’s important. I wouldn’t say that I feel obligated, I just learned a lot and... I feel like *kongress* is a really good place to start new relationships,

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<sup>62</sup> Though purely serendipitous, I find it worth mentioning that Maija left for America on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving in 1949, and the Wednesday before Thanksgiving is the day *kongress* starts each year.

make old ones stronger, meet like-minded people. Like if you go to *lekcijas*,<sup>63</sup> you'll meet up with people who care. And that can mean a new friendship, a new opportunity to get involved with ALJA *valde* and just [involved] in ALJA in general... you're being an active member of this organization. Our organization exists by the people for the people, we do this for ourselves, so our experience can be better, so we can make it better for ourselves. And if we don't have people that attend and are passionate about it, people that don't care enough to travel and spend their own money to do things like this, then we're not going to exist anymore.

The pressure of now being responsible for ALJA's sustainability (and young Latvian-Americans' socialization in general) is what makes spending hundreds of dollars and a weekend away from family worth it for Kristīna, and I think many of us who attend would agree. In this case, we are purposefully selecting our Latvian identity over our American one, and like Kristīna says, many of us have never thought: "Oh, I'm missing out on something."

However, not only can "Latvian activities... interfere with the daily routine of school, homework, and part-time jobs" (Miezitis 1990, 270), they can clearly interfere with family holidays, which are not always mutually inclusive. For some Latvian-Americans, especially those with a non-Latvian parent, this choice is not such an easy one to make. Talking to Natalie during *Rudens svētki* in October, a month before *kongress*, Kristīna and I were vehemently trying to convince her to go, and she told us: "This is the worst excuse in the world but... I think with our side it's about convenience. It's not convenient because a lot of people want to spend Thanksgiving with their family... and it takes a significant amount of commitment to get to [it]." "Their" side (that is, the non-speaking Latvians) would have to convince an entire half of their family that skipping Thanksgiving to go to a Latvian conference—something they most likely cannot identify with—is a reasonable sacrifice to make. Kristīna and I are convinced there is an

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<sup>63</sup> Lectures

easy compromise: celebrate Thanksgiving with your family, then come to *kongress* on Friday. After all, there is no “rule” that says you *have* to get to *kongress* by Thursday. This inherent tension between choosing between two holidays, as it were, has never been an issue for me or Kristīna, because both of our parents are Latvian and attended *kongress* when they were young. Naturally, as parents of college students, they wish they saw us more often, but they have never pressured us to stay home that weekend. We are not as frequently forced to choose between two sides of our family, or two sides of our identity. Not wanting to abandon their *latvietība* when they started making their new lives in America, young Latvian immigrants founded ALJA and started organizing its annual *kongress*, something that has become a tradition for us now.

Historian Eric Hobsbawm writes that

we should expect [inventing traditions] to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed ... or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated. (Hobsbawm 1983, 4-5)

Young Latvians forced to leave their homes, settle in Displaced Persons camps, and make the journey to the U.S. certainly experienced a “rapid transformation” of their society, and were forced to create new social patterns in a new country. Considering the American Latvian Youth Association and its yearly conference have never had a reason to exist in Latvia itself, the tradition of attending *kongress* for Latvian-Americans is an invented one. According to Hobsbawm in the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, an invented tradition is

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (Hobsbawm 1983, 1)

In the context of cultural erasure and oppression, both Hobsbawm and Allan Hanson in “The Making of the Maori: Cultural Invention and Its Logic” argue that cultural groups invent traditions as if they were part of a past in order to create a sense of collective historicity for the group. The group’s goal, as Lindstrom (1982) puts it, is “to read the present in terms of the past by writing the past in terms of the present” (Lindstrom 1982, 317 in Hanson 1989, 890).

Unlike New Zealand’s Maori, whom Hanson writes about, for Latvians in America, their culture was *not* almost eradicated (in the U.S., nor in Latvia), but nevertheless institutions like ALJA and events like *kongress* were created out of an anxiety of future eradication. *Kongress* is in no way claiming to have its own historicity or “untraceable past;” it was invented in a very literal, actual sense, with a clear beginning in 1952. For U.S.-born Latvian-Americans, one could argue that our “collective past” starts at the time of the Latvian DPs’ arrival, around the 1940s. In that case, our collective history is very young and very traceable. Still, by attending *kongress* we are actively maintaining an idea of shared groupness and ancestry; you know that when you go to *kongress*, the other 100+ people there have grandparents with similar stories to yours. *Kongress* serves as a strategic and conscious way to celebrate our connection to each other (our quasi-kinship) and to a collective past that pre-dates the 1940s. Even though our past is still traceable, the centrality of it is what resonates with Hobsbawm: that to invent a tradition is to attempt to sustain a collective past.

*Kongress* is by far the most prominent invented tradition Latvian-Americans follow, though it is not the only one. Attending *kongress* requires a set of “practices”: spending money and effort for traveling, booking a hotel room, paying the participation fee (and accepting the

automatic year-long membership to ALJA that is included), attending the lectures (or also not—skipping itself is somewhat of a tradition), voting for (and perhaps heckling) those who candidate for various board positions, and getting dressed up for Saturday night’s party. The rules and expectations of *kongress* are all tacitly accepted. By attending, one further perpetuates the value of “showing up”—that to be a “good,” active, contributing Latvian-American, you attend and participate in events like *kongress*. Our parents (and maybe even some of our grandparents) did this, and now it is our turn.

*Kongress* is one type of invented tradition which Hobsbawm identifies, and it is one that “establish[es] or symboliz[es] social cohesion or the membership of groups” (Hobsbawm 1983, 9). Big turn-outs are critical; the more people attend, the more money ALJA has going into its next fiscal year, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the bigger the symbolic involvement. *Kongress* serves as a gauge by which young Latvian Americans’ involvement and sense of responsibility are measured. The current president of ALJA, Aleksandra Malinovskis, explains in her Bachelor’s thesis on the rhetorical strategies used by Latvian-Americans to talk about their identity, that

the immense effort it takes to be actively involved in the Latvian American community is an assumed aspect of their identification. Latvian Americans acknowledge that their efforts are shared amongst the group, and it is assumed that any sacrifices that need to be made will be for the good of the group itself. (Malinovskis 2009)

The effort is assumed, even in our generation, much like our parents unquestioningly brought us to Latvian schools or camps, and much like many of them assume we will spend our Thanksgivings at *kongress*.



“When people invent their own traditions,” Hanson writes, “it is usually to legitimate or sanctify some current reality or aspiration” (Hanson 1989, 890). In 1952, the first *kongress* served to legitimize ALJA as an organization representative of Latvian youth in America. It also inherently implied that young Latvians in America were choosing to maintain their cultural distinctiveness, rather than to assimilate to an un-hyphenated American identity. This is certainly an event that still today sets young Latvian-Americans apart from mainstream American culture. In addition to serving as a marker of distinctiveness, *kongress* serves as a legitimate reason for Latvians to come together in the first place. Kristīna explains:

I didn't realize it when I took it on, but it helped me realize how important of a weekend it is not only to our organization but to our organization's members. It's a really great way to bring everyone together in a setting where we can kind of further our Latvian education, if you will. Because for most people, once they graduate from Garezers, their academic Latvian life is over, unless they seek it out for themselves. And granted, not all of the lectures we put on this year were that formal and meant to really educate them about... it's not meant to be a classroom kind of setting. It's really a casual and fun way for people to learn about Latvian politics or just politics in general or other people's experiences, or whatever it might be. It's really cool to be able to bring people together in that way. And also, for the younger crowd, we can kind of sell it to them as a social weekend and they show up and realize it's so much more than that.

What Kristīna identifies is a moment of transition for young Latvian-Americans. Often, you attend your first *kongress* after you have graduated from a summer high school; this is the last formal Latvian education many of us receive. *Kongress*, therefore, serves doubly as a mechanism of maintaining social cohesion but also as a form of further education. Of course, there are those who show up for the weekend without attending any *lekcijas* or the *pilnsapulce*, and are exclusively there for the socializing of it all. However, if a *kongress*' success is measured by its attendance, and we do genuinely want as many people as possible to come, then even those who are not there for the “education” of it are valuable. They are still investing the money and time to

be there, and, as Kristīna says, “the fact that you’re there shows that you care on some level.” They are nevertheless acting upon a certain sense of responsibility to their *latvietība*, because many of them know that it is “so much more” than just a conference.

For Kristīna, as it is for me, friends are reason enough to attend either *kongress* or any Latvian event, for that matter:

It’s not just the fear [of this group not existing that makes attending *kongress* worth it]. I know that any time I go to any sort of *latviešu* event, I’m going to come home so happy. Just the fact that I get to be with my very best friends... for a weekend, or even a week, that is so worth it. Because the relationships that I have with my *latviešu draugi*<sup>64</sup> are so different than my American friends. There’s so much more that goes into it, and that we can share. We get to travel to all these different cities because we have a four day youth conference to talk about our culture. It’s really fucking cool. None of my [other] friends do anything remotely close to that... But the fear of losing that and our children not having that and our children’s children not having that... if we as a generation let this die, if we don’t care enough to keep it going, that’s gonna suck to think about. If one day I wake up and there’s no ALJA and there’s no Garezers... Well, I guess I can whip out the old *Ābece*<sup>65</sup> and start teaching little Jimmy how to read! I guess that's the ultimate goal... to not let it get to that.

She echoes what my mom told me: that Latvian friendships are different, because “so much more goes into them”—more effort, because many of your friends live far away, but also more understanding and things that can go unsaid, because we are still living those parallel lives.

Here, Kristīna is looking to the future to make sense of our present and past, with the goal of historical continuity. While for some, “the primary motivating factor in maintaining one's connection with the Latvian community in youth are friendships,” which “often occur in the context of social, cultural and educational activities in the community” (Miezitis 1990, 269-70), it really does come down to a sense of responsibility. Not necessarily a burning responsibility to

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<sup>64</sup> Latvian friends

<sup>65</sup> ABC’s book

attend a lecture rather than to party with your friends, but a responsibility to maintain and be able to pass down this tradition—in its entirety—to the next generation. While it is comforting to know that there would be people like Kristīna willing to whip out the old ABC's and start from scratch with future generations if need be, as long as people keep attending events like *kongress* and valuing them and organizations like ALJA as much as they do, we can hope it will not come to that. This is exactly why *kongress* does, in fact, guarantee a sense of historical continuity—but instead of “reading the present in terms of the past by writing the past in terms of the present,” like Lindstrom says, I propose that Latvian-Americans are actually understanding the present and the past by looking to the future. We are not under an overt attack of cultural or ethnic eradication like the groups Hobsbawm and Hanson write about, but the strong pull of complete American assimilation is enough to make us anxious. This anxiety is what drove our grandparents to start institutions like ALJA, and it has been re-articulated and passed down to our parents and now to us. For us, inactivity and lack of participation means eradication, because the more we lose our direct ties to Latvia, the more pressure there is on us to maintain them.

It is with this anxiety-driven perception of what the future holds for us as an ethnic and cultural group that we come to understand ourselves in the present while also making sense of our connection to the past.

This all is not to say that *kongress*, as an invented part of *latvietība* in America, is an “inauthentic” part of our culture. What matters is “to understand the process by which [it has] acquire[d] authenticity” (Hanson 1989, 898). Sometimes, the very fact of people talking about and practicing a tradition is enough (Hanson 1989, 897-8) to successfully incorporate it. Judging by the 130 attendees (many of who were first-timers) at the 2016 Columbus *kongress*, this

tradition has reason to continue. In fact, because (like ethnicity) “there is no essential, bounded tradition...the ongoing reconstruction of tradition is a facet of all social life” (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 276, cited in Hanson 1989, 898), what a successful *kongress* looks like now is not necessarily what it looked like in the 1960s, nor is it what a successful *kongress* will look like five, ten years from now. Prior to 1990, *kongress*’s were geared more toward political activism and the Baltic freedom cause. Last year, the most widely-attended lecture was a tutorial on how to apply for dual citizenship (which naturally has only been an option *after* 1991). Now, with Nicole on *padome* as the liaison between a big group of non-speaking Latvians on the east coast and us, coupled with the fact that *kongress* is happening in Philadelphia in 2017, we are hoping for a relatively large attendance from non-speaking Latvians—something that has never happened before. With that, we will have to reconstruct our tradition accordingly.

*An informal way of celebrating Independence Day*

Just about a week before every *kongress*, Latvian-Americans join Latvians around the world in celebrating Latvia’s Independence Day. Latvia celebrates its independence on November 18th, which is when it first declared itself a Republic from Imperial Russia in 1918.<sup>66</sup> Across the U.S., Latvian-Americans celebrate by organizing formal events at their local Latvian centers. From my own experience, the Boston area Latvians usually play a prerecorded video message from the President of Latvia, the Latvian school students prepare songs or poems to recite, representatives from the nearby Estonian and Lithuanian communities give some remarks of support and congratulations, and a key speaker is usually chosen. I personally once had the job

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<sup>66</sup> Its “second” Independence Day is recognized as May 4, 1990, when it declared independence from the Soviet Union. Some people post about May 4th, but to my knowledge no formal events are organized, and the social media posting is minimal compared to that on November 18th.

of reading the Massachusetts governor's proclamation, recognizing November 18th as being a significant day for the Latvian residents of the state. Those participating usually wear their folk costumes.<sup>67</sup> The event is always followed with a buffet-style luncheon. An almost antithesis to this formal way of celebrating November 18th is the informal way in which Latvian-Americans, particularly younger ones, participate in the celebration.

I see more social media posts about Latvia and being Latvian on this day, than on any other day of the year. Members of my generation especially take to social media outlets like Facebook and Instagram to express their *latvietība*. Out of the approximate seventy-five posts I saved, the photos posted were either of the Freedom Monument in Rīga, of the Latvian flag, of the person posting dressed in a folk costume, or of some general place in Latvia (usually of some sort of picturesque rural landscape). Many people included lines from either a poem or a folk song, usually with a patriotic tone (a favorite is "*Latviet's esmu, latviet's būšu, latviet's mūžam palikšu!*"<sup>68</sup>), and nearly everyone included in their caption (either in Latvian or English) some version of "*Daudz laimes dzimšanas dienā, Latvija!*"<sup>69</sup> The hashtag "#LV98", for Latvia's 98th "birthday," was also widely used.

I am no exception to the day's social media frenzy. After spending all day taking screen shots of everyone else's posts, I felt obligated to post a photo to Instagram as well. The photo I chose was a "selfie" my good friend Tija took of us last spring when we were both interning in Rīga. It is a beautiful, sunny, blue-skied day, and I am wearing sunglasses and smiling widely.

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<sup>67</sup> Many Latvian-American children, including me, have their own folk costume. This is in stark contrast to Latvians in Latvia, where the people who own folk costumes are either in dance collectives or extra "folky"; this is not your average possession.

<sup>68</sup> "A Latvian I am, a Latvian I'll be, a Latvian I will stay forever!" from the folk song "*Še kur līgo priežu meži.*"

<sup>69</sup> "Happy birthday, Latvia!"

Milda (the “first name” given to the Freedom Monument) stands tall behind us. I spent upwards of ten minutes searching for the “perfect” poem to use as my caption, and ultimately settled on an excerpt from one by Vilis Plūdons.<sup>70</sup> It is unapologetically patriotic, describing Latvia’s land as “ours,” and how many people suffered and how much was sacrificed—even blood—for the country. As apprehensive as I was about using lines so bold, I chose it for the last line, which more or less translates to: “Everything, absolutely everything—hundreds of ties<sup>71</sup> connect us to this land.” I followed this with my own caption: “Each one of us has that which ties us to [Latvia]. Every day, but especially today, I am thankful for my *saites*! #LV98” My political statement here might come across as dramatic; I am suggesting that I feel just as entitled to Latvia as a land, a nation, a *tauta*, as one from Latvia would, and speaking for “us” (Latvian-Americans) as a whole. While I do think this holds true for many of us, especially in light of this project, I did not intend to sound so severe. I, like many others, wanted to publicly participate in showing my appreciation for my roots, my *saites*, and the sacrifices that were made in order for me to celebrate my Latvian identity as much as I can and do today. I also wanted to *prove* that I was celebrating, especially because I could not attend a formal event in person.

Here, “the use of digital media is, no doubt, culturally and politically meaningful” (Coleman 2010, 490), and very overt symbols tied to Latvia as an independent nation—the Freedom Monument, the flag—are being used as symbols of solidarity (Nagata 1974, 333) between Latvian-Americans and Latvians in Latvia (or anywhere else in the world, for that matter). It is these images of freedom, of beautiful landscapes, of sacrifice that become cultural

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<sup>70</sup> A famous, patriotic poet who lived from 1874-1940; one of the “classics” we learn about in Latvian literature classes.

<sup>71</sup> “*Saite*,” which has been a reoccurring word in interviews.

claims to this *tēvzeme*<sup>72</sup>. These romanticized images, which are “easily accessible and desirable [...] regardless of [one’s] connections to the homeland,” projected by us onto Latvia, “convey the desire for a familiarized territory infused with symbolic sentiments and collective memories, powerful enough to generate a sense of community and loyalty” (Winland 2002, 707). Yet despite this sense of community and loyalty (especially on this day) to Latvia, it is not enough to get people to move there. Home and family, like Maija, Tētis, and my mom explained, is here. This is what Brah (1996) describes as the difference between “homing desire” and a “desire for homeland...where the political desire for homeland is not necessarily coterminous with return to the homeland” (in Winland 2002, 695). With very few exceptions, Latvian-Americans who deeply appreciate and feel very strongly connected to their Latvian identity hope that Latvia remains free (and that the current sociopolitical situation gets better, even), but do not necessarily have the desire to “return.” It is in this situational selection of ethnic and cultural identity that we see young Latvian-Americans particularly laying claim to Latvia’s beautiful forests and seashores and its turbulent but ultimately heroic past, while ultimately selecting their American identity when it comes to choosing a place to call home. Further, no matter where “home” is in America, Latvian-Americans, now more than ever, can participate in making and sustaining their Latvian communities through digital means.

*“Showing up” in online communities*

By looking at what Elizabeth Coleman calls the “cultural politics of media,” we can examine “how cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries, such as those hinged to youth, diaspora, nation, and indigeneity, are remade, subverted, communicated, and circulated through

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<sup>72</sup> “Fatherland”

individual and collective engagement with digital technologies” (Coleman 2010, 488). For Latvian-Americans, I would argue, Facebook groups and pages are the most popular forms of digital and online technology through which members engage with each other. In these public online forums, we circulate information, communicate with each other (and with people we might not know, but nonetheless feel connected to), and are constantly articulating and remaking what it means to be a young Latvian-American born, raised, and living in the United States. I am a member of (or “follow”) eight different Latvian-related Facebook groups, which are discussed in-depth below. Even though each group is representative of different interests, ranging from summer camps to politics to church, and the groups have varying numbers of members (with some definite overlap between some groups), they are all nonetheless centered around members’ *offline* Latvian identities, and “it is important to consider that an Internet user is not always privileging the same national or ethnic identity in every online interaction” (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 457). Someone who posts in the American Latvian Forum, for example, supporting President Donald Trump’s policy may be privileging their American identity in that moment over their Latvian one, considering Latvia would be at imminent risk from Russian aggression if the U.S. were to leave NATO. These groups were also absolutely critical to the success of my survey (discussed in Chapter Three), because I exclusively distributed it through Facebook by posting in these groups. By taking the survey, over five hundred people actively participated, exclusively through the Internet, in the making of *latvietība* as it pertains to this project.

Each summer camp has its public own group or page, though I only follow “Nometne” and “Garezers,” because I have never attended *Kursa*. *Nometne*’s page primarily serves as a place to post reminders about camp application deadlines, job openings, or events that will be



taking place on the camp property. The *Garezers* page posts similarly, though it reaches a wider audience with 1750 “likes” (compared to *Nometne*’s 783 members). The page’s English description explains that “Garezers prospers as a meeting place for Latvians of all ages, to raise and educate Latvian youth, to strengthen the Latvian language, culture and spiritual values, to promote the Latvian heritage and develop links with Latvia”.<sup>73</sup> Since it is a “page” instead of a group, people can leave reviews and ratings (out of five stars). It has an overall rating of 4.8, and among the 5-star reviews are the following:

Some of my fondest memories are from my years at Garezers. It truly is a “little Latvia” a living expression of our language and culture here in the U.S.

I am so grateful for the rooted community Garezers creates for Latvians living outside of Latvia. My fondest memories and strongest bonds are here.

Best place for Latvians this side of ocean! A Little Latvia but without Russians!

These three reviews, but especially the last one, are representative of “existing cultural ideologies play[ing] out...in online communication” (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 456). The ideologies that places like Garezers are our stand-ins for the homeland, that there are specific places designated for Latvian language and culture cultivation, and that Latvia itself is becoming increasingly Russified.

Some pages are more local, like *Boston Latvians (USA)* (with 231 members), the *Latvian Lutheran Church of Boston* (with 310 “likes”), and *Piesaule* (with 194 “likes”), which is the name of the Boston church-owned property in New Hampshire where many Latvians have summer homes and where the annual summer solstice (“*Jāņi*”) is celebrated. These pages are almost exclusively used to post about Latvian events happening in the area, like concerts,

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<sup>73</sup> “Garezers,” Facebook, accessed April 15, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Garezers/>.

fundraising nights, or holiday celebrations—the more “formal” events. For those not on social media, like my grandparents, information about formal events is also passed on through email, word of mouth, and through the church’s newsletter or through the Latvian newspaper *Laiks*. What I call “informal” events, such as Latvian tailgate weekends or ski trips, are exclusively publicized by creating a Facebook event page or by word of mouth, if you do not have Facebook (which, of course, for my generation is rare). Informal participation and online media, therefore, are intimately linked.

The Facebook group with the most “guidelines” by far is *Latvians in America* (with 1324 members). This group works in conjunction with the website [www.LatviesiAmerika.com](http://www.LatviesiAmerika.com), and is meant for “advertisements and announcements.” The group's description includes a list of examples of what one might post as an announcement or advertisement: job searches or offers; sending packages between the U.S. and Latvia; looking for places to stay in Latvia or the U.S.; looking for a person; looking for a “travel companion”; looking for nearby Latvian “neighbors”; or just looking “for interest’s sake.” Any ads or event information must be run by the administrator, and will be deleted if that protocol is not followed. Postings unrelated to Latvians in America or Canada will be deleted, and due to the “large number” of unrelated postings, the administrator will confirm members whose profiles clearly have information about living in North America. I am not sure how strict these guidelines are, as I have posted in this group twice (once looking for submissions to *Vēja zvani*, and the second to post about my survey for this project), and neither time did I have issues with my postings or with the administrator. Nevertheless, this serves as another portal through which the link between Latvians in America (or Latvian-Americans) and the “homeland” are sustained.

One of Nicole's goals as the first non-speaking member of ALJA *padome* was to create some sort of online group that included both "her side" and the Latvian-speaking Latvians. So in the spring of 2017, following our *sēde* in Seattle, she started *Valoda Grupa*<sup>74</sup>, on Facebook and invited every Latvian-American she knew. The group's description explains that it is a group "created to build stronger connections<sup>75</sup> throughout the Latvian community, particularly for those who do not speak the language. Please feel free to share resources, events, or other ideas that may be beneficial for non speaking Latvians to become more involved in our culture!" Many of us were quick to add any Latvian friends on Facebook we could think of, and the group now currently has 435 members. The group even reached Brazil, from which one member wrote: "*Sveiki! Paldies!*<sup>76</sup> I'm [B]razilian and I speak [P]ortuguese. I study basic [E]nglish and [L]atvian language." She has since then posted several times with multiple Latvian language learning videos and resources. Another member, Igor, posted:

I was born in Riga in 1942 and my family and I escaped in 1944. We spent 5 years in DP camp...Kleinkotz and immigrated to US in 1949! To make a long story short, since my father graduated from The University of Latvia as geologist, we ended up in Dallas, Texas. There was a very small Latvian community in Dallas. I never spoke Latvian at home and I forgot how to speak Latvian. However, having been back to Latvia since 1991 a few times, some of my Latvian came back to me somehow! I can understand and speak some but I cannot consider myself a Latvian speaker, a shame!

Aleks, one of our marketing directors in ALJA, replied: "But that's exactly why we created the group! Just because you don't have fluency, doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to share with the rest of the heritage and culture! Come one, come all! It shouldn't matter if you speak it or not."

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<sup>74</sup> "Language Group." This name is still subject to change. I think she just needed a placeholder, and opted for that since she went to *Valodas Periods*, the English speaking camp.

<sup>75</sup> Again, these are our *saites* that we are trying to maintain.

<sup>76</sup> "Hello! Thank you!"

Many of us (19) “liked” his comment, because we felt this truly was the point of this group’s creation: to foster a sense of connection between all Latvians in America (and Brazil, I suppose), regardless of one’s language ability. A little more than a month later, our secretary Andra’s mother also commented on Igor’s post, saying, “...I knew your uncle Igor from NYC and Galina. Galina's sister, Tatjana, was my godmother.” Technological media, and specifically this new Facebook group, has allowed for one non-speaking Latvian immigrant in Dallas, Texas to connect with a Latvian-speaking, first generation Latvian-American in New York—something very unlikely to happen before Facebook’s creation thirteen years ago.

The *American Latvian Forum* has the most members (2087) of the groups I am a part of. The name was changed in early 2017 from its original *American Latvian Association*, with the following post explaining why:

This Facebook group has long been an open forum for crowdsourced news and information particularly of concern to the Latvian American community. Unfiltered discussion is a beautiful thing, and this is the place for it! However, to eliminate any confusion as to the source of content in this group, the administrators of this group (which was previously titled American Latvian Association) would like to point to the American Latvian Association’s Facebook page as the official outlet for ALA’s statements on its programs, organizational activities, and ALA-sponsored news.<sup>77</sup>

This group frequently is the place for politically oriented discussion and debate, especially in light of the President Trump’s election. This group serves Latvian-Americans primarily, and is a popular “place” for discussion without having to meet or “show up” to a local (or distant) Latvian event.

Since the *American Latvian Forum* has been renamed, that leaves the *American Latvian Association* Facebook page, which has 1503 likes, and identifies itself as “the main

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<sup>77</sup> Marisa Gudra, Facebook update, March 1, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/20220100020/>.

representative organization for the Latvian American community.” It further claims that “through 140 member organizations, churches, clubs and some 5,000 individual members we represent over 100,000 people of Latvian descent living in the United States.” It specifies on its website<sup>78</sup> that it is “a non-profit, tax exempt educational and cultural organization registered as a private and voluntary organization with the U.S. Agency for International Development.” ALA’s goals, translated from Latvian, are: “to sustain and unite Latvian society in the United States,” “to defend the country of Latvia and the Latvian *tautas* interests’ in the United States,” “to preserve the Latvian language and to accomplish innovative cultural events,” “to sustain and supply school programs, teaching materials, and teacher seminars in order to achieve the learning of Latvian language, history, and culture,” “to help new immigrants from Latvia understand laws and societal norms in the United States,” “to support the Latvian nation’s efforts to be a democratic, just, and safe country;” and to “extend humanitarian help to Latvia.”

Like ALJA, ALA has several “levels” of membership that one can pay for. A “normal” annual membership costs \$30 a year, and then jumps to \$300, \$800, or \$2000 for “Life,” “Gold Life,” and “Amber Life” memberships, respectively. These life memberships can be paid in a single payment or in various installment plans, and each one comes with a special ALA insignia lapel pin, as well as “an elegant certificate suitable for framing.” In ALA, they send you physical proof of your valuable contribution to *latvietība* in America—even if this is simply a one-time donation and you do not “show up” to anything, be it formal or informal.

Similar to *Latvians in America*, ALA as an organization actively sustains a link between Latvia and the U.S., but has considerable resources to do that through many different channels.

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<sup>78</sup> "Who We Are," American Latvian Association, accessed April 15, 2017, <http://www.alausa.org/en/who-we-are/american-latvian-association/>.

Since its founding in 1951, ALA has served as a nexus at which political, cultural and educational interests and endeavors converge.

In a very literal way, all of these Facebook groups (and any corresponding websites) are enhancing, rather than displacing, discourses and practices of tradition (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 459). Through Internet-based platforms these organizations can spread information more effectively and to a wider audience than any mailed fliers or word-of-mouth could. Someone new to the New England Latvian-American community has access to the information regarding the *Jāņi* celebration in *Piesaulē* without ever having been there, or without even necessarily knowing anyone. More importantly though, I would argue, is that with websites and Facebook groups, Latvian-American organizations are able to provide their members a new way of participating in the community, without needing to be present together physically. This is precisely why “[d]igital technologies are...central to diasporic groups”—because “diaspora and information technologies stand in a ‘homologous’ relationship to each other because ‘in both cyberspace and the spaces of diaspora...location is ambiguous, and to be made socially meaningful, it must be actively constructed’” (Bernal 2005, 661 in Coleman 2010, 491). Whereas Maija and Tētis had to actively construct their participation in Latvian *sabiedrība* by organizing and attending various events, which often limited them and others to their surrounding geographic area, Latvian-Americans today can now actively participate in constructing their Latvian communities and their *latvietība* through online spaces, regardless of their geographic area.

The question then becomes: “Do virtual spaces allow for fundamentally new constructions of identity?” (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 457) That is, does being an active “online” Latvian in America mean you are a different kind of Latvian than one who only

cultivates their *latvietība* through in-person encounters and events? I do not think so. The growing presence and reliance on social media represents a shift in technology and “our times” not just in America, but globally. Being a member of Latvian-centered Facebook groups does not make you a completely different kind of Latvian in America; it makes you one who relies on more informal mechanisms of ethnic identity and group maintenance and organization. Calling each of these separate groups distinct online “communities,” or even calling this a singular Latvian-American online community, “seems to imply a false circumscription and coherence” because of how multi-sited and translocal its members are (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 455). Instead, I propose that these online groups, and the collective online presence of Latvian-Americans, is yet another method of maintaining and reinforcing our quasi-kinship with one another.



Maija (left) and her classmates in Rīga c. 1942. Part of the Freedom Monument can be seen in the top left corner.



The photograph I used for my Instagram post on November 18th. It was taken in Rīga in May 2016; the Freedom Monument stands behind me and Tija (a classmate from *Garezers*).



The newly elected ALJA board members at *Kongress* in Columbus, OH. November 2016. Courtesy of ALJA's Facebook page.





No. 7499886

Name OSINS, Maija

residing at 30 Farquhar St., Roslindale

Date of birth Sent. 2, 1928 Date of order of admission May 9, 1955

Date certificate issued May 9, 1955 by the

U. S. District Court at Boston, Massachusetts

Petition No. 326524

Alien Registration No. 7344169

*Maija Osins*  
(Complete and true signature of holder)

No. 7499969

Name ASBERGS, Ritvars Julius

residing at 16 Harris Ave., Jamaica Plain

Date of birth Jan. 11, 1931 Date of order of admission May 16, 1955

Date certificate issued May 16, 1955 by the

U. S. District Court at Boston, Massachusetts

Petition No. 326584

Alien Registration No. 7259267

*Ritvars Julius Asbergs*  
(Complete and true signature of holder)

Scanned microfilm of Maija and Tētis' petition forms to become naturalized U.S. citizens, May 1955. Courtesy of Ancestry.



### **Chapter Three: Administering an Online Survey about Latvian-American Identity**

#### *Introduction and Method*

After finding a survey related to the significance of cultural elements conducted for children and grandchildren of Latvian immigrants in Australia in 1983 (and again in 1990), I decided I wanted to broaden the scope of my method to include some quantitative research as well. This method appealed to me because I could then obtain data from a wide range of people without having to schedule multiple interviews in specific places. I closely copied Jānis Priedkalns' original survey (see Priedkalns 1994), but administered mine online and anonymously using GoogleForms.

Priedkalns administered his survey to young Latvian-Australians ages 13-18, who were enrolled in two different Latvian summer high school programs. I made the following changes and additions to Priedkalns' original survey (see my full survey in Appendix A): I added a "Demographics" section, asking the respondents to identify their age and various places of residence throughout their life. They were provided with three options: The U.S., Latvia, or "other." I added this section to make it easier for me to analyze responses based on age and to ensure I only use answers from respondents who were either born, raised, or currently live in the U.S. I copied Priedkalns' section on patterns of language use, which asks respondents which language they use with which family members, but I included "Spouse" and "Children" as options because I was also targeting older respondents. The other change I made to this section was substituting Priedkalns' use of "ethnic" with "Latvian" (i.e. "Only Latvian" instead of "Only Ethnic Language"). I also kept his section of Latvian language self-assessment, but in my survey I separated "Understanding" from "Speaking," and "Reading" from "Writing." As we will see,

respondents assessed their own abilities within each skill differently. I thoroughly expanded the options for this section of the survey regarding Latvian program attendance. I asked respondents to identify how long they attended a Latvian (again, substituting this for “ethnic”) school on Saturday or Sunday, a summer camp, and a summer high school. I also asked them to distinguish between programs where Latvian is the primary language of instruction versus English. In the final section of the survey, the element ranking, I removed “Traditional way of life.” This was a theoretically informed decision, reflecting the field’s newer and more nuanced understandings of ethnicity and traditions as constructed and dynamic (as opposed to static). In places that I thought needed clarifying, I provided a translation or example in Latvian, marked by italics. I believe Priedkalns ultimately ranked each element by the number of “Very Important” answers it received. I have chosen to rank them differently, on a point system, as explained later.

At the end of each section of the survey, I provided a blank text box in which respondents could clarify any of their answers in writing. Reading them, several issues with the survey were made apparent. I should have specified a protocol for deceased family members in the “Patterns of Language Use Session.” Several respondents explained that they answered the questions as if that person were still alive, while others chose “Not applicable.” I definitely should have given an “other” option for language use as well. As one respondent noted: “These options are not good. What about those of us from multi-ethnic families?” Several other respondents explained that they spoke neither Latvian nor English with certain family members. Additionally, it may have been beneficial to ask respondents to distinguish between Latvian and non-Latvian relatives. For example, someone who speaks “mainly English” to their mother might do so because she is not Latvian (but perhaps has learned some), or might do so despite the mother

knowing the language (alternately, even, the mother might be Latvian but might not know much of the language). As we can see, the options are many and to ask for such details in a survey might be excessive. Nevertheless, these are all important factors to consider.

I shared the link to the survey exclusively through Facebook; I posted it in various groups, of which I myself am a member: The American Latvian Forum, ALJA (the American Latvian Youth Association), Boston Latvians, *Latvieši Amerikā* (Latvians in America) *Nometne* (for members of the New York camp community), and *Garezers* (for members of the Michigan camp community). The link was “shared” through Facebook by others forty times, and several people reached out to me asking if they could email the link to other contacts. I received a total of 540 responses, all within five days of posting the survey. I received nearly 80% of responses within the first 24 hours of the survey going live. This outreach was critical, and the responses overwhelming. By circulating this survey online, I was taken beyond my own network of Latvian-American youth, and beyond my own network of Latvians I personally knew. Out of the 540 responses I received, I have analyzed 503 of them. I excluded duplicate responses (most likely caused by a glitch in GoogleForms), respondents that chose more than one age range, and respondents which marked “other” for all three questions pertaining to living location (for the purposes of this project I am only interested in respondents who have spent at least part of their life in the U.S.). In general, the majority of each demographic matches most closely with my ethnographic research group (those younger than 31, born, raised, and live in Latvia; attended Latvian school and/or summer camp and high school programs).

## *Survey Findings*

### *Demographics*

31.4% (158) of respondents were younger than 31; 28.6% (144) were 31-45 years old; 30.8% (155) were 46-64; and 8.9% (45) were 65 years or older. (One person did not specify their age.) I believe this reflects the accessibility of the survey; considering I only shared it through Facebook, I am not surprised that the oldest age group was least represented. I was pleasantly surprised, however, by the representation of the 46-64 year range; only three fewer people in this group responded compared to the youngest group.

Of all 503 respondents, 15.9% were born in Latvia, 75.15% were born in the U.S., and 8.75% were born elsewhere (one person did not specify). 11.3% grew up in Latvia, 85.1% grew up in the U.S., and 2.6% grew up elsewhere (five respondents chose more than one answer; I did not include these in the percentages). Now, only 2.8% (14) live in Latvia, just under 2% (10) live elsewhere, while the majority, 94.4% (475) live in the U.S. (four respondents chose more than one answer; I did not include these in the percentages). See Table 1.

The majority of “my” generation's (which I have labeled “Generation 3” in subsequent tables) respondents were born in the U.S. (85.4%, or 135). Only 9.5% (15) were born in Latvia, and an even smaller 4.4% (7) were born elsewhere. (One person preferred not to answer this question). Even more of them grew up in the U.S. (92.4%, or 146), while only 7% (11) grew up in Latvia, and one person grew up elsewhere. 95% (150) of this group currently lives in the U.S. (only about 2% live in Latvia or somewhere else, 4 and 3 people, respectively. One person picked more than one answer, which I did not count.) To situate these age groups politically,

anyone younger than 26 was born after Latvia had declared independence (in 1990), and have therefore never lived during a time when Latvia was occupied.

The respondents ages 31-45 fall in between my generation and my parents', which I am considering "Generation 2.5." While these respondents are important to represent and incorporate into my data, my primary focus of the analyses in this chapter will be between my generation, my parent's generation, and my grandparents' generation. For this reason, I have decided not to include analysis of this age group in some sections. Of this in-between generation, 28.5% (41) were born in Latvia, and almost all of these people (38) grew up there. Only 1.4% (2) were born elsewhere and 2 others grew up somewhere else. 70.1% (101) were born in the U.S., and almost the same amount 71.5% (103) grew up here. (One person chose more than one answer.) Only one of these respondents (who was born and raised in America) now lives in Latvia, and another American-born and raised respondent lives somewhere else. The rest (98.6%, 142) live in the U.S. The fact that more than a fourth of these respondents were born and grew up in Latvia may be representative of a recent influx of younger Latvians who have moved to the U.S. as adults and have started families here.

From my parents' generation ("Generation 2"), only 5.1% (8) were born in Latvia, and those same respondents grew up there as well. 87.1% (135) were born in the U.S., and 7.7% (12) were born elsewhere. 5.1% (8) grew up elsewhere, while 88.4% (137) grew up in the U.S. (2 respondents chose more than one answer). From this age group, only ~4% (6) now live in Latvia, but it is worth noting that each of those people was born and grew up in the U.S. The majority, again, (91.6%, 142) now live in the U.S. Just about 3% (5) currently live elsewhere. (2 respondents chose more than one answer.)



For my grandparents' generation (“Generation 1”), those who are 65+ years old, I was surprised that only 35.5% (16) of respondents were born in Latvia. I assumed that the majority of this age group would have been born there. However, one can assume that it is the younger half of this generation that is using Facebook and had access to this survey (my grandparents, for example, are in their 80s and do not have the slightest idea of how to use Facebook). It would make sense, then, that the younger portion of this generation (born in 1947 or later) were born after their parents had fled Latvia—this is supported by the 48.9% (22) (almost half) who answered “other” as their place of birth, suggesting they could have been born in DP camps. Only 15.5% (7) were born in the U.S., but almost each of the older respondents grew up here (91.1%, 41). Only 4.4% (2) answered “other,” and another two respondents chose more than one answer. No one grew up in Latvia—another indicator of diaspora. 6.7% (3) currently live in Latvia. Two of these three were born there, and one was born elsewhere. Only 1 (2.2%) now lives somewhere else (88.9%, 40), and almost everyone else lives in the US. (One person chose more than one answer.) See Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Places of birth, growing up, and current residence**

	Born in			Grew up in			Currently live in		
	LV	US	Other	LV	US	Other	LV	US	Other
All respondents N=503	15.9% (80)	75.15% (378)	8.75% (44)	11.3% (57)	85.1% (428)	2.6% (13)	2.8% (14)	94.4% (475)	~2% (10)
Generation 3 (< 31 years old) N=158	9.5% (15)	85.4% (135)	4.4% (7)	7% (11)	92.4% (146)	0.6% (1)	2.5% (4)	95% (150)	1.9% (3)
Generation 2.5 (31 - 45) N=144	28.5% (41)	70.1% (101)	1.4% (2)	26.4% (38)	71.3% (103)	1.4% (2)	0.7% (1)	98.6% (142)	0.7% (1)
Generation 2 (46-64) N=155	5.1% (8)	87.1% (135)	7.7% (12)	5.1% (8)	88.4% (137)	5.1% (8)	3.9% (6)	91.6% (142)	3.2% (5)
Generation 1 (65+) N=45	35.5% (16)	15.5% (7)	48.9% (22)	—	91.1% (41)	4.4% (2)	6.7% (3)	88.9% (40)	2.2% (1)

### *Language self-assessment*

For the purpose of my analysis, I am considering someone to be “proficient” in Latvian if they chose “Fairly good,” “Good,” or “Very good” when assessing their own ability in Latvian.

*34% (54) of respondents of my generation speak little to no Latvian.* This is noticeably higher than the percentages of the other age groups. See Table 3. However, in each age group, it was reported that *everyone has an equally, if not better, understanding of Latvian compared to their speaking ability.* Here there is a clear trend that older respondents are more likely to understand Latvian at a proficient level. With very few exceptions, almost everyone self-assessed their reading ability to be just as good, if not worse than their speaking ability. Again, with very few exceptions, almost everyone assessed their writing ability to be worse than their reading ability, if not just as good.

One young respondent in particular struggled to “quantify” how good their Latvian language ability is, because

The current Latvian that is spoken in Latvia today has mixed a lot of other languages in to become more "modern". When I last spoke to someone in Latvia they said I spoke like their grandmother. We as the displaced generation of Latvians have a different language than the one that is used today so it is hard to quantify how good my skills are as an American Latvian.

This respondent is aware just how static our Latvian in America is—it is the same language variety that our grandparents spoke when they left the country in the 1940s. Of course our variety is not completely frozen, because all languages evolve and change over time, but the Latvian spoken by many Latvian-Americans today has essentially remained unchanged for the past seventy years, especially when compared to the Latvian spoken in Latvia today.

**Table 2: Language Self-Assessment by Generation**

	Speak little or no Latvian	Understand little or no Latvian	Little to no reading ability in Latvian	Little to no writing ability in Latvian
Generation 3 (< 31 years old) N=158	34% (54)	15.2% (24)	17.7% (28)	26.6% (42)
Generation 2 (46-64) N=155	7.1% (11)	4.5% (7)	7.7% (12)	13.5% (21)
Generation 1 (65+) N=45	17.8% (8)*	4.4% (2)	17.8% (8)	33.3% (15)

\*This percentage (17.8%) is higher than the other two in part, I think, because there were drastically less respondents in this category.

### *Latvian program attendance*

When considering respondents' self-assessment of their speaking ability, there is a strong pattern between that and their Latvian school attendance. *In every age group (for those who did not grow up in Latvia), those who reported to have no Latvian speaking ability never attended a Latvian school in which the primary language of instruction was Latvian.* Even out of those who assessed themselves as having “little” speaking ability in Latvian, around 45% never attended a Latvian-speaking Latvian school. *For those who consider themselves proficient in speaking Latvian, 89.2% (339) had attended at least one year of Latvian school. Even more significantly, 89.3% of those that attended Latvian school reported that they attended for four or more years.* This means that only 10.7% of respondents (who did not grow up in Latvia) who speak Latvian proficiently never attended a Latvian school in which the primary language of instruction was Latvian.

Several interesting patterns emerged when looking at Latvian program attendance across age groups. One noticeable point is that except for one respondent, no one above the age of 45 attended a Saturday school, summer camp, or summer high school program where English was the primary language of instruction. The most significant and likely explanation would be that these English-speaking programs did not exist yet. It is worth noting that no one in any age group has exclusively attended an English-speaking summer high school program. An English-speaking program is not offered at GVV (in Michigan), but according to my friend Jūlijs, who has worked at both GVV and *Kursa* (the summer high school program in Washington state), “most” of the students at *Kursa* do not speak fluently, so that high school program is no longer one of complete Latvian immersion. In general, however, *a higher percentage of respondents of*

*my generation have attended a summer high school program (for at least one summer) compared to any other age group (62.6% compared to 48.6%, 48.4%, and 4.4%). It is also worth noting that more younger respondents have also attended a summer camp (for at least one summer) compared to any other age group (87.3% compared to 74.3%, 79.3%, and 55.5%).* As discussed in previous chapters, *Nometne* and *Garezers* serve as designated Latvian places where young Latvian-Americans create and cultivate their Latvian friendships, which are of utmost importance to them.

Of most interest to me, for the sake of this project, is how many of those camp attendees attended a program in which English was the primary language of instruction. Of the 79.3% of Generation 2 who attended a summer camp, only one individual (<0.5%) attended an English-speaking program. This percentage increases to 5.6% in the 31-45 age group. This more than triples to 17.4% for my generation. This means that *more than a sixth of respondents of my generation who have attended a Latvian summer camp exclusively attended an English-speaking one.* Though I cannot account for this increase through my survey data alone, from interviewing my mom, I know that she considers her generation to be much more “homogenous” than mine, especially regarding language ability. We see from the survey that my generation has a much wider range of Latvian speaking ability, and has the most “non-speakers” of any age group. This big of a group necessitated an English-speaking program at *Nometne*, which until then, had not been deemed necessary. One respondent from my parents’ generation, told me they “do not see the value of a Latvian school where English is the primary language,” indicating just how important language is as a diacritical feature for some. One mother, however, privately messaged me through Facebook, after she forgot to add “an important comment” in the survey:

...To maintain Latvian identity and culture, it's important to integrate non-speakers and to raise them with heritage and opportunity to learn and participate...I now live about an hour from Boston. I've reached out repeatedly to see if they were accepting non-speakers and have received little to no response. I heard a rumor there was an occasional session but found nothing on-line and my aunt who's been active hasn't seen anything. I was willing to sit in [school] to translate for them as needed, but considering the times I've reached out and been ignored [I] don't see the point in [the Boston Latvian school].

She went on to explain, in what she called her “diatribe,” that her children have attended the day camp of *Nometne* since they were toddlers, and that they even visited Latvia last summer. She finished with “All that said, we have to make our own community.” That is, we actively construct the communities of which we are members. While there clearly still is lingering resistance to adapting Latvian programs to non-speakers, there is also clearly a want and a need for that.

*Some explanations of language ability and program attendance*

Based on the text responses of these survey sections, in regards to their assessment of their Latvian language ability, many proficient respondents attributed their less-than-very good choice to a weakness in grammar. For some, this is due to not attending any Latvian educational programs: “I understand, and can speak - but because I did not go to Latvian schools like Garezers - my grammar is not excellent and I am embarrassed to to write in Latvian.” For others, like this respondent who did attend Latvian school for more than four years, their anxiety is rooted in elders’ criticism: “...I still get anxious like I was a little and the elders would be very critical about [*using the “right” words and endings*] instead of just encouraging speaking in general- it was an all or none adventure so I still tend to freeze up thinking wherever or not I've got it right.” As Suslak writes, “...purist stances toward language have most often been ascribed to older speakers, and explained as a mode of asserting authority over linguistic production and,

by extension, over those people who have more limited access to the purest form of a language” (Suslak 2009, 206). It is for this reason that my grandparents and parents, for example, had taught me what “good” and “right” Latvian should sound like. I will revisit language criticism in the ranking section.

For those who did attend Latvian-speaking programs, several respondents identify a sense of diminishing ability since completing the program: “Since graduating from Latvian School, Garezers and high school my language skills have diminished due to more frequent periods of inactivity;” and “Limited reading in [L]atvian since graduating [L]atvian summer camp.” Others attribute their skills to other programs like Latvian scouts, folk dancing groups, attending church, and spending time in Latvia. Some who hardly attended any educational programs, but still consider themselves proficient in Latvian, attribute their skills to their grandmothers, who helped raise them. The role of grandparents, in combination with experiences like this respondent’s: “A few years ago I taught Latvian to third generation Latvians, ages 12-16. The children weren’t interested at all. They came to school just because of their parents or grandparents,” suggest that some Latvian-Americans are an example of “the grandparent effect,” which is “the tendency for the most competent young speakers of endangered languages to be the ones who spent significant periods of their childhood living closely (or exclusively) with their grandparents” (Hill 1998, 179 in Suslak 2009, 204). Though this is not necessarily *untrue* (Kristīna and I are examples of this), I do not want to discount any conscious effort that members of the immigration generation have made in serious attempt to influence their children or grandchildren, nor do I want to suggest that we (younger speakers) are “passive beneficiaries” of this linguistic knowledge without any of our own agency (Suslak 2009, 204). There are very

active members of the community with no speaking ability, just as there are less active members who are speakers. One respondent, for example, grew up too far away from any Latvian school to attend, but attended a makeshift Sunday “school” as a teenager organized by their aunt, and later attended some Latvian-as-a-Second-Language (LSL) classes offered at the Latvian School in Yonkers, NY. This same respondent nevertheless values speaking Latvian as vitally important, and has taken part in the English speaking program at *Nometne* for twenty-four years now.

### *Patterns of speaking*

In Table 4, below, I have chosen not to include parents or spouses, because I did not ask respondents to specify which members of their family were Latvian. I also did not include children, because for many younger respondents this was not applicable (nor could I assume any circumstances surrounding a parent’s choice to teach, or not teach, their children Latvian). I am considering siblings and Latvian friends as members of the same age group of the respondents, though I know this is not always the case. I have also decided to combine “Older Relatives” with “Grandparents” for the purpose of having a more inclusive group of “elders.” For these calculations, I am again only considering “proficient” speakers. For each group of people being spoken to, I have *not* included respondents who answered “Not applicable.”

The most noticeable difference is my generation’s language choice with peers compared to that when speaking to elders. *61.1% of proficient speakers of my generation reported speaking “mainly English” or “only English” to their Latvian friends, and a similar 64% speak “mainly English” or “only English” to their siblings. Meanwhile, almost 82% speak “mainly” or “only Latvian” with older relatives, and an incredible 95% of these same speakers speak “mainly” or “only” Latvian with their grandparents.* The 61.1% of Generation 3 who predominantly speak



English with their Latvian friends is more than twice as much as Generation 2's. These results support Ilze Miežitis-Matīss' claim regarding patterns of language use of Latvians in Toronto (1990): younger (and clearly older, as well) bilingual Latvians are more inclined to speak Latvian with elders.

Many respondents explained that their patterns of language use, especially when talking to a peer, were situational, or depended on the effort and ease either language required of them. Some employ what Jan-Petter Blom and John Gumperz (1974) would call a "situational code-switch": "I speak Latvian with everyone of all ages at Latvian events in the US;" "I speak Latvian with my friends from Latvia, but mostly English with my Latvian American friends unless I am at a Latvian function." In these cases, the change in language variety is redefining the situation. Some explained that conversation topics dictate language choice: "The amount of Latvian use versus English is mostly based on the topics we are speaking about...talking about work is English, while talking about *Nometne/biedriba*<sup>79</sup>/*Garezers* is mostly in Latvian;" "We try to speak Latvian as much as possible but there are certain topics that do not lend themselves as easily to [L]atvian vocabulary"; "I speak mainly '*virtuves valodu*' - kitchen language. I cannot express myself in Latvian regarding academic, scientific or technical matters;" and "I can express my ideas in English better than I can in Latvian." In other words, "Latvian" topics are discussed in Latvian, while others, especially those which require specific vocabulary, are more easily discussed in English. In these instances, speakers are "metaphorically" code-switching, which ends up "*enriching*" the situation, rather than redefining it altogether (Blom and Gumperz 409).

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<sup>79</sup> Society (Latvian, presumably)

Others explained that those who are present in the conversation, and *their* language ability influence the speaker's choice: "As for speaking with Latvian friends, the language really varies depending on who is present, and the language tends to be more of a mix of Latvian and English"; "[it] depends on the friends." Some consciously put in *more* of an effort to speak Latvian, depending on who they are with: "[...]with [parents] I put in more effort to try in Latvian"; "I speak Latvian even with those who don't speak it all that well"; "Spouse understands Latvian, but does not speak it as well, so when the kids are not around, we speak English more." These speakers, I would argue, are both situationally *and* metaphorically code-switching; there is a desire to redefine the given situation for other speakers present (sometimes in a very literal sense), and to enrich the situation with linguistically symbolic meaning (especially if there is a conscious effort to steer the conversation towards Latvian use). Just like the young Lithuanian-American bilinguals Algis Norvilas interviewed, for Latvian bilinguals it seems the English is informal, and "the language of spontaneous conversation," while Latvian is reserved for formal situations and is "the language of circumstance" (Norvilas 1990, 215).

It is impossible to identify just one reason for why Latvian-Americans are more inclined to speak Latvian with elders—be it out of respect for the elders' wish to speak it, out of a sense of duty to maintain the ancestral language, due to the older generation's greater fluency, or just out of an assumed expectation is hard to say—but the conscious choice and effort are clear. When speaking with bilingual siblings or peers, we see that language choice is indeed influenced by habit, topic, efficiency, presence of children, or the speaker's desire (to either accommodate others or influence others to speak Latvian) (Miezitis-Matiss 1990, 234-6)—something true of my own lived experience as well. From what I have observed, even in my generation, as one gets

older one tends to put in more effort into speaking Latvian with peers, due to an increasing sense of responsibility. As one respondent put it: “If I don't speak Latvian to these people, who WILL I speak Latvian to?”

Interestingly, though, just about half of Generation 2 speaks to their siblings in Latvian, while the other half speaks in English, even though almost 3/4 of them speak mainly or only Latvian to their Latvian friends. There are similar results for Generation 1, with more than half of respondents speaking mainly or only Latvian with their siblings, and more speaking Latvian to their friends (and no one speaking “Only” English to their friends, either).

<b>Table 3: Patterns of language use of proficient speakers</b>				
<b>When speaking to:</b>		Gen. 3 (< 31)	Gen. 2 (46-64)	Gen. 1 (65+)
Latvian friends	“Mainly” or “Only” English	<b>61.1%</b>	<b>26.1%</b>	<b>32.4%</b>
	“Mainly” or “Only Latvian”	38.9%	73.9%	67.6%
Siblings	“Mainly” or “Only” English	<b>64%</b>	<b>49.6%</b>	<b>46.7%</b>
	“Mainly” or “Only Latvian”	36%	<b>50.3%</b>	<b>53.3%</b>
Older Relative	“Mainly” or “Only” English	18.1%	6.25%*	3.7%***
	“Mainly” or “Only Latvian”	<b>81.9%</b>	<b>93.75%</b>	<b>96.3%</b>
Grandparents	“Mainly” or “Only” English	4.9%	1%*	0%
	“Mainly” or “Only Latvian”	<b>95%</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>100%**</b>
*Zero people of this age group reported speaking “only English” with either grandparents or older relatives.				
**For those of generation 1 who identified their pattern of language use with grandparents (I assume they were answering based on when they had been alive), everyone that answered spoke mainly or only Latvian with them.				
***Out of the 27 people of this group who reported language use with older relatives, only 1 answered “mainly English,” and zero spoke only English with older relatives.				

Some similarities emerged in the text responses regarding speaking Latvian. Some were able to speak the language (with parents and grandparents) when they were younger, but gradually lost the language with age. Some changed the language situationally depending on who they are speaking to: one parent, for example, speaks only English to their eldest child, but only Latvian to the younger two. Another respondent, who has a non-Latvian husband, spoke to their children in Latvian until they reached “school age,” but then presumably stopped. Some respondents identify assimilation as a major factor in whether or not they learned the language: “My parents were unusually ‘assimilationist’ for Latvians in the U.S. and spoke to me only in English. My older sister knows Latvian whereas I was not taught”; and “My grandparents wanted to be American right away when they moved to this country so they focused on speaking English only.” Even for the respondents who do not explain the reasons or circumstances behind their language shifts or loss, the “monolingual English background [...] permeates all spheres of life” (Norvilas 1990, 218), and undoubtedly has a strong pull no matter the minority language in question.

Some respondents expressed that they would have preferred a 50/50 option, something between “Mainly Latvian” and “Mainly English,” to more accurately describe their patterns of language use. One respondent (between 31-45 years old) attributes this to growing up: “I wish there was an in-between between “Mainly Latvian” and “Mainly English” - I find that as an adult I speak in a more mixed way with my mother (we both do) than when I was young and she was trying to enforce LV language more strictly.” Several respondents even identified this “hybrid” language by a name. One respondent explains: “My sister and I have our own made up version of Latvian English, that I’ve also passed on to my non-Latvian boyfriend. Think Spanglish. One

sentence will have a mix of English and Latvian words, as much Latvian as we both understand.”

Two other respondents refer to their everyday use of “Latglish” too: “We speak a hybrid English/Latvian depending on the topic. Inevitably our group of friends has created it’s [sic] own Latglish word bank of slang words that we made up and use pretty consistently,” and “With siblings/friends/spouse lots of "lat-glish" - mix and match.” A younger respondent reflected on this phenomenon as well, albeit by a different name:

It is hard to describe the nature in how much we speak Latvian here in North America. Most often among each other we speak English because that is what was most of our first language and because we use it on a daily basis. I think that in certain circumstances where Latvian only is required we are more than willing to comply. A lot of the time when I am with my Latvian friends I know that we tend to switch back and forth between the two languages and for what we tend to call, 'Lungisk.' It is a combination of *latviski un angliski*<sup>80</sup>.

It is clear that Latvian speakers of all age groups are aware of their code-switching and the ease with which they do it. Though few speakers (and I am sure many others, especially of the youngest group) would consider this “Latglish” to be used more than exclusive use of Latvian or English, speaking Latvian as an element critical to maintaining their *latvietība* in the U.S. is valued as vitally important by all of them. Just as Norvilas discovered with his young bilingual Lithuanian-American informants, there seem to be positive feelings, such as a sense of pride, associated with knowledge of the mother tongue, with no explicit feelings associated with English (Norvilas 1990, 222). English, then, is simply a “natural extension of their own selves” while Latvian is treated as a “prized possession” (Norvilas 1990, 222), or something “sacred and valuable,” as Krišs told me. One respondent even says as much: “My husband is American, but growing up [we spoke] only and always in Latvian. The Latvian language is incredibly dear to

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<sup>80</sup> Latvian and English

me. It makes me happy to speak [in Latvian].” Even those who hardly speak it (or know none at all), described the positive emotions they associate with being Latvian, or the effort which they are taking to learn the language, or at least include their children in the Latvian community: “I am Latvian-American on my paternal side, with family in Riga. I was never taught the language but feel very connected and proud of my heritage and what I know”; “My kids know a few phrases in Latvian, otherwise they speak only English. Hoping to send them to nometne this summer!”; “I am learning to speak [L]atvian and try to practice as often as I can!” Being Latvian and being part of the Latvian-American community is something one can enjoy regardless of language ability.

#### *Ranking survey*

Arguably the most significant section of the survey was the one which asked respondents to identify a list of nineteen “cultural features” as “Very Important,” “Important,” or “Not Important” in terms of how vital they were for the survival of Latvian culture in the U.S. Before I collected the results, I predicted that Speaking Latvian, History, Songs and Music, Customs and Celebrations, and Social Life (of the Latvian community) would be ranked most important of all elements. I expected Religious Doctrine, Liturgy, Marrying a Latvian to be among the least important elements. Though Latvian (Lutheran) churches were a fundamental community institution of my grandparents’ generation, as my grandfather remarked: fewer and fewer younger Latvians are attending church, in part, I think, because our ways of participating in the community have changed (as discussed in Chapter Two). This also may not be a trend specific to Latvians, but rather a general shift of an American culture putting less emphasis on the importance of religion. Similarly, there was much more pressure for my grandparents’ (and even

my parents') generation to marry another Latvian, but this too is changing. These were my general predictions; however, I expected there to be a noticeable difference in rankings when comparing my generation with older generations. As previously mentioned, Priedkalns ranked the elements by number of "Very Important" responses each element received. I have opted for a point system, to more closely account for the three different options. A "Very Important" vote counted for two points, "Important" was worth one point, and no points were awarded for "Not Important" votes. The rankings are as follows, organized in Table 4 (found on page 97).

Out of all 503 respondents, "Speaking" and "Customs" were tied for #1 and #2, "Songs and Music" followed at #3, then "Respect for Elderly," followed by "History." To my surprise, "Respect for Elderly" was ranked 4th most important, but it makes sense if we consider that members of the older generations, specifically grandparents from Latvia, serve as the most direct link to the past we are trying to preserve. "Social Life of the Latvian Community" ranked 12th of 19, with "Latvian friends" ranking only four spots higher at #8. I expected these rankings to be higher in the youngest generation. The bottom five values, in decreasing order were: "Contributing to Multicultural America" (15), "Literature" (16), then a massive 248 point difference down to "Liturgy" (17), followed by "Marrying within the Latvian Community" (18) and finally "Religious Doctrine" (19). "Literature" surprised me, only because "Reading and Writing" (in Latvian) was ranked significantly higher at #10. The fact that "Contributing to Multicultural America" was ranked among the bottom five indicates to me that the meaning of this "element" was unclear and/or that the majority of respondents do not consider themselves to be part of a larger multicultural, diverse society.

**Table 4: Cultural element rankings of each group**

Rank (out of 19)	All Respondents (N=503)	Generation 3 (< 31 years old) N=158	Generation 2 (46-64) N=155	Generation 1 (65+) N=45
1	Speaking/Customs and celebrations	Speaking/Customs and celebrations	Speaking	Respect for elderly/ Close family ties
2			Respect for elderly	
3	Songs and music	Songs and music	Customs and celebrations	Speaking
4	Respect for the elderly	History	History	Customs and celebrations
5	History	Love of Homeland	Songs and music	History
6	Close family ties	Respect for elderly/ Close family ties	Close family ties	Songs and music
7	Love of Homeland		Love of Homeland	Love of Homeland
8	Friends from Latvian community	Friends from Latvian community	Friends from Latvian community	Reading and writing
9	Folk dances	Folk dances	Reading and writing	Friends from Latvian community
10	Reading and writing	Helping fellow Latvians	Folk dances	Folk dances
11	Helping fellow Latvians	Social life of Latvian community	Social life of Latvian community	Geography
12	Social life of Latvian community	Reading and writing	Geography	Social life of Latvian community
13	Geography	Contributing to multicultural America	Arts and crafts/ Helping fellow Latvians	Arts and crafts/ Helping fellow Latvians
14	Arts and crafts	Arts and crafts		
15	Contributing to multicultural America	Geography	Literature	Literature
16	Literature	Literature	Contributing to multicultural America	Contributing to multicultural America
17	Liturgy and religious services	Liturgy and religious services	Marrying within Latvian community	Liturgy and religious services
18	Marrying within Latvian community	Marrying within Latvian community	Liturgy and religious services	Religious doctrine and laws
19	Religious doctrine and laws	Religious doctrine and laws	Religious doctrine and laws	Marrying within Latvian community



It is worth noting that not a single respondent in the youngest group ranked neither “Customs” *nor* “Music” as “Not Important.” Additionally, despite the fact that 34% of these respondents speak little to no Latvian, everyone except for one person ranked “Speaking Latvian” as either “Important” or “Very Important.” The top five most important elements for respondents younger than 31 are as follows: Speaking/Customs and Celebrations, Songs, History, and Love of Homeland. The least important elements were: Geography, Literature, Liturgy, Marrying a Latvian, and Religious Doctrine. I was not surprised that Respect for Elderly was not among the most important, though I am surprised that neither Latvian Friends nor Latvian Social Life was not among them.

The top five most important elements of my parents’ generation were: Speaking, Respect for Elders, Customs, History, and Songs. The least important elements were: Literature, Contributing to the Melting Pot, Marrying a Latvian, Liturgy, and Religious Doctrine. The least important elements compare almost identically to the oldest group’s, except that Marriage is ranked slightly more important than either religious element. Speaking, for this group, is the clearly valued the highest, not being tied with any other element. I find it worth noting that Contributing to Multicultural America was ranked #16 by both older generations; this is three places lower than how my generation ranked it. This could be in part due to the ambiguity of the question, though this difference in value could demonstrate that my generation finds it more important to mark themselves as ethnically or culturally different in today’s America (if that is how respondents interpreted that question).

The top five most important values for respondents 65 years and older were as follows: Respect for the Elderly/Close Family Ties, Speaking, Customs, and History. The least important

elements were: Literature, Contributing to Multicultural America, Liturgy, Religious Doctrine, and Marrying a Latvian. I was certainly surprised to see Liturgy, Religious Doctrine, and Marrying a Latvian to stay among the bottom three, especially marriage. I suspect that the results would be different had I received a larger representation of this age group. Though I was surprised not to see Speaking Latvian as the most important element, I suppose it should not be a surprise that the most elderly group ranked Respect for the Elderly as most important (This could be a difference in generational values in general, and perhaps not Latvian-specific). The oldest respondents as a whole ranked Love of Homeland lower (#7, as opposed to #5) than the youngest respondents did. This could also speak to my generation's (at times romanticized) love of Latvia—a mythical homeland some of us have yet to visit.

A few younger respondents (all under the age of 45) were quite candid in their criticism of this community: "...even though there are a lot of Latvians that live near me it seemed the younger generations have not wanted to carry on traditional Latvian celebrations and observances;" "I used to think a lot of these community things were far more important when I was younger. They were. Now I see many of the older generation as right wing and homophobic and being gay I feel pretty cast out from the Latvian community I really invested my life in when I was younger;" and

Latvian culture will survive if the community embraces multiple political values and rejects racism, sexism, heteronormativity, classism, etc. They are not very accepting and welcoming to people who aren't 100% Latvian, or aren't somehow in a clique. I am not active in the Latvian American community for these very reasons, even though I was raised in it. I also find many Latvian Americans to be very superficial and materialistic. These values run counter to the very environmental thinking that I have found in Latvian *dainas*<sup>81</sup>. I also don't understand how so many could have supported Donald Trump. To me, their white privilege is more important than Latvian security.

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<sup>81</sup> Folk songs

Though the survey results seem to suggest the opposite of what the first respondent has experienced (with respondents < 31 ranking Customs and Celebrations as tied for the most important element with Speaking), this is just representative of internally ascribed value, not action. As for the following comments, I find myself agreeing with these respondents. A predominantly white, middle- to upper middle-class community that has inherited vehement anti-communism and anti-socialism from their Latvian immigrant parents has not proven itself to be all that accepting of difference. I myself have heard my fair share of racist, xenophobic (from the children of immigrants, no less), sexist, and homophobic comments from older relatives. Whether or not this is representative of *latvietība* is hard to say, though I do find comfort in the fact that the youngest group of respondents ranked Contributing to Multiculturalism higher than the older generations did. Perhaps younger respondents understand multiculturalism in terms of greater acceptance and inclusivity, compared to older Latvians (just as the critical respondents pointed out). Again, however, this may just be indicative of a more general trend of youth in America, rather than being specific to Latvian youth.

The exclusivity, or cliquishness, of Latvians in America is something other respondents identified as well, especially in connection to language ability. One described experiencing “a lot of Latvian snobbish prejudice” growing up, and was “ridiculed for not speaking fluently” while they dated a fluent speaker. For this person, as well as anyone who has felt anxious around older speakers correcting their language, we see “ideologies of language standardization and languagelessness [being] hierarchically ranked approximations of belonging to and exclusion from” the Latvian community (Rosa 2016, 163). And, because language has served as the most

diacritical feature of Latvian identity in the U.S., this ideology of languagelessness not only “[calls] into question linguistic competence,” but “legitimate personhood-altogether” (Rosa 2016, 163). Until now, with a noticeable shift to being more accepting of non-speakers, not speaking Latvian well or at all warranted questioning how genuine someone’s *latvietība* was. Just as Miežitis writes, “Being Latvian can be painful for others who feel left out because of lack of language competence or mismatched skills or interests, inability to fit in with the Latvian peer group, or lack of financial support from the family to be able to engage in these activities” (Miežitis 270). Being an active participant in the Latvian community, after all, often requires investments of both time and money, as discussed in Chapter Two.

Fortunately, though, the respondent that was ridiculed said that “a lot of that ridiculing mentality has seemed to dull over time”—perhaps this is representative of the language shift and its acceptance within my generation. This same respondent reaffirms that keeping “the language alive” is vitally important, though it should not be “a ‘qualifier’ of if someone IS Latvian or not.”

Another young respondent speaks to this:

I believe that understanding the language is important to be a Latvian, but to say that someone is not Latvian because they can't speak it is a bit too harsh. Would I like for all Latvians in North America to speak, read and write Latvian? Of course. But some of them didn't have the opportunity to learn it from various reasons in their lives. I have many friends that have only one Latvian parent and can not speak Latvian. I do not exclude them from anything because of that. I try to help them understand as best as they can and I pity that they can not have the same experience that I have with our Latvian culture. It is not my place to judge them, [I] just hope that in the future more children don't have to denied this privilege of speaking Latvian because their parents were not able to teach them.

Though this respondent suggests that there is a difference in experiencing “Latvian culture” based on one’s language ability, they nevertheless consider non-speakers to be Latvians, and is

aware that “this privilege,” for some, can be completely circumstantial.

Some respondents believe that creating or maintaining a connection to Latvia today is crucial in maintaining a sense of *latvietība* outside of its borders: “It is also very important to develop a relationship with Latvia as it exists today and not just as the memory of pre-war Latvia [that] has been passed down from previous generations. Language, culture, and politics are ever-changing in Latvia, and the present and future are just as relevant to maintaining a Latvian American identity as the past is;” and

...to me it is important to somehow have a connection to Latvia, that goes beyond experiences at summer camp. I do, however, believe that at younger ages, Latvians need ties to other Latvians in order to have a '*saikne*<sup>82</sup>' to the culture- not just family ties. Whether that is 'socially' within the US/North America, or by visiting Latvia, is a choice. I don't believe participating exclusively in the US (or in diaspora elsewhere) is the only solution, and sometimes I think it inhibits the growth of understanding what is Latvian today.

These respondents, in effect, are saying that in America Latvians “have always looked to the homeland for images and meanings that resonate with or reaffirm their ideas of what being a [Latvian] should be,” and that the original members of the diaspora (our grandparents) have left “a trail of collective memory about another place and time,” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1989, i, in Winland 2009, 701) perhaps creating a sense of attachment to Latvia that does not necessarily correspond with the current sociopolitical status of Latvia today. Perhaps this is why younger Latvian-Americans value a Love for the Homeland as much as they do.

It became clear to me that the element regarding multiculturalism in America was unintentionally vague, as many respondents explained their confusion and uncertainty of how to answer it. My intention was to ask how important it was to maintain a sense of Latvian-ness in

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<sup>82</sup> Link, tie

the US, and contribute to its image of diversity. Now, I see, it could be read to mean blending in. One respondent qualified both readings, saying that “[it’s] important to blend into your new country but also important to hold onto your individuality.” Another feels this conflict more acutely: “Do I tell *amīši*<sup>83</sup> about Latvia? Yes. Do I feel like part of the ‘melting pot?’ No. I don’t see myself as an American. Honestly, I don’t feel like I have a ‘home.’ I’m stuck in this crack between two cultures: too American for Latvia, but too European to incorporate myself into ‘typical’ US society.” This respondent was born in Latvia, but grew up and now lives in the U.S. She is living what Judith Nagata (1974) would call a “double life,” “oscillating” between one ethnic identity and another. This partial but incomplete assimilation has left this respondent in a state of limbo, being able to identify with both lives (and “homes”), but unable to claim either.

Another respondent described the melting pot as having “a very strong ‘gravitational pull,’” and if one wishes to maintain a sense of *latvietība* here, “you have to work at it from all angles”—that is, you have to put in the effort. “Close Latvian friends with shared experiences and a Latvian spouse,” however, “are strong anchors,” and presumably make resisting this strong pull easier.

Though it may be true that a Latvian partner inherently “anchors” someone to *latvietība* more than a non-Latvian partner would, it is clear from the survey that across generations, marrying a Latvian is among the least important elements that help maintain *latvietība* in the U.S. What became clear from the responses is that spousal support of *latvietība* (to whatever extent it may be for a person) is most important, regardless of cultural or ethnic background:

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<sup>83</sup> Slang for “Americans”

'Marrying within Latvian community'-- feels important, but there are plenty of Latvians who have married non-Latvians who still keep up the language/culture in their homes, often with solid spousal support

I'm married to a non-Latvian, but it was/is VERY important to me that he respects (and he in fact LOVES) my Latvian culture.

Regarding life partners, I think that finding another [L]atvian isn't as important as finding someone who will support your efforts to instill the level of 'latvianess' that you are aiming for

I don't know if it really is important to marry a Latvian, but it's still easier to continue a "Latvian life" if you [do]- but that also depends on the individual. If a husband/wife very much support everything 'Latvian', then it isn't hard.

...the Latvian wanting to stay within the community will have to work harder typically if the other spouse is not Latvian and is not supportive of the keeping cultural ties. It's a lot of work to keep up one's culture when only one is interested or vested in it. It can be lonely. However, there are many cases where spouses, non-Latvian, that are very supportive and encourage and take part as well in keeping the culture alive within their family.

As long as the non-Latvian partner is supportive, it seems that remaining active in the Latvian community, and raising one's children to be active as well, is not an impossible feat.

#### *Survey conclusions*

- About a third of respondents younger than 31 speak little to no Latvian.
- For respondents (no matter what age) who did not grow up in Latvia, those who reported to have no Latvian speaking ability never attended a Latvian school in which the primary language of instruction was Latvian.
- For those who consider themselves proficient in speaking Latvian, 89.2% (339) had attended at least one year of Latvian school. Also, the vast majority (89.3%) of those that attended Latvian school at all reported that they attended for four or more years.

- Proportionally, more respondents of my generation have attended a summer high school program (for at least one summer) *and* have attended a summer camp (for at least one summer) compared to any other age group.
- About a sixth of those respondents of my generation who have attended a Latvian summer camp exclusively attended an English-speaking one.
- Of the proficient Latvian speakers of my generation, the majority speak “mainly English” or “only English” to their Latvian friends and to their siblings (61.1, 64%). Of those same speakers, almost all of them speak “mainly” or “only Latvian” with older relatives and with their grandparents (82%, 95%).
- Many respondents across age groups acknowledge that they code-switch (either situationally or metaphorically) between English and Latvian, depending on conversation topic, who else is present, or out of a sense of expectation or obligation.
- Of all 503 respondents, “Speaking Latvian,” “Customs and Celebrations,” “Songs and Music,” “Respect for Elderly,” and “History” were ranked to be the most important elements in sustaining Latvian culture in America.
- “Contributing to Multicultural America,” “Literature,” “Liturgy and Religious Services,” “Marrying within the Latvian Community,” and “Religious Doctrine” were overall ranked as the least important elements.

These survey results, in conjunction with the qualitative analysis I have done, have provided me with comprehensive insights to the changes and shifts Latvian-American cultural (and linguistic) identity has undergone over the course of three generations, which will be discussed in the following conclusion.



## Conclusion

After a lifetime of participation and eight months of research, I would like to think that I now understand my family, my *sabiedrība*<sup>84</sup>, and myself better than before. The “something” that motivated my grandparents and their peers to start Latvian schools, camps, and organizations in a place they considered only a temporary home, the same feeling that motivated my parents and friends’ parents to continue bringing us to these very places, the same feeling that makes me and my peers think we will undoubtedly bring *our* future children there—it is something powerful enough to sustain three, coming up on four, generations’ worth of identity. A responsibility to this continuity stems from a primordial sentiment and “quasi-kinship” that binds all Latvian-Americans. It is this natural affinity, a bond we implicitly accept exists, from the mere Latvian identification itself, that Kristīna and I felt that day after *dziedāšana*. Latvian-Americans are an ethnic group with increasingly permeable boundaries, as we become more and more “assimilated” as Americans. One major way to maintain our groupness, despite its permeability<sup>85</sup>, has been to make language a diacritical feature of *latvietība*. For many Latvian-Americans, especially in older generations, linguistic identity indexes ethnic identity. Ethnicity, however, is not only objective (marked by percentages of Latvian blood, how “Latvian” one looks, or how “well” one speaks Latvian) but subjective too, and young Latvian-Americans are *extremely* conscious of ethnic heritage as a source of identity. Even though being a Latvian-American, at least an active one, is a self-identification that often cultivates a feeling strong enough to override all other differences with other group members and creates a “longing not to

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<sup>84</sup> Community, society

<sup>85</sup> See: Barth (1969).

belong to any other group” (Ambedkar 1955, 11 in Geertz 1973, 260), the boundaries of this group are more fluidly maintained by me and my peers. Because we feel as comfortable as we do being Americans, in addition to being Latvians, we can situationally select which parts of each identity we prioritize with relative ease.<sup>86</sup> My generation’s attitude toward language’s priority is shifting compared to previous ones’—but the sense of responsibility (especially toward our ancestors) is still very present. Citizenship also does not necessarily index a Latvian-American’s ethnic identity, though it does enhance a feeling of it and can serve to legitimize and mark identity. For Latvian-Americans born in the U.S., finding a balance between the two “sides” of their identities can be difficult at times, and one is sometimes compromised for the other.

Being an active Latvian-American is a choice, and my generation has more and different ways of “participation” than our grandparents’ option of just attending local events. As an ethnic group, Latvian-Americans are shifting towards more informal methods of organization, though they are still centered on sociality. The most prevalent way young Latvian-Americans “formally” participate today is by being a member of the American Latvian Youth Association (ALJA) and by attending its yearly conference (*kongress*), which I argue is an invented tradition because it is a strategic and conscious way to assert our ethnic difference and to perpetuate a sense of collective historical continuity. Through ALJA we are currently “formally” attempting to bridge the divide between young Latvian speakers and non-speakers. To my knowledge, such a formalized effort is unprecedented, because until now, the language ideology of older Latvian speakers dictated that language was *the* diacritical feature of *latvietība*, making ALJA exclusive to Latvian speakers. Digital and online media present new, “informal” ways to participate in

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<sup>86</sup> See Nagata (1974).

“being” Latvian-American. Posting to social media on November 18th to demonstrate participation in celebrating Latvia’s Independence Day in one example. Other online groups or pages, some of which represent “formal” organizations or institutions, allow for “informal” participation and community making.

The online identity survey I administered is a profound example of this widespread online “showing up” and identity construction. With over five hundred responses within five days, this is a significant symbol of solidarity by virtue of numerical force alone. The survey results show that there is definitely a language shift (because there are significantly fewer Latvian speakers in my generation compared to the previous two), but there is an increasing interest in attending summer programs (my generation has the highest attendance). This suggests that these institutions and programs are crucial in sustaining *latvietība*, even if they are adapted to suit shifting language abilities—the evidence being that only my generation has a significant number of people who have exclusively attended a Latvian summer program conducted primarily in English. What remains crucial is the socialization.

For those who are proficient speakers, many situationally or metaphorically (or both) code-switch, depending on who is present, the other speaker’s language ability, the setting, or the conversation topic. The most prominent example of situational code-switching is when talking to peers or siblings compared to talking to elders. The majority of proficient speakers speak mainly or only English with peers or siblings, but mainly or only Latvians when speaking to elders. Even if situational language choice structure “does not hold much hope for long term retention of ethnic languages,” this could be turned to the advantage of the ethnic language with an intensive study environment that creates and reinforces sociality (Norvilas 1990, 229). However, as this

project has shown, (1) there are proficient speakers of my generation unquestioningly planning to teach their children Latvian, and (2) even if they do not, and there is not a reversal of the language shift, language is *not* necessarily the sole feature upon which the continuation of *latvietība* rests. According to the survey results, the aspects ranked to be most crucial in sustaining *latvietība* in America by all respondents were Speaking, Customs, Songs, Respecting elders, and History. Religion and marriage within the Latvian community were undoubtedly ranked the lowest in the survey across all generations. Administering this online survey provided me with extensive quantitative data, and was an exciting challenge compared to my more theoretical analysis.

#### *Contributions to anthropology*

In addition to contributing to the limited academic literature on Baltic diaspora (and Latvian diaspora specifically), this project provides insight to the relationship between linguistic identity and generational time. I agree with Suslak “in order to better understand processes such as language shift and linguistic obsolescence we must pay close attention to how linguistic practices express age identity and generational group membership” (Suslak 2009, 201). We see that language and linguistic identity, which are a part of more complex cultural and ethnic identities, are seen as matters of morality, even for adolescents. We should not undermine their agency; they are active identity-shapers and community-makers themselves, with or without language ability.

By analyzing the role of social media such as Facebook and Instagram in the Latvian-American community, this project contributes to the ever-growing literature of digital and online

media.<sup>87</sup> For Latvian-Americans, this media now provides vehicles of participation and identity maintenance that did not exist in the past, and in some cases is reconstituting in the sense of diasporic connection and solidarity. This proved exceptionally relevant with my survey, which demonstrates the scope of methods used and how successful and productive an attempt at collecting quantitative data can be.

Despite being grounded in theories of ethnicity, which are sometimes critiqued by social theorists for being dated and obsolete, this project has attempted to situate them contemporarily. Clifford Geertz's primordial sentiments and Abner Cohen's theory of ethnic groups and boundaries are not bound exclusively to the twentieth century. These concepts have traveled through time, to a very spontaneous moment. These *are* relevant to young people living in 21st century America, and this is spontaneous moment is a dynamic one—in one generation, this all might, and probably will, look very different.

Ultimately, this ethnographic project is in and of itself a cultural act. Out of my own feelings of moral responsibility, I have written this project as one attempt to sustain and preserve *latvietība* as it exists today.

*Where do we go from here?*

I now think back to last summer, watching the campers sing *Mana dziesma*, the song for which the two girls auditioned. They sing the chorus: “*Tie ir vārdi no manas tautas, un dziesma man arī no tās / un es zinu neviens manā vietā to nedziedās.*”<sup>88</sup> Daina, a counselor for the youngest girls (we all collectively call her “Mamma Daina” while at camp), has been crying at

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<sup>87</sup> See: Coleman (2010), Wilson and Peterson (2002).

<sup>88</sup> “These words and this song are from my *tauta*/and I know that no one will ever sing it in my place.”

every rehearsal when we sing this song. Toward the end of the second (and last) week, the oldest campers have been putting their arms around each other and swaying when we sing this.

Between trying to remember to give the children cues of when to sing, and trying to pay attention to the lyrics and chords in front of me, I find myself choking up too. Kristīna and I avoid eye contact so that we do not make each other cry.

This is nothing new. This scene repeats itself every year. With a different song, perhaps, but the same nonetheless. I remember standing on those benches in the sweltering July heat, next to my friends who are still some of my closest friends today. Our parents did the same, as our grandparents watched them. In this moment, the present and past fold in on each other. We must be living our grandparents' dream.

This lyric of the chorus is exceptionally patriotic if you grew up in Latvia or are a Latvian living in Latvia today. As a relatively recently occupied nation, it is powerful to assert that no one will take away your Latvian song, your Latvian words; your Latvian language will not be replaced by another's. For us in America, though, this song provides a dual meaning. We do want the Latvian language and *latvietība* to be sustained; we do not want our *latvietība* to be completely replaced by our American identity. However, in order to do this, we rely on continuity, always looking to the future. We are now singing in our parents' place, who sang in their parents' place. We *want* this continuity; we are not trying to assert a different ethnic identity than that of our parents or grandparents, but the ways in which we lay claim to and prove our Latvian identity are shifting and evolving as our *saites* to our *tēvzeme* become longer.

So, where do we go from here? This summer I will return to *Nometne* to work with Kristīna again. I will sing in the Boston Latvian choir with my brother and my mom at the

Fourteenth Latvian Song and Dance Festival in the United States in Baltimore, where hundreds of people will be participating as either choir singers or folk dancers. I will be celebrating my fifth anniversary of graduating from *Garezera Vasaras Vidusskola* (GVV), with all of my classmates back at Garezers. In the fall I will be moving back to Boston, where I have already been asked to teach at Latvian School on Saturdays. I have already said yes. This is all ongoing; we continue to plan ways to come together and find ways to participate in the constant constructing and sustaining of *latvietība*. As for the progressing language shift: when I talked to Nicole and Natalie, who do not speak Latvian fluently, they explained that at Heritage Camp (the English-speaking session), when they go to *baznīca*<sup>89</sup>, they alternate between singing verses in Latvian and English, which is “weird, and it’s not equivalent... but it works.” We have to keep finding something that works. As long as we are willing to adapt our boundary markers and as long as Latvian-Americans continue to feel a sense of responsibility to maintain their *latvietība*, I am confident that there will continue to be someone to keep singing in our place.



Maija, Mamma, Tētis and me at the Boston Latvian Folklore Collective's (*Piektvakars*) anniversary in Brookline, MA. 2001.

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<sup>89</sup> Church services

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## Appendix A

My online survey was administered through GoogleForms. I have formatted it to fit a word document below.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Please select one statement from each column that is most accurate:

I am _____ years old:	I was born in...	I was raised/grew up in...	I now live in....
< 17	The US	The US	The US
18-30	Latvia	Latvia	Latvia
31 - 45	Other _____	Other _____	Other _____
46 - 64	I prefer not to answer	I prefer not to answer	I prefer not to answer
65+			
I prefer not to answer			

### PATTERNS OF LANGUAGE USE

Please check **ONE** box to indicate which language you primarily use to speak to the following people:

Language used to:	Only Latvian	Mainly Latvian	Mainly English	Only English	Not applicable
Grandparents					
Mother					
Father					
Older relative					
Siblings					
Latvian friends					
Spouse					
Children					

If you wish, please expand your answers here:

## SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ABILITY IN LATVIAN

Please check **ONE** box to indicate what you think is the most accurate assessment of your own Latvian language skills:

Language skills	Very good	Good	Fairly good	Little	None
Understanding					
Speaking					
Reading					
Writing					

If you wish, please expand your answers here:

## LATVIAN PROGRAM ATTENDANCE

Please check **ONE** box to indicate how many years (if any) you attended the following Latvian programs. Please note the distinction between Latvian and English use in the programs.

Program		4+ years	2-3 years	1-2 years	1 year	Never
Saturday/ Sunday school	Latvian Saturday/Sunday school - where <b>Latvian</b> is the primary language of instruction					
	Latvian Saturday/Sunday school - where <b>English</b> is the primary language of instruction					
Summer camp	Latvian summer camp - where <b>Latvian</b> is the primary language of instruction					
	Latvian summer camp - where <b>English</b> is the primary language of instruction					
Summer high school	Latvian summer high school - where <b>Latvian</b> is the primary language of instruction					
	Latvian summer high school - where <b>English</b> is the primary language of instruction					

If you wish, please expand your answers here:

## RANKING SURVEY

Please indicate which cultural features you consider most vital for the survival of Latvian culture in the US. Choose **one** of the following options for each item: *not important* (NI), *important* (I), or *vitally (very) important* (VI).

Aspect of culture		Assessment of importance		
Latvian language	Speaking	VI	I	NI
	Reading and writing	VI	I	NI
	Literature	VI	I	NI
Knowledge, appreciation, and relationships to the Latvian “homeland”	History	VI	I	NI
	Geography	VI	I	NI
	Customs and celebrations	VI	I	NI
	Love of homeland	VI	I	NI
Religion	Doctrine/laws and rules	VI	I	NI
	Liturgy and ceremonies ( <i>dievkalpojumi</i> ), including confirmation ( <i>iesvētības</i> )	VI	I	NI
Latvian folklore	Songs and music	VI	I	NI
	Folk dances	VI	I	NI
	Arts and crafts ( <i>rokdarbi</i> )	VI	I	NI
Family and social relationships	Respect for the elderly	VI	I	NI
	Close family ties	VI	I	NI
	Friends from Latvian community	VI	I	NI
	Marrying within the Latvian community	VI	I	NI
	Social life of the Latvian community	VI	I	NI
Multi-cultural America	Helping fellow Latvians	VI	I	NI
	Contributing to multicultural America (the “melting pot”)	VI	I	NI

If you wish, please expand your answers here: