

IN A BOAT ACROSS THE BALTIC SEA

AN INSIGHT INTO THE MONOGRAPH WAITING FOR THE BOAT: LATVIAN AUTHORS AS REFUGEES IN SWEDEN [1]

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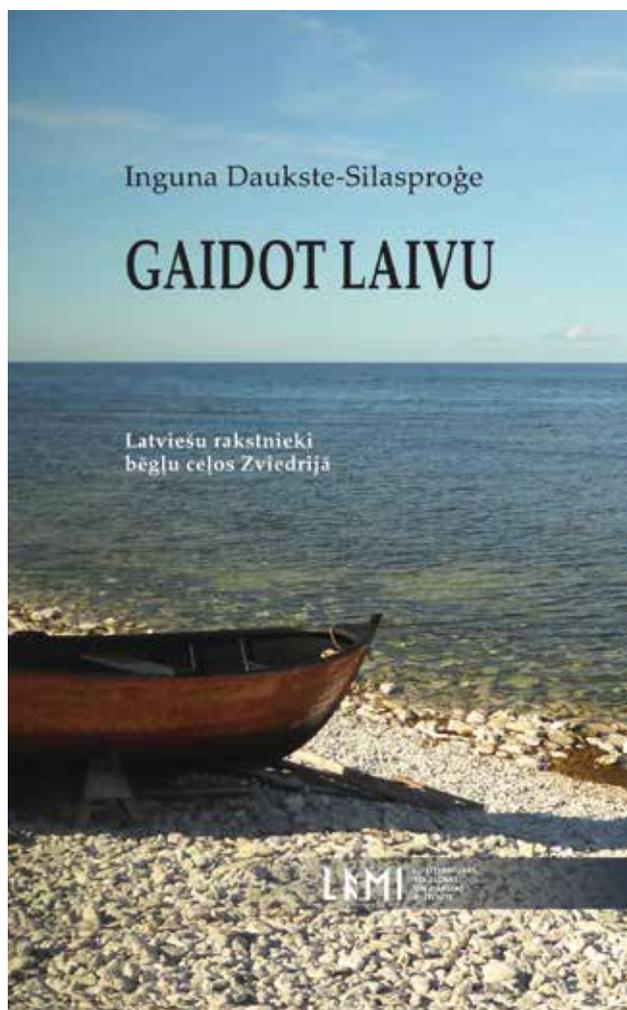
For every scholar it is of utmost importance to find his specific field of research – the range of topics, the historical period, the research aspects. Since mid-1990s, my research interests have been focused on the literature history, aspects of literary and cultural life, documentation of processes and events of the Latvian exile, the psychological aspect of exile as such, national identity and mother tongue in a multi-national environment, generation-related issues in exile situation, the geography aspects of the Latvian exile.

The 20th century was the time of change both for Europe and Latvia. Within just a handful of years, the political events of the century's history subjected Latvia to a series of dramatic changes: loss of independence on 17 June 1940, followed by deportations of the country's citizens on 14 June 1941, then the Second World War with the German occupation, and battles on the soil of Latvia. All of these factors left a truly dramatic influence on Latvia's history and tragically impacted the destiny of so many Latvians. Some part of the nation left its homeland becoming refugees and later – exiles in different countries and continents. Some stayed in

Latvia trying to survive, searching – and finding – some “secret passages” in the labyrinths of the Soviet ideology, providing them with some opportunity to be oneself without conflicting one's consciousness. In 1949, came another wave of repressions, with thousands more deported to Siberia. All of these experiences have formed the dramatic and traumatic destiny of Latvia and the Latvians.

In autumn 1944, more than 10% of the Latvian nation, including a substantial number of the intelligentsia – writers, musicians, painters, actors, journalists and university teachers – left the country to become political refugees. Most of them took to ships and travelled to Germany, a significantly smaller number took a much more dangerous route travelling in fishing boats across the Baltic Sea to Sweden. A still smaller number – mainly Latvian soldiers – found themselves in Denmark, Austria or Belgium. This was a huge wave of emigration, for many years marking a border between the Latvians in exile and those in the occupied Latvia.

This is the fourth book [2] discussing a geographic location, where the Latvian refugees ended up, this time – Sweden. In the monograph *Waiting for the*



Boat: Latvian Authors as Refugees in Sweden I continue my research of the Latvian refugees and the exile period. One may say that my research is also a set of stories about the geography of feelings or the different geographic (environment, landscape) sense. And also the destiny of the Latvians in various lands of residence. The present research is centred on a chronologically and geographically limited view of political and historical events through the perspective of individual person's experiences – that of a creative individual. In a way, based on studies of sources and archives, testimonies and literary texts, a time period from the history of the Latvian exile has been reconstructed. The main purpose of the research was to remind of an age that brought hard decisions and tragic experiences to the lives of a quite a few Latvians. The chronological boundaries of the research have been marked by

the status of boat passengers – at the period studied they are *refugees* – in Latvia, Gotland, Sweden. While working at this research I also had to think of Latvia – the state, the family and everyone who had experienced the historical turning points of the 20th century. It was important to view, as stated by E. V. Bunkše, while thinking of one's own life, “what is home and road for a human being and a Latvian in a violent age of great change? And how a landscape, location and environment can impact the emotions and thoughts of an individual?” [3]

The boat on the cover of this book is a symbol, as the word ‘*laiva*’ (‘boat’) became one, a sign and a hope to get to the other side, to be protected. It not only symbolised the means taking one to safety, that will take across – to the other side, but also the longing for stability and peace, some humane life. The historian A. Daudze has come to a conclusion that the refugees made their choice in favour of Sweden as their refuge was based on its geographic proximity and being left outside direct fight [4]. “Going into exile, people lost everything – their possessions, jobs, social status and also the opportunity to live in their fatherland. In the context of national and ethnic identity an important role is attributed to territory, belonging to which the people feel, in which they dwell and with the name of which they relate their common identity. Latvia had grown physically out of reach, still the lost fatherland continued to exist – as an image formed by literature, recollections and communication.” [5] Sweden, in the autumn of 1944, became the first exile country for the Latvians. In 1944–1945, the shore of Kurzeme (Courland) was the last sight of Latvia seen by some 5500 refugees leaving in boats. They departed for a country not touched by the war, where people had lived in peace for centuries, were accustomed to a monolingistic environment, and the refugees of the Second World War was a challenge and a new experience also for them.

Getting on a boat and the sea itself marks a limit in the refugee's experience – the former life was left in the past, darkness or fog covered the shore of Kurzeme – that is, Latvia. For the ones leaving the shore some door was symbolically locked and a boundary was crossed – now behind it (in Latvia) was left all of the former life, while on the other –

the present – side of it (in a foreign land) they were filled with uncertainty, fear and simultaneously also some hope that a return home will still be possible. Exhausted, soaking wet and desperate after the trip in an overcrowded fishing boat or cutter the refugees made their first steps on solid land in Gotland. What did it mean for the Latvian intelligentsia, including writers and poets, to lose their former life, the audience of readers and listeners, for the academics – their students, university and opportunities of research? So the present research is centered on a Latvian, a refugee, a creative personality on one's way from the shore of Kurzeme to Gotland and in Sweden. And it seemed of importance to remind in the present research that also literary texts can serve as substantial source for the study of Latvia's history, forming understanding or arousing interest in Latvia's history of the 20th century and the destinies of so many Latvians in these crossing points of historical events. And more – to remind of literary texts created decades ago; to urge to read and read again. Also, the route to Sweden taken by the Latvian refugees, their mundane and social life has been discussed, devoting more attention to Latvian writers and poets. In general they were the same refugees – as all the others having left Latvia. Writers and poets took the same route, experienced similar situations, their individual experiences became a collective documentation of Latvians' experiences in a literary form.

The study examines the "life space" of Swedish Latvians (then refugees) – designating this period as an intermediary time between various necessary choices and decisions, including the decision whether or not to stay in Sweden at the end of the 1940s, or to emigrate to another country.

The period viewed symbolically forms a cutline – on the one end of it there is the Kurzeme shore and the way across the sea in a refugee boat, on the other – the new place of residence, namely Sweden, where one assumes the new status of a refugee. The quarantine camps in Gotland and on the Swedish mainland, physical and rather mundane work to earn one's sustenance, being required to ascertain one's own skills and knowledge anew – this characterises the foreign land. The refugees are living two lives in parallel – the Swedish and the Latvian one,

publishing Latvian periodicals, books in Latvian, organising active and eventful social, cultural and literary life. All of this allows to survive emotionally both in the foreign country and being parted from Latvia by a physical obstacle – the Baltic Sea in this case.

In the mind of the refugees then the idea of a closed and limited space prevailed – first, the *boat* (a closed, narrow space enclosed against the outer world) while going to Gotland; second, reaching Gotland marks another closed environment as this is a world in its own right – *an island in the sea*; third, more such closed and delimited worlds are formed for refugees arriving behind a fence and locked gates – in the *quarantine camps* on both Gotland and the Swedish mainland. The enclosed environment left strong impact on the inner world of the refugees. Geographically (spatially) the present research is delineated by three reference points – Kurzeme, Gotland, and Sweden, viewed in separate chapters. Each one of them brings its own specific impressions, tonalities and colour gamut, as well as observations into the documentation of the refugee experiences, emotionally grading the range of feelings from hopes of the departure from Latvia being only temporary to the realisation that from refugees they have turned into exiles and citizens of a different country. In the middle between these two points from the temporal and spatial perspective of refugees' feelings there is infinity, an apocalyptic doom, the power of natural elements (the sea, the wind, precipitation, etc.). This is revealed with emotional intensity in written texts both while still in the power of the experienced and immediate emotions, and also looking back after a shorter or longer time. Departure from the Kurzeme shore while leaving Latvia filled the departees with emotionally vivid and strong memories, found its expression in works of art and literature. The writers on pages of their works or memoirs have authentically documented the feelings and emotions on their way to the island of hopes – Gotland, while leaving the land of hopes Latvia. The very travel in the boat forms a closed microcosmos, isolated from the rest of the world, where each individual's emotion reaches a truly high intensity. In the feelings of the Latvian refugees, their poetry and prose texts, letters or

notes, a large part is occupied by contrasts and sketches of the distinctive Swedish nature. The everyday life and duties of the Latvian refugees is not much reflected in the literary texts, quite often it is possible to learn about it indirectly from the letters of the writers, their essays, reflections, articles and notes, therefore the present study came to be a mosaic of feelings and a “life-map” of sorts, showing the inner and outer world of the then-refugee. Undeniably, in general the literature of Latvian refugees and exile maps a vast spatial and geographic landscape, extending the geographic poetics, contrasts and variety of Latvian literature. Latvian authors of different generations were forced to become refugees, and it is substantial that also the youngest generation turned to writing on a foreign soil, wishing to reflect their experiences. The Latvian literature developed and differentiated.

For those to whom this age is history without direct experiences, each individual story, including also the literary texts, forms, supplements, helps to understand the events of the history of Latvia and the tragic fate of a creative personality within these processes. A multitude of Latvian writers, at the end of the Second World War becoming refugees and arriving in foreign lands, including Sweden, also changed their literary style. Emotions and loss of their homeland, life in a foreign land and the differing landscape environment contrasting with the former life and culture environment brought more pain and nostalgia, patriotic feeling and new visual imagery in their poetry and pages of some prose works, marked different relationships, everyday life and work environment. This features many autobiographic and authentic markers of the age and specific experiences. Not everything in the literary works is always an exact description, still these works feature a documental character (events, emotions, experiences, feeling, etc.) and authentic emotional, records of momentary emotions. These records of past events – the told time and people – in a way also document the age and the event spatially. The teller (the writer) has been one of them, an eyewitness of a kind, and novels turn into “life stories” told in a foreign land. On the one hand, this is a personal and individual experience, on the other – it has the features of the collective memory. And for

the reader of the 21st century these literary narratives become one of the keys, allowing to comprehend the age, the complexity of history and the human fate. Although frequently the border between the memoir literature and literary work is blurred, these texts become sources for the study of the age. Literature – every book, also the ones published in a foreign country – has its audience and its specific reader. The language and literature, also a book in the native tongue provided the refugees with some shelter, strength and consolation for the soul in desperation, and literature (the writing process) provided shelter also for the writer him/herself, thus involving the author’s emotions and longings of the heart in the literary work.

Studying the age it is essential to view in relation the memory with history and historical processes, especially, if those are related to a war time and reflexion of immediate after-war period. One of the ways for relation of such traumatic experience is also literature. It is essential to narrate the past experiences, in order to be capable of living in the present, clarifying/establishing the truth of the historical events of the past that have close ties with the destiny of both a single individual and that of the whole nation. Latvian refugees are characterised by collective emotional experience. From ‘me’ and ‘my experience’ to ‘we’ and ‘our experience’ – this is how the tragic age urges us to view a longer stretch of the nation’s history. Such an opportunity is also provided by the literary texts, including the lifestories, memories, journals, letters and other documents of the age. The feelings of a Latvian refugee are also marked by thoughts, dreams, hopes and pain, they lived with each day (the thought of home, hope of return, memories of the past and hopes for the future). All this forms the world of a Latvian refugee in Sweden – on the one hand, each one’s individual, personal feelings – and not always appropriate for publication, and on the other – those that are so similar. A testimony of the time, the age, the historical events and individual experiences and feelings. This allows to grasp the events better and may become an additional source for a history study. So we can understand the tragic and dramatic age, since there is a strong aspect of direct experiences and eyewitness observation.

After the Second World War, Europe was changed, many countries were subjected to the Soviet power for decades. The Latvians living in the Soviet Latvia and those of the free world were parted for decades. The road to the renewed independence of the 4 May 1990 was long, indeed.

The historical experiences of numerous European nations in the 20th century are traumatic, especially when viewed in the war discourse and in context of various repressions. The experiences of Latvian refugees in the Second World War and their post-war experiences form a complex of traumatic feelings, on the one hand, extremely individual and personal, and on the other, showing clear traces of collective similarities and uniting emotional experiences. The individual experience of the past allows to “construct” the collective past experience in the present. It is of great importance to learn and remember the tragic pages of the Latvian nation’s history. They also include the strength of spirit and national self-consciousness. The time spent by the refugees in Sweden analysed in the present research is a part from the destiny of the Latvians in the after-war Europe of the 20th century and also a part of the Latvian literature and history.

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