

‘Latvians Abroad’: A Planned Latvian Emigration Museum and Research Center

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The twentieth century can be characterized in world history not only by the two total, devastating world wars that took place during the first half of the century, but also by the hitherto unprecedented mass migrations of peoples that accompanied these wars, migrations where millions of people swept across Europe in a few years – not only soldiers, but millions and millions of civilians – to escape the war and save ones life, to escape occupying armies, because they were forced by governing authorities or because their homes had been destroyed.

Latvians formed a small part of this mass movement of peoples throughout the century, having been both a sending and a receiving country. While it lost a significant percentage of its population during the two world wars, it became an immigrant destination during the Soviet period after World War II, only to undergo new waves of emigration in the present century, to the extent that an Integration Ministry study in 2006 estimated that almost 300,000 former Latvian inhabitants were now permanent residents outside Latvia. That

amounts to approximately 13% of the population.¹

Yet in spite of the significance of migrations in recent Latvian history, there has been very little study of the mass migrations and no attempt to preserve the histories and experiences of the emigrants. Fortunately, this is slowly changing with respect to the current populations of former Latvian inhabitants living abroad. In 2006 the Latvian Ministry of Integration launched a systematic investigation of and interaction with the Latvian communities residing abroad, but so far only preliminary data have been published (see www.integracija.gov.lv).

Latvian demographics and history in 20th century – a short outline

The population of Latvia during the last century has varied between 1,6 million and 2,67 million (*Table 1*), the changes most often being due to population migration and loss during a war, rather than to natural causes.

Great upheavals in Latvian history have most often been accompanied by-

Table 1 - Latvian population, 1863 - 2007¹

Year	Total population of Latvia	Latvians (%)	Number of Latvians outside Latvia
1863	1,240,000		
1897	1,929,387	68%	149,000
1914	2,552,000	60%	230,000 – 260,000
1920	1,596,000	72.6%	
1935	1,950,000	75.2%	215,000 – 225,000
1943	1,803,104		
1959	2,093,000	62%	262,000
1990	2,670,000	52%	201,000 - 211,000
1992	2,657,755	52.5%	195,000 – 205,000
2006			300,000 ²
2007 ³	2,259,810	58.2%	

¹ Plakans, Andrejs, 1995, *The Latvians. A Short History*. Hoover Institution Press, p. 88.

² Bērziņš, Aldis, 2006, „Emigrācija skaitlīnos” *Kultūras Forums*, 16. – 22. sept. p. 4

³ www.indexmundi.com/latvia/demographics

great changes in the population. One of the most devastating population losses occurred before and during World War I, when in 1914 about 760,000 people from Western Latvia were forced out of their homes to flee East, many to Russia,² which soon was gripped by civil war. According to Krasnais, there were about 300,000 Latvian inhabitants in Russia at the eve of World War I, which group then more than doubled with the influx of refugees.³ Plakans estimates that by March 1917 some one million Latvians had taken residence outside the Baltic area.⁴ Many made it back to Latvia after the war and Latvia's independence in 1918, but many more remained in Russia when it became the

Soviet Union. A number of Latvians were in leadership positions in the Communist party and were among the thousands killed in Stalin's purges in the 1930's.

The next great upheaval in population came with World War II with the mass exodus of civilians to both the East and the West, as the armies swept across Latvia several times (*see Table 2*).

Toward the end of WWII as the Soviet army was again recapturing Latvia hundreds of thousands of Latvian inhabitants fled or were forced to move West, where about 214,000 ended up on German territory.⁵ Of those more than 100,000 stayed in Germany in DP refugee camps. After 2-5 years in camps most had emigrated to host countries including 40,000

Table 2 Latvian history highlights and population movements 1939 - 1991.

Date	Historical event	Civilian population movement
1939	Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression pact – Baltic countries assigned to the USSR	Hitler urges all ethnic Germans to return to their homeland. Most Baltic Germans emigrate to Germany.
1940, June 17 – 1941, July 5	USSR occupies Latvia.	Approximately 35,000 Latvian inhabitants deported to USSR. First mass deportations June 13-14, 1941. ⁴
1941, June 23	Germany attacks USSR; World War II starts.	Some Jews, communist sympathizers, functionaries and others flee to the USSR with retreating Soviet army.
1941, July – 1945, May	Nazi occupation of Latvia. -1941: Nazi extermination of Jews, mostly in location. -1943: Latvian Legion formed -1943: secret Latvian Central Council formed	25,000 Jews brought into Latvia by the Nazis, of which 10,000 eventually transported back to Germany. 4,000 surviving Latvian Jews transported to Germany in 1943. ⁴
1945, May 8	World War II ends. USSR reoccupies Latvia	Approximately 200,000 (10%) of Latvia's inhabitants flee or are forced to leave for the West. ⁵ Soviet functionaries and some former Latvian inhabitants return to Latvia from the USSR with Soviet army.
1945 – 1991	Soviet occupation of Latvia	1941- 1949: approximately 200,000 of Latvian inhabitants deported to Siberia, about 1/3 eventually return. ⁶ 1945-1955: Some 535,000 workers from USSR sent into Latvia. ⁷

⁴ *These Names Accuse*, 1982, The Latvian National Foundation, Stockholm, p. XXX.⁵ Andrew Ezergailis, personal communication.⁶ Baltais, Mirdza Kate, 1999, "Pies piedu iesaukšana darbam Vācijā, militāram dienestam un evakuācija uz Vāciju", *The Latvian Legion: Selected Documents*. Ezergailis, Andrew, ed. Toronto: Amber Printers and Publishers, pg. 193-199. Of the 200,000 about 30,000 were soldiers, several thousand were mobilized or volunteered to work in Germany, and most of the rest were refugees. Only about 100,000 eventually reached Germany. Mirdza Baltais proposes that during the war about 217,000 Latvians had reached Germany, but only about 140,000 remained as émigrés.⁷ Plakans, Andrejs, *op cit.* p. 155.⁸ Plakans, Andrejs, *op cit.* p. 15

to the United States. There they established still active communities-in-exile, whose two main goals were to remind the world about Latvia's occupation and preserve pre-war Latvian language and culture until the day that Latvia is independent again.

My family and I were among them. Since my father was a Lutheran minister and actively engaged in the Latvian community, I grew up fully a part of two cultures, the American one and the Latvian world, which was the center of my social and cultural life. When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, some emigres returned from their homes in the West, but many were too assimilated and integrated into their host countries. However, often the connection, especially for the older generation, was still there, and many people, even though they didn't intend to move back to Latvia to live, wanted to share their experiences with their compatriots in Latvia. They wanted to tell them what they had done on behalf of Latvia during the occupation, about who they were.⁶ Partly to help implement this desire, I agreed to collect life stories of Latvian-American emigres and eventually to 'return them to Latvia' as part of a bigger story of emigration over the last few centuries. Yet interest in the stories and experiences of emigres by Latvian inhabitants has remained tepid at best. Furthermore, what information there was was scattered and not easily available.

When in the spring of 2006 I participated in a conference on migration and oral history at the Norwegian Emigrant Museum, I realized that what we needed in Latvia was a central research center

for emigration issues, a place where we could research the various emigrations, preserve emigration artifacts and show the emigrant experience. We needed a museum and a research center modelled on that in Norway and that dealt not only with the migration during WWII, but with a much broader time frame. Fortunately, The Museum's director, Knut Djupedal has been extremely helpful and supportive of the idea and has helped us develop plans for implementation that might just be the ones that result in a successful result.

Current emigration from Latvia

Around the same time the Latvian government was becoming seriously concerned about the increasing numbers of young, professional people emigrating in search of better paying jobs and a easier lifestyle abroad. In order to start addressing the problem, they first had to get some statistics about the former Latvian inhabitants now living abroad. Under the sponsorship of the Integration Ministry of Latvia and the PBLA⁷ the Center for Economic and Opinion Research (SKDS) canvassed the embassies and various local ethnic organizations in 75 countries in 2006 to arrive at some preliminary data about emigrants from Latvia in those countries. By 2006 a total of almost 300,000 former Latvian inhabitants (about 13%) had emigrated to other countries. *Table 3* shows the number of host country inhabitants from Latvia or of Latvian descent in the countries with the greatest numbers: 69% of the Latvian inhabitants living abroad were ethnic Latvians, whereas 32% of all emigrants were Latvian citizens. In the USA about half of the latter

Table 3 – Former Latvian inhabitants now permanently settled abroad⁹

Country	Former Latvian inhabitants	Percent of total emigrants
USA	87,564	31%
Great Britain and Northern Ireland	37,500	13%
Russia	30,142	11%
Ireland	30,000	11%
Canada	22,615	8%
Australia	18,935	7%
Germany	9,447	3%
Brazil	10,000	4%
Ukraine	5,079	2%
Sweden	4,000	1%
Lithuania	2,955	1%

⁹ Bšrzinš, Aldis 2006, *op.cit*

have double citizenship.⁸ The numbers in this study are approximate and need more investigation for several reasons. In the first place, the data were obtained from various sources within a country, some of which were only giving very approximate estimations. Secondly, there was no clear definition of who should be included in the counts. It is also clear that by now the numbers have grown, because for 2007 alone *indexmundi* reported an average of 2.7 emigrants from Latvia for every 1000 inhabitants.⁹ In informal surveys most of them do not intend to return to Latvia.

‘LATVIANS ABROAD’ – Museum and Research Center (LA-MRC) - initial plans

The idea for a new history museum in Latvia is based on the premise that Latvi-

ans are not only those who reside within the territory of Latvia, but everyone who considers him/herself as Latvian or belonging to Latvian culture and that their history ought to become part of Latvian history as a whole. The impetus to establish a museum and research center was 1) the lack of systematic preservation of diaspora cultures in Latvia and abroad, 2) no other institution in Latvia or abroad intends to do it, and 3) encouragement by similar organizations, e.g., the Norwegian Emigrant Museum. The mission of LA-MRC is to research, preserve and disseminate the histories and cultures of Latvians abroad as an integral part of the history of Latvia. The goals of the museum are 1) to present interesting, engaging and educational exhibits and programs for broad range of audiences, 2) to initiate and support

a variety of emigration research projects, 3) to collect and preserve the documents, archives, relics and other material culture artifacts of Latvian communities, individuals and organizations abroad, 4) to establish a research library on Latvian emigration, 5) to help build bridges between the people of Latvia and Latvians abroad, and 6) to help build bridges between host countries and Latvia.

The focus of research and exhibitions will be the emigration history of Latvians and their life abroad during the last 200 years. The exhibitions will address the history of the emigration, motivations for leaving of the emigrants, Latvian immigrant communities, their culture, activities and organizations in each country of residence, influence of host country on immigrant communities, emigrants' contributions to the world and to Latvia, contemporary status of Latvian immigrant communities and return migration and its consequences. The first priority regarding the facility will be to develop traditional exhibition galleries, administrative offices and a collections storage facility.

The site will be outside Riga for several reasons. 1) Getting permissions to build in Riga is a multi-year process; 2) building outside Riga is considerably cheaper; 3) we want enough land to have a conference center and an open air museum, and 4) we want to bring much needed economic and cultural development to a provincial region in Latvia. The site should have some connection to emigration, should be within an hour's drive from Riga, be close to other tourist, cultural or educational sites, have a favorable museum and local government environment, be large enough

for future development, and be within our budgetary means.

When fully functional the program will consist of permanent and special exhibitions, travelling (or digital) exhibitions, open-air installations, publications for academic and general audiences, reference library, conference facilities, guided tours and school programs, public programs and special events, internship programs for youth and students, a gift shop or other commercial enterprise. Clearly the program components will be implemented over time, as money becomes available. It is possible that in the beginning we will have to concentrate on collecting materials and developing travelling and digital exhibitions.

The museum will be private, incorporated in Latvia, with a Board of Governors (Trustees), an advisory board and paid professional employees, e.g., director, assistant, curators, etc. The policies will be set by the annual full membership meeting and executed by the Board, which is elected by the membership. We hope that the start-up funding will come from international funds (EU, EEA, local embassies), Latvian ministries, Latvian cultural granting organizations abroad. Operational funding will come from grants, Latvian government agencies, museum membership dues, donations/bequests from individuals or organizations, rental fees and a commercial enterprise connected with the museum.

Implementation – phase one.

Since establishing such an institution in Latvia is a very large undertaking, I started out by floating the idea in the

forums where I was already active and by canvassing key people in the exile community and Latvia. By June 2007 we had formed a working committee of 15 members from the USA, Sweden and Latvia, who had either volunteered after some of my talks or whom I had recruited. Clearly members of the emigre community were very enthusiastic about the plans.

The next step was to found the museum organization in Latvia and to get the officials and people in Latvia involved in the process, because even though the idea of the center and museum came from the emigre community, we wanted the people in Latvia to feel that it was their museum, that they were an integral part of it. Therefore, Ints Dzelzgalvis and I spent the month of June 2007 meeting with various central, local government and museum officials, recruiting potential task force members, and researching potential museum sites. Unfortunately, the major building used for the transfer of emigrants for many years even during Tsarist times was not available. We have been offered several parcels of land for free. We have also investigated two former mansions, connected with emigres, but none are in good enough condition to warrant work on it. The site search for the museum continues.

We have been quite successful in forming potential relationships with local, cultural and government officials, including some local museums and local government officials. The director of the Latvian Museum Board, Janis Garjans continues to be most helpful. The Minister of Culture has expressed her enthusiastic support for the museum, while

the staff of the Integration Ministry's Department for Special Tasks Regarding Latvians Living Abroad has advised us on funding and other matters. Our presence at the AEMI meeting in Turku, Finland 2007 was of special interest to the higher government officials and I think opened some doors for us.

Thanks to the good offices of the well-known and popular Latvian writer, diplomat and public figure Anna Žigure, we obtained the *pro bono* services of a law firm in Riga. They helped us with our by-laws and registered the museum in the official Latvian Registry under the official name of 'LATVIANS ABROAD – Museum and Research Center' (LAMRC), *LATVIEŠI PASAULE – Muzejs un pētniecības centrs* (LaPa-MPC).

Implementation – phase two

After incorporation we have concentrated on obtaining funding to 1) set up and maintain a web site and publish other information, 2) to rent an office in Riga with part time staff, 3) to continue the search for a site, 4) to organize a planning meeting, and 5) to undertake the first, digital exhibition in DVD format as an information and fundraising tool.

We have also started to organize and incorporate a support group in the USA to facilitate fundraising and to start the collection process of exhibition materials. We have obtained funding from the Latvian Integration Ministry and started designing the web site. The other grant applications, to the EEA and Latvian Foundation, Inc. (LF) are pending. We applied for funds for the office, staff and planning seminar from EEA, and to implement the digital exhibition of suit-

cases and the stories that go with them from the LF.

Several important archives and databases have been promised for the museum, the most important being the American Latvian Association organizational data base (ALAIDD), which incorporates materials from all the Latvian-American organizations and their staff, the American Latvian Association Oral History collection and some large, private archives.

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Notes

- 1 Berziņš, Aldis, 2006, „Emigracija skaitlōs,” *Kultūras Forums*, sept. 16-22, p. 4.
- 2 Plakans, Andrejs, 1995, *The Latvians. A Short History*, Hoover Institute Press,.. p. 115.
- 3 Krasnais, Vilberts, 1980, *Latviešu Kolonijas*, Kārla Zariņa Fonds, Melburnā.
- 4 Plakans, Andrejs, *op. cit.* p. 116.
- 5 Baltais, Mīrza Kate, 1999, "Piespiedu iesaukšana darbam Vācijā, militāram dienestam un evakuācija uz Vāciju", *The Latvian Legion: Selected Documents*. Ezergailis, Andrew, ed. Toronto: Amber Printers and Publishers, pg. 193-199. Of the 200,000 about 30,000 were soldiers, several thousand were mobilized or volunteered to work in Germany, and most of the rest were refugees. Only about 100,000 eventually reached Germany. Mīrza Baltais proposes that during the war about 217,000 Latvians had reached Germany, but only about 140,000 remained as émigrés.
- 6 For a more thorough description see Hinkle, Maija, 2006, "Latvian-Americans in the Post-Soviet Era: Cultural Factors on Return Migration in Oral History Interviews," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 37,no. 1, p. 48-67.
- 7 PBLA is the acronym for the Latvian name of the World Federation of Free Latvians, an association of the various national level organizations of Latvians in the USA, Canada Australia, South America, England and Europe. They represent primarily emigres from World War II.
- 8 Bērziņš, Aldis, *op. cit.*
- 9 www.indexmundi.com/Latvia/demographics