

The Exile Documentary Heritage: Collecting, Research and Integration to the Latvian History

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Latvian refugees, emigration, exile and the Latvian diaspora are terms related by and large to the whole of the exile history but also the future. Researching the recorded material we reconstruct and study a part of the knowledge and experience we have been deprived of, acquiring the heritage of a section of the generation the thoughts and aspirations of which we were unaware of for a long time. The experience and impressions of every single person help us understand better the circumstances resulting in big changes in the history of our people. The research of exile history and of events in the lives of the refugees can be studied today due to the well organized and recorded activities of the Latvians living in the West. The Latvians of various countries and continents were united by unions, associations and congregations establishing the foundation for achieving their common goals. In fact, almost all these organizations saw as their primary national political aim to restore the freedom and independence of Latvia. The means and ways of it were derived from the profile of every separate union.

Life in democratic countries, its very experience, the possibility to express one's mind and wishes participating in the politics of the state gave the Latvians in the West the proficiency they could use in later years. Following their primary political goal they thought it necessary to remind everybody, always and everywhere of the fate of the state and the people of Latvia.

This was one of the principal aims of the World Federation of Free Latvians (*Pasaules brīvo latviešu apvienība*) – to be present and take the floor everywhere the independence of Latvia could have been discussed, fighting together with the other Baltic organizations for the rights and the sovereignty of the Baltic States.

Historical research is based on documents, various sources. We have established as our goal to spot, collect, arrange and make accessible for researchers the material we possess. That is why we have been collecting the exile heritage for more than thirty years already. In the initial years of the regained independence we, like the majority of Latvian people, were kindled by purely human interest in everything that had happened behind the iron curtain. As the material accumulated and we developed an idea about the routes of escape of Latvians and their later life in exile, we grew more purposeful in collecting the sources of information bearing in mind the future users and their interests. People have been very kind in handing the material over to the archives. We are grateful for them on behalf of us, but also of the future generations using the records in their research. Besides the Latvian State Archives, written records are being collected by various Latvian institutions of culture and education. In order to have a survey of the location of the material, the collection “Exile Archives Are Coming to Latvia” is being compiled in collaboration with Latvian libraries, museums and educational institutions.

What have we collected in these years? The most remarkable part is the documents of the central exile organizations enabling us to study the history of their political activities. The records of various social, cultural and educational institutions and religious congregations reflect the versatile aspects of life, activities of people and their interest in the preservation of their spiritual heritage and traditions. Personal archives and collections show different points of view on things and events giving history its color. There are three directories assembling

data on the archives and collections in possession of cultural institutions. Of course, these do not include all the material there is in Latvia. A closer analysis of sources and their arrangement has revealed in many cases that the material is fragmentary. Therefore we have appealed to former leaders and members of the organizations to check their archives. It can be some documents are still there and could give us a better idea of the history the organization. Unless we do it today, it can be already late tomorrow.

We know that the change of generations can destroy records, and so we have to be more active with our research in the countries of exile communities. For the purpose we have compiled questionnaires and sent them to all the central organizations trying to identify all the possible archives or the states where the records of exile organizations have been taken to the repositories and research centers of the respective countries.

We have proposed exile cultural organizations to conduct annual field trips to identify people who still have written records.

The aim of assembling material in the archives is to establish a comprehensive data basis for the objective history of Latvia and Latvians including the history of exile Latvians as its inseparable part. Taking into account the tragic events in the Baltic countries in 1940s and their direct impact on the exile community we believe that our attempts at creating a center of exile records in Latvia are justified.

What is the situation of research on exile history in Latvia? On the academic level it can be said to be very fragmentary conducted primarily within the frame of other research topics. There are no historians specialized on the history of exile. The situation outside Latvia is somewhat better but changing. The older generation is on the point of finishing its work and we do not know whether there will be follow-up in the field. The new volume of the 20th century Latvian history is in its treatment of the exile fragmentary. It is time to take up exile history in a more systematic way. Considering the fact that the work done in the Soviet period is tendentious and untrue while the sources used outside Latvia could be only those available in exile, we have to study the sources in Latvia as well as in exile in order to have an objective picture of the period in the history of our people. Research conducted this way can give a thorough survey about occupation authorities and exile activities in 1960s. It is no secret that many people in Latvia know very little about the life of Latvians in exile, their work and share in restoring Latvia's independence. At the same time the exile community has a limited idea about the then mechanisms of power and the environment of lies and misleading information surrounding people in Latvia. One part of the people knows little about the other. So, one of the major goals of Latvian historians is to write a common history uniting different historical events and facts and giving an objective survey of the historical period. These were the aspects that made me study archival records with the aim to find out how good is my knowledge of the exile politics of the occupation regime calling those living in exile emigrants. I looked at the records we received quite recently, the materials of the ministries of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union and the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. I will give a brief survey of the list of the documents.

The first thing the Soviet authorities did after the end of the hostilities was to collect data on the former citizens of the Soviet Union or the refugees initiating active campaigns of propaganda in the exile community. Several documents reveal that the Soviet Union tried to use diplomatic channels, like in the case with Sweden, in order to get the needed information. But the dismissive attitude of the Swedish part made them look for other ways. These were found in Latvia. Local institutions – the executive committees of regions and parishes – were asked to compile lists of all the people that had left Latvia, and of all their relatives that had stayed behind.

Of special value were the people well-known in the fields of culture, education, research or art that could be used in the interests of the Soviet politics. Referring to them,

demonstrating ties and contacts with them turned them into partners and collaborators although in many cases it was far from the truth. This, in turn, resulted in resentment in the exile community for collaboration with the occupation authorities was thought to be impossible. As the regulative records show it was the conscious tactics of the Soviet regime to split the exile community by sowing mistrust. The policy was not entirely fruitless.

The purposeful character of the Soviet policy is illustrated by the order given to the foreign ministry of the Latvian SSR to work out a program for their work with the exile community. The aim of the propaganda was to take a part of the refugees back to the Soviet Union for after the war the shortage of people was noticeable. It would also have diminished the anti-Soviet activities of the exile community. It has to be observed that Latvians held “a special place” in the reports of the foreign ministry on the anti-Soviet propaganda. The Soviet authorities collected data on individuals, refugee organizations, publications, events and various activities.

Exile publications were read carefully, commented and retold. In order to be well informed the ministry of foreign affairs of the Latvian SSR tried to have abundant resources to subscribe to foreign publications, including the exile ones.

The Latvian SSR needed legal organizations enabling it to keep in contact with the refugees. On April 24, 1947 the then minister of foreign affairs P. Valeskalns sent an official letter to the secretary of the Central Committee of the Latvian CP E. Kalnbērziņš proposing to found in Latvia an association that would establish cultural contacts with foreign countries. Other Soviet republics were said to have those associations already. The Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party adopted a corresponding decision and the organization was established.

Of interest is another group of documents – the materials related to the talks and discussions of the staff of the Soviet embassy and the exile Latvians. Every meeting was recorded and evaluated whether a particular person was suitable for achieving the aims of the Soviet propaganda. It has to be observed that these documents are rich in material on the exile community. In principle, these interviews reflect the moods prevailing among the refugees at that time. At the same time we are familiar with the traditions of the Soviet information, so we have to be critical about the material and compare it to other sources of information.

Soviet authorities grasped quite quickly the significance of Latvian unions in organizing the refugees, and one of the special directions in the ideological work was to discredit the central organizations and the activities of their leaders. There are documents proving that in late 1960s the embassies of the Soviet Union made proposals how to split and ruin emigrant organizations. We need not comment today on the success of the policy. The activities of the organizations and their results speak for themselves. Why so much attention was paid to the exile associations? As the people of embassies, observing carefully the activities of these organizations and studying their documents, reported most of the associations saw as their primary aim to restore the democratic and independent Latvia by supporting and encouraging compatriots living at home, compiling materials for Western printed press and radio, fighting against the Soviet propaganda in exile communities, involving the exile youth in various cultural activities to guarantee the sustainability of culture, its national spirit and feelings of unity, developing different ways and forms of public action, and by giving material support for those Latvian refugees that were in need.

Therefore it was necessary to discredit the active workers of the organizations. How the policy was pursued? As an example we could refer to a secret letter by the minister of foreign affairs of the Latvian SSR to the Latvian minister of security from the year 1948. Attached to the letter was the list of best-known and more active leaders of exile organizations in America. The ministry asked to compile discrediting material on those people, especially on their collaboration with the German occupation authorities. The

application stressed the importance of facts on their participation in the German actions like massacres, blowing up of factories, destruction of cultural heritage, or on their collaboration with the German occupation authorities in subjecting the Latvian population to the regime, distributing German propaganda material, campaigning for enlistment in the German army, and working for the German secret police, etc.

The staff of the security and foreign policy bodies of the Soviet Union followed closely the activities of **the accredited representatives** of the independent governments of the Baltic States. In fact, the records show that the Soviet Union had analyzed it thoroughly. Although reports portrayed their work in a sarcastic and negative light, they had to admit that in many countries the accredited representatives had managed to gain continued support to the principle of Latvian independence and the policy of unrecognizing the occupation. In one of the 1984 reports by the Soviet embassy in the US sent to the ministry of foreign affairs of the USSR it has been observed that the Baltic exile organizations are regular guests in the events organized by the US State Department or other institutions, and the accredited representatives of the non-existent states are invited to receptions in the White House while the Soviet representatives are sometimes not. Next the report observes that the leaders of exile organizations have many possibilities to access various US state institutions and officials. With 18 months there had been almost 70 informal meetings in the White House, the US Congress and the State Department with the participation of the representatives of exile organizations. The list of facts and examples could be continued – but this is not my task.

For comparison I looked through the documents of the corresponding period on the activities of exile organizations and various public figures. These revealed their reaction on different circumstances and facts concerning the activities of the exile community.

The unambiguous conclusion is that the aims set at the establishment of the World Federation of Free Latvians were steadily put into practice – Latvians like other Baltic people were always present reminding at every possibility the independence of Latvia. But we have to admit that in many cases the people living in Latvia knew nothing about the activities of Latvians living in the West.

This brief study was not a research project but emerged from the need to understand our ideas concerning the Soviet emigrant politics. We have to admit that the backstage was unknown to us for long. A more thorough study of this part of our common history is still ahead.

This is an important and wide field of work that cannot be done alone and so the archivists have proposed to establish **the Research Center of Exile History**, established already in Estonia and Lithuania. The Latvian State Archives and other institutions assembling records of exile community would be the basis of research with data bases arranged by international standards so that these could be later exchanged with immigration research centers of other countries.

To guarantee research level we hope to avoid provincial approach not limiting ourselves to the issues of importance **for Latvia only**. The context has to include all the Baltic States as well as other foreign countries. The exile history is as to its essence related to global issues – the history of the emigration of no research history in Latvia but a topic of great relevance in the contemporary society. The subjects of integration and emigration are topical also within the context of the European Union. The role and significance of Latvian diaspora is of importance also in the contemporary independent Latvia. This, however, is already an issue for the future historians.

The aim of the project is to study exile history in connection with the history of Latvia integrating them into a whole to consolidate our national unity and break down mental barriers for we share a common fate, 60 years of heavy trial. We have to admit that both parts have stood the test.

I would like to quote what our diplomat Kārlis Zariņš said 54 years ago: “We all know our great duty to our fellow countrymen living in homeland. I have to say that years in exile have not been futile. We all are trying to acquire the Western culture and way of life, to master the cultural achievements of the West and collect material values for it all is needed in homeland. Once it was said, “Sons, sail the seas and collect money into your purse,” now we could say, “collect the West-European culture for the well-being of your fatherland!” Living abroad no one can think he returns home as a hero. We return with the knowledge and experience we have had to serve our suffering people and devastated fatherland.”

Finally I would like to say that Latvian emigrant community has fulfilled the wish of our outstanding diplomat, Latvia has become a member of the NATO and the EU and continues its development as an independent state.

Translated by Anne Lange