

Livonian Lifestories: Source of Identity

This example from a well-known respondent such as Lizete is just one example of the way in which Lifestories of the Livonian Coast open the way to understanding Livonian identity.

The Livonian Coast is located on the northern part of Kurland on Kolka's Peninsula in Northwestern Latvia. Between the World Wars, there were eleven Livonian fishing villages. After World War II, however, this part of Latvia became a border zone occupied by the Soviets, and the civil inhabitants slowly disappeared. The main source of income - fishing – was forbidden and there was nothing for young people to do. This area's inhabitants today are largely older individuals.

The main sources for this study of Livonian identity are:

1. Lifestories of Livonians and inhabitants of the Livonian coast recorded in the 1980s. The Latvian Oral History Collection now holds over sixty Lifestories that address on Livonian identity and history. (These are indexed according to the marker Li), each of which is at least 1.5 hours long.
2. The results of qualitative research analyzing the responses of 120 interviewees who discussed living conditions on the Livonian Coast and issues of identity in 1997.
3. Video interviews with experts in this field from Estonia and Finland. Interviewees include Seppo Suhonen, Eduard Vaari, Tiit Rein Viitso.

Based on these sources, I have tried to define the main themes and key words found in individual memories recorded in Lifestories in Livonian villages in the 1990s:

1. Refugees from World War I and World War II
2. Livonian social life and community activities (Livod It) between the wars.
3. Fishing, fishermen's and fisherwomen's work and the dangers of the sea
4. Parent's high value of work- work as a most important factor of life.
5. Children's and youth's plays and games in Livonian houses
6. Support from friends and related ethnic groups in Finland and Estonia.
7. World War II in the forests and on the sea.
8. World War II and postwar repressed and its influence on the lives of many people
9. Topological mythological motifs

The Lifestories found in the oral history collection may be divided into categories according to the way in which the interviewees form their narrative. In the first group, the narratives provide a broad and informative picture. In the second group, the interviewee forms a rather free and open Lifestory. The Lifestory could be a chronological telling, where the interviewee stops at important periods and events in his or her life, but it could also be a story that ties simply together several important personal events in the individual's life. In the third category, a talented orator provides a performance, and in this story, the main highlights are the ways of expression and the inimitable color of the story.

In this article I will consider how Livonians express and characterize their identity, as inhabitants of the coast of Kurzeme, fishermen and women, and in terms of ethnicity. Respondents who spoke Livonian, but have since passed away, are Katrina Krasone, Peteris Dambergs, Alvine Uzpils, Emilija Rulle, Marta Betholde, Elza Mansurova, and Lizete Švanenberga. Others who speak Livonian Elfrida Žagare, Pauline Kļavina, Imgarde Cerbahai, Edgars Volgansksis.

Sharing a common land and history plays an important role in identity formation for those most active Livonian society members, who still spoke Livonian into the 1970s. Even up to the regaining of independence, the history of twentieth-century Livonians continued in the oral tradition, passed on to others by the generation who had experienced it themselves.

World War I Refugees

According to the Latvian Encyclopedia, there were approximately 2,000 to 3,000 Livonians in Kurzeme prior to World War I, but in 1925, only 1,238 of Kurzeme's inhabitants identified themselves as Livonians and in 1935, 944 identified themselves as such. Oral history sources give us a glimpse of life behind these numbers.

World War I events appear in many lifestories, as the respondents' early childhood memories, in family histories, and in explaining their place of birth.

I was born in the autumn and in the summer of the next year we fled to Estonia and went by boat to Saaremaa. I do not remember this, but I know this from stories. Ella Kandere, born in Sikrags, 1914.

Alberts Kriekis, born in St. Petersburg, 1917. His parents died when he was young - **"fleeing during the war, no one knows, how they got there."**

Peteris Dambergs, born in Sikraga in 1909, remembers World War I events himself:

It was summer. We had climbed on the dunes and watched, how in Ventspils the [grain?] elevator was burning. We could see its fire and smoke, we could see it. People said, look, they're now burning the Ventspils elevator. I started to cry and my father hit me on the bottom for that - what am I crying for! But soon after that . . ., it was so, that the village inhabitants were planning to leave because the Germans were coming. My grandmother, I remember said, "Muskarls" (that is my dad) he can't stay here because he has *disagreements* with the forester and the landlord.

Even after seventy years the atmosphere of the fleeing reveals such details as, *Ventspils elevator's fire, father's disagreements with the forester.*

These memories from such a long time ago are proof of the strong impression an event leaves on an individual's mind, even though he or she was a small child at the time. This personal experience found in memories can be compared with archival materials about refugees, official governmental notices etc. The emotions expressed in these stories and first childhood impressions reveal that these events have influenced a person's understanding about values, the world, and his or her place in it.

"Well, and then I remember, that we packed our things, some clothes, primarily only those clothes. We did not take other things, of course. We did not even take the nets. We just packed those in bags and took them to the seashore. One of our relatives from Ventspils had come. . .My mother's mother's relative of some kind, and they left him in our house, he did not come with us, he was left at home as a watchman, so to say. / . . / Those people who could leave on their own in some way, left on their own. At that time *uradniki* encouraged people to leave, went from house to house and encouraged people to leave."

Edgars in Valgama, born in 1912 and has, since 1939 lived the greater part of his life in little city, in Finland, also remembers from his childhood the fear as a refugee:

". . . When we had arrived in Pernava, then we could hear that the German shooting had started from the direction of the sea. There were small children, my brother also, the neighbors' had their children, everyone screaming. Then we were under the deck [they were building a ship]. I remember, that's the only thing, that my mother then yelled at the men above to be careful, to come down. My mother's *shout of fear* has stayed in my memory to this day."

The centrality of emotion in Peter Dambergs's story provides evidence of the detail found in memories:

". . . Young Fisher was planning to leave. The older Fishers wanted to stay here. I still remember, how they all were clustered together, crying along the seashore, walking away, as though they were staying, as though they were going home. . . Their son was still calming them down, stroking the older Fishers, and so they stayed here.

What Peter Dambergs remembers himself has also become a part of the next generation's memory. Erna Vanaga, maiden name Breinkopf, emotionally tells of her parents' experience. Her sister's birthplace and her grandmother's place of death in Revele is an unforgettable part of the family's history.

And then we went to Revele [. . .] Velta was born in Revele. She worked with fish, I remember, how mother told us how they packaged fish not in the center, but somewhere outside of town. Grandmother - my mother's mother and my father's mother - both died there. Both grandmothers are buried there. [. . .] She very often thought about them, mother still cried, that they had just begun to live, everything now was destroyed. Grandfather in Sikraga was considered to be very wealthy - he had ships, father's father, grandfather Didrikis had had ships. They were considered to be rich. Then when they returned, they saw that there was no room for them to live....

Peter Damberg's story reveals the refugee relationship with the locals and the awareness of language relatedness:

. . . Well we left for Kuuresaare, now Kingisep, in Saamsala. We lived there for one, approximately one month. Then the refugees who had settled there were evacuated away to Haapsala... In Haapsala even in the refugee school...some Estonians attended the refugee school. You did not have to pay for anything there. Livonian language - is similar to Estonian, but it is not Estonian, and the language of the islanders is also different. We were "kurrata saarlasiid" - islanders from the devil..We could get along...

The refugee situations are shaped by coincidences, experiences, uncertainties and moving from one place to the other. The only form of material security are items taken from home.

Alvine Murniece (born in 1906 in Luznas) still remembered in 1996 the long refugee voyage and returning home to her place of birth:

"I had several brothers. In World War I, when that war came, then everyone fled from here. With a ship from (Migeltorn) to Haapsala. We were in Haapasala, Revele, and there in Revele - Tallin, father was taken by the war and we again were left at home, and then from there to Vjatka, then to Kirov, there we were. And then when Father was released, he was so old, that's why Father got home. And then Father and Mother went to work on the railroad, and we kids were around the house again, and there, where we were, in Vjatka. And then from Vjatka we were transferred to Rezekne, working on the railroad. And then from Rezekne we got home only when the war ended. . . We got home only when the war ended. We came home only with what we had on our backs. . . we came back on a little sled, which we were given there, and so we came home, on the small sled.

The small sled is the salary for life in exile. But many did not return from the refugee travels - some died, some disappeared without trace, and disappeared in Russia. Such is the story about the old (?) devil:

It is berry picking time, and all the women went to pick berries, but the hay must also be taken care of because it has been rather rainy. Now the sun is shining, now the hay should be processed, because there were many animals.

That was in greatgrandfather's time. He had stripped naked and tied the stump with all its roots to his back and had gone over the hills on all fours, and the women went home screaming that they had seen the devil.

(Silvija Milda Helena Rudzite, born in 1921 in Vaide, story recorded in Boston).

Many of the Livonians have very developed artistic talents, and a poetic sense of the world fits well with the fishing lifestyle. This is apparent in the first Livonian poetry collection where the majority of the authors have earned their living on sea, as well as in the expressive way in which the narrators describe their daily live and environment in which they live.

"When Ernest finally was released to go home, he could not even step over a blade of grass. He could not even step over a blade of grass," Alvina Murniece remembers her husband's return from Siberia.

She describes her father's and brother's struggle with the sea as though she had been there herself:

"My father was a fisherman, he was a fisherman. How many times didn't he almost drown, but he was saved again again. Once he and my brother had been fishing, and what happened, but the wind came and knocked over the mast and so water was coming in and around the boat. And Father had clutched the bottom of the boat, and that brother too. That brother said, I can't any longer, I'm letting go, I can't anymore. My Father said, hey, hold on, hold on, what will we say, what will I tell your wife, when I get home, what will we tell your wife...well, they see, that another boat is coming from in the direction, where they are. Maybe, when they come closer, they will save us. The wind was building, building much stronger. Yes, and then the boat came closer and saved them, but then everything that they had stayed on the sea, and the boat too... good, that they could save those people.

I grew up between the covers of a Bible, ninety-eight-year-old Emilija Princis describes her religious upbringing in 1995 in Ugale.

In Irmgarde Cerbaha's memories brought from Sweden, Finno-Ugric mythology's familiar bird motif plays a central role in her narrative of refugee boat crossings across the sea.

For each it was different. Sprogi had had a rather crazy time of it, they said, that they survived a storm, and had to throw everything overboard. For others it had gone rather well. My sister-in-law's mother told me, she left from Liepaja, and they were going along and then the fuel started to run out, and there is nothing else...Just the open sea, and everyone starts to panic. No land, none. Gotlande Island should have been there, but it was not. Finally, somebody noticed a crow, it was flying, and they they turned in the direction, where that crow was flying, and at they were at the very point!

They would have gone by, and through, if the crow had not brought them...

Estonian and Finnish Researchers

Stories about Estonian and Finnish researcher expeditions long remain in the speech and memories of narrators. Lizete (Dvanenberga?) remembered, how Estonian researcher Oskars Loorits was given the name Valdapa - Whitehead because of his pure white hair.

Elfrida (Žagare) remembers stories she has heard about the Estonian Professor Ketunaanu, who in the summer lived with his students in her father's house in Klavi, Sikraga.

That student and I still write to each other (Vaino Kirele)...That Finnish professor Ketunaanu had lived one summer in Santas' house, he had come with his entire family. Later they lived with us, we gave them the big room, and Hilda and I slept in the hay stack. We learned Livonian. My Grandmother was everyone's teacher. My father's mother Eda Cerbaha, she was old then, she had the time to dedicate to this. [. .]

The Finnish student taught this young Livonian girl her father's father's language. The researcher's interest raised the value of the language in the eyes of the Livonian's themselves. Leontine Udre says:

I was in church at the time, I was being confirmed. And when I came home from church, then suddenly someone came up to me on the way home, and (laughs) so it went on all the time. So they came, and taught me Livonian, taught me language. They learned quickly too, that young Finn, I did not know anything, but they taught me Livonian.

Finnish and Estonian researchers' fieldwork found resonance in society, which raised Livonian self-respect and awareness. All of the Livonian awakening events were encouraged and supported by the Finno-Ugrian society--the founding of a Livonian Association, the blessing of the flag, the teaching of language in Livonian village schools, the building of the Livonian Center.

Professor Ketunaan said, that we need to train a Livonian teacher. Hilda (Griva, born in Cerbach), studied for two years in Finland because her parents did not have the money to send her to schools...The first year was in a craft and home economics school. The second year she studied in a teacher's seminar, but in Latvia she was told that she would not get a job if she studied abroad. With the help of a scholarship from Janson, a Finn, she continued her education in Jelgava's teacher's institute. She studied the piano with Sibelius' daughter and learned to play the violin.

In spite of Finnish and Estonian support, no one from this generation became a local Livonian language teacher. The poor material conditions, the obstacles created by Latvia's bureaucrats and the Livonian Association's officials became unsurmountable after the occupation of Latvia in 1940, when the Livonian Association was disbanded and all Finno-Ugric connections broken.

The Golden Years

In the short period between the two world wars, the fruits of hard labor gradually became apparent. This period of the narrators' youth was also the happiest time, particularly in comparison with subsequent events. Livonian culture and social events have a central role in their memories.

Mazirbe had its choir, Kari Stalts's daughter Margarit led it. Blum's, Lielirbes choir director sang in it. Blum's choir went to Saamsaal to sing. They had their own musicians--for brass and string instruments, they went to Saamsaal in their own motorboat. How beautiful it was in Saamsala! Rocks and then a small green island in the sea, there above everything (green?). How did they swim up there! A pile of hay on top, and then all along to the seashore--we have sand, but there everything is green. . .all kinds of trees are growing...

The impressions of youth have remained in all their color in Emilija Rulle's memory. In the case of Leontine Udre, she remembers how important Mazirbe used to be, especially after the building of the Livonian Center:

Well, the majority of the musicians came from Ventspils. Even, even party-goers came from Ventspils. Then along the entire seashore, only Mazirbe had something like that, a community center with a parquet floor. Nowhere was there anything like it, I don't know, it could be, that Roja had something like it, but there was nothing in Kolka like it. We were better than Kolka then. We had...we had a doctor, we had a nurse, we had a midwife, we had a (forestry?), we had a pharmacy. We had a station, and there was a lot of work at the station, where they brought all the materials, where there were those who loaded it, who chopped wood. We were a big village, yes.

After those dances, there were performances after those dances. There were so many, again so many, there were party-goers, and...Of all the villages, there was nothing elsewhere, they even came from Kolka, Mensils. All of Vidale, all came to Mazirbe, yes. And then others came with the small train from Ovisi, from Luzna...

Emilija Rulle talks about her native Lielirbe village

Before, Lielirbe had eight old homesteads (saimniekmaja). When everyone was given land (jaunsaimniecibas), then there were 64 homesteads. Lielirbe was a big village. We had our own musicians, choir, the only thing we did not have was a club...At Easter we swung in the swing, at Midsummer's we built a fire and danced, in the winter we had Kekatvakars. The boys held Martinvakars, Vatslava, in February the girls held the Kekatvakars.

Every Saturday and Sunday we danced. In the summer along the seashore, in the winter inside. There was Galniekhouse and Bukhouse, old houses, big rooms, and in the winter every Saturday all of the young people went to the dance. After that we all cleaned up the room, cleaned it all. Everyone brought something--boiled peas, my mom baked *plodins* - boiled potato, white flour inside, and carrot on top.

Aina Bolsinga's memories connect her native Dumele with a legend that she weaves into biography, tying it to the year she was born:

The baron had a field on the lakes, an entire field on a lake, which had been God's Lake, but had been drained. There is an entire legend, that he was riding a horse, and the lake like a snake crept along with him, and he circled around it with the horse, and that is how the lake came to be, and later the baron, digging a ditch by hand, drained it. It was drained in 1837 - one century and one year before my birth. The lord needed the field, he had many animals.

Work and Traditions

We had to keep many animals so that the sand would be fertilized. We had some eight hectares, and rye grew well there, and along with that we had to keep very many animals. Even though we did not get much out of the animals, but we still needed the fertilizer because otherwise nothing would grow in that sand. Mostly we sowed rye, potatoes, peas...That was all for ourselves, so that's how we grew up--rather poor, not wealthy. I am sure, it was the same for everyone in the village...

When they could not sell their fishing wares, then they tried to use it as barter with the farmer's in exchange for food. Erna Vanaga, born in 1925 in Sikraga remembers:

Marketday was Wednesday... and when you could not sell anything, then on the way home Mamma said--run along, dear, to that house -- to Pan, to Ding- he was the one from Dundaga...run along and ask them, maybe they are willing to buy something and then you tell them, that you are selling, and you tell them, if they do not have money then we will also accept food- peas, potatoes, grain--And they took it, too, we weren't going to take it back home with us after all...

Ernests Murnieks remembers:

We were not that well off. As soon as one daughter grew up a little, she had to work as a shepherd, then the other daughters had to go, each one..Those daughters, older daughters, never got to live at home.

Here, on the shore, before my time, there was rarely a boy who had not been to sea [. . .]Who wanted to be a captain, he had to go to school. There were also those locals who went to work on the big ships. They went there from Ventspils. Big ships did not come here.

Women also, however, often found a place on fishing boats, especially if help was needed during dangerous times on the sea. Erna Vanaga remembers, when still as a girl:

Then Dad also went to the shore. I remember--he had a bag of sand, so the boat does not capsize. Dad could not go alone, after all, so I went with him. I remember that as though it were today: Dad rowing by himself...It was not horribly high, we were not far out into the sea. And I was really afraid, I was so horribly afraid, but still, I did not want to show it, that I am afraid, and I wanted to go with Dad. I remember it like it was today, that Dad rowed. And now I had to pull out those nets, and we already see that we have the quota, we see we have it, but now the waves are getting really horrible, horribly big. I am afraid, and Dad says you know, girl, you're going to have to take the oars....

The seashore was the site of all work for providing for daily needs, including brick baking, as Alberts Kriekis remembers:

I worked at Brauska landlord's brick kiln for two years -- baked and made bricks. Each worker received a rather good wage. We piled up one hundred unbaked bricks in a wheelbarrow. You had to have strong arms and be a strong man to control that pile. I fired up the kiln and piled the bricks in myself, had to know how to pile them in so that the fire got through. The boss checked each of them himself, struck each of them. When the brick gives a clear sound, then it is the highest quality, then they were taken away to Mazirbe station. They had clay there, really good and high quality.

Theodors Vangravs, born in 1915 in Jaunupe remembered that working with his dad together on various jobs, he noticed the wisdom the old man's wisdom:

There were some winters, when you could fish all winter, and others, when it was not even close - the lake froze from November through April, and in May you could still walk on the ice by the sea, and you can't put the nets in. Then we went to work in the forest [. . .]

I also chopped trees, when they were ready. In those times we did not chop forests like they do now--in the summer, in Midsummer's they chop forests. That wood is not good for anything, it is wasted. You can't do that - go and chop just when you think of it. It is not good for anything when it is cut down at the wrong time. For example, if you chop down a leafy tree in the summer, in the early time, that tree is rotten, it does not have any value.

Irmgarde Cerbaha remembers that they were accustomed to not locking doors, and at the end of the war in the *crazy times* this resulted in a lack of trust and suspicion regarding the incoming army.

At that time it was not in fashion to lock doors. We are not used to locking doors. They came and asked, why don't you lock your doors, maybe you are waiting for someone...My goodness, those were *crazy times*...

The war made it impossible for the Livonian Association's head Peteris Breinkopfs to carry out his responsibilities, as his daughter Erna Vanaga remembers:

When the Russians left, Dad was worried--the Estonians or Finns had given him a windgenerator--and the Russians had taken it all. They came in there once and said, postaz!

Viestus Udrins: **Father's father was a captain for half of his life, the other half he took on the job of the farm. He was big and tall, he curled his mustache and, when he came from the sauna, put it behind his ears. Father fished, sent the fish to Ventspils with the little train, had been trained in carpentry. He made furniture, built houses. (Dzilnas). We could never have been wealthy, noone here was wealthy, Father was in the homeguard, and that's why he was deported.**

World War II

In the places where Livonians lived, the war began with the "messenger"s--Soviet military bases that were built here in accordance with the ambiguous agreement signed between Latvia and the Soviet Union. Arvids Brencis remembered, that still as a boy he received a warning from a worker who was sent to work with him:

A bricklayer came to work here, he employed me to help him. That bricklayer said, goodness, I really don't know, what to think, but judging from what I've heard, it seems really bad.

Everyone becomes involved in and threatened by the war, even the shore fishermen. Alberts Kriegis remembers:

We were fishing, and that was already in German times, a plane was coming. We were pulling in fish, twice, three, times around, but nothing. Then that plane came to Saunag, it began shooting. There Zarina (boat) stood anchored, they had shot at that. [. . .] That was the only thing they shot--Ludvig, Feldman's foot was shot, and he barely got home. And he got to shore with oars. That one was (miris?- nost?) off--he had been shot in the head--said, that it was a Russian plane and the pilot was a woman. I said, no time to wait, we have to get to shore however we can.

Livonian villages undergo permanent change--men go to war, or flee to the woods and after that -- across the sea. Teodors Vanags remembers the dramatic fates of the locals:

Jekabs and his entire family went across the sea from Ventspils in their own motorboat. Father's youngest sister went with Jekabs to Sweden, then to Canada. The sons had to go to the army, the Russian drafted them. The German comes--fled, the Russian comes--fled. My brother was sent to Siberia - he died. He did not go with the Russian, even though he was drafted, he served on the *Rona* on in obligatory service. The Russian took over. Went into the Latvian army and he fell into that most complicated time of transition--spent long years in Siberia.

At the end of the war, life becomes more tense for Alberts Kriekis:

I fled, that was the year I hid in bunkers and everywhere. For those who were captured, that was the end for them.

The most tragic memories are also tied to comical ones. The inhabitants of the shore were used to the fact that war always pushed them out of their homes, that the war is not theirs, but that they must submit to its rules of the game. The climax and end of the war takes place in the forest and at sea.

Olga Rumpenberga remembers, that Dumele forest brothers and the Germans celebrated Christmas together:

They arrived with a small half-tank--one was familiar, a friend of my husband, the Latvian went to look for beer. The half-tank came in, I was thinking that they are coming to capture the forest brothers, and all those

celebrating Christmas were out the window - to the sauna! We had a full house, they were never partisans to me, only locals...They knew, that they would be chased out, they had so much livestock, just bake the bread and slaughter the animals, salt the meat. People came from one army and from the other, everyone wanted to eat. Sometimes everyone drank a beer together and sang...one in German, one in Latvian. Who didn't know how to sing in German in the German time?

Aina Bolsinga, as a three-year-old, once had to guard the forest brothers hidden under the bed:

But I remember, when another time they were in the house when I was three years old, and they were in the bedroom under the bed--and they placed me on the pottie in front of them. And when the Germans opened the door, I was supposed to scream really loudly, for them not to come in, and I screamed, too. Gut, gut, said the German.

Dumele, in the middle of the forest, was like an island, where inhabitants still lived by the rules of humanity, not the rules of war.

Both the Russian, who had fallen, and the Latvian, who avoided the army--all shared the same piece of meat, no one was at the other's throat--because everyone was a person!

Many events have not become a part of a collective memory because only a few participants remember it. Many inhabitants moved and no longer shared a common space, but those, who did, were silenced and could not talk about their experiences. When they were allowed to talk freely again, a long time had passed. People who now live in Livonian villages no longer have common collective points of memory.

The number of documents and records of primary sources is decreasing, as the testimony of primary sources is available only from original documents or an eyewitnesses. The only evidence of the Livonian villages destroyed in the twentieth century are the original names of homesteads that hang on empty houses. The other valuable links to this past are the people who once lived there.

The number of witnesses of the Livonian history and the scope of their memory grows when one goes inland away from the shore. Many memories of people who used to live in fishervillages have already been recorded in Dundaga, Ventspils, Talsi, Riga, and outside of Latvia- England-Durby, and in the United States in Boston. When life in a common space is disturbed, then the common history lives on in lifestories. Livonians reveal their unique and particular experiences, their imagination, and talent for performing in lifestories, which are key to a study of Livonian identity. Oral history is a human guide to traditional history based on documents. It facilitates the understanding of the role of historical events in the individual's life, and the role of the individual in history.