

**LATVIANS ABROAD –**  
**Planned Latvian Emigration Museum and Research Center**

**Maija Hinkle**

Latvians Abroad – Latvian Emigration Museum and Research Center

The 20th 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 one’s life, to escape occupying armies, because they were forced by governing authorities, because their homes had been destroyed, etc, etc.

Latvians formed a small part of this mass movement of peoples throughout the century, having been both a donor and a receiving country. While it lost 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, so 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 (Bērziņš 2006, 4).

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](http://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.

**Table 1 - Latvian population, 1863 – 2007 (Plakans 1995, 88)**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total population of Latvia</i>	<i>Latvians (%)</i>	<i>Number of Latvians outside Latvia</i>
1863	1,240,00		
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 (Bērziņš 2006, 4)
2007 ( <a href="http://www.indexmundi.com/latvia/demographics">www.indexmundi.com/latvia/demographics</a> )	2,259,810	58.2%	

Great upheavals in Latvian history have most often been accompanied by 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 (Plakans 1995, 115), 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 more than doubled during the influx of refugees (Krasnais 1980, 118). Plakans estimates that by March, 1917 some 1 million Latvians had taken residence outside the Baltic area (Plakans 1995, 116). Many made it back to Latvia after the war and Latvia's independence in 1918, but many remained in Russia when it became the Soviet Union so that in the 1926 USSR census 151 500 people listed their nationality as Latvian (Krasnais 1980, 118). 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).

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

<i>Date</i>	<i>Historical event</i>	<i>Civilian population movement</i>
1939	Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Agression 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 ( <i>These Names Accuse</i> 1982, XXX).
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. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1941: Nazi extermination of Jews, mostly in location.</li> <li>- 1943: Latvian Legion formed</li> </ul>	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

	- 1943: secret Latvian Central Council formed	Germany in 1943 (Ezergailis 2008, personal communication).
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 (Baltais 1999, 193-199). <sup>i</sup>  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 (Plakans 1995, 155).  1945-1955: Some 535,000 workers from USSR sent into Latvia (Plakans 1995, 154).

Toward the end of WWII as the Soviet army was again recapturing Latvia hundred of thousands of Latvian inhabitants fled or were forced to move West, where about 214, 000 ended up on German territory (Baltais 1999, 193-199). Of those more than 100,000 stayed in Germany in DP refugee camps. After 2-5 years in DP camps most had emigrated to host countries, including 40,000 to the United States. There they established still active emigre 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 (Hinkle 2006, 48-67 for more thorough description).

Partly to help implement this desire, I agreed to collect lifes 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 Norwegian Museum 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 jobs or an 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 PBLA (World Federation of Free Latvians)<sup>ii</sup> 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.

**Table 3 – Former Latvian inhabitants now permanently settled abroad (Bērziņš 2006, 4)**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Former Latvian inhabitants</i>	<i>Percent of total emigrants</i>
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%

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 have double citizenship.

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

([www.indexmundi.com/latvia/demographics](http://www.indexmundi.com/latvia/demographics)). 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 Latvians 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 intended to do it, and 3) encouragement by similar organizations, e.g. the Norwegian Emigrant Museum.

The mission of LA-MRC is to research, interpret, preserve and disseminate the histories and cultures of Latvians abroad as an integral part of the history of Latvia, to build bridges between Latvians in Latvia and Latvians abroad and their host countries, and to add Latvia to the international discussion on migration.

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 organize various outreach projects, e.g., multicultural festivals, and 6) by undertaking economic activity to help support the museum.

The focus of research and exhibitions will be 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 Directors (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, and 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 – first year**

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 in 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, too, that they were an integral part of it. Therefore, I and Ints Dzelzgalvis spent the month of June, 2007, meeting with various central, local government and museum officials, recruiting task force members, and researching potential museum sites.

We were quite successful in obtaining verbal support and helpful advice from cultural, government and local officials in Latvia, including the Director of the Latvian Museum Board, Janis Garjans, the Integration Ministry's Department for Special Tasks Regarding Latvians Living Abroad, the Cultural Minister, some members of Parliament, an advisor to the President, several museum directors and writers. In the emigre community we have had ongoing support from the American Latvian Association. Internationally our presentation at the AEMI (Association of European Migration Institutions) annual conference in 2007 has opened some doors for us in Latvia.

We were less successful in finding a museum site. We have been offered a number of free parcels of land and have investigated several former emigre mansions and the buildings connected with emigration in the western city of Liepāja. The sites have either been too far from Rīga or they were in too poor a condition to warrant work on them.

On Sept. 25, 2007 we founded the museum organization: LATVIANS ABROAD – Museum and Research Center (LA-MRC) (*LATVIEŠI PASAULĒ – Muzejs un pētniecības centrs (LaPa-MPC)*) and elected our first Board of Directors.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Implementation – second year**

Our goals for the second year were to: 1) intensify search for funding, especially from grants; 2) set up and maintain a web site, publish a brochure and disseminate other information; 3) to rent an office in Riga with part time staff; 4) to continue the search for a site; 5) to organize a planning meeting; 6) to start actively collecting objects, stories and documents; and 7) to

undertake the first, digital exhibition 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.

Funding will always be the major issue and risk factor for the implementation of the museum. Therefore we were particularly encouraged when we obtained substantial start-up funding from the EEA and Norway Grants with the participation of the Latvian Societal Integration Fund. The 18 month grant has allowed us to open an office in Riga, hire two part-time employees, organize a planning seminar in July, 2009, continue searching for a museum site and start the collection. We have also obtained partial funding from the Latvian Foundation, Inc, for an electronic exhibition, and from the Latvian Integration Ministry to design the web site. Please visit it at [www.diasporamuseum.lv](http://www.diasporamuseum.lv).

In starting the collection we are concentrating on: 1) writing a collections policy document; and 2) obtaining materials from the countries in which we already have active programs or where we have contacts – USA, Brazil, Australia, Sweden, and Bashkiristan in European Russia. Several important archives and data bases have been promised for the museum, the most important being the American Latvian Association organizational data base (ALAIID), which incorporates materials from all the Latvian-American organizations and their staff, the American Latvian Association Oral History collection and some large, private archives. Marianna Auliciema has been on a two week expedition to Brazil to collect materials and record life stories. The Latvian government financed Arta Savdona travelling to Bashkiristan to record the Latvian Song Festival there. Maija Hinkle has carried out presentations together with mini exhibitions in Latvian communities in the USA.

The planning seminar was held on July 2 and 3, 2009 in Riga, under the leadership of Knut Djupedal, Director of the Norwegian Emigrant Museum. The principal of Interpretative Solutions, Inc. Peter Dajevskis from the USA was the main consultant for the seminar. Several important decisions were made and task forces formed as a result of the seminar.

In September, 2009 we were accepted for full membership in the Association of European Migration Institutions (AEMI) and have started joint projects with the German Emigration Center and the Svenska Emigrantinstitutet. We would appreciate partnerships with other

Emigration and Migration institutions, as well as with the Baltic Heritage Network and other Baltic organizations.

## References

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Of the 200,000 Latvian inhabitants, who fled West at the end of World War II, 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.

<sup>ii</sup> 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.

<sup>iii</sup> President Dr. Maija Hinkle (USA), Vice-president and Treasurer Ints Dzlezgalvis (USA), Board members Marianna Auliciema (Latvia), Vita Ozoliņa (Latvia), Ināra Reine (Latvia, USA), Juris Zalāms (Latvia), auditor Astrīda Jansons (Latvia, USA). In the 2009 LA-MRC Annual Meeting the Board was expanded by two members, Dr. Ieva Vītola (Latvia) and Daina Gross (Latvia). The new auditor is Arta Savdona (Latvia).