

## The Image of Latvia in the Eyes of Children Born in Displacement: The Example of Mass Deportations of 1941 and 1949

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**Abstract.** When studying the mass deportations, which have directly affected more than 57,000 inhabitants of Latvia, a lot of attention is paid to the implementation of the deportations and the deported population. To date, less attention has been dedicated to those born in displacement, which is an important aspect of deportation research. The purpose of the current article is to uncover the impressions of the children born in displacement about the Latvian SSR before they moved to their parents' homeland and the factors that influenced their thoughts about it. The article examines the origin of these children's families and its influence on them as they grew up, whether Latvian language was taught in the families and the assessment of knowledge after moving to Latvia, and their attitude towards Latvia. The article is based on case analysis reviewing the video testimonies of children born in displacement and, in some cases, of their parents. These video testimonies are available in the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia Audiovisual Archive repository. The examples used in the current study show the different experiences of different families, both in their attitude towards teaching the Latvian language while the family is still in forced settlement, and after moving to live in Latvia, and in various other aspects. The quality which unites all the examined examples is the silence prevailing in the family and also in the society about the experienced repressions and the origin of these people, which has had an impact on their subsequent lives, for example, not being able to enter the chosen educational institutions or not obtaining a permission to leave the Latvian SSR even in cases of athletic success.

**Keywords:** children, childhood, Latvia, mass deportation, displacement, forced settlement, language

## Introduction

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the inhabitants of occupied Latvia experienced two mass deportations, as a result of which 57,549 people of different nationalities and ages were deported from Latvia in 1941 and 1949 (Pelkaus 2001, 14; Šķiņķe 2007, 23). The conditions in which the displaced people lived varied, however, the long years spent in forced settlement (from at least seven years in case of those deported in 1949 to 14 years or more for those deported in 1941), the loss of hope to return to the homeland, which was explained by the fact that the power of the regime led people to believe that people were displaced for life, encouraged the desire of the deported people to live as normal a life as possible, which encouraged the formation of relationships and families even being away from homeland. Families were formed not only among the deportees of different nationalities, but also among local residents. The first children were born in the families that had been formed in the locations of forced settlement until the liberation took place and the decision was made to return to the Latvian SSR. The providers of all the video testimonies used in the current article were born in displacement as the first children in their families, with the exception of Tamāra Vilerte. In the deportation of 25 March 1949, the parents of Tamāra Vilerte were deported along with their five children, of whom daughter Vaiva (b. 1938) died in displacement in 1955 (Šķiņķe 2007, 223). Tamāra was the only one who was born in displacement and she already had brothers and sisters who were born before the family's deportation. So far, the population deported on 14 June 1941 and 25 March 1949 has been studied in various aspects, however, less attention has been dedicated to those people who were born in the locations of their parents' forced settlement.

The aim of the study is to uncover the knowledge and opinions of the children born in displacement about the Latvian SSR before they moved to their parents' homeland and the factors that influenced their thoughts about it. The research question of the report is whether the children born in displacement successfully integrated into society after moving to the Latvian SSR, despite their origin and upbringing outside of Latvia during their first years of life.

## Methodology

The article has been prepared on the basis of the video evidence obtained from the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia (LOM) Audiovisual Archive repository, using the method of case analysis. From the total collection of 2,432 video testimonies, nine video testimonies contain interviews with those born in displacement, however, other video testimonies of deportees also include stories about children born in displacement. Deportations and the victims thereof are commemorated every year, with special attention at the anniversaries of

the events. Formerly, more attention could be devoted to those who experienced deportation, whereas today, due to their age, more vigorous studies could involve those born in the places of forced settlement to examine their experiences. Video testimonies have been recorded in the LOM Audiovisual Archive repository since October 1996. Initially, the focus was upon the repressed people – those deported in 1941 and 1949, and the testimonies of their children, who were born in displacement, were recorded in addition to the testimonies of their parents, including the aforementioned video testimony of Tamāra Vilerte, which was made in 2004. Only since 2012, the video testimonies of children born in displacement have been recorded as separate units, which are not an addition to their parents' narratives, and accordingly these testimonies are broader and more informative. The article draws upon the video testimonies of two women who grew up in the places of forced settlement, established relationships and gave birth to the children born in displacement, which have been discussed in the report – Margarita Kumizova (b. 1931) and Irina Holma (b. 1924). Both women gave their video testimony to LOM – Margarita in 2008, when she was already 77 years old, while Irina gave her video testimony in 2016 at the age of 92. At the time of giving the video testimony, both women remembered their youth and the repressions they experienced. Tamāra Vilerte (b. 1954) gave her video testimony at the age of 50 – the recording of her testimony was made in 2004. Aija Freiberga (b. 1950) gave her video testimony in 2012 at the age of 62, Dzintra Hirša (b. 1947) and Alvis Jansons (b. 1948) were over 70 at the time of the video testimony, giving their video testimony respectively at the age of 73 in 2020 and in 2021. All the witnesses in their video testimonies talk about a time 40 or more years ago.

The current report provides an insight into the characterisation of the families of the children born in displacement as reflected in the video testimonies, their attitude towards moving to their parents' homeland – Latvian SSR, the attitude towards learning the Latvian language in the family while living in displacement, and the characterisation of language proficiency after arriving in Latvia and the influence of the place of birth on the subsequent life.

## Results

### 1. Family

The video evidence used in the report shows that the deported young people formed families in the places of forced settlement. Thus, the parents of Dzintra Hirša (b. 1947, Librehte, OMF 2300/3421e) – mother Vera Jancova (b. 1919) and father Voldemārs Librehts (b. 1919) – were deported with their families to the Krasnoyarsk region on 14 June 1941, there they met, got married and their daughter was born. Likewise, the parents of Alvis Jansons (b. 1948,

OMF 2300/3448e) – father Harijs Jansons (b. 1925) and mother Tamāra Austruma (b. 1925) met in displacement, after each of them with their families were deported to Krasnoyarsk region in 1941. Astrida Holma's (OMF 2300/3175, 3176) parents had a similar fate – her mother Irina Fetlere (b. 1924, OMF 2300/3174, 3175) was also deported with her family in 1941, but her father Vilis Holms (b. 1915) met Irina in displacement, started a family and in 1954 Astrida was born. The mother of Aija Freiberga (b. 1950, Letko, Skrambovska, OMF 2300/2733, 2734), a Polish agricultural worker Sofija Letko (b. 1915), was deported in 1949, got pregnant by an unknown man in the place of forced settlement, and raised her daughter with her partner Antons Skrambovskis (b. 1904) (Vīksne 1999, 695), who joined her in forced settlement after being released from Minlag. After his release, reuniting with Sofija and her daughter, and then being released from the record and returning to the Latvian SSR, Antons married Sofija and adopted Aija. Tamāra Vilerte was born in forced settlement in the Omsk region, where the Vilerts family had been deported on 25 March 1949. In addition to parents Indriķis (b. 1910) and Lidija (b. 1913), there were also children of different ages – two daughters Vaiva (b. 1938) and Benita (b. 1948) and three sons – Modris (b. 1939), Ivars (b. 1941) and Jānis (b. 1943) (Šķiņķe 2007, 223). Regarding those families that were formed in displacement, the children born there were most often the first children in their families until the time when the families returned to live in the Latvian SSR, whereas in the families that had already been formed in Latvia before the deportations, the children born in displacement joined the children that the families already had.

## 2. Moving to the parents' homeland in the Latvian SSR

After the parents were released from forced settlement, a decision was made to return to their homeland, along with their children, who had been born in displacement. The children had no say in this matter, however, their inner feelings were diverse, for example, Dzintra Hirša (OMF 2300/3421e) mentions that she knew from what her parents told her that she should return somewhere, but at that time she called only Russia her homeland. Aija Freiberga knew that her mother always longed to return to Latvia, therefore she had no objections to go with her, but the children did not always feel supportive of the implementation of this decision, – for example, Alvis Jansons (OMF 2300/3448e) remembered that he much better liked it at the place of his birth, even after moving to the Latvian SSR and starting school here, he had asked his parents to return to the location of their forced settlement and his own place of birth. Likewise, Astrida Holma (OMF/3175, 3176) remembers that she did not want to leave her birthplace at all, she even cried when she heard about such decision of her parents. Alvis Jansons also informed that he had already been to Latvia once before moving, because his parents had gone on a scouting trip with him to find out whether there was

a place to live in case of moving. This trip did not alter his dismissive attitude towards the fact of moving. Notably, not everyone made the decision to return to Latvia after being released from forced settlement, so Irina Holma's (OMF 2300/3174, 3175) sister Margarita Kumizova (OMF 2300/1921, 1922, 1923) with her husband, a local Russian, and their sons who were born in the place of Margarita's forced settlement did not return to Latvia because there was no place to live. The opinions of the children born in displacement about returning to their parents' homeland were not asked, hence, their thoughts about it did not matter in the decision-making process, however, the feelings of the children born in displacement regarding this decision vastly differed. There were children who empathised with their parents, were aware of where their parents came from and accepted this decision without objection, while other children felt better in a familiar environment, so they showed resistance to such changes in their lives.

### **3. Importance of nationality in displacement and attitude towards language learning**

Although at times the hopes of returning to the homeland were lost, the nationality of the parents played a role also when parents had to choose a name for their children born in the camp. The choice was also influenced by the aim to hinder the easy transformation of that name, as it was customary among Russians, Irina Holma (1924–2018, Fetlere, OMF 2300/3174, 3175) admitted, explaining the reason why she named her daughter Astrīda (b. 1954). The parents of Tamāra Vilerte (b. 1954, OMF 2300/758) had a similar consideration, indicating that the name was acceptable when living in Russia, but it was possible to Latvianise it and call their daughter Mārīte if they managed to return to Latvia. Of course, there were also cases when only the subjective choice of the parents played a role in selecting the name, without any considerations of the euphony of that name upon the potential return to Latvia. Alvis Jansons (OMF 2300/3448e) got his name because it was the name of a friend of his father.

Certain tendencies in the video testimonies reveal the attitude of these families towards teaching the Latvian language to the children born in displacement – since some people had lost hope of returning and worked long hours, they did not teach their children Latvian language. These children were looked after by the older women, also relatives, for example, grandmothers, who did teach these children the basics of the Latvian language after all, according to Alvis Jansons (OMF 2300/3448e), as well as Dzintra Hirša (OMF 2300/3421e). Nevertheless, here, too, the fact that Latvian was not used as the language of communication within the displaced family played a certain role. Thus, Alvis Jansons (OMF 2300/3448e) admitted that he himself did not want to learn Latvian, but he had learned songs in Latvian that were sung at various gatherings, although he did not understand their true meaning and significance. The desire to learn Latvian

failed to appear after his relatives from Latvia sent him the Latvian primer. Dzintra Hirša (OMF 2300/3421e) pointed out that the family tried to celebrate the festivities even in forced settlement, saying that Christmas was celebrated in the family and she learned to recite Christmas poems in Latvian. The most appropriate situation for teaching the Latvian language in the family was in the Vilerts family, where daughter Tamāra (OMF 2300/758) was under the care of her brothers and sisters who spoke Latvian, thus making sure that she learned Latvian at home.

The situation changed after these children arrived in Latvia, and in order to continue the schooling in Latvia and in Latvian language, additional efforts became necessary to master this language at the required level. Not only parents, relatives, but also teachers from the respective schools came to help. The continuation of education in Latvia was influenced by parents, as well as the school staff, who in some cases encouraged parents to send their children to classes with the Latvian language as the language of instruction, even though they could have made a choice in favour of a class with the Russian language of instruction, but also in a school that was geographically closer to home. The geographically closest school was chosen by the parents of Astrīda Holma (OMF 2300/3175, 3176), and thus, she continued her education in Latvia in Russian, went on to Russian-language higher education, and worked in collectives where everyday communication was in Russian. Quite opposite choice was made by the parents of Dzintra Hirša (OMF 2300/3421e) – following the advice given by the director of the nearest school, and at the encouragement of the school administration, they decided to send their daughter to a class with Latvian language of instruction. Within the short period until the beginning of the school year and also in the first years when Dzintra studied in Latvian, the teachers helped her in various ways. After returning to Latvia, the parents of Alvis Jansons (OMF 2300/3448e) decided to use only Latvian as the language of communication in the family and also to send their son to school with Latvian language of instruction, thus, his further education took place in Latvian. The fact that the children were not taught Latvian in the locations of forced settlement, or that the people around them helped them learn only the basics of the Latvian language, in most cases did not have a great role as to which language was chosen for education after returning to the Latvian SSR. After returning to their homeland, the parents chose to send their children to schools with the Latvian language of instruction, the parents themselves and other relatives, as well as teachers helped these children to acquire the Latvian language at the required level, so that they would continue to receive education in Latvian language, regardless of what the children themselves initially thought about it. In exceptional cases, as in the case of Astrīda Holma included in the report, the education in Latvia continued in Russian, substantiating this choice with the school geographically closest to the place of residence.

#### 4. The impact of being born in displacement upon the subsequent life

The children born in forced settlement adapted to their families, following the example of their family members and did not talk about the repressions they experienced, pointing out that such were the times and everyone knew what and where they could talk about and what they could not talk about, even without a prior warning (Aija Freiberga OMF 2300/2733, 2734, Alvis Jansons OMF 2300/3448e, Dzintra Hirša OMF 2300/3421e). The same adaptation took place in the society as well, indicating that families most often, including the family of Astrīda Holma (OMF 2300/3175, 3176), preferred to live a secluded life and stick together only with their closest relatives. Although no one spoke publicly about the experienced repressions, both the school administration and the authorities knew people's biographies, consequently, the origin of the children born in displacement affected their life course. Not only Alvis Jansons (OMF 2300/3448e), but also Dzintra Hirša (OMF 2300/3421e) notes about the influence of the place of birth upon their subsequent life, stating that, despite success in sports, they were not allowed to join training camps and competitions outside of Latvian SSR and had not been given an official justification for that. Likewise, Astrīda Holma (OMF 2300/3175, 3176) recalled that she was not permitted to go on a recreational trip to North Korea in the 1970s precisely because of her origin. Despite the prevailing 'silence' in the society concerning the experienced repressions, the regime was informed about the biographies of its citizens and used this information to influence the lives of the people not only by limiting the opportunities to achieve success in sports beyond the Latvian SSR, but also in their future lives. Particular individuals born in displacement in their video testimonies did not directly disclose anything about how their origin had affected their future life, however, the narration itself reveals fragmentary insights into these consequences.

#### Conclusions

The video testimonies of the children born in displacement talk about their early lives and the origin of their families – most often, they came into the world as the first children in families that were formed in the locations of forced settlement, as their parents, who were repressed during the mass deportations carried out in Latvia, met under these conditions. The fact that Aija Freiberga (OMF 2300/2733, 2744), who was born to a Polish mother, is among those born in displacement illustrates the fact that people of various nationalities were repressed in Latvia.

The narratives of the children born in displacement show that their parents had told them that it was not their homeland even before they were released from forced settlement and returned to live in the Latvian SSR. This confirms

that children had access to information about Latvia and the repressions experienced by their parents from an early age, however, the understanding of it was different for each child, to a large extent – related to their age. Furthermore, the fact that the children born in displacement expressed their attitude regarding the parents' decision to return to their homeland was related to their age and individual comprehension of the available information about the place to which they should go, opinions varied from total denial to acceptance of the parents' decision.

The Latvian language proficiency of the children born in displacement was directly related to the decision made by their parents – whether to purposefully teach or not to teach Latvian language to their children. Since some of the younger people who had established their families in forced settlement had lost hope of returning to their homeland and already used Russian as the language of conversation in the family, the children were deliberately not taught Latvian, except in cases where a family with children already established in Latvia had undergone forced settlement, and Latvian had been used as the language of conversation in the family from the very beginning.

The children born in displacement were looked after by other people who lived in forced settlement, most often – elderly women, relatives, who communicated with these children in Latvian, thus providing the necessary basic knowledge. After returning to Latvia, lack of Latvian language proficiency at the required level in most cases did not play a decisive role in parents' choice to send their children to schools with the Latvian language of instruction. Not only parents and other relatives, but also teachers helped children to acquire the Latvian language at the required level. Of course, there were some cases when children born in displacement in Russia continued their education, which had been started in Russian, in the same language also after their return to Latvia.

The children who had been born in displacement, became integrated in the Latvian SSR together with their families, they blended into the general society. Likewise, these children knew about their origin and the repressions experienced by their parents, but they did not speak about it loudly and publicly, they maintained the 'silence' prevailing in the family and society regarding the repression they had experienced, however, the ruling power did not permit to forget this aspect and reminded of it in various ways, limiting the opportunities of these people, for example, to travel outside the USSR, to obtain the desired education or to build a career.

In continuing the research on this topic, it would be important to expand the number of video testimonies of children born in displacement, as well as the range of topics they bring up, such as communication and attitude shown by local residents and other people in forced settlement, settling in Latvia, membership in youth organizations, biography issues and other topics. This should be



explored in a more in-depth study of the topic launched by the current article. Moreover, not all those deported from Latvia and their children did return to Latvia after their release. Their motivation behind this decision should be explained accordingly.

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