

Pēteris Pildegovičs

# My China Story



**To my dearest  
spouse Galina  
with gratitude,  
respect, and love**

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# My **China** Story

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In this narrative, written in the form of a diary, its author Pēteris Pildegovičs shares with the reader the observations during his post as the first Latvian diplomat in China, as well as the impressions gained during his work at Xinhua News Agency, where he has been the only employee from our country to date. The author also introduces the reader to the experience of his extensive travels throughout China, often referring to countless conversations with the Chinese of all generations and social backgrounds.

The book is dedicated to Galina, the beloved wife of Pēteris Pildegovičs.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I look back at my life, it reminds me of the cresting waves in the sea. At the first glance, they seem all alike, but when looking deeper, each of the waves washes up something special, connected to a specific period in my life.

The first wave brings me to Riga Library No 9 where I first set my eyes upon the magazine “Kitai” with Chinese characters – quaint, mysterious, and simply beautiful.

The next wave gave me the questionable opportunity to observe the world in the North of the European part of Russia through the soldiers’ barrack window for three long years while I was doing my mandatory service.

Dressed in the military uniform and rough kirza soldier’s boots, I was washed up by the next wave onto the doorstep of Moscow State University’s (further – Moscow University) Oriental Language Institute. Sitting by the desk in the ancient Moscow University building and gazing directly at the ruby Kremlin stars during my rare free moments, I started exploring my first Chinese characters.

The wave that followed really thrilled me because Galina came into my life...

The next wave took me to the Far Eastern State University (hereinafter – Far Eastern University), where I used to teach Chinese for many years. Then it

carried me on further to an even more distant place – Nanyang University in Singapore.

After being away for 20 years, I always believed that some day one of the waves would bring me back home to Latvia.

When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, it finally happened, as there was a need to establish the Department of Asia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereinafter – MFA) of the Republic of Latvia.

While working at the Ministry, the moment came when I and my spouse Galina departed for China with a mission to open the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia there.

After a short while, we found ourselves in the world of journalism taking up work responsibilities at the Xinhua News Agency, and that was the very same time when I and Galina started compiling the Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary.

I have decided to share with my readers some insights about the two latest waves of my life's journey – my experience as a diplomat and a journalist. It has been well-documented because, while in China, I used to record my daily routine in the diary. And one more thing – on April 6 of 2017 my dearest wife and friend Galina passed away. I am dedicating "My China Story" to her.

This book will acquaint the readers with my personal story of China, the country I have been tied to for more than a half of a century.

It is my sincere hope that those Latvian diplomats and journalists whose work is also related to China will write their own stories about the ever-changing country, both ancient and surprisingly modern at the same time.

## PART 1 DIPLOMATIC DUTIES

### My mission in Lithuania is about to finish (1998)

**11.06.1998** Two years of intensive work have passed. On the working agenda have been – solidarity of the Baltic countries, Latvian-Lithuanian sea border, Butinge oil terminal case, collisions of Sventaja Latvian community, Lithuania's relations both with EU and NATO, and, of course, with Russia. For me as a specialist in the languages and cultures of East Asia, it has been especially interesting to understand how Lithuania is forming its relationship with China, especially taking into account the fact that Lithuania has already opened its embassy in China and it is being represented by a good colleague of mine, Dainius Voveris. Efforts to understand the similarities and differences with our closest neighboring country; working with the Lithuanian press; revival of the Lithuanian language; working in the Seimas, the Lithuanian Parliament; wonderful relationships with Česlovas Juršėnas and other deputies; establishing a circle of friends and acquaintances among the members of the diplomatic corps in Vilnius; getting to know Vilnius, Kaunas, Alita, Mariampole, Druskininkai, Klaipėda Nida, Sventaja and many other towns and places in Lithuania; reflections of and insights into Lithuanian mentality – this

list cannot embrace everything that I have encountered and have had to deal with, whether urgently stressed by time constraints or in the routine course of my daily duties. The days and weeks have passed quickly, bringing their count to two full and very productive years.

While on diplomatic mission in Lithuania, my spouse Galina has been with me the whole time, and we have shared everything. Our lives first became intertwined when we both were studying at the Oriental Languages Institute of the Moscow University. I was studying Chinese, while Galina – Japanese. The spark that was ignited on the wide steps of the ancient Moscow University, united us in all our future life. Galina, then a graduate of the faculty of Biology of Leningrad State University, was working at TINRO (The Pacific Ocean Fishery and Oceanography Scientific Research Institute). The objects of her research were fur seals, and with her research she was well-known both in the USSR and in international scientific circles. As part of the Soviet delegation she participated in many international conferences in the Soviet Union, twice in the USA, and once in Japan. During our stay in Vladivostok, Galina was a senior research associate at TINRO. I was working at the Far East University as a teacher of the Chinese language, as well as being in charge of the Chinese Language Department. In Vladivostok, our three sons were born – Juris, Andrejs and Pēteris. In 1979 we moved to Latvia, where I worked at LSSR Science Academy's Institute of Philosophy and Law, but Galina was the head of the Fisheries Department Laboratory. Having accumulated this kind of life and work experience, in 1996 we arrived at the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia (Hereinafter – LR) to Lithuania, but now our road is leading back to Riga so that we could prepare for our next assignment – the diplomatic mission in China.

At the Latvian Embassy in Lithuania, I have been working as an adviser. Many people have come to our farewell party to say good-bye: the advisor to the People's Republic of China (further – the PRC); the chief geologist of Lithuania, Gediminas Motuza; one of the leading environmental researchers in Lithuania, Imantas Lazdinis; the advisors to the embassies of the USA, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine; Česlovas Juršėnas, the deputy Chairman of the Seimas, the Lithuanian parliament; a delegation of Latvians residing in Vilnius; Algis Butkus, the Head of the Latvian Language Department of Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas), the members of the Vilnius Hunters' Association, our neighbors and other guests. Many heartfelt wishes and sincere words are being said. A traditional Lithuanian music band "Ratutis" is playing. Galina and I dance the night away. The party lasts until early morning hours preparing us for a transition to the next road that life has prepared for us, a very long road, indeed.

The next morning we still go to the beautiful Galve Lake in the vicinity of Trakai. It is pleasant to the eye to watch the transparent, serene waters. Birds are chirping. On the steep shore, carpenters are building a new, white family house. Trakai has always been a positive and inspirational place for us. It is already our third summer in Lithuania. Everything feels so familiar and dear, maybe exactly because it is our last day in Lithuania, and we are going back to Riga the following morning.

Finally, I am saying goodbye to my colleagues at the Latvian Embassy to the Republic of Lithuania: “The two years spent in Lithuania have been a wonderful gift of destiny for both of us, Galina and me. It has presented us a fascinating job and has allowed us to see and learn so much.”

Meanwhile, at our apartment in Vilnius Galina is neatly packing up our belongings. We are returning to Riga.

**14.06.1998** We are leaving Vilnius and turning a new page in our life. The organized hustle of finishing up the mission in Lithuania is replaced by another busy period – preparation for the assignment in China.

**14.06.1998 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Latvia**

Several of my colleagues at the MFA already have experience of opening an embassy in another state and have been carrying out the duties that I will have to encounter. I listen to the advice from V. Krastiņš, L. Buligina, K. Eihenbaums, M. Popkovs, V.Birkavs and other diplomats. The Minister of Foreign Affairs is of the opinion that I need to arrive in China in time to manage for the celebrations of the National day of the People’s Republic of China on the first of October.

We have serious and valuable discussions with the chief accountant G. Bozdorfa about various finance, accounting and cash flow related regulations, prescriptions, recommendations, etc. Dz. Liepiņa, a ministry accountant, with a smile, yet seriously, recommends better not to mix one’s personal purse with the ministry funds. As an example, she mentions a case when one Lithuanian diplomat has been directly transported from his diplomatic mission to Lukiskai prison. Indeed, such an example sounds convincing enough.

I am very helpful to Laura Trēgere who instructs me for several days how to make payments and money transfers correctly, how to file a financial report on the computer, how to compile quarterly and yearly reports. She also acquaints me with the budget of the LR’s Embassy to the PRC.

S. Mellepe acquaints me with the guidelines for the consular service.



I also have several meetings with IT specialists teaching me how to send e-mails and answering to my questions, like "Will it be possible in China to use programs with Latin alphabet?"

Every day I am at the MFA trying to learn and understand everything about my new duties. At the same time we are applying for visas at the Chinese Embassy because already on September 25 we need to arrive in Beijing. When one issue is resolved, we immediately focus on the next ones. My dear spouse Galina did not hesitate a moment regarding the mission in China. As a person coming from the Far East, she was used to travelling long distances, for instance, the trip from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky to Leningrad, where she studied. At that time, it was possible to get from Vladivostok to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky only by ship, and the travel took four to five days. Then, nine days had to be spent travelling by train along the Trans-Siberian Railway to Leningrad, as there was no air traffic. So, the whole trip took two weeks – as people used to say, from one ocean to another. In all our joint travels, Galina prepared for the trip very rationally and accurately with a clear understanding of what the trip involved. A detail not to be missed is that already at home, in Riga, Galina agreed to carry the burden of financial accounts and reports at the embassy. Without an exaggeration, I can say that every task she took upon, she carried out with the greatest sense of responsibility. My task was to introduce Latvia to the diplomatic circles of Beijing, as well as to activate and expand relations between Latvia and China, to follow the press publications in China and use them to popularize the name of Latvia. In addition, working without Chinese staff, I was supposed to communicate on all possible levels when solving various bureaucratic and housekeeping issues at the embassy. The work ahead promised us many new and unprecedented challenges. My dear Galina did not shrink from them, and was always my greatest support.

In the autumn of 1998, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the duties of the State Secretary Deputy's for administrative and legal issues were being carried out by J. Kārkliņš. We had several meetings dedicated to practical things – the embassy premises, ensuring communications – phone bills, daily expenses in China, and many other things that we would need to address right after arriving in China. We also met diplomats from Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Latvia to discuss many practical aspects.

Besides dealing with the already mentioned administrative and bureaucratic formalities, regulations, recommendations and requirements, it was necessary to follow the mass media campaign in Latvia whose aim was to spread the news about opening the Latvian Embassy in the People's Republic of China. I was involved in preparing interviews for the magazine "Skola un Ģimene", the newspapers "Lauku Avīze" and "Latvijas Vēstnesis" and the national

TV news programme “Panorāma”. I was also interviewed by G. Dūzis from LNT, another popular Latvian TV channel. This way the Latvian society was informed about opening the Latvian Embassy in the distant country. When trying to tell the audience about my upcoming duties, I tried to select some characteristic facts, as well as episodes from my own life experience, which would demonstrate both the differences and commonalities between our cultures. During my previous trips to China, I had noticed that the people in the older generation, when hearing the word “Latvia”, made the connection to it as one of the former Soviet Republics. The common theme of the conversation then would be the building of socialism in both countries. What is more, the older generation remembered both the “good times” when the relationships between China and the USSR were flourishing and N. Khrushchev’s ruling period when the first tensions started and then aggravated in a really sinister way. As for the present times and building “socialism with Chinese characteristics” 中国特色社会主义, an ordinary Chinese citizen is having a hard time to explain the theoretical foundation of this concept. Yet, once at a railway station, a peasant dressed in a green military “vatnik” type coat, “explained” the term to me very succinctly: 吃的穿的不成问题 – food and clothes – no problem”. The man probably remembered the times when food and clothes were an unsolvable problem. In a country with 1.3 billion inhabitants the man’s words are reflecting considerable success. However, right at this very moment our similar experiences take separate ways, especially, considering the implications of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chinese socialism can look back at series of successes that keep surprising the rest of the world. Witnessing the differences in the standard of living between different regions of China, between the city and the countryside inevitably makes one wonder. “Is this really one and the same country?” Yes, exactly! It is one and the same country, indeed. As all countries, China has numerous problems, of course, and they are being addressed and solved persistently, step by step. Knowing the Chinese language greatly facilitated my learning about China’s culture, history and politics. Before leaving for the mission, I had been teaching Chinese at the University of Far East and at the University of Latvia; in addition, I myself was learning non-stop. Not once had I had an opportunity to visit China and its diverse regions, and I had seen changes happening right in front of my eyes.

However, now just before leaving for China with the special mission of opening the Latvian Embassy, there was a certain anxiety in my heart. I was very well aware of the fact that, especially the practical and bureaucratic side of the job involved many nuances I had no idea of. I understood that I would have to learn a lot all the time. Accepting this challenge, Galina and I were resolved to learn all the time and to master the art of diplomacy while embracing our new experience.

“Grindex”, one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies, as well as “Dzin-tars”, the well-known perfumery and cosmetics company, express their interest about the expected opening of the embassy. The banking sectors are interested as well, and, running a bit ahead of time, I can say that an idea about establishing a commercial attaché’s post in China is expressed by finance people.

As it is well-known, presents and small gifts are very welcome in China. The Chinese love amber and everything made of amber. Galina and I are walking around the stores in the Old Town of Riga looking for souvenirs that could help us to establish the right mood for the many talks with our Chinese colleagues when we start our new life in China. Likewise, it is important to take books and other printed material about Latvia to tell people about our geographical location, culture and mentality.

The Finance Department of the MFA provides me with financial means to last until we open a bank account. Some of it is travellers’ cheques, some – plain cash.

As one can see from the description above, the schedule for the last two months before leaving Riga has been extremely tight – running from one interview or briefing to the next one.

**07.09.1998** I am driving along Lake Ķīšezers. I take a glance at the lake, and exactly at this very moment it occurs to me that I am going to leave Latvia soon. The feeling is overwhelming. Well, travelling distant roads is not new for me. In 1961, I was on a train departing from Oškalni railway station, which is not far from the place where I had spent all my childhood. The train had on board hundreds of young men, drafted into the military service. I was one of them. Who could have imagined then that my way home would take 18 years? I would graduate from the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University, work for almost ten years at the Far East University and then, after 18 years, arrive to Riga with my family of five people. Although now I was travelling to the country I had already been linked to for several decades, the new duties and requirements were making me thoughtful. What does the future hold in store for me?

### **25.09.1998 Arriving to Beijing**

We are on board of the plane and all concerns, reflections, and insecurities are left behind. I have already been to China several times. Now I am just having flashbacks about my Chinese study years and about my previous visits. The information from the cabin crew brings me to reality. At 8:30 the plane lands at Beijing Airport. Away with all these thoughts! There is no time for sentimentalities. I need to solve a whole bunch of questions connected with the transfer to the hotel. The Chinese MFA allocates a car with a driver to us



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for several days, as well as appoints an employee from the Protocol Department to provide support with accommodation and settling in. During the first week, every morning outside Kempinski Hotel we already have the MFA car waiting for us, and with the help of an experienced civil servant we are able to sort out all of the outstanding tasks of starting the mission in China.

In the afternoon of the first day of our arrival, a representative of the Eastern European Department of the MFA of PRC and an employee of its Protocol Department pay us a visit. Then we have a short rest. At 14.00 we arrive at the Ministry. We are received by the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Zhang Deguang. I present him the note from the MFA of Latvia about my designation as Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of the LR to the PRC. I have met Vice Minister Zhang Deguang several times, and my participation in the process of harmonizing relationships between Latvia and China provides a favorable background for our talks. The fact that I am being received at the MFA right after my arrival to China should be evaluated as an outstanding gesture of favor to Latvia.

Later, I report to the MFA of the LR about handing in the note to the MFA of the PRC and about the meeting with the Foreign Vice Minister of the PRC Zhang Deguang. **1 2**

**28.09.1998** All diplomatic corps are invited to a reception at the Great Hall of the People. This year Chinese people, but especially the Chinese military have been fighting with the most severe floods in the *Yangtze* River basin since 1959. Three hundred thousand military personnel have taken part in restraining the floods. With powerful, uplifting music in the background, they are showing on the screen hundreds of soldiers carrying sand bags, boards, even timber logs, and building protective dams with tremendous effort. The flood waters look sinister, but the multitudes of people are fighting courageously. The documentary is showing officers-commanders, who are leading the emergency works and soldiers dressed in protective gear who, with clenched arms and bare shoulders, are supporting provisional dams and trying to divert the wild flood waters. The element has created a community of people, and they are ready to do whatever it takes to stop the uncontrollable force of the waters. Unfortunately, in 1998 the floods of the *Yangtze* River took away lives of 1,200 people. Floods are not uncommon in China; however, this one has been the worst in many decades. The Chairman of the PRC Jiang Zemin 江泽民 delivers a speech saying, "The Chinese people are invincible!" The grandness of the event and the images of the vast country seem to sharpen my senses and affect the perception of reality slightly at the same time. Everything is grand and mighty and superlative, including the premises where the military people are paid respects for their heroic deed. It will take time

to get accustomed. It will take time to get accustomed to Tiananmen Square 天安门广场, to the “human mountains and seas”, to the fact that it is almost impossible to find a place where you can be alone with yourself... We decide to spend the weekend at the Yi-He Yuan Imperial Garden (Summer Palace) 颐和园, which becomes one of our favorite places amidst our busy lifestyle. **3**

**30.09.1998** Today we have been invited to a celebration of the founding day of the PRC at the Great Hall of the People. The number of participants is about 1,000, including diplomats representing 140 countries. The Prime Minister of the PRC Zhu Rongji (朱镕基) is making a speech. I remember this man as the Mayor of Shanghai from 1988–1989. It is a well-known fact that in 1989 student uprisings were taking place in China leading to bloody clashes in Beijing, which led to casualties among all sides – the students, the civilians and the army. During those turbulent days I was doing my traineeship at Fudan University in Shanghai. Thanks to the Mayor who densely deployed workers’ patrols in the city, not a single drop of blood was shed. Now Zhu Rongji is speaking as the leader of the economic life in China, looking back at the achievements, but also highlighting the problems to be solved – for example, the uneven development of the regions, reorganization of state companies, and expansion of high-speed roads.

**01.10.1998** The time when we are being taken care of by the MFA of the PRC, helping us to accommodate and make it easier to perform our diplomatic duties, is over. September days have passed, and it is already October 1. We have a task – to prepare our expenditure balance for September, the previous month. I am very thankful that my spouse Galina has undertaken this responsibility. Now she works as long as it takes to make “all ends meet”, and, eventually, we can send our financial report to Riga. Our colleagues at the MFA of Latvia gave us sound advice – to enter all day’s expenses on the computer starting from the very first day. That’s what we did, and after the first report had been filed, we understood two things – we will have to file such a report every month and, what is the most important, we can cope with this. This way we started a very strict routine – to end our working day with filing the expenses, which fully guaranteed the transparency of our finances.

While sipping Beijing’s fermented milk from tiny exquisite porcelain jars in the suite of the elegant hotel, we finally can start to enjoy our weekend. We realize that we are getting accustomed, slowly, but surely, to our new duties.

**05.10.1998** It is the time for Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival 中秋节. The Chinese really love these festivities. People go for a walk in the parks or other nice places. Students on their campuses read poems dedicated to the festival, sing and dance. People are enjoying the sight of the full moon and are treating each



other to cookies called “mooncakes” 月饼. Mooncakes can have different fillings, but the most popular is the filling made of hawthorn marmalade. This is the second most important festival after the Spring Festival 春节, and it marks the middle of the Autumn. It is held on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the eighth month, which roughly corresponds to September 15. The Chinese are convinced that on this day “the Moon is brightest and its shape is roundest”. The concept of roundness or fullness has several connotations – first of all, it’s the harvesting time. Moreover, the Moon is the symbol of femininity – that is why roundness also symbolizes fertility. The festival is celebrated with the whole family, and everyone is treated to mooncakes. It is admirable how the Chinese seem to know how to avoid holiday excesses like heavy drinking and partying. People are just enjoying the poignant moonlight and the very special round form of the Moon. The mood is uplifted and nothing seems to obscure the “mutual attraction” of the people and the Moon.

After several working sessions with the Chinese IT specialists, we are finally able to establish e-mail connection with the MFA of the LR, and this is already a new stage in our mission. A week has passed trying to solve this issue, and now I am more than happy to receive a congratulation letter from Mr I. Kamarūts in the name of the Technical Department of the MFA.

We are paying our first visits to our friends in China. Of course, Dainis Voveris, the Ambassador of Lithuania to the PRC is on our list. He gives us many valuable pieces of advice on choosing the apartment, embassy premises, communications, computer maintenance specialists, and so on. My wife Galina has a very good relationship with D. Voveri’s spouse, so we really appreciate the opportunity to spend some time in a warm, family-like atmosphere. Considering that most of the time we need to deal with all the big and small challenges on our own, this is really a nice change and support for us.

We are back to our Kempinski room. Right below our windows, a German October Fest tent has been put up, where every night they play German songs, and an Austrian singer is yodeling vigorously.

We are preparing one of our first diplomatic notes – a request for the MFA of the PRC to issue us the diplomatic identification cards.

Although there has been some red tape, we finally see the light at the end of the tunnel with opening the bank account. We really need it urgently because the funds in the form of cash and checks provided for us by our MFA are drying up.

The shuttle bus from the hotel provides us a smooth journey to the center of Beijing, and we take this opportunity when needed. On one of the weekends, we decide to take a ride to hotel “Beijing” (北京) and take a walk in the central

Tiananmen Square 天安门广场, the name of which means “Gate of Heavenly Peace”. The total area of the Square is 400,000 square meters. During the times of emperors, all their important rulings were announced here. On October 1 of 1949, the announcement about establishing of the People’s Republic of China was made exactly here. One of the central landmarks in the square is the Monument to the People’s Heroes 人民英雄纪念碑. Every day soldiers raise the national flag by this monument. Today, as well, we see many people walking around, sitting down on the stone slabs, contemplating and soaking in the special aura of this place. Most of these people are visitors from other provinces of China. At times, there are groups of foreigners surging up. I have already been here before – ten years ago, in the autumn time. I have a vivid memory about kites being flown over the square and the delight caused by this sight in everybody present, and especially, in the owner the kite. We walk around and spend some time in this huge square, which carries a special meaning for every Chinese citizen.

The northern sector of the Square is crossed by one of the main streets in Beijing, Chang’an Avenue 长安街. Later, during the two years of my diplomatic mission I used to cross the Tiananmen Square 天安门广场 many times in my car. Of course, one can imagine that when sitting by the wheel, there is no time to sink into deep reflection about the significance of this square in the value system of the Chinese people. Needless to say, in a place so meaningful for the whole country, the drivers behave impeccably. Yet, there is no shortage of stately policemen, and they are watching the traffic flow very carefully.

After the walk around the Tiananmen Square, we dive into the small and charming Sun Yat-Sen Park (孙中山公园). The aroma of cedar trees is rich and refreshing. The branches of the willow trees are swaying in the wind, and we have escaped the hustle and bustle of the city. This is exactly something that we have been missing.

**11.10.1998** Today Chargé d’Affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Estonia to the PRC, Mr A. Birov gives us a ride in his car around the center of Beijing and acquaints us with the diplomatic residential areas. We visit the diplomatic residential area of Sanlitun 三里屯. Running ahead of the events, after a few months we will choose the premises for the Embassy of the LR exactly here. Just a small detail – the Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania to the PRC is nearby.

In any case, the atmosphere on this Sunday afternoon spent together with the Estonian diplomat is nice and collegial. He shares his experience and knowledge of Beijing’s life. Maybe it’s about mentality, but A. Birov is so

sure about the advantages of living at Kempinski that it makes us a little thoughtful. He says that it is possible to hire a driver and a secretary, and that he is not going to move anywhere. It is possible that the Estonian Embassy is still located in the Kempinski Hotel...

**12.10.1998** We are attending an event at the Embassy of Belarus. The invited guests: diplomats from the former USSR republics or socialist camp countries – Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Mongolia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary. The working language is Russian. The inertia of the past clearly prevails in the mutual relations. The ambassador or chargé d'affaires of each country talks about their country's relations with the PRC. On one hand, it was interesting to hear the speaker's point of view; however, it seems that the future of meetings in such format is not very certain or clear. Russia's role as the nucleus or the dominant force of this group of countries is now more in the past. After the questions addressed to me during informal talks, it could be understood that the rapprochement between Latvia and Taiwan has not remained unnoticed at the international level. In fact, it turned out later that my doubts were reasonable. Meetings hosting diplomats of the post-soviet countries in this format gradually disappeared at a later stage.

Another event of the day is getting a call from the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC: we can receive our diplomatic ID cards. We have been living without this important document for more than two weeks, and finally we are really able to prove our status in China.

**14.10.1998** The official form of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC has been created on the computer. We have received the embassy stamp and are opening our embassy account at Bank of China. All of these are small, but important work details that make it easier for us to do our job.

**15.10.1998** With the onset of autumn, the air temperatures are slowly beginning to fall. The air is becoming cleaner and the visibility is better. At such times, one can see that the north-western edge of Beijing is surrounded by mountains. If there is smog over Beijing, it is impossible to discern anything at the skyline.

Several hundred British businessmen working in the PRC are meeting with the British Prime Minister Tony Blair at the Kempinski Hotel. Galina and I are in the hotel lobby. Tony Blair enters vigorously and offers his congratulations to the participants of the meeting. We are happy to witness this event. After getting acquainted in more detail with the purpose of the British Prime Minister's visit, I write a report to the MFA of the Republic of Latvia.

**20.10.1998** We are in the Ritan Park 日坛 (Sun Park or The Temple of Sun Park). As in other parks in Beijing, grand cleaning works of water bodies, artificial lakes and ponds are being done this year. There are many digging machines, specialized excavators and dump trucks working. There are pipes everywhere through which the liquid sludge and clay sediment are pumped. The number of workers is incredible. Their faces and clothes covered with dirt, they are helping the machinery and mechanisms with long shovels. Every time when I see something like this, it makes me admire the Chinese ability to mobilize and involve a huge number of people. This has always been the case in this country, and it is time for us to get used to it slowly.

Here is another example. Alongside with cleansing of Beijing water bodies, the stone wall, which separates the Forbidden City 紫禁城 from the rest of the city, is being cleaned from the dust deposits. There are so many stonemasons working here that it's hard to believe one's eyes. Can there really be so many stonemasons in one place? Yes! It turns out that it is true. These people are working unhurriedly and monotonously; probably their tools are exactly like the ones they used to have a thousand years ago.

**21.10.1998** We have decided to visit the very center of Beijing. The famous expensive shopping street Wangfujing (王府井) is being reconstructed. Walking along the street means trying to balance oneself between deep ditches and piles of excavated mud. A step aside, and your feet sink into sludge. We also see that some archaeological findings may have been encountered unexpectedly as we observe young archaeologists already working busily on the site under the guidance of their teachers. One can imagine how this popular street would look like when it is fully reconstructed. But when will it be? Walking is a real challenge, and we want to get out of it all as fast as possible. Once again we have found the stop of our shuttle bus and are happily having a ride "home" – to our Kempinski Hotel.

**23.10.1998** We are discussing with the representatives of the MFA of the PRC the possibility of publishing an article about Latvia in one of the central newspapers. Our national holiday of November 18, Independence Day, is not far away, and this could be the first step in popularizing Latvia and telling people in China about our country. However, many things still need to be negotiated and coordinated, and it has to be done in unusual and sometimes unfamiliar circumstances.

**25.10.1998** We are preparing a circular note for the Diplomatic Corps in Beijing on the commencement of the work of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. As our temporary address we indicate: Kempinski Hotel 145.

**26.10.1998** Today we are meeting with the Ambassador of Lithuania to the PRC D. Voveris and the Chargé d'Affaires of the Estonian Embassy to the PRC A. Birov to discuss the formation of the Baltic Club. We are also talking about a joint trip to get to know China more deeply. As mentioned above, diplomats from both our neighboring countries have helped me many times with good advice on issues related to specific bureaucratic procedures in China. Our relations are collegial, and diplomats from both neighboring countries kindly provide advice if we need it.

**29.10.1998** I am writing to T. Baumanis and asking him to send me materials dedicated to the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Latvia.

Looking back at the past two months in Beijing, we see that each day we have multi-level challenges that need to be addressed quickly and immediately. The computer and the printer have caused a lot of concerns. However, we have acquired many skills needed for the job. If help is needed, we have the coordinates of several technicians at our disposal. The most important is that a belief is slowly growing in us that with hard work everything can be dealt with. Of course, knowledge of the Chinese language is very helpful, but if there is some very specific vocabulary, then dictionaries come to the rescue.

**01.11.1998** We try to use the weekends to get to know more about the Chinese capital, especially its historical buildings and parks. Thus, on this day we arrive in the center of Beijing, whose true gem is the particularly attractive and picturesque chain of lakes, hand-crafted by people. Some of the lakes are Qianhai (前海), Houhai (后海), Beihai (北海). Our visit, as well as most of our stay in Beijing coincides with impressive reconstruction works – an unimaginable amount of work is being done here. The lakes are being completely drained and then cleaned of sludge deposits, as well as everything thrown into the water by some non-disciplined citizens. This process involves a huge amount of equipment and countless numbers of people. I would not like to say that every visitor to the park throws something onto the ground or into the water. However, there are those who do not care and throw their sunflower or pumpkin seed packets or ice cream wrapping papers straight into the water. Now this place is filled with the noise from dump trucks, crow-bars, compressors and pumps. As mentioned in the PRC press, it is planned to clean all water bodies in Beijing. When looking at the sturdy Drum 鼓楼 and Bell Towers 钟楼, a random gazebo or a humpbacked bridge, one comes to a surprising revelation. Due to the work currently being done, the landscape greatly misses the water bodies, whose calm surface and reflections would make everything even more colorful and brighter. The water is an indispensable element here, but at the moment it is missing. Anyone visiting Beijing could be advised to dedicate at least an hour to visit these lakes. In a relative

quiet, when the annoying traffic noises have receded, when there is no impression that the whole of China is coming over you, it is possible to indulge in a soothing reflection here – to feel the heart of the huge nation pulsating and imagine how the Son of Heaven was taking a walk in Beihai Park with his courtiers, officials and bodyguards hundreds of years ago.

Tonight in our room of the Kempinski Hotel, we write in Chinese the addresses of all 157 embassies and missions of Beijing's Diplomatic Corps on the envelopes, and soon they are on their way to the addressees.

The only employees of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia from September 1998 to January 2000 were the two of us – me and my spouse Galina. It is during those days that Galina worked especially hard and with the greatest sense of commitment so that we could cope with everything. The amount of work was huge, and we did not count the working hours.

Tonight Galina admits that she has a great sense of satisfaction for the work done. In the evening, however, we still have to prepare printouts of our October cash flow.

**03.11.1998** Galina is calculating the area for the embassy apartment according to the prepared plan. The plans and costs of the premises of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC have been updated. I contact J. Kārklīšs and inform him about the benefits and other features of the potential premises.

**04.11.1998** I am trying to catch up on the Latvian newspapers. A month and a half away from home have distanced us from the events in Latvia.

**05.11.1998** Journalist I. Rākins, with whom we have repeatedly created articles in Latvia dedicated to China and East Asia, comes to visit us at the hotel. I. Rākins has brought with him a TV journalist who wants to understand everything about the peculiarities and success of the PRC economy, as well as the scope and characteristics of the economic cooperation between the Republic of Latvia and the PRC.

**07.11.1998** On a Saturday afternoon, quite by accident, I look into the diary of 1998. The pages I read recall the first semester at the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in Lithuania. During that period, certainly, all attention was focused on Lithuanian and Baltic issues. On June 14 we were returning from Vilnius to Riga. Including our holidays, we had less than four months to spend in Riga. The time was spent mainly preparing intensively for work in the PRC. On September 25 we are already in Beijing. It has been an extremely tense and exciting year, a real year of the Tiger 虎年. In addition, I also am a Tiger according to the Chinese horoscope. Really, can't complain about boredom. All matters are urgent, and everything needs to be done without hesitation.



The diary disciplines and teaches me to tell very briefly about the main events of the day. In addition, such activity develops observation and analytical skills. How could I have told so much about the opening atmosphere of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC, working alone with my Galina, if I did not have the diaries of 1998, 1999 and 2000 at hand...

**08.11.1998** We have received an invitation for 8 November from the Russian Embassy in the PRC to attend an event called “На королевскую рыбалку”, which could be translated as “Royal Fishing Trip”. We discuss different possibilities and cannot really come to conclusion on what exactly lies under the intentions of the Russian Embassy. When we both arrive at the Russian Embassy, Ambassador I. Rogachov receives guests and addresses them: “This day in Russia is the Day of Reconciliation...” Most likely, after many decades of class struggle, such recognition is necessary for the Russian society and its future. This is exactly what Ambassador I. Rogachov, who is quite popular among Beijing’s Diplomatic Corps, is talking about.

I. Rogachov is one of the few foreign ambassadors to China who personally knew Mao Zedong 毛泽东, Zhou Enlai 周恩来, Marshal Zhu De 朱德, as well as the next generation of senior leaders, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, Jiang Zemin 江泽民, and other senior PRC leaders. The Ambassador’s authority has developed thanks to his brilliant knowledge of the Chinese language, as well as the deep understanding of the Chinese history and people. It was on this day that I met him personally, and in further diplomatic activities during our conversations he always found some time to discuss important events.

*A short commentary and a brief insight into the history of the Russian Embassy in the PRC. In 1861 the first Russian ambassador was accredited in Beijing, and the diplomatic mission was established. From the XVIII century and until 1956 a Russian spiritual mission was there. The Russian Embassy in the PRC is one of the largest embassies in the world in terms of area, with a total of 16 ha.*

During the “Royal Fishing” reception on November of 1998, carp were caught in the ponds of the embassy with nets to become immediately a treat for diplomats. It is no wonder that after studying Chinese at the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University and 10 years of work at the Far Eastern University in Vladivostok I met many former study and work colleagues at this event. I remember that most of the guests were ambassadors from the former USSR republics, or the so-called socialist camp countries. At this event, like at the reception at the Belarusian Embassy mentioned earlier, the guests often resorted to recalling old times. However, after 1991, the new times were setting new challenges for the former Soviet Republics. The diplomats who

had gathered had something new to talk about as well. Everyone had in mind an idea, plan or task that was not supposed to be told to a wider circle.

**09.11.1988** The idea I expressed yesterday about the entry of the former USSR republics into modern reality is largely confirmed on the following day. The celebrations at the Russian Embassy are literally immediately followed by a reception in the EU mission in China. It is a large event with about half a hundred ambassadors from EU countries, the British Commonwealth, the United States, Russia and Asia. The host of the event – the EU Ambassador to the PRC Mr Wilkinson – outlines the latest EU development trends and intentions. After the Ambassador's speech, the diplomats present try to clarify issues that are important within the EU for their country or region. Latvia's accession to the EU is still far away. And yet...

Today there is another meeting, too – with the Ambassador of Lithuania to the PRC D. Voveris. We are talking with my Lithuanian colleague about contacting the Eastern European Support Group of the Chinese Parliament, or in full, the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, as well as contacting the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the PRC.

**10.11.1998** We are preparing 40 invitations to the first November 18 celebrations in China. I would like to emphasize that this is less than two months after arriving in this country. Our plan is simple and clear. We are inviting the ambassadors of the nearest neighboring countries of the region and also the ambassadors of the former USSR republics to our celebration. Of course, we also invite the ambassadors of other countries, with whom we have managed to develop more interactive relations in this short period of time. In any case, it will not be necessary to explain to the invited guests Latvia's geographical location nor the main twists and turns in our country's history. The celebration of such an important event for the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC as the Independence Day of Latvia imposes a great responsibility on us, as well as a desire to celebrate this event in a really honorable way.

**12.11.1998** Active cooperation with the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC is going on, clarifying the details of our event. For example, the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC informs me that a separate room is needed for my conversation with the main guest of our event – the Deputy Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China Zhang Deguang. We also invite several representatives of the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC to the event.

**15.11.1998** It's a Sunday afternoon and we're going for a walk to the diplomatic district of Sanlitun (三里屯). Autumn is in the air in Beijing. The golden autumn colors still prevail, but the trees are slowly becoming bare. The leaves

of sycamores are falling down with a rustling noise. A slight breeze picks up the fallen leaves of ginkgo trees. They can be recognized because of their peculiar shape. The air is crisp, and the visibility is good. The overall feeling is also positive, although I am a bit concerned about the event in honor of Latvia's Independence Day, which is approaching rapidly. In the evening, for the first time in Beijing, it occurs to me that maybe I should put my hat on. The weather is becoming colder in Beijing.

**16.11.1998** We send an article dedicated to the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Latvia's Independence to the editorial office of the newspaper "Beijing Daily" (《北京日报》).

**17.11.1998** At the Swedish Embassy in the PRC, I am meeting with the Minister of the Embassy, Lars Freden. Who would have thought that? From 1991 to 1992 Lars Freden worked in Riga, and was the head of the Swedish mission in Latvia. Although he is well acquainted with the problems of the Baltic states, his main specialty is sinology. Thus, we have a lot to share with each other – our own stories about studying the Chinese language and getting to know China as well as understanding of the current issues in this country today.

**18.11.1998** My wife and I are both dressed up and ready for the Latvian Independence Day celebrations at the Kempinski Hotel. It should be noted that celebrating a national event at the Kempinski Hotel in the Chinese capital is viewed in this megalopolis as demonstrating one's sense of subtlety and good manners. This hotel in Beijing is well known not only among diplomats, but also among international business people as well as senior officials of the PRC.

I. Forande, a graduate of the Sinology Division of the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Latvia, V. Pole and A. Dobrijaņina, students of the same department are the first guests to arrive to the ceremony. At this historical moment, they are the only representatives of Latvia in Beijing whom we know about. Gradually, the invited diplomats and officials start arriving. The main guest of the event, the Deputy Foreign Minister of the PRC Zhang Deguang, is also present. We have a rather long conversation with the distinguished guest, in which Latvian-Taiwanese relations are touched upon, and a hope is expressed from the Chinese side that the future relations between the PRC and Latvia will be formed on rational and generally accepted foundations. When the official conversation is over, I am back in the common hall with the other guests. The Croatian Ambassador says nice words at this celebration as well. Polish Ambassador Pan Z. Goralchik is in a good mood, and his witty remarks contribute to a free and friendly atmosphere at our reception. We soon find common conversation topics with the Polish Ambassador, as he is also a sinologist with an excellent knowledge

of Chinese. China became Mr. Z. Goralchik's field of interest two decades ago. The Ambassador of Kazakhstan, observing the Latvian students present, comes up with a completely unexpected revelation. Vera Pole reminds him of Vija Artmane, the famous Latvian actress in her youth. Undeniably, Vija Artmane was extremely popular throughout the Soviet Union and, as we can see, Kazakhstan was not an exception. The atmosphere of the evening is really warm and collegial, and one after another the guests express their appreciation of the fact that Latvia has presented itself well in China. The guests express many wishes for success. When the guests are already departing, Galina and I invite the Latvian students to our hotel room, which could be called the small Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC at that time. So, this has happened. The Latvian Embassy in the PRC has made a public statement, and we have joined the large family of Beijing diplomats at an official level.

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**21.11.1998** We are leaving for Baoding (保定), where the Economic and Trade Seminar Exhibition will be taking place. The distance to be covered is 140 km. The highway is excellent, and we reach our destination within an hour and a half. Baoding has been the key to Beijing since ancient times. There is a well-known saying in China: "Whoever rules in Baoding, rules in Beijing". Historically, the city used to be the residence of the governor of the capital district. It is freezing cold in the unheated hall where the seminar begins. The speakers are mainly local officials. Among the invited guests – the guest of honour – the Ambassador of Iceland. He is a tall and slender man, who has arrived in an equally elegant car. After less than an hour, suddenly cold water starts to flow from the right upper corner of the stage. The most honorable guests are on a podium on the stage. The ones whose seats are closer to the "waterfall" are moving further away. The foreign guests exchange puzzled looks. The Chinese side, as people who have experienced a lot, are less surprised. After a quarter of an hour, the problem is solved. Only the wet floor on the right side of the stage reminds of the incident...

Business talks on activating economic and trade contacts are followed by lunch at an unimaginably luxurious palace: Beijing duck 北京烤鸭, pigeon broth, pancakes stuffed with donkey meat, lamb stew, emperor's cornbread are on the menu. The food is fantastic, and we try to taste everything on the table. While we are feasting, there has been a snowfall of about 10 cm. In Beijing it is called "the big snow". Before leaving, we notice five huge owls sitting motionless in the giant cedar trees by the governor's residence. The locals explain to us that the owls have been living in these cedar trees since the emperors' times. When it gets dark and night falls, the owls become active, but as the morning approaches, they return to their old cedar trees.



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The road back is long and filled with adventures. First of all, we spend five hours on the road. Secondly, on the roadside we see a few cars that have skidded off the road. It looks like the Chinese do not know how to drive on a slippery road in winter conditions. The bottom line is that “the big snow” can be a big concern for people. The next day, children hurry to make snowmen before the snow has melted. According to their face shape and eye slit, the snowmen definitely are Chinese. Well, how else? We are in China.

**24.11.1998** The end of November in Beijing is bright and sunny. This is in stark contrast to late autumn in Latvia, where it is often considered the most depressing time of the year. Personally, I do not agree with that. When walking on a forest trail in November or December in Latvia, I enjoy the weather no

matter what. In the evening, the sun looks like a round and incredibly large ball shedding bright light onto the Chinese capital.

Our work pace is extremely tense as we have to solve ourselves all the problems we face in our daily routine, including household problems, which takes a lot of time. Tomorrow it will be two months since we have arrived in Beijing. The time has passed so quickly. During the first weeks, everything was new and unfamiliar, but now, in most situations, we feel much more comfortable – we already know where, how and to whom a particular issue should be addressed.

**26.11.2017** After two months and five days, our car arrives in a container. When the car is unloaded from the container, I ask the driver to bring it to the hotel. Our boxes and bicycles are transported to the hotel by the company truck. The car is parked in the basement of the hotel. Boxes with literature about Latvia, documents and folders, even the flagpole, straight from the container – everything is placed in our only room, which proudly performs the functions of an embassy in case we have visitors. Being cramped in our only room is not a problem, though. What we really miss is homemade dinners, cooked according to our taste and by ourselves.

**28.11.1998** Today is the first time I've been driving a car on my own in China. With an anxious feeling that I cannot hide, I get by the wheel to set off on my first journey into the streets of Beijing. Having left the Kempinski, I turn right and go in the direction of the Fourth Circuit Road 四环路. I have driven a car in Vladivostok, where the streets run up and down the steep volcanic cliffs or wind along the many bays and peninsula. I have driven a car in Moscow, known for the heaviest traffic in the USSR. The last two years in Vilnius were an interesting experience as well, as the grid of streets in the capital of Lithuania definitely cannot be compared to Riga with its plain relief and strict, geometric urban layout. What I am trying to say is that I am not a novice driver at all. However, even after many years of studying Chinese characters, to read the names of the streets while driving and to get my bearings is not easy at all. In the 1990s, just outside the Kempinski Hotel, the suburbs of Beijing start, with bleak, single-storied villages and congested streets. I am trying to turn the car in the direction of Beijing Airport. Too late, and I miss it the first time. I make a huge circle around the city along the Third Circuit, trying to memorize some landmarks, but now I do not have a slightest idea how to return to our hotel. Eventually, we find ourselves in the northern part of Beijing, where it is possible to take the road to Badaling (八达岭), the section of the Great Wall of China to which visitors of Beijing are usually taken. Despite all the experiences and confusion, we still manage to get onto the Third Circuit Road, which leads us safely to the Kempinski Hotel. Although we feel exhausted after this



ordeal, the existing traffic rules in the PRC have not been violated and we have never been stopped by the traffic police. Well, we have passed the first exam on the streets of Beijing, if not with an excellent, then at least with a satisfactory grade. Well, enough about driving. I only want to say, running a bit ahead of the events, that after driving for two years in Beijing, as well as in Chengde (承德), Xi'an (西安), Luoyang (洛阳), Qingdao (青岛), Shaolin (少林), Huhhot (呼和浩特) and elsewhere and making in total 22,200 km in China, we did not have a single traffic offense or accident. **6**

**29.11.1998** Following our first independent road trip, on the next day we drive to Beijing Airport. This time, we are stopped for the first and only time by the traffic police officers. They point at the green diplomatic number plate of Lithuania and ask an abrupt and very concrete question: "What kind of car plate is that?" When I explain the origin of the plate to the police officer, the answer is as follows – in China you can only drive with the PRC car plates, and your green car plate is being confiscated. It turns out that, according to the traffic rules in the PRC, driving without a car plate is a less serious violation than driving with a car plate from another country. Of course, on the same day I comply with the existing order and start the procedure of obtaining a local car plate.

**02.12.1998** There have been problems with our computer for several days. It turns out it has caught a virus. The annual report has been corrupted in Excel, the files do not open, and the press reports cannot be read. For several days we are getting nowhere. Several IT men replace each other, but the computer still does not work. This is not good, and it affects successful performance of our tasks.

**03.12.1998** J. Kārklīņš, the Head of the Administrative Department of the MFA, arrives in Beijing. Together we go to the diplomatic district of Sanlitun 三里屯 to get acquainted with the future premises of our embassy. We also go to some villages where detached houses are let out. In short, there are several offers, and it is for us to decide what our priority will be. Then we pay a short visit to the Great Wall of China. **7**

**04.12.1998** This day begins with a visit to the MFA of the PRC, where we meet with the Head of the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Department, Zhao Xi Di, who tells J. Kārklīņš: "The main thing is not the number of embassy staff, but the quality. 贝德高 (P. Pildegovičs) is doing the workload of 10 people..." What can I add here? Our micro-team has two members. I am the only diplomat. My spouse Galina closely follows the financial flow of the embassy and deals with everything that comes up during the day. Our mission is a real challenge that we have accepted. We are trying to do our



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best to fulfill our responsibilities. Knowledge of the Chinese language and of China helps a lot. To be frank, we often face many things that we are not familiar with, too. We are discussing with J. Kārklīņš an option for the Baltic states to rent or buy a plot of land and a house, which could be a joint embassy of the three Baltic states. In this way, the Czechs and Slovaks have been using the premises of the former Czechoslovak Embassy on several occasions. Such issues are not simple; they must be discussed. Would it be rational, or is such a project already doomed to failure?

This evening, together with J. Kārklīņš, we attend a reception at the Embassy of Finland, where we exchange views with the ambassadors of Finland, Kazakhstan, Croatia, Sweden and others. We also meet the already mentioned Minister of the Swedish Embassy L. Freden.

**06.12.1998** The visit of J. Kārklīņš, Director of the Administrative Department of the MFA of the Republic of Latvia, has been completed. In a way, it could be regarded as an inspection visit to China to see first-hand how the mission is being carried out. Our achievements, especially the establishment of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia, are positively assessed, and it provides a great sense of satisfaction, as well as a desire to do our best in the future.

Snow has fallen again in Beijing – this time the one that is called the “moderate snow”. The cover of the snow is not more than 5 cm thick. Residents of the capital continue to ride their bicycles actively. Often the road becomes slippery, and then cyclists fall from their bicycles and wallow in the white snow trying to stand up. A gorgeous blanket of snow enwraps Beijing, especially its parks and gardens, turning the capital into a real Christmas pastoral. The low – hanging willow twigs are covered with sparkling snow. The ice on the ponds is shimmering. The air is cool and crispy. Going for a walk on such a winter day is a real treat, and we try not to miss it. The copper-colored ball of the sun is setting behind the roofs. The day turns quietly into the night.

**07.12.1998** Everything necessary for the inclusion of information about the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC on the diplomatic list of Beijing has been done, and all paperwork has been submitted to the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC. We return to the Kempinski on foot. On our way back we drop into a familiar Uighur restaurant. The food is always delicious here. The kebab is juicy, and the vegetables are excellent. Freshly baked bread “nan” 饅 tastes great. Inside the eatery one could wish for more organization and tidiness, though. Well, the staff are busy – everybody’s watching some popular TV program.

**08.12.1998** A “political decision” has been made – we are taking a note to the Beijing Customs Department 北京海关 with a request to provide us the diplomatic corps car plate. Our request is accepted, and we receive a customs letter which is to be submitted to the Car Diagnostic Center, located on a completely different side of Beijing. At around 11:00, the “ordeal” begins – a very thorough inspection of the brakes, steering system, engine, body, muffler and other components. We are the only “non-Chinese” in the vast crowd of motorists. If a European person still appears, then more often than not he would have a Chinese assistant. Nothing doing... Maybe it’s exactly here that I understand how useful the knowledge of the local language is. The many years of studying Chinese have not been spent in vain. Fortunately, we are moving forward step by step in the line, and the time comes finally when the black number plate with red hieroglyphs of Beijing’s diplomatic corps is affixed to the protective bar of our car. We return to the Kempinski exhausted, but satisfied. Beijing traffic police will no longer have a reason to stop us and wonder about the Lithuanian diplomatic car plate.

**09.12.1998** We drop into a gas station, but cannot refuel. There is no electricity. Opposite the Kempinski Hotel there is a large undeveloped field, behind which is a small, nice lake. In our free time we go for a walk there. The frozen lake is covered with a shining mirror of ice. The lake looks so beautiful in its winter attire, and we cannot understand why the local people throw bricks, twigs, stones and other rubbish onto the ice.

**10.12.1998** The Institute of Foreign Policy of the MFA of the PRC is hosting a reception at the restaurant “Thai Village” 傣家村. Ambassadors of the Northern and Eastern European countries, Russia and Central Asia have been invited. The ethnic food of the peoples living in Yunnan Province 云南省 is being served. We listen to their folk music. The performers’ costumes are gorgeous, and the atmosphere is festive at the reception. Friendly and collegial relations have already been established with many ambassadors.

**11.12.1998** We rise early in the morning, travel to the airport and after a one hour long flight, we are already in the administrative center of Shandong Province 山东省, Jinan City 济南市. The organizers of the event are entrepreneurial people from Shandong Province, who want to cooperate with Latvian business people. The above mentioned entrepreneurs, as well as the Chinese language students of the Department of Oriental Studies of the University of Latvia L. Stupaka, A. Kalniņa and J. Holodova attend the gala lunch. The students are honing their Chinese language skills in Jinan City and have come to the event after learning about our arrival in Jinan. After the lunch, we go to our room with the students, and I give them Latvian newspapers, literature about Latvia, as well as “Laima” chocolate, probably the most well-known



Latvian chocolate brand. On my part, I briefly introduce the students to the activities of the first months of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. We spend an hour chatting in Latvian and enjoying the cordial, sincere atmosphere with our expats. In the afternoon, Galina and I go for a walk, and very soon we reach the old town of Jinan, where we find the famous Baotuquan 趵突泉 Spring, known all over China. This spring, together with the park of the same name, can be called the symbol of Jinan. Baotuquan Spring is widely known not only as the best of the 72 springs in the park, but also as “the most famous spring in the entire Tian Xia Empire 天下第一泉” – as the Chinese themselves like to describe something really outstanding. Since ancient times, poems and ballads have been dedicated to this spring. According to researchers, this year marks 3,543 years since Baotuquan spring has been mentioned for the first time. The combination of the geographical location and geological features of Jinan City have played a role in the origin of the Baotuquan spring.

The spring basin is rectangular in shape, about 30 meters long from west to east and about 18 meters wide from north to south. Spring water flows out of the limestone grotto around the clock, sometimes reaching its peak of 240,000 cubic meters per day. At these peaks, the jet of water rises up and can reach a height of 26 metres.

The water from the spring is fresh and suitable for drinking, especially for making tea. Tea tasting is popular with the visitors to the park, particularly with the tourists. There is a saying in Chinese: if you have not drunk tea from the Baotuquan spring, you have ruined your trip to Jinan. Be that as it may, although Galina and I do not try tea from Baotuquan Spring, we thoroughly enjoy the visit to the popular tourist destination, famous for its history and legends. The visit to Jinan and the park has given us an opportunity to see something really unique. We are slowly walking back to our hotel reflecting and lingering in the fond memories of the places we have seen. The main event of Jinan's visit is still scheduled for the next day.

There are cities in China that should not be missed. Such cities have the flavor of history, they have an important place in people's value system, they call and thrill human minds... One of such cities is the native place of the great Confucius 孔子, Qufu 曲阜. This city had been calling, inviting, and stimulating our imagination long before. Will we really be able to walk the paths that the great Master has walked? What is the energy of this land, which is empowered by the Taishan Shrine 泰山? Was it from his birthplace that the Great Master inherited the gentle power and humanism, the energy of the Tree, which helped him to unite all of China, as well as to smooth out the contradictions between North (Water) and South (Fire)? These are very

delicate matters. Will we be able to perceive at least a small bit of the strong, gentle and all-encompassing energy of Confucius' homeland Qufu 曲阜? These and similar thoughts are preoccupying us during our free evening while we are preparing for the visit to Qufu 曲阜.

A few words about Confucius' native Shandong province in eastern China. The Taishan Shrine 泰山 is located here. For the Chinese people ascending to the Taishan Shrine has a very special meaning. It is believed that once a lifetime, every Chinese person has to climb Mount Taishan and also climb it down on his or her own. A few years later, Galina and I climbed early in the morning to the Taishan Shrine to watch the sunrise from the top of the hill. It was chilly, and the monks were trying to keep warm wearing long green military style "vatnik" coats. Unfortunately, when we reached the top of the mountain, it was wrapped in fog. During the rest of our stay in China, there was no other opportunity to climb to the top of Mount Taishan. Yet, we are proud of the fact that we managed to climb to the top and were able to make our way down, thus paying homage to China's most famous shrine.

Let's return to the Great Teacher. It is impossible not to recall my studies of Chinese at the Institute of Oriental Languages at Moscow University from 1964 to 1970. Already in the mid-1960s, relations between the USSR and the PRC were marked by a freeze, which deepened the gap between the two countries. In 1965, an incident took place in Moscow's Red Square between the local and Chinese students, which ended up in a public brawl and fight. This became the formal reason for all Chinese students to be withdrawn from the USSR higher education institutions, while the Soviet students were withdrawn from studies in the PRC. The conflict between the two neighboring countries reached unprecedented levels. For more than 20 years, Soviet sinologists lost the opportunity to practice and deepen their knowledge of Chinese in the Chinese language environment. Moreover, when the Great Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 began in 1966, we, students of the Institute of Oriental Languages at Moscow University, were learning Chinese by reading and translating articles from Chinese press with cruel criticism of Confucius. However, the flow of time, like the changes taking place in China, could not be stopped. In the late 1970s, at the initiative of Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, China began to open up to the world; reforms were launched in the country, and the construction of socialism, but with "Chinese characteristics" 中国特色社会主义 continued. For the rest of the world "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is probably still a concept, whose theoretical base is difficult to comprehend. It is very much true even for the countries of the former socialist camp, which have had a lot of experience in building socialism. However, at the moment I do not want to analyze this process in more detail, but rather I would like to reflect

on the role of the great Teacher Confucius in the new China, as well as dwell on my impressions of Confucius' homeland Qufu 曲阜 at the end of 1998.

We leave early in the morning. Our journey to Confucius' native town Qufu 曲阜 has begun. Driving through the countryside, we see the so-called Chinese "blind villages" lining up along the roadside. I mean the fact that in these villages the peasant houses have windows facing the courtyard, while the "unwelcoming back of the house" is turned towards the street and does not have any windows at all. For a while, it attracts my attention, but then I have to conclude that "that's the way it is" – in China, the windows of rural village houses face the courtyard.

On the roadside, we often see tables covered with coarse tarpaulin, on which pottery, dishes and vases for sale are displayed. Interestingly, there is always room for larger or smaller figurines of Confucius on almost every table. So, local people must be proud of the famous man whose birthplace is here. There is relentless movement and activity on the road everywhere. Soon we reach Qufu 曲阜, which is an ancient, but very cozy and lively town at the same time. People say that life has stopped here. However, I would not like to agree with that. Time just flows differently here. Time here compresses in itself and becomes a spatial dimension. **In the town of Qufu, time embraces you, slows down, fills you with emotions and heals you.** Indeed, in my perception, this historical place is saturated with an ancient, almost divine aura. The old town is surrounded by a rampart, and most of its dwellings or temples are associated with the name of Confucius. Construction and building are prohibited here. Behind the wall, there is a modern town that is developing quickly.

Confucius Temple 孔庙 impresses with its size. Here, every object is permeated with love and respect. Everything is real, significant and valuable. The guide in Confucius House 孔府 leads us through the dining room, the women's quarters, the room where Confucius was born. She can be proud of her work as well as her extensive and deep knowledge. She is ready to tell about the Great Teacher for hours. Her account of his life and creative work around 700 years before the birth of Christ is very informative and rich in details. The buildings and memorial sites have been rebuilt and reconstructed many times with great care and respect. Some scars of the Cultural Revolution have also survived, such as a dent in a stone slab. It is interesting that souvenir traders in many shops and stands can have the same surname as Confucius 孔子, which could be pronounced as *Kun* or *Kon*. In 2009, on the 2560<sup>th</sup> birthday of Confucius, the teacher of all Chinese, the Confucius Family Register was published, the world's largest genealogical tree, which includes 88 generations. According to experts, there are more than 3 million people in the world who have the same surname as Confucius and who are related to the Great Teacher.





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We are overwhelmed and lack for words to express our feelings being in the homeland of, I believe, the most respected Chinese person in the world. In a way that is difficult to explain, we certainly feel the powerful, gentle and all-encompassing aura of the Great Teacher here, in Qufu.

From the generous legacy of Confucius, I would like to dwell on the following thought of the Master: **Three things never come back – time, word, opportunity. Therefore – do not waste time, choose words with care and do not miss the opportunity.** We had been thinking about this trip many times, and yet the time and opportunity to visit the homeland of Confucius came quickly and unexpectedly. Choosing the right words is not easy at all, as I still feel deeply in my soul the unique atmosphere of December 1998 when my and my wife Galina's main task was to lay the first stones in the foundations of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. Every day we had to deal with a myriad of practical things, always wondering how to solve this or that issue. Ironically, we were able to switch to the reflection of the personality of the Great Master only when already on board our plane on the way from Beijing to Jinan 济南. Nevertheless, we were immensely glad to have taken this chance. Even though we later visited China more than 20 times, such an opportunity never arose again. **8 9**

**13.12.1998** We take a taxi in Jinan, next we are on the plane, then we take a taxi in Beijing again, and at around 9:00 in the morning we are again in “our home” – the Kempinski Hotel. As we have started our journey at three o'clock in the morning in Jinan, the whole day in Beijing we both feel some jetlag and restlessness. We are too tired to stay up; yet trying to have a nap ends with eyes wide open. So, we decide to breathe some fresh air and go for a walk in the vicinity of our hotel. To our surprise, the small lake by the hotel is frozen and on the perfect mirror of the ice we see ice fishermen lined up next to one another. It turns out this pastime is popular in China, too. We see such sights later as well, which confirms our “theory” that the Chinese love fishing both in summer and in winter.

**15.12.1998** We are meeting with our Lithuanian colleagues. The details of concluding the lease agreement for the embassy premises is what we are interested in. We need advice, and Lithuanian colleagues are sharing their experience with us. In recent days, we no longer are using Beijing taxi services. I sit behind the wheel of our car and slowly and carefully memorize and learn the routes we need. The traffic flow of the Chinese capital does not seem too aggressive to me, and I manage to adapt to it.

At the Kempinski Hotel we are suffering from intolerable heat. Another thing – we have long wanted to cook ourselves the food we are used to. However, we do

not have our own kitchenette, and we can only wait patiently when we finally get to our new premises.

**16.12.1998** For the fourth time, we are arriving at the Sanlitun diplomatic district, where we are urged to provide directions on what else needs to be replaced or repaired. So, before we move to the new premises, we ask to change the bath, refresh the worn parquet and whitewash the walls in some rooms. The previous tenants of these premises have been the embassy of a small country of Southeast Asia, Brunei. Brunei is now a developed industrial country with a high standard of living, whose main economic sector is oil extraction. Anyway, these premises satisfy the needs of our embassy. In addition, the Sanlitun district is convenient and has a good reputation in Beijing.

**17.12.1998** We meet with an employee of the Administrative Department of the MFA of the PRC and discuss the final version of the text of the lease agreement. Of course, it is a bit strange to hear that according to the Chinese procedures, the area is surveyed including the wall thickness, the width of the window niches, half the area of the stairwell, and so on. If the contract is drawn up on the basis of such terms, we will have to pay an extra thousand dollars for about 40 additional square meters. The ambassadors of Azerbaijan and Lithuania have already informed us and warned us that it is completely hopeless to convince Chinese officials to change their minds.

**20.12.1998** Christmas is coming. We are on the move throughout the day, dealing with the embassy premises, as well as other bureaucratic issues. We arrive in our hotel room, and – to our surprise we find a green Christmas tree, decorated with German style ornaments, in a giant pot. This is unexpected and very moving. In the hall of the Kempinski, a Chinese pianist is playing Christmas melodies, familiar since my childhood. Drawings of Santa Claus are on the walls; right in the hall kiosk – even gingerbread can be found. In fact, Christmas is not widely celebrated in China. However, it is different in five-star hotels, where guests from the Western countries are staying.

**21.12.1998** We coordinate the details of New Year holidays with the MFA of Latvia. We submit a note to the MFA of the PRC that I will be on leave until January 5, and we fly to Harbin. Here a sunny, clear and cold morning is awaiting us: – minus 18 degrees C. The flight in the 30-seat JAK lasts an hour and a half, and soon the plane is already on the landing strip. We go through the usual formalities. Then the airport employee looks at my diplomatic passport of the Republic of Latvia and asks, “Do you speak Russian?” I answer, “Yes. In Vladivostok, at the Eastern Faculty of the University of the Far East, I have worked for 10 years...” Vladivostok is one of the most important cities in my life, and having a flashback from the 1998, I may also say – “the land of my young days ...”

**31.12.1998** On the last day of the year we try to sum up the events of the past year. The year of the Tiger 虎年, according to Chinese horoscope, has really been very active and as challenging as an encounter with a real tiger. The first half of this year was spent in Vilnius, at the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in Lithuania. We really enjoyed working and living in Lithuania in many respects. However, as early as in the beginning of 1998, I received a hint that I would have to go to China starting from the middle of the summer. Why China? This is a completely different story related to my studies of the Chinese language and my professional interest in the country. My spouse Galina and I, we both accepted this challenge, and it turned out that it took a whole summer to prepare for it. The last three months of the year have been very busy and stressful in Beijing, coping with diplomatic work and many bureaucratic issues. At the same time, it has been a compelling insight into the history of the Chinese capital, which has caused many interesting revelations and deepened our understanding of China, both in the past and in the present. On the last day of the year, looking out of the window of the Vladivostok's apartment at the Eagle's Mound, a kaleidoscope of years spent here flashes before my eyes. I remember my former workplace – the University of the Far East and trips inspired by the outstanding specialist of the Primorsky Krai region, V. Arsenyev. The memories about the trips around Primorsky Krai and the vast territories of Far East – Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka, the Commander Islands, Magadan and Yakutsk are still vivid and dear to my heart. They are an indispensable part of my life, and I am happy to be able to share them with the closest person in my life, my dear wife Galina. The year 1999 lies ahead of us. Working side by side, we will have to ensure running of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. We are ready for the challenge.



## 1999–2000 Work at the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC

On 1 January 1999, at the beginning of the New Year of the Hare 兔年, we slip jolly into the Panin's family apartment in Vladivostok. Galina's sister Ina's family wishes us success in the future work of the Latvian diplomatic mission. Galina and I both wish her sister's family success in the field of higher education at the University of the Far East.

We are both familiar with Vladivostok, and yet we understand that we will definitely face some new and unfamiliar things. We decide to go for a walk. The wind is cold and furious. In Vladivostok, the wind blows consistently in the same direction throughout the winter – from the north, from Khabarovsk. I haven't forgotten this from the time I used to live in Vladivostok. When this type of wind blows, sometimes you have to turn sideways in order to move forward at all. The wind gusts are so fierce that they burn your cheeks. Our walk is short this time.

**02.01.1999** Our lively holiday mood has subsided a bit. Farewell feelings are not comparable to the joy of meeting dear people. Soon we are already sitting on the Vladivostok-Khabarovsk train and watching the familiar names of the suburban train stations dashing by – Sedanka, Okeanskaja, Sadgorod. In the morning we are in Khabarovsk, where – a minus 28 degrees C frost awaits us. In a few hours we are flying to Harbin. An hour-and-a-half-long flight, and we are already landing into the thick fog of Beijing. All in all, this time we have been on the road for 24 hours. We are full of impressions and tired as well.

**04.01.1999** A huge wad of New Year congratulation cards is awaiting us on the table at the embassy. Our colleagues – Latvian ambassadors to other countries are wishing us happy New Year. There are many congratulations from the ambassadors of Beijing's Diplomatic Corps. Of course, our friends have not forgotten us either. It's a special, warm and touching feeling when you are holding greeting cards from dear and close people in your hands. We find several dozens of letters in the e-mail as well.

**05.01.1999** After returning from Vladivostok, we sleep for 12 hours. However, we need to get busy as soon as we wake up. First of all, from the embassy account we transfer the payment for the rent of Kempinski Hotel room for the month of December, 1998, as well as pay our telephone bill during that time. In the evening, we register our expense receipts and do our accounting.

**06.01.1999** At the central telegraph we pay for internet services and then walk to the Beihai Gongyuan Park 北海公园. Beihai can be literally translated as "North Sea". In the neighbourhood there is Zhonghai 中海 ("Middle Sea") and

Nanhai 南海 (“South Sea”). In fact, the so-called “seas” are man-made lakes, and they are part of the emperor’s garden, located northwest of the Forbidden City 紫禁城. It is one of the largest gardens in China, with many historically significant buildings. During the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, until 1911, it was the Imperial Park associated with the Forbidden City. In 1925, it was opened to the general public. Lake Beihai occupies more than half of the park area. In the middle of the lake rises the island of Qionghua 琼华. The island is famous for the White Stupa Baita, decorated with engravings of the sun, moon and flame, which was destroyed by the earthquake of 1679 and then rebuilt the following year. The stupa also suffered from the 1976 earthquake, but it was rebuilt. To the north of the park there is Qianhai Lake 前海, to the south – Zhonghai Lake 中海. The buildings on the shores of both lakes are home to the PRC’s top management. Beihai Park, like many Chinese gardens, has been created by imitating the picturesque places and architectural objects of different regions of China. The famous Hangzhou 杭州 and Suzhou 苏州 pavilions and canals were used as a source of inspiration for the emperors’ gardeners. That is why many of the buildings and vistas of this park are true masterpieces of landscape design, which demonstrate great architectural skills, sense of style, as well as the immense creativity of the traditional Chinese garden. On this cold January day, the slight wind is playing with the fringes of the weeping willows. The chain of lakes with the traditional buildings, the complete peace and quiet in the very center of Beijing – all this makes one forget about everyday worries and takes the visitor to another wonderful world. To dive into this so Chinese world, one doesn’t have to travel far, doesn’t have to waste effort and time, but should go towards the center of the ancient city, and already in the vicinity of the park the atmosphere becomes really tranquil preparing the visitor to absorb the world that historically was available only to the emperor and his entourage.

Walking along the shores of the lakes, we spend about four hours and return to the embassy refreshed and full of energy. We used to return to Beihai Park many times in other seasons as well, and always this place gave us a boost of energy and a possibility to escape the hustle and bustle of the city at least for a few hours. **10 11**

**07.01.1999** We have recovered from our trip to Vladivostok to the extent that we have resumed our daily fitness activities – attending the gym and the swimming pool. That means we are full of energy and back to our full working capacity. We make a money transfer of USD 10,000 to the diplomatic service of the MFA of the PRC – for the repairs of our premises and other expenses. A message has been received from the MFA of the Republic of Latvia – we must deliver the annual financial report for 1998 by 15 January.





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**08.01.1999** I go downstairs to the Kempinski garage and find that our car battery needs to be replaced. It takes 477 yuan, and our car is fit with a new battery. Our Foreign Ministry is considering the candidate for the post of the future ambassador. A small comment – I have arrived in Beijing with a mandate to open the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. My official status is “chargé d'affaires”, which in diplomatic jargon would be “a cartoon” (that is what the pronunciation of the word means in Latvian) or in literary language – “an authorized clerk”. So my future is not very clear. Will I be working here in China for a year or for a few months more and then be replaced by other colleagues? Of course, we have been discussing this matter with Galina and we have decided that we are flexible and open to any course of events – be it returning to Latvia or continuing the work. Whatever will be, will be...

**09.01.1999** It's the weekend. We get into our car and drive to the western edge of Beijing, to the Badachu 八大处 monastery complex. Here one can delight your eyes and soul by watching eight Buddhist monasteries and shrines. This place is a delight for both one's eyes and soul, comprising eight Buddhist monasteries and shrines. We plan the route on the map, and off we go. Here are the names of the Buddhist monasteries in the Badachu complex: Changansi 长安寺, Lingguangsi 灵光寺, Sanshanan 三山庵, Dabeisi 大悲寺, women's monasteries Longquanan 龙泉庵, Xiangjiesi 香界寺, Baozhudong 宝珠洞, Zhengguosi 正果寺.

Badachu is an attractive place for year-round visits. It has a pleasant climate – cool in summer, but relatively warm in winter. Visitors can walk from one shrine to the next, enjoying the great scenery and having a closer look at rare plant species. Some of the growing trees are over 600 years old, but they are still lush green. In September and October, the residents and guests of the capital love to come here to the so-called Red Leaf Festival 红叶节, the time when trees and plants change their attire to the bright autumn colors. It reminds us of the tradition in Latvia to watch leaves change color in the picturesque town of Sigulda, which is just an hour's drive from Riga, the capital, and is dubbed “little Switzerland” for its hilly relief and unique beauty. Although both countries are separated by thousands of kilometers and the cultures are quite different, if you want, you can see similarity in traditions.

We arrive here in the middle of winter, when the bushes have dropped their foliage and the ponds and streams are covered with shiny ice. In this place one can often see both monks and nuns, who are dressed in typical attire. It is especially striking that both male and female cult servants have exactly the same hairstyles. That is – their heads are shaved bald. Their faces radiate calm and inner balance, and you can often see them engaged in unhurried conversations. Tourists from both China and other countries are enjoying the unusual, yet impeccable proportions of the outstanding architectural monuments here. For example, our eyes linger at a tall pagoda, which looks like it has stepped out from a Chinese watercolor drawing. The construction material looks so light and airy that it seems that the stone has no weight at all. The building rises gracefully against the backdrop of the mountains, the hills and the sky. We climb to the 1650 m mark and after a while we slowly descend. Charged with the fresh mountain air and tired, but happy, we drive back to the embassy.

**11.01.1999** We are busy preparing the “1998 financial report of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC”. We are perplexed – the final sum is double of the amount needed. We make a call to Laura Trēgere, and she clears up the situation. It turns out that a minus sign had to be entered in the yuan box. Somehow we have missed it. Now the report is perfect, and we can send

it to the MFA. After several days of hard work on the financial statements, Galina deserves to read a good detective novel.

**12.01.1999** The Annual Financial Report for 1998 has been sent to Riga. I receive news that a meeting of the ambassadors of the Republic of Latvia is being organized during February 8–12. It means I might need to go to Riga.

**13.01.1999** A representative of TBI (Transit Business Information) company arrives in Beijing with the task of preparing Latvian-Chinese transit business information. I switch to this task and start preparing the program of the event with the representatives of Beijing and Tianjin. When we go for a walk in the vicinity of the hotel, we notice that the wind has become really bitter and cold. Beijing winter...

**14.01.1999** A computer technician comes to look at our computer and finds that a virus has mixed up the programs on our computer. He is fixing the problem. We go to the Sanlitun 三里屯 diplomatic area to check how repair works are going on in our future embassy premises. A large team of builders is working here, and the progress is visible.

**15.01.1999** We buy flight tickets from SAS for a round trip – to Riga and back. Then we make some orders – a sliding wall, a consular counter and a glass wall for our Sanlitun embassy residence.

**16.01.1999** It's the weekend again, and we keep exploring Beijing. This time we go to Xiangshan 香山 Park, which is one of the most famous and beautiful parks in Beijing. It is located in the northwest of Beijing, on a branch of the Xishan Mountains 西山. This park was established during the Jin 金 Dynasty in 1186. In later years, during the Qing 清 Dynasty, the reign of Emperor Qian Long 乾隆, new pavilions and gazebos were built, and the park was expanded. Some of the most interesting structures in the park are the Lamaist Monastery Zhaomiao 昭庙, as well as Liulita 琉璃塔 Pagoda. The Tibetan Lamaist Monastery Zhaomiao was built in 1780 as the residence of Panchen Lama during his visits to Beijing and his meetings with one of the most powerful emperors of Tianxia Empire, Qian Long. The Chinese say, "The road to the sanctuary should not be easy." The climb to the mountain fully confirms this. There are several roads in the park leading to the top of the hill. The road on the right leads to the Lamaist monastery. But you can also choose another trail, which will definitely delight you with landscapes or miniature gazebos, revealing another, not less beautiful angle of the mountain. Today, together with the round journey to the park and back, we spend seven hours on our trip.

In fact, my wife and I both fell in love with this park so much that later we bought monthly tickets and went climbing Mount Xiangshan twice a month, including the autumn and winter season. The most comfortable climb was

on weekdays when we were given a vacation while working at the Xinhua 新华 Agency. However, I will tell about my journalist's work experience in the chapter dedicated to that period.

**17.01.1999** As a professional biologist and participant in several Pacific expeditions, Galina is always interested in getting to know the wildlife of the country. She suggests visiting Beijing Zoo 北京动物园. We have found that the Zoo is located in the Xizhimen 西直门 district, and also that the animals there represent mainly Chinese fauna. The Zoo area, like most of Beijing's parks, is designed as a classic Chinese garden. Flower plantations alternate with Chinese bush thickets, small groves, meadows and, definitely, ponds and hillocks incorporating aviaries and pavilions.

One of the most visited animal species in the zoo is definitely the big panda 熊猫 or bamboo bear, also called the spotted bear. This animal lives in Sichuan Province 四川省 and Tibet 西藏. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, panda has been a sort of Chinese symbol. In summer, pandas go to the mountains and tend to climb to 4000 m above sea level. Pandas feed almost or only on bamboo shoots, consuming up to 30 kg of bamboo shoots per day. Of course, we linger for a long while watching these slow, lazy-looking animals, bearing in mind the fact that they can only be found in China. Especially touching is the sight of the little cubs that keep crawling awkwardly on their mothers' backs. A sleeping panda can even look like a man-made doll. You can see the difference only when it suddenly starts to move. Very impressive was the rock eagle, which, of course, was feeling sad in its cage, isolated from its native element – being able to soar freely above the mountain ranges. We also saw long-legged cranes described by Chinese poets. There was also an opportunity to see up close the Tibetan “yacks”, with a mighty thick layer of coarse wool on their bellies. Anyone interested in exploring the Chinese wildlife can be advised to find a free moment and visit this Beijing Park, which is also a zoo.

**19.01.1999** After several hours of working at the computer, we go out for a short walk. Occasionally there are some very strong wind gusts. One can see paper trash, cellophane bags and food containers fly in the air. I do not want to say that the people of Beijing do not care about the cleanliness of their city. The center and the main streets are definitely in perfect order... However, a few steps away from the main avenues, the reality is quite different.

Night falls over Beijing. What a blessing! Finally, the pile driving machine under our window has stopped working. About two weeks ago, behind the Kempinski Hotel, right in front of our windows, the construction of a pedestrian bridge over a small canal began. The noise of the machines did not stop, be it night or day. Therefore, we are happy that the peace and calm at night has finally been restored.

**20.01.1999** Drawing up a new working plan for 1999 is on our agenda. I have a sample plan, and the main thing is to adapt to the common plan, taking into account the specifics of China. I work both before and after lunch and I hope that the first draft will be ready today.

**22.01.1999** Galina and I, we are both going to the IKEA store to look at the furniture for our embassy premises. The quality of the Swedish furniture is wonderful. The material is mainly the pine tree, well-known in Latvia. The prices are comparatively high, though. It may be a subjective feeling, yet it just seems to me that this Swedish furniture lacks some intangible quality that could be described as “soul”, or personal touch. Be that as it may, we both agree to buy furniture in this store, and in the range of the Swedish furniture we hope to find something that, from the Latvians’ point of view, would “have a soul”.

**23.01.1999** Saturday is here, and we continue to explore Beijing. This time we drive to the western corner of Beijing, Haidianqu district 海淀区, to get acquainted with Yuan Mingyuan 圆明园 Park. This Beijing Park is described as follows: “The tragic meeting of the West and the East.” Why so? Let’s try to find out. To the west of this park is the famous Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park. Our object of study today consists of three gardens: Yuan Mingyuan (Perfect Clarity Park), Changchun Yuan 长春园 (Long Spring Park), Yichun Yuan 绮春园 (Wonderful Spring Park). During the years of the greatest prosperity, there were more than a hundred scenic and architectural complexes in this park. More than 800 castles and pavilions had been given the name by the emperor.

Emperor Kangxi 康熙 donated this park to his son, and in 1709 the emperor himself wrote the name of the park on a board at the entrance to the park. It later became the emperor’s park.

Some of the park’s landscapes were created in the Jiangnan 江南 style (“Jiangnan” means lands south of the Yangtze River); others were created in the style of ancient parks, as described in ancient poems and legends. Gardens and parks were created here in all the forms and styles ever practiced in China.

European-style buildings were built in the northern section of the park. The park’s fame reached Europe, and it influenced the design and creation of the Versailles Gardens.

The answer to the above question about the tragic meeting of the West and the East in this park can be found in the following historical facts. In 1860, the combined forces of Great Britain and France occupied Yuanmingyuan 圆明园 Park and, first, looted it; then burnt it down. The park, which had been



carefully designed and maintained for 150 years, was destroyed. After that, the Chinese emperors partially restored the park. However, in 1900, the park was completely destroyed by the joint army of eight European countries.

It is specifically the remains of the European-style park buildings that have been preserved in the form of ruins. In this place, every visitor to the park is immersed in reflection on different historical eras, wars, destinies of people and clashes between civilizations. Similar thoughts overwhelmed us both. During the following years of living and working in Beijing, we returned to Yuanmingyuan Park several times. Such a visit was always not only a weekend walk, but also a reflection of past events inspired by the ruins of the European style buildings.

**25.01.1999** Installing a telephone in the new embassy premises is on the agenda. We need to visit several places, which is not always that easy taking into account the scale of Beijing. A brief description of Changanjie 长安街, the main street in Beijing, may help to understand the scale of this megapolis more clearly. The street stretches through the capital city for 40 km. During the two years of my diplomatic career, I drove in my car from one end of this street to the other countless times, every time taking a closer look at the characteristic features of Beijing – the capital of China.

Many things have arrived in the post today, also from Latvia.

**27.01.1999** At the Club of Ambassadors of Eastern European Countries, each ambassador describes his country's cooperation with China. I later write to the MFA of Latvia about my observations at the meeting.

**28.01.1999** Together with the Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Estonia to the PRC of China Mr A. Birov, we go to the Spring Festival organized by the Chamber of Commerce of the PRC. A multitude of people, loud music, microphones turned full blast. The Chinese are accustomed to playing music much louder on major holidays than elsewhere in the world. I continue getting acquainted with the ambassadors of Beijing's Diplomatic Corps. Together with A. Birov we return to the Kempinski. A beautiful, full moon rolls out over Beijing. It's freezing slightly. A delegation of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia is arriving in China tomorrow.

**30.01.1999** Weekend trip to Taoranting 陶然亭 Park. The name of the park can be translated as "Gazebo of Pleasant Feelings and Fun". During the Yuan Dynasty, a women's monastery Cibeian 慈悲庵 ("Monastery of Mercy and Compassion") was located here. In 1695 a pavilion "Taoranting" was built here, the name of which is taken from the verses of the great poet of the Tang 唐 dynasty Bai Juyi 白居易, "Wait till the chrysanthemums are yellow and home-made wine is ripe, (I'll) drink with you and be carefree." This pavilion



is one of the four most famous pavilions in China. Below is a list of the most famous pavilions in China:

- Aiwanting 爱晚亭 “Late Love Pavilion” Changsha 长沙 City, Hunan Province 湖南省
- Huxinting 湖心亭 “Lake Heart Pavilion” Hangzhou City 杭州, Zhejiang Prov. 浙江省
- Taoranting 陶然亭 “Pavilion of Pleasant Feelings and Fun” Beijing
- Zuiwengting 醉翁亭 “Old Drunk Man’s Pavilion” Chuzhou City 滁州, Anhui Prov. 安徽省

Currently, the park features ten pavilions from nine provinces in the PRC.

Poets, writers, scientists and Chinese patriots used to gather in Taoranting Park. In later years, revolutionaries and participants of “The 4<sup>th</sup> of May Movement” used to meet here – Li Dazhao 李大钊, Mao Zedong 毛泽东, Zhou Enhai 周恩来 and others. Let’s look at this very important period in China’s history and further development.

“The 4<sup>th</sup> of May Movement” began in May and June of 1919, and was aimed against the Japanese invasion and the interference of imperialist states in China’s internal affairs. The move was a response to the decision of the Paris Peace Conference not to return to China the former Japanese-occupied German concessions in Shandong Province. “The 4<sup>th</sup> of May Movement” marked a significant change in the views of the Chinese intelligentsia, namely a shift from traditional culture to Westernization of China. There were other important aspects – the language of conversation “baihua” began to spread in the country, a critical evaluation of Confucian ethical norms and traditional historiography began, new educational requirements were developed, an evaluation of the form of republican government was launched together with new political theories, etc. Chinese studies at Moscow University could not have been imagined without dwelling on “The 4<sup>th</sup> of May Movement” motives and events.

The importance of Taoranting Park in this movement makes us look at it with real interest. In the cool January air, we leisurely walk along the winding paths. We look at the intricate gazebos, artificial cliffs, lakes and ponds, calligraphic inscriptions carved in stone. Each new turn of the road brings out its own special message.

I will never forget an elderly man, dressed modestly, but too lightly for the winter day, who was practicing Beijing Opera arias in the outskirts of the park, standing and singing all alone by the bare wall. There was no public, but he was not sparing his larynx on such a cold winter’s day. I assume strengthening his vocal abilities was giving the elderly man a sense of satisfaction and

accomplishment. After several wonderful hours in this great park, we drive back to the Kempinski along the already familiar Third Circle 三环路 road.

**31.01.1999** On Sunday, together with the head of the delegation of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Latvia V. Voins, we are going to Wofosi 卧佛寺, the “Sleeping Buddha Temple”. This temple is located at the foot of the Xishan 西山 Mountains, about 20 km from Beijing. The temple is an integral part of Beijing’s architecture, which attracts the attention of many tourists around the world and equally of Buddhist believers.

The temple was built during the Tang 唐 Dynasty in the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. The main relic of the temple was the sleeping Buddha, carved in sandalwood. This is where the name of the temple came from. However, due to frequent fires, the sculpture did not survive. During the Yuan 元 Dynasty, reconstruction of the temple began, which was completed in 1321. Instead of the sandalwood sculpture, a bronze sculpture depicting Buddha in nirvana was cast. Around 7,000 craftsmen took part in these works.

The main relic of the temple today is the Sleeping Buddha, which is recognized as the largest sleeping Buddha statue in China. The length of the sculpture is 5.2 meters; its weight is 54 tons. The Buddha is lying on one side, his face turned towards the south, his right arm supporting his head, his left arm leaning on his hip.

The “Sleeping Buddha Temple” is also famous for its two relic sandalwood trees. According to a legend, the sandalwood trees were brought from India at the same time as the temple was built. These trees normally grow only in the south, and it is amazing that they have survived in the harsh climate of Beijing and have grown so tall. Today, Wofosi Temple is part of the Beijing’s Botanical Garden (北京植物园). The temple is not only part of Beijing’s architecture, but also a shrine to faithful Buddhists.

The above-mentioned Latvian delegations were visiting China for the first time and were happy to see any of our recommended tourist attractions in Beijing. So, we decided to visit this temple, which we ourselves had not been able to see yet. As in other cases, it was extremely pleasant to walk in an environment where the natural mountain slopes and forests harmoniously merge with the formations by human hands – a perfectly developed skill and tradition of Chinese gardens. Both we and our guests really enjoyed the trip. We revisited this shrine several times during our stay in China.

**01.02.1999** We are having the telephone line installed on the premises of the new embassy. We order a diplomatic service minibus and move boxes with various contents, computers and our personal belongings from our Kempinski Hotel room to the new embassy premises. The hotel room, to which we have

become so accustomed in four months, our small Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC, looks strangely empty now.

**02.02.1999** We go to the nearest Furniture House to choose the office furniture for the new embassy premises. The parquet has already been varnished, and the apartment looks fresh, shiny and bright. The only thing is that the rooms are so empty that one can hear a loud echo – we have not acquired any furniture necessary for the work of the embassy. In the Furniture House we choose two desks, two chairs and two bookcases, as well as two universally usable sofas. Only the two of us will be working here in the nearest future, so we do not have very high demands.

**03.02.1999** I am preparing a note about the new address of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC and my absence during February 6–13 this year.

**04.02.1999** We conclude an agreement with the diplomatic service of the MFA of the PRC on the premises of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. The contract states that the area of our premises is 233 sq. m. According to our measurements, the area of the premises is 190 sq. m. As I have already explained before, in China, the area of premises includes the thickness of window openings, the square of stair spaces, etc. The price per sq. m. is 25 USD; per month – 5800 USD. We spend our last night at the Kempinski.

**05.02.1999** We are buying a coat rack for our hallway. Blinds are being installed on the windows of the new premises. Finally, we are saying farewell to the Kempinski Hotel, which for 4 months and 10 days was our home, as well as the premises of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC.

**06.02.1999** Nine and a half hour flight Beijing-Copenhagen-Riga.

**07.02.1999** I am at the First Forest Cemetery in Riga. I want to share a moment with my parents. The flames of candles are flickering in the white snow that covers their gravesites. My greatest gratitude goes to my parents for everything I have achieved in my life. They have taught me love of work, determination, strength and endurance.

**08.02.1999** I have several meetings at different services of the MFA of the Republic of Latvia today. When I joined the MFA in 1991, my first task was to set up an Asian branch. I am meeting with my former colleagues – M. Šteins and L. Azaryan. I am restless, because Galina is alone in Beijing, without my constant support.

**09.02.1999** Meeting of the ambassadors of the MFA of the Republic of Latvia in 1999. M. Mora reports on the work plan for 1999, I. Putniņa – on rotation issues, J. Kārklīņš – on the 1999 budget, S. Mēlupe – on consular issues.



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The activities of the day are busy and informative embracing the whole spectrum of embassy work.

**10.02.1999** J. Kārklīš says: “Until the end of 1999, the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC will most likely not have a consular employee, let alone other employees.” Speeches are delivered by Prime Minister G. Krasts, President G. Ulmanis and others. Official talks are followed by a “family picture” of ambassadors and chargé d’affaires of the Republic of Latvia in 1999. This is my first and only picture in such a company. **12**

**11.02.1999** We are having talks with representatives of ministries representing specific industries. I have a meeting with Foreign Minister V. Birkavs, who gives a brief assessment of my work, as well as a perspective of my further work in China.

**12.02.1999** Iveta Šulce gives an excellent report on Latvia’s progress towards the EU. I am meeting with the State Secretary of the MFA M. Riekstiņš, who

also thinks that by the end of the year we will have to work alone with my wife Galina, who has already confirmed that she is successfully coping with the financial flow of the embassy.

**13.02.1999** Flight back – Riga-Copenhagen-Beijing.

**14.02.1999** At the airport of the capital of the PRC, I am greeted by my closest people – Galina and my youngest son Pēteris and his girlfriend Nadya. I try to get some sleep, but in vain. I feel tense after the long travel and can't fall asleep. In spite of the jet lag, in the evening all four of us go to our favorite Uighur restaurant to feast on perfectly cooked lamb in Uighur style.

**15.02.1999** We call the phone technician; after a short time – the computer specialist. Then we take all our accumulated belongings and bicycles in our car from the Kempinski to the new embassy premises. We have decided to buy a TV for the embassy. While I was away, a lot of documents and letters have arrived from the MFA of the Republic of Latvia.

**16.02.1999** According to the lunar calendar, China is celebrating the New Year. This holiday is called the Spring Festival by the Chinese 春节. It is actually true because after this holiday spring arrives. By the way, in the Far East of the USSR, the arrival of spring was also associated by the locals with the “Chinese New Year”, as it is more often called in European languages. All night, firecrackers are being fired and people are rejoicing.

We decide to go to the Great Wall of China 长城 in our car. The trip in terms of distance is about the same as for our weekend holidaymakers from Riga to Sigulda – about 50 km. We drive to the last upper parking lot and then walk on foot. The visibility is perfect. It is typical that Beijing has a relatively large number of sunny days in winter. Last night we heard fireworks all around. Even now we can hear firecrackers being blown up somewhere on the other side of the nearby mountains. The spring festival is going on. Although we are not climbing the Great Wall of China for the first time, every time we come into contact with one of the wonders of the world, the emotions are very special. Behind the mist, mountain ranges hide untold stories about the legendary “wall”. It should be admitted that the climb itself is an act of absorbing the energy of the mountains. Maybe that's why the Chinese love so much what in modern narrative is called “trekking” or in a simpler language – climbing mountains.

**17.02.1999** Today is our grandson Tommi's second birthday. We celebrated the birth of our grandson in Vilnius on February 17, 1997. We have decided to go to Lake Beihai 北海 in the very center of Beijing. I recently wrote about our first visit to this fantastic place. Then we walked around the whole lake and reached the island of Qionghua 琼华, and almost reached the White



Stupa 白塔. Having explored the place already, we can tell our son and his girlfriend more about these testimonies of Beijing's history. This time many people are wearing festive clothes. The Spring Festival continues. Watching the people, one of the first thoughts is – how calmly and respectfully people are celebrating. We do not see excesses so often observed in our celebrations. People are walking, chatting, and simply enjoying the festive atmosphere. In the evening, we celebrate the birthday of our grandson Tommi in a warm and sincere atmosphere.

**18.02.1999** I am riding a bicycle for the first time in Beijing. I am not very happy with the experience because the wind is cold and strong. I get as far as the stadium, and I think that we could ride here on our bikes when the weather gets warmer.

We have planned to visit the Temple of Heaven 天坛, but the cold and windy weather keeps us from doing so.

In the evening, all four of us – together with my youngest son Pēteris and his girlfriend Nadia – go to the bowling alley and we even try playing this popular game.

**19.02.1999** In the evening we attend a Beijing Opera 京剧 performance. Beijing Opera is a true treasure of China's national heritage. Beijing Opera as an independent theater genre originated and developed in Beijing, thus acquiring this name. The origins of this theater genre date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and "Jingju" was formed from local type of performances in several provinces, especially the local drama of Anhui Province 安徽.

For a long time, Beijing Opera was considered a form of mass entertainment. It was not until 1880, when the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 was being celebrated, that Beijing Opera theater groups were invited to demonstrate their talents at the Chinese court. In later years, a special three-storied theater was built in the emperor's summer garden Yiheyuan 颐和园 for the performances of Beijing Opera.

As a theater genre, which represents the specifics of the ancient Chinese theater, Beijing Opera has gained widespread recognition from the Chinese people. This genre of theater is a synthetic art that includes movements, acrobatics, gestures and facial expressions. Make-up is represented at Beijing Opera as a separate, quite specific form of art, in which each make-up color has its own special meaning. We also attend this special performance of theatrical art on the evening of February 19. I would like to add that the song lyrics are not always understood by the Chinese themselves. Therefore, a string of hieroglyphs with a short description of what is going on runs on one or both sides of the stage during the musical pieces. In this performance, however,



a lot could be understood just by listening, and the running string of hieroglyphs made the comprehension even easier. The second part of the play featured traditional Chinese circus art and acrobatics. Absolutely breathtaking was the performance in which about 20 circus artists climbed onto one bicycle. After the performance, overwhelmed by such expressive and inspiring art, we go together to the new premises of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC, which at the same time has become our home.

**21.02.1999** This time in winter, we are revisiting the already familiar emperor's summer residence in Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park, where we are greeted by the frozen mirror of Kunming 昆明 Lake. The radiance of pure ice, peace and quiet, the glorious three-storied Beijing theatre building of the aforementioned Empress Cixi – everything that the eye catches in this Chinese rulers' garden, gives a unique feeling of freedom and unusual harmony. We are grateful to the fate that all four of us – together with our youngest son Pēteris and his girlfriend Nadia – have been able to visit such a great place.

**21.02.1999** It's Sunday morning. Having thoroughly researched the map before leaving, we are already on our way to the Chinese National Museum Park 中华民族园博物馆. Unlike many other parks, temples or castles already described, the beginnings of this museum park are associated with a very modern event. It was conceived as part of the 2008 Beijing Olympics National Park. In addition, this museum park demonstrates China as a multi-ethnic country. 96% of the Chinese population is Han 汉族, which is how the Chinese call themselves. There are a total of 56 nationalities in China, among which 55 are referred to as 少数民族, or "minorities". The museum park is dedicated to the material and spiritual culture of the peoples living in China, and visitors can get acquainted with their homes with roofs made of straw, tiles and other building materials; wigwams; traditional mills; bridges, including traditional rope bridges; drum towers; water wheels; boats, and, finally, churches and pagodas. The exhibits, dedicated to practically all peoples living in China, are copies, not authentic buildings or artifacts, as is the case with our Open-Air Museum in Latvia. Thus, the idea of the museum is based on imitations of traditional material culture. In that respect, the Chinese are unrivaled masters of imitation. Thus, the exposition provides an opportunity to get acquainted with traditional ethnic villages, their architectural peculiarities, as well as many other exhibits, some of which may also be authentic objects. The day when we visit the museum park is warm and sunny, and it feels like spring. We walk along the winding paths, which reveal a different landscape with each new turn. We read with great interest the short comments about each respective homestead or exhibit. All comments provide information on the province where the particular nationality lives. In my view, if a visitor is interested in

the material culture of the peoples living in China, such a visit would provide answers to many questions. **13 14 15**

**22.02.1999** Today we are saying good-bye to our youngest son Pēteris and his girlfriend Nadia. They were the first guests in the new premises of our embassy. Together we tried to do the shopping of the first necessity items to get accommodated in the new place. It was also a kind of housewarming of the place where our diplomatic activities will be taking place in the future and where our home will be. The location of the embassy is advantageous for several reasons. First of all, the MFA of the PCR is close nearby. The second advantage – a lot of embassies are located in close vicinity. This means that carrying out diplomatic activities will not be too complicated.

**24.02.1999** Nils Dalman, the Honorary Consul of Latvia in Brussels, has arrived in Beijing. He was born in Shanghai himself and has many friends in China. Nils Dalman was an active participant in the process of normalization of relations between the Republic of Latvia and the PRC. Nils was present when the Latvian flag was hoisted for the first time after the normalization of relations in Beijing. The event, organized today by Nils, is attended by the Vice President of the PRC Institute of Foreign Policy, a correspondent of the newspaper “Rénmín Rìbào”, as well as a representative of the Artists’ Union of the PRC. These people are knowledgeable and interesting conversation partners. Our discussion extends quite a bit.

**25.02.1999** Event at the Cuban Embassy. Many participants are already familiar to me. Once again, the discussion is based on the description of the country’s contacts with the PRC. At the Beijing Telephone Department, we arrange connection of our premises to international telephone line. Then we drive to the furniture store to exchange the desk. Today it is exactly five months since we have been in China.

**28.02.1999** On Sunday, we decide to just take a ride and see where it takes us. We start driving in the direction of Shanhaiguan 山海关 and go for about 70 km. The highway is wide and, it being a Sunday, not too congested. In populated areas, there are long lines of shops and restaurants along the side of the road. All catering establishments are designed to serve as large number of customers as possible. Everyone in this country is aware: “There are so many people here. The goods on sale must be varied and attractive.” When Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 started his reforms, the focus was on small business development. The farmers who were released from the communes fed the overpopulated country very quickly. If someone intervened and slowed down the development of a small business, it would immediately draw the line for the “miracle of China”. Indigenous Chinese collectivism also reflects in the following



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widespread tradition in China. When the next customers are just approaching the entrance door of a diner, the employee – a young lady or a young man – immediately asks: “How many people?” It means – how many people will have lunch or dinner together. Most often, it is a group of friends, colleagues or co-workers who come to such a diner for a meal. It is quite difficult to imagine that a Chinese person would have a meal alone.

Observing China’s daily life during this small trip, one cannot fail to notice that everything necessary to repair or maintain a car or a bicycle is immediately available. Or if you need to have lunch or dinner – you are welcome. Of course, one can only do that at the time that is traditional in China – lunch after 12:00, dinner – after 18:00. These are very simple issues, but it must be taken into account that they must be addressed in a country with a population of 1.3 billion. Another feature we notice during this small outing is that almost the entire roadside is one endless construction site: residential houses, restaurants, industrial and commercial areas and much more. We stop at a white limestone hill. Having climbed bit higher, everywhere around us we see people working busily. It seems nothing can stop their busy activities. We are the only foreigners on this route. This allows us to observe real life, not a prepared protocol event. We stop at a restaurant and enter it. Right after we have exchanged the first couple of sentences, we feel the nice, welcoming atmosphere. Without hurry, we settle into our places and start choosing the food. We decide upon fish in sweet and sour sauce. The vegetables and snacks are great, too. We have a friendly chat with the owner and enjoy the delicious fish.

**01.03.1999** I am preparing a report on China’s reforms. Belarusian diplomat M. Pinchuk arrives at our embassy to find out how Latvia is cooperating with Taiwan. A Taipei mission has already been opened in Belarus, but cooperation is not very successful. Mr Pinchuk is a graduate of the Department of Chinese at the Oriental Faculty of St. Petersburg University, who has studied not only Chinese language, but also Chinese history, literature, and many more at the university for several years.

**03.03.1999** There is an opening of a trading house in Yabaolu 雅宝路. Ambassadors from Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Lithuania, etc. are participating in the event. Yabaolu Street is well known to the people of the former USSR or today’s CIS. Everything from the goods in demand in the region is traded here. One can say that the working language here is Russian, and many of the merchants communicate fluently in Russian.

The next event of the day is the meeting of the PRC Political Advisory Council. Everything in this meeting is big, huge and solemn. High officials are giving speeches from a high rostrum.

The day ends with a reception dedicated to the National Day of the Kingdom of Morocco at the Kempinski Hotel. About half a thousand people are taking part. On the podium, next to a large samovar a man dressed in traditional Moroccan attire – white loose clothes and a red “fez” on his head – is treating the guests to aromatic mint tea. Guests are offered excellent North African cuisine. It is a good opportunity to exchange impressions with the already familiar diplomats and to exchange business cards with the others.

**04.03.1999** The day is dawning grey and depressing. We are busy with the postal packages. Then we receive the printer which has been repaired. The Swedish Ambassador has invited us to a concert by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra at the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Theater (21世纪). The orchestra conductor is the world-famous Estonian conductor Neeme Järvi, who has worked in the best orchestras of many countries around the world. The composition by J. Sibelius is one of the most memorable pieces at this concert. His music can really touch one's soul. You can feel the ambience of windy forests and storming seas, and all your life glides before your eyes.

**05.03.1999** Together with my Lithuanian colleague G. Galgauskas, we arrive at the House of the People's Representative of the People's Republic of China and listen to the speech of the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China Zhu Rongji (朱镕基). As a matter of fact, in 1989 during the student unrest I was a trainee at Fudan University. Zhu Rongji was the mayor of Shanghai. His thoughtful and energetic actions, involving large workers' patrols in maintaining order in Shanghai, prevented riots and bloodshed in the city. Today, the Chinese Prime Minister is speaking out against empty chatter, corruption, swindling and other “diseases” that are hampering China's planned reforms.

Afterwards, we make the payments for internet, gas and electricity. In the evening there is a reception at the Swiss Embassy. I am familiar with the ambassador of this country, because he is also a sinologist, and we have met at the club of ambassadorial sinologists.

**08.03.1999** A 2 cm thick snow blanket has fallen in Beijing. Everything looks clean and white. I write to my colleagues at the MFA E. Gavele, L. Azarjana, A. Ābele and M. Šteins.

A man arrives to make the flagpole bracket, as well as the base of the plate “LR Embassy in the PRC”. We receive the magnetic cards for the embassy door. In the evening we meet with the Honorary Consul of the Republic of



Latvia in Singapore, Mrs. R. Skuja-Steele. In 1974/75 I spent one academic year at Nanyang University in Singapore. About 20 years have passed since that time. However, Sentosa Island, Zhongong, Changi Beach, Sembawang and many other places in this city-state will remain in my memory forever. Remembering the time in Singapore, I can once again feel the rapid and saturated dynamics of this tropical country. Of course, Mrs. R. Skuja-Steele talks about current Singapore issues. She herself is involved in a joint Singapore – the PRC English language training program. Our conversation extends to three hours, and it is interesting for both of us to share our observations and thoughts.

**09.03.1999** I start my morning with a bike ride, followed by some morning exercises. Today I have a meeting at the Polish Embassy. Gifts are being discussed for the ambassadors who are concluding their work in the PRC. The next thing is the issues of renting premises and land, as well as payment of the Chinese staff. The discussions are businesslike, and their participants are knowledgeable and experienced.

I am trying to delve into the report of the Prime Minister of the PRC Zhu Rongji.

**10.03.1999** For the first time, we receive the newspapers that we have subscribed to – “Rénmín Ribào” and “China Daily”. In the international shopping center (国际贸易中心) we pay for the telephone service. At the telephone center 东直门电话中心 we are trying to solve mobile phone connection issues. I continue my work on the interview of the MFA of the PRC and the report of the Prime Minister of the PRC.

**12.03.1999** I have prepared a report on the issues raised in the PRC Prime Minister's report. Galina also reviews the prepared summary and suggests some improvements.

Ms Wu Yi 吴仪, Deputy Prime Minister of the PRC, has returned from a trip to the Baltic states, as well as Belarus and Ukraine. All the ambassadors of these countries are meeting the honorable lady at the airport as a part of a formal protocol event.

**15.03.1999** I make a call to the West Asia and North Africa Department of the PRC. We arrange a meeting. The MFA of the Republic of Latvia is interested in the relations between the PRC and Iran.

Together with my Lithuanian colleague D. Voveris, we attend a political consultative conference at the House of Representatives of the PRC. The report of the Prime Minister of the PRC is approved, as well as some constitutional amendments. Beijing's Diplomatic Corps is widely represented at the event.

**16.03.1999** It's a historical day. On the second floor, a bracket is attached to the window of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC, and we raise the Latvian red-white-red flag. The moment is very emotional. More than 130 countries are represented in the diplomatic corps of the Chinese capital. Now every guest of our embassy will be able to get acquainted with our colors and one of the most important symbols of Latvia. The Lithuanian Chargé d'Affaires D. Voveris and the Economic Adviser of the Lithuanian Embassy J. Kriskoviciene come to visit us for this event. In honor of such an event, we open a bottle of a 110-year-old Armenian cognac. Our Lithuanian colleagues are saying, "Good luck and success to the Latvian Embassy in the PRC!" We send the message to the MFA of the Latvian Republic, and of course, we share the exciting news with our friends.

**18.03.1999** A plaque "Embassy of the Republic of Latvia" is being affixed in the stairwell of the second floor, at the entrance to the embassy. The plaque of the Latvian Embassy joins the plaques of other embassies also at the entrance to the diplomatic campus. **16**

We have been invited to a graphic art exhibition at the Swedish Embassy. The works are made by art students, and the impression is that young people still have a lot to learn.

This very evening we are having a meeting of the Baltic Ambassadors' Club. With our Lithuanian and Estonian colleagues, despite our busy schedule, we are discussing a joint trip around China.

**20.03.1999** Together with Galina we once again go to IKEA store to choose a kitchen table, chairs and a TV table. The furniture is all made of pine wood, which feels warm and very Latvian. We have decided to finally furnish our rooms as they still look empty and ascetic.

**21.03.1999** It's Sunday morning. To get to know the city better, we drive for a long time and in the western segment of the Third Circuit Road, near the Diaoyutai 钓鱼台 government hotel, we find a large park. We start exploring the map. It turns out we have reached the Yuyuantan 玉渊潭公园 Park. This park has a history of more than 200 years, with periods of boom and bust. In the first years of the PRC's existence, the park was quite forgotten and dilapidated, until in 1960, the government began to restore the park. Today, it is one of the most favorite parks of the capital's residents, the most characteristic features of the park being blooming sakura trees in spring, a large lake and wonderful walking trails. It is no wonder that Sakura festivals are held in exactly this park. Of course, we immediately go for a walk and fully enjoy the recreational opportunities offered by this Beijing Park.



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**22.03.1999** I get on the bike and go to the Workers' Stadium 工人体育场. The scene is completely unexpected – my favorite pond has been drained. Several hundred people with heavy hoes are digging and tearing the bottom of the pond in order to harrow its surface and revive the pond. This is so characteristic here. You can employ one good bulldozer – and twenty people will lose their jobs. It's the problem of overpopulation in China, which demonstrates itself clearly right here.

We have been invited to a working lunch at the Eastern European Department of the MFA of the PRC. The lunch is held at the premises of the MFA, in a very narrow circle. The above-mentioned visit of the Deputy Prime Minister of the PRC Ms Wu Yi 吴仪 to the Baltic states, including Latvia, is being assessed positively. Unexpected information for me is the fact that the Taiwanese Foreign Minister has visited Latvia. It is undeniable that the rapprochement with Taiwan does not bring us much closer to the PRC. Accordingly, this conversation does not end on a very encouraging note. Another highlight is the fresh news from the Chinese colleagues about the possible visit of the Minister of the Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, Mr V. Birkavs, to China. Depending on many reasons and circumstances, it may take up to a couple of years for a country's foreign minister to visit China. It has been five years since the normalization of Latvian-Chinese relations. Obviously, the PRC is still watching us closely.

**23.03.1999** I am in the West Asia and North Africa Department of the PRC, where we discuss the PRC's relations with Iran. The conversation is open, with facts and opinions provided.

Afterwards, we buy furniture that we have already chosen in the Swedish store IKEA.

**24.03.1999** I am busy writing reports on the meeting of the Baltic Ambassadors' Club, on the talks in the Department of Eastern Europe of the MFA of the PRC, as well as in the Department of West Asia and North Africa of the MFA of the PRC.

Galina is assembling the Swedish furniture we bought yesterday, involving me in this work as well. Internationally, this day will be marked by the decision of NATO to bomb Serbia. How is this all going to evolve?

**25.03.1999** NATO forces are bombing Serbia. Aerodromes are burning, bridges are collapsing, air bombs are exploding. This is a nightmare, impossible to comprehend. We both are feeling a bit under the weather; probably have caught a virus or something. We decide to stay home, at the embassy.

At noon we assemble the pine wood kitchen table. The wood is warm, and you can feel its texture. This is a really positive occupation.

I am attending the Greek National Day celebrations. Diplomats, of course, will always remain diplomats. However, the main topic tonight is NATO's attacks on Serbia. I share a few thoughts with diplomats from Bahrain, Algeria, Nigeria, with whom I have never met before. It is also good to talk with my already well-known colleagues from Lithuania, Estonia, Belarus and Russia.

**26.03.1999** An employee of Harbin External Relations Department arrives at our embassy. We are talking about possible transnational cooperation. The guest opens a long scroll of paper with the text of a future collaboration plan written in excellent calligraphy. I add my entry to the roll – a wish that this idea succeeds.

**27.03.1999** We have decided to dedicate this Saturday to another Beijing Park, Lianhua Chi Gongyuan 莲花池公园. In the western part of Beijing, pretty easily we find the place where the park is supposed to be. There is only one small problem – a huge railway station, Xizhan 西站, namely Beijing Western Railway Station, has been built on this site. The building is very impressive, probably built in order to serve a billion of passengers. Part of the park is an undeveloped walking area, where we both have a good walk and then return to the embassy with a sense of accomplishment – on this Saturday we have relaxed and again learned something new.

**29.03.1999** I am participating in a press conference of the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the PRC. Plans for the Investment Fair taking place from 8 to 12 September 1999 in Xiamen 厦门, Fujian Province 福建省, are being discussed. In the evening together with Galina, we record the recent days' expenses on the computer.

The bombing of Serbia continues. Is it really not possible to come up with a smart solution to stop this campaign? Serbian political forces, both in position and in opposition, are against the bombing.

**30.03.1999** There is a meeting of Eastern European ambassadors at the Czech Embassy. I have already met a good many of the participants. We are having an active exchange of views on each country's bilateral relations with the PRC. We receive passports with new PRC visas.

Russian Prime Minister J. Primakov has visited Belgrade and Bonn in an attempt to persuade German Chancellor G. Schroeder to stop bombing Serbia. NATO is not inclined to cease the attacks.

**31.03.1999** I am attending a seminar on consular issues at the German Embassy. The participants of the seminar are the diplomats of EU countries, as well as of the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Cyprus, etc. I hear lots of interesting news about their cooperation with the PRC. The report by the Hungarian representative on the Chinese community in Hungary, which can be measured in thousands of people, attracts my particular attention. Roughly, half of the Chinese population in Hungary comes from the PRC and the other half – from Taiwan. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the Hungarian authorities to control the activities of this community.

I am writing reports on the Eastern European Seminar at the Czech Embassy, as well as on the seminar on consular issues at the German Embassy.

Thousands of people have fled their homes in Serbia. The West continues to exert pressure on Serbia.

**01.04.1999** Galina is working on the quarterly financial report and is asking me to print out the financial accounts.

Serbs have taken three American soldiers prisoner. The attack on Serbia will be intensified.

**02.04.1999** I send the report on the consular seminar at the German Embassy to the MFA of the Republic of Latvia.

NATO forces have bombed the Serbian Interior Ministry in Belgrade.

**04.04.1999** It's Saturday again. We have decided to get acquainted with Daguan Yuan 大观园 "Garden-Park". It is located in the southeast of Beijing,



Xuanwu District. 宣武区. This park was built in 1984, and its construction lasted for five years. Unlike other gardens and parks in Beijing, it is neither a former imperial garden nor a former private park. Daguan Yuan 大观园 Park was built as a filming site of the famous Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 novel *The Dream in the Pink Palace* 红楼梦. This novel is one of the four most famous works in the Chinese literature. The author, Cao Xueqin, vividly describes the complex inner world of the Chinese feudal family of three generations, tells of the conflicts and passions that boil over in such an intergenerational community. It is important to note that the family depicted in the work belongs to the higher society of China at that time, and that is why the gardens, pavilions, gazebos, beautiful trees and flowers form a special background for the scene of human passions.

Today, Daguan Yuan Park is a favorite place of the capital's residents, as well as many guests, where the Mid-Autumn Festival is celebrated and large historical performances are held. It can even be said that the opportunity to share a moment in such a "dream" created by the Chinese creative spirit and fantasy is an opportunity of lifetime. It was a pleasure to be aware of how lucky we are and to walk along the winding paths while enjoying the blooming flowers, as well as listening to the soft sound of the traditional string music, which made the "dream" even more charming.

**05.04.1999** The air in Beijing seems electrified. A strong wind is blowing. A sandstorm is raging. There was a real sand blizzard at night. In the embassy there is a layer of brown sand on the floors and tables. Outside, people are cleaning dust from their cars, bicycles, sidewalks, and shop windows.

We receive a large postal package from Riga. The months that we have spent in Beijing have left Latvia's news further and further in the background. After receiving the post, there is a desire to read about the events in Latvia until the last page is finished. Even though we live in the age of electronics, it is a special feeling to hold a newspaper or a book in one's hands.

**07.04.1999** My wife has already prepared the quarterly financial report in which all positions match. However, 0.07 santims remain. We are trying to understand – how so?

At the MFA of the PRC I am meeting with the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Latvia Yao Peisheng 姚培生, and we discuss the following issues:

- On April 26, 1999, a Latvian TV delegation led by Mr R. Tjarve is arriving in China.
- A delegation of Latvian businessmen is visiting China in July 1999.

- In a few days, a delegation of the Ministry of Education of Latvia headed by the Rector of the University of Latvia Mr J. Zakis is arriving in China.
- The visit of Foreign Minister V. Birkavs to China is also being discussed.

The Chinese ambassador, Yao Peisheng, is from Shanghai, and we can easily find a common language. I had an internship at Fudan University and lived in Shanghai for a year. Communication is simple and natural, setting aside the official tone of the Foreign Ministry's protocol.

**10.04.1999** While still at the embassy, we study the map. Inside the Second Circuit Road, east of the Temple of Heaven, is the Lake Long Tan Park 龙潭湖公园. We haven't been there yet. The history of this park also goes back hundreds of years, as it is actually located in the old town of Beijing.

The landscape of the park is dominated by Lake Long Tan (龙潭). The so-called moon bridges make the sight of the lake especially appealing. Moon bridges are arched pedestrian bridges associated with gardens in China. The reflection of the arch on the surface of the water symbolizes the moon, and it is truly an admirable sight. The park also has man-made grottoes, rock gardens and tea houses. Our visit to the park coincides with the time when magnolias, sakura trees and forsythias are in full bloom. We walk around the big pond, which I would rather call a lake. After the short trip, having explored again one corner of the Chinese capital and caught some spring sun tan, we feel reenergized and can go back to the embassy quarters.

**11.04.1999** We have decided to travel today as well. We drive in the direction of Miyun 密云 reservoir. This reservoir provides the capital with the drinking water. The source of the water supply is rain. Thus, if it has not been raining for a long time, it can affect the water supply in the city.

The area along the highway is flat at the beginning. Slender poplar trees with whitewashed trunks grow on both sides of the road. When we get to the reservoir, it turns out that it is actually not allowed to access its shores. However, our diplomatic number plate adds weight to our small company, and the law enforcement officers are not being very strict this time. As a result, we manage to get to a nice bay, where we can have a rest and enjoy the view of the reservoir, which, in fact, looks very much like a natural lake. Then we continue in the direction of the summer residence of the former emperors of the Qing Dynasty, Chengde 承德. There are ridges of rocks along the highway, and in our understanding we are now driving along a mountain road. We have a small rest, and I start a conversation with a Chinese driver. When I mention that this road leads through a mountainous area, he is very surprised, "Sorry, but where do you see the mountains? The real mountains are very far from

here.” Probably people accustomed to the plains have their own view on this matter.

In 1703, Emperor Kangxi 康熙 established the emperor’s summer residence in ChengDe town, where the Manchurian military summer camp was also located. It was one of the eight summer residences of the emperors of the Qing Dynasty.

In 1767–1771, Emperor QianLong 乾隆 built an extensive temple complex in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition – Putuo ZongCheng Temple 普陀宗乘之庙. This complex in China is also called the “Little Potala”, compared to the well-known “Potala” in Tibet, the palace of the Tibetan rulers and the Tibetan Buddhist temple complex. In 1994, ChengDe complex was included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. We wanted to visit ChengDe as a place especially associated with the rulers of the Qing Dynasty. However, this time after some kilometers we turn the car back in the direction of Beijing. It seems to have been our longest independent trip. Both in Beijing’s very busy traffic and on the roads leading out of the city, we are starting to feel safer and more confident. Watching Chinese traffic, as well as browsing through various informative press publications, it must be admitted that there is practically no information about drunk drivers. Also later, during our stay in China, we never heard of driving under the influence as a problem. In the evening, it rains gently in Beijing. Spring is in the air. We celebrate quietly my dear wife Galina’s birthday. We receive greetings from all our three sons, which brings warm feelings of family and revives memories about our family celebrations together.

**12.04.1999** Together with our Lithuanian colleague, we are discussing our travel plan to Xinjiang. I write a report for the MFA about the meeting with the Ambassador of the PRC to Latvia Yao Peisheng.

NATO Secretary General H. Solana appears on the evening news. The heavy burden on his shoulders makes him look tired and nervous. After three weeks of bombing in Serbia, it is still not clear how to get out of all this mess.

**13.04.1999** In a Syrian shop not far from the embassy, they sell German sauerkraut. Galina is cooking sauerkraut soup. We haven’t cooked this familiar dish in Beijing yet, and its flavor makes us feel so much at home, except for a section of Chinese soldiers marching in front of our windows.

In Serbia, the airport, bridges, roads, the Ministry of the Interior and other objects are being bombed. Serbian police have expelled several thousand Albanians from Kosovo. There is a military, ecological and ethnic catastrophe happening in Serbia right now. NATO promises to continue bombing as long as S. Milosevic remains in power.

**14.04.1999** At the end of April this year, a world floral exhibition is taking place in Kunming. Ambassadors of Beijing's Diplomatic Corps are invited to this major event. The Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC provides information on the tickets, hotel reservations and other similar issues.

The bombing of Serbia continues. French and British warships have entered the Adriatic Sea.

**15.04.1999** Today, our sinology students I. Forande, V. Pole and A. Dobrijaņina are visiting the embassy.

At 14:25 at the MFA of the PRC, I receive a letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC Tang Jiaxuan to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia V. Birkavs. The main message of the letter is a request for Latvia's support in the vote on the resolution on human rights in China. I immediately send this letter together with the accompanying letter to Riga.

The summer heat is starting to take over in Beijing.

In Serbia, a NATO pilot drops a bomb at an Albanian refugee camp. There are 60 casualties.

**16.04.1999** We confirm our participation in the Kunming "EXPO 99" to the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC.

**17.04.1999** On Saturday a visit to the pool and a tennis match have been scheduled. Everything goes according to the schedule. This day gives relaxation after the tense week. Yet, the heat is almost unbearable. A thunderstorm breaks out in the evening. The lightning strikes are so powerful that it seems to us they could make the plaster fall off the walls in our room. When the storm is over, the air feels fresh and clean, which is very relieving after the spell of sweltering heat.

**19.04.1999** We start the day with a visit to the bank as we need to carry out several banking transactions.

At 14:45 in the Department of West Asia and North Africa of the MFA of the PRC, we discuss the PRC's relations with Palestine. While maintaining constructive and fair relations with Israel, the PRC has opened a Palestinian embassy in Beijing. Actually, it's nearby – in our San Li Tun district. This example demonstrates not only the independent and autonomous position of the PRC in the decades-long conflict between the two nations, but also the capacity and maturity of Chinese diplomacy.

At 20:00 there is an event at the Hungarian Embassy. It starts with a boring wait, which extends to an hour and a half. The plane from Shanghai by which the delegation of the Council of Europe is supposed to arrive has been delayed. The ambassadors present are expected to advise the Council of

Europe delegation on what and how to talk about human rights in China with the former Prime Minister, the current Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC, Li Peng 李鹏. It is a bit complicated because the PRC does not accept mentoring and only recognizes talks where both parties are perceived as equal partners in the dialogue. In addition, Li Peng is not the most popular leader in the PRC since the event of student unrest in 1989.

**20.04.1999** Yesterday I returned from the Hungarian Embassy after midnight. The first thing in the morning I start filing the report, and a couple of hours later the report is on its way to MFA of the LR.

I am meeting with A. Brīviņš, a Latvian from Hong Kong, and we are discussing a possible candidate of the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Latvia in Hong Kong.

**21.04.1999** I'm at Workers' Stadium 工人体育场, which is nearby the embassy. At the lowered pond, the old willow trees have turned green. The workers are still shoveling the soil. This has been going on for more than a month. People work with shovels, hoes and wheelbarrows. The technology could not have been more primitive; however, the results are clearly visible.

Today we decide to buy a fax machine. The procedure is simple. We pay and the company installs the fax machine on the embassy premises.

**22.04.1999** I attend a meeting of the ambassadors of the EU and Associated Countries at the German Embassy. The key issues are German-PRC bilateral relations and the Balkan conflict.

The fog in Beijing is so dense that it almost feels like rain.

We receive the first fax message from our youngest son.

The US Secretary of Defense, Cohen says on TV, "NATO will continue to strike preventively wherever it deems it necessary."

Lennart Meri, President of Estonia, states, "The further away one or another country is from us, the less avid our economic interests are."

**23.04.1999** I am sending to the MFA of the Republic of Latvia the report on yesterday's meeting at the German Embassy.

NATO's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary is being celebrated in Washington.

The TV center has been bombed in Belgrade.

**24.04.1999** Saturday is here, and we are going on a tour to the Mutianyu 慕田峪 section of the Great Wall. This section of the Wall is located near Huairou 怀柔 city. In the west, this section borders with the Jiankou 箭扣 section, which



has not been reconstructed since its construction in 1368 and has now turned into ruins. In the east, the Lianhuachi 莲花池 section begins, which is also practically ruins.

The Mutian wall section is, in fact, older than Badalin (八达岭), which is usually visited by most of Beijing's guests. The length of the section available to guests is 2250 m. There are 23 watchtowers at this section. The wall runs up and down the mountain range, repeating the natural curves of the terrain.

The Mutian section was strategically important during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and covered Beijing from the north. Nowadays it is being preserved as an ancient historical landmark. In 1983 restoration works were carried out here. We get lost a bit on the mountainous roads, yet we reach the destination successfully. Galina and I couldn't agree more that this has been another opportunity to experience the diversity of the Chinese Great Wall and to feel the special magnetic aura of one the wonders of the world. We return to the embassy premises a bit tired, but definitely happy because we have made it.

**25.04.1999** We dedicate this Sunday to Beijing's largest mosque, Niujielibaishi 牛街礼拜寺. The largest and oldest mosque in Beijing was built in 996 AD, in the southwestern district of Xuanwuqu 宣武区, which has long been inhabited by Beijing's Muslim population. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the mosque acquires the present shape. The main peculiarity of the mosque is that it has been built in Chinese style with a two-storied roof and small windows. However, the interior was built in accordance with Islamic traditions.

Getting close to the mosque during our visit is complicated, because it is simply not possible to break through the crowd on Saturday. Many people are wearing traditional round Muslim hats. The largest Muslim Chinese community is called the "hui" 回 nationality, and it is scattered throughout the country. People of this nationality speak Chinese and are committed to the Islamic religion. Islamic Uighurs 维吾尔, Kazakhs 哈萨克, Kyrgyz 吉尔吉斯, Tajiks 塔吉克 and other minorities living in Xinjiang should be mentioned as well. Frankly, we had expected more from today's visit to the mosque. Only later we learn that it is characteristic of other Chinese cities as well that traditional Chinese architecture prevails in the design of mosques.

**26.04.1999** I am meeting the Latvian Television delegation led by R.Tjarve at the airport. In the afternoon, the delegation arrives and interviews me about the work of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. One of the questions is: why does Latvia need an embassy in the PRC? My answer is: "The rapid growth of the new China has been noticed all over the world. This may not be a well-known fact, but from the first day, the PRC supported

the restoration of the independence of the Baltic states, as well as the withdrawal of the former USSR army from the Baltic space. Taking into account China's rapidly growing influence in the world, opening an embassy in the PRC is in the vital interests of any country. The next important issue is – what Latvia can offer to China. In this regard, we are working with our respective ministries and preparing a visit of Latvian entrepreneurs to China.”

I. Forande, who is one of our Chinese speaking expats, arrives at the embassy to receive a recommendation from me to work for a Chinese company. I get to work and immediately prepare the necessary recommendation.

**27.04.1999** We get up at 5:30 and go to the airport. After a three-hour flight, we land in the administrative center of Yunnan Province 云南省 in Kunming 昆明. The temperature is +12 degrees Celsius. This is not very warm. Another name for the Kunming is Spring City 春城. The first impression is the abundance and variety of flowers in this city. We decide to visit Lake Cuihu 翠湖, which I had the opportunity to see in February of 1989. We walk along the shore of the lake and rejoice at the magnificent promenade with small bays and islets, where small souvenir shops, cozy tea houses and restaurants are located. We discover an orchid pond and admire the humpback bridges that connect this realm of countless islands. Eventually, it gets colder, and we return to the hotel.

**28.04.1999** We take a walk around the city and come to Kunming City Museum 昆明市博物馆.

Wanting to know more about the city, we open the museum door. The museum's exposition introduces us to the history of Yunnan Province, which is inseparable from the history of China. Dramatic historical events have unfolded here against the background of the lush subtropical nature. Opium wars under the pressure of the combined British and French military contingents, the collapse of the Qing 清 Dynasty, the Xinhai Revolution 辛亥革命, the war with the Japanese invaders 抗日战争 – all these calamities and collisions have befallen upon this land in the southwestern corner of China. Today Kunming is a prosperous, green, tidy, and comfortable city. One can feel the fresh breeze from the nearby mountains. In the afternoon, we visit the largest Buddhist temple in Kunming, Yunnan 圆通寺, which is the residence for the local Buddhist clergy. It is one of the main Buddhist temples and is under state protection.

Unlike in other temples, here the stairs do not lead up, but down. The Great Hall of the Temple is located at the very bottom of the shrine. The magnificent buildings and the soothing atmosphere inside have inspired many poets and artists. We observe with genuine interest how a new temple is being

carved from hard tropical wood. Carpenters are working extremely accurately, even fanatically. Every stroke of the axe is neat and precise. Needless to say, in China, wood is an expensive material that is treated with respect.

We continue to enjoy the southern elegance of Kunming.

**29.04.1999** Despite the fact that the sky is overcast, we go on an excursion to the Daguan park 大观园. We have recently visited a park in Beijing with a similar name. We start walking along the shore of the lake and admiring its picturesque islands and peninsulas. Somewhere at the horizon we are supposed to see the beautiful mountains, which many poets have lauded. However, the fog is getting thicker, and all we can see is the fog. Then it starts raining. We have to surrender and retreat because we haven't taken our umbrellas with us. Well, today is our wedding anniversary. Being young students of the Institute of Oriental Languages at Moscow University, we celebrated our wedding both in Moscow and Riga. When we were exchanging our vows, could we imagine that we would be celebrating one of our anniversaries in Kunming, on the shores of Lake Cuihu 翠湖? We find a small, cozy restaurant and order lunch in Dai 傣 style – fish cooked in aromatic spices, thin threads of venison, meat rolls in rice flour. The surrounding scenery is exotic and delightful. We share our memories. Our married life from the very start involved wide geography – Moscow... Vladivostok... Riga. Our honeymoon trip started in Moscow and took us to Vladivostok. I recall seeing the shores of the Pacific Ocean for the very first time. Another exciting challenge was settling in Vladivostok for real and getting to know the unique climate, vegetation and wildlife of the region. The precious memories come flooding back.

**30.04.1999** We have come to Kunming Old Town to see two famous pagodas: Dongsita 东寺塔 and Xisita 西寺塔. The architecture seems very unusual to us. We can literally feel the breath of history here and can only wonder what these buildings have witnessed in the course of centuries.

We are attending the grand banquet for Beijing's Diplomatic Corps dedicated to the opening of "EXPO 99". In the evening, the opening performance of "EXPO 99" starts in the city stadium: "The Romantic Symphony of Earth and Heaven", "Green Movement". The performance involves more than 20 peoples living in Yunnan Province, dressed in their national costumes. The event ends with impressive fireworks. Exploding firecrackers can be heard all around. The music seems a bit too loud for us. Everything is grand and breathtaking. We have trouble falling asleep...

**01.05.1999** "EXPO 99" is attended by more than 90 countries around the world. The PRC has been chosen as the host country for an event of this scale for the first time. The total costs of "EXPO 99" for the PRC are around

6 billion USD. The slogan of this exhibition offered by the PRC is “人与自然 – 迈向21世纪” – “Man and nature on the way to the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. For us it is also the first time to participate in such a large international exhibition.

Even being accustomed to the Chinese scale, it is hard to comprehend how Chinese provinces have managed to create such colossal gifts for “EXPO 99”. Some of the examples are: an approximately 30 m long panel “Man and Nature”, a 3.5 m tall porcelain vase, painted with traditional Chinese life scenes, a calligraphy sample from Anhui Province 安徽省, a gift from Yunnan Province 云南省 – “Seaman’s Zheng He 郑和 ship”. And there are many more. Everything is extraordinary, exquisite and of giant scale at the same time. I spend some time admiring these presents. Represented in the exhibition, there are also 89 exhibits from other countries.

**02.05.1999** Today we drive to the Stone Forest 石林, the full name of which could be “Stone Forest – the World Geological Heritage Park of Yunnan Province” 云南石林世界地质公园. This is a world-famous geological phenomenon, located in southwest China. It formed 200 million years ago as a result of a tectonic shift in an old, dried-up seabed. The landscape of this national park is peculiar in that the rock formations look like a giant stone forest. The strangely shaped rocks seem to grow from the very soil. The rock blocks resemble petrified trees and pagodas, beasts and birds; however, it all has been created by nature itself as a result of wind, water streams, and erosion of volcanic lava. The rock height is about 40 m and can reach even 45 m. The rocks seem to grow straight up from the bright green grass. Large dew drops glisten on the grass stalks. The territory of the National Park consists of seven zones, two of which in 2007 were included on the UNESCO National Heritage List. We walk along the Stone Forest trails together with diplomats from many other countries. At one of the trail bends, we meet Russian Ambassador I. Rogachov. He offers to have a picture taken together as a keepsake, and we discuss the latest news. **17 18 19 20**

The stone forest is located in the Autonomous District of Yi nationality 彝族自治县. Girls dressed in bright, hand-embroidered national costumes greet the tourists and offer them pieces of embroidery, pinafores, purses and other masterpieces of folk crafts. I start chatting with the girls, and then it’s my turn to explain from which faraway land we have arrived in this truly unique Stone Forest. Once again I’m overwhelmed by realizing how blessed I have been to have this opportunity to encounter strange cultures and see most beautiful places on Earth.

The opportunity to attend “EXPO 99” for members of Beijing’s Diplomatic Corps has been organized by the MFA of the PRC. On behalf of all members





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of the diplomatic corps, I can only confirm that we are grateful for this opportunity to visit “EXPO 99”, as well as to learn more about the friendly and fascinating Yunnan Province.

**04.05.1999** I am writing a report on “EXPO 99”. In the afternoon I send it to our MFA.

**05.05.1999** We are at the Embassy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. A garden party on the shady lawn is held in honor of Queen Elizabeth II’s birthday. It is widely attended by ambassadors from all continents. Mostly, I am meeting many people for the first time. We exchange our business cards.

In the afternoon, a second diplomatic event of the day takes place at the World Trade Center 世界贸易中心. The ambassadors of Beijing’s Diplomatic Corps are invited by the EU. Hundreds of high ranking diplomats and civil servants are participating.

In the evening, we meet with Mr V. Larin, my former student from the University of the Far East, who has arrived in Beijing as the director of the Institute of History of the Far East Scientific Center. We have a long and friendly conversation.

**06.05.1999** It’s sweltering from the very morning. It is clear that summer in Beijing will require stamina and concentration. I get on my bike and ride to the shop to pick up “EXPO 99” pictures.

**07.05.1999** We call a technician to check our telephone lines and find out that one of the lines has not been connected to international communication channels.

We are seeing off the delegation of the Latvian TV at the airport.

Then we buy a fridge, and in the afternoon we already have it delivered to the embassy premises.

Worrying news – the Embassy of the PRC has been bombed in Belgrade. A wave of outrage is spreading rapidly all over China. The media is filled with photos from the ruined PRC Embassy building and images of crying relatives of the deceased.

**10.05.1999** Beijing is filled with rumors that Chinese students are blocking the US Embassy in the PRC, as well as smearing the embassy’s facade with paint and ink. Before 6:00 p.m. we leave our embassy to see what’s going on. However, our attempt to get closer to the US Embassy is futile. The residential areas surrounding it are closed. Later, news appears in the press that the US Ambassador, a former naval admiral, had not been able to get out

of the student-besieged embassy and had been forced to survive on crackers and juice for a couple of days. The British Embassy in the PRC is blocked in a similar way.

In the evening, I have a distance communication session with the MFA of the RL.

**11.05.1999** I submit a letter of condolences from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia V. Birkavs regarding the deaths of the PRC Embassy staff in Belgrade to the MFA of the PRC, addressed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China Tang Jiaxuan.

**13.05.1999** I have been invited to a meeting with German Chancellor G. Schröder at the German Embassy. As I approach the embassy, I feel that something is not as it should be. It turns out that the meeting has been cancelled. Germany is a member of NATO and has taken an active part in the bombing of Belgrade. The bombs dropped on Belgrade destroyed the Chinese Embassy. All day, China is mourning the deaths, and all TV channels are showing the footage of the tragic scene.

**14.05.1999** The Chinese press continues to pay close attention to Chinese journalists killed in Belgrade.

Serbia has been bombed non-stop for 50 days. How can this conflict be resolved?

**15.05.1999** I spend Saturday with my former fellow student. We play tennis and wander together in the famous Imperial Summer Residence in Yiheyuan 颐和园. At the beginning of the summer, the emperor's park looks attractive and enticing as well. The best thing is that we can drive ourselves and can get to the residence in a nick of time – it's fast and convenient.

Another weekend event is a visit to the Pearl Market. So far I have not said anything about Chinese markets, so it is time to dwell for a while on the world-famous Beijing Pearl Market. In Chinese, it is called 红桥珍珠市场 or abbreviated – 红桥. This market is right next to the Temple of Heaven 天坛, so a visit to both sites can be combined.

A visit to the Pearl Market really allows you to feel the atmosphere of Chinese trading style.

The Pearl Market begins with street vendors at the walls of the Temple of Heaven. In 1995, the government built a special five-storied building, which houses the market halls these days.

Beijing Pearl Market is the largest pearl market in Northern China, as well as one of the 10 largest pearl markets in the world. No wonder, because China

is the land where they first started to grow pearls artificially. Such pearls are completely identical to the natural ones. The Chinese treat pearls as something sacred.

The market has been visited by world famous celebrities, and their photos are displayed here. The list of such visitors includes Michael Phelps, Margaret Thatcher, G. Bush senior with the First Lady and many others. A unique and unforgettable experience is observing pearl stringing on a thread. The fingers of the workers move amazingly deftly and skillfully. The choice of pearls can satisfy every taste. There is only one thing – you need to know how to bargain. Otherwise, you might overpay considerably. The product, which initially supposedly costs \$ 200, can be purchased for \$ 20 after a longer bargain. A client who does not bargain cannot evoke respect in a Chinese salesman. If you intend not only to have a sightseeing tour around the market, but also to purchase pearls, then it would be best to ask an expert's advice; otherwise, there are no guarantees that you buy a replica or imitation for the real price of pearls. If this is not possible, remember some tips. First, if you rub two pearls against each other, fine stone dust or powder must appear. You can also try the tooth test – lightly rub the pearl against the front of your tooth (not against the edge, which can scratch the pearl). If the pearl is natural or cultured, it should feel gritty, not slippery. Finally, if a fake pearl is brought close to a burning match, there will be an unpleasant odor. When it comes to pearl quality, the color and shape of the pearl are important. The closer the shape of the pearl is to a perfectly round one, the more expensive the pearl will be.

All this suggests that Pearl Market should be included in Beijing's list of attractions if you need to bring an unusual gift home to your bride, wife, daughter or granddaughter. Pearls will always symbolize the charm and mystery of the East. Another reason to visit the place is just the opportunity to feel the atmosphere of the market and observe a different trading culture, not necessarily trying to get adrenaline rush from engaging in bargaining.

In the end, we leave our guest from St. Petersburg at the Pearl Market and together with my spouse return to the embassy affairs.

**17.05.1999** Bad news – the seat has been stolen from Galina's bicycle at the Sunlitun diplomatic campus. I don't want to suspect anyone, but the feeling is very disappointing. Now I need to figure out where to buy a new seat.

Three Chinese businessmen arrive at the embassy and want me to put a stamp on their purchase-sale contract. The entrepreneurs are quite assertive, but I withstand their pressure and eventually get rid of them.

**18.05.1999** We are going to Fangshan 房山, as well as to the adjacent Zhoukoudian 周口店. This day trip has been offered to the ambassadors of Beijing's

Diplomatic Corps by the MFA of the PRC. Fangshan is famous for its stalactite caves and the ancient Buddhist monastery Yunju 云居寺. In turn, in Zhoukoudian in 1926, the Swedish archaeologist J. Andersen found a prehistoric tooth, but in 1929 – a skull of the so-called Peking Man. In the history of archeology, the Swedish archaeologist occupies an outstanding place, and Zhoukoudian was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1987 as a site of the Peking Man.

The construction of Yunju Monastery began in 616 AD. In this monastery, sutras have been engraved on 15,000 stone slabs, written down using more than 20 million hieroglyphs. Writing them down and engraving is said to have taken 500 years.

We go on an underground hike in the stalactite caves. Stalactite formations look like fairy tale scenes and can spur unlimited imagination in every visitor. A surprise awaits you after every bend of the cave – all of a sudden you meet a Giant Lion, a sad Lonely Monk or the silent Petrified Beauty.

On our way from the caves to the monastery and further to the site of the Peking Man, I have friendly discussions with diplomats from Poland, Hungary, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Also, it is a great opportunity to speak Chinese to other visitors – local people who have gathered here from all corners of China.

**20.05.1999** Cameroon's National Day is celebrated with a reception at the Sheraton Hotel. There are many guests in the luxurious hall. Not only the color of their skin, which ranges in different shades from black to brown, but also the gorgeous colorful outfits and intricate coiffures of the ladies show that it is an African country that is celebrating its National Day. One can see the sons and daughters of the Black Continent in the expanses of the world. To tell the truth, it is still a little bit of cultural shock for me when a black person starts talking to me in Chinese. Later, during my stay in China, I witness many times that African diplomats speak fluent Chinese, which testifies to their superb linguistic abilities.

**23.05.1999** We go for a Sunday walk in Sanlitun embassy district. The street is quiet. Ginkgo and acacia alleys form a "thick roof" and provide an excellent protection from the hot sun rays. In the early morning hours, another Chinese passion attracts our attention. This is especially true for elderly men. Many of them carry cages with singing birds. Having arrived at their favorite place, the men hang their cages on a tree branch and ... just listen to the bird singing. Sometimes they engage in discussion with a neighbor who has hung his pet's cage nearby trying to compare the performance of their singers. Such scenes are in deep harmony with the clean and quiet embassy district. We also enjoy

both listening to the songs of the singing birds and watching the old men in their leisure activities.

**24.05.1999** I receive a letter from the Department of Oriental Studies of the University of Latvia with an offer to review a bachelor's thesis. At the university, it may seem that the work at the embassy can be combined with the responsibilities of a university professor. I respond that being the one and only diplomat at the embassy may require from a person all his efforts and even more.

**25.05.1999** The Algerian Embassy is hosting a large reception in honor of Africa Day. The guest of honor is the Deputy Prime Minister of the Council of State Qian Qichen (钱其琛). I met this man in 1994, when I came to the PRC as part of a delegation led by our Prime Minister M. Gailis to normalize relations between the two countries. He is a very experienced diplomat and statesman; from 1988 to 1998 he was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. His presence and an official speech give the necessary weight to every event. The hall has a host of guests, most of them from African countries. In the afternoon I attended the Argentine National Day reception. In the shady garden, guests are treated to an unusually tender and juicy beef chop baked on charcoal in Gaucho style, with a small, warm white bun. Many Latin American diplomats discuss Latin American issues and current affairs.

**26.05.1999** Diplomatic service, Central telegraph, payments, other practical things – that's the list for today.

**27.05.1999** The Russian Embassy is celebrating Pushkin's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. The event is attended by a plethora of professors from Beijing universities, A. Pushkin's translators, senior officials and students.

A. Pushkin's poetry is being read aloud both in Russian and Chinese; singers perform romances with A. Pushkin's lyrics. What is more, not only prominent Chinese professors demonstrate good knowledge of Russian, but often also very young people – both university students and pupils. This is a truly grand, electrifying and emotionally intense intercultural event.

**28.05.1999** I attend a reception in honor of Croatia's National Day. I have known the Croatian Ambassador since the early days of our arrival in Beijing, and we have established good relations as close colleagues. About 300 guests have arrived, and the ambassadors of many countries have known each other already for a longer time. What a busy and rewarding week...

**29.05.1999** We are wandering in the Lilac-Colored Bamboo Park 紫竹院公园. We know the park alleys quite well already. The music is playing, and people are dancing ballroom dances. Some are exercising. Some are practicing Beijing



Opera pieces. It is really touching how people with low income are taken care of. There is a small bakery right in the park where they bake corn flour buns. There is a small line of people, but everything happens fast, and the price is so democratic that everybody can afford it.

On Sunday we are staying at the embassy, which is our home at the same time. I am preparing a report. Galina is reading. We are taking a rest after the busy week with all the banks, payments, events, receptions, reports and calculations. We have no assistants, unfortunately, but everything needs to be done.

**31.05.1999** It is raining in Beijing, which is quite a rare phenomenon.

**03.06.1999** My spouse Galina is going to a ladies' meeting at Green Lake Villa, where the spouses of ambassadors of Lithuania, Latvia, Croatia, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia will be taking part.

**05.06.1999** Saturday's car ride has brought us to Beijing's Muslim Cemetery 北京回民公墓. We decide to have a look and try to understand the peculiarities of this culture. Unlike in our tradition, the ancestors' graves are not being maintained. Grass grows everywhere. At some gravesites, relatives kneel on small mats and pray. There are not many visitors. Just nearby is the Eagle's Hill forest park 鹰山森林公园, where we hear a jaybird singing. These are the very outskirts of the big city. I doubt it if the members of the diplomatic corps ever come here. This is not the parade door side of Beijing. I am drawing parallels with the Tartar nationality in Moscow. When I was a student in Moscow, I happened to visit Moscow's tartar cemetery. The purpose was the same – to become acquainted with the Muslim cemetery culture, to have a look a little bit beyond what is allowed or offered officially.

**06.06.1999** We look at the city map just to find out that at the eastern part of Beijing there is one park which we have not explored yet. On Sunday morning, we drive eastwards. It is not without effort that we find the Cave and Mud Park (窑洼公园). We search for a long time, but we do not find the caves. It turns out to be a "people's park" – without a gate, without a fence, not well-groomed and, basically, half-abandoned. It seems to us that even the visitors to the park are not "well-groomed" either. However, even a desolate and unkempt park may have its own charm. At least for us, this short walk in the Cave and Mud Park was a breeze after all the hustle and bustle of the routine diplomatic work.

**07.06.1999** We are going to the Chamber of Commerce of the PRC. Driving is a pain in the neck. In the mad heat we get stuck in traffic jams and watch other drivers rolling their dull and sleepy eyes. The journey to the Chamber of Commerce of the PRC in Beijing's traffic takes us half a day.

The President of Finland, M. Ahtisaari, arrives in the PRC. The purpose of the visit is to try to persuade the Chinese government not to veto the UN Security Council's vote on the Balkan crisis.

**09.06.1999** The weather has changed. The sky is grey and overcast. The aspen tree leaves rustle in the wind, which seems a good sign, so we decide to go for a walk. Soon we realize that it has been a mistake. The heat has not ceased. We surrender and return under the embassy roof. We notice that from the small "market street", where we used to buy fruit and vegetables, all vendors on tricycles have disappeared. It turns out that it has been the police order – to clear the street and move the vendors somewhere else. One of the vendors says to me in a hushed voice, "This is bad" (这样不好). Probably, this is because they do not allow selling produce in the diplomats' quarters.

**10.06.1999** Journalists from "Latvijas Avīze" are arriving in China. We have plans to go to Harbin together.

Slovenian Counselor Mr M. Cencen has invited me and Galina along with Indian, Bulgarian and Argentinian diplomats and their spouses to a dinner. The atmosphere is nice and cozy. The evening unfolds with stories about different national traditions and interesting episodes of our lives. Some of the guests are superb storytellers.

**11.06.1999** We are invited to a reception on the occasion of Russia's Independence Day. The number of guests reaches several hundreds, including almost all of the diplomatic corps and the senior officials of the PRC. I still manage to make it through the crowd and personally greet the Russian Ambassador I. Rogachev.

**14.06.1999** We arrive in Harbin together with the journalists of "Latvijas Avīze". At the airport, we are met by a representative of Heilongjiang Province 黑龙江省 External Relations Department. Almost the entire 45 km long road from the airport to the city is being rebuilt and widened. There are dust clouds and heavy machinery on the road. It takes us at least two hours to get to the city center. We are finally in Harbin, which, especially after the events of 1918 in Russia, has developed into a truly cosmopolitan city with large communities of former Russian citizens, as well as foreigners of other origins. After the long journey – with multiple plane delays from Beijing and the dusty road from the airport to the city – we are a little tired. That's why everyone quietly retires to their rooms. On TV, CNN are showing NATO troops entering Kosovo. 200 Russian paratroopers still control Pristina Airport. Whether or not to let the Russians in Kosovo – the presidents of the United States and Russia have been negotiating this for two days already.

**15.06.1999** The grand opening of Harbin 哈尔滨 10<sup>th</sup> Fair is taking place. We hear loud speeches and the beat of drums. Flags are fluttering in the wind. There are scores of people from Russia – Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Chita. I see Polish and Russian ambassadors, as well as diplomats from many other countries. There is incredible buzz and noise all around – promotion campaigns, advertising merchandise.

We have an introductory tour around Harbin's historical center – “The European District”, as they call it now. One of the sights, Sophia's Cathedral looks exactly like a church in any Russian town could look like. History vibrates in the air and Russia's ever-active presence in this city is felt strongly. When looking closely at the historical part of the city, it is not difficult to notice the resemblance of the buildings to the historical part of Vladivostok. Having lived in Vladivostok for 10 years while working at the University of the Far East, I became quite familiar with both the historical center of the city and the modern areas. During the times of Russian Empire, entrepreneurs from Vladivostok or Khabarovsk quite often, and not without success, used to set up their businesses also in Harbin, Changchun or Shenyang, namely, in the northeastern provinces of China, bordering with the Russian territory. In this connection, it is impossible not to mention the merchants of the first guild I. Churin, A. Toporkov, A. Kasyuanov, whose trading houses were located in both Russian and Chinese towns. I would like to dwell briefly on the activities of merchant I. Churin. When I arrived in Blagoveshchensk in 1976 on a business trip, the town looked more like a big village; however, one building on the bank of the Amur River attracted my attention. The building, adorned with magnificent arches, clearly had a look that reminded me of the past glory of the Russian Empire. When I asked the local people about the history of the building, they told me that it was Churin's Trading House. The arched windows of the Trading House were overlooking the territory of China right beyond the river, which seemed quite symbolic. The most popular department store even in today's Vladivostok is also the former Churin's Department Store. For the readers who are interested in Harbin's history during the interwar period, I would like to recommend a book by Latvian scholar Edgars Katajs – “Under Ten Flags”. Mr Katajs masterfully describes the Latvian community in this city, as well as the events in Harbin during the turbulent times.

There is a wealth of literature on Harbin in many languages. Throughout its complex history, Harbin has been a mix of cultures, religions and nationalities. Latvian community has had its own special place in this “layered pie” of diversity. Therefore, I am happy to share my personal impressions of this city, to

which I was invited as one of the guests of Harbin's 10<sup>th</sup> Fair. We are enjoying the gorgeous, Siberian scale view opening over the Sungari River. A monument has been erected on the bank of the river to those who fought the floods in 1957.

In the evening we are attending a concert for the invited guests.

**16.06.1999** Today we are going on a tour to the district of Harbin populated by high retired officials, representatives of foreign companies and the so-called "new rich Chinese". It abounds in replicas of different world famous architectural objects: a cascade of water fountains like in Peterhof Palace (St Petersburg, Russia); a "Venetian" bridge over a water body, gates designed in the style of Yuanming Yuan Park. Well, replicas will be replicas. In the afternoon, we arrive at the Tigers' Garden. The huge area is home for about 120 wild cats. These animals are fed with live chicken, rabbits, and young goats. The Chinese press sources claim that in such "tiger gardens" there are more tigers than there are left in the wild in the Northeast China taiga area. The animals that we see seem to be in good physical condition – they behave naturally and playfully. One cannot remain indifferent when observing the elegant, flexible gait of the giant felines and their rough play. These animals seem to embody the true splendor of the taiga and the true might of nature.

**17.06.1999** Today we have an excursion to the site of the former city of Aachen 阿城, where a museum was opened a few years ago. The city of Aachen was the first capital of the Jurchen Jin dynasty since 1173 (金 1115–1234). Our guide, a petite lady, is extremely knowledgeable and tells us with great enthusiasm about the history of the place. A giant castle mound stretches nearby. That's where the town used to be once. A barely visible earthen wall has been preserved in this place. In fact, this story is just one of the pages in China's thousands of years of history.

Nearby is a Manchurian village with a small museum of household items. Northeast China has historically been a region inhabited by the so-called minorities. In the course of time, many of the minorities have adopted Chinese (Han) culture, often even losing their own language. One example is the Manchurians of Northeast China, most of whom no longer speak Manchurian today.

**18.06.1999** I wake up early and decide to get acquainted with the Harbin market. People are buying different herbs like sweet flag and yarrow, as well as small gooseberries, dills, and sorrel. The vendors first pour the fresh milk from a container into a jar, and then – into the bottle. Looks quite familiar to what I have seen in Russia. I haven't observed such scenes in other regions of China.

**19.06.1999** Finally, we're back to our embassy. It's nice to spend the night "at home". We send the materials of Harbin's 10<sup>th</sup> Fair to Riga. It is raining in Beijing, which is not very common.

**20.06.1999** For the purposes of the "Diplomatic List", we provide the new coordinates of the embassy to the MFA of the PRC.

In the evening, there is a reception in honor of the Slovenian National Day. I am surrounded by ambassadors from Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and others. Everybody has one and the same question to me: "Really? Are you going to have a woman president?" Apparently, the information about the Latvian presidential election has become available to a wider audience.

**22.06.1999** In the evening, I am attending a reception in honor of the National Day of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Their embassy is located in Dongdan (东单), which is a part of the city inside the former city wall with a tangled network of single-storied houses and small streets. Even the taxi driver, born in Beijing, has trouble finding the right address. At the Luxembourg Embassy we are greeted by an authentic Chinese garden with a rampart, a covered gallery, trees and flowers. Traditional Chinese string instrument music can be heard in the background. Elegant mini snacks are being offered. Diplomats from the EU and its associated countries are participating. No doubt, this has been one of the most elegant receptions so far.

**23.06.1999** The sun is back. It is baking hot from the very morning. It is Midsummer's Eve, and our thoughts are turning homewards. Galina herself has composed some texts to Midsummer Līgo songs and has sent them to our three sons. Along with the traditional Līgo songs, which come from the depths of the Latvian folklore, on Midsummer Eve, it is perfectly ok to improvise as you sing along; just add the refrain "Līgo!" In the evening, the bright trail of the sun can be seen through the embassy kitchen window – feels almost like in Latvia on Midsummer. We celebrate the holiday, just the two of us, and of course, the memories are flooding back about celebrating this holiday at different times in our lives. My colleague I. Baranova from the MFA of the Republic of Latvia sends us greetings.

**24.06.1999** Together with my friend from the university times and his family, we go on an outing to the Miyun 密云 lake, as the water reservoir is called. It's a two-hour drive, and we are already on the shore of the lake: blue water, ragged mountain peaks towering across the lake. It's so quiet. The feeling is a bit surreal. The spectacular nature makes us appreciate the grandness and majesty of the country. The water has the same salinity level as the sea, and swimming here is a pure pleasure. After the hustle and bustle of the metropolitan city, we really enjoy the moment on the shore of the lake. We continue



our way, and after two and a half hours we arrive in Chengde 承德. My friend takes care of checking-in at the hotel. I am the driver. This is how we have divided the duties. Our ladies, in turn, are taking care of the drinking water and small snacks. For more serious meals we visit some small restaurants. In China, regardless of the region, at 12:00, when it is time for lunch, you will definitely be able to order hot food. **21 22**

**26.06.1999** We are already on our way back to Beijing. We choose the road through Xinglong 兴隆, and this journey turns out to be a severe ordeal both for our physical and mental strength. We need to drive more than 50 km along a narrow mountain road, which, in fact, needs to be repaired badly. Sometimes, we have only the wall of rocks on one side of the road, and our only companions are mountain goats. In some places I have a feeling that we are going to slide over the village roofs. There are sections where the roadside is actually the edge of the abyss. Even in such harsh conditions, at 12:00 in a roadside restaurant we are treated to a carp, which a few moments ago was playing unknowingly in the small pond behind the eatery. We spend about ten hours on our way back and are immensely happy when reach the gate of our diplomatic campus.

**29.06.1999** I am writing some diplomatic notes – concerning changing my Latvian driving license to the Chinese one. I also need to have the car's technical passport extended and the car insured.

For the first time in China, we buy a can of Australian herring. For Latvian people herring is both an everyday meal and a delicacy. If we haven't seen herring here for months, then herring is definitely a delicacy for us. It doesn't matter anymore, if it's pickled in Latvian or Australian style.

I receive so many congratulations on Peter's Day, which is my name day. We spend a nice and cozy evening together. Another sweltering day in Beijing quietly turns into the night...

**30.06.1999** In order to obtain a driving license in the PRC, the medical certificate is required, as well as a translation of the driving license issued in the Republic of Latvia into Chinese. We do everything we need to do to meet these requirements.

Today it is +34, even +37 degrees Celsius in Beijing.

In the evening, my wife and I enter the data of the last expenditure checks for the month of June. Galina is already starting to prepare the quarterly report.

**02.07.1999** I am going to the US National Day celebrations with my Lithuanian colleague. After the bombing of NATO, the façade of the US Embassy to the PRC still remains vandalized.

In the evening, I attend a reception in honor of the National Day of Belarus.

**03.07.1999** It is being officially reported that the temperature in Beijing is +37 degrees Celsius – so as not to have to stop work and create relief for working people. In fact, it is not excluded that the temperature is even higher.

**04.07.1999** Galina has been working on the quarterly report. In the afternoon the work is done. There are flowers blooming in front of our embassy. **23**

**05.07.1999** Today I receive my new driving license, officially valid in the PRC.

We send the quarterly report to the MFA of the Latvian Republic.

Mr J. Kanels is interested in the PRC's import tariffs and regulations.

I have prepared a report on the PRC-the US relations.

**08.07.1999** Galina is sorting out and organizing our paperwork.

Russia files an official protest in connection with the Language Law adopted in Latvia, which determines the Latvian language as the only state language in Latvia.

Ms V. Viķe-Freiberga takes the oath of allegiance as the President of the Republic of Latvia.

**10.07.1999** On Saturday we swim in the pool and play tennis. On the way back to the embassy, we buy a chest-of-drawers at IKEA.

**11.07.1999** On Sunday, we go to the Badaling 八达岭 sector of the Chinese Great Wall as well as a bit slightly further to Yanqing 延庆 and Songshan Nature Reserve 松山自然保护区. In Yanqing they have opened a water park, and my friends and I take advantage of the hot springs and other pools. Then, despite the rain, we start to climb the mountain. However, the rain is getting stronger and we are forced to turn back. From Badaling we drive back to town. At times the downpour is so strong that it seems it would be better to stop and wait.

**12.07.1999** Monsoon rains have reached China. In large river basins, heavy rains often cause floods. If the length of the river is several thousand kilometers, then the rapidly rising water can bring great damage. This year is not an exception. 240 people have already died in the floods in the Yangtze Basin. China is a country that can suffer from both floods and droughts at the same time.

**13.07.1999** A lot of information is coming from Latvia about the new Language Law, which has stirred the non-Latvian opposition sentiments in our society. The Russian Federation press also continues to criticize the Latvian State Language Law.

Galina assembles the chest of drawers bought at IKEA, and it adds coziness to our home.

**14.07.1999** I am attending a reception in honor of the French National Day. The list of guests includes almost the entire diplomatic corps. The Ambassador of Tajikistan thanks me for expressing my condolences regarding the victims of the landslide in Tajikistan a few days ago. I also receive my thanks from the Ambassador of Armenia, to whom I had expressed my condolences on the death of the Catholicos of all Armenians, the chief bishop and spiritual leader of Armenian believers worldwide. The table is served with exquisite French wines, oysters, cheeses and other delicacies. With each passing month in Beijing, the circle of ambassadors I know is expanding.

**15.07.1999** We go to the bank to do our routine financial operations. There are checks to cash in and bills to pay. We pay our electricity, phone and gas bills. Today is my birthday. I receive greetings from Latvia. Our sons call on the phone. Galina and I discuss our future work, the possible visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia to China and other current events.

**17.07.1999** Different chores are piling up. More and more often on weekends we use one of the free days to stay at the embassy in order to catch up with what has not been done during the intensive working days. The workload is increasing, but we are still the only employees without any assistants.

**19.07.1999** We go to the Bank of China. At the embassy, we complete our health insurance forms at Williams Russel, a company based in London. On the Atlantic coast of the United States, J. F. Kennedy, Jr has left his home on a small plane and has not returned. The coast guard search and rescue team have been searching the missing plane and passengers, but with no results.

**20.07.1999** We are going to the Ministry of Culture of the PRC. I take with me a load of plans and suggestions from the side of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia concerning future cooperation, seminars, etc.

We provide materials on Latvian ports and transit opportunities to maritime transport companies in the PRC.

The elevator and stairwells of the embassy building are undergoing major cosmetic repairs.

We receive a message from the MFA of the Republic of Latvia – the visit of our Minister of Foreign Affairs to China planned for 1999 has been canceled.

**22.07.1999** We continue to work with the PRC maritime shipping companies. It is boiling outside. The air temperature is about +36 °C. Traffic jams and the excruciating heat take a lot of energy. Yet we are still alive and kicking...

**23.07.1999** We have visitors – students of Chinese language – V. Pole and A. Verhojaņina. They have finished their studies, and tomorrow are returning to Latvia.

**24.07.1999** The weather forecast – today in Beijing it is +42.2 °C. It seems to be the record for this summer. We are in the swimming pool – at least some relief from the heat. The local men, having taken off their shirts or at least rolled up the sleeves, are relaxing in the shade of the trees. We are enjoying some lamb at a Mongolian restaurant. To separate the meat from the bones, every client is provided a small knife. They do not give knives to clients in Chinese restaurants. We return home. The air conditioned embassy is a good shelter from the heat.

**25.07.1999** It's again a visit to the bank to make all routine payments.

I have been invited to a reception at the Swiss Embassy. I meet the Swiss Ambassador, who speaks excellent Chinese and knows China very well. The Swedish colleague L. Freden also participates in the event, and we discuss current issues of our work.

**28.07.1999** We send materials about this year's Xiamen Investment Seminar to our Development Agency. We also send informative material to the port of Riga about sea transportation in the PRC.

I am attending a reception of Israel Embassy at the Swiss Hotel. It's a small event and the atmosphere is pleasant and warm. I have noticed that the background of Israeli-PRC relations is permanently positive. In the most difficult years, when Jews were forced to leave Germany and other German-occupied countries during World War II and seek refuge elsewhere, China was one of the countries that accepted Jewish refugees. This has not been forgotten...

**29.07.1999** I have decided to stay at the embassy and prepare a report on the Falun Gong 法轮功 movement in the PRC. I am trying to make the report as compact as possible.

In the evening, as many times before when I have wanted my mood to lighten up – I start re-reading Latvian author Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš. His language is the language spoken in the region where my parents come from. His narrative and imagery is sincere and dear to my heart.

**30.07.1999** I send an article on Falun Gong to the MFA, as well as an overview of measures to promote relations between the Republic of Latvia and the PRC.

A report on the international lawyers' seminar in the PRC goes to the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Latvia.

Together with Galina, we are preparing suggestions on the year 2000 budget of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC.

**02.08.1999** We have decided to sort out and organize our paperwork – documents, newspaper articles, etc. We are pretty efficient at this work, and soon everything can be overviewed and accessed easily. Then Galina reviews check and balance books.

I go to the bank and do all necessary things there.

We order a stainless steel stand for the national flag. Then we buy a new lock for the embassy door. Finally, we also buy new and elegant coat hangers for the embassy lobby.

There is an unexpected call from Riga. A Latvian sailor has died in an accident in one of Chinese ports.

I call the MFA of the PRC. It's very late. Nobody picks up the phone.

**05.08.1999** We receive a note saying that on July 31 a Latvian sailor has died in a fire on a Panamanian ship in the port of Guangzhou.

J. Kārklīņš, Deputy State Secretary for Administrative Affairs of the MFA reports that Ambassador E. Semanis will be arriving in Beijing in 1999. Thus, we can plan on returning to Latvia in the middle of 2000.

**06.08.1999** We receive the new “Diplomatic List” from the MFA of the PRC.

In the evening I am attending a reception at the Embassy of Côte d'Ivoire.

**07.08.1999** It's Saturday, and I and my friend from university times have decided to visit one of Beijing's great historical sites, Lugouqiao 卢沟桥 Bridge, also known as Marco Polo Bridge. In ancient times, the bridge used to connect the banks of the Yongdinghe 永定河 River, and was often a popular spot for poets and artists who admired the “Early Morning Month over Lugouqiao.” At the walls of the Wanping Fortress, just next to the bridge, after a long and difficult journey to the capital of the Tianxia Empire, tired travellers from caravans settled overnight. Nowadays, the river has dried up, but the bridge has survived and still attracts the attention of tourists from far and near.

***Brief information:** the bridge was built in 1189–1192 and has experienced much. In 1215, the Mongols completely destroyed Beijing, but the bridge remained. The bridge has 10 pillars supported by 11 arches. Initially the bridge was adorned with 627 lion sculptures. Nowadays their number is something around 482 or 496. When Marco Polo visited this bridge, he said, “The bridge is so wonderful that I doubt if there is another bridge in the world that can compete with the Lugouqiao bridge.”*

*On July 7, 1937, a collision took place on the Lugouqiao Bridge between the Japanese Imperial Army and a company of Chinese soldiers stationed in the aforementioned*





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*Wanping Fortress. This incident was used as a pretext for the start of the Japan-China war, which lasted from 1937 to 1945. The Chinese consider the fight against the Japanese invaders to be a phase of war of World War II in the Asian region.*

The rich historical background of the Lugouqiao Bridge confirms the outstanding importance of this bridge in China's long and complex history, both in ancient times and in the events of the Second World War.

The souvenir vendors are especially persistent here. The place is also constantly overcrowded with group tours. Actually, it was interesting to eavesdrop on guides' stories. Some of them were so enticing that there was a desire to open the book and take a deeper look at the history of the events that surround the Lugouqiao Bridge. I wish I could have visited the Bridge on more occasions; however, such opportunity did not arise.

**09.08.1999** We are taking the first steps in establishing contacts with the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the PRC.

Mail has arrived from Latvia. I hand over the letter of the newly elected President of the Republic of Latvia, V. Viķe-Freiberga, addressed to the Chairman of the People's Republic of China, Jiang Zemin.

We have received the coat of arms of the Republic of Latvia, which will be placed on the embassy wall.

Information arrives from Guangzhou about the Latvian sailor who has died in the port of this city. I transfer this information to the MFA of the Republic of Latvia, as well as to the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in Russia.

**10.08.1999** I have a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the PRC.

We go to the bank and make the payments for the phone, electricity, and Chinese and Hong Kong newspapers we have subscribed to.

I pay a visit to the Hungarian Embassy. Ambassador O. Juhász concludes his third term in China, as well as in his diplomatic career. The Ambassador's address is meaningful, heartfelt, and down-to-earth.

**12.08.1999** I submit samples of fish delicacies of two Latvian fish preserve companies – “Kaija” and “Vilpra” to the “Youyi” 友谊 store.

**14.08.1999** It's pouring outside. We dedicate Saturday to the embassy's finance accounts. The weekdays, especially if you have to travel to several addresses in the capital, are so busy that we often need to catch up during the weekend.

**15.08.1999** Galina suggests that we go to the Silk Market, which in Beijing is called 秀水街, or Silk Street and choose gifts to take home. Silk Market is one of the most exciting places in Beijing. The modern Silk Market 秀水大厦 is a seven-storied building with 1,700 sales outlets employing 3,000 of service

staff. The place looks like a huge, busy anthill. If you are not an assertive type of person and bargaining is not your cup of tea, then it's better to skip this place. If Chinese trading manners are acceptable, be bold and head for it. That's exactly what we do and end up buying all kinds of silk fabrics which we think our relatives might like.

**17.08.1999** Our vacation can start. Before leaving for the airport, I disconnect the car's battery. I also disconnect the computer, fax, TV and the fridge. At 19:15 we leave for the airport in a taxi. The rest of the journey is really smooth. After a seven hour flight we are in Helsinki. The transfer to Riga is in one hour, and we can continue our journey. From above, we already see the Estonian Coastline, the Latvian shore of the Baltic Sea with the pebbly Vidzeme beach. The plane lands and we are here. The only disappointment is that our luggage continues flying somewhere else

**23.08.1999** At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs I am meeting with the Deputy State Secretary for Administrative Affairs J. Kārkliņš. Together we discuss starting consular work in China. Then a conversation follows with the Secretary of State M. Riekstiņš, who confirms that he always reads my reports with interest.

M. Riekstiņš recommends looking for the candidacy of the Honorary Consul of Latvia in Hong Kong – a popular and influential person. Finally, I meet the head of the Personnel Department I. Putniņa, who says she has heard many positive reviews about my work in China.

**24.08.1999** I am meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs I. Bērziņš and give a brief summary of what has already been accomplished in Beijing. I answer the Minister's questions on the tension in PRC-Taiwan relations and the possibility of a military conflict, on PRC-North Korea relations, PRC domestic political balance, PRC army leadership's relations with the government, etc.

The Minister confirms his intention to visit China.

I am meeting with representatives of the company "Kvadrapak", who are planning a business trip to China.

A meeting with Saeima deputy O. Denisov on the forthcoming visit of the delegation of Latvian parliamentarians to China follows.

**25.08.1999** At the Ministry of Economics I meet Ms L. Aizbalte, and we talk about the willingness of several companies, namely, "Zunda", "Dambis", the Ship Repair Plant and "Baltline" to start business negotiations with China.

At the Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Latvia I receive informative materials for sending to China.

**30.08.1999** Both of us, Galina and I have been invited to meet with the Ambassador of the PRC to the Republic of Latvia Yao Peisheng at the Embassy of the Republic of China. We have a valuable discussion on what has already been done in China and on different other bilateral issues.

**31.08.1999** I am meeting with J. Tiškins and G. Cēberis at the Ministry of Culture. We discuss the possibility of organizing exhibitions of graphic artist J. Petraškevičs, as well as of Latvian folk costumes in China.

At the MFA, L. Trēgere installs a new financial reporting program for us.

Over the weekend, together with my brother Aivars, my sons and grandchildren, we go to the cemetery to visit the gravesites of our ancestors – the Pildēgoviči family. This has already become a nice tradition for our family. **24**

**01.09.1999** I have a conversation with the next Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to the PRC Mr E. Semanis.

**06.09.1999** My vacation, which also has included solving many work related issues at the MFA and other institutions, is over. We are on our way back to China. Again our luggage is missing... This happens, especially on long flights.

I switch on the computer and wade my way through the emails, accounts and reports. I am trying to get acquainted with all the information and organize the priorities.

**07.09.1999** Our car has become so dusty from outside that I can barely see through its windows.

My first visit is to the MFA of the PRC, where I present the thank you letters to the Chinese colleagues from our Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

**08.09.1999** Tajikistan's National Day celebrations are organized at the International Club 国际俱乐部. The Ambassador of Tajikistan reports on the visit of President Rahmon to the PRC.

**10.09.1999** At the Mexican Embassy the atmosphere of the Mexican National Day celebrations is joyful and relaxed. Musicians are singing traditional songs accompanied by the sound of guitars, whistles and loud exclamations. The music is so vibrant and engaging that many participants want to hit the dance floor right away.

**11.09.1999** Together with my University friend and his family we are going on a trip to Tianjin 天津. There is one interesting episode in connection with Tianjin. When we met with our sports executive V. Baltiņš at the Embassy in Beijing, he informed us that the delegation of Latvian gymnasts had their accommodation in a "town near Beijing". Today, 15 million people live in that



“town”. It is one of the four cities directly subordinated to Beijing and is called the Beijing Sea Gate. Looking from the other side, for the people of South China and Central China Tianjin has always been the Gate of Beijing.

Tianjin’s location on the northern section of the Grand Canal has contributed to the city’s development. In Chinese history, Tianjin has entered as the place where the unfavorable for China Russian-Chinese treatise on Tianjin (1858), as well as the Treaty of Tianjin (1885) were signed.

Our intention to visit this city is more related to the desire to visit the nearest beach...

We get lost a bit, but then we find our way and arrive at a well-equipped beach area. Only the sea has disappeared. At low tide, the sea recedes several kilometers from the shore and the seabed is exposed, where locals search for mollusks. For us, being unfamiliar with this natural phenomenon, this is a surprise. However, there is an artificial bay with sea water and it looks perfect for swimming. On the other hand, when the tide comes in as far as the built-up concrete wall and the water level rises by several meters, it is better to listen to the advice of local people and be cautious. Fortunately, seafood is offered in abundance and the cottages are nice and cozy. We have a wonderful weekend rest.

**12.09.1999** We decide with my friend that on the way back we will visit the city of Tangshan 唐山, which on the night of July 28, 1976 at 3:42 was wiped off the face of the earth by an earthquake with a magnitude 8.2 on the Richter scale. The PRC government reported to the world that 250,000 people had died. However, according to other estimates, the death toll could have reached 650,000 or even 800,000 people.

Prior to this event, the inhabitants of the surrounding villages testified having observed strange behavior of the dogs – refusing food and loud barking. The animals, as sensitive seismographs, had been trying to warn of the imminent danger. The city was destroyed in 23 seconds. More than five million houses collapsed.

Nowadays, a memorial stele reminds of this terrible tragedy. Next to the stele is a sculptural group of a rescue worker with two children in his hands. The Information Center – Museum provides more details about the events of the tragic night. A moment of silence helps visitors to relive the night of July 28, 1976. Of course, on September 12, 1999, traces of the giant tragedy are no longer visible in Tangshan City. However, testimonies, pictures, and stories by witnesses abound. The Tangshan disaster has been used as the main line in the plot of the film “Earthquake” by director Feng Xiaogang. Back to Beijing



we take the Beijing-ShenYang freeway. It's a multi-lane road, so unfortunately, I have no time to look around at the scenery.

**13.09.1999** I am attending an event at the Polish Embassy where I have a longer conversation with the correspondent of "Rénmín Ribào". Then I exchange views with the ambassadors of Israel and Iceland.

I am doing some analytical work with the PRC and Hong Kong newspapers. Late at night I receive a phone call from Ms I. Putniņa. She asks me to write a justification for a personnel recruitment requirement according to which ambassadors to China need to have knowledge of Chinese, especially if they are ambassadors from the EU countries.

**14.09.1999** I stick to my routine and cycle to the Workers' Stadium nearby to do my morning exercises. Great is my surprise when I see that the stadium has already been filled with young people dressed in colorful costumes. The forthcoming event is called 民族运动会 Sports Festival of Nationalities. Judging from the national costumes, I conclude that most of the young people represent the minorities living in the provinces of Yunnan 云南, Guizhou 贵州, Guangxi 广西 and Gansu 甘肃. The basic idea of the event is that all nations living in China play sports. In some sports, such as martial arts or horseback riding, the strongest are the Mongols or the Kazakhs and Uighurs living in Xinjiang, for whom these sports are traditional. The stadium is crowded and the mood is festive, but I understand that I should postpone my morning drills till the next day.

After 12:00 I am on a train departing to Dezhou 德州 in Shandong Province where I am planning to attend a Fair. In ancient times, the bedrock of the Huanghe 黄河 River was located in the vicinity of Dezhou, and at that time this river was called Deshui 德水, which could mean the Blessed River. Consequently, there were other place names in this area that used the hieroglyph De 德, which has many meanings, such as – virtue; virtuous; favorable; benevolent and many others. Modern Dezhou can be noted for its peaceful rhythm of life, clean streets and order. The main goal of this fair is to attract investments. Together with the ambassadors of other countries, I am also honored to stand in the front row, just behind the podium with the microphone where key speakers are supposed to deliver their talks today. A "balloon gun" goes off, firing thousands of balloons from a mighty barrel. As befits a big holiday, the gongs join in. Their shrill sound is ear-splitting. The color red is everywhere. Official speeches follow. One of the speakers is an American gentleman of Indian descent who talks about the difficulties of entering the Chinese market. The concert in the evening is absolutely superb. We have an opportunity to enjoy the sounds of the Malaysian bamboo flute. Then

an opera singer, educated in Italy, delights the audience by his juicy bass. The female soprano is also very good.

**17.09.1999** The journey back to Beijing in a first-class car of a luxury double-decker train begins. We drive along the plain, and the view from the window on the second floor of the car is spectacular. The feeling is fantastic. I start talking to my travel companions in the compartment: the secretary of the Tanzanian Ambassador, a Chinese engineer from Maryland (USA) and his sister from Urumqi. Both of them have been visiting their mother in Jinan. This is an example of the dynamics of Chinese mobility in the world and in China today. I have not forgotten Mao times when Chinese people did not even have the right to leave their province. Maybe, however, it is not the time to linger in memories and get stuck in the past, because we live today and we will live tomorrow.

**21.09.1999** The celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC are already approaching. I am planning to dedicate an article to this event. It has already been a year since we arrived in China. I have talked in person to countless people, accumulated observations, and constantly followed the press releases of the PRC and of other countries on the PRC issues. Certainly, in 1999 we can already talk about the success of the reforms that are being carried out in the country. What are the signs that the country's economic growth has begun to take shape? What is behind the success of China's reforms? The world is actively debating these issues, and the pragmatism of China's leaders is coming to the fore. China's reforms are not focused on privatization of state-owned enterprises, but primarily on the development of private and, especially, small businesses. When thinking about the effectiveness of China's reforms, experts pay attention to the characteristics of the Chinese that allow them to successfully compete with Western partners.

The Chinese worldview is based on the attitude of the great teacher Confucius towards the supreme power, family values and personal behavior in society. Natural conditions, living and working traditions contributed to the development of such qualities as collectivism, cohesion, discipline and patience. The fight against natural disasters required joint action of thousands, even millions of people. The limited number of products and minerals, as well as the growing population is the reason for the nation's unimaginable austerity and pragmatism.

This working day has passed in an attempt to put on paper my reflections on China's accomplishments during a half of a century. It has definitely been an exciting, analysis-focused process.

**22.09.1999** An exhibition of Peruvian paintings is being hosted at the Kempinski Hotel: sunrise in the mighty mountains, exotic flowers, cacti and other

plants typical of the country. Peruvian musicians dressed in ponchos are playing traditional musical instruments – all kinds of pipes, flutes and guitars.

After a short rest, I have to go to the meeting of the PRC Political Advisory Committee. Among those present are President Jiang Zemin, Vice Premier Qian Qichen, Defense Minister Chi Haotian and many other senior leaders. These senior officials walk around the tables in a group and exchange a few words with the present diplomats – participants of the anniversary festivities. In connection with the anniversary, each ambassador receives a big gift package.

**23.09.1999** I continue working on the article dedicated to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC.

Farewells are said to the Cuban Ambassador at the Cuban Embassy. He has served as Dean of the Diplomatic Corps in the PRC for 11 years. I have a conversation with a young man who has studied in St Petersburg. He remembers with gratitude his teachers and appreciates the unique opportunity of being able to study in St. Petersburg.

**24.09.1999** Early in the morning I am at the airport to meet Galina, who has stayed in Latvia 18 days more. I have been struggling with all embassy work and mundane tasks all alone this time, and I must say that it has not been easy.

Galina's arrival coincides with the popular Mid-Autumn Festival 中秋节, which for the Chinese and other East Asian nations symbolizes the middle of the annual cycle and lags behind only the Spring Festival 春节 in terms of importance. The full moon symbolizes femininity and fertility. It is believed that the moon is the roundest and brightest on this day. This festivity is related to the legend of Hou Yi 后羿 and Chang E 嫦娥. Both spouses meet only once a year, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar. Although my wife and I have been separated for only 18 days, it is very pleasant to be together again on China's favorite holiday and to treat ourselves to the so-called "moon cookies" or "moon cakes" 月饼.

**27.09.1999** I meet with a Chinese student Xu Ning, who is studying at the Latvian Academy of Music; he is satisfied with the quality of the studies and the knowledge gained at the Academy of Music.

I send the article dedicated to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC to Riga.

**28.09.1999** We are both going to the airport to meet a delegation of Latvian journalists led by Ms M. Kosteņeckā. The group has a transfer flight to Dalian 大连. We have a short talk, and the journalists need to proceed to their plane.

**29.09.1999** At 11:30 am starts an event at the Embassy of Cyprus. Among the participants are many diplomats from southern European countries, as

well as Chinese officials. The talks are mainly about the Southern European region, as well as other issues.

We go to “Beijing Telecom” to pay for the Internet.

**30.09.1999** We receive invitations to the festive events dedicated to the National Day of China in the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC.

The celebratory banquet dedicated to the National Day of the PRC at the Great Hall of the People starts at 18:00. The number of the participants is 5,000. The honorary guests are the most senior officials of the PRC. Among the guests are the entire diplomatic corps, as well as the senior officials of state ministries. How can such a number of guests be seated and served in one hall? It turns out it is possible, and everyone invited feels welcome and appreciated. When leaving the banquet, we are surprised by the strong wind gusts and rain outside. Acacia and willow trees are swaying in the wind. A minibus has overturned on the slippery road soaked in rainwater. We are lucky to have our umbrellas in the car thus being saved from the heavy rain.

**01.10.1999** At 11:00 we are in the lodge of the diplomatic corps on Tiananmen (天安门) Square. We are watching the military parade: ground troop column ... sailors ... pilots ... paratroopers ... the latest model tanks. They demonstrate not less than 15 types of missiles, including the ballistic Dongfanghong-31 (东方红-31). Such a missile could reach Los Angeles. The demonstration of countless MIG-31 and SU-27 fighter jets lasts for a half an hour. There is even a tanker aircraft, meant for refueling fighter jets, hovering above the parade field. When the soldiers and military technique have left the square, it's time for the masses of working people to demonstrate their enthusiasm. As a student at Moscow University, on several occasions I had to take part in the festive demonstrations on the Red Square. What I see today in the main square of Beijing, reminds me of the atmosphere in the Red Square. It is difficult to deny that big countries have big ambitions. **25 26**

**04.10.1999** On the holidays, we have decided to go to Shandong Province and climb the sacred mountain of Taishan 泰山. We are guided by a wonderfully apt proverb dedicated to this mountain 登上泰山,一生平安 “If you have climbed Mount Taishan – you can be calm for a lifetime...”

After driving 540 km along quite decent roads, we settle in a small hotel at the foot of the mountain. It's a bit chilly in the room, but the hotel has provided really warm blankets, so we understand that we are not going to freeze at night. It is slightly drizzling outside. If our neighbors were really polite people, they could choose not to sing at late hours; however, they choose to sing.

**05.10.1999** We get up at 6:00. Then we have a quick breakfast and for 60 yuan buy tickets for the mountain climb. The foot of the mountain is covered in









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mist, white and dense as milk. The steps are solid, made to stand forever. Our spouses also agree to climb, and all four of us are moving upwards. After some forty minutes our ladies decide to give up this time. My colleague and I are stubborn and continue climbing. I'm happy that my breath is strong and I do not feel very tired. The climb takes us one hour and forty minutes. At the very top of the hill in the tents live workers who are occupied with making the stone steps and building a gazebo from timber. We have hoped very much that the fog would recede, but in vain. The very top of the mountain is surrounded by white clouds of fog. That's all we can see. And, yes, of course we see the monastery Heaven's Gate 天门. Most monks are wearing green army overcoats, as it is freezing at the top of the mountain. We understand that we will not see the spectacular view from the mountain top this time. The Chinese travellers who have climbed to the top together with us say that this is nothing unusual. Well, just our luck. Going down the wide, solid steps feels like a light walk now. We continue our trip, and in the evening of the same day we are already in Qingdao 青岛. 27

**06.10.1999** Qingdao is a city in the eastern part of Shandong Province 山东省, on the shores of the Yellow Sea 黄海. Today it is an important port, naval base and industrial center. From 1897 to 1922, Qingdao was under German rule, and it is the Chinese city with the strongest German influence. Every Chinese person knows that one of the most popular beers in China is "Qingdao Beer"

青岛啤酒. The first European brewery in this city was built by the Germans. The red tiled roofs of coastal mansions are also German heritage. The Germans drew up a city plan for Qingdao, and the city still retains the features of that plan. All of this is true, and yet today, this city with its gorgeous flower beds, sycamore trees, decorative plants, clean streets and stately skyscrapers reminds me rather of Singapore, where I spent a whole year at Nanyang University. That being said, I dare to argue that the appeal of modern Qingdao is the result of the hard work of the Chinese themselves. Once in the city, we search for the beach for a while, and finally we find it. In the distance one can see the ocean ships and islands. The air feels salty as it should be by the ocean. There are sopkas (hills formed from former volcanoes) here just like in the Far East of Russia. Here and there at the top of the hill one can see a miniature Chinese gazebo, in perfect harmony with the surrounding scenery and geographical relief. We jump into the salty ocean waters. Then we feast on sea mussels and crabs while drinking the light “Qingdao Beer”. We look at the vast expanse of the ocean and listen to the pounding surf. This is what we miss in Beijing. We go for a walk on the beach and see crowds of local people also walking and having good time. People are dressed differently, but with taste and are kind and welcoming. It starts getting dark on the beach, and we retire to our hotel.

**07.10.1999** We start our long way back – Qingdao ... Jinan ... Dezhou ... Beijing 青岛 ... 济南 ... 德州 ... 北京. On the roofs of peasant houses, arranged on tree branches, or just lined up in front of a village house, corn dries. Farmers are busily preparing the ground for the new planting season. Others are taking care of vegetable beds. We stop on a long, newly built bridge. Beneath us, the Yellow River 黄河 is flowing swiftly over the rocks. The shade of the water fully justifies the river's name. We have read a lot about the real might of the river and now we can see it with our own eyes. We are already in Tianjin 天津. To our great disappointment instead of a freeway we need to take a narrow road where the traffic is slow and congested. Soon it gets dark, and driving is a challenge. Yet at 19:30 we successfully reach the embassy – our sweet home.

**08.10.1999** I send letters of reply to M. Riekstiņš, V. Baltiņš, L. Aizbalte, I. Putniņa, I. Stengrevica.

Galina is working all day compiling the financial report on the first three-quarters of the year. **28 29**

**09.10.1999** It's Saturday morning. We have a little morning walk and then back to work. We enter the three-quarter financial report into the computer program. Mr V. Baltiņš invites us to a joint lunch.



28 29



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**10.10.1999** After the relatively long and tiring trip to Shandong Province, we do not want to go anywhere far today. Instead, we decide to enjoy the charm of the ancient Beijing. We go in the direction of the center of the city and end up in one of the oldest parks in Beijing – Shichahai 什刹海. This park includes three lakes – Qianhai 前海, Houhai 后海 and Xihai 西海. Although the city with its traffic jams, industries and noise is close by, here you can enter a realm of peace and natural beauty. Mirrors of the lakes, beautifully designed embankments, pedestrians and fishermen, willow trees, calm and silence – all these components provide a special charm to the place and help everyone to

attain the necessary mental and spiritual balance. Galina takes many pictures. They will be a great complement to our story about China. Finally, we get into the car and drive back to the embassy. **30**

**11.10.1999** We have sent the financial report on the first three-quarters of the year to the MFA of the Republic of Latvia.

The PRC Friendship Society is hosting an event to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of immigration of the Chinese into Peru. I am trying to find some conversation partners who could tell me more about this historical fact. However, I am not lucky in that sense. Even though the Latin American Chinese I talk to at the reception have preserved their Chinese language, yet they prefer to speak Spanish.

In the evening – a reception at the Nigerian Embassy. I meet the Rwandan Ambassador and some Chinese colleagues. One of them even pays an unusual compliment to me: “A woman has taught you Chinese...” This man is right. At university, all my Chinese conversation teachers were Chinese ladies.

**12.10.1999** At the Spanish National Day event, I meet the new Estonian Consul, Ms M. Kurbel.

I have a telephone conversation with the Ambassador of the PRC to Latvia – Yao Peisheng.

**15.10.1999** The news arrives from the MFA of the Republic of Latvia – in the spring I am being withdrawn to the disposal of MFA.

I attend an event at the Belarusian Embassy.

**17.10.1999** We enjoy our Sunday in the Botanical Garden 植物园, located in the Xishan 西山 Mountains, between Xiangshan 香山 Park and Yu Quan Shan 玉泉山 Mountain. The Botanical Garden features about 6,000 plant species, 500 different flowers and 1,900 fruit trees. The most popular objects in the Botanical Garden:

- Evergreen plants and palm trees
- Tropical water plants
- Cocoa and coffee trees
- Peony garden
- Chrysanthemums with sweet leaves, and other plants.

We walk around, and time flows by. It turns out we have spent the whole day in this splendid garden. Other diplomats, as we notice, are enjoying this place as well.



**18.10.1999** A confirmation letter arrives from the MFA regarding my withdrawal to Riga after the new ambassador has taken over the responsibilities from me.

Exactly eight years ago, on October 17, 1991 I started my job at the MFA.

**19.10.1999** I am attending a meeting at the Chamber of Commerce of the PRC.

**21.10.1999** There is a meeting of the ambassadors of the EU and Associated Countries at the Embassy of Finland.

The National People's Congress (PRC Parliament) has a discussion on the visit of Latvian parliamentarians to the PRC.

**22.10.1999** I am writing a report on the meeting of the ambassadors of the EU and Associated Countries at the Finnish Embassy.

In the afternoon, I attend Kazakhstan National Day celebrations. Kazakh women are wearing their national costumes. There is plenty of food, which is tasty and even quite exotic. A lamb is being roasted in the embassy courtyard. I know the Ambassador of Kazakhstan quite well. He has given me as a present a few good books on the history of Kazakhstan.

**23.10.1999** Together with our friends, we drive to a semi-wild, semi-abandoned park in Shijingshan Gongyuan 石景山公园. On the other side of the park, we find a kind of a waterpark. We get on a round float and rush down a waterfall. A bit of unusual kind of entertainment for us, but it is fun.

**24.10.1999** Just like last year, we are invited to the Russian Embassy. The event has a neutral name – “Царская рыбалка” (Royal fishing). Russia celebrates Reconciliation Day. The intention of the holiday is to reconcile the Russian society divided since the October Revolution, as it was called in the past, or the October Coup, as it is called today. Among the guests are all the ambassadors of the CIS and also of the Baltic states. It has been eight years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The former united republics are slowly adapting to the new conditions. The Baltic states have a different vision for the future. Typically, none of the participants of the festival, including representatives of Russia, try to patronize and teach us how to live. The carp, just caught from the embassy ponds, is really tasty. The atmosphere of the conversations is calm and relaxed. **31**

**25.10.1999** Member of Parliament O. Denisov calls to tell us that there will be no charter flight. Instead, the Latvian delegation is travelling on a regular flight.





At the embassy, some workmen are putting up blinds, which, hopefully, will save us from the unbearably hot Beijing sun.

**26.10.1999** Ambassador Z. Goralchik bids farewell to the Polish Embassy. He is an experienced sinologist who is fluent in Chinese and has been studying China for decades. He is an interesting conversation partner and has a genuine Polish character and sense of humor.

**27.10.1999** There have been endless changes when it comes to the joint visit of Latvian entrepreneurs and parliamentarians to China. Multiple rescheduling of the visit, inclusion of the parliamentarians in the delegation, difficulties in purchasing airline tickets – all this has influenced the attitude of the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Latvia – Yao Peisheng.

**28.10.1999** The representative of the PRC Foreign Trade Promotion Committee informs us that the meeting of Chinese entrepreneurs with Latvian colleagues has been canceled. Such a turn of events has angered the Ambassador of the PRC to Latvia – Yao Peisheng, who has persistently supported the visit and has done a great job in organizing it. I am writing a report to L. Aizbalte and O. Denisov and asking to halt the visit in these circumstances.

**29.10.1999** Once again, the PRC's Foreign Trade Promotion Committee is noting its dissatisfaction with the inclusion of parliamentarians in the business delegation.

L. Aizbalte reports that the visit of entrepreneurs has been postponed to November 22.

**30.10.1999** All this turmoil around the visit has required a lot of strength, and at the weekend I have only a desire to focus on playing tennis and taking a walk in the fresh air. Fortunately, my beloved spouse Galina is always by my side and knows how to find the right words even in seemingly deadlock situations.

**01.11.1999** I am invited to lunch at the Swedish Embassy. Lars Freden is an adviser to the Swedish Embassy, a sinologist by education and has known China for a long time. Here is his monologue.

“If you were Chinese, what would you be proud of? What has China given to the world in recent decades, given China’s 5,000-year history? What is China’s vision for the future? China today is not a country where democracy is developing. Jiang Zemin is well received in England, France, Portugal, Morocco and Algeria. In Europe, someone may shyly whisper a word about human rights in China, but that’s it. At the same time, Falun Gong adherents are sent to labor camps. My view is that there will never be a European model of democracy in China...” I would like to add that Mr Freden wanted to express only his own views, without even trying to move on to an exchange of perspectives. Personally, I do not rule out the possibility that China does not aim to establish a European model of democracy. China has been making its own way towards success all along, imitating no one, but focusing purposefully on the needs of its 1.3 billion million people. Yes, and I’ll never forget that peasant wearing a modest military style coat who said, 目前- 吃的, 穿的- 不成问题. In translation it means something like “food and clothes for everyone – not a problem now”. It was approximately ten years after reforms had begun in China. The small businesses were flourishing and helping to satisfy the basic needs of the people. Let the Chinese market speak for itself about the offer that applies to every member of the society. **32 33 34**

**02.11.1999** The bank computer has a problem. We are patiently waiting for our turn.

E. Semanis calls to inform about the estimated time of his accreditation in China.

**03.11.1999** We collect the framed Latvian photos from the workshop. It’s a nice touch to the interior to remind visitors that we are from Latvia.

We dine in a small canteen in the western region of China, where one of the main dishes is lamb with onions, as well as a soup with small dumplings. Everything is delicious.



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**04.11.1999** We buy a metal ladder for the needs of the embassy. Taxi drivers refuse to take our purchase – the stairs are long and can be placed on the car roof only with great difficulty. What to do? We both carry the ladder to the embassy on foot, and it's not complicated at all.

Ms L. Aizbalte sends us official information about the participants of the group that is coming to China.

Galina together with Ms Voveriene, the spouse of the Lithuanian ambassador, is attending Canadian auction.

**07.11.1999** We dedicate this Sunday to the already familiar Lilac Bamboo Park 紫竹院公园. One could say that we have become fans of this park. Today the wind is very strong. The willow tree branches are moving in the breeze. The day is bright and sunlit.

**09.11.1999** The Committee of the Foreign Trade Promotion of the PRC says it straight: “O. Denisov, a member of Latvian Parliament, cannot be the head of the delegation or a member of the delegation.”

Latin characters are mixed with hieroglyphs on the embassy computer. The computer has gotten hung up again. We call the technician. This is frustrating.

The German Embassy briefs on Mr Schroeder's visit to the PRC from 2 to 5 November this year. I immediately brief the MFA of Latvia.

On this day, our second granddaughter is born. It's a bright and happy event. Galina writes to her sister in Vladivostok.

**11.11.1999** I am attending an event at the Polish Embassy. There are many people and also lots of routine. I cannot feel any fresh ideas in the air this time. We hang up the framed art photos on the embassy walls. In one of the pictures – white fluffy clouds over the lake. It looks almost like Baltezers Lake, where our home is. Imants Ziedonis, the great Latvian poet, has said that in Latvia we have the most beautiful clouds in the world. Being so far away from our homeland, we sometimes have felt like a tiny drop in the ocean. The small exposition of the photographs with traditional Latvian landscapes helps us to pull ourselves together and to feel the sense of belonging to Latvia.

**12.11.1999** The computer technician is struggling with our computer and finally takes it with him to the workshop.

We attend a concert in the evening, the first part of which could be described as very “loud” and multinational: an Afro-American drummer, a Latino guitar player and a Chinese lady – vocals. Another Chinese girl is playing “pipa” 琵琶 – a traditional Chinese string instrument. In the second part we enjoy

a Lithuanian jazz concert. Saxophonist Labutis together with other professional Lithuanian jazz performers is just perfect.

**14.11.1999** On Sunday afternoon we drive to the park Liuyin Gongyuan 柳荫公园. The park is located just north of the Second Circle 二环路 Street, which repeats the trajectory of the former city rampart. The name of the park Willow Shadow Park includes the name of the tree which is the most common in this park, namely the willow. Actually weeping willow branches above the water surface of a pond or a stream is a common sight in almost every Chinese park. The branches blowing in the wind symbolize leaving someone or departing. They are used as imagery in many poems. In this park the willow tree twigs moving in the slight breeze seem especially graceful. Galina is acknowledged as the best photographer in our family, and the pictures she makes in the park will really complement our story. Perhaps it is in this park that we begin to feel more tangibly that the Beijing phase of our lives would be over after a while. And again both of us will be on the road. Well, each of the parks is not just unique in their own way, but also arouses special feelings and memories connected with moments in our life. **35 36**

**15.11.1999** The Foreign Trade Promotion Committee of the PRC addresses me with eight questions, which I immediately send to Riga.

A Ukrainian artist comes to our embassy, tells about his endless failures and asks for material support. I lend 200 yuan to this person from our own resources. You never know how life might treat you...

**16.11.1999** I am attending an event organized by the Kingdom of Belgium. All Beijing's Diplomatic Corps have been invited. A special treat are the pancakes which are being baked right in front of our eyes. We can choose the filling ourselves – cream, crushed chocolate, and something that tastes like currant jam... a bit unusual, but very tasty.

**17.11.1999** There is an important incoming document today: the Chargé d'Affaires of the embassy P. Pildegovičs is being recalled from the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. Finally, our future is clear. Incidentally, there is something else going on at the MFA, as far as I know – they are discussing sending Pildegovičs junior – our son Andrejs – to the PRC. It turns out that already the second generation of the Pildegovičs family will be working in China.

**18.11.1999** The holiday of 18 November has arrived and we have our days off. We have decided to go to Hohhot 呼和浩特, the capital of Inner Mongolia. The excellent road winds among the sloping hills of Inner Mongolia and a wide view opens in front of us. On a hill on the roadside we see a half-ruined watchtower. If it could speak, it certainly would tell stories about the endless





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clashes and wars of the belligerent nomadic tribes with the Han. The stories would tell about the heyday and power of the nomadic statehood, as well as its decline. Occasionally, we see villages on the roadside where farmers dwell under one roof with their livestock. The land is mainly cultivated. In some places, we see terraced land patches for agricultural use. In some places, rain-fall has washed away the riverbeds and erosion has ruthlessly crumbled and damaged the terraces built by hard work. There is an endless stream of heavy trucks loaded with coal on the highway. It is written on the sides of the cargo box – do not carry more than 40 tons. If it happens that a column of coal trucks has formed, then there is no option but to stay in the column and drive slowly because it is impossible to overtake. There are numerous coalmines in the area. The road is not very wide, but its quality is excellent. The area seems to be less populated. We both agree that we feel much more relaxed here than in Central China. In the evening, around 18:00, we are already in Hohhot. The first hotel we try to settle in turns out to be an army hotel. No wonder the military look perplexed – what are civilians, moreover, foreigners looking for in an army hotel. We correct our mistake quickly and settle for the night's sleep in one of the tourist hotels. This has been a fantastic day. We have traveled more than 500 km and literally have travelled to a different part of the world – Mongolia colonized by Chinese (the Han). **37 38 39 40**

**19.11.1999** It has been freezing at night in Hohhot  $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$ . We have had a great rest and want to explore Hohhot. One of the city's most popular sites is Wang Zhaojun's Tomb 王昭君墓.

Wang Zhaojun is one of the most famous women in Chinese history, born in 52 AD during the Han 汉 Dynasty. She was an unusually beautiful



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young woman who belonged to the emperor's court. The Hun king came to the emperor and asked for a wife. Such a marriage arrangement in those days was called "Heqin" 和亲 – a way to avoid war between states. The King of Huns chose Wang Zhaojun. When the emperor saw her beauty, he bitterly regretted that he had agreed to give away Wang Zhaojun as a wife to the Hun king. It is said that on the way to the land of the Huns, the wild geese saw the beauty of Wang Zhaojun, forgot that they had to fly and... Fell to the ground. This is certainly a poetic and moving tale. Wang Zhaojun's Tomb is a flat mound. The November day is bright and sunny. Galina and me climb to the top of the mound and try to imagine the beautiful Wang Zhaojun and her harsh destiny. Unlike in the times of the legend, 2,000 years ago, Hohhot area now is surrounded not only by steppes, but also by agricultural land cultivated by the Hun. In the streets of the capital of Inner Mongolia I hear only the Chinese language. When I ask one man where the Mongols are, he answers with a question, "Do you see the mountains in the distance?" I say, "Yes!" The man explains, "Behind the mountains, Mongols raise their herds of cattle, moving from one pasture to another, and that is where you can hear the Mongol language..." At the top of the mound we have another conversation. An elderly man is walking alone, enjoying the warmth of the November sun. I start up a conversation. The old man says, "Yes, we eat much better these days, and we dress much better. However, we used to be much closer to each other in bygone days..." Well, people in my country sometimes come to the same revelation as well.

We find the way to the great monument of Mongol architecture Wutasi 五塔寺. The temple was built in 1732 and houses more than 1,500 Buddha figures. The exterior of the temple is impressive – strict, elegant lines; outstanding architectural composition. It has been worth travelling hundreds of kilometers to see this masterpiece. We need a good rest tonight. Tomorrow we are going back – to our home, the embassy.

**20.11.1999** We enjoy driving home along the excellent highway. After an hour we stop to have a rest at the top of the hillock. The sun is shining. A police car pulls up. We hear a kind question, "Do you need help?" We respond kindly too, "Thank you! We're just having a pit stop. It takes 11 hours to travel home. We arrive at the embassy quite tired, but happy. I give a pat to our reliable travel companion – "Lada" car. We have made it – we have seen Inner Mongolia!

**22.11.1999** Together with the Ambassador of Lithuania D. Voveris and Chargé d'Affaires of Estonia A. Birov, we celebrate the holiday of November 18 – Latvian Independence Day. I am glad that we, three Baltic diplomats, have managed to maintain good, collegial relations. We have a photo taken



together. Most probably it will be some other people of Latvia who will be celebrating Latvia's Independence Day here next year. We give a present to both our colleagues – a wonderful book “Let's Save in Silver”.

There is a wonderful piano player's A.Skanavi waltz music concert at the Russian Embassy. The day is very busy and emotional. Beijing is again shrouded in a dense cloud of fog.

**23.11.1999** We are extending our visas at the Protocol Department of the MFA.

Then we go to the airport to meet the delegation of Latvian entrepreneurs consisting of 34 members. We review our negotiation agenda for tomorrow. The delegation is accommodated in a hotel in the center of Beijing.

**24.11.1999** Negotiations between the Chinese and Latvian entrepreneurs are taking place at the PRC Chamber of Commerce. All Latvian delegation is involved in the talks. We present printed material on business opportunities in Latvia to our Chinese colleagues.

**25.11.1999** We inform the Latvian delegation about the Chinese side's interest in meeting with Latvian food producers.

Together with Galina we enter the data on our expenses into the computer. Tomorrow, together with the delegation, I am going to Shanghai and then to Fuzhou.

**26.11.1999** I am up at 5:30 and leave for the airport. After a flight which lasts an hour and a half, we are already in Shanghai. This is my third visit to Shanghai with many years in between. I'm trying to detect any changes. In 1988–1989 I had my internship at Fudan University. Shanghai, with its winding streets, smelly canals, quite spacious, but not very clean quarters of single-storied buildings, without a subway or a bridge across the Huangpu 黄浦 River, seemed then to justify the idiomatic meaning (*at least in Latvian and Russian – translator's note*) of the phrase, – makeshift dwellings, gigantic chaos... Now Shanghai looks kind of more compressed and, definitely, taller; also faster, noisier and definitely more dynamic than Beijing.

**27.11.1999** We go on a tour to Shanghai's 468 m high TV tower “Pearl of the East” 东方明珠. The transparent floor of the tower's viewing platform makes some visitors to the tower quite hesitant. Through the haze I recognize the outlines of the familiar Shanghai sites. Pudong 浦东 banking and office district, which locals compare to Manhattan in New York, stands out especially. Another landmark that has a unique place in the history of the city is the main promenade on the banks of the River Waitan 外滩 Huangpu 黄浦. Shanghai was one of the most important industrial and trading towns

in Asia already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is evidenced by the skyscrapers from the 1930s, which embody the very atmosphere of that era. I am surprised by flower arrangements decorating the two-level street overpasses. At the intersections of the main streets one can see even five-storied overpasses with busy traffic moving in all directions. Everything is perfectly clean and tidy. It is raining heavily on the first day of our visit to Shanghai. In the evening we watch a wonderful Chinese circus performance.

**28.11.1999** A unique feature of Shanghai is the sound of the night watch bell, which reminds everyone to safeguard themselves against odd fires. The man who collects old cloths, pulp and empty bottles also rings a bell. Amazingly, this habit is still alive in one of the most modern cities in the world. As for the architecture, the buildings have a tendency to become taller and taller, apartment blocks not being an exception.

After an hour's flight we are in Fuzhou 福州, the administrative center of Fujian province 福建省. This coastal province is famous for the great number of emigrants to other countries. It is a historical fact that Marco Polo has visited this town. Another well-known traveler, a Chinese seafarer Zheng He 郑和, set off on seven expeditions to the Indian Ocean from Fuzhou.

Driving from the airport to the city, we see green palm trees and harvested rice fields. Remains of bonfires indicate that farmers have been burning stalks of corn. In the suburbs two- and three-storied cottages prevail. Soon we reach the seacoast. It is low tide, and the water has receded leaving small fishing boats on the wet sand. The people of Fuzhou greet in a Buddhist manner – with hands together in a prayer-like gesture. It is warm and I can wear the suit without an overcoat. At around 9:00 the negotiations of Latvian entrepreneurs and their Chinese colleagues begin. The active exchange of ideas goes on for about two hours, which allows each participant to introduce their offer to those present.

Next is a tour of Fuzhou Pagodas and temples. We start with Baitasi 白塔寺, then comes Xichansi 西禅寺 with a 15-storied pagoda, and finally – Gushan Yongquan 鼓山湧泉. As elsewhere in China, gazebos and bridges can be found everywhere, built with ingenuity and yet according to the traditional style. Both the style of the buildings and the conversations with the people of Fuzhou reveal that the city today still has a strong Buddhist tradition. In one of the temples, I start a conversation with an elderly monk. As a sign of appreciation, the honorable man gives me a present – a fruit of the “iron tree” 铁树. As the monk explains, it blooms once in 50–60 years. I have never heard about such a tree, but the gift is a pleasant surprise.



**01.12.1999** Again we are on the plane and soon land in Beijing. The sun is hiding behind the pale shroud of smog. However, the air feels fresh. We are getting ready to receive the delegation of the Latvian entrepreneurs at the embassy. For treats we buy some sweets at a Syrian store and a few bottles of wine. The entire delegation of 34 people arrives at 20:00. Our usually quiet premises are buzzing with conversations and laughter of our guests. We have a “family photo” taken in the hall next to the national flag. Heartfelt speeches and wishes are being exchanged until we all end up joining in merry songs. When the guests board the bus, we part with a song. Its lyrics “...here I am in Latvia, on the banks of my sweet River Gauja...” seem to make Latvians feel at home in any corner of the world, no matter how far their homeland is. We are glad that everyone feels invigorated and inspired. As always – all preparation work for the visit has been successfully completed by the team of just two people – my dearest wife Galina and me. **41 42**

**02.12.1999** The computer keeps getting hung up. I contact “China Net”. Just in the evening, the computer restarts, and I can open some 18 documents and start reviewing them.

**03.12.1999** The Ambassador of Kazakhstan reports on the visit of President N. Nazarbayev to the PRC. Next, the ambassadors of Russia and Kyrgyzstan report on the PRC’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). The information is interesting and valuable.

**06.12.1999** I am writing an article on the visit of a delegation of Latvian businessmen to the PRC and preparing an analysis of the PRC’s accession to the WTO. Then I send both documents to the MFA.

I write letters of gratitude to the Chamber of Commerce of the PRC, as well as to Ms L. Aizbalte. We receive several letters of thanks from the members of the Latvian entrepreneur delegation.

Galina is preparing congratulatory letters to the embassies of Beijing’s Diplomatic Corps.

The Deputy State Secretary for Administrative Affairs J. Kārklīņš has sent me the new list of staff of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. It is planned that the Ambassador and a Counselor will work at the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC.

**09.12.1999** It’s the celebration of the Emperor’s birthday at the residence of the Ambassador of Japan. The event is very well attended. In fact, it seems that I’ve never been yet to such a crowded reception. Frankly, we are happy when we get outside. There are limits to everything.



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**10.12.1999** At the Western station 西站 we buy a train ticket to Hong Kong. We also pay for communications today – telephone, fax, mobile phone bills.

**11.12.1999** It is time for our Saturday morning walk. The pond is covered with a thin, shiny layer of ice. The day looks bright, sunny and joyful.

**12.12.1999** The train starts its journey to Hong Kong 香港. We have decided that Galina would stay at the embassy and I will be travelling to Hong Kong alone. I have chosen travelling by train this time to be able to look at

the surroundings. As far as I can see, stretches a great plain with green rice fields. We quickly pass by Shijiazhuang 石家庄, the administrative center of Hebei 河北省 Province; then – Zhengzhou 郑州, the administrative center of Henan 河南省 Province. I would like to see the Yangtze River, which the Chinese more often call Changjiang 长江. We arrive at Wuhan 武汉, the administrative center of Hubei 湖北省 Province when it's already pitch dark. The train is pulling over the bridge over the Yangtze. The dark waters of the river are below, but it is impossible to see and feel its majesty.

**13.12.1999** It starts to dawn. I look out of the window and see hills, rivers, streams, also well maintained vegetable beds, sheds and nice small cottages. We have a longer stop at Guangzhou 广州, the administrative center of Guangdong 广东省 Province. Then the train starts moving again and we keep winding for almost two hours among the hills and tunnels of Jiulong 九龍 (also called Kowloon). At the destination, I go through minor formalities and take a taxi to the Eaton Hotel. I check in, but at one moment I feel strange discomfort. Suddenly I realize that I am dressed too warm and try to find some lighter clothes in my suitcase. I am not in the mood yet for a tour around Hong Kong probably because I feel too tired after the long journey. I buy a couple of small milk bottles and cookies and turn in.

**14.12.1999** We had been thinking about making a trip to Hong Kong for some time. Yet the workload at the embassy kept growing, while the staff complement remained the same – just two of us. It happened more and more often that we had to work at the expense of the holidays to represent our country properly. The end of the year was already approaching. Well, then when if not now? So, we decided that this was the right time to realize the plan. What is more, it really intrigued me – where does the attractiveness of this small bit of land lie and why do people try not to miss the opportunity to visit Hong Kong when visiting China.

Modern Hong Kong is a special administrative district of the PRC 特别行政区. Hong Kong is one of the world's major ports as well as one of the leading Asian and global financial centers and is the place where Eastern and European cultures blend.

Hong Kong is often referred to as the Pearl of the East 东方之珠, sometimes – as “Asian New York” 亚洲纽约. Hong Kong cannot really be called a Chinese city, considering at least the fact all people in Hong Kong speak English. Ironically, despite the city's colonial history, its inhabitants have not become British, yet they are no longer Chinese.

Hong Kong is not on the list of the largest cities in the world, or even in China. The area of 1,100 square km is home to about seven million people. However,

this place has other unique characteristics. Thus, National Geographic magazine calls Hong Kong “the third largest financial center in the world and the eleventh largest industrial zone”. Hong Kong is famous for its gold and currency markets, its film industry and other indicators. The port of Hong Kong is the world’s third largest port, receiving more than 7,000 ships a year from around the world.

Hong Kong earns and spends with inexplicable gluttony – nowhere else in the world you will ever see so many Rolls Royce cars driving on the crowded streets.

Another record of Hong Kong is the fact that it is the world’s most populous city, with an average population of 54,000 per 1 square km. There are also slums in Hong Kong, known as ‘danga’, where people live in junks and boats.

The majority of Hong Kong’s population come from Guangdong Province (95%) and speaks the Guangdong dialect, also known as the Cantonese dialect 广东话. Two languages are officially used: the Guangdong dialect and English. Until recently, the people of Hong Kong were reluctant to speak “putonghua” (普通话), the official language of the PRC. Times are slowly changing, and nowadays Hong Kong people can also switch to the official language of the PRC. In addition, Hong Kong has been inhabited by immigrants from India, Pakistan and Nepal since the times of the British rule. In recent decades, there have also been plenty of immigrants from the United States, Japan and Europe, making Hong Kong a truly international city.

### **The most important event in the modern history of Hong Kong**

In 1985, the Governments of the United Kingdom and the PRC signed a joint declaration, according to which the 99-year lease of the territory by the United Kingdom expired on 1 July 1997 and Hong Kong transferred under the jurisdiction of the PRC. In this way, Hong Kong became a special administrative district of the PRC 特别行政区. Deng Xiaoping’s 邓小平 “One State – Two Systems” 一国两制 formula was put forward as the theoretical basis for reunification. The document stated that the PRC government takes responsibility for Hong Kong’s foreign affairs and defense for 50 years. Hong Kong retains the right to control the monetary system, customs policy, legislation, police forces and immigration policy.

I start the next day with the hotel coffee and some cookies. Then I find out the address of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. I walk out of the hotel, and immediately I am overwhelmed by Hong Kong’s special atmosphere – skyscrapers; the distinctive flavor of seafood – dried, fried, boiled and cooked in other ingenious ways, the traditional full-text hieroglyphs flickering in

the bright array of advertisements; the sounds of the Guangdong, or Cantonese dialect, not that often heard in the capital; the fast left-hand traffic, the busy people – craftsmen, salesmen, janitors, drivers and bankers. Everything is for real, and everything is happening very fast. One can literally feel the pressure upon every member of the society here. After a while, I need a break and return to my hotel Nathan Road 彌敦道.

**15.12.1999** Now my road leads to Hong Kong Municipality. It's a long journey through a tunnel under the sea – to the island of Hong Kong. The island stands out with its steep mountains and brightly washed skyscraper peaks. The salty smell of the breeze in my nostrils reminds of the proximity of the sea and its eternal, inexplicable attraction. In the municipality, they explain to me that a note must be submitted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC in Beijing, requesting permission to look for an Honorary Consul in Hong Kong. My visit to Hong Kong is in a sense a reconnaissance visit. Now the Hong Kong municipality will know that Latvia has its own embassy in the PRC. The next visit is to the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce. The response is positive: "If a delegation from Latvia arrives in Hong Kong, bilateral meetings will be organized."

**16.12.1999** Today I am going to the Chinese Chamber, where I receive a warm welcome. I tell my story about Latvia and we discuss possible cooperation. The next destination is Federation of Hong Kong Industries. I get a feeling that people in Hong Kong really know how to communicate and how to get involved in joint projects.

At 18:30 at the hotel "Furama" there is a solemn event in connection with the inauguration of the Honorary Consul of Lithuania. National consuls of EU countries, Vietnam, Russia, etc. are participating. The Honorary Consul of Lithuania is a Hong Kongese of Indian origin, who has invited to the celebration several dozens of his close relatives. Our neighboring country Lithuania is entering an active phase of expanding their diplomatic activities to Hong Kong.

**17.12.1999** Dark, torn clouds are gathering over Hong Kong, from time to time bringing occasional rain showers. Today I am travelling to nearby Macau, which is called [ōu.mǔ:n] in Cantonese Chinese, but my trip starts with a flashback of Tiananmen Square (天安门) in Beijing.

*A short commentary. Throughout 1999, an electronic screen in the Tiananmen Square was doing countdown of the days left until the PRC takes over Macau (澳门) in its jurisdiction. The PRC's press and other media did not spare their efforts bringing to the public the message that on 20 December 1999 Portugal would be*



*handing over its former colony of Macau to the jurisdiction of the PRC. Now there are just a few days left until the historic event.*

*I have decided that such opportunity cannot be wasted, and I am already on my way to Macao – on a small passenger boat, which is rocking on the ocean waves. After a short journey, I step ashore, and the first thing I see is a seedy building of a shopping mall. I decide to walk on foot and soon reach Pujing 葡京, or “Portuguese Center”. Senadi Square is known for its gorgeous wave patterned mosaic tiling, reflecting Portuguese colonial influence. Another famous historical site and tourist attraction in Macau is the ruins of St Paul’s Cathedral. In fact, after the typhoon and fire of 1835, only the facade of the Cathedral has survived. It is decorated with elements and reliefs typical both of Europe and China and is recognized as an architectural object where the traditions of Western and Eastern cultures merge. St. Paul’s Cathedral was built in 1580 and included in its ensemble St. Paul’s College and St. Paul’s Church. At that time it was the largest Christian church in East Asia. I take a leisurely walk through the center of Macau and suddenly come to an elegant mansion area. The Portuguese really knew how to bring not only their churches and their distinctive architectural features into this corner of Chinese land, but also the tradition of constructing mansions in their own – Portuguese – style. I walk into a Portuguese bookshop. The saleswoman, who is Chinese, speaks fluent Portuguese. A grand size book about Portuguese seafarers and their discoveries catches my eye. The Portuguese definitely have something to say about seafarers and discoverers. Finally, I don’t really expect to, but I manage to get inside the municipality of Macau. The door is wide open, and I can walk around and admire the portraits of all the governors who have ruled in this land in the course of 440 years. Yet there is some tension in the air. After two days Macau is transferring to the jurisdiction of China. It is a historical moment. I am happy that I’ve decided to use this rainy day in Hong Kong to visit Macau. I wave farewell to the brightly lit casino “Lisboa”, and soon my boat is already approaching the coast of Hong Kong.*

**For reference:** Macao territory – 27.2 square km

*Population – 597 thousand people*

*Every year, around 25 million people visit Macau, mainly tourists who are happy to get rid of their extra money in many Macau casinos, as well as to visit the horse race course or the kanidrome, where dog races take place.*

**18.12.1999** Today I am meeting Latvian expats in Hong Kong – A. Brīviņš, M. Martinsons and J. Latvelis. Our compatriots have thorough knowledge of Hong Kong and can tell a lot of interesting things about this land, which is neither East nor West, yet at the same time, bears features of both great cultures.

**19.12.1999** In the morning I get up early and depart for Chilajiao 赤臘角 Airport, which is more known in the Guangdong dialect as Chek Lap Kok Airport. The road to the airport winds across the modern Hong Kong bridges, and through the tunnels beneath the mountains. Today, I am flying to Hangzhou 杭州, the administrative center of Zhejiang Province 浙江省省会. How dry and official the modern name of this city sounds! Firstly, every Chinese person and secondly, every Sinologist knows by heart the saying – “Paradise is in Heaven, but Suzhou and Hangzhou – on the Earth.” 上有天堂, 下有苏杭. I have hoped to get a little insight into Hangzhou, maybe even go for a stroll on the shores of Lake Xihu 西湖. However, my time in Hangzhou is so limited that I can't explore anything. Yet I hope to see, so to say with my own eyes, the Great Canal 大运河, which is also known as one of the wonders of the world, even more astounding than the Great Wall of China. Astronaut William Pogue, looking from the spacecraft aboard, thought he had seen the Great Wall of China. However, it turned out to be the Grand Canal – one of the world's oldest hydraulic structures, which still operates today.

*A brief characteristics of the canal: the length of the canal is 1782 km. However, with branches to Beijing 北京, Hangzhou 杭州 and Nantong 南通 – 2470 km. Depth of the fairway – 2–3 m. The canal has 21 locks, and the maximum annual cargo traffic of about 10 million tons. The canal connects the Yangtze (长江) and Huanghe (黄河) rivers.*

I take a taxi from Hangzhou 杭州 to Suzhou, and we drive right along the bank of the Grand Canal 大运河. On one of the countless self-propelled barges a husband and his wife are uploading heavy blocks of cargo. Their doggie, dressed in a warm sleeveless outfit, is trotting around. At the very stern of the barge, there is a small kitchenette with steam rising up from a black pot as the family is cooking a simple dinner. Barges of all types and sub-types, loaded almost over the top, are moving back and forth, avoiding skillfully any collision with the other ships. I found this incessant activity especially impressive in the rays of the setting sun, when the barges stubbornly continue their way in spite of the darkness that is starting to set in. I would say that the modern dynamics of the ancient canal creates both strong awareness of the history and a sense of satisfaction that the waterway made by previous generations is still alive and well today. It is only about 5 degrees below zero outside, but the cold seems unbearable because the rooms are not heated. People just do not heat their houses in the area south of the Yangtze River. At the Suzhou Chinese restaurant where I intend to have dinner, nobody has taken off their coats. In a few minutes, I realize why.

**21.12.1999** On my way back to Beijing, I am visiting Hangzhou and Suzhou as part of my diplomatic duties. Since 1997, Riga and Suzhou have been twin

cities. Because of the busy schedule, it has not been possible to set aside time for a separate trip to Suzhou. So now, I have arrived in this city of bridges, pagodas and landscaped gardens, the attractiveness of which is so expressively included in the quote above comparing them to paradise on earth.

In 1997, Riga and Suzhou became twin cities. In one of the central parks in Riga, Kronvalda Park, one cannot but notice an exotic Chinese style gazebo and an arch, which are gifts from Suzhou to Riga. While wandering along the streets of Suzhou, I find myself in the magnificent Canglangting 沧浪亭 Garden, where visitors can examine Chinese-style furniture made from tree roots. I especially like one gazebo and wish I could carry it home to our garden in Bergi in the suburbs of Riga. Of course, it is just a dream.

Later in the day I visit the Department of External Relations of Suzhou Municipality, where in a nice and welcoming atmosphere, we are discussing the possibilities of mutual cooperation. In addition to being historically and visually appealing, Suzhou is also a modern industrial city. Countries such as Singapore, the Republic of Korea and Finland are very active in this city. The New Technology Park, which Singapore has developed in the city, is not different from new technology parks I have seen in Singapore. I give my hosts some informative materials about Riga and Latvia, receiving in return a wonderful porcelain vase painted in Chinese traditions.

**22.12.1999** Finally, I am truly happy to be at “home” – the Embassy of the Latvian Republic to the PRC – again. Throughout my absence, Galina has kept the embassy “alive” alone – just like it happens in other embassies where the staff consists of only one diplomat.

There is no time for leisure, though. We spend the rest of the day compiling the report on my duty trip to Hong Kong. Tomorrow will be a new day, and we will have new tasks.

**23.12.1999** Mrs. Duan 段女士, the manager of the diplomatic campus, brings us a Christmas wreath – as a greeting to the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC.

I continue writing the report on the trip to Hong Kong, Macau and Suzhou. Then we both write many greeting cards, as Christmas and New Year are near.

**24.12.1999** We have the embassy plaque attached to the entrance to the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. The coat-of-arms is attached now on the second floor – at the entrance door of our embassy. We send the Christmas cards to Beijing's Diplomatic Corps.

I inform the Protocol Department that I will be leaving Beijing for the New Year holidays. In the other note I inform the MFA of the PRC that

the Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to the PRC, E. Semanis, will be arriving in Beijing soon.

**28.12.1999** There are still a few tasks to do in the morning – sending the notes, servicing the car.

After all the rush, we are at the railway station on time to catch our train to Harbin. The sleeping car is great. Yet, the ride would be more enjoyable, if the train kept shaking less.

**29.12.1999** We get off the train in Harbin right in the hustle and bustle of the busy railway station. Passengers, carriers, drivers – everyone is hurrying, shouting, offering services. We are met by a representative of the travel company – a Russian-speaking Chinese lady, called Lera.

We check in at the hotel and try to get some sleep. When our energy levels are back, we take a taxi to the city center. We can already see from the distance the ice sculptures made of pure, transparent ice cut out from the Sungari River. The flashing hieroglyphs are inviting: “Enjoy the beauty of Harbin’s ice lanterns” 哈尔滨冰灯欣赏 ... “Ice Lantern Exhibition” 冰灯艺术博览会. Pagodas, sculptures of gods, gates, castles, gazebos – everything is transparently blue and unrealistically beautiful. On the bank of the Sungari River we see ice rocks, slides, fortresses, and even a cable railway. In the very center of all these attractions stands a monument to the people of Harbin (哈尔滨人民防洪胜利纪念塔) who overcame the floods of 1957 in the area. It seems that the collectivism inherent in the Chinese character is also formed by the very nature of China, be it floods, or in other cases – unprecedented droughts. Such disasters can be overcome only by combined efforts of hundreds of thousands of people. It gets dark soon and it’s freezing. However, it turns out the citizens of Harbin are not afraid of dark and cold. Wearing bright green jackets over their warm clothes, accompanied by drums and gongs, they briskly march along the streets of Harbin, cheering up both themselves and the passers-by. Truly, such sights can be seen only in Harbin, in the northwest of China. We are overwhelmed and return to the hotel. **43 44 45 46**

**30.12.1999** The road to the airport is perfect. On the roadside, herds of cows, overgrown with wool, are wandering along the fluffy snow, picking up grain left over from the last year’s harvest. Harbin Airport is large, convenient, and tidy. An hour’s flight – and we are in Vladivostok. Holding my diplomatic passport, the airport clerk asks, “Do you speak Russian?” After a short pause, I answer in fluent Russian: “I have worked at the University of the Far East for ten years...” You should have seen the clerk’s facial expression...

**31.12.1999** This New Year’s Eve is not only the end of the old year, but also the dividing line of hundreds, even thousands of years. We are saying good-bye

to 1999 and saying hello to 2000. The biggest surprise for the world, and for Latvia, of course, is the news from Russia – Yeltsin announces his resignation and appointment of Putin as acting president.

Both for me and my wife, Galina, the past year has been a real challenge, performing the duties entrusted to us without any assistants or local support staff. Of course, the knowledge of Chinese acquired at the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University has helped a lot. I will always be grateful to my faithful friend Galina, who has been by my side and has never shied away from any jobs. In fact, she has been doing a great job of typing hieroglyphic text on the computer. If needed, I can trust her to write a diplomatic note. No wonder – she has graduated from the same Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow as me, only the Japanese language Department.

We spend the last day of the passing year in the bright, sunlit town of Vladivostok. I go for a walk and find myself at the Tiger Sopka. This town always brings back memories to me – after all, all three of our sons were born here. Galina defended her doctoral thesis here. In 1974, I departed from Vladivostok on my overseas journey to Singapore to study Chinese. In 1978 we travelled all around Primorsky Krai (*Приморский край* – translated as Maritime Territory). Tinkan Bay, Nakhodka, Suchan, Tetouhe, Olga Bay, Sihote-Alina Mountains, Sandagou, Kavalerovo, Chuguyevka, Hanka Lake, Chernihivka – these are just some of the most beautiful places we visited on the trip. We spend the New Year's Eve with the closest relatives from Galina's side – Galina's mother Nina Vasilyevna, her sister Inna with her husband Mikhail, their daughter Sveta and her husband Dmitry. We keep walking down the memory lane until the morning of the new millennium comes.

**01.01.2000** We take a walk to the beach. The wind is biting cold, and we return home. In Vladivostok, we spend five days visiting, meeting and talking with our old friends and former colleagues from the University of the Far East.

**06.01.2000** Outside, the wind is howling and a snowstorm is ravaging – as severe as snowstorms in the Far East can be. Everything is white with snow. It is even dangerous to cross the street because it is impossible to discern a car moving along the street. We are getting concerned. What to do? We need to be getting to the airport already. We decide to do it now. Outside, the snow gets into our eyes – it's difficult to keep them open. Several trams on the street are not moving. We take a taxi. The windshield wipers are not helping and our driver, an elderly man is holding his palm above his eyes as if this could help him to see the road better. The journey to the airport is a real ordeal – both physically and mentally. Eventually, we arrive at the airport and spend the night at the airport hotel called “Venice”.





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**07.01.2000** In the morning, the white snow is sparkling in the sun. Unfortunately, our plane to Harbin is delayed several times. Eventually, we arrive to Harbin; however, our plane to Beijing has already left. In the evening, around 19:30, we are finally at our home in Beijing – the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. Our mailbox is full of letters and greeting cards. I switch on the computer and check the emails. We are being asked to prepare the financial statement for year 1999.

**08.01.2000** We depart for the airport to meet Mr E. Semanis, the new Ambassador, with his family. Their SAS flight is delayed for three hours, so we bide away our time at the VIP lounge. The flight arrives, and we meet the Ambassador's wife Tatjana and their daughter Līga. The Semanis family accommodate themselves at the Kempinski Hotel. We have completed our mission – met the Ambassador – and can walk home to the embassy. **47 48**

**09.01.2000** With E. Semanis, we discuss our joint work and division of responsibilities in the future, as well as matters of tactics and strategy. In addition, E. Semanis informs me that the length of my and my wife's diplomatic mission in China will be decided by the MFA of the Republic of Latvia. Galina and I together record the last expenses of 1999 in the accounting program.

**10.01.2000** The Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC reports that a copy of the credentials of Ambassador E. Semanis can be submitted tomorrow.

We accompany the Semanis family to an American school where they would like to enroll their daughter Līga. Then the Ambassador and his family visit the Latvian Embassy for the first time and we show them around.

**11.01.2000** Galina prints out the draft of the financial statement for year 1999. The report clearly shows how each santim of our budget has been used. We send the draft report to the MFA.

We provide a copy of the accreditation letter to the MFA of the PRC. Everything's fine.

In the Kempinski Hotel we sign an apartment lease for the family of Ambassador E. Semanis.

**12.01.2000** Lately we have been very busy with all kind of new tasks and routine duties, so we decide to go for a walk. In fact, we need to do it because we haven't taken pictures of Beijing in snow yet. Ritan 日坛 Park seems a good choice to admire Beijing in winter time. Snow covered gazebos look charming. So do the trees. The people of Beijing are hurrying to take pictures because snowfall does not occur often here. Later, Galina continues working on the final draft of the financial statement for year 1999. Until now, both



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my wife Galina and I used to have separate office rooms. After the arrival of the Ambassador, Galina moves to the embassy kitchen with her computer and documents. The vacated space becomes the ambassador's office. Somehow we have not thought about this issue earlier, although it was possible to rent a separate apartment for us. Anyway, our career in China is coming to an end soon.

**13.01.2000** We send to the MFA report No. 1 of year 2000 – the financial report for year 1999 with a note that the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC has economized 29,000 USD, which will allow the embassy to purchase a car and a computer to ensure the further work of the embassy.

We get news that the ambassador has called Ms M. Prince at the MFA of Latvia and told her about the warm welcome in Beijing and the well-equipped embassy. Well, my spouse Galina and I have tried to do our best.

**15.01.2000** We meet our friends and drive to the Dazhongsi 大钟寺 temple market, where the choice of products is simply unlimited – piles of vegetables, watermelons and honeydews. In the basement, one can find all possible



seafood. We want to buy Dragon shrimps (8 shrimp for 80 yuan) and we manage to find them. Later we cook the big shrimps in our friends' apartment while chatting and simply having good time together. After returning to the embassy, we meet with Lithuanian Ambassador D. Voveris, who tells us that the Lithuanian Embassy is moving to other premises. It's sad that we are not going to be neighbors anymore.

**16.01.2000** I am sorting out and organizing materials dedicated to the domestic policy of the PCR, which I have been compiling for a whole year. The materials concern the Chinese army, the China Communist Party, activities of the Chairman of the PRC Jiang Zemin, the reforms, and other themes. The sources I've been using are Chinese, as well as Hong Kong and Western press.

Galina and I work until late to file expenses for the year 2000.

It is still freezing in Beijing. The locals claim that last summer has been one of the hottest in recent years and this winter is the coldest in the last twenty years. This is what people say. If needed, we can check weather reports.

**17.01.2000** I make an appointment with the Department of Eastern Europe and Central Asia of the MFA of the PRC for January 20 to discuss timing of the possible visit of the Minister of the MFA of the Republic of Latvia to the PRC.

I am meeting with Wang Kaiwen – the next Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Latvia.

At the Kyrgyz Embassy I am meeting with their ambassador, who unexpectedly presents me a gift – the Kyrgyz epos “Manas”.

Later I attend talks in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce on the possible supply of mineral fertilizers from Latvia.

**18.01.2000** Together with Ambassador E. Semanis and my wife Galina we are going to the River Garden to look for the possible future residence of the Ambassador. The River Garden village is built in European tradition and ensures adequate living standards.

**19.01.2000** We send the University of Latvia the offers of the Ministry of Education of the PRC to study in China.

**20.01.2000** The Department of Eastern Europe and Central Asia of the MFA of the PRC announces that the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia I. Bērziņš will be received in China in the first half of 2000.

**21.01.2000** We receive a Parex Bank shipment at customs.

In the evening, the two of us go to the ancient center of Beijing to take a walk along our favorite lakes – Qianhai 前海 and Houhai 后海. The residents of the capital are enjoying the winter – they are dancing and skating on the lake ice. In the evening, we have dinner with the next Ambassador of the PRC to the Republic of Latvia – Wang Kaiwen, whom I have known since 1994. He is pleasantly surprised by this appointment. Wang Kaiwen speaks Russian, and he has taken an active part in organizing the visit of the Latvian Prime Minister Mr Gailis in 1994, when relations between Latvia and the PRC were being normalized.

**22.01.2000** We are working with Mr Semanis on editing his speech. Galina and Ms Semane are discussing the concept of organizing the embassy premises.

**24.01.2000** We agree with the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC that Ambassador E. Semanis will be delivering his accreditation speech in English. At the request of the ambassador, I find a quote by Mao Zedong that could be included in the accreditation speech: 我们的责任, 是向人民负责 “Our duty is to serve the people”.

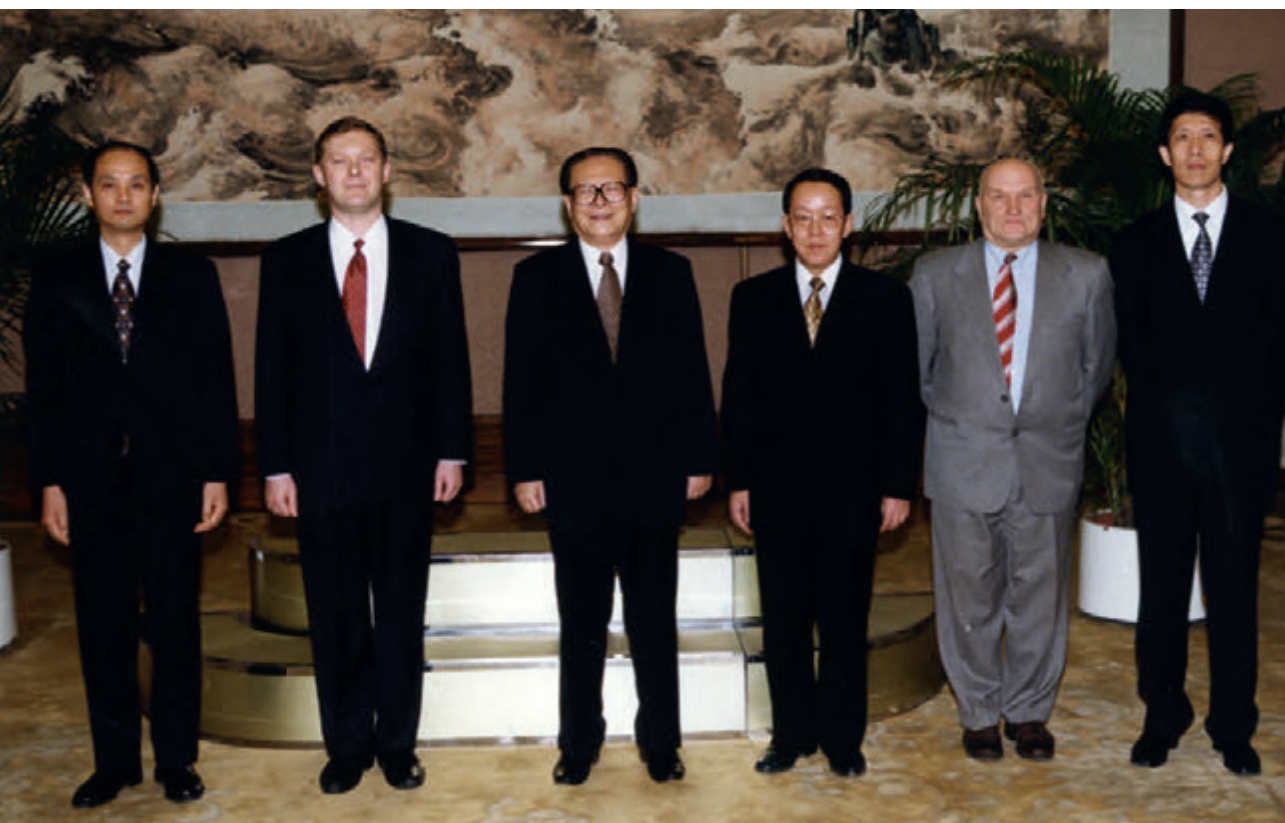
**25.01.2000** At 9:20 we arrive at the Great Hall of the People, where the accreditation of Ambassador E. Semanis will be taking place. From the Chinese side, the accreditation of the Ambassador will be confirmed by the President of the PRC Jiang Zemin. E. Semanis gives his accreditation speech in English. After the Ambassador’s official speech, there is a short conversation with the President of the PRC, Jiang Zemin, and I have the opportunity to say a few sentences in Chinese. The President asks me where I have learned Chinese. I answer – at the universities of Moscow, Nanyang (Singapore) and Fudan. The President makes a concluding remark, “The Ambassador has good English and Chargé d’Affaires – good Chinese. You will be able to do your job well.” **49**

At the Latvian Embassy we are joined by Ambassador’s spouse Tatjana and my spouse Galina, as well as Niels Dahlmann, who has actively supported co-operation between Latvia and the PRC, especially the normalization of Latvian-PRC relations during the visit of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Latvia M. Gailis on July 28, 1994. We celebrate this historical moment by opening a bottle of champagne.

At 18:00 I am attending a reception at Xinhua 新华 Agency. This day has been very tense.

**26.01.2000** Ambassador E. Semanis attends the seminar of Eastern European countries. After returning from the seminar, the Ambassador takes his seat in the office, but I move to the “bedroom”. It is becoming obvious that we need to think of our own apartment.





At 17:00 I need to attend an event at the Chamber of Commerce of the PRC.

**27.01.2000** We have a meeting with Niels Dahlmann and his colleagues. This has been already the fourth event this week, and I start to feel a bit weary.

**29.01.2000** The wind is howling outside. I get on a bike for the first time this year to go to the stadium. The wind is so strong that it is difficult to move ahead. I stop and have my morning exercises by the pond.

We send our income declarations to Riga.

I am organizing my document files. The wind is still raging outside. We spend this evening with Galina alone, in complete silence.

**30.01.2000** On Sunday, together with our friends, we prepare salmon with boiled potatoes. After having spent more than a year in China, we really crave our own traditional home-cooking. We return to the embassy, but because of the strong wind, the rooms are so cold that we have to put on our warm track-suits while sitting in the office.

**31.01.2000** I receive the new “diplomatic list” at the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC. The news is coming from the MFA of the Republic of Latvia that we will have to work until September, when Ms D. Liberte arrives in Beijing.

**01.02.2000** We pay at the bank for the rent of the embassy premises.

Agents from the apartment rental company arrive to discuss terms and conditions of the Ambassador’s residence. They bring letters of offer. There is a long discussion about international telephone lines. My computer is occupied. There is big fuss all around, which does not allow focusing on all other outstanding tasks.

**03.02.2000** We mail our Spring Festival greeting cards.

There is an event at the Polish Embassy.

In the evening, we go for a walk. Spring is in the air. We start up a conversation with a man who has brought out a cage with his songbirds. He tells us that even late in the evening, after six o’clock, it is not too cold for the birdies to be outside. Later on, we meet such men with bird cages quite often. They are both listening to their songbirds and also exchanging experiences with their hobby buddies.

**04.02.2000** We go for a morning walk. The air is dry, cold and crispy, and the feeling is fantastic.

I dedicate the morning hours to some analytical work on press materials.

Then I drive the ambassador to the EU Embassy and return to our embassy.

**05.02.2000** We go to bed quite early, yet we have hardly closed our eyes, when we hear a rumbling noise of fire crackers, explosions and shouting all around the Embassy Quarter. The Year of the Dragon has set in. On such a significant day, we decide to visit Taoranting 陶然亭 Park. I have already written about the park before in my diary. It’s so charming here – the frozen ponds, gazebos and hillocks. The atmosphere is so relaxing that all tension that has built up during the week gradually wanes away.

At the embassy, I can continue working on the computer.

**06.02.2000** We go for a morning walk and then I continue working on the analytical overview.

There is news from Russia – after more than two months of siege in Grozny, Chechen fighters have left the town... And fallen right into a trap allegedly set up by the Russian army. How is this uneven fight going to end?

**07.02.2000** I am busy preparing the PRC’s foreign policy review: analysis of the PRC-the US, the PRC-Russia, the PRC-Japan, the PRC-EU relations.

In the evening I read Latvian literature classics – the novel “God Nature Work” by Anna Brigadere. It’s an excellent read with brilliant language – heartfelt, thought-provoking and close to every Latvian’s mentality. It’s a true pleasure to read something like that in my native language, especially at a moment when the continuous stress and linguistic fatigue arising from using Chinese and other foreign languages is taking over.

The wind does not stop howling and raging outside all day.

**09.02.2000** Our car’s radiator is leaking. We call a technician.

We have dinner in our favorite Uighur eatery. The lamb, as always, is so delicious.

In the evening, we are about to turn in when we get a call from Riga. Our son Andrejs is breaking the news that he has been extended a proposal to work as a political advisor for the President of Latvia, V. Viķe-Freiberga. We as parents are just dumbfounded – so proud of him.

**10.02.2000** Latvian journalists Mr Voroncov and Mr Antropov (“Panorama Latvii”) are visiting the embassy. Together with Ambassador E. Semanis, we talk to the journalists and answer their questions. Ms M. Mora and Mr A. Sjanīts are also candidates for the position of the President’s political adviser. All candidates will be considered, and the choice will be made in the next few weeks.

**11.02.2000** We pay at the bank for the Ambassador’s apartments at the Kempinski Hotel. In the afternoon we drive to ChaoYang Gongyuan 朝阳区公园 Park. Just like last year at the Spring Festival, people are walking with their family members and friends, having rides on the “mountain railway”, carousels and having fun. Some people are buying snacks from the vendors. The atmosphere is nice and friendly. **50 51**

The Ambassador with his family has moved to a house in the village of River Garden. We wish them luck in the new place!

**12.02.2000** We plan to spend Saturday with my friend from university times and his family. It’s freezing slightly outside. Well, then it’s the right time for a game of tennis. We play for about an hour. Then we go to Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park, which I have already mentioned several times. We take a walk along the frozen ponds and remember the good times when we were students. We meet a large group of Chinese seniors who, having heard me speaking Russian with my friend, immediately start singing enthusiastically the 1960s Russian song “Moscow Evenings”, very popular in China then. The song sounds good in the Chinese language as well. When all verses of the song are finished, they start singing “Katyusha”, another popular Soviet

song from the World War II period. The song is about a Russian woman called Katyusha. Standing on a steep riverbank, she sends the song to her beloved, a soldier serving far away. The Chinese pronounce the name as “Ka-qiu-sha”. This song is popular in China as well. Most often these songs are sung by people who have studied in the former USSR. Very often they are memories of their young days, which are dear to every person. Our impromptu singing episode proceeds in a mutually respectful and friendly way. Actually, in China you quite often can witness seniors engaged in singing, for example, Beijing opera pieces in the park. Senior dance is equally popular, with special attention being paid to performing the steps precisely. Interestingly, it does not matter very much who your partner is – it might as well be another man or another woman.

We return home late in the evening feeling really relaxed.

**14.02.2000** Our ambassador has driven from his River Garden village to the embassy for the first time and now knows how long his journey to the embassy can take. We discuss plans for the embassy’s work in the near future.

At 11:00 we leave on separate missions – the ambassador – to the Iranian Embassy, me – to the Ukrainian Embassy. Ambassadors of 15 countries have arrived to say goodbye to the former Chargé d’Affaires of Ukraine, Mr Sultansky.

Then Galina and I go to the Beijing Telegraph Office to deal with the connection of new electronic equipment for the embassy.

I am a bit frustrated at the moment as my computer has gotten hung up, and I am not able to do things that need to be done.

**15.02.2000** At Beijing Telegraph Office 北京电信, we pay for two new e-mail addresses – for the Ambassador and D. Liberte.

**16.02.2000** We talk to the shipping company’s agent about customs clearance issues for the Ambassador’s container. Then we go to the Customs office regarding the container.

At 15:00 I am visiting a photo exhibition arranged by Moldova. I like both the content and the layout. There are a certainly a few things that we can learn from Moldovan colleagues and should bear in mind when we will be organizing our exhibitions.

**17.02.2000** We submit all the documents necessary for the customs clearance of the container to the customs.

The official photo of the Ambassador’s accreditation ceremony from the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC is ready and we can receive them.

The computer technician arrives. E-mail is working now, but Word still would not open and we cannot print out documents.

**19.02.2000** Galina and I are both at the Workers' Stadium 工人体育场. Almost every morning we take a bike ride and do our morning exercises. I often do my tennis racket drills against the wall. Today the wind is especially fierce. It sweeps through the streets of Beijing lifting up sand and dust. Sometimes I need to close my eyes to protect them from the small flying particles.

I am working on the section on the PRC's domestic policy.

In the photo workshop, we receive additions to our photo albums – the pictures of winter scenes in Beijing parks. This is what our collection was missing. While dealing with the Ambassador's apartment, we enter Kempinski Hotel hall, where, it seems, not much has changed – likewise in 1998, during the first year of our diplomatic mission, we are greeted by the two familiar tangerine trees. **52**

**20.02.2000** We receive sad news from Vladivostok. Galina's mother, Nina Vasilyevna has passed away. We had our three sons born in Vladivostok – Juris, Andrejs and Pēteris. After the sons were born, my wife Galina continued to work at the Pacific Institute of Fisheries and Oceanography (TINRO) as a Senior Research Fellow. In 1971, Galina defended her doctoral thesis in biological sciences. I was working at the Far East University as a Chinese language teacher. Both of us being so busy at work, my mother-in-law was the person who actually took care of and brought up all three boys. It is so good that we visited her and welcomed in the New Year together. In deepest gratitude, we both bow our heads in front of Nina Vasilyevna.

**21.02.2000** At the bank, we file paperwork concerning the rent for the Ambassador's house.

At around 18:00 together with the next Ambassador of the PRC to the Republic of Latvia – Wang Kaiwen, we have dinner at the Qianmen Roast Duck Restaurant 烤鸭店. We exchange our views on China and Latvia in a pleasant and warm atmosphere. The next Ambassador of the PRC to Latvia is a Muslim, and he is very surprised that my wife and I have visited a Muslim cemetery on one of our Beijing's tours. Wang Kaiwen says, "I doubt if any other diplomat, trying to get to know Beijing more deeply, has ever visited the Muslim cemetery ..."

**22.02.2000** A very "commonplace" bank transaction for us – we withdraw 10,000 USD in cash at the bank and take the load of banknotes, just like a basket of potatoes, to the embassy – it will be a deposit for the Ambassador's house.





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Finally! My computer has been fixed – it's working.

**23.02.2000** The Ambassador's container arrives. They bring the boxes meant for the embassy to our consular department room, but the Ambassador's personal belongings are taken to the "River Garden" house. In the evening I am reading again Anna Brigadere's "God Nature Work". I read the chapter about little Annele's childhood. The descriptions are so true, vivid and heart-felt – a book that makes my soul happy.

**25.02.2000** Telephone technicians arrive and in a couple of hours the needed telephone lines are installed.

The Ambassador invites us to visit him at his home in the River Garden village. A detached house certainly provides more space for imagination and improvisation. The Ambassador shows us his collection of mugs.

It's already very dark when we return back to the embassy.

**29.02.2000** Today is the "spare" day of the leap year, which, in fact, turns out to be very busy and fruitful.

At 8:30 at the hotel I meet two gentlemen – representatives of "Latvijas dzelzceļš" (Latvian Railway) Company – Zorgevics and Veidemanis. Negotiations on a transit corridor between the Latvian and Chinese parties are taking place at the Ministry of Railways of the PRC: Shanghai 上海 – Zhengzhou 郑州 – Lanzhou 兰州 – Urumqi 乌鲁木齐 – Astana – Yekaterinburg – Riga. This route is one of the shortest land roads from the PRC to Latvia. The route passes in transit through Kazakhstan and Russia. For the transit corridor to become operational, a great number of not only bureaucratic, but also political obstacles will have to be overcome.

**01.03.2000** Once again, together with the technician we are trying to solve the computer problems. Then I do some analytical research of the PRC and Hong Kong press.

At 18:00 at Wangfujing Roast Duck Restaurant 王府井烤鸭店 we have dinner together with the representatives of Latvian and the PRC railway departments. The food is excellent, and the duck is really delicious. Only – this has been already the third time I'm having duck recently – not too often?

**03.03.2000** It's getting really warm here. Even for Beijing, +15 Celsius is way too warm in March. In the evening, I continue reading Brigadere's book "God Nature Work". And again, I can only admire the penmanship of the author. How powerful her every word is, how sharp her skills of observation are, and how she finds this genuine way to speak to every Latvian's heart! The book makes me proud of our language and our hard-working people.





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**04.03.2000** On Saturday, we have planned to go for a “photo hunt” in the ancient part of Beijing, near the Zhonggulou 钟鼓楼. With real pleasure, we wander the ancient, narrow streets, called “hutung” 胡同 by the inhabitants of the capital. The aisles between the houses are narrow and cluttered with bicycles, boxes, barrels, baskets, buckets, and you name it. This is the ancient one-storied Beijing. The windows of the houses are facing the inner yard. The blind, windowless walls of the houses are facing the street. We try to capture something characteristic and take many photos. The weather is sunny and warm. **53 54**

We have bought some meat of a young shark and cook it for dinner, yet we do not find the taste very delicious, to put it mildly, and decide not to repeat this experiment. Then we try a Thai fruit called “fire dragon” 火龙. Well, it is peculiar – definitely, edible. We are not beginners in the field of exotic foods, yet this time...

**07.03.2000** After the endless collisions with my embassy computer, I finally can send the annual report to the MFA of the Republic of Latvia. In the vicinity of the MFA of the PRC I meet again with the next Ambassador of the PRC to the Republic of Latvia – Wang Kaiwen, and we have dinner together.

**08.03.2000** I greet Galina on the International women’s Day with a small flower in a pot. We have been celebrating this holiday most of our lives, and I don’t think that it is the worst heritage from the Soviet times.

At the Great Hall of the People, there’s a ladies’ event. Ambassador’s spouse Tatiana and my spouse Galina are going to the party. **55 56**

In the evening I am reading Mr E. Kataj’s book “Under the Ten Flags”. It is a biographical story about the Kataj family, the Latvian community in Harbin and events in China at that time. What read could be more interesting to me than that! Especially, when the face of China is changing so dynamically and now it is a totally different world.

**09.03.2000** It’s the day for banking operations. I spend all day entering payment data on computer until the day’s work is done.

**10.03.2000** We have additional payments to process now – the health insurance for the Ambassador’s family, as well as direct payments to their landlord. We are again discussing future work projects of our embassy with the Ambassador.

**11.03.2000** I start my Sunday morning with a tennis workout in the stadium. I have been practicing almost every morning, and today I feel pretty comfortable with the racket and the ball. The game is real fun. With friends, we decide



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to go to one of our favorites – Yuanmingyuan Gongyuan 圆明园公园 Park. For a couple of hours we wander along the park alleys enjoying the quiet and solitude. There are not many visitors today, so it feels really relaxing.

**12.03.2000** At the reception of the National Day of Mauritius, I get acquainted with the adviser of the Embassy of Kazakhstan, whose duties include the development of the so-called “transport corridor” of Kazakhstan. He agrees to meet and to discuss this matter in greater detail.

**13.03.2000** Our office equipment is constantly breaking down. We keep taking our computers to the workshop, yet they continue having problems. One day the printer is not working; another day it is impossible to use Latin alphabet and so on and on.

At the World Trading Center we pay our telephone bill, which is an impressive sum this time. We have had many incoming and outgoing calls recently.

**15.03.2000** We are discussing with the Ambassador at length the business prospects and opportunities of the Republic of Latvia and the PRC.

Then we go to the diplomatic vehicle rental center. The Ambassador wants to rent a car and hire a driver. The cheapest offer is 11,000 yuan a month, the most expensive – 12,500.

We pay 1,500 yuan to the Embassy of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea for the ambassadors’ farewell events.

**16.03.2000** We go to the airport to see off Wang Kaiwen, the next Ambassador of the PRC to the Republic of Latvia. At the airport we meet also the former Ambassador of the PRC to Latvia – Yao Peisheng. He is going on a diplomatic mission as an Ambassador to Kazakhstan. **57 58**

We receive news from Riga that our son Andrejs has passed the competition and has been appointed as a Foreign Policy Adviser to the President of the Republic of Latvia, V. Vike-Freiberga. It’s a pleasant surprise for both of us.

**17.03.2000** We are having lunch together with the staff of the Eastern European Department of the MFA of the PRC. All issues in bilateral relations are being addressed together with these colleagues.

The Ambassador’s computer is broken down again. What a shame...

**18.03.2000** We take the Ambassador’s computer to the workshop. Today a sand storm is raging in Beijing. There are so many tiny sand particles in the air that sometimes it is impossible to see the sun. The cars have their headlights on while driving. The air feels electrified. I am not feeling very well, either.

**19.03.2000** We decide to go for a little outing by car on Sunday morning. We do not have a special plan, but somehow we find ourselves at the Mutianyu 慕田峪 section of Great Wall of China. We haven't been out of Beijing for some time. Driving in China can be challenging and full of surprises. For example, a man on a bicycle all of a sudden may decide to cross the highway with fast moving traffic. Or a small tractor makes an unexpected turn. Anyway, the air is very fresh and clean today. We see the ragged mountain tops, which seem so close we could touch them. We are enjoying the spectacular view of the Wall, which is winding up and down the hills. The place is also less crowded here.

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**20.03.2000** The Ambassador arrives at work and switches on the computer that we just got mended yesterday. It won't work again.

I'm very upset. We spent the biggest part of the weekend with the technicians and all in vain. Is it viruses at fault or lack of qualification or what...?

We get a call from the Bank of China. It turns out there has been some inaccuracy in the payment bill for the Ambassador's residence. Now I need to go and clear it out.

We are at the Diplomatic Service Department of the MFA of the People's Republic of China, where a pass must be obtained for the Ambassador's driver to enter Sanlitun 三里屯 diplomatic campus. The Ambassador is going to his River Garden village house for the first time with a rented car and a driver. We are having the first spring showers in Beijing.

**21.03.2000** We are submitting a note to the MFA of the PRC for extending visas for the Ambassador's family and me. Then we submit a letter from the embassy to the Bank of China with a request to correct the bill of the Ambassador's home owner. The Ambassador, together with several Eastern European ambassadors, is summoned to the MFA of the PRC in connection with the elections in Taiwan.

**22.03.2000** We send a document package to a Shanghai company with a proposal of furfural trade and receive three document packages at the International Post office 国际邮政.

Just before the working day is about to end, the Ambassador opens his computer, which gets hung up immediately. What can I say? Especially when these guys from the computer workshop have almost made our office their permanent home recently...

**23.03.2000** Such a fierce wind has never been experienced yet. It's howling like a lonely steppe wolf..



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The computer man arrives and takes the Ambassador's computer to the workshop.

**24.03.2000** At the MFA of the PRC we receive passports with visas for the Ambassador's family and me. I redeem the plane tickets: Beijing 北京 – Urumqi 乌鲁木齐 – Lanzhou 兰州 – Beijing 北京.

**25.03.2000** It's Saturday. We want to go to the market of the Great Bell Temple 大钟寺. Very soon, though, we get into a traffic jam of tricycles, refrigerator trucks and people, spending almost an hour there. Yet we manage to buy a piece of salmon. Then I play tennis with my friend from University times and have a really relaxing afternoon. At 17:00 I am back at the embassy. The computer technician arrives. Nothing is working again. I have to take the computer, the printer and the monitor to the workshop. Well, this is how the evening of a perfect day turns out.

**26.03.2000** On Sunday we record our weekly expenses on the computer and make a few requests for the MFA of Latvia regarding the quarterly report. For the upcoming trip to Urumqi, I select some printed materials about Latvia. Here will be a brief description of the city and region of Urumqi (乌鲁木齐). In the ancient Mongolian language, Urumqi means "good pasture." Today, Urumqi is the administrative center of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous

Region 新疆维吾尔自治区 . Urumqi is located on the northern branch of the Great Silk Road. The city is located in an oasis with eastern Tianshan Mountains on one side and a large salt lake on the other. Modern Urumqi has traditionally been considered a Uighur territory, although it has been at the crossroads of several cultures. Geographically, Urumqi is the city furthest from the sea: the nearest shore of the world's ocean is 2,500 km from Urumqi.

In the past, Urumqi was a small Uighur village, but today it is already a true megalopolis with a population of about 2 million. Urumqi's population began to grow rapidly only in the 1960s, when the PRC government launched a government campaign for the mass relocation of the Han (Chinese self-name) from the eastern parts of the country to Xinjiang to integrate the region into the cultural and linguistic environment of the main nation. The PRC's state policy changed the ethnic landscape of the region and the city quite radically. The Chinese language prevails in most spheres of life, and without it, it is difficult for Turkic Uighurs and Kazakhs to move up the career ladder. It is the representatives of these peoples who feel the limitation of their rights in modern Xinjiang, and from time to time radical people emerge in the Uighur community, who advocate the independence of Xinjiang, or East Turkestan, and its withdrawal from the PRC. However, in the city and Xinjiang, taken together, most signs are in two languages, Chinese and Uighur, which uses Arabic characters. The area of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is 1,700,000 square km. The population is about 20 million people.

After looking up this unembellished factual information about the city to be visited, on the afternoon of March 27, together with Ambassador E. Semanis, we arrive in Urumqi after a three-hour and 40-minute long flight. One can hear both Chinese and Uighur languages around. In the evening we are invited to watch a spectacular show of Uighur dancers, which rather looks like a beauty contest at a sultan's harem. The bare navels of the exotic dancers clearly demonstrate that the restrained outfit style that Chinese ladies adhere to has remained in mainland China.

**28.03.2000** Today we are on a tight schedule and immediately after breakfast, right at the hotel, meet with the representatives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Administration. Representatives of the Xinjiang Department of Foreign Economic Relations, as well as the Geology and Tourism Boards make presentations. Each presenter distributes both his / her report and the literature of the respective profile to the audience. We, in turn, offer literature about Latvia to the participants of the event.

Of course, this is just the first meeting to get acquainted.

In the afternoon we visit a company where  $2 \times 1.5$  m wide granite slabs are cut with the help of Italian machine tools. Next, we visit a furniture factory and a high-tech zone. In the evening, there is a lavish dinner with a generous selection of Uighur cuisine.

**29.03.2000** According to today's schedule, we arrive at a company where hop extract is produced with German equipment. This site is followed by a modern bank and a giant hotel, which houses an impressive exhibition of exclusive furniture, bas-reliefs, stones and jewelry. We have lunch together with colleagues from the Czech Republic, Slovenia, France, Switzerland, and other countries. My colleagues ask me to say some thank you words in Chinese to the organizers of the event on behalf of all present. Well, I have to concentrate and respond to the request of my colleagues.

**30.03.2000** The first trip is to a fine wool textile factory, which sends its products mainly to Western European countries and the USA. Finally, we visit the bazaar. The local men of dark complexion keep approaching us and offering to exchange dollars for yuan. On one of the tables, I spot out a round-shaped Kazakh hat. I decide that it will be a nice memory from Urumqi and Xinjiang. A bit of haggling, a few yuan, and the hat is mine. It is very crowded here. We hear different languages around. Being accustomed to Asian features, I am able to distinguish between Uighurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, not to mention Han. Skyscrapers of hotels, banks and office buildings mark the skyline of the city. The snow is melting and revealing curbs of the streets filled with litter. Urumqi citizens could have been tidier. After a two hours and 40 minutes long flight, we land in Lanzhou 兰州, the administrative center of Gansu Province 甘肃省省会. The highway from the airport to the town center is excellent. On both sides we see clay and salt fields. The villages are modest, but tidy. As far as my eyes reach, there isn't a single tree or bush in sight. I would say – quite a harsh-looking landscape.

**31.03.2000** *A brief description of Gansu province. Gansu Province is located in the northwest of China, and the 1,600 km long historic Silk Road 丝绸之路 runs through it. In turn, about 1,200 km from the Silk Road, constitutes the Hexi 河西 Corridor, which connects the provinces of central China with the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region through Gansu Province and is China's gateway to Central Asia. The administrative center of Gansu Province, Lanzhou 甘肃省省会兰州, in ancient times was built in a strategically important location at the confluence of the Silk Road with the Huang He 黄河 River.*

*An important historical fact is that in 1928, Qinghai 青海省 Province (Amdo), as well as the Autonomous Region of Ningxia Hui minority 宁夏回族自治区 were separated from Gansu Province.*



On the last day of March, we first visit a pharmaceutical factory and a brewery in Lanzhou. This is followed by about the same format exchange of information and ideas as in Urumqi. The concept of the Great Europe-Asia Bridge 欧亚大陆桥 attracts my attention. I ask whether the PRC society and the representatives of all the provinces involved in the project have jointly discussed issues related to this concept and its development. In conclusion, I wish the representatives of Gansu Province that the new Silk Road becomes a high-speed road connecting Europe and Asia.

**01.04.2000** Early in the morning, we start our journey to a Tibetan Monastery in Gansu Province, Labrang 拉卜楞寺, which is an important center of Tibetan Buddhism outside Tibet. We drive fast along a narrow mountain road with villages of Chinese Muslim minorities – Hui 回 or Salar 撒拉 people scattered on its sides. The village men wear white, round Muslim hats. Women cover their heads with dark brocade scarves. The mosques, without exception, are built in Chinese tradition and do not feature any particular Islamic elements. Approaching the Labrang Monastery, we see a young Buddhist monk with a bag on his shoulder walking in our direction. During the Cultural Revolution, in the period from 1966–1976, most of the monastery buildings were destroyed. The buildings were reconstructed in the 1990s. Currently, 1,200 monks live in the monastery. The Labrang Monastery is a real repository of art objects. Here one can see frescoes and tapestries, Tibetan furniture, many Buddha sculptures decorated with precious stones and golden ornaments. We climb onto the upper terrace of the monastery. We see the local Tibetan people gathering in small groups on the mountain slopes, the typical flat roofs of Tibetan houses, and a mountain river flowing swiftly downhill. An eagle is soaring majestically below us. It is typical Tibetan scenery. I am trying to take pictures for our album. **61 62 63 64 65 66**

**02.04.2000** During the meeting with the leadership of Gansu Province, the need for investment to implement the concept of the Great Europe-Asia Bridge is discussed. Then we fly all the way back over Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of the PRC 内蒙古自治区 until we land in Beijing. The valuable visit to the Uighur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang and Gansu Province in the northwest of China is over. These days, this region of China is playing a very important role in the development of the new Silk Road.

**03.04.2000** Today is allotted for making our bank payments. There is a whole pile of bills and invoices on the table. Now we need to make payments also for the Ambassador's residence and his daughter's school. There are also a lot of documents in electronic format. All incoming documents need to be registered and organized.

The Ambassador and his spouse, as well as Galina and I have been invited to the MFA of the PRC for a working dinner with one of the Deputy Ministers of the MFA of the PRC. During the dinner, human rights in the PRC are being discussed, as well as the PRC's relations with Russia. The tone of the other side is clearly patronizing, as if they were talking to a younger brother. I have never met this ministry official before. The dinner leaves a bitter aftertaste.

**04.04.2000** Galina is preparing the gift write-offs required for the financial report. We need to do this according to the new instructions received in January. Many write-off documents have accumulated, so it takes all day to do this paperwork.

I make an appointment with the Ministry of Culture of the PRC. It has become cooler in Beijing. It's a pity that we don't have time for a walk.

**05.04.2000** In the early morning the computer technician arrives with the Ambassador's computer, which now should be in good order. Together with Galina we are working on write-offs for representation expenditure. Finally, it's done.

The small pink flowers of the cherry trees, called "Yingtao" 樱桃 in Beijing, are in full blossom, as well as magnolias 木兰 and peaches. The blooming fruit trees and flowers are a beautiful reminder of spring that has sprung. Working hard, one might not notice this.

**06.04.2000** The fierce wind is howling outside, swirling clouds of fine sand and dust. The sun becomes pale and hazy, and dusk sets in. I can feel gritty sand between my teeth. The air is electrified. The elements are raging outside. I am taking our Ambassador by car to the Ukrainian Embassy. We have been working with Galina all day to enter the financial report on the computer. This process has become more complicated since the new, more cumbersome, report template has been introduced, according to which yuans must be converted into dollars, but dollars – into Latvian currency – lats.

It's already dark outside, but the wind keeps howling.

**07.04.2000** I introduce the idea of a video conference "Crafts 2000" to the representative of the Ministry of Culture of the PRC.

We discuss the publication of the Ambassador's article with a journalist from the "Economic Guide" 经济导报. Galina continues working on the financial report.

**08.04.2000** For this Saturday, we have a plan to go together with my friend from university times to Beijing flea market "Panjiayuan" (潘家园). It is the largest flea market in the whole country, with a unique understanding of supply and demand. People sell here a variety of applied art items, calligraphy



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samples and watercolor paintings, stationery, porcelain, furniture, used household items and many more. There are more than 3,000 trade stands, whose owners come from 23 Chinese provinces and cities embracing all geographical corners of the country. In addition, representatives of national minorities sell different ethnic handicraft items. Prices in this market are lower than in other Beijing markets. People say that if the antique market “Liulichang” (琉璃厂) is a place for intellectuals, then “Panjiayuan” flea market is a paradise for everyone...

It does not matter here whether the goods are originals or imitations; the main thing is the joy of being together and trading. Most items for sale are displayed on blankets or pieces of fabric spread straight on the ground. Buyers can pick up the item they like and carefully inspect it from all sides. The giant square is full of works by Chinese craftsmen, masters and charlatans, too. Everyone is either haggling or buying or trying to sell something. The local people seem to be immensely enjoying immensely this atmosphere, which resembles a busy anthill. We, as well, try to enjoy this experience to the fullest until it is time to look for our car and return home. **67 68 69**

**09.04.2000** After a long week of hard work, Galina successfully completes the financial report in compliance with the new regulations. Her sense of duty and professionalism is admirable, and she proves once again that not only can I rely on her in our marriage, but she is also a trustworthy and irreplaceable colleague at any job she is doing.

I go to the car workshop where our car is being repaired.

**10.04.2000** I congratulate Galina on her birthday. She receives greetings from our three sons, as well as her sister and our friends in Latvia.

We are participating with the Ambassador at the Eastern European Investment Seminar, which takes place at the Chinese government hotel – the Diaoyutai 钓鱼台.

Peter Batai from the UK, whom I met during the Urumqi trip, invites me to a grand reception at the World Trade Center 世界贸易中心, which is attended by a large number of diplomats and high-ranking business people from the PRC.

After all this rush, in the evening I am finally together with Galina, and we remember that, after all, it is her birthday today.

**12.04.2000** There are busy discussions going on with the editorial board of the “Economic Guide” 经济导报 about the Ambassador’s article which is supposed to be published.

Arrangements have been made about the meeting at the Ministry of Railways of the PRC.

**13.04.2000** Two businessmen arrive at the embassy from Inner Mongolia. They are interested in furfural, a chemical product made in Latvia. I provide the visitors with basic information and business contacts.

We discuss Easter holiday plans with the Ambassador.

**14.04.2000** At 8:30 we leave the embassy and keep driving non-stop for six hours around the streets of Beijing carrying out different routine chores. At the Beijing Telegraph 北京电信, we inform the customer service that our computer server has gone out of order. We ask for expertise and assistance in repairing the embassy's computer equipment. At the bank, cash needs to be withdrawn and utility bills need to be paid, etc. At the Post Office we send the filled-out questionnaires of the population census to Riga. We return to the embassy feeling quite exhausted.

**15.04.2000** It's Saturday, and we have new plans for the day off. The morning starts with a good tennis practice. Then we go to the World Park 北京世界公园. Here, in a few hours one can visit all continents and see the world's most outstanding architectural, historical and cultural monuments: Buckingham Palace, Taj Mahal, Red Square, Mermaid of Warsaw, Notre Dame Cathedral, St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican, Sydney Opera House, Acropolis and Trojan Horse, Egyptian Pyramids and much more. Throughout the day, we slowly move from one historical object to another, never ceasing to admire the imagination, as well as the amount of work done. People who have walked enough have the opportunity to watch a concert featuring world music and a wide array of folk dances: Uighur, Romanian, Mexican. It turns out to be a really relaxing day. **70 71 72**

**16.04.2000** Our car needs fixing again – a nice way to start Sunday. Niels Dahlmann has invited us to dinner. It's a special occasion as his wife, Paula, and their son have arrived in Beijing. The other guests are old friends of Niels – some are European diplomats and some are Chinese friends, who speak very good English. Niels is great at creating a cozy atmosphere. He jokes a lot and tells interesting episodes from his rich, lifelong experience. We get back to the embassy quite late – after nine in the evening.

**17.04.2000** At the External Relations Department of the Ministry of Railways of the PRC, we discuss the possibilities of mutual cooperation.

The Ambassador leaves for a reception at the Russian Embassy.

In the evening, Galina and I discuss the upcoming car trip together with the Davidov family – our former fellow students.

**19.04.2000** We buy a printer and an answering machine for the embassy.



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Together with the Ambassador, arrangements are made at the PRC Diplomatic Service on renting another car (13,000 yuan per month) and also on the services of another driver.

The Ambassador and his spouse Tatjana have invited the Ambassador of Lithuania D. Voveris and the Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of Estonia A. Birov to dinner. We have been invited, too. Madam Ambassador has set a wonderful table for us. Next, we talk about the entry of the Baltic states into the Chinese market. On our way back we get caught in a heavy rain shower.

**20.04.2000** We are up at 6:00 a.m. and start our journey by picking up our friends. They join us quickly, and we are lucky to avoid Beijing's traffic jams. On both sides of the highway, the wheat fields are gently green and thick like a well-kempt hedge. The road stretches before us straight as an arrow. It looks like driving at speeds below 100 km per hour would be considered bad manners. To the south of Beijing, there is a large plain, yet far in the distance we can discern the contours of the mountains. We are following our route – Beijing-Zhengzhou 北京 – 郑州 steadily, and after a while, on our right we can see Shijiazhuang 石家庄, the administrative center of Hebei Province 河北省省会.

At the beginning of the XX century it was a village with 150 houses and about 500 inhabitants. Shijiazhuang's further growth does not exceed 100 years, and in the Chinese tradition it is a small period of time. However, 100 years has been enough to turn the village into an industrial city with a population of 4 million inhabitants. Unfortunately, it is the same industrial development that has to be blamed for the fact that the city is being called the “smog capital” of China.

... Tourists only pass through Shijiazhuang as transit passengers. The city has almost no architectural monuments or other historical evidence. However, since my studies of Chinese at the Institute of Oriental Languages at Moscow University, a certain text related to this city has stuck in my mind. It focuses on the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune, one of the most respected foreigners in China. He arrived in China in 1938 and became famous as a selfless and highly professional physician, as well as communist internationalist, who joined the ranks of the 8<sup>th</sup> CCP Army under Mao as a physician. In 1939, during an operation, he contracted blood poisoning and died. Mao Zedong's Collected Articles include “Dedication to N. Bethune”. It is in Shijiazhuang that a monument has been erected to this man, and the Chinese still honor him today. We have decided that we need to arrive in Luoyang 洛阳 before it gets dark, so a visit to Shijiazhuang is postponed to some other time.

The tires are humming; we are dashing past countless villages or at times an occasional pagoda. Their silhouettes are familiar from the university textbooks,

yet they are so much more impressive in real life. A pile of ruins of an ancient watchtower under the blue skies makes us reflect on the many wars fought in these lands, dynasties born and perished, towns built and destroyed.

In today's China, you have to pay highway tolls. Almost always, an access road, which is free of charge, runs relatively parallel to the highway. Such roads can be very congested, and their quality is lacking. However, the smaller roads allow travelers to observe the rural life scenes – in some places there is wheat or corn spread on the roadside to dry; in another place – geese are strolling leisurely around or piglets are bathing in the mud.

After having driven about 600 km, we arrive in Zhengzhou 郑州 City, the administrative center of Henan Province 河南省省会. It is interesting to note that this city is considered to be the geographical center of the country. And even more importantly – as Zhengzhou used to be one of the capitals of ancient China, this city is called the cradle of Chinese civilization. The Chinese estimate that the city's history goes back as far as 3,600 years. Indeed, many traces of history have survived in Zhengzhou. One such testimony that cannot be missed is the Temple of Confucius (郑州文庙). It is a cult ensemble of the Han Dynasty, built 2,000 years ago. The adepts of the great teacher, Confucius, like to spend longer time in the temple contemplating and meditating. Although our journey is pretty intensive, we are still able to find a moment when to pay respects to the Great Teacher. For many centuries, his teachings have permeated the Chinese people mentality, I would even say – “genetically”, and have had a profound effect on their thinking, as well as on the structure and behavioral norms of society both in China and its neighboring countries, such as Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Singapore. Following the great teacher's call to live one's life according to the highest moral standards, ethics gradually have taken the place of religion in the Chinese tradition. Of course, in the Chinese spiritual world, it is just one of the options alongside with Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, and even Christianity. However, it is undeniable that the doctrine of Confucianism is more or less deeply ingrained in every member of this society.

Zhengzhou is also famous for its mega grand monument to Mao Zedong. The local guides recommend visiting the monument in the evening for a photo. Such a photograph could be named “Chairman Mao in the rays of the sunset.” In addition, in the corner of such a photo a place could be found also for the traveler himself. Having felt both the ancient atmosphere, as well as learnt about the more recent history of Zhengzhou, we continue our journey.

We have covered about 807 km today, and in the evening we reach the town of Luoyang 洛阳.



Luoyang's history dates back as far as five thousand years. The city has once been the capital of 13 Tang 唐 and Song 宋 dynasties and 96 emperors have ruled here.

The symbol of the city is the peony flower 牡丹, which has been cultivated in Luoyang for 1,500 years; in all these years Chinese gardeners have created about 600 varieties of peonies. In mid-April, peonies begin to bloom. Since 1983, from 15 to 25 April, an exhibition of peonies has been taking place in Luoyang, attracting several million lovers of flowers and tourists from all over the world.

In the spring of 1989, I also had the opportunity to be in Luoyang during the peony bloom. Along the city's central streets, parks, and squares – everywhere the diversity of these flowers seemed to be multiplied by the great love by which the flower beds are tended with. I struck up a conversation about peonies with a Luoyang gardener then, and the kind man gave me some seeds of the famous Luoyang peonies.

After the long day behind the wheel, the only thing I can think of is rest. We have divided our duties during the trip in such a way that the responsibilities about checking-in at the hotel are delegated to my friend Andrej. He is coping with these very well, and soon we are in our rooms. Lying on my bed, I still have flashbacks of what we have seen and experienced today. First of all, I am surprised how impressive the modern roads are. The gas stations are very convenient, as well as the roadside restaurants, where at rigorously observed hours (12:00 – lunch; 18:00 – dinner) a hot meal is always available, be it the remotest corner in the mountains or the desert. Sometimes we pass pagodas on our way. Although weathered in the course of centuries, they still look stately. According to legends, in ancient times monks used to live there. It is interesting to imagine how they went about their daily chores, how they studied, how they copied scriptures in those bygone times... When travelling, it is always fascinating to communicate with local people. They are willing to talk almost about anything – this year's harvest, summer droughts and other everyday things. Very often they ask questions about Latvia and whether living in a small country is better than living in a country with a huge population. Frankly, this question is not that simple. I have often been wondering how living in a country with a population of more than 1.3 billion people must feel like. There are millions of people in the country who all hope to find some job. Working people must retire at 60; what is more – not everybody is eligible to receive a pension, as is the case with peasants in China. I've been pondering these issues often while travelling in this vast country, and this trip is not an exception.

We are going to Longmen 龙门石窟 cave monastery, which I have already visited before. I was there in 1989 and also wrote about it. Now, I am sitting behind the wheel myself, and I must say that driving in Luoyang periphery is not an easy job. Our road to Longmen Cave Monastery leads through a never ending street market. There are countless trucks and cars of all sizes, horse-drawn carriages, tricycles, and, of course, people carrying cargo on their shoulders. One must be extremely careful when driving through this market jungle. A Chinese taxi driver once told me, “A Chinese driver has two eyes to look in front of him and two eyes in the back of his head.” Once we have gotten out of the lively market area, a gorgeous landscape of juniper groves on the mountain slopes opens in front of our eyes. This beautiful scenery allows us to shift into a more relaxing mood and tune in for the upcoming visit to the monastery. The scale of the monastery caves is impressive. It is estimated that Longmen Cave Monastery 龙门石窟 has more than 2,000 grottoes with 43 temples and about 100,000 religious works of art. There are several thousands of Buddha statues here. Only in a country like China could it have been possible to find thousands of stonemasons, Buddha believers, who patiently toiled year after year carving Buddha figures in stone one after another, receiving only a skimpy daily meal as a reward for their work. Ironically, I can tie this to modern day scenes in China. In the summer of 1999, in Beijing, near the Forbidden City, I happened to observe hundreds of stonemasons carving ornaments in marble blocks for the future railings of the Forbidden City’s bypass. Their work was accompanied with the monotonous sound of chisels and hammers striking the surface of the stone – just like a thousand years ago. In the era of computers and modern technologies, it sounded like a salute from times gone by. As I mentioned, in 1989 I also wrote notes about my visit to the monastery. I cannot get off my mind the atrocities that were inflicted to this monastery during the Cultural Revolution – countless Buddha statues with broken noses, mutilated faces – defiled by the hands of Red Guards (Hóng Wèibīng) 红卫兵. Just like 10 years ago, during my previous visit, the many Buddha figures in the caves of the Longmen Monastery are a silent reminder about the abuses inflicted by the Red Guards. Among the visitors one might see an occasional Buddhist monk. The times have changed, and the brutal pressure on all religions has ceased, along with the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution. Buddha figures in the grottoes are reticent to speak out about what might happen tomorrow. Looking at today’s open China and the course of active reforms, one does not want to believe that there may be people in China again who would raise their hands against the holy Buddha, worshipped by a large part of the Chinese people. A walk along the banks of the river with the countless grottoes hiding Buddha figures, takes the traveler into the distant past. However, the bustle of the parking lot nearby brings us

to reality. Yes, we have come here, to the Longmen Cave Monastery not on the back of a camel like in ancient times, but in our reliable car, and we have covered really long distances. **73 74 75**

**22.04.2000** While visiting Luoyang, it is impossible not to visit the Shaolin 少林寺 Monastery. Shaolin's name has resonated far and wide in the world – as a place where martial arts are studied. During my internship in China in 1989, I already had the opportunity to visit this place. The popularity of Shaolin has grown to such an extent that in order to get to the monastery you have to make your way through a dense crowd of people. Considering that I need to drive our car all the way, I don't have the strength and willingness to fight my way through this live "wall" of people. We agree with my travel buddies that I would be waiting somewhere nearby until everyone else explores the monastery. While biding my time away, I come across several memorial plaques dedicated to foreigners – masters of martial arts, who once have honed their skills in Shaolin Monastery. They are masters of martial arts from such countries as Japan, Korea, USA, Canada, etc. Indeed, the names of these foreign martial arts masters are honored in Shaolin Monastery. The crowd becomes larger, and I start looking for my fellow travelers. Finally, we are all together again and continue our way. Sometimes the road climbs steeply upwards, at times we need to descend abruptly from a high mountain pass. I concentrate on the road, and that really takes a lot of effort. Thus, unfortunately, I miss the opportunity to enjoy the spectacular scenery. It is important that we reach our destination safely and, preferably, before the sunset, which we manage to do. At the hotel site, we are welcomed by steep, bright mountain peaks. The Huashan Mountains are one of the five Daoist shrines. They are famous for the particularly scenic rocks. A mountain trail connects several peaks, the highest of which is located at 2,130 m above the sea level. The mountain trail leads past the Daoist monasteries, pagodas, temples, gates and bridges. The Huashan Mountains are located on a mountain range that separates the northern part of Shaanxi Province 陕西省 from its southern part, as well as the north of China from its south. On an ancient map of China, where the country is depicted as a square, the Huashan Mountains occupy the western corner of the map.

We quickly check in at the small hotel. This has been a hard day driving in the mountains. At dinner we are treated to local beer called "Xibeilang" 西北狼, which could be translated as "Northwest Chinese Wolf". The Chinese beer brewed from rice malt seems lighter than the beer varieties we drink in Latvia. In any case, the evening hour with a glass of beer accompanied with remembering and sharing what we have seen on the way, is a great way to relax. **76 77 78 79**



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**23.04.2000** We get up at 6:00 and start climbing the mountain. A rough cobblestone trail, built in the course of centuries, leads us upwards. The mountain stream with crystal clear water is bubbling over the rocks. A Daoist monk wearing the characteristic black hat is descending along the cobblestone steps. On one of his shoulders, he is carrying the same type of a canvas bag that monks have been carrying in China for hundreds of years. At a quick glance, it seems that nothing whatsoever connects the monk to the modern world. It might as well have been a scene from several hundred years ago. We climb for two hours, yet we do not get to the top of the mountain. The local people say that you need at least two or three days to have a proper walk in Huashan Mountain Trails. We are planning to visit Xi'an 西安, and there is also the way back to Beijing. That's why we need to go down the mountain. If only we had more time, I am sure that we would have made it to the top. Everybody takes their seats in the car and off we go to Xi'an. We already see the skyline of Xi'an when something completely unexpected happens – we have run out of gasoline, and there is no gas station nearby. What to do? I take my rubber container and head to the nearest village. I tell the first person I meet about my problem. In a few minutes, the number of sympathetic people reaches several dozen. The news about us has already resonated through the whole village. The people are curious, and we have to answer many questions. We try to do that, but then, luckily, we see a man with a bucket of gasoline approaching us. We are saved and our mood improves considerably. This is the first time we have had this kind of a mishap while travelling in China, and we are happy that the problem has been solved. We enter Xi'an and are overwhelmed by the huge traffic jam. The transport flow is so dense that it seems a collision is unavoidable. The distance between our car and other vehicles is just a few centimeters. The traffic is like a living organism that is twisting and swirling, and I need to stay extremely focused at all times. This is very tiring, so I feel blessed when we finally reach the hotel and check in. For an hour or so we get some rest, and then we are ready for the next challenge. We want to get to the old town. Moving in the heavy traffic is stressful, so we are all a bit wound up. Finally we get to the famous Xi'an Wall and try to walk around it to get an overview of this building, which is perfectly preserved. Indeed, on the top of the wall there would be enough space for a horse-drawn carriage as the legend says. We are overwhelmed by the possibility to literally touch the history here, and it makes us ponder how impressive this capital could have been in its heyday. We continue our walk and notice a grand mosque. In the courtyard of the mosque I see three elderly men, wearing the typical round Muslim hats, deeply engrossed in their work. I approach them and see that they are inscribing lines of the Quran on a light wooden board with the help of small sharp knives, just like a surgeon's scalpels. The sharp knife separates

the white wooden chips from the board, and the beautifully curved Arabic characters remain inscribed on its surface. Not only these men have skillful hands, but they also know by heart the rigid lines of the text, in which not the slightest mistake is allowed. I start talking to the men, and we have a good conversation. Of course, they want to know where we come from. As we part, I get an unexpected present – the traditional round Muslim hat. I say thanks for the present as well as for the pleasant and sincere conversation, and we continue exploring the city, which has an outstanding place in the history of China.

**24.04.2000** At 7:00 we leave for the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇. I first visited Xi'an in January of 1989 when I was doing an internship at Fudan University. We came to Xi'an in a company of three people – Bronya from Poland, a Korean guy from the United States and me. This time I am at this unique historical object with my wife and my friends, and we have been driving all the long way from Beijing to Xi'an. The scene of the Terracotta Army that opens to our eyes is incredible. First of all, we are impressed by the number of the soldiers. We try to look into their faces. Amazingly, every soldier has unique facial features and even facial expressions. Judging from their outfits, these soldiers must have belonged to different tribes. The nuances in terms of clothes, shoes, hair arrangement, and weapons are so subtle. The emperor's guards took their places underground more than 2,000 years ago, and this complex was accidentally discovered in the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This discovery created a worldwide sensation. Now it is a well-known landmark, and tourists from all over the world flock here.

... The tomb was built for an emperor who “comes into the world only once in a thousand years”, 千古一帝 and is an outstanding monument of the world cultural heritage.

... When the young emperor ascended the throne, he was 13 years old. The country was governed by an adviser until he reached the age of 21. In 221 BC, he declared himself the first emperor of All Under Heaven (Tianxia) Empire, Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇. He managed to end the internal wars and, for the first time in China's history, create a centralized state. During the reign of Qin Shi Huang, the system of hieroglyphs was unified, systems of money, measures and weights were introduced, the construction of the Great Wall began and a unified national road network was created. The deeds of Qin Shi Huang had a huge impact on all future dynasties. However, even in such a brief description, it is impossible not to mention his other side. This emperor has also gone down in history as a ruthless fighter against the ideas of Confucianism. Even more – Qin Shi Huang ordered Confucian books burnt and

the followers of Confucian ideas buried alive in pits. 焚书坑儒. These four hieroglyphs precisely describe the emperor's intolerance of the teachings of the Great Teacher 孔子 and his followers.

Shortly after coming to power, he began construction of his mausoleum. The Terracotta army 兵马俑 protects the tomb from the east, which was the only direction from which the enemy could threaten Xi'an 西安.

The mighty emperor could not come to terms with the presumable loneliness in the afterlife. In his grand tomb, more than 600 burials were discovered, made at the same time as the emperor's burial.

The Terracotta army and cavalry were created scrupulously according to the features of the real army and fully in line with the tradition of the Qin 秦 Empire. The central building of the cemetery complex was the Underground Castle 地下宫殿, which has not been uncovered to this day. The ceiling of the castle is designed in the form of an astronomical atlas inlaid with precious stones. On the floor is a map of rivers, lakes, and seas, filled with liquid mercury, which creates an illusion of constant movement. This is complemented by a model of the geographical relief of China.

The tomb complex was built between 246 BC and 208 BC. When the emperor started construction, he was 13 years old, and the construction of the tomb complex took 39 years. In some stages of the work, the number of craftsmen and workers employed in the construction of the tombs reached 700,000 people. At that time, the country had a population of about 20 million.

The building style of the complex is meant to confirm the charisma and grandeur of the Emperor – Qin Shi Huang.

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, Chinese archaeologists conducted the tomb research. The tombs were investigated with the help of ultrasound, which showed three large cavities or voids. No further excavations are carried out today to preserve them for future generations.

... We start getting acquainted with the tomb complex by touring the 6,000–7,000 year old settlement of the original people. The old homesteads with cellars for storing provisions have been perfectly preserved. Next to the buildings are exhibited clay pots with ashes – the remains of the ancient inhabitants. Adult ashes were deposited in larger pots, children's ashes – in smaller ones. It is, therefore, understandable that cremation was known here many thousands of years ago. The homesteads used to be surrounded by deep ditches, which protected the inhabitants from predators. Using a bit of imagination, we can picture an authentic village with almost tangible evidence from thousands of years ago.

Next we proceed to the Emperor's – Qin Shi Huang's tomb, which was found by farmers in March of 1974 while digging a well near Lishan 骊山 Hill. This accidental discovery caused a real sensation – first in China and then all over the world. In an ancient country like China, there are a myriad of archaeological and historical sites. However, this one is so special that there is no excuse for a foreign traveler to miss visiting the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang.

The size and diversity of the Terracotta Army are truly grandiose – 8,099 soldiers – each with its own traits and facial expressions, belonging to different ethnicities or tribes, dressed in uniforms or clearly distinctive attire. Setting my eyes upon the thousands of these soldiers standing still, I try to imagine the society and the state where the ruler is so concerned about his life beyond the grave that he gathers hundreds of thousands of craftsmen and builders and spends his lifetime, building these tombs, which are now a celebrated UNESCO World Heritage Site. One can only agree that it is almost impossible for us to imagine the success and significance of the Qin Dynasty in the history of China and humanity.

Zhao Kangmin 赵康民, the head of the library of Shaanxi Province 陕西省, Xi'an City 西安市, Lintong County 临潼县, was first mentioned as the discoverer of the Terracotta Army. Indeed, he was the first person to report the discovery of a clay figure to the county authorities. Thus, it was believed that Zhao Kangmin was the discoverer of the tombs of the famous Emperor Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇陵 Terracotta Army 兵马俑. In those years, the peasants who struck upon the first clay figure while digging a well were disregarded.

... The Terracotta Army became a treasure of the Chinese state, and yet Zhao Kangmin was not fully recognized as a pioneer and he did not become famous in China. There lies another truth here, about which we will find out immediately.

It is peasant Yang Zhifa 杨志发 that is now presented to tourists as the discoverer of the Terracotta Army as he was the one who unearthed the famous clay figure when digging a well. What were the circumstances? In 1974 the province was suffering from severe drought and a few peasants decided to dig a new well. When they had reached the depth of 4–5 meters, one peasant's spade struck a clay figure. When the peasants saw that it was a clay figure of a human in real size, they were so scared that some of them ran away. However, some of the braver ones remained, and Yang Zhifa was among them. He brought the figure home. Yang Zhifa's wife, who was a village teacher, realized that the figure might have cultural value and the fact should be reported to the authorities. In recognition of the discovery, County authorities issued a reward to peasant Yang Zhifa – 30 yuan 元... Peasant Yang Zhifa, being a very

honest man – gave this amount to his brigade, with whom he found the clay-made human figure while digging the well. The brigade, in turn distributed this amount evenly per each person and, as a result, Yang Zhifa – received 7 Mao 毛 and 8 fen 分 in cash. At that time one could buy a small bottle of Chinese vodka for 5 Mao. Not a long time after Yang Zhifa had handed the clay figure over to the authorities, a representative of the Lintong County Library confirmed the archaeological find and thus became the pioneer discoverer of the Terracotta Army. That man was Zhao Kangmin 赵康民.

... The news that spread around the world about the amazing discovery did not bring anything good to the villagers. Large areas of the village were demarcated, the barren soil was further depleted, and all the villagers began to hate Yang Zhifa, who had sold large areas of the village for 30 yuan. Yang Zhifa, hated by his countrymen, had no choice but to leave his native village and move to another place of residence at the foot of Lishan 骊山 mountain. Separated from the rest of the world, Yang Zhifa was leading his days in solitude. In 1989, the President of the United States Bill Clinton arrived in Xi'an with his family, and during his visit to the Terracotta Army site found out that the first person to see the clay man was peasant Yang Zhifa. Bill Clinton expressed a wish to meet with, as Chinese officials at the time said, “the insignificant Yang Zhifa” 无足轻重的杨志发. Dressed in new clothes, Yang Zhifa went to a meeting with Clinton. The US president asked Yang Zhifa for his signature; however, it turned out that the peasant was illiterate. He drew three circles on the paper, which was supposed to depict the three well holes where the figures were found. Meeting Bill Clinton changed Yang Zhifa's life substantially. From being despised by his countrymen, Yang Zhifa became a respected man. He was sent to study calligraphy and learn to write. However, he learnt only 9 hieroglyphs – “The discoverer of the Terracotta Army Yang Zhifa” 兵马俑发现人杨志发.

After returning to the USA, B. Clinton sent 300,000 USD to Yang Zhifa as recognition for his contribution in researching world history. The honest peasant Yang Zhifa did not keep this money to himself again, but gave it away for a noble purpose – building a museum of the emperor's tomb. Later, he became a state-subsidized farmer; what is more, farmers in three local villages were provided jobs at the Emperor Qin Shi Huang Museum. Every week they worked only four days; their working day lasted only a few hours, yet they received 8,000 yuan a month. For one of the Spring Festivals, the deputy governor of Shaanxi Province 陕西省 sent the museum a couple of slogans – 翻身不忘共产党, 致富全靠秦始皇 meaning: “If you have stood on your feet – don't forget the Communist Party; you have come to prosperity – thanks to Emperor Qin Shi Huang”...



In the end, the discovery of the Terracotta Army is inseparable from the contribution of many people. We cannot deny the merits of the venerable Zhao Kangmin in the unveiling of the tombs, nor can we underestimate the contribution of Yang Zhifa 杨志发.

This historical artifact is absolutely priceless, a true treasure of the Chinese people.

Let's assume that not all secrets of the Terracotta Army have been revealed yet, but the day will come when it will happen!

In the evening we return to Xi'an, but hardly have energy to explore the most famous capital of Ancient China. We are not just physically exhausted, but also mentally unable to absorb new information. This trip has taught me one important lesson, which might be of use to other travellers. Yes, it is fun to travel around by car; however, if you also want to record your impressions, then you'd better think about delegating the tasks during the trip more carefully. Being the driver and a correspondent at the same time can turn out to be a bit too difficult.

Yet, we pull ourselves together and walk slowly to Baxiangong 八仙宫 antiques market. However, we are so saturated with the new information that we cannot really dig into the vast offerings where next to the real thing you can find superb imitations. Very often they are of such a high quality that even an expert cannot tell the difference.

**25.04.2000** The old town surrounded by high walls, the impressive mosque, the antiques market, the strict ranks of soldiers in the tomb of Emperor Qin Shi Huang – we are leaving them all behind as we cross the Huang He 黄河 River. This river is also known by the name “Yellow River”, which is a direct translation of the characters making up the river's name. Indeed, its muddy waters have a brownish yellow hue. What is more, the current here seems quite strong. You don't want to imagine what happens when the river breaks loose and leaves its banks during the floods. The town of Xi'an 西安, which we are leaving now, is the administrative center of Shaanxi 陕西省 province. On the other side of the river, starts another province with a similar name – Shanxi 山西. In my opinion, Xi'an, known as the capital of Ancient China, deserves a higher place in the hierarchy of China cities than just the capital of a province. Looking outside the car window, the overall impression is that the whole country has entered an intensive phase of reconstruction and economic upswing. This is especially evident on the highways we have been traveling for several days. However, as it might happen elsewhere in the world, in one section of the road we get into a traffic jam. It's a mountainous mining area, and the bypass leads through dusty, dilapidated villages. Here we see

a different picture. Board ends, old and rusty wheelbarrows, wires, food containers – a few men are sitting in the middle of this mess, smoking and discussing something. It seems it does not even occur to them that surroundings can be kept clean and orderly. Unexpectedly, we are caught in a sandstorm. It feels as if somebody were throwing handfuls of sand at us. Young trees, recently planted, are swaying in the wind. Sometimes, the gusts are so strong that they are pushing our car sideways. Unshaken by the furious wind, a monument to some Chinese historical hero stands on a stone pedestal. Only the folds of his ancient gown are filling up with sand. Another turn – a pagoda emerges through the veil of sand and dust particles. Its empty window holes are overlooking indifferently the highway where heavy loaded trucks are dashing swiftly by. These scenes from the sandstorm stay engraved in my memory. At sunset we arrive at the administrative center of Shanxi Province in Taiyuan 山西省会太原. Having experienced the sandstorm on the road and spent several hours in the car, we once again need to find a place to stay. Everything works out well, and there's only one thought on my mind – to get some sleep.

**26.04.2000** We start the day with repairing the tire. On our itinerary we have one of the most interesting tourist attractions in Taiyuan city – the Twin Pagoda 双塔寺. In China, pagodas are most often retained in their authentic historical look. They have not been improved by applying modern techniques or materials. It seems that it is exactly this kind of attitude that allows one's imagination to conjure up scenes from the past, when monks dwelled in pagodas. They not only performed religious rituals there, but also copied and translated canons from Sanskrit. Pagodas certainly confirm the skillfulness of their architects and builders in the course of many centuries. Having looked at Taiyuan's Twin Pagoda, we start our way back to Beijing because the time allotted for the trip is expiring quickly. The mountain road is narrow, but its quality is excellent. Small villages have burrowed into the clay slopes on the roadside. Every possible patch of land has been cultivated. Finally, we pass Shijiazhuang 石家庄, and then reach Beijing District, or the Greater Beijing 大北京, as the capital of China is sometimes called. According to the administrative division adopted by the PRC, a city may include rural areas adjacent to it. Therefore, the population numbers may differ from one source to another. On the western side of the horizon we see the jagged mountain peaks. The sky with the cumulus clouds looks just like in Latvia. Weary after the long trip, but also happy and charged with a load of new impressions, we drive along the streets of Beijing. We say good-bye to our travel companions and head to the Latvian Embassy, our sweet home. It is always a fantastic feeling – to return home, especially after such an intensive schedule, when every day has brought us new challenges and revelations. **80 81 82 83**



**27.04.2000** After the week-long “rally”, our car looks miserable and very dirty, so I start my day with washing the car. While performing this simple, but responsible job, I come to the conclusion that I will need some time before I’m ready to hit the road again. In fact, during the two years, spent in China, I drove 22,000 km, without any reprimands from the side of the law enforcement authorities or any accidents. Yet, to tell the truth, sitting behind the wheel in China is not exactly a Sunday picnic.

There are piles of documents both on my table and on my computer. I’m trying to organize them and respond to the most urgent ones. We send two packages to Latvia by DHL. The Ambassador is attending a reception at the Embassy of the Republic of South Africa.

**28.04.2000** I am preparing a request for the MFA of Latvia for allotment of funds for the Embassy of the LR in the PRC. We collect the trip pictures from the photo store. This will be a great complement to our story.

**29.04.2000** This is our 33<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary. The 29<sup>th</sup> of April, 1967 seems both so far and so near. We first set eyes on each other in Moscow, on the wide steps of the Oriental Language Institute of Moscow University. Isn’t that something that has been destined to happen – we are both now in the Far East – in China. Isn’t that something that we were getting ready for while studying at the university? Due to the political situation, for a long time it seemed like a dream, almost impossible to attain. Yet, here we are, and we have been using the Chinese language daily already for the second year. A few days ago, we returned from the trip through this ancient land, which today is undergoing a true renewal. In the end, we can feel satisfied with the way our lives have evolved. We receive greetings from all our three sons. Our old friends haven’t forgotten about us, either. Galina has prepared a festive dinner, and in the evening we remember our parents. We think back to the time when we had our wedding – actually, twice – both in Moscow and also in Riga – in my old house by the Viaduct Bridge. We feel like getting some fresh air, so we decide to go for an evening walk. However, it is so hot and humid outside that we soon return to the embassy. We spend the rest of the evening of our special day in a quiet, yet sincere mood.

**30.04.2000** Galina fills out bank documents at the embassy. Then we go to the bank and withdraw cash for the embassy’s daily needs – both US dollars and yuan. We need to hurry up because starting with the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, state institutions close for holidays. Galina is arranging our recent trip photos in the album.

**01.05.2000** The Ambassador arrives at work in the morning. He has forgotten that the 1<sup>st</sup> of May is a holiday both in Latvia and in China. Soon he returns





to his suburban residence. We decide to try a very special fruit – the so-called “king of the fruit” – durian. When we cut the fruit open, we find nuts inside – about the size of a walnut. The pulp tastes good, but nothing out of the ordinary. Sure, your life will not be miserable if you never try durian. **84**

**02.05.2000** We have a long discussion with the Ambassador about the ways to activate Latvian-Chinese economic cooperation. The second point on our agenda is the forthcoming visit of our Minister of Foreign Affairs to the PRC. Once again, communications have gone out of order, and we need to call technicians. The walk after work in our neighborhood is a real blessing. The heat has ceased and the evening breeze is so refreshing.

**03.05.2000** The Ambassador and I are working on an article describing the activities of the Latvian Embassy in the PRC for the Latvian business newspaper “Lietišķā Diena”. We have planned for tomorrow to put our ideas together and create an article reflecting the work of the embassy.

**04.05.2000** Early in the morning we are in the swimming pool, which is always very energizing. Well, if not for the fact that the water temperature today is +27 °C. Once back at the embassy, I complete the article on the input of the Latvian Embassy in the search of market opportunities in China.

**06.05.2000** I open the Internet, and I cannot believe my eyes – in the World Hockey Championship in St. Petersburg, Latvia has beaten Russia 3:2. It is a truly historic event, and it will be something to tell about to other diplomats here, in China. Galina and I have decided to take a car ride outside Beijing. We pass Huairou 怀柔, and the journey up the mountain begins. In some places, there's just a wall of hard rock on one side and an abyss on the other



side of the road. This makes us a bit wary, especially when, down in the gorge, we see a truck, which resembles a squashed metal pancake. The crumbling remains of the Great Wall of China that we see here bear very little resemblance to the glamorous Badaling 八达岭 wall sector, which is mainly shown to tourists from all over the world. The mountain slopes look fresh and green in spring. In the distance we can see the pointed mountain peaks. For people who have grown up on the plains, such sight makes their hearts beat faster, and we are not an exception. Actually, it does not take long from Beijing to get to the mountains. Beijing borders on the west with the Xishan 西山 Mountains. We stop to relax and enjoy the delightful spring scenery. Although surrounded by mountain peaks, seemingly in the middle nowhere, we manage to get a fantastic trout in a roadside restaurant. We are heading back to town, happy and relaxed.

**07.05.2000** Sunday passes struggling with loads of different chores. The leaves of the tall aspen trees behind our window are trembling in the evening breeze and making that particular sound that might mean the weather is changing.

**08.05.2000** We have lost telephone and fax connections with Riga. Supposedly, the international cable has been damaged. Nobody knows when it might be fixed. The Ambassador, together with other colleagues, has been invited to a talk with the Prime Minister of the PRC, Zhu Rongji. Positive feedback arrives from Riga about our joint article for the business newspaper "Lietišķā Diena".

**09.05.2000** Today is the Ambassador's name day. We search for nice flowers for a long time and finally find a gorgeous bouquet of gladiolus. It's a small event at the Ambassador's place – just his family and both of us. Today is also the day when historically, in the USSR tradition, we used to celebrate Victory Day. I started school in 1945; so naturally, I have some war time memories. On the Viaduct Bridge, next to Bērzaunes Street, where my home was, a tall German soldier was standing with his uniform sleeves rolled up and a heavy automatic gun on his chest. Looking at this man, I was wondering – can anybody be mightier or stronger than him? That night, before the Soviet troops arrived, the Viaduct Bridge was blown up. The nearby "Ērenpreis" Bicycle Factory had all its windows shattered to pieces. In Zemitāna Railway Station, a blown-up locomotive was lying on its side. These childhood scenes are as if imprinted in my memory. Probably, as a six year old boy, I could not draw any logical connections at that time. During the fifty-five years of the Soviet rule, they were propagating their own official point of view. Today, we can look at the causes and consequences of the war from a different angle. What matters most is the desire to prevent a recurrence of a similar global

catastrophe created by people themselves. Yet, 1945 is relentlessly fading away into the realm of history.

**11.05.2000** Together with the Ambassador, we meet the MFA of the PRC, where we discuss the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia I. Bērziņš to the PRC. The visit will last four to five days, three days in Beijing and one and a half days in Xi'an. We also talk about a possibility to organize a Latvian photo exhibition at the Exhibition Center. 50,000 yuan for seven days does not sound like a realistic price for us. At the end of the day, together with Galina, we enter the recent expenses into the computer files. The psychological tension is beginning to show in connection with the forthcoming visit of the Foreign Minister I. Bērziņš to China.

**12.05.2000** I contact Tianjin about the new embassy car that has arrived. It turns out that the brokerage firm is located in Sanlitun, our diplomatic district. Two ladies, employees of the company, come to the embassy, and we fill in all the necessary documents. Everything also goes smoothly with the customs formalities. We drive to the bank to pay our phone bills. Then again – work with the financial documents until all weekly expenses have been recorded.

**13.05.2000** For the weekend outing, we choose to drive out of town in the southern direction, which we have not explored yet. In Beijing, most of the historical objects are located either in the Old Town or in the western side of the city. The first park we see is Tuanjie Gongyuan 团结公园 and the other one is Senlin Gongyuan 森林公园, which could be translated as the Wood Park, just like the famous Mežaparks (a district named Forest Park) in Riga. To the south of Beijing stretches a wide plain with cultivated fields and well-maintained roads lined with whitewashed poplar trunks. Overall, the area is very tidy. Our hearts rejoice when we look at the freshly green fields of wheat. The parks we visit are newly created recreational areas and cannot boast rich historical background, unlike the parks in inner Beijing. Nevertheless, they likewise offer the visitor an opportunity to enjoy a relaxing walk along the shady alleys, and, of course, the traditional elements – gazebos, ponds and humpback bridges are integral parts of these parks as well. What is more, to get to these parks we did not need to spend many hours in the car. Satisfied that we have used the opportunity to leave the densely crowded city center, we drive back home.

**14.05.2000** Sunday starts with drizzling rain. Hiding under our umbrellas we take a walk to the optician's to pick up Galina's new glasses. The old glasses were left on a bench in one of the parks. The rain becomes stronger. The sky is grey and overcast. At home, we have "ethnic" comfort food – young boiled potatoes with cottage cheese and sour cream. This is the taste of my childhood.

In China, sometimes you need to work hard to cook something that we have been used to in Latvia. In the evening, I go to the wet sauna, which is, probably, the best ritual of the week.

**15.05.2000** An agreement has been reached on the meeting with the Ministry of Railways of the PRC tomorrow. So far, the Ministry of Culture of the PRC has not sent an offer for premises for the Latvian photo exhibition.

At 18:00 we attend an impressive event at the Kunlun 昆仑 Hotel. The event is dedicated to Shanghai, which is applying for the status of an EXPO host city in 2010. I meet the Mayor of Shanghai, the Vice Mayor, and the Head of the External Relations Department of Shanghai Municipality.

**16.05.2000** At the Ministry of Railways of the PRC we have a constructive conversation with a senior consultant of the External Relations Department. Right after the meeting, I write a report to “Altair”. A representative of a Tianjin company that manufactures firefighting equipment arrives at our embassy. She will be going on a business trip to Riga in July. We provide the representative with the necessary information. In the evening, we receive we receive the address of the exhibition hall we requested from the Ministry of Culture of the PRC. I revise the commentary prepared for the Latvian photo exhibition.

**17.05.2000** At 10:30, at the Embassy of Japan, I offer my condolences on the death of former Japanese Prime Minister Keturo Obuchi. In the afternoon we visit the hall where the Latvian photo exhibition presumably could take place. We agree on all the details.

**18.05.2000** I get on my bike and go to the Workers’ Stadium 工人体育场. First I ride three loops on my bike. Then practice tennis against the wall. Finally, I end up with stretching exercises on the bank of the pond by the green willow trees. That’s a good start for the working day. Such physical activities have become almost a routine for me.

At 12:00 I have a routine working dinner, and again Beijing duck is being served. I cannot deny that it is tasty, yet it has also become a sort of a routine – I’ve had it so many times, both on my visits to China, as well as now while I’m here on duty.

I am reading Latvian papers. There’s a sad and tragic story about the great Latvian actress Antra Liedskalniņa, who has passed away. The leaves in the aspen tree outside our window are trembling in the slight breeze...

**19.05.2000** Today is the bank day. We withdraw cash for embassy payments – both US dollars and yuan.

Together with my spouse Galina we attend a reception at the Cameroon Embassy. It is widely attended by diplomats of other African countries with



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their spouses. The ladies are absolutely amazing. Their coiffures, exotic gowns and color palette go beyond the wildest imagination. The delicious cuisine at the reception tops it all, and the afternoon is a great success.

At 18.00 I need to attend “Finnair” reception where I meet Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian diplomats.

**20.05.2000** On Saturday we have decided to go on a trip to Nanhaizi David’s deer garden. 南海子麋鹿苑. We wander around a little bit until we get off the Third Circuit Road 三环路. We need to ask for the way; however, in the end, we find the garden. The area is really large. Once, the emperor used to hunt deer here. At one point these species of deer disappeared in China altogether. Ironically, it turned out that they had survived in England. Later, the UK donated several couples of these deer species to China. Today the deer garden features about 800 deer. Sad and touching is the memorial site dedicated to extinct animals. Their names are written on rectangular concrete slabs as if creating a “domino effect”. Once a species perishes, it creates an irreversible domino effect. Here, one can also find drawings and poetry devoted to birds and animals that no longer exist in the world. There are no crowds, and it is a great place to escape from the hustle and bustle from the city. **85**

**21.05.2000** We focus this Sunday on our household chores. We clean the interior of the car and do our routine shopping. Outside it is +28 °C, and we are not in the mood for walking. I organize documents in folders. In order to enforce my Chinese character skills, I copy the names of some celebrated working people from the pages of “Rénmín Ribào” newspaper onto the computer. Thus I activate my knowledge of the characters and better memorize them.

**22.05.2000** Before the clock strikes six in the morning, I am already on my bike on the way to the stadium. I practice my tennis skills and then do some exercises in the shade of the willow trees by the pond. Well, not strictly on a daily basis, but carried out regularly enough, these morning exercises have already become a habit and give me the energy much needed to cope with my work duties.

At 9:00 we are at the furniture shop and for our big shopping spree: 26 chairs, a big conference table, office furniture, a writing desk, an office chair, and a bookcase. Then we go to Customs and sort out all formalities needed to receive the new embassy car.

**23.05.2000** Early in the morning, I am riding my bike along the shady streets of Sanlitun district. It is interesting to watch how elderly men bring out cages with their canary birds, then hang the cages on the branches of a ginko tree and listen to the birds singing. Sometimes they put up the bird cages very close to each other to compare the songs. The birds sing, and the men can socialize and enjoy good company. This is just one of the many interesting hobbies I have observed that Chinese people like to practice.

At 9:30 together with the Ambassador we attend The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (NPC) – the Chinese Parliament, where we discuss in detail the visit of Latvian parliamentarians to China.

In the afternoon, we attend an exhibition of a Slovakian surrealist – I'm afraid, not my cup of tea. At the airport, after a long and complicated search, we finally receive our VIP cards.

Mr M. Deitons from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia reports that Minister I. Bērziņš does not wish to deliver a talk during his visit to China.

**24.05.2000** My wife Galina and I are at the Exhibition Association of the Ministry of Culture of the PRC. We are warmly welcomed; however, the fee for renting the premises necessary for the Latvian photo exhibition continues to grow and has already reached 18,000 yuan, plus 9,000 yuan more for posters and advertising expenses in the newspapers.



I submit a letter from our Foreign Minister I. Bērziņš to the Prime Minister of the PRC at the Eastern European Department of the MFA of the PRC.

The transport company delivers the new embassy car.

**25.05.2000** At the Ministry of Culture of the PRC, we finalize an agreement on the Latvian photo exhibition during the visit of Foreign Minister I. Bērziņš from 14.05.2000 until 18.05.2000. We pay 18,000 yuan for this service.

At 11:30 I attend the Africa Day reception at the Togolese Embassy. Then I receive the VIP cards at the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC.

Journalist O. Gerts, whom we once met in Vladivostok, visits our embassy.

**26.05.2000** At 9:00 we are at the bank, where we withdraw cash for short-term expenses. We need to register the new car at the customs office. The customs official looks for the engine number with the help of a small mirror, but does not find it. Eventually, they copy the number from the car's documents.

At 12:00 I am having a working lunch with the editor of the Economic Herald about interviewing I. Bērziņš during his visit to China.

**27.05.2000** We organize the printed promotional materials, which have been brought from Latvia. We additionally pay 7,400 yuan to the Exhibition Association of the Ministry of Culture of the PRC for annotations, invitations, information in the newspapers and organizing the opening ceremony of the exhibition.

The delivery men bring the big conference table to the embassy premises. We move the ascetic furniture bought by us initially to the consular section, our bedroom and my office. Together with the Ambassador's family we go once more to the furniture store where we purchase a sofa and some chairs.

**31.05.2000** At an early morning hour, I am at the Workers' Stadium by the pond, under the branches of my favorite willow trees. A white duck mother with a couple of dozen yellow ducklings is gliding on the surface of the pond. The serene scene is filled with cheerful optimism.

I apply to the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC for a new diplomatic list.

The process of registering the new car at the Diagnostics Center seems endless. It is necessary to stay even after lunch to complete the formalities.

**02.06.2000** At 8:00 we are at the MFA of the PRC. The diplomats from Eastern Europe, the Baltic states and the CIS have been offered a joint trip. In an hour and a half, we are in Tangshan 唐山, which in July 1976 was hit by an earthquake that turned into a giant disaster. About 200,000 people perished. Our delegation visits the museum dedicated to the disaster. I have already

been here before and have told about it in detail when describing our trip to Qingdao 青岛.

Next we drive to “Panasonic” and ceramics factories. In the evening, we are welcomed by the mayor of Tangshan. There are many speeches, and the food is excellent. We are happy when the evening closes and we can have some rest after the long day. On the next day we visit a spinning mill and a cable factory. The visit to the factory reminds of the Soviet time excursions to production sites. What is more, mostly Russian is spoken throughout the day. The atmosphere is quite relaxed, though, and very often we end up discussing mutually how each country is developing relationships with the PRC. At the end of the trip, we arrive at the Eastern Tomb of the Qing Dynasty 清东陵. In Chinese tradition, tombs must be located on the southern slope of the mountain. The slope, in turn, should overlook a lake or a river. In these tombs, everything strictly meets the requirements of Feng Shui, so the heavenly sons can rest in peace. We manage to take a walk along the paths, as well as to catch a glimpse of a theatrical historical performance with lines of participants dressed up in ancient, lavish costumes. The end of the trip with an insight into the history and Chinese traditions is really interesting, all the more so because this is my first visit to this tomb. **86** **87** **88** Immediately after returning to the embassy, at 18:30, I have to take on the role of a host, receiving the delegation of Latvian parliamentarians. There are many questions about the work of the embassy, speeches and wishes. It is great to meet up with colleagues with whom I have worked together in the past. Everyone is in an uplifting mood. This has been a very busy and stressful, but rewarding day.

**05.06.2000** We do our routine procedures at the bank. Then I attend a reception at the Danish Embassy. In the afternoon, I prepare invitations in English and Chinese for the event at the Latvian Embassy on June 14, which is the remembrance day of Soviet deportations in 1941. We plan to invite 20 ambassadors, as well as representatives of several key ministries of the PRC, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Trade, the Ministry of Culture, and a few other institutions. I finish the complete list late at night.

**06.06.2000** 8:30 – at the Exhibition Association of the Ministry of Culture we have an agreement on invitations.

We receive the new car license plates before lunch at the diagnostics center. In the afternoon, we enter the last week’s expenses on the computer.

An order has arrived from Riga – as of September 1 this year, Mr P. Pildegovičs will be returning to the disposal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That brings complete clarity to our future plans.



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**07.06.2000** Our routine tasks include filing insurance documents for the new car and completing the bank transactions. We receive the printed invitations for our reception planned on June 14. I make calls to the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC. The schedule is pretty tense today.

**08.06.2000** In the boiling heat, I make a considerable round in my car delivering invitations to the Eastern Europe Department of the MFA of the PRC, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation of the PRC, the Ministry of Culture. In the end, all our invitations have been passed to the addressees.

At 14:00 we go to the National People's Congress, Chinese Parliament. We meet with Deputy Foreign Minister Wang Guang Ya. On behalf of Latvia, the address is delivered by the Speaker of the Latvian Parliament (the *Saeima*), Mr R. Pīks. After the official dinner, in a narrower circle we have a chat, which extends a bit too long. We get home very late – 23:30, completely exhausted.

**10.06.2000** I organize into folders the documentation for the new car, photo exhibitions, etc. Together with Galina, we enter a large stack of financial documents on the computer. The work's been done. Two hall chairs and a table are brought from the furniture store. After a while – 26 chairs made of Malaysian wood are delivered. Thus, our conference hall has been fully furnished.

**11.06.2000** It's Sunday and the desire to leave the town is only natural. Again, we choose the lesser-known southern direction. On the map, we have found Wanmulin 万亩林 Park. We find the park without any problems. It turns out that this park also has a small zoo with several pheasant subspecies, as well as rare animals, such as the wild donkeys. We spend several wonderful hours on the shore of a picturesque pond, sitting on a concrete bench in the shade. A couple of fishermen are angling nearby. In a short while, they have a decent catch. For the first time in China, I hear the cuckoo, which is called "bugu" by the Chinese 布谷. This is how the Chinese perceive the bird's song, which to us seems to sound like "cuckoo". It is not even Midsummer, yet we see on the roadside that the first wheat crops are being harvested already. **89 90 91**

**12.06.2000** At 9:00, employees of the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC arrive at the embassy to get acquainted with the location and directions to the photo exhibition. Everything has been coordinated, and the photos for the display have also arrived. It is boiling hot in Beijing today – +38 degrees Celsius.

**13.06.2000** We receive the delegation led by Foreign Minister I. Bērziņš at the airport. Then we proceed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, where we are met by the Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan 唐家璇. He speaks so quietly that I need to concentrate really hard to follow what he is saying.





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The next meeting is at the Foreign Policy Association. I take the floor and outline briefly the forthcoming important event in Latvia – the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Riga. I also note that the relations between the twin cities of Riga and Suzhou are developing successfully. The next stop is the Ministry of Foreign Trade of the PRC. Everything goes according to the plan. The tense atmosphere of the high-level visit is exacerbated by the sizzling heat in Beijing.

**14.06.2000** The delegation leaves for the Great Wall of China. I stay at the embassy.

At 14:00, a meeting takes place at the Ministry of Railways of the PRC. The Latvian photo exhibition opens at 15:00. The Chinese assisting staff has set up the exhibition successfully and with taste. We don't see many visitors yet. The Ambassador of Kazakhstan, with whom I have had a good relationship for two years already, presents me a gift – two valuable books. One of them is called "Kochevniki", which could be translated as "nomads", and the other is the book "Asia" by the well-known dissident Olzhas Suleimenov. This man became famous in Kazakhstan and throughout the USSR for advocating the closure of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site. Our Minister of Foreign Affairs is being interviewed.

The official reception at the Latvian Embassy starts at 18:30. Ambassadors from Portugal, Ukraine, Denmark, Norway, and other countries start arriving. And yet... Here are some words from the address by Foreign Minister I. Bērziņš: "The Embassy of Latvia was established in 1998... Now we are opening the Embassy of Latvia..."

The Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC had been working since July 17, 1998, when my spouse and I arrived in China with the mandate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia to open the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. Since that moment, the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC had been working for almost two years, for which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia had been regularly receiving reports. My spouse Galina and I had worked together at the embassy for less than two years, without any assistants. Not a single word was said about that period. Obviously, our novice foreign minister, who previously had been mostly occupied with domestic political battles, had a very vague idea of what an embassy's work involves. **92**

**15.06.2000** Our delegation arrives at the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China – the Chinese parliament. We meet with the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. In conclusion, we meet with the representative of the younger generation – the Vice Chairman of the PRC

Hu Jintao 胡锦涛. I have an opportunity to exchange a few words in Chinese with Vice Chairman Hu Jintao. **93**

While getting ready for this visit, I have been participating in the preparation of all the key points of the talks. Not only did I have the honor of establishing the Asia and Africa Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, but I also headed it since 1991, when I started working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thus, together with the Ambassador, we have worked hard on bringing to life the idea of our Foreign Minister's visit to China.

We are again at the airport, and our delegation is leaving for Xi'an.

**16.06.2000** At the bank we withdraw a considerable sum of cash because we have had quite a few expenses this week. We also pay our telephone and electricity bills.

Dark clouds gather at midday, and we have a pouring rain for the first time this summer. I even hear thunder rumbling. In the evening, Galina and I watch the occasional lightning bolts illuminating the horizon. It is good to spend these hours together peacefully. The garrison commands have ceased outside our windows. Even the birds in the aspen trees have become quiet.

**18.06.2000** We arrive at the airport. The visit of the Foreign Minister has come to a close. We are finally all together, and it seems that we could have a sincere talk now. Yet, it seems that there is nothing to talk about. The Minister says thoughtfully – we need to hire a Chinese secretary. The Minister seems very quiet and concerned. No objections from our side – if a Chinese secretary needs to be hired, then it needs to be done.

**19.06.2000** We go to our photo exhibition, where we take down the photos and bring them to the embassy.

The heat is sweltering in Beijing, and driving is not easy. The Ambassador asks me to name about 14 persons to whom I. Bērziņš should send letters of thanks. In the afternoon, we make subscriptions for newspapers – both in Chinese and in English. I prepare the note on the ambassador's leave. Galina organizes expenditure receipts. Then we go to the Kempinski Hotel to pay for the reception of the opening of the embassy premises (11,775 yuan). At the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC we receive a photo album with an account of I. Bērziņš visit. We pay for the transfer of a container from Tianjin. The day is unbearably hot – it is boiling outside. Galina and I celebrate our youngest son's birthday.

**21.06.2000** The Ambassador leaves for his vacation together with the family. We have dinner with the people from the Exhibition Centre. The atmosphere is joyful and relaxed.



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**22.06.2000** We are preparing a letter of condolences on the death of the mother of the Emperor of Japan and submit the letter to the Japanese Ambassador's residence.

We go to the Luxembourg Embassy in the Dong Dan 东单 district, which is in the heart of the ancient Beijing. It features a tangled network of single-storied houses and small streets, which are called "hutung" 胡同 in Chinese. This is the only embassy I have visited so far which is located in the historical center of the city. In the inner courtyard, musicians are playing traditional Chinese string instruments. Elegant mini snacks are being offered. Everything here is well thought over, sophisticated and demonstrating a true understanding of Chinese culture and traditions. The Luxembourg Embassy has invited ambassadors from

many European and other countries. Luxembourg diplomats have no problems with Chinese language skills, let alone with other European languages.

Back home at our embassy we work hard recording all of the expenses until the books are balanced.

**23.06.2000** It is sweltering in Beijing on our national holiday – Midsummer.

We attend a reception at the Slovenian Embassy. We are all together – a full complement of Lithuanian, Estonian and Latvian embassies, with Galina and I as representatives from the latter. I share the news from our MFA that in Berlin, the embassy personnel of the three Baltic countries have decided to celebrate Midsummer, or Janis's day, as we call it, together.

In the evening, back at the embassy, we both try to create Midsummer Eve's atmosphere. We have so many memories to share – how we celebrated the shortest night of the year together with the Latvian diaspora in Vladivostok during our ten year stay in the Far East, and, of course, how we used to celebrate back home, in Latvia. We get greetings this evening also from our sons and our friends.

**24.06.2000** Galina is working in the consular section. The room looks much more compact and better organized now. It is pouring outside. The rain does not stop for two hours. I find a good read – the diaries from my Lithuanian diplomatic mission period. The day is very quiet, and we are both in a reading mood – feels like being in a reading hall of a library.

**27.06.2000** In a few weeks, this is the third time we need to express our condolences to Japan – on the death of former Prime Minister Takeshita. We take our English-Russian dictionary to a library in Beijing to have it rebound.

**30.06.2000** We go to the bank and withdraw 500 USD. It seems that there is no more money on our account. Galina starts working on the semi-annual financial report, and works on it all day.

When the sun is setting in the middle of summer, our kitchenette with the pine wood table and chairs seems a very cozy place. We sit there and share memories about our childhood years – mine spent in Latvia and Galina's – in Kamchatka. We do not often get in such a sentimental mood, yet, probably, taking a walk down the memory lane from time to time is inherent to human nature.

**01.07.2000** On Sunday we have decided to drive somewhere. Around 6:30 we leave for Huairou 怀柔. We are driving along an authentic mountain road. The river valley is about a kilometer below us. We come to a small village, called Liulimiao 琉璃庙. There we have lunch in a small restaurant. The trout fillet, lamb, and shrimp are delicious. There are few people around, and we catch that Sunday feeling. We turn our car around, and soon we are back

on the plain again. This has probably been one of the most difficult trips, as the temperature outside is well around +40 degrees Celsius.

**03.07.2000** It is the National Day of Belarus. The reception is mainly attended by CIS ambassadors, as well as some Eastern European diplomats. No matter how things unfold, Belarus is just a few kilometers from Daugavpils city, one of the regional centers in the eastern part of Latvia, and only a dialogue can help maintain good relations. Fortunately, I know a few anecdotes in the Belarusian language, which help me as ice-breakers now.

In the evening, I am attending a US Embassy reception at the Sheraton Hotel. The Ambassador and his spouse are greeting the guests. One lady of a mature age is wearing a bright blouse in the colors of the American flag. Perhaps something less flashy would be more age-appropriate? Well, I am just thinking. Here and there I see the shaved napes of US marines. The snacks are very democratic – sliced corn cobs, beer, Big Mac. Mellow saxophone music is playing in the background and people exclaim “Fantastic!” now and then.

**04.07.2000** Galina keeps struggling with the semi-annual financial report, without hardly any visible results yet.

During the day it starts raining incessantly. In the evening, Galina has some good news – she has finished the report! Taking into account that she is a doctor of biological sciences and has never worked in the financial sphere, she delves into the financial nuances with her inherent sense of responsibility and, for the second year in a row, successfully copes with work without which no government structure can exist.

**05.07.2000** We sent letters of thanks from Foreign Minister I. Bērziņš to several ministries of the PRC, as well as to Vice President Hu Jintao. I contact the Ministry of Culture of the PRC and discuss the possible time and place for the exhibition of the Latvian artist Mr Petraškevičs. The financial report for the first half of the year has been sent to the MFA of Latvia.

**10.07.2000** I prepare the response to the proposal of the Protocol Department of the MFA of the PRC to go on a trip to Ningxia Autonomous Region and Qinghai Province on 24 August.

**12.07.2000** I am preparing theses for a discussion with experts from the PRC on how the PRC has avoided anti-dumping steps taken by the US Department of Commerce regarding imports of steel products from the PRC to the USA. It turns out that such countries as Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus have also suffered from US anti-dumping measures. I call the embassies of these countries and try to find out about the present situation. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Trade confirm, however, that Chinese



steel producers have suffered from the US anti-dumping measures. I prepare and send a report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. I am attending the National Day celebrations (Storming of the Bastille) at the French Embassy.

In the evening, we see an exhibition of Peruvian paintings in the hall of the Kempinski Hotel.

**15.07.2000** Galina's sister Ina as well as the parents of our daughter-in-law have arrived from Vladivostok to visit us. We are now a family of five for a few days. Galina and I try to show our visitors Beijing, which we already know quite well. When Galina is together with our guests, I stay alone at the embassy to do paperwork. Today is my birthday. We are up already at 6:00 a.m. and drive to the Great Wall. It is very hot, and the visibility is poor. This time we climb the left side. We are all sweating out, yet we reach the top and are very happy. Next we go to Yanqing 延庆 Aquapark. This is pure enjoyment – swimming-pools, water slides, hot mineral water baths... In the evening we sit at the festive table at home and talk about the good old times – Uncle Jānis' country house in Eglaine parish, the long and sweet summers in the outskirts of Krāslava and Daugavpils. The atmosphere is cordial, and the birthday party is perfect.

**16.07.2000** It's a "China Daily" event at a musical instrument store. They demonstrate and play the traditional Chinese string instruments and pipes. At another table, a grey-haired craftsman demonstrates how to cut out a stamp with the help of some sharp instrument. As a present, we get a calligraphy sample.

**17.07.2000** Both sisters are buying different teas to take to Vladivostok. At around 15:30 we are at the Beijing Railway Station. Our guests take their seats, and the train starts its journey to Harbin.

**18.07.2000** We pay around 12,000 yuan for long-distance calls, mobile phones and electricity (expenses related to organizing the reception of parliamentarians and the Foreign Minister in Beijing).

We receive the new diplomatic list from the MFA of the PRC.

**19.07.2000** At 8:15 I go to the Beijing Library, where I receive the re-bound English-Russian dictionary. At 13:30 I am at the Beijing Railway Station. I am watching crowds of people passing by: stylish girls on giant platform heels, humble working men in black Chinese slippers, the new rich – dressed intentionally modestly, but with the air of certain exquisite elegance. The high-speed train we take is heading to Beidaihe 北戴河. In the countryside, the wheat has

already been harvested, and young corn sprouts are already stretching towards the sun. After two and a half hours, we arrive at our destination.

**20.07.2000** We are taken by bus to the seminar place – Qinhuangdao 秦皇岛. Unexpectedly, after a talk by a French colleague, I am invited onto the stage. I climb to the podium and tell, in fluent Chinese, my story of why Latvia is interested in the New Silk Road project and why Latvia hopes to become one of the pillars of this project. The reaction of the audience is exceptionally curious and enthusiastic. People address me. They want to exchange business cards and do not hide admiration of my Chinese language skills. In the further course of the seminar, a representative of the Ministry of Railways of the PRC, the editor of the “Economic Herald” and an expert from Taiwan also mention Latvia in their talks.

**21.07.2000** Today, the New Silk Road project is no longer referred to just as an international mega-project, but also as a lever to balance the development in China, bringing the development level of the inner regions of Western China closer to the development level of the coastal provinces.

It is already late in the evening when our double-decker train starts its way back past the well-kept fields of the Chinese plain. The sun's edge touches the horizon and disappears below it. Here and there people are hurrying to finish the day's work.

**22.07.2000** I write a report on the Beidaihe seminar, sort out and organize documents, including yesterday's seminar materials.

**24.07.2000** First, we go to the bank. Then, we drive to the airport to meet the Ambassador, who is returning from vacation with his family.

I make a call to Latvian company “Radiotekhnika” about a draft contract for the purchase of RRR acoustics in China.

**25.07.2000** It takes quite a long time in the airport labyrinths to find DHL mail. Finally we receive the shipment.

The Ambassador, together with the former Prime Minister of Latvia, G. Krasts, is attending the PRC Parliament.

**28.07.2000** Together with the Ambassador, we welcome the delegation of Latvian Trade Unions.

**29.07.2000** At 6:00 a.m. we are up and leaving for a weekend trip to Tianjin 天津, which is the seafont closest to Beijing. We find our way quickly and do not get lost in Tianjin, which is a great success. Having passed through the outskirts of the city, we drive through the areas where mollusks are farmed. We try to stick to a road closer to the sea shore. After a three-hour drive, we

see a very long dam, behind which small waves are rippling on the beachfront. After checking-in quickly at the hotel, we have our first swim in the salty sea water. For lunch we have several types of mollusks and some octopus. Raindrops begin pelting down on the sandy beach encircled by the dams, and a beautiful semi-circle of the rainbow appears in the sky. Feeling tired, but happy, we slowly walk back to our hotel. **94**

**30.07.2000** We start the next morning with a walk and our first morning swim. As far as the eye can see, both to the right and to the left, an about four to five meter high dam stretches, which traps the tidal waters over an incredibly vast area. In the morning, the water seems much cooler. Just before the noon, we start our way back. The highway is excellent. The villages along the roadside have very well-kept fields, and almost everywhere – carp ponds. There is also no shortage of small restaurants where you can taste freshly caught carp. China knows how to feed its huge population. Any traveler, who intends to explore some town, a monastery or a shrine and happens to be hungry, can be my witness.

**31.07.2000** Galina and I have a humble dream – we would like to build a Chinese style gazebo back at home in Latvia – at our place in Bergi. This idea, probably, stems from our romantic worldview. When I think about it, my decision to study the Chinese language, especially initially, may have seemed something exotic and totally impractical to other people. However, today these studies help us to make our living; besides we have come to China not in the search of exotics. At least at this moment our intentions and plans about the gazebo are purely practical; therefore, we browse through several shops in search for books that could serve as a practical DIY manual of building such a construction.

Another thing – I have always been fascinated by dictionaries. We are going to say good-bye to China very soon, so we always use the opportunity to drop in some bookstores in search for a good dictionary to enrich our collection. One of such shops is Xidan Tushudasha 西单图书大厦. In this multi-storey bookstore, young Chinese people can be observed sitting right on the floor or windowsills and reading some book that they have found most necessary and interesting.

In the evening, former Prime Minister G. Krasts and his wife arrive at the embassy and we spend a nice evening in a pleasant company.

I would like to mention that G. Krasts was the Prime Minister when the decision was made to open the Latvian Embassy in the PRC and I was entrusted with the honor of performing this duty.



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**04.08.2000** Exactly four years ago we embarked on the diplomatic mission at the Latvian Embassy in Lithuania. We have been away for a long time; that is why the internal desire to see home is getting stronger day by day. We attend an exhibition of Uzbek products together with the Ambassador. Uzbekistan produces aircraft and mines a considerable amount of gold, silver and other valuable minerals. The population of the country is 24 million. Uzbekistan is the geographical center of the Central Asia and has been a participant of the Silk Road since ancient times. Uzbekistan's modern relations with China have a deep historical background.

**05.08.2000** After a long debate with Galina, we decide to buy a Chinese style writing desk. We find such a table relatively quickly. After some deliberation, we come to the conclusion that we really like the table and need to buy it. We also have decided to buy for ourselves the same kind of sofas that we bought for the embassy in 1998.

**07.08.2000** At 10:00 we coordinate with a transport company an agreement on hiring a driver for the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia. At the bank, we request the withdrawal of money for the salaries and our intended purchases. I am preparing material at the request of the Latvian Institute regarding information on Latvian-Chinese relations.

**09.08.2000** At the bank, we pay the rent of the embassy premises for the third quarter, as well as the rent for the Ambassador's house.

After yesterday's heavy rainfall, the humidity in the air is very high. It is hard to breathe and move around.

**12.08.2000** We buy microwave ovens for our sons. Galina starts packing the boxes. Every day we follow a strict plan; otherwise, this process may become too hectic. Time flows relentlessly, and we are on the move again. Our previous experience of packing and moving helps a lot to keep things under control. When we lived in the Far East, we together with all our three young sons used to visit my in-laws on the coast of the Baltic Sea regularly until we moved to Latvia altogether. Now the most important task is to pack the container and to remove our car from the Chinese inventory list. We are both focused on these two tasks.

**14.08.2000** At the Ukrainian Embassy, we enquire about getting the VAT refund on purchases made on the Chinese market. Ukrainian colleagues are very knowledgeable in this respect and give us a few pieces of valuable advice.

We hand in a note to customs about taking our car out of China.

We also participate in a seminar at the MFA of the PRC on the trip to the west of China.

**15.08.2000** There are big boxes, small boxes, and average size boxes all around our bedroom. We continue packing, then make payments for our long-distance calls and our mobile phones.

At 23:00, we stop packing to take some rest.

**16.08.2000** Almost simultaneously, the four sofas and the writing desk are delivered. We pay for the purchases (6,200 and 13,700 yuan). As a bonus for my Chinese language skills, the shopkeeper gives me a present – a beautiful wood-carved statue of Guanyin 观音. This image of the goddess goes together very well with the desk.

We continue packing until we are completely exhausted.

**17.08.2000** Men from the transport company arrive and take our luggage boxes and bicycles. After having served us faithfully on the roads of the vast lands of China, our reliable automobile, or our “partridge birdie”, as we endearingly used to call it because of its modesty, speed and reliability, is being taken to the customs parking lot as well. Now we are “non-car” people again.

At 18:00, we have a farewell evening at Restaurant 唐人街酒店 with employees from the MFA of the PRC Peng Dongmei 彭东梅, and Zhang Gaoyu 张高子, who met us on September 25, 1998 and were our guides to Beijing's life for the first week. The speeches and recollections are heartfelt and sincere. These diplomats understand very well what it means to open an embassy in a strange



country being a team of just two people. We return home in a good mood and emotionally positively charged.

**18.08.2000** Here we go – from the shipping company to the Customs, from the Customs to the diagnostics center, where we deliver our car number plates, the PRC's driver's license and the car's technical passport. I get back my Latvian driver's license. It looks as if we finally see light at the end of the tunnel. To cut through the red tape of the bureaucratic procedures has taken two weeks, including the weekend.

**21.08.2000** We withdraw cash for our salaries and to pay for the container shipment. At the customs warehouse I myself drive our “partridge birdie” into the container where our other stuff and purchases have already been loaded. The container gets sealed in our presence, and all that remains is to pay for the service.

**22.08.2000** We rewrite our Bank of China dollar and yuan accounts in the Ambassador's name. Then we pay 28,807 yuan for the container to the shipping company.

**24.08.2000** In a group of 200 diplomats, we fly to the city of Xining 西宁市, the administrative center of Qinghai 青海省 Province. All continents are represented in our group. After a two-hour and 15 minutes long flight, we land at an airport built in the mountains. Xining is located more than 2,000 m above sea level. Our first tour is to a huge aluminum plant that produces more than 200,000 tons of aluminum per year. On our way back, I observe the city and its people. There are many Muslim men, who can be recognized from the characteristic round caps they are wearing. The city is quite clean and nice. In the evening, we have an excellent dinner where the leadership of the Qinghai Province are taking part.

**25.08.2000** After breakfast, we depart to see the Longyangxia 龙羊峡 power plant. The road leads through harsh mountainous scenery. On the mountain slopes we sometimes notice yaks, which do not move, as if they'd been carved out of rock. The concept and the present look of the power station remind me of the Nurek Power Station in Tajikistan. The flowing waters of the mountain river form a reservoir of water that drives the massive turbines. Next, the mountain road takes us to Qinghai Lake 青海湖, which is the largest lake in China. In front of us, opens up a vast expanse of water reflecting the fluffy white clouds in the sky and the jagged mountain peaks on the other side of the lake. A Tibetan folk ensemble meets us in the local House of Culture on the shore of the lake. Slender people wearing Tibetan clothes and cute soft boots are performing their traditional dances. This is followed by the characteristic throat singing. Tibetans are indigenous to this province, and



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historically this land is called Amdo; it used to be Tibetan territory. Qinghai Province was established after 1949.

**26.08.2000** We are going to Taersi 塔尔寺 Monastery. Barley bundles arranged in a form of cones on the roadside catch my eye – they look just like the ones from my childhood in the Latvian countryside. Here, peasants spread the barley on the adobe floor. Then a small tractor pulls a roll over the barley, which is spread on the earthen floor, to release the grain from the barley ears.

Taersi may not be as large as the Labrang Monastery seen in Gansu Province, yet it is very well attended. Tibetan worshippers slide along the ground, showing their humility. Prayer wheels are spinning. The monastery hall is permeated with the monotonous murmur of the monks in meditative postures. They are sitting in a long line and reading their prayers. The room is lit with lamps filled with burning yak fat, which spreads a specific aroma. I feel as if I'm being immersed deeply in a strange world where I do not belong. Yet, I am talking here about my personal feelings in this shrine of Lamaism.

**95 96 97 98**

We return to the hotel and very quickly find ourselves on the next leg of the journey. The plane is taking us over the desert dunes... From above, we see the Huanghe River 黄河 and then the green, neat city of Yinchuan 银川, which is the administrative center of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region 宁夏回族自治区省会. The diplomatic delegation meets with the authorities of Ningxia. During this event, I ask the management of the Autonomous Region to comment on how this district is to be included in the New Silk Road project.

**27.08.2000** In the morning, we pay a visit to the free economic zone. We are shown a fully computerized Japanese production line with computer-controlled lathes and cutters. Only a few highly skilled workers are involved in the production process. The next object is vineyards, where five years ago used to be a desert. Today, the waters of Huang He have turned the desert into a green vineyard that reaches for miles. Naturally, the visit concludes with wine tasting.

We arrive at the tomb of the kings of Xixia 西夏王陵. Xixia was a state founded by Tangut ethnic group and existed between 1038 and 1227 AD. This state was located northwest of the Song State 宋, later – of the Jurchen 女真 – Jin State 金. Xixia State controlled the eastern section of the Great Silk Road. Tanguts were an ethnic group related to the Tibetans, their language being close to the Tibetan language. In 1227, Xixia state was subjugated and destroyed by Genghis Khan's warriors. Tanguts dispersed and became part of the Genghis Khan Empire. According to historical sources, part of Tanguts joined the ranks of Genghis Khan's army during his military campaigns in





China. From those times, several pyramidal clay structures, not very tall, yet peculiar, have survived in Yinchuan. They are the tombs of the rulers of Xixia state. The majestic mountain ranges in the background are guarding their peace, and the air of history whose secrets yet need to be discovered is felt overwhelmingly here. **99 100**

In the evening, we have an opportunity to watch an authentic Chinese Muslims' music and dance performance. The singers and dancers are wearing traditional outfits, and the impact of the Islamic culture is felt throughout the concert.

**28.08.2000** Today we are going to Lake Shahu 沙湖. A reed thicket grows on the edge of the desert sand. Behind the reeds, stretches the mirror of the lake. Camels are pacing in a line, one after the other, along the gentle slopes of the dunes. This could have been an ordinary scene during the legendary Silk Road times. Next we go to get acquainted with the forest planted in the former desert areas. This is a great deed, which demonstrates the man's victory over the desert. Seedlings for feeding silk cocoons are grown here now...

Next, our road leads to the airport, and after an hour we land in Beijing. In the evening, we collect our suitcases and move from the embassy to the Zhao Long 兆龙 Hotel.

**29.08.2000** We start the morning with a swim in the hotel swimming pool. My wife hands over the financial matters to Ms D. Liberte. This takes all day. Slowly and patiently, I send the materials on my computer which have already lost their relevance to the recycle bin. In the evening we are both tired, but we have done what needed to be done.

**30.08.2000** At 9:00, together with D. Liberte, we go to the bank and withdraw funds necessary for the work of the embassy. Galina is working very intensively with D. Liberte, going into all the nuances of the embassy's finances and trying not to forget a single payment address.

I keep purging the contents of the bookshelves and the computer trying to get rid of everything that is not relevant. D. Liberte also turns to me with questions that are still unclear. When everything seems to be done, around 18:00 we sit down at the dinner table with D. Liberte. Three of us are saying good-bye to the embassy, which we had the honor to open. In the period of time from 1998 till 2000 we regularly informed the MFA of the Latvian Republic about all actualities in the PRC. Throughout our mission, we cooperated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC and other ministries.

Both Galina and I tried to perform our duties with full responsibility, providing the relevant structural units of the Republic of Latvia with timely



reports on the measures taken. We followed the use of the funds entrusted to us especially closely. At the end of our mission, the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC had saved USD 20,000. Just two of us managed to cope with the entire workload of the embassy, without hiring local Chinese staff.

**31.08.2000** We are up at 6.00 in the morning. We cross the street and enter the embassy. Galina writes a letter to her sister in Vladivostok. I browse through the incoming e-mails.

*A unique phase in our lives has concluded. The last few weeks have been overwhelming. We have been pre-occupied with packing our luggage, sorting out stuff and organizing everything for our smooth trip home, fearing lest we forget something important. Now it seems that everything's been done and I can take a look back. With our arrival, the name of Latvia was finally heard in Beijing on a new level. From the very first days, mutually trustworthy relations were established with the Lithuanian and Estonian diplomats. Over the two years, friendly relations were developed and strengthened with the ambassadors and diplomats from Croatia, Poland, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Sweden, Albania, Switzerland and many other countries. I managed to publish materials about our country and its achievements in the PRC press. Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs was regularly informed about current events in the PRC. Throughout our mission, we cooperated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC and various other ministries. Together with my dear wife Galina, we did our best to perform our duties by providing the relevant structural units of the Republic of Latvia with timely reports on the measures taken. We followed the use of the funds entrusted to us especially closely. At the end of our mission, the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC had saved USD 20,000. We never hired local staff, yet managed to cope with all the duties and routine chores of the embassy on our own. We spent weekends very often in the parks of Beijing, deepening our knowledge of the history of this large and ancient capital, were constantly in contact with people from all walks of life, getting to know the country from inside out, not just through official talks subject to diplomatic protocol. I remember an elderly Chinese man who said the following in a conversation with me: "Sir, I've been listening with great interest to your language and your attitude towards China and its people... Do you know what your advantage is? You can and you know how to communicate with the common people of China 老百姓. If necessary, I believe you would be able to have a conversation with high-level leaders..." This man was probably right, because in the capacity of a diplomat, I had the opportunity to speak in Chinese with such men as the Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Qian Qichen, the Chinese Minister of Defense Chi Haotian, the Chinese Foreign Ministers Tang Jiaxuan, and Zhaoxing, President of the PRC Jiang Zemin 江泽民 as well as Vice President of the PRC Hu Jintao. I mention these leaders of the PRC and high-ranking PRC officials because they all asked me the same question: where*

*did you learn your Chinese? The book also includes photographs of meetings with these PRC leaders. I remember with gratitude the welcoming attitude from the side of the employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC and, of course, the fact that a car was assigned to us in order to help us to get oriented and be able to perform our duties starting from the first week in Beijing. I remember the many Beijing parks with lakes and willows twigs flowing in the wind and the intensive working hours by the computer in our spacious embassy. Interestingly, when I arrived to some diplomatic event or a reception sitting by the wheel of my own car, the drivers of other embassies were absolutely convinced that I was a driver by profession. When I joined the other diplomats, nobody doubted that I was an ambassador. In reality, I was just a chargé d'affaires. How delicate are these matters... I cannot say thanks enough to my dear wife Galina, who did an excellent job as an accountant although she had never studied to be an accountant. In fact, her two university degrees – in marine biology and in Japanese philology couldn't be further from this field. Besides – during these two tense years, Galina always found the right words when it seemed to me that I could not cope anymore. Serving on a diplomatic mission in China for two years and representing Latvia every day, we had to deal with every assignment, every problem that we faced, be it big or small. In the course of time, the diplomats will rotate, and each of them will have their own story to tell about this dynamic and constantly changing country.*

Tomorrow Galina and I are travelling back home to Latvia, to our house in the suburbs of Riga. We are missing Latvia, we are missing home...

At 8:30 we depart to the airport and soon we are on our way to Helsinki. Everything seems quite ordinary. After an eight hours long flight we land in Helsinki. In Riga, two of our sons, Juris and Pēteris, meet us. The car pulls into the unpaved street of our neighborhood – Bergi suburb. A few hours later, our third son, Andrejs, arrives, and we all have a blessed evening together. Galina and I are very tired and soon turn in. We are at home, and that says it all.

**PART 2****Work at Xinhua News Agency  
in 2002–2004**

**26.02.2002** On our arrival to Beijing, we are met at the airport and taken to the “You Yi” hotel 友谊, where we settle in an apartment rented by Xinhua News Agency 新华社. On the next day, we are busy completing the legal formalities and medical certificates. **1 2 3 4**

**28.02.2002** *A short insight: Xinhuashe 新华社 is an official information agency of the PRC and, at the same time, China’s most important source of news. It was established in 1931 as “The Red China News Agency”. Since 1937, the agency has been operating under its current name – Xinhua News 新华. Xinhua operates more than 170 foreign bureaus worldwide. There are 31 bureaus in China, as well as a specialized military bureau.*

*In 1944, the agency started to broadcast in English. The agency currently publishes more than 20 newspapers and more than 10 magazines. Formally, the agency is part of the PRC government.*

Today is my first day at the new workplace. I arrive at the Xinhua Agency’s main building, where several thousand journalists work in two shifts. I am going to work at the Russian editorial office. Next to it are located English, French, Arabic and Spanish editorial offices. Xinhua Agency prepares its newsletters

in all these languages. How did I get the job at this agency? Like most young men at that time, at the beginning of 1960s I was drafted into the Soviet Army, where the official language was Russian. It was not a matter of choice; however, this experience partially laid the basis for my Russian language skills. Then, from 1964 till 1970 I studied Chinese at the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University. From 1970 to 1979, my workplace was the Oriental Faculty of the Far Eastern University, where I taught Chinese. The studies at Moscow University, as well as my work experience at the Far Eastern University, contributed to my knowledge of the Russian language, without which studying or working at a Russian university would be unthinkable. The job offer by the Latvian branch of Xinhua Agency was, in fact, a new challenge, and, after some deliberation and consultations with our sons, my wife Galina and I decided to accept this challenge.

So, February 28, 2002, became my first working day at Xinhua Agency. Frankly, for me it was like jumping into cold water. One reason for that was the fact that between 1991 and 2000, while working for the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I rarely had to speak Russian, not to mention writing in Russian. Therefore, on the first working day, I have to refresh my skills of using the Russian keyboard, as well as translating the text into Russian written language. It is not that simple at all; moreover, I notice my colleagues at the Russian editorial office watching me unobtrusively, which could be understandable taking into account the fact that Russian is not my native language. After the editor's signature or visa, the news goes on the air, and it is unacceptable to have inadequate Russian language in the news feed. Yet, psychologically, I feel like a guinea pig. The next sad problem is the computer technology. Unexpectedly, half of the already translated text disappears for good. It means that I need to write the text anew while the pile of incoming tasks both on my desk and computer keeps growing.

Tension is building up, and I start feeling a pulsing in my temples. Hurry up... Hurry up! Yet I cannot cope with the growing pile of texts. These are the feelings of my first days at the new job, and I start questioning myself whether I have made the right decision accepting this challenge.

**03.03.2002** The Chinese colleagues working next to me have noticed that my pace of work is not fast enough and kindly offer their advice. Not every word needs to be translated. Rather the text should be retold in a form of the main theses. Such skills cannot be acquired immediately. However, after some practice I am starting to get the knack of this art.

**07.03.2002** I notice that my ability to deal with translating numbers from Chinese is being closely monitored. Anyone who translates from Chinese





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has realized that numbers need to be translated extremely carefully to avoid making a mistake. The range of the topics is remarkably diverse. As a result, the texts may contain such specific vocabulary that I immediately need to resort to a specialized dictionary. In all editorial offices, including the Russian office, there is a rich set of dictionaries that allow finding answers to questions in specific fields. The most frequently used dictionaries are so worn out that they are literally falling apart. We can also borrow dictionaries from the English editorial office. The journalists next door are very collegial and never refuse advice if they know some lexical area better. On the other hand – the staff of the Russian editorial office are all sinologists and can help the colleagues from other editorial offices with a deeper understanding of Chinese history and the processes taking place in the country. Such is the atmosphere of this international fraternity of journalists, in which I am slowly beginning to fit in.

**09.03.2002** This is a free Saturday, so my wife and I walk around the vast area of the You Yi Hotel and explore its gardens and ponds.

A few days later, Beijing experiences a heat wave, unprecedented since 1840: +22 degrees. In March, it is not only shocking, but also exhausting – we must change into our summer clothes and adapt to the new conditions quickly.

**13.03.2002** When I come home, we sometimes discuss the texts I edit, and Galina can often suggest a more successful and stylistically appropriate version. Here are some examples of the wide range of texts I need to tackle: fight against organized crime in Hong Kong, the Chinese pharmaceutical market, the aging of the Chinese population, the nuances of PRC-Taiwan relations, etc. In fact, it might be any possible press release or article that reflects the many aspects of life in PRC, translated for a Russian reader. Whatever it takes, the edited version of the material which goes on air must be precise and understandable. The brand of the world-famous Xinhua Agency must guarantee the highest possible standards.

**15.03.2002** The two weeks since I've been working at Xinhua have passed very quickly. I feel that this has been a mighty restart for my language skills. The knowledge of both Russian and Chinese is a prerequisite in my new job. After these two weeks, both my Russian and Chinese have been reactivated considerably. I feel more confident and relaxed. Moreover, I think that all my previous work experience accumulated while working as a teacher at university and as a diplomat in China is helping me to take on the new role of a journalist – something I have never done before.

**16.03.2002** The wind is carrying particles of sand. Local people do not call it “a sand storm” yet. However, when the wind blows, fine grains of sand end up on my teeth, and the feeling is not nice. We make a purchase, which is

a joyful event for both of us, but especially, for Galina. We buy two bicycles for 178 yuan. It would be 13 lats (Latvian currency in 2002) for one bicycle, which is a very good bargain. Galina is really happy about her comfortable and light vehicle. We'll soon go for a test ride. On the vast territory of the hotel, we find the Youyigong Castle 友谊宫. The evening sun is setting behind its majestic towers and showing us the direction where our dear home, Latvia, is.

**20.03.2002** We are experiencing a serious sand storm, which, as local sources say, has been one of the strongest in the last thirty years. The feeling is very uncomfortable. Even in the middle of the day, the cars drive with their front lights on. The air feels so electrified and saturated with sand that it is not advisable to go outside. Janitors are busy with sand removal. Car owners also need to clean the sand from their vehicles.

We have found a really tasty kind of bread that we both like – the Kazakh bread called “nan” 馕. The same name is used for this type of bread not only in China and the countries of Central Asia, but also in India and Iran, as well as in the Turkic languages. Another simple treat we enjoy is the traditional sour milk, which is drunk from small, light cups.

**26.03.2002** My colleague Valentina Hanina is finishing her work at Xinhua Agency. I am being entrusted with her position, which means that after having completed a successful probationary period, I have become an editor, namely, the person responsible for the quality of the news. The translated texts land on my table as snowballs, one after another, and keep piling up. Sometimes I need to concentrate really hard to cope with all the texts. Some days, I need to edit about 18 texts. Even more, there have been days when more than 20 texts come in. Then it really takes blood, sweat and tears to get the work done. It's like a race when you have to leave aside everything that interferes with the work, including lunch breaks. So, for example, on 27 March, instead of having proper lunch, I make do with a sandwich and a cup of milk, and then – back to work again. In my family, when life is tough and we need to work hard, we say – “nothing doing, that's what a poor artist's life is like”. Probably, the saying comes from some Russian literary work or a movie. Anyway, coming back home, I feel like a squeezed lemon. When the texts pour in one after another, the editor must read them and make the necessary corrections very quickly. My brain is working, I think, at its maximum. On 28 March, I receive my first salary, as well as words of appreciation. It brings a great sense of satisfaction.

**29.03.2002** Together with my colleague Nikolai, we have lunch in a modest eatery on a small lane in the neighborhood of our agency. A bowl of soup and a pancake roll with meat stuffing cost only five yuan, which is a very democratic price. I can assure you – every citizen in China can afford such lunch.



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**31.03.2002** Galina and I go for a bike ride. The territory of the “You Yi” hotel is so vast, and there are so many lanes and alleyways here that it is possible to have a good ride without even leaving the hotel complex. It is Easter and we would like to attend a church. We take subway to Xizhi Men 西直门. Then we change lines and get off at Xuanwumen 宣武门. At 10 o'clock we are at a Catholic church. There are so many worshippers that we enter the church with great difficulty. Services are held here in English, Latin and Chinese. I hear carols that I've heard since my childhood. The worshippers are mostly Chinese people. Outside, it is +28 Celsius. In the church, it could be even hotter. The humidity is almost unbearable. After about a half an hour, the Way of the Cross begins and people start walking out of the church. The atmosphere created by the organ music and the familiar melodies allows us to feel the Easter spirit. Although the crowds of people and the unusual heat wave this spring brings us to reality, we are still very happy that we have celebrated Easter in this way. **5**

**02.04.2002** We start visiting the pool on the hotel grounds. It is a small indoor pool, but it is always in perfect order and definitely provides relaxation. For the first time, I am working in the second shift, which starts at 14:00 and ends at 20:15. I need to edit an article dedicated to the theme of space.





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The commander's seat on the spacecraft is occupied by a dummy – a sensor which looks like a human. I stare at the phrase for a long time until it finally dawns on me what this all is about.

For lunch, I have a pie with radish filling and a bowl of light soup. At least, such diet will not allow me to put on weight.

**04.04.2002** The first half of the day is free for both of us, and we dedicate it to taking photos of the beautiful nature in spring. Everything is in full bloom on the lovely hotel grounds. Several varieties of peaches have blossomed, as well as lilac and forsythia. Magnolia trees are already dropping their petals. We try to capture this spring beauty, sometimes also posing ourselves against the picturesque background. However, we are mostly focusing on shrubs and fruit trees in full bloom. Today we get nice, heartfelt letters from home. **6 7 8**

This is my first working Saturday. The number of people in the huge hall on the third floor has shrunk by two thirds. It feels somehow cozier. Absent is the pressure which is clearly felt when all workstations are filled and the people are toiling without lifting their heads. In the afternoon, I am snowed under by the unceasing flow of articles again. Having finished the last article, I hurry to the bus stop. Very strong gusts of wind have hit Beijing. It does not feel safe on the street – what if the wind breaks some heavy branch of the mighty aspen trees...

The first working Saturday is followed by the first working Sunday. Psychologically it feels somehow unfair. It is probably, deeply embedded in my mind that Sunday is the day of the rest. A strange coincidence – both Galina and I, we dream about the same thing at night – our home in Bergi, in Latvia.

**08.04.2002** After the weekend shift, Monday is a day off. The sand wind is blowing in Beijing, so we do not plan to go outside. After the intensive work at the computer, my eyes start feeling discomfort. I consult with my colleagues who are working in the same conditions. They all agree that I need to see the optician and start using some eye drops.

**11.04.2002** It is Galina's birthday today. I buy her beige purple roses and ice-cream. At a Chinese restaurant, I order fish in sweet and sour sauce, quail eggs and a small melon. Six messages with greetings have arrived in the email. Our hotel has given Galina a delicious cake as a birthday present. We are in a festive mood and celebrate the occasion. On the next day I take the biggest part of the cake left over to my workplace to treat my bosses and colleagues. Galina takes care of my eyes in the evening.

**15.04.2002** At work, everything goes on as usual. Suddenly, tragic news – a plane of a Chinese airline has crashed near the Busan Airport in the Republic of Korea. More than 120 people have died.



After work, Galina and I explore, as we have named it, the “Japanese Communist Trail”. Why such a name? An elderly couple of Japanese Communist Party veterans are living in the You Yi Hotel, and we have seen them taking regular walks, too. Today we try out their favorite route.

**16.04.2002** Today I am doing the afternoon shift. The first working hour can be used by editors at their own will. The translators are doing their job, and when the text is ready, it would enter my computer and “land” on my desk in paper format as well. The texts that I edit cover a broad spectrum of life in the vast country – from the visits of heads of state and honored guests to smuggling, homes for the disabled, Chinese history, and other press materials of virtually anything. In the middle of the shift I can go outside to breathe some fresh air, and then again texts keep coming in, one after another. I return home at night – it’s already dark and the streets are not very well-lit. This is one thing I still need to get used to.

**17.04.2002** Since I arrived to work at the Xinhua Agency, I’ve been reading Chinese newspapers and copying out the most interesting vocabulary, as well as phrases and figurative expressions almost every day. It helps a lot in activating the language. However, working by computer and reading newspapers puts more strain on my eyes; therefore, I have started to use eye drops like my colleagues do. If the translator has not coped with a more complicated part of the text properly, but has just given a superficial account, then I have to “roll up my sleeves” and translate it myself. It is possible that other texts are being submitted for editing simultaneously. Such moments are the drawbacks in the editor’s work. Today is not an exception – just before the end of the shift, three texts come in. I hurriedly review them and manage to get to the company van, which takes me home.

**19.04.2002** Yesterday I arrived home from the evening shift at 20:30. Today I have the morning shift, so I have to leave for work at 7:30. It requires a lot of stamina when the two shifts coincide like this. The only option is to accept it and start getting used to the intense rhythm of life and work at Xinhua.

**21.04.2002** I’ve been working for seven days non-stop. It’s pretty crazy... The afternoon starts in a bit more relaxed mood, yet the evening ends up in a rush.

**22.04.2002** Finally I have my free day. We had planned to climb Xiangshan 香山 Mountain, but it’s raining outside. I am working on my Chinese vocabulary development. In the evening, in spite of the drizzling rain, I get on my bike and make a couple of loops on the hotel grounds. My eyes are hurting a bit. The daily workload is not getting smaller, and the strain on my eyes remains the same.

**23.04.2002** Only two interpreters are working today. I read a newspaper for a while. During lunchtime I leave the agency building for a walk in its vicinity. Lu Xun's 高中 Secondary School is located next door. A bunch of students rush into the small dining room during the break. All secondary school students in China wear uniform tracksuits. The students are in a cheerful mood. They are having fun and jostling with each other mischievously. It looks like all of them have some pocket money to buy the food. The Chinese younger generation seems to be well-educated, well-nourished and confident about their future.

**24.04.2002** Early in the morning before work, I make a couple of loops around the hotel grounds on my bicycle. At work, everything is going its usual way. Unexpectedly, the shift manager arrives and tells me that the company is going to sign a one-year contract with me, with a salary of 5,000 yuan a month. First of all, it means that Xinhua has appreciated my job performance. This is important for me, because when I started working at the agency, especially during the first weeks, the specifics of the work made me wonder whether I have made the right decision. Now everything is in place. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that I am actually doing the same kind of work that the well-known specialist of languages and cultures of East and Southeast Asia, journalist and writer V. Ovchinnikov was doing a few years ago. His books have been translated into Latvian as well, for example, "A Branch of Sakura". In addition, at my workplace I often meet another sinologist, well-known in Russia – N. Ahmetshin, who has given me his book "Secrets of the Silk Road". Most of my other colleagues are graduates of the Department of Sinology at the Institute of Oriental Languages, Moscow University. Colleagues from other editorial offices often drop in to consult with the Russian editorial staff on current Chinese issues.

I share my news with Galina, and we both conclude that the contract conditions are acceptable. We go for a walk in the garden of the Technical University 理工大学. All the trails and paths are full of students who are often diligently cramming their English texts.

**25.04.2002** At 6:00 in the morning we are on our bikes. This time we make three loops. We stop by the fountains in the square in front of the castle. We cannot miss having a closer look at the miniature pine trees with long and soft needles, cultivated to mimic the shape of the famous Huangshan Mountain 黄山 "Guest-Greeting Pine" 迎客松; a ginkgo tree with a curious form of leaves, and the rare white bark pine 白皮松. Everything is spick and span, in great harmony with the green-tiled house roofs, gently curved out at the corners. That's what the "You Yi" Hotel's palace square park looks like.



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At work, some of the texts are so nebulous that it is difficult to grasp their main idea. Yet, it is a matter of honor for me to cope with such texts, too. At the agency's shop I buy the spring fruit loquat, which is popularly called "mushmulla" by local people, while the dictionary name in Chinese is – "pipa" 枇杷.

**26.04.2002** Early in the morning, I play tennis with J. Macdonald from New Zealand. I haven't held the racket in my hands since the year 2000, so my performance is quite mediocre. However, the training has taken place. I am working on repeating and strengthening my Chinese phraseology stock. Then I get on my bike and ride to the Kazakh eatery, where I buy lamb soup, boiled rice and vegetable salad. The day passes peacefully.

**27.04.2002** This Saturday is at our disposal as well. We decide to visit the Beijing Botanical Garden 北京植物园. There are countless rare species of big and small trees, shrubs and bushes here. Some are in full bloom, others have green foliage. The place is not crowded in the morning time. It is pleasantly warm, not scorching yet. What can be better than this? **9 10** In the evening we attend a concert of the Beijing's symphonic orchestra at the concert hall Tian-qiao 天桥. The program features musical pieces by Chaikovsky and Braams; Chinese music is included, too. I wish we had such nice holidays more often while working at Xinhua.

**29.04.2002** It has been raining hard all night and it is still raining in the morning. Through the lashing rain I make it to the office. The first article to edit comes in very soon. Then the work tempo accelerates. Today is our pay day. I receive 4,925 yuan. The afternoon is pretty busy, too. Article after article arrives. In the last minute, I jump into our company van, which takes me home. Today we have our 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We recall how we registered our marriage in Moscow, at Frunze district civil registry office and celebrated our wedding – first at our university dorm room, but then took a flight to Riga, where we had our wedding celebration at my parents' old house. Now more than thirty years separate us from that event. **11 12** There is so much to remember about twists and turns in our lives, rich in transcontinental flights...

**01.05.2002** China is celebrating the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. The pace of life is becoming slower, if not halting altogether during this holiday week. For a great part of the population who are not eligible to have an official vacation at work this is like holiday time. Official vacation time can be enjoyed only by people employed by state institutions, while millions of peasants and self-employed people in towns do not have such a privilege. Our "You Yi" Hotel is located in the western side of the capital, so it is only about a 40-minute bus ride to the nearest Xiangshan 香山 Mountain. One and a half years have passed since our diplomatic mission in Beijing, and we have not climbed this mountain for exactly this long. So, we start climbing prudently and without haste. From time to time, we stop to enjoy the great mountain scenery. There are crowds of people around. Today we make it only halfway up the hill. We start our way back, and we are home at around 15:00. Galina makes dinner. For the first time, we are going to taste an exotic fruit "huolong" 火龙. It's a purple tropical fruit, reminding one of a big





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pine cone. The fruit has white pulp inside with something that looks like black poppy seeds. The fruit tastes unusual and delicious.

**03.05.2002** At the photo shop we receive the photos we took at the botanical garden. Indeed, it's all about flowers and spring: blooming peaches, acacias, forsythias and many other decorative trees and shrubs. Galina carefully arranges these photos in the new album. We have a large collection of photo albums, and they are good reminders of all our journeys.

After a longer break, we have a traditional Latvian dish for dinner – young potatoes, pickled cucumbers and sour milk poured in the dainty Chinese porcelain cups.



**05.05.2002** The Chinese have been celebrating the May Day holidays already for the fifth day. Only three translators are working, so the pace of work is more relaxed. It occurs to my colleagues in the Russian editorial office that this is Orthodox Easter time as well. To top it all off, my buddy from university times, Maija Mikulina has a birthday. These are good reasons to celebrate. Our colleagues from other editorial offices join in – the Frenchman Jean-Pierre, a Hungarian couple, a Canadian, a Serbian couple, other journalists and sinologists. We are having fun and joking in different languages. The atmosphere is relaxed. These people are used to the multicultural environment and can easily find a common topic to talk about.

**07.05.2002** I've been working for four days in a row already. The morning is quite calm; the working tempo gets more dynamic in the afternoon. Interestingly, it does not worry me so much anymore. I have developed my speed reading skills. Yet, it does not mean that I can lose my agility – you still have to pay attention to all details. In the evening Galina and I go for a walk in the Yiyuan Garden 颐园 on our hotel's grounds. The tall aspen trees are whispering their stories to the wind. In a leisurely conversation, we both discuss the work to be done in the coming days.

**08.05.2002** We go to the local market where we used to buy vegetables and black chicken 乌鸡. This type of chicken, in fact, looks more like a baby crow to us. However, the Chinese are convinced that its meat improves your blood circulation and thus strengthens your health.

I continue working with different categories of Chinese language vocabulary. Our colleague's job contract at the agency is expiring and she is going back to Russia. She has invited her colleagues and workmates to a farewell party at 17:00. The Chinese colleagues, one after another, join in karaoke singing. If Russian colleagues are anywhere around, the Chinese would never miss an opportunity to sing the popular Russian song "Moscow Nights". This song is still well-known in China, and you may hear it performed both in Chinese and Russian languages.

**10.05.2002** We start the day with a bike ride. Then we sit down and read in one of the garden gazebos of the Yiyuan 颐园 Garden. In the evening, while having a walk on the hotel grounds, we come across Suyuan 苏园 Garden, designed strictly according to the Suzhou architectural tradition. The rock arrangements by the pond, the silence, the setting sun, and the steep eaves of the gazebo roofs in Suzhou style – we feel blessed to have this opportunity to enjoy the calm serenity of the evening. More so, there are no articles piling up on my table at this moment, and we can spend our time as we wish.

**11.05.2002** To give an insight to what my day's job involves and what kind of texts I need to edit, here is a list of the articles I have edited today:

- New initiatives to attract highly qualified foreign specialists to work in China.
- 500,000 disposable food boxes are collected daily in Shanghai.
- An electronics exhibition of Heilongjiang 黑龙江 province has opened in Vladivostok (this province is bordering Primorsky Krai (administrative district of Russia), where Vladivostok is situated).
- More than ten specialized aircraft will start fighting locusts.
- A book on the production of bacteriological weapons in China during the Japanese invasion (1937–1945) has been found.
- Production of firecrackers is terminated in Tianjin 天津.
- In Jiangxi Province 江西省 the growing of forests in arable lands has started.
- Between March and May this year, 11 sandstorms have been registered in China.
- Due to the floods, the railway traffic has been suspended on the section of Changsha–Nanning 长沙–南宁.
- About 20 percent of China's territory is threatened by desertification.

This is neither the hardest nor the easiest day at work. In fact, the range of topics published in newspapers is fairly wide. I can only add that practically every day I have to deal with introductory articles, which are a part and parcel of the policies implemented by the CCP and its propaganda tools. Well, this is what the job involves in the country that is building socialism with Chinese characteristics...

On my way home I get caught in a pouring rain, which is unlikely to stop soon.

**12.05.2002** Yesterday, the torrential rain was followed by a fiercest thunderstorm. Lightning bolts were exploding with such force that it seemed they must have hit the neighboring building. The morning at work is pretty busy; however, I manage to cope with everything. At the very end of the working day, three more articles come in. While I'm trying to finish them, the company van has left. I need to borrow some money to pay for the taxi. Such moments are not very motivating...

**13.05.2002** The driver of the company van turns on a Buddhist prayer on the radio. I ask him if he is religious. He answers, "No, but the prayer has nice words". In the evening we enjoy the illuminated water fountains. In the evening light, the water drops sparkle and shimmer in different shades. The air feels fresh and slightly humid.

**14.05.2002** Today I'm working the second shift. While at home, I come across an interesting article about the irreconcilable contradictions and intolerance

between the people of Beijing and Shanghai. Shanghai residents perceive the people of Beijing, first and foremost, as arrogant people and haughty officials from the capital city. Beijingers, in turn, look at the Shanghai people as street-smart dealers, and it is not excluded – even swindlers, who, on top of that, speak a language impossible to understand.

The shift manager Guo and I work quietly side by side. We finish everything on time, and, late at night, the Xinhua van is taking me home along the not very well-lit streets of Beijing. I can't really say that I am very tired, only that my eyes hurt at times.

**15.05.2002** After breakfast we take a walk in the spacious garden of the Technical University 理工大学. In the lobby of the main building of the university there is a relatively large photo exhibition dedicated to the minorities of the western part of China. It features colorful, vivid pictures of Mongolian, Tibetan, Uighur, Kazakh, etc. nationalities. People of these nationalities cannot be confused with the Han, the indigenous people of China, mostly because these minorities still wear their national costumes. The type of clothes that these people have been wearing for hundreds of years allows them to survive in the harsh climate of the Tibetan mountains or the Gobi Desert. With Guo, the manager of the shift, we are discussing what would be the best way to define the phrase “development of a good relationship between the young people who live in the vicinity of the Chinese-Russian border on both its sides” in the Russian language. We agree on something like this – “the young ambassadors of friendship in the Chinese-Russian border region”. Again the company van is taking me home along the dark streets of Beijing.

**16.05.2002** We ride a bike and exercise, and then buy some Kazakh bread, as well as fresh fish and vegetables. During the lunch break, I take a walk on the territory of Xinhua from one gate to another. This serves as a kind of exercise. Late at night, the company van takes home my talkative Spanish colleagues and me.

**17.05.2002** The day starts with an early visit to the swimming pool. I have the first shift today. A nice surprise – Ms Duan invites Galina and me to lunch next Tuesday. Among the other informative articles, there is a short, but interesting article about a miniature Koran found in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region 宁夏回族自治区. Unfortunately, the tense work atmosphere does not allow me to read it more thoroughly, because other articles, which have to be edited immediately, are coming in on my computer and piling up on my desk one after another.

The wind is trying to find its way in the foliage of the aspen trees next to the hotel. My colleague Nail Ahmetshin gives me his book “Secrets of the Silk

Road” as a present. Together with his daughter, a student at that time, Nail has visited the sites associated with the historic Silk Road. In addition, in the Moscow Sinology Library, he has researched many scientific works dedicated to the Silk Road. Every conversation with this science-oriented, highly knowledgeable and professional person provides an insight into the depths of the rich Chinese civilization.

**19.05.2002** After a tennis match with J. Macdonalds from New Zealand, I buy a melon and go back to my hotel apartment. I switch on the computer, which immediately gets hung up. This is such a waste of time, and now I am in a bad mood. The computer starts working only late in the afternoon. We decide that milk and fresh strawberries will be enough for our evening meal. I start reading Ahmetshin’s book with great interest.

**20.05.2002** During the lunch break, I go outside to do some exercises with the gym equipment. I spend all my day sitting by the computer, so physical exercise is a must. An article about a newly discovered star catches my eye. The star will be named “Star of Nanjing University” 南京大学星. Next, I read about the Chinese spacecraft landing on the Moon, planned for the year 2010. In this area, too, the Chinese are trying to keep pace with the rest of the world.

**21.05.2002** Today I get special treatment at work. At 12:15 we go to the restaurant “Minzu Fandian” 民族饭店. The lunch is being organized by the management of Xinhua Agency in honor of the fact that specialists from New Zealand and Latvia have started their work at the agency. The atmosphere is nice and relaxed. In the English language editorial office there are several employees from New Zealand, and it has been easy to develop nice and friendly relations with them. After the lunch, we even get our taxi expenses paid for. We get home to our hotel in a light and cheerful mood. This positive evaluation of my work from the side of the management can be interpreted as consent to confirm a full year contract with the agency.

**23.05.2002** Outdoors, it’s around +30 degrees. The conditioner is switched on all the time. We are waiting for the outdoor pool to be opened. Meanwhile, we frequent the small pool indoors. Some texts at work are so convoluted that it takes much time and effort to decipher the meaning. All that remains is just to stay focused and do my duty as best I can. I go home with a plan in mind – I need to fix my bicycle. In China, this is not a problem. On almost every street corner you can find a small repair shop, where they will mend your bike for a really low price.

**24.05.2002** The e-mail connection is not working in our apartment. A representative of the computer shop has already visited us twice. Finally, after 15:00 the e-mail connection is renewed. It’s a pity, that we have wasted a full working

day and much effort on solving this problem. Tonight the air temperature rises to +34 degrees Celsius, and even the evening walk does not give the expected relief.

**25.05.2002** Today the big outdoor pool is open. You can swim while looking at the green trees and blooming bushes and listening to birds' songs. This is a real pleasure. Today I am working with two ladies – translators. They are cooperative, calm and efficient. I can cope with everything that comes up. In the evening Galina and I feast on mulberries, which look similar to our familiar blackberries, then listen to the wind in the big aspen trees outside our window.

**28.05.2002** Beijing has been hit by a heat wave. I am perspiring abundantly already at 5:30 in the morning during my tennis workout. We both need to visit a doctor. My eyes hurt, but Galina has a sore throat. We wait in line for a long time until we get to see our doctors. The optician prescribes new glasses for me – one pair for reading, the other one for working at the computer. The working day is hard. The texts that keep coming in are monotonous and dull.

**29.05.2002** Swimming in the outdoor pool is perfect. Nothing could be better in this sweltering heat. The Chinese colleagues are having a meeting in the morning, so texts are not coming in at the moment. When they return to their workplaces, the usual rhythm of the day is restored.

**31.05.2002** The computer gets hung up unexpectedly in the afternoon. There are no texts to edit. A computer technician, who is called in from Xinhua Agency, eliminates the fault quickly and efficiently. In the following months I need to turn to her for assistance a few more times, and she always manages to bring our computers back to life. Actually, a woman – computer technician is still quite a rare case. So far, I have seen only gentlemen represented in this profession, both in Latvia and here, in China.

**01.06.2002** Xinhua Agency has hired a bus, which takes us on a weekend outing to the Miyun Reservoir 密云水库. I have driven myself along this road many times – during the time when Galina and I were opening the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in China. The program includes climbing the mountain. The sun is scorching. We get as far as a steep rock with a small waterfall. The energy has been spent climbing up, so the way back seems quite long and tiring. At the hotel, the pool, the sauna and dinner are awaiting us. The evening in this mountain resort turns out calm and relaxing. The next morning we go climbing again. Taking into account yesterday's physical exertion, today's climb is not easy at all. However, I pass this test as well. The slope we take back is quite steep and exposed to the sun, so it takes a while. This has been the most physically active weekend so far.



**03.06.2002** Swimming pool in the morning, and off I go – to work. The traffic is very heavy today. Normally I spend about a half an hour on my way to work; this morning it takes 52 minutes. Yesterday's climb can be felt – in the morning everybody is a bit slow because of the sore muscles. The busy rhythm in the afternoon helps us concentrate on the texts that are coming in nonstop.

For the first time, I come across the name of Latvia in the texts I have to edit. The President of the PRC, Jiang Zemin, is going to visit the Baltic states after the St. Petersburg Summit.

**05.06.2002** The day at work is comparatively calm. China's hopes have collapsed at the World Football Cup – the PRC has lost to Costa Rica with the score 0:2. The hard work and effort invested by the Serbian coach – Boras Milutinovich – have been in vain. The air quality is bad in Beijing today. A heavy shroud of smog surrounds the city. Our youngest son Pēteris has defended his master's thesis while working full time. We congratulate him with this important achievement.

**06.06.2002** Strangely, I wake up in the middle of the night. Then I fall asleep again, but cannot get up to go to the pool before work. Galina goes swimming alone. At work, initially everything's going its usual way. The tempo gets faster in the afternoon. Then Guo, the manager of the shift, approaches me and tells me the news. I'll have to work as the only editor for one month until a new employee arrives from Moscow. This is going to be a heavy load, but do I have a choice?

**08.06.2002** Galina and I have been discussing the idea of compiling a dictionary for a long time. Here is the plan. In the morning, while the translators are working on the texts, slowly and gradually, I could start making the rough draft of the Chinese-Latvian dictionary. Usually, this time span lasts for about one hour and can be used by us, editors, at our will. Thus, on June 8 of 2002 I start compiling the first pages of my dictionary. Some time ago, I asked the manager of the shift whether I could keep my materials on the work computer for the following day. The answer was a categorical "no". To my surprise, it was not the legal aspect of my private activities at the official working time that was discussed. I was simply told that I was not allowed to save any text prepared for my personal needs on the work computer after the end of my shift – even if it were the rough draft of my dictionary. However, I could print out the material and take it home. Well, then Galina and I come up with a plan how to make the best out of this situation. At the beginning of the shift, while translators are still preparing the texts, I would try to compile at least a few pages of the dictionary draft. I would print them out and take them home at the end of the working day. Then Galina would retype

my text onto our computer. I mentioned earlier that Galina had graduated from the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University, where she studied Japanese. In written Japanese, Chinese characters are used as well, so they were not unfamiliar to her. This knowledge would allow Galina to enter the left column of our future dictionary – the Chinese characters – on our computer. The Latvian translation in the right column would be my responsibility. We came to this solution gradually, step by step, trying to find the right approach and the right division of duties. On the first day I prepare three pages of the draft: in the first column – the lexical unit, written down as a Chinese character, in the second – transcription of the word, and in the third – translation into Latvian. The process is extremely exciting and engaging. Starting from the very first pages, I understand that this is what I'll be doing whenever I have a moment, free from my direct editor's duties.

I share my excitement with Galina as soon as I get home. The raindrops trickling down the windowpanes soon take us to the world of dreams...

**10.06.2002** This time I am not late for the morning swim. In the garden under the walnut trees, we are reading newspapers – “Rénmín Ribà” 人民日报 is widely commenting on the participation of President Jiang Zemin at the St. Petersburg Summit. The air seems much fresher after yesterday's rain, especially when a light breeze begins to blow. We continue discussing our work on the dictionary draft. I do not have much spare time at work, but I have completed two pages already. Our son Andrejs calls and tells us that President Jiang Zemin has already concluded his visit to Latvia. The honored guest has seemed to be talkative and relaxed. The visit has proceeded as planned.

**13.06.2002** I read about the visits of the President of the PRC to Latvia and Estonia. It turns out that Estonia is the PRC's largest trading partner in the Baltic states. Whenever I have a spare moment from my editor's duties, I add a new lexical unit in the column with the Chinese characters. That is the easiest part of the job. To find the relevant Latvian counterpart turns out to be much more difficult. I understand pretty soon that I need a dictionary, for my brain is not a computer. I write a letter to our sons and ask them to send a few dictionaries as soon as possible. Here, they would be my linguistic laboratory. My wife Galina – as my closest and only partner in creating a Chinese-Latvian dictionary – is also slowly, but steadily getting used to retyping the draft pages I have prepared onto our home computer.

After a few rainy days, there are cumulus clouds in the Beijing sky today... A relatively rare phenomenon...

**14.06.2002** In the morning I am working with two ladies – translators at quite a calm and relaxed pace. In the afternoon, the manager of the shift, Guo,

takes over, and the texts start arriving with such a speed that I can barely find a moment to run to the bathroom.

**15.06.2002** On Saturday morning we can treat ourselves to a bike ride and a visit to one of the best swimming pools in Beijing. Every time, while swimming in the open pool, we rejoice at the sight of the blooming bushes and the sound of birds songs. Later, we go for a walk around the vast gardens of the Technical University. Everywhere you can see students sitting in the shade and cramming with their English textbooks. The students look very motivated and diligent. We don't mind their company at all, as they do not make noise or shout loudly and allow us to enjoy the garden to its fullest. We can walk as much as we want, or find a free bench where to rest our feet.

**17.06.2002** I manage to prepare three pages of the dictionary draft at work. However, the texts to edit are coming in one after another – 24 articles altogether during one shift. Maybe it is not a good idea to work at the dictionary during working hours? It might be that my colleagues do not like it and, therefore, are sending me more texts. This is a delicate situation – nobody has reprimanded me yet for the strange way I am using the few spare moments at the workplace. We have news from our son Pēteris, who has received his master's diploma.

**19.06.2002** My work computer gets hung up. It takes the technician a long time to fix it. I try to keep working, but at the end of the shift my text mysteriously disappears. As for the Sino-Latvian dictionary, I have managed to prepare just half a page. An interesting text has arrived for editing – “The Road of Tea and Horses”. It is a historical account of how tea used to be transported from Yunnan Province 云南省 to Europe. It was taken on the backs of camels or donkeys through Tibet 西藏, then through India 印度 and Persia 伊朗 to the final destination – the European countries 欧洲国家. I am getting carried away by the article and editing it takes all my time.

**22.06.2002** On Saturday only two translators are working. Unbelievable! That's a rare occasion.

I manage to prepare six pages of the dictionary draft. It looks like our “micro enterprise” is starting to gain momentum. I take the printouts of the dictionary pages home, and Galina enters them onto our computer. It may seem that we are doing double work; however, there is no other option because Xinhua Agency does not allow its employees to keep personal stuff on the computer. It is perfectly understandable because the dictionary manuscript is not connected to my direct job duties in any way. Anyway, we both have started up a project which not only brings a great sense of satisfaction, but also involves hard work.

**23.06.2002** In Latvia, rainy spells are quite common in the month of June. Probably that is why, when it is raining hard, we say “it’s raining like Midsummer Eve”. It is pouring down now in Beijing, and it seems only natural to us, because, after all, it is Midsummer Eve, one of the nicest Latvian holidays. Everything is calm at work. I cope with my direct job duties and don’t forget about the dictionary. My Russian colleagues invite me to celebrate the feast of “Troitsa”, or Pentecost. There are five of us, all graduates of the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University. We share the many memories of the teachers of our institute: D. Voskresensky, M. Yuriyev, J. Molchanov, A. Kotov, T. Zadojenko, as well as the teachers of spoken language from China: Huang Shuying, Liu Fenlan, Lin Lin, Tan Aoshuang. These teachers all came from the north of China and spoke the correct standard Chinese; thus we, students, were taught and guided to acquire impeccable pronunciation from day one. Of course, we remember our student jokes and pranks. It is our unanimous opinion that thanks to our teachers and the “Moscow School” we are able to cope with our responsibilities at a news editor level today.

**24.06.2002** The sky is overcast on John’s day, and we are expecting more showers. In our thoughts, we are in Latvia with our dear people and friends. A few days ago we sent our Midsummer greetings to Latvia.

**26.06.2002** Monsoon rains have reached Beijing. It’s raining today as well. The air temperature is +16 Celsius, which is considered to be quite chilly at this time of the year. We have to do without the pool and the bike ride. Most of our Chinese colleagues are attending a concert. I do not have too many texts to edit, so I can make some time to work on the dictionary.

**27.06.2002** Today it is cold and dreary, too. The road to work is wet. I have seen a couple of road accidents recently. For the first time, the Shift manager Guo notices that I am working at the dictionary and expresses his interest. I wonder what’s going to happen now. What if he does not approve of my activities?

It is dark and wet outside when we go home. On the bus, my Spanish colleagues Antonio and Nijaki are chattering in unbearably loud voices.

**28.06.2002** The day starts with a crazy text about tectonic changes in prehistoric times. The shift manager Guo seems to be kind of gloomy today. All of a sudden, he starts searching for a missing article about Chinese polar researchers – on my computer! In the end, the missing text is found, but on his own computer. Ha! Ha! Maybe it’s because he is concerned about my dictionary draft? Just before the end of the working day a real race starts. The texts are pouring in non-stop. When the day is done, I jump on my bike and go to the Kazakh eatery to get some lamb and the delicious Kazakh bread.

**29.06.2002** I get a few greetings on my name day. We buy three dictionaries at the bookstore. When compiling a dictionary, a great variety of vocabulary has to be included; therefore, different lexical aids are needed.

**01.07.2002** The air in Beijing is thick and humid today. The sky is overcast, and the visibility is poor. We go for a short walk in the evening. The Russian TV channel demonstrates a documentary of the massacre of 1990 in Baku where 130 people died. In 1991 this was followed by the bloodshed in Vilnius and Riga. The Soviet Union was bound to fall apart. Galina is working hard recording the dictionary pages prepared by me onto our home computer. In the evening, the park of the Technical University is packed with people of all generations. It strikes me that all these people can be together in an organized, calm and respectful way.

**03.07.2002** We start the day with a bike trip and a swim in the pool. When I sit down behind my desk at work, two texts are already waiting for me. However, in the afternoon, the tempo is more relaxed, and I can work with my dictionary draft. In the end, I have completed about four pages. At home, Galina enters everything onto our computer – first, the lexical unit in Chinese characters, then the transcription, and finally – the Latvian translation. I proofread Galina's work and sometimes add the missing diacritic marks, but, on the whole, the quality of her work is great.

**05.07.2002** Galina wants to visit a hair-dresser. Yesterday I copied out some words and expressions necessary for a visit to a hairdresser for her. In the evening, we want to sit on a bench in the hotel garden, but it is so hot (+30) there and cicadas are so deafeningly loud that after 15 minutes we go back to our apartment.

**06.07.2002** I put a table of Chinese dynasties and a map of China in a visible place at my workplace. In the process of text editing, these important sources of information are needed very often and must be at hand. All of a sudden, one text that is still in the editing process disappears. Again we call the computer specialist. After lunch, my text has been restored, and I continue working. Outside, it's boiling – +34 degrees.

**08.07.2002** The water in the swimming pool has warmed up, too, yet the morning swim is still refreshing. Unexpectedly, one of the hotel employees gives me a present – a bookshelf. I accept it with gratitude. We order fish for lunch. Then we buy a watermelon, a mango and some ice cream. At the optician's, I order bifocals – for work on a computer and for reading. Thus, the whole free day is dedicated to sorting out household things.

**10.07.2002** After a bike ride and a swim, I read newspapers in the hotel garden. I am doing the afternoon shift today. At work, something extraordinary has



happened. My buddy has left three articles for me to edit, without any explanation. I have no idea, why he's done that, but I start editing the texts. Later everything goes as usual, and I even have some time to work on the dictionary draft. Galina has prepared everything for our trip tomorrow to the coast of the Yellow Sea 黄海.

**11.07.2002** This morning we skip the bike and the pool. We get ready quickly and catch a bus to the Beijing Railway Station. Soon we are on our way to Beidaihe 北戴河, a favorite resort with China's top officials, and also used by the Xinhua News Service. The road to the shore of the Yellow Sea leads along a plain that is as smooth as the surface of a table. Blue-green corn fields and gardens with young cedar trees flash outside the window. Occasionally, we cross a body of water that probably has been a river once, but now has turned into a ditch spreading foul stench. Unfortunately, most of the rivers in China are heavily polluted, so it's better not to put your feet in them. Improving the environment here is a big problem, which is still waiting for a solution. We spend two hours and 20 minutes on the way. Having checked in at the hotel, we go straight to the beach. The place is so crowded that there is no place to lie down on the sand. So, we go for a swim. The water seems as salty as in the ocean near Vladivostok, where we also used to go for a morning swim. We take a dip into the salty water about three times and then get back to the hotel. The festive dinner is complemented with many thank you and congratulatory speeches.

**12.07.2002** Early in the morning we are at the sea shore. The waves are low, and the water feels delightfully warm and silky. We swim for about half an hour and then go back to the hotel for breakfast. At 3:00 p.m., a bus takes us to the city of Shanhaiguan 山海关, near the first gate of the Great Wall of China, or a border guard post called Laolongtou 老龙头, which could be translated as the "Old Dragon's Head." At a distance of 8,851 km, or 10,000 li from here – in the western direction, on the border of Gansu Province 甘肃省 and Xinjiang - Uighur Autonomous Region 新疆维吾尔自治区, one can find the "Great Dragon's Tail" – the westernmost gate of the Great Wall of China, or its frontier border guard post Jiayuguan Pass 嘉峪关.

In the earlier centuries, Shanhaiguan was of great strategic importance because it was located at the point where Manchuria and Mongolia meet. It is the only place where the Great Wall of China extends into the sea by 23 meters. "Old Dragon's Head" left a powerful impression on me. I have seen other "Old Dragon's" sections before: Badaling 八达岭 and Mutianyu 慕田峪. Unfortunately, on the way to Huhhot very little is left of the wall. And today we are standing here, in Laolongtou 龙头, where the waters of the Yellow Sea's Bohai Bay 渤海 are gently washing the Old Dragon's muzzle. So far, only the Chinese people with their hard work and joint effort have been able to

build such a mega structure. No wonder, as the population of China today is 十四亿, which literally means 14 “hundreds of millions”, or as we would say – 1.4 billion people. The air temperature during the visit to the Dragon’s Head is so extremely hot that it starts dulling one’s senses – plus 38 degrees. Wherever and whenever possible, we look for a sheltering shade.

**13.07.2002** Today we feel so comfortable in the water that we swim as far as the buoys delineating the safe swimming area. The water is really salty and warm. Our group is taken to a park. The winding road among oddly shaped pine trees is leading uphill. Walking is becoming difficult because of the heat. In the park, we are offered an opportunity to watch a Chinese circus show. For the first time in my life, I see a parrot riding a tiny bike, roller skating and raising a flag with the help of its beak and claws. In the evening, there is a gathering of Wuhusihai 五湖四海. It means, literally, – “People from five lakes and four seas”, i.e. people from all over the world. Indeed, the participants of the evening include guests from Canada, Japan, Australia, Spain, New Zealand, Russia, and also from Latvia. The party is filled with bustling noise and heartfelt jokes. The mood is great.

**14.07.2002** The morning starts with a tennis match. I am sweating, and taking a dip in the sea helps me to get refreshed. This day involves a lot of physical activities; feels almost like in my younger days... We find a gazebo where it is possible to enjoy the quiet and to read for a while until it’s time to depart. At around 18:00, we are at home – in our hotel room. The air temperature in Beijing is +40. This is utterly exhausting, especially after lounging around on the beach where, at least for a few days, it was possible to feel the fresh breeze of the Yellow Sea.

**15.07.2002** It’s my birthday today, but I’ll think about it in the evening. A pile of articles on my desk are waiting for me already. I get to work immediately. The shift manager, Guo congratulates me on my birthday with a Chinese saying which might sound something like this: “an old horse pulls the plough with an effort, but his furrow is straight”. It should be noted that 2002 is the Year of the Horse in China 马年. Galina has baked a cake and has also provided plates and forks. My colleagues are eager to try her treat. Everything is up to the mark. At home, I check my e-mails and find greetings from our sons and from Inna, Galina’s sister.

**17.07.2002** After a short bike ride, we take a dip in the pool. The water feels too warm. No wonder, considering the hot weather we’ve been having. I am preparing a thank you letter, but the draft disappears mysteriously. I need to write it from the start.

**19.07.2002** For the fourth day I have been working from 8:00 to 17:00. I am getting tired. After yesterday's rain showers, the air seems fresher. At the office, I keep working in both directions – editing the translations, as well as working on the dictionary draft. This has become almost a routine. If the texts to be edited come in, I immediately get to work. If they are delayed, I turn to the dictionary draft. It's a bit unpleasant that sometimes my dictionary entries disappear before I print them out at the end of the working day. If this happens, I need to start everything from scratch. I really wonder – is it because somebody disapproves of what I'm doing during the spare moments? Today I order our dinner at a Chinese eatery. With one hand, I am holding my bike's handle, with the other – trying to juggle the dinner box. While on the road, I get caught in a sudden downpour.

**23.07.2002** Sometimes at night my sleep is interrupted, which is not really conducive to working at the office. The days are pretty mundane. The work tempo is quite tense most of the time. In such conditions, it is important to be in perfect physical condition to be able to cope with the work. Galina has rewritten four pieces of the dictionary draft. Our team of two people is working at its full capacity, and each of us has our own field of work. These are just the first steps in compiling the dictionary draft, but we're absolutely fascinated and carried away with the project, which brings a great sense of satisfaction.

**24.07.2002** In the morning the Xinhua van picks me up. The air quality is really bad today. It seems that the whole city is covered by a lid of smog. The visibility is extremely poor, and it is difficult to breathe. After work I am going home with my colleague K. Garibov. He says he is very happy with his job here, because at home in Moscow, he is not in demand. K. Garibov is a philosopher by education who has also worked in journalism. Given the difficult times in Russia, most Russian colleagues tell similar stories. Such insights greatly help me to balance my own feelings. In addition, I am the only employee from Latvia in this institution of the CCP. That's why I believe it's a unique experience to see how China's largest news service works.

**25.07.2002** I have been working from 8:00 to 17:00 for two weeks in a row. My Chinese colleagues work two hours less. In spite of the seeming hustle and bustle in the office, there exists an iron-clad order, without any compromises. Everybody must know his or her place and has to cope with one's duties. That is the name of the game here – take it or leave it!

**27.07.2002** My fragmented diary notes, where I try to reflect the busy working rhythm, is, in fact, also an attempt not to become estranged from my native Latvian language. Immersing into the depths of the Chinese and the Russian languages almost leave no space for Latvian. In my rare free moments, I try to

pick up some Latvian book and read a few pages. This time I have taken with me a book by Edvarts Virza – “Straumēni”. My soul rejoices at the pastoral depictions of the Latvian countryside – they make me hear the calm flow of the Lielupe River, taste the harsh sweat dripping from a workman’s forehead, and, above all, feel the omnipresence of God in this world created by the author, the world which is so distant from me geographically, but so close to my heart. The author’s language is juicy, poetic, and powerful at the same time. Definitely, my native language, especially if I’m not occupied at work or with some daily chores, is among those things that I really miss here, in China.

**29.07.2002** I start the day with a bike ride and a dip in the pool. It might seem ironic but sometimes I feel that this is the best part of the day. While on my bike or in the pool, I am in control and feel like a full-fledged human being. As soon as I sit by my desk and the texts start pouring in, the feeling is very different. You feel like a small screw in the colossal mechanism of Xinhua Agency. There are thousands of employees in this high rise building and you are just one of them.

Today texts keep coming so intensively that I can’t even dream about getting down to the dictionary draft. I get my paycheck – 4925 yuan, 75 yuan being deducted in taxes.

**30.07.2002** The air is so humid that it is even difficult to breathe. Feels like a bathhouse. The morning swim is very refreshing. My colleagues go out to have lunch. Now it’s the right moment for me to get down to the dictionary. As a result, I have four pages of the draft to take home. Not often am I that prolific. In the evening, we go for a walk. The singing of cicadas, insects similar to grasshoppers, sounds like an electric saw in action. We go back to our apartment, and I immerse myself indulgently into the idyllic world of “Straumēni”.

**31.07.2002** Beijing is wrapped in smog. The air temperature is +38, and that says it all. These are extreme conditions. Everybody is very quiet on the bus when we are returning home. There is simply no more energy to speak.

My colleague K. Garibov comes over to my desk a couple of times. We start chatting, and, as a result, I have no time left for my dictionary job.

**01.08.2002** It is +38 today as well. There are five translators working, and there is no time for me to get bored. At home, Galina has prepared cold soup. Wow, this is a blessing! Since the first day at our hotel home, we have been cooking ourselves. No matter how you praise the Chinese cuisine, the tastes that we’ve been used to since our childhoods are the best.

**03.08.2002** The humid heat has been prevailing already for a few days. Somehow I have managed to catch a cold in the hottest time of the year, which,

in fact, is not the first time for me. At the doctor's office at work I get some medicine and manage until the end of the shift. At home, Galina takes my temperature, and the thermometer shows 38.2. I do not feel well, so I call my colleague and ask him to substitute for me the next day.

**05.08.2002** I'm feeling well enough to do my shift. There are texts to edit, but I can also work on my own project. When at home, I get on my bike and go shopping.

**06.08.2002** For the first time after the illness, we both go for a bike ride and have a swim in the blue-colored water of the pool. It is a real pleasure to be healthy again and have a refreshing swim. My shift is crazy – it turns out we have two young inexperienced girls – translators, who hand in carelessly translated, half-ready texts. Their job needs to be almost completely redone by me, which is very time-consuming. After work we go to the Finnair office, where we buy airline tickets. Galina will be going home to take part in the renovation of our private house in the Bergi suburbs, Latvia, which we jokingly call “Reconstruction Project 2002”.

**07.08.2002** The bike ride this morning is excellent. A light breeze is felt in the air, and the heat has receded. We are swimming in the pool and rejoicing at the greenery and flowers around. The cicadas have gotten quieter as well. The texts for editing are coming in slowly, and I can devote some time to the dictionary. I manage to do all the editing jobs, too, so, in the end, I'm happy with my working day. We have been invited to a farewell evening by my Spanish colleague. Brazilian Gi prepares beef Brazilian style. He is a brilliant chef, we must admit. The meat is amazingly juicy and soft, with a layer of streaky bacon and coarse grains of salt on top. It's literally melting in one's mouth. Everyone's in a great mood. Jokes and stories in different languages, the sounds of the guitar and songs add to the great atmosphere.

**08.08.2002** My Chinese colleagues have understood that I am using the pauses in the work process to work at the dictionary. Nobody is surprised or objects. The atmosphere at the office is friendly and collegial. My colleagues know that as soon as a text comes in for editing, I will put my dictionary pages aside. Sounds of hammers and drilling machines are disturbing our peace at the hotel. They have started routine repair work in the adjacent room. There is nothing we can do but to put up with it. According to the farmers' calendar 农历, autumn begins today. Walnuts are turning ripe in the hotel garden.

**09.08.2002** On Friday, life goes its usual way – I am both editing texts and working with the dictionary. We have a quiet Friday night, one of the best times of the week. There are two free days ahead.



**12.08.2002** In the evening, I pick up another one of my favorite Latvian books “The White Book”. On all my trips to China and other places around the world, I have always taken along a book in Latvian. Most often these have been either “The Green Book” or “The White Book” by Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš. One of the reasons is that his dialect is the same language that my parents used to speak. In his books he uses colorful local words and expressions to describe, for example, such practical notions as boiling cabbage soup or a tree branch, which are very different from the standard literary Latvian. His books always take me to the land of my childhood, more so, to the very place where our family roots are. Reading Jaunsudrabiņš has always been a very moving, poignant and thought-provoking experience – a journey I take into my parents’ language, the lives of the characters in the book and my world outlook. Although the author and I are several generations apart, my postwar time childhood is not that different from the life of a young boy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is described in the book.

**14.08.2002** I am doing the second shift today. I turn to the Department of Foreign Experts with a request to transfer us to the much quieter apartment in the adjacent building. The French editorial staff member Teresa is terminating her employment with Xinhua and vacating her premises. Teresa is an experienced journalist, born in Xianggang (Hong Kong) and is fluent in the Guangdong (Cantonese) dialect. Her contract with Xinhua is expiring and she is discontinuing her employment with the PRC news service. The officials from the Department of Foreign Experts promise to consider my request. Ms Chen, an interpreter, with whom I am working together, likes to play cards on the computer in her free time. At such moments, she doesn’t pay any attention to me, and I can freely work on my dictionary draft. I write in my diary: “Working at the news agency means iron-clad routine – day by day”.

**16.08.2002** Yesterday I returned home from the second shift at 20:30. This morning I am already departing for work at 7:30. This is pretty tough. Regarding the dictionary draft, at the moment I am working on phrases with negative connotations. It’s not that easy to find an appropriate solution for converting the phrase into Latvian. My rusty Latvian language is causing problems. The dictionary is my last resort. When the version offered by the dictionary does not seem convincing, I start feeling helpless.

**17.08.2002** I start translating the Chinese farmers’ calendar for 24 field seasons. When all the dictionary entries are completed, it could be added as one of the appendices. In any case, compiling the dictionary is a really engaging process. In the evening, I read the Latvian daily newspaper “Diena” with great interest. First of all – I miss the Latvian language and, secondly, the events in Latvia are starting to feel more and more distant to me.

**19.08.2002** At night it starts to rain, and in the morning it is still pouring. I need an umbrella to get to work. The shift manager Guo brings me articles about Shanghai, because Russian Prime Minister M. Kasyanov is going to visit the city. After a longer break, it is possible to go outside and sit in the garden. The air temperature is +20. Has the heat receded for sure?

**21.08.2002** The morning is awfully busy. The texts keep coming in nonstop. The end of the working day is pretty tense, too, as a couple of texts arrive literally during the last minutes of the shift.

A huge military helicopter with 115 Russian army officers and soldiers has been shot down in Grozny.

**22.08.2002** Visibility is very poor in Beijing again. The air is thick and humid. At the office, it feels as if the rooms haven't been aired at all. In the evening, a storm breaks out with thunder and lightning. Now it is clear why I was feeling oppressive discomfort all day along.

**23.08.2002** The sun rises later than in the middle of the summer, which makes it more difficult to get up in the morning. Shift manager Guo informs me that I will need to work some extra hours. In the evening, we go outside to sit in the garden of the Technical University. The heat has receded and cicadas are quiet. Here and there, elderly ladies are sitting on the benches while looking after their grandchildren. The representatives of the younger generation of the grand nation are happily frolicking around, dressed in the typical split-crotch panties exposing their naked bottoms. The atmosphere is peaceful and family-like.

**26.08.2002** Today, our French lady, Teresa, is travelling back to France and vacating her Yiyuan apartment. The day at work is pretty stressful, and I do not expect any special favors. When I come home, there is a cargo tricycle in front of our doors. I start carrying our stuff downstairs and loading everything into the tricycle. Galina takes a picture of me in this action. We start the journey from our place in Yayuan 雅园 apartment block to Yiyuan 颐园 apartment block. Some belongings fall from the tricycle, but the friendly Chinese staff take them upstairs to the third floor, Teresa's former apartment, which from today will be our home in Beijing. We have moved our house in Beijing one more time. In the new place, we are embraced by the silence and peace, which is so rare in Beijing. **13 14**

**28.08.2002** I stay at home and Galina goes to the pool alone. At work, I file the documents for the new living place. Everything must be in order. We realize, to our great surprise, that it's been six months since we arrived in Beijing. Time flies really fast.

**29.08.2002** Texts are coming in, interesting in terms of content. For example, there is an article about the Lions Club offer to perform cataract operations at the expense of the club. The leitmotif of the text is – 视觉 – eyesight in the first place. The next article is about the Japanese bacteriological war against China, which is a particularly sensitive topic in China. The afternoon is a real race against time and the articles that are flooding my desk. After such a working day, there is a true feeling of relief when the day is over.

**30.08.2002** Today, it's a real sweatshop at the office. I edit 29 texts, in total. In the evening we feast on a delicious fish to mark the six months at the Xinhua agency, completing 200 pages of the dictionary, and, of course, moving to a new place.

**01.09.2002** Opposite our hotel is the Zhonguan 中关村 Tower. Today we can't see the tower. The fog is as thick as pea soup. In the evening, I see a modern Chinese slang dictionary in a bookstore. I take a look inside and decide to buy it. With the rapid development of the Chinese language, new expressions appear in the colloquial language. Their origin and meaning could really be worth exploring. The dictionary also includes a brief explanation of each idiomatic expression. The expressions sound well rounded and right on the dot – like a whiplash. We enjoy a calm day in the quiet neighborhood and being together – just the two of us. It seems that autumn is announcing its rights and the summer heat is receding. The temperature is a bit above +20, which feels very comfortable. Galina has been working on the lexis of yesterday's draft. In the evening we have sour cabbage soup – feels like a greeting from my motherland. This is wonderful. Cicadas outside the window can be heard, but they are much quieter.

**08.09.2002** Galina has a swim in the pool. I am feeling a little bit under the weather, so I abstain this time. We go to the market on the Third Circuit Road and buy an excellent mullet fish. The evening comes, yet somehow I do not feel relaxed.

**10.09.2002** This morning we go for both a bike ride and a swim in the pool. Such a beginning to the day is a real energizer. Today we have only two translators working, so I manage to prepare six pages of the dictionary draft.

**11.09.2002** Lengthy articles about the PRC's international cooperation in the fight against terrorism are coming in first, then – articles harshly criticizing scamming and wasting money during the construction of the Sanxia 三峡 hydroelectric power plant. In the evening, we are supposed to join the farewell dinner organized by my French colleague Meri, but the rain and cold wind gusts force us to cancel this plan.

**13.09.2002** At 2:30 at night we get a call from Krāslava, a small town in Latvia. A young man tells us about his business plan – he wants to organize



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glove production in China. He has woken us up in the middle of the night, and we cannot understand how we could be of assistance in this matter. More so, my work at the news agency is in no way related to such practical things as production of fashion accessories. I cannot fall asleep again; what is more I have a total lack of energy in the morning. The hours before lunch are still ok, but the afternoon leaves me totally exhausted. At home, I just have dinner, watch the evening news and turn in.

**14.09.2002** Only two translators are working today, which is quite rare. I rush to my dictionary draft, but when the texts come in, rush to the editing job. The best season is about to start in Beijing – mellow and warm – around +23. September is called the Red Leaves' Festival 红叶节 by the capital residents. Just like people from Riga flock to Sigulda, probably the most picturesque town in Latvia, to enjoy the splendor of autumn leaves, so people of Beijing go, for example, to Xiangshan 香山 or Badachu 八大处 to take photographs or just to enjoy the colorful leaves. **15 16 17 18**

**15.09.2002** In September, the sun rises noticeably later and affects the routine of our sporting activities practiced all summer. This is the fourth week since

I've been working from 8:00 to 17:00 every day. As a result, I feel tired and dream about a less intense work schedule.

**16.09.2002** Galina wants to visit a hair salon before she leaves for Latvia. After three hours, she returns with a perfectly acceptable hair style. We visit the Suyuan 苏园 Garden on our hotel grounds and, sitting on the shore of a pond, rejoice at the sight of the filigree Suzhou 苏州-style gazebos built with great skill and ingenuity. There are some plans we need to discuss, especially Galina's forthcoming trip to Latvia.

**19.09.2002** The sky is covered with grey clouds, and a strong wind is blowing. Feels like autumn. We buy presents to take to Latvia. At work, the schedule is quite stressful. I do the job, but I also manage to work on my dictionary during the free moments. The weather is dull and dreary. As soon as it gets dark, it starts raining.

**20.09.2002** We wake up early and start preparing for the road. Galina shows me where she keeps the money, medicine, clothes, products and everything else. For about two months, I'll have to manage on my own. The hotel shuttle bus takes us to the airport. We get a cup of coffee, and then it's time for Galina to board the plane. She starts her journey to Latvia, but I return to the hotel. Now it's time for me to deal with the house chores from which I have been completely relieved until now. Galina has been in full charge of cooking, cleaning and doing basically everything about the house, which is not only time consuming, but also requires specific skills.

**22.09.2002** For the first time, I take a bike ride to the Emperor's summer residence in Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park. Then I walk around Kunming 昆明 Lake. It takes about two and a half hours. On my way I watch people enjoying different pastimes. An elderly lady is knitting while walking slowly. An elderly man is juggling four balls. A couple of grey-haired ladies are singing an aria from Beijing opera in two voices. Another man soaks a huge brush in a bucket of water and paints beautiful hieroglyphs on the sidewalk. The mysterious, graceful signs dry up and disappear quickly. A man with a small radio hanging on his neck runs past me. There is a quite busy beach at the lake outlet; however, there are only a few swimmers in the water. I collect my bike from the parking lot and go back home to my hotel. Altogether, my journey on the bike and on foot has lasted approximately four hours.

**23.09.2002** In the morning, I have a bike ride and also do some serious exercise. Then the agency van takes me to work. The first part of the day is quite calm. In the afternoon, one of the interpreter ladies starts asking me questions about some texts which have already been edited. That seems strange – let's see where it takes us. At 18:00, Mr V. Jeremejev arrives. He wants to talk about his





project – reconstruction of Krāslava manor house in Latvia. To my knowledge, the abandoned manor house is not in a very good condition, so I think this man lives in the clouds. However, it happens quite often that people with ideas that seem impractical at the beginning, eventually, conquer the world.

**25.09.2002** It turns out that the large pool, which used to be a real source of pleasure for us all summer, has been closed on Monday. While swimming, we could look at the green trees and the sky and listen to the songs of birds. Today it's only nice memories about the summer, which has passed so quickly.

**26.09.2002** I sit down by my desk and see that a pile of texts has already accumulated on it. There are five translators working, and they make us really busy. I hardly have time to rush to the bathroom. When at home, I realize that it is not a good idea to go shopping for food every day. I must think of something.

**28.09.2002** Using the new and comprehensive dictionary of “Xinhua Zidian” 新华字典 as a source, I am compiling a commentary in Latvian on rarely used Chinese characters. This is a very difficult and time consuming process. I continue working on it in the afternoon and slowly, but steadily some kind of a system is emerging. For lunch I have a bowl of Mongolian soup, which is delicious and invigorating.

**30.09.2002** This Monday is a free day for me. I decide to take a longer bike ride. After an hour and a half I am at the gate of the Botanical Garden 植物园. I have been here with Galina several times. This time my primary goal is not so much sightseeing, but an opportunity to do some physical exercise. By bike, it takes the same amount of time to get back to the hotel. At 12:00 I am at home, surprised that I have coped with this route so successfully. The News Agency offers its employees a few days' holiday on the coast of the Yellow Sea, in the same, already familiar Beidaihe 北戴河 resort. Without thinking twice, I say “yes”, more so because Galina is in Latvia and I have to manage on my own.

**01.10.2002** It is still dark in the morning when strong wind gusts attack Beijing. The wind throws over bicycles and flower pots, tears off tin tiles from the roofs and smashes windows. I take my bicycle upstairs to my room. Then I have a quick breakfast and depart for the train station. We are in Beidaihe at around 15:00. I rush to the beach, but, to my disappointment, the sea is stormy today. It is not very pleasant to walk without a jacket. I have hoped that the weather on the sea coast would be more summer-like. I walk along the beach until I get to the PRC Air Force resort center.

**02.10.2002** Early in the morning I am on the beach. First I walk, then jog, and then do the same again in a reverse order. After the breakfast at the hotel,

I cannot resist the temptation of the beach again. Maybe living in the land-locked Beijing is the reason why the sea attracts me so much.

In the afternoon the tidal waves are washing up the shore. I taste the small local crabs and feel the authentic Beidahe atmosphere. Probably, it is the reason why our news agency has been renting hotel rooms here for many years.

**03.10.2002** At 5:40 in the morning, I am on the beach where many people have gathered to see the magic of the sunrise. Everybody hopes that the upper edge of the sun will appear straight from the water line at the horizon. However, today the horizon is hidden in a light fog and the sun goes up from there quite quickly. Some time ago Galina and I saw the sunrise here in all its glory. The Chinese regard this magic sight to be a blessed moment. Indeed, it's fascinating to watch the new day dawn – the tiny edge of the sun disc grows bigger by every second.

I meet some journalists – my acquaintances, who complain that the water has become too cold in the sea. Right on the seashore, I order a bowl of flour-pumpkin soup. It tastes unusual, but is not bad at all. The grilled octopus, however, is absolutely fantastic. I book my railway ticket for Saturday.

**04.10.2002** The sea is rough again today I walk barefoot on the water edge. After the intense editing job, I really needed to clear my head. The overall feeling is great. One thing that gets me down at my present stay in Beijing is the iron-clad routine when every day is the same as the previous one. It reminds me of the time when I was doing my mandatory military service. There is almost no way to break the steady rhythm set by our news service.

In the evening, I get carried away by the book “Five Days”, whose author is Anšlavs Eglītis. The fact alone that I am reading a book in Latvian, on the shore of the Yellow Sea is amazing! The short holidays pass too quickly.

**05.10.2002** Before going back to the capital city, I linger for a couple of hours on the beach. For lunch, I choose a light meal – rice with milk. On the tiny table in my train compartment, a couple of loving parents have set up a clamorous computer for their technically advanced kid. They are not alone – all over our coach, the sound of mobile phones, pagers and electronic toys merge into unbearable noise. I feel I'm on the verge... When back at the hotel, I adapt quickly to my Beijing routine again.

**06.10.2002** The pool, stretching exercises, and off I rush to the office. The working day starts with a long TASS news reel about elections in Latvia. After the four vacation days it's a bit difficult to switch to the working rhythm. At the end of the day, I have already readapted.

**07.10.2002** Only two translators are at work, so I can devote some time to the appendix with the rarely used characters. I'm struggling with it all day. When I am ready to print out my draft, the printer gets hung up and I am left with nothing. At home, I make millet grain porridge for my supper.

**08.10.2002** I tell the computer man about my problem yesterday with the printer, and after a short while, he brings me the printout. I've been lucky – at least I do not have to write everything anew, as has happened a few times before.

The working day is calm and balanced. I complete my daily duties and also have some time left to work on my dictionary. At 18:00 at the hotel “Minzu” 民族 I meet with the spouses M. Kūle and R. Kūlis. We talk about China and about Latvia, as well as remember our former colleagues in Riga.

**10.10.2002** It's a free day and I could take it easy. I do some house chores, then write letters to my sons. All of a sudden I get a phone call – they need me at work. There is nothing I can do. I get dressed quickly and leave for work. I struggle a long time with an article about the cloned goat kids from Taiwan, followed by the news about producing fuel from plastic waste.

**11.10.2002** The accuracy of one translated piece raises doubts in me. Nothing else remains – I take the original text in Chinese and look through it. As a result, there are many corrections. Our American colleague Krista is being very loud this afternoon. I have to reprimand her, because it is disturbing and prevents concentrating on work.

**13.10.2002** I go on a bike ride. While riding along the canal, I stop at a small temple – Wanshouji 万寿寺. I go around the Imperial Summer Residence 颐和园 Park, and then past the Yuquan Shan Ta (Jade Fountain Hill 玉泉山 Pagoda). This pagoda is located in the military area, so it is not accessible. I spend about three hours on the way, which is quite enough for a good exercise. At home, I cook tuna soup for the first time in my life. It tastes delicious. Then I continue reading the book by Anšlavs Eglītis – “Five Days”. Once again, I delight in the Latvian language and the storytelling skills of A. Eglītis.

**14.10.2002** After a day of work, I walk along Sun Yat Sen Park 中山公园, along Tiananmen 天安门 Square, until I reach the Music Hall 音乐厅. The auditorium is nice and well-lit. The portable pipe organ in the middle of the hall looks slightly skewed – it's missing one of the wheels. The performer is the well-known Latvian pipe organist Tālivaldis Deksnis. A Chinese lady organist, who has studied in Vienna, assists him. T. Deksnis starts the concert and is superb. However, this kind of music is not very familiar to the Chinese audience, and they start leaving the hall. It is getting more and more conspicuous... Nevertheless, the organist plays his program in all good conscience. I meet him



afterwards, and we have a little chat. The sounds of the well-known church chorales have aroused special emotions in me. I am so thankful to the artist for this opportunity. The Western world has not yet accustomed the Chinese public to this wonderful kind of music.

**16.10.2002** My Arab colleagues recommend a place where to buy some good lamb. I follow their advice. At home I put the meat in a pot and start cooking it. After three hours, the meat is not tender yet. In fact, it is impossible to chew it. I continue the cooking process. After four hours, I decide that, probably, the lamb has not been “very young”. What a bargain!

**17.10.2002** Two texts have not been very accurately translated, so I need to read the original text in Chinese, which is quite time-consuming. The editorial office is well equipped with specialized dictionaries, as well as additional information sources about the world’s best-known news services. All you need to do is – search quickly, find the required term and insert it into the text according to the content. Today there are five translators working busily, so I might as well forget about my dictionary draft. I am trying to consume the lamb I cooked yesterday. I need to diversify my diet, but, probably, this lamb was not the best choice.

**19.10.2002** The cleaning ladies have opened the windows on the third floor and it’s rather chilly in our office. I am afraid to catch a cold, so I ask them to close the windows. At 17:15 I take subway to Wangfujing 王府井, where I’m supposed to meet some people for a dinner featuring the famous Beijing duck 北京烤鸭. The other participants of the dinner are the pipe organist T. Deksnis, the secretary of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC – D. Liberte, head of the editorial office of music programs of the Chinese National Radio and the Chinese pipe organist. The atmosphere is relaxed and we talk about the pipe organ music, as well as about China and Latvia.

**20.10.2002** There are two translators doing the Sunday shift. This normally means less amount of work, yet I keep stumbling with some of the texts, which are quite trying and need more time and effort.

In the evening, I count the pages of the dictionary draft compiled in the last two days and I am quite happy. It’s ten pages, which is not bad at all.

**21.10.2002** Monday is my day off. I have decided to go on a bike trip to the Moon Temple 月坛, although Moon Park would be a more appropriate name today. I have been thinking about visiting this park for a long time, and now I can finally make my wish come true. The first impression is that the park looks quite neglected. History books, however, say that emperors of both Ming 明 and Qing 清 dynasties loved to visit this park, relax under



the roof of a gazebo and enjoy the splendor of the full moon in the sky. There is still a wall preserved with calligraphy samples, all of which are poetic verses dedicated to the Moon. Although today this park is not one of the most visited places in Beijing, in my opinion, it still bears the aura of history. I do not regret that I have travelled all the way here on my bike. After all, this is my free day, and I have gained a new insight into the history of the ancient town. Not far from the park, a spacious Mongolian restaurant is trying to attract visitors. Dressed in the ornate robe and extravagant boots of a nomad, a man speaking fluent Chinese is inviting everyone to taste Mongolian cuisine. I get on my bike and start my way back. It's not easy to ride because of the strong cross-wind.

**22.10.2002** After a longer time, I am working the afternoon shift. The rhythm of work is quite tense, yet I manage to contribute to my dictionary project as well. In the evening I read Latvian newspapers. For some reason, I cannot fall asleep. In fact, my life is very quiet and peaceful now, which is not bad at all. Probably, as a result, every meeting or event outside the ordinary schedule causes smaller or bigger stress.

**24.10.2002** I do some light housekeeping, and then it's time to leave for work. All of a sudden, we hear shocking news from Moscow. Masked terrorists have seized 700 people at a theatre building and are demanding Russia withdraw its troops from Chechnya. V. Putin cancels his planned visit to Portugal. Prime Minister M. Kasyanov also stays in the country. What's going to happen? How can the situation be resolved?

**25.10.2002** For the second day in a row, Chechen militants have been holding the hostages in the concert hall. The well-known pediatrician L. Roshal and singer J. Kobzon have met the fighters for discussions. Only very brave people, or as Chinese say – “men with big livers” can do this kind of thing.

I go to the library and talk to one employee, who kindly agrees to rebind one of my dictionaries, which is almost falling apart. Then I write greetings to my eldest son Juris on his birthday. In the evening, I browse through my diaries of recent years. There are no regrets – we have lived our life to its fullest: exciting trips, family gatherings with parties and relaxing in the bathhouse, visiting family gravesites, getting to know the beautiful regions of Latvia – Sēlija and Latgale, working together to refine our house and garden in Berģi. Now, when I'm alone in a strange country, this read helps me through my mundane, lonely existence.

**27.10.2002** We are only two “enthusiasts” in the pool this morning, but the feeling is good and invigorating. On our way to work, my colleague Nail Ahmetshin invites us to a farewell dinner on Tuesday, as he is terminating his contract with the news agency and returning to Moscow. It's a pity because

he is one of the most interesting buddies. His knowledge of Chinese history is deep and comprehensive. He has explored the ancient Silk Road during his trips and written a book about it.

**28.10.2002** They announced on the news yesterday that the hostage crisis has been resolved. Into the hall, some kind of gas was blown, which put to sleep not only the militants, but also the hostages, of whom 117 people did not survive. What the Chechen militants did was atrocious, but what about the *spetsnaz* ('*Special Operations Forces*' – Russian abbreviation) rescue operation? Was it justified? This entire event leaves bitter aftertaste.

**30.10.2002** My colleagues are kind of sleepy today. I use the first part of the day to work on my project. After work, I work around our apartment – do some housekeeping and cook tuna soup for dinner. In the late evening, I read an article about the famous author and an excellent expert of China – Pearl S. Buck.

**31.10.2002** As soon as I sit down behind my desk, I see six interpreters in the "line of fire". This can only mean that the day will not be easy and there will be a lot of texts to edit. So it is. However, I manage to write some pages of the dictionary draft as well.

I get on my bike and ride along the river to Wanshou 万寿寺 Monastery. Next to the small building of the monastery, some carpenters are working in the yard. The careful attitude of the artisans towards the log, the way how they adjust and cut it deserves utter respect. Probably, this log will be used as a beam in the monastery structure. Timber and wood materials as such, by the way, are extremely valuable in China. For example, the price of a piece of wood for a kitchen cutting board is calculated according to its weight. China is not rich in wood resources. Most timber is imported from many other countries.

The ride back to the hotel is not easy because of the strong headwind.

**01.11.2002** My plan for the free day is to go climbing Xiangshan 香山 Mountain. However, it turns out that I have got on a wrong bus, which takes me to the familiar Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park. Vendors by the park wall are selling embroidered slippers, so I buy a pair for Galina. Then I decide to walk to the South Gate, but on my way I start feeling weary and hungry. A corn cob from the street food stand tastes absolutely delicious and is cheap, too. After taking a few brief stops on my way, I finally reach the You Yi 友谊宾馆 Hotel. Now I feel absolutely exhausted. Yet, I have cleared my head and got a break from the "non-stop editing syndrome".

**02.11.2002** It's Saturday, and there are only two translators working. Immediately, I switch to my dictionary draft.

I leave the territory of the news agency and turn onto a narrow lane. Holding chopsticks in one hand, a vending lady is gobbling down her boiled noodles right behind the table with raw pieces of meat laid out for sale. I have some soup and chicken with nuts. I have prepared nine pages of the draft today. It might be a record of all times so far. In the evening, I drop into a barber's shop. The barber's wife is busily moving around in the tiny room. A baby is lying in a cot. The barber puts some kind of a cloak, which has not seen soap and water for a long time, around my neck and sets to work. The place lacks basic cleanliness and hygiene. The ceiling has not been white-washed, most probably, since the time when the PRC was founded in 1949.

**04.11.2002** It's Monday today, and it's my free day. Only now do I realize how advantageous it is to have a holiday on the first day of the working week. The mountain tracks are almost devoid of tourists. They were packed with crowds of enthusiastic climbers on Saturday and Sunday. Now I know that Monday is the best day for hiking or riding a bike. I start climbing, take a short break now and then, and make it quite easily to the top. The stone road leading to the top of the mountain always causes admiration in me. The massive stone blocks are so skillfully cut and polished to fit with each other to form a road that will, by all means, last forever. The roadside and every curve of the track are clean and well-kept. The place at the foot of the mountain is bustling with trade. One can find all sorts of things here: hazelnuts and cedar nuts, chestnuts, almonds, peanuts and walnuts, dried Chinese dates, boiled and fried corn, persimmons, mandarins, coconuts, and even dried sparrow carcasses. Jewelry is also displayed on the counters – beautiful, curiously shaped stones, silverwork, and even autumn leaves in cellophane. Accompanied by a synthesizer, a blind man is playing the traditional Chinese string instrument “er-hu” 二胡. Its sound is beautiful and melancholy. Today it's mostly seniors who are climbing the mountain. Some are singing arias from the Beijing Opera 京剧. You may also overhear a Chinese folk song, or “Moscow Evenings”, which is still very popular in China. Some people combine climbing with traditional gymnastics. A group of youngsters or college students might appear amidst the seniors as well. The biggest luck today is the fact that it's sunny, and the wind is almost still. An icy breeze can be felt only on the very top of the mountain. At 15:00 I am at home, happy and energized. Blessed be the free Monday!

**06.11.2002** The 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CCP has begun. Meetings are held in all public institutions. The journey to my news agency office takes much longer, because congress delegates travel to the congress meetings on special buses and other vehicles must yield to them. The festive atmosphere of a big event is taking over the capital. I start chatting with a lady selling fruit on the street. “The Communist Party is holding too many meetings,” she says. I'm trying

to play devil's advocate and object: "The Communist party allows you to earn money!" The saleswoman just retorts, "How much does the Communist Party earn, and how much do I earn?" Even if you hear somebody grumbling now and then, there is no impression that people's dissatisfaction could turn into an organized protest. There may be more police presence on the streets these days. The atmosphere reminds me of the pomp and fuss during the Communist Party Congresses in the Soviet Union, especially to people who remember those times. The office has become visibly busier as well. The number of articles has increased. They are playing background music in the office and journalists are treated to free lunches. The administration asks us to work after our regular hours. There is no option but to agree.

**09.11.2002** Saturday is a day off for me, and I am planning to leave the town at least for a while. I take bus No. 904 which goes to Wanquanzhuang 万泉庄. The bus is overcrowded. Loads of people are streaming up and down the mountain. At around 10:00 I am on top of the mountain. I'm very happy, first of all, because I've made this decision not to stay at home, and because I have actually made it to the mountain top. At the foot of the mountain people are drinking tea and chatting leisurely. The sun is shining. A man asks me, "Why do you think the emperor chose Beijing as the capital of China?" Without waiting for my answer, the man explains: "The emperor chose Beijing because there are four seasons here, and that is a tremendous advantage..." Remembering the heat of southern China and the harsh winters of northeastern Siberia, one can only agree with this man. It must be said that, probably, due to climate change, the summers in Beijing have become quite hot these days. Every summer there are at least two or three days in Beijing when the temperature rises above +40 degrees. This is not a joke anymore.

**12.11.2002** In the morning, I go for a bike ride while it is still dusky outside. There are fewer people and bikes, so it is more relaxing. The translators are busy with the Congress materials, which means I can use this spare time to work on the dictionary. I have reached the particle "de". Numerous dissertations have been dedicated to this Chinese language element by many linguists. The translation of the particle into Latvian requires deep consideration and great patience. It has 12 uses and they all must be included. After returning to the hotel, I go shopping on my bike. I need honey, jam, butter and some notebooks.

**14.11.2002** The closing day of the 16<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress has arrived. After 13 years in power, Jiang Zemin 江泽民 is leaving and Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 is taking office. We are flooded with messages, articles and press releases. Everything is done on the run. Every article and press release must be reviewed. Today I have to put my dictionary aside. In the evening, my fellow at the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University, also a sinologist, visits me. We haven't met





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in a long time and we decide to celebrate this event at a Mongolian restaurant. The lamb is absolutely fantastic. We remember our study years, as well as our joint trips in China.

**17.11.2002** This is my working Sunday. Only two translators are working, and that gives me an opportunity to work on my dictionary project. It gets dark very quickly, already at 17:20. I struggle on my bike against the fierce and cold headwind. My hands are freezing. Yet, travelling by bike gives me an opportunity to do my shopping where and how I want. I am in a pensive mood – tomorrow



is Latvia's birthday – our Independence Day. I am feeling very lonely now, probably that's why I am getting emotional when I think about the autumn time in Latvia and celebrations of the 18<sup>th</sup> of November in the previous years. I send greetings to my former colleagues at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, L. Azaryana and M. Šteina. I also receive several greeting cards and messages from Latvia.

**20.11.2002** Accompanied by military planes, J. W. Bush has arrived in Prague. The NATO Summit dedicated to its enlargement is about to begin. The name of Latvia is on the list of the seven new NATO member states.

**22.11.2002** One of the translators hands in a translation of a very low quality. I immediately sit down to fix it. After a while, in comes another article, raising doubts whether the translator has understood its essence. I wonder, because these translators have never caused problems before. The closer the end of the working day, the higher the pile of incoming articles grows.

**24.11.2002** This is my third ascent to the Xiangshan 香山 Mountain. There are much fewer people on the track. For the first time, I am climbing with my warm winter jacket on. Eventually, it gets too warm. So I take off the jacket and carry it. Climbing the mountain gives fantastic vigor to my mind and body. A man who has done his doctoral thesis at Moscow University starts talking to me. We just chat and exchange our thoughts freely. Such conversations with strangers are usually struck up by one or the other side spontaneously and naturally, and then, in the same manner they end abruptly. Some of them, however, stay in your memory for a long time. **19 20**

**25.11.2002** It's quite chilly in my hotel apartment. It looks like the cold wind is blowing through the balcony's window and door frames, which are not well sealed. I go to bed early to get warm under my blankets, at least. Such are the winter conditions at You Yi 友谊 Hotel.

**26.11.2002** At work my attention is attracted by a text about one of the Emperors of the Ming Dynasty, who ordered a law to be cut in stone on punishing those who cut forests extensively thus causing imbalance in the environment. There are very few forests left in modern China, so nothing can be more relevant in China today than concerns about protecting the environment.

**30.11.2002** It's my working Saturday. There are five translators working, and the day can hardly be called peaceful. However, in the evening I see that there are four pages to add to the dictionary. It's already very dark when I leave the hotel on my bike to do some shopping. I start really missing the homeliness and comfort that only Galina is able to create in our home, but nothing doing – I still need to be on my own for a while. Galina is now in charge of the reconstruction works at our home in Latvia and manages the workmen.

So, I go shopping and cook for myself. As a young man, I lived at the student hostel and used to cook for myself. Luckily, some of these skills have survived and help me to get by.

**01.12.2002** There are only two translators on Sunday shift, so I take home eight pages of the dictionary draft. This could be the best result I have achieved. In a small eatery next to our news agency, I order a lamb leg with a scone. There is much more bone on my plate than meat, though. I check the e-mail in hopes of getting some news from home, but in vain. Probably the message is on the way...

**02.12.2002** I take buses 332 and 347 to Badachu 八大处. When we had our own car, we used to drive mostly to Xiangshan, but we also happened to visit its neighboring Badachu Mountain. Climbing here is much less demanding than on Mount Xiangshan. I am soon at the top and try to go in the direction of Xiangshan Mountain. Soon, however, I stumble upon a fence and give up my intention. The mountains of Badachu and Xiangshan are located next to each other, yet people have separated them by administrative borders and fences, so I cannot visit them both without breaking the law. A man on horseback gallops past me. A horseback rider in this area is not a very common sight. A letter has arrived with good news from Galina, my wife. I'll try not to delay with the answer.

**03.12.2002** Beijing is wrapped in winter smog. The fog is cold and wet, and breathing is difficult. It's in stark contrast to the clear blue sky that we had just a few days ago. The first half of the day is quite calm. However, approximately an hour before the end of the working day, seven quite lengthy articles come in, and the manager asks me to stay a bit longer until I finish editing them. The visit by Russian President V. Putin has concluded, and such an event is being reflected on and discussed widely by the press. I get home quite late. There is some millet grain porridge left, which I finish and then turn in right away.

**05.12.2002** It's really disturbing when experienced translators make mistakes, and I need to spend time on correcting them. Needless to say, I can't even think about my dictionary project on such days.

**06.12.2002** The first half of the day is extremely dynamic. However, I'm already used to my job, and it does not bother me very much. During the lunch break I leave the territory of the news agency and dine at a Uighur restaurant. A redheaded Uighur man, wearing a white Muslim hat, brings me a bowl of lamb soup. The soup is delicious and not too expensive.

**07.12.2002** It's Saturday – time to relax. At 9:00 I start climbing Xiangshan Mountain, and at 10:20 I am already on the top of the mountain. It's a bit

chilly, maybe below zero. Occasionally a rare snowflake flutters in the air. Feels like winter. About two thirds of the journey up the hill seemed quite strenuous, but I'm proud that I could make it to the top in an hour and a half, which is not a bad result at all. Galina hasn't written for a while. I'm afraid lest she overwork in all that turmoil of repair work. I've been missing her for a while...

**11.12.2002** Having woken up early, I go to the square in front of the castle on our hotel grounds. On one side of the square, illuminated by green lights, the miniature "Guest-Greeting Pine" 迎客松 looks delightful. The tree is not too tall, but its slender twigs are extending as if greeting guests with outstretched arms. The pine is a cultivated replica of the famous Huangshan 黄山 mountain pine tree 迎客松. At work, tedious texts on the PRC's achievements since joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) keep pouring in.

**12.12.2002** In the early morning, I go outside in the hotel park to jog and do some exercise. I feel that my breath has become deeper and longer. It is very likely the result of climbing the mountain. I have already climbed the mountain alone several times. At work, everything is as usual. The texts are coming in for editing, but I also have some time to work on the dictionary draft. It's a bit disturbing that the editing material starts accumulating just before the working hours are about to end. However, this is not my first day at work anymore, and I usually cope with everything. In the evening, I read the Latvian daily newspaper "Diena" – it's enough to lift up my mood.

**13.12.2002** At 8:00 I take my seat on the bus to go to Xiangshan 香山 Mountain. One of the bus doors is not working properly – it's neither closed nor open. As a result, it's quite chilly on the bus. The bus route is already familiar to me. The names of different roadside eateries flicker by. Every time one restaurant catches my eye. Next to the Chinese characters, it has a notice in the traditional Mongolian script, arranged in a vertical line – 铁木真. This is how Genghis Khan's 成吉思汗 original name Temuchin sounds in Chinese. He was called by this name at birth and also in the period before he became a famous warrior. Traditional Mongolian script is not very common in the Chinese capital, yet occasionally you can see it. Next to the sign in the ancient Mongolian, images of Mongolian yurts are attached to the end of a pole. Galina and I have visited these restaurants several times. Interestingly, when we once ordered lamb, the waiter brought a small knife for cutting meat, which is not customary in Chinese restaurants. The lamb itself has always been perfect. While climbing, I drink "butter tea" 油茶, which looks rather like a stew than a drink. "Butter tea" is not particularly refreshing, but it gives you energy. That's why I can make it to the top of the mountain in an hour and a half. Today the sun is shining here and the wind is still. I chat with the other climbers a lot. It has been a great morning, and I can return to the hotel in a cheerful mood.

**15.12.2002** It's a working Sunday. There are only two translators working, so I can dedicate more time to the dictionary. During the lunch break, I cross the street to enjoy an egg and delicious corn porridge. There's a great event in Beijing today – the first snow has fallen, about 1.5 cm thick. In Beijing, it is called "small snow"; it makes the streets dangerous. In the constantly flowing stream of cyclists, someone slips and falls from time to time, followed by others falling down as well. Beijingers know that very well, yet continue to drive and ride bicycles. I get good news from Galina, who is going to join me in Beijing in January. I wish it happened sooner as I miss her very much in my lonely life.

**19.12.2002** Snowing continues in Beijing – occasional snowflakes are drifting in the wind. One must be careful on the slippery streets. It's quite cold and a winter jacket is needed. All of a sudden the weather changes and something similar to a thaw in the Baltics sets in. The day at work is very tense. Many translators are at work and, accordingly, there are many texts coming in. I send a greeting card to my grandson Tomas on his name day.

**21.12.2002** I have decided to write New Year's cards to all my friends. It's not that easy. First of all, I must write the address on more than 20 envelopes. Next, I need to write the text on the cards and, finally, need to mail them. At the post-office I have a surprise – they weigh each envelope carefully and, in the end, I have to pay 240 yuan for the stamps. I never thought that I would need so much cash on me. Luckily, I have completed this pleasant duty. Besides, I love getting hand-written cards myself. I hope that this year will not be an exception.

**23.12.2002** I get a letter from Galina. She is going to buy tickets for her flight to Beijing. At the end of the working day, together with Palestinian Mohamed – an editorial veteran from the Arab language office, and New Zealander J. McDonald I am invited to attend a gala dinner with the leadership of the Xinhua Agency. We go up to the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor of the news agency's tower, where we get seated at Chinese style round turntables. The management of the news agency are participating in the dinner as well. An address is expected from the participants, so I say a speech, too. Moreover, I'm the only one of the invited guests who delivers the speech in Chinese. The atmosphere is relaxed; everybody is in a good mood, so I even start liking this party...

**25.12.2002** This is a working Christmas Day. In the tense rhythm of Xinhua, no one really cares about creating a special Christmas holiday mood. Today it seems that Christmas does not even exist. The reality is that we are overloaded with articles and too busy. My colleagues in the English, French and Spanish editorial offices suggest that we should ask for a couple of free days as compensation during the Spring Festival.

**26.12.2002** The second day of Christmas has the usual working rhythm. Mikhail Yefremov, a new employee from St. Petersburg, has arrived in the Russian editorial office. There are four translators working, so it's an average load. In the evening, we all attend a concert for foreign specialists working in Beijing. The concert program features Mozart and Vivaldi along with the Russian popular folk song "Kalinka". At the end of the concert we listen to a powerful, hymnic opus with lyrics written by comrade Mao Zedong.

**27.12.2002** It's minus 8 outside. I have decided to climb the mountain. Yet I'm asking myself – will I be able to do that? For the first time, I am carrying a small, recently purchased backpack with some tangerines and lemon water. The mountain is covered with white snow. It's a true winter feeling. As soon as I warm up, I take off my down jacket, fold it carefully and place it in my small backpack. Climbing is much easier now. There are some slippery spots, but, overall, the track has been cleaned well. After one hour and 15 minutes, I am at the top. So far, it has been the best time. I put on my down jacket only when I have descended the mountain and reached the bus stop.

**28.12.2002** Sitting down at my office desk, I see that there are three articles left for me from yesterday. I start editing them immediately. During the lunch break I go outside and turn into an eatery run by Salar people. The Salar 撒拉 ethnic minority live in Gansu 甘肃省 and Qinghai 青海省 provinces in the northwest of China. I order lamb soup, which is delicious. Salar people are mostly Muslims, and lamb soup being their traditional dish, it is always perfect. In the evening, I read a heartfelt e-mail letter from Galina.

**29.12.2002** I'm working this Sunday. The office is not very busy today. At lunchtime, I come across a wonderful, quiet ethnic restaurant of Hui people. Hui people are scattered all over China. Beijing even has the Niujielu 牛街 district, which is often called by people "Muslim district", one of the reasons being that it has the largest mosque in Beijing. At the Hui restaurant, I am treated to lamb stomach soup and a couple of bread rolls. The place is cozy and the food is delicious. At home, I myself try to cook mushroom soup for dinner. Let's see how it goes... It has been a peaceful and blessed day.

**31.12.2002** This is the last day of the year. I began it with writing a summary of year 2002, as well as a dedication to my sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, and, of course, the huge reconstruction works of our Bergi house and Galina's great contribution to this project. Then I laze around for a while until it's time to go to work. There are three translators working, which could be defined as a gentle mode. My son Andrejs has returned from a visit to St. Petersburg and tells me about his trip. A little more than two months to go, and I will have worked at Xinhua for a full year. It's unbelievable. I know



for sure what I will be doing when my contract with Xinhua ends. It will be purposeful work on compiling the Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary. It has become not just an exciting and enlightening project, but rather my great passion. These are my thoughts at the time when 2002 has not yet ended and 2003 has not yet begun...

**01.01.2003** Today is New Year's Day – the first working day in year 2003. Everything is as usual at the news agency. There are three translators working, so the schedule is not that tense. While translators are doing their job, I get down to my dictionary draft. For lunch, I drop into one Muslim eatery. I must have been very hungry – it turns out I have ordered more food than usual. As a result, I get sleepy at work. However, I do not give up and prepare six pages of the dictionary draft. At my hotel *home*, I spend the evening peacefully. There is nothing interesting on TV, either.

**02.01.2003** By 10 o'clock in the morning, I am at the foot of the mountain. I buy a monthly ticket for climbing the mountain. It's cheaper than buying a ticket for each separate climb. Actually, only now I realize that I have become addicted – I cannot imagine my life without climbing the mountain on the weekend. The solid stone steps are winding uphill. Every time I climb, the turns and bends of the route are becoming more and more familiar. After an hour and twenty minutes, I reach the top of the mountain. There I take off my down jacket and put it in the backpack. As I'm wearing just my tracksuit, walking is pure pleasure. At times, I have a gulp of lemon water or have a juicy tangerine for a snack. An elderly man keeps me company all the way down the mountain. We chat about whatever comes to mind. He says he was born in 1932 and gets a pension of 1,700 yuan. That's a decent amount taking into account the fact that most Chinese people have to survive on 500–600 yuan a month. In the evening, a fierce wind starts blowing.

**03.01.2003** It's winter in Beijing. The air temperature is minus nine degrees. The wind is raging now. There are five translators working, so it's pretty busy at the office.

These are headings of the texts that I've been editing today:

- Diaoyutai 钓鱼台 island archipelago belongs to the PRC. (*P. P. – in Japan, these islands are called Senkaku, and from Japan's point of view, they belong to Japan; the island archipelago has long been a controversial issue in the relations between the two countries.*)
- Shanghai's gross domestic product reached 65 billion USD last year.
- The Huanghe River 黄河 is covered with ice in the length of 1200 km.

- For eight consecutive years, Guangdong Province 广东省 has been occupying a leading position in the PRC in terms of income taxes.
- In the year 2003, around 2 million university graduates in the PRC will be looking for jobs.
- More than 100,000 fishermen have to look for another job.
- Remains of fossilized animals have been found in the South of China.
- 36 million people belonging to ethnic minorities have escaped poverty.
- The French Foreign Minister has arrived in the PRC.

All the above texts have been sent from the translators' computers to my computer, and it is my duty to polish their translation so that it becomes acceptable Russian. In the rapid flow of information I do not have time to do a deeper analysis of the content, and it is not my duty, anyway. Editing needs to be done promptly and accurately. Also, as I have mentioned before, I'm using every break to work on my dictionary project. As a result, my working days are pretty busy. The content of the articles that I edit, in turn, allows me to gain insight into the political, economic, etc. life of the country.

At lunchtime, I go to the hotel where I have delicious sauerkraut, which I have cooked by myself. I even manage to have some rest during the break. Today during the rare free moments, I have completed two pages of the dictionary draft. When I get home after work, I feel as if I have caught a cold or something. After taking a hot shower I feel much better.

**05.01.2003** For the first time this winter the frost is biting my ears. The strong, icy wind is chilling to the bone. I cook soup to last for three days and then continue reading Nail Ahmetshin's "The Secrets of the Silk Road". I bow my head in deep respect in front of Nail for the trips he has made exploring the Silk Road, as well as for his books dedicated to this topic. I used to read them at the Moscow Library of Sinology. His language is rich and colorful; in addition, he is a brilliant storyteller.

**06.01.2003** I have five interpreters waiting for me at work, which means that I have to "roll up my sleeves" to be able to cope with text editing. Some of my colleagues with whom I share my ride to work on our company van 班车 can be real chatterboxes. Their constant babbling keeps getting on my nerves, but there is nothing I can do about it. I really miss some news from Riga.

**07.01.2003** Whenever there is free time, I try to add a few entries to the dictionary. Now I am working on the translation of the character feng 分 into Latvian. It's not an easy task because the character has numerous meanings. It's a great intellectual challenge – formulating these meanings in the most understandable and efficient way. Galina has written me a nice letter. It's freezing in

Latvia – minus 28 degrees. Galina's letter means very much to me as it helps me make it through during these lonely days without her.

**08.01.2003** I've heard many good words about pigeon meat broth from my Chinese friends. Today I buy a pigeon carcass on the market and cook the broth. In the evening, I sit down to write e-mails to my friends in Latvia. Probably, I'm a little tired from my "hermit's" life, which has extended too long...

**09.01.2003** In the morning, I go outside to do my exercises and hope to enjoy the moment while the place is still not crowded. As soon as I get to the square in front of the palace, I hear that clickety-clackety sound of high-heeled shoes. A young lady walks in one direction, then turns around and walks the other way. I try not to pay attention and focus on my exercises, yet the sound is so annoying that I start winding up. After all, I specifically chose this early hour to be alone for a while. All of a sudden, she emerges from the darkness only to ask a question, "Where is the third apartment block?" You may call me sexist, but now I am starting to understand Taliban militants who forbade women to wear shoes on high heels lest their footsteps distract men.

After the busy day at work, I enjoy my pigeon broth. It's absolutely perfect, and may be even tastier than chicken broth.

**10.01.2003** The bus takes me to the mountain and at 10:00 o'clock I start climbing. There are two young Chinese ladies walking beside me. They never stop to make a break on their way. Unconsciously, I try not to lag behind. In the end, when I look at my watch, I don't believe my eyes – I have made it to the top in one hour. That's a record so far! I walk down with another group of people. From time to time, people to whom I've talked to before greet me. They know that I come from Latvia. So today, when they recognize me, they exclaim, "Today Latvia is climbing the hill!" 今天拉脱维亚在爬山. Of course, this brightens up my day.

**13.01.2003** In the evening, I decide to lie down and relax a bit. Just below our window there is an iron gate that leads from one hotel courtyard to the other. The gate, which is usually locked, has been left open today. The strong wind keeps moving the gate parts back and forth with a terrible clanking sound. Outraged, I walk downstairs, find the locksmiths who use the gate, and ask them to fix the gate so that I can get some sleep.

A few days ago, I looked up the calendar and realized that I have been alone for 17 weeks. Probably, it shows...

**15.01.2003** I decide to have a longer walk after breakfast. First, I go as far as the Goethe Institute and then to the Third Circuit road 三环路. Then, past the Technical University, I return to the hotel. In the afternoon I go to work, where five translators are ready to keep me busy. D. Liberte, an employee of

the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC calls me and sends me the authorization template that I need. I cannot appreciate enough what Galina is doing back in Latvia now. She is leading the reconstruction works and, as always – if she does something, she does it from all her heart. Of course, our son Pēteris is taking a very active part in all this process, too.

**16.01.2003** Today I work in the afternoon, but tomorrow I need to leave at 7:30. It's not easy, but you've got to do what you've got to do. Regarding the dictionary project, I'm stuck in the section dedicated to bees and bee-hives. The vocabulary here is abundant and very specific, so I have to be careful not to do any irreversible harm to the bees with inaccurate terminology.

**17.01.2003** I spend the night feeling like I've been incarcerated in a Gestapo or KGB cell. Somewhere next to my room, a loud compressor works all night through producing a shrieking, disturbing sound. As if that were not enough, the metal gate, which has been left open again, starts clanking in the wind. I cannot fall asleep for one, two, three hours. On the way to work, one of my colleagues keeps leafing through the pages of his notebook. The sound of the rustling paper is unbearable. My nerves are strained; I'm almost on the verge. Thank God, my Chinese colleagues are discussing something at work, and, as a result, there are fewer texts to edit.

Feeling anxious and weary, I get home, to my hotel room, and finally, try to get some sleep.

**18.01.2003** Some light snow has fallen – about 3 cm thick. This is called the “small snow” in Beijing. The tiles on the pedestrian walks are extremely slippery and dangerous now. You have to be very careful in order not to slip and get injured

In the evening, I make fish soup. The newspaper “Diena” has arrived from Latvia. I can browse through its pages and immerse myself into the whirlwind of the latest developments in Latvia.

**19.01.2003** At 6:30 in the morning, I am on my way to the bus stop. I start climbing from the bottom of the mountain at 8:00 and after an hour and a few more minutes I'm on the top of the mountain. The clouds clear up and the visibility is perfect. I have been looking down to the capital from the top of Mount Xiangshan 香山 so many times that the corner of the western part of the city seems quite familiar to me. Of course, it is also because I've been exploring this area on my bike especially actively.

**20.01.2003** In the morning, there are no texts yet to be edited, so I get down to my dictionary draft. In the afternoon, a lady from the administration asks me about my future plans. Xinhua would like to prolong my job contract for one more year. It's not an easy question. I cannot answer it straight away because

I need to hear what, first of all, Galina thinks and, secondly, what my sons' opinions are. Personally, I have a feeling that after five years spent abroad I would like to move to my home in Latvia permanently. On the other hand, I feel flattered and inspired because I have proven to myself and to others that I can cope with an editor's job. Most probably, it has been my ultimate goal. In addition, sustaining the knowledge of two foreign languages purposefully and professionally has been a unique and outstanding experience. I am so preoccupied with these thoughts now, and I'm really looking forward to hearing Galina's opinion.

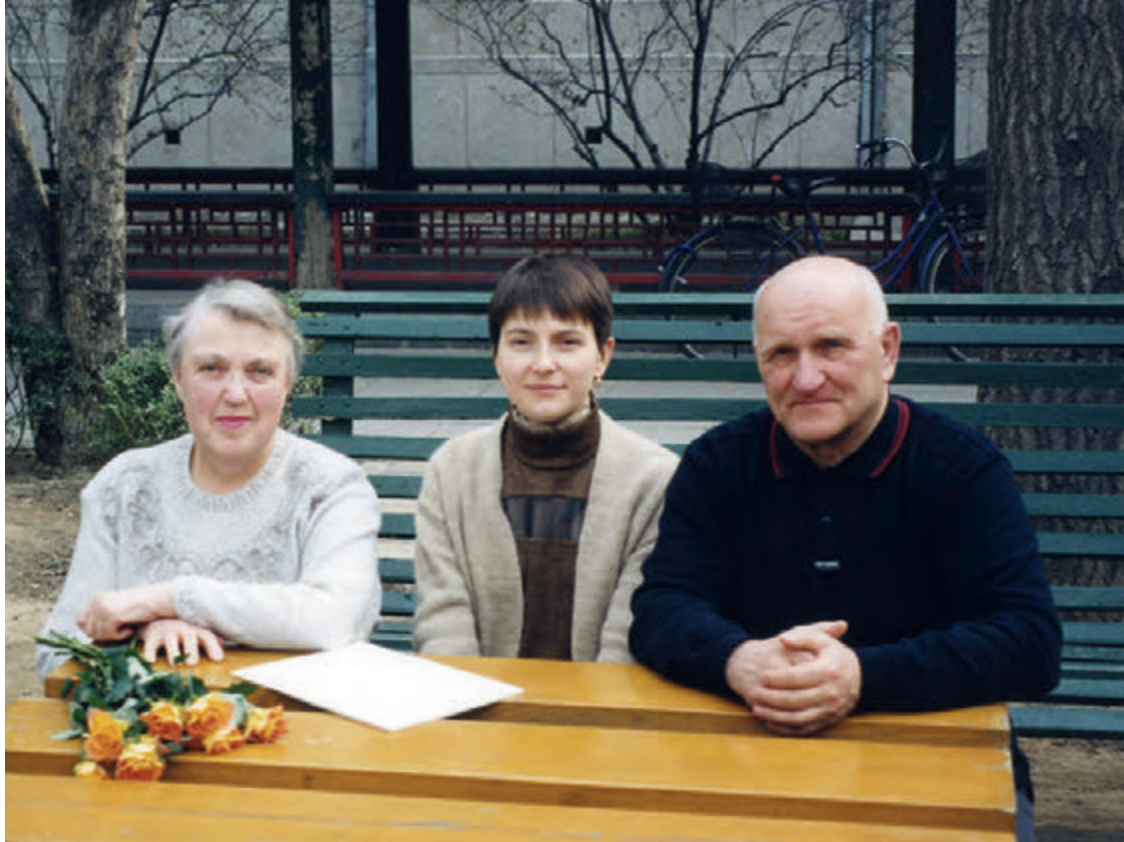
**22.01.2003** I feel intuitively in the morning that something may go wrong today. I work my shift without any problems; then I have a meeting with D. Liberte. At 18:00, I am at the Kempinski Hotel. Ms D. Liberte arrives with her husband Dima. We start filling out the form of the Power of Attorney. When finished, we chat and enjoy some coffee with an apple pie. We have quite a few things to talk about because between 1998 and 2000 it was my wife Galina and I who singlehandedly opened the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. In addition, when we finished working at the embassy, Galina handed over the financial affairs of the embassy directly to no one else but Dace Liberte. It is also interesting that for the first four months of our diplomatic mission Galina and I lived exactly at the Kempinski Hotel.

When we say goodbye to each other and look at the clock, it's already eleven in the evening. Buses no longer run in Beijing at this time. I have to take a taxi to get back to my hotel, which is located on the opposite side of the capital. However, I have received the document I needed, and, of course, it has been great to meet up and have a sincere chat after all this time. **21**

**24.01.2003** I have decided to climb the mountain today. I get ready, and at 6:00 in the morning I am on my way to the bus stop. I get on bus No. 904 and start looking out of the window. Everything is perfect. Then I remember that my monthly ticket has remained at home, on the fridge. What to do? I get off the bus and head back to the hotel, my *home*. The weekend hasn't started as intended, so, first, I lie down a bit. Then I start cooking fish and vegetable soup and doing other house chores. The apartment has to be clean and in order when Galina arrives. At the end of the day I come to conclusion – maybe it was meant to be – to skip the mountain today.

**25.01.2003** I am at the airport on time. The plane is not delayed, and, finally, I meet my Galina. She looks as if she's shrunk a bit – she has lost a few kilos being busy with the repair work. Galina is the most precious person in my life. It's impossible to count how many times we have taken Trans-Siberian flights to travel from Vladivostok to Riga and back. This time Galina and our son





Pēteris have been working hard to complete the renovation of our house in Bergi, Latvia. I am very happy and very moved that we can finally be together. We talk and talk about the things done and about the improvements made to our house. I can't stop admiring her – how on earth she has strength for everything.

**26.01.2003** I leave for work at 7:30, as it's my working Sunday. There are only three translators, and I manage to do the editing, as well as to work on my dictionary. For dinner we have the carp soup I cooked yesterday. In the afternoon, I go shopping on my bike. It's so good to be together again.

**27.01.2003** Galina has prepared the delicious herring she has brought from Latvia. We are thirsty for talking with each other, so we talk and talk... The jet lag keeps Galina awake at night. Then the wind starts to howl. At work, I treat my colleagues to "Laima" chocolate, also brought by Galina, and give them small presents – amber beads.

**28.01.2003** It's minus 10 outside. The frost is biting. We both go shopping for food. At work, I am proposed to write an application for extension of

the contract. Six translators are at work, and when the texts are ready, I sit down to edit them. I have given small amber jewelry pieces to all ladies in our office, and it looks like they appreciate such a sign of attention. A letter arrives from Vladivostok – from Inna, Galina's sister. Galina and I are gradually starting to get used to being together again. It feels so good.

**29.01.2003** I prepare the application to prolong the contract. Galina treats me to a delicious vegetable stew. At work, I am editing an article on the possible consequences of the USA's attack on Iraq. There is not much optimism in this regard. Arab extremists are becoming more active. Galina starts rewriting the dictionary draft onto our home computer and wonders how much I have managed to do while she's been away.

**30.01.2003** The night's sleep is interrupted, and again until half past two at night we talk about the repair work done in Bergi house. Then I get just a few hours of sleep, and it's time to get up and leave for work. There are six interpreters working today, and there is hardly time for anything else. Yet, I use some of the rare free moments to stitch the pieces of the dictionary draft together. Sometimes I have to deal with vocabulary that cannot be understood without looking up specialized dictionaries. According to the lunar calendar, the Year of the Horse is ending 马年. As for me, I really spend the last day of the Chinese calendar feeling like an old and sick horse. It looks like I have caught something. I have a runny nose, headache and my eyes feel very tired. At the end of the working day it gets worse. I come home totally exhausted. Luckily, I have two free days ahead, and I hope to get better in this time.

**01.02.2003** Today is the first day of the Year of Sheep 羊年. Even after the dawn, from here and there, fireworks can be heard. Firecrackers and similar explosive devices are a part and parcel of the Spring Festival. Although the city council has issued special instructions and requests regarding the procedures and restrictions for conducting fireworks on the holiday, people are so passionate about this holiday tradition that they often ignore these well-meant recommendations. Galina insists that I stay home and take my medicine, so I hope to get well soon. We both stay home and enjoy the free day at our disposal.

**02.02.2003** We go for a morning walk. The wind from the east is cold and unpleasant. My eyes start watering. The walk is quite short. Tragic news has arrived from the USA – seven astronauts have lost their lives during an unsuccessful landing of the spaceship. This tragedy can be observed on TV screens all around the world. I have heavy thoughts about humanity's dreams of space conquest and the harsh reality.

**03.02.2003** There are three translators at work, who do not have even slight interest in what I am doing. So, I shouldn't be wasting time and better move on

with my dictionary project. The second half of the day is busier with editing. I have decided to involve Galina in the mountain climbing trip tomorrow; the more so because she has been busy with the house repairs for such a long time. We still keep discussing what has been done and what still needs to be done about our renovated house. Meanwhile, I get everything that's needed for tomorrow's hike ready.

**04.02.2003** We get on bus No. 904, and after about 40 minutes we are walking towards the gate to Xiangshan 香山 Mountain Walk. Galina is wearing her winter coat, which is not really suitable for climbing, so she gets as far as the terrace, but I reach the top of the mountain. Be that as it may, Galina's first climb has taken place and will certainly be followed by the next one. Not far from the bus stop, we find a place where we can get some hot lamb soup. There is a small gas stove with a pot on the table to keep the soup warm – the lamb bones and tendons prevail over meat in the soup, yet it tastes good and is very invigorating. We return to the hotel tired, but happy. From time to time, a lone firecracker still explodes on the street or in a courtyard, but there is a feeling that the celebration of the Spring Festival is coming to an end.

**05.02.2003** From the hotel we depart to Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park. We walk along the bank of the canal, which is covered with thick ice. In a place where the locals cross the canal on the ice, several sections of a beautifully ornamented marble railing have been broken. Pathetic vandalism! We go as far as the South Gate 南门 of this splendid park. We admire the sharply curved arch of the bridge. The majestic summer residence of the emperor always relaxes the tension and provides much-needed relief. We have been here at all times of the year, and the place has never left us disappointed. It has always provided a rest from the hustle and bustle of the overcrowded city. In the evening, Galina continues to enter the draft pages of the dictionary prepared by me onto the computer. We both are enjoying this quiet, but creative atmosphere and being together.

**06.02.2003** Galina agrees to try a new route for our walking exercise. First we walk to the Zizhuyuan Gongyuan Park 紫竹院公园, already familiar to us, then turn right and walk along the park to Changshou 长寿寺 Monastery – and then along the river to the bridge and back to the hotel. The day is sunny, and my mind is happy and free. For dinner Galina cooks barley pearl soup, which tastes like at home, in Latvia. With great interest, I read E. Veidemane's book "Legend in Autumn" about R. Pauls, the legendary Latvian popular music composer, whose personality is revealed through interviews with D. Kuplė, V. Lapčēnoks, G. Ulmanis, Z. Liepiņš and many other artists, musicians, politicians, etc., known and respected in the Latvian society. During the three days

of the Spring Holiday I have recharged my batteries and am fully ready to get back to the routine of the editorial office.

**07.02.2003** We climb the mountain again. This time Galina ascends well above the terrace. I hope that on one of these days we both will reach the top of Xiangshan 香山 Mountain. Actually, climbing to the top of the mountain for us is more like a private goal, a kind of a benchmark because we have not joined any competition with specific time or other targets. We've heard that young Beijingers organize races – who will be the first to the top. We climb because we like it, in a way learning from the Chinese people as climbing the mountain has been a favorite pastime in their culture for thousands of years. I start talking to an elderly man. It turns out that he can speak Albanian. During the period of the great friendship between the PRC and Albania (in the 1960s and 1970s), many Chinese used to work in Albania for quite a long time. This is the first time I've met such a person. In the evening, Galina continues working on the dictionary draft. We have spent the small, four day long vacation of the Spring Festival in a nice, meaningful way, and I am ready to get back to my office work.

**09.02.2003** The wind is howling all night through and does not let us sleep well. There are four translators working, but I can manage everything – both editing and compiling my dictionary draft. The wind is still strong when I'm going back to the hotel. The steppes and deserts of Inner Mongolia are very close to Beijing. The Northern wind blows from that direction. Local people are used to it. I have no idea whether there is some predictable pattern of the wind direction. Some days are very windy in Beijing, while some are not. All I can say is that every winter there will be at least a few days when the wind in Beijing will be really furious.

**10.02.2003** It's minus six outside. I do some exercise on the gymnastics equipment in the park. The morning is chilly, so there are not many enthusiasts besides me here. I take my seat in the office, and again the two foreign languages interact and intertwine in front of my eyes. I need to focus really hard so that the final product can be called good standard Russian language. Of course, the experience that I have accumulated during this year at the news agency helps a lot. However, there are still moments when I am confronted with such linguistic equilibrium that I have never seen or heard of before. Likewise, the contents of the article could be very specific, too. I have my lunch at the neighboring eatery. All ingredients of the soup have been diced into small pieces, yet the soup is really delicious. In the evening, Galina works on the draft of the dictionary. I feel a bit tired and have some rest.

**11.02.2003** It's minus nine outside. People hurry to work. Some are wearing hats, but some – just small bunny earphones on their ears. The representatives

of the younger generation are wearing very short jackets, just barely below the waist. One can understand that it is important for them to look stylish. Those who are older are more practical and wear comfortable down jackets, simple and warm. At lunch break I leave the agency building and look for some eatery. Not far away, I see a sign – 西域餐厅. The first two characters denote the lands west of the Yumenguan 玉门关 Gate of the Great Wall of China. In modern times it's called Xinjiang 新疆, and, logically, this place must offer Xinjiang cuisine. So, today I try Tianshan soup 天山汤. In the soup, there is chopped beef, carrots, and egg drops. The soup is light and tasty, especially when there is “nan” 饅 bread as a side dish. The dry frost in Beijing gets stronger in the evening.

**12.02.2003** I've been working for the fifth day in a row. It would be nice to have some rest, but do I have a choice? During the lunch break, I am on my way to the same eatery I visited yesterday when all of a sudden, Wan Chengcai, the founder of the Riga branch of Xinhua Agency, pops up in front of me with a Chinese lady. They both have been living in Riga for quite a long time. Both of them are very well aware of the economic, political, etc. scene in Latvia. We have a chat.

**13.02.2003** I'm working today as well. For lunch, I try a different place. There is a TV on the wall in the eatery showing an NBA game. The Chinese giant Yao Ming (Houston Rockets) is on the court. The customers are following the game eagerly. Yao Ming dashes ahead. He is surrounded by the opponents, but manages to turn around, throws the ball backwards with amazing ease and scores two points. The public in the small restaurant applaud. The customers are picking spicy snacks from a huge bowl filled with pickles – fermented and slightly marinated pinkish radish, crispy carrot, as well as sauerkraut, familiar to us. There is also small, green, and very hot pepper, which I better leave alone. In the evening, Galina treats me to Latvian comfort food – boiled potatoes with Latvian herring.

**14.02.2003** On our way to Dazhongsi 大钟寺 Monastery – Museum, we see an interesting sight on the street. Three men are riding cargo bicycles along the bicycle lane. On the right side, each bicycle has attached an approximately 60 cm deep wire basket, filled with sugar reed stalks. The bundle of the sugar reed is about 2 m tall, and from a distance the bicycles look like loaded boats with tall masts. In such a way sugar reed is transported to the market. How do the local people use this sweet treat? First, the skin is removed from the reed stalks; then the stalks are cut into pieces. You are supposed to chew these pieces until the sweet juice has been used up, and then spit out the pulp. Sadly, but more often than not it happens to land also on the pavement... At the Dazhongsi Monastery, one can see bells cast in honor of the restoration of





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the PRC's jurisdiction over Xianggang (Hong Kong) 香港 and Macau (Aomen) 澳门. There are few people in the monastery museum, and it allows us to enjoy both the atmosphere of history and reflect on the recent important events in China. 22 23

**15.02.2003** We have decided to climb the mountain today, but I get an early morning call from my office. My colleague is sick, and I need to substitute for her. I have lunch at the diner owned by people of Salar 撒拉 nationality. The lamb and radish soup is not bad at all. This is the last day of the Spring Festival. From here and there, loud firecracker blasts can be heard.

**16.02.2003** We go on foot to the nearby Yuanmingyuan 圆明园 Park, already familiar to us, where we wander among its many ponds and hillocks. The bright rays of the sun are warming us, and we joke that this nice weather must have been brought by the Spring Festival...

**17.02.2003** The ride to work in the morning is bumpy and nervous. The traffic is congested and the van driver's manners are a bit abrupt. First thing in the morning, I start working on the draft of my dictionary. The Chinese modal verbs and the various categories of auxiliary words, specific only to the Chinese language are causing me a headache. I need to think carefully to make the translation into Latvian as adequate as possible. My Chinese colleagues leave for a meeting, and I can concentrate fully on my work. Galina is concerned about home. I miss Latvia and our house, too, but now we have the new contract and our obligations.

**19.02.2003** I go up the news tower to the administrative office to talk about the signing of the new contract and my intention to go on vacation in August. At home, Galina and I talk about our strategy for this year. Galina will be leaving for Latvia on 6 June, but I will have to stay on my own for three months again. We make a firm decision that on the 26 February next year I will be terminating my work relations with Xinhua. Indeed, after six years, spent abroad, we would like to finally settle down in our family home, especially now when we are both carried away by our project – “Comprehensive Chinese-Latvian Dictionary”. It seems that regular transcontinental flights are hardly conducive to this kind of work...

**20.02.2003** There are five translators working busily, so “polishing” the texts takes all my time. Nina, our colleague, wants to go on vacation exactly at the same time when Galina and I have planned our holidays. It's a pity that this is causing so much fuss, in fact, about nothing. I believe everything will be resolved somehow. Today we commemorate Galina's mother, who used to look after our three sons, as well as her sister's son when we lived in Vladivostok. How happy she would be to see how the younger generation are doing now. We go for an evening walk. It's warmer and feels like spring.

**21.02.2003** After a break of two weeks, we have decided to spend the day climbing the mountain. The sky is grey, and the visibility is very poor. Galina gets beyond the terrace. A few, not very steep, bends remain to the top. It is not

very easy, but I manage to get to the top of the mountain. We are happy with our accomplishments. One family has seen us climbing before and ask why we haven't been on the mountain for two weeks. That is true. What can I say? In a city of millions, they have noticed us. It's a small place. When climbing down, I feel the strain from the exercise in my leg muscles. We have delicious pork rib soup and fried eggplant in a village restaurant at the foot of the mountain.

**22.02.2003** It's a working Saturday. During the lunch break I find the way to the Muslim-populated area on Niujie 牛街 Street. In a small eatery, I order corn soup. Across the street, an old, shoddy tricycle is collecting dust while leaning against the wall of a one-storied house. There is some old ladder and used wooden window frames next to it. The gray tile roof is covered with all kinds of junk – pieces of slate, wooden boards and poles. It seems that nobody sees this mess, and nobody worries about it. Life goes on its usual way in this ancient part of the town.

**23.02.2003** This is my working Sunday. This time I have spicy lamb soup for lunch. The chef has been very economical on the meat whose presence is hardly felt, yet the lamb stock is tasty and invigorating. I am working together with three translators, so I have also some time left for the dictionary draft. Today is the day of the Soviet Army. Having served in the North of the European part of Russia, I can't erase this date from my memory. Wearing my soldier boots, straight from the barracks, I took my entrance exams at the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University. That is where I learnt the Chinese language and that is where I met my dear Galina. These are memories that never fade.

**24.02.2003** Today is Monday, but I have a day off after working the two weekend days. Once again, we take a walk along the bank of the canal to the Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park. We really like this route because the street leading to the park is not too congested. The river canal is still covered with ice. It seems it's still possible to walk on the ice. The day is bright and sunny. The river canal enclosed by white inlaid marble railings is a beautiful creation of human hands. It is only sad that the white ice is covered with all kind of litter left by people – plastic bags, pieces of torn rags and other kinds of rubbish. It is especially dirty at the South Gate 南门, where the arched bridges cross the canal.

**25.02.2003** The morning is free as I work in the afternoon. During the lunch time, I walk around the news tower and get as far as Beijing's main street, Changanjie 长安街. In this area, the city is building the historically traditional houses, called "siheyuan" 四合院. They are made of impregnated timber and have a courtyard. The Mayor of Beijing has decided to build several such neighborhoods for the 2008 Olympics to reintroduce the flavor of old times

in the rapidly developing Beijing. For the first time, I am working with headphones on, which is very convenient. I don't hear my colleagues chattering and can focus fully on my work.

**26.02.2003** Exactly a year ago, on February 26, we arrived in Xinhua. Now I am prolonging the contract for one more year. There are a number of factors that determine our future plans. First of all, it is the desire to devote all our efforts to compiling "The Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary". The second consideration is that we really miss living in Latvia, in our own home. There are six interpreters at work today, and the place is extremely busy. Maybe it's also the end of the month syndrome when the editorial office needs more texts. My colleagues at the Russian language editorial office are complaining as well that the pressure at work is growing.

**27.02.2003** The draft of the dictionary has already grown to 670 pages. Galina goes through all the text and adds the tones. When I started working on the draft, I didn't know how to mark the tones on my computer. Now I know how to do it, so we need to go through all of the draft and put the tones in place. Today, seven translators are working, so it's a mad race. We are translating and editing nonstop. During the break, I go out in the yard to have some exercise at least. I get home at 20:30, but next morning I have to be at work already at 7:30. The rules are drastic.

**02.03.2003** For a walk, we choose to go in the direction of Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park again. The smog above Beijing is so thick that people are wearing masks. We decide to go across the bridge over the river-canal and have a look what is happening in the village of Landingchang 兰靛厂. We find ourselves in a different world – something like a medieval street, full of contrasts and buzzing life, with craftsmen, chefs, and sellers. We need to push our way through the surging crowd, which is made even denser by bicycles, carts, mules tied on the roadside and piles of waste. We feel a strong urge to get out of here and we manage to do that. I hope this has been the first and the last time we have visited this place. Walking along the river-canal, we notice that young men, equipped with sharp spears tied to a bamboo pole, are trying to hunt fish in the ice-free places near the shore. There are two containers left by the bridge that have board scaffolding installed inside. This is actually a night lodge for people who do all kinds of low-paying jobs and have come to the capital from the overcrowded countryside to earn some money. These people are willing to do any job. At other times, I have seen construction workers settling for the night's sleep on the first floors of unfinished buildings. This is happening at the time when the building is still under construction. These are just some of my observations of real life in Beijing, which most passersby do not notice.

**04.03.2003** Unexpectedly, we have frost – minus six degrees. In the morning we see that part of the large territory of our hotel has been fenced in with tapes. There are a lot of police and military people around. The session of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (NPC) has begun, in which the new government and the new Chairman of the PRC will be elected. There is practically nothing to edit, as the articles we receive have already been approved. As a result, I do not feel particularly tired when I get home. We go for an evening walk. The classes at the Technical University have just finished. The crowd of the young people leaving the campus looks like a dark river forming a bend at the corner of the stadium. In old times, Mongolians used a measure unit called “darkness” to count large crowds of people – one “darkness”, two “darknesses”. I always feel overwhelmed when I see large masses of people, and it makes me wonder how many people can be amassed in one small place.

**05.03.2003** At work, we listen to marches and hymns. The Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China Zhu Rongji 朱镕基 is delivering his report. The texts for editing are coming in regularly, but there is no pressure. The day is calm, and the evening is quiet. The Honorary Consul of the Republic of Latvia in Singapore Rita Skuja-Steele calls me. Unfortunately, we cannot meet, so we just talk on the phone.

**06.03.2003** The NPC session continues. The new government is being elected; reports are being read and speeches – made. With Galina's sister's son Kirill, we go to the Mongolian restaurant. We order their specialty that never disappoints – leg of lamb. As usual, the pocket-size knives are handed out to each of us. The meat is so delicious that it simply melts in our mouths. A slightly tipsy Mongolian man sitting at the next table starts singing a song. Probably, about those times when Genghis Khan managed to conquer almost half of the world. We talk about Kirill's childhood and about Vladivostok, which is both so near and so far.

**09.03.2003** Today is Fat Tuesday. Galina has made wonderful pancakes. We are saying goodbye to Beijing's winter. This has been our third winter in Beijing and my first at Xinhua Agency. I have lunch in the small restaurant owned by Salar people. The small cast iron stove is spreading warmth, and I feel very comfortable sitting close by it. Altogether there are seven tables in the small room. Paper napkins and bones are scattered on the floor. The food is simple and delicious – as always. A picture of Mecca and wise words from the Qur'an in beautiful Arabic script decorate the wall. I am welcomed here as an old acquaintance with the words: “Have you come over?” 你来了, where “you” is used in the second person *s* as an informal pronoun.



**10.03.2003** This is my free Monday. All of a sudden, it starts snowing abundantly. We dismiss the idea of climbing the mountain or taking a walk to the emperor's summer residence and decide to go shopping instead. I have put on my sports shoes, but soon I regret it. The snow is melting and my feet are getting wet. At the market, we stack my backpack full of food items. Then we manage to take some pictures of the gardens in the snow. At 15:00 I am meeting with my former student Dana Rudāka. She is doing an internship at the China Diplomatic College now. We spend about two hours together in the garden of Zizhuyuan Gongyuan Park 紫竹院公园, as we have so much to talk about.

**11.03.2003** Today it's both rain and slush in Beijing. We go for a walk, but our clothes are getting soggy in the rain, and the overall feeling is kind of sluggish. My colleagues at the office hand me a coupon for the festive dinner – the NPC session is still going on. The day passes so quickly that I can only compare it to a Mongolian warrior's arrow that whooshes past your ears in the vast grasslands. The night is dark when the van is taking me home. Galina is working hard entering the items of the dictionary on the computer. The number of pages is approaching seven hundred. Late at night, I can hear the wind rising.

**12.03.2003** Although the wind was howling all night, the morning is sunny, bright and it is even warm in the sun. At work the pressure is quite intense. There are six translators working, and articles keep flooding in. For the first time, I have to speak to the shift manager as I see that the unedited version of my text has been released on air. Nobody wants to “lose face” and appear irresponsible when it's not one's own fault. The atmosphere is tense for a while.

**13.03.2003** I realize that in the busy work schedule, an effort should be made to devote more time to walks, bike trips, swimming and mountain climbing. Every day, texts run through my head, languages change rapidly, so it is essential to find some way to disconnect from this process a little and give some rest to my brain. There are six translators working today, and the hours are flying. Galina is devoting herself totally to the dictionary draft. Sometimes I wish she took it easier. The thing is that she always does her best at any work she endeavors. In our joint project she has taken up a considerable load of work. Overall, our life here at the news agency is strictly programmed.

**14.03.2003** The NPC session is coming to a close tomorrow and the tempo at the office starts accelerating. The domestic news is on the foreground. Again, I am invited to a “festive lunch”, where we are treated to a great carp in a delicious sauce, which is complemented with Beijing's fermented milk. All in all, I have edited about 30 articles today.

**15.03.2003** The free Saturday is dedicated to a trip to Badachu 八大处. We take buses 332 and 347. Occasional snowflakes are gently falling and covering

the ground. The Buddhist shrines are busy with monks and visitors. We try to take pictures of the Pagoda shrouded in layers of fog. On the way back it gets a bit chilly. This has been a nice trip.

**16.03.2003** We have planned an outing today as well, but it's raining hard from the very morning, so it would not be too wise to set out on a longer journey. I get on my bike, though, to get some fruit from the market. An elderly man, with whom I sometimes exchange hellos, asks me if I know any other languages apart from Chinese. I don't know what to say. That's an unusual question.

**17.03.2003** After the two days off I really feel relaxed. In the morning, I have some time to work on the dictionary, but after 9:00 all kinds of texts start surging in. Most of them are focused on the conclusion of the NPC session, election of different commissions, the new government members, etc.

In the garden of the Technical University, Galina and I are enjoying the sight of the full moon and the cool freshness of the evening.

**18.03.2003** Everything goes smoothly in the morning. At 7:30, the company van is trying to make its way through the congested streets of Beijing. The ride is a bit bumpy, but I understand the driver perfectly well, as driving in Beijing at this hour in the morning can be an ordeal. I was behind the wheel in Beijing in 1998, and it seems there was less traffic on the streets of the capital city then. Today is the last day of the NPC session. They announce the name of the new Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and names of many other high standing officials. In the evening, Galina and I go for our traditional walk.

**19.03.2003** Today is the first day after the NPC session, and the texts for editing have completely different content – there is less solemn pathos and pomposity. While performing my direct duties – editing texts, I also manage to add a few pages to the dictionary draft. In the afternoon, a shroud of smog starts enwrapping Beijing. Harsh winds, probably from the steppes of nearby Inner Mongolia invade the city. Galina has an unpleasant surprise – twenty pages of the edited text have disappeared from the computer screen. We are not savvy enough to recover the text from the depths of the software, so we choose the simple and hard way – to rewrite the text. Running ahead of the events, I must say that during the eight years that we dedicated to compiling “The Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary”, this was not the only case when we were not able to recover the text.

**20.03.2003** It has been raining all night, and it is still raining when I leave for work. On the night of March 19–20, the United States have launched a rocket attack on Iraq. The US-Allied war against Iraq has begun. Latvia is also supporting this campaign. The United States have not taken the views of the UN Security Council into account. The evening is dark and dreary.

Galina is working hard entering the draft pages of the dictionary on our home computer.

**21.03.2003** After the morning coffee, we take bus 904 to the Sleeping Buddha Temple 卧佛寺. Just my luck! The temple is closed for repairs. There is nothing left but to go to the already familiar Xiangshan 香山 Mountain. After yesterday's rain, the stone steps are shining clean. We really enjoy climbing up the hill. Suddenly one man notices me and says, "I remember you! We were swimming together in the swimming pool." After some time a grey-haired lady talks me up, "You're from Latvia, and you were born in Tiger's Year!" This is just amazing – you cannot get lost even in the city of millions! Climbing is fun today and, deeply satisfied, we are heading back home.

**22.03.2003** Today we are working in a very gentle mode. Only three interpreters are at work. I have compiled seven pages throughout the working day. I haven't been so prolific in a long while. On the computer, by pressing "pian", I finally rewrite 50 character elements that will be included in the appendix of the dictionary. We receive a letter from our eldest son Juris confirming that he has received the doctor's certificate. His studies have lasted longer than expected by the program, but the goal has been achieved. As for the dictionary, I have reached the character 海. Here I encounter a large number of sea plants and creatures. Galina, a professional marine biologist, is an expert on this topic. She often advises me – be it on sea creatures that I've never heard of, sea plants or seaweed.

**24.03.2003** At the shopping center we buy a warm, insulated jacket for Galina and a checkered cowboy shirt, made of thick cotton jersey, for me. We cross the street and find ourselves in the Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Garden. It is becoming warmer rapidly – the outdoor temperature has risen to plus 20 degrees. Small, purple buds of violets are protruding through the short grass. Tiny green leaves have appeared on the fringes of the mourning willows. People are relaxing in the park and practicing their hobbies. Some are singing arias from Beijing opera or traditional Chinese folk songs. I overhear also the sound of the Chinese two-stringed fiddle 二胡 "er hu". On the dance floor, couples are engaged in classical modern dances. The place is especially popular with grandparents and their adored grandchildren. Everybody is happy about the spring that has finally arrived. We feel elated, too. This has been a wonderful and relaxing holiday after a hard period of mundane work. **24 25**

**25.03.2003** In the morning I go for a walk in the park of the Technical University. There are six translators working today, and the rhythm of work is pretty tense. As for the dictionary, I conclude the 海 entry with the many terms of marine zoology and botany. The night is pitch-dark when I am returning to the hotel together with my talkative Spanish colleagues. The US and British

military action in Iraq continues. Iraqis are showing fierce resistance near Basra and elsewhere. Baghdad is being shelled with huge bombs.

**26.03.2003** After a break of half a year, we resume our visits to the pool. Swimming is always an invigorating exercise both for one's mind and body. Galina is working hard systematically rewriting the dictionary entries on our home computer and saving them also on a diskette. She goes through all the ready text from the letter "a" up to the letter "f" and adds tone signs to the transcript of the characters, which I, unfortunately, did not do from the very beginning. It's a long and tedious, albeit rewarding process.

**28.03.2003** It's not a picnic at work today. Two full teams of interpreters are toiling nonstop – six translators in the morning and six in the afternoon. Rapid pace must be maintained not to lag behind. After work, we go for a walk. It's about plus eight outside. After the intensive work with the texts, walking is both refreshing and relaxing.

**29.03.2003** This Saturday I am not working, and we have guests – Dace Liberte and her husband Dima. We walk around the Suyuan 苏园 and Xiangyuan 香园 gardens on our hotel grounds. For lunch we have a delicious carp. Then we return to our apartment and have strawberries for dessert. We talk with Dace and Dima about our experiences in China and many other things. The conversation is sincere and relaxing. We have been looking forward to meeting our guests for a long time, so it's good to finally meet them.

**30.03.2003** After breakfast – once again, we take a walk to Yiheyuan 颐和园 Emperor's Summer Residence. This is one of our favorite routes for a couple of reasons. First of all – we can cover the distance to this wonderful park on foot. Secondly, it is not for nothing that buses of tourists from all over the world are taken exactly to this splendid park. Such an opportunity should not be missed. The ice in the river canal has melted. Willow trees – a very popular decorative tree in China – are being planted along the banks of the canal. We decide to peep into the ancient village of Landingchang 兰靛厂, which we visited earlier. To our surprise, we are witnessing this old, dilapidated village being torn down. It's plus nineteen during the day, which means we should change our winter coats to summer clothes. The humidity is rising, too.

**31.03.2003** I am working a full day until 5:00 p.m. The atmosphere at the office is relaxed, and I can manage everything – edit the texts and work on my dictionary draft. I go to the Muslim restaurant for lunch and allow myself to be persuaded to enjoy the stomach soup. Frankly, the dish does not arouse much enthusiasm in me. The flavor of the stomach can be felt too distinctively. Next time, I'd better try something else. Again, I am surrounded by the children from Lu Xun 鲁迅 School, who are loud and excited about everything.





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Galina and I go for a walk in the park of the Technical University. It gets dark soon, and the black night embraces everything.

**01.04.2003** We get up late and skip the swimming pool. The day is grey. The Chinese translators are quiet today. As for the draft of the dictionary, I have reached the entry 好, which has numerous finely nuanced meanings. Only persistence can help here. The weather is getting worse. The wind starts howling. Galina says no to a walk. I ride on my bike to the market to get some food products. In the evening, the weather reminds one more of autumn than spring. It's wet and dreary.

**02.04.2003** Again I oversleep, and it's too late for the pool. After yesterday's rain, the air is fresh and the streets are clean from the dust. In the news agency courtyard I do some exercises on the gym equipment; then the editing race begins. I am still struggling with the entry 好, a word with such rich content that I have to think well how to put across its many meanings into Latvian. In the evening Galina and I go for a walk. White and purple magnolias as well as some interesting shrubs that look similar to peach trees are in full bloom. The fringes of the mourning willow trees are swaying in the gentle breeze. This is the genuine beginning of spring. My colleague New Zealander John, a senior, admires the gorgeous feathers of jay birds. I can only agree to that. The only difference is that in Latvia jay birds do not live in the parks.

**03.04.2003** This morning our willpower is strong enough. We get up in time to get to the swimming pool. The right thing to do would be to make swimming a regular exercise because it helps to recover when the work schedule is so tense. The journey to work is a bit bumpy due to the traffic which is extremely dense. The morning at the office is quite relaxed, yet in the afternoon I get a document prepared by the PRC Government on human rights violations in the United States. The document consists of six parts and requires careful scrutiny. During the evening walk, Galina photographs the blooming forsythias and magnolias. The magnolia flowers are simply gorgeous, with huge white and purple petals. We find it strange that these blooming shrubs and trees do not have leaves yet. It is a wonderful evening, and when we look at the sunset we think about Latvia, which is thousands of kilometers away, but still waiting for us. **26**

**04.04.2003** After 6:00 we start waking up. A leisurely breakfast and we're on our way. At 8:45 we start climbing the Xiangshan Mountain 香山. This time, Galina is wearing an outfit appropriate for mountain climbing. I have a small backpack with me, where I can put our jackets. Shortly after me, Galina also appears at the top of the hill. She has made it the whole way to the top for the first time. On the slopes of the hill, "David's peach" bushes are blooming with pale pink flowers. Surrounded by other bushes and greenery, they look like small pink islands. We slowly climb down the hill and can't take our eyes

off the huge, old cedar trees on both sides of the track. Interestingly, it looks like all of them have been numbered. We are very happy with this day off.

**05.04.2003** On this day, the Chinese are celebrating the Qingmingjie 清明节 festival, which could be translated as the Day of Remembering the Dead. It is customary to visit and clean up the family gravesites during this festival dedicated to the departed relatives. This activity is called “sao mu” 扫墓. In the time free from editing, I struggle with the list of abbreviations and terms for the dictionary.

**06.04.2003** During lunch time, I warn my colleagues that I may be late as I’m going to Niujie District 牛街区, where Beijing’s main mosque is located. When we were working at the Latvian Embassy a few years ago, this mosque was surrounded by old, mostly one story buildings. The narrow streets were full of people. Now there is an open space around the mosque. I enter the mosque and choose a round Muslim hat at one of the vendor stands. When I return to the news service, I show the purchase to my colleagues. A member of our editorial staff, who herself is a Muslim, explains to me, “You have bought a Beijing Muslim’s hat.”

**08.04.2003** In the morning I get on my bike and go to the market to buy some grapefruit. With great interest, I read the book “China” by the world-famous sinologist J. K. Fairbank. His insights into the history of China are sophisticated and well argued. I return to this work again and again. In Baghdad, a hotel has been bombed in an air raid, killing two Reuter journalists.

**09.04.2003** There are five translators occupied with the translation of articles into Russian, and the pace of work is sometimes more, sometimes less intensive. When I have a free moment, I love exploring many other dictionaries. This has led me to the conclusion that I need to buy the recently published “Chinese-English Dictionary”. I have set myself a goal – to indicate the word classes in “The Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary”. No such work has been done so far, so it is going to take a long time.

The mass media are increasingly paying more and more attention to the new disease – atypical pneumonia (SARS). No vaccine has been found yet to cure this malady. TV is showing historical footage – US Marines and crowds of Arab people are demolishing Saddam Hussein’s monument.

**10.04.2003** The weather has unexpectedly become colder; it’s only about + 5 degrees. We go to the pool today. In the garden of our hotel, the purple, white and pink magnolias are in full bloom. At work, when free from editing tasks, I keep struggling with the bulky 黑 section. In the evening, when I’m leaving the agency, it’s quite chilly. Galina is working incessantly entering the draft pages on our computer. We are both working hard today.



**11.04.2003** It's pouring outside, and I need an umbrella to get to work. I will have to work from 7:30 to 17:00 with two translators. Together with lunch time, I will have to spend more than nine hours at the news agency. This is not an easy ride at all. For lunch, I have a plate of tasty pilaf in the Muslim canteen. The afternoon is literally a race against the clock. The articles keep pouring in. The driver takes me home alone in an old Mercedes. Today is Galina's birthday. We raise a glass to the very fact that we are holding on in good health, working hard, doing sports and are willing to work more. I am very thankful to my wife who is sharing with me this passion to travel and experience faraway places. **27**

**12.04.2003** I have deserved a holiday from work, so after 8:00 we start climbing the mountain. We choose the left side of the mountain, and our road leads along an ordinary footpath without stone steps. However, in this way we have avoided the crowd because on Saturdays climbing enthusiasts flock to the main route. So, today we don't meet many people, and I don't need to socialize with people I barely know.

**14.04.2003** We make a couple of loops on our bikes along the blooming alleyways of our hotel. The peaches and magnolias are still in bloom. There are colorful jay birds flying around in the park. Jay birds in Beijing are regarded as decorative birds. I couldn't agree more. The shades of their feathers are fantastic. For lunch I have corn stew and Muslim salad – all for 12 yuan. Such meals are available to almost everyone in Beijing. Towards the end of the working day, my energy levels are decreasing. In the evening, Galina and I both go out to sit in the shade of the blooming trees in the splendid Palace Square of the hotel park.

**15.04.2003** We wake up early, and I manage to take a dip in the pool. A bit later, the company van is taking me to work. The working rhythm is pretty intensive. For lunch I have a glass of milk and some bread with jam. A computer technician arrives to enter the number of the new card for internet communication into our computer. We check the internet, and everything is working fine.

**16.04.2003** Before 6:00 a.m. we go on a bike ride – around the entire hotel park. There are six translators at work today, and only at noon I can manage to work on the dictionary. At home Galina has prepared “black chicken” soup, which is really delicious. The black chicken, actually, looks more like a baby crow and might seem weird when you see it for the first time, but it's very popular in China because of its great nutritional and even medicinal qualities. While I'm at work, Galina has also been working busily on the dictionary project.

**18.04.2003** We have been looking forward to my day off and now are taking bus 904 to Xiangshan 香山 Mountain. The wind is quite strong. Entering the mountain park, we turn left towards the stone wall and then climb higher and higher. Because of the wind, the smog has completely dispersed. The visibility is wonderful. On the other side of Beijing we can even see the World Trade Center 世界贸易中心. The whole journey – quite a vigorous climb both uphill and downhill, including some steeper slopes, has taken us three hours. We feel that we deserve some lamb meatball soup, as well as fried lamb pieces with “tiger salad”. After lunch, we return to the hotel in a great mood.

**20.04.2003** When texts come in, I edit. As for the dictionary, I am stuck at the extensive entry of the character 潮. For lunch, I have a delicious stew at the Muslim restaurant. The wind is fierce outside, and it makes me feel a little bit under the weather.

**21.04.2003** We go to the Technical University. This is one of our favorite routes because there is a huge park here, fit for walking. It turns out that one of the gates is closed due to the atypical pneumonia – SARS. Many students are wearing face masks. We decide to take into account the recommendations that we hear at every step – we, too, buy face masks and put them on when

leaving the hotel. The fight against this infectious disease in China is not yet very successful.

**23.04.2003** At work, texts about the atypical pneumonia keep coming in one after another. Nervousness has taken over Chinese society. The number of patients is said to be approaching two thousand. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC has invited 138 embassies and representatives of international organizations to disseminate information on the prevalence of SARS in China and the measures taken to combat the disease. Tomorrow, a staff meeting dedicated to this issue will also be taking place at the Xinhua Agency.

**24.04.2003** At 8:30, we – experts from all editorial offices – are taken to the main building of the Xinhua News Service for a briefing. The lecture is droning on, and its content is superficial. The information about its spreading rate and the measures taken to combat the disease has been collected from various national press publications. After about two hours, we return to our workplaces, where we will have to stay until 20:30. As a result, our working day extends for almost as long as two regular shifts. While compiling the dictionary, I have come to the conclusion that it is not very productive to run all over the floor in search of the relevant specialized dictionaries. A lot of needed information can be found in I. Oshanin's four-volume "Great Chinese-Russian Dictionary". From another point of view, my work on drafting the dictionary has taught me to look more broadly and not to limit the number of sources used. After this unusually long day, I return to our hotel's "home" quite exhausted.

**25.04.2003** Early in the morning Galina and I go for a bike ride around the entire hotel complex. At the big cedar next to the castle, we do some exercises. At 7:30 the company van picks me up to take me to the news service. In today's articles they are already talking about 2,400 cases of SARS. What makes people thoughtful is the fact that search for an antivirus has not yet yielded results. There is a version that the source of the disease could be animals, in particular pigs.

**26.04.2003** We walk to the bus and notice that the streets are unusually empty. There are fewer city buses. Fear of SARS has embraced Beijing. Most local people wear masks or sit at home in a disciplined manner today. Also on the mountain, there are fewer people than usual. We walk up along the side path. When we have climbed to the main road, the sun is already scorching. We decide not to climb to the top this time and return home – tired, but happy and ready for work next week.

**28.04.2003** We ride on our bicycles through the grand hotel's park, which is absolutely empty. First we make three laps on bikes and then do some exercises by the tall cedar tree. I have just taken my seat on the van, when



the driver breaks the news: “One of the foreign specialists has fallen ill with the “atypical pneumonia”. My colleagues have long faces and become quiet. Later, it turns out that our American colleague Jenny has just caught a cold. However, the Chinese colleagues are holding briefings all day long and seem quite agitated. The epidemic has not been stopped yet. In the evening, the fresh spring rain starts drizzling on the fresh green leaves of the trees.

**29.04.2003** The morning is a bit cool, but bright and fresh. At 6:30 we have our bike ride along the alleyways on the hotel grounds. The leaves of the aspen trees on both sides of the road are fluttering in the gentle breeze. We stop by the tall cedar tree and do some morning exercises. At 14:00 I return from work to our hotel “home”. On this day in April, we always have special feelings – in 1967, on April 29, we got married. Thirty-six years have passed since that day. Unhurriedly, we walk down the memory lane remembering the events both in Moscow and in Riga. In our tiny dormitory room in the high-rise building of Moscow University, our wedding guests had arrived – Galina’s sister, grandmother, and aunt from her side and, of course, my group mates at the Institute of Oriental Languages – future sinologists A. Davidov, S. Muravsky, V. Birjukov, as well as our close friends – Latvian students at the University of Moscow – J. Štrauhmanis, A. Dreimanis and J. Švinka. The official ceremony took place at the Frunzenskaya Naberezhnaya registry office. Jānis Štrauhmanis had decorated the borrowed “Volga” car with a white ribbon, which was not yet common in Moscow at that time, but it looked so elegant... We, the bride and the groom, were feeling so happy and excited trying to comprehend the importance of the moment. At the registry office, our union was sealed and we exchanged our wedding bands with our names engraved inside – *Galina* and *Pēteris*. We had all our life ahead of us. The plane to Riga was delayed for a while. My parents and the invited guests had already started worrying. However, gradually, the celebration got under way. According to Latvian wedding traditions, a saw horse, a two-man saw and a wooden log were brought from the wood shed. Galina and I had to saw the wooden log into halves. It turned out that we were excellent at this job, which was a good sign, and as our married life has confirmed, it was a true sign. Egils Ermansons performed the duties of a photographer, and great photographs have been preserved, which witness this important event of our lives. Today, on April 29, 2003, as we are celebrating our anniversary again, we can only wonder how much has happened in our lives during these years.

In the evening, Galina’s sister Inna calls to congratulate us. Then, on April 29, 1967, Inna made it all the way from Vladivostok to her sister Galina’s wedding. These are precious and touching memories. Yet, we are slowly returning to reality.

**30.04.2003** Texts that keep coming in at work do not show any hope that SARS could be receding. The cure has not been found yet. I get on my bike and head to the bookstore. I am going to buy a new Chinese-English dictionary with Latin names of plants and animals which need to be included in our dictionary. I will leave the Latin names of the Chinese fauna and flora to Galina. After all, she's a professional biologist, having defended her doctoral thesis in the field of biology.

**01.05.2003** The First of May is celebrated in China as well. We go for a longer bike ride. However, I somehow feel uneasy about this atypical pneumonia or SARS and want to learn about the latest developments. Unfortunately, there are no indications that the epidemics is decreasing. On the contrary, the worst outbreak supposedly is being observed in Beijing.

**02.05.2003** We get on our bikes and ride to our familiar and beloved Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park. We check the time and see that in an hour and 15 minutes we have reached the park and come back. It's not bad at all. Galina is riding a ladies' bicycle, which she says is very light and comfortable. In the afternoon, Galina is working on the dictionary draft, but I am lazing around and getting ready for tomorrow.

It has occurred to me to look in my diary of 1998. It was the Year of the Tiger, which is my year of birth, too. The key events of 1998:

- Completion of the diplomatic work in Lithuania;
- Visit to the PRC as a member of the delegation led by the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Latvia T. Jundzis;
- Opening of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC;
- 1999 New Year's Eve in Vladivostok.

Working and living according to such an intensive schedule and covering such geographically huge distances – that year was something a bit out of the ordinary. In a way, it possessed the energy and dynamics of the tiger. My diary helps to recall that very special and challenging year in greater detail. I believe that, likewise, my present diary of the year 2003 will be a valuable source of information of my work at Xinhua Agency, which has not been any less of a challenge.

**03.05.2003** We go for a walk in the nearby Zizhuyuan Gongyuan Park 紫竹院公园, which is our long-time favorite. We know every corner here, but always want to return. We feel good here and whenever we have free time, we mostly end up here, in this wonderful sample of Chinese park architecture. On our way back to the hotel we peep into the former district of small restaurants

and shops. Mongolian and Kazakh restaurants have been torn down, as well as the Uighur bakery. The area is closed as Beijing is fighting with SARS.

**04.05.2003** Today we are wandering along the alleys of Wofosi 卧佛寺 Monastery. We climb the steep cliff behind the temple. At the top of the cliff there is a gazebo, from which one can see the whole monastery complex. The peach trees have already blossomed, and the Chinese spring is on the rise. The epidemic of SARS is not receding yet. **28**

**05.05.2003** We start the day with a bike ride. It's so refreshing to have some physical activity in the morning. In my hotel room I organize the texts that I have edited at Xinhua. It takes several hours. Great news arrives from Riga: at the World Hockey Championship in St. Petersburg, Latvia has beaten the Russian team 2:1. Latvia – the great country of hockey! In the afternoon, the air becomes so humid that it's difficult to breathe.

**06.05.2003** I get a taxi to Finnair ticket office. We book Galina's ticket for June 5 to Riga and tickets for both of us back to Beijing on September 12. Back at the hotel we have an unpleasant surprise. A constant, dull noise is coming from the workshop just below our windows and does not stop even after 20:00 in the evening. What a nuisance! I have to wear headphones to block out the annoying sound.

**07.05.2003** It's pouring at night. In the morning, the downpour ceases, but it's still raining. Galina suggests we go shopping for presents to take home. In the evening we are watching the sunset in our hotel's Suyuan 苏园 Garden. The moment the last sunbeam disappears from view, my thoughts run towards our Motherland.

**08.05.2003** Immediately after breakfast, we walk along the river-canal to the Wanshou 万寿寺 monastery. We manage to return to the hotel in time, because the sun is starting to scorch. With great interest I read the collection of discussions of the "Summer Academy" – conversations of K. Streips, V. Muktupāvels, A. Stranga, as well as A. Butkus, whom I met in Lithuania, with the participants of the summer camp. In the evening, we listen to a fantastic concert by the outstanding Russian singer D. Hvorostovsky. This man embodies the true spirit and soul of his native Siberia.

**09.05.2003** After a longer holiday, I switch on to editing very reluctantly. However, after a few hours I am back on track again. Whenever I get a free moment, I manage to add a few pages to the draft of the dictionary. The members of the Russian community are celebrating the Victory Day: two families from the Xinhua team of journalists, two ballet teachers from Ulanude, Czech Lubomir. The party is turning into a quiet evening sharing memories of the war and the victory that now seems so far away.



28



29

**10.05.2003** Only two translators are working today, which means it is quieter at the office and there is less hurry. The work on my dictionary project is progressing well, too. In the evening we are lingering by the pond in Suyuan 苏园 Garden. Once again, we admire the tall, curved cornices of Suzhou-style pergolas.

**11.05.2003** The day is grey. At night we hear the first thunder this spring. I'm working with two translators today as well. There are not many texts to edit. I am struggling hard with the 黄 entry, very important in the Chinese language. In the evening we walk in the garden, which is moist after the rain.

**12.05.2003** We go outside at 5:30. The entire park is ours. There is not a single soul in sight. This can be only in very early hours of the morning. In the morning there are three translators working, which means I can devote some time to the dictionary. In the afternoon, it gets much busier. There is worrying news – somebody on our floor has fallen ill, and it might be SARS. Galina and I are baffled. What should we do? Maybe both of us should return to Latvia together?

**13.05.2003** We have made it a habit – to get up quickly at 5:30 and ride our bikes on the hotel grounds. At the English language editorial office one of our colleagues has caught SARS, and all twenty of his colleagues need to stay in quarantine at home. We receive a letter from our youngest son who thinks that because of the outbreak of SARS we had better terminate our contracts and return home.

**14.05.2003** Probably, the matter is serious. I am concerned and cannot fall asleep. As a result, I only drop off when it's already time to get up. At the news agency we are all moved to the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, and in a way it's a quarantine, too. It takes a while, until I settle down in my new workstation and get used to the new computer. There are eight translators working and texts keep pouring in as if they were falling out of a cornucopia.

**15.05.2003** The sky is pretty overcast. It's plus fifteen outside. It's supposed to be cold for this time of the year in Beijing. In the courtyard of Xinhua Agency I do some exercises on the gym equipment. Then I go up to the 13<sup>th</sup> floor and realize that the new workplace is amiss. The doors are very close to my desk; people are constantly walking in and out, sometimes leaving the door open, which creates drafts that I have never liked. In the afternoon, a part of my dictionary text suddenly disappears from the screen. I have to call the computer man, who manages to recover the text after some struggling with the software. Texts for editing keep coming in until the last minute of my shift. Galina and I enjoy the evening sitting on the stones in the palace garden.



**16.05.2003** It has been raining at night, and in the morning the alleys and paths are still wet. We both go around the hotel grounds twice on our bikes. The company van picks me up to take me to the Xinhua News Agency. I am working on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor together with four translators. There is enough time for editing and for my private dictionary project. I have some coffee and unhurried conversation with my colleague M. Jefremov from St Petersburg. In the afternoon, closer to the end of the working day, the sky turns black and the wind starts howling. On the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, this is especially noticeable, because at this height the strength of the wind is felt more. I do not feel very comfortable. My Chinese colleagues keep working as if nothing special were happening. Maybe I am too emotional? Through the pelting rain and gusts of wind the company van takes us home safely.

**17.05.2003** For the first time, we go on our bicycles to Zizhuyuan Gongyuan Park 紫竹院公园. We manage to take pictures of herons that are trained by people to catch fish. The birds have a ring around their neck that prevents them from swallowing the fish they have caught. They bring their catch to the master getting a reward at the end of the day. I've seen herons used in the fishing industry in other towns of China as well. In the evening I meet D. Liberte at the Kempinski Hotel where she gives me the Power of Attorney I needed. **29**

**18.05.2003** It's a working Sunday with two translators. My colleague Cheng is mostly playing cards on her computer. The other colleague has gone out somewhere for a walk or something. I can fully concentrate on my dictionary draft and, as a result, at the end of the day I have completed seven pages. This is almost a record. At 21:30 I am at home feeling tired like a dog.

**20.05.2003** We start the day with a wonderful bike trip – no crowds, no traffic jams. SARS has left such a heavy impact on tourism that our hotel is almost empty. There are practically no visitors. I still work on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor. It's very hot and stuffy here. Working is not easy today. Texts are coming in non-stop. Galina meets me, and we go shopping for presents for our sons. It's plus thirty in Beijing today, so it's better to skip walking tours. I start feeling upset when I imagine that I will have to lead my lonely bachelor's life again when Galina leaves.

**22.05.2003** We are up already at 5:30. Galina would like to have a bike ride before leaving for the airport. The air is so fresh that riding is very easy. The jay birds start warming up their voices. At around 8:30 we leave for the airport. Galina, wearing a mask, leaves to check in for the flight.

I take my seat behind the desk in the office. There is a pile of articles already waiting for me. It keeps me busy for two hours non-stop. At home I have my dinner alone. My dear Galina is probably at home already, tired, but happy.

**23.05.2003** I go for a bike ride alone. In the palace courtyard I do some practice with the tennis racket. Then I take the films to the photo shop to be developed. Galina calls me in the evening and tells me that the plane has been half-empty and the flight has been good. Our sons Andrejs and Pēteris have met her with flowers at the airport. I'm happy too that everything has gone well and the flight has not been difficult.

**25.05.2003** I have a free Sunday, and I have decided to go on a bike trip to Badachu 八大处. We have visited this complex of Buddhist monasteries several times. For the first time I am going there on a bike. There is one incident that I want to tell you about. I am riding along the bike lane absorbed in my thoughts without paying particular attention to what's happening around me. Suddenly, the man on a bike in front of me decides to stop. First he slams on the brakes abruptly and then, moving his weight on his left leg, quickly throws his right leg backwards over the seat. As a result, his foot stops only a couple of centimeters from my nose. I have just been lucky not to be hurt. I don't even try to start a discussion about this incident with the other side involved, just take it as a warning for myself to be alert at all times when riding a bike in China. I return to my hotel "home" tired, but full of interesting impressions. This has been a well-spent day. Another day of hard work lies ahead.

**26.05.2003** After the two days of a good rest I sleep so well that I skip my morning exercises. There are six translators working, so there is no time for anything else. Yet I manage to add a few entries to my dictionary draft. My colleagues are getting louder in the afternoon. I put on my earphones and focus on what I have to do.

At home I receive a letter with good news from our youngest son. This weekend they are going to install the new kitchen unit in our house in Berģi. I go outside to breathe some fresh air; however, it starts raining soon.

**28.05.2003** Today there are six translators "on the firing line". As a result, I do not write a single line for the dictionary. At lunch time, I go outside into the news agency's garden to have some rest from the intensive reading and editing. Through the open door of the gym I see my other colleagues using the lunch break to play a match of table tennis. The Chinese are especially good at this kind of sport.

**29.05.2003** The new day dawns, and the morning air is crisp and fresh. The feeling is great. I practice with my tennis racket for about 20 minutes and then the van picks me up. Seven translators are working so intensely that at the lunch break I try to steal a moment for a nap at my table. Actually, it's not forbidden at the news agency – everybody can use their lunch time as they wish, including catnapping at one's own table. In the afternoon the work tempo

is really high, and it's getting really tense. To top it all off, the shift manager informs me that next week I'll have to do the editing job alone, as my colleague Nina will be quarantining. There is nothing else I can I do, but pull myself together and hold on!

**30.05.2003** After yesterday's demanding schedule I lose a couple of hours of sleep. Yet, in the morning I'm quickly back on the track. There are fewer translators today at the office, and the atmosphere is calmer. Without any pangs of conscience, I feel free to do some dictionary work, too. Nobody objects, either.

**31.05.2003** On my free Saturday I decide to climb the mountain. I have missed several weekends already. That is why early in the morning, I leave the hotel so willingly and take a bus to Xiangshan 香山. Somehow I find myself at the beginning of a steep track which I haven't climbed before. I decide to try out this route to the top of the mountain. I must admit that climbing in hot weather is more difficult than in winter time. Yet, with the help of willpower I manage to conquer the mountain top, which brings me a great sense of satisfaction.

I look into the bookstore, because we have decided that in our dictionary we will not only indicate the classes of words, but also offer not only the simplified, but also the complete script of the characters. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to stock up our library with some additional dictionaries.

**02.06.2003** I go outside to the palace garden and start reading a Chinese newspaper. Two young ladies – students – approach me and start talking to me. Immediately, I am surrounded by a bunch of young girls who want to talk to me. Well, I just wanted to spend a moment alone reading the newspaper... The workload is not too heavy; however, it's very humid and hot, which makes working difficult. I ask the shift manager to install a ventilator. In the evening I go outside to the Suyuan 苏园 Garden. There is a young woman on the bank of the pond looking after her young child. We start talking. It turns out she has graduated from the Oriental Faculty of the Far Eastern University with a specialty in Chinese. She is very surprised when she learns that I used to work at the university and exactly at her department for ten years. It's a small world, isn't it?!

**03.06.2003** The biggest problem at work is to survive the extreme heat and humidity. The shift manager shows me how to switch on the conditioner. It helps, but not much. It's getting even worse in the afternoon, but the work must continue. This is also the fourth week I have been working alone. I have to grit my teeth and endure three more working days.

**04.06.2003** My sleep was interrupted at times last night. When it seemed that I could safely fall asleep, a mosquito attacked me. In the afternoon my Chinese colleagues have a meeting, and this is the time when I can safely switch to

my dictionary project. While we are driving home, the sky turns pitch black. Then the storm starts with thunder explosions, lightning bolts, wind gusts and pelting rain. I receive a letter from Galina with good news about repair work as well as our grandchildren's visit.

**05.06.2003** For the first time, the elements drive me out of the Palace Square. Unexpectedly, it starts raining heavily. At work, I try to cope with my responsibilities, even though I am running out of energy. I am very happy to find in Webster's dictionary the Latin name for 甲鱼 - the edible soft-shell turtle (*Trionychidae*), which is widespread in China. I spend the evening sitting on the bank of the pond in the garden of the hotel Suyuan 苏园 Park and watching the pink fish calmly swimming in the clear water. It's a perfect way to relax after battling with the piles of newspaper articles.

**06.06.2003** At work, seven interpreters are madly typing on their keyboards as if they were running a sprint. In addition, it is plus 34 degrees outside. During the lunch break, I go to the news agency's garden and find a place to sit down and clear my head in a pergola entwined with grapevine. We discuss my vacation with the shift manager. According to the management, I am entitled to 28 days' of leave, plus two more days to replace a sick colleague. Something does not seem right. I'll need to enquire.

**07.06.2003** It's an early Saturday morning. I'm going out on my bike. Soon I reach the Xizhimen 西直门 subway station. Then the road takes me to Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park. Here I find myself among singing people. I can't say that all of them sound professional, but they all seem to be singing from the bottom of their hearts. Their voices comprise all the rich and colorful palette of the folk songs. Just as Latvians have dedicated many songs to our main river the Daugava, so the Chinese sing about the Yangtze, which in Chinese is more often called Chang Jiang 长江. In these songs one can hear the might of the river and the people, united during thousands of years with common destiny. After a short exchange of ideas with the singers, I hear somebody say, "You are not 'lao wai'" 老外. This is how the Chinese usually call foreigners who do not speak Chinese, do not understand China and, therefore, are not considered to be very intelligent. I perceive these words as a compliment for my knowledge of the Chinese language and also the knowledge and understanding of the Chinese people demonstrated in the short conversation.

Later I am talking to another man and, after a while, he hesitantly asks, "But... You are not Chinese, are you?" I have not lost my sense of humor yet, and, seriously, I won't be trying to claim to be Chinese. Another thing is that I have been in the Chinese world for more than 50 years. Of course, I know a few things about China.

**10.06.2003** It's a beautiful summer morning. I get on my bike and set out to the Palace Square. The "sword men and women" soon arrive here. These are mostly elderly, retired people who share the passion for traditional Chinese martial arts. Grandmas and grandpas line up in the square and their swords begin to rattle. At times, the movements of the sword bearers become quite dynamic proving their remarkable skills and truly youthful dexterity. At work, although there are five interpreters, the atmosphere is not tense. I keep sorting out my vacation issues. In fact, I haven't been on vacation since I started working for Xinhua. For the previous year, 2002, I am entitled to four weeks and for 2003 – two weeks of vacation. Cheng, the manager of the shift, explains to me that other colleagues at the Russian editorial office have no objections. It is now important for me to maintain my internal balance and work alone for the remaining weeks before I can go on the leave.

**11.06.2003** We start the working day with five translators. Some of the texts are really cumbersome. In particular, we are struggling with the "triple representation" formula put forward by President Jiang Zemin. I am discussing with my Russian-speaking colleagues how to better translate this creative self-expression of the President of the PRC. During the lunch break I manage to do some exercises on the gym equipment. Physical activity is a must when you have to spend the whole working day sitting by the computer.

**12.06.2003** The day is not stressful. There are four translators working. While compiling the dictionary, from time to time, I encounter lexical units that make me ponder and dig through the dictionaries for a long time until I manage to find an appropriate counterpart. The implementation of my idea is also complicated by the fact that this is going to be a comprehensive, encyclopedic dictionary. The range of vocabulary in such a dictionary is practically unlimited. The weather is still amazingly nice. It's not hot.

**13.06.2003** I get up shortly after five. In twenty minutes I am in the Palace Square. The teacher of "sword people" has arrived at the square before me. We both politely greet each other and continue our routine morning activities. Back at the apartment, I am writing a letter to my dear Galina according to the draft outline I made yesterday. The morning at work is relatively calm. I stubbornly keep working on the draft of the dictionary.

**14.06.2003** I go on a longer bike trip exploring the one-storied Beijing on the shores of lakes Xizhimen 西直门, Xihai 西海, Qianhai 前海 and Houhai 后海. The aura of the three dynasties' history is tangible here. On the shore of the lake, a girl is sitting on a bench and playing pipa 琵琶. It is an oval string instrument played only by women. Her deft fingers, wrapped with white ribbon, are quickly touching the strings of the instrument. The wonderful,



rich melody flows freely and gently. It can only happen in the old Beijing and only on the shores of the lake. The lake, the girl, the subtle instrument, and the curious sounds – this scene will always remain in memory.

In the evening, the Frenchman Jean-Pierre is holding a farewell party. He cooks a meal for us himself. The central dish is a baked hare in mayonnaise and delicious white homemade bread. And French wine, of course... Jean Pierre picks up the guitar. He plays and sings, and all his being is radiating with joy indicating how happy he is to say goodbye to Xinhua. A new job and new friends are awaiting him in Shanghai.

**15.06.2003** I arrive on my bike to the familiar Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park. Today I am listening to Beijing Opera 京剧 songs. The three performers are standing very close to each other, and each of them is singing a solo aria. I do not understand how this is possible. People come, listen for a while, and leave. Some stay a bit longer. I ask – what are the criteria of a good performance? The answer is – demonstrating deep understanding of this kind of art. In my understanding, this genre is so specific that only a Chinese person can perform arias on the highest level or evaluate the quality of the performance to its fullest. Well, I may not be right, and somebody can oppose me.

**16.06.2003** This morning I cannot get up in time to do some sports. At work, I both edit and work on my dictionary entries. Around noon, it starts sweltering. When my colleagues leave for lunch, I stay in my workplace and take the liberty of having a nap. It seems to be helping to regain the needed energy. When the heat is becoming unbearable, I moisten my face and head with water. It refreshes for a while and helps to overcome the critical point. The hot weather has set in, and there is no other option but to get used to living and working in conditions when the temperature exceeds +30 degrees. These are radically different circumstances than before. For the first time after the outbreak of the SARS epidemic, police officers allow visitors to enter the territory of the Technical University. The student shop here offers the same level of assortment as before. We have an unexpected “gift” at work – on our floor, where the English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Russian editorial offices are located, air conditioners have been installed, which automatically turn on and off with the help of relays. Hopefully, we will be able to breathe at least.

**18.06.2003** It's sweltering already in the morning. I think I haven't found the right approach to the conditioners yet. Maybe they should be switched on earlier. The texts keep pouring in. I hardly manage to cope with editing. I have written only 1.5 pages for the dictionary. This means, I have dedicated almost all day to my direct job duties.

**19.06.2003** Despite the heat in the morning, I still do my tennis work-out. I work in the afternoon today. On our floor, air conditioners and fans are working all day through. The working conditions are comparatively optimal. At my hotel apartment, I open the balcony door only at night to let in some fresh air. I look forward to hearing from Galina. How is she coping alone with all the repair work? Isn't it too difficult for her?

**20.06.2003** I'm trying to take it easy today. It's still sweltering hot. I have a few things to do around the house. Before it gets dark, I go for a bike ride. It's stuffy and humid, though. I congratulate my youngest son Pēteris on his birthday.

**21.06.2003** The morning bike ride does not feel refreshing anymore. Yet, I'm so used to it, and it provides some physical load as well. I work with three translators, and at the end of the day I have added five new draft pages to the dictionary. In Latvia, the feelings of the upcoming Midsummer holidays are probably already vibrating in the air... Cheng, the shift manager, tells me that my application for a six-week vacation has been confirmed and signed. I feel lonely at the hotel apartment. The Midsummer's Eve is so close. A quiet, genuine Midsummer rain starts drizzling behind the window. Unfortunately, e-mail contacts with Berģi have not been restored yet.

**23.06.2003** This is the first day when the pool is open from six o'clock. I am the only person so early in the morning, so I can have all the pool for myself. I take a dip, just like we used to do in the old days. Again, I go to Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park. Here I have a chance to talk to calligraphers, and they explain me about the different names of calligraphy styles. Then I listen to Beijing opera singers. It seems to me that I am starting to accept this kind of art, yet in no way I can call myself an expert in this field. I strike upon a small Uighur bakery, where I buy "nan" 饅 bread. They use the same name also in Xinjiang, in Kazakhstan, in the Turkish-speaking Central Asian countries of North India, and elsewhere. I am looking forward to letters from home, but there's nothing in my mailbox.

**24.06.2003** The swimming pool, commuting to work, gymnastics in the yard of the news agency – this is my usual routine. At work, some kind of ventilation draft is felt on the level just above the floor. Today is the short working day, and I go home around 14:00. There are still no email contacts with Berģi. Loneliness is felt much sharper on holidays than on normal working days.

**25.06.2003** It's so hot outside that I can't even pull myself together to go to the pool. Even a vigorous bike ride in the scorching sun does not give the expected relief from the heat. For lunch, I have cooked fish and vegetable soup. I walk onto the balcony a couple of times in hope to get some fresh air, but it's still unbearably hot.

**26.06.2003** My sleep is very poor. I keep waking up several times and then lying half-awake. It is probably connected with the weather change – looks like it's going to rain. I have noticed that changes in the weather have affected my sleep many times. I arrive at work weary and exhausted. What a surprise! As soon as I get behind my desk, I feel a rush of energy and start work as if nothing has happened. Indeed, I feel like an old horse that knows his job and never fails his master. There are six interpreters working today, and I don't even have time to lift my head while editing.

It rains slightly during the day and breathing becomes easier. I buy products – beans and pearl barley to last until my next paycheck.

**27.06.2003** Early waking up and swimming in the pool. Lots of interpreters in the office means a lot of work. During the lunch break, I go to the apartment, which I haven't done in a long time. I have some chicken soup and even manage to lie down and relax for a while. This helps me to maintain my strength and cope with the editing. In the afternoon, we experience a strong thunderstorm over Beijing.

**28.06.2003** At six o'clock, I take a dip in the pool. Immediately after breakfast, I go by bike to Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Garden. Everyone can choose here from the different options of traditional Chinese hobbies – such as fencing with sticks, calligraphy, Beijing opera, breathing exercises, martial arts and probably much more. Singers gathered in the bamboo grove, accompanied by an accordion, are chanting diligently the repertoire of the USSR-PRC friendship period. In the Chinese version, the famous Russian folk song of the Volga River boatmen “Ej, Uhnem” or “Yo, Heave Ho!” sounds like “Hey uhu”. In addition, some songs are sung in Russian, while other Soviet songs are sung in Chinese. Everything is performed in a truly enthusiastic and emotional manner. I spend several great hours in the park. If I become hungry, freshly baked cornmeal scones can be found just a few steps away. Of course, I taste them.

**29.06.2003** I go by bike to Yuanmingyuan 圆明园 Park, but it turns out that at 6:40 a.m. it is still closed. I then decide to go to Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park instead, but I notice a lively market on the side of the street and stop to have a look. The selection of fish, mushrooms, algae and other food items is abundant. I continue my way and finally get to Yiheyuan Park. By now, I'm a little hungry, so I buy a boiled corn cob. What an easy way to grab some food to replenish my energy! Now I'm fit to go back to the hotel. There I cook pigeon soup, which has already proven to be valuable. The broth is simply delicious. The pigeon wings are not bad either. In the evening, I write a few e-mails.

**30.06.2003** In the morning, I manage to take a dip in the pool, which is good because one of the most stressful working days lies ahead. First of all, there are the texts to edit, as usual. But there is another thing – all interpreters are tasked to translate several articles on how China is fighting the SARS epidemic. In addition to the huge amount of work, the computer is starting to act up. The load and pressure are enormous! After work, in the evening, I try to ride my bike, yet I feel exhausted, so I'd better return to my apartment.

There are several emails waiting for me. I decide to write to Galina to cheer her up so that she has enough strength to finish up the extended repair works.

**01.07.2003** Instead of the usual half-hour, the drive to work takes an hour and twenty minutes. The streets are heavily congested with traffic. Again we need to edit giant sheets on fighting SARS. The last hour before the end of the working day is especially stressful. I need to run to catch the company van that takes me home. Finally, I receive a letter from Galina with good news. The family of our middle son has visited her and she's been picking and cleaning gooseberries and quince fruit with our grandchildren. That would be all well, but she should also relax.

**02.07.2003** I write to Galina. Then I go to the seamstress's to pick up my repaired pants. The long texts on the fight against SARS have ceased today. Yet, an hour before the end of work, I feel that I have no more energy left. Getting off the bus, I feel some fresh breeze. The air seems to be moving and the aspen leaves are fluttering.

**03.07.2003** I feel good and start my morning with jumping into the pool. This way I'm gathering energy for the working day. I take my seat by the computer and ahead I go with editing, as well as my dictionary project. The last hour of the working day turns out to be the hardest. In late evening, I listen to the cicadas. It's still sweltering, but's bearable. It's time to turn in.

**04.07.2003** The day is grey and overcast. Galina is writing that by buying airline tickets in Latvia we would be overpaying. I decide to buy the booked tickets already today. I take a taxi to Finnair, and after a while, I'm holding the ticket to Riga on August 14 and back to Beijing on September 24 in my hands. I'm missing home so much. Making a decision and acting quickly makes me feel that time is flying faster. Maybe it's the scorching sun and the wind, but I feel restless. Anyway, in the evening, I'm happy that I have the tickets in my pocket.

**06.07.2003** It's pelting down when I'm swimming in the pool. Being connected to the elements of nature is one advantage of an outdoor pool. It's Sunday, and at work it feels like Sunday as there are only three translators in the office. There is enough time for me to do both editing and some work on the dictionary project. For lunch I enjoy carp, cooked by myself. It's really delicious. Then,

already in the evening, I go on a bike trip. In China, owning a bike is especially convenient for purchasing food products, because the infrastructure of the neighborhood markets is planned to be accessible to cyclists. Bicycles are also useful for small trips, for example, as a morning exercise, which Galina and I practice quite often. Finally, if you are not afraid of the lively traffic on bicycle lanes, you can also go on a further trip, for example, to one of Beijing's many historical sites or great parks. I use my bike in all ways mentioned above, and I can also recommend it to my readers.

**07.07.2003** At 5:30 I am leaving on my bike for the nearby Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park. The lotus flowers here are in full bloom. Some have already bloomed; others are still in the bud. These flowers, so popular in China, grow in the countless ponds here. Visitors to the park are walking along the banks of the ponds – both in groups and alone – and admiring the splendor of the lotus flowers. Some are taking pictures. Grandmothers are pointing out the most beautiful flowers to their grandchildren. No one here remains indifferent. Having feasted my eyes upon the magnificent flowers, I watch the martial arts practice and then leisurely walk past the aerobics lovers until I come upon a group of Beijing Opera fans. I wonder how this peculiar form of art is perceived by the Chinese themselves these days and ask this question to some people in the audience. Most of the people I talk to agree that mainly the older and middle-aged generation are still interested in this kind of art. To understand Beijing Opera, it is important to know the plot of the particular legend it tells about. These people also tell me that performers in the park are, basically, amateurs. Yet, I am surprised about the overwhelming number of enthusiasts practicing this hobby. Well, Beijing Opera is an amazingly democratic art: these melodies can be heard in the market square, the military garrison, the hotel lobby, or anywhere else. “Choir singers” these days perform only Chinese songs – about the civil war when the People's Republic of China was born and the Chinese fought against the other Chinese, about the native village, about the village girl's love and dreams about her chosen young man. Near and far, whatever the country, it is not difficult to trace similarities in the content of folk songs.

In the evening, once again, I buy food products and, “on my own responsibility”, I even dare to buy a beautiful skirt for my little granddaughter Evina. A thunderstorm interrupts my evening walk and makes me rush back to the apartment.

**08.07.2003** The day is bright, and the sun is shining. The wind is quite strong, though. I have noticed that when the weather forecast reports storms on the Chinese coast, the echoes of these storms sometimes reach the capital in the form of strong wind gusts. This time, the cyclones bring me a kind of fatigue.



I have no desire whatsoever to move around too vigorously. In the evening, in my thoughts, I wander to the time when our sons were born and raised in Vladivostok. On the weekends we used to go to Okeansk or Gornostaja and simply enjoy being together with our children on the ocean shore.

**10.07.2003** Like many other mornings before, I start the day with a bike ride followed by a dip in the swimming pool. It takes longer than usual to commute to work. The streets are heavily congested. If there are six interpreters at work, I have to be on my toes all the time. Sometimes I feel like a soldier on duty – just “charge and fire”. It’s already been about a year and a half since I started working for Xinhua. I spend every day constantly surrounded by Chinese and Russian languages. My eyes automatically notice the shortcomings in the Russian translation. If, however, there are difficulties to understand the text, I must examine the original article in Chinese. Everything has to be done quickly. It is not acceptable for texts to accumulate on my desk – such are the requirements of the Chinese Xinhua News Agency.

In the evening, I try to open the balcony doors, but it’s still sweltering outside.

**12.07.2003** I haven’t slept much, and my head aches in the morning. For lunch I cook young catfish, bought yesterday, with some vegetables. It turns out great. Then I go by bike to get some Uighur scones and milk. Slowly, I’m trying to recharge my batteries. In the evening, there is a big gathering – the wedding party of my American colleague Jenny and a young Chinese young man.

**13.07.2003** Around 5:30 I leave the hotel to climb the Xiangshan 香山 Mountain. The sun is hiding behind the clouds, but it’s still hot and humid. I’m sweating profusely, and climbing is not at all easy at the beginning. But then my body adjusts, and eventually I reach the top. Many families are climbing today. As today is Sunday, there are many groups of college students and young children on the track. I return home satisfied with winning the fight between me and the mountain. **30**

**14.07.2003** The morning starts with the swimming pool. At work, the morning schedule is not very tight. I can dedicate some time to the dictionary project. For lunch I have delicious catfish broth. Probably, the wind has done its good job – the sweltering heat has decreased and I can breathe again. The day slowly turns into the night. The hotel attendant is still tinkering with some metal junk outside my window. Otherwise, it’s perfect.

**15.07.2003** I start my birthday with the daily swim. At the shop of the Technical University, I buy some disposable plates and spoons as I intend to treat my colleagues with my birthday cake. First, I take some cake to the 13th floor, where our administration sits. Then I go to the third floor, where all the foreign language editorial offices are located, and treat my colleagues. My clothes get



a bit messy with the cream, but, in the end, I haven't forgotten anyone. After I have completed the afternoon work today, Cheng, the shift manager, asks me to come to work early in the morning tomorrow. Working two shifts in a row is the hardest mode of work here, but nothing can be done about it. I get birthday greetings also from my dear Galina, our sons and friends.

**17.07.2003** After the daily swim, I take a bike trip to the market and fill my backpack with vegetables, sea bass, fresh milk and fermented milk. Today I also write thank you e-mails to everybody who has remembered me on my birthday. In the evening, I make several big circles around the hotel grounds on my bike. It seems, this day has helped me take a rest after working on Saturday and Sunday.

**19.07.2003** The morning light is playing with the reflections of the blue tiles in the water. The pool looks lovely and inviting. Our hotel pool is, actually, said to be one of the best in the whole capital city. The morning swim is very invigorating. There are three translators at work today, and I can add a few entries to my dictionary draft. For lunch I have sea bass soup. Being engrossed in work, I don't notice that it has started raining. The noise outside the window is annoying. My supper at home is simple and healthy – oatmeal porridge.

**21.07.2003** Right away after breakfast, I am on my way to Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park. This time I spend a lot of time by the lotus pond. The lotus flowers keep blooming. When they wither, their bolls – the rounded seed capsules – are plucked and sold right here in the park. They are used to make some kind of porridge. I start talking to a former Shanghai resident who has lived in Beijing for 30 years. In his opinion, the northern part of China has better living conditions: heating is provided in winter, the temperatures never reach plus 40-degrees, and the infrastructure is good. In any case, it is interesting to listen to this opinion, while other people, certainly, might have a different point of view. In the apartment, I have the delicious sea bass for dinner and make some soup to last for the next three days.

**22.07.2003** After the daily morning swim I depart to work wearing shorts for the first time. My colleague Jue hands me out an envelope with 320 yuan for the extra work done a few days ago with the texts dedicated to SARS. First of all, it's a nice sign of appreciation from the side of the editorial office and secondly, it is always pleasant to have some extra cash. Galina has written me a heartfelt letter.

**23.07.2003** Although the morning is overcast, the swim is perfect. The translators are in full complement today and are keeping me busy. During the lunch break I go outside and see that the tower of Xinhua News Agency is enwrapped in a thick cloud of smog. My Russian colleague N. Gubarev is telling me that he is starting to get sick and tired of the “factory” style work at Xinhua. Every day it's the same, no much time for travelling or practicing some hobby. I can't say that I disagree with him.

All of a sudden, it starts pouring.

**24.07.2003** The morning is grey and foggy. The pool is perfect, though. The six translators at times type like mad, at times – slow down. However, there is no time to laze around. An integral part of the agency is the people in the military uniforms. They are always on duty in the hallways and in the lobby where they look after order. This has been so since the first day of my work here and probably will stay permanently. There is nothing to wonder about it as Xinhua is the mouthpiece of the PRC government. In the evening, I make five laps in the park on my bike. Then I write e-mail letters to my youngest son and to my nephew from Galina's side.

**25.07.2003** It's drizzling. I am the first person to take a dip in the pool this morning. All translators are in the office and are working really fast. All that remains for me to do is to adapt to their crazy rhythm. As for the draft of the dictionary, I am occupied with the translation of the character 就 into Latvian. In Chinese, this character may have the functions of a verb, preposition,

adverb, conjunction, and noun. Each meaning should be explained with an example. This is something that I need to ponder about really hard. This is just one example. I find this kind of work extremely interesting and engaging.

**26.07.2003** A grey cloud of smog is hovering over Beijing. People have electric lighting switched on in their apartments all day long. I remember my mother, who passed away 22 years ago on this very day. The loss of parents, like the days of one's childhood, is unforgettable. This time I feel it even sharper because I have been alone for several months. The dense cloud of smog is not dispersing.

**27.07.2003** I am trying to make my way through the thick fog to Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park. The mourning willows, lotus ponds, gazebos – everything is wrapped in the grey, thick mist. People say that the humidity is 98%. I finally make up my mind and buy a selection of poetry of the period of Tang唐 and Song宋 dynasties. At a free moment, I translate one of Li Bo's 李白 poems into Latvian. Although my direct job and most of my time is connected with “polishing” newspaper articles and also drafting a Chinese-Latvian dictionary, I try not to lose hope that one day I will find time for translating Chinese poetry into Latvian.

**28.07.2003** The sky has finally started to clear up. The Xishan 西山 Mountains can be seen in the distance. It is reported that today it is +38 degrees in Beijing, but in some places – even +41 degrees. It could be this summer's record. The evening is very hot; it is impossible to turn off the air conditioner.

**29.07.2003** Around two o'clock at night, I get up, turn off the air conditioner and open the balcony door. It was not possible to do this before. The sweltering heat was intolerable. Together with my colleagues New Zealander John, Junior and Greg, we go to the Bank of China 中国银行, where credit cards are issued to us. I have to help my colleagues because they do not speak Chinese. From now on, we will be receiving our salaries using a credit card. Many translations today are quite sloppy, which requires an in-depth study of the original text in Chinese. At one point, the texts on my desk are starting to accumulate in a pile. I try to avoid such a situation. At the end of the working day, everything is back to normal.

**30.07.2003** In the morning I go to the pool; then until noon I stay in my apartment occupied with some chores, including cooking bream soup. In the afternoon, I am struggling with the translation of 具有 into Latvian. I come to the conclusion that two meanings can be distinguished: \*to be endowed (with something) and \*contain, include. I'll stay with this. Very often, when working with specific dictionary entries, I get stuck wondering how to solve yet another linguistic conundrum. The reason is simple – this is the very first Chinese-Latvian dictionary. I wish I could look somewhere for advice. What

is most important, however, is that there is a desire to find a solution to every such linguistic puzzle, or, to put it in a more academic way, a task of linguistic nature.

**01.08.2003** August is here, and so is my vacation time. First I think I'd go to the park, but then I decide that it will be better to have a rest at home. I only leave the apartment to get some groceries, but the rest of the day I recharge my batteries lazing around on the couch. After all, my buddy editor is on vacation, and I will have to work five days in a row. According to our plan, I was supposed to live alone without Galina for 11 weeks, but now it's just 12 days left.

**03.08.2003** Galina is writing that in Latvia the temperatures have reached +30 degrees, too. At the Dazhongsi 大钟寺 Temple, I buy three bronze figurines as a gift for our three sons: a galloping horse with its mane flowing in the wind – for Juris; a slender pagoda – for Andrejs, and a turtle – for Pēteris. I translate a verse of Li Bo's 李白 poetry. I like translating poetry, only there's never enough time for such an activity. At work we celebrate our Spanish colleague Antonio's birthday with the fellow journalists.

**04.08.2003** I jump into the pool and swim my usual distance. The company van is not too full, but the way to work is longer than usual because the streets are crowded. The afternoon is not too stressful. After lunch, the working pace accelerates. S. Mironov, the Speaker of the Russian Supreme Chamber, has arrived to Beijing. Articles dedicated to this event should be translated and edited extra efficiently. The shift manager is on the go all afternoon. In the evening, the air is hot and humid. I switch on the air conditioner to have some relief from the sweltering heat.

**05.08.2003** The day is going its usual way. The pool provides some freshness. At work it's the same "factory" routine. In the afternoon, I get a bunch of articles on exhibitions, arranged by China in Paris, Berlin, the UN headquarters and the US. Some of the texts need serious improvements. I work like a horse – putting in all my energy and persistence. Towards the end of the day I get another couple of half-ready texts. I'm totally exhausted. In the evening I go for a bike ride and stop at the palace square to admire the water fountains. When it gets dark, the fountain is illuminated and turns into a fairy-tale. Sometimes a couple of hundreds of cars arrive here in the evening. People are attracted by the harmonious play of water and light.

**06.08.2003** The day at work is very stable and harmonious, without rush or idle pauses. Out of curiosity, I count the pages of my dictionary draft. It turns out it is 1,060 pages altogether. I'm not too happy with the pace of work, yet the progress cannot be ignored.



In the evening I get on the bike and keep circling around the hotel grounds, but after a while I understand that it is better to call it a day. The sweltering heat is almost unbearable. For dinner I have black rice. It is said that it used to be on the menu of the emperor, the Son of Heaven. I don't know what recipe they used to cook black rice for the emperor, so I just boil it. Now my teeth and mouth are dark blue as if I had eaten blueberries. The dish is edible, but I cannot say that I am too excited about it. I write a letter to Galina. Exactly a week is left before I am leaving for Riga.

**07.08.2003** I haven't slept well and have no energy to go to the pool. The morning is still ok. In the afternoon I feel so sleepy that I can hardly stay awake by my desk. The depressing heat is at fault. I have a short nap and, strangely enough, feel much better. I even have energy to compile a couple of pages for the dictionary. Still, I'm totally exhausted when I return back to the hotel. I just make a short trip on my bike to get some vegetables and fruit.

**08.08.2003** Everything is ok with my sleep tonight. I get up and go straight to the swimming pool. While there, it starts raining. On my way to work, the rain becomes heavier. There are so many texts to edit that I really look forward to the lunch break. Today, the same like yesterday, my energy levels are completely depleted in the afternoon. After a short nap, I pull myself together and do some editing work as well as add a few entries to the dictionary.

**09.08.2003** I wake up not feeling very fresh and understand that I'm not in for a swim nor a bike ride this morning. Before vacation, I need to exchange my yuan bills to US dollars. I visit several banks on my bike, but in vain. Probably, it's not meant to happen today. Somehow, I come across the wise words by Leonardo Da Vinci "Only solitude can give you true freedom". My period of solitude and true freedom has extended for too long. I'd gladly give it away...

**10.08.2003** I set out to Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park again. Opposite the park, there is a large shopping center, where I would like to buy some gifts to take home. Hardly have I mentioned my intention, when the salesman goes, "Oh, you want to buy gifts. So, you are going home..." A bit later, in the park, the boatman waves me "hello" as if we were old acquaintances. I've spent countless weekends in this park. No wonder, people recognize me. Indeed, this park is like my second home. But now I want to visit my first home, Latvia. In the evening, I feel I'm ready for my vacation.

**11.08.2003** After a two-day break I take a dip in the pool with great pleasure. The autumn sky is clear and blue today. However, during the day the temperature is still above +30. Today I have luck with the banks – I exchange 7,000 yuan for 840 USD, so I am all set for my vacation. I send a happy birthday greeting to my son Andrejs and the proud Mum of three sons, Galina, as well. While

the children were young, she was surrounded by four men. It was not easy for one woman to deal with everything. But my Galina was able to cope with it all.

**13.08.2003** The day starts as usual – the pool, breakfast, journey to work. There are six translators working, and editing is not a joke today. I try to relax during the lunch break, but it's not easy because of all the hustle and bustle around in the office. Texts keep pouring in until the very end of the working day. I complete all the tasks. Tomorrow my other colleagues will be dealing with the texts. The shift manager Cheng says an abrupt “good-bye” to me. At home, packing takes a few hours. Tomorrow I'm going home.

**14.08.2003** In the early morning, I manage to have a swim, then I have breakfast and at 8:45 I'm off to the airport. At 12:10 the plane takes off. The route is already familiar, taking into account my previous journeys in the course of several years. First we fly over the Gobi Desert, and then under the wing of the plane, I can see the towns of Eastern Siberia and the Northern Ural Mountains – Ulanude, Irkutsk and many others. The plane lands in the lush Helsinki, soaking in rain. A short flight and I am greeted at Riga Airport by Galina and our youngest son Pēteris. Our middle son Andrejs joins us on the way. When we get to Berģi, our youngest son Pēteris shows us around the renovated house. He is the one who shows all the changes and makes comments on the photos. Indeed, they have done an amazing job. It hasn't been easy, or cheap, either. I will have to start getting used to the changes.

**15.08.2003** I am up early in the morning. The six hour difference in time zones is felt. I try not to bother anyone. It's so wonderful to be able to walk straight out into the garden. The air is fresh and fragrant. Everything is lush green, bright and tidy. Everything is so dear and familiar. I have missed the place so much.

The feeling of returning home is indescribable. I have left behind the crowded megalopolis and the stressful job at the news service. Texts, texts and texts are still mingling in front of my eyes. In the evening, it already feels like autumn – wet and not very warm anymore. It's such a sharp contrast with Beijing's heat.

**16.08.2003** Today we have a big family gathering with our sons and their families here, in Berģi. We congratulate the youngest son Pēteris with finishing the renovation works. Pēteris carried the financial burden, but my dear Galina was responsible for closely monitoring the progress of work, liaising with the construction workers and purchasing the materials.

**17.08.2003** Early in the morning Galina and I go to pick mushrooms. We have our special “secret” places in the woods – in the wood clearing under the high voltage line near our village. Sometimes it happens that in the search for mushrooms we wander away in different directions. Then we find each other again.

We are all alone in the quiet pine forest. It's such a relief after the overcrowded streets of Beijing. On our way back I listen to the rustle of wind in the nearby birch trees.

**18.08.2003** Unexpectedly, a letter arrives with an invitation to participate as a guest of honor in the Ilūkste District Festival on August 23. To understand why I am invited to this festive occasion, we should look at a short biography of our family. My father Pēteris Pildegovičs rebuilt the demolished Vilcāni home-  
stead in Pilskalne Parish after the First World War. He successfully managed his farmland in the period between the two world wars. The medal "For Diligence" serves as a testimony to my father's achievements in agriculture. At the end of the summer of 1944, when the nearby town Daugavpils was already burning, my parents together with us, their two sons, my mother's aunt, and our grandmother fled the place. In the evening of our first day as refugees, I asked my father, "When are we going home?" After a long pause, the father replied, "Never..." On August 18, 2003, we receive this unexpected invitation to participate in the Ilūkste District Festival. The invitation has been extended after many decades have passed and even the collapse of the USSR has been experienced. Maybe symbolically – but it is my returning to our father's home. Inconceivable... I call my brother Aivars, and he immediately agrees to come with me to Ilūkste.

**19.08.2003** I need to run a few errands by car, so I sit by the wheel of our old and reliable "Zhiguli". For a year and a half, I have only been riding a bike. No wonder, I feel a bit nervous and uneasy. Gradually, I am recovering my driving skills. At the Culture House of VEF (State Electronic Factory), we have a reunion of Riga 9<sup>th</sup> Seven-Year School. I meet my classmates, and we have an idea to get together – all girls and boys from the class 7a. We graduated in 1953, so exactly 50 years have passed since that time.

**21.08.2003** With a steel brush, I clean the wooden edge of the newly dug ditch. Then I impregnate the wooden fastening of the edge with "Erlit" solution. In the evening, after such hard work, my back is a bit stiff. Together with Galina, we clean up the gravesites of our parents in the 1<sup>st</sup> Forest Cemetery. At the parents' grave, I pray to God and thank my parents for everything I have achieved in my life. This has only been possible thanks to the values they have instilled into me – love of work, purposefulness, strength and endurance.

**23.08.2003** At 6:15 we leave to pick up my brother Aivars. Around 10:00 we cross the Daugava River opposite Svente town. At 10:00 the festive procession in Ilūkste begins. The residents of Pilskalne, Šedere and Bebrene parishes participate in the festival. Accompanied by the music of the Latvian Army Orchestra, we march on a parade along the streets of Ilūkste. In the evening,

the Latvian Army Orchestra plays and marches on the square. The celebration is grand and emotional. We sleep over in Ilūkste.

**24.08.2003** At Laši Cemetery we take care of the gravesites of our grandfather, grandmother and our uncle Sulas Jānis. We clean up the gravesite of Pakrastes Ausmaņa at Demene Cemetery, and the gravesite of our beloved aunt Ancīte at Daugavpils Lutheran Cemetery. Aunt Ancīte gave shelter to all her nieces and nephews, and the summers we spent in Niderkuni are one of my most beautiful childhood memories. Finally, opposite Krāslava, in Priedaine Cemetery, we clean up the resting places of my godfather Ādolfs Pildegovičs and aunt Anna. We visit these gravesites of the relatives of the Pildegoviči family every year together with our sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren. This time, however, the eldest son Juris is working, the middle one, Andrejs, is going to Rēzekne tomorrow, but the youngest, Pēteris, is departing to Turkey tomorrow. It is a pity... However, we, three representatives of the older generation, respond to the invitation, as well as pay a visit to the sanctuaries of the Pildegoviči family. We have seen and experienced a lot during this emotionally charged trip. I wish my father and mother had been able to make such a journey to the happiest places of their lives while they were still alive.

**28.08.2003** The work on the ditch's edge has been fully completed. Now I'm mowing the lawn. We welcome our old friends – Jānis Sviķis and his wife Lilija. Jānis is planning to attend the world basketball championship in the USA. The atmosphere this evening is the one that could only exist between people whose friendship is measured in more than five decades. At the World Athletics Championship, Latvia's hopes in the javelin throwing discipline are crushed.

**30.08.2003** I attend a reunion of former Moscow University graduates in the high-rise building of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Some participants express the idea that in the times of the USSR, when the people of the Baltic states served in the army together or even had to share the hard crust of bread at the Soviet concentration camps in Siberia, the people of the three Baltic nations were much closer and sincere to each other. I don't think it would be interesting for anyone to go back to those times. The above-mentioned idea belongs to those who have spent most of their lives "building communism." Of course, we talk, discuss and argue about the present state of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, as well as about our common future.

**01.09.2003** Our grandson Tomass starts school today. Three of us are attending this event together: Galina, our eldest son Juris and I. In the afternoon, we are organizing our barn shed, impregnate the fence posts, and collect the fallen apples. There is always enough work when you have a private house with a garden, and healthy fatigue in the evening is guaranteed.

**02.09.2003** It is getting uncomfortably cool. The central heating boiler has not been heated for a long time, so it's time to start it. In the Latvian countryside, the wet weather has affected the grain crops. We may need to import grain.

**03.09.2003** We take our wall clock to the repair shop. I start a fire and burn all kinds of trash. Galina is weeding the strawberries. We are having a quiet and calm afternoon in our yard.

**04.09.2003** After sifting the ashes, I take 10 wheelbarrows of waste to the ditch. Then I sit down to write an application for the Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary project.

**05.09.2003** It's one of those beautiful September days, filled with the bright colors of the autumn flowers, the sunlight and the white clouds in the clear blue skies.

**06.09.2003** The reunion of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, year 1953 graduates of Riga Seven-year School Number 9 begins with the laying of flowers on the gravesite of our class teacher Anna Zemīte. When we try to ask ourselves how come we are together again – 50 years after graduating from school –, the answer is only one. Either our class teacher was the best, or we are the best. We are meeting in Carnikava, at Arnis Jākobsons house. Altogether, we are 18 former 7<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys. We have to share a myriad of memories, emotional words and reflections on the past decades.

**08.09.2003** The lawn is being mowed and the fence is being painted. My son Andrejs has printed about 300 pages of the dictionary draft. At the publishing house “Zvaigzne”, we discuss the possibilities of publishing the dictionary, the possible sources of funding the project, and the idea in general.

**10.09.2003** We receive the PRC visas at the PRC Embassy. In Bergi, we paint the fence and the fence posts. I am trying to gather my thoughts on publishing the dictionary for the conversation with the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China Ji Yanchi. I have known the Ambassador since autumn of 1991, when he arrived in Latvia under the capacity of the third secretary together with two other PRC diplomats with the task of opening the PRC the Embassy in the Republic of Latvia. At that time, I was the head of the Asia branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. Ji Yanchi's career has been so dynamic and successful that today he is the Ambassador of the PRC to the Republic of Latvia.

**13.09.2003** Saturday turns out to be a very busy day – together with our sons and their families, we scrape, polish, and paint all day long. Galina organizes a feast with fried bream and other delicacies. Such working together has been a tradition at our home for many years. The house requires people's hands and



hearts. We try to answer these needs. At the end of the day, there is a great sense of satisfaction with what we have accomplished.

On Sunday we drive to Vecāķi Beach. It's just a half an hour's drive and we are strolling along the seashore. It is so warm that many people walk barefoot. Others even go swimming. Vecāķi Beach is very tidy now, and its infrastructure is being steadily modernized.

**16.09.2003** At the publishing house "Zvaigzne" I meet with a computer specialist, as well as the project manager on budget issues. We have heavy rain in the evening. The autumn darkness and rain embrace everything. Is the summer really over?

**17.09.2003** At the restaurant "Shangri-la" I am meeting with the Ambassador to the Republic of China Ji Yanchi. I have with me about 300 pages of the manuscript of the Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary. I present my intention to the Ambassador. My impression is that the Ambassador's reaction is positive, and there is hope for support from the PRC Embassy. In future cooperation, we will have to look for ways to implement the project in a mutually beneficial way.

**18.09.2003** In the afternoon, I share my impressions of modern China with the teaching staff of the Department of Geomatics of the Technical University's Faculty of Civil Engineering. In the evening, at Pinķi Ice Hockey Hall both my wife and I are watching our youngest son Pēteris playing hockey. The ice is perfect, the uniforms are beautiful, and the athletic young men are truly enthusiastic about the game.

**20.09.2003** Latvia is voting on joining the EU today. We also cast our votes at the Garkalne Municipality. In the evening we walk to the beach in Carnikava, where we are visiting our friend. The Baltic Sea meets us with a refreshing breeze, the sounds of wind in the tall pine trees and splashes of the cold waves on the seashore. These sights, sounds and smells have been encoded in us since our childhood and are especially sharply perceived before leaving on a long journey.

**22.09.2003** We are spending the afternoon with our grandchildren. There is a lot of excitement with looking through the photo albums, talking and singing. Galina is already packing our suitcases for the journey. This will be the fourth year far away from Latvia. Now we need to return to China to complete the contract which ends in February of 2004. Tomorrow we are meeting some close friends.

**24.09.2003** In the morning, I pick the fallen apples in the garden. Then we have breakfast and depart for Riga Airport. The plane from Helsinki departs

on time. Galina does not feel well during the flight. The plane arrives in Beijing according to the schedule. We are rather weary.

**25.09.2003** We have not yet recovered from the long flight when the phone rings. Cheng, the shift manager asks me to come to work today. It's a complete shock. I answer that I have just arrived in Beijing and I cannot go to work today. However, Ms Cheng is persistent and asks me to come to work tomorrow. In fact, September 26 is my last day of vacation. I will have to remind her about it, but I agree to go to work tomorrow. We are still jet-lagged, but it's time to unpack and put things in place.

**26.09.2003** Finally, we have had a good night's sleep and can start the new day being full of energy. After breakfast we go for a walk in Suyuan 苏园 Garden. Red and dark, almost black, fish are swimming in the pond. Rain-drops are falling on the surface of the water. The lotus flowers have withered. The leaves of the trees and bushes are gradually turning yellow, and the presence of autumn is felt in the air. At 13:15 I am at the bus stop. At work, I treat colleagues with some Latvian sweets and candies. During our wonderful and intense vacation, I have forgotten how to turn on my work computer. Slowly I get back to the routine of the editing process.

**29.09.2003** After arriving in Beijing, we still feel jet lagged and sleep badly at night. First, it's difficult to fall asleep, and then we cannot wake up on time. The administration of the editorial office offers to let us spend some days on the shore of the Yellow Sea, in the resort of Beidaihe 北戴河. The first week of October in China is marked by the National Day celebrations. The people are resting, and much of the work is being postponed to the coming weeks. We both discuss this offer and agree to go to the sea shore. After all, we have spent such an intensive vacation in Latvia that some rest after the "rest" would not be bad at all. Early in the morning, we are on our way to Beijing Train Terminal, where a double-decker is waiting to take us to the Yellow Sea. Almost every passenger's got a cell phone, and everyone is talking. The railway coach is filled with endless babble. From the window, as far as my eyes can see, there are stretching polders with countless fish ponds. Crustaceans are raised in these ponds to feed the whole country. After a five hour ride, we are in Beidaihe. We check in and settle in a tidy and cozy room.

**30.09.2003** After the morning coffee, we walk to the sea shore. We choose the direction left of the hotel, where we see steep cliffs on one side and the sea bay with countless fishing boats on the other side. We are surrounded by the peace and quiet of a small resort, which is so relaxing after the crowded streets of Beijing. A gentle rain starts drizzling. We realize that we have been walking for four hours. For lunch, there is huge selection of seafood – shrimp,

prawns with cashew nuts, jellyfish with fresh cucumbers, and soup from three types of seafood. The lunch is light and delicious. After the long walk and lunch, we fall asleep fast like babies. Our holiday is delightful – just as expected, and we have four more days of vacation ahead.

**01.10.2003** Early in the morning, we walk along the main street of the resort village. The sun is shining. The day is bright and joyful. Pines trees have been planted on the sidewalks of the wide streets. Most of the buildings are resorts and holiday homes rented by the largest PRC newspapers, the MFA of the PRC, the Armed Forces, mining and other industries. Door-to-door vendors are riding on scooters and offering apples and pears, stopping wherever potential customers appear. After a sharp turn on our road, the view of the sea with countless fishermen boats opens to us. We stand and watch this dynamic scene from fishermen's life for a while. The ships keep coming into the port and leaving it. They are bringing their catch: oysters, mollusks, and small fish. For lunch, we feast on fresh mollusks, oysters and fish in sweet and sour sauce.

**02.10.2003** We are up already at 5:00, ready to go and watch the sun rise from the Yellow Sea. After about 45 minutes, we are on the seashore. I have my camera ready. Amazing – in a few minutes, the bright disc of the sun is above the water. Large numbers of people have gathered to catch a glimpse of this magic moment. When I look at the crowd, it strikes me that most of the people have pitch black hair, which means these are the local people, because the natural color of hair for Chinese can be only black. Of course, elderly people have grey hair. I have seen only red-haired Uighur people, which is one of the Turkic minorities living in China. Returning to the sea shore, Galina and I wonder if everything in life really is so short-lived and momentary. The sun rises fast and fills the shore with bright light. After a short rest at the hotel we go for a walk again and come to a place called “Pigeon's Nest”. Here we try a delicacy that we have never tried before. It's a small sturgeon. The taste of this fish is truly fabulous. Already in the evening we watch the sun setting and the night falling down on the shore, accompanied by the gentle murmur of the tiny waves. Well, we are experiencing a dream holiday.

**03.10.2003** After the intensive walks during the three previous days, we decide to be less active today. This is the warmest day so far and the sky is clear. At noon it's plus 22. I try walking barefoot along the water edge. The fishing boats, the same as yesterday, keep coming ashore and leaving again. In sacks or small barrels, the fishermen are bringing ashore whatever their catch is – shrimps, prawns, mollusks. In the evening we are watching the sunset on the southern side of the peninsula. The copper disk of the sun is slowly sinking behind the zigzag shaped hilltops.

**04.10.2003** Early in the morning, we are on the sea shore. The same as yesterday, the fishing boats measure the way from the fishing destination to the shore and after a short time, which is necessary to transfer the catch into the hands of the buyers, go back to the sea. The weather has gotten a little colder. We have delicious fish in sweet and sour sauce and scallops for lunch. Then we take a taxi to the railway station and after spending three hours on the train, finally arrive in our apartment at 18:00. We both have a feeling that the holiday has been in the right time and place. Galina has grown up by the Pacific Ocean where the landscape is defined by the contrast between the ocean and the snow-capped “sopkas”. My favorite place by the sea, ever since my childhood, has been the calm and flat Vecāķi Beach on the coast of the Baltic Sea. That is why we appreciate this possibility to get away from it all and spend a few days by the sea so much.

**06.10.2003** Monday is a working day for me. I do some exercises on the gymnastic equipment in the Xinhua yard and take my seat in the office. Today, six interpreters are typing busily on their keyboards. The computer gets hung up three times and slows down. However, I manage to do everything and the work goes on smoothly. After the working day, Galina and I go to the Park of the Technical University. We talk about the contract and discuss what pretext to give for terminating it.

**07.10.2003** This is the last day of the Chinese National Day holidays. The streets are still empty, and the company van quickly reaches the news service. There are quite a few texts to be edited, yet I manage to work on the dictionary project as well. The day is gray. The air masses from north of China are forming a thick fog. Galina has cooked a great borsch from the red beetroots we have brought from Riga. In the evening we go to the Palace Square, where the fountains are still working. There are very few people here tonight. We stay for a while at the fountain. **31 32**

**08.10.2003** Grey fog has enveloped Beijing. There is no wind to drive out the thick fog. I am working with five interpreters at a much faster pace today. During the break, I go back to the hotel for lunch. In the afternoon, the pace of work increases. There is time only for editing, nothing else.

**09.10.2003** The fog cover is even thicker today, and it doesn't get any lighter. We want to eat out at the Uighur restaurant, but it turns out there is no electricity in the whole area. The chefs and other personnel of the eateries are hanging out on the street, talking or smoking and waiting for the blackout to end. It's been the third day since the thick fog has enveloped Beijing.

**10.10.2003** The company van is overcrowded. There are six translators typing fast. At the end of the day it dawns on me that polishing the texts does not



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inspire me anymore and I'm starting to get sick and tired of this kind of job. Galina has cooked a typical "kindergarten" dinner for me – semolina porridge. If you add a spoonful of jam to it, why not?

**12.10.2003** It's been raining for several days. I do not go home during the break, but have lunch at the Salar people eatery – lamb soup with pieces of turnip. Then I go for a short walk around the block, trying to do everything to regain energy, because today is the seventh working day in a row.

**13.10.2003** This is the eighth working day in a row. The vacation in Beidaihe was wonderful, but now I must make up for the free days. During the lunch break I go to the apartment; otherwise the day would seem unbearably long. In the evening we are about to leave for a walk, when, out of the blue, Aleksey Voskresensky appears on our door step. He is the son of my teacher of Chinese at the Institute of Oriental Languages at Moscow University, Dmitry Voskresensky. We spend the evening talking about Moscow, our studies at the Institute, about China and about Latvia. It's an open and sincere get-together.

**14.10.2003** It's a free day, finally. We enjoy idling around and getting up later. I go to the bank to carry out some financial errands. It's sunny and a bit windy. We walk to the Mongolian restaurant where we have Mongolian style lamb, lamb soup, and four delicious dumplings to top it all. The eatery is clean and decent. We really enjoy the opportunity to spend this free day in a relaxed, leisurely way.



**15.10.2003** It's a historical day! China has launched its first astronaut into the space. Articles for editing are pouring in like an avalanche – about the launch of the rocket, about how the President of the PRC, Hu Jintao, observed the event, about the first Chinese astronaut's personality, about his activities on the spaceship and many other details and points of view. I work until lunch without raising my head. In the afternoon we go to the garden of the Technical University to take pictures of the golden persimmon fruit 柿子. Let's see how we have succeeded. The BBC and other broadcasters continue to comment on the Chinese space flight.

**16.10.2003** The first Chinese astronaut Yang Liwei 杨利伟 has returned to Earth! Congratulations! The whole working day is filled with texts marked “very urgent”. The atmosphere is as tight as possible. Not even a minute to spare. Such a historic event! In Xiangyuan 香园 Garden, we are enjoying the autumn colors. We talk over our plans and do not notice how it gets dark. Tomorrow is a full-working day, and I need to rest in order to cope with my duties.

**17.10.2003** The weather is warm and pleasant. There are four interpreters working and texts keep coming in non-stop. Our departure to the hotel during the lunch break gets delayed. The one to blame is the veteran of the Arabic editorial office, Mohamed, who has been taking part in the funeral ceremony of the former general director of Xinhua. Before the working day ends, I find, to my surprise, that I have prepared four pages of the dictionary draft. We enjoy a quiet evening alone in our apartment.

**18.10.2003** We have been thinking for a long time about climbing up to Biyunsì 碧云寺 Monastery, which is located right next to the Xiangshan Mountain, so today is the day. Biyunsì is a monastery of the Yuan Dynasty, reminding in a way the Wutasi Monastery, which we saw in the capital of Inner Mongolia, Huh-Hoto. Under the shade of trees, trails and steps are winding up to the building. In fact, Biyunsì Monastery is a revelation for us, as well as the yet unexplored path. We have visited Xiangshan complex many times, but not this place. We are very satisfied with our journey and return to our hotel.

**19.10.2003** After a long break, we spend the morning in Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Garden Park. We haven't been here since mid-August. The day is a little cooler than yesterday. We walk twice around the lake; then we walk to the hotel. I feel I have regained strength and energy for the next working week.

**20.10.2003** I am discussing my remaining vacation with one of the editors-in-chief, Mrs Shi. I have to make a written request a week before Christmas. At work, the atmosphere is a bit sleepy this time. However, I manage to edit the texts as well as to do some work on the draft of the dictionary. The computer gets hung up and we cannot access our e-mails.

**21.10.2003** After returning from the vacation I need to work in the afternoon for the first time. Also, for the first time we attend the indoor pool. We enjoy our swim. The company van is waiting for me. I use the lunch break to work on the dictionary draft. My colleagues have already become accustomed “my peculiarity”, and no one objects. The most important is that the edited texts are handed in promptly and in good quality. This is like a “business card”, or in other words the matter of professional honor for every member of the editorial office. We are freezing outside while waiting for our van. Strong and cold winds have arrived from nearby Inner Mongolia.

**22.10.2003** Galina and I choose one of our traditional walking routes – to the Palace Square. However, instead of the peaceful atmosphere, we have the first unpleasant surprise – a lawn mower is making annoying noise nearby. Then we notice a huge crowd at the main building. The alleys are full of cars and people. We feel very uncomfortable in this hustle and bustle and try to leave as soon as possible. At home, things are not made better by the computer technician, who simply does not arrive. We have no connection with home. Feeling grumpy, I depart for work. Here, everything goes its usual way. Nothing has changed at the “conveyor belt” – translators are translating and editors are editing. My American colleague Jenny promises to help with our computer.

**23.10.2003** Having refreshed in the swimming pool, we are waiting for Jenny. She comes over with her Chinese husband, and they spend not less than an hour by our computer, but to no avail – “This page cannot be opened”. Our hopes vanish, and it’s time to go to work.

My Chinese colleagues are engrossed in a heated debate and the translated texts are not coming in. I use this opportunity to work on my dictionary.

**24.10.2003** This is my day off. We haven’t given up the idea to revive our computer. So, we go to the Internet café in the main building of the hotel and ask the café ladies to enter a new internet address for us. The kind ladies respond to our request, and we return to our apartment with the new computer address. In the evening, we try and try again until we manage to send some letters from the new address. That’s how it goes with modern communications. Let’s see what the future has in store.

**25.10.2003** We get on our bikes and ride twice around the hotel grounds, covered by the golden autumn leaves.

There are only two translators working today, which is very rare. This gives me an opportunity to compile seven pages of the dictionary. I go home tired, but happy about my record achievement.

**26.10.2003** The bike ride today is perfect. We enjoy the cool, crisp air and the autumn colors. I give Galina a bouquet of flowers. Today is the birthday of

our eldest son Juris. At work, the atmosphere is relaxed, with two translators only. After having a festive dinner, we go for an evening walk.

**27.10.2003** We go to the pool, but it's impossible to swim because the temperature of the water is over +30. My American colleague Jenny comes over with her husband. They help to fix our computer, finally. We go to our beloved Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Garden. It's quite chilly. The fringes of the mourning willow trees are swaying in the strong wind. The park is almost empty. Being able to enjoy the fresh breeze and avoid the crowd is a pure blessing. It's been a perfect day of rest, and we are happy for the restored computer connection.

**28.10.2003** The day is dawning bright, sunny and dry. At work, the text editing goes smoothly, but with my dictionary draft, I am stuck at the entry 拉. The character has multiple meanings, and so far I haven't figured out how to deal with them. Tonight we also go for a walk to the Palace Square. The TV channels are full of news stories about the bloodshed and violence in Baghdad.

**30.10.2003** The visit to the pool is sheer pleasure. The streets are congested, but our reliable company van pushes its way through the countless traffic jams. There are six translators at work, and this is getting serious. It's like a hurdle race. My brain needs to process not less than 30 texts in a very short time. On such days, at the end of the working day the editors get on the bus weary and thoughtful. In the evening we have a nice walk in the Palace Garden.

**31.10.2003** A heavy cloud of smog is hovering over Beijing starting very early in the morning. We conscientiously stick to our morning routine and have our bike ride. At work, there are 6–7 translators working all the time. I'm engrossed in my work, when I notice an official delegation approaching. One man is looking at me. His face seems familiar. Yes, it's Romano Prodi – the President of the European Commission. When I explain to him that I am from Latvia, he exclaims: "What an unexpected meeting! Welcome to the EU!" Unthinkable... After work, Galina and I go for an evening walk.

**02.11.2003** The wind has picked up yesterday night, and now it's blowing really hard. We walk along the canal, dressed in white marble in the direction of Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park. Walking against the strong wind is difficult; but refreshing, especially after the hard work the previous week.

**03.11.2003** I feel relaxed, and around 5:30 I am already up. I start the day with translating a few verses of Chinese poetry. Instead of a half an hour we spend more than an hour on our way to work. There is already a pile of texts on my table, and till the lunch break I work only on these texts. For lunch I have fried rice in Arabic style. Then I put on my headphones and have a short nap in my workplace. Yesterday's wind has brought lower temperatures, and I need to think about wearing warmer clothes in the future.

**04.11.2003** With the small backpack on my shoulders I depart to the market to buy some food. Then I continue translating Chinese poetry. It takes a long time to find the right words in Latvian that would correspond to the Chinese characters. It's not that easy. I work in the afternoon today. There are loads of texts coming in at the beginning, but towards the end of the shift I can take a break and even work on the dictionary.

**05.11.2003** Quickly, we get ready and, in a few minutes, we are enjoying our daily swim. The winter indoor pool is not big, but very cozy. We go for a little walk as well. Then I get back to my Chinese poetry translation. Putting the Chinese verses across into Latvian is not easy. In order to deliver the refined beauty included in the characters to the Latvian reader, the wording must be alternated several times until the text shines brilliantly in Latvian as well. I find this creative process extremely exciting. In fact, the daily work in editing contributes to the translation skills. In the editing job it is important to make sure that the text, originally written in Chinese, is correct and sounds natural in Russian. The whole working day I operate with two or even three languages, keeping in mind that I am putting together the draft of the Chinese-Latvian Dictionary.

Today, five interpreters are working, and they make me run for my money. Yet, I manage to get down to the dictionary as well. In fact, I start the 劳 entry, which forms the base for many lexical units. Ms D. Rudāka calls, and we have a long talk.

**06.11.2003** Although it's raining, we do not skip our daily ritual – a bike ride. We also drop in the market behind the Third Circle Road 三环路. Frankly, the noisy hustle and bustle at the market place is really getting on my nerves today. The Internet connection is disrupted due to the weather conditions. When we leave the news agency after the second shift, the snow starts falling. The first snow is wet and slushy. The trees, still bearing their yellow autumn foliage, are gradually turning white.

**07.11.2003** The snowfall overnight has been remarkable. The park alleys are full with huge broken tree branches. We find out how to make a long distance call to Harbin because on our vacation we'll be going to Vladivostok via Harbin. Before the sunset, we go for a walk in the Palace Garden. The winter scenery with the quiet water fountain and snow-covered trees is truly enchanting.

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**08.11.2003** It's not too cold, yet it's subzero temperatures. Definitely, I need to dress warmer today. The Xinhua Canteen, where I have lunch, is huge, and does not feel very cozy. The agency employs several thousands of people, and the Chinese know how to feed thousands when needed. I have a nap at work,





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which is absolutely legal. My Russian colleagues invite me to the celebration of the “Reconciliation Day”, which was called the “Anniversary of the Grand Socialist October Revolution” during the Soviet times. The new format or the meaning of this holiday is not really clear even to my Russian colleagues. The old format with parades and speeches by the leaders of the communist party, on the other hand, belongs to history now. Today’s gathering is just a reason to socialize and have fun, without particularly dwelling on the subject matter of the holiday.

**09.11.2003** There are only three translators at work, which means I can work on my dictionary project as well. Together with my colleague M. Jefremov we have lunch at the Muslim eatery. I have homemade lamb soup with noodles. The meal is delicious, nutritious, cheap and very democratic. This is where local people eat, and one can feel the true traditions and authentic atmosphere of the place. In the evening, Galina and I enjoy walking in the snow covered Palace Square. Our eldest granddaughter Eviņa has her birthday today, and we wish her all the best.

**10.11.2003** Although Beijing is wrapped in the white cover of snow, I go for a short morning bike ride. There is not much traffic and not many janitors



cleaning snow, either. It's not difficult to cycle, the only condition – you need to dress warmer.

Galina and I walk along the canal, until we come to a large bridge. Working people who have arrived in the capital from the countryside live in this area in insulated winter tents. The living conditions are harsh, but such is the reality of the huge nation and its state. Then I think to myself – interestingly, what will the average prosperity of the Chinese be in 20 years? Will average working people have to live in tents then as well? Frankly, I believe that the answer is “yes”. Moreover, in Inner Mongolia, for example, living in yurts is an ancient tradition of the nomadic people. For nomads, the yurt is the most suitable home – not only in summer, but also in winter. Such reflections run through my head while we are walking and breathing fresh air. In the evening I continue to practice translating Chinese poetry again, and the feeling is amazing.

**11.11.2003** The air conditioner next to my workplace is turned on, and there is no escape from the sweltering heat. While the interpreters of our department are in a “production meeting”, I can focus on my private dictionary project. I am starting work on the entry 了, and anyone who has learned Chinese can imagine how much effort it will take to comment on this character and to explain it in Latvian. Galina exchanges information with her sister Inna about the invitation we need for the trip to Vladivostok. In a BBC program, Siim Kallas, the Estonian Prime Minister, is trying to confirm Estonia's choice and optimism about joining the EU.

**13.11.2003** The nights are getting longer. Sometimes I sleep like a log and have difficulty waking up in time to prepare for the coming work day. Again, we are stuck in a traffic jam and spend more than an hour on the way to work. The schedule is intensive, and I devote most of the time to text editing. In the evening we are in the Palace Garden again. We decide that I will be asking for a leave from 28 December of 2003 till 10 January of 2004.

**14.11.2003** We start the morning with our usual routine – a bike ride and morning exercises. For lunch, I have pork ribs at the Xinhua canteen. In the afternoon, they change all computers at our editorial office to new ones. They have some different features, so we'll have to get used to them gradually. Outside, the sky is grey and low. It's either late autumn or early winter.

**15.11.2003** We have long wanted to revisit the lakes of the ancient center of Beijing, where we have been many times before. So we take a bus to Xizhimen 西直门 and then continue on foot to Houhai 后海 Lake. We are in no hurry, so we walk around the lake, enjoying the one-story Beijing, which is now surrounded by the modern city. Here, in the old part, every stone is imbued with the air of history, and the traveler is surrounded by the authentic Chinese

world. Satisfied with what we have seen and experienced, we return to our hotel apartment.

**17.11.2003** The working day begins with unexpected revelations. The new computers... do not have the Chinese language installed. Then it turns out that they don't have the English language either. When I want to print out a couple of draft pages at the end of the day, the computer doesn't obey my command and I end up with nothing. It feels the same as when I started working for Xinhua on 26 February in 2002. Although not modern anymore, the old computers, had everything I needed both for editing and for compiling the dictionary. Needless to say, everything worked perfectly.

**18.11.2003** We wake up early, before 6:00. After breakfast we immediately go for a walk to the Palace Square. It turns out that we are not the only walking enthusiasts. Several elderly couples are enjoying the morning hour walking unhurriedly along the Palace Square. At home, I tackle Chinese poetry again, trying to find the necessary imagery and vocabulary in Latvian. At work, it seems I'm starting to get the knack of the new computer. However, the text I have typed today disappears without a trace. Galina has prepared a festive dinner with tuna salad. It's the 18<sup>th</sup> of November – our State holiday.

**19.11.2003** It's pouring outside, which is very rare in Beijing at this time of the year. I am getting friendlier with the new computer. The team of translators is in full complement today, so I need to be on my toes. At 14:30 I am at home and we depart to the Kempinski Hotel to attend the festive event dedicated to the 18<sup>th</sup> of November. As soon as we enter the hall, we are approached by many old acquaintances – diplomats from Kazakhstan, Poland, Uzbekistan, Russia, Sweden, Kyrgyzstan and other countries. Not that long ago, in the time period between 1998 and 2000, Galina and I used to work as diplomats in Beijing, our task being to open the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC. The diplomats from several countries still recognize us, as the time when we were involved in diplomatic work is not that long ago. The atmosphere at the reception is nice and cordial. We are leaving after 20:00.

**20.11.2003** There are so many texts to edit that there is no time for boredom. It looks like I am slowly getting better with my new computer. When we are returning home, the streets of Beijing are dark and desolate. A nice letter has arrived from our son Andrejs telling about how the three brothers with their wives, fiancées and children have been celebrating the 18<sup>th</sup> of November together.

**21.11.2003** We are up early in the morning and in a short while we are on our bikes ready for the morning ride. Only three interpreters are working, which means I can dedicate some time to my dictionary project. At lunch time my

colleague and I go to the Uigur eatery where we choose some beef soup. I must say honestly that there is hardly any trace of beef in the soup. Shortly before the end of the working day, the shift manager Cheng approaches me looking quite distraught and apologetically informs me that there is no possibility to prolong the contract after 25 February. Otherwise, the staff of the editorial office are satisfied with my performance. There have been good words heard not only from the more experienced colleagues, as well as from the younger generation, but also from the administration. However, there is a regulation at Xinhua to conclude contracts with foreign specialists for two years only. On the other hand, I feel relieved because Galina and I have already resolved not to prolong the contract.

**22.11.2003** At the Russian Embassy we are filing our documents for visas for our trip to Vladivostok. It turns out that the original of the invitation is required; copies are not accepted. Nothing doing, we'll ask Galina's sister to send the original. It's a quiet working Sunday for me. At times I edit the texts; otherwise, I spend most of my time drafting the dictionary. At the Uighur's I have "lamb soup" and cannot find any faults with it. The city is wrapped in thick fog again.

**24.11.2003** First of all, to buy airline tickets we send copies of our passports to Harbin. We also discuss the idea of sending part of our books by diplomatic mail or "bag" with the help of D. Rudāka. We are taking part of our luggage to Vladivostok, from where we will send it to Latvia. Of course, we will also have luggage to carry on the plane when we fly home. The fog is very thick, which makes me feel not very well.

**25.11.2003** We are up early, and the only sound we hear in the park is the crunch of the dry aspen leaves below the wheels of our bikes. The air is humid and a bit chilly, but there is no frost. Every morning when we drive to work, I see about four people, wrapped in quilts, lying on the sidewalk below one of the countless Beijing bridges. I wonder who these people are. Are they working people doing some menial jobs or are they homeless? It is not really a usual sight in Beijing, but sometimes I happen to notice similar scenes. There are many translators at work today, hence, not much time for my dictionary draft. Having arrived at the hotel, I drop off after lunch. Probably the intensive work is causing this fatigue. Galina has written letters to our sons.

**26.11.2003** Light snow has fallen overnight. We skip our bike ride. The company van is packed with people. We have three new colleagues in the French editorial office. Sometimes six or even seven translators are working simultaneously. There is no time for rest. There are a whole bunch of rarely used characters which need to be entered in the dictionary draft; what is more, both the simplified

and the traditional version need to be recorded. This job needs all my attention. My head gets heavy around lunch time, so I go outside for a walk. The weather in Beijing this year changes often and quite rapidly. Maybe that's why I feel a bit run-down at times.

**27.11.2003** This morning it's sleeting lightly in Beijing. At work, the atmosphere is calmer. At noon I try to take a nap, but in vain. On my way back home I grab a few cans of beans. In the evening, I get back to Chinese poetry again. The process of translating poetry is pulling me like a magnet; I just wish I had more time.

**28.11.2003** The translators' team is working in full complement today, yet I manage to squeeze out four pages of the dictionary draft. In spite of the wet and foggy weather, Galina and I go for a walk in the Palace Square.

**29.11.2003** We start the morning with a bike ride. After breakfast we set out on a walk to Yuanmingyuan 圆明园 Park, which we already know very well. Within an hour and a half we are at the park gate. On our way, we see dozens of stonemasons working in the vicinity of Peking University 北大. Their hammers are clicking like many hundreds or even thousands of years ago. We have visited this park many times. Altogether it's 350 ha of artificial lakes and ponds, hillocks and pine groves, bridges and gazebos. This is an excellent place to recharge one's batteries after the hours spent by the monotonous news service conveyor. On the way back in a Muslim restaurant we have some "nan" bread with stewed lamb. The meal is really delicious and invigorating.

**30.11.2003** The day is grey and murky – one might think that the sun has not risen at all. In spite of that, we still go on our routine bike ride. After the intensive work at the editorial office it feels like I deserve a calm day, without the usual rush. It turns out that way. We just stay home and enjoy being at leisure. In the evening, we write to our sons.

**01.12.2003** The last month of 2003 has begun. We discuss the forthcoming end of my work at the news service. We are very satisfied to know for sure what we will be doing after returning to Latvia. Of course, we will work on our house, but most importantly – we will move forward with the dictionary project. After an intensive day of work, Beijing sinks into winter darkness. Latvian newspapers have arrived. For us, it is extremely interesting to look at them: sports hall construction, winning the right to participate in the European Football Championship, Riga theater season events...

**02.12.2003** Looks like I have caught something. My chest is squeaking. We go to the Russian Embassy to get our visas. Everything goes smoothly. The documents have been submitted, and the fees have been paid. Then we rush back

to the hotel. At 13:15 I depart to work. At work, the symptoms intensify – runny nose and sneezing have been added to the wheezing. On the way back to the hotel, I feel really sick. Galina takes care of me and covers me warmly with blankets. The night is restless.

**03.12.2003** I'm still feeling sick. Several times I get up and then lay down again. At 13:15 it's time to depart to work. I have runny nose and watery eyes, yet, to my surprise, I can see the screen clearly. Even being in such condition, I manage to add three pages to the dictionary draft. I need to write Christmas cards to our relatives, but, in the evening, I even lack energy to write a diary entry.

**04.12.2003** I stay inside the office all day not to breathe in the cold outdoor air. The feeling is slowly improving. There are six interpreters on the “fire line”, and the texts keep pouring in. For my lunch Galina has packed up hot lemon water with two sandwiches, some cleaned walnuts, and even a lobe of grapefruit. She is my guardian angel. At home, Galina tells me the news from her sister Inna who has successfully completed the pre-defense of her dissertation.

**05.12.2003** Today is a day off. Together we go to the doctor's. He prescribes 2 kinds of cough syrup. I have a light headache. Today the atmospheric pressure is high, which probably affects the way I feel today. At home, I get down to translating Chinese poetry, which is always a source of inspiration and enjoyment.

**06.12.2003** The Northern wind howls all night through. Probably, it comes all the way from Siberia, halfway sweeping across Mongolia plains. The air temperature is falling rapidly. In the morning it was already minus eight. There are three translators working, which means – it's the right time to put together the dictionary draft. Galina is already packing books to be sent to Riga. I am meeting with Ms I. Viksna, a journalist from the Latvian newspaper “Rīgas Balss”. She asks sensible questions, and we have a lively, constructive dialogue.

**09.12.2003** The translators are not being too industrious this morning, so I manage to contribute considerably to the dictionary draft. At about 13:00 I leave the Xinhua campus to air my head a bit. I get on my bike to buy some fruit. It turns out that the fruit vendors have moved to an indoor pavilion, where everything looks clean and fresh. I buy some persimmon and grapefruit. Galina has collected the visas from the Russian Embassy.

**10.12.2003** The sky was clear yesterday and it seemed that it was going to stay so for a long time. Yet, this morning sidewalks, fences and trees are covered with fine, white snow. The pace of text editing at work is not too intensive. As for the dictionary, I am stuck with the entry of character 灵, which turns out not to be as simple as it may seem. I am not giving up, though. When I get back



to the hotel, I am so exhausted that there is no more energy left for any mental work. There is only one thought on my mind – to have a rest.

**11.12.2003** Before lunch, I am working with five interpreters. During the lunch break, I quietly take the “legal” nap. I’m at home at 2:30 p.m. Galina has cooked Crucian carp. The lunch is wonderful. In the evening, we rejoice at the golden glow of the sunset in the Palace Square. In the evening, Galina puts folk remedy – mustard patches on my chest. After half an hour my skin begins to burn. At night I’m restless because of wheezing, coughing and the sore, burning skin on my chest. Will there be a positive effect from this treatment? The squeaking in my chest has continued too long.

**12.12.2003** Everyone is sleeping in the company van this morning. I skip my morning exercises. The night has been hard and almost sleepless. At the Muslim eatery I have lamb flavored soup and “nan” bread for lunch. That’s a light and healthy meal. In the afternoon, the work pace is getting more intensive. My buddy N. Vasiljev is delayed for about 15–20 minutes. The van is crowded, and it’s a long way home along the congested streets of Beijing.

**13.12.2003** Writing New Year’s greetings takes a long time. We have dinner with my Russian colleagues in a Mongolian restaurant. In a stark contrast from the Soviet times, the Russian colleagues are not behaving in a patronizing way, trying to teach other nationalities how to live. The conviction about the benefits of socialism has disappeared together with the Soviet Union. The conversation gets really interesting when my colleagues start sharing their deep professional knowledge of China. The specialists of the Russian editorial board have a good command of the Chinese language and know Chinese culture, literature and history. Employees of the English, French and Spanish editorial offices, with rare exceptions, “polish” the texts in their mother tongue without a deeper understanding of the original texts. However, we are in a holiday mood already and talk mostly about our families and children. Most importantly, the road lies ahead for every one of us, and it brings us especially close tonight.

**14.12.2003** Galina wants to attend a hairdresser, so there we go. At the market, we buy nuts and vegetables. For the first time in China, we boil broad bean pods, a dish which reminds us of our home. The taste is not exactly the same as the one of broad beans picked in the garden on a summer day in Latvia, but at least we have tried. It’s Sunday afternoon, and I’m saving my energy for tomorrow. I pick up a Latvian newspaper, and in my thoughts I am in Latvia.

**15.12.2003** It’s a full working day with a full team of translators. My colleague M. Jefremov and I have a rather ascetic lunch in the Uighur eatery – lamb flavored soup and some “nan” bread. Such a light lunch maintains my energy levels needed to cope with the direct job responsibilities and even to add

to the dictionary draft. The news service has invited both the Chinese and Russian employees of the Russian editorial office to a joint pre-Christmas dinner. The atmosphere is relaxed, filled with fun and jokes both in Russian and Chinese. The subordination which is felt in the work process has given way to the festive mood.

**17.12.2003** We slowly walk to our favorite store, where we buy honey and jam. At the medical center, the Chinese doctor prescribes homeopathic drugs that are supposed to relieve my cough which has extended too long and is becoming a nuisance. It's time to leave for the afternoon work shift. Everything goes smoothly, and I can both edit the texts and add to the draft dictionary. The most important recent event in the foreign news is the 13 December. American soldiers have captured Saddam Hussein. Will this event alleviate the rising wave of violence and bloodshed in Iraq? Only time will tell...

**18.12.2003** We want to take a walk, but the wind is so fierce outside that we give up our intention. I have to wear my best suit, because the senior management of the Xinhua Agency has invited us both to a Christmas dinner today. At work I find seven texts that need editing on my table. It turns out that my partner Nina is occupied with some extra task at the request of the news service. Nothing doing – I immediately get down to Nina's texts. Around 18:00, Galina arrives in our editorial office for the first time and gets acquainted with our editorial staff and also my workplace. We take the elevator upstairs, where the top management of the news service and the employees of other editorial offices, also invited to the dinner, have gathered. The most respected man in this narrow circle is the Palestinian Muhammad, who has worked in the Arabic language section for 20 years. He is referred to as the "great friend of the Chinese people". Xinhua Agency has even given him an apartment in the capital. We are treated to delicious Chinese-style food, including Beijing duck. The atmosphere at the table is festive. Everyone listens carefully to the important people of the news service. We are taken back to the hotel by the company van. One more festive event has concluded.

**19.12.2003** My lungs are squeaking like an old floorboard. It's been already one month. I go to the medical center again. The doctor listens and tells me to come again in a few days. After lunch I sleep like a baby. Maybe that's what my body needs. In the evening I am translating Chinese poetry, which is always a challenge, but also a great source of enjoyment. It's the same tonight, but I somehow cope with the task.

**20.12.2003** Only three interpreters are working on Saturday and the atmosphere is calm. The unpleasant thing is that I have a heavy head and, basically, feel under the weather. In the afternoon I feel better and my working day goes on more smoothly. We send a name day greeting card to our grandson Tomass.

**22.12.2003** We haven't been out walking for quite a while. First, we go as far as the canal-river. Today it's covered with dirty grey, dusty ice. Almost unconsciously, we find ourselves on the path to our beloved Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park. This is one of our favorite destinations, which can be reached from our hotel on foot, without using any means of transport. Although we have been to this park countless times, one cannot get tired of the Emperor's summer residence. At any time of the year and every hour of the day, the park is colorful and inviting and there is always something to see. In the evening we go to a Christmas event in the "Polytheatre" concert hall. Many hundreds of foreign specialists working in Beijing have come to the concert. The concert is intended as a thank you from China to foreigners working in the country. Excellent local dancers professionally perform Spanish and Arabic dances, and even Irish line dances. The opera singers sing both in Italian and Chinese. We return to the hotel in a cheerful mood.

**23.12.2003** An atypical heat wave has reached the capital of China in December. During the day, in the sun, it is around plus ten. At the news service, they continue to heat the premises like in the wintertime; as a result, the workplace is uncomfortably hot. Such a high temperature makes one tired, but there are no options. After lunch at our apartment at the hotel, we both take a nap. The newspaper "Diena" brings tragic news: four Latvian mountaineers, with Mr E. Ķirsis as the group leader have perished in New Zealand. The daughter of E. Ķirsis has also died in the tragic accident. I talk to my New Zealand colleagues. They confirm that the mountains of New Zealand, especially for foreigners who are not familiar with the nuances of the local weather, can be very dangerous. In the evening we both work on the draft of the dictionary.

**24.12.2003** The company van is half-empty this morning. I work out on the gym equipment. The working day is pretty calm, and the workload is balanced. I have some time to add a few entries to my dictionary, too. It's the short working day and at 14:00 the van is taking us back to the hotel. In the evening there is an event at the hotel for the foreign experts. We decide to drop in for a short while and end up in joint singing of the Russian popular song "Kalinka".

**25.12.2003** The night is sleepless, with bouts of cough and insomnia. In the morning, the company van is almost empty, as well as the streets of Beijing, swept by the cold winds at night. I sit down at my computer and the marathon of editing starts. It takes all my attention and mental energy to read, understand and to correct the text, if needed. At 14:00 we are heading home. At the booking office we find out about the railway tickets. The moon phase is changing, and it's getting colder in Beijing.

**26.12.2003** I go to the Xinhua administrative office to ask about our plane tickets for the Beijing-Helsinki-Riga flight. After two years at Xinhua we are going home. The office lady, without hesitation, confirms that the matter will be resolved. After an hour, an employee brings me the confirmation that the airline tickets have already been ordered for February 26 of 2004. This is, undoubtedly, very nice. The texts keep pouring in non-stop, keeping me busy. Galina and I are going together to collect the train tickets. Everything works out fine, and we get our tickets without any problems. I'm happy that we have solved two serious issues today.

**27.12.2003** Before the lunch break, I go through the desk drawers and sort out the documents, translations, and notebooks – everything that has accumulated over these two years. Galina is packing everything up. We are moving our house again. In the afternoon, we visit Ms D. Rudaka, who has invited us to visit her at home, in her apartment. Ms Rudaka herself has made Japanese sushi. We also taste “Charlotte”, Latvian cream liqueur. The evening is nice and relaxed. We chat until 22:30 when it's time for us to say good-bye and go back to our hotel “home”. The taxi briskly navigates through the dark, empty streets of Beijing and takes us safely home.

**29.12.2003** Galina suggests going to the store and buying gifts to take to Vladivostok. We continue to prepare for the road. Then we go to the medical center and get some syrups and infusions to fight my prolonged cough. Saving my strength, I lay down. In the afternoon we leave for the railway station, and the train pulls out of the station. We pass Shanhaiguan 山海关, Shenyang 沈阳, and Changchun 长春. I have visited the first two cities. Changchun is still unfamiliar to me. Time after time, smaller Chinese villages flash by in the dark window. The sleep is not really deep, more like a series of short naps. Around 6:00 we arrive to Harbin 哈尔滨.

**30.12.2003** For a while, we need to hang around at Harbin Railway Station. Then the company hands out the plane tickets for the flight from Harbin to Vladivostok, which we have booked beforehand. The representatives of the company kindly offer to help us with the purchase of return railway tickets for January 7 – for the trip from Harbin to Beijing. We leave for Harbin Airport. Without delay, we check in and board the plane. After just an hour's flight, our plane starts looking for the runway in the maze of sopkas of the Primorsky Krai. We land in Ozjornije Kluci – that's how Vladivostok Airport is called. Less than ten years ago, I was returning for good to Riga from this airport. An airport employee, seeing my Latvian passport, asks – do you speak Russian? I answer – a bit ... Ha! Ha! ... We throw ourselves into the arms of Galina's sister Inna and, in a short while, we are on our way to the central town of Primorsky Krai, about which the Russian professional revolutionary V. Lenin once said:

“Владивосток далеко, но это город нашинский,” – meaning “Vladivostok is far away, but it is our city”. I try to look deeper into the features of the city through the taxi window. We haven’t been here for four years.

**31.12.2003** The sleep is restless in the Panin’s family apartment, where we used to live from 1970 to 1979. Everything here is soaked with our memories about the bygone days. We are now two families together – Galina and I and her sister Ina with her husband Mikhail. Ina and Mikhail take us to a good clinic in the town, where the doctors recommend I take care of my airways. The good news is that I’ll soon be leaving Beijing with its endless smog and fog. We send a large package of clothes to Riga. Walking around Vladivostok, it goes without saying that the city has changed a lot – freshly painted facades of the old houses, brand new buildings, extremely intensive, even dangerous traffic. On the other hand, the biggest attraction of Vladivostok is the “sopkas”, which meet with the ragged coastline of the ocean here. After all, the city stands on the coast of the Pacific Ocean, and that means something. The fresh breath of the ocean and the world is what sets Vladivostok apart from other cities, which undoubtedly have their own charm.

Today marks the end of a very intense year, during which Galina lived in Bergi, Latvia, for almost five months, participating in the renovation of our house in the most active way together with our youngest son Pēteris. All these months, I was toiling alone at the news service – both doing my direct job duties as an editor and, at the same time, patiently and step by step, drafting the Great Chinese-Latvian dictionary. Galina recorded my dictionary templates on our home computer. For both of us, drafting the dictionary is a whole new field of work, and we feel involved in an extremely exciting project.

Vladivostok has a very special place in our life. All three of our sons were born here, and it is here where Galina defended her dissertation as a candidate of biological sciences. Galina’s father, Kirill Ivanovich, and her mother, Nina Vasilyevna, have been put to rest here. I ask God’s blessing for the bright memory of the departed relatives, as well as for the success of all our family members in the New Year. I also ask for God’s blessing in the implementation of our plan – the Chinese-Latvian Dictionary project.

**01.01.2004** It turns out that we have not lost our vigor yet. On New Year’s night we stay up and talk until 5:00 in the morning lingering in memories, distant and near. Galina and her sister spent their childhood in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka. Especially after the years of absence, both sisters enjoy sharing their childhood memories. The vital energy of Kamchatka’s Peninsula is indescribable and extremely powerful. In 1976, Galina and I both went on an expedition to the Commander Islands via Petropavlovsk. Then I also had the opportunity



to see the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka. The sight of the snow-capped volcanoes is as powerful as the sight of rugged Alaskan mountains depicted in Rockwell Kent's paintings. Galina's father, Kirill Panin, came to Kamchatka as a student of St. Petersburg University and fell in love with the country so much that he stayed in the Far East for good. We have decided to go to the Morskoye Cemetery, where Galina and Inna's parents rest. The streets of the city are virtually empty as people are recovering after the New Year Eve's celebrations. The cemetery, which is on one side of a *sopka*, overlooks the Pacific Ocean. A tiny islet with a small lighthouse is clearly visible in the distance. The islet is called *Ostrov Skryplyov*. Every ship that enters the port of Vladivostok from the ocean passes this island. At night, the lighthouse sends a warning to sailors. All four of us, standing by the parents' grave, wander into distant memories, when the parents meant the whole world to both of the sisters. Galina and I are grateful for the fate that has given our family this opportunity to visit Vladivostok, which is so dear to our hearts, as well as to visit the gravesite of Galina and Inna's parents in Morskoje Cemetery.

In the evening, old colleagues from TINRO (Institute of Pacific Fisheries and Oceanography) visit us – the Perlov and the Anikeyev spouses. With these colleagues, Galina has participated in the Pacific expeditions, as well as done scientific research at TINRO. For the second evening in a row, we talk and talk and talk... It all ends with a big pile of dishes in the sink and a great sense of satisfaction for an evening spent in wonderful company.

**02.01.2004** The day is filled with visits to our relatives in Vladivostok, heartfelt speeches and witty jokes. On the way back, we stop by the Memorial Arch dedicated to the visit of Nicholas the Second to Vladivostok.

**03.01.2004** Today we have something else in mind. We take a bus to the Botanical Garden, and then walk up the hill along the nature path. We reach the highest point of the *sopka*, from which we can clearly see the Sedanka Water Reservoir, the seashore with the De-Friz Bay, and the peninsula, which goes under the same name. Having lived in Vladivostok for many years, we have climbed the *sopka* and walked along the shores of De-Friz Bay many times. Those were the years when our sons were young kids, and we used to go everywhere together. And, of course, we were young, too. This time we have a Chinese thermos with mulled wine along with us. Sitting on the trunks of fallen trees, we sip the mulled wine and, of course, share our dear memories that are slipping further and further away from us due to the unstoppable race of time. But the day is bright, and our mood is bright, too. Happy and satisfied, having revisited the places where we used to wander in our young days, we take a trolleybus and return home.

**04.01.2004** We take a tram to the Pervorechensk market, where we wander around the market pavilions for a long time and buy sterlet – one of the most delicious fish in Russia. I have decided to cook this fish myself so that we can taste the acclaimed delicacy. In the evening, unfortunately, I feel that I am coming down with some nasty fever. Inna starts nursing me right away because I need to be “fixed” before our departure to Harbin on January 7, which is round the corner.

**05.01.2004** The thermometer shows 38.3 Celsius in the morning. What the heck? I drink rosehip and sea buckthorn tea in the morning. I sweat heavily, but feel much better in the evening. I start cleaning the slimy sterlet. The water in the saucepan is already boiling, and the back of the sterlet disappears in the bubbles. Soon we have to prepare for the exclusive meal, because none of us have tasted this fish before.

**06.01.2004** The fever is down. We start our final packing. Then we take a short morning walk. The taxi arrives, and we start our journey to the airport. After an hour's flight, we land in Harbin. The distance between Vladivostok and Harbin is 850 km. We transfer from the airport to the Railway Station, where we wait for about an hour and a half for our train. At 17:00 the train starts moving. The first important station is Changchun 长春, followed by Shenyang 沈阳 and also Shanhaiguan 山海关. The hot, stuffy compartment is not very comfortable. Our neighbors, having stripped barefoot, are jabbering endlessly on their cell phones.

**07.01.2004** At 6:00, the train arrives at the Beijing Railway Station. Having visited Vladivostok, we return to our hotel apartment, where we start unpacking our suitcases and preparing the “financial account” of the journey. The day is sleepy, with a slow recovery from everything experienced in Vladivostok, as well as during the journey – by plane, train, taxi. We go for a walk before the sunset. It turns out we have received many holiday greeting cards from Latvia.

**08.01.2004** Tonight we sleep for about 12 hours. This is the result of the intense schedule during the previous week, the long journeys and the load of impressions we have accumulated. We set out for a longer walk; however, the wind is stiff, so in order not to provoke my respiratory tract, after a walk in the Palace Square, we go home. Galina starts typing my dictionary draft pages on our home computer. After the most intense and fulfilling trip to Vladivostok, we have a quiet evening.

**09.01.2004** After a good night's sleep, we just lounge around the house. The weather in Beijing is completely out of the ordinary – plus one degree and the sun is shining brightly. It's too hot in winter clothes. We watch

the sunset in the Palace Square. When the copper colored sun sinks in the west behind the palace, the silhouette of the building stands out distinctly against the evening sky.

**10.01.2004** We sleep well tonight as well. Sadly, this is my last day of vacation. I go by bike to the store, where I buy a new planner for the year 2004 to record various practical issues. Before lunch, we set out for a walk. We choose the route leading to Yiheyuan 颐和园 Park and walk along the frozen canal river against the brisk wind. At the humpback bridge, a small group of brave men of a more mature generation have cut a hole in the ice and are taking a refreshing swim. What is more, I notice one intrepid Chinese lady among the gentlemen, too. It looks like representatives of the elder generation are particularly fond of this winter sport. It both charges the swimmers with energy and creates a sense of unity. On our way back, the sun is shining in our faces. At home we see that we even have managed to catch some tan. In the evening, I have that familiar feeling that the vacation is over and it's time to get back to work tomorrow.

**11.01.2004** At 6:00 I am up, and at 7:30 the van departs to the news service. Tiny snowflakes are gently falling down. There are four translators at work. The texts to be edited start coming in quickly. After a two-week vacation, it takes me a while to readapt. However, soon I get into the rhythm and everything is as it used to be. At noon, my colleague M. Jefremov suggests we have lunch together, and we do have a nice meal of soup and local bread. Of course, we exchange the latest news and holiday impressions. In the evening, my wife and I, as usual, take a walk in the Palace Square.

**12.01.2004** At night, strong wind gusts break out. In the morning, the thermometer is showing minus 6 degrees. Today is my day off. The wind gusts have not subsided yet when we walk to the market behind the Goethe Institute. We buy some food and then, fighting with the gusts of wind, walk home. Galina's sister Inna has sent us a heartfelt letter after our recent visit to Vladivostok. I am gathering my strength for work next week. In the evening I am occupied with translating Chinese poetry. I always associate this activity with pleasant, creative moments. Otherwise – everything is very quiet. The fierce wind finally subsides.

**13.01.2004** Galina and I are up at 6:30. The weather is calm; the wind has died down, which really matters in Beijing's climate. I get down to translating Du Fu's 杜甫 poem. I move forward steadily, but not too smoothly. Before lunch we go for a walk in the Palace Garden. The feeling is wonderful. At 13:15, the company van departs to Xinhua. I treat my colleagues with Vladivostok sweets. One of Vladivostok's most famous candies is called "Bird's milk". These candies are highly acclaimed by my Chinese colleagues. The texts are coming



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in so rapidly and abundantly that for a couple of hours there is even no time to go to the bathroom. They keep me busy until the last minute of my shift at 20:00.

**14.01.2004** In the shop of the Technical University we buy jam, bread, and vegetables. We put our purchases in a small backpack and slowly walk back. I contact Finnair about the allowed luggage weight. The workload has aggravated considerably. There are six translators typing busily. Besides, there are four more people on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, who are bringing me their translations. I'm busy till the last minute – hardly have time to grab my personal belongings and run to the company van.

**15.01.2004** The wind is still, and the sun shines in the morning. We both go walking in the park of the Technical University. **35** Students have gone on vacation, so today it is possible to enjoy the warm rays of the sun and silence in solitude, without countless witnesses. An interview with me has been published in the Latvian newspaper "Rīgas Balss". I can view it on my computer. The interview could have used some editing, but, overall, it is acceptable. At work, the atmosphere is not as stressful as yesterday. However, it is not possible to divert my attention from the official duties. By that I mean – there is no time left over for the dictionary draft.

**16.01.2004** Yesterday I arrived at the hotel at 20:30. I am on my way to work again this morning at 7:30. The transition from the second shift to the first is a grueling endurance test. The only thing that helps me is the fact that

I have been working in this mode for about a year or two. Fortunately, there are no traffic jams this morning. During the first hour at work I can focus on the dictionary. Later it gets busier. At the humble diner owned by Salari people, I get a modest meal for 13 yuan: Black radish peel salad as a starter and “ram’s soup” with a barely noticeable hint of lamb’s presence in it – as the main course. I can make do with that. First of all, I’m not a particularly choosy person. Secondly, I want to understand whether I could live and work in about the same conditions as most Chinese people. That is why I often describe these modest meals that I have in the places where local people eat. It helps me to understand the people and the country better and deeper.

The afternoon is extremely busy. Altogether, in both the morning and the afternoon shifts, there were thirteen translators working. I am dog-tired and trying to make my way home through the traffic jams.

**17.01.2004** It’s a day off, and I don’t need to get up early or run anywhere. We decide to visit the bookstore, as we need a dictionary with Latin names for China’s flora and fauna. The day is grey, and in the evening it starts to snow. We go for a short walk in the evening along one of our familiar routes.

**18.01.2004** The sun is shining through the window. We decide to walk to the river. Outside, we realize that the wind is not that strong, however, it’s cold and bitter. Therefore, we walk to the Palace Square instead. Galina compiles the list of dictionaries and books. In the afternoon I struggle with Du Fu’s 杜甫 translation into Latvian. The stylistic means of expression of the Chinese language are not that easily transferred into Latvian.

**20.01.2004** I have naively hoped that there would not be many translators at work. My hopes are crushed. The full team of translators is working today, and the texts keep pouring in. Only at a rare moment or two I manage to do something for my project. For lunch I have a carton of kefir with a pastry. I’m trying to take a nap; however, the murmur of voices around makes it impossible to disconnect. So I keep working on the dictionary draft. In the afternoon, I leave the office to breathe some fresh air. A strong gust of wind almost makes me gasp for breath. What is more – in the yard of the news service, a frozen sparrow is lying in the air with its feet in the air. It is very cold in Beijing. In the evening the wind intensifies, and the thermometer shows minus eight degrees. Tomorrow is the first day of the Monkey Year, which the Chinese believe must be a smart, resourceful and successful year. Let it be!

**21.01.2004** It is minus 12 degrees outside. This has been the coldest morning in Beijing this winter so far. I scurry to the company van. The streets are half-empty. Here and there, one can see a lone pedestrian or a cyclist. The day is stressful at work. I try to do my best. On the way home, the Xishan 西山





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Mountains can clearly be seen on the western edge of the town. It happens only when the air is clean and the visibility is good. Looking forward to the Monkey Year, Galina has prepared a festive lunch. We greet the Chinese New Year together.

**22.01.2004** Firecrackers keep exploding all night long. China is entering the Year of the Monkey. Only three translators have taken their seats, which means that I will be able to focus on my dictionary project as well. I carefully clean my computer's keyboard. It's literally soaked with last summer's sweat. When I finish this job, it's more enjoyable to take my seat and log onto the computer. In the afternoon, I take a walk in the courtyard of the news service campus. The cold weather we had the last two days has receded.

**23.01.2004** Today as well there are only a few translators working, and I quickly cope with the editing and then neatly put together the draft pages of the dictionary. With my colleague M. Jefremov we enjoy delicious pilaf with a tender piece of lamb. Beijing is once again dominated by fierce winds. We are pleased that our work at Xinhua Agency is nearing completion and on 26 February 2004 we'll be heading home.

**24.01.2004** After five days of work, I enjoy staying at home. I manage to cope with the translation of the closing words of Du Fu's 杜甫 poem. **36** It was

difficult, but I did it! I get on my bike and ride along the windy streets of Beijing to the market to get some rice and vegetables. In the evening we watch holiday concerts – fiery Spanish and Indian dances. We also watch the news from Davos, where our President V. Viķe-Freiberga is currently participating in the summit of the heads of state.

**25.01.2004** The morning is nice and sunny. We walk in the garden of the Technical University and then have lunch at the Goethe Institute – lamb loin, eggplant fried in oil and spicy Sichuan vegetables. In the afternoon, Galina continues to work on the dictionary draft. We hope to get some letters from Latvia in the evening, but in vain...

**26.01.2004** We both almost oversleep. I get up quickly and hurry to work. The team of translators are occupied with their own businesses, and nobody disturbs me for a long time. I roll up my sleeves and get down to the dictionary. During the lunch break I try to take a short nap, yet it does not help. Then I go outside to get some fresh air. Then the translators start running around and eventually make me busy until the last minute of my working day. I start feeling a bit under the weather. My chest has started squeaking again.

**27.01.2004** We sleep well and get up on time. I take my seat by the desk, but no translations come in during the first hour. I try not to waste such an opportunity and switch to my dictionary project. My colleague M. Jefremov tells me about the Herzen Pedagogical University, where he is employed as a “semi-professor”. Around 16:00 I go outside. Otherwise, from the endless work on the computer, my head starts spinning like a vortex.

**28.01.2004** Officially, the Spring Festival is still going on, but there are already five translators “on the line”. Some texts are quite raw and require more in-depth study and time. In the afternoon, the air on our floor is so stuffy that I need to go outside to get a gasp of fresh air and recover. In the evening, as many times before, we walk to the Palace Square. The day is already an hour longer than at Christmas time.

**30.01.2004** I had my day off scheduled for today. However, I have been called to work, which means I can relax only on the coming Sunday. Six translators are working before lunch and also after lunch. Altogether, the texts have been written by twelve different authors. The texts come in with such speed that there is no time for anything else. I exit the news service building and walk around the yard a couple of times. The physical activity will help to endure this sprint marathon till the end...

**31.01.2004** The morning is grey, and so is the rest of the day. We discuss our plans and decide to go to the marketplace. At the market we buy fish – some bream and crucian carp, as well as coffee and our daily vegetables. When we

get home, Galina still has energy to rewrite the dictionary drafts, but I lay on my bed and fall asleep like a baby. Probably the intense work during the spring holidays has gotten me down. I feel squeezed out like a lemon. Probably an hour of rest will do me good. Only one month remains till the end of our mission. The day turns quietly into the night, and we spend a calm evening together.

**01.02.2004** I have been working in the Russian-language editorial office on the third floor of the huge Xinhua agency tower for almost two years. Especially lately, the omnipresence of the security guards in the building is becoming annoying. In short, there is a soldier on guard by the elevator next to the computer room. When we come inside the building, there is a guard at each door. There are also guards in every section of the yard. Wherever you glance, there is a soldier or a security guard or other people in civilian clothes watching you. And so it goes every working day, with the ever present name tag hanging on my neck, too. This is the existing order here, at the state news service.

Sunday arrives with strong wind gusts. They bend to the ground the slender trunks of bamboo trees in the small grove below our windows. At times, the wind gusts subside. I'm cooking lunch – fish stuffed with vegetables. It turns out great. After tasting my cooking achievements, I fall sound asleep. This is most likely due to the fatigue caused by the harsh rhythm of work in the recent weeks. I have to work a double load next week, too. I must cope with that.

**02.02.2004** The company van is half-empty and quiet this morning. I take the elevator to floor nine to talk to the administration about my Finnair tickets. The day is somewhat tense. I do the editing and manage to do some work on the dictionary. On my way home, I notice that the weather has become quite chilly and windy. At home, we spend the evening in our separate rooms. Galina keeps entering the pages of the dictionary draft onto our home computer. That's how our small editorial office works – although we work independently, our input is inseparable.

**03.02.2004** Today I must wear a suit to work. Xinhua Agency is hosting a lunch, which for some of us is the farewell event, but the welcome lunch for those colleagues who have just arrived at the agency. Until 11:30 a.m., I am busy with editing. Galina and my colleague M. Lomakina also attend the ceremony. The first persons of the event are the Deputy Director of the Agency and Ms Shi. The atmosphere is relaxed, and everyone who wants to say something is given an opportunity. Another important thing – I am invited to the editorial office on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, where they inform me that the agency will be paying for my spouse Galina's return flight ticket to Riga. In the evening I take my

beloved book “Straumēni” and become immersed in the realm of Latvian history, culture and people’s ideals.

**04.02.2004** Six translators are busily typing and keeping me busy. At the agency canteen, I have “pig hands” 猪手 for lunch. In fact, they are the feet of a pig. I even manage to get some sleep at my workplace during the lunch break. During the rare spare moments, I also manage to add a few entries to the dictionary. The wind is fierce when I’m making my way home. And it’s getting stronger and stronger.

**05.02.2004** As every year, exactly two weeks after the Spring Festival on the first night of the full moon (the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the first lunar month) – the Lantern Festival 元宵节 is being celebrated. A perfectly round Moon is spreading its silver light above the town. Firecrackers go crackling again. In the middle of the night, the wind starts roaring. At work, today it’s probably a record – 41 edited texts. Probably, I have never had such a number of edited texts in one day. It’s been a continuous race with the teams of six to seven translators working in both shifts. It could only be compared to a marathon performed at a sprinter’s pace, arduous and totally exhausting. In the evening, the wind has calmed down and people can fully absorb the magic atmosphere of the moonlight. Firecrackers keep exploding again and again, in spite of their ban in Beijing.

**06.02.2004** The first morning news is sad. Thirty-seven people have died in a crowd on the outskirts of Beijing. Yesterday, so many people had gathered in a suburban park on a “viewing bridge” to enjoy the full moon that the recently built bridge collapsed. In Moscow, an explosion in the subway has taken 40 victims. These are just one-day events. Isn’t that enough human tragedy for one day? At work – the first half of the day is hard, yet the afternoon is not easier either. I have been working in editing alone for three weeks already. I would really like to relax and get some time to organize my thoughts.

**07.02.2004** After five days of continuous work, I have earned two holidays. After breakfast, with Galina we discuss the things to be done before we conclude our extended business trip: sell our bicycles; install a Chinese character program on our computer; withdraw all funds from the banks; pack our belongings, etc. Then we go to Yanyunsi 岩云寺 market to buy souvenirs and gifts. We have lunch in a local eatery: lamb with leek and carp with rice. In the evening, we continue to discuss our current issues without hurry.

**08.02.2004** At the Chinese commercial bank, we withdraw our savings in both dollars and yuan. Quite unknowingly, our feet take us to the gates of Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park. We enjoy the winter landscape. Crowds of people are sledging on the ice of the frozen pond – children, adults,

whole families. The people on the small sledges move forwards by pushing themselves with two sharp metal spikes. Everyone is excited and having great fun. For five “mao” 毛 we buy hot and delicious corn scones. They are baked in a small bakery right in the park, and the price is really affordable to every visitor. We conclude the day with a walk in the Palace Park.

**09.02.2004** At work, I meet with Wan Chengcai, the former head of the Riga branch of the Xinhua agency, and we decide to have lunch together. When the lunch break comes, we go to the canteen, where we enjoy “jiao zi” or, in other words, dumplings in the style of Tianjin. We have known each other for many years, and now we are talking about the time he spent in Riga when his mission was to open the first branch of the agency in the Baltic states in order to write about the events in all three Baltic states. We also touch upon the recent years that he has spent in the Chinese capital. Wan Chengcai says good words about my two years of work at the agency. The afternoon is pretty busy. The texts come in non-stop until the very end of the working day.

**10.02.2004** After almost a month, I am working in the evening. It means after breakfast we can go for a walk in the big park of the Technical University. Students have not returned from the holidays yet. The alleys of the park are wide and empty. Senior citizens are walking and chatting in small groups. Before work begins, I stop by the Xinhua Agency and watch the busy flow of people and traffic on the street. A Muslim man 回民 wearing a round white hat passes by on his bike. After a while, a bunch of loud high school students burst onto the pavement. The stream of cars and city buses seems endless. On the other side of the street, a Catholic church with its European style steeple fits in perfectly in the scene. The life energy of the giant city is spinning round like a mighty wheel. At work, the afternoon is quiet and peaceful.

**11.02.2004** Lacking energy for a longer outing, we limit ourselves to a walk in the Palace Square. On my way to work, one of my nicest colleagues, John McDonald, from New Zealand, invites me to his farewell party. We have been playing tennis and discussing various things together. He has been very interested in the Baltic states and also in the reasons and circumstances of the collapse of the USSR. Today I have to work with five translators, but I also manage to add a few items to the dictionary draft. Late at night, the company van rushes us home through the dark streets of Beijing. Sadly, our computer is down, and we cannot get online.

**12.02.2004** We receive three emails today, and it really makes our day. During our regular walk, we circle around the Castle Square again. I take the camera to work to have pictures taken with my colleagues. For two years we have been sweating out side by side in the computer room on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the huge



agency. The rhythm of work is steady, with a tendency to maintain constant pace. No wonder, I take home two and a half pages of the dictionary draft at the end of the working day. Our youngest son Pēteris calls to discuss our imminent returning to Latvia. We can't fall asleep for a long time after this conversation.

**13.02.2004** Today is my day off. In the canteen of the Technical University we book a separate lounge for dinner with our closest colleagues from the Russian editorial office. In the first half of the day, the weather is gentle and spring like. When we come home to the hotel, the northern wind from the plains of Inner Mongolia starts howling. This wind blows from the expanses of the semi-desert, which is not that far from the Chinese capital. During the day, I take a nap to gain some strength for the evening. Galina is conscientiously rewriting onto the computer the draft pages of the dictionary prepared by me. In the evening at 18:00 we meet together with our closest colleagues in the canteen of the Technical University. The Nikolaev and Yefremov families are participating. My colleagues pay me an extravagant compliment. They call me “Latvian Bichurin” comparing me to the famous Russian sinologist I. Bichurin, saying “Mr Pildegovich, likewise, has the experience of a sinologist, teacher, diplomat and journalist...” I can explain very briefly that I. Bichurin (1777–1853) served in the Orthodox mission of Beijing for 14 years and was the first Russian sinologist to leave invaluable input in scientific work, including drafting up the first Chinese-Russian dictionary. I have not lost my sense of reality, yet I feel flattered. In fact, in a way I can identify with I. Bichurin, as similar to him, I feel like a pioneer in realizing my idea of the Chinese-Latvian dictionary. However, I am only at the beginning of the road, and there are many years of work ahead. Returning to our dinner, it is a success because a nice friendly atmosphere is always conducive for having sincere talks and bonding ties between people.

**14.02.2004** There are only three translators working, so there is none of the usual pressure. Lunch time starts at 13:30, and everyone is entitled to a short nap at work. I try to take this opportunity. It seems to help. After returning to the hotel, we both go to the Palace Square. We like the evening walk which helps to unwind after a hard day's work.

**15.02.2004** Although I don't feel in a real mood for work today, at 7:30 the van picks us up to take us to the news service. Today as well, there are three translators at work, and that allows me to delve into the realm of my dictionary project. At lunch break, with my colleague M. Jefremov, we revisit the Muslim eatery where we are treated to lamb soup. The Transvaal Aquapark has collapsed in Moscow. Twenty-three visitors have perished...

**16.02.2004** I spend the mid-morning writing a speech for the official dinner with the management of the Xinhua Agency. A wonderful table has been

set for my 14 colleagues and me. In my speech, I note that while working at the Russian editorial office for two years, I have forgotten that I have another important duty – being a grandfather... When I was studying at the Institute of Oriental Languages at Moscow University, one of my teachers, Liu Fen Lan, listening to my Chinese pronunciation, asked me, “Do you have Chinese relatives?” Today, I would have replied to her: “The whole Russian editorial office of the Xinhua Agency are my relatives.” When the atypical pneumonia epidemic broke out in China, we were all together and continued to work. Editing texts about the Huanghe 黄河 and Changjiang (Yangtze) 长江 Rivers, the Huashan 华山 and Taishan 泰山 mountains, which I have seen with my own eyes, as well as about the current affairs of the whole country, has been a truly unique opportunity for me.

**17.02.2004** Having arrived at work, I go up to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. I receive my final pay slip, the plane tickets, as well as several checklists for returning Xinhua agency documents. I work until noon. Then I have lunch with Wan Chengcai – the first representative of Xinhua Agency in the Republic of Latvia and Wang Fengxiang – the first Ambassador of the PRC to the Republic of Latvia. We also touch upon the forthcoming visit of the President of Latvia to the PRC. When the lunch ends, Wan Chengcai says significant words: “Our time is gone... We all have many years on our shoulders...” My wife Galina and I collect the developed pictures of our farewell dinner with the colleagues from the Russian editorial office from the photo shop.

**18.02.2004** We take out all our dollar and yuan savings at the bank. There are six translators by their desks, and I have to sweat it out again. In the afternoon, I breathe some fresh air in the agency’s courtyard, and then toil hard again until the very last minute of my working day. I arrive home pretty tired. The only remedy is a walk in the Palace Garden. We walk around for a long time in the beautifully designed area, decorated with lush spruce trees, as well as other carefully selected trees that are well-looked after. I am able to breathe freely again at least for a while.

**19.02.2004** I’m at work again. I call Finnair about the allowed luggage weight. On the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the agency, I hand over the documents issued to me by Xinhua. The texts to edit are pouring in like an avalanche. What is the most unpleasant at this time is the hazy smog all over the capital and the fact that my body does not seem to like it. Thank God, the “short” working day is over, and at around 3:30 I am already back at the hotel apartment.

Galina treats me to pearl barley – potato porridge. This dish has an amazingly Latvian taste. In the evening we go for a walk to the garden of the Technical University. Everything here is familiar and close, yet every time we can find something new and enjoyable here.

**20.02.2004** We have been thinking about going to Yabaolu 雅宝路 the shopping street, very well-known, especially among people from Russia and the CIS countries. We wander for a long time, but can't focus on a specific purchase. As a result, we return to the hotel with empty hands and in low spirits. We lie down for a while. I look out of the window – it's raining... My blood pressure is low, and the feeling is miserable. This has been a day without a single spark of inspiration.

**21.02.2004** It rains all night. I need an umbrella to get to the company van. I print out the name list of my colleagues at the Russian editorial office in Chinese characters, as well as our Latvian address for luggage check-in at the airport. There are not many texts to edit, and it's a good opportunity to move forward with my dictionary. For lunch I have delicious Arabic pilaf with beans, chunks of meat, mushrooms and carrot cubes. Everything would be fine, only the serving is too big. In the afternoon, the tempo of work is pretty intense until the last call. The wind starts howling outside the hotel window again. Tomorrow is my last day at work.

**22.02.2004** The wind has dispersed the dark clouds. The sky is bright and clear. It's easy to breathe. The mid-morning is not especially busy. There are only three translators typing. I have brought the pictures for my colleagues who participated in the farewell dinner. For lunch, my colleague M. Jefremov and I have lamb soup and "nan" bread. In the afternoon, I go outside into the yard to breathe some fresh air. The yard is full of workmen busily building scaffoldings from metal pipes. They are going to repair the old building. I am taken home to the hotel in a brand new news service "Buick" limousine. The driver has put on some background music – nice Chinese pipe melodies. My job at Xinhua Agency is over. My main job was polishing the texts, but at the same time it allowed me to keep my finger on the pulse of everything happening in the huge country and learn both about its past and present. This has been a fascinating, unique experience.

**23.02.2004** At 8:30 Xinhua van arrives at the hotel. We take our boxes with the books to the airport. Our luggage has been checked in. My wife and I go to the Kempinski, where we are meeting Ms D. Rudāka. We have some ice cream and tea and talk until late in the evening. Around 23:00 we return to the hotel.

**24.02.2004** I go to the bicycle repair shop and hand over our bikes to the owner for a small fee. We keep packing. The hotel attendant comes over and checks on our room before we leave. On this nice and pleasant evening we take a walk in the Palace Garden. We realize that very soon the western part of Beijing, where we have walked and cycled so often during all seasons and kinds of weather, will become our memories, the same like the strenuous work at a news

agency, with intense surfing between the Chinese and Russian languages. Galina is as busy as a bee and does not waste her time, but keeps working with the dictionary. She sits by the computer and prints out loads of pages. It is possible that the one thing that the work at the news service has taught me is strict discipline and understanding that once we focus, we can do so much in a short amount of time. Remembering my colleagues, with whom I have worked shoulder to shoulder for two years, I can agree that the editorial duties have taught me a careful and considerate attitude towards the time available. After all, everything I have prepared for the future dictionary was done during the moments when I was free from my direct job duties. I can hardly believe it myself. Probably the great pressure has also taught me to use every free moment meaningfully and effectively. Just a few more days and we will be returning to Latvia. My head is buzzing with all kinds of thoughts and reflections.

**25.02.2004** After the endless packing, farewell lunches and dinners, and completing the formalities for terminating employment, we decide to go for a walk to our beloved Zizhuyuan Gongyuan 紫竹院公园 Park. We each have a warm and tasty corn scone and then enjoy a walk in the young bamboo groves and on the shores of the ponds. Finally, we have lamb ribs for lunch at the Mongolian restaurant. We give away some of our household items that we are not taking home to our colleagues from the Russian editorial office. I send the following text to all my e-mail recipients in Latvia: “P. Pildegovich’s “Voice of Beijing” Mission Is Over...”

**26.02.2004** The day of departure is here. At 8:30, a Xinhua van with two colleagues from the Russian editorial office enters our yard. All our belongings are being neatly loaded on the bus, and soon we are on our way to the airport. Everything goes smoothly and without delays. At 11:40 a.m. the Finnair plane takes off, and we start our journey home. The flight lasts for about eight and a half hours, during which we are half asleep and half – awake. Helsinki Airport greets us with slight wind. The plane to Riga leaves according to schedule. Our sons Andrejs and Pēteris greet us with flowers. My journalist’s mission has come to a close. Both Galina and I understand that our future will be closely connected with further work on the Chinese-Latvian Dictionary project. It started in China and now has fully taken over our minds. We are back in our Bergi village, where we celebrate our homecoming in our house together with our sons. We are both tired and thrilled...

**27.02.2004** The time difference between Beijing and Riga wakes us up at 1:30 at night. Our youngest son Pēteris, together with his girlfriend Nadja and his colleagues, are preparing for the skiing trip. At 5:00 Pēteris and his friends depart for Germany. Galina and I are still restless. We are not sure whether we have managed to relax at all... Around 6:30 we start to move around the house.

We understand one important thing – we have returned to Latvia, and our China life has remained in China...

**04.03.2004** We are slowly starting to adjust to the time difference. Often we go for a walk in the nearby pine forest, where we can enjoy the silence, the rustle of pine tree needles, and our leisurely conversations. We rejoice at the clear, blue skies and the white clouds. For a good reason, I. Ziedonis, the great Latvian poet, has said that the clouds in Latvian skies are the most beautiful in the world. After the long absence and drastic working conditions, everything around the house feels especially cozy and pleasant. It goes on like that for about a week. On March 4, we start unpacking our Chinese-Latvian dictionary materials for further work. In the evening, Galina eagerly begins writing out the Latin names for Chinese plants, animals and birds. We didn't use to include the Latin names until we got to the letter "L". Galina is now trying to fill in this gap so that the reader has the relevant information starting from the first page of the future dictionary. While working at the agency, I was able to work on the dictionary when I had some free time left over from text editing; at home I can work on the dictionary all day if I want to. And it's nice to see that Galina is also deriving satisfaction from this work, too – she is able to put to use her knowledge, especially of biology. No less important is the fact that she copes perfectly with transferring the character text to the home computer. Finally, we are both pleased that we are taking a road not taken before and that the dictionary will be in demand, especially for young people who are learning Chinese.

**05.03.2004** After returning to Latvia, for the first time I take my seat at the writing desk and start revising the draft of the dictionary. Where necessary – I make corrections. I am slowly regaining the rhythm of work disturbed by the long journey home. After working for several hours at the computer, I walk to the nearby pine forest. Instead of the paved yard of Xinhua agency, surrounded by tall houses, here I have the whole forest at my disposal if I decide to take a break from my work. It's just not comparable. Therefore, returning home is a huge event for both of us. The work of compiling the dictionary has taken over our minds. We are following this call from our free will, and each new day brings new discoveries, bigger or smaller. As soon as we sit down by the computer, we become like disciples who want to be useful to future generations. During our evening walk, we go as far as the steep hillock in the dune forest. It is freezing, and the sunset is burning copper red. Our hearts are filled with immense satisfaction and gratitude for this amazing day.

**10.03.2004** Galina and I go for a walk in the forest. The month of March is at its best in the forest. The white, clean snow is shimmering in the bright sun. The sun is slowly setting, and the sky is turning bluish-green. The colors are



so vivid, and our senses are so unusually sharp. It is probably because we have been separated from Latvia for such a long time. We are coming home, and Galina, my diligent bee, does not hesitate to occupy her place at her computer. The work on compiling the draft of the dictionary continues.

**12.03.2004** Earlier, when I was writing about my job at the Xinhua Agency, I already mentioned that I was suffering from the polluted air in Beijing. Returning to Riga, I get in touch with the doctors and arrive for an examination at the Stradiņi Hospital, ready to hear the opinion of the doctors about my health. I have also taken dozens of draft dictionary pages from home to the hospital. During the few weeks spent in Latvia, I have come to the conclusion that I have been working on the dictionary while being completely detached from the Latvian language. No wonder, because the work on the draft began and continued in China for two years. I have decided to re-examine the whole draft, starting from the first page, and, where necessary, to edit it. In my free time from medical procedures, I read and edit the text written in China.

**15.03.2004** I am still having my medical tests done at the Stradiņi Hospital. Depending on the schedule of the procedures, I work on the dictionary draft – both in the morning and in the afternoon. At Xinhua Agency, I managed to compile three or at best five pages of the text during the working day, but the number of pages edited at the hospital extends into dozens.

**17.03.2004** Today, I am undergoing a ‘bronchial provocation’ to find out the causes of the bronchial sounds that I had in China. With a few interruptions, I continue working on the dictionary. In addition, while at the hospital, I do not hesitate to turn to the doctors with questions about translation of specific medical terms in Latvian.

**19.03.2004** In the morning, I go outside for a walk along the streets of Āgenskalns. Ernestīnes Street... Talsu Street... Bakery “Dēli” (in Latvian – “Sons”) with white coffee... After all this time in China, even the most average café in Riga with its everyday menu seems unusually lovely and cozy. At 14:20, my Galina arrives and we start our trip home. At the Bērgi bus stop we get caught in the rain and our feet get muddy. After being absent for eight days, I am back home, where I feel so good.

**23.03.2004** Lots of house chores and little jobs have piled up because we have been away for so long. Yet, there is always a strong desire to return to compiling the dictionary. I have to find answers to the pages which I have marked in the hospital. The dictionary needs to be more comprehensive and powerful.

**24.03.2004** I am going to the Stradiņi Hospital to obtain the prognosis of my health condition. In the afternoon heavy rain starts pouring. The road turns into a huge puddle. The ditches are flooded, too. The rain drops keep rattling

against the window pane. We are both cozily sitting in our separate studies and struggling with the draft of the dictionary. My task at the moment is to find the correct explanation for characters 白党 and 白军. Both concepts mean something between the “White Movement” in Russia and the “Kuomintang” in China.

**25.03.2004** On this day, flags with black mourning ribbons are being hoisted in Latvia. In 1949, 43,000 Latvian people were arrested and, without a court trial, deported to the Amur, Omsk and Tomsk regions in Siberia. On 25 March 1949, it was still a deep winter in Latvia. The house where I grew up was near the Gaisa Bridge on Brīvības Street. All night heavy trucks packed with people, scared and dumbfounded by what was going on, were passing by. The trucks from the Vidzeme countryside were diverted to the Torņakalns Railway Station, where these poor people were loaded on cattle wagons ready to depart to Siberia. My parents and I were prepared to hear the heavy knock on our door in the middle of the night... Today I am attending a memorial mourning rally at the Freedom Monument. The President of Latvia, V. Viķe-Freiberga, is attending the event.

**01.04.2004** I start sorting out the dictionary entries completed in China. There are many rarely used lexical formations which I have previously marked as unanswered due to the busy schedule at the editorial office. Now I have armed myself with an array of dictionaries and, slowly and patiently, I am working my way through these linguistic puzzles. Translating such lexical formations is never easy. No matter how complicated it may be, I try to offer a version of my own translation in each case.

**02.04.2004** Mr J. Ūdris calls me and asks to write an article about China for the official government newspaper “Latvijas Vēstnesis” on the eve of our President’s visit to China. Today, the flags of the seven new NATO member states, including Latvia, are being hoisted at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. They hoist the NATO flag on the Holy Spirit Tower of Riga Castle today as well.

**05.04.2004** Galina complains about feeling unwell. She rests for a while. In the afternoon I start writing the article about China, but Galina gets down to the dictionary draft. We spend a quiet evening enjoying working side by side in our studies. Our son Andrejs tells us that the Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China to Latvia, Ji Yanchi, has informed the President of the Republic of Latvia that I am working on a Chinese-Latvian dictionary project.

**11.04.2004** I go to the Jugla shopping centre to get some flowers for Galina on her birthday. At 10:00 we attend an Easter Service in the Usma Church at the Ethnographic Open Air Museum. The family of our middle son Andrejs with all our grandchildren are present, too. There are different folk and traditional

entertainment activities going on in the open-air museum – swings, walking on stilts, rolling discs and eggs. Several folklore ensembles are performing, including “Maskačka Buskers”. At home we lay the table and share a festive birthday dinner with our close friends, sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren. Galina’s birthday is filled with sincerity and bright, sparkling humor...

**16.04.2004** I am gradually becoming aware of the best way to work on the dictionary project. After a morning walk in the woods, I get to work and edit the dictionary until lunch. Then I have lunch, rest a little and go back to work. Based on how I feel, I work two or three hours. When typos or other errors start appearing in the text, I take it as a signal that I need to stop working. Cutting fruit tree crowns, lawn mowing, raking the old grass – these and other simple physical chores allow me to get rid of the accumulated fatigue. On the next day, I can continue. The process of compiling the dictionary has an amazing magnetism, and each new day brings new discoveries.

**18.04.2004** I am working now with the draft material we compiled during the “later stage”, which already shows a certain degree of “maturity” in terms of the level of the translation into Latvian, description of the possible word classes of each character, tones indicated in the transcription of each character, simplified and full-text characters, Latin names of Chinese plants and animals, historical comments – all these features have already become the content of the new encyclopedic dictionary.

**20.04.2004** I really like forest walks, but I can’t stand when people leave litter on these trails. I have become a true “lone green warrior”. When walking in the forest, I always have empty plastic bags with me, which I use to collect the “gifts” left by litterbugs. This morning I even drive by car, and end up with three big bags of the collected junk in the trunk. In the afternoon, I sit down at the writing desk, and my mood immediately improves. Systematic and intensive work is the best medicine against all ailments and also against a gloomy mood. During the evening walk in the dune pines, we run across two young deer. To see wildlife so close up is a really exciting adventure for us. From my study window I am watching the sun setting down against the background of bluish-green shades of the April sky.

**23.04.2004** A low atmospheric pressure area has formed over the territory of Latvia. The day is grey and wet. I am fighting with heavy drowsiness. However, we are both working on the dictionary. This work is both exciting and rewarding as it fills our days with real content. To have a rest, I prune our apple-tree crowns. Nobody has done it for several years.

**26.04.2004** Today it’s been two months since we returned from China. Looking back at this short time, we both agree that we have already re-adapted

in Latvia and Riga. We are both happy to live in our home and take care of it ourselves. We rarely visit places where crowds of people gather, though. Probably the four years in China have taught us to appreciate the possibility of leading a quieter life style. My Galina, in particular, and I too, often devote a full day to compiling the dictionary. Editing is quite a demanding activity and requires intensive digging through other dictionaries. Definitely, things are moving forward.

**28.04.2004** In the morning, I am working on writing the justification of the dictionary project. In the afternoon, Galina looks after the grandchildren in our son Andrejs' apartment. The evening passes quietly.

**03.05.2004** After breakfast, I am pruning the plum and apple trees. Then I sit at my desk and immediately tackle several linguistic puzzles. In one sitting I complete the editing of 18 pages of the draft. Galina, in turn, is persistently working on complementing the draft of the dictionary.

**06.05.2004** I am meeting with Mr A. Sarkanis at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He has valuable experience not only in compiling dictionaries, but also in publishing them. An example is the Lithuanian-Latvian dictionary, which has been created with the active participation of A. Sarkanis. We discuss a number of practical issues – the contract, concept of the dictionary, license to publish the dictionary and other practical issues.

**07.05.2004** The weather seems to be changing. The wind comes in great gusts. Our entire village is dressed in white and pink cherry and plum blossoms. It's a beautiful and bright, but short moment. In the evening news they show our middle son Andrejs issuing the citizens' certificates together with the President of Latvia Ms V. Viķe-Freiberga. A minute later, our youngest son Pēteris is commenting on banking problems. Both Galina and I can't believe how grown-up our sons are.

**11.05.2004** At my writing desk, I am struggling with the 10 天干 Heavenly Stems (the cyclic signs of the ten-sign cycle) and 12 地支 Earth Branches (the cyclic signs of the twelve-sign cycle). The signs used in Chinese chronology for counting time have not been translated into Latvian so far. The translation is evolving slowly, in deep reflection.

**13.05.2004** We are trying not to leave behind our household chores. However, the time spent by the computer while compiling the dictionary has become for us the criterion for a day spent successfully. If nothing interferes, we have the "morning session" and the "afternoon session", which last until about 18:00 in the evening when we watch the evening news. This has already become a habit. After the news, we no longer work on compiling the dictionary. Galina

and I are both rediscovering with delight the fact that summer evenings in Latvia are long and light. It was different at this time of the year in China.

**25.05.2004** Having worked busily all morning and afternoon, today I have edited almost 30 pages. I deal with everything that comes up, for example, with the so-called “universal” characters that have many connotations. It would be desirable to maintain such a rhythm of work every day. Yet, compiling a dictionary is not our only responsibility.

**30.05.2004** We attend the Riga City School Festival at the Open-Air Museum with our grandchildren. We watch a play for children “Sprīdītis”, climb into the so-called “salmon box” – an old disused fishing boat, and throw stones into the lake. In the evening we go for a walk to our “hill forest”. In the marshy meadow we decide to cross two ditches. We succeed to cross the first one, but our dear grandma Galina gets stuck in the second one. I have to push and pull until I get Galina out of the swamp. She is all wet and her boots are full of mud. This has been one crazy adventure. Galina is the first one to take a hot shower.

**01.06.2004** Summer is here – today is the first day of June. We go to the forest with our grandchildren. The cuckoo keeps calling loudly and persistently. Everyone is overwhelmed by the spring-summer mood. Our son Andrejs arrives. He has just returned from his visit to the United States and Mexico and immediately falls asleep. We have spent three nice days with our grandchildren, without even touching the dictionary.

**06.06.2004** After a break of several days, I resume work on the dictionary. It's quite productive because the weather is not too hot. I have the wish to work on the dictionary, but it is summer time, and not only are there more house chores to do, but the temptations of summer come along – walks in the forest, swimming, visiting friends. We are walking with our grandchildren in the direction of Bergi Village car service station. Suddenly a fox dashes across the highway like a red flame. It happens so unexpectedly, what is more, in the close presence of people.

**08.06.2004** The weather has changed at night. It starts drizzling, and the wind is strong. The long-awaited changes are taking place in our village – the natural gas pipeline is being installed into the houses of Smilgu Street. Now we can hope that our turn will come soon, too. In the evening, the fierce wind turns into a storm. The raindrops are pelting down. It feels almost like autumn.

**09.06.2004** I sit down at the desk. My nose is running and eyes are watering, which makes working difficult. Galina takes care of me again in the evening. She prepares a hot bath for my feet. I turn in for the night feeling sick and miserable.



**10.06.2004** I wake up, and feel that I'm almost back to normal. I start a fierce struggle with the 机 (ji) section. In the further course of the work I have to face a multitude of homonyms – characters with the same pronunciation and very different meanings. Pulling together all my patience, I move forward step by step or even half step, but still making steady progress.

**11.06.2004** I'm still struggling with the same section – homonyms which are pronounced in the first and second tone. Sometimes I feel completely baffled, but still keep wading through the intricate labyrinths of the characters. Sometimes, I even come across characters which are not included in the most comprehensive and modern Chinese-English or Chinese-Russian dictionaries. This is what the job involves in this exciting field of linguistics.

**17.06.2004** It's drizzling outside. The sky is grey. Some chapters may be more challenging, yet it is so cozy to sit by the writing desk. I'm walking the road not taken by anyone. To be a pioneer in some field feels so exciting. The range of the characters I'm dealing with today includes both words which are familiar to me from my first day at university and also words that I have never seen or heard before.

**20.06.2004** Our neighbor Viktors Mengots comes over and brings a huge flower pot. He gives the flowers to Galina in a sincere and heartfelt gesture. Today we are expecting our youngest son Pēteris. It's his birthday. We are trimming the grass in the front yard. Pēteris takes care of the hedge. Then we have a barbecue with chicken and take a sip of good cognac. The evening is warm, and everybody is relaxed. In the evening we watch a soccer game between Portugal and Spain. The Portuguese fight hard and win.

**21.06.2004** The raindrops start pattering gently on the rooftop. This is the right time to get down to editing the dictionary draft. I manage to complete 20 pages. It does not stop raining all day. A nasty northern wind starts blowing. It's a perfect day for working at home, and I try to make full use of it. In the end, we do not leave the house at all. The icon of Tihvin Madonna has been brought to Riga. Huge crowds of people are gathering outside the Russian Orthodox Cathedral. Nothing feels better than working at my writing desk.

**23.06.2004** On Midsummer Eve I complete mowing the lawn. It takes a while to rake the grass, but I manage to do that before the guests arrive. In the evening, our son Pēteris with his bride-to-be drives into the yard through our gate decorated with oak tree branches. A while later, our son Andrejs also arrives with his family. Our daughters-in-law together with the children are occupied with making Midsummer flower crowns. The big boys decorate the house with birch tree “meijas” – freshly cut young birch trees. When we start singing, our repertoire includes not only the traditional Midsummer Līgo

songs, but also the sailor and hunter songs we used to sing while living in the Far East. The younger generation intrepidly jump over the bonfire as we all celebrate the shortest night of the year.

**24.06.2004** The revelers of the Midsummer Night are slowly recovering. Everybody is happy with the celebration of the biggest holiday of the year here, in the house built by our parents. Galina and I decide to take a walk on the beach. In a half an hour we are on Vecāķi Beach, where we spend about two wonderful hours by the sea. As a child, while studying at the 9<sup>th</sup> seven-year school in Riga I arrived in Vecāķi together with my classmates and our class teacher Ms A. Zemīte on a train pulled by a steam locomotive. Since then, I have been convinced that the most beautiful seashore in the world is the Vecāķi Beach. My Galina also has started liking Vecāķi.

**25.06.2004** The morning is bright and sunny. The coals in the Midsummer bonfire stop glowing. We go walking along our canal river and make it as far as the railway bridge. At home, I get down to the dictionary trying to edit and organize the draft material we have brought from China. I have a strong desire to return to the working rhythm as soon as possible.

**29.06.2004** It is the name day of Pēteris. In the Pildegoviči family, Pēteris is a popular first name. My father was Pēteris, I am Pēteris, and my youngest son is also Pēteris. My brother Aivars arrives with his daughter Guna's family. My friends and fellow students arrive, too. Also my sons with their families are present. Although it rains outside for a while, we are in a great mood. We share funny and unusual stories among us. The atmosphere is pleasant and relaxing.

**02.07.2004** The series of celebrations and holiday parties is over. The morning starts with drizzling rain, which at times turns into brief showers. Galina has her health examined at the Gaīļezers Hospital. We both resume work on the dictionary.

**03.07.2004** Together with the Jākobsons family, we arrive in Tallinn, where the Estonian Song Festival will open tomorrow. None of us has seen this event celebrated in Estonia, so this is why we have arrived in our neighboring land.

**04.07.2004** We arrive in Pirita, the site of the Festival, in good time to have a walk around. We come upon a large memorial ensemble where the fallen soldiers of the USSR army are buried. Close by there are large cemeteries where German and Estonian soldiers have been laid to rest. Above all – the clear blue sky and one truth... All of them were just soldiers who had no other choice...

We observe the participants and spectators of the song festival. We look with great interest at the folk costumes of different regions of Estonia: men wearing long socks and shorts, a group of women with Finnish daggers attached to their belts, women from the Set region wearing blouses adorned with huge

brooches, Estonian Russian folk groups in Russian ethnic costumes. What is more, among the spectators we see many elder and younger ladies wearing traditional outfits as well as men in linen shirts and round hats.

The choir starts singing the familiar and beloved Estonian songs: “I will return soon”, “Wake up, my heart”, “This wonderful land”, “Tuljak”, “Estonian flag”. These are deeply thrilling, patriotic songs, dear to every Estonian’s heart. The audience oftentimes show respect to one or the other song by standing up and singing along. The conductors get huge crowns made of oak tree leaves. We see thousands of bright faces. The light that enters people’s souls is reflected in their faces. Among the guests is the President of the Republic of Latvia V. Viķe-Freiberga. Our son Andrejs is also a member of her delegation. Galina, me and our friends are thrilled. We wanted to feel the Estonian atmosphere of this event, and we are sure we have succeeded.

In the evening, the Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to Estonia E. Skuja shows us around the embassy. I write a few words in the visitors’ book. Then we travel back home. Some years ago, in order to find out more about our neighbors, we also used the opportunity to watch the Lithuanian Song Festival.

**06.07.2004** At home I mow the lawn. Galina picks a large basket full of strawberries. Unfortunately, a mosquito has stung her eye. A tractor has dug a trench along our fence, and our house will soon be connected to the natural gas pipeline. Carpenter Egils has completed assembling the bookcases in my study. Now I can start organizing our bags of books and various reference materials. I want to put them in a certain order: Russia ... Singapore ... China ... Korea ... India ... I have visited all these lands at some point and even lived in them for a longer or shorter period of time. It will not be easy to arrange all this bounty.

**12.07.2004** After a longer pause, I find an opportunity to resume editing the dictionary. Frankly, I need to tune in again. However, after an hour, everything is back on track. It is important that the work is always rewarding.

**13.07.2004** I take Galina to her health examination procedures at the Gaiļezers Hospital. I return home then and edit the dictionary draft until 16:00. A large part of the day has been dedicated to working on the draft dictionary. Then I take Galina home from the hospital. The weather is changeable throughout the day.

**14.07.2004** We start the day by taking a bucket of strawberries grown by Galina to our youngest son Pēteris. Next I take Galina to her medical procedures at the Gaiļezers Hospital. At home I work until 18:00 at the dictionary. It would be nice if I could maintain this pace every day.

**15.07.2004** This time we take the strawberries grown by Galina to our middle son Andrejs. It’s my birthday... In the evening, the Jākobsons spouses arrive

and we quietly celebrate this event, remembering the good old days, lingering on the successes and failures of the new Latvia...

**18.07.2004** Today Galina has her medical procedures at the hospital again. It's so warm that I decide to have a swim in Langstiņi Lake. The wind is swaying the treetops of the birch trees that grow on the shore of the lake... Above us is the clear blue sky... It's a wonderful summer feeling... Galina swims quite far into the lake. I try to turn her back to the shore, but Galina does not listen to me. At the bookstore I buy I. Rozenvalde's "Dictionary of Foreign Words", as the vocabulary range of our project is unlimited. Every tool can be useful.

**22.07.2004** I am struggling hard with the dictionary draft, trying not to get distracted by other jobs. As a result, I manage to dedicate most of the day to my project. Although the sky is overcast, we both go swimming in Langstiņi Lake. We have hardly returned home, when the rain turns into a real storm. What a blessing it is to be under the roof at such a moment.

**25.07.2004** Together with the Jākobsons family we go to the Opera Festival in Sigulda. Among the performers are such wonderful, talented singers as A. Antonenko, S. Vaice, I. Galante, Estonian singer M. Palms, Russian singer N. Ushakova, and the young Roma nationality boy from Sabile Dz. Čiča, whose voice could be compared to the voice of the legendary Italian prodigy – Rober-tino Loretti. The evening is nice and warm. We thoroughly enjoy the beautiful summer event on the open-air stage against the backdrop of the medieval castle ruins and the scenic primeval valley of the River Gauja, the so-called "Latvian Switzerland".

In fact, the rhythm of life this summer could be divided into two big segments. The first one is everything connected to the dictionary. As I mentioned before, the venture, which we started while working at the Xinhua Agency in China, has evolved into an unprecedented project. As for myself, the many years of work as a Chinese language teacher at various universities have proved to be quite useful for this linguistic undertaking. The experience of a diplomat and a journalist have also contributed to my expertise. Finally, several years spent in a Chinese-speaking environment have been invaluable. In turn, Galina's assets include graduating from the Faculty of Biology of Leningrad University, defending her dissertation as a candidate of biological sciences, and studying Japanese at the Institute of Oriental Languages of Moscow University. The second segment is maintaining our house and its surroundings, which require attention right here and now, every day. The main jobs around the house are known, basically, to any private house owner – lawn mowing, trimming the fruit trees and shrubs, cutting the grass in the ditches with a hand-scythe, weeding strawberries, picking black and red currants, harvesting apples,

raking the fallen leaves, which alone can last for almost two months. When at some point the process of compiling the dictionary becomes monotonous and tedious, we immediately switch to one of these other activities. After a few hours of mowing, it is possible to return to the “jungle” of Chinese characters and continue solving phraseological and idiomatic puzzles. Just like in Anna Brigadere, our classic author’s, book *God, Nature, and Work*, we have been experiencing the beautiful summer months in the closest connection with Nature. Managing the house built by our parents has been our Work that has taught us new truths every day. I have not forgotten about God by saying a private prayer every morning. The presence of God, Nature and Work has made us both happy.

Running ahead of the events, I would like to add that year 2004, when we returned from China, was the first year of purposeful work at the Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary. The work on the Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary was on our agenda until 2010, when the book was published in the oldest Chinese publishing house “Shangwu yin shu guan” 商务印书馆.

**31.07.2004** Our youngest son Pēteris is organizing a reunion of the 45<sup>th</sup> Riga Secondary School graduates in our house. Galina and I are moving to Pēteris’s apartment on Senču Street. In the morning, we take a walk along Mēness Street. Unexpectedly, the bells start ringing in the small Latvian Orthodox Church. When these bells stop, the bells of the Pokrov Church start ringing... I haven’t heard such an expressive chiming of church bells in a long while.

**04.08.2004** A spell of hot weather has set in, and it’s hard to work at the desk. I struggle with the texts, half-asleep, and it seems my brains have become sticky in this heat. However, I move on, step by step, into the depths of the dictionary.

**06.08.2004** I need to find the Latvian counterpart of the character 里. This Chinese character has two different meanings and can be clearly understood only when followed by the characters of the full or classical notation, for example, 里(裡裏). Understandably – writing the comment takes time and some effort. However, in similar cases, I have developed a strict approach. It does not matter how long writing the comment will take, it must be understood by myself and, more importantly, by others.

**09.08.2004** Some sections are more difficult, some are easier. I have to sift through everything that has accumulated in the Chinese language in thousands of years. Probably, that’s the most engaging aspect of this work. We have started to frequent our canal-river. The Baltezers-Ķīšezers Canal is manmade; however, due to the current it has become a river which can flow in the direction of Baltezers Lake or Ķīšezers Lake depending on the wind direction.



We have cleared up a small beach area, and it gives us a possibility to have a refreshing swim without leaving our village.

**11.08.2004** Galina and I both go to the Castle Square, where we meet our middle son Andrejs and congratulate him on his 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Italian, Danish, Swedish, Finnish, Lithuanian and Estonian warships are lined up along the right bank of the river Daugava. The embankment is packed with the Navy personnel – brave officers and sailors in parade uniforms. We are celebrating the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Latvian Navy. The visitors, especially the children, are crowding around the ships.

**13, 14, and 15.08.2004** We are going on a trip to visit our family gravesites. We are a big company – all our three sons – Juris, Andrejs and Pēteris, our grandson Tomass and granddaughter Evuce, my brother Aivars, me and Galina. From the Daugavpils highway we turn to Svente and continue to Dēmene. Ausmiņa, the young daughter of our father's sister Emilija, is buried in the small Lutheran cemetery of this village. We trim the hedge, paint the edging of Ausmiņa's grave white and clean everything up. We arrive in Krāslava via Skrudaliena and Saliena villages. We have been staying overnight with Skerškāni family for several years already. As always, we ask to heat the sauna. After the fatigue of the road, it is a special pleasure to relax in the sauna, leisurely talking over the latest news. The rapid stream of the Daugava River flows in the valley just below. These places have been close to my heart since childhood, when I spent an unforgettable summer with my godfather Ādolfs and aunt Anna in Priekdaine parish. Early in the morning, Andrejs and Pēteris go fishing in the river. From Krāslava we drive to Daugavpils, where my father's sister Anna, our dear aunt Ancīte, rests in the Lutheran cemetery. In the senior years of primary school I used to spend my summers with Aunt Ancīte in Niderkuni. The lines by Jānis Rainis, our great poet, characterizing these places have stuck in my mind since my school years: "The land of my young days..." Here, these words acquire a special meaning for me. In the summer of 1946, when for the first time after the war we went to Eglaine on summer holidays, the Grīva German School greeted us with black, empty window frames. The building had been severely damaged in a fire. We clean up the site of Aunt Ancīte's grave and drive to the guest house "Drīgenes", where we sleep in the attic room. It's windy at night, but we squeeze tighter together. Then we arrive at the Laši Cemetery, where we take care of the cemetery of our grandfather Ādams and grandmother Magdalena. Sula Jānis, the husband of our father's sister Jūlija, also rests in this cemetery. I have spent several unforgettable summers in my childhood at "Kangari", Aunt Jūlija and Uncle Jānis' place. Even today, I recognize every hillock and forest edge, colored by the memories of my young days. I have been walking along these trails with all the relatives mentioned above,

and that is why they can never be erased from my memory. Visiting of family gravesites every summer has become our family tradition, which brings all three generations together. Galina also met my father's sisters, who welcomed her kindly and sincerely from the first day. I'm glad that on approaching the Laši Church, my granddaughter Evuce exclaims: "I know this place!" We leave the Laši Cemetery and almost get soaked in rain. On the way back, we plan to stop by Ormaņkalns, the highest peak of Sēlija region. We get a little lost, but eventually find it and climb the observation tower. We try to spot the forests of Lithuania in the dense fog, but in vain. Yet we manage to see the shape of Lake Sauka. Our next stop is the memorial museum of the Latvian writer J. Jaunsudrabiņš – "Riekstiņi". The museum guide is a relative of the writer and is well acquainted with his biography. This author is especially close to me because he speaks like my parents used to speak. It is the dialect of the Augšzeme Region with peculiar pronunciation and also specific vocabulary. We have lunch in Nereta town, and then our sons go straight to Riga. Galina, my brother Aivars, and I drive to Sigulda through Skrīveri and Mālpils. Our journey, bonding all three generations together, is over, and my brother and I are thankful for this opportunity to spend a couple of days in the world of our childhood.

**16.08.2004** The new morning rises bright both in our house and in our souls. Visiting the resting places of our ancestors has uplifted our mood. We have shown respect to our loved ones. We have all been together – all three generations... We have walked the paths of our childhood... It is not easy to organize such a trip, but when it is successful – the heart is filled with joy. After the dynamic trip, it is pleasant to get back to our calm and comfy routine at home.

**21.08.2004** I congratulate my brother on his birthday. In the evening, I resume work on the dictionary draft, which has been set aside for several days. Our sons haven't called since our journey. Of course, they have busy work schedules and their own family matters. We are used to not being in touch for several days, yet our hearts are always longing to hear from them.

**24.08.2004** It can be felt more and more that autumn is approaching. We drive to the village river and Galina has a swim. I just wade barefoot along the water edge. Many characters start appearing in the draft of the dictionary requiring a great deal of insight, as well as search for reference and explanations in other dictionaries. The work is slow, but always interesting.

**31.08.2004** Both Galina and I are working all day on the dictionary draft.

**08.09.2004** Around 9:30 a.m. I am at my writing desk, and, without switching to anything else, work all day. The result is – more than 10 pages processed. It hasn't been so in a long while.

**09.09.2004** From the very morning I'm working on the dictionary draft. During the break I go outside and rake the fallen leaves. For the first time this year, I see a flock of cranes flying above me in the clear blue autumn sky. The great migratory pathway of cranes and geese goes right above our house. Every year – in autumn and spring – the migratory birds fly over our yard. They follow the best compass in the world – the migratory bird path programmed in the birds' genes. After we settled permanently in Latvia in 1979, I still used to automatically grab my travel bag whenever I saw the V-shaped echelon of cranes flying over our yard. For 18 years I used to revisit Latvia in summer and leave in autumn. An interesting job was awaiting me at the University of the Far East, as well as our three sons and my dear Galina. It is now the autumn of 2004. Galina and I have both returned from China only earlier this year. Definitely, we haven't been very eager to travel distant roads yet. After overcoming huge distances, we are happy now to be in the home built by my parents.

**10.09.2004** Together with Galina and our friend Jānis we are picking mushrooms in Tome woods. The weather conditions have been favorable and we are lucky – there are plenty of them. All we have to do is just bend down and cut. Our baskets are soon full. The weather is superb. The pine forest is warmed by the autumn sun, and picking mushrooms is pure pleasure. At home, we clean, sort and process our bounty until late in the night.

**14.09.2004** For several days I haven't had time to work on the dictionary draft. Today I sit down by the computer and get stuck. I have to decipher what characters 鹿角草 mean. It's like beating against a hard wall. After spending considerable time and energy on this item, it turns out that it's a seaweed called "Irish lichen". Judging from the characters, the translation could be "deer horn grass". This small example gives an insight into the enormous amount of vocabulary in both languages, giving an idea of how long and carefully one has to look for an answer concerning the meaning or content of a particular lexical item.

**15.09.2004** The Ministry of Transport asks me to translate a small booklet into Chinese. It is not possible to do several jobs at the same time, so I am not very willing to get involved in this project.

**17.09.2004** Another request comes a few days later. On September 28 our President Viķe-Freiberga has a meeting with the Director General of the Xinhua Agency. I am asked to be the interpreter. After two years spent with Xinhua, it would be awkward to refuse such an offer, so I agree.

**20.09.2004** Our eldest son Juris is moving to his apartment on Palangas Street. Galina and I collect most of his belongings, take them to Palangas Street and carry them up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Our eldest son Juris is not a particularly

organized person. He spends his days however he wants, with little regard for what is accepted in the family or society.

**28.09.2004** I arrive at the Presidential Palace, where I interpret the conversation of President V. Vīķe-Freiberga with the Director General of Xinhua. Judging self-critically, the result seems acceptable to me. After all, I have spent years living and working intensively in the language environment. At the same time, it is never too late to learn and improve. Together with Galina, we plant cherry plum trees for our hedge.

**30.09.2004**

Today, our house is being connected to the central natural gas pipeline. For several years, we used to heat the house with coal, then – with wood. We are now switching to gas heating, and we very much hope that it will be much more convenient.

**05.10.2004** The Ministry of Transport is negotiating with me about the brochure on Latvian ports and railways. I am aware that this will delay my work on compiling the dictionary; however, the request from the officials of the Ministry of Transport is so intense that I agree to do this piece of work, which is not my duty at all. Often in the evenings, when the day's work is over and Galina and I no longer have the strength to fight with the compilation of the dictionary, we read books.

**11.10.2004** An agreement has been reached at the Department of Oriental Studies of the University of Latvia to start working as a Chinese language teacher. It's been 10 years since I last taught. I enter the auditorium, and we start translating the text into Latvian. Indeed – the process is so engaging that when the bell rings, I have the feeling that I have never left the teaching job.

**13.10.2004** Galina is completing the formalities for acquiring Latvian citizenship. I am working on the translation of the booklet for the Ministry of Transport. I need to use the dictionary to look up a lot of specific vocabulary related to the transport industry and decide how to incorporate it all in the booklet.

**14.10.2004** Everything has developed in such a way that now I am doing several jobs at the same time – I am translating the booklet for the Ministry of Transport, teaching Chinese at the University of Latvia, both of us are working on the dictionary draft at home. In addition, almost every day there is something to do about the house. On the top of that, if our son Andrejs' family asks, Galina goes to look after the grandchildren. There is a great proverb in Latvian – “work drives work”. We can only agree with that.

**25.10.2004** The completed translation of the booklet has been submitted to the Ministry of Transport. At the University of Latvia, we write tests, translate

and analyze texts with the Chinese language students. It has been several weeks since I've been able to pick up the dictionary. From my notes I gather that the last time I was working on compiling the dictionary was September 21.

**03.11.2004** Today I resume working on the dictionary. Things are not running very smoothly. It will take time to get back to the slightly forgotten routine.

**05.11.2004** It's foggy and wet outside – just the right time to get back to the dictionary. It feels better today, and I am deriving great satisfaction from the process.

**06.11.2004** Galina's sister Inna arrives from Moscow by train. Together we visit our eldest son Juris, later – the youngest one – Pēteris, and in the end, arrive in Bergi. We talk and talk and talk... Both sisters are very close, and their relationship is really warm... Our families are separated by huge distances, but we try to find an opportunity to meet, and where there's a will, there is a way.

**12.11.2004** Today I have managed to concentrate on the dictionary and the result is evident – 12-pages of the manuscript.

The funeral of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat is taking place in Ramallah. There are hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, a sea of people and intense emotions...

Galina returns from St. Petersburg, and I drive to meet her. In the evening, Galina tells about her trip. The Panin family comes originally from St. Petersburg. In addition, Galina is a graduate of the Faculty of Biology of the Leningrad (Soviet period name of St Petersburg) University. Her cousin Anastasia and her daughter Tatjana still live in the city. Visits to St. Petersburg for her are always very personal, full of precious memories.

**14.11.2004** I am preparing new study material for the Chinese lessons at the university. It's time for autumn chores in the garden – cleaning the surroundings, raking leaves, lighting bonfires. At times, I manage to work on the dictionary, but I would like to do more.

**17.11.2004** I continue to work on the dictionary manuscript. At around 18:00 I arrive at the War Museum. In connection with the celebrations on November 18, the diplomatic corps, as well as former and current Latvian ambassadors and diplomats have been invited to a reception here. The exhibits of the museum illustrate the history and development of the Latvian statehood.

**19.11.2004** After breakfast, we take our grandchildren Evuce and Tomass sledding to our familiar pine forest nearby. Children are having so much fun going downhill. The day is bright and sunny. What can be better than this?

**23.11.2004** It has been snowing hard at night, and the snow keeps coming down. We take shovels and clean the driveway. Galina is sorting out the game



meat. After all the hustle and bustle at the hunters' cabin, it's nice to be at home again. The snow keeps falling, and the wind keeps blowing snowdrifts on the roads.

**24.11.2004** I am preparing the text 中国根 “Chinese roots” for the university classes. After lunch, I am quite successful at the editing job.

**26.11.2004** Galina takes her naturalization exam. I buy a white lily to give her in honor of this event. After 14:00 Galina comes home and says that she has done quite well. She tells me about her experience and I share her joy that the exam is behind her. In the evening, looking back at what I have done today, I see that I have edited eight-pages.

**28.11.2004** Together with Galina, we enjoy a beautiful walk along the canal bank. It's slightly chilly – minus six degrees. The trees and the ground are white with snow. At home, I sit down at the desk and edit seven pages of text. It starts to get dark around 16:00. These are the short days and long nights of Latvia in November.

**30.11.2004** We are visiting our son Andrejs. My granddaughter Evuce asks me to read her book, and we end up reading six fairy tales in a row. It's Andrejs' name day, and we all enjoy the cake and tea.

**01.12.2004** The winter has lasted for two weeks only. The snow is melting rapidly. I am delivering a lecture at the Latvian Society “Observations of the last two years in China”. The listeners are mostly older people. One gentleman asks me about the ancient Uighur script, which was later borrowed by the Mongols. Such a specific question can be asked only by a person who has been reading serious books on Chinese history.

**03.12.2004** A thaw has set in. The fog is extremely dense. The thick blanket of snow is melting fast. I get down to organizing my writing desk. While doing several jobs at one time, all kinds of stuff has accumulated on my Chinese writing desk. I need to organize and reorganize everything in order to concentrate on the main goal – editing the dictionary draft.

**04.12.2004** I start my day by correcting the students' tests. Next, until noon, I edit the dictionary draft. For lunch, Galina cooks wonderful smelt fish. Of course, the years we spent in Vladivostok come to mind, when in the winter months this delicacy was often found on the tables of the city residents.

**05.12.2004** Together with my friend Jākobsons' family we go to the acclaimed Latvian painter M. Tabaka's exhibition. The exhibition is being attended very well. “Basketball Players”... “Gypsy Dance”... “Swimmer”... “Mother's Portrait” – lots of talented, expressive works, characterized by the unique touch and mindset of the artist.

**10.12.2004** Yesterday the sky was clear and blue. Today everything is shrouded in mist, and it's slightly drizzling all day. I am in my study correcting the students' papers.

**11.12.2004** In the morning, the weather is dry and sunny again. Just yesterday everything was covered by the thick veil of fog. We are slowly starting to get used to the changing weather conditions in Latvia. Our climate is very different from the weather conditions in the Russian Far East or in China, where one of the most important features is steady winter time, without thaws. I have lived in these distant lands for a long time, so I can compare Latvia's climatic conditions with other familiar regions. After being away for several years, the short hours of light in late autumn seem unusual.

**12.12.2018**

I get to work in the afternoon and work non-stop until 18:00, until our youngest son Pēteris comes to visit us.

**14.12.2004** I sit by my desk all day and move on step by step. At the end of the day, I have ten pages of the ready, edited text. It's cold and dreary outside. Galina is reading in the kitchen; I – in my study.

**17.12.2004** We have brought our waste paper to the recycling point on Kroņu Street. Kroņu Street is the world of my childhood. Here, I saw with my own eyes how in the autumn of 1944, athletic German tank crew men, dressed in black uniforms, were moving the mighty "Tiger" tanks from the long ramp to the train platforms in order to retreat to Kurzeme region and continue the fight with the rapidly attacking USSR army. In the autumn of 1994, I also witnessed the USSR troops leaving for Russia from the same ramp. It turns out that the ramp and I are living witnesses of history. I do not know why, but the ramp is currently being demolished.

**21.12.2004** Today I have completely finished editing the draft manuscript which we managed to prepare while we were in China. After two years of work at the Xinhua Agency, we returned to Latvia on 26 February 2004. The process of editing has been documented in my diary of 2004. All this time we have been doing editing parallel to a variety of household jobs, without which life in a private house with a garden is unthinkable.

**22.12.2004** We have a great swim at the army base swimming pool on Krustabaznīcas Street. In the afternoon, I write Christmas and New Year's greeting cards. Galina scrubs and cleans the house as she wants everything to be spick and span for the holiday season. The village is covered in white snow. Silence and peace are everywhere.

**24.12.2004** Our children and grandchildren start arriving. Galina has prepared a festive dinner – wild boar roast with mushrooms picked by ourselves, and many other delicious treats. Then it's time to exchange presents.

**26.12.2004** I switch on my computer. Today I'm starting a completely new type of task. In fact, after returning from China, I have just been editing the material prepared while in China. I feel that my compiling skills have become somewhat rusty. However, they quickly return, and the work process becomes really exciting. I meet some challenges as well. For example, today I am having trouble finding one character on my computer. It turns out that this character can be found in my laptop program. Apparently, I need more time to get back on track. However, I do not give up and slowly continue to work. Galina is reading a book on the first floor, I am working on the second floor. The village is already asleep...

**31.12.2004** It's New Year's Eve, and Galina and I reflect on the events of this passing year. The most important is the fact we have returned back home and have been gradually readapting to the life in Latvia. The next achievement – we have completed editing 1,300 pages of the dictionary draft manuscript. Just recently we went on to compile the rest of the dictionary. To tell the truth, we can be truly happy with what we have done this year. What the future holds in store for us depends very much on ourselves. These are our reminiscences and reflections on the eve of 2005. We have accomplished only a part of what we have planned to do. However, the dictionary project has utterly enthralled us and has been filling up our days with purposeful labor.

## PART 3 TRAVEL IN CHINA

### Sacred mountains of China

**10.10.2001** With a group of travellers consisting of 7 people we depart for Moscow at 6:20 a.m. At 11:00 p.m. the plane takes off for Beijing. Under the wing of our plane, we can clearly see the Gobi Desert 戈壁沙漠, which is the third-largest in the world. The Gobi Desert measures over 1,600 km from southwest to northeast and 800 km from north to south. On our way from Moscow to Beijing, the plane crosses the desert in the north-south direction, and for a modern plane it takes about an hour to cross it. When crossing the desert in clear weather, a view of a vast ocean of sand dunes, without the slightest signs of human presence opens up from the plane's porthole. In some places, it seems, we can identify barely visible caravan trails. The environment is harsh, even hostile, dazzlingly cold in winter, but equally dazzlingly hot in summer. Around 8 a.m. we land in Beijing. Here, the temperature is above +20 degrees Celsius. We check in at the hotel "Neimengu Binguan" 内蒙古宾馆. At the production meeting in the evening, we discuss the aims of this trip:

- search for a "Qigong" 气功 teacher of breathing exercises;
- shooting a movie.

Funds are needed to achieve the intended goals, and the organizers of the expedition are working on this issue.

**12.10.2001** We leave for the Great Wall of China 万里长城. The October sun is unexpectedly warm. Just like yesterday, it is around +20 degrees Celsius. Sadly, but the experience of this first trip shows that it will not be easy to work with the group. Some members of the group wander away in one direction; the others also disperse. In the evening, we wait for around 2 hours until we are all together again. The mood is gloomy. The positive thing is that by the evening we can already watch the material filmed during the day.

**13.10.2001** We are going to Xiangshan 香山 today. It is wonderful to climb the mountain when the air is crisp and clear. We are slowly moving up the hill along the path covered with stone slabs. Our cameramen are filming and taking pictures. The middle-aged and older group members are easier to strike up a conversation with. The cameraman A. Kalniņš works hard and very efficiently. B. Apinis has an interview at the exhibition of Chinese drawings. The evening at YiheYuan 颐和园 Park is amazing. Everyone is pleased with this day.

**14.10.2001** We start the day with a visit to Yonghegong 雍和宫 Lama Temple. Our cameraman A. Kalniņš films a lot. Then we go to the China Ethnic Museum 民族公园. I visited it during the time of my diplomatic work. However, I have not been in the southern wing, where you can find buildings from the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region 新疆维吾尔自治区 with typical features of Muslim architecture. I find it interesting, even though this is a new park aimed to showcase the architectural, traditional and folklore heritage of the peoples living in China. Today, for example, Miao nationality 苗族 singers and dancers are performing. In addition, visitors to the park can also get acquainted with the costumes and jewelry of this ethnic group. It is believed that there are 56 ethnic groups living in China. Featuring displays of almost all ethnic groups, the museum occupies a vast area and offers the visitors a great walk. At the hotel we are preparing for tomorrow's trip to Chengdu 成都, the administrative center of Sichuan Province 四川省省会.

**15.10.2001** Before noon, we visit China Millennium Monument 中华世纪坛. In the afternoon we go on a trip to Chengdu by train. The train is quite comfortable. Everyone takes their places and soon it gets dark.

**16.10.2001** There are plenty of railroad tunnels on our way. Occasionally, we see steep mountains in the morning mist. Our fellow travellers are in a joyful mood and join in singing the popular Latvian folk song "Where Are You Going my Rooster...?" There is no shortage of audience. We arrive in Chengdu in the evening.

**17.10.2001** We are going to Leshan 乐山, where our aim is to see the famous statue of Leshan Giant Buddha 乐山大佛, which is one of the world's largest statues of Buddha and, for more than a thousand years, used to be the largest



statue of Buddha in the world. The statue is carved into a rock above the confluence of three rivers, namely, the Min River 闽江, the Dadu River 大渡河, and the Qingyi River 青衣河. The Buddha faces Mount Emei 峨眉山. Its head is on the same level as the mountain, but its feet rest on the riverbank.

The Giant Buddha statue was built during the Tang dynasty 唐朝. The work began in the year 713 and continued for 90 years. The height of the statue – 71 m, size of the head – 15 m, shoulder width – 30 m, arm length – 8 m, nose length – 5.5 m.

According to one legend, the construction of the Giant Buddha statue began as an appeal to the gods to supply the three rivers with plenty of water and ensure that the lands on their banks are always fertile.

According to another legend, the construction of the Buddha statue began to control the dangerous water whirlpool at the confluence of the three rivers, which had taken many sailors' lives. For almost a century, while the carving of the statue was in process, all the rubble was being thrown into the place where the rivers meet, which filled the dangerous whirlpool hole. Thus, the Buddha statue brought blessing to the people.

Because of the humid and warm climate, dark patches have appeared on the Giant Buddha statue. Yet, the face radiates peace. The sacred place enchants every traveler, no matter from which part of the world the visitor comes from. In 2001, the Taliban blew up the massive Buddha statue in Bamyan Province, Afghanistan. After that, the people of Leshan decided to carve an even larger Buddha statue than the one destroyed in Afghanistan. Our visit to Leshan coincides with the construction of the new Buddha statue. We hear both the noise of cracking the stone where the new statue of Buddha is being built and the melodies hummed by the monks, which can be heard from the hill across the small valley. These background sounds take us to a totally different world – without the brutal noise created by industries or traffic. The cameramen are filming busily. The group has time at leisure. I choose to walk alone along the paths – visiting the monastery, the ancient Buddha sculpture, and the place where the new statue is being carved. It's interesting that all these cultural changes that we see in Leshan and in other places are taking effect against the political backdrop of the so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics. I belong to a generation that well remembers the "Cultural Revolution", which was an excruciating ordeal for religious people in China. In modern China, the government has become much more tolerant. People's loyalty to the government is at the forefront; however, the religious affiliation is left to be decided personally by each individual. The PRC government allows its citizens to participate in religious meetings of an international nature as

well. Marriages often take place in a Catholic or a Lutheran church. Several times, I have seen a young couple taking pictures outside the church. It does not surprise anyone today. Walking along the path, I accidentally come across a huge, egg-shaped, dark purple banana flower. The bright flower is hanging down from a steep cliff at the side of the path. When we get on the bus and start driving, I can't take my eyes off the carefully tended fields, where the rice crops are stacked drying in neat bundles...

**18.10.2001** We rise early and soon are on our way to Mount Emei 峨眉山, the most famous sacred mountain of Sichuan Province. These mountains are famous for their beautiful natural landscapes and religious sites of Buddhist saints. The Bodhisattva of Mount Emei is supposed to be Pǔxián Púsà 普贤菩萨. According to the legend, Bodhisattva flew from the top of Mount Emei, sitting on the back of his three-headed elephant. Since then, this mountain has been considered the eternal abode of the bodhisattva.

The magnificent, pristine mountain landscapes that we see while driving are in perfect harmony with the ancient historical and cultural heritage of this area. In the first century AD, the first Buddhist monastery in China, Wannian Temple 万年寺, was built on this mountain. The monastery has a statue of the Bodhisattva Pǔxián Púsà 普贤菩萨 sitting on the back of his three-headed elephant.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were more than 100 monasteries at the top of Mount Emei, most of which were destroyed during the “Cultural Revolution”. Jinding Temple 金顶寺, located 3,077 meters above the sea level, has been completely restored. Since the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, this mountain has been a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists and one of the main Buddhist shrines in China. When planning the trip, we counted on the possibility of visiting this shrine, which is very popular and has a special meaning for the Chinese people. We are on our way now and will soon reach Mount Emei. The bus arrives at the parking lot at the foot of the mountain. Further, as is common at other Chinese mountain shrines, we climb for about 1.5 km along the stone steps built for eternal use. We are on the top of the mountain and should be able to see a magnificent view as a reward for the difficult climb. Unfortunately, everything is enveloped in mist. During my travels to the sacred mountains of China it's happened for the second time. The first time it was when I was climbing similar “eternal stone steps” through swathes of mist to reach the top of Mount Tai 泰山 in Shandong Province. The same as today, there was an opaque mist at the top of the mountain. I could only imagine the breath-taking view from the top of the mountain.

At the top of the Mount Emei there is also an old Buddhist monastery with painted walls. You can even enter the monastery building, which looks abandoned, as if without a master. You can hear chanting of monks from a tape record player. Our film crew is filming the silhouette of the temple. As we approach the edge of the cliff, we see warnings everywhere to be careful, because of the abyss below. Today it is completely hidden by the fog. We begin the return journey along the stone path. Three Tibetan monks chanting their prayers emerge from the fog and likewise disappear into the fog. The monks, broad-shouldered and strong, climb in a manner typical to the Tibetans – slowly but persistently. We return to the hotel very tired.

**19.10.2001** Today's agenda includes a visit to the Chengdu Wu Hou Shrine 武侯祠 Museum, dedicated to China's beloved Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 (181–234 AD). He was a strategist and politician during the Three Kingdoms period 三国 (220–280 AD). In particular, in the novel "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" he is portrayed as the epitome of wisdom and ingenuity. He served to the ruler Liu Bei 刘备 (昭烈帝), and took part in the command of the joint troops of Shu 蜀 and Wu 吴 states that fought their southern neighbors. Many legends and stories tell of Zhuge Liang's brilliant mind and ability to emerge victorious from the most difficult situations. It is said that Zhuge Liang took part at the command of seven battles, returning victorious from all of them. Loved by people, Zhuge Liang is also called the Sleeping Dragon 伏龙 or the Crouching Dragon 卧龙.

From another point of view, as a real historical figure Zhuge Liang had undeniably established himself as a brilliant strategist and an embodiment of ingenuity. However, his subsequent campaigns were no longer that successful, and in one of them, Zhuge Liang eventually died of exhaustion and hunger.

In the memory, and even more so in the mentality of the Chinese people, Zhuge Liang has remained a hero for many centuries, and even today people do not cease to admire him. Looking into the faces of the visitors, you can see that people of all ages and walks of life come here to honor and admire the wisdom, intelligence and ingenuity of this real person.

Before noon, we take a bus to Chongqing 重庆 – a huge city on the banks of the Yangtze River 长江, with a population of 32 million (including urban and rural areas of the city). After the construction of the Sanxia (Three Gorges) 三峡 hydroelectric power plant and the rise of water level in the Yangtze River, Chongqing can be reached by sea vessels. For a short reference, I would like to add that Chongqing used to be part of Sichuan Province, and in those years the population of Sichuan Province exceeded 100 million. After the administrative reform of 1997, Chongqing was singled out as southwestern municipality

under the direct administration of the central government of China 直辖市, and today it is a metropolis of the region, which plays an important role in any aspect of Chinese statehood. Here, we will be transferred to the ferry to continue the journey. **1**

**19.10.2001** In the evening, around 19:00 we get on the ferry. Crowds, a lot of hustle and bustle, but finally we take our seats. The ferry goes down the Yangtze River, which the Chinese often refer to as Changjiang 长江. I feel excited to be here – this is my first trip on the China’s “mother river” 母亲江. The panorama of Chongqing at night is shining with lights. The ferry is sailing rapidly downstream. The searchlight on the shore casts its beams onto the river. Everything looks bright and dazzling.

**20.10.2001** Early in the morning we arrive in the city of Guicheng 鬼城, where the ferry is docked for some time. Not far from the river, we go up a steep hill, wherein a brightly painted architectural edifice one can get acquainted with the Buddhist hell. Every traveler who sees here the agony of hell waiting for sinners will certainly become thoughtful. It is believed that Buddhism’s depiction of hell and the torments that await the sinner has an important place in the Chinese mentality. The banks of the river are getting higher and higher. The fog embraces the steep slopes. The Yangtze River is working hard, indeed. Ship caravans are lining up and down the river. The stream gradient of the great river is clearly felt. Without doubt, the strength of the current admirable. At an angle from the coast, rises the Shibaozhai Rock 石宝寨. The ferry is rapidly going down the river. On the deck, people are watching the shores, chatting. I also join the conversation.

**21.10.2001** At night our ferry is docked. We board a smaller boat and embark on a trip along Wushan Xiaosanxia 巫山小三峡. The name of this place could be explained as “three small Wu mountain gorges”, as well as “a small river”. About 500 meters tall, maybe even taller cliffs are literally hanging over this small river. They say that two thousand years ago, there was a pedestrian platform-bridge on the left bank. Today, only the support holes of this platform have survived. To punch holes in the vertical rock must have been a real feat for the ancient climbers. The gorge winds and bends... The river is noisily bubbling over the rocks. Occasionally, we see monkeys frolicking on the banks of the river. Everything we see around us is an amazing interaction between the people and nature. We return to the ferry, and after about an hour’s journey, we arrive at the three great gorges of the Yangtze River – Sanxia 三峡. During my numerous trips to China, I have long dreamed of seeing these gorges with my own eyes. I remember seeing an old engraving depicting Chinese barge haulers almost crawling while pulling boats against the Yangtze River current with wide straps thrown over their shoulders. Backbreaking work trying to

fight the power of nature. Even now, looking at the gorges from the ferry's deck, I am overwhelmed with the power and might of the "mother river". I could stay here and watch for hours. Unfortunately, the gorges and the river eventually plunge into the darkness of the night... **2**

**22.10.2001** Our itinerary says that today we explore the city of Yichang 宜昌. We start our day with a trip to Sanxia (Three Gorges) hydroelectric power plant 三峡发电站. It is a project of the century in China and, in addition, is meant to be the world's largest hydroelectric power plant. Its implementation requires the relocation of two million people. State propaganda is trying to convince people that those who leave the steep banks of the Yangtze River will have much better living conditions. However, in Chinese culture, the native village has deep roots in people's conscience. This bond has formed in the course of centuries. It's not that simple to leave the native place forever. We visit the Musical Instrument Museum and Landscape Park 巴楚乐宫 on the bank of the Yangtze River. Bai Juyi 白居易, Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修 and other famous poets have derived inspiration here. The steep majestic cliff and the powerful, yellowish stream intertwine into a gigantic multidimensional symphony. It is definitely a place of inspiration that people have long appreciated and continue to admire. We stop by the Museum of Farming; then we visit a paper mill where we see how paper was made in old times – with hand work and simple tools. We admire an ancient log splitter. The place is meant to be a kind of a national reservation for the Tujia 土家族 people. The mighty power plant is a couple dozen kilometers away; however, there is no electricity here...

**23.10.2001** We are back on the train. Carefully cultivated fields flash past the window. The rice fields have already been harvested. The seedlings of the new harvest are sprouting out of the soil. Depending on the terrain, small, horseshoe-shaped patches of cultivated paddy fields are either winding up and down the hill, or are equally carefully embedded on the flat plain. Next to the Chinese houses, one might often see old clutter; the courtyards might not be tidy; however, the fields are all dressed up like young brides. It is usually older and middle-aged people who are working in the fields. We don't really see younger people growing and taking care of vegetables. We drive almost all day and in the evening arrive in Changsha 长沙, the capital of central China's Hunan province 湖南省省会.

**24.10.2001** We have reached our destination – Mount Heng (Hunan) 南岳衡山. First, we drive along the highway. It is a pity that the sun is covered by the dim veil of fog. Three hours later, the bus begins to move up a steep hill. Spruces and pine trees appear, and this sight warms my heart. The hotel is small, but clean and tidy. I go outside for a walk. The air is clean and refreshing. I can smell the fragrance of pine trees. Many Taoist temples and Buddhist monasteries





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have found home in these mountains; therefore, it is a popular destination for pilgrims. Over the centuries, a certain model of the monks' way of life has developed here, which includes farming and spiritual immersion in oneself. Buddhist rituals are combined with growing vegetables, grain and tea. **3**

**25.10.2001** Immediately after breakfast we start to climb the mountain. Overall, I am doing pretty well. My younger colleagues who are climbing at a more rapid pace overtake me, but I prefer a slower tempo alongside our guide from Changsha, who is not a very tall man. We have a lot to talk about, and eventually, we also reach the top with the Daoist and Buddhist monasteries and temples. Firecrackers are being blown up in a special square oven next to the monastery building. Thin smoke is winding up from the thin incense candles. At the very top of the mountain, we find the Taoist temple Zhurong 祝融. A beautiful view of the entire mountain range opens from the top of the mountain. A Taoist priest throws two halves of an animal horn on the ground. Depending on how these halves fall, he makes a prophecy – whether or not the request written on paper and burnt in the fire will reach the addressee – the deceased relative. There is tense silence around. The face of the Taoist priest is stone-cold. Only he can understand the message that the two halves of the horn are sending. It may bring the asker either a ray of hope or hopeless misery. After a while, we watch a performance of a Uighur acrobat, Adili Wuxor 阿迪力. The tightrope has been stretched over a small ravine at the height of more than 10 m. Hundreds of people have already gathered in the ravine, including us – guests from Latvia. Wearing soft leather shoes and holding the balance beam in his hands, with the graceful movements of a cat, Adili Wuxor makes a step after step on the rope stretched above the abyss. He reaches the middle section and starts a trick with a stool – Adili Wuxor places the stool on the rope and sits down on it. Then he performs a somersault and many other tricks. The audience is completely mesmerized with each new, seemingly incredible move. We are told through the loudspeakers that Adili Wuxor's family has been practicing this art for several generations. He has taken part in aerial acrobatics shows in many Chinese cities and abroad. Indeed, we have seen an amazing, unique show today.

In the evening, when we try to summarize what has been done today we come to the conclusion that we have walked on foot about 15 km on the mountain trails. We are tired, but happy. Everyone wants to go to bed and relax.

**26.10.2001** With a short delay, we leave from the comfortable Hengshan Shrine Hotel 衡山. After 4:00 p.m., we arrive in Changsha 长沙. My colleagues are expressing a wish to have something European on the menu. However, if our trip goes into the hinterlands of China, sometimes quite far from major cities, then it should be borne in mind that most of the food on the table will pertain to Chinese cuisine. The conclusion is simple – the first excitement

about the exotic, as well as diverse Chinese cuisine has passed. Now there is a desire to eat something that is familiar and known since childhood. Today is our eldest son Juris's birthday. I call my wife Galina and congratulate her on this event.

**27.10.2001** Karaoke is being played next to our hotel for many hours, in fact all night long. At first it seems we have a madhouse next door... Later we realize that it is, so to speak, art... Our next leg of the journey is about 400 km long. We arrive at the administrative center of Jiangxi Province 江西省省会, Nanchang City 南昌市, with a population of 5 million. From the river we can see the panorama of the city, which from the point of view of people from Latvia, is both beautiful and attractive. We still have to cover about 250 km until we arrive at Lushan 庐山 Mountain Park. **4**

There are 99 peaks in the Lushan Mountains. The mountains are located in the north of Jiangxi Province, on the southern bank of the Yangtze River, not far from China's largest freshwater lake, Poyang Lake 鄱阳湖.

The summer residence of China's military and political leader Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 was located in the Lushan Mountains. Since 1925 he led the Kuomintang Party 国民党 and in 1933 made a speech on cooperation with the Chinese Communist Party 中国共产党 in the war against the Japanese invaders. The Lushan Mountains are witnesses to both the ancient and modern history of China and are deeply embedded in the memory of the Chinese people. However, these mountains are important not only for the Chinese people...

In 1996 the Lushan Mountains were inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List. The landscapes of the Lushan Mountains delight the eye, soothe the soul, warm the heart, and give a feeling of flight and freedom. These mountains are famous for the rich spiritual and cultural heritage both on the national and global scale. More than 600 historical out-of-town summer houses and villas have been preserved in the Lushan Mountains, which show architectural features characteristic to 18 countries. Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches and a mosque have been preserved here. Each building is associated with its own legend, and, only by delving into the relevant story, can one begin to understand how the Lushan Mountains have acquired their modern look.

Moving is the story of villa No 310, in which all the furniture and things are arranged as it was during the life of the American writer Pearl S. Buck. Her novel "The Good Earth" brought her the Nobel Prize in 1938. As the representative of the Swedish Academy acknowledged in connection with this event, the writer received this award for "a versatile, truly epic portrayal of the life of Chinese farmers"...

Today, the Lushan Mountains have become part of China's National Geological Park, as well as a favorite holiday destination for both Chinese and foreign tourists. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee refers to the Lushan Mountains in the context of global culture: "Buddhist and Daoist temples and monasteries, the White Deer Grotto Academy 白鹿洞, founded by the Tang 唐 dynasty scholar and poet Li Po 李白, which has survived to this day and in which the prominent neo-Confucian philosopher of the Song 宋 dynasty Zhu Xi 朱喜 used to teach – each of these buildings fit into the landscape with wonderful harmony and make the Lushan Mountains a remarkable place of high aesthetic value in the context of cultural heritage, inseparable from the spiritual and cultural life of the Chinese people".

Immediately after breakfast, we start to climb the mountain. At the beginning of our journey, we come across a Tibetan stupa – a whitewashed pagoda. Next, we notice a fine Chinese gazebo attached on the very edge of a steep cliff, hiding in the gently swirling clouds of fog. We climb the mountain for a long time and finally reach a stone cave, which houses the Taoist Shrine – the Cave of the Immortals 仙人洞. I strike up a conversation in Chinese with the monks and nuns, who are friendly and open to conversation. We talk about everyday things, and this togetherness is well sealed by the common language, as well as by what I have seen, experienced, and learned during the many visits to China.

**29.10.2001** We start walking along the so-called "Five-Peak Trail". The trail is winding through a pine forest, drenched in the sun, and we often come across viewing platforms. We stop there to admire the steep cliffs, which are stretching up vertically for many hundreds of meters. On the roadside, I notice strange flowers that I've never seen before. Local farmers, hanging on ropes, are looking for edible mushrooms and lichen on the steep slopes of the cliffs. This requires great climbing skills. In fact, taken from my own experience in mushroom picking, this strenuous activity hardly associates with mushroom picking at all. Later we see a man carrying two empty oil barrels down the mountain. He uses just a simple wooden support and his cane. The metal barrels are empty, yet it seems to me that the man's skill and strength is denying any rules of gravity. Four men chanting "A-A-A" and "O-O-O" are carrying a concrete mixer on their shoulders, which, in their opinion, weighs about 800 catties 斤. That could be close to 400 kg. What is more, these people are not tall fairy tale giants at all. Their resilience is simply amazing.

**30.10.2001** We are climbing a steep path leading towards a pointed mountain peak. **5** **6** The view from its top is amazing. The weather is bright and sunny. A light haze is wrapping the mountain peaks. The sight reminds me of the Chinese watercolor paintings with the peculiar distant perspective. The Chinese artists are great masters at drawing watercolor paintings of such





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mountain landscapes. We continue to follow the mountain trail. A sharp turn, and... We see the former summerhouse of Mao Zedong 毛泽东. The shape of the hills reminds me of the familiar stratovolcanoes (sopkas) of Russia's Far East. On a steep riverbank, we have a modest meal in a small dining place. Then it's time to start the journey back home to our hotel.

**31.10.2001** Having briefly acquainted ourselves with the Lushan Mountains, today we say goodbye and move on. For the first couple of hours we drive along the highway, and all we can see is the broad thoroughfare. Next, we turn onto a narrow, winding road with excellent pavement. The driving pace is slower, which allows us to have a better view of the roadside villages and scenes of Chinese rural life. Quickly, we reach the junction of Jiangxi 江西 and Anhui 安徽 provinces. For the first time, we see haystacks, which are quite high, but thinner than the ones we used to have in Latvia. Some villages are pretty shabby, some – quite modern, with houses featuring a “mandatory” tiled facade. In one small town, we notice that a room in a public toilet complex serves as an apartment for people. After a 12-hour journey, we arrive at the hotel at the foot of the Huangshan 黄山 Mountain. We are weary after the many hours spent on the road and, without delay, retire to our hotel rooms.

**01.11.2001** In the morning, we start climbing up the mountain. At the very foot of the mountain, we are met by rocks whose surface has been polished by rain and wind for thousands of years. In some places they are overgrown by moss and miniature pine trees. The steps, cut in blocks of stone, lead straight up the mountain. The steps are high, and climbing is slow. The road is winding through narrow gaps between the rocks. Climbing requires strength and stamina. I try to climb at my own pace so that I can control my breathing. The journey lasts throughout the day. It's a serious physical fitness test – no joke. I have to motivate and inspire myself before each bend. Finally, we reach the top. A fabulous scene opens in front of us in all its glory. A gentle veil of fog is embracing the peaks – sometimes covering them, sometimes revealing yet unnoticed edges. We can only agree with what we have already heard – the Huangshan Mountains are the best. However, cross my heart, I can say that all the sacred mountains that we have already seen – Mount Emei 峨眉山, Mount Heng 衡山, Mount Lu 庐山 – all of them, without exception, have their own unique beauty and magnificence. Yet, we cannot deny – having reached the top of the Huangshan Sacred Mountains makes us feel excited and happy.

**02.11.2001** We spend the night in a small hotel at the top of the mountain. All the materials needed for the construction of this building have been carried here on people's shoulders. These tough men slowly carry the heavy burden up the mountain – resting occasionally while supporting their load either against a thick cane or against the railings of the track. Such work is rewarded

with 800 yuan a month. I tried to talk to one of these men. He was not very talkative...

It rains heavily in the morning. From our hotel we go down to the cable railway station. The wind is strong. Along the way, we can see huge, old wooden water wheels. It is interesting that such medieval technology works alongside ultra-modern high-speed roads. Perhaps such a scene is part of China's paradoxes. It continues to rain in the afternoon as well. In the evening, we arrive in Huangshan City 黄山市. At the dinner table, it is decided that tomorrow we do not organize any joint events, but have time at our own leisure.

**03.11.2001** Our tireless cameraman goes to film the sites. Other colleagues go for a walk. I stay in the hotel and try to figure out how to tell the story about our unique trip. I haven't heard that anyone from Latvia has been on a similar trip yet – with an emphasis on the sacred mountains. Such a story would require some reliable sources. I leave the hotel and in the nearest bookstore buy a good book about the Huangshan Sacred Mountains.

I decide that I should rent a bike. It is very common in China to rent a bike from hotels, train stations or city squares. I look around the hotel, but I can't see any bicycles for rent. I start talking to a young Chinese lady, slender as a reed, and ask if she could lend me her bicycle for a while. She says "yes" without much hesitation, and we agree on the place where I can give her bike back. Then I go to the antique store district of Lao Jie 老街. I love the wooden houses with the curved roofs here – they look wonderful and so very Chinese. They have spacious shops on the ground floor and apartments on the upper floor. The range of the antiques on offer is very wide. In fact, I'm not so much interested in shopping as in having a conversation with the antique dealers. These people can often tell a lot about their assortment for sale – ink holders, seals, fans, old costumes, watercolors, brushes, porcelain vases and much more. The day begins to draw towards the evening. In a couple of hours, we will be boarding the train to Beijing.

**05.11.2001** The train is rocking us back and forth all night. The road passes through Anhui 安徽, Jiangsu 江苏 and Shandong 山东 provinces. We travel across the plain all day and around 23:00 we arrive in Beijing. A light frost awaits us. We return to the hotel "Neimengu Binguan" 内蒙古宾馆, where we are served Mongolian milk tea. I like this tea, although I cannot say that I am used to having tea with milk.

**06.11.2001** The Qigong master arrives already at 6:00 in the morning and we have an hour's training. I am responsible for translation. While listening to the Chinese teacher's recommendations, we are gradually gaining understanding of the art of breathing and gymnastics, which is so popular in China.

I go out for a walk and look at the flow of cyclists. The Chinese rarely ride fast. Most of them are pedaling rhythmically, without hurry. The flow of traffic is very dense. Suddenly, somebody's bicycle breaks down. The man, holding his bicycle by the handlebars, slowly walks out of the flow of cyclists; no one pushes him, no one complains, although he is disturbing the others. In the evening, I watch the sun setting in the golden twilight. Over there, where the sun goes down, is our dear homeland, Latvia...

Small is my homeland  
 As wide as two arms can hardly stretch  
 Dear is my homeland  
 As warm as two hands can hardly hold  
 Deep as its black soil is my homeland  
 Throughout my life... (Knuts Skujenieks; translated – A. J.)

I have been watching the Beijing sunsets for several years. It seems to me that the moment when the dim disc of the sun disappears beyond the horizon in the west is most glorious in Beijing. We have dinner at a Uighur restaurant. No one can say no to the amazingly delicious lamb. In the capital, the lamb is imported from the steppes and deserts of Inner Mongolia.

**10.11.2001** We enjoy the beauty of Beijing in Beihai 北海 Park. During my diplomatic mission, I loved to come here with my wife Galina in our free time. We used to walk along the shore of the lake at a leisurely pace, listen to the voices of people and nature, the sounds of music, as well as the songs of canaries in the cages, brought here by the old men. Beijing, the city of millions, is unique in the fact that these downtown lakes are surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the city. Meanwhile, in the vicinity of the lakes, especially in the Hutong 胡同 villages with their traditional alleys, life flows just like it used to several centuries ago. Grandfathers argue over the big political issues, grandmothers rejoice at their grandchildren running along the shore of the lake, a young girl, embracing the graceful pipa 琵琶 violin, plays a delicate melody. Nearby, on the shore of the lake, a man is sitting on a stool while the barber is shaving his head bald. These scenes of Beijing are explicitly encoded in my memory because for several years this city, likewise many others in my life, used to be my second home.

**11.11.2001** While we drive past, I catch a glimpse of the Kempinski Hotel, where the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC was opened on November 18, 1998. The only employees of the embassy were Mr P. Pildegovičs and his spouse Galina. I find it hard not to dwell on these memories, as they are so special, so private for both of us. The plane departs on time. After the eight-hour-long flight, we land in Helsinki. At 20:00 Latvian time we arrive in Riga.

The “journey to the Sacred Mountains of China” is over. This has been a great trip including many provinces of China. Without exaggeration, I can say that it has been the first time that I have climbed the sacred mountains with such determination and inspiration. I have plenty of new impressions and a great desire to share with others what we have seen and experienced.

One of my many conversation partners wrote down for me the Chinese characters containing the names of the five main peaks in China. Our trip did not include only two peaks: the Center Mountain Song Shan and the East Great Mountain peak – Mount Tai Shan which I climbed in 1999 while performing my duties as a diplomat.

五岳  
The Five Great  
Mountains:

东岳 ---泰山  
East Great Mountain:  
Mount Tai Shan

中岳----嵩山  
Center Great Mountain:  
Mount Song Shan

西岳---华山  
West Great Mountain:  
Mount Hua Shan

北岳----恒山  
North Great Mountain:  
Mount Heng Shan  
(Shanxi)

南岳---衡山  
South Great Mountain:  
Mount Heng Shan  
(Hunan). (The pronunciation of the North Great Mountain and South Great Mountain is similar, but the Chinese characters are different.)

## China insights

**21.05.2008** At about 9:30 a.m., Galina and I arrive at the Chinese Embassy, where I hand in our letter of condolences for the deaths of 40,000 people in the earthquake in Sichuan Province. Having returned home, we pack our travel bags and leave for the airport. We depart for Helsinki on schedule. A few hours at the airport of Finland's capital, and we are heading for Beijing. The plane is comfortable. We have in-flight dinner and in-flight breakfast. The plane lands at the new airport of Beijing, where the minibus of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia picks us up.

**22.05.2008** We arrive at “Lianhua” 莲花, which is a comfortable hostel in the single-storied old town of Beijing. 7 After a little rest and lunch, it turns out that we feel strong enough to walk to Beihai Lake 北海. In the section dedicated to my diplomatic work in China, I have already mentioned this group of lakes, which is a true gem of Beijing's ancient center. My fellow travelers are enjoying the exotic atmosphere of the Emperor's town, yet we start feeling tired. After all, we have a transcontinental flight behind us. We return to our hostel. A small pitcher of Beijing's sour milk, a slice of cheese, and it is time to get some rest.

**23.05.2008** We start the day with returning to Beihai Lake to capture the beauty of the imperial garden in a film. Before filming, we contact the staff of the park with a request to allow us to film the territory of the park. Unfortunately, we are turned down rather abruptly. Perhaps, we have been too polite, law-abiding citizens. Next time, let us play dumb and try not to excel with our good manners. We arrive at the emperor's ancient summer residence in Yuanming Yuan 圆明园 Park, which I also know very well. Here we start filming without informing anyone or asking for permissions. Nobody reprimands or stops us. My fellow travelers are deeply impressed by the tragic story of the “Meeting between the West and East”. In a few words, in 1860 the combined Anglo-French force destroyed and burned this architectural gem combining both traditional Chinese and Western style elements. This is the reason why this calamity is often called the tragic meeting of two civilizations. Trying to look into the nearest future – I would rather prefer that modern civilizations did not meet in such a way...

**24.05.2008** In the Temple of the Earth 地坛, we have a chance to hear a few wonderful performers of the Beijing Opera, accompanied by eight virtuosos of a string orchestra. The solo singers take turns singing their pieces. On one side of the square, a bearded gymnast is demonstrating his gracefully smooth body movements. In another corner, people are learning dance steps. It is very common not only in Beijing, but also in other Chinese cities that the most active





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participants in such activities are senior citizens. In the Temple of the Earth, we listen to the guide's story of the emperors, who used to come to the temple to ask for blessing for the new harvest or protection against the floods.

**25.05.2008** We arrive at the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Immaculate Conception by the Xuanwumen Gate 宣武门. **8 9 10** The church was founded in 1605, when Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci began preaching the word of God in Beijing. Today an important Sunday service is taking place. About half of the churchgoers are Chinese. The other half are “English-speaking” – as people from different European and other countries are called here. Services are held in Chinese and English. The lyrics of the church hymns appear on multiple screens among the church columns. The atmosphere is festive. The churchgoers are wearing their best Sunday clothes. There are all generations here – from children to the elderly. Our cameraman Mārtiņš is filming; I am translating interviews for Mr A. Šablovskis. It is hot inside, and the crowd is large, which is quite tiring. This church is not an exception, but rather an example that reflects the Chinese government's fairly tolerant attitude towards religion nowadays.

At 19:30, we are at Tiananmen Square 天安门广场. The square is named after the “Gate of Heavenly Peace” 天安门, which is located on the north side of the square and separates the square from the Forbidden City 紫禁城. The national flag is being lowered. It is a solemn moment that countless residents of the large country, as well as its visitors, want to see. The size of the square, which was considered the largest in the world until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, never ceases to amaze. The city traffic passes along one side of the square. This is the main thoroughfare in Beijing – Chang'an Avenue 长安街. The square has two important landmarks – “Monument to the People's Heroes” 人民英雄纪念碑 and the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong. Everything here is huge, powerful, and impressive. Next to the spacious square of 440,000 square meters (880 × 500 m) is the building of the Chinese parliament – the National People's Congress 人民代表大会 and the ultra-modern Grand National Theatre. The flag ceremony is over. The people on the square are gradually dispersing. **11** Immersed in thoughts, our small group of travelers returns to the cozy hostel in the center of the ancient Beijing.

**26.05.2008** We briskly walk through the huge Gùgōng 故宫 museum complex, which has been the residence of the Emperor – the Son of Heaven 天子 since the times of the Ming Dynasty. The complex is also called the “Forbidden City” 紫禁城. For over 500 years, the country was ruled from this palace by 24 emperors, 14 of whom belong to the period of Ming 明 Dynasty and 10 – to the period of Qīng 清 Dynasty. According to the legend, this complex has 9999.5 rooms, but, in fact, the correct number of rooms is 8707. It is said that the emperor wanted 10,000 rooms because number “wan” 万 has a special



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meaning in Chinese culture. Ordinary mortals as well as foreigners were denied entry to the Forbidden City. That is why many legends have spread about what used to happen behind the high walls of the palace complex. Like many times before, I cannot do without stopping and talking to other visitors of the huge complex. The conversation partners I meet today come from different parts of China – farmers from Fujian Province, a young painter, some grey-haired Beijing's Muslims, a few rather Westernized Chinese from Xianggang (Hong Kong) and many more... 12



We arrive at the Kempinski Hotel. On 18 November 1998, the Kempinski Hotel hosted a solemn event in honor of the opening of the Latvian Embassy in China. My wife Galina and I were representing our country. These are deeply emotionally charged memories for me. The next place is the diplomatic quarter Sanlitun 三里屯, where I had the honor of raising the Latvian flag on the new premises of the embassy, as well as attaching the coat of arms of Latvia at the entrance to the campus comprising embassies of several countries. Alas, we cannot stop the passage of time. However, there are events that have remained imprinted in my memory, maybe because Galina and I were the only witnesses of those events.

**27.05.2008** We start the day with a visit to Liulichang 琉璃厂 Street. The production of glazed ceramic tiles for the imperial buildings began here already during the times of Yuan 元 dynasty. In later years, Liulichang Street became very popular in Beijing as a place for trading with various antiques and art objects. Even today, a multitude of framed landscapes, watercolor paintings, carved seals, embroideries, and other art objects made of bronze, jasper, ivory, ceramics, paper, and you name it are on offer. In the afternoon, we walk to the Baita 白塔 Pagoda, which is the oldest Tibetan Buddhist building in Beijing. According to the legend, the emperor of the Yuan dynasty Kublai Khan 忽必烈汗 shot arrows from his bow in the four cardinal directions to mark the borders of the new temple's grounds. The author of the stupa's iconic design was the Nepalese architect Araniko, who, through this project, fostered the development of relations between Nepal and China. The breeze of wind at the foot of the mighty stupa seems to be blessing the visitors. The sculpture of the architect Araniko seems so small and fragile in comparison with the mighty stupa in the background. This man, all alone, managed to do so much to affirm his religious beliefs and, at the same time, to make a noble attempt to harmonize the relations between his homeland, Nepal, and China. The visit to the Baita Pagoda becomes deeply ingrained in my memory.

In the evening, we are at Beijing West Railway Station, ready to travel to Yan'an 延安 – a city which occupies a special place in the formation of the People's Republic of China. The voice on the loudspeaker announces, “The train Beijing-Lhasa 北京-拉萨 will be departing in a quarter of an hour”. Until recently, such message would sound like a pure fantasy. Now, the highest railway in the world crosses mountain passes even with a height of 5000 meters.

**28.05.2008** The train is speeding across the mountainous Shaanxi 陕西 province in the northwest of China. Strangely shaped, jagged mountain peaks are towering at the horizon; we are crossing valleys and going through countless tunnels. The breakfast is Chinese-style 中式早饭 and very basic, even skimpy. Instead of bread, we are served “baozi” 包子, a steamed Chinese doughnut.

Then there are some salted vegetables 腌菜 and porridge 粥. At midday, we arrive at the city of Yan'an 延安 in the northern part of Shaanxi 陕西 Province. If there is a genuine desire to look into the period of the formation of the People's Republic of China, it is simply not possible to leave out the "Yan'an period". In modern China, Yan'an is considered the cradle of the Chinese Revolution, or the birthplace of the "Red China". The "Long March" 长征 of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Army was completed in this city (during the "Long March", the PRC Armed Forces, while fighting with the Japanese invaders and the Kuomintang troops, covered 25,000 li or about 12,000 km). In 1937, Yan'an became the administrative center of the "Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region" 陕甘宁边区, controlled by the PRC government. The leaders of the Communist Party, such as Mao Zedong 毛泽东, Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇, Zhou Enlai 周恩来, Zhu De 朱德, Lin Biao 林彪 and others resided here. These people later became the founders of the PRC.

In those years, about 40,000 soldiers were deployed in the cave houses窑洞 on the mountain slopes around the city. In China, a special term appeared – "The spirit of Yan'an" 延安精神, meaning focusing on the battle, asceticism, rejection of the temptations of capitalism and, finally, the unity and cohesion of the party members in the name of the next victory. The symbol of the city is the Baotashan 宝塔山 pagoda, which was built in the VIII century and survived the Japanese bombings in 1938–1942. One of the tourist attractions are the cave houses, where the leaders of the PRC had their headquarters. Today they house the "Yan'an Revolution Memorial Hall" 延安革命纪念馆. **13 14 15**

We must not forget that in the 1940s it was here that the interests of world powers, namely the United States and the USSR, intersected. In the interests of the Soviet Union, an envoy of KOMINTERN resided here under the status of TASS correspondent. On behalf of the United States, the Dixie Mission sought to coordinate U.S. cooperation with the CCP in the fight against the Japanese army. The second US goal was to try to reconcile the CCP and Guomindang. In the course of their missions, the analysts of both great powers saw not only the strengthening of Mao's role in the domestic politics as the leader of the CCP, but also Mao's unwillingness to become a satellite of the USSR or the United States. A brief look into Yan'an's not so distant history makes it possible to understand the role of this once hard-to-reach corner of China in the fight against the Japanese invaders, during the following civil war, and in the formation of the PRC, overall.

On the first day after arriving in Yan'an, quite by chance, we start climbing a steep hill and end up in front of a cave house 窑洞, which is inhabited. **16 17** We have an interesting conversation with the owner of the dwelling. He is happy to talk to us, too, and says that he provides transport services and earns





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about 1,000 yuan a month, as well as raises four sons. The owner shows us around his home with a TV antenna, sleeping cots, and a summer fireplace in the yard. This man sees life in a positive light and is satisfied. There is a small, round window above the entrance door of the cave house. The bottom wall and side walls are windowless, so the house has little daylight, which we find rather uncomfortable. On the other hand, the occupants of the apartment take their home for granted. People have lived in the caves of the Loess Plateau for hundreds of years. The owner explains to us in a business-like way that the cave houses are pleasantly cool in summer and warm in winter. What else can we do, but agree.

**29.05.2008** Accompanied by a guide, we arrive at the Headquarters of the CCP's 8<sup>th</sup> Route Army and get acquainted with the cave residences of the Communist Party leaders. Of course, the cave dwellings of the CCP's top officials are perfectly clean and tidy. However, the concept of the dwelling reminds us very much of what we saw yesterday – a simple and modest cave house of an ordinary person. Overall, the living conditions in these dwellings must have been ascetic, if not harsh. Such way of life could be regarded as the epitome of the term “Yan'an spirit” 延安精神, which I mentioned yesterday. On the national scale, the town of Yan'an symbolizes the naive, utopian period, when Chinese communists pursued idealized simplicity of life, cherished the true national culture, and observed social justice. It is not for nothing that Colonel D. Barrett of the US mission “Dixie” wrote: “Yan'an's atmosphere is characterized by strong energy, without signs of corruption prevalent in the areas controlled by Guomindang...” Our small group of travelers from Latvia has come to Yan'an to look deeper into China's recent history and also to try to understand the role of the Communist Party in the world's most populous country, whose economy is now among the world's leading ones. After getting acquainted with the museum, we return to the hotel. In a short while, we depart for Yichuan 宜川 City. The road is rapidly going downhill, and soon we find ourselves in a mighty canyon. Here we go – the expanse of the yellow waters of the Huanghe River 黄河 is stretching in front of us! The specific tint of the water is, actually, the reason why it is often called the “Yellow River” in other languages. We check into a cave hotel 窑洞宾馆. In the cool of the evening, we go to see the roaring Hukou Pubu 壶口瀑布 waterfall. **18 19 20 21** Before the waterfall, the Huanghe flows along the Jinxia 晋陕canyon, and its width is about 300, even 500 m. Then the river narrows abruptly to about 30–50 m and falls down from a cliff, about 30 m high. The width of the waterfall varies depending on the season and the amount of the water in the river. The sound of the waterfall is similar to the hissing sound of a kettle boiling over. That is why the name of the waterfall Hukou 壶口 could be translated as “Kettle spout”.



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This waterfall is also known as the largest yellow waterfall in the world and is located on the border of Shaanxi 陕西 and Shanxi 山西 provinces. In the past, this area was relatively difficult to reach for travelers. Nowadays, one can drive to the waterfall by car. Hukou Waterfall is depicted on the 50-yuan banknote, and seeing this image, especially for a foreigner, could be a good incentive to visit this place, which means so much to the Chinese people. The Huanghe River itself symbolizes the unwavering and unyielding spirit of the Chinese people, while the roaring waterfall is compared to the unbreakable and unstoppable power of the nation.

Such comparisons can be found in many literary works or heard on TV. It is worth a visit to the waterfall to see with one's own eyes whether these metaphors hold true. We stay here for a few days, and every night we go down to the waterfall immersing ourselves into the magic synergy of sound and color of this wonderful creation of nature. In the evening, souvenir vendors wearing the typical headgear of Shanxi Province – tiny turbans – pack their stuff to continue trading the next day. The sun disappears behind the edge of the canyon, but Hukou's mighty roar does not cease for a second.

**31.05.2008** At around 9:00 we set off for the village of Kenanpo 克难坡, where Guomindang General Yan Xishan 阎锡山 had his headquarters during the war with Japan. The buildings look well preserved and neat. The terrace has a magnificent view of the vast Huanghe Valley. A few days ago, we visited the headquarters of the CCP in Yan'an. Guomindang army, with its headquarters in the village of Kenanpo, was the CCP's fiercest opponent. The nation was drawn into a blood shedding war where a brother fights his own brother. Latvian people are no strangers to such turns of history. Here in China, we see that the warriors on both sides are remembered and honored equally respectfully. On the way back, we look into the cave villages... With TV satellites attached to the entrances of the dwellings, flocks of chickens and black-spotted piglets wandering around, and people willing to talk to us. They tell us that life is getting better and their view of China today is brighter. **22 23 24 25** The walk to the village has been quite long, and the sun has been hot. We return to the cave hotel weary, but full with new impressions and revelations about China's recent history. **26**

**01.06.2008** Early in the morning, around 7:15, we have breakfast and say good-bye to the magnificent Hukou waterfall. First, we drive along the wide canyon of the Huanghe River in Jixian 吉县 County, then about 135 km in Linfen County 临汾 along a road with ongoing roadworks and small, shabby mining villages on the roadside. Quite weary from the long trip, we arrive in Pingyao 平遥 at around 20:30. (19; 19a) It means that we have planned our route successfully. Pingyao is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the aura

of history can be felt here from the very first step. We have our evening tea, and then it is time to relax.

**02.06.2008** The history of the city of Pingyao dates back to 827–782 BC. Over many centuries, the city was rebuilt 25 times. During World War II, Pingyao was occupied by the Japanese army. Today, Pingyao is a city – museum, whose main income comes from tourism. **27 28**

The buildings that have survived in this city date back to the Ming 明 and the Qing 清 dynasties. In fact, it is the only city in China with fully preserved medieval architecture. The city has a total of 99 museums and objects protected by the state. In 1997, Pingyao was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Walking along the streets of Pingyao takes the traveler back in time many centuries ago. Shops are stacked with paper appliques, varnished wood carvings, figurines of bronze, jasper and ivory, traditional Chinese outfits, rubber stamps, fans and much more – everything created by hands, minds and imagination of Chinese people. We have lunch at “siheyuan” 四合院 yard restaurant. It is a square courtyard with several buildings on the perimeter. Typically, the external walls of the buildings do not have windows. Pingyao has preserved about 400 such courtyards since ancient times. Overall, there is a variety of styles characteristic to the city. Some of the buildings are built in the classical “siheyuan” tradition. In other cases, two or three buildings have been joined together. The administrative buildings are decorated with calligraphic inscriptions. Thus, next to the town hall, there is a gazebo with an inscription “观风”, which could be translated as “gazebo from which the wind is observed”. On another gazebo, the inscription “听雨楼” says “gazebo, where you can listen to the rain”. In short, a traveler can see in Pingyao many unique things that cannot be found in other Chinese cities.

After a great lunch in a very traditional Chinese restaurant, we depart to visit a Christian church. In the church, we both film and chat with Chinese Christians. When asked how Christians feel in modern China, people say: “The churches are open and full of believers...” During the years spent in China, I have seen many times beautifully dressed brides and grooms being wed in the church. Of course, in China, as in the former USSR, the propaganda of atheism was forceful, becoming especially drastic during Mao Zedong’s reign. After Deng Xiaoping’s reforms began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Chinese people have been slowly returning to churches and temples. The churchgoers whom we talk to are open to our improvised conversation, and in many cases say that they have inherited the religious feelings from their parents. When the music starts to play, the churchgoers enthusiastically join in singing. Most of these melodies are familiar to us since our childhood.



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**03.06.2008** Together with D. Rītiņš, we intend to visit a historical estate of a rich merchant from Shanxi province. The estate, actually, used to be a small, private city-fortress, with a home school, rooms for the merchant's sons and daughters, guest apartments, fortification systems, etc. During his lifetime, this merchant had become an authority in the trading and business circles of Shanxi Province. In traditional China, the official Confucian ideology saw trade as a second-class occupation, which was not particularly respected. However, starting from the ninth and tenth centuries, the official ideology changed its attitude towards the "world of trade", especially when it affected powerful clans of merchants, through which corrupt officials could invest their personal funds in profitable commercial operations. How it was in the merchant's home that we visited, remains the realm of history. Yet, the stately mansion allows us to draw the conclusion that, in those times, the official circles of high-ranking officials not only allowed the traders to do their jobs, but also gave them an opportunity to keep in pace with the times in terms of education and social status.

Both for D. Rītiņš and me, this has been the first insight into the life of Chinese merchants, and it leads us to reflection on the flexibility and mobility of traditional Chinese society. On the way back, we are caught in a sand storm, followed by heavy rain. We drop into a Buddhist monastery and then return to the hotel.

In the afternoon we meet a local artist, who calls himself a student of the famous Qi Baishi 齐白石 (1864–1957). Qi Baishi is famous in China as a great master of the "flowers-birds" and "herbs-insects" genre. The depictions of shrimp created by Qi Baishi's brush are considered unbeatable. Our artist is a great storyteller. He says that during the Cultural Revolution, the peony was considered a counter-revolutionary flower. However, the artist liked this flower very much and continued to paint it. In order to avoid criticism and reprimands from the authorities, the artist claimed that the peony was a Chinese herb, whose flowers and seeds were used in medicine. On this basis, he could continue painting peonies. In the evening we are supposed to attend a concert, if there are no problems with electricity...

**04.06.2008** We get up early and get on a double-decker train which is taking us to the administrative center of Shanxi Province 山西省省会 – Taiyuan City 太原市. To get a better view, we take seats on the second floor. The feeling is slightly weird. We look from above at the meticulously cultivated fields, deserted cemeteries, a few small factories here and there, and then – the endless fields of crops and vegetables again. After a few hours of travelling, we enter Taiyuan city, where we quickly find the bus station and continue our way. The ticket control officers board the bus and it turns out that our driver has violated

the rules. Some of the passengers do not have tickets on them. The ticket controllers tell the driver to leave the bus and put the bus on hold. We are transferred to another bus and can continue our journey. First we travel across the plain, but then our road gradually starts going uphill. After a five-hour-long drive, we see the snow-capped mountain peaks. We can hardly believe our eyes. However, the white snow on the mountain tops convinces us that this is for real. We quickly check into a hotel with a view of the mountains. During the evening walk, we occasionally meet athletic Tibetan monks walking in small groups. We are so tired that soon we return to the hotel. Now it's time to get some sleep.

**05.06.2008** The Wutaishan 五台山 Mountains are one of the four Chinese Buddhist shrines. It is believed that Manjushri, Bodhisattva of wisdom, resides in the Wutaishan 五台山 Mountains. He may appear in the sacred mountains of Wutaishan in the form of a pilgrim, a monk or a miraculous five-colored cloud. **29 30 31 32 33 34 35**

This trip to China has brought us closer to the sacred mountains, so we begin to climb one of them – Mount Wutaishan. Long lines of pilgrims are slowly moving uphill. As far as the eye can see, the climbers are all Chinese. We haven't seen any European faces yet. My younger colleagues are climbing faster, yet I do not lag far behind. On my way up, I look into a small shrine, where a young and very energetic monk starts talking with me. When I have briefly described the places which I have managed to see in China, the monk calls me “Chinese” and invites me to the shrine. Under the guidance of the monk, for the first time in my life I perform a Buddhist prayer ritual – I hold my hands above my head and lie with my face down on the floor in front of the image of the Buddha. After such spiritual renewal, I continue to climb the mountain. We get to the point where the alpine meadows border on a wonderful forest of young larch trees. The white peaks of the Wutaishan Mountains seem to have come closer. And yet there is still a long way to go to the top of the mountain. We decide to end our climbing trip here and start our way back. Having returned to the village, we have lunch. It starts to rain pretty hard. In the cafe, we look at our travel photos on the computer. The rain becomes heavier.

**06.06.2008** It rains all night, and it gets cold and damp in the room. We decide to move on and soon reach the mountain pass, where we get out of the van to take pictures. Colorful Tibetan flags with prayer texts on them are fluttering in the furious wind. Shivering in the cold wind, we quickly take photos and move on. We reach Datong 大同 city without any problems and delays and quickly check into the hotel. The city of Datun is located in the northern part of Shanxi Province on the Loess Plateau about 1,090 m above the sea level. It is not far from the border checkpoint of the Great Wall of China, which separates Inner

China from Inner Mongolia. Without hesitating for a moment, we take our seats on the bus and depart for the monumental complex of Yungang Grottoes 云冈石窟, which is included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This complex of cave temples features 45 manmade caves, the origin of which can be traced back to the period of the Northern Wei Dynasty 北魏, 386–534 AD. To this day, 51,000 stone statues have survived in the 252 niches of the cave temple complex. Compared to other cave temple complexes, such as Longmen 龙门 in Henan Province 河南 or Mogaoku 莫高窟 in Gansu Province 甘肃, the Yungang Grottoes Complex impresses with its unusual style, which is, accordingly, called the “Yungang” style. The foreign influence is strongly felt here, which brings the Yungang Grottoes Complex closer to the sculptures of the Buddhist tradition of India and Central Asia.

Indeed, the complex reflects the historical path of Central Asian and Indian Buddhist art in China very well. The sculptures of the Wei Dynasty period reminded people that “the Emperor, the Son of God, is also the embodiment of the Buddha.” After the cold and damp night and the long journey, it is so good just to sit down on a bench here and truly enjoy the moment. The long journey has led us to the destination – a brilliant, unique and highly expressive man-made creation. The people who created the grottoes and the sculptures must have been inspired and blessed by a higher power. The sculptures are reaching towards us through the centuries, and, I hope and believe, they will talk to the minds and souls of many future generations. Tired, but emotionally charged we return to our hotel. **36 37 38**

**07.06.2008** We arrive in the Xuankong Monastery 悬空寺, not far from the Beiyue Hengshan 北岳 恒山 Sacred Mountain. **39 40 41** It will not be an exaggeration to say that nothing like this can be seen anywhere else in China. The name of this monastery can be translated as “Hanging Monastery”, which gives a clue about the location and the architectural structure of this building. I will stick with the name – Xuankong Monastery. The Monastery has great historical importance and it’s a popular place with tourists and travelers. The monastery was built during the period of the Northern Dynasty (386–534 AD). The temple complex combines Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian altars. There are 40 halls and pavilions fixed along the vertical wall. The buildings rest on wooden piles, which, in turn, rest on a rock. The rock itself forms the inner wall of the rooms. Niches have been carved in the rock to place Buddha statues. Xuankong Monastery is the only one in China that combines three religious-philosophical schools: Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Visually, the Monastery resembles a man-made swallow’s nest. Implementation of such an idea, undoubtedly, has required excellent engineering and building skills. Moreover, not every person’s body can acclimate to living here



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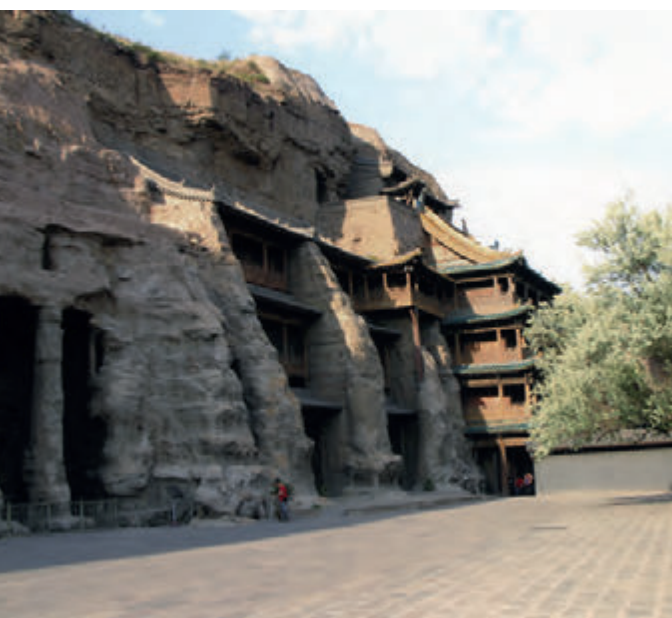
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or even visiting the place at such a high altitude. During our short visit, we saw people, who climbed up the steep stairs, sat down and then claimed that they couldn't move further on or even look down – they felt so dizzy. When I look at the wide valley with steep, reddish cliffs stretching on both its sides, I do not see any other human dwellings in the immediate vicinity. Holding on firmly to the railings, I admire the silent Buddha statues, feel the energy of the mountains, and come to the conclusion that, maybe, this is the right place to talk with the Creator himself. We drive six kilometers further to Beiyue Hengshan 北岳恒山 Sacred Mountain Daoist Monastery. I have an opportunity to talk to a Daoist monk 道士. **42 43** One might think that it is behind the walls of such monasteries where we should look for the true meaning of this ancient philosophical school. Let's take a brief look at the essence of this school, as well as Daoism versus Confucianism.

The Daoist system is based on the concept of “dao” – the “way”, in other words, an impersonal law of the world, understanding of nature and its regularities. “Dao” is nothing – the beginning and the end of the world at the same time, because all material things arise from nothing and then go into nothingness again. So only “dao” (non-existence) is eternal; everything else is transient. “Dao” is the original non-existence without a name; if we give it a name, we turn it into existence. Proponents of Daoism attributed contradictory qualities to “dao”; namely, “dao” was regarded as something in which the opposite becomes the identical. It should be noted that Daoism developed as a doctrine opposed to Confucianism. The opposing nature of both teachings is manifested in the interpretation of the concept of “dao”, which plays a decisive role in the philosophy of both Confucianism and Daoism. Confucius treated “dao” as the observance of moral principles, humaneness or altruism – “Ren”, 仁 and personal development by practicing different arts – archery 射箭比赛, musical instruments 练习演奏乐器, calligraphy 书法, and mathematics 数学. In other words, “dao” was treated as a social phenomenon in Confucianism.

In Daoism, on the other hand, the main focus is on the natural aspect of “dao”, which is reflected in the main postulate of Daoism, “Follow the naturalness of all things and do not carry anything personal.” Naturalness and simplicity are at the heart of the Daoist philosophy. Many of these ideas were later developed by several Western philosophers.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Daoism was in deep decline, and only a few more or less educated monks and hermits were practicing the teaching. Over the next several decades, various methods, techniques and doctrines were reborn under the name of Qigong 气功, which has reached unprecedented popularity. One of the peculiarities of modern Qigong is its connection with the martial arts – Wushu 武术, which took off in the 1980s. During that period,

Qigong and Wushu started to be recognized as “the precious cultural heritage” 宝贵的文化遗产. The Qigong boom sparked interest in Daoist texts. This leads me to the conclusion that the great Daoist tradition lives on not only behind the walls of monasteries and ancient shrines in China, but also elsewhere in the modern world.

An important area of Daoist activities in modern China is environmental protection. At the doctrinal level, it is determined by the self-value of the main principle – 德. Nature is perceived by followers of Daoism as the embodiment of 德 in this world. A wise person, in response to the challenges of life, would turn to nature for advice. Laozi’s ideas in modern China are seen as a management guidebook. Daoism offers ways to use the country’s greatest wealth – human resources. In 1997, a survey was conducted in China with the following question: “What areas of modern Chinese life are affected by Daoism?” Responses:

- 39% – culture; arts
- 29% – health protection
- 28% – domestic politics of the PRC
- 21% – science; education
- 21% – foreign politics of the PRC
- 18% – economic reforms
- 13% – environmental protection
- 10% – agriculture

The results of the survey show that one of the traditional schools of philosophy in ancient China is playing a significant role in modern Chinese society.

The courtyard of the monastery is filled with the fragrance of the young pine trees. It is very quiet, which lets me take a moment to reflect while observing the busy monks in the traditional Daoist hats. With the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in the late 1970s, new winds entered the Daoist monasteries as well. Unlike it was during Maoist times, the monasteries were now allowed to pursue economic activities, such as tourism around the Daoist sacred mountains and monasteries; trade; opening of small businesses, hotels and teahouses; agriculture, and cattle breeding. Proceeds from these activities were directed to the restoration of the monasteries, ensuring better living conditions for the monks and enabling the monasteries to have regular religious practices.

Having walked around the monastery and its adjacent buildings, we take the wide stone steps, built for eternal usage, and return to our van to start our journey back to Datong 大同.

**08.06.2008** We visit a Lutheran church. The parishioners are singing enthusiastically. After a short exchange of words in Chinese, my kind neighbor lends me the song book, and I join in on the singing. The church is packed with



people, and it's not only elderly people who are present. The preacher kindly answers our questions and tells us about his church. Then we walk on foot to the next church, which turns out to be a Catholic one. There are many people here as well, and the priest is open and welcoming.

**09.06.2008** Early in the morning, we leave Datong. On the outskirts of the town, we pass by dilapidated, partially demolished miner villages. Later the surroundings become more appealing to the eye. We see gentle hills, plantations of young pine trees, and grasslands. The road gradually becomes rougher. We meet more and more trucks loaded with coal. The road signs constantly remind us not to carry more than 40 tons. When we talk to the drivers, they confess that oftentimes they exceed this limit and carry heavier loads in order to earn more money.

It is a real art to stack the large pieces of coal in a pile, much higher than the sides of the truck. It looks dangerous to me – what if the big pieces start falling out... The traffic is heavy, and our van driver often has to maneuver, overtake and brake. The journey is long and tiring. After nine hours on the road, when it is already getting dark, we arrive in the city of Ordos in Inner Mongolia. Its Chinese name is Dongsheng 东胜. Ordos is also the name of the vast plateau, which the Turkic peoples consider to be their land of origin. In the city, all the signs are, first of all, in the Ancient Mongol script, while the Chinese characters can be found below. The city is young and hospitable. The gesture of courtesy from the taxi driver, who takes us to a Mongolian restaurant for free, is surprising. It usually doesn't happen like so.

**10.06.2008** After some hesitation, the owner of the Mongolian restaurant agrees to answer our questions about learning Mongolian at school; whether Chinese Mongolians can visit their relatives in Mongolia and vice versa; newspapers, radio programs and TV broadcasts in Mongolian. He tells us that Mongolian is taught at the primary school level. Higher education must be acquired in Chinese, because only good knowledge of Chinese provides good job opportunities. Mongolian language is used in the press, radio and TV, though. In the evening, we watch a musical fountain show based on digital electronic technologies. The colorful fountains go up and down, with water streams dancing to the beat of wonderful music. There are thousands of viewers watching the amazing performance of light, water and music. **44**

**11.06.2008** We embark on a trip to Ejin Horo to visit the Genghis Khan Memorial 成吉思汗陵. **45** **46** **47** Genghis Khan was the founder of the most powerful empire in human history and conquered practically all the lands that his warriors were able to reach. His life ended in 1227 in the kingdom of Xi Xia 西夏, a country to which Mongols came with a sword and brought only misery,



not peace. There are many versions of Genghis Khan's burial site, but to this day the exact burial place of the mighty conqueror is unknown. It is believed that after Genghis Khan's death, his remains were transported to Mongolia and buried in the modern-day Khentii "aimag" (province), near the Onon River, where he was born. According to Marco Polo's account, the mourning escort killed everyone they met on their way. The slaves who carried out the funeral were sentenced to death. Afterwards, the soldiers who had killed the slaves were also slain. According to one of the folk versions, a riverbed was created above the Genghis Khan burial ground so that no one could find it. According to another version, a giant herd of horses was driven over Genghis Khan's grave and then trees were planted, which forever hid the burial place. The permafrost may also have played a role in hiding the burial site. In Ejin Horo, we can see Genghis Khan's shirt, tent and boots on display. We have already heard some of the versions regarding Genghis Khan's burial ground before our trip to Inner Mongolia. However, we have included Ejin-Horo in our itinerary hoping to experience the atmosphere related to Genghis Khan. The road winds among gentle, green hills with rare, isolated settlements. Above us is only the blue sky, worshipped by Mongolian people. In the distance, we see a building

whose shape reminds us of a huge yurt, a traditional Mongol dwelling place. The dome of the yurt is covered with pink and blue ceramic tiles decorated with traditional Mongolian ornaments. Everything is neat and clean. The visitors are welcomed by girls wearing the traditional Mongolian robes and long boots. They speak good Chinese. If there are no visitors, the young ladies switch to Mongolian when talking to each other. **48** **49** Several Mongolian men dressed in the traditional robes are standing a little further away from the visitor flow. As the museum staff member later tells us, the men are the direct descendants of Genghis Khan. Who knows? Maybe it is one of the many legends again... We enter the big yurt – the main Genghis Khan memorial building. A giant mural on the round walls of the memorial building shows scenes immortalizing Genghis Khan's heroic deeds. Men on horseback, with bare swords in their hands and quivers of arrows on their shoulders, are galloping towards the victory like an unstoppable whirlwind. Attacking mercilessly, they crash everything that gets in their way. In the background, behind the backs of the warriors, villages are burning, and people, being chopped with swords, scream in terror. It seems I can hear the sound of the countless horseshoes hitting the dust, and my heart starts to sink. Looking around, I have an impression that the depiction of the brutal power is so powerful that some of the visitors do not tend to linger in front of the mural for a long time, but rather leave the hall expeditiously... It is perhaps their first awareness of the power that was sweeping across Eurasia, the world's largest continent. Outside one can look again at the blue sky of Inner Mongolia and recover from the disturbing, violent scenes. On the way back, we try to talk to a beekeeper, but he avoids a conversation. In Ordos, we notice many new tall-rise buildings that seem to be put on a halt. They are either half-finished or not inhabited yet. It seems that it was predicted that the growth of the city would be much faster and that the new buildings would contribute to the dynamics of city development in the way that is so typical of modern China. In this regard, Ordos is not the only example in China when ambitious plans have turned out to be unrealistic. A bit later, I will be telling about Hainan Island 海南 where blocks of empty and half-finished hotels have been waiting visitors in vain for years.

**12.06.2008** From Ordos, called Dongsheng 东胜 today, we travel to another Inner Mongolia city – Baotou 包头. This city has sprouted on the banks of the Huanghe River. After about an hour's drive from Baotou, we arrive at the edge of the desert, by the dried-up bed of the Hat River. **50** **51** An amazing sight demonstrating the power of nature opens before our eyes – miles of golden dunes, rolling like waves in the ocean up to the very horizon. The height of the dunes reaches 200 meters. In order to travel in this sea of sand, one must have the skills that we, people from Latvia, hardly have. A kind



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of a “desert theme park” has been created here with a whole range of attractions – such as a camel ride, a ride on the desert sand in a jeep, sledding in a bathtub from the top of a dune and other kinds of entertainment. The camel guides make a small lap of honor past us holding their animals on a leash. I also hear Mongolian spoken among the guides. At times I notice the Han Chinese making fun of the Mongolians’ accent in Chinese. This happens everywhere in the world. Some people think that they are smarter than others. I don’t believe that this small episode allows for making far-reaching conclusions about





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the relationship between the largest ethnic group in China and the national minorities. We have lunch in a restaurant nearby. From the window, a fantastic view of the desert opens up, stretching as far as the horizon. The desert is really impressive and powerful, but it is an absolutely foreign element to me. The heat is also quite hard to bear. After the short visit to the desert, we return to Baotou. We wait for a few hours in a small restaurant until it's time to board the train to Beijing.

**13.06.2008** Our sleeping berths on the train are on the third level. The ceiling of the coach is just above my nose. The train covers most of the distance at night, and in the morning we pull into the splendid Beijing West Railway Station 西站. Our familiar hostel in Old Beijing is waiting for us. We are full of new impressions, very tired and very dirty, too. Having refreshed ourselves, first of all, we try to organize our thoughts and discuss the further plans. I work on my travel diaries, trying not to forget the most vivid episodes. We have lunch together and watch the videos from the trip. All of a sudden a thunderstorm starts, and we have to stay at the hotel. My colleague D. Rītiņš would like to continue our journey and see more, so we agree to discuss the possible route tomorrow.

**15.06.2008** Our travel companions disperse, and I go walking alone along the narrow streets of the single-storied Old Beijing. Such blocks of single-storied houses are called “hutung” 胡同. The morning usually starts early here. Younger people are rushing to work. The elderly are occupied with house-keeping chores or are just sitting on the porch and chatting with the neighbors or passers-by. Such conversations can extend or stop abruptly. In any case, one can see that people enjoy this leisurely way of exchanging the news. Quite a few times, I have also seen elderly ladies pulling a puff or two of smoke from a short pipe while discussing the latest events. Very seldom, in fact, just a couple of times, I have seen elderly ladies with bound feet. These poor women are not able to take a single step without a walking stick. This tradition comes from old times and is not practiced anymore. I remember seeing some foot-bound elderly ladies in Singapore as well. Overall, it seems that life goes its usual way in the narrow streets of Old Beijing, just like many centuries ago... At times, one might notice a car parked here or there, yet the majority of car owners live in the modern districts of the city. In the evening, Mr Šablovskis and I review our trip notes, paying special attention to the names of places in Chinese.

**16.06.2008** My nose is stuffy, which makes breathing difficult. As a result, I cannot fall asleep. In order to divert my thoughts, I go out onto the balcony and listen to the sounds of Beijing at night. The city is not awake yet at three o'clock at night. The nearest streets are empty and deserted. I have breakfast together with D. Rītiņš, with whom we have decided to go to the Sanya 三亚

seaside resort on Hainan 海南 Island. We arrive at the airport on time. After a three-and-a-half-hour-long flight, we land in the city of Sanya on the coast of the South China Sea. As soon as we leave the plane, I feel the hot, humid air of the seashore. One thing is clear – we are in the tropical climate zone now and need to acclimate to the new surroundings. Our hotel room offers an amazing view of the warm South China Sea. Of course, we cannot resist the temptation and take a dip in the ocean waves. The water is extremely salty and too warm as well. In the evening, we feast on delicious king prawns. As soon as it gets darker, people flock to the beach. They dance, exercise, play different sports. Gongs are playing and people are singing. We watch a classical theater performance in the Hainan dialect called “琼剧”. This is what I call a true resort atmosphere. **52 53 54**

**17.06.2008** The night is long and restless with a thunderstorm, rain and the pounding sound of the ocean waves. We take a swim in the ocean before breakfast. The Brazilian coffee they cater for breakfast is perfect. A Chinese doctor, a very kind lady I meet by chance, helps me to choose the right medicine at the drugstore. D. Ritiņš goes for a bike ride. I stay at the hotel and take my medicine. At dinner we try the Chinese eel, which could be just a distant relative of the Baltic Sea eel. Ours is tastier, or maybe its taste is more familiar. The oxtail soup is perfect. A Uighur ensemble performs in our restaurant in the evening. We listen for a while as well. Uighurs, who belong to the family of other Turkic peoples living in China, have their own song and dance traditions. Such ensembles often travel to perform in other Chinese cities and provinces. People continue having great fun singing and dancing on the ocean shore. What is interesting – there are no incidents or need to involve the police. The holiday feeling never ends at the resort.

**18.06.2008** We get up early and start the day with a swim in the sea. We have decided to go to the national park of Li ethnic minority 黎族. I even manage to talk to a Li minority tour guide. However, somehow we change our minds about visiting the park and turn back to the hotel. The wind is quite strong and the waves are high, yet we decide to go for a swim. In the evening, the tide is low, but the waves are still strong. We refresh ourselves with some coconut milk. Then we listen and watch the performances of a multitude of dancers, gymnasts and singers, until the music and background sounds merge into a kind of hollow boom...

**19.06.2008** Early in the morning we take a moment to have a swim; however, it's already time to leave. We depart for the airport, and after an hour-and-a-half-long flight, we land in Guiyang 贵阳, which is the administrative center 省会 of Guizhou 贵州 province 省. This province has been very poor since ancient times. However, the rapid growth of modern China has also reached





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these mountainous lands. A new airport has been built in the provincial administrative center of Guiyang. Although Guiyang is squeezed in between the mountains, the city is neat and cozy. High-speed roads have been built in the complicated mountain terrain. We find a man who promises to take us to the Huangguoshu Pu Bu 黄果树瀑布 Waterfall. When we get outside the city, a picturesque landscape of barren, rocky karst terrain opens to our eyes.

The road from Guiyang to the Huangguoshu Pu Bu 黄果树瀑布 Waterfall leads mainly through the plain; however, here and there we see some very peculiar geological formations – karst hillocks and rocks. In Guizhou Province, such steep hillocks or vertical cliffs rise up here and there on a completely flat surface thus forming the unique landscape of the area. The stubborn Guizhou farmer often tries to turn the land at the foot of these rocks into farmland. They use the stones picked from the fields to make fences around their plots of land. In the plain among the rocky hillocks, we see fields of rice. The blue sky reflects on the surface of the flooded fields. On the southern side of one of the hillocks we see stone gravesites. The vertical slab of the stone has the name of the deceased person inscribed upon it. **55** The facades of the village buildings are clean and tidy, although Guizhou is said to be one of the poorest provinces in China.

The final destination of today's trip is the Huangguoshu Waterfall, which is well known not only in China but also around the world for being one of the most popular tourist attractions in Western China. Huangguoshu Waterfall is 78 m high and about 10 m wide. Next to this waterfall are 18 other waterfalls, which together form a whole group of waterfalls – the largest in the world. Huangguoshu Waterfall can be viewed from six different angles – from above, from below, from the front, from left and right. Behind the waterfall, there is a cave, where one can listen to the sounds of the falling water, enjoy the spectacular view, as well as feel the tremendous power of this wonder of nature.

According to the legend, yellow fruit trees 黄果树 once used to grow near the waterfall. They cannot be found here anymore, yet their name has survived in the name of the waterfall – Huangguoshu Pu Bu 黄果树瀑布. **56 57**

According to another legend, Colonel Wu Sangui 吴三桂, after a lost battle, threw all his wealth into the Rhinoceros 犀牛潭 Waterfall, which is one of the branches of the Huangguoshu Waterfall group. In Chinese historiography, Colonel Wu Sangui does not have a particularly flattering assessment mainly because of the fact that in 1644 he opened the gates of the Great Wall of China Shanhaiguan 山海关 border checkpoint to the Manchurian warriors. As a result, the Ming 明 Dynasty fell and the Manchu Qing 清 Dynasty came to power. The locals believe that in sunny weather a rainbow appears over the Rhinoceros Waterfall 犀牛潭, indicating the place where the jewels are hidden in the depths of the waterfall.





**20.06.2008** The night is restless because of the never-ceasing noise from the highway above the hotel. Together with D. Rītiņš we climb the mountain paths and visit all six viewing platforms which allow enjoying the beauty of the waterfall to the fullest. The human presence is felt here inasmuch as it helps to bring out the glory of nature. Fortunately, there are no signs of brutal intervention of civilization into the majestic landscape. We take a dip in the pool, and then it's time to go back to Guiyang. Just a day ago we listened to the sounds of the roaring ocean outside our windows; now we have the hustle and bustle of a Chinese downtown with car beeps, engine roar and people chattering. Neither Dainis, nor I have the inspiration to go out; more so, because tomorrow we have to be back in Beijing.

**21.06.2008** We have our morning coffee, and depart for the airport, where the plane is ready to take us to the capital of China. After a two-and-a-half-hour-long flight, we land in humid Beijing. We return to our "Lianhua" 莲花 hostel. Everything is cozy and familiar here. We lie down for a while in our rooms in the depressing heat. A. Šablovskis has prepared three CDs with the travel photos. Towards the evening it gets even hotter and more humid. We all are packing our suitcases because tomorrow is the last day of our trip to China.

**22.06.2008** After breakfast we walk to the district's farmers' market. The selection of vegetables is rich, and the prices are cheap, too. We can see vegetables



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that are familiar to us – onions, carrots, potatoes, cabbage, and tomatoes. Leeks are typically bought in large bundles, which are weighed in “jin” 斤 – or, more understandably, – in pounds. Next, we see several varieties of Chinese radish 萝卜. There is a huge selection of “gua” 瓜, which is a type of pumpkin. Mărtiņš is filming my conversations with the vegetable sellers, who are very hopeful that we will also buy something. But we don’t buy anything.

Next, we visit fish vendors’ tables with seafood 海鲜. Interestingly, the Chinese prefer freshwater fish that live in rivers, lakes, ponds and also in rice fields. First of all, we notice carps and perch, which are familiar to us. However, the range of fish peculiar only to China is incomparably wider. What has been said about

freshwater fish should not be taken categorically – like many other things in the East. The Chinese coast is washed by a number of seas, and sea fish are undoubtedly popular here. Our attention is drawn by the many types of prawn 虾 and shrimp 小虾. If the purse of the customer allows, they might pick a crab 螃蟹 as well. The visit to the market definitely provides an insight into what people eat in China and what is available and affordable for every citizen; by the way, even to those whose wallets are not too fat. After getting acquainted with the market, we walk to Beijing's Muslim District 牛街区, where we intend to visit the mosque. I start a conversation with a man who seems to be working in the mosque, and he does not refuse to talk about Beijing Muslims 北京回民. It is widely believed in China that in the 13th century, Muslims came to China from the lands of modern Central Asia along the historic Silk Road. Over the centuries, these people lost their mother tongue but retained their belonging to Islam. In mosques, the Imam's prayer is sung both in Arabic and Chinese. Chinese Muslims speak different Chinese dialects, depending on the province in which they live. The representative of the mosque tells us the same story, in a slightly more detailed way. In any case, Chinese Muslims have integrated into the country's society over the centuries and are perceived as an integral part of Chinese society. To have a memory about the visit to the mosque, I buy myself a round Beijing's Muslim hat.

Returning to the hostel, we have dinner together and discuss our wonderful trip, during which we have managed to visit so many fascinating places related to Chinese history. I will definitely remember the many evenings together with A. Šablovskis and D. Ritiņš when we talked for hours, reflecting on what we have seen and experienced...

**23.06.2008** The night is restless. There is a storm raging outside with thunder and lightning. I have a light breakfast, and then it's time to depart for the airport. We take our seats, but the departure is delayed. There is a line of planes on the runway because of the bad weather. Finally, we take off. I have two free seats besides me, so I can even lie down for a while, which is quite a rare opportunity. Then everything is as usual – a nap, airline food, reflecting on what I have seen on the road. We arrive in Riga exactly on Midsummer Day. Galina, our youngest son Pēteris and our daughter-in-law Nadja meet us. I wish I could celebrate the holiday with the rest or at least watch the concert by Raimonds Pauls, our Maestro of popular music, on TV, but I crash out on the sofa. This is the best gift after wandering along the distant roads of the world.

## On the historic Silk Road together with Professor Shang Quanyu 尚劝余

The Confucius Institute of the University of Latvia was established in 2011. Since then and to this day, I have been the director of the Latvian side of this institute. In turn, since 2014, the duties of the director of the Chinese side lie with Professor Shang Quanyu. Both of us and our secretary, coordinator Laura Zātiņa, spend our working days together in the main building of the University of Latvia – as the university employees lovingly say – in “Rainītis”, namely, Raiņa Boulevard 19. Our mission is to teach Chinese in Latvian schools. At present, we have established a network of educational institutions, which includes a total of 12 secondary and higher education institutions in such cities of Latvia as Riga, Daugavpils, Rēzekne, Jelgava and Ventspils. Liepāja, Jēkabpils and Krāslava will be joining these cities in the next school year.<sup>1</sup>

We have to do everything that concerns providing our volunteer teachers with accommodation and ensure that they are ready to start work in the respective educational institutions. Together, we celebrate such popular Chinese holidays as the Mid-Autumn Festival 中秋节, the Spring Festival 春节 and the end of the school year.

One of the reasons for another trip to China could be our joint work with Professor Shang and, not less importantly, the fact that I was still in mourning for my dear spouse Galina, who passed away on 6 April 2017. I just needed some change to overcome the sad and depressive mood. After discussing the idea with Professor Shang, we together set off on our journey to China on 1 December 2017.

**01.12.2017** I get up at 4:30 in the morning. The taxi arrives soon, and I'm at the airport around 6:00. Everything proceeds according to schedule, and we board our plane to Amsterdam. After a two-hour flight, we land in Amsterdam, where we have to spend four hours at the airport. Finally, the big plane takes us up and we are heading to Guangzhou 广州. The flight to the largest city in South China takes 11 hours. It is interesting to note that after a six-hour flight, when we have crossed several European countries and also the expanses of Kazakhstan, another five hours remain to fly over the territory of China. The duration of the flight over the territory of China allows us to understand the size of the country. The flight is long and tedious, but there is nothing

<sup>1</sup> This is the information up to 2017 when this part was written. Later on, Katrīna Barisa took the place of Laura Zātiņa as the secretary and now Marija Jurso serves as the secretary replacing Katrīna Barisa; We have established a network of educational institutions, which includes a total of 20 secondary and higher education institutions so far.



we can do about it. The food is good, and my fellow traveler Professor Shang keeps me a good company, just like in our cozy office at the UL Confucius Institute on Raina Boulevard. When this flight is finally over, our marathon still continues. We wait for the plane to Zhanjiang 湛江, a city on the shore of the South China Sea, for nine hours. Historically, it was the southernmost port of the Sea Silk Road, which united China with nearby Southeast Asia, as well as with European and African countries. Formerly, the city was called Guangzhouwan 广州湾, and in the period from 1898 until 1945, the city was under French rule (from 1943–1945, it was occupied by Japanese army). After 1945, when the World War II came to an end, French Government agreed to return these lands to Chinese jurisdiction and Guangzhouwan 广州湾 was renamed Zhanjiang.

Waiting for the next flight tries our patience. We are getting hungry, too. Luckily, free tea or coffee and biscuits are available for transit passengers at Guangzhou Airport. It helps us to maintain at least some energy levels, which are dropping rapidly. This is our third flight in a row. Finally, after an hour's flight, we land in Zhanjiang. We are so disoriented that it is difficult to understand what the hour of the day is – our journey from Riga to the shores of the South China Sea has been so intense and so long. Tall palm trees and exotic tropical flowers are greeting us outside of the airport. I check into a small hotel that has previously served for high officials of the China Communist Party and that Professor Shang has kindly booked for me. I am trying to connect my computer to the net, but unsuccessfully so far.

**03.12.2017** The first night at the hotel is a total nightmare. After the long and tiresome journey, it is impossible to switch off and fall asleep. I lie half-awake and keep waking up maybe five or seven times. The breakfast is typically Chinese – with steamed buns (baozi) 包子, soya cheese, cottage cheese 豆腐, and cauliflower 花菜 – no meat at all. I continue to explore my hotel, where I am completely alone, without any neighbors. I leave the hotel area and find a tailor lady who promises to take in my pants. I have lost so much weight that they are literally falling down. Professor Shang and his wife 张老师 come over, and we have lunch together. The selection of seafood 海鲜 is amazing. Needless to say – we are on the shores of the South China Sea. We decide to go for a walk on the beach along a wide, I would say, European style promenade. It's low tide and the sea has receded from the shore leaving large tide pools and areas of moist sand in places. It is getting dark already, so it is difficult to discern much on the unfamiliar beach. I just try to remember the way from the hotel to this place so that I could find it on my own. Larger and smaller ship silhouettes can be traced in the dark sea. It means the bay is navigable. In the twilight, I can hardly distinguish the shoreline on the opposite side of the bay. **58 59 60**





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**04.12.2017** The jetlag is killing me. I can't get a wink of sleep. I get up several times, and then decide to take a walk outside. The driveway of the hotel is lined with tall palm trees. So I walk and look at the palm trees. Must be a strange sight in the middle of the night... Thank God, there are not any witnesses! When Professor Shang arrives, I tell him – I am ready to give up anything for a needle therapy session or visiting any other doctor because my sleeping schedule has gone completely away. Professor Shang listens to me and promises to help, but he already has a very definite plan for today. His friend picks us up in his car at the hotel entrance and off we go. For a while, we keep driving along the streets of Zhanjiang. Further, the city sights change to rural landscapes. Gentle hills alternate with valleys and small rivers. The tropical flora, which I don't know much about, prevails here, although, while I was studying at Nanyang University decades ago, I spent a whole school year in Singapore, which is about 120 km from the equator. Striking up a conversation with the driver, I learn from him that the PRC's and Vietnam's border is about 300 km from here. We have arrived at today's destination – an orange grove. The owners of this plantation are Professor Shang's friends. It's their private property. The trees abound in juicy golden fruit. We can pick and taste them on our own or choose the best ones from the basket offered by the hosts. The fruit are mellow and sweet. It is difficult to believe my own eyes. I am in an orange grove, and I am a welcome visitor here. I wonder how the hosts manage to take care of the garden. It turns out that it's mainly a family business, but farmhands are hired to help with harvesting. Packing, marketing and logistics process is controlled by the owners themselves, without counting their own working hours. I find it stunning. We rejoice at the sight of the orange trees, bent under the weight of the fruit. The trees are just a few meters high, and no ladder is needed to pick the fruit. The hosts give me a box of the golden fruit, so I can feast on the juicy oranges all week while staying in Zhanjiang. **61 62 63**

On the way back, we enjoy wonderful seafood at a restaurant. Professor Shang kindly recommends tasting the “sand worm”, which, frankly, does not arouse much enthusiasm in me. Before returning to the hotel, Professor Shang takes me to an acupuncture doctor, who stabs me with countless needles. The needle session is followed by a head massage; then my sore muscles, legs and arms are treated. I patiently endure everything in the hope that this ordeal will help me get back to sleep. For dinner, a glass of Chinese style fermented milk, and then straight to bed. **64 65 66**

**05.12.2017** Finally, I can get a real night's sleep, after which I wake up at 7:30. The computer man summoned by the hotel is not able to connect my laptop to the net. I resume work on “My China Story” manuscript, and my life acquires a completely different dimension. I have a goal and I'm trying to move



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in the direction of this goal. Today I have to take care of my lunch and dinner on my own because the hotel offers only breakfast. Having left the grounds of the hotel, I easily find a small eatery, where I have lamb soup with delicious boiled rice. In the afternoon, I continue writing my travel notes and visit the pool. When I'm done with that, I go for a walk to the beach. On the shore, a small young girl is singing a song into a microphone. Her father is by her side, having connected the microphone to the charger placed in a handcart. It is getting dark, and the sounds of the song are resonating over the beach in a strange, enchanting way. After a while I notice that the girl has a small

box at her feet – for tips. So, the girl is working. Her voice sometimes vibrates giving out the anxiety and sense of duty of the young child. I come home quite physically exhausted. I am glad that I have resumed writing my travel notes. Professor Shang has kindly provided me this opportunity to spend a few lovely days on the coast of the South China Sea. I am truly grateful to him...

**06.12.2017** Seep is fragile; I'm twisting and turning. When I leave the hotel, I see that the weather conditions have changed. Everything is grey, and the sun has disappeared. This can bring some relief. I buy some tomatoes, onions, leek and vegetable oil. I'm going to make salad for myself. Then I continue working on "My China Story". "Nothing works, unless you do" – isn't that a great idea? Professor Shang comes over and is trying to connect my laptop to the hotel's Wi-Fi, but in vain. In the evening, I walk along the shore of the bay until I reach the military zone, where the promenade ends. A base of the PRC navy is deployed in the town, and it is right from here that two modern warship destroyers left in the summer of 2017 to moor in Riga, Kundziņsala docks on August 5. **67** **68** On August 6, I also had the opportunity to visit these warships, as well as talk to the marines. While in Zhanjiang, I happen to see some sailors, but I would not say that it is a common sight. I return to the hotel feeling physically tired, but happy.

**07.12.2017** This morning I go for a walk on the beach right after breakfast. I strike up a conversation with a man I have noticed earlier. He is not very tall, with shaved head, inquisitive eyes, dressed plainly, but with taste. He strides, as if measuring his steps – at a certain time of the day, covering a certain distance. We say hello to each other and start talking. It turns out my new acquaintance is a calligrapher, and he is surprised at the opportunity to continue our conversation in Chinese. Returning to the hotel, I continue writing "My Chinese Story". I work with short breaks. Again, I have lunch at a small eatery – a light noodle soup, nothing too excessive. Professor Shang arrives, and we meet with the colleagues from Belarusian University of Physical Education, who are doing an internship at Lingnan Pedagogical University 岭南师范学院 (formerly Zhanjiang Pedagogical University 湛江师范学院). One of the Belarusian colleagues is the vice-rector of the said Belarusian University of Physical Culture; the other colleague is the director of the Belarusian side of the Confucius Classroom Programme of the same university. Both Belarusian colleagues inform us that they created a Confucius Classroom at their university two years ago. Belarusian colleagues, introducing us to their country, say that there is no politician in Belarus who could replace Lukashenko. They probably know better regarding this delicate issue. Together with our Belarusian colleagues, we visit a Catholic church built in Zhanjiang during the French colonial period.





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Professor Shang takes me back to my hotel. It's enough for the day's work; I'm longing to have a rest. **69 70**

**08.12.2017** This morning I go for a beach walk, too. The same as the previous times, I see my new acquaintance, the calligrapher. This time we exchange our business cards. The calligrapher's surname is Wu Jian 吴建, and he is an expert in foreign trade. In his free time, his passion is calligraphy. He participates in national calligraphy competitions and introduces me to a booklet that lists his works and participation in calligraphy competitions. Calligrapher Wu Jian's

apartment is on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor of a tall rise building, offering a spectacular view of the South China Sea 南海海湾. The apartment is spacious, designed European-style, and very practical. In a small aquarium in one corner of the spacious living room, I see sizeable carps which could, by any means, be placed on a pan and served for dinner. The calligrapher politely asks if I would like to have some Italian coffee. I do not refuse, and we continue our leisurely conversation. Mr Wu Jian gives me his calligraphy samples and a booklet about his calligraphy concept. It is amazing that we have met as passers-by. I noticed this small, neatly dressed man because he seemed to be a very organized and rational person. What an unexpected meeting and wonderful atmosphere, full of respect and attention! It's just a small episode of "My Chinese Story". When, meeting with Professor Shang, I tell him about this encounter, he is surprised by the artist's invitation to visit his apartment. Professor Shang adds that not every artist would invite any passer-by to his apartment.

For lunch, I have noodle soup with minced beef and then continue working on my story. When I start feeling tired, I go to the pool. Unfortunately, the pool is being maintained and utilized at the same time. The noise is terrible, and there are crowds of people. In China, it is characteristic that repair work usually involves a large workforce. However, I manage to swim my regular distance. Then I work on my diary, but afterwards, go to the beach. Before turning in, I read a couple of pages from the Latvian novel "Straumēni"... I have a great desire not to lose contact with my one and only homeland, Latvia, with its language and everything that's dear to every Latvian's heart.

**09.12.2017** The breakfast at the hotel hardly excels with imagination – every day it is 100% the same – the steamed buns, soya cottage cheese, and the never absent porridge 粥. Then I take a walk by the sea. Having returned to the hotel, I get down to business – "My Chinese Story". I manage to work productively until 11:30. Then Professor Shang and his wife arrive and we go for lunch. My colleagues have chosen a restaurant with several halls. We "dive" into one of them. The place is loud and busy. The waiters are running to and fro with full and empty trays. The first question that is asked is – how many people? The Chinese usually have a meal together with other people, in a bigger or smaller group, seldom alone, but sometimes it happens, too. We are trying Guangdong cuisine 粤菜 – which is, probably, the richest cuisine in China with plenty types of dishes, a wide selection of seafood and other specific treats. After lunch, I go to the pool, and then work on my paper until the very evening. Late at night I enjoy my walk on the beach, which is, probably, the best thing about my vacation here. The sea promenade is clean, comfortable and well-looked after. I walk about five kilometers altogether in one direction and then – back.



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Now I go for a walk twice a day. It helps a lot to concentrate on “My Chinese Story”. **71**

**10.12.2017** After the morning walk, I get right down to the story and work on it until 11.30. I go to Professor Shang’s place for lunch. His wife 张老师 has prepared dumplings in Shandong province style 饺子. We are talking about Professor Shang’s work at Zhanjiang Pedagogical University 湛江师范学院. The conversation also touches my colleagues’ home provinces of Shaanxi 陕西 and Shandong 山东. I have had the opportunity to visit those places, and we talk about their most outstanding historical sites, nature parks and other landmarks. **72 73 74**

After lunch and an exchange of views on China, we go for a walk in the nearby park with a peculiar name – Cunjinqiao Gong Yuan 寸金桥公园. Before we decipher these characters, let me give a small insight into the history of Zhanjiang. Between 1898 and 1899, Zhanjiang, who was called Guangzhouwan (广州湾) in those years, was the subject of the Franco-Chinese War. As a result of the war, most of Guangzhouwan’s territory became a French colony. However, it was here that the Chinese showed fierce resistance to the French invaders and part of Guangzhouwan’s territory remained unoccupied by the French. After World War II in 1945, the French Government agreed to return the former French colony of Guangzhouwan to China. In the same years, Guangzhouwan was renamed Zhanjiang as it is still called today. In the part of the city that the French failed to occupy, a park was created with a sculptural group of fighters, who, during the above mentioned war, did not allow the invaders to occupy a single foot of their native land. In 1961, Zhanjiang was visited by the great Chinese writer and the first president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, who dedicated to the park the beautiful and patriotic words – 一寸河山一寸金 (every foot of a river or a mountain is worth its weight in gold). These words, then, form the name of the park. The measure of length – 一寸, which equals to 3.33 cm, could be called a “foot” in this context. Thus, the name of the park – 寸金公园 – could be translated as “Golden Foot Park”. The figures of the sculptural group remind visitor of the park of the aforementioned events in the history of China. I am grateful to Professor Shang for telling me this story. **75 76**

There is another interesting feature of Zhanjiang, which I learned from conversations with the people of this city. Looking back into a more distant past and taking into account the fact that the city is located on the shores of a gulf, one of the popular occupations of the local people is said to have been piracy. Since then, the spirit of disobedience to the authorities has remained in the character of the people of Zhanjiang.





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Professor Shang and I return to the hotel, where we pay for my stay. Just to be on the safe side, we save in a flash drive the part of the story I have written in Zhanjiang.

**11.12.2017** Together with Professor Shang and his wife, we leave for Zhanjiang Airport at 8:30. The plane departs according to schedule. After a two-hour-and-forty minute-long flight, we land in the largest city in north-western China 西北, the historically most famous capital of Ancient China, Xi'an 西安. The city's history spans for more than 3,100 years. Xi'an, called Changan 长安 in the previous centuries, used to be the capital of the Zhou 周, Qin 秦, Han 汉, Sui 隋, and Tang 唐 dynasties of the Chinese Empire. It is believed that the Silk Road 丝绸之路 began exactly in the city of Changan and led through the city of Lan Zhou 兰州 to Dunhuang 敦煌, where it further diverged into two branches. The northern branch passed through Turpan 吐鲁番, crossing the Pamir Mountains, further to the Fergana Valley and, through the Kazakh steppes, to the Middle East and the Mediterranean coast. The southern branch led along Lake Lobnor 罗布泊 and the southern part of the Taklamakan 塔克拉玛干沙漠 Desert, further to Jarkend 莎车 and the Pamir Mountains, and then – through the modern Central Asian countries and the Middle East – to the Mediterranean coast. I mention the Silk Road for two reasons. First of all, on this trip we will have an opportunity to see the legendary road, which used to be the longest land caravan and trade route in the world. Secondly, the historical road has been brought to life today in the project “One Belt – One Road” 一带一路, in which Latvia is involved as well.

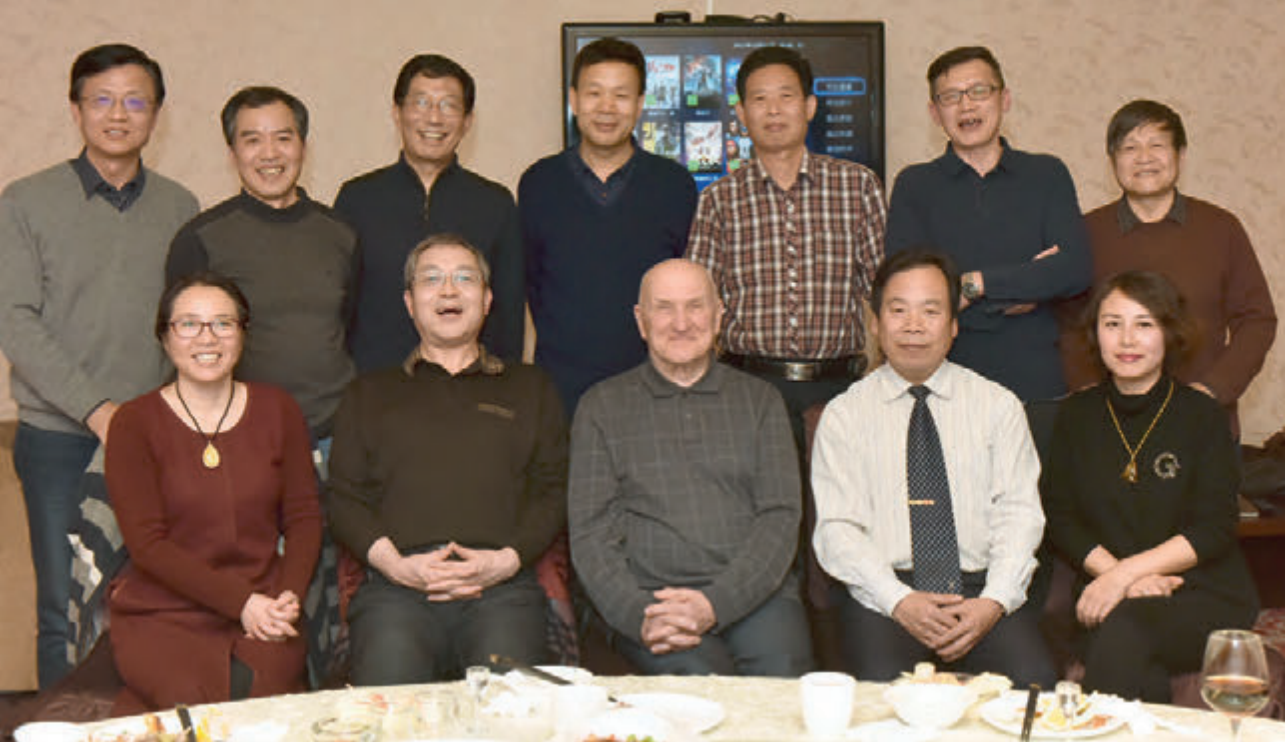
So, we have arrived in Xi'an. I try to embrace the airport building in one glance. As in many other cases, I realize that the airport has been built for a billion people. The place is so huge that we need to walk for a long time in the expanses of the airport, covered with shiny tiles, until we reach the taxi stop. We check into our hotel quickly. After a short rest, we depart to the “Institute of Socialism of Shaanxi Province” 陕西省社会主义学院, where a meeting has been scheduled with Professor Shang's former fellow students. I will try to explain briefly what the “Institute of Socialism” is. China, actually, borrowed the idea of a school for career communist party officials from the former USSR. There is a different nuance, however – the Institute of Socialism, as a substructure of the ruling party, prepares high-level officials for the democratic parties of China's political scene. To make the picture clearer, let's name the democratic parties represented in the PRC: Guomindang Revolutionary Committee 中国国民党革命委员会; Chinese Democratic League 中国民主同盟; China Association for Democratic Statehood 中国民主建国会; Chinese Association for the Promotion of Democracy 中国民主促进会; Chinese Peasants' and Workers' Democratic Party 中国农工民主党; China Zhi Gong Party

中国致公党; 3 September Association 九三学社; Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League 台湾民主自治同盟. The PRC Communist Party has a total of 108 seats in the NPC (National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China) – the PRC Parliament. In turn, the above-mentioned democratic parties have a total of 36 seats. Such a structure of the national parliament – from the point of view of the Western world – can be viewed in different ways, even critically. However, in trying to understand the reasons for China's rapid rise, as well as the stability of the Communist Party, it would not be superfluous to study in more depth the nature of relations between the Communist Party and the democratic parties and their real participation in public administration.

During the evening spent at the Institute of Socialism, it was interesting for me to listen to the opinions of Professor Shang's colleagues about the causes of the collapse of the USSR. It must be said that the participants of the discussion were deeply knowledgeable on this issue. One of the main reasons for this genuine interest is China's reluctance to "follow the path of the USSR". It is no secret that there are regions in China which are not tended towards the center. Therefore, it is no wonder that institutions like the Institute of Socialism of Shaanxi Province operate in every province of China, and their main mission is to consolidate the vast nation and preserve the statehood. **77 78**

As a former student who has spent several years of life in dormitories and three years even in soldiers' barracks, I cannot help but notice the special atmosphere of friendship that exists between the former study mates. Such relationships usually last for a lifetime and such cohesion can form only in the dormitories or barracks. I hear lots of nice memories, jokes, laughter, and feel the warmth and sincerity in the air. I also see that my LU colleague Professor Shang is highly respected by his former fellow students.

We decide to go to see the Great Goose Pagoda 大雁塔. Professor Shang has studied and lived in Xi'an for ten years and knows the city very well. However, when we get to the Great Goose Pagoda, he is confused – a huge, newly built complex dedicated to the Tang Dynasty opens up to the view – in the place where once there used to be an empty field with a few dilapidated huts. When illuminated in the evening, the buildings with the curved cornices and colored tiled roofs look especially gorgeous. Several sculptural groups supplement the ensemble. One of them is a long row of camels, loaded with heavy burdens, which are making their way across the desert. Elsewhere, there are a few muscular figures of wrestlers, immortalized in martial art postures. Another group – a band of musicians – seem to be deeply engrossed in musical meditation. Then there are dancers, the salesmen in the market, and, finally, the emperors. Definitely, the newly built Tang dynasty complex tells about



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the times the Chinese people are proud of. There is a reason for this pride – Changan is claimed to once have been the largest city in the world – both in terms of area and population.

When looking at the spectacular scenery of the Tang Dynasty city, I cannot help but think about the funds invested by Xi'an Municipality in the construction of this mighty complex. One thing is clear: the government has found the resources to celebrate the history of the nation, and the result is impressive. Professor Shang is slowly making his way in the black night and does not stop repeating his “mantra: “I saw it. There used to be only old, shabby houses here... I can't recognize my own university town...” 79

**12.12.2017** Yesterday, together with Professor Shang we checked into the hotel booked for the delegates of the Annual Global Conference of Confucius Institutes. The accommodation is provided by the Headquarters of the Confucius Institute. This year, the conference is attended by about 2,500 participants from 140 countries.

In 2016, a 16 + 1 format conference was held in Riga, where the prime ministers of 16 Eastern European countries met with the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China Li Keqiang. The main topic of the agenda was the actualization of the new Silk Road project in the Eastern European region. In parallel with this event, a conference of Sinologists of the Confucius Institutes of the mentioned countries was held at the Confucius Institute of the University of Latvia. Notably, a representative of the publishing house 商务印书馆, Yu Libin (于立滨), who was responsible for preparing both the “Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary” and the “Latvian-Chinese, Chinese-Latvian Dictionary” for publishing in 2016, also attended the event. We met sinologists from the countries of the Eastern European region and gained knowledge about the development of Chinese studies in this part of Europe. 80 81 82 83

Of course, each new meeting strengthens our cooperation, and the annual meeting of the World Confucius Institutes is a grand platform that brings countries and continents, as well as professionals involved in Chinese research closer together. As the tradition goes, the World Confucius Institute Conference begins with presentations by senior officials from the Headquarters of the Confucius Institute, which mark new avenues in the development of the Confucius Institute project. 84

Further on, our work continues in sections focusing on specific issues of teaching and learning Chinese and experiences in this field in regions and countries around the world. We have lunch together with the delegation of the LU partner university – South China Normal University (SCNU). We





have already met many times both in Riga and Guangzhou. The atmosphere at the working lunch is friendly and collegial.

This evening we are invited to a concert focusing on the culture and traditions of Shaanxi Province 陕西. Let us take a brief look at the history of this province. Shaanxi Province is the gateway to northwest China. The province is located in the center of the country and is considered the cradle of Chinese spiritual culture. In a slightly broader context, it could be called the civilization of the Huanghe River Basin 黄河, not forgetting that the Yangtze River Basin 长江 civilization is no less important in Chinese history. Changan used to be the political, economic and cultural center of ancient China for more than 1,000 years. For 1,180 years, the state was ruled from here. The organizers of the concert are trying to demonstrate not only the peculiarities of the province, but also the importance of Shaanxi in the context of Chinese culture in general. From the point of view of clothing, Shaanxi people can be easily distinguished from the people of other regions of China. The men's headgear resembles a small turban with one end that hangs along the cheek. People dressed this way perform a traditional dance number at the concert. The superb string orchestra captivates the audience with its size, wonderful sound and level of performance. The "Prayer to Rain" included in the concert is unforgettable. Northwest China is a giant region, often hit by natural disasters, such as drought. The scene starts with a depiction of the areas affected by drought.



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For grain to sprout, rain is needed. Yet, there is no rain. The fate of the fields is in God's hands. The peasant is trying not to lose hope and is praying to God. The audience in the hall realizes how fragile our world is. The peasant whispers the words of the prayer. Then we hear the first rain drops falling. The prayer has been heard. People sigh in relief. I think there are no indifferent spectators in the audience. In 1920–1921, more than half a million people died in Shaanxi Province of drought in the summer. Another natural disaster in the region is the floods on the Huanghe River, which have always caused great damage and claimed human lives. The very nature of China has instilled in the Chinese people the awareness that only together, with the participation of many thousands and even millions of people, natural disasters such as droughts and floods can be overcome. For several days after the concert, I am still overwhelmed and come to the conclusion that, given Xian's place in Chinese history; it deserves a more appropriate status than just an administrative center of the province. **85**

After the concert at the Xi'an Hotel, it is possible to regain energy splashing in the swimming pool, which seems incredible after having seen the artistic reflection of the people's fight against the disastrous drought in this area. Today's Xi'an offers modern subway services, and exactly in these days, the Xian-Chongqing 西安-重庆 high-speed railway line is being opened. The railway line crosses mountainous terrain, many rivers, ravines and gorges. The high-speed train travels through mountain tunnels just like the subway in any town on the plain. I see the coverage dedicated to this national importance event on Chinese TV. The high-speed railway connects northwest China with southwest China. These are huge distances that now can be covered in a few hours.

**13.12.2017** After yesterday's impressive concert, where the talents of the Loess Plateau people, the scope and the cultural depth of this cradle of Chinese civilization were revealed in all their glory, my night's sleep is interrupted. After such intense emotional moments, the scenes of what I have seen and experienced glide before my eyes again. Around 7:00 I have breakfast. Next – swimming pool with sauna. I have lunch with Professor Shang and his wife, teacher Zhang. In the evening I try to continue writing "My Chinese Story". Unfortunately, the computer keeps stalling. Suddenly, the Latvian diacritic marks disappear. I try to restore them, but in vain.

**14.12.2017** Today our journey continues. Therefore, this morning every next step must be taken in a strict and thoughtful order. I start the day with the swimming pool; next – breakfast; then packing the suitcase. Then we take the hotel bus to the high-speed train station. The train leaves the station, and soon its speed reaches 100 km per hour. After a while we are travelling at 150 km per hour. Soon the speed tableau shows over 200 km per hour. **86 87** With my fellow travelers we discuss the benefits of the high-speed railway versus a flight.



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One advantage of the railway is that you do not have to spend time traveling to and from the airport. The next plus of the railway – you can take more luggage with you. Another advantage is that you can observe the surroundings through the window of the coach and get to know the peculiarities of the respective region. Right now, the villages of the Loess Plateau are flashing by outside the window. From time to time I see some Christian churches. Then I notice a farmer's gravesite in the middle of the corn fields. Sometimes we pass cemeteries that are not taken care of at all. I arrive at the conclusion that, according to Chinese traditions, the deceased can be buried in the farmer's own land, on the edge of the field, as well as in the nearest cemetery. My observations during the many trips to China suggest that the favorite resting place is the southern slope of a hill. A trip in such a modern vehicle as a high-speed train allows one to notice a lot, even the peculiarities of Chinese cemetery culture. Also, in the agricultural regions of the Loess Plateau, it is common to see that farmers have excavated soil on their land for house building material or other purposes. The difference in level between the plots of land in a village can reach two to three meters. I will later touch upon the findings that farmers have made while removing soil in their fields.

Our train arrives at Baoji 宝鸡 train station. The city is striking with a myriad of new buildings. Without having the opportunity to consult a history book or, as the Chinese say, a “scroll” or a roll, one might have the impression that our high-speed train has arrived in a newly built city. However, the place has a long and rich history. Indeed, getting to know China is unthinkable without looking into its history “scrolls”, which today do not have to be dusty parchment rolls, but might as well be electronic means. It is absolutely clear that previous knowledge of history can reveal a lot of interesting, even unsuspected features of a country even while looking out the window of a high-speed train. According to a legend, one of the most respected emperors in Chinese mythology, Yan Di 炎帝, is said to have been born near Baoji. Yan Di is revered as the “divine farmer” 神农 and inventor of the plow, as well as credited with the merits of being the founder of Chinese pharmacology 神农尝百草. These characters could be translated like: “the divine farmer found out the healing properties of all plants.” Baoji City is also revered as the birthplace of Emperor Yan Di 炎帝故里, “a village of bronze objects” 青铜器之乡. Baoji City is the site of Emperor Yan Di's tomb 炎帝陵. **88**

Another cultural attraction of Baoji City is the Daoist Temple of Jintai-guan 金台观. A 700-year-old oak tree grows in the courtyard of this temple. The locals say that the oak was planted by monk Zhang San Feng 张三丰, who is considered to be the founder of Wushu Wudang School 武当派 and a legendary figure in the history of Taoist philosophy. Worshiping the ancient





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oak is a special ritual of Daoist monks. The thousands of years old cultural strata of the Baoji district may have been the reason why the Museum of Bronze Objects 宝鸡青铜器博物馆 was opened in this city a few years ago. In the museum area of 34,000 square meters, one can see Bronze objects from Zhou 周 and Qin 秦 eras. These objects have been found by local farmers when excavating yet another layer of loess soil. According to the order adopted in China,

accidentally found historical objects must be handed over to the museum. This is mostly the case. People who either rob a tomb or embezzle ancient bronze objects are severely punished. The December day is crisp and serene when we arrive at the museum and walk through its many halls, listening to the story of an extremely knowledgeable guide. We also visit one of the two terraces on the museum territory, which reveal a wonderful view of the Weihe 渭河 river valley and the city, which looks so modern. The concise information about the city claims that the cultural layer of Baoji City is as deep and ancient as the entire Chinese history of several thousand years. **89**

Professor Shang and his study mates suggest eating lunch in an interesting eatery, where pialas with food arrive on a miniature conveyor belt, along which visitors are seated at their tables. In a small counter, everyone marks how many pialas have been taken. In any case, this is something unexpected, even amusing. The Chinese food in the northwest is simpler and less varied than in the south of the country. Here, in harsher climates, various types of noodles are offered. Lamb is especially popular; however, there are noticeably less greens and fruit. **90**

After lunch, we return to the hotel. This is already the third place where I am staying during this trip. I open my laptop and – what a miracle – it works! I can write in Latvian with all the diacritic marks. In the late evening, I leave the hotel and buy a couple of bottles of fermented milk. Working on the computer makes me happy just because I am able to write in Latvian. It is also great that in spite of the hurry and pressures of the trip, I have stayed faithful to my goal. Now I can add my new impressions and observations to “My China Story”.

**15.12.2017** Yesterday, before going to bed, I took the medicine recommended by my Chinese colleagues. Either under the influence of the medicine or in some other way, I have slept well in the new place. After the very traditional Chinese breakfast – rice porridge 粥, buns 饼 and tea eggs 茶叶蛋, I open the computer and set to work. I am writing about the closing months of my diplomatic mission in July and August of the year 2000. It is the time when this part of my life in China is slowly becoming a category of history. Those were emotional weeks and days. I try to tell this story as recorded in my diaries. I manage to work until lunch, which I have together with Professor Shang and his wife. She is very pleased with the visit to Baoji because it gives her a possibility to visit her mother. In the evening, I work again in my hotel room. Then I organize my belongings and pack my suitcase because we are moving on tomorrow.

**16.12.2017** After breakfast, I go for a walk in the nearest park. The air is crisp and exhilarating. The air temperature is just a few degrees below zero. In the park,





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as in other Chinese cities in the morning, people exercise and dance. Among the gymnasts and dancers, one can see many cheerful senior citizens. Typically, Chinese retirees like to get together and spend the wonderful morning hours in joint activities. There are also those who just walk or sit on a bench, discussing the latest news. I walk around the park about three times – through the small bamboo groves, along the stone-paved bank of the river, across the quaint humpback bridges. One can also sit down and relax in the charming gazebos. Many elements of the park repeat. However, in my opinion, such planning of a park can always offer its visitors the opportunity to attain peace of mind and relax from the hard daily work and noise of the dense traffic flow. 91

When I return to the hotel room, Professor Shang calls to inform me that we are leaving at 10:00. We quickly get out of Baoji City. The next leg of the journey is a bit unusual – we drive along a bumpy mountain road. Quite often we meet powerful trucks loaded with rubble. It is these trucks that have damaged the road. Our driver has to lower the speed and maneuver the car skillfully to let the trucks pass by.

Along the way, we can see the cave villages “窑洞” 村庄 that were once common in this area. Today, such villages are only partially inhabited. Many villagers

have moved to comfortable houses. Older people maintain the tradition, claiming that cave dwellings are cool in summer, but warm in winter. In addition, in summer they can use an outdoor fireplace, keep chicken and goats. This is the way of life that they are used to and that is acceptable and comfortable enough for them. We leave the bumpy mountain road behind us, and again we are on the highway. After a few hours, we enter the Changwu county 长武县 of Xianyang city 咸阳市, Shaanxi province 陕西省, which is located on the Loess Plateau 黄土高原 and where we stop at the cave village 窑洞村落 of the ancient Silk Road horse exchange station Shilipu 古丝绸之路驿站十里铺. We are welcomed by Professor Shang's cousin Cao Hongchun 曹宏春 and provided accommodation in a cave hotel 窑洞宾馆. It turns out to be almost on the level of a VIP deluxe room. The interior is unusual and impressive. There are no windows, and the ceiling is arched – as it should be in cave dwellings. It is a bit chilly in the room, however. At first I wonder how I am going to warm up in this luxurious apartment. Then I put on both my winter and summer pants, and it becomes much cozier. I am even ready to continue working on “My China Story”. The work in the strange surroundings is quite productive. **92 93 94**

**17.12.2017** I have spent the first night at the cave hotel. So far, so good. I open my laptop with the intention to continue working on my memoirs, when Professor Shang arrives with our fellow travelers. We all go to a restaurant where we try the popular local dish – lamb broth 羊肉泡馍. We put crumbs of bread in the hot broth and enjoy it. In the winter conditions of northwestern China, such food is quite nourishing. After lunch, we go to the Buddhist monastery Zhaoren 昭仁寺. The monastery was built during the Tang Dynasty, between 627 and 649 AD – in memory of the warriors who took part in the battle in this area. The architectural construction of the monastery is unique, with no support columns used. In addition, the monastery displays excellent calligraphy samples. A charming and knowledgeable guide tells us about the history of the monastery. Not far from the Zhaoren Monastery, we take a look at the local history museum, where the exposition “Culture of Cave Dwellings” 窑洞文化 attracts my attention. The ancient, perhaps one of the first photos made in China show several cave villages and camel caravans with bundles, boxes and bags on the animals' backs. While travelling along the old Silk Road, they have stopped at the Shilipu 十里铺 horse exchange station to rest and replenish their water and food supplies. This exposition only confirms my opinion that in the lands of Loess Plateau 黄土高原, cave villages must have been something as traditional as homesteads in the Latvian rural landscape. **95**

We arrive in the hometown of Professor Shang, Longtoucun 龙头村. The professor's native cave house is close to the highway. The door of the dwelling is half open. The Kang 炕 bed-stove, where the professor came into this world, is still



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in the same place. There is still a photo of Jackie Chan 成龙, a martial artist and actor, hanging on the wall by the bedside. When I ask my colleague if he was practicing Wushu 武术 as a young man, he replies: “I was actively involved in Taiji Quan 太极拳 for some time in my youth, but I have not really been in Wushu 武术”. I look inside and try to understand how people lived in the cave house. Professor Shang’s parents, like other villagers, had a small yard and several household caves. There was a separate living cave, as well as a separate cave that served as a pantry, a separate cave for chickens or goats, and finally a cave-toilet. At the far end of the residential cave I see a large wicker basket where the family used to store grain. At the moment, there are just a couple of empty worn buckets or baskets scattered on the floor in this windowless room. My eyes see only abandonment and sadness. Professor Shang’s parents’ home and his childhood nest has been forsaken forever. The living conditions in the cave houses of Loess Plateau were harsh and grueling. I am deeply moved... In his childhood, Professor Shang used to run to his elementary school from this house every morning. He later studied at middle school 中学 in the nearby Xianggong town 相公镇. Then he moved to Xi’an to study at the Department of History of Northwest University 西北大学历史系. From 1980 to 1984 he obtained his bachelor’s degree and then taught history at the Baoji Teachers’ College 宝鸡师范学院 for three years. In the period from 1987 to 1990, he defended his master’s thesis at Northwest University. Finally, between 1991 and 1994, he defended his doctoral dissertation, having spent 10 years altogether at Northwest University. It would be interesting to mention the amount of scholarships in Chinese universities, which allowed Professor Shang to complete his studies. During his undergraduate studies in the 1980s, he received a government stipend of 20 yuan a month; during his master’s studies – 60 yuan a month. In turn, during the doctoral studies, the monthly stipend was equivalent to 200 yuan. As Professor Shang himself comments, these scholarship amounts are incomprehensible to the young people today, especially – 20 yuan. Today, at best, it is the price of one meal. In today’s China, you can’t even buy matches for Fens, the smallest unit of change. The yuan has depreciated sharply in the recent decades. **96 97**

The object of Professor Shang’s research is the fighter for the independence of India, M. Gandhi. He has written several books on Gandhi. From 2002 to 2003 Professor Shang studied at St. John’s University in the United States. In 2005/2006 he completed an academic program at Jawaharlal Nehru University in India. In 1999, Professor Shang’s work “M. Gandhi and J. Nehru” 甘地和尼赫鲁 came out; in 2004 – his book “Religious Philosophy of M. Gandhi” 甘地宗教哲学研究; and presently he has submitted to the publishing house his latest project – “Research of M. Gandhi’s most topical themes” 甘地热点问题研究.

We are back at Professor Shang's childhood place. Maybe Professor Shang is not as emotional a person as I am. I look at the tall weeds in the yard of the cave house, and in my mind, I am in Latvia. I catch myself at the thought that similar feelings take me over when I look at the abandoned homesteads in the Latvian countryside. Maybe I'm just nostalgic, and we have to put up with the fact that saying farewell to the lifestyle which has become archaic is inevitable, no matter how painful it is for those who have grown up in these homes. When we were approaching Professor Shang's hometown, I saw many abandoned cave villages through the car window. Only rarely could I spot an elderly man or woman in the yard. Most houses were abandoned. We linger for a while with Professor Shang in the world of his childhood, and then we move on. **98**

A deaf man lives next door to Professor Shang's native home. Together with Professor Shang we enter his yard. As elsewhere, we see several entrances to the caves: to the living space and to other farm premises. There is an outdoor kitchenette in the yard. Communication with this man is difficult because of his hearing problem. The desire to maintain the familiar lifestyle and not to depend on anyone – perhaps this is also the motive that encourages this man to stick to everything traditional and customary, not feeling any temptation to move to a modern, but inherently strange and unfamiliar home. **99**

I remember how the grandfather of my childhood friend, having moved from a wood heated house on the outskirts of Riga to a modern apartment, used to miss his wood shed, which every other day provided him with his familiar job – chopping wood...

On the edge of the professor's native village, all three of us walk together along a narrow country path to a small hillock. It is not marked with a fence or a hedge. We have come to Professor Shang's parents' gravesite. His father's name – Shang Zhenmin 尚振民 and mother's name – Wen Runxiang 文润香 – along with the names of Professor Shang and his wife and daughter as well as his sister and her husband and their children have been engraved on the memorial stone. Professor Shang's father was the head of Longtoucun village. As I mentioned earlier, the living conditions of the Shang family were no different from those of the rest of the village. The base of the memorial stone has slightly crumbled and should be repaired. However, nobody pays the slightest attention to it. Ms Shang, teacher Zhang 张老师, ignites the "sacrifice money" 冥币 – banknotes in nominal value of thousands. She stirs the burning banknotes with a small twig repeating: 吃啥买啥. These words mean approximately this: "Whatever you want to eat, you buy it" In addition, the deceased can be offered a sip of wine, an apple or something else edible. This tradition is popular elsewhere in the world where the Chinese people live. For example, in Singapore









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I saw an elderly man squatting on a busy sidewalk and burning the sacrifice money while saying a prayer. He did not care about the traffic or the crowds of people passing by. Having spent a moment at my colleague's parents' gravesite brings me to a kind of reflection. Professor Shang has trusted me with a very private, family side of his life, as well as has given me an opportunity to look deeper into Chinese traditions which have been preserved till today and are still practiced and cherished. 100 101

Next, we see Professor Shang's cousin Cao Hongchun 曹宏春, who has undertaken to arrange all matters related to our accommodation, as well as meals and excursions. In terms of character, he resembles Professor Shang. He is very respectful, businesslike and also kind to us – guests. Everything happens accurately, on time and exactly as planned. When speaking to his relatives, Professor Shang switches to the Shaanxi dialect, which I am, unfortunately, unable to understand. In the cousin's house, the eldest and the most respected persons are his father's sister Shang Yumei 尚玉梅 and his father's sister's husband Cao Shouxin 曹守信. Other relatives and grandchildren are also

present – the apartment is full of people. They are all very interested in me, and everybody wants to exchange at least a word or two with me. I find it pleasant to talk to these people as well. Then there is an important thing – taking a picture together; and of course, drinking tea. It seems that I am the first visitor here from such a distant place in the world as Latvia. **102 103**

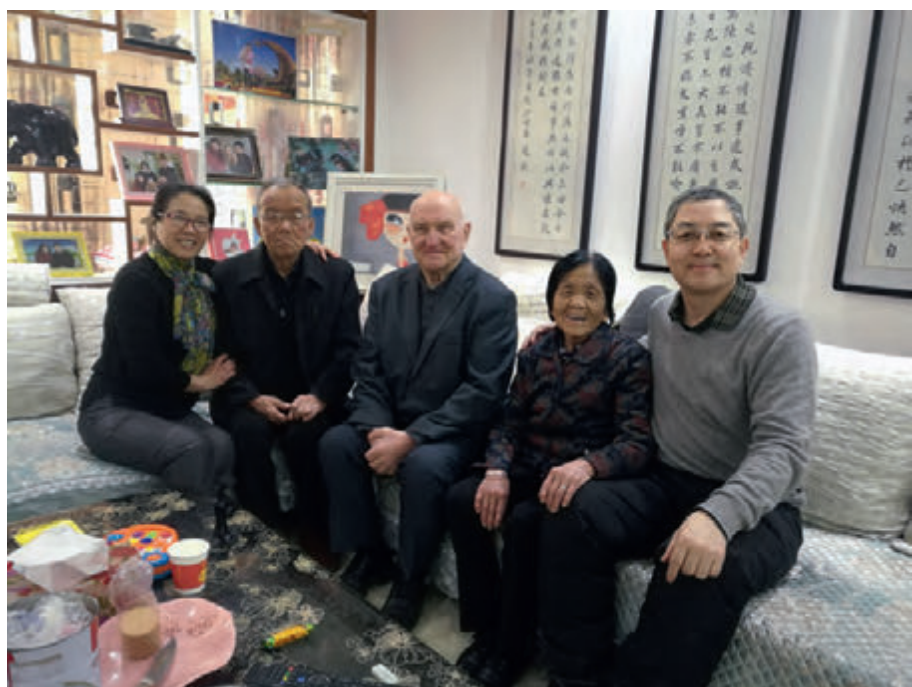
We return to our quite extravagant cave hotel 窑洞宾馆. There have been so many impressions during the day that the night is restless. At times I am awake and at times doze off for a while. Even reading my favorite novel “Straumēni” does not help...

**18.12.2017** For breakfast we have soya cheese soup 豆腐汤 with pieces of scones. Not exactly my cup of tea, but we must eat something, anyway. After a while, we depart to Xi'an Airport. First, we drive along a local road, then – take a fast freeway with several tunnels. We arrive at the airport on time and depart to Guangzhou 广州 on time as well. This will be the fourth stop of our trip: the partner-university of the Confucius Institute of the University of Latvia – South China Normal University (SCNU) 华南师范大学. We are settling in at the teachers' dormitory. The room is comfortable and nice. It's time for rest now.

**19.12.2017** The night sleep is weird... Maybe I was asleep, maybe I wasn't. The travel impressions of the few recent days are so strong that I feel overwhelmed. On the first day at our partner university, we meet with Chinese language teachers who will be working as volunteers in Latvian educational institutions in 2018/2019. Each of our future educators tells us at which university they have studied, or are still studying, and on what topic their bachelor's or master's thesis has been. Some of our prospective teachers have already worked abroad – in the Republic of Korea, Thailand, Nepal or some other country. The atmosphere at the event is warm and collegial. The new teachers are excited, and are trying to present themselves in the best possible way. In any case, the event is a success, and we both with Professor Shang are pleased that already here – at SCNU – we have met the future Chinese language teachers of the Confucius Institute of the University of Latvia. **104 105 106**

There have been discussions and talks all day. They have required full concentration and a great deal of strength. I feel completely exhausted after dinner. I send text messages to my sons. I would like to read a couple of pages from the book I have with me – the novel “Straumēni”. However, I soon realize that I am completely exhausted, so exhausted that it takes a while until I fall asleep.

**20.12.2017** During breakfast I tell Professor Shang that I would like to work on “My China Story” until lunch time. With great joy, I switch over to the story about the trip to the sacred mountains of China. Indeed, it helps. For two hours



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my focus has shifted to discussions with monks and pilgrims in a completely different part of China. I am very pleased that I have taken a moment to work on my manuscript, which takes me closer to the goal. Our former volunteers Wang Shu Hui 王树蕙 and Mo Wanting 莫婉婷 have invited us for dinner. Wang Shu Hui worked in Latvia for two years; moreover, she spent the second year at Rēzekne Academy of Technologies. Both of the alumni have good memories about the time spent in Latvia, which was their first work placement abroad. It was great to hear that both of them are now teachers in Guangzhou. As a present they give me Goji Berry, which is considered to be the most valuable plant in Chinese medicine for improving vision. In addition, Wang Shu Hui is the only Muslim woman of all our Chinese teachers. When she was working in Latvia, she brought me two Muslim hats as a gift. At the events of the Confucius Institute of the University of Latvia, Professor Shang and I used to put on these hats sometimes, thus fitting well into the atmosphere of the respective event. **107 108**

After the nice dinner with our former teachers, together with Professor Shang we depart for Guangzhou Airport. My colleague was with me when this trip started in Riga and now he is seeing me off when I board the huge Air France plane which is going to take me to Paris. After the 10-hour-long flight, I'm finally in Paris. I have to wait five hours for the flight to Riga. I'm hungry and look for something to relieve my hunger. What could be better than the wonderful French bread! With real pleasure, I devour the freshly baked, delicious French bread. Departure to Riga is being announced. My grandson Thomas is meeting me at the airport. I am taken home to Bergi. That concludes my three-week-long journey. There are so many impressions, observations, and insights that I want to share with my readers.

In conclusion, I would like to dwell very briefly on Professor Shang's life story, as well as touch upon the educational opportunities in modern China in general. In the many years I have lived, worked and traveled in China, I have come across facts that show that the capacity of provincial schools compared to metropolitan schools is limited. Therefore, young people who are coming to urban universities from minority areas are given the opportunity to strengthen their Chinese language skills throughout the first study year. Something similar was happening in the times of the USSR, when the applicants from the other Soviet Republics to universities in Moscow or elsewhere in Russia were first given an opportunity to consolidate their knowledge of the Russian language for one academic year.

Returning to Professor Shang's example, I would like to emphasize that the basic education obtained in the native village of Longtoucun 龙头村 was at a level that allowed him to study successfully in the nearby town and graduate

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from the senior middle school 高中, which furthered his studies at Northwest University in Xi'an. I am no stranger to the opinion heard among the Chinese themselves that Chinese intellectuals reproduce intellectuals and that career civil servants, in turn, reproduce career civil servants. Most probably, this is true. However, Shang's biography shows that a curious and talented person in China can build a successful scientific career. The next question is my colleague Professor Shang's personality. We have been working together at the Confucius Institute of the University of Latvia for four years. His competence, respectful attitude and sensitivity to work with the new volunteers in each school year, the great sense of responsibility in performing his duties – these were the qualities that cemented our small team and created the collegial atmosphere that has ensured the implementation of our mission in life. In turn, our duty, like the duty of other Confucius institutes in the world, is to popularize the Chinese language and culture in Latvia. Returning to our trip – during all three weeks I constantly felt Professor Shang's concern for me, as well as his desire to show me things in China that I had never seen before. I am very grateful to Professor Shang, and I would like to pay tribute to him calling him "Junzi" 君子 of the modern China. This is the term for a selfless man of high morals, which was introduced in the Chinese language by the Great Teacher Confucius 孔子. In every step of the trip, he showed his concern and a desire to maintain an equal, non-patronizing dialogue and to share his vast knowledge. The idea of the trip was to change the surroundings completely, which would allow me to recover from the heavy loss of my wife Galina. I am very grateful to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Latvia, which helped me to make this trip, as well as to my sincere colleague Professor Shang, with whom we are still working side by side at the Confucius Institute of the University of Latvia.

## EPILOGUE

When looking back at the period of my diplomatic and journalistic work in China, it is undeniable that these years have endowed me with a unique opportunity to get to know China – this ancient, but also surprisingly modern and dynamic country – through the lenses of everyday experience. The responsibilities of the diplomatic mission and, especially, my work as a journalist, as well as the process of compilation of the Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary in China have ensured being in a permanent contact with several languages, which, in turn, has provided me a unique and continuous practice in such linguistic areas as sentence structure, vocabulary and stylistics. Being in a Chinese-speaking environment for several years has facilitated my in-depth study of the Chinese language, which is undoubtedly a lifelong learning process.

Dwelling on both periods of my stay in China, I cannot fail to mention my life partner Galina, who was always by my side. During the first years of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the PRC, she skillfully managed its financial flow. During the two years of my employment at the Xinhua News Service, she became involved in the project of compiling the Great Chinese-Latvian Dictionary.

Overall, the years at Xinhua have clearly given a new direction to our lives. We have been passionately committed to the work on the Great Chinese-Latvian



Dictionary. We have persistently continued walking uncharted roads, where each day has brought new discoveries and unprecedented sense of satisfaction.

The many years of work as a Chinese language teacher at various universities formed the basis for achieving this goal. The knowledge gained as a diplomat and journalist was also useful and interesting.

The years spent in China, the experience gained, the great work completed – it all has come with God's blessing. For my determination, strength and endurance – I am truly thankful to my parents. Finally, I will always be most grateful to my dear wife Galina for her unrelenting work and devotion.

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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my colleague Professor Shang Quanyu for his profound interest in creation of this book, as well as correcting the texts in hieroglyphic script. Furthermore, I am indebted to Professor Shang Quanyu also for his translation of the book "My China Story" into Chinese, which he did in collaboration with Chinese students studying in Latvia.

I bow my head in front of Biruta Jēgere, my fellow student at the Institute of Oriental Languages at Moscow State University, for her long and selfless work in editing the book "My China Story" several times over.

At the stage of my life's journey, when the fast-paced recordings of the daily events turned into a book, special thanks to T.S.

Pēteris Pildegovičs







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