

## ***IN THE BEGINNING, THIS WAS AN EMPTY PLACE...*** **PLACE-RELATED NARRATIVES IN TIMOFEYEVKA, SIBERIA**

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**Abstract:** The current article focuses on the place-related narratives collected in Timofeyevka village (Novosibirsk Oblast, Russian Federation), which was established in 1895 by emigrants from eastern Latvia (Latgale). The aim of the article is to discuss the reasons for the creation and functions of these narratives, at the same time attempting to grasp the significance of referring to the specific place. The material has been subdivided and characterised in detail in four groups according to its genre affiliation: personal and collective experience stories, memorates and legends. The article is based on material collected in Timofeyevka during the fieldwork of 2004 and 2006.

**Keywords:** emigrants, ethnocentric legends, Latgalians, memorates, personal and collective experience stories, place-related narratives, Siberia

One of the most characteristic features of place-related narratives is that they are made functional only in close connection to the specific elements of geographical and cultural landscape. An interesting aspect of the study into place-related narratives is the creation of this layer of folklore and its functioning within emigrant communities, which, having settled in a foreign territory, have created their own layer of place-related narratives and toponyms in their new place of life, thus not only adapting to the new environment and creating spatial landmarks, but also accumulating individual and collective experience. In this respect, Siberian villages established at the turn of the 20th century by deported convicts and emigrants from the European part of the Russian Empire constitute a remarkable and valuable field of research.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, tens of thousands of people from all regions of Latvia moved to Siberia. Several of the settlements that were established in Siberia by Latvians have survived until today. One of them is Timofeyevka village on the left bank of the River Tartas in Vengerovo district of Novosibirsk Oblast (Fig. 1), which in 2004 had 170 inhabitants, of whom 66 (or 39%) were Latgalians<sup>1</sup> by their ethnic origin, and 28% of them –



**Figure 1.** The main street in Timofeyevka village. Photograph by Sandis Laime 2006.

mainly old and middle-aged people – had excellent or moderately good knowledge of Latgalian (Mežs 2011: 72–74).

Timofeyevka was established around 1895 by Latgalian who had emigrated to Siberia (Melnalksnis 1938: 308). Judging by the fragmented information provided by the villagers and found in archives, the name of Timofeyevka might have been derived from the name of its founder Timofejs Marnauza (Kursīte 2011: 20–21).<sup>2</sup> The area of the Timofeyevka settlement was approximately 40 km<sup>2</sup>, which was subdivided into 114 separate land lots. The most distant land lots allocated to Timofeyevka inhabitants were about 10 kilometres away from the village. Timofeyevka was the settlement's administrative and religious centre: prior to collectivisation, the centre of the village featured not only Latgalian farmsteads, but also a dairy, a school and a Catholic church (Melnalksnis 1938: 308). By registering for a particular section of land, the head of the family acquired rights to occupy a land lot, the area of which depended on the number of male members in the family. Each male member received 10–15 *dessiatines* (approximately 11–16.5 hectares), which still remained in state ownership,

but was transferred into the use of the farmer and its successors *forevermore* (ibid.: 329). The land lot allocated to each family was unofficially named after the surname of the farmer, thus the area of the village was gradually covered with land lots named after the inhabitants. Part of these place names are still used today. They have been adopted not only by Latgalians who have moved to Timofeyevka from other villages, but also by members of other ethnic groups, who have settled in the village since the middle of the 20th century.

The idea of collecting place-related narratives emerged during fieldwork in Timofeyevka in 2004, when the first interviews revealed that the villagers used place names that seemed to have been coined by themselves. Later on, some places emerged (*Toņkas griva, Tataru kolns*, etc.), about which the villagers produced more or less detailed narratives. This article is based mainly on the material acquired during interviews conducted by the author; the material was systematically collected during the 2004 and 2006 fieldwork<sup>3</sup>. The place name and folklore material in the form of a dictionary was summarised in a separate publication (Laime 2011). Collections of a smaller volume of place-related folklore and toponyms were acquired also in other Latvian villages in Siberia (see Blinkena & Stafeca 1995: 112–113; Laime 2007: 152–153; Rozenbergs 1995: 133).

The aim of the analysis of the comparatively few place-related narratives written down in Timofeyevka is to understand the reasons for creating and telling these stories, at the same time attempting to grasp the significance of referring to the specific place in each case. The material collected in field research has been classified and analysed according to its genre affiliation. Depending on the content and form of the narratives, they have been subdivided and characterised in detail in four groups: personal and collective experience stories, memorates and legends.

Part of the places situated in the vicinity of Timofeyevka are sometimes mentioned in the informants' **personal experience stories**. Certain places in the vicinity of the village are linked to episodes of the personal experience of each villager, which are in turn linked to chronologically different stages of human life. The topicality of these stories in the repertoire of informants is determined by different factors: the uniqueness of the event, i.e., a tragic, comic or otherwise unusual situation that forms the core of the potential story; the significance of the event in the course of the informant's life; the subjective wish or unwillingness to tell the specific episode of experience to somebody else, etc. Narrations of this kind cannot be included in the indexes of legend types and they have variations neither in the aspect of time nor in the aspect of place (Garda-Rozenberga 2008: 140). Sandra Stahl argues that "the individual's perception of his experience will be variously affected by collective structures

or concepts, but the story about the experience will remain sufficiently 'individual' because of the unique combination of collective and individual aspects represented by the individual personality" (Stahl 1977: 16–17). Thus also each place-related narrative that is based on personal experience is unique, as certain objective realia (the place) intertwine with subjective experience, creating a unique combination, which usually, however, becomes a part of historic, social and other contexts significant to the whole community.

The personal experience stories related to specific places constitute a part of the most dynamic repertoire of Timofeyevka place-related narratives. For example, interesting events may be told when discussing the events of the day in the evening, in the family circle or among friends, but afterwards these narrations may lose topicality and be forgotten, and only the most vivid events are conserved in the repertoire. Sandra Stahl notes that, in order to become a successful performance, "a personal narrative must make some statement about the topic in terms of traditional attitude" (ibid.: 24). In this case the link to specific places may lose significance, putting the event in the focus of attention. This situation can also be observed in relation to personal experience stories heard in Timofeyevka: the further in the past a particular episode of experience was set, the less frequently it was linked to a specific place. This may be caused by a number of reasons. First, the aspect of place is not crucial in relation to the event and traditional attitudes; therefore this detail is lost in the story as time goes by. Second, the place is not specified as the listener (interviewer) does not have good knowledge of the local landscape, hence it is not important from the point of view of the informant to specify the place. Third, the omission of place in the narration may be stimulated by changes in the landscape, etc.

The personal experience stories related to specific places are mainly in the repertoire of experiencers, and less often in the repertoire of the people closest to them. Other members of the community, although they might have heard the story, usually do not retell it further, as the aim of this genre is to share personal experience.

In my research, I have classified some of the narratives based on real events as **collective experience stories**. Although the specific events have been experienced by one or some members of the community, this experience might be important to the whole community for a number of reasons; therefore, by generalising the event, the experience becomes collective and, unlike personal experience, is told in a wider circle with the aim of putting into focus various ethical, social, religious or other norms accepted in the community. The informant does not have to be the experiencer or the eyewitness of the event; however, if the informant has personally experienced the event, it may, at the same time, be his or her personal experience story. As the accuracy of events

contained in these stories is gradually lost and the participants of the event are typified, collective experience stories may become legends over a longer period of time. Specific places involved in such events may be given names related to the specific event.

The most vivid collective experience stories documented in Timofeyevka are related to the so-called *Toņkas griva* (Toņka's hillock). The story is based on an accident that took place in the vicinity of Timofeyevka in the years of the Second World War: on a field while threshing grain, the threshing machine pulled in a young girl called Toņa (full name – Antonia), who died on the site; therefore the place of the accident was named *Toņkas griva* (Laime 2011: 180–181). This place name and the story associated with it is known not only to the contemporaries of the event, but also to those villagers who were born after this event, and also to people who have moved to Timofeyevka in the last decades. The event was described in detail only by two informants: Valentīna Bule, who was the younger sister of Antonia, and Nina Kukule, who saw the crippled body of Antonia when it was brought to the village. In addition, the latter's uncle was an eyewitness to the event. These narrations also contain a short characterisation of Antonia's family and the circumstances of the accident, while in the stories by other informants, who do not have a direct connection to Antonia or the event, additional information is usually omitted and only the tragic fact of the accident is emphasised.

There are at least two reasons why this accident became a part of collective experience in Timofeyevka community and is still told nowadays, half a century after the actual event. First, remembering and retelling this event is an indirect illustration of workplace safety rules, and the consequences that may occur if they are ignored. Thus, when telling about the tragic death of Antonia, the community focuses on a stricter observance of workplace safety rules. Second, human death in accidents, just like suicide, murder, or any similar death before *one's time*, is traditionally regarded as unclean. This can be said especially about accidents, in which young unmarried people have died in an unnatural way.<sup>4</sup> Fear of the people who have died an unclean death is based on the belief that the souls of the people who have died before their time stay on the earth, usually in the place of accident, and may harm the living. In this context, a remark included in the story by Viktoria Ruduša is significant: she said that the villagers had been so scared by the accident that even a long time after the event everyone saw the deceased Antonia in their dreams.

During fieldwork, no villager was met who would have been an eyewitness of the event and would retell it as his or her personal experience story, although it is certain that there were such people. The narrations of the eyewitnesses of the event have enabled this story to become a collective experience story, as the

accident shocked not only Antonia's relatives, but also the whole community of Timofeyevka. Already now, one can observe the process of the specific additional event-related information disappearing from the narrations, preserving only the mere fact of the accident. Thus in the future, narratives about *Toņkas grīva* may transform into a legend telling that in *Toņkas grīva* a young and beautiful girl called Toņa met her death (and therefore this place is *bad*, haunted by ghosts, one should not go there, or similar interpretations). There are hundreds of places in Latvia about which such limited-content legends are told. Their background information is long forgotten, only the name of the person who committed suicide, was murdered, or died in an accident, has survived. Over time, new personal experience stories and memorates about people's experiences and troubles at the *bad place* twine around such places and continue the oral tradition related to the specific place.

A second scenario is also possible for the development of the tale on *Toņkas grīva*. With the gradual disappearance of the background information connected with the accident, the tale may simply fade away. It seems that this has happened to the tales about *Magdas pūrs* (Magda's swamp) in the vicinity of Timofeyevka. In Latvia, if legends are told about a place and this place carries a name related to the narration, the place name is the last to disappear from oral tradition. Even if legends or tales about a specific place are not told anymore, its name can still be preserved, if people use it as a landmark in their communication. Today, the place name of *Magdas pūrs* is still actively used by Timofeyevka villagers, as the swamp is situated near the village; however, during fieldwork, the author did not manage to ascertain a specific event from which the name of the swamp could have been derived. Only Veronika Pridane said that the swamp was called this way because of some Magda, who had wanted to hang herself there (Laime 2011: 177). If this really happened, such an event might have been preserved in the memory of the villagers for some time, especially taking into account the fact that in a Christian society suicide is considered to be a mortal sin. An attempted suicide would also be a sufficiently significant fact to name the specific place after the unfortunate woman. Other villagers linked *Magdas pūrs* to a Magda who had lived a very long life, more than a hundred years; therefore the swamp is also called *Babas pūrs* ('Grandmother's swamp') (Laime 2011: 177). Considering all this, the Magda-related events might have taken place in the swamp soon after Timofeyevka had been established at the end of the 19th century or at the beginning of the 20th century. This is indicated by the fact that the swamp-related event was already known to the mother of the oldest villager, Vera Kalugina (b. 1914), who had told Vera about it when she was still a child. It seems that the events that took place in the swamp more than one hundred years ago have now lost their topi-

cality; therefore the majority of Timofeyevka villagers have only preserved the name of the swamp and not the narratives related to it. The information given by Tatiana Peščerska that the swamp was named after the surname *Magda* (Laime 2011: 177) indicates a more recent tradition that the creation of a place name is explained with the technique of building place names most frequently used in the vicinity of the village, i.e., it was derived from the surname of the person who farmed the specific land lot.

In **memorates**, unlike in personal and collective experience stories, events based on the personal experience of the informant or a person close to him or her are interpreted as supernatural. On the one hand, memorates are similar to personal experience stories, as they reveal an emotional experience of the informant or persons close to him or her. On the other hand, they are similar to belief legends, as the event is later directly or indirectly interpreted in accordance with the beliefs that exist in the community about supernatural beings and phenomena. Interpretation is directly influenced by the discussion of an event within the community, if a phenomenon that has been experienced in the state of *numen* (a supernatural being without clear manifestation) is identified according to the preconceptions of the community and enters the state of *omen*, acquiring the figure of a specific supernatural being (Honko 1989: 108). Indirectly, the interpretation can be introduced also by the experience author on the basis of the preconceptions existing in the community.

The majority of memorates heard in Timofeyevka are not linked to specific places near the village. Such, for example, is the supernatural experience of several villagers involving house spirits, as this layer of beliefs still functions in the village. The only two memorates about specific places of the vicinity of Timofeyevka are related to the village cemetery (Fig. 2). Graveyard as a place for the burial of the dead is a significant object in the inhabited space of any community that holds various norms in high regard. The significance of the graveyard in the landscape of Timofeyevka is expressed, for example, by the fact that the word *kapi*, or Latgalian *kopi* (graveyard), is contained in the names of the places closest to the graveyard, such as the near *Kopu zaimka*<sup>5</sup> and the stream *Kopu ryucs*.

In the memorate told by Vera Kalugina, a situation is depicted in which a norm – the priest's ban to go anywhere on Sunday until noon – is not respected. In breach of the ban, the informant and her brother, sent by their mother, went to collect sorrel for soup to the surroundings of a cemetery. This was evidently considered an especially dangerous area, as there the trespassers of the rule faced a sanction: they heard small children crying beneath their feet. This caused such an attack of shivering to the brother that it could only later be stopped by a whisperer (Laime 2011: 176). The crying beings are not identified in the



**Figure 2.** Timofeyevka village cemetery. Photograph by Sandis Laime 2004.

informant's story, and thus they have remained in the state of *numen*, although it can be assumed that these are souls of the dead. It is significant that the children's cries stopped when the *Kopu ryucs* stream was crossed. Evidently, the *Kopu ryucs* stream is regarded as a kind of border between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This is also implied in the cemetery euphemism *aiz ryuča* (over the stream), which is used in Timofeyevka (Stafecka 2011: 168). When informants say: "*Man sen jau laiks doties aiz ryuča*" (It is high time for me to go over the stream), they mean that the dying time has come.

The event described in a memorate by Vera Loča (b. 1928) was experienced by her daughter, who one evening had driven past the graveyard to Timofeyevka and seen a person walking out of the graveyard (Laime 2011: 176). In the narration, the informant highlighted twice that the person was dressed in white clothes. Evidently, the situation – a white person walking in the graveyard – had seemed strange rather than frightening, as the onlookers had stopped to observe the person. Then the person had begun to rise to the skies, which is a sufficiently convincing sign for the person to be regarded as a supernatural

being. Interestingly, the informant stressed this feature, repeating the same words again and again: [...] *bet tas* [cilvēks], *skatāmies*, *ceļas gaisā*. *Sāka celties un celties gaisā*, *augstāk un augstāk*, *un augstāk*, *un augstāk*, *un augstāk*, *bet mēs visi skatāmies...* (...but that [person] we saw was rising into the air. He began rising and rising into the air, higher and higher, and higher, and higher, and higher, but we were all watching...). The daughter's experience, as is evident from the story by the informant, was immediately discussed at least in the family circle and, explaining this event in the context of the then recent events (funeral of Konstantīns Kravalis's father), the being in the state of *numen* (person in white clothes) was interpreted as the soul of a specific dead person that transcended from the graveyard to the world of the dead.

The link between memorates and specific objects of the landscape is created over a longer period of time, marking *good* and *bad* places in the landscape in the vicinity. It is evident that in the case of Timofeyevka, one hundred years has been too short a period for a broader network of such places to be created around the village. The only such place mentioned in the narratives is the graveyard.

In emigrant villages of Siberia, the documented place-related **legends** can be subdivided into two parts: those having a plot *brought* from the homeland, and those that have been adopted from neighbouring peoples in Siberia (see Tuisk 2002: 109). In the oral tradition of Timofeyevka, no localisations of place-related legends known in Latvia were written down although several such narratives have been documented in other Latvian villages in Siberia.<sup>6</sup>

The repertoire of Siberian Latvian place-related folklore is mainly dominated by place-related plots that are known in Siberia. Significantly, in Timofeyevka they are mainly linked to the Tatars. Until the 16th century, when ethnic Russian settlers, including Old Believers, began to appear in Siberia, the Tatars were among the dominating ethnic groups of Western Siberia. Nowadays, only a minority of Tatars living in Siberia are successors of Western Siberian Tatars for the reason that the majority is made up of the Tatars who have moved here from other Tatar-inhabited regions. Legends about the Tatars and other indigenous peoples of Siberia have been borrowed by European migrants from other peoples living in Siberia (Tuisk 2002: 110–113).

According to Bengt af Klintberg, ethnocentric legends constitute one of the contemporary groups of legends. He notes that, when describing foreigners and minority groups in these legends, the lifestyle, values, and norms of the majority are revealed. The depiction of foreign ethnic groups is usually based on ethnic stereotypes, or generalisations, which label the characterisation of the representatives of another ethnic group either positively or negatively. Bengt af Klintberg mentions Swedish legends about immigrants as vivid examples of this legend subgenre (Klintberg 1989: 72–73). This wording can also be turned

the other way round, i.e., ethnocentric legends may be just as characteristic of the folklore of minority groups, or immigrants, and in this case the subject of legends is the representatives of the dominating nation. These legends, in turn, strengthen the system of values, norms and traditions of the minority, which is especially important if the respective group is small and detached from its ethnic homeland. Such were the settler communities of Latvians and other ethnic groups scattered all over Siberia, living in isolated villages. Aivar Jürgenson notes that the aim of Estonian emigrants, when arriving in Siberia, was not to integrate into the local society, but to create a new, isolated community. In the new environment, the emigrants tried to find or created circumstances that would allow them to continue their homeland lifestyle (Jürgenson 2006: 371–372). Here, one can also refer to emigrants from the territory of Latvia; however, it must be taken into account that, when arriving in Siberia, the settlers did not settle in uninhabited territories.

The Timofeyevka Latgalian consider the Tatars to be indigenous people in the vicinity of their village. This is indicated by several place names and narratives attached to these places. For example, previously, when there were three streets in the village, the one closest to the river was called *Tataru ūļneica* (Tatar Street). Today this street has almost vanished, but villagers still remember its name. There is also a former graveyard named *Tataru kopi* (Tatar graveyard) on the other side of the River Tartas, which is also indicative of the former presence of the Tatars. The most well-known place connected with the Tatars is *Tataru kolns* (Tatar Hill). According to legends, it is a place where the Tatars had lived in the past; a former Tatar burial ground; a place where the Tatars buried themselves when the *white people* appeared, or the white birch trees started to grow in this region; a battlefield where clashes with Yermak's troops took place, etc. (Laime 2011: 179–180).

The Tatars still live in this area. A larger Tatar population resides in the relatively nearby Uluck village, in smaller numbers they also live in other villages. Also two Tatar families have settled in Timofeyevka; this seems to encourage the preservation of Tatar-related legends. It is likely that this topicality was determined not only by the presence of the Tatars in the ethnic composition of the village and the traces they have left in the surrounding landscape, but also by their different appearance, foreign language and religious identity, as well as the unusual way of life and traditions judging from a Latvian point of view.

Among the most evident differences from Latgalian, the Tatars' anthropological characteristics can be pointed out: the dark colour of skin and dark eyes. For this reason, they are called *black people*, whereas settlers from Europe, including Timofeyevka Latgalian, are referred to as *white people*:

*Previously, there were Tatars here. When Latgalians arrived here, the Tatars got scared. It's been told that they dug a large pit [on Tatar Hill], covered it with a pole, filled it up and died. They were afraid that the white people had arrived. Here, it's been told, the Tatars lived before us. This street where we live, the Tatars lived here previously, it was a Tatar street. When Latgalians arrived, they ran off – got scared and ran off.<sup>7</sup>*

Another significant difference between the Tatars and Latgalians reflected in legends is their religious identity, as Tatars are Muslims. Various Tatar traditions are also related to this. In the narration about *Tataru kolns* by Vera Kalugina, there is an interesting episode about how the Tatars once hunted wolves on horseback and asked Allah for help:

*Tataru kolns – the hill across Magda's swamp is called Tatar Hill. Previously, the Tatars lived here and afterwards left for someplace else. Oh my, how they chased wolves! Riding on horses! They chased them for so long until they tripped. And kept calling: "Allah! Allah!", but that 'Allah' means 'God' in the Tatar language! So they prayed to God, the Lord to catch and kill that wolf.<sup>8</sup>*

The different religious affiliation of the Tatars is also mentioned in a story by Tatjana Peščerska about a Tatar graveyard: it is stressed that the Tatars do not put a cross on their graves, but a pole with a crescent on top of it (Laima 2011: 180). It is also worth mentioning that the graves of the Tatars buried in Timofeyevka cemetery during the Soviet era were also decorated this way. Likewise, Vitālijs Savickis explained that the burial traditions of the Tatars are different in the aspect that before the coffin is lowered into the grave it is wrapped in a cloth (Laima 2011: 180).

With the description of the Tatars who differ from Latgalians anthropologically, linguistically and religiously, these legends mainly unveil the values and way of life that is significant to Latgalians themselves. Consequently, the legends borrowed and adapted in Siberia have strengthened Latgalian ethnic and religious identity.

Although relatively small in volume, the collection of place-related folklore written down in Timofeyevka provides a sufficiently vivid illustration of the conditions for the creation and functioning of different subgenres of place-related folklore in the oral tradition of Latgalians who have settled in Siberia. On the one hand, various episodes of individual and collective memory have been stored in place-related narratives, on the other, place-related legends have been told to safeguard ethnic, religious, social and other norms significant to the community, and to strengthen its ethnic identity.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Latgalians are inhabitants of Latgale, a cultural and historical region in eastern Latvia. They differ from other inhabitants of Latvia in their distinctive linguistic and religious identity: Latgalians speak the High Latvian or Latgalian dialect of the Latvian language and are Catholic (inhabitants of other regions of Latvia are predominantly Lutheran). At the time of migration at the turn of the 20th century, Latgale was a part of the Vitebsk governorate. In Russia, the successors of Latgalian settlers are sometimes considered as belonging to a separate people – Latgalians – which is indicated in the data of the Russian national census and the ethnicity entry in passport.
- <sup>2</sup> The use of personal names and surnames in particular has been the most common way of coining toponyms in Timofeyevka and also in other Siberian villages.
- <sup>3</sup> Fieldwork led by Professor Janīna Kursīte was conducted in Timofeyevka in 2004 and 2006 by representatives of the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art at the University of Latvia, and other research institutions.
- <sup>4</sup> Latvian folklore contains evidence about how at the funeral of single young people, their wedding was also celebrated; for example, “the first day of the funeral of single people was called the wedding day and only the second – the funeral” (LTT 2077, Sēlpils); “when the funeral of a young (single) lad or lass is being celebrated, then one says: “Well, today (the first day of the funeral) we will celebrate the funeral and tomorrow (the second day of the funeral) we will celebrate the wedding.” The first day of celebrations is passed silently, but on the second day people dance, play games and sing” (LTT 2383, Aumeisteri).
- <sup>5</sup> *Zaimka* – ‘a shack in which field workers stayed while away from home’ (loanword from Russian).
- <sup>6</sup> For example, one of such legends has been written down in Sukhonoj (former Sibīrijas Marienburga or Siberian Marienburg), Krasnoyarsk Krai. The legend tells about a sauna that sank into the ground because people had gone bathing in it on a day of celebrations; a big pit that is still visible nowadays has remained in the place of the sauna (Laime 2007: 152–153). Legends about sunken churches (rarely also saunas) are widespread in Latvia; therefore this motive could have been brought to Sukhonoj by Latvian emigrants.
- <sup>7</sup> Vladimirs Tereško (b. 1939), Timofeyevka, Novosibirsk Oblast > Sandis Laime, 2006 (cf. Laime 2011: 180). This legend plot is known all over Siberia, where it has settled along with the first wave of Russian emigration from northern Russia (see Oinas 1968).
- <sup>8</sup> Vera Kalugina (b. 1914), Timofeyevka, Novosibirsk Oblast > Sandis Laime, 2006 (cf. Laime 2011: 179).

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