

Why Did We Leave Latvia?

Both of us had been thinking about an exhibition like this for quite some time, independently of each other. We knew a lot about Latvian refugees who had arrived in Gotland after crossing the Baltic Sea in boats at the end of the Second World War. But who are the Latvians who have moved to Sweden after 1991?

It is estimated that 5000 Latvians fled across the sea in boats to Sweden in the 1940s, and almost twice as many have moved to Sweden after Latvia gained its independence in 1991. Considering how easy it is to travel between the two countries nowadays, many more have decided to live in Latvia but regularly go to Sweden to work.

We represent both of these groups of Latvians. Gunta, who is a journalist and teacher by profession, is one of the Latvians who moved to Sweden after 1991. Petra, whose parents arrived in Gotland by boat as refugees after the Second World War, was born in Sweden in 1945 and is a Swedish-Latvian photographer and historian.

We were able to realise this project with the support of Nordplus and through cooperation with the Latvian Oral History Researchers' Association "Dzīvesstāsts" (Life Story) and researchers from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia. Over the course of this project, we met, interviewed and photographed many responsive, open and enterprising Latvians, members of the so-called "diaspora of hope". The exhibition contains only short excerpts from their interviews; the full versions are held in the Latvian Oral History Archive in Riga and make up a part of our nation's living history testimony.

There are various reasons why Latvians choose to make their homes in Sweden. Only a part of them do so to improve the living standards of themselves and their families. Others find it difficult to live with the prejudices in Latvian society. Still others move to Sweden for love or education. We met families who went to Sweden to save their child's life or ensure better medical care for their children. One of the families we met returned to Latvia because family ties turned out to be stronger than the "bonuses" a family with children received in Sweden.

No matter where we met - whether in Stockholm, Göteborg, Piteå or Luleå - our conversations were very open, honest and touching. It was difficult to remain indifferent when listening to their stories, because it is not always easy to find one's place in a foreign land; such people fight many battles. Most of our interviewees, however, have managed to find their place, find a variety of work, and learn the Swedish language. But Latvia and the Latvian language still play a significant role in their lives.

This exhibition is only the beginning. We plan to continue this project and introduce others to the Latvians who in recent years have chosen to live in Sweden.

Authors of the exhibition:

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