

## A REPRESENTATIVE SELECTION OF FOLKSONGS OF LATVIANS IN SIBERIA



***Sibīrijas Latviešu Dziesmas*. Sound producer: Edgars Jackevičs; Video producer: Aigars Lielbārdis; Text: Ilmārs Mežs, Lidiija Leikuma, Aleksei Andronov, Sandis Laime; Producer Ilmārs Mežs. Mantojums, 2009.**

With combined effort, researchers of expatriate Latvians in Siberia have completed a representative selection of the folksongs, instrumental music and dances and games of Latvians in Siberia. The hard cover book in small format contains the inserted CD and a double DVD; the

former featuring 52 pieces and the latter 126 pieces. The entire length of material recorded on the discs exceeds 5.5 hours.

The book has an attractive cover design and a good selection of photographs nicely complements the text. The text is featured in three languages (Latvian, Russian and English). Information in Russian will be hopefully useful for younger Latvians in Siberia, who may find reading the language of their forefathers more challenging. The translations definitely expand the audience who might be interested in the Latvian diaspora in Siberia and peculiarities of their ethnic culture. True, the English translation has been presented in summarised form. If anything, the book could have had page numbers.

According to the authors, the publication was inspired by Estonian Folklore Archives' publication *Songs of Siberian Estonians*, which consists of two CDs and an anthology in three languages. Like the Estonian counterpart, the Latvian publication encompasses as many Latvian communities in Siberia as possible and the Russian songs, which are also sung in villages today, have been deliberately left aside. The compilers have attempted to avoid repetition of the same songs and instrumental pieces, but different performances of single folk songs can be listened to on the discs.

The work of Latvians, however, is far more voluminous – the sound and video material has been made in Latvian communities in Siberia in the period 1975–2009. At the same time, *Songs of Siberian Estonians* are based on material recorded only on the expeditions of Estonian Folklore Archives and does not even include the tradition of the ethnic group of the Seto (hopefully their folksongs will be published as a separate volume in the future). It is commendable that the Latvians have published between the same covers the entire song and music repertoire of both Latvians and Latgalian, collected by different folklore collectors from Latvian expatriates in Siberia. By the way, four songs featured on the CD were recorded on the fieldwork expeditions to Siberia by the Estonian Folklore Archives.

Quite logically, the number of older recordings is smaller, because the study of Siberia used to be more complicated in the Soviet period, especially because recording devices were not commonly used due to the inaccessibility of quality devices. Thus, the

CD contains only one song from 1975: a truly enchanting violin and zither piece recorded by Ingvars Leitis. Recordings from the time some 20 years ago (1989–1990) were made mostly in Lejas Bulāna and Augšbebri (Bobrovka), which are well-known Latvian villages in Siberia, and Kurzemes Ozolaine (Kurlano-Dubovka) near the latter. When in 2004, extensive joint expeditions to Latvian communities in Siberia together with scholars of the neighbouring countries were initiated, recording technology was already widely used on expeditions, but the better folk singers and players of instrumental music had already passed away. The inclusion of earlier recorded material is thus justified, even though compared to modern recordings their quality leaves to be desired. The collection compiled by Latvians features instrumental music, but most of the recorded music has been played on modern instruments – the Russian garmon, accordion or bayan. There are however, few players of instrumental music left in Estonian communities in Siberia.

The DVD offers the spectators a chance to see many singers and players of instrumental music, observe their sincere performance, learn a funny game or a dance step, or use the material as a research source. Quite entertaining are the small visual detours: village scenery, ride along a muddy or snow-covered village road, villagers doing their everyday chores, children playing ball games on the street, taking photos in front of a village club, conversations with the local Latvians. Remarkably, one of the youngest Latgalian in Siberia has been interviewed. The visual material is surprisingly versatile, and enables among other things the viewers to observe a very popular tradition of singing and dancing on the village street.

Of course, most of the video-recorded groups seem to have come together specifically to demonstrate their songs and dances, but their enjoyment of performance is sincere.

In the Latvian publication, the songs and tales have been categorised according to regions/villages; this categorisation enables an overview of the songs and music of a specific region. Latvian scholars also note that the regional variations can be quite remarkable. For example, Suhonoya (Sukinava) used to be a village where every man could play an instrument. And even today the village has its own folk group.

The publication gives an overview of the development and current situation in Latvian settlements in Siberia, the collectors of Siberian material throughout times, the singing tradition of Latvians in Siberia, and the names of folk singers and players. The collection features full song texts with translations and this allows a comparison these with Estonian folk songs. Similarities between these can be noticed in terms of melody and lyrics. Brief information has been provided on villages where the recordings have been made: the year of establishment, the region of origin of the emigrants, language use. Here I disagree with the claims that the Ryzhkovo village has a larger percentage of Estonians than of Latvians (20% and 10–15%, respectively) and that Latvian is used only by the older generation are not entirely correct. During a fieldwork expedition to Ryzhkovo a few years ago I met some young people who spoke Latvian.

The collection of Latvian songs in Siberia definitely offers a joy of recognition. The formation and development of Estonian and Latvian communities have been more or less the same; they often lived in close quarters and maintained active communication with each other. The emigrant communities in Siberia were formed of people from certain regions in homeland; these people also retained their original dialect. Like

Latgalian speakers in Siberia who cannot generally read Latvian literary language, the Seto group in Siberia cannot understand Estonian literary language. The repertoire of Latvians in Siberia includes traditional folk songs (the most popular of which seem to be St John's Day songs) as well as popular early 20th-century author songs. People from regions where the choir singing tradition had well developed by the period of emigration, continued the tradition in Siberia. Scholars have noticed that the choir singing traditions are considerably weaker in the Latgalian region in Siberia, while their old traditional song repertoire has been better preserved. The same seems to apply to the Seto group in Siberia. In Latvia, the best known village of expatriate Latvians in Siberia is Lejas Bulāna (Lower Bulanka), while the Estonians mostly know the village of Upper Suetuk (Verkhni Suetuk).

Both Latvians and Estonians in Siberia value their traditional song repertoire. Certainly the older generation is more knowledgeable in the tradition. In the past years, scholars have noticed some attempts to revive the ethnic culture and language. The Latvians' winter courses on Latgalian language and culture, organised in Achinsk, definitely help to improve the situation. Estonians, unfortunately have nothing analogous to contribute: Estonian language is taught only in the Upper Suetuk village and at language courses at the Estonian Society in Krasnoyarsk.

Scholars of both countries have a major work cut out for them in introducing and studying the unique language and culture of the expatriates in Siberia. *Sibīrijas Latviešu Dziesmas* is a fine guide on the way. Enjoy the discoveries!

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