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Lithuanians in Twentieth-Century Latvia: Their Representation in Oral History Sources

IRĒNA SALENIECE
Daugavpils University, Vienības iela 13, Daugavpils 5401, Latvia
Email: irena.saleniece@du.lv

The article examines some aspects of the self-awareness of the Lithuanians born in the 1920s and the 1930s and living in Latvia, which are reflected in their life stories. The interviews were recorded during field research by the Daugavpils University Oral History Centre in south-eastern Latvia. These oral history sources reflect some features of the narrators' identity: Lithuanian ethnicity (Lithuanian language skills, everyday life habits, Catholicism, etc.) and connection with Latvia (understanding of Latvian history and some characteristics of historical consciousness, attitude towards Latvians). The analysis of the sources reveals that Lithuanian ethnicity is not the determining feature of the self-awareness of the studied group. Certain common value orientations and features of Latvian national identity are observed, which are characteristic of the majority of Latvian residents of the said generation. Despite a certain degree of 'otherness', Lithuanians in south-eastern Latvia perceived themselves as members of the local society.

Keywords: Latvia, Lithuanians, ethnic identity, national identity, oral history

INTRODUCTION

In the field of the humanities and social sciences, the phenomenon of the 'other' is of fundamental importance, since the formation of self-consciousness is possible only in relation to the 'other' [41: 125–131]. For a sense of 'we' to emerge, there must be 'others'. In specific historical and social contexts, the 'others' are perceived in different ways: as hostile, unacceptable, 'foreign', or as different yet not provoking hostility. When specifying the content of the phenomenon of the 'other', historians often associate it with interethnic relations [44: 98–99]. Throughout Latvian history, there have been many 'others', including representatives of various ethnic groups, Lithuanians among them. In Latvian perception, Lithuanians were never regarded as 'foreign,' as over the centuries a shared Baltic origin, the closeness of languages and cultures, common historical experience, and the political aspirations of the early twentieth century oriented toward a shared future were obvious [18: 6]. After the establishment of

national states, Lithuanians on the territory of Latvia became part of the emerging political nation of the *people of Latvia* [12, Article 2].[1] They obtained full rights, that is, were officially recognised as 'ours' and together with all Latvian citizens experienced the twists and turns of twentieth-century history.

The aim of this study is to identify the characteristics of self-identification and certain features of the identity of Lithuanians residing in the territory of present-day Latvia, whose recollections are recorded in oral history sources and preserved in the collection of the Oral History Centre of Daugavpils University. To achieve the stated aim, the following objectives were set:

1) to establish the source base of the study by analysing the life histories of Lithuanians selected from the collection of the Oral History Centre of Daugavpils University;

2) to characterise the features of the respondents' ethnic identity (language, religion, everyday life practices, etc.);

3) to examine the respondents' understanding of the events of twentieth-century history, their self-identification, and their attitudes toward other participants in the historical process;

4) to reveal the presence or absence of features of Latvian national identity, that is, to determine the degree of the respondents' integration into Latvian society.

The object of the study is the perception of Latvian Lithuanians of of themselves in the context of the history of the twentieth century.

Only in recent decades the historiography of the Lithuanian minority in Latvia (as well as that of the Latvian minority in Lithuania) has been enriched by significant achievements. Both in the interwar and the Soviet periods, the primary aim of ethnological research in Lithuania and Latvia was the study of local cultures. Scholars explain this by political circumstances: during the interwar period, such research served to confirm the uniqueness of a particular people and to justify the necessity of its existence within an independent state with defined borders. During the years of the Soviet occupation, drawing attention to this topic was considered politically unacceptable, since Latvia's proximity had historically contributed to a more favourable economic situation than in other regions of Lithuania. Thus, throughout the twentieth century, the primary object of research in Lithuania was Lithuanian folk culture, while in Latvia it was Latvian folk culture [31: 118–120]. Fortunately, this tendency has been overcome, and scholars in both countries no longer avoid the topic of the Lithuanian and Latvian minorities [16; 17; 20; 28; 32]. At present, a body of research on the Lithuanian population of Latvia is already available. Most notably, this includes a fundamental monograph by Lithuanian ethnologists on Lithuanians in south-eastern Latvia [30], which examines manifestations of their identity. Individual chapters of the monograph address the circumstances of the formation of the Lithuanian community in Latvia, cultural traditions within the family and the community, as well as the current state and future prospects of the Lithuanian community in Latvia. The Latvian historian Ēriks Jēkabsons has also published several works devoted to Lithuanians in Latvia, including a monograph exceptionally rich in factual material [27]. The book presents numerous events and facts from the lives of Lithuanians from the time of their appearance in the territory of Latvia to the present day, with particular attention paid to their socio-political and cultural activities. The author demonstrates an excellent

1 'The people of Latvia' is the term used in the Latvian Constitution (1922) to designate the sovereign of the Republic of Latvia. By employing a national rather than an ethnic designation ('the Latvian people'), the authors envisaged the implementation of the idea of a political nation in Latvia.

command of the material drawn from documents preserved in the archives of Latvia and Lithuania, as well as from the Lithuanian and Latvian press and published sources.

The present article attempts to examine the existence of the Lithuanian minority in Latvia by drawing on oral history sources, which to date have been studied to a lesser extent. The informational potential of these sources makes it possible not only to reconstruct historical facts, but also to comprehend them 'from within', from the perspective of the participants in the historical process themselves – in this case, from the perspective of Lithuanians in Latvia. This, in turn, will introduce certain nuances into the understanding of twentieth-century history and, on the other hand, will make it possible to clarify the specific features of the historical consciousness, self-awareness, and identity of Lithuanians residing in the territory of present-day Latvia.

RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of creating oral history sources is to preserve the life history of a specific individual as narrated by the person themself, so that scholars (historians, anthropologists, linguists, and others) may subsequently engage with and interpret the information contained therein. Sources of this type emerge in the course of a dialogue between the researcher and the respondent and contain various layers and levels of information, among which the reality of the past appears only in the form of fragments [25: 79]. These fragments, however, are fully suitable for reconstructing a more or less coherent picture of the past, especially when used in combination with sources of other types [34]. Undoubtedly, in order to obtain valid information, the source base must be sufficiently representative; it is necessary to take into account the imperfections of human memory and other individual psychological characteristics, as well as the influence of political, ideological, and other factors on the narrator. However, already at the stage of preparing for and conducting the interview, it is possible and necessary to apply various techniques for clarifying the information obtained [21: 318]. When using oral history sources, a careful verification of the reliability of the information they contain is required, which, however, is also carried out when working with any type of source [22: 41].

Oral history sources reveal both the picture of the past as recalled by the narrator and features of his or her identity [29]. Life-stories give us the possibility to reconstruct, from the present perspective, the way the participants of the historical events provided motivation, justification, and explanation of their behaviour in diverse situations [26, 436–440]. In interviews, people talk about what they have seen (or perceived with other senses); they do not always directly formulate their attitude to what they have experienced. Nevertheless, evidence provided by contemporaries [23: 43–69] makes it possible to reconstruct the socio-psychological condition of the population under different political circumstances. The analysis of the content of statements, lexical and other language means used, emotional manifestations, as well as non-verbal ways of expression allow us to quite accurately determine exactly the narrator's attitude to the facts described, i.e., to reveal the features of his/her self-identity. It is clear that not all narrators provide information to answer the question posed by the researcher, but among those, who touched on the topic of interest in their life-stories, there will be something in common about their attitude.

The British scholar Paul Thompson notes that in oral testimonies that take the form of autobiographical narratives, the life of a single individual is the medium through which historical experience is expressed. The facts contained in any life narrative can be fully understood

only when they are considered as an integral part of the person's entire life. However, in order to make the necessary generalisations regarding a particular issue of interest, it is necessary to extract relevant statements from numerous interviews, bring them together, and examine them from a new perspective, thereby assigning them a new meaning [40: 267]. Thus, of the four principal methods of reconstructing history on the basis of oral testimony described by Thompson, the so-called reconstructive cross-analysis was employed in the writing of this article. This method aims to reconstruct in detail how the social context, or its individual elements, operates and changes through the use of biographical interviews [40: 269].

The article draws on materials from the oral history source collection of Daugavpils University (the abbreviated designation of the collection DU MV, with reference to the interview number in the collection catalogue). In order for the recorded recollections to be used as fully-fledged historical sources, their preservation and accessibility for researchers must be ensured. Both of these functions are fulfilled by the Oral History Centre of Daugavpils University (*Daugavpils Universitātes Mutvārdu vēstures centrs*, DU MVC), founded in 2003. The Centre not only organises interviews with respondents in compliance with the required legal and ethical standards but also ensures the storage and use of DU MVC materials in accordance with established regulations. Throughout its existence, alongside individual interviews, the MVC has conducted 16 expeditions in south-eastern Latvia, during which life histories were recorded from individuals who, in the overwhelming majority of cases, had never intended to document their life experience in the form of diaries, extended autobiographies, memoirs, or similar texts. As of late 2025, the MVC collection comprises 1,352 life histories of local residents who represent various local ethnic groups and confessions, urban and rural populations, individuals with different levels of education, and diverse professional and social statuses.

For the present study, respondents selected for interviews indicated the ethnic affiliation 'Lithuanian' or were born in Lithuania. Nevertheless, the composition of the respondents is heterogeneous. Among them there are both 'fully' Lithuanian individuals, that is, those with Lithuanian roots on both the paternal and maternal sides, as well as children of mixed marriages (but only those who identified themselves as Lithuanians were included), and Old Believers who were born in Lithuania and later resettled in Latvia. Female and male respondents differ in their former social status, but above all in their individual interests, beliefs, and tastes. The DU MVC collection contains 22 life stories of Lithuanians in Latvia and 35 of respondents connected with Lithuania (born, educated, or having lived there). After analysing the interview content and verifying the reliability of the information from a historical perspective, only those interviews providing the most convincing evidefor the issues addressed in the article were selected for citation.

All the data related to the interviewees was anonymised. The study follows the Personal Data Processing Law adopted by the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia on 21 June 2018, the Code of Ethics for Scientists approved at the meeting of the Senate of the Latvian Academy of Sciences of 4 November 1997 and its approved revised version (2017), and the Daugavpils University Code of Ethics, adopted on 6 March 2019.

REPRESENTATION OF LITHUANIANS IN ORAL HISTORY SOURCES

Evidence of connections with Lithuania and features of Lithuanian identity

The majority of narrators reflect on their own identity, albeit to varying degrees. They readily recall their childhood, even if it was difficult, because turning to one's roots helps an individual

construct a narrative of their own life in light of the values acquired at an early age within the family and at school. As a rule, information about the place of birth, the social status of the family, as well as the circumstances of relocation to Latvia, if such relocation occurred, is conveyed with a high degree of accuracy.

In most cases, the narrators are Lithuanians born in the Latvian-Lithuanian border region. This refers to the former Ilūkste District (the parishes of Demene, Medumi, Ilūkste, Subate, and Aknīste) in Latvia, or to the Rokiškis, Zarasai, and Utena districts in Lithuania: 'I was born three kilometres from Subate and have lived only in this area' [2]; 'my homeland is a village near Rokiškis' [3]. As a rule, ancestors who had settled in Latvia much earlier are also mentioned: 'my grandfather and grandmother came from Lithuania back in 1893. Sixteen families bought land here from the Plāteris counts [*shows written confirmation*]' [11]; 'my grandfather, who came from Lithuania, bought 61 hectares of land [in Vecborne, Ilūkste District]' [9]. The main reasons for relocation to Latvia among the narrators born in Lithuania were family-related: young women married [3; 10]; in one case, a ten-year-old boy's mother died in Lithuania, and in 1940 he was taken by his aunt to Nereta [7]. A female narrator notes that she and her husband decided to move to Latvia because their house interfered with land reclamation works: '… land reclamation began in the collective farm, and then we moved the house from Lithuania, transported it here, and built ourselves a home here. […] During the Soviet period, when land reclamation was underway, that was when we left. If land reclamation had not taken place, I would still be living there in Lithuania today' [1].

All narrators were born into peasant families and from an early age became acquainted with physical labour and material hardship; nevertheless, they retained a strong sense of attachment to their families and their native region. In the interviews analysed, the narrators did not identify their ethnic or religious affiliation on their own initiative, doing so only in response to the interviewer's questions. Only in one case was a spontaneous statement recorded: 'I am Lithuanian by nationality. Born in Lithuania' [7]. Nevertheless, in general they identify themselves as Lithuanians (sometimes specifying that this is how they are recorded in official documents) and as Catholics. This is corroborated by references to the use of the Lithuanian language within the family [2; 7; 11]. Kinship ties with relatives living in Lithuania are frequently brought to the fore, and trips to Lithuania are mentioned [6; 7; 8; 11].

The majority of narrators profess Catholicism, and all recall that they observed Catholic religious rites regardless of the political situation and official regulation. One narrator recalls:

> Of course, I believe in God. I come from a religious family; my mother was a fanatically religious person… As children, we went to church regularly and also took part in processions. … During the summer feasts there was a beautiful procession: girls carried church attributes, and the younger ones walked in front of the priest and scattered flowers. Each had a small basket in her hands; we prepared the flowers ourselves, picking daisies or cornflowers. And then we would walk, walk, bow, turn toward the priest, and scatter the flowers.

This is how a narrator born in 1935 remembers her childhood. Later, after enrolling in a pedagogical institute and joining the Komsomol, she was fully aware of the possible negative consequences of attending church; nevertheless, she did not renounce her faith in God and 'went to church quietly, in secret'. The narrator describes a pattern of behaviour

employed by believers throughout the Soviet Union: 'we knew in whose presence it was possible to speak about such matters and in whose presence it was not advisable to do so… I secretly baptised both of my children while being a member of the Party' [4]. Similar religious behaviour – maintaining fidelity to Catholicism and employing various strategies to keep this commitment concealed – is also described by other Lithuanians in south-eastern Latvia [2; 7; 8].

For the sake of fairness, it should be noted that in the border areas where Lutheranism predominates on the Latvian side (Aknīste and its surroundings), Lithuanians who are Lutherans are also encountered. In the interviews analysed, only one such case was identified: 'There are no [Catholic] churches nearby, but here there was a Lutheran congregation; in Sauka there is a church, where I was also baptized, and here the indigenous population are Lutherans' [6]. However, under conditions in which mixed-confessional marriages were contracted and, during the Soviet period, the authorities deliberately created obstacles to the practice of religion, a certain 'blurring' of religious notions among the local population is entirely understandable. When asked about the differences between various confessions, one narrator does not immediately find an answer, asks a clarifying question, and then responds: 'Well, there is no difference – everyone believes in the same God' [2]. In addition, all narrators are unanimous in noting that interest in religion has declined among subsequent generations, thus attesting to a tendency toward secularisation within their families. As one narrator remarks, 'In Soviet times it was not allowed; they forbade it more for the young people, but the elderly went anyway. My parents went to church, and I went as well. But I no longer involved my daughters; they were young girls, they went very rarely, and now as well…' [10].

Within the framework of the present study, the experience of ethnic Russians from Lithuania who, by force of circumstance, became residents of Latvia during the Soviet period merits particular attention. They are Old Believers of Lithuania who possess knowledge of the Lithuanian language, which they acquired either through schooling in Lithuanian schools [3; 10] or simply through everyday interaction with Lithuanians: 'I mostly lived and worked in Lithuanian households' [1]. The narrators preserved nostalgic memories of their Lithuanian neighbours and of the employers for whom they worked before the war: 'The Lithuanian women next door were very good… we lived very, very amicably' [3]. At the time of the interview, they even preferred to watch television programmes from Lithuania, as they did not understand Latvian [3], whereas 'I understand everything in Lithuanian; no one can deceive me in Lithuanian' [1].

The statements of an eighty-year-old female narrator were particularly moving:: 'I am Lithuanian; my cemetery is in Lithuania, my parents are buried there, and my husband as well – all of them are there; and I told my son, when I die, do not bury me here, take me back to my homeland' [1]. With pride, she showed a sash decorated with a Lithuanian ornament, on which her name and the name of the collective farm were woven. At her retirement ceremony, this sash was placed over her shoulder as an honorary symbol of conscientious work. The narrator emphasised that this was the most valuable gift for her precisely because it was proof of respect she enjoyed while living in Lithuania.

The role of schooling in the formation of the identity of Lithuanians in Latvia

In the narrators' opinion, which coincides with the views of Lithuanian scholars [30: 38–40], school – specifically, Lithuanian-language schools in Latvia – played a significant role in their moral development and in the strengthening of Lithuanian identity: 'Children were

taught to be honest! And the children were more honest' [8]. A kind of indirect confirmation of this view can be found in the life story of a female narrator born in 1940, who chose Russian as the language of the interview. In her childhood, she spoke only Lithuanian at home, but she started school after the war, when Lithuanian schools in Latvia had ceased to exist. 'When I started at a Russian school – I didn't know a word [*laughs*]. […] Oh, don't ask! At first it was so difficult… but you know, children learn languages very quickly' [9]. Gradually, in everyday communication she switched to Russian and forgot Lithuanian.

During the interwar period, when with the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia the Latvians for the first time in history acquired their own state, the situation was different. A specific policy was implemented with regard to Lithuanians as one of the national minorities. The Latvian education laws adopted in 1919 [13; 14] ensured school autonomy for national minorities, which was recognised as one of the most successful in Europe at the time [42, 47; 24]. Funding for educational institutions of national minorities was provided by the state and local authorities in proportion to the number of inhabitants belonging to the respective ethnic group. As a result of this policy, more than 500 national minority schools of all levels – primary, basic, and secondary – were operating in Latvia by 1925 [33: 244].

A female narrator born in 1921 nostalgically recalled her four years (apparently from 1928 to 1932) at a Lithuanian school in Aknīste: 'On Mondays, everyone would gather together, sing a song, say a prayer, and then go to their classrooms' [8]. Another narrator (born in 1924) emphasised the importance of school in preserving Lithuanian ethnic identity: 'I attended the school in Subate, a Lithuanian school. […] My father was Lithuanian; he greatly valued the Lithuanian language and everything connected with it, and he sent me to that school – so that is why I went there' [2]. After the establishment of the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis, school autonomy was abolished [15], although schools of ethnic minorities continued to exist. For example, in the 1934/35 academic year, thirteen Lithuanian schools were in operation [28: 48], including in the border areas – in Nereta, Aknīste, Subate, Laši, and Indrica. Some of these schools continued to function into the 1940s. According to a narrator born in 1930, in 1946 he completed a Lithuanian lower secondary school in Nereta, then went to Riga and enrolled in a Lithuanian secondary school, 'which was closed in 1948. […] Why was it closed? […] What could one explain to a child – the school was closed, and that's it! And I returned to my parents, and in 1951 I finished boys' 1st secondary school in Rokiškis' [7].

Overall, despite the policy of Latvianisation pursued by the government of Kārlis Ulmanis, the Lithuanian minority in the pre-war period remained loyal to the Latvian state: 'the older generation, without any propaganda or any integration programmes, grew up as patriots of Latvia. […] you know, there were Lithuanians here, Russians, Latvians, also Poles; Roma would pass through here, Jews as well – we lived amicably' [6]. The Second World War, the incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union in 1940, and the subsequent Sovietisation became a serious ordeal for the majority of the local population, including Lithuanians. Adaptation to the new conditions was accompanied by a reassessment of perceptions and values, which shaped their attitudes toward the events of which they were contemporaries.

Perceptions of twentieth-century history among Lithuanians in Latvia

The life histories of residents of south-eastern Latvia born in the 1920s and the 1930s make it possible to identify certain features of the historical perceptions of this generation. The version of twentieth-century Latvian history they present is not a 'textbook' one and

often diverges from existing historiographical interpretations of this period. The narrators do not demonstrate a thorough familiarity with scholarly concepts of twentieth-century Latvian history. Moreover, given the age of most respondents, their school years fell in the years between the late 1920s and the early 1940s, a time when national historiography was still in the process of formation. Many significant events of twentieth-century history had not yet occurred at that time, and therefore the respondents could not have derived well-established historical interpretations from their school history courses. Their primary source of historical knowledge was their own lived experience, assessed against commonly accepted values and common sense.

The testimonies of 'ordinary' people – rank-and-file participants in the historical process – make it possible to reconstruct an image of history that is close to the lived experience of residents of Latvia born in the 1920s and 1930s, including Lithuanians in Latvia. As narrated by local Lithuanians, the history of twentieth-century Latvia appears in a personal dimension, which is highly relevant for contemporary historical scholarship, given the recognised need to break free from the dominance of overly sociologised historical constructs and to turn toward a more *humane* history. However, one should not conflate the logical constructions produced by historians through the generalisation of extensive factual material with the often-indistinct image of history that emerges in the course of a respondent's narrative. Most often, history appears as a background against which the events of the narrator's personal life unfold. The point of reference is the fate of a specific individual – the narrator's own life trajectory. In the interpretation of past events, the features of the narrator's identity and their individual system of values become obvious. When compared with data from other interviews, it becomes possible to assemble, like a puzzle, a version of history in which certain shared perceptions characteristic of Lithuanians in south-eastern Latvia converge. This, in turn, makes it possible to compare the attitudes of local Lithuanians, Latvians, and representatives of other ethnic groups toward past events. Among the key events mentioned in the majority of life histories are the Second World War, post-war resistance, mass deportations, and the collectivisation of farmland.

Thus, by the early 1940s, the first generation of people who had no experience other than life in an independent Latvian state had grown up and entered independent adulthood in Latvia. For ordinary residents, the occupation of the country by the Soviet Army in 1940 and the rapidly ensuing political, ideological, and socio-economic transformations came as a bolt from the blue. Under the new conditions, local officials who attempted to continue performing their official duties found themselves if not labeled as 'enemies,' then regarded as 'suspects' in the eyes of the new authorities. In turn, the actions of the new authorities generated misunderstandings and rejection, and complete confusion prevailed among the population.

The moment when the Red Army entered the territory of Latvia on 17 June 1940 was the first direct encounter with Soviet people. The visual impression that the Lithuanians in Latvia gained was just as unfavorable as that received by the representatives of other local ethnic groups – Latvians, Poles, and others. All of them recalled the comparatively unpresentable appearance and uncivilised everyday conduct of Soviet soldiers [35], especially when compared with the Nazi occupiers that soon replaced the Soviet troops [36].

However, in the recollections of Lithuanians analysed here, situations suggesting a sense of inner superiority over the Soviet occupiers are mentioned more frequently than in the accounts of other contemporaries: 'I would say this: we were hardly afraid of the Russian soldiers' [7]. It may be assumed that this feeling was more characteristic of the post-war period

and may even have been inspired by a later re-evaluation of the course and outcomes of the war in the post-Soviet context. Nevertheless, narrators tended to project it onto the entire period of the Soviet occupation beginning in 1940. For example, a woman born in 1928 recounted how Soviet soldiers 'wanted to behave indecently toward us [young local girls],' that is, to engage them in sexual relations [3]. The girls did not yield and rejected the unwanted 'admirers' with sharp verbal retorts. Unlike interactions with the Germans, there was no language barrier, as the case concerned Lithuanian Old Believer women. At the same time, the narrator spoke with admiration about the German soldiers: 'Handsome, all tall, there were no short ones, the uniforms were very beautiful, grey […] the Germans were handsome, very handsome – well, one of them would even have married my sister Marina' [3]. Such perceptions are also typical of respondents of the same age from other ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, the attitude of Lithuanians in Latvia toward the Germans was not as favourable as that of a large part of the Latvian population. A narrator born in 1930 recalls the fear inspired by German soldiers: 'When they came, then – God forbid – they would shoot you on the spot' [7]. This fear arose from the inhumanity of the Holocaust and was reinforced by the assumption that 'if they [the Nazis] had gone further, the end would have come – it had already come for the Roma, for the Poles. It might have come for Latvians and for Lithuanians as well… I do not accept that!' [7]. German forced labour migration policy also instilled fear in people: 'People were taken away to work there, in Germany' [1].

In one interview [7], a discrepancy between Lithuanians and Latvians concerning service in the German army is brought up. Responding to the question of why Lithuanians did not join the German army, the narrator said: 'Perhaps Lithuanians are somehow different – I cannot say exactly. […] They were more inclined to defend their own – to defend their own people… they belonged neither to the Germans nor to the Russians.' It should be noted that the narrator generally identified himself as a Lithuanian; however, in this case he adopted a clearly distanced position: Lithuanians appear as 'they'; moreover, they are presented in a somewhat idealised manner. Latvians, by contrast, are portrayed as allegedly not sharing the Lithuanians' attitude: 'Lithuanians did not join the German army; Latvians were in the German army with insignia. A large truck with a covered back would arrive, stop, Germans in German uniforms would jump out – but they were Latvians who were catching Lithuanians for the army.' This is not a groundless claim, as the narrator presented himself as an eyewitness to the events: 'I can show the place where I saw it happen.' However, the said incident took place on the territory of Latvia, and the Lithuanians mentioned were subjected to such 'hunt' not as Lithuanians *per se*, but as citizens of Latvia who were subject to conscription [27, 102–103]. In general, respondents were disinclined to condemn former soldiers of the Latvian Waffen-SS Legion. At the same time, they also saw no grounds for their glorification today: 'Nowadays it has again become customary to take pride in the fact that, if not you personally, then some close relative served in the legion', yet people were forced to serve there, many fell on the battlefield – 'that was their fate' [6].

The narrators were unanimous in their assessment of the Holocaust as a horrific tragedy:

> I was about sixteen years old when the shootings took place. I lived there, very close by. I remember that day – everyone was terribly agitated. 'They are shooting the Jews today in Subate,'

> they said. Indeed, six kilometres from where we lived, one could hear it – they [bullets] were falling like peas. We were all frightened… it was a truly dreadful day [2].

According to the narrators, the cause of the tragedy lay in the malicious will of specific individuals vested with power: 'the one who gave the order, who caused all this, was insane' [7]; 'Hitler was probably responsible for all of this' [2].

In the areas along the Latvian-Lithuanian border, national partisans were active until the early 1950s [19]. Virtually all narrators confirmed this fact; moreover, they demonstrated an understanding of both the differences and the similarities among various partisan groups [39]: 'In our area, during the Soviet period, there were partisans. There were also opposing partisans – that's how it was!' [7]:

> They lived in the forests – people called them Forest Brothers; now they are referred to as national partisans, those for whom Soviet power was unacceptable or who were absolutely certain that Siberia awaited them; they continued to fight until around 1952–1953. […] In the Zalve forests during the German occupation, the famous Oškalns unit was active. […] This reflected the general mood of the entire country, a widely held attitude – young people were saying that 'I will fight neither for the Russians nor for the Germans,' and they went into the forest [6].

The narrators' attitude towards the national partisans is expressed rather controversially, with the spectrum of opinions ranging from understanding and support to hostility.

There are no contradictions in the descriptions or disagreements in the assessments of two post-war events that characterise the process of Sovietisation of the occupied Baltic territories: mass deportations of 1949 and the subsequent collectivisation are closely linked in the consciousness of contemporaries, and memories of them are traumatic in nature. Narrators mentioned concrete examples of individuals subjected to repression, and their accounts remained associated with strong negative emotions such as fear, a sense of injustice, and powerlessness in the face of a hostile authority: 'Just do not think that I support the actions of the Russians [meaning 'representatives of the Soviet authorities'], when they transported people in wagons and threw them out along the way' [7]. Recalling the deportations, a female narrator born in 1926 (from a very poor family, forced to work as a servant in an affluent household from an early age) expresses indignation that ownership of land and the alleged 'exploitation of hired labour' were cited as reasons for the deportations. From her own experience, she knew that a landowner was first of all a hard-working person; although she herself had been 'exploited', she nevertheless retained gratitude toward her employer, who had given her an opportunity: '[…] one has to earn bread. If I had nothing to eat, I went to work for someone so that they would feed me' [1].

According to the narrators, there existed a stable link between deportation to Siberia and the beginning of the rapid expansion of collective farms: 'When people were taken away, everyone became terribly frightened and then piled their petitions [onto the chairman's desk at the collective farm founding meeting]: 'please accept me into the kolkhoz, please accept me into the kolkhoz' – there was no end to applications, everyone was afraid…' [2]. Despite the fact that very few of the respondents came from genuinely affluent families (and some even grew up in families of landless peasants, agricultural

labourers), they all continued to express indignation at the manner in which collectivisation was carried out. People did not accept coercion or the unwillingness of the authorities to take the aspirations of the peasants themselves into account.

> What did collectivisation mean for a farm like my father's, when in twelve years he had built houses on bare land here and had acquired all the necessary agricultural equipment so that one could live and work? And then – no, everything is taken away from you, and you are told to go and serve God knows who! [*indignantly*] My father could not accept this: 'I will not go to the kolkhoz under any circumstances!' And he took a job on the railway, worked on the railway; at that time Viesīte was a railway junction, with a narrow-gauge railway' [6].

One female narrator attempted to recall a little song that was sung secretly during the Stalinist years: 'I used to sing the song myself, but now I've forgotten it: "Cut off my tail, but I won't go to the kolkhoz!" [1].

Over time, however, local residents adapted to Soviet regulations: 'At first, of course, it was very hard. When we joined the kolkhoz, [...] we would bring home a kilogram of grain [instead of wages] – well, what is a kilogram? Ten kilograms? There was nothing there […]. But later the kolkhoz became prosperous. They started paying money. You would receive it, go out, and buy whatever you wanted. And everything was cheaper; you could obtain things with money' [1]. Less affluent residents, who constituted the majority of the population, were attracted by the socially oriented measures of the Soviet authorities (free medical care, secondary and higher education, etc.), as well as by opportunities for upward social mobility. Although initially, in 1940, the changes in Latvia did not elicit support among the local population, gradually many people – especially representatives of the younger generations who received Soviet upbringing and education – opted for cooperation with the communist regime. 'I would put it this way – now there are more supporters of Soviet power than there were in 1940, because we have already raised others, accustomed them to it, since it was good for them and it was good for us as well' [7]. Nevertheless, judging by the sources analysed, Lithuanians who grew up in pre-war Latvia generally did not support Soviet policy.

Just as among Latvians, in the recollections of Lithuanians born in the 1920s and 1930s and residing in south-eastern Latvia, there often emerged a self-perception of the 'little person', seen as a pawn in the hands of the authorities of powerful states or specific political forces. They are convinced that, basically, their behaviour in any given situation could change nothing. Consequently, their attitude toward political actors is that of a victim: '… it was impossible not to fight – neither for the Russians nor for the Germans. For the sake of survival, one had to side with one or the other' [6]. Despite the initial shock caused by the Soviet occupation, after the experience of the Nazi occupation, when the repressive actions of the authorities were often directly targeted at large groups of local residents, including Jews, the Slavic population, and others [38], Soviet rule no longer provoked complete rejection. It is noteworthy, in my view, that after all the transformations the narrators experienced, the framework of ideas and values formed in their childhood prevailed:

> to become overly greedy and forget everything else [is not right]. But there is also this notion – 'as it came, so it went, you know', I do not like that either. I like it when I see that a house has been renovated, the windows are being replaced, the roof is being put on – I see that something

> is being done, that something is moving. […] One should also have property, one should have a family, one should have everything [7].

The historical period to which the narrators express a desire to return is referred to as the 'old times of Ulmanis', when, according to their conviction, 'people were all more just, more honest […] everyone was more harmonious then. Everyone was, I don't know, friendlier, more honest…' [8].

Thus, when recalling the events of twentieth-century Latvian history and people's behaviour in critical situations (Soviet and Nazi occupations, mobilisation into the Nazi or the Red army, armed resistance, mass deportations, collectivisation, and others), in which they were participants or witnesses, Lithuanians in Latvia express views and attitudes that are comparable with and largely similar to those of their contemporaries among the local population, both Latvians and representatives of other ethnic groups.

Attitude toward Latvia and Latvians

Judging by the sources, the majority of narrators did not dissociate themselves from Latvia. Almost all of the life histories examined were recorded in the Latvian language (this being the narrators' choice). Their recollections of the past closely resemble those of Latvians; they share the same values and, at times, even identify themselves as Latvians of Lithuanian origin. Nevertheless, in the course of the narratives, situations occasionally arose in which Latvians appeared as the 'other', distinguished from the narrators themselves or from their ancestors.

For example, this occurred when the discussion turned to the policy of deliberate Latvianisation, which took place twice during the twentieth century: during the years of Kārlis Ulmanis's authoritarian regime and in the Soviet period. The first campaign fitted into Ulmanis's ideology of 'national unity'. A specific instance of such Latvianisation is presented in one of the sources analysed: '…around 1939, there was such a Latvianisation campaign, when those who had non-Latvian surnames changed them to Latvian ones, and thus my father, Lithuanian by ethnicity (his family having migrated here from Lithuania), changed his surname to a Latvian one' [6]. The narrator's father's brother retained a Lithuanian surname, and as a result their children – cousins – now bear different surnames, which at times causes surprise among others. This situation demonstrates that attitudes toward Latvianisation among local Lithuanians varied and included elements of rejection. At present, however, we have only one perspective available – expressed by those who fully supported the policy of the *Vadonis* (Leader): 'There was no coercion at all… [it reflected] the general mood: Latvia was supposed to be Latvian. That was Kārlis Ulmanis's call, and the people accepted it as such. And many people in this area Latvianised their surnames' [6]. It should be borne in mind that this opinion was voiced by a narrator born in 1934, who was unlikely to have personally remembered the moment when the choice was made. Nevertheless, he fully approves of his father's decision, as it corresponded to the narrator's own convictions.

The fact of 'Latvianisation' during the Soviet period is mentioned in only one life history: 'At birth I was Sabinskas Edmundas. During the Soviet period, at the Ilūkste passport office they said: 'What kind of German surname is that!' and they crossed it out…' [7]. In reality, the surname and the given name were retained but were officially recorded in a Latvianised form with different endings. The narrator regarded such actions toward himself as unjust, because he perceived himself as a Lithuanian born in Lithuania. He placed responsibility on

the passport office employees as representatives of the Soviet authorities, and, in my view, he is right, since the actions of these officials were aimed not at strengthening 'Latvian-ness,' but at standardisation within the broader process of Sovietisation.

As is well known, issues of ethnicity in the USSR were resolved administratively, without regard for individual self-identification: in union and autonomous republics, only the cultural claims of the titular ethnic groups were recognised [45: 92], as well as those of the Russian-speaking population. Judging by the narrator's age (born in 1930), the incident occurred when he received his first passport in the post-war years. He was made to understand that it was dangerous to insist on retaining a 'hostile' surname. In this way, ethnic specificity deemed superfluous from the perspective of bureaucracy was eliminated from official documents. Such a form of bureaucratic 'Latvianisation' has so far not been addressed in the works of Latvian historians, although it undoubtedly merits scholarly attention.

Undoubtedly, in the conditions of living among Latvians, Lithuanians became integrated into the Latvian environment not only through the actions of the authorities but also through natural processes, in some cases to the point of losing their 'Lithuanian-ness.' Many respondents themselves were aware of this, noting that even their parents were already closer to the Latvian language and way of life: 'My mother became a Latvian' [2]; 'He [the narrator's father] became so Latvianised that I remember when he once visited his relatives in Lithuania, my mother even laughed that his Lithuanian had already become rather weak' [6]. Other narrators acknowledged that the connection with Lithuanian ethnicity had been lost either by themselves [4; 8; 9] or by their children [11].

Moreover, circumstances unfolded in such a way that, at times, the respondents had had to perceive themselves as Latvians even in the eyes of other Lithuanians: 'When I now come to Lithuania… they see my car (its license plate with the Latvian flag) and [say]: 'horse's head" [7]. It should be noted that not only this anecdotal episode, but also much more serious reflections led the narrator (who, as mentioned earlier, identified himself as a Lithuanian born in Lithuania) to acknowledge that, although he felts drawn to his homeland – 'it pulls me toward my native land' – his place was nevertheless in Latvia. Moreover, he demonstrated the position of a citizen of the Republic of Latvia: 'although I am Lithuanian, I hold Latvian citizenship,' and he expressed sincere concern for the state of affairs in the country, as well as dissatisfaction with Latvia's lagging behind Lithuania: 'we know that the standard of living, culture, and economic situation in Latvia during the Ulmanis period were better; Poles came to work, Lithuanians [as well]… And now I can see it too – I do not want to say that nothing is being done here, but Lithuania is moving forward much faster' [7].

It appears that we are dealing with a Western European model of national identity, the components of which, in accordance with the concept developed by A. D. Smith, include a historical territory, a politico-legal community and equality of the members of society, as well as a shared ideology and culture [37: 19]. During the period of the independent republic, a form of national identity that articulated an individual's connection with the state also began to take shape in Latvia. Bearing in mind that identity is formed through social processes [43: 280], the functioning of the state system of universal compulsory education may be regarded as an important factor that contributed to young people of Lithuanian origin acquiring a sense of belonging to the Latvian state.

School graduates went on to continue their education, entered military service or self-defence units, and actively engaged in the country's economic and cultural life. Decades

later, they recalled this period with pride, readily spoke the Latvian language acquired in childhood, never forgot, and enthusiastically welcomed the restoration of the state symbols in the late 1980s – the flag, the coat of arms, and the anthem. Together with Estonians and Poles, they were among the most loyal ethnic minorities actively participating in the struggle for the restoration of Latvia's state independence in 1991 [27: 123].

Somewhat different are the aforementioned narratives of the Old Believers of Lithuania, which do not contain clearly articulated markers of national identity. Against the background of an undivided sympathy toward Lithuanians, the attitude of this group of respondents toward Latvians is more reserved due to dissatisfaction with language policy in Latvia, since, as migrants of the Soviet period, they did not acquire proficiency in the Latvian language. Nevertheless, the narrators did not perceive a significant difference between Lithuanians and Latvians:

> How could they differ?! Everyone, everyone is together – friends. These are not people who came from somewhere else. Everyone here is *local*. […] I wouldn't say that Latvians have wronged me, or Russians, or – God forbid – Lithuanians. A Russian is more likely to say something [bad] than a Lithuanian or a Latvian. That's how I see it [1].

This female narrator often articulated her views more expressively than her neighbours. Thus, when answering a question about the significance of Russia for her, she voiced an opinion typical of local Russians:

> What is Russia to me? [*the narrator laughs*] No, dear, my homeland is my own. I love only my own homeland, and Russia… what is Russia to me? I have not lived in Russia […] I am telling you the truth. I have lived here, I grew up here, I know only this place [1].

Thus, despite the shared ethnic roots, the Old Believers (born in Lithuania) interviewed in south-eastern Latvia do not identify themselves either with those Russians who arrived in the Baltic region during the years of Soviet occupation or with present-day Russia.

CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the source base – life histories of Lithuanians born in the 1920s and the 1930s, who lived in the territory of present-day Latvia, drawn from the collection of the Oral History Centre of Daugavpils University – made it possible to identify key aspects of their identity. Textual and contextual analysis of these sources enables the identification, through the prism of the narrators' subjective perceptions, of the distinctive features of worldview and attitudes toward the surrounding world characteristic of this group.

The majority of respondents are natives and long-term residents of Latvia. Possibly for this reason, their Lithuanian ethnic affiliation did not function as a primary mode of self-characterisation in the course of the interviews. Nevertheless, a shared element is the memory of Lithuanian origin, of parents and more distant Lithuanian ancestors, as well as of the circumstances under which the family moved from Lithuania to Latvia. In the narrators' own perception, evidence of their 'Lithuanian-ness' includes knowledge of the Lithuanian language and culture, practising the Catholic religion, certain features of everyday life, and ties with Lithuania through relatives living there. In recollections of the past, the Lithuanian school in Latvia during the interwar period is of exceptional importance, having served

as the principal factor in strengthening Lithuanian identity through the systematic acquisition of the Lithuanian language and culture, including religion. However, the realities of life are such that, by the time of the interviews, most narrators had lost fluent command of the Lithuanian language, and subsequent generations in their families no longer speak Lithuanian. Concern about the possible loss of the religious component of identity among local Lithuanians was expressed to a lesser extent on a subjective level; nevertheless, one cannot fail to note the objectively existing influence of secularisation under contemporary conditions. Thus, with regard to Lithuanians in south-eastern Latvia, it may be concluded that their ethnic affiliation exhibits a certain degree of 'blurring' and does not constitute a defining feature of their self-consciousness.

A distinctive feature of the historical perceptions reflected in the sources examined is the evaluative attitude toward the historical events highlighted by the narrators. Such evaluations are only rarely connected with an objective analysis of the corresponding socio-political systems. The primary criterion is the narrator's lived experience in the past and its correspondence to a certain level on their own value scale, including the possibility of achieving personal goals and the observance or violation of their interests. Recollections of the Second World War and post-war Stalinism of Lithuanians in south-eastern Latvia born in the 1920s and the 1930s, just as of Latvians and other local residents, often reflect self-perception of being an object acted upon by overwhelming forces, whether Nazis, usually personified by Hitler, or Communists in the figure of Stalin. Traumatic experiences are associated with memories of the Holocaust and with a persistent sense of threat posed to local residents by an 'alien' authority. Living under conditions that offered no possibility of individual choice compelled the narrators to be cautious in their assessments and to refrain from unequivocal condemnation or, conversely, from the glorification of the actions of their contemporaries (for example, service in the Latvian Waffen-SS Legion or in the ranks of the Red Army). Trauma and tragic emotions are also linked to recollections of national partisans, mass deportations and other forms of repression, as well as the initial stage of the collectivisation of agriculture. For residents of pre-war Latvia, the possession of property, especially land in the case of rural inhabitants, was a guarantee of stability and a marker of high social status. It is therefore not surprising that the respondents expressed sincere indignation at the fact that Soviet authorities repressed people on the basis of their material prosperity and, in essence, deprived them of property under the guise of nationalisation and collectivisation.

It appears that in addition to the markers of ethnic and confessional identity, the generation of the Lithuanians who grew up in Latvia between the 1920s and the 1940s predominantly exhibits features of Latvian national identity rather than Soviet identity. Despite the diversity of specific situations recounted in the life histories, certain shared value orientations characteristic of the residents of Latvia born in the 1920s and the 1930s can be discerned, which influenced their self-identification: faith in God, tolerance toward others, and a pronounced respect for labour and private property, as well as practicality and a high valuation of material well-being, i.e., the factors that enable individuals to preserve dignity and self-sufficiency under any historical circumstances.

I believe that the principal factors that prevented the reconfiguration of national identity and enabled Lithuanians of the interwar generation to retain a sense of belonging to Latvia and to transmit it to subsequent generations over the fifty years of Soviet occupation were a shared historical experience and common values among local residents, as well as

the evident discrepancy between the communist utopia and the unattractive reality of 'socialism.' The contrast between the disordered and insecure life of the Soviet period and the memories of the 'Ulmanis era', idealised through the prism of childhood perception, nourished nostalgia for what had been lost. Consequently, at the turning point of history in the second half of the 1980s, Lithuanians stood out for their active participation among those who advocated the restoration of Latvia's state independence.

Thus, it may be argued that despite a certain degree of 'otherness', Lithuanians in south-eastern Latvia perceive themselves as members of the local society. Their worldview, while adding certain nuances, forms part of a broader shared social whole.

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IRĒNA SALENIECE

XX a. Latvijos lietuviai: vaizdavimas žodinės istorijos šaltiniuose

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami kai kurie Latvijoje gyvenančių lietuvių savimonės aspektai. Tyrimo tikslas – atskleisti dabartinės Latvijos teritorijoje gyvenančių lietuvių, kurių prisiminimai užfiksuoti žodinės istorijos šaltiniuose, savęs identifikavimo ypatybes ir tam tikrus tapatybės bruožus. Tyrimo objektas – respondentų savęs kaip lietuvių Latvijoje suvokimas ir jų XX a. istorijos supratimas.
Latvijos lietuvių mažuma analizuojama pasitelkiant iki šiol mažiau tirtus žodinės istorijos šaltinius, kurie atskleidžia tiek respondento prisimenamą praeities vaizdą, tiek jo tapatybės bruožus. Straipsnyje remiamasi Daugpilio universiteto Žodinės istorijos centro (*Daugavpils Universitātes Mutvārdu vēstures centrs* – DU MVC), įkurto 2003 m., žodinės istorijos šaltinių kolekcija, kuri užtikrina Pietryčių Latvijos gyventojų gyvenimo istorijų fiksavimą ir išsaugojimą, taip pat jų prieinamumą tyrėjams. Iki 2025 m. pabaigos DU MVC kolekcijoje yra 1 352 vietos gyventojų gyvenimo istorijos. Šiam tyrimui atrinkti interviu su respondentais, kurie nurodė etninę priklausomybę „lietuviai“ arba gimė Lietuvoje. Visi su apklaustaisiais susiję duomenys buvo anonimizuoti. Pasakojimų turinio, leksikos ir kitų kalbos priemonių, emocinių apraiškų, taip pat neverbalinės raiškos būdų analizė leidžia gana tiksliai nustatyti pasakotojo požiūrį į aprašomus faktus, t. y. atskleisti jo / jos tapatybės bruožus.
Nors respondentų etninė priklausomybė rodo tam tikrą „išblukimą“ ir nėra jų savimonę apibrėžiantis bruožas, jie išlaiko savo lietuviškos kilmės atmintį, taip pat aplinkybes, kuriomis šeima persikėlė iš Lietuvos į Latviją. Pripažinta išskirtinė lituanistinės mokyklos Latvijoje svarba kaip pagrindinio veiksnio, stiprinančio lietuvybės tapatybę tarpukariu. Tačiau interviu metu dauguma respondentų jau negalėjo laisvai kalbėti lietuvių kalba, o vėlesnės kartos jų šeimose lietuviškai nebekalba.
Tapatybė išreiškiama ir respondentų apmąstymuose apie XX a. istorinius įvykius, atskleisdama jų savęs identifikaciją ir požiūrį į kitus istorinio proceso dalyvius. Tarp Pietryčių Latvijos lietuvių, gimusių 1920–1930 m., Antrojo pasaulinio karo ir pokario stalinizmo prisiminimuose dažnai iškyla savęs, kaip objekto, paveikto didžiulių

jėgų – nacių ar komunistų, suvokimas. Trauminės patirtys siejamos su Holokausto, nacionalinės partizaninės kovos, masinių trėmimų ir kitų represijų, taip pat ankstyvųjų žemės ūkio kolektyvizacijos etapų prisiminimais. Nuolatinio grėsmės jausmo, kurį kelia „svetima“ valdžia, prisiminimais lietuviai dalijasi su latviais ir kitais bendraamžiais vietos gyventojais.

Lietuviams, užaugusiems Latvijoje 1920–1940 m., daugiausia būdingi Latvijos nacionalinio, o ne sovietinio identiteto bruožai. Pagrindiniai veiksniai, kurie neleido pertvarkyti nacionalinio identiteto ir padėjo tarpukario kartos lietuviams išlaikyti priklausymo Latvijos Respublikai jausmą bei perduoti jį ateities kartoms, buvo bendra istorinė patirtis ir bendros vietos gyventojų vertybės. Nepaisant tam tikro „kitoniškumo“, Pietryčių Latvijos lietuviai save suvokia kaip vietos visuomenės narius.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Latvija, lietuviai, etninė tapatybė, tautinė tapatybė, žodinė istorija