

Atis Lejiņš

A Guest of the KGB

I visited Riga in 1970 as a guest of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Countrymen Abroad. This made me somewhat of a pioneer, since very few Latvians had previously availed themselves of this opportunity. With the Soviet easing of travel restrictions on tourists and the subsequent "invasion" of Riga by hundreds of Latvians from the West, the Committee in 1970 was just bracing itself to carry out the role assigned to it by the Soviet secret police in order to cope with this challenge.

I accepted the invitation because I wanted to see and feel the country to whose cause I had committed myself while still a teenager. Though born in Latvia, I had no memories of it, as my parents had joined the millions of refugees fleeing to the West ahead of the advancing Red Army. I was a Latvian but did not know Latvia as a concrete phenomenon. The Latvian "cultural attaché" at the Soviet embassy in Stockholm offered me an attractive deal—room and board in Riga and the trip back to Sweden. All I had to do was get to Riga and then the Committee would take care of me. I was soon on my way.

I initially had no ambition to write a book about my confrontation with Soviet Latvia, nor to expose myself to the KGB's brainwashing process. However, Imants Lešinskis, chairman of the Committee, proved to be such a congenial conversationalist, so skillful in presenting the Soviet case, that I found myself going along with the program he had planned for me. I did take notes, albeit cryptic ones, on my sojourn. The result was a

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slim book published in Latvian in 1976, after first appearing in serial form in the largest Latvian newspaper in the West, *Laiks*. The publication put a stop to any more visits on my part to Riga. In other words, "higher circles" there were not amused about what I had to say about the Committee and Soviet Latvia.

In 1983 the Swedish version of my book appeared with two additions—a short commentary by Imants Lešinskis, who had in the meantime left the system he had so eloquently defended to me, and my own further comments on the work of the Committee, which I have opposed since 1970.

In his commentary to my book, Lešinskis confirmed my observations about Soviet Latvia and thanked me for portraying him as human and sympathetic. He noted that was exactly the impression the KGB had wanted him to leave on me. Lešinskis wrote:

In actual fact there was nothing humane in the discharge of my duties. I was a technocrat, a little Brezhnevian cog in an enormous machine built to deceive citizens from the West. Even though the modern tanks of the Russian empire had crushed to pieces Dubček's "socialism with a human face" in 1968, I did my best in 1970 to conjure up its human characteristics in my rigid face belonging to a bureaucrat from a remote and Russified Soviet province . . . the "arguments" of Soviet historians were fully put to use by the Soviet bureaucrat and KGB agent Imants Lešinskis in his conversations with Atis Lejiņš. It should be noted, however, that this representative of the new class had, for a long time already, himself no longer believed in a single one of these "arguments." . . . Atis Lejiņš's book is promising. It shows that a young man with adequate information is capable of discerning facts. In spite of the efforts of Soviet historians, statisticians, and others to warp reality, the signs showing the decline and breakup of the present Soviet empire are very clear.

In the following translated excerpts from my book, I have included only those arguments used by Lešinskis that are essentially the ones used by the Committee people even today.

Late Sunday evening I wander the city's half-empty streets. I can't put my thoughts together. If you really try you can hear, here and there, Latvian spoken in an otherwise Russian city. Would I, if I were not Latvian, know that this was Riga—I mean our Latvian Riga? You almost have the impression that this city is not even bilingual any longer, because most of the people you meet on the streets are Russian, and it is striking how most of the posters and film advertisements are also in Russian. Is it the end for us? I have felt myself to be a Latvian for eleven years, and where has that brought me?

I remember how Latvian consciousness awoke in me. It was in the unbelievable heat in the middle of the Australian desert on the banks of Australia's biggest river, the Murray. I was there on summer holidays far away from the big city and working with my relatives on their irrigated fruit plantation. Uncle Vincis had fought like a tiger to pull himself out of debt and drove me and my cousin to work from sunrise to sundown. We worked side by side, and my uncle sang Latvian songs almost without stopping. They were mostly soldiers' songs and ballads. He also didn't spare us any of the epithets he had acquired in the Latvian Legion, when my cousin and I began showing signs of weariness. In this way I came into contact for the first time with the real Latvian language and jargon. I remember especially that once, when we had really made an issue of our burdens, Uncle Vincis became angry and shouted that we should read *Dvēseļu putenis* [The tempest of souls], a historical novel by Aleksandrs Grīns. Then we would learn what a hard life was like.

The book was about the First World War and the Latvian War of Liberation. I had a hard time trying to read it at first, because the written Latvian language was then difficult for me to decipher. But I didn't give up, because the first pages already lifted me into another world. I was just as old as the hero of the book—sixteen—and just like him in love for the first time. When I came to the part where the Latvian battalion came up against the German troops, bells began to ring and I was gripped by a terrific sensation. With one leap I was with the boys in the trenches, face-to-face with the historical enemy and oppressor. When I finally finished reading the book, I arranged my life on a completely different track.

But here I am back in Riga's reality. Where shall I go? People live here, come and go with their worries and business, all are to themselves in their little worlds, but they are not my people. They are not Latvians. Yes, certainly, the names of the streets are in Latvian, but of what use is that? The great majority of the people probably don't even notice that—they read instead the Russian equivalent under the Latvian names. But there are 300,000 Latvians living in this city, according to official statistics! Where are they? Have they been pushed aside completely by the crowds of Russians in this city of 800,000? [Today the number is close to one million.] I return to the hotel and ask the gentleman in uniform standing at the entrance for directions to the men's room; not understanding, he shakes his head before launching into a long harangue in Russian. I reply in Latvian telling him where he can go!

It is a bitter feeling not to be here with my own relatives, with Latvians who could have greeted me and with whom I could have stayed. Now, instead, I am isolated in my own country, sitting in an old, run-down hotel, cut off from the life of the people. There are only two things left to do—either give up in despair or else strike back with renewed strength. The room is empty and dreary. It is night. Outside the noise of a car or tram can be heard now and then. Otherwise it is quiet. Out in the night the façade of the National Opera building is bathed in light from the spotlights.

"But Atis! You as a historian should know that the city of Riga, from a historical perspective, has never been Latvian. During the so-called years of independence, it was made Latvian artificially. It never has been Latvian and it cannot be Latvian. The geographical location of the city determines its international character. Besides, we have an expanding industry that demands the influx of new labor. Remember, Ulmanis also imported Polish workers to Latvia!" Thus spoke Imants Lešinskis.

[Kārlis Ulmanis was independent Latvia's dictator between 1934 and 1940. Before that he was a democrat and head of the Farmers' party and prime minister on several occasions, including in 1934 when he seized power in a bloodless coup without the knowledge of his party. He promised a new democratic constitution that would do away with the very many small parties

in the Latvian Parliament. However, no constitution had yet been drafted when the Soviet Union occupied Latvia in June 1940. It was under his leadership that the Red Army had been driven out of Latvia in 1919–1920. During the 1930s many Poles came to Latvia as agricultural workers because of the farm labor shortage in Latvia and because wages were higher than in Poland.]

Lešinskis is the chairman of the Committee, which has its offices at 11A Gorky Street. These are the rooms that once belonged to the Latvian Foreign Ministry. They are quite beautiful and designed in Latvian style. But now, well—different times, other customs!

I have it on the tip of my tongue to answer him by saying that Stalin himself once exclaimed that history was pronouncing judgment on the Baltic Germans, the old invaders of Latvia, by the increasing predominance of Latvians in Riga. Stalin once had to creep before the Latvian Bolsheviks to solicit their support. But now, apparently, it has become progressive to have Russians increasingly dominate Riga. However, I don't take it up. The laws of history are clear to all.

Our conversation can thus continue in a friendly and businesslike manner about questions of Latvian history, about the *strēlnieki*, the famous Latvian Rifle Regiments during the First World War, about Stalin's bloody purges, about the assimilation of Latvians in the West, and cultural developments in Latvia.

Lešinskis is a pleasant conversationalist. He is polite, intelligent in his use of persuasion techniques, and never upset or irritated by opposing viewpoints. His knowledge of Latvian problems, both those of independent Latvia and those of Latvians in exile, is profound. He claims that he studies history alongside his breadwinning journalistic work; that is why he is able to defend his opinions on Latvian history from the Soviet perspective.

Lešinskis is in his forties, but if he continues to chain-smoke, I have the definite feeling that he will not live too long. During our discussions he frequently scatters cigarette ashes on his rather faded, dark-blue suit and brushes them away with the back of his hand. Now and then he squints at me over the rim of his eyeglasses to make sure I have understood everything

correctly. In all, he makes a sympathetic impression, and his Latvian is certainly well polished.

We talk for over two hours, and when I leave I am convinced that at least this Soviet "functionary" is a true believer, a real Communist! Of course, he no doubt has recorded our conversation on tape. One could expect no less from the cultural section of the Latvian KGB.

I decide that I must now follow a strict schedule if I am to do some research and get to know the town. Imants Lešinskis and another comrade, Arte Jāne, offer me their help and I accept, although I don't really understand why they are paying me all this attention. Perhaps it is because I am rather active in the exile Latvian youth movement, and that I am hoping some day to write a book on the Latvian revolution of 1905.

After an excellent supper in the hotel restaurant with Imants, I run into some friends from America. Fantastic! Who would have ever thought, when we met one another at parties and other Latvian events many years ago, when we danced, sang, and drank, that one day our paths would cross again in Latvia itself! This would not have occurred to us even at the high point of our reveries!

I have already started to accustom myself to today's Latvian "Soviet Socialist Republic." The most pressing questions have been discussed. You can't just go on and talk about obvious things forever. The picture is clear and life goes on, in a hurry, but you yourself are not part of it. You are a foreign body here. Your steps do not take you in any specific direction—to school, work, home, the store. You wander about, and everybody hurries past you.

I look into shops and bookstores, sit for a while in cafés and the library, and work my way through the big department store built during Latvia's independence period. It is crowded all right, but differs enormously from the ones in the West. This is supposed to be a country where they have instituted socialism—the "best" social system for mankind! A system where the nationalities question is also said to have been resolved. Nevertheless, a store clerk berates me in Russian for persisting to speak Latvian. In general, people here are rather sullen and not especially polite and helpful.

I return to my hotel room and turn on the radio, which, by the way, I can't turn off completely. I can't find any bug hidden in it, though I probably would have to take the radio apart to find one. In any case, that's not where it would be hidden. It's no secret that listening devices are installed in rooms set aside for tourists. Everybody knows that. Still, not everybody remembers it.

So what is the radio saying today? The same old stuff: another victory is being celebrated in one factory or another; lengthy figures on production results are being announced, which without doubt prove that life is getting better and better. In foreign news the superior morality of the Soviet Union's policy of peace is once again demonstrated. We are the nice guys, the others are the scoundrels. . . . After a while you really begin to get the feeling that this is already 1984, because all the information coming from that box is identical with what is in the newspapers, and the papers duplicate one another. It is not true, however, that one can't buy foreign newspapers. They are available in the lobby of the Riga Hotel but are of little help. They come from the most trustworthy East European satellites.

Again alone. And that means once again an oppressive feeling of loneliness. This depressing condition is something new to me. I suppose it's because friends and real people are especially needed here. Big Brother is always looking and constantly following because he can never trust anybody. That is why everybody wears a uniform mask. I can well understand why people have such neuroses here. I can feel that by talking to people of the older generation, since simply talking with me means taking a risk. However, nobody knows who I really am. But the craziest thing of all is that, on the outside, everything seems as normal as anywhere in the West, if one ignores the material aspect and certain peculiar social norms. It also seems normal because the great majority here are Russians, and perhaps they would indeed be satisfied with Riga, their "little Paris," were it not that there are still too many Latvians around. An interesting question: What is the size of the Russian democratic opposition here?

Naturally, there are Latvians in Riga. After a while I definitely get the impression that there is quite a large minority, which is spread out all over the large city. But that inadvertently evokes

once again the crushing feeling that on the question of our nation's continued existence, the point of no return has already been reached.

Of course, that does not mean the end. As a minority in its own republic, the Latvian people would certainly be allowed to carry on a long time yet in the service of its gravedigger. And no doubt all kinds of cultural activities and games will be tolerated. But if I consider this from the perspective of the nation's existence, then the awful feeling does not go away.

The only positive sign is the younger generation that I have run into. Unafraid, bold, though careful. Fine people, but they are so few. Where are they? In their homes, at work, in the suburbs outside the center, working in the country? I once asked this question of a party functionary who was accompanying me to an event. His answer was that they come out of the woodwork only in the evenings and then can be seen in cafés and other places. It is interesting that the same functionary expressed concern about our assimilation in exile, what they call emigration. As if that were the big Latvian problem, and not what is going on here.

I still haven't crept under the blanket. I'm boiling. In my fantasy I am fighting Russians who come at me from all sides like black tidal waves and who stare at me with their stern, self-satisfied smirks of self-righteousness, of judges pronouncing sentence: You—you are a fascist! (However, if you become a "good" Latvian, we are ready to elevate you to the status of mankind!) I surrender in despair and fall, fall, and soon it will be all over. But then I pull myself together again and shoot up like an arrow and begin to hatch desperate plans to save all "bad" Latvians. Have I fallen in between the merciless grindstones already? Friends say that it is only natural to fall into a depression after the first few days. But you do survive, you certainly do. And then that little flame of spite gets ignited. A fire, if there is fuel around, needs just a little spark to get going. Now that is a "law of history" that I have learned quite well here.

From above I am pressed by the "functionaries," mainly the Committee—from below by the "people," or easily seen reality. The man turning the grindstones, a very discreet person, never

shows himself, but his presence can be felt in every nook and cranny.

I have to say that the arguments used by Imants Lešinskis have strength. Our dialogue—or rather, Imants's monologue—continues, with breaks, every day. Right now we are discussing Latvia's incorporation into the Soviet Union and its consequences. The striking thing is that there is some truth to what he says; he is relatively right on some questions; and he has some opinions that coincide even with the viewpoints of critics in exile.

Imants asks this question: "Why didn't the leading exile circles after the war distance themselves from the crimes perpetrated against humanity in Latvia during the war, including the shooting of Jews? You did have a 'self-administration' of sorts, didn't you, which makes it responsible together with the Germans for the crimes?"

"And what was the situation with Latvian aggressive retaliation against people accused of collaboration? Anybody 'anti-German' was automatically thought to be a Communist and from there on it was straight up against the wall. What would have happened if, for having had the slightest contacts with fascism under the Germans, Latvians would have been shot and hanged after the war?" (Well, Imants, wasn't there a thorough "combing" anyway? But he probably is trying to tell me that had the party gone all the way, not many Latvians would have been left over, for who hadn't, one way or the other, gotten mixed up with the Germans.)

And more from Imants: "But for us, who fought on the other side, and who have been endlessly defamed and accused by you for betraying the cause of the people—if we hadn't had our Red Rifles Corps and Communist party, then the Latvian people most certainly would have fared poorly after the Germans had been driven away, because how could you have shown the Russians then that all the Latvian people were not 'fascist'?"

"And, Atis, can there be any consideration either from the national, military, or political perspective that can justify submitting to German mobilization in 1943, when the scales of victory had already clearly tipped in favor of Russia? Wasn't that the height of folly, a suicidal act, which wiped out a whole

generation?" (But a wiser alternative, Imants, an all-encompassing guerrilla apparatus like that of the Lithuanians, wouldn't be to your liking either, because that would have cost the Red Army most dearly, as it did indeed in Lithuania. So we are left with the third alternative, greeting the other occupation army?)

Imants continues his arguments: "But if we are now talking about Latvian mutual destruction, why did the bandits shoot their own kinfolk who were put into office or who had received land allotments in the beginning under land nationalization? Were those poor beggars guilty? They would have been shot if they had not followed party directives. How many, Atis, were not shot by their own countrymen? We can understand fighting against Red Army units and the KGB, but what's so heroic about killing ordinary citizens?" (Yes, Imants, agreed, but let me ask, is this really not an attempt to discredit the guerrilla movement?)

[Here it is interesting to note what Lešinskis wrote in his memoirs in *Laiks* after his defection. He described how after the war he visited his aunt in the countryside and observed the activities of the guerrillas. Though he was a true Communist then, he found himself admiring their heroism and unselfishness in the face of complete annihilation. Lešinskis is of the opinion that the guerrillas lost because the Western powers were indifferent to the occupation of the Baltic states and did not give aid to the guerrillas.]

More from Imants: "We don't claim that we are without fault and haven't committed mistakes. But the party has admitted to these—Stalin's crimes, the deportations and repression—and if we can do it, why can't the older exile leadership do likewise? Especially about acts against Latvian Communists and one or two other things?"

At night I have to struggle against this syrup before dropping off to sleep. Many of the bricks in Imants's pyramid of arguments are good, but its foundation is hanging in the air. The party has never acknowledged and corrected Stalin's fundamental crime against the independence and sovereignty of three nations, carried out in league with Stalin's short-lived ally Hitler, which was the cause of all the subsequent evil and acts of atrocity committed by both sides. But you can't even mention the secret clause of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, because the Latvian peo-

ple made a revolution, you see, in the fateful year of 1940 in order to "join" the Soviet Union.

Imants acknowledges some of my objections against the Stalinist period but claims that today everything is different. For him the present system is the best one for the Latvian people, but he admits that there are financial difficulties, that there is a demographic threat to the Latvian people, and that the Latvian people have suffered excessive losses. But that's about all. When talking about Czechoslovakia, he plays the same old tune—socialism was saved there, etc., etc. And if people throw stones at Ulbricht from the West, then that is because he is so popular in East Germany, much to the chagrin of Western reactionary circles.

Sitting at the dinner table in the Riga Hotel where our discussion ended for the day after a sumptuous feast, I told Imants the anecdote about Dubček and Ulbricht in Brezhnev's stomach: Dubček was very surprised to find Ulbricht there, but comrade Ulbricht explained that he got in through the other end. Imants did not laugh.

But what's wrong with the people if they are living in the best of possible systems? You see hardly any joy in the construction of Communism, and where does the disguised fear come from? As a result of the war, "illegal repressive actions," the terror, deportations? Or does the KGB continue to work behind the scenes with its well-proven methods of keeping up the best system?

Why didn't I ask Imants why, if the Latvian Communists are that fine, the air is better in Tallinn and Vilnius? Is it because they haven't purged their parties of national Communists, as happened in Riga in 1959–1960, and replaced them with Russians or Balts born or raised in Russia who can hardly speak their native languages?

Riga is an ideal city for me. I have traveled about and lived in many of the world's cities and still I must confess that according to my taste, Riga and its beaches are second to none in the world. Not too big, not too small, and beautiful notwithstanding the run-down condition and grayness.

I would very much like to stay in Riga for a while, work, do anything, so that I could become acquainted with the Latvian

land, city, and people. But I'm not free to do that. "With us it's different. . . ." This reality of Soviet Latvia is like a stone wall, against which you bang your head in vain. The official reason for the prohibition on my staying is that it would be very hard for a person who has grown up in another social system to adapt himself to the socialist order of things in Soviet Latvia. In addition, staying would mean taking an apartment away from a local Latvian who had earned it more than I. Perhaps, in very rare cases, exceptions can be made—for instance, if the immigrant possesses special skills and know-how that are needed here. Now I wonder what the good people at the United Nations would say about this kind of discrimination against a countryman wanting to emigrate back to his own country, while at the same time the state facilitates immigration of foreigners from Russia and the other Soviet republics? (They, of course, do not take away any living space from the locals. . . .)

If the Committee for Cultural Relations with Countrymen Abroad is not interested in me as a Latvian, why are they interested in me?

I somehow can't get things straight in my head tonight. Everything is turning around as in a cement mixer. It is only with great effort that I can imagine, looking through this window, what life in Riga looked like during independence. In the final analysis, it was only a moment in the long history of the Latvian people, when, after many centuries, they became masters of their own house again. And that moment disappeared in the flow of time long ago.

The Africans had the whites on their backs for a few centuries before they were driven off. And where they are still lording it over the Africans, much of the world sympathizes with and supports the Africans until the liberation struggle gains the upper hand. But for the Latvian people, the long oppressive night rolls on. Behind the lonely statue of liberty with its hands raised upward toward the black heavens, the piercing party neon slogan screams out in red: "Long Live the Communist Party of the USSR!"

It appears that Moscow does not feel that secure in its new policy toward America. It is afraid that the understanding with the United States is only superficial. "Crazy circles" are supposed

to exist in the United States, which could change or influence the administration's policy of conciliation with the Soviet Union. I take it that by "crazy circles," Imants means all those who express the least criticism of the USSR. Latvians in America are one such group that is very negative toward the government of the USSR and hence "reactionary" and "revanchist." They are dangerous because they could influence larger and more powerful American circles, which are capable of changing the United States policy of friendship toward the USSR.

Now if the Latvians were an isolated critical group, they wouldn't be interesting to the present masters in Latvia. But they are not the only ones, and together with others they are harming the Soviet Union's interests in America. In this wider context, the Latvians must be opposed. The ultimate goal, of course, would be to divert them onto the opposite course, onto the path of friendship with the USSR as laid down by Moscow. The minimum aim would be at least to neutralize their political thrust. And this is where the Committee can step in with a helping hand.

It does make sense. The most natural way for Moscow to influence the groups in America that are ethnically related to its subject peoples would be by way of ethnic, i.e., organic connections. The means: culture under the slogans of peace and freedom. And being a progressive young man, my duty would be to work for friendship between the major nations and peoples. Well, in politics they're not so dumb in Moscow! You can say what you like, but politics for them is a program that they carry out according to a well-laid plan.

Apart from cultivating friendship, the Committee justifies its existence in two other ways: Riga cannot be indifferent to the fate of the eight to ten percent of the Latvian people living overseas—which, I suppose, means that they should not disappear. The other reason is that it is not nice that Latvians overseas lie about the USSR. Well, of course, lies should be combatted if they indeed are lies. But what about that approximate eight percent living spread out all over the big "Motherland" (USSR), outside the borders of the small "motherland" (Latvia) if borders are what you can call them? Why no concern for them? Because they are not telling fibs about the USSR?

And anyway, isn't it about time to start worrying about the future prospects of the "basic Latvian nation" in Latvia?

Comrade Lešinskis is a man who can explain convincingly how Soviet power returned to Latvia at the close of the war. There were those against and those for, but the majority of the people wanted to see what would happen. At least it could not be any worse than under the Germans. Without a doubt some groups had been thoroughly persecuted under the German occupation and the so-called Latvian self-administration. Apparently Imants belonged to this category, which is why he greeted the return of the Soviets with real enthusiasm. (But there was also an underground against the Germans that did not greet the Soviets with any degree of enthusiasm.) And in the middle of all this, you had the tendency toward a fratricidal settling of accounts, of revenge. A Latvian killing another Latvian because he was pro-German or pro-Russian. And why was he so? Because the damned ideology stood above everything else, and accounts had to be settled. A foreign ally had to be chosen; aid was needed.

But what about those in the middle—those who were only pro-Latvian? They got it from both sides, without any ally standing behind their backs.

Undoubtedly, I am exaggerating, because I didn't live in those times. I know that Latvians aided Latvians in spite of sharp ideological conflicts even at the risk of losing their lives. But we cannot afford to do what the large nations can. We are too small. Our particular circumstances should dictate to us that we are all, in the first place, pro-Latvian, and everything else comes after that. When talking about the Second World War, then, we should not get ourselves mixed up with German or Russian nationalism, no matter how and in what forms they are disguised.

The official exile ideology has been reticent on just how many Latvians fought on the other side. For a long time, it was possible to deny that there were any. Only Russians fought in the Red Latvian divisions. But I met a former officer who had fought in the division that stopped the Germans right outside Moscow. All of them were Latvian boys, who, like the officer, had fled from Latvia. They had voluntarily, to a greater or lesser extent,

gotten mixed up with the first Soviet occupation. What the devil did they know about Stalin's socialism? When they did find out how it worked in the Soviet Union itself, they were ready to crawl back to Latvia on all fours to kiss Ulmanis's big toe. Initially, the Germans were shooting the Soviet Latvian deserters, until the Latvian boys piled up German corpses in such stacks that the Wehrmacht reconsidered in a hurry and offered Latvian deserters peace in Latvia. The officer together with his forty men then crossed the front. At the end of the war, he arrived in Sweden with his skin still intact. But what about those left in the hell of Moscow's defense? When the Germans had been beaten back, those who were still alive received honors: a special red flag; all kinds of medals and scrap; and the designation of "guards" for their division. However, these things don't give birth to Latvian children, and Latvian soldiers were again slaughtered under foreign command. And the depleted Latvian ranks were filled by Russians.

Perhaps many of these former riflemen, who managed to stay alive during the war, deeply regret their struggle. But do we have in exile any who likewise regret fighting in the blue-gray German longcoats? And what about those who fooled these young men and helped the Germans mobilize them? Our boys sang bravely as they marched: "We will first beat the hell out of the Russians; after that, we'll take on the Germans." And what a beating they took themselves!

All these thoughts run through my mind as my talks with Imants Lešinskis continue on the banks of the beautiful Gauja at Sigulda. We have finished off two bottles of wine, one for each of us, and that really loosens our tongues in opening up sensitive questions. For my part I press him mostly about the bleak future prospects of the Latvian nation, in response to which Imants interjects that we in the West should send a youth "brigade" to Latvia to promote a higher birthrate for Latvians here. What does he mean by that? Is it the fault of the Latvians that the nation is dying? People cannot be isolated from the social system in which they live. That is also to blame. On the other hand, why do Lithuanians reproduce themselves in such numbers? Because the majority of them still live in the countryside and are Catholic?

In the evening comrade Jāne escorts me to a concert in the Riga Cathedral. On the way she queries me a lot about the European Latvian Youth Association and its statutes. She mentions on several occasions the statute about the restoration of independence to Latvia and implies that it is not good. I formulate my answers carefully because now I see that the comrades have a system for working me over. Everyone has his or her assignment. She listens to my answers attentively. I have to admit that almost no one has shown such interest in and attentiveness to me before!

Finally she asks me the inevitable—what is my position on the independence statute? I, naturally, stand unswervingly for the right of nations to self-determination; I am here in Latvia to investigate if the Latvian people have that right. (You wouldn't have anything against that, would you?)

I must admit that Arte Jāne leaves me with the impression that she is a true believer in the Communist faith. Seems incredible, but there you have it—one more real Communist. Yet a person like all others. In addition, a friendly and polite woman. Works hard. Can anybody like that be bad? After all, everybody has to earn his keep. I do, however, notice that she is a little nervous—if only everything goes well with me in her fulfillment of the party's directives.

There you have it: two Latvians belonging to opposite political poles. But there is one more essential difference in our politics. I don't deny her or Lešinskis their right to be Communists and to belong to a Communist party. But they deny my political rights, in fact, my very political existence. Here there are only two alternatives—either you become a Communist or a "non-party person"; in both cases, you deliver yourself completely to the one and only party.

But what's the point in arguing with them about this closed, totalitarian way of thinking? Imants says that the Latvian people have no other alternative than the one they find themselves in now. And that is a fact. The past determines the present and that is simply how it is. But why could not Moscow have chosen the Finnish alternative for Latvia? Or the Polish People's Republic alternative? Why didn't the "people's revolution" in Poland demand the incorporation of Poland into the Soviet Union,

as happened in the Baltic states? Actually, the choice of alternatives could have been left to the people themselves. I'm sorry. For a while I got carried away and forgot that my consciousness has been conditioned by my bourgeois upbringing. The party is infallible, and my people belong to the progressive part of mankind that is building a new world. There is nothing else to do other than accept the facts, say "thank you," be merry—and serve.

Imants wants me to understand that they, the party people, are doing a great service for the Latvian nation. They guarantee to Moscow that the Latvian people are politically safe; otherwise they would really get it. Moscow is not carrying out a Russification policy, but is, instead, simply following a policy of uprooting hostile elements, because it fears the re-emergence of anti-Russian feeling.

Imants does not observe historical facts in his argumentation. Little independent Latvia never threatened the Russian Goliath. That is a fact that not even the world's biggest fools can deny. It is also a fact that Latvia allowed the Russian armed forces to have bases on Latvian territory, an amazing precedent for a neutral state. Sweden, for instance, would never allow anything like that. And it was not because of "elements hostile" to Moscow that Latvia was swallowed into the fraternal community, but instead because of a Soviet conspiracy with "friendly" elements in the Third Reich, with Hitler and Ribbentrop. Neither the Latvian government nor its people were consulted. Is it then so surprising that, after enjoying the tender mercies of Stalin under the first occupation, one or two Latvians overreacted in their strivings to avenge the deportation and torture of their loved ones?

Besides, the Latvian national army with its reserves would have defended Latvia much better against the German armies on their way to Russia because it would have had the wholehearted backing of the Latvian people. The purged Red Army didn't exactly distinguish itself in this regard. Russia could have felt itself much more secure because Latvian partisans would have continued to battle the Wehrmacht. You can thank your infallible party that the exact opposite took place. But this the

party will never admit while it has imperialist interests in the Baltic.

I'm sorry, the "hostile elements" are to be found elsewhere. The horse goes before the cart, not the cart before the horse.

It is interesting to see what happens if I "switch" sides by way of experiment. If you succumb to the pressure and accept the party line, then the millstone around your heart disappears as if by magic. The depression evaporates. It is replaced by bright panoramas; the world is perceived in completely different colors—without fear, without tension. It is sometimes even uplifting. You lose all inclination to associate yourself with the poor wretches who struggle in vain against the historically determined, correct social system.

But as soon as you reject this temptation, you are thrown back into hell, the seething and screaming hell, with yourself a tiny bit being thrown about in the deepest bottom of the mincing machine. Fat chance of getting at the hand turning the handle!

The continuation of the conversation goes like this: "Russia would be mad to try to destroy the most productive nation in the Soviet Union. That would really be a stupid policy because it would hurt Russia itself." (That's right, Imants, let the hard-working serfs slave away, as long as they know their place. Any rebellious elements will be snuffed out!)

Then there is the unending use of statistics (which, by the way, are taken from the first half of 1940) to compare the period of Latvia's independence with the period when Soviet power already blossomed and bloomed. It shows with what intensity they try to prove that Soviet Latvia is better than independent Latvia, as if they had a bad conscience. It must be proved above all else that today you have much better figures, which is supposed to mean that today you must be much happier.

I am beginning to suspect that behind this unceasing comparative exercise with "bourgeois" Latvia something vital is hidden. I mean, they are completely crazy in this regard. Why? To justify something evil? All right, maybe today people in Soviet Latvia do live better than in the Latvia of 1938–39, from a material perspective. After all, thirty years have passed. But one thing is absolutely clear. There can be no comparison whatso-

ever between Latvia and the Soviet Union at that time. Bread in Latvia was cheaper. So what could the Soviet Union offer the Latvian people in 1940? A lower living standard? Is that what people want when they make revolution? And who benefited from all that followed, when people would be living much better today in Latvia if Latvia had followed Europe's democratic way?

How do you admit this terrible mistake? A person can live only once. You can't "rehabilitate" a spent life and say, "Sorry, we goofed. Let's begin anew and live better!" The dead cannot be brought back to life either, nor can we bring forth all the potential children of those adults who perished. All in vain!

Therefore you must block with the full power of the state any possibility that the younger generation might begin objectively to evaluate, analyze, and critically appraise everything that has to do with independent Latvia. For that you have your wonderful dialectical materialism. But simultaneously you must overtake the Western democracies at any price, where under capitalism there is more real socialism than in the "first socialist country." Then you would have concrete proof that everything had not been in vain!

Perhaps that is the sword of Damocles under which all these Soviet propagandists of statistics are sweating? How much better would it have been if that damned independent Latvia would never have been! Now you have to mess about with this confounded comparative business as long as the Latvian nation still exists.

There are economic arguments that go along with this stating of statistics. Imants asks, "Which country in the world would be interested in Latvia's industrial goods? Only Russia, that is, the Soviet Union. Have you thought about what would happen after 'liberation'? Also, under Ulmanis an artificial agricultural policy was forced on Latvia that held back the living standard. Latvia was a little Afghanistan. Ulmanis had to go because that was the precondition for an industrial boom. It costs something to import raw materials, and the finished goods are needed by those who sell the raw materials. Consequently Russia needs Latvia, and Latvia needs Russia. The market itself dictates this. Other countries do not need Latvia."

Again the syrup. It tries to find the smallest opening by which to squeeze itself into the cells of your consciousness, so that you won't be able to think positively about independence any more. I hold out: "Imants, about Afghanistan I have to give the Soviet Union a zero. Even for Soviet propaganda, such a comparison is bad. But if Latvia's goods are an unknown quantity in Europe, whom do we have to thank for that? I do, however, have to give you credit for this question, and our economists ought to start thinking about it. Of course, much would depend on whether there would be democracy also in Russia, with whom Latvia could establish genuine and friendly relations. But that won't be easy—giant neighbors have always been more or less of a plague. But let's have a few more words about the necessity of replacing Ulmanis. Logic is lacking in your argument. Granted, Kārlis had to go, but was it done in the right way when Latvia's national authoritarian regime was replaced by a Russian national dictatorship run by a brutal mass murderer? That is something even more than just interference in the internal affairs of another country. If Russia had clear economic interests in liquidating independent Latvia's regime, then that is colonialism and imperialism! What happened then to the principle of self-determination? Wasn't a Latvian change of government a Latvian affair?"

I say goodbye to the taxi driver who took me to the airport and soon I am high above Riga. I look down upon the old land of the Latvians and try to imagine what happened in 1940: a giant military force marched into the country; the label of "socialist revolution" was pinned on it; a new government was proclaimed that could articulate only one word, "yes"; then the whole country was swallowed up—lo and behold, the Latvian people had been liberated! And if you happen not to like that, you'll get a bloody nose. Now that is something! Too bad that Latvia was occupied at the wrong time when everybody was looking the other way. But who gives a damn about us today? We are an issue too uncomfortable even for defenders of small states.