

The background of the entire cover is a close-up, slightly blurred image of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in a dynamic, waving pattern. The colors are vibrant, with deep blues, bright whites, and rich reds.

**Politics of a  
Refugee Community**

**AMERICAN**

**LATVIANS**

*Ieva Zake*

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# **AMERICAN LATVIANS**

## Preface

This book is a product of my more than a decade long interactions with the American Latvian community involving both informal observations and formal research. I began writing about the American Latvians in 1995 when I arrived in the United States as an exchange student. One of my very first papers written at University of Michigan was for an anthropology class where I used the American Latvian community in nearby Toledo, Ohio as the subject of my study. Their efforts at preserving Latvian identity, their cultural events and political meetings fascinated me. Everything they did seemed strangely familiar and alien simultaneously. Having grown up in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia and strongly identifying as a Latvian I felt tightly connected to these exiles' dedication to maintaining their ethnic identity. At the same time, I was frequently reminded about the many ways in which we were fundamentally different.

Admittedly, I had heard about American Latvians while growing up under the Soviet regime during the 1970s and '80s. Most of what I was had been exposed to was extremely critical of them. The Soviets perceived Latvian émigrés as a threat and disseminated vitriolic propaganda against them. As most Soviet citizens, I was well trained at distrusting, but never openly questioning what I was told by the Communist regime. Undoubtedly, the vigilance of Soviet anti-émigré propaganda heightened my and other Latvians' interest in the exiles. The fact that the Soviets disliked and feared Latvians in the West so intensely made them appear powerful and almost heroic. At the same time, I knew that although Latvians in the West were "Latvians," they were also "Westerners" and therefore very much not like me and anyone I knew. I was not completely sure if I could trust them and whether they trusted me. Overall, Soviet Latvians, including me, carried notably ambiguous and often confusing perceptions of the émigré community.

I had first met a number of American Latvians during the early 1990s when they visited Latvia in increasingly bigger numbers. Just as I had

anticipated, they were different from us. They spoke with a funny accent (it actually became a running joke among Latvians in Latvia to imitate the way that American or Canadian Latvians would always insert “uh” when speaking in Latvian). They were loud and unrestricted in their manners and laughed in public like nobody in Latvia would dare. They were smart and interesting and knew a whole lot of things that most of Latvia’s Latvians had never heard of. My parents attended a couple of lectures given by distinguished émigré professors from the U.S. and talked for days about the ideas of democracy, liberty and free market that they had learned from these outsiders. The visiting exiles represented to me, my parents and majority of Latvians in Latvia, a life that we were longing for and yet did not know how to get there. Unsurprisingly, American Latvians were admired and envied by the Latvians who were slowly emerging from the grips of the Soviet regime.

At the same time, Latvians in Latvia could not help but notice that on many occasions Latvians from the West were clueless about our life in the USSR. American Latvians seemed so sheltered and unaware of the difficulties that Latvians in Latvia had gone through. Moreover, in the interactions between the émigrés and the locals, it increasingly seemed that American Latvians looked down on Latvia’s Latvians as badly educated, brain-washed and mentally unhealthy paupers in a dire need for salvation. And it appeared that the émigrés perceived themselves as the only hope for any improvement in Latvia. In response to this perceived arrogance on the part of the émigrés, Latvians in Latvia harbored feelings of resentment. Some began saying that the exile Latvians had chosen the easy way out by fleeing the Soviets. Others were angry that the Latvians in the West had betrayed Latvians under the Soviet rule. As noted, Latvians in Latvia had very mixed feelings about American Latvians and other Latvians from the West and these sentiments began reaching the surface of the public discussions with increased regularity. In fact, they continue still today.

When I arrived in the U.S. my attitudes had been greatly influenced by these emerging conflicts between the two parts of the Latvian nation. I could not help but become aware of my differences from the American Latvians. To be sure, they treated me extremely well and welcomed me. Yet, I was unable to immerse myself into their community. Our experiences simply could not be matched and I often felt like an outsider although we all spoke the same language and shared a culture and an ethnic identity. Consequently, in my interactions with the American Latvian community I always remained a neutral observer. I was sympathetic, but

I was not taking sides in the internal conflicts of the community. I understood them, but I was not one of them. Although sometimes frustrating, this disconnection, I believe, was actually helpful in the writing of this book. In it, I am engaged and sympathetic to the American Latvians, but I am also analytic and not emotionally attached.

When I began studying the American Latvian community as a professional sociologist I was quite surprised to find how little academic writing was available on this émigré community. It seemed that refugee groups such as Latvians had arrived in the U.S. and become adapted to its culture and social context without anyone noticing them. While many other American ethnic groups received lots of attention from many different perspectives, it appeared that émigrés such as Latvians or other Eastern Europeans of the post-World War II period were strangely non-interesting to academics, journalists or politicians.

These refugees had never complained or asked for help, they had worked hard and pushed themselves to succeed. They had sent their children to college and accomplished a comfortable middle class standard of living. And exactly because they had been so successful, they had become invisible as a distinctive ethnic group. However, the more I looked at their case, the more apparent it became that they were a truly unique minority with a compelling story to tell. They had a strong and persistent ethnic self-understanding and a sophisticated organizational network. They were articulate, mobilized, politically active and intellectually vigorous. They were also loyal to the United States and strong supporters of American values and political principles. They were a model minority that rarely received any acknowledgment. This book is my attempt to correct the omission of American Latvians from the literature about ethnicity in the United States and to offer a take on the nature of this ethnic community and its controversial place in American political context. The book argues that one of the most important factors that allowed American Latvians to preserve their ethnic identity was their well-defined political position. At the same time, their complex politics might have also been the reason for why they had remained intentionally or not unnoticed by the scholars of American ethnic history and sociology of immigration.

I hope that this book shows that by studying small immigrant and refugee groups such as American Latvians we can gain a highly valuable perspective on American immigration and problems of ethnicity. The book therefore is intended as both a contribution to the literature by and for the émigré community itself and the larger knowledge about the plurality of American society as a whole.

I would like to acknowledge that the research for this book was partially funded by the Non-Salary Financial Support Grant (in 2005/2006 and 2007/2009) of Rowan University and by the Emerging Scholars Grant (2009/2010) of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies. Most of the archival research was carried out at the Immigration History Center in University of Minnesota and I am grateful to its Director Dr. Donna Gabaccia and archivists Halyna Myroniuk and Daniel Necas for their enormous help. The Center generously provided me with two Grants-in-Aid to carry out research in its archives. Many thanks go to Valters Nollendorfs and Andris Strautmanis for helpful leads and suggestions as well as to the extremely supportive and interested audiences at my two research-in-progress presentations at the Immigration History Research Center in February of 2007 and April 2009. I would like to acknowledge the research and editorial contributions of my undergraduate assistants Laila Bundza and Graham Gormley. I am also indebted to the audiences at the 66<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America at Philadelphia in 2008, 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies at Indiana University in 2008, the 123<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association at New York City in 2009, the Eastern Sociological Society's meeting at Philadelphia in 2007 and the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association for the Baltic Studies at Washington DC in 2006. They heard various parts of this book and offered helpful insights and criticisms. Finally, earlier versions of parts of this volume appeared in the book "Anti-Communist Minorities in the U.S.: Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees" (Palgrave-Macmillan 2009), the *Journal of Baltic Studies* and the *Journal of Cold War Studies*.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Irving Louis Horowitz and the editorial board at Transaction Publishers for their interest in this book project. Special thanks go to my editor, Andrew McIntosh, for his efforts in seeing this book to its publication.

Finally, I am indebted to numerous American Latvians who were willing to participate in this study and provided me with invaluable insight into their experiences. The book is dedicated to the émigré Latvians who inspired me to come to study in the U.S. and who took care of me when I got here—Ilze Kļaviņa, Rūta Kļaviņa, Ilze Švarca, and Agnese and Kārlis Bomis.

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## Introduction

As a rule, Latvians in America call themselves American Latvians, not Latvian Americans. This name has a larger significance—it reflects the self-perception of the community. It shows that Latvians in America privilege their ethnic identity over their host country and it also signals the importance that the refugee status plays in how they define themselves. 80 percent of Latvians in the United States are descendants of political refugees from the destroyed Europe of post-World War II.<sup>1</sup> They came to the U.S. as the Displaced Persons, grateful to be accepted and thus able to escape the onset of the Soviet regime. This flight had not been their choice. They were forced out of their homeland and while trying to make a new life in the United States, most of them were convinced that they were there only until it would be safe to go back home. Therefore they accepted the American context, but did not immerse themselves in it completely. They resisted assimilation also because they believed that they might be the only Latvians left after the Soviet occupation, forced Russification, political prosecution and deportations in their homeland. Consequently, the refugee mindset remained strong even when the émigrés and their children had a chance to return to Latvia in the 1990s. Most of them did not, but they continued to call themselves American Latvians thus preserving the refugee identity as the foundation of their community. This phenomenon suggests that there is something unique about the population of refugees that sets them apart from other immigrants. The present book deals with specifically political aspects of this difference.

Research on American immigration and ethnic groups has greatly expanded in the recent decades. For example, the newsletter of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society that comes out about twice a year regularly lists close to a hundred books and articles recently published on the issues of immigration and various aspects of ethnicity in the United States. This growth of empirical research has fostered a notable expansion of theoretical discussions about the nature of immigration

and differences among immigrant groups. One of the aspects relevant for this particular study is the debate about the meaning and place of the category of “refugee” in immigration history and sociology.

The older perspective on this issue has been called a realist approach. It made a straight-forward proposition that immigrants were usually people who pursued economic gains through migration. In other words, immigrants were those who chose to leave and who had the possibility of returning to their homeland if they wished so. Refugees, on the other hand, were people who had been driven out of their countries due to political reasons such as wars, military occupations, ethnic violence etc. Peter Rose, who represented the realist perspective, put it simply that immigrants were pulled out of their homeland, while refugees or exiles were forced out.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the basic difference between the two populations, according to the realists, was that refugees faced political pressure and their fate had been decided by someone else. They would not have left if they had not been made to by some highly negative political circumstances. The immigrants instead were the people who made the decision to leave for themselves and usually due to economic reasons.

The nominalist or social constructionist perspective rejected the distinction between the two populations.<sup>3</sup> Some of the early critiques of the realist perspective were introduced by the world systems theory, which argued against the dichotomy “because political conditions can cause the economic problems that lead to migration.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, both refugees and immigrants were pressured to leave because their countries (notably those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) were in continuous economic distress caused by the political inequality between the First and the Second and Third Worlds. In other words, economy was political as well for the nominalists. They expanded their argument to propose that the title “refugee” was merely a bureaucratic label, which certain governments had put on specific immigrant groups in order to treat them differently than the rest of the migrating population. Sociologically there were no clear-cut differences between immigrants and refugees according to the nominalist perspective. The distinction had been socially constructed by the states—both the homelands and the hosts—following specific, usually foreign policy related, political motives. As a result, refugees were welcomed with positive immigration policies, while immigrants were harassed and deported. At the same time, the countries from which the people were leaving treated immigrants as merely a transitory phenomenon and encouraged contacts with them, while refugees were defined as traitors who had put their selfish interests above those

of their nation. In addition, a number of international organizations and various legal institutions had been developed to perpetuate and enforce these constructed differences between the two groups. In sum, as argued by the nominalists, the category "refugee" was ultimately just a label invented to create politicized distinctions among immigrants, while in reality they were more similar than different.

Both realist and nominalist perspectives had certain conceptual advantages and disadvantages. Realists' research generated reliable evidence that effectively described the circumstances surrounding refugees' decisions to leave. In particular, the realist perspective was good at showing how the emergence and destruction of nation-states and conflicts among them triggered refugee movements. The realists were also successful at demonstrating that refugee experience was significantly different from that of other immigrants. For example, the realist-oriented research was able to prove that the trauma of flight and exile had a lasting impact on the formation of the refugee identity. The realists acknowledged that the treatment of refugees by their host countries was often politically determined, however the realists argued that this did not mean that the category "refugee" as such was merely a product of government policy. To them, it was an effective way to describe and analyze attitudes of the host society toward particular immigrants. According to realists, it was important to remember that refugees were people who could not go back even if they wanted to and this situation had major consequences in terms of their behavior in the host country including the networks they built and the extent of their accommodation. One of the major problems with the realist perspective was that it generated studies on specific cases, which failed to make generalizable conclusions about global immigration processes.

The nominalist approach was stronger in this respect. Its research revealed general patterns of international migration and adaptation in the context of complex relations between nation-states. The nominalist position was supported by research that showed how nation-states imposed cohort differences on immigrants and refugees by admitting them in waves and thus restructuring their communities. The nominalist writing also pointed out that there was little difference in how immigrants and refugees used social networks and family connections when deciding about their destinations. In sum, they demonstrated that assimilation process was very much alike for the two groups and that the label "refugee" had no significant effect on how particular immigrants adapted to the new situation.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, this book contributes to the realist perspective, which has fallen into a disfavor due to the influence of social constructionism in the sociology of immigration. To counter this tendency, the present study builds upon the traditional concepts of Peter Rose's "sociology of exile."<sup>6</sup> He agreed with nominalists that the politics of rescue, that is, the process of developing immigration legislation and practices in the host country, played important role in defining who counted as a refugee and how they were treated. However, he stressed the importance of such aspects of the refugee experience as perpetual sense of loneliness, the loss of control over their own destinies, the startling realization that they were a minority in the host country, which complicated their relations with the host society, as well as the refugees' self-centeredness and preoccupation with their fate. These experiences had undeniably strong impact on the lives of refugee groups and therefore, according to Rose, warranted a conceptual approach that distinguished refugees (exiles, émigrés) from immigrants. This study utilizes Rose's insights and offers additional empirical evidence to strengthen his approach.

In particular, this book points out that one of the most significant, though often overlooked, characteristics of exiled groups is their political activism. For example, this book provides ample evidence that refugees unlike immigrants are politically engaged and mobilized right from the arrival in the new country. In fact, this book supports Cheryl Benard's contention that life within a refugee community is "governed by its own 'foreign' and 'domestic' politics,"<sup>7</sup> that is, refugee groups are almost like nations or polities by themselves with their own political realities and processes.<sup>8</sup> The largest part of this internal political activism of the refugee groups deals with retaining a strong connection to the homeland. Refugees often keep double citizenships or see themselves as members of two different nations for much longer than immigrants do. In those cases when the political entity they left behind no longer exists, refugees actively work to preserve their lost country both in their memories and their politics. Thus, refugees are much more likely to act as "governments-in-exile"<sup>9</sup> than other immigrant populations. This also means that refugees are more likely than immigrants to create a double identity in which they successfully assimilate socially and economically, but refuse to adapt culturally and politically. This does not mean that they do not participate in the political processes of the host land. Exactly the opposite is true—they often are a lot of more politically engaged and active than the rest of the host country's society. However all of their attitudes and forms of activism are governed by their refugee condition, that is, they

make political decisions not on the basis of domestic considerations of the host country, but rather due to foreign policy considerations. Refugees tend to be concerned first and foremost about how one or another policy will impact the situation in the homeland.<sup>10</sup> The present book provides ample evidence of this process in the American Latvian community.

Latvians in America remained tightly connected to their occupied homeland. In fact, their pro-Americanism was rooted in the belief that the U.S. was the only true friend of their Communist-dominated country. So they were proud Americans because it was extremely important for them to remain Latvians. Their experience in the U.S. was determined by their sense of being the possible very last carriers of Latvian ethnic identity. Thus their personal and their nation's past continued to play a significant role in how they built their future in the host country. Interestingly, this tendency did not decrease with new generations of Latvian émigrés, which indicated that their pattern of assimilation was distinct from what is usually expected of immigrant groups.

In addition, similarly to other refugee groups, Latvians in America were fairly homogeneous community and they migrated as whole families, when possible. Their family networks played an important role not only in terms of creating a tightly knit community, but also in replicating certain class-based behaviors in the host country. The social and cultural cohesion of this refugee group had a long lasting impact on their ethnic identity. Latvians in America represented a selective stratum of the inter-war Latvian society—mainly the upper and middle classes with a very high proportion of politicians, public figures and intellectuals among them. Due to this, they immediately formed numerous political and cultural organizations and founded a multitude of periodical publications. Every small group printed a newspaper, a literary magazine, a children's paper and a church newsletter. These exiles had strong opinions and they were used to expressing themselves. They wrote, read and eagerly discussed each other's publications. This helped the American Latvian community that did not live in ethnic enclave to nevertheless maintain strong social, intellectual and cultural ties.

Apart from shedding light on the debate about differences between refugees and immigrants, this study makes other contributions to the larger understanding of American history, history of immigration and sociology of ethnic groups. One of the most valuable areas that are explored in this book is the nature of the cold war in the U.S. The book aims to de-emphasize the importance of governments and state institutions when studying the cold war period, but instead focus on the people's

lived experiences during this time. This approach, for example, pays a lot of attention to the nature of propaganda in the two countries and its impact on the way Americans and Soviet citizens perceived themselves and each other. This book acknowledges that, of course, the cold war was “fought” on the higher echelons of the U.S. and USSR leadership and it was a dramatic military and political opposition. But, as it is shown here, the cold war also played itself out in the cultural and social lives of people who were not directly connected to the governments of their countries.

In the case of Latvians in America, the micro-level internal dynamic of their community was powerfully impacted by the macro-level processes of the cold war era. As refugees from the USSR, Latvian émigrés not only engaged in political activism against communism and on behalf of the American interests, but they also directly felt the pressure of the Soviet state, which tried to use them for espionage and propaganda purposes. At the same time, American Latvian community mobilized itself and invested a lot of time, energy and financial resources in preserving American anticommunist stance, which in the post-McCarthy era caused them to become labeled as right-wing fanatics. In fact, the story of American Latvians reveals much about the changing American relations with both domestic and international communism during the cold war. Furthermore, a careful historical and sociological analysis of American Latvians illuminates the complex reality behind such vague blanket-categories as “white Americans” or Americans of “European descent.” This book suggests that many ethnic groups, which at some point were all termed “white ethnics,” had distinct cultural, political and social positions. Finally, this book also addresses the issues related to the broader phenomenon of repatriation where émigrés and their descendents migrate back to their homeland after a prolonged period of time. The book gives an insight into the experiences, difficulties and issues faced by American Latvian repatriates who decided to return to Latvia during the reestablishment of Latvian national independence.

It has to be made clear that this book selects and focuses on the most striking and politically relevant moments of the experience of American Latvian émigrés in the U.S. between the 1950s and 1990s. It highlights such controversial topics as ethnic anticommunism (Chapter 2), the hunt for Nazis among American Latvian émigrés (Chapter 3), the Soviet propaganda war against the émigrés (Chapter 4) and the national independence movement during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Chapter 5). The book does not aim to offer a comprehensive history of the American

Latvian community or of all Latvian groups throughout the world. Its goal is, however, to provide a careful description and analysis of the complex political experience of Latvian refugees during the post-World War II period.

To create such a sociological portrait of an émigré group, this study employs the perspective of interpretive sociology that attempts to understand complex historical situations from the point of view of the motivations of their participants. In terms of the data, the book uses such varied sources as semi-structured interviews with the leaders and members of exile Latvians' organizations, archives of the largest émigré organizations, the vast amount of émigré publications and periodicals, Soviet documents from the recently opened secret archives of the Communist Party in Latvia and a multitude of secondary sources and media materials from Latvia.

It should also be noted that this is one of the very first scholarly books written in English about the community of Latvians in America. Most of the existing texts in English about American Latvian experience have been memoirs or autobiographies. They have been good at offering an invaluable insight into the traumatic past of this refugee group, but they have failed at providing a neutral and analytical perspective on this minority group. Most of these books told the story of escape from the threats of the Soviet regime and documented life in the post-World War II Europe. They were written by émigré Latvians themselves and their purpose usually was to relate the true story of the flight into the exile to the Western audiences. Many of these books ended with the refugees' settlement in the U.S. and thus they did not explore the internal dynamic of the refugee community in its host country.<sup>11</sup>

One exception to this was a controversial memoir "A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile" by Agate Nesaule,<sup>12</sup> a daughter of Latvian Displaced Persons and a professor of English and women's studies in the U.S. Her book was brutally honest about the horrors of the war and flight from Latvia. It was also apparent that the author's goal was to not only talk about the refugee experience in general, but also emphasize the women's perspective such as the perpetual threat of rape and violence. At the book's center was Nesaule's complicated relationship with her mother whose traumatic experience cost the relationship with her daughter. Nesaule's mother's spirit was broken by the war experience and nothing can mend it and help the daughter and mother become close again. Apart from exploring her personal perspective on the war and exile, Nesaule's memoir also contained numerous

sad stories about American Latvians who either committed suicide, or killed and psychologically tortured their spouses or became alcoholics while carrying the deep and painful scars of war and the loss of their families and homeland. This book did not offer the optimistic ending of émigrés having found the safe haven in the U.S. Instead, Nesaule's description of the exiles' soul showed how individual American Latvians battled with pain and misery, while the community as a whole tended to avoid discussing such issues openly.

In Nesaule's portrayal, American Latvian society of the post-World War II period was hardly an example of success, prosperity and stability, which was the image that it tried to present to the Americans. In reality, the émigré life was plagued with failures, exclusion, poverty and personal disappointments. Neither the émigré society, nor the Americans appeared in a positive light in Nesaule's writing. While the refugee community was shown as quite narrow-minded, dogmatic and obsessed with its nationalist agendas, the Americans were portrayed as arrogant, ignorant and uninterested about anything beyond their own little worlds. Naturally, Nesaule's memoir received mixed response in the émigré community. It was confused as to why she had to make Latvians look so bad. The book generated positive interest in the Western and Latvian academic world where it was studied as an example of a feminist autobiographical writing.

Most, if not all, of analytical research on American Latvian community has been published in Latvian.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, often such texts were intended as contributions to the controversies inside the group itself, that is, they were hardly neutral in their analysis of the processes inside the émigré community. The only other major discussion of American Latvians that was objective and sociologically broad discussion was the dissertation of a promising sociologist Juris Veidemanis. He completed this research in 1961 at the University of Wisconsin. His very thick and detailed doctoral thesis analyzed the changes and continuities in Latvian value system from independent Latvia, to the Displaced Persons camps to resettlement in the U.S. The dissertation offered an insider's look into the experiences of Latvians as refugees and recent arrivals in America, particularly in the Milwaukee area. The study showed that although Latvians shared quite a few values with the American context, they would be likely to assimilate only in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> generation. One of the main reasons for this resistance to assimilation was the way in which the Latvian exile community had preserved most if not all of the values from their society back home. This also allowed Veidemanis to