

November 7, 2011

Athabasca University - Latvians in Alberta Project The Auzins Family

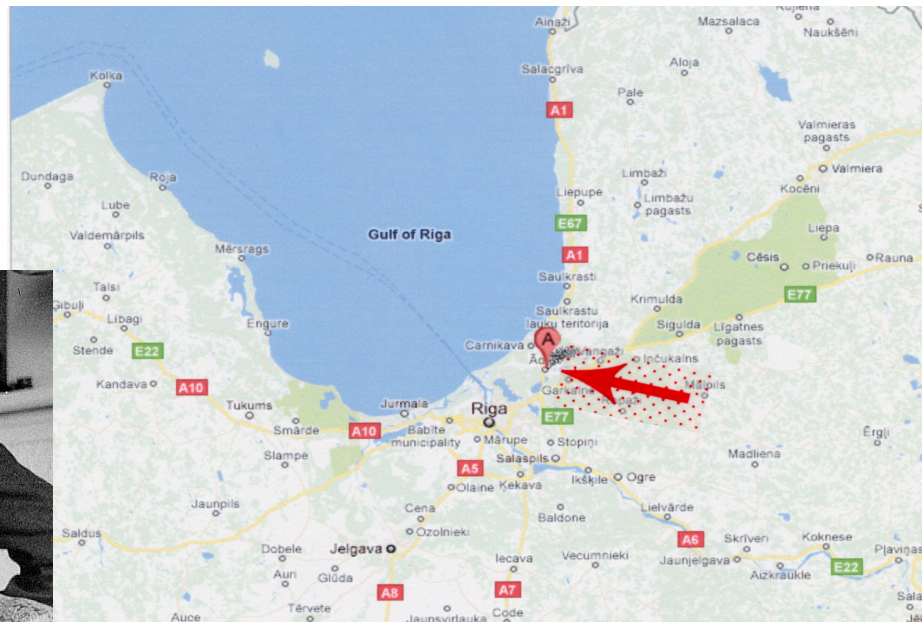
I have been asked to contribute a brief history of my family's immigration experience. This is primarily about my parents, but as I am the last surviving member of my family, it is up to me.

My name is Andy Auzin. I was born in Riga, Latvia in 1939. My primary language is English, but I do understand and can speak some Latvian. I am now retired from a career in insurance and financial services. I lived in Edmonton until moving to the Vancouver area in the 1970s.

My father, Voldemars (Valdis, Walter) Auzins (1904-1972) studied animal husbandry, and was an instructor in cattle breeding. When he married my mother Marija (Mary) Berzins (1906-1994), he took over the operation of her family's 50 hectare farm. This farm, located 15 km NE of Riga in the Adazi district had been in the Berzins family for many generations, and was quite prosperous.



*Valdis & Mary at home in
Edmonton 1970*



Location of the Berzins ancestral family farm "Zaldavi"

They had three sons, Juris (George 1932-1992), Uldis (Ollie 1935-1994), and Andris (Andy b1939). Life was good, the farm had milk cows, horses and orchards. Farm produce was sold in nearby Riga. My father would commute to town on his prized NSU motorcycle.



Father's prized NSU motorcycle



New family addition - Ollie 1935

But, in 1944 there were political storm clouds on the horizon. While the German Army had driven the Russians out of Latvia ending their occupation of 1940-41, the tide of war was turning. The Germans were now losing on the Eastern front, and it became apparent that they would soon re-occupy Latvia. My father was quite aware of the 1941 deportations by the Russians of “politically unreliable” persons. He was also aware that it was Stalin's plan to collectivize the private farms in newly occupied territories. The fate of the land owners was likely to be deportation to Siberia.

It must have been a wrenching decision for my parents. It was September, and the harvest was not yet done. Do they leave their idyllic life behind and flee – or, what if they are wrong, and things won't be all that bad.

They decided to flee. Packing only what they could carry, and with three boys aged twelve, nine, and six, they set out with another family in a horse drawn wagon. They headed for the port city of Ventspils approximately 200 km west. It was hoped that space on a ship would be available to transport them further west.

Being six years old at the time, I have little recollection of this 200 km journey. It must have been arduous and stressful. What I do remember is a lot of traffic, confusion, and dead cows and horses on the side of the road.



The port of Ventspils marked * above was a main escape route for many Latvians, Baltic Germans, and retreating German military. See picture to the right.

Our family boarded and arrived at the north German port of Kiel on Oct 25th, about the same time as the Russian army overran Riga. Note that while we were escaping to Nazi-held Germany, it was perceived at that time to be the lesser of two evils.



*Refugee ship – Port of Ventspils
Latvia, October 1944*

We lived in several cities in central Germany often having to spend many hours in bomb shelters due to Allied bombing raids. One night a bomb exploded a block away hollowing out a large building and creating an intense fire. I clearly remember the sound of the explosion – I've never heard anything like it since.

We were in Saalfeld in early 1945 when American soldiers appeared. It was an artillery unit, and they set up in a field across from the hotel where we were staying. They were cheery and relaxed, playing catch with oranges and passing them to civilians. We had been living on a diet of green pea soup and kohlrabi! They assured us that if they got firing orders they would give notice so we could get away from the noise and concussion.

When the war ended in May 1945 we relocated to the Fischbach displaced persons refugee camp near Nuremberg. Most of the residents there were Latvians. This was to be our home for the next three years.