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Age: 61 August 2011 Edmonton, Alberta Canada

Question: *What did your Latvian heritage mean to you growing up, and what have you been doing to maintain your Latvian heritage/nature?*

My earliest memories are of playing outside a 2 story house in northeast Edmonton at the base of a long set of wooden stairs, on a wooden sidewalk running in front of the house. My parents shared the house in the early 1950s with 2 other Latvian families (the Bachs and the Snepst) for a year or two before they moved to Edmonton Strathcona, and started the long process of saving up for a down payment on a house in Holyrood, where I ended up living on an off for much of my adult life. I now live in a relatively new neighborhood in southeast Edmonton with my mother, books and other paraphernalia of a lifetime of collecting things.

Why do I dwell on where I lived? For me, my Latvian heritage was embodied in the life of my family, which was very close. Our grandparents (Janis and Hermine Grivnieks) lived with us for a few short years in Edmonton Strathcona. Later they moved to Vancouver to live with my aunt and uncle, and their children (the Ceplitis family). My parents and grandparents spoke Latvian in the home, and hearing Latvian throughout the house on a regular basis I found it no problem to understand it. But being a shy and respectful child, I gained no ability in speaking it.

An early attempt on my father's part to teach me Latvian ended in frustration and tears for both of us (or for me at least) as I was physically unable to articulate the rolling "R" of Latvian as required in "ritenis". Living in fear of disappointing my father, and my father being unable to stand the trauma he was causing his son, soon caused us both to give up on my learning to speak Latvian.

I understood early on that my parents like every other Latvian that we knew in Canada, was starting on a new life in Canada. We were immigrants, and just finding our way in Canada. My Latvian heritage at that time meant a strong sense of community in the Latvian Diaspora; an easy calm among its many members in each other's company and place in Canadian society; and an unconsidered allegiance to the Latvian language and customs of church going, working hard, and socializing together when the work was done.

The talk of my grandparents and parents made it clear that our family had escaped Russian oppression, while losing a nation. Latvia was a prison state from our perspective, which saddened me to some degree, but it was never a big part of my daily life – I was too busy enjoying everything the world had to offer me in Edmonton Strathcona in the 1950s and early 1960s. Our family felt the loss of our ancestral home, but did not dwell on it, as there was nothing we could do about it.

Latvian culture to me was embodied in the people we knew as children. My parents' best friends early on were a university professor and his wife (Karlis and Mrs.

Lesins), and a surveyor and his wife (Stan and Anna Rudovics, who was working outside the home as a dentist). This small circle of friends was expanded a few years later to include a young couple newly arrived from Eastern Canada (Roland and Chris Neys). General acquaintances included another 20 or so Latvian families starting a new life in Canada who we met at various Latvian get-togethers. Despite the understanding that we were all escaping Russian tyranny to some degree, I did not see them as “refugees”. I simply saw them as gracious adults beaming kindly and respectfully upon my parents (Peteris & Mirdza Poruks), brother (Janis), sister (Maija) and me. One of our favorite ladies was Renate’s Tante who always gave us 25 to 50 cents when she arrived at our home for a visit on 85th Avenue to purchase candy and/or ice cream at the local confectionary on 99th street. Latvian culture was a social milieu of gentleman and lady-like conduct reminiscing about the good old days in Latvia, and the daily trials and tribulations of starting a new life in Canada (with a great deal of humor thrown into the mix).

Some of our Latvian friends were skilled in Latvian handicrafts so we were the happy recipients of a number of beautiful gifts of weaving (mittens) and embroidered pillows. Mrs. Lesins in particular was very talented in creating intricate woven straw handicrafts, which I enjoyed seeing hanging from the ceiling, and sitting on tea tables, book cases, and window ledges in their 1 bedroom apartment a block or so from where we lived in Old Strathcona.

The 1950s and early 1960s were a simpler time in comparison to today, and the lessons I have learned about living graciously seem a bit archaic in today’s world, but I treasure them mightily. I am sorry to say I never developed an ability to speak Latvian, and my understanding of verbal Latvian is probably waning even now. Most of the gracious people I knew as a child have passed on, and their children have either been scattered to the four corners of the world, or are expressing themselves in our English-dominant Canadian culture and language.

I value my Latvian heritage very much, but do little or nothing in an active way to maintain it. Attending the odd Latvian church service, and the November 18 Independence Day celebration continues, but it is pretty low key, and no replacement for a life in a Latvian community just finding its feet in a new country after a long and horrible war.

I watch developments in Latvia from afar, but not too closely and not too often. From what I can make out, Latvia is slowly overcoming the consequences of many years of oppressive government and economic stagnation. The future looks good for Latvia, but I think it unlikely that I will go there to make much of a contribution to that better world. I have retired and look forward to studying Latvian history and culture more actively from the comfort of my own armchair.

Time will tell however.