

Māra Zirnīte

Livonians in Northern Kurzeme



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B A L T I J A S
J Ū R A



The Livonians

This booklet is dedicated to an ancient nation – the Livonians – whose last home was the northern Kurzeme peninsula. The 20th century brought immense challenges to both individuals and the entire nation of Livonians. Today, only a handful of Livonians remain on the narrow strip of land between the blue sea and the green forests of Kurzeme. This in spite of the area actually having been inhabited for a very long time, as evidenced by historical documents and place names. For example, the name of Lūžņa Lake (*die see to Losne*) was first mentioned in documents already in 1290. The Livonians have a long history as an ethnic group. They formed just under 10% of the population of the Duchy of Courland (10,000 people in a total population of 135,000), which was founded in 1561. A census in the late 19th century counted approximately 3000 Livonians. But the 20th century proved fateful. Many people were executed, sentenced to hard labour, or fled into exile following the 1905 revolution. World War I soon followed the revolution, and as a result many of the people living along the coast were driven into exile to Russia. Many did not return. The number of Livonians continued to fall, and despite support from related nations and a Livonian national awakening, the 1935 census recorded only 944 Livonians. World War II brought enormous loss of life, also among the Livonians. In 1959 only 185 people were officially registered as Livonians; in 1970 their numbers had fallen to 48. In the census of 1989, 135 people in Latvia considered themselves to be Livonian. Previously cultivated and shaped over many generations, the Livonian language and culture are today almost extinct.

The Livonian language

The Livonian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric family of languages. The Livonians' closest cultural neighbours are the Estonians and Finns. The sound of the language can best be heard in the names of the fisherman villages of northern Kurzeme, which stand alongside their Latvian counterparts: Melnsils (*Mustānum*), Kolka (*Kūolka*), Vaide (*Vaid*), Saunags (*Sānag*), Pitragš (*Pitrōg*), Košragš (*Koštrōg*), Mazirbe (*Irē*), Sīkragš (*Sīkrog*), Jaunciems (*Ūžkilā*), Lielirbe (*Īra*), Miķeļtornis (*Pizā*), Lūžņa (*Lūž*), Oviši (*Paṭikmō*).



The Tāmnieki dialect

The Tāmnieki dialect of Latvian has also been influenced by the Livonian language. This dialect is spoken throughout the area formerly inhabited by Livonians – in northern Kurzeme, but also along the eastern coast of the Gulf of Riga in Vidzeme. Traces of the Livonians can be found in Latvian language and culture and also in the landscape of fisherman villages. Most of the former Livonian fisherman villages – from Sikrags to Kolka – are now included in Dundaga district and Slītere National Park.

The life stories

In the late 1980s and 1990s Māra Zirņīte interviewed people who had been born along the Livonian Coast at the beginning of the 20th century. Many interviews with members of Livonian families were conducted in the late 1980s. These now form the Livonian Collection of the National Oral History Archive in Latvia. Conversations with six Livonians have been chosen from this collection of sources.* Having been born at the turn of the century, the Livonian narrators were lucky enough to have grown up with the Livonian language. The life stories reveal moments from a life that no longer exists; they tell of times when there was little to eat, but they also create a feeling of satiety and are full of humour and poetry. Everything in them is united by a culture that has from generation to generation served as a standard for all things secular and spiritual. The people cultivated the sandy soil, protected their fields from wild animals, herded their livestock in the forest, mowed hay in the forest meadows, and fished with nets in the sea. Man did not overstep his bounds and lived within the chain of natural life. Livonian life stories show the history of the relationship between people and nature. But this is only one aspect of the stories; the life story is like a slice of life, and it reflects the whole range of colours and facets in a lifetime.

* The book “Libieši Ziemeļkurzemes ainavā” (Zirņīte, M. 2011, “Libieši Ziemeļkurzemes ainavā”) contains full transcripts of interviews in the Tāmnieki dialect of Latvian.

↻ Grand opening of the Livonian Community House in Mazirbe, 1939. Photo from the Latvian Oral History Archive (OHA).

← Alvine’s grandparents, Marija and Pēteris Botters, spoke only Livonian to each other. Photo from the turn of the 20th century, Latvian Oral History Archive (OHA).

↻ Estonian folklorist Oskar Loorits and members of the Bertholds family on the Žonaki farmstead in Vaide. Photo by Lauri Kettunen, 1920, from the archives of the Estonian Literature Museum.



Emīlija Rulle

Born in 1910 in Lielirbe. Died in 1989 in Ventspils. The memories told by **Emīlija Rulle** are particularly unique; she tells of the people, lives, customs, and place names in the village of Lielirbe that are no longer used, because locals do not live there any more. Emīlija Rulle remembers her early childhood on the banks of the Lielirbe River. Back then she spoke only Livonian, which the emigrants from the farming villages did not understand at all. During World War I, Rulle's family was driven from their homes on the coast and they lived with Latvians on the other side of the forest. Rulle learned to speak Latvian during this time and also later in school. The school offered optional Livonian language lessons, taught by Mārtiņš Lepste. Rulle attended these lessons and was therefore one of the few who was literate in Livonian. Rulle sang in the Lielirbe choir from a young age. The choir, directed by Mr. Blūms, sang at church services and in concerts at various Livonian cultural events. Rulle remembers a trip the choir took to Saaremaa, where they sang Livonian songs, as well as the grand opening of the Livonian Community House in Mazirbe. Rulle tells about poems that she wrote and dedicated to her favourite cat, picking cranberries, and the funny boy Little Jānis who “wore three shirts and had three peas in his spoon”. Rulle remembers the rebellious Livonian poet Uļi Kīnkamegi, who was a neighbour of hers. She tells about daily life along the coast – tending the fields, fertilising them with seaweed, herding livestock in the forest, fishing, the simple food of fisher-folk and occasions of people drowning in the sea. Rulle tells about Easter celebrations as well as childhood pranks and mischief, which she has remembered into her old age.





⌘ A boat on the Livonian shore, 1930s. Photo from the Latvian Oral History Archive (OHA).

← Emīlija Rulle with her friends, 1930s. Photo from the archives of Valda M. Šuvcāne.

⌘ Narrow gauge railway bridge across the Irbe River. Photo from the Talsi District Museum collection.

↑ Emīlija Rulle with her husband and Alvine Uzpils in Ventspils. Photo by Vaira Strautniece, 1989.



Irmgarde Matilde Cerbaha

Born in 1921 in Sikrags. Presently resides in Ventspils.

Elfrīda Virginija Žagare

Born in 1914 in Sikrags. Died in 2001 in Riga. The cousins Irmgarde Matilde and Elfrīda Virginija tell about the families of their parents – the Cerbahs brothers in Sikrags. Their childhood memories include tales of shepherding, haymaking, jokes, and the mischief and song-games in which both eccentric adults and the neighbour Gypsies took part. They tell about seeing Baptist baptisms in the sea and how the fish dealer trampled a load of dried flounder. The language researcher Lauri Kettunen (1885-1963) and his student assistant Väinö Kyrölä from Finland stayed at the Cerbahs' house during the summers. The cousins' grandmother Ede was a knowledgeable language and folklore resource for the researchers. A third cousin, Hilda Grīva née Cerbaha (1915-1984), was a Livonian cultural figure, violin player, singer, and choir director. She left home for Finland to study music and become a teacher. Grīva studied piano with the daughter of Jean Sibelius. Because she needed a diploma from a Latvian university in order to work as a teacher in Latvia, Grīva then attended and graduated from the Teachers' Institute in Jelgava. But she never got the chance to work as a teacher of Livonian due to the Red Army entered the village after World War II. Instead, Grīva taught singing, and in 1972 she began directing the Livonian and Ventiņi ethnographic ensemble "Kāndla". Irmgarde Cerbaha also sang in "Kāndla" since its inception. Irmgarde's brother, Armands, fled by boat to Sweden as a refugee together with other young men from the fishing villages. Many residents of Sikrags and their families fled to Sweden as refugees during World War II. Irmgarde later visited them and continues to correspond with her brother. He worries that the older generation is dying, leaving him no one to talk to about his native village.

↖ Irmgarde Cerbaha. Photo by Māra Zirnīte, 1996.

← Elfrīda Žagare. Photo by Irēne Junkere, 1993.





⌘ The Folmanis, Sprogis, and Andersons families of Livonian refugees from Sikrags in Gotland. Photo by David Holmert in Visby, 1944.

← The Livonian folk ensemble Kāndla at the Ventspils Open-Air Museum, late 1980s. Photo from the personal archives of I. Cerbaha.

↙ Train station in Sikrags. Photo from the archives of Baiba Šūvcāne.

↑ Irmgarde Cerbaha and Elfrida Žagare with Estonian students in Sikrags. Photo by Māra Zirnite, 1996.

Kārlis Dišlers

Born in 1920 in Pitragi, where he spent his entire life. Died in 1998 in Pitragi. Dišlers was a fisherman and woodworker; he tells about jetties built in several fishing villages in the late 1930s, before World War II. Kārlis Dišlers tells about his father, from whom he learned the carpentry trade. His father also made boats. Dišlers' mother was ill for a long time; her children took care of the livestock and milked the cows during that time. Gradually everybody left home for Riga or the factories. Dišlers participated in the building of jetties in the fishing villages from 1938 until World War II. The construction manager Zariņš was a distant relative of Dišlers who fled to Sweden at the end of the war. Dišlers began fishing in the sea with his boat during the war. On October 1, 1944, all coastal residents were driven 20 km inland. Dišlers was detained immediately following the war and sent to a filtration camp in Dundaga. Other men were sent further to Siberia, but Dišlers was released. After the war he worked in the high seas fishing fleet. Dišlers also tells of a local curiosity: the largest juniper tree, which grew next door to his house. He remembers a clever resident of Pitragi invented humorous names for the "streets" in the village based on the foibles of the local residents. By the 1990s fewer and fewer locals lived in Pitragi; the older people had died and the younger people left the village to find work elsewhere.





⌘ Fishermen by a jetty, 1990s. Photo by Gunārs Janaitis, from the Latvian Oral History Archive

← Men push a fishing boat, 1930s. Photo from the Latvian Oral History Archive (OHA).

↙ Remains of a jetty. Photo by Vaira Strautniece, 1987.

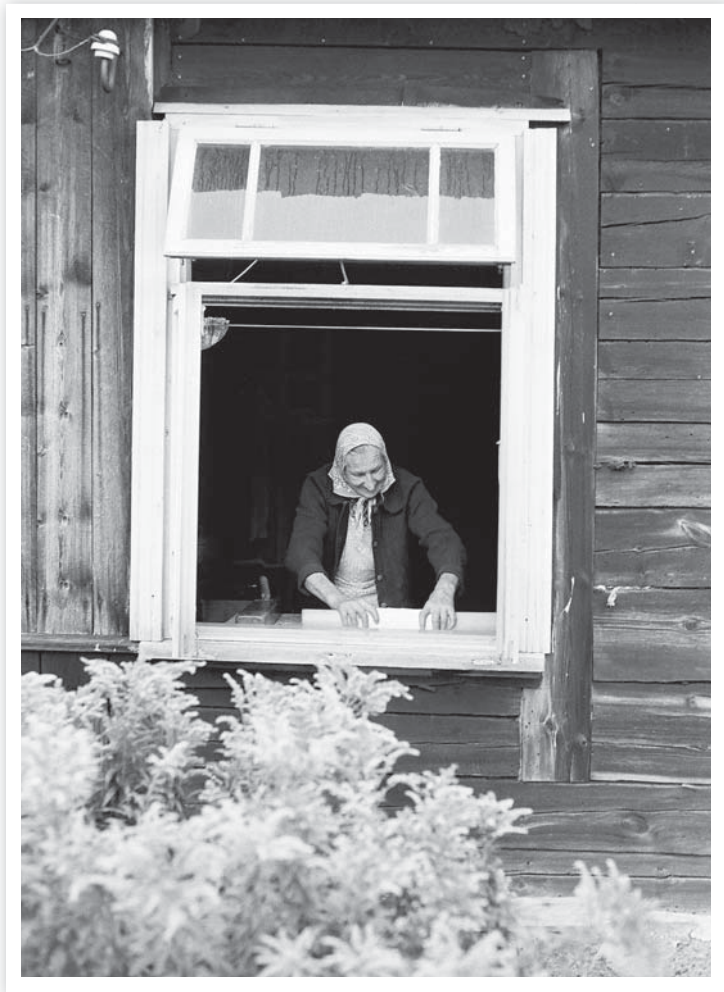
↑ Kārlis Dišlers with fish trap. Photo by Irēne Junkere, 1993.



Alvīne Mūrniece

Born in 1906 in Lūžņa, where she spent her whole life. Died in 1993. Mūrniece tells about how every feature in the surrounding landscape – forests, hills (*kangari*), paths, bogs – had a name. The memories told by **Alvīne Mūrniece** are also particularly unique; she tells of the people, lives, customs, and place names in the village of Lūžņa. These names and customs are no longer used, because locals do not live there any more. As a ten-year-old child Mūrniece's mother had still seen sections of stone foundations possibly left over from the church in Lūžņa. Plates and dishes from a church were found along a bend in the Lūžņa River long ago. All of this is related to legends of the existence of a church in Lūžņa village long ago. Mūrniece's grandfather was the bell ringer at the church in the neighbouring village of Miķeltornis, and her grandmother had been sent to work there as a maid. After they married, only Livonian was spoken in their home. Mūrniece was ten years old during World War I, when the Tsar was still in power and all of the coastal residents were driven away from the coast. As a result, she lived in Russia for four years. Mūrniece remembers her mother's brother drowning in the sea. She remembers at the beginning of the war, when the Germans had not yet invaded, a Russian airplane fired at a local fishing boat, killing two fishermen. The third fisherman, her husband's brother, escaped but was later sent to Siberia and died there after the war. All coastal residents were again forced to move inland at the end of World War II. After returning to her home, Mūrniece prayed to God that she not have to leave her home ever again. Her husband and his three brothers were deported to Siberia after the war. The court took away Mūrniece's horse, which it declared to be a part of her deported husband's property. Her husband did return from Siberia but was very weak. During her interview Mūrniece also tells about the Livonian painter Jānis Belte (1893-1946), who lived in her village and also wrote poems.





↖ A shed that no longer exists on the Krūmkalni farmstead. Photo by Vaira Strautniece, 1985.

← Alvine with her husband, Ernests. Photo by Vaira Strautniece, 1985.

↙ Narrow gauge train with a load of firewood, 1930s. Photo from the archives of Kubali School Museum.

↑ Alvine kept the burial towels used at funerals for people from Lūžņa village. She regularly washed and ironed the towels with an old-time clothes roller. Photo by Vaira Strautniece, 1985.



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Paulīne Kļaviņa

Born in 1918 in Vaide. Died in 2001 in Riga. Kļaviņa takes us into her home-museum, where she has carefully displayed many household items, tools, furniture, and crafts. Her house is a typical Livonian home, and her story is not only about objects but also about the people who have made these objects and used them on a daily basis. She tells about her father's tailoring table, which he got in the early 20th century. Kļaviņa's parents married in 1902, and they received a woven basket from Liepāja as a wedding present. Kļaviņa also has the bridal blanket that her mother made for her wedding in 1902. Kļaviņa tells about the large Žonaks family and its members Andrejs Betholds (who later lived and worked in America), the world famous pianist Ozoliņš (now living in Canada), and the comedian Ansis, who was well known in the local Vaide area. Kļaviņa remembers *Vastlāuji* celebrations and beliefs associated with Lent. Estonian researchers of the Livonian language often stayed at her family's house. Kļaviņa's mother, Katrīna Zēberga, was a great storyteller who dutifully stressed that one should always tell a researcher all he or she asks, because the researcher makes his or her living from such things. Like Emīlija Rulle, Paulīne is an everyday poet. For them, common events are the soil in which their poetry thrives. Like many Livonian poets, they find words for their poems in their daily work, in their livelihoods, and in their joy of the natural world surrounding them. This becomes clear when reading the book of poems about the sea titled „*Ma akūb sīnda vizzō, tūrška!- Es viltīgāks par tevi, menca!*” (*I'm More Cunning Than You, Cod*), which has been published in both Livonian and Latvian and a poem by the Estonian researcher Oskar Loorits dedicated to the immortality of the Livonian spirit. The last conversation in the book is particularly significant: even though people and generations come and go, the Livonian spirit can never be lost as long as memories of it survive, as long as there are people and books that pay tribute to it and can tell about it to future generations.





↖ Everything in Paulīne Kļaviņa's yard has a story. Photo by Vaira Strautniece.

← Pauline and Oskars Stalts at the opening of the Livonian ethnographic collection at the Mazirbe boarding school. Photo by Vaira Strautniece, 1978.

↙ Pauline shows a "briefcase" made in 1912. Photo by Vaira Strautniece.

↑ Pauline Kļaviņa at home next to the oak tree planted in the 1930s. Photo by Vaira Strautniece, 1989.





The **National Oral History** (NOH) project is a field of research as well as a research collection at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia. The memories and life stories in the collection help historical events to be understood from the perspective of the individual. The stories also reveal daily processes and experiences that are important to people. Seeing parallels in another person's life leads to empathy and allows the human significance of history.

NOH interprets unique regional characteristics and creates a bridge between the experiences of various social and ethnic groups, between generations, from the past to the present, and from science to society. Life stories collected during the course of NOH research can be put to use today and in the future. They lead to a better understanding of other societies and ethnic cultures and disclose the wide variety of individual attitudes towards the human environment. Life stories reveal people's feelings as well as their various social and individual characteristics, such as customs, values, style, fashions, ideas, spirituality, and personal relationships under both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances.

The life stories of **Livonians** and other residents of the **Livonian Coast** are grouped in a separate collection at the NOH. **The Dzīvesstāsts** (*Life Story*) Latvian association of oral history researchers has been created to provide an opportunity for everyone to tell his or her own life story as well as their whole nation's story.

For more information visit www.dzivesstasts.lv.



Slitere National Park is located in northern Kurzeme in the districts of Kolka and Dundaga. The park was established in 2000 and has been included in the *Natura 2000* network of Special Areas of Conservation of European Union.

Slitere National Park covers 26,490 hectares (16,360 hectares of land, 10,130 hectares of sea). Geologically the oldest area of the park is the former coastline of the ancient Baltic Ice Lake. The former coastline is now covered by old-growth deciduous forests and is known as the Slitere Blue Hills. This area, marked by great biodiversity, is where the park began in 1923 as the 1100-hectare Slitere Natural Monument. Trees in this part of the park have not been harvested for over 90 years. A series of dunes, formed over a period of 6000 years, runs parallel to the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Riga. The dunes, called *kangari* in Latvian, alternate with marshy depressions called *vigas*. 150-180 dunes alternating with the marshy hollows are laying along the coastline between Kolka and Bažu Bog, a unique nature creation that nowhere else is covering such a large territory. Bažu Bog (1880 hectares) is the largest bog within the park. An integral part of the park is the coastline with its sandy beaches and dunes, dry meadows, littoral pine forests, and clear waters. The dunes along the shore, which are the newest geomorphological feature in the park, have been relatively well preserved due to the sparse population and former restrictions on access to the area.

Slitere National Park takes pride in the coastal villages of Sikrags, Mazirbe, Košrags, Pitrags, Saunags, Vaide and Kolka, where the traditional landscape of Livonian fishermen villages can still be seen. The park is located along an important bird migration route, and magnificent concentrations of birds can be observed here in the spring.

For more information about Slitere National Park visit www.daba.gov.lv and www.slitere.lv

The Livonian Coast – an area within the European Green Belt

The Iron Curtain divided Europe for more than 40 years in the second half of the 20th century. It stretched from the Barents Sea in the north, along the eastern and southern coasts of the Baltic Sea, to the Black and Adriatic Seas in the south. Today, the once restricted border zone has been included in the European Green Belt, an area created to protect the natural and cultural environments.

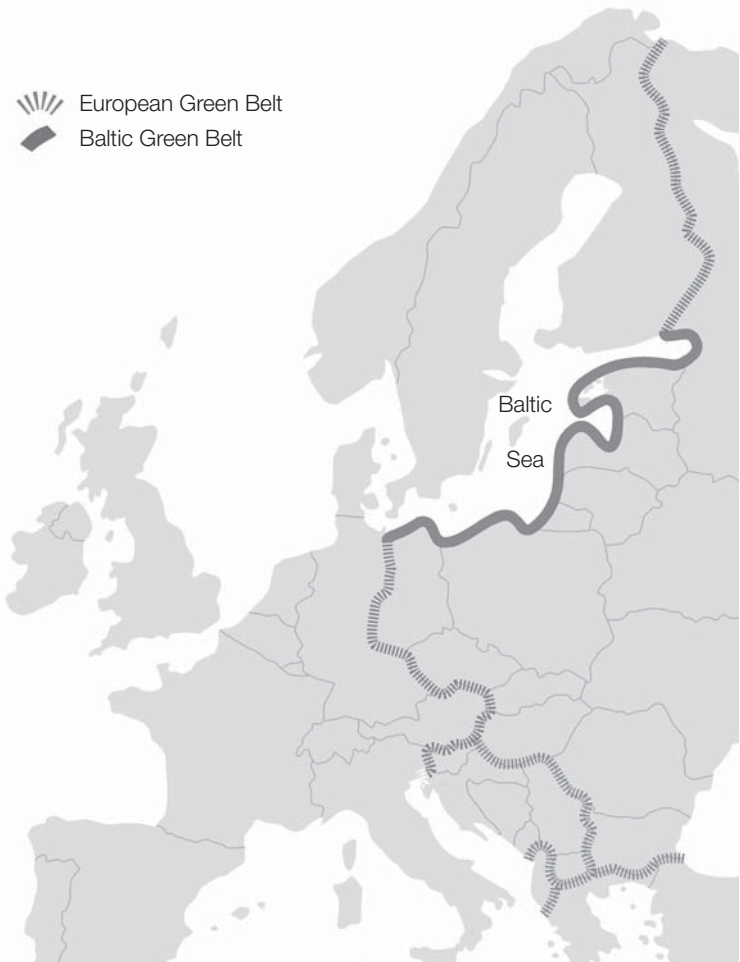
The Livonians, an small ethnic group native to Latvia, inhabit a narrow sliver of land along the coast of northern Kurzeme. The two world wars and life in a border zone have brought suffering, deportation, restricted movement, and limits on traditional trades and occupations for the Livonians.

Ironically, though, the severe restrictions on movement and employment also had a unique positive effect, namely, the natural environment was able to renew itself without the intrusion of industry, construction, or intensive logging. When compared with other areas of Europe, the natural environment along the former border between Eastern and Western Europe has remained much more pristine and in better condition up to the present day. Rare species of plants and animals have survived in the forests, meadows, and dunes of the former border zones. Since 1989 European environmental activists and biologists have been engaged in protecting the valuable natural and cultural environments found in this unique territory, called the European Green Belt.

The attempts to re-establish the Livonian culture in the fishermen villages along the Kurzeme coast correspond with the basic concept of the European Green Belt. Because Livonian small-scale fishing, agriculture, and animal husbandry were traditionally carried out in harmony with the natural environment, reviving these activities can provide an excellent chance to economically develop the region without harming the diverse environment of the Baltic Sea coast. At the same time, Livonians and their descendants can act as ambassadors: on the one hand they can promote the protection of their unique natural environment, and on the other hand, by main-



taining the cultural heritage of the military border zone, they can serve as a reminder of how easily large empires, in their aspirations for power, can grind a small ethnic group into non-existence.



For more information about the European Green Belt, visit www.europeangreenbelt.org and www.balticgreenbelt.net

