

# From the Voices of the Deported: The Mass Latvian Deportation of June 14, 1941

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In the occupation of Latvia during and after the Second World War, the Soviet Union carried out massive deportations, exiling more than 57,000 women, children, and men, in two separate instances in 1941 and 1949. The government targeted individuals in leading positions in state and local administration, economic institutions, and cultural foundations, along with their relatives. Only during the period of Glasnost, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s, did Latvians themselves gain access to archival documents related to the deportations. Only then could scholars begin substantive research regarding this period in Latvian history. Moreover, until the fall of the Soviet Union and Latvia's reestablishment of independence in 1991, survivors were torn between the urge to speak out and the fear of reprisal for talking.<sup>1</sup> As author and political activist, Sandra Kalniete, explains: "I grew up under the influence of Soviet propaganda, knowing almost nothing about the real history of Latvia. The latter was totally buried in silence. This self-imposed censorship mirrors the desire of my parents not to complicate the life of their child with unanswerable questions and dangerous doubts. Above all they wanted to protect me from a repetition of their own tragic fate."<sup>2</sup>

This paper documents the mass deportation of Latvians as revealed through the life histories and a written memoir of four survivors: Valērija Sיעeniece, Alma Dreimane, Hilda Zemzare and Ruta U, all deported on June 14, 1941, the first of the two massive events. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine women's voices in order to reconstruct a portion of Latvia's past that has been largely omitted from the written history of the Second World War, and was in fact concealed during the Soviet occupation. Because the occupying regime banished entire families to Siberia in the deportation of June 14, a significant share of the survivors were women and children during this period. This paper reveals women's perspectives of the Second World War mass deportations from Latvia. These voices of Latvian women can be used to recount the history of their deportation, what the Symposium of the Commission of Historians of Latvia has called "the hidden and forbidden history of Latvia under

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<sup>1</sup> Janis Riekstins, "The 14 June 1941 Deportation in Latvia," in *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations 1940-1991*, ed. Andris Caune, et al. (2005), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Kalniete, *With Dance Shoes in Siberian Snows* (Riga, Latvia: Occupation Museum Association of Latvia, 2006), 7.

Soviet occupation.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, this study acknowledges and illuminates the humanity and agency of the exiled of June 14, 1941, their struggle for survival and their expressions of resistance.

I have chosen to use both life history interviews and a published memoir in this work. Life stories, oral histories, autobiographies, diaries, and letters are all forms of personal documentation involving memory. Indeed, life stories and oral histories may take the form of oral or written communications, but are distinguished from other personal documents because they are transmitted through and guided by an interviewer.<sup>4</sup> Valērija Sieceniēce, Alma Dreimane, and Hilda Zemzare were among the deportees of June 14 who left life histories with the Latvian National Oral History project.<sup>5</sup> Their narratives meticulously describe their plight as women who lived through this trying period in Latvia’s history. Ruta U. left a written record in the form of a memoir. She was a Latvian girl exiled to Siberia on June 14 as a family member of an alleged “enemy of the state.” Soviet authorities arrested Ruta, age fourteen, in her home, along with her sisters, ages twelve and nine, and her mother and grandmother. For five years she suffered hunger, cold, and hard labour before she was permitted to return to Latvia, only to be deported again a few years later. Eventually released with her health destroyed, Ruta died in 1957. She recorded her early experiences in a diary which American friends of the family smuggled out of Soviet dominated Latvia in 1967. Ruta U.’s *Dear God I Wanted to Live* was originally published in Latvian in 1977 and translated into English in 1980, using only the first initial of this author’s last name in order to protect her father and sisters, still living. Her memoir is an important and unique supplement to orally recorded wartime experiences. The integration of this published diary with the collected life histories expands the type of experiences represented, including the voice of a young girl, rarely incorporated, indeed often dismissed, in traditional historical analyses.

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<sup>3</sup> Riekstins, "The 14 June 1941 Deportation in Latvia."

<sup>4</sup> Baiba Bela-Krūmiņa, "Patība Un Sociāli Kulturālais Konteksts," in *Latvijas Mutvārdu Vēsture: Spogulis*, ed. Māra Zirnīte and Indulis Leinerts (Rīga, Latvija: Latvijas Universitātes Filozofijas un Socioloģijas Institūts, 2001), 126.

<sup>5</sup> Māra Zirnīte, "Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs - Deported 1941," [www.itl.rtu.lv/LVA/dep1941/astasti1.php](http://www.itl.rtu.lv/LVA/dep1941/astasti1.php). The LNOH project is part of an effort to document the inhumane events of the deportations during the Second World War as well as the post-war period. The Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia and the Latvian State Archives have jointly compiled over 2,500 oral histories as part of this endeavour. The collection contains audio recordings of interviews of the deported collected since the late 1980s.

## Background

Beginning with the period following the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union extensively used exile as a form of repression. Vladimir Lenin created the *Cheka* Soviet State security organization in 1917 to perform mass arrests, imprisonments, and executions of so called “enemies of the people.” Although the agency was reorganized and renamed multiple times, Joseph Stalin utilized this organization considerably to maintain social submission and to silence political dissent during his autocratic rule from 1929 to 1953. The unit ran the Gulag prison systems, conducted distributions of food and suppressed peasant rebellions. In this process, the agency claimed to target “class enemies” such as the bourgeoisie, members of the clergy, and political opponents of the new regime. In fact, the government besieged both documented political activists in the population and entire ethnic groups in their efforts. Although the regime accused certain groups of German collaboration, this was often merely an excuse for persecution.<sup>6</sup> In its several incarnations, some English acronyms for the agency include: NKVD, MGB, and the KGB. However, Latvians generally continue to use the original “Cheka” term when referring to the system. As explained by author and survivor Helena Celmiņa, the Chekists themselves changed; as individuals retired or were relieved of duty, others took their place. While their style changed, their function and purpose remained the same.<sup>7</sup> This was true especially in the perceptions of those who experienced the Chekists firsthand. The testimonies of these four deportation survivors are peppered with the term, and in this paper I will remain true to my sources by using this word.

In Latvia, Soviet authorities usually separated men from their families, many permanently, and locked them in separate transport wagons. Operative groups in charge of the deportations transferred these prisoners to so-called Gulag reformatory labour camps where their cases were purportedly investigated. They sentenced prisoners either to death or to 5-10 years of incarceration in heavy labour camps. Of the 5,263 men arrested on June 14, 1941, an estimated 700 were shot, while 3,441 died in incarceration. Thus, only about one fifth survived imprisonment. At the same time, the Soviet system exiled family members of the arrested without even the pretence of trials or investigations, transferring them to remote districts in Siberia or the Kazakh. The arrest of a head of the family served as a basis for the deportation of remaining relatives.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* (London: Macmillan, 1960). Isabelle Kreindler, "The Soviet Deported Nationalities," *Soviet Studies* XXXVIII, no. 3 (1986): 387-405. Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples: The Deportation and Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Helēna Celmiņa, *Sievietes Padomju Cietumos* (Rīga: Treji Deviņi, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Riekstins, "The 14 June 1941 Deportation in Latvia," 63, 68.

## The Deportation

Between June 13 and 14, 1941, an estimated 15,424 Latvian residents, among them more than 2,400 children under the age of ten, were seized to be deported to far regions of Siberia.<sup>9</sup> Soviet authorities generally gave entire families less than one hour to prepare for the journey. Few people realized what was happening to them. Soviet guards allowed the deportees to take with them only what they could carry and the state confiscated everything left behind. This process undoubtedly left a psychological impact on the deportees as it is mentioned by many prisoners as representing a life changing experience, a transformation from the familiar to the abrupt ambiguity of what was to come. There was no time for reflection, and the deportees were no longer in control of their own futures.<sup>10</sup>

All four of the narratives under investigation here begin before the traumatic event, at a time when the victims were unaware of the oncoming storm. They were watching things happen to others but still living relatively normally. Ruta U. recalls that all night long on June 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> she heard trucks, many more than usual, coming and going. After breakfast she and her mother set out for the market, leaving her two younger sisters at home. The beginning point of this narrative tells something about the emotional experience of the deportation as a traumatic episode in the life of this fourteen-year-old girl. The contrast between the ordinary life of going to the market, and the arrest and terror of the subsequent deportation is striking in her narrative.

As Ruta and her mother walked, one truck after another passed them, all loaded with people and their belongings: "Women and children were sobbing and whimpering [...] The trucks proceeded slowly, deliberately; house numbers were checked. The men were looking for a certain address [...] Suddenly, a truck stopped, right at our front gate [...] Totally bewildered, I stood there, unable to move. I began to tremble, feel hot and cold."<sup>11</sup>

Eight guards stormed Ruta's home. They told Ruta, her mother, grandmother and two sisters to pack a few necessary things and get ready to leave, but they did not tell them where they would be taken. According to Ruta, the women filled suitcases and sacks with belongings and stuffed wicker baskets with food. "The Chekists kept rushing us to finish up and get into the truck."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Kreindler, "The Soviet Deported Nationalities," 391. Irina Serbakova, "The Gulag in Memory," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 525. Vieda Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 105-06.

<sup>11</sup> Ruta U., *Dear God I Wanted to Live* (Brooklyn, NY: Gramatu Draugs, 1980), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The Soviet authorities simply told Alma Dreimane that she needed to go to Tukums, a city in Latvia, to sign some papers. This thirty-two year old mother left her daughter, stricken by scarlet fever, behind in Latvia with the child's grandmother. Merely being asked to sign papers was a salient contrast to the horrors that were to follow this individual. Her account discloses deeper meanings of these events of what may seem like mere details of incidents, a distinguishing feature and strength of life stories and oral histories. This narrative tells the reader what she did, what she wanted to do, what she believed that she was doing and what this survivor later thought that she did, a pattern which is revisited throughout this paper.<sup>13</sup> In her oral interview, Dreimane recounts her detainment:

Then in comes a man .... He says, 'You need to come home. You need to go to Tukums – to sign some kind of documents there,' .... And now... Well, if I must go, then I must go. So we go. He follows behind me, instead of next to me – abiding by all of the rules. [Emphatically] At a neighbor's house there's a young man, a classmate of mine – at that moment he's working, ploughing. We come up to where he's working, to the roadside. And he says to me, 'Dear Alma, where are you going?' I say: 'I don't know where I'm being taken. Either they'll put me in prison or shoot me.' His hands fall to his sides. And the other guy is mumbling behind my back. But see, as I... [laughs]. But the main thing was the walk – him following behind me. Yes. I see on the road – a full truck. I'm the last one. So we go inside so that I can get things .... I see that they've got small children, too.

*Interviewer - Baiba Bela-Krūmiņa:* In the truck?

*Alma Dreimane:* Yes. Now I ... I don't understand, I don't understand ... what to take and what to leave.

*Interviewer:* And if you're told that you're only being taken to Tukums to sign some documents, nothing else?

*Alma Dreimane:* Yes. And the Russian is telling me to take all of my belongings, the Russian officer.

*Interviewer:* And what does he say? He doesn't say that you're being taken far away?

*Alma Dreimane:* [...] Well, he says: 'Take something.' I take a pillow, a blanket and one bed sheet. [...] He says, 'Take all of the

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<sup>13</sup> A paradigm described by Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 36. In Portelli's exact words, oral history reveals "not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they were doing, and what they think they did."

bedding.’ [...] You know, I left with only the clothes on my back.<sup>14</sup>

The guards herded the prisoners, as if they were animals, into cattle and freight cars, in which they spent several weeks, some even months. Ruta U. remembers that her railway car was furnished with four bunk beds, two at either end. However, there were more than thirty people in the car already, and all day long new prisoners arrived. Food was not regularly provided. Despite the harshness, interspersed throughout Ruta’s account is evidence of human kindness and mutual support of fellow deportees in this traumatic time. Her story shows the determination to preserve humanity amongst the unbearable. In these cattle cars, her family often lived from the generosity of the other prisoners, some of them strangers, ones who had thought to bring food along. Moreover, one brief episode of the arrest is significant and remained with Ruta as a glimmer of hope throughout her struggles. She believed her father had escaped.

[B]efore our departure a Chekist came running and stopped outside the car, calling my father’s name. So he had not been found! Our hearts grew easier, for now there was hope that perhaps he would be able to save himself and stay in Latvia - a situation which could very well hasten our return. Shortly after midnight on June 15 we left Riga, heading for an unknown destination, and an unknown future. The night was dark and full of terror... Such grief and sorrow! It seemed as though tonight the whole Latvian land were trembling with pain and tears.<sup>15</sup>

The train proceeded slowly to Siberia. On the way the Latvians encountered trainloads of prisoners from Lithuania and Estonia. Through the small, austere windows Ruta could only see women and children. As revealed in this young girl’s narrative, she stoically identified with other children on her journey, usually those smaller and weaker than herself. She recalled that many small children in her car perished along the way, unable to endure the miserable

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<sup>14</sup> Baiba Bela-Krūmiņa, *Interview with Alma Dreimane*, Mutvārdu Vēstures Avoti (Rīga, Latvija: Izlase, 2004). Transcription and quotation symbols utilized throughout the life histories:

... – sentence broken off or interviewee paused.

( ) – further explanations told by the interviewee, which differ from the rest of the story in speed or intonation

[ ] – comments in square brackets and italics provide information about the progress of the interview or the interviewee’s intonation

[...] – omissions in text

<sup>15</sup> U., *Dear God I Wanted to Live*, 13.

conditions. Their little bodies were buried near the railroad tracks. Indeed, many victims died -- especially infants, the sick and elderly.

These women's narratives emphasize the value of family and human camaraderie during this horrendous plight. More than anything, the deportees longed for some news of the current situation in Latvia, but there was seldom a way to get information. Ruta recalls one instance:

It was on the eve of Midsummer Day when we spotted a railroad worker leaning against our car. He was reading a newspaper [...] After some pleading, he rolled up the paper and deftly tossed it through the window bars into our car [...] On June 22, war had broken out between Germany and the Soviet Union [...] We talked back and forth, discussing various possibilities [...] Good news spread quickly through all the wagons. Everywhere people began to celebrate Midsummer Eve with song. Our car too soon filled with the merry sounds of the Latvian *līgo* songs, traditionally heard only on this one night of the year. We were almost happy, almost convinced that now everything would be all right. We would be saved. Yet the train did not move [turn or change course]. War had been declared, but we were already deep within Russia.<sup>16</sup>

Valerija Sieceniece discloses in her interview: "I wasn't eating anything; I didn't want to live anymore. And then there was that man from the Jewish family, who had noticed that I was not eating and began to talk with me. And he began to convince me. And that helped me. And then I began to eat again."<sup>17</sup> When the train reached Novosibirsk, the capital of Siberia, the bolts were removed from the doors and the deportees let out. Valērija Sieceniece remembers her arrival:

Our end station was in Novosibirsk. There we were all made to take our belongings and get off the train. I climbed out [...] And I was standing there by my things, and all of a sudden Spilva runs up to me and says, "Vallij, your mother is here!" Well, I dropped everything and ran as fast as I could, and noticed a small, pale woman. Well, we fell into each other and hugged, and then I got this real drive and energy to live.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Māra Zirņīte and Vilis Zirņītis, "Interview with Valerija Sieceniece," in *Mutvārdu Vēstures Avoti* (Rīga, Latvija: Izlase, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Yet, almost immediately the Soviet guards again forced the prisoners onto a boat in order to take them deeper into Siberia. After about a month's traveling by train and boat, they finally reached their destination. Sieceniece goes on to describe their new home and provisions. She communicates the details of the clothing and the general appearance of the people whom she encountered upon arrival.

We got off in a village called Kuchi in Parabel region. That's where we had to get out. The locals had gathered along the river's edge. Well, the sight was just too pathetic. They were dressed so poorly, everybody in shabby clothing. You can imagine – there were no definite bright colors. Emaciated. Children with bare feet and bloated stomachs, with big eyes in their little heads, dressed in mother's or father's jacket, also came running. And everyone looked at these people with great wonder....<sup>19</sup>

Sieceniece's narrative reveals not only the conditions in which these Siberian souls lived, but also foretells what was to become of her own future and the battle for her own continued existence.

### **The Struggle for Survival**

Prominent in these women's narratives are meticulous images of everyday experiences. They describe in full detail the daily routine of the prisons and concentration camps, and the appearance and character of the people. These women seem to recall calmly and with detachment the tortures and agonies that they had to bear. Hilda Zemzare was exiled to Krasnoyarsk Territory<sup>20</sup> with her daughter and mother. She depicts the struggles of almost 200 people, mostly women and children, who were taken to the fishing village Agapitovo. The deportees set up tents. "We had to go work. Rafts were frozen in the Yenisei, and we had to chop them out and pull large logs ashore. [...] There were also big strings there. We chopped and stole them, then dried them, and then wove braids out of them and sewed something like slippers to wear on our feet. We didn't have anything, of course, only little shoes. Then we were warm. That's the way it was."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Krasnoyarsk Territory covers 2.34 million sq km, or 13.6 percent of entire Russia. The Territory spans several climatic zones, from arctic to continental, and has arctic deserts, tundra and tundra forest - in the north, the taiga - in the central part, and the steppe and forest-steppe - in the south.

<sup>21</sup> Inta Kraskevica, *Interview with Hilda Zemzare*, Mutvārdu Vēstures Avoti (Rīga, Latvija: Izlase, 2004).



Ruta and her family took refuge in a former cattle shed when no other housing could be found. The women fashioned a shelter for themselves, typically the task of men in traditional Latvian society. They removed the manure with their hands and built a roof out of birch bark. The women covered the ceiling beams with small branches and topped them with sod and sand. Then they spread clay on the walls using a small flat piece of wood to smooth it out.

The most important task was the building of an oven. But where could we get bricks? There was no choice but to make bricks from scratch. We got hold of a big trough and mixed clay, white sand and horse manure with water. [...] After mixing the stuff, we pounded it with our feet, until the mess was smooth enough to use. It was poured into a mold, pressed and dumped out on some planks. In the sun the bricks dried and hardened. [...] Finally we had enough bricks for an oven.<sup>22</sup>

According to Zemzare, the Chekist guards gave her group only flour to eat and directed the women to fish for food, again the customary duty of men in Latvian culture. But there were only a few elderly men at the labour camp and some boys. The women mixed the flour with water and fried it on a barrel like flatbread, and as Zemzare recalls, if there were no fish, they often did not eat.

Mrs. Korn and I were sent across the river to fish. There were little fishing huts there. We left the children in the huts and went fishing during the night to the lakes that were further off, so that there would be food to eat. I row the boat; Mrs. Korn throws the net into the river. Then one time we have to go back to our real camp to get bread. Mrs. Korn goes off to get the bread; I stay there all alone with the girls. Mrs. Korn says that she'll be back tomorrow, but a storm comes up, and, you understand. And she cannot get back, an awful storm, awful waves...<sup>23</sup>

The narratives attest to the brutal conditions of the camps. Soviet guards terrorized the deportees. Food rations were meagre and did not replace the calories expended through work. Ruta U. tells how those who had brought some food reserves could get by, but the remainder lived in misery. Yet, the deportees plucked grass, chick-weed, and nettles and made meals of them. But after a while, there were no edible plants available.

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<sup>22</sup> U., *Dear God I Wanted to Live*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Kraskevica, *Interview with Hilda Zemzare*.

I'll never forget a moment which manifested for me the deepest, saddest hunger. Whenever we received the monthly ration of fish, no one threw the bones away. They were saved, dried in a pan, and consumed. One day my little sister Maya was sitting by the fire alone. In the small frying pan that was placed on two bricks, were some fish bones. With great care she turned them from one side to the other, to quicken their drying. She sat there, with her small hands folded in her lap, ragged, dirty, and impatiently waiting for something to eat. Unable to wait any longer, she picked up the bones one by one and devoured them.<sup>24</sup>

People grew weak and were crippled by diarrhoea, scurvy, malaria, and tuberculosis. Many did not survive the first year. Zemzare describes a day in August:

1942 ... in August, they came to get us - we were being taken to go fishing. Vera's little Jānītis was ill, he had diphtheria. Minna Rubens was there, Nīče.... We were taken to Nosoboyev. We hadn't gone far, when someone came running after us, shouting that Vera's Jānītis had died. [...] And then another Jewish man had frozen – there by the Yenisei, he had gone to trade things at the other kolkhoz. [...] When Mrs. Lazdiņš died, I don't know how she was buried.... I was very ill when she was buried.<sup>25</sup>

Ruta's little sister Maya suffered from head ailments where the back of her head was covered with abscesses. Her hair, sticky with pus, was infested with lice. Her eldest sister, Dzidra, grew extremely thin, and her entire body was covered by painful suppurating boils. Ruta's grandmother died soon after arrival, and her mother in 1943. The younger sisters were sent to an orphanage. Thus, young Ruta was left to fend for herself, not yet an adult but at 16 considered too old to be placed in this institution.

Only a small number of those deported in 1941 later returned to Latvia. As described by Zemzare:

[W]hole families died off there. Whole families died out. There was a family named Ragailis, there were five of them, and probably all of them died. The Ragailis family. The Voicītis family... almost all of them died, they put the mother and the little boy Andrītis together in one coffin. Valentīna... no, Paulīne froze

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<sup>24</sup> U., *Dear God I Wanted to Live*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Kraskevica, *Interview with Hilda Zemzare*.

on the river. Mrs. Lazdiņš was from Daugavpils, her son Konrāds died. The Nīče's son Arnolds died. About half of the people died by spring. We were on sort of a shore, and then there was a valley and then another sort of hill. On that hill was a big, big hole, and they took everyone up there and threw them all in that hole – you couldn't dig anything in the winter – that was considered the North, Agapitovo, that counted as the North. They dragged everybody up there and threw them in that hole – without coffins, without anything, just threw them in there naked. I still see it all right in front of me. Then in the spring they covered the hole.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, experiencing the deaths of so many people was staggering to Zemzare. She vividly recalls that not only individuals died, but entire families perished in these horrendous circumstances. So many souls were lost that few living remained to mourn them. While the concentration camps before the Second World War largely supplied labour for the immense Soviet industrial and agricultural projects, a work force that had to be fed, conversely the wave of repression after the 1940s, including the mass deportation of Latvians, appear to be different from the previous camps, and characterized by little paid work, little to eat, and very little warmth. Indeed, the Soviet Union's objective in this exile seems to have been eradication through mass starvation and exposure rather than mere containment.<sup>27</sup>

## Resistance

Although there were indeed major expressions of direct defiance of the deported, including armed escapes, uprisings and strikes, opposition generally took a more subtle form. While overt rebellion may not have been possible or even prudent in the Siberian wilderness, Latvian women developed their own coping techniques and methods of defying authority such as camaraderie through song and the sharing of scarce food. Powerless to contest her forced exile, Valerija Sieceniece fought to remain with her family. Sieceniece and her mother had been herded into separate railway cars. According to this survivor, her advantage was that she spoke perfect Russian. In fact, she had graduated from a Russian language school as a youth. Sieceniece beseeched a guard in a position of authority: "I do not want

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Serbakova, "The Gulag in Memory," 523., Jānis Riekstiņš, "The 14 June 1941 Deportation in Latvia," in *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations 1940-1991*, ed. Andris Caune, et al. (Riga: Institute of the History of Latvia, 2005), 70.

to be separated from my mother. What can I do?" The guard asked her to sign an official document and granted her the request.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Zemzare, not able to bear that her dead mother's body be left without a proper funeral, conducted a burial in disobedience to Chekist orders. Ultimately, the true mode of resistance was often a determination to conserve one's humanity.

We were at the edge, my mother slept on the right-hand side. I warmed a brick and placed it by her feet – her feet were always very cold. And then one evening – it was already late – I was warming the brick and putting it by those feet of hers, and all of a sudden I felt that she wasn't moving.... And she had died.... And then I ran over to Mrs. Nīče, to my neighbor, for some help. There was a certain tent, a special tent there, where all of the dead were placed. Many people had already died.... Dogs had chewed the heads of those they had not managed to bury yet... of the dead people... those fishermen's dogs. And so Mrs. Nīče helped me. Then I went to the fishermen, arranged for some boards, made a little coffin. Not just out of boards, though, we put sawdust in there and whatnot.... The ground was awfully frozen. And then Mrs. Kom [Korn?] and Maija Lazdiņa and Ksenija Fleiberga ... we all went to chop out the grave. We were shown where the graves were. But of course we couldn't chop very deeply, we made it shallow, shallow, all of the ground was completely frozen. And then it was early evening when we put her on a sled; it was snowing. And then we buried her there.<sup>29</sup>

Many deported Latvians endured exile by seeking solidarity and friendship from fellow Balts. Common songs were often a form of resistance as well as endurance. Ruta U. recalls a specific episode in her journey to Siberia in the crowded cattle cars, the evening of Midsummer's Eve. According to Ruta, the deportees commemorated this national Latvian holiday with traditional songs, "Our car too soon filled with the merry sounds of the Latvian *līgo* songs".<sup>30</sup> Indeed, many Latvians consider song as one of their distinguishing cultural features. Latvians often call themselves a nation of singers.<sup>31</sup> Ruta describes that on the banks of the river Ob, two trainloads of prisoners, one Latvian and the other Estonian, passed the time in song and dance. "I remember a lovely summer

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<sup>28</sup> Zirnīte and Zirnītis, "Interview with Valerija Sieceniēce."

<sup>29</sup> Kraskevica, *Interview with Hilda Zemzare*.

<sup>30</sup> U., *Dear God I Wanted to Live*, 17-18.

<sup>31</sup> Dace Bula, *Dziedātājtauta: Folklorā Un Nacionālā Ideoloģija* (Rīga, Latvija: Zinātne, 2000).

evening. So warm, so pleasant. Some youths had brought their fiddles and accordions along. In a jiffy a band was formed. Many young people started dancing. It was a strange and moving experience, these familiar melodies lilting above the vast Russian river.”<sup>32</sup>

Over time the songs of the exiled grew increasingly sadder. When Ruta and her family were put on a small boat together with the same people who had been on the railway car, she recalls the sorrow of leaving the rest of her young countrywomen and youths behind. They had been like one large family supporting one another in grief. Now they were blown away like dust across the vastness of Russia. “It was a pleasant, quiet summer night. Our friends ashore were singing a Latvian tune. The sorrowful melody stayed with us for a long, long, time. Then it was gone. Silence.”<sup>33</sup>

After the war, many deportees appealed to Soviet authorities for permission to return to Latvia. Most petitions were denied. Yet, due to the initiative and efforts of the personnel of the Orphanage Department of the Latvian Ministry of Education, more than 1,300 children were transferred back to their homeland from Siberia in 1946.<sup>34</sup> Among those returned were Ruta U. and her sisters. Ruta ends her memoirs on October 13, 1950, a day when she was nearly arrested again in her home in Latvia, having already served five years of hard labour, to be sent back to the Siberian Gulag.

Should I be lucky enough to stay in Latvia, I hope to live long enough to see the power of the Communists come to an end. But will I ever be able to forget that they were responsible for the many innocent lives so tragically ended in the bleak Siberian taiga? For the death of my mother and grandmother, for the misery of my sisters, and for the wasted years of my own youth? Sometimes I find myself trembling with rage and the desire for revenge. But should I be dragged away from my homeland once more, I have only one wish left. I hope that these recollections, these memories of my young years in Siberia, will be read by many.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the ultimate defiance for these four women was sharing their moving stories. These women’s accounts emphasize the power of talking about their past and being together with survivors. They understand the power of revelation of their personal experiences.

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<sup>32</sup> U., *Dear God I Wanted to Live*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Riekstins, "The 14 June 1941 Deportation in Latvia," 72.

<sup>35</sup> U., *Dear God I Wanted to Live*, 136.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to illustrate the type of knowledge that can be gained by examining and interpreting the memories of Second World War deportees, specifically survivors, the majority of whom were women and children. Indeed, it is from survivors that we can appreciate the humanity and agency in peoples who have been suppressed by other societies. Due partially to the character of traditional documentary resources, historical constructs of this period have largely produced a lifeless view of the deported, exiled and annexed, such as the people of Latvia, as merely the victims of external conditions. Scholars have predominately depicted individuals, especially women, as being without control or free will. Yet, women's memoirs and oral histories show solidarity and support among the deportees, and a determination to survive. Through these survivor's narratives, we may recognize the human element in the deportations of June 14, 1941.

The testimonies of Valērija Sieceniece, Alma Dreimane, Hilda Zemzare and Ruta U. convey the terror of their deportations and meticulously detail their everyday existence in exile. The survivors exhibited remarkable adaptation to their merciless surroundings as they clung to life, and at times even experienced cheerfulness in the face of tragic human events. These women's narratives communicate the daily routines of the prison camps, the appearance and temperament of the people. Indeed, there was human kindness amongst the inhumane conditions of the brutal Siberian frontier. These narratives reveal value of personal relationships in times of despair, such as Sieceniece's story which describes the caring and mercy of the Siberian host families. The Siberian villagers demonstrated pity for these new deportees. Seeing them as they were, they must have thought that these pathetic folks would surely perish without their aid. The villagers, who were themselves impoverished, ushered the exiles into their homes.<sup>36</sup>

Deportee accounts show how seemingly minor routines and rituals often assumed an important role for people in situations of extreme suffering. For example, Ruta's family fashioned a shelter for themselves out of manure and birch bark. They covered the ceiling beams with small branches and topped them with sod and sand. But it is noteworthy, that the most important task for these women was the building of an oven. And Zemzare, not able to bear that her dead mother's body be left without a proper burial, organized a funeral in disobedience to Chekist orders. Even the people remaining in the Latvia with an almost dismantled government, powerless to contest the forced exile of Latvian men and women, fought to bring their children home. While most petitions for citizens to

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<sup>36</sup> Zirnīte and Zirnītis, "Interview with Valerija Sieceniece."

return to their homeland were denied, due to the resourcefulness and hard work of the Orphanage Department of the Latvian Ministry of Education, more than 1,300 children were successfully transferred back to Latvia in 1946.<sup>37</sup> Among them were Ruta U. and her sisters.

In the end, the true mode of resistance for these survivors of their harsh Siberian exile and for the people of Latvia may have been their memories and the strength of mind to communicate their poignant life stories. Individuals such as Valērija Sieceniece, Alma Dreimane, Hilda Zemzare and Ruta U. have testified to a portion of Latvia's history generally concealed during the Soviet occupation. The life stories, oral histories, autobiographies, diaries, and letters of Latvian survivors help us recognize the human element in the mass deportations of the Second World War. The Latvian National Oral History project is the country's effort to bring about a more complete history of this period incorporating the voices of the people. The endeavour has collected over 2,500 oral histories and life stories as part of its efforts consisting of audio recordings of interviews of the deported compiled since the late 1980s. Along with considerable collections of diaries, letters and autobiographies, they serve as testaments, indeed memorials, to the women and children who have been bombed, burned, starved, left homeless or exiled during wartime.

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<sup>37</sup> Riekstins, "The 14 June 1941 Deportation in Latvia," 72.