

Home as History: Space, Memory, and Solidarity in Latvia

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The topic focuses on the history and social dynamics of an apartment building in the center of Riga to consider the intersections between space, memory, and solidarity in twentieth and twenty-first century Latvia. This discussion is based on "**Project House**" housed in the National Oral History Archive at the University of Latvia—a collection of over twenty oral histories (from 1995 to 2019) with the inhabitants of one apartment building, in the center of Riga. The speakers examine this history from different perspectives.

Data from a longitudinal study conducted at the NOH project were used in the study of biographical disruption caused by radical social changes. The House (*Māja, in Latvian*) project took place over the course of several years and used the biographical approach; as a source of information it used life story interviews, focused narratives, interviewee personal documents and also researchers' comments regarding the course and content of the interviews.

Empirical data and information used:

- Narratives from the life story interviews with the **both owners** of building. Interviews were performed in several sessions, with new biographical events and aspects being revealed during each session;
- life story interviews with the residents of the buildings, to describe the context of the research situation;
- analysis material from semi-structured questionnaires, which were answered by home owners and residents at the beginning of the fieldwork. Includes socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, answers to questions about changes in living conditions and characterization of existing situation;
- extracts from a house documents describing the structure of the population and mobility in the house;
- records made by researchers during the fieldwork process;
- personal documents of respondents - letters, correspondence with state institutions, photos, diplomas, awards. Used to understand the context;
- materials from the archives of the Republic of Latvia.

«On the Denationalisation of Building Properties in the Republic of Latvia», 30.10.1991.

Section 1. The following are repealed:

the Latvian SSR Supreme Soviet Presidium Decree of 28 October 1940, "On Nationalisation of Large Buildings" and all regulatory enactments issued pursuant to this decree;

the Latvian SSR Supreme Soviet Presidium Decree of 14 March 1941 "On the Inclusion of Country, Large-Scale and Kulak Farms into the State Fund", the Latvian SSR People's Commissars Council Decree No. 359 of 14 March 1941, "On the Approval of the List of Country, Large-Scale and Kulak Farms to be Included in the State Fund" and all regulatory enactments issued pursuant to these decrees;

And - all Latvian SSR Supreme Soviet Presidium decrees with which the building properties owned by individual natural persons were nationalised.



Project «House (MĀJA)»

Built in 1936

Two owners

Nationalised in 1940

Denationalised (reprivatised) in 1992

Velta and Livija – homeowner`s heirs

A “microhistory” of a building provides significant insight into the transitions of power in Latvia from 1936 to the present. The trajectories of the founders of the apartment building—the V. and K. family—were closely tied to those of Latvia.

V. and K. established the home during a period of optimism during interwar independence. WWII, the Nazi and Soviet occupations shaped the fates of all inhabitants; V. and K. were deported. In 1991, with the reestablishment of independence, the building and its inhabitants also gradually gained control of their lives.

50 years later, due to the process of denationalization, the two heirs were one of the first ones in Latvia to regain the house inherited from their parents. The denationalization of the house gives the opportunity to return to the property inherited from parents, and this is not only an economic event, but it also has a significant symbolic meaning - the recovery of status, the recovery of the lost life.



Līvija with her father Jānis 1939

Līvija: My mom got to bury my father. He died in October 1943. My mom is very resilient and kind of an adventuress. But father ... he actually died of starvation, he just went out. They sold everything there... Women are more physically resilient, that's one thing, but... We later talked to mom and thought he would have survived as well, but he succumbed psychologically.

And most importantly, he was a lawyer ... Law, Court, Justice, Legal Approach.. And he could not digest this absurdity in his foolish head. It somehow feels quite absurd. In such a situation, you should not ask for anything, but you have to try to do something, try to survive. But he collapsed internally. Well he was also a tall man, an impressive build, the big ones, they all died faster of hunger.



Livija: Grandmother kept the documents of the house. They stood in the closet, we were leafing and looking at them; even though we looked at these documents as a joke. Granny might have thought that we would get our house back one day, since she kept those documents, but I didn't think so. There's a saying, "they didn't interfere with anyone" and such things were not thrown out.

Livija:

Question: And did you get this house from inheritance? - Half of the house. Now I have this apartment and another one. The rest of the property I both gave as a gift and sold. I wasn't thinking about doing anything with the house, because I neither have any interest, nor calling or abilities. Also, my understanding of management is not that great so that I could deal with all the matters regarding the house, managing it and the like. But since Velta proposed it all and took care of all that, I agreed.

In the end it is good that we regained this house. After all, at least I'm sure that at least this apartment is my own, I don't really need much more.

Velta's stories are more like heroic tales, stories about pain and revenge. Livija's stories has not revealed a cry after the avengement of her own or her parents' fate. The pain is not cried out, but the story often uses good-natured irony, which gives the impression of wanting to distance herself from the painful experience.

The aspect of justice is what is revealed in both stories. The reference to "restoring a justice" works both at the emotional level (morality, memories, remembrance, the assessment of the complex life from the point of view of the broken destiny), and at the practical level (the feeling of actual "restoration of justice" and the self-evident realization of the moral revenge).

Narratives of both of the house owners who regained the denationalized house, are not only bright and unique individual biographies, they also appear as typical biographies of specific social groups, reflecting the different manifestations of the historical process.



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