

The Daškevica sisters arrived in the United Kingdom under the auspices of the Baltic Cygnets scheme in order to work in a hospital. Left: Archival photo, 1947. Right: Zigrīda Daškevica (1927–2025) in her apartment in London. She is interviewed several times between 1990 and 2011.

PHOTO: LATVIAN NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

Diasporic heritage and remigration

IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND RETURN AMONG SECOND-GENERATION LATVIAN EXILES

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abstract

This article examines the remigration of second-generation Latvian exiles who relocated from the United Kingdom to Latvia in the 1990s after the restoration of independence. Drawing on life-story interviews, the study approaches return not as a purely demographic or economic phenomenon, but as a biographical and identity-shaping process. It analyzes how Latvian identity maintained within exile families, participation in diaspora youth organizations, political socialization, and accumulated professional capital shaped both the decision to return and subsequent settlement trajectories. The findings suggest that remigration emerged through a multidimensional constellation of factors: structural opportunities in post-socialist Latvia, language competence and Western-acquired skills, family considerations, and a consciously articulated wish to "be Latvian in Latvia." At the same time, return involved negotiating tensions between an ideologically constructed homeland and post-Soviet realities. The study highlights remigration as the transformation of inherited belonging into lived social participation.

KEYWORDS: Exile Latvians; return migration; identity and belonging; post-Soviet Latvia; intergenerational memory.

Latvian exile communities that formed after the Second World War were shaped by the experience of forced migration and a powerful nostalgia for the lost homeland. This sense of loss became a central element of collective identity in exile. Over several decades, attachment to Latvia was actively maintained and reproduced, even as exiles adapted to new social and cultural environments in their host countries and passed on these identity frameworks to the next generations.

The restoration of Latvian independence in 1991 marked a decisive turning point, leading to what can be described as a post-exile period. Yet only a small proportion of exiles and their descendants chose to return permanently to Latvia.[1] During fifty years of separation, both the exile communities and Latvian society had undergone profound changes. The post-exile reality was therefore marked by tensions between long-sustained hopes and memories, contemporary social realities, and visions of a future that no longer aligned with earlier expectations – a dynamic also observed in broader post-exile contexts.[2]

In the Baltic states, however, this encounter unfolded amid the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reconstruction of independent statehood. Remigrants entered societies undergoing rapid political, economic, and institutional change, which shaped both decisions to relocate and subsequent experiences of settlement.

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES the remigration experiences of second-generation Latvian exiles, asking how forms of Latvian identity shaped within the family and exile institutions, participation in youth organizations, and accumulated professional capital influenced both the decision to return and the process of resettlement in Latvia. Drawing on perspectives from post-exile studies and narrative identity,[3] the article approaches remigration as a biographical process through which inherited memories, exile experiences, and contemporary life in Latvia are integrated into meaningful narratives of belonging. The empirical analysis is based on six life-story interviews with second-generation Latvian exiles who relocated from the United Kingdom to Latvia during the 1990s; all interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms.

The article makes an empirically grounded contribution to research on second-generation ethnic return by demonstrating how diasporic heritage, transmitted through family memory, language, cultural practices, and institutional participation, acquired practical significance when it converged with professional opportunities, family circumstances, and the structural transformations of post-Soviet Latvia. Rather than privileging identity or economic opportunity as a single cause, the analysis examines how these dimensions intersected within individual biographies and how inherited belonging was subsequently renegotiated through everyday life in Latvia.

The first section outlines the historical and theoretical context of Latvian exile and second-generation return. After presenting the data and methodology, the empirical sections examine family-based identity formation, participation in diaspora youth organizations, decisions to remigrate, and experiences of settlement. The conclusion considers how inherited belonging became translated into migration decisions and lived social participation.

Latvian refugees and the formation of the exile community

The Latvian exile community emerged in the final phase of the Second World War, when approximately 200,000 Latvians fled westward in 1944–1945 as the Red Army reoccupied Latvia. While some departures followed German evacuation plans, many families fled independently under chaotic and rapidly changing wartime conditions. The decision to leave was shaped by direct experience of the first Soviet occupation (1940–1941), marked by repression and mass deportations, as well as by fear of renewed Soviet rule.[4]

By the end of the war, approximately 178,000 Latvians were located in the Allied occupation zones in Germany, with smaller groups in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe.[5] In displaced persons camps, refugees established schools, churches, choirs, publishing initiatives, and political organizations. These institutions supported material survival and provided a setting in which displacement could be collectively interpreted. As Inta Gāle-Carpenter has argued, exile became an organizing principle that restored purpose to lives disrupted by war and forced migration.[6] Refugees began to describe themselves as *trimdinieki* – exiles committed to preserving Latvian culture abroad, opposing Soviet rule symbolically and politically, and working toward the restoration of an independent state. Shared memories of pre-war Latvia, the experience of flight, and the loss of homeland formed what can be understood as a community of memory.[7]

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BETWEEN 1947 AND the early 1950s, most Latvian refugees resettled in the United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain, and other Western countries.[8] Churches, Saturday schools, youth organizations, cultural associations, publications, and political advocacy groups maintained Latvian language and cultural practices while sustaining the restoration of independence and eventual return as a shared political horizon. Even as everyday life became increasingly rooted in host societies, return remained an important moral and symbolic reference point.

The intention to return nevertheless weakened over time.



Approximately 200,000 Latvians fled westward in 1944–1945 as the Red Army reoccupied Latvia.

ILLUSTRATION: RAGNI SVENSSON

Drawing on surveys conducted among Latvian exiles in the United States between 1957 and 1987, Pēteris Norvilis found that an aspiration that had been nearly universal immediately after flight gradually declined: fewer than three quarters of respondents expressed a clear intention to return in 1957, and approximately half did so by 1979.[9]

The restoration of Latvian independence in 1991 marked the formal end of exile and created, for the first time in five decades, a real political possibility of return. At the macro level, the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the structural barriers that had long made remigration impossible. Yet the long-anticipated return did not unfold on a mass scale. Decades of separation had reshaped both Latvian society and diaspora communities abroad, and the idea of return now had to be negotiated within concrete life circumstances. Research has shown that practical considerations – family ties, established professional careers, and social integration in host countries – combined with perceived cultural differences and uncertainties about belonging, significantly limited the scope of return migration.[10] Structural change, in other words, made return possible but did not make it inevitable.

THE LATVIAN CASE formed part of a broader transformation of European migration following the end of the Cold War. Kulu and Tammaru identify ethnic return migration as a significant feature of post-socialist Europe, encompassing both political refugees and their descendants returning from Western countries and co-ethnic populations relocating from other parts of the former Soviet sphere.[11] Their analysis of Estonia, which is particularly relevant to Latvia, shows that return after the restoration of independence was historically differentiated and selective rather than a uniform movement toward an ancestral homeland.

Studies of ethnic return migration also identify tensions arising from the presumed cultural proximity of co-ethnic migrants. Although returnees may possess facilitated access to citizenship and be expected to integrate naturally, identities and social practices formed abroad can produce simultaneous experiences of home and foreignness.[12] This tension is especially pronounced for the second generation. Conventional definitions of return migration imply movement back to a previously inhabited place, whereas individuals born abroad "return" to a homeland known primarily through family narratives, inherited memories, cultural practices, political commitments, and occasional visits.

In his study of Latvian and Estonian exile descendants, Delaney Michael Skerrett argues that settlement in the ancestral homeland is often shaped by emotionally charged memories of loss, occupation, and injustice transmitted across generations.[13] Such narratives can create a sense of belonging and a moral relationship to a place not known through previous residence. The central question is therefore not simply why second-generation exiles returned, but how Latvia became imaginable as a place to which they could meaningfully return.

Górny and Osipovič address a similar question in their study of second-generation British Poles. Their respondents were generally well integrated into British society but retained Polish language practices, cultural attachments, and identification with Poland.[14] To interpret this relationship, it is useful to distinguish between a "private" homeland grounded in lived attachment to the place of one's upbringing and an "ideological" homeland sustained through identification with an ancestral nation.[15] For

second-generation exiles, Latvia could not function as a private homeland in the same sense as their country of birth. Instead, attachment was constructed through family memory, language, citizenship, cultural and religious life, diaspora organizations, and engagement with political developments in Latvia. Their relocation may consequently be understood as remigration only in an expanded sense that distinguishes inherited belonging from previous residence.[16]

RECENT WORK on diasporic return further complicates any straightforward equation between return and geographical movement. Alatas and Slama argue that diasporic return should not be reduced to travel or permanent resettlement in an ancestral homeland. They instead draw attention to processes of re-embedding and re-encountering through which individuals enter, recover, or renegotiate diasporic frameworks, relationships, and identities.[17] Their intervention is useful here not because the Latvian cases lack physical relocation, but because it shifts analytical attention from movement itself to the social and identity-related processes through which return becomes meaningful. Physical remigration may thus represent one particularly consequential moment within a longer process of diasporic identification rather than its beginning or inevitable culmination.

This perspective also helps distinguish emotional attachment from an intention to relocate. As Alatas and Slama note, drawing on *Appadurai* (1996), emotional ties to an ancestral homeland can make return, whether physical or otherwise, morally significant without necessarily generating a desire for permanent return.[18] The Latvian case therefore requires attention to the additional biographical, institutional, and structural conditions through which inherited attachment was converted into an actual migration project.

Seen in this light, the existing scholarship offers complementary but not identical interpretations. Studies of ethnic return migration emphasize the political and structural conditions that enable co-ethnic relocation; work on inherited memory and ideological homelands explains how descendants can develop meaningful attachments to places in which they were not born; and recent debates on diasporic return caution against treating physical movement as the sole or self-evident expression of belonging. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that second-generation remigration cannot be explained either by structural opportunities or by inherited identity alone. Rather, return emerges through the intersection of political change, diaspora socialization, family memory, and individual life trajectories.

VIEWED FROM THIS perspective, second-generation exiles who relocated to Latvia in the 1990s occupied an inherently ambivalent position. They possessed important forms of privilege, including citizenship by descent,[19] Latvian language competence, ethnic belonging, diaspora networks, and often Western-acquired professional capital. At the same time, they faced expectations of "natural" integration based on presumed cultural proximity. Decades of Soviet rule, however, had produced substantial cultural, linguistic, and experiential differences between diaspora and local society. As Brenick and Silbereisen suggest, the ethnic homeland, while symbolically central, may in practice feel unfamiliar, requiring migrants to navigate between inherited identity, societal expectations, and lived realities that diverge from imagined belonging.[20]

The analytical issue is therefore not simply whether second-generation exiles felt Latvian or regarded Latvia as home. It is how an inherited and ideologically sustained relationship to Latvia was translated into a practical decision to relocate, and how that relationship was subsequently revised through everyday encounters with post-Soviet society. In this respect, the Latvian case allows the article to examine remigration as both physical relocation and a continuing process of biographical re-embedding, in which symbolic belonging is tested, modified, and enacted through social participation.

Data and methodology

The empirical material consists of six life-story interviews with second-generation Latvian exiles born in the United Kingdom during the 1950s and 1960s who permanently relocated to Latvia during the 1990s. The interviews were conducted in 2016 within the Latvian National Oral History (NOH) Project as part of a broader research initiative on Latvian remigration. Life-story interviews are particularly suited to examining return migration as a biographical process because they allow participants to connect migration and return decisions, family and kinship relationships, life-course transitions, and post-return experiences within a single narrative, while situating these experiences in broader historical, cultural, and social contexts.[21] In-depth biographical interviews also make it possible to explore aspects of practical consciousness by encouraging participants to reflect on motivations and influences that are not normally articulated in everyday life.[22]

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The interviews were selected from the NOH remigration collection according to three criteria: the respondents belonged to the second generation of Latvian exiles, had been born and raised in the United Kingdom, and had settled in Latvia after the restoration of independence. The purposive sample is not statistically representative; rather, it brings together respondents with a shared historical background, generational position, and migration trajectory. This relative homogeneity enables a comparative examination of how people socialized in similar exile settings interpreted their decisions to relocate and their subse-



Displaced persons from Greven refugee camp taken to Münster station for transport to the ship for England. May 1947.

PHOTO: VOLDEMĀRS BLANKENBURGS/UK LATVIAN DOCUMENTATION CENTRE AND ARCHIVE



"Balt Cygnet" was known as a European Volunteer Worker or EVW Scheme, which brought over 14,000 Latvian Displaced Persons to Britain between 1946 and 1950. The picture shows one of the first groups of Balt Cygnet in London. PHOTO: NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF LATVIA

quent settlement in Latvia. The focus on the United Kingdom reflects the composition of the available interview material rather than a comparative host-country research design.

THE BRITISH LATVIAN exile community provides an important context for these narratives. Formed mainly by displaced persons who arrived through the European Volunteer Worker schemes after the Second World War, it was smaller than Latvian communities in North America and Australia, and many of its members subsequently re-emigrated overseas. Organizations such as Daugavas Vanagi and the Latvian National Council in Great Britain promoted the preservation of Latvian language and culture, the non-recognition of the Soviet occupation, and political advocacy for the restoration of independence. Although intermarriage and integration into British society contributed to the weakening of organized community life during the 1960s and 1970s, the Latvian national awakening of the late 1980s revitalized diaspora organizations and political engagement with the homeland.[23] The study therefore examines this particular exile context rather than comparing Latvian communities across different host countries.

The analysis combined a biographical perspective with inductive thematic comparison and attention to the narrative construction of experience. From a biographical perspective, migration is not treated as an isolated event but interpreted within a broader life course in which past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations shape mobility decisions.[24] Narratives are understood not simply as records of past events but as socially situated accounts through which respondents organize experience, negotiate identities, and attribute meaning to their decisions.[25]

THE ANALYTICAL PROCESS was iterative. Each interview was first examined as a complete life story, with attention to how respondents retrospectively connected family history, identity formation, remigration, and settlement. The interviews were then compared across cases to identify recurring themes and interpretative patterns. The analytical categories were not predetermined by the literature but developed through repeated engagement with the material and were subsequently interpreted in relation to existing research. The principal themes included family socialization, language, participation in diaspora organizations, professional and family trajectories, motivations for remigration, and experiences of settlement. This approach made it possible to analyze both what respondents recounted and how they constructed remigration as a meaningful part of their biographies.

The sample has important limitations. It does not include individuals who considered remigration but remained in the United Kingdom, those who returned to Britain after relocating, or those who regarded their settlement in Latvia as unsuccessful. The material is therefore shaped by selection and survivor bias and cannot support generalizations about second-generation Latvian remigration as a whole. Instead, the study offers an interpretative analysis of how one purposively selected group of successfully settled remigrants understood and narrated the relationship between inherited belonging, relocation, and life in Latvia.

Family-based identity formation in childhood

The life stories identify the family as the primary setting in which Latvian identity was sustained, and the possibility of future remigration first became imaginable. As Elizabeth L. Curiskis argues in her study of intergenerational return within the Latvian diaspora, everyday practices such as language use, attitudes toward homeland, and interpretations of historical experience create an emotional and symbolic framework through which the second generation later understands belonging and return.[26]

The life stories examined here echo this insight. Latvian

ancestry, purposeful upbringing, and systematic language transmission functioned as both symbolic and practical "start-up capital". Although the respondents were born in the United Kingdom and had visited Latvia only occasionally before independence, being raised in Latvian reduced the distance between an inherited homeland and the prospect of living there.

In several narratives, maintaining Latvian identity in the family extended well beyond everyday language use and involved systematic participation in exile community life. Parents are often described as committed patriots and active members of diaspora organizations who structured family routines around Latvian activities such as Saturday schools, choirs, youth groups, concerts, cultural events, and summer camps. For example, Rota summarizes her childhood by saying that "there was more Latvian life than English life", while Ivars and Juris recall speaking Latvian consistently at home and encountering English primarily upon entering school. In Juris's case, his limited English proficiency initially even caused concern among school authorities.

AT THE SAME TIME, life stories reveal that the maintenance of Latvian identity was not always a seamless or unproblematic process. For many second-generation respondents, particularly during adolescence, participation in Latvian institutions, most notably Saturday school, generated tension. Compulsory attendance sometimes clashed with the desire to integrate into local peer groups. Kārlis, for instance, recalls an emotional conflict between sports and friends on the one hand and the obligation to attend Latvian school on the other. Yet he also acknowledges that the "first stage" structured by his parents later proved to be an important foundation for sustained attachment. Ivars, in his turn, normalizes such resistance with humor, describing it as almost universal among second-generation children, while Valters links his reluctance not only to generational distance and pedagogical style but also to childhood difficulty in perceiving the practical value of what was being taught in Latvian Saturday schools. At the same time, he remembers Latvian summer camps in markedly positive terms, highlighting the emotional intensity of shared activities such as songs, sports, discipline, and "lessons about the fatherland", as well as the strong sense of community created by younger instructors and peer groups.

These accounts also suggest that second-generation ethnic identity was not simply transmitted intact from parents to children. Drawing on Isajiw's typology, Miezitis (1990) distinguishes three patterns of ethnic identity maintenance: the transplantation of the old culture, a rebellion pattern, and a rediscovery pattern in which individuals invest elements of their ancestral past with renewed symbolic meaning.[27] The narratives examined here display elements of this movement: Latvian practices initially imposed by parents could be resisted during adolescence but later reinterpreted as personally meaningful sources of identity. Family and community institutions therefore did not mechanically produce remigration; rather, they provided cultural, linguistic, and symbolic resources that respondents could subsequently appropriate and translate into their own biographies. This process also illustrates that intergenerational identity transmission should be understood as dynamic rather than deterministic: parental socialization created dispositions and resources, but respondents themselves actively reinterpreted these within changing historical and personal circumstances.

AN IMPORTANT AND socially complex dimension of identity maintenance also concerns the experience of exile as loss. In childhood, this was often felt as the absence of an extended kinship network. Rota, for instance, recalls a sense of injustice when comparing herself to classmates who regularly visited grandparents and relatives, while her own extended family remained in Latvia or had been dispersed by war and repression. In her account, the Latvian exile community partially substituted for the missing family network but in ways that were emotionally ambivalent:

> **I had many Latvian aunts and uncles, but they were not our relatives. They were single Latvians without families, and we would visit them so that they wouldn't be alone. We were meant to keep alive the joy of being Latvian and to let those older people feel happy that I spoke Latvian, that I wore the folk costume, that I could recite a poem. They would all cry. Those are my memories. We were like a doll placed in front of everyone.**

"LATVIAN ANCESTRY, PURPOSEFUL UPBRINGING, AND SYSTEMATIC LANGUAGE TRANSMISSION FUNCTIONED AS BOTH SYMBOLIC AND PRACTICAL 'START-UP CAPITAL'."

This recollection captures the dual character of community life in exile: it generated belonging and continuity, yet it could also produce a sense of performance and instrumentalization.

Beyond language and organized community life, some narratives point to another strategy of sustaining identity: the material and spatial reconstruction of the homeland in the host country. For instance, Juris recalls his childhood home in Birmingham as a deliberate attempt to recreate a rural Latvian farmstead:

> **We had a large garden with big trees and three fields where potatoes were planted. [..] I spent my youth planting potatoes and digging them up. And that was my completely normal Latvian life. Only later did I realize that it was a Kurzeme[28] farmstead that had been recreated there.**

Gardening, growing potatoes, keeping bees and chickens, and sharing domestic life with older relatives who had never fully

learned English made Latvian belonging part of embodied everyday routine. The homeland was thus not only narrated or represented symbolically; elements of its landscape and social world were recreated within the British domestic environment. Such practices gave respondents a form of mediated familiarity with a country in which they had never lived.

FINALLY, THE LIFE STORIES indicate that maintaining Latvian identity also involved political socialization. Several respondents describe having internalized, from an early age, a particular interpretation of history and a morally charged stance toward occupation and Soviet rule which was often reinforced by parents' public engagement in exile organizations and political activities. For example, Ivars frames his presence in Britain not as a natural condition of belonging but as the outcome of a historical rupture deeply internalized within the family. In his life story, he recalls his father's strong political engagement in exile as well as the emotional intensity that accompanied it:

> **I absorbed that sense of anger – anger at what had happened and why. I think that's where the feeling came from that we didn't really belong in England. It felt like some kind of – there's an English word for it – aberration, just a glitch of history. It just happened that we ended up in England.**

This narrative connects family memory with the sense that life in Britain resulted from historical injustice rather than voluntary migration. As Skerrett has observed in relation to Latvian and Estonian exile descendants, ethnic identity and attachment to the homeland were socially and emotionally transmitted through family narratives, national symbols, and memories of collective trauma.[29] These processes contributed to the construction of Latvia as an ideological homeland: a place not grounded in respondents' previous residence but made meaningful through inherited memory, language, domestic practices, and political interpretation.

The family therefore provided the initial resources through which Latvia became imaginable as a potential place of residence. These resources did not determine remigration, nor were they experienced uniformly across the life course. Their significance emerged through later reinterpretation, as inherited practices and memories were incorporated into respondents' own identities and combined with the personal and historical circumstances that eventually made relocation possible.

Youth engagement in diaspora organizations

Whereas the previous section examined family-based identity transmission during childhood, this section focuses on a later stage in the life course, when participation in youth organizations became increasingly voluntary and contributed to the consolidation of Latvian identity through peer networks and civic engagement.

The analysis shows that alongside the family, self-initiated



European Researcher's Night 2025 – station of the project "Navigating Post-Exile: Transformations and Transitions in the Latvian Exile Community after 1991". PHOTO: M. KRŪMIŅA



Pop-up exhibition from the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music collections dedicated to authors associated with the post-exile period. PHOTO E. KURSĪTE



The Latvian diaspora festival "Bērzes Strazdi" takes place in the United Kingdom every year. The festival attracts hundreds of Latvians who gather to celebrate Midsummer. PHOTO: BĒRZES STRAZDI/FACEBOOK

engagement in Latvian youth organizations played a significant role in consolidating identity and shaping the possibility of remigration. Most interviewees describe active participation in diaspora political and civic structures, particularly the European Latvian Youth Association[30] (ELJA) and its cross-border networks, as an important phase in their biographies. These narratives reveal that organizational environments functioned not merely as mechanisms for preserving "Latvianness," but as spaces of socialization which formed agency, civic competence, and peer-based belonging.

Several respondents describe ELJA as renewing or strengthening an attachment that had weakened after they finished school or began university. Kārlis, for example, recalls that the organization allowed him to re-enter a Latvian social environment and meet peers beyond the relatively narrow circle of his local community. His account illustrates that second-generation identity was not transmitted linearly or sustained with equal intensity throughout the life course. It could be resisted, weakened, and later reactivated through relationships that offered belonging independently of parental obligation. As Levitt and Waters observe, second-generation engagement with transnational networks may vary across life stages while accumulating significance over time.[31] ELJA was therefore important not as a single formative event but as part of an ongoing renegotiation of identity and belonging.

AS A EUROPE-WIDE NETWORK, ELJA brought together Latvian youth from different countries and facilitated participation in international congresses. It created a transnational Latvian social space while also providing practical experience in travel, networking, organizational work, and cross-border cooperation. Latvian belonging was thus experienced as dynamic and transnational, as well as structurally distinct from the socialization horizons available to peers in Soviet Latvia.

This civic dimension became particularly significant during the late 1980s. Kārlis recalls protests, letter-writing campaigns, and public information initiatives intended to raise international awareness of the situation in the Baltic states. Such activities shifted the emphasis from preserving cultural traditions to enacting Latvian identity through political participation. Respondents could experience themselves not merely as custodians of an exiled community's memories but as actors capable of contributing to political change.

ELJA also offered a generationally distinct form of community. Valters remembers encountering people of his own age whose attitudes seemed "more relaxed, freer, and more open" than those of his father's generation. He acknowledges that, as a child, he had been unable to fully understand the physical and emotional consequences of his parents' forced displacement. Thus, youth organizations provided an intermediary space in which the inherited political commitments of the exile community could be retained while Latvian identity was reformulated in ways that were socially and emotionally meaningful to the second generation.

The friendships and networks formed in these settings sometimes extended into post-exile life. Valters doubts that he would have settled permanently in Latvia had he not joined ELJA at the age of sixteen. Many of his peers subsequently moved to Latvia and remained active in civic initiatives. In his narrative, the organization thus functions as a bridge between exile socialization and later life in Latvia, providing social continuity and relationships that made relocation more imaginable.

Importantly, this organizational engagement coincided with the gradual opening of borders and political liberalization, allowing contact with peers from Latvia. Valters recalls that at first his relationship to Latvia as a state was not clearly articulated; what mattered was the discovery of a Latvian-speaking peer community. With the onset of the *Awakening* period and the increasing presence of visitors from Latvia, youth events became spaces in which Latvia as a political phenomenon acquired concrete meaning:

> **The event where I first truly saw Latvia as a state in its own right was, to some extent, the 8th World Latvian Youth Congress.**[32]

Participation in youth networks also affected everyday language practices. Ivars describes a "turning point" following an ELJA congress, when conversations with his Latvian girlfriend shifted spontaneously from English to Latvian and continued in Latvian thereafter. Language thus ceased to be primarily an inherited obligation and became a natural medium of peer and intimate communication. Its significance lay not only in linguistic competence but in the relationships through which that competence was used and sustained.

For some respondents, diaspora networks also shaped educational and geographical mobility. Through Latvian contacts in Britain, Rota attended the Latvian Gymnasium in Münster[33] and later studied at a German university. These experiences expanded her contacts with people from Latvia and created opportunities to visit the country before independence. Organizational participation therefore contributed to transnational biographies in which mobility, adaptation, and network-building had already become familiar before remigration.

Taken together, participation in ELJA and similar structures operated simultaneously as a mechanism of identity consolidation (language, peer-based belonging), as a school of political agency (protest, advocacy, transnational coalition-building), and as an infrastructure of social capital (lasting friendships and networks that later extended into Latvia). These components did not predetermine remigration but accumulated as biographical resources that made the decision to relocate more plausible once structural conditions allowed it.

The decision to return

The life stories suggest that second-generation remigration in the 1990s cannot be explained by emotional attachment or ideological loyalty alone. Respondents had to integrate relocation into ongoing life trajectories involving careers, family formation, and their children's futures. Language competence and attachment to Latvia made return imaginable, while employment, income

security, professional prospects, and family circumstances influenced whether it became practically feasible.

The economic transformation of the early and mid-1990s created particular opportunities for diaspora Latvians. As Western companies entered the Baltic markets, individuals who combined Western education and professional experience with Latvian language skills and cultural familiarity occupied an advantageous position. For Pēteris, corporate restructuring in London coincided with an opportunity to represent his firm in the Baltic states. Relocation therefore became possible without abandoning his professional trajectory or accepting substantial economic insecurity. His subsequent involvement in Latvia's institutional environment illustrates how Western-acquired expertise, together with linguistic, cultural, and social ties, became valuable in both state-building and the emerging private sector.

A SIMILAR STRUCTURE appears in Kārlis's narrative, where return is prepared through regular visits to Latvia and a gradual familiarization with local conditions, as well as through marriage to a woman from Latvia, which transforms relocation into a shared family project. He emphasizes the importance of not "moving blindly," but securing employment in advance that would allow him to utilize experience accumulated in London. For his turn, Juris describes how his professional pathway to Latvia unfolded through international projects linked to the introduction of Western expertise into post-Soviet economies, including legal assistance in developing securities legislation. Although accepting a position in Riga felt "a bit early" in career terms, he describes return after independence as a matter of timing rather than possibility: professional decisions were ultimately subordinated to an intended life geography centered on Latvia.

Practical opportunities, however, acquired significance within narratives of identity and belonging. Ivars presents return as a decision about the cultural and linguistic environment in which his children would grow up:

> **If we want our children to be Latvian, we have to make a big decision.**

In his account, Latvian identity could no longer be maintained exclusively through the symbolic and institutional practices of diaspora life; it also required a choice about residence, everyday language, and the family's future. The statement does not establish identity as the single cause of remigration but shows how relocation was retrospectively constructed as a practical enactment of belonging.

The life stories also reveal emotionally charged moments of affirmation that reinforced the decision. Juris recounts that after publicly declaring his intention to return, next morning he woke up with an inner conviction that "I am going home." He acknowledges that such experiences are difficult to explain to those for whom Latvia is not an "imagined homeland," but an unproblematic everyday environment. The significance of such narratives lies not in establishing whether Latvia objectively constituted "home", but in showing how respondents themselves constructed return as a morally and emotionally meaningful biographical transition.

ANOTHER RECURRING theme concerns remigrants' attitudes toward the "real" Latvia after 1991 and their capacity to accept the gap between the Latvia preserved in exile memory and the everyday realities of the post-Soviet state. Some members of the diaspora refrained from returning because they perceived Latvia as insufficiently "free", citing the continued presence of former Communist Party elites or incomplete decolonization, and because their expectations were shaped by an idealized image of interwar Latvia. By contrast, the interviewees who did relocate emphasize a willingness to accept Latvia as it was, recognizing that different historical experiences – exile and Soviet life – produced divergent perspectives. In this sense, remigration appears not merely as spatial relocation but as a moral and political stance: to move to Latvia implied accepting responsibility to engage, contribute, and improve, rather than waiting for an idealized correspondence with inherited visions of the past.

"THE ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE EARLY AND MID-1990S CREATED PARTICULAR OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIASPORA LATVIANS."

Across these narratives, remigration emerged when professional opportunities, family circumstances, and inherited attachments converged within particular biographies. None of these dimensions operated independently: practical opportunities made relocation feasible, while the desire to live and raise a family in Latvia gave those opportunities biographical meaning. Return was thus narrated neither as a purely strategic career move nor as the automatic fulfillment of ethnic identity, but as a decision through which professional, familial, emotional, and political considerations were brought together.

Expectations, encounters, and trajectories of settlement

Physical relocation marked the beginning of a continuing process of settlement in which expectations formed in exile encountered the social, linguistic, and professional realities of post-Soviet Latvia. Although language competence, professional capital, and diaspora networks facilitated relocation, respondents describe experiences ranging from rapid adaptation and new friendships to culture shock, exclusion, and disappointment.

A central tension in many narratives concerns the gap between the Latvia constructed in exile and the Latvia encountered after 1991. For instance, Valters describes his pre-1994 understanding of Latvia as "conceptual" and "artificial," shaped by his parents' memories and by accounts from individuals who had not lived in Latvia since the end of the Second World

War. Upon settling in Latvia, he quickly realized that there was a substantial discrepancy between inherited narratives and lived reality. Even if the imagined Latvia had matched reality, he notes, adaptation would still have required time: everyday routines, social norms, and professional cultures were not directly comparable to those in Britain. His account illustrates how the ideological homeland constructed in exile became reinterpreted through everyday encounters with the social realities of post-socialist Latvia.

Rota similarly recalls having perceived Latvia during childhood as something "sacred" and distant. Only after settling there did cultural references learned in exile acquire concrete meaning: songs about birch groves, rivers, and landscapes became connected to places she could experience directly. The homeland was therefore not simply found upon arrival but transformed from a symbolic reference point into an everyday sensory and social environment.

SETTLEMENT WAS ALSO shaped by the ambivalent status of "exile Latvians" in post-independence society. Respondents encountered curiosity and sympathy but also suspicion and stigmatization. Kārlis recalls that his Western background made him a marked figure at work: colleagues tended either to like or dislike him intensely, sometimes judging him according to his origin rather than his performance. Stereotypes portrayed exile Latvians as unable to understand local society because they had not experienced Soviet rule, or as unsuccessful emigrants who had returned to "teach others how to live". Such attitudes created a symbolic boundary between forms of Latvianness shaped by exile and those grounded in Soviet-era experience. Belonging was therefore evaluated not only through language and descent but also through historically specific biography.

"RESPONDENTS ENCOUNTERED CURIOSITY AND SYMPATHY BUT ALSO SUSPICION AND STIGMATIZATION."

These tensions were intensified by the broader socio-psychological climate of the 1990s. Kārlis describes what he calls the "post-independence blues": an initial euphoria followed by economic strain, disillusionment, and the pressures of transformation. At the same time, Western societies were often idealized in popular imagination, reinforced by imported media and narratives of rapid prosperity. Remigrants thus entered a social context that simultaneously idealized "the West" and projected resentment or suspicion toward those arriving from it.

IN SOME CASES, tensions were not merely symbolic but practical and occasionally confrontational. For example, Rota recounts an incident in which she became trapped in an elevator, and neighbors refused assistance because she did not ask in Russian, labeling her a "fascist who had come back"[34]. The episode reveals the persistence of ethnolinguistic hierarchies and post-Soviet power dynamics in urban space. Adaptation, in such moments, meant learning to navigate local norms without necessarily accepting them as legitimate.

Language constituted a further layer of complexity. Although Latvian proficiency was an important resource, the sociolinguistic environment of the 1990s remained strongly shaped by Soviet language policies, under which Russian had become practically indispensable in many urban, professional, and interethnic settings. Russian therefore continued to be widely used in some workplaces and in communication with Russian-speaking residents. Respondents who lacked Russian proficiency could experience exclusion when conversations or meetings shifted into Russian. At the same time, lexical and semantic differences between exile Latvian (often preserved in forms closer to the 1940s standard) and colloquial Latvian shaped by Soviet experience produced misunderstandings. Kārlis's examples, idioms like *pupu mizas* ("bean peels")[35], or expressions such as *atšifrēt* ("to decipher")[36] – illustrate that the gap was not merely lexical but experiential. He associates this indirect, allusive style of communication with Soviet-era practices, where direct speech could be risky. Language thus functioned as an imprint of historical experience embedded in everyday interaction.

YET THE NARRATIVES also highlight resources that facilitated settlement. First, new friendships in Latvia were crucial. For example, Valters emphasizes that in Latvia he could form relationships based on shared interests rather than solely on ethnic belonging, which was a shift from exile contexts, where Latvian identity itself was often the primary basis of socialization. In this sense, Latvian identity moved from being a community-defining criterion to an unmarked background condition within a more diversified social field.

Second, several interviewees stress the importance of accepting Latvia as a dynamic and changing state rather than expecting correspondence with an idealized interwar past. This acceptance functioned as a psychological strategy that reduced the risk of disappointment and allowed respondents to focus on practical engagement.

Third, everyday life in Latvian, i.e., the ability to conduct business, access services, and interact socially in one's primary language, emerges as a deeply motivating dimension. For Rota, the simple fact of using Latvian as a fully operative language in professional and public life was itself a source of fulfillment, particularly given the partiality of linguistic experience in exile. This linguistic normalization was complemented by sensory and spatial encounters with forests, trees, and rivers that Rota had previously known mainly through Latvian school lessons and folk songs, transforming a homeland sustained symbolically from afar into a lived environment. At the same time, her reflections on regulatory complexity, business challenges, and early experiences of pressure or informal expectations reveal a dual perception: Latvia is simultaneously attractive and demanding, a space requiring the learning of new "internal rules."

Settlement thus involved more than adaptation to a new environment. Through friendships, work, language, conflict, and everyday spatial experience, respondents revised the meanings attached to Latvia and to their own Latvianness. The ideological homeland inherited in exile neither disappeared nor corresponded fully to post-Soviet reality; it was gradually reworked into a form of belonging grounded in social relationships and everyday participation.

Conclusions

The six life stories examined in this article present second-generation remigration as a biographically grounded process in which inherited belonging, practical opportunities, and individual aspirations converged within a specific historical context. Family socialization, Latvian language competence, participation in diaspora institutions, and political engagement made Latvia imaginable as a potential place of residence. These resources did not lead automatically to relocation, but they acquired practical significance after the restoration of independence created new possibilities for mobility, employment, and participation in Latvian society.

Professional opportunities, family circumstances, and inherited attachments should therefore not be treated as competing explanations. Western education, professional experience, language competence, and diaspora networks helped make relocation feasible, while emotional attachment and the desire to build a life in Latvia gave that possibility biographical meaning. In several narratives, the wish to "be Latvian in Latvia" formed part of this constellation, but it operated together with career considerations, family projects, and perceptions of the country's future. Remigration was thus narrated neither as the automatic fulfillment of ethnic identity nor as a purely strategic response to economic opportunity.

Arrival did not complete the process of return. Respondents had to reconcile an ideological homeland sustained through family memory and exile institutions with the social and cultural realities of post-Soviet Latvia. Culture shock, linguistic differences, unfamiliar workplace practices, and ambivalent attitudes toward "Western Latvians" challenged expectations of natural integration based on common descent and language. At the same time, friendships, professional relationships, everyday use of Latvian, and sensory and spatial familiarity gradually created new forms of embeddedness. In this process, Latvia was transformed from an inherited symbolic homeland into a lived, though not uncomplicated, social environment.

THE ARTICLE CONTRIBUTES to research on second-generation ethnic return by showing how diasporic heritage becomes relevant to migration when it intersects with particular biographical and structural conditions. It also demonstrates that return involves more than movement toward an ancestral homeland: inherited forms of identity are tested and renegotiated through everyday participation after relocation. The findings are limited to a purposively selected group of six remigrants who remained in Latvia and described broadly successful settlement trajectories. They cannot explain the experiences of those who decided not to relocate, returned to the United Kingdom, or regarded remigration as unsuccessful. Within these limits, the study offers an empirically grounded account of how inherited belonging was translated first into a decision to relocate and subsequently into lived social participation.

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