

Representation of Christmas in Childhood Memory Narratives: Reflecting and Revisiting the Past

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Abstract Political contexts of different epochs heavily influence the specificity of national, traditional, religious, and family festivities. Dramatic transformations of the festivity culture, which encompasses stable cultural-historical values and traditions as well as reveals the world perception of the society and family as its smallest social structure, were brought about in Latvia by the change of political power in 1940, they continued during the period of World War II and the Soviet era due to the impact of colonial policy implemented on the territory of Latvia. The aim of the paper is to study transformations of celebrating Christmas in childhood memory narratives by Latvian (Latgalian) writer Diāna Skaidrīte Varslavāne (b. 1932), which, permeated by WWII events and colonial trauma, reveal both individual / family history and the collective past.

Despite propagated atheism and targeted actions for elimination of religion during the Soviet era, Varslavāne's protagonist not only retains her religious beliefs, but continues celebrating religious holidays (including Christmas) privately. Christmas (the last family holiday) and Easter (the time her parents tragically die) in her autobiographical prose become a border line between the time "now"—full of psychological, emotional and physical pains—and radically opposite "then"—spent with her family and full of hopes and expectations. Due to the loss of the life fundamentals (parents, home), the heroine is striving to maintain her "self," her religiosity and spirituality, as it is only through them that she can hold a "conversation" with her tragically deceased parents and ensure the preservation of the ancestors' values and identity.

At conducting the research cultural-historical, biographical, comparative methods and content analysis were employed.

Keywords autobiographical narrative; memory; trauma; religious holidays; transformations.¹

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Introduction

One of the goals of autobiographical literature is revealing human’s inner world. Though, quite frequently, such literature describes a negative life experience, the narrative of this kind testifies to the human’s true nature, which gets revealed when a protagonist faces both positive and negative emotions, success and failure (Roscan 143). Such type of narrative provides the author with the opportunity to share his or her life experience with other people and, what is especially vital, to stop keeping silence about pains and traumas experienced previously (Aouadi 202).

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The category of memory in autobiographical memory narratives reveal not only subjective world perception and individual or family history and recollections, but function as historical evidence that provides a panoramic overview of the shifts in public discourse, ideologies of society, political objectives, and cultural paradigms. Being a socially constructed notion (Halbwachs), collective memory “relates to important changes in the social fabric or to important threats to social cohesion and values” (Paez, Liu 107) and can be defined as “a system of meaning that allows groups to redefine who they are and where they are going” (Hirschberger 1441).

The memoirs of childhood and the past in Latvian literature, representing an important stratum of autobiographical writing, have always been significant for depicting the turning points in the history of the country and its people (national awakening, formation of individual and national self-awareness, WWII events, exile), as well as constructing and re-constructing their religious and cultural identity. The key texts of autobiographical childhood memory narratives in Latvian literature were written in the first half of the twentieth century by significant Latvian writers of the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century (Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš, Anna Brigadere, Ernests Birznieks-Upītis, Aspazija etc.)¹ who focused on the ascertainment of the national code (home, nature, fatherland, faith, education, work) (Rinkeviča; Kačāne), as well as placed the emphasis onto the distance between the past and the present by supplementing the plotline with the present viewpoint and author’s position on the past (Rinkevica). The next obvious expression of autobiographical narratives is observed after the restoration of the independence of the country, since 1991, when self-expression was no more censored. These prose works to a greater extent focussed on oppression and subjection experienced as a result of WWII events and Soviet colonial policy, which might be the reason for trauma and a depressive state (Dobrenko, Shcherbenok); in addition, according to Sadiya Abubakar (2017), trauma is present in all forms of literature as it “surfaces as the shady part of all narratives that tell of a history, memoir, agonies and sorrows of the writer or about the subjects (characters) created” (119). The aim

1 Childhood memory narratives *Baltā grāmata. Simts tēlojumu vārdos un līnijās* [The White Book. A Hundred Sketches in Words and Lines], 1914–1921 and *Zaļā grāmata* [The Green Book], 1950–1951 by Jaunsudrabiņš (1977–1962); trilogy: *Dievs, daba, darbs* [God, Nature, Labour], 1926; *Skarbos vējos* [In Harsh Winds], 1930; *Akmeņu sprostā* [In Stone Cage], 1933 by Brigadere (1861–1933); trilogy: *Pastariņa dienasgrāmata* [Pastariņš’ Diary], 1922; *Pastariņš skolā* [Pastariņš at School], 1924; *Pastariņš dzīvē* [Pastariņš in Life], 1924 by Birznieks-Upītis (1871–1960); dilogy *Zila debess zelta mākoņos* [The Blue Sky in Golden Clouds] (*Zila debess* [The Blue Sky], 1924; *Zelta mākoņi* [Golden Clouds], 1928), by Aspazija (1865–1943) etc.

of this stream of autobiographical literature—trauma narratives—was to present authentic or semi-authentic personal experience (Verdins), enhance the understanding of social-political context of the individual and collective trauma and self-identification in the new circumstances when reconsideration of the shared past took place (Kaprāns), as well as to depict the impact of such a trauma (e.g. the Soviet massive deportations to Siberia etc.) on individual and collective identity (Birzniece; Ļaha; Meskova, Kupsane) as represented in the autobiographical book translated into 15 foreign languages *Ar balles kurpēm Sibīrijas sniegos* [With Dance Shoes in Siberian Snows] (2001) by Latvian politician, independence movement leader and writer Sandra Kalniete (b. 1952), the prose works *Pieci Pirksti* [Five Fingers] (2013) and *Paradīzes putni* [Birds of Paradise] (2018) by the winner of the Annual Latvian Literature Award in Best Work of Prose category (2014; 2019) Māra Zālīte (b. 1952), and many others.

According to Craps and Buelens (2008) “[c]olonial trauma [...] is a collective experience, which means that its specificity cannot be recognized unless the object of trauma research shifts from the individual to larger social entities, such as communities or nations” (4). In addition, trauma experienced by communities and nations under the impact of colonial powers and included in autobiographical narratives is mainly marked by the concepts of tenacity and survival rather than convalescence (Saxena 181). Contextualization of the past events in a literary work allows evaluating colonization conditions and draw essential conclusions about their nature, consequences caused by them, psychological and mental impact on human [nation], including the imposed break with the tradition and a loss of daily or festive habits, rituals, customs, as well as about the ways of overcoming them: “[...] once a trauma and loss under colonial regime are contextualised and understood as a manifestation of oppressive politics and power equations, the conditions of colonialism can be addressed” (Saxena 183-184).

The research is aimed at investigating transformations of celebrating Christmas in childhood memory narratives depicting the events of WWII, Nazi and Soviet occupation—*Cilvēks spēlējas ar lāčiem* [Human Plays with Bears] (1975) and *Dzērvīnīki* [Cold and Red Feet] (2001)—by Latvian (Latgalian) writer Diāna Skaidrīte Varslavāne (b. 1932). After the publication of her first long story in 1975, the writer’s works were no longer published and for a wider circle of readers they appeared only after Latvia regained its independence; some manuscripts are still not available.

Historical and Cultural Context

The understanding of Latvian population about the preservation of national and

religious values, about identity, traditions, cultural heritage as well as about serious challenges their safeguarding pose due to the influence of historical and political events has been affected by radically different aspects of various regimes. An essential feature of the history of the twentieth century Latvian society is a repeated colonial and post-colonial experience, as well as the trauma of totalitarianism. In the result of WWI and on the basis of the principle of self-determination of nations, the independent state of Latvia was established in 1918, and in the postcolonial situation it developed as one of the most rapidly growing states in Europe, oriented towards restoration and protection of national identity and culture (Krūmiņš, Bleiere). In the result of geopolitical changes in 1940, Latvia was “actually liquidated and from an independent national state became a subordinate subject of the Soviet Union” (Mintaurs).

Colonialism, according to Jürgen Osterhammel (1997), is a system of domination and a sustained effort of controlling “from a geographically distant home a new political organization that had been created by invasion or settlement” (10-11). The identification of the Soviet power as a colonial power has been addressed in post-colonial criticism and theory by Violeta Kelertas (2006), Neil Lazarus (2012), Epp Annus (2012), Benedikts Kalnačs (2016) etc. who based their studies on David C. Moore’s (2006) definition of the term “postcolonial” which was applied also to the former Soviet Regions—“the Baltic states, Central and Eastern Europe (including both former Soviet republics and independent ‘East Bloc’ states), the Caucasus, and Central Asia” (Moore 15). Colonialism is not only an enterprise of economic exploitation and political control, but foremost “a cultural project of control” (Dirks 3), thus, by reconstructing and transforming culture, colonialism becomes a cultural formation and, vice versa, culture—a colonial formation.

If the inter-war period (1918–1940) is characterized by strengthening Latvian-ness as a unifying foundation, at the same time preserving multiform expressions of ethnic minority cultures and their religious peculiarities, then during the Soviet colonial power, the primary focus is laid on belonging to the Soviet state, development of a civic ideology, giving up manifestations of national, religious and cultural identity. The Soviet colonial period (1940–1941; 1944/5–1991) brings about brutal changes in both the state administration structure and system of education and culture. The colonial policy of the USSR in Latvia was oriented towards the disruption of national identity, hence “the Latvian national self-confidence was considered a dangerous anti-Soviet manifestation” (Šteimans 60). One of the expressions of Soviet colonialism was the persecution of religious people, for whom atheism propagated by communists was not acceptable, and this marked a radical turning-point in

Latvian culture including festivity culture.

For Latvia, the colonial trauma largely coincided with mass traumatic WWII experience. During WWII, the German occupation (1941–1944/45) adopted the policy which, due to the influence of the trauma of the first Soviet occupation and deportations, aroused false hopes among the Latvian population that they might be supported in their attempt to restore independence, “[...] speaking about culture the Nazi pretended to be bearers of culture and demagogically promised the enslaved nations a wellbeing after their victory in war, so that to gain support from the population on the conquered territories” (Šteimans 76).

After the restoration of independence, the concepts of culture and cultural identity became significant again and were gradually employed as the research object in the framework of post-colonial discourse: “[...] attempts of Baltic scholars to integrate their efforts in the field of postcolonial studies can be seen as an attempt to contribute to this painful identity search” (Kalnačs 24).

Varslavāne’s Prose in the Context of Traumatic Experience

Writer Varslavāne was born in the period of independent Latvia (August 30, 1932) in a Latgalian (south-eastern region of Latvia) town—Rēzekne. The idyll of the harmonious life of patriotically-minded and multi-religious (Catholic and Orthodox) family and the sense of a free citizen in an independent country were destroyed by the Soviet occupation in 1940, when by order of the new power parents were forced to live and work each in a different town while children had to attend school whose necessary attributes were “alien flags, incomprehensible words of the anthem [...]” (Varslavāne, *Asmu zemes...* 9).

After the return to their native town and having avoided the 1941, June 14 deportation, the family worked and lived in the hope that Latvia’s independence would be restored some day. During WWII, under the German occupation, both of her parents were killed in a Soviet air raid before her and the elder brother’s very eyes, leaving the girl mentally and physically traumatized (head trauma and post-traumatic hearing difficulties):

I have forgotten nothing! My memory brings back Stalag with Russian prisoners of war—just opposite to our small house, and their strange looks and laughter when I and my brother were standing there next to our dead mother... Days full of pain, and nights—well, everything, everything!”¹ (Varslavāne,

1 Here and henceforth all translations of the quotes from Latvian and Latgalian have been translated into English by the authors of the paper.

Dzērvinīki 5)

This tragic event of 1944, which fell on the eve of Easter, and last memorable happy event with parents, which fell on winter religious holidays, particularly Christmas, constitute polarities: in her childhood memories they became a border line between the time “now”—full of psychological, emotional and physical pains and radically opposite “then”—spent with her family and full of hopes and expectations. Having so suddenly and early lost her family, she also witnessed how the previously accepted values and traditions in state administration, education and culture were gradually undergoing crucial transformations.

Trauma has been a research object in different fields of studies (medicine, psychology, literature, culture, art) (Abubakar 120; Andermahr 1; Schönfelder 28, 43; Wood Anderson 6). In literary studies, nuances of depicting world wars, colonialism and decolonization, authoritarian regimes, genocide and global terrorism are investigated (Erl). By evaluating the impact of trauma on literature, psychological and cultural traumatic experience on the individual and the collective is revealed. Such studies explore “inexpressible in words” traumatic experience in autobiographical narratives that balance between the boundaries of imagination and reality, subjectivity and objectivity since the subject of trauma in literary narratives is simultaneously “personalized and contextualized, fictionalized and historicized, as well as psychologized and metaphorized [...]” (Schönfelder 29).

The term “trauma” is used to designate “a profoundly distressing, painful, or shocking experience that affects the individual so deeply as to cause a disruption in, injury to, or breach within the structures of the mind and the psyche and that, as a result, may have a persistent impact on an individual, especially regarding his or her relation to identity, memory, and the social environment” (Schönfelder 20-21). Trauma is a lost feeling of security in the result of violence and a situation when the individual’s personal life story which had begun in a harmonious and orderly world is destroyed (Hernández 17).

In this peculiar way, readers are given the opportunity to have an insight into the colonial past and “become familiar with it”: “Narrativization of trauma allows insight into specifics of the colonial past as a pathway to integration of the traumatic memory. This process of integration may also involve addressing the sensitive issue of complicity” (Visser 15). Authors, in turn, express their traumatic experience inflicted by the events in the past.

Currently many scientists maintain that no age group is protected against the influence and consequences of mental traumas (Dar et al.), including those caused

by colonialism, war events or terrorism (Bradford; Kidd; Lalonde; Waugh et al.). Publications assert that children endure such events inwardly and remember them for a long time since a traumatic stress provoked by such occurrences causes serious psychological aftereffects: “While it was previously believed that children did not understand or remember traumatic occurrences, there is now increasing awareness that children are very vulnerable to the stresses of war and terrorism” (Liu 3). The loss of parents, especially witnessing family members killed, as well as the loss of home during the aggressive attacks and moving to another household while being orphaned make children particularly vulnerable (Liu 4). Although both grown-ups and children display rather similar symptoms, children’s reaction to tragic events considerably differs from that of grown-ups (Bulut 16).

This individual and collective traumatic experience was embodied by Varslavāne in her prose works—autobiographical long story *Cilvēks spēlējas ar lāčiem*¹ and in the long story *Dzērvinīki*², which due to the ban on publication in the Soviet period was issued only after the restoration of statehood in 2001 in the framework of post-colonial discourse. In the former memory prose work, the ten-year-old girl’s, Skaidrīte Varkalne’s, narrative depicts the period of German occupation in Septiņkalne [Rēzekne] from 1942 to 1944 when both of her parents tragically perished, representing also the flashbacks from the earlier time, i.e. the independent Latvia and the first year of the Soviet occupation; in the latter—a year on a Latgale farm as viewed by an eleven-year-old orphan living with her brother in a family of their relatives. The depictions of war and post-war events cover a broad spectrum of experiences and emotions—the girl’s surprise, fear, despair, inner protest, mental and physical trauma. The girl’s further experiences in Soviet Latvia are described in the autobiographical work “Timseņa ausa... Veļtejums Latgolys pēckara bērniem”³ [Darkness Descended... Dedication to the Post-war Children of Latgale] published in the Latgalian literary almanac *Olīts* [The Source] depicting the writer’s studies, daily duties (the mundane) and celebration of festivities (the festive) and their transformations (Varslavāne, “Timseņa ausa...” 1992, 1999). All of these prose works,

1 The story was written continuously during many decades, first published in the literary magazine *Karogs* [The Flag] in 1972 (Varslavāne). After its publishing in the book version the publishers were punished and the writer was banned from further publishing her works, “It was told so [...] That crazy book should not have been published. Aren’t there better themes?” (Varslavāne, *Asmu zemes...* 35).

2 The story *Dzērvinīki* was written in 1977–1992.

3 The title is a reference to and the opposite of the title of the Latgalian folk song “Gaismeņa ausa” [Light Downed] emphasizing the onset of “darkness,” i.e. collapse of moral, cultural and religious values. The work was written in several stages: 1944, 1947, 1987–1990.

except the one published in the Soviet period, are written in a Latgalian dialect.

The events described in Varslavāne's texts are shown within the frame of both mundaneness and festivity; the transformations in holidays and festivities can be traced by making the contextual analysis of changes in power, i.e. the time "then" and "now."

Transformations of Christmas Celebration in Varslavāne's Autobiographical Prose Works

Christmas in Pre-Soviet Latgale: *Cilvēks spējējas ar lāčiem*

Traditionally, Christmas has been perceived by families as a sacral moment imbued with emotions (Kovzele 103-104), and as such has been preserved in memories of the older generation, including the writer's childhood memories, "[...] in our family, we liked Christmas best of all, and how we celebrated it in our parental home we will never forget" (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 140). The representatives of different religious and denominational groups in Latgale, the region depicted by the writer, are characterized by a deep religiosity, "[...] in Eastern Latvia, where religious traditions were fundamental, the population has preserved the Christian faith" (Saleniece 203). Christmas like other religious holidays was, on the whole, celebrated according to Christian traditions; in Latgale, where the proportion of mixed families is especially great, Christmas was often marked twice—according to the Julian calendar and according to the Gregorian calendar. For Varslavāne's heroine, "our" god is "the generous Orthodox god" who "understands Latvian and Russian" [religious belonging of her mother and matrilineal grandfather], for her matrilineal grandmother this is "a boring Lutheran god," while for her father and his relatives it is "a furious Catholic" who "makes one stand on one's knees," confess and read the Bible in Polish and Latgalian (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 62).

Memories of Christmas as the last holiday spent together with her family come flooding back to the protagonist orphan Skaidrīte when she is looking back to her family's life under the difficult conditions of the German occupation and is comparing it with the life in independent Latvia, i.e. when after her parents' death she is playing and speaking with her teddy bears, revealing her traumatic experience to them or, vice versa, letting her teddy bears speak and tell their observations about the events of her life. The fact about her parents' death as well as the description of this tragic event through the girl's eyes is revealed to the reader only in the final chapters of the story, however, already the first lines of the story introduce teddy bears to us as both pupils of Skaidrīte (future teacher) and the prototype of a family

whom she cannot take leave of starting a new life in her relatives' home.¹ The use of a game as a multidimensional instrument of introspection in an autobiography allows the author to show the whole spectrum of young heroine's experiences and emotions, her seeking for answers to complicated questions by synthesizing the message of the "Bear family" with the author's viewpoint. The structure of the story resembles a cinema montage: the narrative is permeated by interludes (a talk between the Bear family and their "teacher" and a family member at the same time), and when the "cinema sequences" change, they seem to be sounding pauses that give relief. In the result of the interaction between such narrative forms the author deliberately broadens the potential of readers' perception.

The protagonist describes Christmas in free Latvia and during the German occupation as holidays celebrated in the space of home and in the circle of a sincere and loving family, at the table laid for a Christmas meal, with a decorated Christmas tree brought right from the forest and Christmas presents (also the dear teddy-bears) put secretly under it.

During the period of the German occupation, celebration of Christmas at school and in church together with German soldiers made the girl feel discontent, since memory brought back visions from quite a different past—"golden epoch," namely, the real, true Christmas celebration when their parents were speaking with children and their eyes were shining with joy:

[...] before war, mother too came to the forest, father decorated a fir tree with sparklers and lighted them. The sparkling needles and snowflakes were falling down. We tried to catch them, clapped our hands. Mammy's eyes glittered like stars. Alas! Then she laughed differently! (Varslavāne, *Cilvēks spēlējas...* 136)

In memories of protagonist's mother, Christmas was a charity time in independent Latvia, when donations were collected, children of poor families were visited and given gifts (Varslavāne, *Cilvēks spēlējas...* 125). The same religious discourse continues also under the Nazi German occupation, however before Christmas mass, presents are prepared at school for the German soldiers stationed in the town to keep their morale. The heroine participates in this activity, but the author describes her perplexity:

They are drawing fir tree twigs, putting them on the parcels in which they

1 "Mother Bear [...], Father Bear, the little ones—Brother and Sister, always sit in the middle..." (Varslavāne, *Cilvēks spēlējas...* 6).

have inserted needle work and embroideries, cigarettes, cookies, sweets, even woollen mittens and socks. Presents are arranged with due diligence: the Germans like order. [...] “What magnificent presents!” Skaidrīte thinks. “But if I offered to some small hand [children from Russia / prisoners of war] a piece of bread or mittens through a freight car window, what will they do with me?” Arrest me, shoot me?” The soldier who punished her might later receive a greeting card drawn by her...” (Varslavāne, *Cilvēks spēlējās...* 130-131)

The author devotes three chapters to a detailed description of the last family Christmas: “Svētku priekšvakarā” [On Christmas Eve], “Jūs, bērniņi, nāciet...” [O Come, Little Children...]¹, “Ak, eglīte...” [O Christmas Tree...]², choosing the titles of Christmas carols for two of them.

The story shows Christmas eve within the context of a binary opposition “now” and “then,” marking the transformations of traditions by a subjective comparison of past and present events in the changing world, including the process of child’s growing up and reaching maturity. If “now” Skaidrīte goes to the forest for a fir tree accompanied only by her father and brother, then “before” the period of getting ready for Christmas was an integral element of festivity: decorating fir trees and lighting sparklers in the forest, decorating Christmas tree at home, with her mother taking part in all these activities. Wishing to decorate a fir tree in the forest just as they have done it before, the girl reaches in her pocket and fishes some bright worsted wool and pieces of coloured paper out. The symbolic reverberations of family traditions hidden deep in the “memory pocket” simultaneously reveal colourfulness, lightness and serenity of her early childhood experiences. When the last Christmas attribute—Skaidrīte’s favourite small copper bell—has been put on Christmas tree in the space of home, a farewell to her childhood is “rung in,” and it will have neither parents nor Christmas, nor a small princess listening to fairy-tales told by her mother, “I hang it on a lower branch, touch it with my finger—ting! What a clear sound! My voice sounded like that in childhood, and I was called a Lark then” (Varslavāne, *Cilvēks spēlējās...* 139).

In the story, the symbol of a bell and semantics of ringing it are related to the

1 The title of the German composer Johann Abraham Peter Schulz (1747–1800) and poet Christoph von Schmid’s (1768–1854) Christmas song “Ihr Kinderlein kommet” [O Come, Little Children] (1811); Latvian translation by the poet and translator Jānis Ruģēns (1817–1876).

2 The title of Ernst Anschütz’s Christmas song “O Tannenbaum” [O Christmas Tree] (1824) (based on the sixteenth century German folksong); Latvian translation by Ernests Dinsbergs (1816–1902), the nineteenth century Latvian pedagogue, poet, publicist, and translator (Jundze).

accentuation of transformations and to the relationship and distinction between the polarities, i.e. between the spiritual and the secular, the past and the present.

The mention of Christmas corals has a multi-dimensional meaning: it is a reference to both growth in the popularity of church Christmas traditions and services with Christmas corals in the nineteenth century, and to the influence of the German culture on Latvian cultural space in general. It is also a reference to the period of the movement of Young Latvians (1850s–1880s)¹ when an active process of Latvianizing the foreign cultural heritage, also texts of German songs, was started. However, in the story Christmas is described not only within the context of peaceful holiness, hopes and solemnity², but also within the context of the synthesis of a hidden tragedy of the past and the future. The subjective perception of the news about the death of the Latvian modern poetry and drama pioneer Aspazija (Elza Rozenberga; 1865–1943)³, received not long before the beginning of the Advent time, symbolically reveals the destruction or end of the epoch of dreams, ideals and human entity cherished by a whole generation, including her parents, especially mother, because among the broad interests of the popular writer, the basic conditions for the creation and existence of the nation and state had also been a matter of concern for the poetess. Having realized the role and irreplaceable significance of Latvian literati and education and cultural figures Rainis' (Jānis Pliekšāns; 1865–1929)⁴ and Aspazija's personalities, the importance of their social activity and creative work in parents' life (accentuation of collective memory), on Christmas, children make an attempt to restore hopes cherished by the parents' generation by joining in the discourse of this writer and social-political figure: reciting poems written by Aspazija ("Dzimtene" [Motherland], "Mazā sirmā kumeliņā" [On a Small Grey Horse], "Mēness

1 Young Latvians—mid-nineteenth century or First Latvian National Awakening movement of Latvian intellectuals. See more: Ijabs (2014).

2 "[...] we have put on our best clothes [...]" (Varslavāne, *Cilvēks spēlējas...*147).

3 In her works, Aspazija depicted "not only woman's, but also Latvia's (Latvia—a woman / mother) longing for changes, her need for transformations and inner freedom which through the artefacts of world-scale or "alien" cultures open greater opportunities for understanding 'oneself' and 'one's own' individual self-confidence, as well as the future prospects of 'one's own' culture and social activities in the context of European innovative tendencies (Kacane 92). See more: Meškova (2003).

4 Rainis and Aspazija [husband and wife] are world level Latvian writers who have been crucially significant in the history of Latvian literature and culture and who have created many works full of rebellion spirit; in the result of the Sovietization during the Soviet era, their Latvian national discourse was deliberately transformed to fit into a frame of the Soviet-Latvian ideology (Zelče, "The Sovietization of Rainis...").

starus sūgo” [The Moon Beam Light] a. o.). In this way, the continuity of cultural heritage, traditions, intellectual wealth and previous generation’s ideals seeking for the truth and free will is attested. The Christmas Day is shown by the author within the context of giving presents: along with giving practical utilitarian presents (e. g. a carbide lamp given by father), making semi-utilitarian (saffron bread, pies, butter cookies, ginger bread presented by her aunt) and non-utilitarian (a day-off given to her father as a gift to the family) gifts to children is also emphasized. A Christmas meal includes Latvian dishes (peas with bacon, roast pork, fruit salad), exotic fruits (lemon) and cognac. After a collective singing, lightening one tall white candle instead of many small ones on the Christmas tree and receiving Christmas presents placed round the bottom of the tree by Santa Claus, Christmas Day ends in emphasizing the category of memories: leafing through a family photo album, the protagonist realizes that photos of the family’s last Christmas will be missing in the album, nevertheless the “photo of this eve” will remain in the memory album of their hearts (Varslavāne, *Cilvēks spēlējās...* 150).

Christmas in Soviet Latgale: *Dzērvīnīki*

Although Christmas was not immediately eradicated from the calendar by the colonial power in 1940 (Simyan, Kačāne 183), as indicated in author’s autobiographical description, one of the first childhood memories in the Soviet period revealing the collective past of Latvia was replacement of religious holidays with secular ones, “Instead of Christmas, the New Year [was] celebrated at school” (Varslavāne, *Asmu zemes...* 10).

The writer depicts the Soviet era as a destructive force which via the instrument of intellectual influence and ideological power (education institutions), as well as repressive methods, drastically transforms traditional values of the previous system. The content of school curricula was brought in line with aims of the totalitarian regime, but religion and church (also religious holidays), being dangerous phenomena for the Soviet power, were to be maximally transformed or destroyed: “The Soviet society based on the communist ideology, which rejects God and any religious manifestations, recognized as a norm atheistic world outlook with own conduct of society members including teachers” (Saleniece 197).

All the faithful, especially representatives of church, “were discredited and declared as enemies of the Soviet power, and the Churches were gradually remade to marionettes obedient to the Soviet regime” (Krūmiņa-Koņkova 141). In her prose writings, Varslavāne, too, shares her observations:

Who doesn't know that school will always implement the policy of the government which has won in the country! (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 98)

[...] the headmaster read instructions that the Kremlin had forbidden pupils to be engaged in that... religious propaganda. And also mustn't take part in the Holy Mass. (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 136)

During the period of the Soviet occupation, all the religious rituals and holidays are actually forbidden, but the “taken-away” Christmas is purposefully replaced with the equivalent more suitable for the Soviet power—the New Year.

The New Year, though celebrated also in free Latvia, in the Soviet time acquires a different nuance: secular songs sung there in Russian and roles given to children and young people in plays favoured by the Soviet power are unknown and strange to them. Mechanisms of this kind functioned as effective tools of exerting influence, “[...] In the Soviet period, holidays used to be called ‘a universal work of art’ created with the involvement of numerous professional activity organizers, ideologists, public relation specialists, media employees and artists, and this ‘work of art’ was created on the territory of the whole vast Soviet state” (Zelče, “1940. gads...” 35-36). In time when all hearts in Latvian families desire to see the wonder of Jesus Christ birth, pupils are forced to spend long hours at school rehearsing a New Year performance, “[...] headmaster announced the dress rehearsal for the New Year performance just on Christmas” (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 138).

In the girl's memories, Christmas is the last holidays spent together with her family: having lost her parents, she also realizes the shared tragedy of the loss of family holidays marked as “ours” and “real.” Within the context of non-acceptance of holidays imposed by the ideology of the Soviet power, she asks a rhetorical question if she will never have her own and real holidays (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 41). Thus, a traumatic experience is revealed by representing a parallelism “taken-away family / childhood—taken-away Christmas,” both due to the Soviet colonial power: “Autobiographical memories relatively well keep explicitly negative emotional events, and this refers to both the event itself and its details” (Kapraņš, Zelče 24).

Varslavāne's protagonist who after her parents' death has converted from Orthodoxy (mother's religion) to Catholicism (father's religion) remains loyal to Christianity, since in the girl's subjective perception rejecting religion and religious holidays would mean the rejection of her own family and memories about it. This feeling is symbolically expressed by the teddy bears presented to her by her parents on their “own” Christmas, which still are with the protagonist in the time of the new

stage of her life impacted by political ideology and secularization. Prayers for her are a requiem to the souls of her parents and simultaneously a dialogue with them. Therefore, unlike many other of her peers, in the morning before going to school, the protagonist attends church, sings in a church choir and as soon as the Advent time begins, she lives in her “own” holiday atmosphere, while at school everything is done to get ready for the “alien” integrated New Year:

Advent has come. The rosary will be recited, and getting ready for Child Jesus birth has begun. I am occupied to the bottom of my heart. But school is again getting ready for its own festivity—seeing the New Year in. And songs are different there, even a performance from “Zelta zirgs” [Golden Horse] by Rainis¹ [...] I have to sing in that choir as well, and sing those Russian songs. About some “jolocka” [from Russian—a small fir tree / secular New Year tree]² which was born in the forest, had grown there and was said to be very beautiful. And leverets and kittens in that song are not delighted about Child Jesus, but go to town to delight children! Just of their own accord, because the old year is exchanging with the new one. There is not a single word about the Holy Family. (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 135)

In the last year of WWII, along with traditions of religious holidays and festivities (Christmas, Easter, May singings, the Holy Virgin Mary’s Ascension Day, Holy Communion, the Holy Mass a. o.), the traditional rituals of festivities and folklore customs were practiced as well, for example, fortune-telling on Christmas,

We are a religious family and see the New Year in at church with the Holy Mass and the Communion. [...] Now only frying, cooking, decorating a fir-tree. Then we try to find some lead buttons for a game of fortune-telling—to melt lead and pour it into cold water to make a shape that will shadow coming events. And if you try hard, the German coins can be melted as well. (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 145)

The description of girl’s attitude to holidays and festivities testifies to the fact that part of Latvian religious community lived in two parallel worlds. People lived “on

1 See Footnote 3 on page 12.

2 A reference to the secularized Soviet New Year children’s song *V lesu rodilas’ jolochka* [In the Forest a Little Christmas Tree was Born], initially known as Russian Christmas song (1903; put to music in 1906).

two sides” (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 136) and, contrary to the allowed one (collective, party, atheistic), there existed the side undesirable for the Soviet power and hostile to its propaganda (national, religious, private):

About this side of my life [prayers in church, singing in a church choir] I never talked with other girls at school [...]. (Varslavāne, *Dzērvinīki* 135)

On the whole, “[...] guarding Latvian cultural identity under the unfavourable political and social conditions meant preservation of the ethnic status, resistance to the open and hidden Russification” (Kaprāns, Zelče 14), thus such a secret and risky way of life in the Soviet era ensured maintaining one’s own national, ethnic, regional and religious identity and didn’t allow the Soviet colonial power to reach its long-term goals, including cultural superiority.

Conclusion

In the result of a long-lasting collective trauma of the occupation and shared pain, which, according to Istrate (2012), “violated the national dignity” (in: Hanovs 139), Latvian literature of the turn of the twenty and twenty-first centuries focused on reconsideration and revisiting the past. Analogous with other post-war and post-colonial writers, Varslavāne depicts not only individual memory and her own traumatic experience, but also the collective traumatic past. In her childhood memory narratives, through the portrayal of the individual past in the context of the changes of the political power, the collective experience is exposed, also in relation to the preservation of cultural and religious identity. In Varslavāne’s autobiographical stories, the illustrated transformations of celebrating religious holidays (including Christmas) report a political, social and cultural situation in the then Latvia, as well as represent the reaction of a local population, including children, to the events they have been witnesses to. One of such experiences of the heroine was related to socio-cultural deprivation and the realization of the loss: the loss of the parents, of the family home, and of cultural and religious traditions, on the one hand, and immense strivings to preserve such deeply individual aspects of one’s life as spirituality and faith, which ensure communication with the ancestors, on the other.

Being an integral part of every nation’s spiritual culture, holidays and festivities synthesize experience and perceptions of previous generations obtained during many centuries. Varslavāne’s memory narratives not only emphasize the belief that participation in festivities and observation of religious holiday traditions ensure the succession of culture-significant information and passing it down from one gener-

ation to another, but also relieve confusion and trauma, i.e. contribute to human's emotional and mental survival by maintaining one's own spiritual "self."

Holidays and festivities encompass values, traditions and world vision characteristic of a specific socium which, depending on the current social and political conditions, might be preserved and passed down openly (celebration in the family, church, education institution, cultural centre, city square) or secretly (celebration mainly in the family and occasionally in the church), thus forcing to lead a double (i.e. public vs. secret) life. During the years of secularization, celebrating religious holidays was discouraged, which made a negative impact on Latvian festivity culture in general and determined the transformation of the paradigm and world perception throughout several generations until today. Thus, culture of festivities is not a statical phenomenon but rather a manifestation of the dynamics of traditional cultural forms and innovations, to a great extent affected by the approach, aims and landmarks of a political power.

The leitmotif used by Varslavāne in her childhood memory narratives, is the concept of "taken-away family / childhood—taken-away Christmas." Under the German occupation, Christmas is celebrated in the atmosphere of the conditions limited by war, full of tragic events and previously unknown experience, where the issue of love, being human, and of philanthropy is called into question. Christmas is represented as a family festivity; however, the emphasis is laid on the past, the category of memory and nostalgia, reflection on the pre-war period—"the golden era," as well as on subconscious awareness of the approaching tragedy.

Despite the ban imposed on celebrating religious and national holidays in the period of Soviet occupation, people continued preserving their national, ethnic and religious identity. The binary opposition "then—now," namely, things observed in free Latvia and those in the Soviet Latvia, is offered by the author in several variations. "Then" religious holidays (Christmas) were actively marked and celebrated in church, at school and, most importantly for the small girl, in the family with all due respect for the ancestors' traditions and different religious denominations. "Now," in the Soviet era, the space of the family for the maturing heroine is no longer limited to the space of home only, but has expanded to nature in general and church in particular because home is where the parents are. Just like the majority of population in Soviet Latvia, the heroine lives in two parallel worlds: along with the world imposed by the political power there is a different one related to the "family" (the world of memories, games, literature, religious songs and holidays), which is the source of strength and endurance in the time of chaos and tragic events.

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