

Christian Holidays in Latvian Exile Periodical *The Voice of Latgale* (1946–1985)

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Abstract The paper is aimed at analyzing newspaper articles on Christian religious holidays in a Latvian periodical *Latgolas Bolss* [The Voice of Latgale] (for a specific period known as *Latgola* [Latgale]) published in 1946–1985 in exile (Germany, France and the USA) in Latgalian—the historic variant of the Latvian language spoken in the south-eastern part of Latvia. The timeframe within which the newspaper was published (during WWII in Latvia, later in exile) is characterized by the effects of the loss of Latvia’s independence (1940), the country’s occupation and reoccupation—dramatic events in the history of the country that forced many Latvians to flee their homeland and find refuge in the West. By employing the cultural-historical, biographical and content analysis methods, the newspaper articles by Latvian Latgalian authors on two major religious holidays (Christmas and Easter) were selected to study internal representations while manifesting one’s identity through the medium of the native language from the perspective of a displaced person (cultural memory) under the impact of the external factors and surrounding reality.

The conducted research allowed concluding that the written texts about religious holidays in the Latvian exile periodical were presented as a component of the Latvian national and cultural identity. The depictions were imbued with nostalgia for the lost homeland and awareness of the risks of losing one’s identity and culture. The binary oppositions in the conceptual categories of space (“homeland—foreign country”), time (“then—now”), and value system (“one’s own—alien”) allowed Latvian Latgalian intellectuals to highlight the crucial role of the Christian (Catholic) faith in both adapting to changes and challenges in a new country and maintaining a sense of belonging to Latvia, i.e. during a process of redefining oneself and of reconstructing and negotiating identity in exile. Alongside the Christian segment, the pre-Christian heritage based on the Latvian pagan belief

system (winter solstice and spring equinox traditions and rituals) was presented as a major part of celebrating Christmas and Easter. The celebration experiences in the homeland juxtaposed with the observed and experienced celebration forms in a foreign country were perceived within a binary opposition “one’s own—alien”, where “one’s own” was characterized by the sacral, natural, and tranquil, but the “alien”—by the profane, artificial, and tumultuous.

Keywords religious holidays and traditions; Latvia; exile; memory; identity¹

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Introduction

Festivities as “residues of the past” (Popelková 173) incorporate not only the nation’s mythological thinking and elements of ancient cults and rituals (Mpofu 28), but also social and family life norms, standards of behavior, ideals and values (Korolova et. al. 544; Kovzele “Svētku kultūras transformācijas pierobežā...” 9). Compared to other holiday groups, religious holidays reveal “some of the most important values of a community as well as the place of these values in households and families” (Goldscheider 39). Members of the society intuitively follow the traditions and values and find spiritual inspiration in the “continuity in contents” of these festivities (Tak 12), which they try to preserve and inculcate into the coming generations.

In academic research, there is an opinion that religiosity “plays a key role in defining the boundaries of cultural differences” (Lipnicka and Peciakowski 1). Festivities, including religious holidays, reflect human nature and are vital “for managing, producing and reproducing national memories and identities”; they create

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favorable conditions for reflection on who we are as a nation (Mpofu). In various crisis situations of society's existence (natural disasters, epidemics, deportations, wars, etc.), it is the festivities that contribute to self-identification processes and ensure the unity of a group of individuals or society as a whole. In cases of the loss of national sovereignty and political repressions, as well as of living as a refugee in exile, two festivity functions become especially important—that of consolidating and that of accumulating; both involve preservation of and handing down cultural knowledge, norms and values of the nation (Kovzele “Svētku kultūras transformācijas pierobežā...” 11-12). In situations hazardous to spiritual and physical existence, festivities help to preserve and strengthen individual and national self-confidence and sense of belonging. Religious holidays and their traditions, in addition to previously mentioned functions, perform also the functions of providing emotional satisfaction and support in upholding faith in circumstances of physical and mental terror and exhaustion, especially in cases when the religious/ denominational belonging of the colonizers is different from that of the nation they have colonized or when trying to preserve one's identity in exile.

Exile has been defined as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home”, therefore “its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (Said 137). It has also been commonly perceived “as the presence of a broken past presence” (Schuback 179). In scientific literature, exile has been mostly viewed as an ontological condition, as a “meta-category describing an existential attitude” against a specific historical period and/ or periods (Enquist Källgren 54).

The concept “exile” within the article denotes the period of time from the final stage of WWII (the autumn of 1944–1945), when, trying to escape from the potential repressions of the Soviet power and mortal danger, about 10% of a total population left the country and found a refuge in other, mostly western, countries, to May 4, 1990, when Latvia regained its national independence and people, who had left the country, had the opportunity to return to their homeland (Celle 5; Daukste-Silasproģe 5; Plakans). After Latvia's occupation (1940) and by the end of WWII (1945), about 125 thousand of the Latvians were forced to leave their homeland and settle down in other countries—Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, Canada, USA, Australia, and elsewhere in the world (Zalkalns 50). In the situation characterized by the exiled Latvians as “the exile cross” (Anspoks 1), i.e., day-to-day anxiety about survival in new and unfamiliar conditions when starting their lives from scratch, they tried to remain united as a nation, respectfully treating the values of their own culture. The conscious commitment to preserve and strengthen Latvian cultural

heritage in exile was manifested in the field of writing, book publishing, theatre, painting, fine arts and, among other forms of representation of national cultural achievements, in the celebration of holidays (Kovzele “Peculiarities of Actualizing the Subject of Festivities...” 398).

A vital signifier of intangible cultural heritage and a means for transmitting the experience of the past in exile was festivity culture: national, family, and, among others, religious holidays (Ķestere, Kaļķe). Preserving and handing down cultural values and traditions to the younger generations was accepted as a calling since the loss of their own cultural environment meant for them also “existential loss” (Nollendorfs 219). On the occupied territory of Latvia marking national and religious holidays openly, due to the policy implemented by the Soviet power, was no longer possible; such holidays were considered “usual working days” (Latkovskis “Zīmāssvātki” 1). By living on mission, a symbolic spiritual link with the lost homeland was maintained.

This paper is aimed at analyzing the representation of religious holidays (Christmas and Easter) and their traditions in the Latvian exile newspaper *Latgolas Bolss* [The Voice of Latgale] (also *Latgola* [from Latgale]) published in 1946–1985 in Germany, France and the USA. The study is based on sources written in Latgalian—a Baltic language variety closely related to Latvian and spoken mostly in the Latgale region¹. The present study continues the research on the perceptions and depictions of festivities as analyzed by the authors of the paper in the research article “Representation of Christmas in Childhood Memory Narratives: Reflecting and Revisiting the Past” (Kacane and Kovzele). To supplement the previously conducted study on transformations of celebrating religious holidays in childhood memory narratives by Latvian Latgalian writer Skaidrīte Varslavāne (published in Latvia), a wider perspective has been offered, as reflected in periodicals by Latvian Latgalian intellectuals in exile and as presented in texts on both Christmas and Easter.

Methodology

The research was conducted by employing cultural-historical and biographical methods, as well as qualitative content analysis, which is a rather flexible and widely used research method (Cavanagh) that allows one to analyze content and interpret meaning from the different (verbal and visual) textual data. This study

¹ The Latgalian written standard was formed during the nineteenth century. To many Latvian-speakers this language variety is unintelligible because it has sufficiently distinctive features (Lazdiņa and Marten 68-69). Latgalian is protected by Latvian legislation: “The State shall ensure the maintenance, protection and development of the Latgalian written language as a historic variant of the Latvian language” (Official Language Law).

analyzes texts from the printed and later digitalized sources—articles published in the exile periodical *Latgola* [from Latgalian: Latgale] (publishing years: 1946–1954), a successor of the newspaper *Latgolas Bolss* [from Latgalian: The Voice of Latgale] (initially published in Latvia in 1943–1944), and later known as *Latgolas Bolss* again (publishing years: 1955–1985).

In the result of an in-depth exploration of the content of 971 issues—308 issues of the newspaper *Latgola* and 663 issues of the newspaper *Latgolas Bolss* accessible to the public in the Latvian National Digital Library collection “Periodicals” (see Table 1)—, 21 publications dedicated to religious holidays (Christmas and Easter) were selected for citation as more vivid and complete evidence in the context of the analyzed research theme. The searches were made by exploring the content of the articles available in the newspaper, rather than entering specific keywords and thematically relevant article titles.

Table 1. The number of the issues available in the Latvian National Digital Library collection “Periodicals”

<i>Latgola</i>	
Year of publication	Number of issues per year
1946	6
1947	-
1948	37
1949	45
1950	48
1951	30
1952	46
1953	48
1954	48
	308
<i>Latgolas Bolss</i>	
1955	24
1956	24
1957	24
1958	24
1959	24
1960	24
1961	25
1962	24
1963	24
1964	24
1965	24
1966	24
1967	24
1968	24

1969	24
1970	24
1971	24
1972	24
1973	24
1974	24
1975	24
1976	24
1977	24
1978	24
1979	14
1980	15
1981	15
1982	13
1983	16
1984	12
1985	1
	663
In total:	971

Source: Latvian National Digital Library

Table 1 presents the scope of the text corpus of the study. Moreover, as the research has revealed it also testifies to the fact that not all issues of the newspaper *Latgolas Bolss* have been preserved and not all are available in the Latvian National Digital Library. In total, there were 1084 newspaper issues: 55 issues of *Latgolas Bolss* were published in Latvia in 1943–1944 (remain beyond the scope of this paper); 1029 issues were published in exile, which includes 366 issues of the newspaper *Latgola* in 1946–1954, and 663 of *Latgolas Bolss* in 1955–1985 (both within the scope of this paper). In 1955, the first issue of the newspaper *Latgolas Bolss* was published as No 422 and it was referred to as the twelfth year of publishing. This proves that *Latgola* was a successor of the newspaper *Latgolas Bolss*; from that time onwards the newspaper was published with its original title *Latgolas Bolss*.

The ten authors of the selected texts (see Table 2)—clergymen, publicists, writers, poets and public figures—were born at the end of the nineteenth century or at the beginning of the twentieth century in the south-eastern region of Latgale (then a part of the Russian Empire) or had some relation to it. The first years of activity for many of them coincided with a crucial period in Latvia's history when the Latvians managed to unite and change the course of the development of the nation under the impact of such historical events as the First Latgale Congress (1917), the proclamation of the Latvian State (1918), Latvian War of Independence (1918–1920), and Latgale joining with Latvia (1921).

Table 2. Profile of the authors whose articles were selected for the analysis

No	Name, Surname, years of life	The number of articles selected for the analysis/ religious holiday discussed	Brief biography
1	Aloizs Anspoks (1903–1985)	1 (Christmas)	Born in Preiļi civil parish, Anspoki (the current Preiļi district); priest, publicist, and social figure, who in 1944 emigrated to Germany where worked in the field of intellectual work, wrote life stories of the saints, composed hymns and sacred songs; Anspoks died in Germany.
2	Vladislavs Bojārs (1905–1984)	1 (Christmas)	Born in Bērzgale civil parish (the current Rēzekne district); writer, education and press employee whose first publications appeared in 1928, went into exile in 1944, lived in a refugees' camp in Germany, where worked as a teacher, later studied in Munich; in 1950 went to live in Canada, where studied in St. Jerome's College Ontario province; Bojārs died and is buried in Canada.
3	Jezups Grišāns (1891–1988)	3 (Christmas – 2; Easter – 1)	Born in Kaunata civil parish, Orehovka (the current Rēzekne district); priest and publicist, in 1944 went into exile in Germany, from 1945 lived in Italy, from 1948—in Argentina, from 1953—in the USA; living in exile published memoirs, wrote prose works, worked in local congregations, initiated organizing the American Latgalians Centre; Grišāns died and is buried in Stockbridge, USA.
4	Anna Konāns, born Ušacka; (1894–1984)	3 (Christmas)	Born in Balvi civil parish, Lielolksna (the current Balvi district); publicist and social figure, after WWII emigrated to Germany, but after 1950 settled in Connecticut, USA, where she published an article about Latvia, its culture and people; Konāns is buried in the USA.
5	Leonards Latkovskis (1905–1991)	6 (Christmas – 4; Easter – 2)	Born in Varakļāni civil parish (the current Varakļāni district); linguist, folklorist, publicist, ethnographer and writer, who had published his writings in the native country since 1927; in 1944 went into exile to Bavaria, Germany, where he founded and was head of the gymnasium for the Latvians, worked as a translator, in 1950 went to the USA, where he worked as a professor of linguistics, and was a researcher, participant of congresses and conferences, from 1947 till 1955 worked as an editor of <i>Latgolas Bolss</i> ; Latkovskis died and is buried in Louisville, USA.
6	Jōņs Leidumņiks; real name – Jōņs Mozga (1909–1982)	2 (Christmas)	Born in Varakļāni civil parish (the current Varakļāni district); the poet, first works by him were published in the periodicals of Latgale at the end of the 1930s, in 1944 went into exile to Germany, lived in Neuötting am Inn, where he was actively engaged in public activities of the Latvian Catholic congregation; in 1948 went to England and in 1951—to Canada, where he worked as a secretary typist, compiled and edited periodical editions, worked in St. Joseph's hospital in Ontario where he later died.

7	Konstantins Nautris; (real name—Konstantins Krusts) (1912–1985)	1 (Christmas)	Born in Riga; educator, writer and publicist, whose poems, stories, and sketches were published in periodicals from 1930. At the end of WWII, he went to Germany and lived in Neuötting am Inn, later in other camps in Germany; in 1950 emigrated to the USA and settled not far from Denver where he founded the society of local Latvians and actively participated in the public life of the Latvians in exile and published fables, from 1971 till 1985 worked as an editor-in-chief of the newspaper <i>Latgolas Bolss</i> ; Nautris (Krusts) is buried in Denver, USA.
8	Alberts Spoģis (also—Spogis) (1924–2020)	1 (Christmas)	Born in Vārkava civil parish, Bratiški village (the current Preiļi district); poet, philosopher and publicist whose first publications were issued in 1948; after wounding he was put into a prisoners-of-war camp, later studied at the universities of Hamburg, Bonn, Madrid and Münster; worked as a teacher, was the author of publications in different periodicals, and the author of 4 poetry selections; in 1998 was awarded the Three Star Order, category IV; Spoģis died in Münster, Germany.
9	Jezups Voskāns (N/A)	1 (Easter)	The identification of this cultural activist from the Latgale region is currently problematic; a short press article (“Breivūs latvīšu bolss” 3-4) dedicated to him states that he was a poet who served twice in the Korean War and settled in the USA, Voskāns’ poems were mainly published in the early 1960s in the newspaper <i>Latgolas Bolss</i> and the magazine <i>Dzeīve</i> .
10	Ontons Zvīdris (1911–1992)	2 (Easter)	Born in Makašāni (the current Rēzekne district); painter, sculptor and writer; in 1942 he was sent to Germany where he worked as a farm hand near Flensburg, after WWII he stayed in Flensburg, studied at Düsseldorf Art Academy, in 1946 moved to England, in 1949—to Canada where he graduated from art college and organized several exhibitions and Latgalian cultural events, Zvīdris materially supported the Latgale Research Institute and was actively involved in its activities, he was an editor and collaborator in the newspaper <i>Latgolas Bolss</i> (from 1978) and the magazine <i>Dzeīve</i> ; Zvīdris died in Toronto, Canada.

Source: Latgales dati; Latvian Literature Digital Resource; Paukste et. al.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the research have been presented in five sections. The first section presents a brief history of the newspaper *Latgolas Bolss*, the second section traces reflections of religious holidays (Easter and Christmas) by the exiled Latvians as a significant segment of the Latvian national and cultural identity, the third section focuses on the religious aspect of holidays rituals, whereas the fourth section—on pre-Christian rituals as described in the exile newspaper. The fourth section “Religious Holidays as a Mirror of Society: One’s Own vs. Other Values”

demonstrates the exiled Latvians' observations of new forms of celebrations in a foreign country and dwells upon the conflict between internal and external goals and needs.

The Newspaper *Latgolas Bolss*: Brief Overview

The work of the newspaper *Latgolas Bolss* is divided into two periods: the first related to its founding and publication in Latvia (1943–1944) and the second—to its publication in exile (1946–1985).

The history of the newspaper reaches back to the end of the 1930s when a Latvian publishing house known as “Joņa Cybuļska izdevnīceiba” initiated by the poet, educator and publisher Jānis Cibuļskis (1911–1997) and the writer and publisher Vladislavs Locis (1912–1984) was founded (Latgales dati; Paukste et al.). Its work was interrupted by the change of powers and WWII events until 1943, when Locis obtained the licence of an independent publisher and the publishing house, known as “Vl. Loča izdevnīceiba”, continued its activity in Daugavpils—a city in south-eastern Latvia. The first issue of the newspaper under the title *Latgolas Bolss* was published on 3 November, 1943 in Daugavpils, and from summer 1944—in the capital Riga under the conditions of the German occupation (1943–1944) (Datubāze...). The newspaper managed to publish 55 issues and “reflected the life of the local community, followed socio-political events in the world, published articles by the representatives of the Church, holiday addresses, as well as original texts on cultural history, law, journalism [...]” (Murinska 376-377).

After the Soviet reoccupation and Locis's forced emigration to Western Europe in 1944, Vladislavs Locis's publishing house resumed its work in exile and the first issue of the weekly newspaper under a new title *Latgola*—a continuation of *Latgolas Bolss*—was published on 5 September 1946 (the first editor-in-chief—Norberts Trepša) in displaced persons (DP) camp in Neuötting am Inn (1946–1949), later—in Munich (1949–1954) (Germany). After nine years of being known as the newspaper *Latgola*, from 15 January 1955 to 26 January 1985, it was published with its original title—*Latgolas Bolss* (the first editor-in-chief—Leonards Latkovskis (1948–1955) by “Latgaļu izdevnīceiba”—the successor of Locis publishing house. The editorial board of the newspaper was located in different cities and countries—Louisville, USA (1955), Strasbourg, France (1955–1956), Hollywood (1957), San Francisco (1957–1970) and Denver (1971–1985), USA. The newspaper was aimed at preserving Latgalian culture in exile and bringing together the Latvian community scattered around the world by fostering their Christian belief (Murinska). After the restoration of independent Latvia, the edition was renewed in Daugavpils on 15

May 1993, however, it was suspended after 6 issues due to financial issues (Latgales dati; Murinska).

Religious Holidays as Part of National Identity and Lost Homeland

For the current research thematically relevant publications can be found in the newspaper immediately after the end of WWII when it was published in a displaced persons camp in Neuötting am Inn. It can be explained by the attempts to overcome the loss of family, home and homeland, as well as to search for the possibilities for reviving and preserving a feeling of connectedness and a sense of belonging in circumstances of fear of losing one's national, ethnic and religious identity due to the interruption of intergenerational communication of values. The analyzed texts reveal that the older generation's staying behind, being deported or passing away was perceived as a tragic loss not only for a specific family, but also for the nation as it was believed that Latvianness was taken "to the grave with them" (Grišāns "Atmines nu pogótnes" 2).

On the one hand, the articles under the study were predominantly devoted to presenting religious festivities and traditions, as well as their attributes and rituals, within the frame of memory of the time in independent Latvia (the category of the past). The experience the Latvian Latgalian authors had gained in free Latvia was described in the context of the "golden past" and nostalgia. Such a view on festive traditions complied with the triad of the time typical of early romanticism—the past (Golden Age) was replaced by the present (Iron Age), and then followed by the future equivalent to the past (Golden Age). The Latvians in exile attributed this perception of time to Latvia's historical, political and social reality when the flourishing newly-found country lost its independence and masses were deported to Siberia, whereas thousands were forced to flee.

On the other hand, the articles were aimed at preserving cultural heritage and educating the younger generation (the category of the future). Recognizing the fact that the younger generation growing up in exile, where foreign influences "like a whirlwind" swept over

(Latkovskis "Tradīciju nūzeime" 1), was constantly brought under the process of assimilation, representatives of the intelligentsia (Jezups Grišāns, Anna Konāns, Leonards Latkovskis, Jezups Voskāns, Ontons Zvīdris etc.) considered their duty to popularize the traditions of these festivities: "[...] attention now is focused on one thing: maintaining [Latvian] language and [festive] traditions" (Konans "Uz jaunā goda slīkšņa" 2) (the category of the present). Thus, via these written texts, the Latvians working in the field of culture were striving to unite the exiled Latvians

and promote the preservation of their national and cultural identity in the unfamiliar cultural environment:

Traditions in their totality contain and preserve nationality [...]. Those not ashamed of their traditions living among foreigners do not run the risk of merging with the mass and being lost to their own nation. (Latkovskis “Tradīciju nūzeime” 1)

These publications were aimed at not only preserving the Latvian Latgalian identity and Latgalian as the values of the Latvian culture, but also at uniting the people abroad for the hoped-for homecoming:

[The Latvians] live only with the thought about their homeland, about the future—freedom, perfection—, because the present is void like a mother’s heart who has lost her only child. (Rancāns 5)

The authors of the articles underlined a deep conviction that faith was a spiritual basis which would help to ensure the Latvian nation’s “physical and spiritual existence” (Latkovskis “Vacōs latvīšu tradīcijas” 2) and “national unity” (Latkovskis “Tradīciju nūzeime” 1), and that the only way for the Latvians to exist as a nation was, as it was emphasized repeatedly, to “remain a Christian nation” (Latkovskis “Vacōs latvīšu tradīcijas” 2).

Following the Liturgical calendar was the means to preserve a link with the ancestors and ensure continuity, as well as to build a stable life in the future. For centuries, the identity of Latvia in the European cultural space, as stated in *The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia*, has been shaped by “universal human and Christian values” (1922). The significance of Christian traditions and values, including celebrating religious holidays, was widely reviewed and acknowledged as the approved basis: “Church festivities and teachings have affected the lives of our ancestors in all of their completeness” (Latkovskis “Tradīciju nūzeime” 1).

The written testimonies under the analysis reveal the fact that within the limits of their possibilities, the Latvians in exile tried to cherish all their ancestors’ traditions and customs to preserve Latvian cultural heritage in as unaffected form as possible. It was natural for them to include their reflections within the binary opposition “then—now” or “the past—the present”. In comparing the experience of celebrating festivities in their native country, refugee camps, and other foreign countries, the authors of the newspaper articles consistently used the adverb “before”

(in the homeland)— at a time when “morals of fathers were alive” (Konans “Pagōjuši Zīmas svētki” 3)—and juxtaposed it to the adverb “after”—the time in exile when “[...] everything, except the naked life, is lost” (Leidumnīks “Zīmas svātku sveceites” 2). For the Latvians in exile, the first conception was related to freedom, stability, joy and happiness, while the second—to the longings for the lost homeland and emotional pain. For this reason, the mode of presentation of religious holidays was not only emotional, but also motivational:

[Christmas in Latgale]

In Latgale, Christmas was [celebrated] modestly, but sincerely and with love. (Konans “Zīmassvātki dzimtinē” 2)

There was much of poetry typical of simple people, untouched by a life mechanism and practicalness as yet. (Latkovskis “Svātki” 3)

This was a festivity about excellence. (Ibid. 2)

[Easter in Latgale]

[...] a Catholic man longed for Easter and spring. At least, some time ago it was so in the homeland. (Zvīdris “Leldīnas un pavasari gaidūt” 1)

[...] you wouldn't find any other place where Easter was waited for with such great solemnity and celebrated with such a pure joy as it was once done in our native country Latvia and was regularly practiced in our dear region Latgale. (Vōskāns 2)

[...] nowhere else have I experienced such joy and enthusiasm on Easter as in Latgale. (Grišāns “Leldīnu svātki Latgolā” 1)

The descriptions were permeated with the authors' autobiographic memories, nostalgia for the lost past, and a tendency to idealize the formerly observed and experienced during celebrating religious festivities, which reveals both individual and collective history.

Christian (Catholic) Traditions of Celebrating Christmas and Easter in Latgale

The conducted study revealed that a part of publications on Christian holidays can be viewed as informative texts (focusing on specific traditions and rituals) permeated with both unpleasant/ deactivated and activated¹—being upset, sad, depressed, tense etc.—, and pleasant/ activated—being alert, excited, hopeful etc.— emotions. The tendency to describe in detail Catholic holidays and their celebration

1 More on differentiating emotions by activations and deactivations, see Acheampong et. al.

traditions can be demonstrated by reflections on Christmas that constitute the majority of texts on religious holidays. Christmas is often described in the context of tragic events in the history of the home country, the importance of praying for offenders and forgiving them their sins and wrongdoing is emphasized:

We, those living in a foreign country, are obliged to pray for our oppressed and exhausted homeland and celebrate holidays with the spirit of those Christmas in our hearts which we had in our free homeland, and we have to pass this spirit over to our children and grandchildren. (Latkovskis “Zīmassvātki” 1)

Focusing on specific Christmas traditions followed in free Latvia, in his publication “Svātki” [Holidays] (1956), Latkovskis mentions the main attributes and symbols of this holiday—the white tablecloth and hay under it (an analogy with the manger of Bethlehem, where new-born Jesus Christ once slept), observance of strict fasting, prayer, going to church:

A strict fast was kept on *Kūču* day: adults did not eat at all, only children were given a little food suitable for the day of fasting. And when the first stars were visible in the sky, the family sat down at the table on which food was laid [...]. Everyone stood up, led by the father, recited the prayers [...]. After singing some holiday songs, the family went to bed, got up early in the morning and rode a horse-drawn carriage to church. (Latkovskis “Svātki” 2, 3)

In the article, Latkovskis also provides a detailed analysis of such Christmas activities typical in Latvia and his native region Latgale as sharing *kaladas* or wafers—a thin blessed unleavened wheat bread, which symbolizes Jesus Christ, and is also a symbol of love and reconciliation (*Zemīte*),¹ and preparing *kūčas*—a special festive dish.² Although the newspaper article aimed at emphasizing the importance of traditions in order to ensure the preservation and continuity of religious holidays, its didactic function is also clearly observed:

[*kaladas*] symbolize the Christian spirit and can be traced back to the traditions

1 According to the old Latgale tradition, with the beginning of Advent that starts four weeks before Christmas, the parish priest visited each family of the parish, gave his blessing to the family and the house, asked religious questions to the children checking their knowledge and distributed *kaladas* (M.).

2 For a detailed description, see Grīns and Grīna.

of early Christians—to stick together, help and defend one another. [*Kūčas*] are whole wheat grains cooked or, to be more accurate, stewed in a small saucepan. When grains are already soft, honey is added, if there is no honey, you can do with treacle. Wheat and honey symbolize the Savior's arrival. Wheat is the most valuable grain given by the earth, clean, without husk. Honey, too, is clean and valuable and sweet—production of industrious bees. It symbolizes a new era, connection with the arrival of Christ. (Ibid. 2-3)

In the paper “Zīmassvātku tradīcijas” [Christmas Traditions] (1964), Latkovskis also focuses on the linguistic aspect of religious traditions, thus proving his erudition and foreign language skills. The author describes the origin and meaning of the refrain *kaladu*, pointing out to the fact that Christmas was closely related to the processes and changes in nature:

Kindred forms can be found in the Ancient Indian or, to be more precise, Sanskrit language: *kala* means ‘time, death, unavoidable fate, season’, *kalata* ‘just the right time to do something’, *akla* ‘at the wrong time’ (*alfa privatium*), *kaladharmā* ‘law of the time, unavoidable death’. The form of our refrain *kaladu* is kindred to the Sanskrit form *kalata* which expresses: now is just the right time (the turning point of the sun towards spring and lengthening of a day). (Latkovskis “Zīmassvātku tradīcijas” 2)

The newspaper articles published in Latgalian during the period under analysis also provide information on traditions of celebrating Easter in Latgale, however, the number of publications on Easter is smaller in comparison to the number of newspaper articles on Christmas. For example, in an expanded article “Leldīnu laiks” [Easter Time] (1962), Voskāns lists the most essential, to his mind, festivity activities—consecration of willow-branches in church, taking part in the Holy Mass and the festive procession:

On Palm Sunday, willow branches were taken to church to consecrate them, and those who slept late were also not forgotten and received a kind of ‘blessing’ [...]. The Holy Mass began. The whole church hummed like a beehive, the organ was played and exaltation songs were sung. After the Holy Mass, followed a procession, all the congregation went round the church. (Voskāns 2)

Unlike Latkovskis, Voskāns is more focused on church ceremonies and the fixation

of its details, rather than celebrations of religious holidays at home.

Pre-Christian (Latvian Pagan) Traditions of Celebrating Christmas and Easter in Latgale

In the early twentieth century in Latvia, there was a tendency to return to pre-Christian, “national” religion (so-called Neopaganism or *Dievturība* movement, which as a reconstructed form of paganism developed in Latvia in the 1920s and still exists nowadays (Stasulane “A Reconstructed Indigenous Religious Tradition in Latvia” 1)).¹ This process was provoked by the necessity “to substantiate the right of the Latvians to create their nation” (Ibid. 4) after the proclamation of independence of the Republic of Latvia (1918) and it was based on a specific mission “to unite the Latvians, putting forward indigenous religious values as the unifying element” in such a way making “Christianity more Latvian” (Ibid. 3). Similarly, ethnic, national and religious identities overlapped for the exiled Latvians after WWII, thus contributing to maintaining and succession of ethnic, national and religious values: “It would be in vain to look for a purely national element in Latvian traditions that is not somehow related to the spirit of Christianity” (Latkovskis “Tradīciju nūzeime” 1).

In the newspaper, next to the publications about the liturgical year, the nature of religious holidays and the nuances of proper celebration, several publications appear, in which pre-Christian/ Pagan traditions and customs of Christmas and Easter are dwelt upon, thus confirming the syncretism of pagan and religious holiday culture characteristic of Latvian culture. The descriptions of the ancient celebrations of Christmas available in the periodical mainly include descriptions of ritual activities and/ or plays. In the article “Svātki”, Latkovskis mentions the ancient Christmas activity *čigānos iešana* [going “gypsies”]—a folklore tradition of wearing masks in the time period starting from Christmas Day until the Star Day (6 January) (Rancāne 81):

[on Christmas] [people] went “čygonūs” [went mumming—visited other people wearing special clothes, masks] or welcomed “čygonus” [mummers] at their own homes. (Latkovskis “Svātki” 3)

In his article “Zīmassvātku rūtaļas (Nu atmiņu lūka)” [Christmas Games (From Memory Circle)] (1958), Bojars focused on games “Vylks i koza” [A Wolf and a Goat] and “Īkoru daleišona” [Distribution of Rings] practiced in Bērzgale civil par-

1 For detailed information on the movement, its history and transformations, see Stasulane “The Dievturi Movement in the Reports of the Latvian Political Police...”; Stasulane and Ozoliņš.

ish, Latgale region; thereby he emphasized their ancient, mythological origin and playfulness:

[...] a wolf was trying to get into the yard after a she-goat, but the players covered it up with their hands. When a wolf managed to get into the yard and catch the she-goat, the she-goat replaced the wolf, but the wolf played the role of the inquirer, and the game went on again [...]. (Bojars 2)

In former times, the name *ikor* was given to a ring, which, perhaps, was borrowed from the word *īkōroit*, *īgyut*, *īmontoit* [to desire, to get, to acquire]. [...] One of the players was a distributor of *ikors*, the other—a guesser trying to guess into whose hands the *ikor* was put. The distribution of *ikors* was done with the guesser looking [in whose hands the *ikor* was put], and either seeing or not seeing it, as it had been agreed on. [...] the distribution of *ikors* usually began with singing [...]. (Ibid.)

In the analyzed works, the ancient customs of celebrating the spring equinox were described more often and more widely than those of the winter solstice. Zvīdris informed about Latvian Easter celebration traditions in his article “Leldīnas un pavasari gaidūt” [Waiting for Easter and Spring] (1982), where the diversity of egg painting methods in former times has been described:

[...] painting eggs, which was done by boiling eggs in onion skins or in birch-tree leaves which were obtained from birch besoms, since trees didn’t have leaves so early in spring. There was no dearth of artificial colors and egg varnish as well. (Zvīdris, “Leldīnas un pavasari gaidūt” 1)

An expanded description of another important tradition—erecting spring equinox swings—can be found in Zvīdris’ article under the title “Leldīnes” [Easter] (1966). In the publication, the author has enthusiastically fixed the tiniest details of the construction so essential for Latvian national culture:

First, logs were barked smooth, then holes were chiseled and bored to a definite measure, two round and deep holes were dug, after that, beams were raised perpendicularly and the butt ends of the logs were dug deep in the ground. For these mighty poles to be stable, they were propped up by supports, since they could get loose at swinging. Then two swing poles were prepared and hung on the swing posts. For all connections to be strong and safe, they were bound

with metal and fastened with screws. (Zvīdris “Leldīnes” 1) [a long description of erecting the swing follows].

It is noteworthy that this publication was supplemented by “Redakcijas pīzeime” [Editorial Board Remark] (the author—Leonards Latkovskis—one of the editors of *Latgolas Bolss* at that time), which described the tradition of *ūlu kačošonas* [rolling of eggs]:

[...] a piece of a shingle was chosen [one-piece wood], resembling a small trough, with a hollow. [...] both ends of the shingle were open [...]. To roll eggs, the shingle was placed on some supports, about 45 [degrees] slantwise. One egg was placed on the lower end and the other egg was let rolling freely down from the raised end. The rolling egg hit the egg on the lower shingle end. The stronger egg cracked the weaker egg, and the cracked egg was lost [...]. (L. 2)

This activity, as evidenced by the latest survey, is no longer widely spread in the Latgale region (Kovzele “Svētku kultūras transformācijas pierobežā...” 81-82).

Religious Holidays as a Mirror of Society: One’s Own vs. Other Values

Since Christmas has often been perceived as the only time of the year for maintaining active on-site relationships between distant family relatives (Cheal), it is celebrated on a grand scale. Gift exchange has long been a traditional part of Christmas, however, gift culture has been deeply ingrained in Western societies as a social, cultural and economic experience on a much greater scale than in other parts of the world (Belk).

The conducted study revealed that the exiled Latvians struggled with accepting different holiday celebration traditions, especially with local people’s “obsession” with the cult of gifts, as well as with the uproar and noise in the streets, which, in the authors’ opinion, erased the initial sacral meaning of Christmas as a time of silence and charity. The extreme focus on purchasing gifts and other attributes of religious holidays was perceived as a distraction from their faith. While holding onto their memories and building their new lives abroad they still prioritized the spiritual and natural over the material and artificial.

While describing her experience in the USA, Konāns mentioned that weeks until Christmas was the busiest time of the season as “[...] shops are full of people who are buying gifts, starting from expensive furniture and ending with toys”

(Konans “Pagōjuši Zīmas svētki” 3). Even financial instability didn’t stop many from borrowing great sums of money to follow the rules dictated by the consumer society. Leidumnīks provides a similar description of the pre-holiday situation observed in the USA: “[...] here everyone runs, hurries, carries home bundle after bundle, still thinking whether they have not forgotten about anybody” (Leidumnīks “Zīmassvātku breinums” 3). According to the Latvian authors’ observations in foreign countries, the concept of “holy” was frequently mixed up with the concept of “profane”, Christmas was turned into a “matter of shops”. Therefore, the massive usage of religious attributes for commercial purposes caused considerable dissatisfaction among them:

Luxurious shops become cathedrals of a modern man, where [working] in the sweat of one’s brow you can get everything you desire. [...] From the silence of the small stable in churches and Bethlehem, angels have joined the crowd of markets. (Spōgis 1)

If inhabitants of free Latvia “spoke about [Christmas] and waited for it from the Advent already” (Konans “Zīmassvātki dzimtinē”, 2), then while encountering new cultures in exile the internal (spirituality) aspect was overshadowed by the external (colorfulness and splendor). The traditional perception of Advent as the beginning of the Christian liturgical year, which was associated with fasting, peace, silence and reflection was contextualized within nostalgia:

We see a great difference if we compare the old Christmas with the present one here, in the USA. Now, you, poor man, don’t feel and are not enthusiastic about the approaching Christmas, since everything is as monotonous as on any other Sunday: without Advent, without the peaceful four-week fast, which we had in our homeland Latgale, and which was the time of silent reflection and solemn preparation for celebrating our Savior’s birth. [...] Now everybody [does everything] only for oneself. The old traditions fade into oblivion. (Grišāns “Zīmassvātki” 2)

The joy of celebrating religious holidays, as reflected in the newspaper, was genuine only in the homeland as “the source of this joy and happiness was true faith and love for the God and those of one’s nearest” (Grišāns “Leldīnu svātki Latgolā” 1). Great attention was paid to comparing the moments they had spent in their homeland in serenity and tranquility before religious holidays as they allowed to

feel the presence of God in their homes. Religious holidays, celebrated once in their native country, were attributed to “holy time” (Bojars 2), when “happiness,” “joy,” “peace” (Anspoks 1; Grišāns “Atmines nu pogótnes” 2; Grišāns “Leldīnu svātki Latgolā” 1; Grišāns “Zīmassvātki” 2; Vōškāns 2), and “spirit of concord” (Nautris 3) reigned in families. They were compared to the idyll full of bliss, when “[...] a special God’s blessing and peace prevailed in the Christian community and homes” (Grišāns “Atmines nu pogótnes” 2). In exile, joy was perceived as feigned as it was stimulated not from within, but from without, which contradicted the religious peoples’ belief that inner peace comes from inside, not from outside. Regret was expressed that exile made celebrating according to former traditions impossible (Grišāns, “Zīmassvātki” 2).

The authors of the newspaper articles saw Latvian cultural values as endangered and feared that with time they would be taken by strange but at the same time in some way attractive and exotic foreign traditions or, as they were referred to, “half-savage dances” on television (Grišāns, “Atmines nu pogótnes” 2). Other cultures and customs were initially perceived as a threat to one’s own culture and the continuity of ancestors’ traditions due to different value systems. The balance was searched for and with time, having settled in their new home countries, it was acknowledged that it was impossible and unnecessary to alien oneself from both either old or new traditions. Having recognized that, in parallel to different means of adaptation, various attempts were made to safeguard Latvian values and assert their own ethnic, national and religious identity: the Latvian community in exile revolved around Latvian Cultural Centers, Latvian fraternities, Latvian heritage and language schools, and Latvian congregations. The wish to preserve one’s identity and the need to adapt to the new Western lifestyle contributed to the phenomenon of hybrid or double/ multiple identity (also known as inclusive identity) when the categories within the binary opposition “one’s own – other” no longer had clearly observed boundaries.

Conclusion

As revealed by the analysis of the text corpus, reflections on Christian holidays (Christmas and Easter) in the exile newspaper *Latgolas Bolss* were primarily aimed at preserving the Latvian identity and the Latgalian language as values of the Latvian culture. For the exiled cultural activists, it was important to unite the Latvians abroad through the perceived ties between faith and national belonging as they saw a link between religion and national identity and recognized them as entwined phenomena. In contemporary Latvia with no official or preferred religion,

only 11% of Latvia's inhabitants believe that "religion and national belonging go hand in hand" (Kishi and Starr), however, Latvian Catholics who fled the country in the 1940s believed that national solidarity could be built not only through folklore (ethnic identity), but also through faith (religious identity). According to Tadeušs Puisāns, an exiled historian from Latgale, to be Christian meant being Latvian (see: Misāne), this view was adopted by many Latvian Catholics for whom highlighting Christian holidays and festive culture in general, including pre-Christian heritage, became one of the means of preserving national identity and unity.

In reconstructing Christian holiday traditions from afar at a time when homecoming was impossible due to the Soviet totalitarian regime, the Latvian Latgalian authors presented informative and emotional texts that have become a part of collective memory. The depictions of religious holidays were imbued with nostalgia for the lost homeland and concern about losing one's identity and culture. The binary oppositions in the conceptual categories of space ("homeland—foreign country"), time ("then—now"), and value system ("one's own—alien") allowed the exiled Latvian intellectuals from Latgale to highlight the crucial role of the Christian (Catholic) faith in both adapting to changes and challenges in a new country and reconstructing and negotiating identity in exile.

The conducted research also testifies to refugees' struggle in a new cultural environment while trying to keep their hope for returning to the lost paradise. Knowledge of celebrating religious holidays in homeland juxtaposed with the observed and experienced celebration forms in a foreign country were perceived within a binary opposition "one's own—alien", where "one's own" was characterized by the sacral, natural, and tranquil, but the "alien"—by the profane, artificial, and tumultuous. Differences in value systems manifested themselves within the tensions between the past, present and future or between the real and the desired.

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