

# LITHUANIAN AND LATVIAN MUSICAL-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION DURING SOVIET-ERA IMPRISONMENT AND EXILE

## 1. BROTHERHOOD AND UNITY

### *Summary*

Gaila Kirdienė

Music making and culture under the complicated conditions of the pre-war, WWII years and post-war decades of Soviet repression, terror, and genocide could be the subject of extensive research, enabling the juxtaposed experiences of different nations and various fields of science. A comprehensive study, carried out jointly by scientists of all three Baltic States, would be relevant. This monograph, as well as the whole publication, is focused on the study of the national and Baltic musical-cultural identity, informal communication and consolidation of Lithuanians and Latvians in places of political imprisonment and exile.

The object of the research is the musical-cultural communication of Lithuanian and Latvian political prisoners and exiles deported from Lithuania or Latvia to the most remote places of Soviet Union (often referred to in the broadest sense as Siberia) from the year 1940 (1941) to 1953. Cases of Lithuanian Latvians and Latvian Lithuanians are covered here too. Musical-cultural communication between Lithuanians and Latvians before deportation (in the interwar or post-war years) and after returning to Lithuania or Latvia—their ethnic homeland or neighboring country—is also considered (see scheme 1).

The research encompasses the issues of Lithuanian and Latvian national and Baltic musical-cultural identity and interaction under conditions of the communist authoritarian regime in places of political imprisonment and deportation: which elements and outlooks of their music and culture united or divided them; how their communication unfolded and on what factors it depended; how national and joint Lithuanian-Latvian musical-cultural activities helped them to survive and strive for freedom in unity while organizing actions of resistance (strikes, uprisings) in forced labour camps. The study applies methods of qualitative research and phenomenology, cf. music psychology.

The sources of the research are the memorials of witnesses and authentic documents from imprisonment and deportation places: letters to their relatives, photographs and inscriptions on their back covers, self created greeting cards with wishes in verse. A great number of such authentic documents have been accumulated in the Lithuanian and Latvian state archives: documents collected by the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Center (hereinafter LGGRTC) in Vilnius and the Latvian Occupation Museum (OM), the Museum of Scripture and Music (RMM) and the Latvian Association of Lithuanian Political Prisoners and Repressed in Riga (LLPKRD). A lot of such documents are also kept in the private archives of the ex-deportees who kindly allowed us to copy and publish them. However, Lithuanian-Latvian or Latvian-Lithuanian song collections are rare.

Since 2010, I intensively collected material about music making of political prisoners and deportees from Lithuania. By 2013 I have managed to record the memoirs and other material from over a hundred witnesses who used to play, sing and dance during the deportation. In 2014, when I began to study the traditional musical-cultural communication between Lithuanians and other nations, there was a great lack of material on Lithuanians' relations with Latvians. Therefore from 2014 and especially in 2018–2020, after the Culture Council of Lithuania had supported the project, I collected material on this topic not only in Lithuania, but also in Latvia. I recorded 46 witnesses on this topic: 39 Lithuanians (12 of whom live in Latvia, 3 of whom are Lithuanians who married Latvians in Siberia) and, to a lesser extent, Latvians (5; three of whom were born in Lithuania), and two children of mixed Lithuanian and Latvian families of deportees (one of whom lives in Lithuania and the other in Latvia). Lithuanians living in border areas with Latvia and Latvians who were deported together with Lithuanians became especially valuable informants of this study. The Latvian material we had recorded was significantly supplemented by Latvian memoirs.

Five main ways of communication among Soviet era imprisoned and / or exiled Lithuanians and Latvians can be distinguished: verbal (related with poetry and singing) and nonverbal – instrumental musical, kinetic (dance and sport), visual and customary behaviour.

Generalized ideas that Lithuanians and Latvians are brothers are well known, they are united by the common unfortunate destiny of the repressed and exiled. However, wide diversity of Lithuanian and Latvian inter-communication and its intensiveness and dynamics, depends not only on their customary behaviour attitudes and prevailing national characters, but also on marginal and (post)trauma status of the repressed, persecution, varying conditions of the place and other factors. Only in some camps an obvious intensification of their relationships (often after successful actions of the resistance when the regime got weaker) could be traced (see table 2).

Comparison between communication of political prisoners and those who were exiled allows to define four main models of their communication: three of them unfolded in the forced labour camps and three in exile, two of them were coinciding (see scheme 2). Verbal communication is certainly universal, but model of musical and kinetic interaction was widely spread as well: Baltic dance parties were the main form of communication for the exiled youth and in camps Lithuanians and Latvians sang alternately, learned each other's songs and played team sports quite often. In camps, visual communication was impacted by the growing Baltic ideological and cultural consciousness, which led to the resistance actions and strengthened afterwards. Meanwhile in exile, joint traditional annual celebrations were the highest form of Lithuanian and Latvian musical-cultural unity, which often led to mixed Baltic marriages. Preference to one of the identities or, in rare cases, formation of a double – Baltic – identity in the families can be observed.

Thus, Lithuanian and Latvian communication in Siberia encompassed main ways of cultural and national expressions: mother-tongue, traditional music making (singing and instrumental playing), youth dance parties (traditional choreography) and traditional holidays. Despite all persecution, prohibitions and famine the people had to suffer as well as denominational differences, multifaceted communication of the repressed Lithuanians and Latvians, their unity helped them to survive, to preserve humanistic values and national identity, and in some cases, to form a Baltic identity which they maintained even after returning to Lithuania and Latvia.

Starting from the first imprisonments and especially intensively from 1948 onwards, despite the stricter regime and prohibitions, the political prisoners of the Gulag had undergone a multifaceted secret musical-cultural life. Meaningful informal and traditional musical-cultural activities were a humanistic necessity for the most patriotic and brightest imprisoned Lithuanians and Latvians. It helped to restore their human dignity, psychological balance and encouraged the youth to seek out education. It was also important for the maintenance and consolidation of national and Baltic identities and played a huge role in mobilizing forces and resisting the authoritarian regime. The idea of a common state of Latvia and Lithuania was also nurtured.

The model of verbal, musical and kinetic ways of communication was widely spread in camps. Political Baltic prisoners made efforts to maintain and refine their language as well as to communicate in both Baltic languages. Lithuanians and Latvians from the same part of country usually knew both languages and people learned each other's language during deportation. In such cases they did not need to communicate in a third language – Russian, or, rarely, Polish. Compatriots and Baltic as well as Ukrainian people, sang alternately during respite and sometimes even at work. The Baltic unity is evidenced by the preservation of two – Latvian and Lithuanian (in Inta camp) and Lithuanian Latvian (in Rechlag, Vorkuta, Komi) – collections of traditional songs. It is worth mentioning sport activities – not only national, but in later years, teams from all the Baltic countries gathered in the camps.

During the period of 1950–1963, the exchange of self-created postcards / miniatures with wishes in verse on the occasions of various traditional holidays or even independent days of Lithuania and Latvia was an immensely popular way of cultural interaction between compatriots and Baltic people in camps. Denominational differences were one of the main reasons to have celebrated Lithuanian and Latvian traditional, religious holidays such as Christmas Eve, Christmas and Easter, separately. Lithuanians still sang during the May services, and Latvians celebrated Midsummer. In 1955–1956, as soon as they were released from prison, people of various nations celebrated traditional holidays all together. Traditional religious

holidays were celebrated also by Baltic political prisoners sent into exile together with the deportees. This led to creation of mixed Baltic families as well.

During the WWII and the post-war years, the conditions of deportation of Lithuanians, as well as Latvians, were hardly possible to endure. In 1942–1943, most of the deportees transported to the Arctic died in the winter. From the very beginning Lithuanians and Latvians agreed well, but it took time for them to start singing together. Whenever possible, compatriots would celebrate traditional and state holidays in secret in their homes. The conspiracy was also followed later, in 1948–1956. Due to exhausting work without any free time, even Latvians deported together with Lithuanians did not come to sing, although everyone knew both Baltic languages well. In those places Lithuanian youth did not even organize dance parties, and they forgot about traditional holidays.

From 1948, Latvians who lived in the same places of exile with Lithuanians, sometimes also Estonians (1952–1957 in Krasnoyarsk) quite often participated in Lithuanian or joint Baltic dance parties at home or outside. Lithuanian and Latvian male musicians, or female ones who played the accordion, less often, the violin or wind instruments, performed dance music, accompanied the songs, immediately attracted the attention of the other Baltic exiled and helped them to get acquainted. Lithuanians and Latvians would sometimes gather and sing together in various places of exile. On the island of Khuzhir in Lake Olchon, Irkutsk district, deported Baltic intellectuals not only sang (a collection of songs preserved in the family archive; songs were recorded in 1988) and danced together, but celebrated traditional seasonal holidays as well. A mixed Baltic family emerged. On the other hand, in Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk region, the communication between Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian students and youth was sometimes hindered by the Russian language barrier or negative national stereotypes. This investigation confirmed the conclusion made in my article on Lithuanian-Ukrainian musical-cultural relations (2018), that in larger communities of compatriots in exile, relations with foreigners were not as relevant – for small Baltic nations, the most important issue in the Soviet-era ‘international mill’ was to bring young people together and maintain their national and cultural identity.

To sum up, the traditional, informal musical-cultural activities, communication and unity of Lithuanians and Latvians in the Soviet-era exile were important for the preservation, fostering and strengthening of their national identities, as well as Baltic self-awareness and spiritual resistance. Personal and national freedom, as well as Baltic culture – language, music, dance, customs and communication, human dignity, feelings – were all values that led the Gulag to revolt. Lithuanians were one of the main organizers of the active resistance actions, consolidating with Ukrainians, Poles, Latvians and Estonians as well. During the years 1952–1955, the strikes and uprisings in Karaganda, Norilsk (Gorlag) and Vorkuta camps, organized by unarmed, only strong in spirit political prisoners, led by intellectual insight, songs and hymns, were the true predawn of the Singing Revolution.<sup>1</sup> They are undoubtedly considered to be seen as a part of the general movement for the liberation of the Baltic States from the Soviet communist Stalinist regime. Its participants gained vast experience and strengthened their determination to return to Lithuania or Latvia and to continue their efforts to restore independence of their native country and all three Baltic States.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Šmidchens G. *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2014, p. 115, 154–158, 179–186.

## 2. VORKUTA SONGS

### JĀNIS LĪCĪTIS' CREATIVE WAY IN THE SHADOW OF OCCUPATION, WAR AND EXILE

Rūta Līcīte

Born in a poor family of Vidzeme mercenaries, composer, and music teacher Jānis Līcītis (1913-1978) was awarded with a bright head and a good ear. Barefooted, playing a shepherd's pipe he went to Vilzēni and Urga primary schools and later to Riga Teachers' Institute. In the Jēkabs Vītoliņš's course he studied harmony, counterpoint basics, singing and choir conducting techniques. Being involved in collecting and studying folklore, Vītoliņš also encouraged his students to do so. In 1934, Līcītis received a certificate of graduation from the Institute. Later he joined the Special Composition and Theory Class of Professor and Conservatory Rector Jāzeps Vītols in the Latvian Conservatoire. In the spring of 1940, he graduated as a free artist. He is the last student of Vītols in the Independent State of Latvia.

The first Soviet occupation in 1940 started the main tendency of formation of culture and education system – extreme politicization. February 1948 brings notorious resolutions of the Communist Party *On Combating Formalism* and *On Muradeli's opera "The Great Friendship"*. They do endless damage to the musical life of both Russia and the occupied republics.

Father worked in schools, led the choirs, and created. In the summer of 1943 he was summoned, declared fit for military service, and had to go to the front after a couple of days. Acquaintance with the former student Haralds Broks, the conductor of the police orchestra, helped him. He included musicians who felt threat for their future into his orchestra retrospectively. Līcītis had to play alto and baritone, to transcribe notes, to arrange and to conduct the orchestra. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 1950 he was arrested. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March of the same year he was taken to the 10th camp of the 29th mine among the Vorkuta camps, at that time in the Komi ATSR.

The initial period was the hardest one. Luckily, he was strong in health, physically fit in rural works. However, when working in the coal mine, eating goose-foot, a little porridge, and 400 grams of bread a day, soon nothing was left but the bones, the skin and the brown beard from the tall, well- built man. The only lucid moment was an extremely limited but still a chance to play music. Anyone capable of playing an instrument or singing has been invited to participate in an amateur artistic work, organized by the Cultural and educational department. Līcītis brought together the exiles of the camp, established a small variety string orchestra, and became himself the conductor of it. The orchestra consisted almost of the people from the Baltic States. In August 1956, Līcītis received a permission to return to Latvia.

Composer Līcītis was patriotic focused on folklore values. He has undergone a strict professional school of his teacher Jāzeps Vītols who was taught by Russian giants of classical music. Later Līcītis was inspired by Western European trends in modernism. His creative growth really began when he was forty-three years old, after his return to Latvia from Vorkuta. He was accepted into the Union of Composers again. Among his first works is the variation of the piano for a song written in the camp, *I am Sitting at the Table* (Lith. 'Sėdžiu už stalelio') (1957) and Arrangements for Voice and Piano of seven Lithuanian folk songs (1958). That year the composer married my mother, pianist Tija Goba. With her literary talent she translated Lithuanian lyrics into Latvian, and after she accompanied at the premiere and other concerts and radio shows. These seven arrangements have not been released so far, although they are undoubtedly the best lyrical works. It demonstrates an excellent understanding of the essence of the folk song, perfectly balancing between diatonic and chromatic in the piano accompaniment and sets the cycle in contrast.

In addition to string quartets, two works for symphony orchestra, piano for several opuses, Līcītis created almost vocal or vocal symphonic works: songs for the choir, cantata, two oratorios, solo songs – and a whole set of Latvian folk song arrangements for various choirs. Strong side of Līcītis is the language of harmony, the masterful use of polyphony. His five string quartets belong to the gold fund of this genre of Latvian music. His way as a composer is crowned by the Fifth Quartet (1975).

## THE SONGS WHICH UNITED AND INSPIRED THE WINGS OF FREEDOM

Daiva Vyčinienė

A set of 105 Lithuanian songs—a handwritten notepad collected by Jānis Līcītis, a Latvian composer imprisoned in Komi at the 29th Rechlag, Vorkuta shaft in the camp of the enhanced regime in 1951-1955, has a priceless documentary value. Another such authentic Lithuanian or Latvian testimony—a collection of folk songs written down with melodies at the place of political imprisonment and / or exile—is not known. This set also becomes a special testimony of the survival of Lithuanians and Latvians in the camp through joint singing. At about the same time (1953-1955) imprisoned in Vorkuta soloist singer of Uchta and, later, Vorkuta Musical Theater Balys Radžius (1917-2000) wrote down the lyrics of all the songs in Lithuanian.

This song set is not only valuable as an extremely rare authentic document. It can become an important subject in folklore science, ethnomusicology, anthropology, phenomenology and other fields, raising a wide range of issues relating to the origin, authorship, distribution and singing of songs. While studying the songs written down by Līcītis and discussing their incredible variability, it is worth remembering the first half of the 20th century when Lithuanian songs were called the *people's songs* (Lith. 'žmonių dainos'). Folklorists believe that the premise for this term may have been connected with the creation and promotion of professional songs. With the increase of the number of folklore remixes, a separate name was needed for traditional, oral and written, authored, harmonious folk songs that the choirs studied. In 1920, Mykolas Biržiška also considered folk songs in a similar way, stating: 'People sing them, assign them to their songs – that is enough for us; these songs will be the people's songs'.<sup>2</sup> This description of *the people's songs* blurring any boundaries between genres, as well as bridging the fundamental differences between folk and authorship, would, in my opinion, be very suitable for defining the genre diversity of songs of Līcītis' collection.

Probably for many readers, especially non-Lithuanians, after seeing this set of songs recorded in a forced labour camp, the first question that may arise is: how is it possible to sing under such intolerable conditions? The answer lies in the very nature of Lithuanians – their indivisible, one might say, innate connection with the song. For Lithuanians, song and singing, on the one hand, have been a factor uniting the whole community from old times. Even in the most depressing memories of exile, there are bright episodes of singing or chanting. Naturally, the usual remedy for the soul—singing—has refreshed, encouraged, gave strength to political prisoners. As it can be seen from the numerous notes in the archives and the memoirs of political prisoners and / or deportees, Lithuanians are not so concerned about what is sung, but they care just about process of singing. The feeling of freedom in singing is associated with singing as an opportunity to be / become free. Song / singing under resistance becomes, to say the least, a combat tool that, like any weapon, is attempted to be taken away.

Thus, singing in the extreme conditions of survival is not only the means of consoling the spirit, maintaining a sense of self-esteem and freedom, but also a form of spiritual resistance or even struggle. Lithuanian song of the 20th century has a long *path of freedom*. From 1918 to 1920 there were independence struggles, volunteer marches. From 1920 to 1939 – liberation of Vilnius, post-war partisans, songs of political prisoners and exiles. Up to the end of 20th century – the movement of folklore ensembles, ethnographers and hikers. All these events are of great importance in the liberation of Lithuania from the Soviet regime, which led to the Singing Revolution and Restoration of Lithuanian Independence.

Translated by Lina Šleževičiūtė-Sakalienė

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<sup>2</sup> Biržiška M. *Dainų atsiminimai iš Lietuvos istorijos [Memoirs of Songs from the History of Lithuania]*. Kaunas, 1920, p. 106.