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Crossing the waves. Cooperation experience among Polish and Latvian ethnologists: Latvian perspective

Some time has passed since the beginning of the millennium, when Professor Dagnosław Demski¹ and I drew figures in the sand on the street in Krāslava (south-eastern Latvia) to discuss knowledge. I drew a circle to illustrate that knowledge represents the inside of the circle line, and what we don't know is outside of it (I had read this in a magazine some time before). As we learn more, the circle grows larger, and so does the area of our ignorance. The more we learn, the more we realise how little we know. Professor Demski took the stick that we used as a writing tool and began sketching waves, which he equated with the process of acquiring knowledge. Collaboration with the Professor brought me several waves of knowledge.

The first wave: Symbolic boundaries

The experience in Krāslava was unique in many aspects. Weather-wise, for one. It was May; sun-drenched dandelions blossomed on the soft green slopes that surround the azure lakes. In terms of meeting people, for another. Krāslava is a multicultural city. Its coat of arms features a boat with five oars. Each oar is designated for a different nationality living here: Latvians, Poles, Russians, Belarusians, and Jews. At the time, I was gathering data for my doctoral research on the impact of historical variables on Latvian ethnic stereotypes, and I spoke with representatives from all the groups.

1 In the context of our academic cooperation, we were always Danek and Ilze, without titles or professional level restrictions, which made the cooperation more open. Throughout this work, however, I will refer to my esteemed colleague as Professor Demski.

Professor Demski's interests at that time included border areas. He had been studying the issue in Belarus and Lithuania. Now he was here, at the borderlands between Latvia and Belarus. He was accompanied by a colleague (unfortunately, I forgot his name) who knew the city better than either of us, because he had formerly worked at the Polish school in Krāslava.

The languages we used for communication and work were English and Russian. We spoke Polish with local Poles (in which case the Professor interviewed them, and I was simply present) and with Latvians – vice versa – without alerting the respondents to the fact that one of us did not belong to his/her nationality. My understanding of the Russian language, as well as my Latgalian background,² enabled me to comprehend parts of what was said in Polish. In the evening, we reviewed what we had seen and heard throughout the day, and I got the opportunity to learn about what I had missed. We realised that such tactics already had to be used in the first interview, when the Latvian respondent was quite frightened, and was unstoppable in her talk about the mutual trust and friendliness between Poles and Latvians (E 74, 288).³ The most evident outcome of this interview were the knitted socks (or gloves?) gifted to both Polish scholars.

We interviewed Russians and Belarusians in Russian. There were no Jews in Krāslava. That “oar” had been completely broken during the Holocaust (Ezergailis 1999; Melers 2013). The Jewish cemetery in Krāslava was locked, and it was believed that the three existing key sets were kept by the relatives of the people buried there. The townspeople showed us that we could enter the Jewish cemetery from the Daugava River side. It was a very steep bank. Regardless, we walked through the long grass, climbed the river bank, and explored the cemetery in the name of science. Of course, we did so with great reverence and respect.

While the Professor interviewed the Poles in their homes, I looked at the contents of their bookshelves, the newspapers on the table, the embroidery on the tablecloth, and the paintings on the walls. In several homes, I was astonished to see large portraits of Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) – an important figure in Polish culture; a poet, a writer, and an apostle of the idea of national freedom. Latvian houses did not feature images of the greatest Latvian poet and dramatist Rainis – born Jānis Pliekšāns (1865–1929); or of Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923) – a collector of Latvian folk songs, writer, and promoter of the national revival

2 Latgale is the eastern part of Latvia, which, unlike other regions of Latvia, has been historically influenced by Poles, Polish culture and the Catholic Church.

3 The interviews conducted during fieldwork in Krāslava are stored in the Repository of Ethnographic Materials (E), Institute of Latvian History, Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia.

movement; or any other secular heroes. The abodes of Catholic Latvians had the so-called God's Corner, with holy images of Virgin Mary, Jesus, and other saints. Icons were also to be found in the homes of Catholic Poles, Orthodox Christians, and Old Believers.⁴ The Old Believers were my greatest discovery. They did not dwell in Northern Latgale, where I am from.

One time, we stood at the *mol'ennaia* (a prayer house of the Old Believers) waiting for a *nastavnik* (an elder of the congregation). Suddenly, Professor Demski looked at me and said, "You will not be allowed inside the prayer house!". Since we were doing fieldwork, I had understandably chosen to dress comfortably, in jeans. Of course, there were no skirts or scarves in my backpack. I was not prepared. How could I have known that!? When the *nastavnik* arrived, I asked, "May I enter?" He exclaimed, "Aha! You know!?" He went on to remark that being a woman in trousers was uncultured, like being a semi-hen or a semi-rooster. To say I was shocked to hear that would be an understatement. The young hardline feminist in me was about to erupt. I blushed, took a deep breath, and was about to share my opinion on his statements, but I was stopped. Professor Demski, who noticed this, called me aside. "Do you want to enter the *mol'ennaia* or present your position on women's rights?", he asked. I realised that an emotional speech driven by my righteous anger could also ruin my colleagues' chances of entering the prayer house, and thought about my priorities at that moment. The frustrated lady in me gave way to the would-be scholar; I counted to 10 and back before returning. To be honest, I was unable to enjoy or appreciate what I saw there because my wrath did not dissolve immediately. But it was a valuable lesson nonetheless. Now it appears amusing as a symptom of the troubles of my growing up.

However, Old Believers continued to attract my scholarly attention. Professor Demski returned to Poland with his colleague (on the way they witnessed the funeral ceremony of the Old Believers, which, as he described in his ethnographic text messages, was a long event). My plan was to go and interview a couple of Old Believers. They did not disappoint me! If there were symbolic ethnic borders somewhere, here they were present everywhere! I will only highlight a handful of the things they said:

4 The Old Believers were a group of Russian religious dissidents who refused to embrace Patriarch Nikon of Moscow's liturgical reforms for the Russian Orthodox Church (1652–1658). Fleeing persecution in Russia, they migrated to what is now Eastern Latvia (Latgale), which at the time was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as *Województwo Inflanckie*.

The Russians who settled in Latvia under the Soviet occupation rule should not be referred to as Russians! They're Soviets! They have no roots, and they have nothing! Belarusians are *bul'byaniki*,⁵ who prefer the *lazyrnij* hue for their windows. Latvians lack backbone! But Roma are not worthy of consideration at all! (E 74, 276).

All these sentiments were, of course, based on a deep personal grudge against a specific person of each of the listed nationalities.

My respondents also shared heartfelt family stories, including one about their grandchildren, whom they referred to as *latyshonok v bochke mochenyi*.⁶ They also provided many recipes for fish dishes, since many Old Believer fasts prohibit eating meat. The family myth concerning a particular location of origin in Russia was not very compelling. My doubts were sparked by the lack of any family tree, and a library filled with popular and scientific materials about the history of Old Believers in Latvia (e.g., Zavarina 1986; Russkiye 1992).

Undoubtedly, learning from books is one thing, but seeing a living tradition with your own eyes is a truly unique experience! I had heard the expression *lezhat' v grobu v belih tapochkah* [To lie in a coffin with white slippers] as a common cultural quote since my Soviet childhood, and now I knew why! An Old Believer showed me her "dying outfit", which consisted of a pale orange *sarafan*, a white shirt, other garments, and crocheted white slippers! White slippers! I was surprised and grateful for the opportunity to experience such a thing!

After returning from field work, we had to start preparing a publication regarding Poles and Latvians' mutual perception and stereotypes. It was not easy! My professional tools at that time included the education of a historian, and the usual methodology of Latvian ethnography (post-colonial legacy), which combined elements of nationalism, class struggle and cultural trauma. I still admire Professor Demski's patience in allowing me to deal with this mess of mine at my own pace, gently guiding, presenting theoretical literature; a little provocation, and a lot of discussion. It was not simple, but we managed! We even published three articles (Demski, Boldāne 2005; Boldāne, Demskis 2007a; 2007b). I would definitely write my section differently now, but it was a valuable learning experience for writing and defending my thesis. I will be eternally grateful to Professor Demski for this assistance.

5 *Bul'byaniki* – the name comes from the Belarusian word *byl'ba*, which means "potato".

6 From Russian – "Latvian soaked in a barrel". Soaking in a barrel is a part of the Old Believers' baptismal ritual. The respondent's daughter-in-law was Latvian.

The second and the third wave: Visual encounters and former military bases

After such an emotionally charged collaboration, we took a break for a couple of years. While on maternity leave, I was pleased to receive a letter from Professor Demski with a request to review a work whose scope of analysis concerned Latvia. “Oh yes! Something more interesting than diapers and children’s literature!”, I thought. This was the first of the projects led by Professor Demski which involved my research on Latvian material. After participating in the conference in Tartu in 2014, my article (Boldāne-Zeļenkova 2015) was included in one of the four volumes published by the project on visual communication (Demski, Baraniecka-Olszewska 2010; Demski *et al.* 2013; Demski *et al.* 2015; Demski *et al.* 2017). I always recommend these works to my colleagues who work with visual sources and propaganda topics, or whose scholarly interests include the era analysed in the volumes. Despite its brief duration, this period allowed me to become acquainted with a new topic and new colleagues, with whom I continue to collaborate in various capacities.

Former Soviet military bases as a subject in the “past in the present” was the next research topic introduced by Professor Demski. This was a topical matter for Latvia, which was essentially one enormous military base during the Soviet occupation – nearly every significant administrative unit had a military facility. I sincerely regret being unable to adequately focus on this research while being preoccupied by my professional tasks at the institute. It was fascinating to learn what is often overlooked in everyday life: how former Soviet military bases were adapted to the existing time-space. We established that some of them had become cultural sites (museums, tourist attractions, or both), others continued to serve military purposes, others still had become parts of the forestry infrastructure, while the majority had turned into slums. It must be added that the uninitiated may experience a surreal feeling while picking berries in the forest, and then encountering silicate brick ruins. Only a former employee can recognise that there used to be a checkpoint here, a cafeteria there, and that a given structure was an officers’ house (such as the former USSR nuclear missile base in Zeltiņi, Alūksne). It was fascinating to track the historical modifications of the environment and see the patterns in their subsequent development or destruction. The research issue was rich in counter-narratives, symbolic and physical barriers, stereotypes, prejudices, cultural trauma, nostalgia and other themes. The findings of this research have also been published in various special editions of journals compiled under Professor Demski’s supervision (Seljamaa *et al.* 2017; Czarnecka *et al.* 2019).

Professor Demski invited me to the former military town of Borne Sulinowo on the Polish-German border, which left an indelible impression on me when researching this issue. I went there twice: once to attend a seminar, and once – accompanied by my Latvian colleagues Ineta Lipša and Kaspars Zellis – to do field research at a military event (Fig. 1). Events associated with experimental archaeology and/or ethnography are well-known in Latvian historical reenactment. But this was something else! Tanks from the Second World War, turn-of-the-century cavalry, and the opportunity to sip raspberry-flavoured beer with a Napoleonic army officer who proudly claimed that even his waistcoat buttons were original! Professor Demski and his colleague Dominika Czarnecka's experiences and writings helped me understand how all of this multi-layeredness, variation, and contrast fit so well in Borne Sulinowo.



Fig. 1. From the left: Kaspars Zellis, Dominika Czarnecka, Ilze Boldāne-Zeļenka, Dagnosław Demski. Borne Sulinowo, August 2015. Photo by Ineta Lipša.

Later, while on a train to or from some former Soviet military base in Latvia or Poland (long journeys were a staple of this research project), Professor Demski began discussing Buffalo Bill, his ethnographic shows and guest performances in Europe. I listened to him with much curiosity. The only event I associated with the phrase “ethnographic exhibition” at the time was the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition, which had taken place in Riga in 1896 as part of the 10th All-Russian Archaeological Congress. But the Professor’s story was about something different. Thus, we have arrived at the next wave.

The fourth wave: Ethnographic and freak shows

“Have there been any ethnographic shows in Latvia?” Professor Demski’s seemingly simple question went unanswered aboard the train at that time. I drove home and used a search engine to carefully examine the database of digitised periodicals and publications of the National Library of Latvia (LNL) using various key words (those that came to me not knowing the topic). Unsuccessfully. The search engine of the LNL’s digital system also linked the term “ethnographic show” to the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1896. Another entry that appeared in response to my query concerned the ethnographic exhibition in Moscow, which took place a few years before the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition and displayed Latvians; however, there was nothing about staged otherness or non-European Others. Did it mean that such events had never taken place in Riga? Would that be so improbable? The Russian Empire, which included the territory of Latvia during the long nineteenth century, had no overseas colonies. The Russian Empire, just as the Russian Federation does today, annexed the territories of neighbouring countries.

After some time, Professor Demski sent me an article by Irina Novikova (2013) which described, among other things, the “Dahomey Amazons” on display at Riga’s 700th anniversary in 1901. Aha! There was a clue! I read the 1901 press, jotted down all the designations and epithets in Latvian, Russian, and German that referred to the troupe and the show, and resumed my search in the large LNL periodical collection. I found three. I shared my findings at a conference in Warsaw (2017) organised by Professor Demski’s project team.⁷ I compared the Latvian material with the data on performances by ethnic groups and freaks in Central and Eastern European towns, supplied by my colleagues at the conference. There were some findings, but no conclusions could be made at that stage. As a result, in the special issue dedicated to the topic of living human exhibitions, I chose to write about the Latvian audience’s (press) reaction to ethnographic shows (Boldāne-Zeļenkova 2020). Although the tone of the press was sympathetic (e.g., the Sinhalese received more sympathy than the Ashanti), to the Latvians of the day it was quite clear which side of the civilised/uncivilised divide they were on and why. The press emphasised education, Christianity and lifestyle as key characteristics when comparing Latvians to the people appearing on stage.

My previous efforts, as well as the substantial research highlighted by Professor Demski, which included his own contributions and those of his colleagues,

7 For detailed information about the conference entitled “Staged Otherness. Human Oddities in Central and Eastern Europe, c. 1850–1939” see <https://stagedotherness.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed October 30, 2024.

resulted in my successful post-doctoral project application on the issue of living human exhibitions.⁸ The project implementation period was both thrilling from the professional point of view and problematic due to global events (the Covid-19 outbreak, which later overlapped with Russia's invasion of Ukraine). Mobility was severely restricted. Then came the refugees. I met Ukrainians on all my business trips in March and April 2022, most of all in Warsaw. There were many desperate people, but also many responsive and caring ones who assisted them. *Za wolność waszą i naszą* [For your freedom and ours] – I witnessed this Polish expression, often mentioned by the Professor, in action, and felt extremely grateful to Poles!

Historians never ask the question: “What if?,” yet I have come back to it because of a completed post-doctoral project. I suppose that if I had been able to travel to Poland as planned, i.e. in the first year of my research project, the final output might have been more substantial. I was particularly motivated by the joint business trip to Wrocław with Professor Demski, Dominika Czarnecka, Katarzyna Kość-Ryżko, and Oyungerel Tangad. The city itself, the Anatomy Museum, and the Wrocław Zoo. The things we heard during interviews, read in the archive, and seen in the expositions, all contributed to a single overall image, allowing us to draw similarities and get more insight into what was going on in Riga over the course of the nineteenth century in this context. I was quite excited to see the Wrocław Zoo. Since I became interested in the topic of displaying otherness, I have been trying to visit a zoo in every city I travel to! The zoo provided both visible and hidden facts, which I appreciated.

During my visit, the project group led by Professor Demski and co-authors published a book, which I believe to be the most comprehensive compilation of the history of ethnographic exhibitions in Central and Eastern Europe (Demski, Czarnecka 2021). Working on the Latvian translations of texts for the *Staged otherness* travelling exhibition prepared by the project group (which we planned to show in Latvia), I learned a lot while looking for the most accurate translations of various terms. From my point of view, the exhibition was a success in both the virtual and the physical format.⁹ We opened the travelling exhibition in Riga, at the Academic Library of the Latvian University.¹⁰ The hall was full. Professor

8 “The live human exhibitions in the territory of Latvia at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries between science, entertainment and homophobia” (1.1.1.2/VIAA/3/19/516/ESS2020/350).

9 For a digital version of the exhibition *Staged otherness* see <https://stagedotherness.eu/#>, accessed October 30, 2024.

10 For an invitation to the event see https://oldlvi.lv/lv/saturs_files/eksponeta_citadiba_ielugums.jpg, accessed October 30, 2024.

Demski and Dominika Czarnecka provided context and historical background to the exhibition panels. We placed the flowers received at the opening of the exhibition at the memorial site dedicated to the Ukrainians who died in the war started by Russia, in front of the Ukrainian embassy in Riga.

The work of Professor Demski and Dominika Czarnecka encouraged and motivated me to present the collected Latvian material in a virtual display (in Latvian), so that future scholars researching the topic have a platform from which to start.¹¹ I have no doubt that the exploration of this issue will continue in Latvia in one form or another. This was proved during meetings with Latvian colleagues and museum curators, following the conference in Riga in 2023. The conference entitled “Contentious collections in Central and Eastern Europe: The legacy of ethnographic shows and beyond”, co-organised by three of us and the Museum of Anatomy, was an extraordinary event in terms of content!¹² Collegiality, support, and mutual respect are what I recall from the conference planning process. Many people were curious about the University of Latvia’s international conference in Riga, which featured only one Latvian speaker. Someone must always be the first. And we succeeded! So, it may be claimed that Professor Demski provided the impetus for several new topics entering into Latvian historiography.

The next wave...?

I would like to put an ellipsis mark at the end of the story about the waves of knowledge that impacted my career, initiated by Professor Demski. I admit that the Professor’s view of acquiring knowledge is broader and more optimistic. His sayings have proved true in other matters as well. Regarding the reality that children will grow very fast indeed; as well as the fact that those to whom you now act as assistants will soon turn to you for advice. And so with many other things that will surely come to my mind when the article is already published.

Dear Professor, I hope that someday, when I celebrate the same anniversary as you do this year, I will receive an email with your views on our collaboration! Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you have taught me, for your friendship and for the wonderful colleagues I have had the opportunity to meet because of you!

Danek, sto lat!

¹¹ Digital exhibition on displaying otherness in Latvian territory: <https://dzivasizstades.wixsite.com/divaini>, accessed October 30, 2024.

¹² Information about the conference, including the programme and theses, can be found here: <https://www.lvi.lu.lv/en/about-us/news/detail-view/t/79911/>, accessed October 30, 2024.

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