

*In the
Name of
Freedom:*

President of Latvia
Vaira Viķe-Freiberga

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Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga

A Biography by Ausma Cimdiņa

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In the Name of Freedom

A Biography of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga

by Ausma Cimdiņa

Foreword To The English Edition

For many years Latvia was an occupied part of the Soviet Union. Since independence was regained around 1990 few countries have developed as rapidly as Latvia. After only a little more than a decade the country has been invited to become a member of NATO and successfully concluded membership negotiations with the European Union.

At the beginning of summer 2003 President Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was re-elected for a second term as President of Latvia. She received an overwhelming majority in the ballot in the Saeima, the Latvian parliament, with eighty-eight votes to six, which was certainly a vote of confidence.

In this biography, titled '*In the Name of Freedom*', the author, professor Ausma Cimdiņa, gives an informative, fascinating and interesting picture of the life and achievements of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga from the time that she had to leave her war-torn homeland, during many years in exile in as varied countries as Germany, Morocco and Canada, which has made her fluent in English, French, German and Spanish.

When Vaira Viķe-Freiberga returned to Latvia after 55 years she did it with a long successful professional academic career behind her in which she, among many other things, became a professor of psychology at the University of Montreal. She returned to become the director of the Latvian Institute in Rīga but one year later she was elected as her country's president.

Seen from an outside perspective it is President Viķe-Freiberga's very clear standpoints in foreign policy matters which have had the greatest impact. But her role as her country's leader also in domestic policy is also of tremendous importance. Her very clear attitude concerning matters of morals and ethics is of utmost importance both in Latvia and in the European Union.

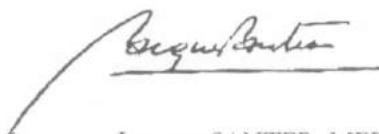
It is an honour to cooperate in the project of translating Ausma Cimdiņa's excellent biography about President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga into English, a book that has so far only been available in Latvian and Russian. This translation has been possible through fruitful cooperation, to which we are very grateful, between the Latvian publishing house Jumava and the Robert Schuman Foundation.

The Robert Schuman Foundation was established in honour of one of the founding fathers of today's European Union. In his name the foundation has for many years sponsored and supported activities in the countries on the other side of the former Iron Curtain, in order to promote democracy and human-rights. With the prospect of membership of Latvia to the European Union coming we now want to make both the country and the President of Latvia known to many people in the EU. Publishing this book is a step in this direction.

In order to prepare the English version of the book, which was originally printed in 2001, the author has written an additional chapter with the aim of making the book more up-to-date. In this chapter Professor Cimdiņa has included a couple of the President's most recent speeches about NATO membership, the signing of the EU treaties in Athens in April 2003, and her acceptance speech to the Latvian Saeima, when re-elected as President for a second term.

I believe that many people will read the story about the achievements of Latvia and the excellent Latvian President with great interest.

Brussels, September 2003



Jacques SANTER, MEP

President of the Robert Schuman Foundation
Former President of the European Commission.

*I solemnly swear that all my efforts will be dedicated
to the benefit of the Latvian people. I shall do everything
in my power to promote the welfare of the Latvian state
and its people. I shall consider the Latvian constitution
and the laws of Latvia to be holy, and I shall abide by
them. I shall treat everyone with fairness, and I shall
carry out my obligations to the best of my abilities.*

THE CEREMONIAL OATH OF OFFICE
OF THE PRESIDENT OF LATVIA

I

THE BEGINNING OF THE LONG, LONG ROAD

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was born on December 1, 1937, in Rīga. Near the end of World War II, Vaira Viķe's parents rejected the idea of life under a Communist regime, and they left Latvia. From 1945 until 1998, she was an émigré — in Germany, Morocco and Canada.

LATVIA

Vaira's Birth

Children are the fruit of love. They are the product of their parents' passions and of the desire for life to continue. Annemarija Raņķe's and Kārlis Viķis's baby was born on December 1, 1937, and she was named Vaira. People cannot remember the first moments, months or years of their lives, nor do they remember those people who were present at their birth and nurtured them as infants. We must write the first pages of our personal biographies based on things we are told by people close to us — parents, grandparents, older brothers and sisters, other relatives and neighbours.

The first major event in an infant's life is the Christening, the giving of a name. Even though the baby is the star of this event, she is not an active participant as yet. A name is assigned without the baby's knowledge, without its acceptance. They say one's name influences one's life and destiny. Latvians are one of relatively few ethnic groups in the world to celebrate name-days, by assigning a name to each



Vaira, 1938

calendar day, but not on a religious basis, as with patron saints. Every Latvian has a name-day. Vaira is a name that has its origins in a by-gone way of life. According to the dictionary of Latvian names produced by Klāvs Siliņš, "Vaira" first appeared in 1882 and was registered in the Latvian capital of Rīga in the first quarter of the 20th century. When Vaira Viķe was born, Vaira was not a particularly common name. By the time of the presidential election of 1999, there still weren't very many "Vairas" in the country, yet, by a curious coincidence two women, both named Vaira, were nominated for office. What's more, they were both émigré Latvians.

Are there anecdotes to explain why the future President of Latvia was called Vaira? Who chose that name? It was something new — the neighbours had never heard of it, had they? Or had someone perhaps met a good Latvian woman called Vaira and named the newborn girl after her? Reverend Bergs christened our Vaira at the Dome Cathedral in Rīga. Her mother Annemarija Raņķe chose the name. She was an

avid reader, and at the time when she was expecting her first child, she was enthusiastic about the work of Jānis Veselis. He wrote novels based on ancient Latvian myths and the daughters of the Sun appeared as characters, one called Kaira and the other — Vaira. The name Kaira seemed far too sensual for a small child, the root of the word relating to the concept of passion or temptation, and so Annemarija instead chose the other one: Vaira. Perhaps this choice of name had some subtle influence on her later interests, which focused so much on Latvian mythology and culture, on the ancient Latvian worldview.

Now, so many years later, is there still anyone around who may have memories about Vaira Vilke-Freiberga's childhood? Is the question relevant today? The role of childhood influences usually becomes recognized and understood only in later years and elicits interest only in the light of later accomplishments. Fortunately, there are photographs available showing Vaira as a child and her surroundings, that were preserved through the long émigré years, when the family moved from place to place. The black-and-white photographs of her earlier years in Latvia reveal a happy baby, and then a very serious, even sad-looking child, an observant child whose focus is in the distance.

Remembering her childhood, the President has said that she was sometimes referred to as “the poor orphan girl” when she was very young. However, she adds immediately that she never found this description particularly apt. After all, she had three separate sets of relatives — more than others did.¹ She was not deprived — she was privileged! How did this come about? Just a few weeks after the baby girl was born, the family suffered a tragedy. The baby's father, who was a professional sailor, was killed in a hurricane on board a Latvian ship as it was crossing the Atlantic Ocean. He was buried in the depths of the ocean, never having seen his one and only child. Vaira was too young to be aware of the tragedy at the time that it happened, but the fact as such was never erased from her consciousness. When she grew up, she kept her father's name, the surname she had at birth, and carries it to this very day.

¹ Runge V., Zariņš A. and Abula B. (eds.) *Latviešu literatūras darbinieki rietumu pasaule* (Latvian Literary Figures in the Western World). *Mežābele* (1991), p. 356.



Father Kārlis Viķis, 1936

Much later, her son would be named Kārlis after her father. The first book by Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs, "Saules dainas" ("Sun-songs", 1988) begins with a tribute to the men of the Viķis family. The book was dedicated "to the memory of two brothers who died without a grave or a monument on this earth". She continues: "Those men are my father, Kārlis Viķis, who was lost in the waves of the Atlantic Ocean, and his brother, Vilis Viķis, who was lost in the swamps of Volkov" (in Russia).²

One of Vaira's earliest memories is a clear visual picture of the pale green dress she was wearing when her mother remarried — Anne-marija Raņķe bound her future to Edgars Hermanovičs, also a sailor in his younger days. Vaira's mother took her new husband's surname when she remarried, but Vaira kept the surname of her natural father — Viķis. It was also under this name that she published her first articles in



Mother Annemarija
Raņķe, 1930s

Latvian and in French outside of Latvia. Once she began to publish her work in Soviet Latvia, she had to yield to the existing linguistic standards. In Latvia, she is identified through the feminine version of her surname — Vīķe.

When Vaira Vīķe was born, the father's profession usually determined the social status of families, so we can say that she was born into a sailor's family. This is not particularly typical of the biographies of the most distinguished Latvians, but in her case, it can be seen as somewhat symbolic. Many prominent Latvian authors have written about their happy, idyllic childhood in their homeland. Vaira does not quite fit that pattern, but nevertheless her parents — her mother and her stepfather — built firm foundations for the little girl's life. They survived the horrors of the Second World War and the endless trials of exile in a most unusual way.

From her birth until October 10, 1944, just three days before the Red Army invaded the city, Vaira lived in Riga. Her earliest memories are of the city and its environs on both sides of the Daugava River. There is an island in the Daugava River called Dole, where her father was born, and the small town of Salaspils across the river from the island. When she and her family were forced to flee Latvia, Vaira had just had her seventh birthday. Thus she spent only seven years in her native country, yet this period left such a mark on the young girl's heart and soul, that the call of the homeland proved to be stronger than any other throughout the long years of exile.

The loss of Latvia was painful and tragic to those who emigrated. To be questioned and reminded about it remains painful to this day.

In the year this book was written (2000), October was warmer than it had ever been in the 20th century. The summer had been wet, but in mid-October the temperature soared above 20°C (68°F). Young people were walking down the streets of Rīga in T-shirts. That Saturday in October 2000 was warm and sunny. President Vīķe-Freiberga had just returned from an annual conference on security and cooperation in the Baltic region. She was the keynote speaker at the event, and talked about the priorities in Latvia's foreign policy — to join NATO and the European Union as quickly as possible. She reminded her audience that the accession of each and every country to NATO had served to promote stability and that for geopolitical security reasons Latvia could no longer afford not to be part of it.

The President and I met at her residence in Jūrmala. She was casually dressed — a moss green sweater, chequered grey pants and flats. She was probably relaxing from protocol and the formal demands of her official life. Her husband, Imants Freibergs, was sitting at a desk, working on his computer. Two elderly cats, Riekstiņš and Zilīte, listened to our conversation. The felines came to Latvia along with the Freibergs family when they moved from Canada, and now the cats are "citizens" of Latvia. The Latvian poet Kārlis Skalbe wrote that the heart is nourished by small nothings, and I suppose this is true, especially when considering the world of a child. I asked the President to forget for a moment the affairs of state and the strategically important events of the present. I asked her to remember.

Her most vivid childhood experiences are linked to the war. Even unbidden, they rise to the surface of her memory. The war is tied to purely existential questions — the ongoing danger of bombing raids, the intolerable sense of hunger as the war drew to an end and Vaira was in Germany, the panic of fleeing Rīga in October 1944. But surely these cannot be the only memories. Surely there must be a sunny corner of a small child's life involving completely different emotions. How else could she ever have preserved the positive outlook on life and the openness to the world that has accompanied her throughout her life, and given her strength and faith even in seemingly hopeless situations? I asked the President what places — which landscapes, which people, which events — had etched themselves most deeply in her heart, which

ones called to her to return. I was aware the question would be a painful one for the President. Life's happy moments buried within our souls can create a deeper pain than any physical suffering or violence.

The Scent Of Rīga's Sidewalks After The Rain

"I have a great many memories from childhood," says the President. "I have talked to people who are the same age as I, and many of them say they don't remember very much from their early childhoods. I think that when I was a child, my consciousness was awakened at quite an early age. I remember a lot, perhaps because the memory of a child is a blank slate, quite literally a *tabula rasa*, and if something is imprinted on it, you remember it as long as you live. I also have a theory that we remember those things we experience in moments of heightened awareness, of special states of consciousness. When I think of my childhood, it seems I see various scenes from a movie, as if my life were a film that could be rewound and watched again. Those are visual images and smells. It has been scientifically proven that people remember certain smells for a very long time. The French author Georges Duhamel wrote a famous book, which began with the words (here she points to her bookshelf and quotes Duhamel's writing from memory, immediately translating the text into Latvian) "If someday I were born again, then I would remember the fatherland of my childhood on the basis of the smells." One of my childhood memories involves the building where we lived on 81 Lāčplēša Street in Rīga. I was going to the next building to look for a friend to play with. It had just stopped raining. The sun was shining, there were puddles in the street, and I thought the puddles were extremely beautiful and fascinating. I loved to wade through those puddles, although I was always scolded afterward, of course. I remember the very specific smell that emerges from the evaporating stones of city streets. The sun shines after the rain, the stones give off that very subtle scent, and I feel light and happy". Asked whether her native home has survived the ravages of time and if it is still standing today, the President responds in an unexpectedly direct and rational way: "My native home was the No. 1 Hospital in Rīga". For children who were born on

a farm in the 1930s, the concept of “first home” is not a poetic construction. At that time it was very common for children to be born at home on the farms, and the name of the homestead was recorded at the Birth Registry. Vaira, however, was born in a more contemporary way. The fact that she was born at the No. 1 Hospital in Rīga prevents any romanticizing of the event.

Letting The City Child Recover In The Country

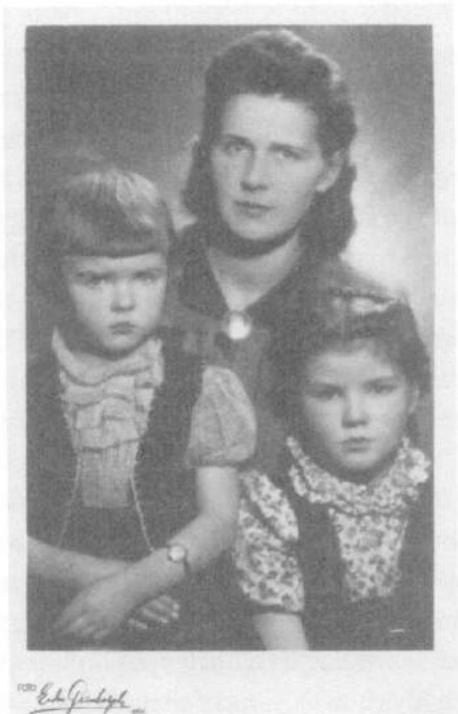
“I remember another moment from one of the last summers before we left Latvia. I was visiting distant relatives at a homestead called ‘Riekstiņi’. They let me stay at their home in the summer of 1943 so that I could enjoy fresh air and more wholesome country food. On this particular day, my stepfather had come from Rīga to see me, and we walked along the banks of the Daugava River to visit neighbours. This was at Dole, an island directly opposite the small town of Salaspils. It was the very beginning of summer, and the lilac bushes were in full bloom. The banks of the Daugava River were completely covered with thick lilac bushes. It had just rained, and the scent of the lilacs was wafting through the air. This lived in my memory even when we were in Germany later on. Every time I smelled lilacs, I felt a stab in my heart. I had an inexpressible sense of longing for all that.

“I have many memories about the banks of the Daugava River. Jāņi, the Summer Solstice festival, for instance. It may have been in 1943 or 1944. We were near Salaspils, and large boats or barges were floating down the river. They were the kinds of boats that are described in songs — decorated with garlands of flowers. People in the boats were holding bouquets of summer solstice flowers and greenery. Young people — boats full of girls, boats full of boys, all of them decorated with flowers, floating downstream from Lielvārde toward Rīga. The hay had not yet been mowed, and the meadows along the Daugava River were full of flowers. This image of Jāņi has become a part of my memory. I always carry it with me.

“Another of my most vivid childhood memories is tied to the park on the Salaspils baronial estate. In order to reach the ‘Riekstiņi’ home-

stead, we had to cross the park. On the bank of the Daugava, we shouted to attract the attention of the man who ferried people across the river from the Dole bank. I believe his name was Strazdiņš. There was an alley of white acacias and other fairly exotic trees — as was typical on baronial estates. Even back then the park was a bit run down, but I assume some of the trees are still there today. My parents were riding bicycles, I sat in a basket in front. As we crossed the park, however, they got off their bicycles and walked. The white acacias were in bloom, it was very beautiful indeed."

Vaira's mother came from the Latvian town of Nīca, in the western province of Kurzeme. Therefore the President should have memories from Kurzeme, too. "What I remember from Kurzeme is the time I got the scar which is still visible on my cheek today," she continues. "Sometimes in the summer I'd stay with my grandmother at the 'Raņķi' homestead in Dunika. That day the grown ups had come to 'Raņķi' from the nearby 'Birznieki' homestead, where my aunt, my mother's sister, lived. They were harvesting flax. I had been brought to 'Birznieki', to spend the day with my cousins. One of them, a boy, was a few years older than I. Back then we had these little metal buckets with a handle for jam. We had found that sort of rusted bucket somewhere in the ditch, and my cousin decided to use it as a toy. He had discovered all by himself that centrifugal forces oppose gravitational ones, and he wanted to demonstrate this to me. He was very boastful and proud about his knowledge. He poured muddy water from a ditch into the bucket and then began to spin it around his head to demonstrate that the water was not pouring out. As soon as he really got going, the rusted handle broke off and the bucket, which was still full of water, flew directly at me on a straight tangent. I hadn't liked his game from the very beginning. I was afraid, and had intuitively stepped back, but my cousin got angry. He said I was stupid and a coward because I wasn't coming closer to really observe his experiment. That was one of the first times I discovered I possess a certain intuition and that I should always obey it. That time I ignored the intuition that strongly pushed me back, and obeyed my cousin instead, but I shouldn't have. The whole thing took just a few seconds; there was no way for me to escape that bucket. It was a very painful and drawn-out ordeal. My cheek was cut to the bone



Vaira (L) with her mother and her cousin Dzidra in Latvia in the early 1940s

some time in the morning, but the adults who could help me would only return in the evening. The cut was really deep, the bottom part of my cheek hanging down and blood gushing out. I asked my cousins to use the first-aid kit, but they did not know how. The boys picked some strawberries, squashed them and packed them in the wound to stop the bleeding. Rust, mud and strawberries — that mixture adorned my swelling face for the whole day. Because my cousins were afraid to be scolded, they refused to go and tell the adults and ask for help. It was late in the evening before my aunt took me back to 'Raņķi', I was put on a bicycle and taken to the doctor in the dark, down a bumpy gravel road. The doctor's office had recently been bombed and had burned down — that makes me think this must have been the summer of 1941 — and my long trip with the painful wound turned out to be virtually for nought, because the doctor didn't have any instruments to put in stitches nor any medicine to tend my wound. All he could do was to wash it out and disinfect it with alcohol."

What can one say about this story? Scars both large and small, noticeable and invisible, are a part of every person's body — scars that have been collected during games, adventures and accidents. Not all adventures, of course, end as traumatically as the experiment with gravitation and the marmalade bucket. A child's physical vulnerability and the threats to their as yet fragile bodies have been described beautifully by the Polish pedagogue and author Janusz Korczak in an essay titled "How to Love a Child". Korczak reminds us that blind and excessively protective love can safeguard a child from misfortune and danger, but also shield her against joy and an understanding of life. Trauma and discovery may be more closely related than we think.

Loving Grandmas And Stern Grandpas

Even though the time that Vaira spent with her grandparents was very short, it still plays an important part in her memories. Our grandfathers and grandmothers (the more fortunate among us encounter two of each) may be very different, but are nevertheless very real to us. We first perceive them when we are children, and they are fixed in our thoughts and memories with the clarity and brilliance of Biblical images. Little Vaira had three grandmothers and two grandfathers and a step-grandfather.

"I had a Rīga granny, a Dunika granny and a Dole granny," says the President. "While I was still in Latvia, I attended the funeral of my Dole grandfather, who is buried in a small cemetery in Ķekava, on the opposite bank of the river. I visited him once when he was in hospital for an operation. That was the last time I saw him. He took me out into the hospital garden for a walk, and I had a peculiar sense that he was saying goodbye. My intuition came into play once more. I cannot remember the specific words that he said, but he caressed my hair in a way, which made me understand that we would never meet again. I think he told me to grow up clever and strong. After that hospital visit, another Sunday, my mother said I could go to the hospital again with her to visit my ailing grandpa. I had a choice between going fishing with my dad (my stepfather) and going to the hospital with my mother. I chose

to go fishing, because I really loved to wade around among the reeds in the water and I loved being with my dad. Later, because of that decision, I had pangs of conscience.

"My Dole granny and I went to visit my grandfather the following Sunday, but his bed was empty and covered with a blanket. My grandmother could not understand what had happened to him. A nurse came. She was wearing a white smock and a starched white cap, and my grandmother asked about her husband. The nurse asked for my grandfather's name. My grandmother said it was Vilis Viķis, and the nurse snapped, 'Viķis is dead!' in an abrupt and brutal manner — as if to say 'Why are you bothering me, what more is there to ask, it shouldn't come as a surprise.' My grandmother collapsed and started to sob loudly. Thus my memories of my Dole grandpa are associated with this brutal and insensitive person and with my grandmother's sorrow.

"In Dunika, too, I had grandparents. According to my mother, this grandmother was very sweet and loving and my grandfather was supposed to be severe and cantankerous by nature, but I didn't feel that he was. He could also be very kind at times. During the war we couldn't get much of anything, but I remember once that he went to a locked cabinet and took out two pieces of candy he had set aside especially for me. In my mind I still have an image of him sharpening some kind of farm implement on a grindstone. He let me stand beside him and watch, and sometimes he explained things to me. I loved that. I felt my grandfather was paying attention to me, that he respected me. I don't remember much about my grandmother except that we went mushroom picking in the forest, and then we boiled the mushrooms and packed them into clay jars with salt."

At that time there weren't any household chemicals to get rid of flies in the summer. Vaira's grandmother then picked poisonous red *Amanita* mushrooms known as mušmires (or fly killers, in Latvian), sautéed them in butter and then set them out in little shallow dishes on the table. The little girl was told she must not touch, let alone eat the mushrooms, because if she did — she would die — just like the flies. Butter was in very short supply during the war years, and the sautéed mushrooms had such a heavenly smell that young Vaira reached out her hand. "No!" admonished her grandmother very sternly. When

granny left the room, she had to struggle fiercely with herself to resist the tempting treat.

"My grandmother knew a great deal about medicinal plants. She helped women during childbirth and visited the seriously ill. She loved every living creature, but particularly dogs and flowers. With all her loving nature, however, there was a certain sharpness to her character. Nevertheless, I loved to walk around with her and to wrap myself in her skirts."

The Dunika grandfather died shortly after World War II, but Vaira was fortunate enough as an adult to meet her Dunika grandmother once more. This was in 1969, when she visited Soviet Latvia. There was a strict ban against émigré Latvians leaving the city limits of Riga. In order to meet her granddaughter, the ailing Dunika grandmother and several other relatives travelled to the capital, where émigré Latvians, including Vaira, were housed (and closely watched) at Hotel Riga. Vaira's grandmother and grandfather lived on the same farm all of their lives. They were laid to rest at the Dunika cemetery.

At the President's official residence in Jūrmala, there is an intimate little corner with a table. On that table there is a very old photograph of Vaira as a child. The photograph is still encased in its pre-war frame. We see her in a winter coat with a warm rabbit skin muff, collar and hat. The story of this photograph and this coat is also the story of Vaira's grandmother from Riga — the mother of her stepfather. Vaira was particularly fond of her. "Back then the norm was for people to avail themselves of the services of a professional for every need under the sun," the President says. "Your coat was made by a tailor, the dress was sewn by a seamstress, the hat came from a milliner, and pictures were taken by a professional photographer. Every item people owned had been produced or manufactured specifically for them. In pre-war Latvia it was commonplace for people to visit a photographer from time to time to have their picture taken, not just for passport purposes. You might even say it was a tradition." Remembering her warm winter coat, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga reminds us that this coat was really something special. During the war, not everyone could afford to have new clothes sewn for him or her. Many goods were issued only on the basis of special rationing coupons, but the coupon by no means guaranteed

that the goods would actually be available. The shortage of goods created a black market, and many things that were supposed to be exchanged for coupons ended up on the black market instead. These were the origins of the system of 'blat' that was such an integral part of life in Soviet Latvia. "If you didn't have something that could be traded for something else on the basis of 'blat', it was all but impossible to get fabric for new clothing," she continues. "People simply used old materials to sew new things. People went to seamstresses who were astonishingly clever at turning one piece of clothing into something else. At that time children's clothing was almost always sewn from their parents' clothes. The same is true of the coat that you see in that photograph. I remember how my Riga grandmother ran all over the city to get the thread, lining and quilting. The little coat was dark blue with white rabbit fur. My grandmother had to put a lot of thought into how she could trade something for that rabbit fur. All those things were in short supply, and one had to be extremely determined to get one's hands on them." The Riga granny was a widow who had married again. Her second husband didn't play as great a role in Vaira's life, but she remembers her grandmother as a woman who was forever on the move, forever making sure that the girl was comfortable and that she was properly dressed.

Vaira did not live in Latvia long enough to start school. When it comes to cultural activities during the German occupation of Riga and Latvia from 1941 until 1944, she most vividly remembers visits to the theatre. Her parents were keen theatregoers, but sometimes did not have anyone with whom to leave their child. So for safety's sake, Vaira was taken along to the theatre starting at the age of three. "That was a world in and of itself. It played an enormous role in my intellectual development," she observes, remembering her childhood.³

Lord, The Earth Is On Fire

The darkest and most desolate memories in Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's life are ones she does not like to discuss willingly. These are about

leaving Rīga and Latvia. When asked about how she left Riga to go to Liepāja (on the west coast), about saying farewell to the city, the President answers: "Every step of the way is engraved in my memory. The whole thing happened by chance. On the street my dad met an acquaintance who had been posted as a guard. He was supposed to guard the transport vehicles that the German army would use to retreat toward Kurzeme. This man told my dad that the Russians were already at the gates of Rīga. Through the man's relatives and acquaintances, we learned that early in the morning of October 10th, at around 5:00 or 6:00 a.m., a convoy would start out at the end of Lāčplēša Street and then proceed down Valdemāra Street. This convoy would make it possible for a certain number of people to get to Kurzeme (the western part of Latvia on the Baltic Sea).

"We literally had a few hours to make the decision to leave and to pack our bags. This acquaintance that my dad met by chance in the street basically determined our destiny. We left Rīga on October 10th. We were allowed to take only those things we could carry in our hands. It struck me as something distressing and dramatic — this need to choose so suddenly and quickly what to take along and what to leave behind. Sometimes I still suffer from nightmares in which I have to flee and have only minutes to decide what to save and take with me. In October 1944 I was allowed one doll and my teddy bear and given a small suitcase to carry, which contained soap and diapers for my little baby sister. My stepfather had gone ahead, carrying two heavy suitcases on a bicycle. My mother and my little sister had also left the apartment ahead of me. She carried my sister who was eight months old on one arm, and a bag of food in the other. I had to drag along the suitcase with the soap and the diapers, without which travelling with an infant would not be possible. My Rīga granny came with me on this trip when we were leaving the city.

"My arms soon tired from carrying the suitcase, and we stopped at the nearest street corner so that I could catch my breath. It was such a familiar place. There was the butcher's shop — it's still there — where my mother and I often stood in long lines to get some meat or sausage in return for rationing coupons. Near a different corner there was a shop with a huge laundry roller, where mother used to take her linen

sheets to be pressed after laundering. I was suddenly overcome by enormous sadness at having to leave our home. I could not move at all. I wanted to turn back and etch these places in my memory, to take them with me. My grandmother got anxious and called out: 'Child, don't do that!' She said that when you leave a place, you must never look back. If you look back, it means you will never return. But I needed to look back and so I did.

"I looked back and suddenly felt a terribly clear conviction that I would see these places again, but that I would never again see my grandmother. This was the last journey I would take with my Rīga grandmother — someone I loved so dearly. All this struck me as we were walking down Lāčplēša Street to Valdemāra Street, where we were going to get into the army trucks that would take us to Kurzeme. It was a long trip for my short little legs, and I sensed, with every step my grandmother and I were taking toward our goal, that a little piece of our last moments together was being chipped away. I was suddenly frightened. Could it really be that by looking back I had violated a rule of destiny and thus determined my subsequent fate? Could things somehow have happened differently if I had not looked back?"

Vaira's family remained in Latvia until close to the end of World War II and left because they could not imagine living again under a Communist regime. From 1945 until 1998, she lived as an émigré. That didn't mean, however, that for all of those years she had lost contact with Latvia. In 1987, she was already fairly well known as an émigré academic, and on her 50th birthday, the Chairman of the Board of the Latvian Writers' Association and poet Jānis Peters, wrote these deeply felt words: "At the crossroads of the planets, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga always sees Latvia as her immutable lode star. She knows the Latvian people and the richness of their cultural heritage."⁴

The President mentions her mother's steadfast approach when they had to leave Latvia as one of her most vivid memories from pre-war Latvia. Before the family left, her mother took great care to wash the floors and to put up clean curtains. If she was to return (and every

⁴ Peters J. "Ceļa vārdi dzimtenes nesējai" (Words for a carrier of the mother-land), *Literatūra un Māksla*, 11 December 1987, p. 10.

single person who left as a refugee hoped this would be the case), Vaira's mother would be returning to a clean home. If not, then those who live in the apartment subsequently would know what kind of people their predecessors had been. Vaira grew up in a patriarchal family. The father went out in the world and earned money, the mother, even though she also did various things outside the home, took care of the children, nurtured hearth and home.

Her parents did not live to see their daughter become President. Vaira was visiting Latvia when she received news of her mother's death. This was in 1993. Vaira had just watched a film called "Būris" (The Cage), produced by the director Ansis Epners and based on the eponymous novel by Alberts Bels and remembers feeling an immense sadness even before she received the sad news. After arriving in Canada in the summer of 1954, Vaira's parents had settled in Toronto and remained there until they died. Annemarija Hermanoviča (née Raņķe) is buried at the York Cemetery in Toronto. Shortly before she became the President of Latvia in 1999, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga also buried her stepfather, Edgars Hermanovičs, in the same place.

GERMANY

On The Road To Lübeck

Upon leaving Rīga on October 10, 1944, the Hermanovičs family joined the stream of refugees flowing toward the western Latvian province of Kurzeme. The Red Army was cutting off land routes in the direction of Kurzeme, and what came to be known as the "Kurzeme cauldron", or "Fortress Kurzeme", had started to emerge. This region housed some 200,000 German and Latvian soldiers, as well as about half a million civilians, including refugees. The Soviet Union, moreover, had managed to establish a group of Red partisans in Kurzeme known as the "Red Arrow" brigade, which seriously hampered and even threatened the lives of civilians, in particular.⁵

⁵ Balodis A. Latvijas un latviešu tautas vēsture (A History of Latvia and the Latvian People). Rīga: Neatkarīgā teātra "Kabata" grāmatu apgāds (1991), p. 322.

There were also Latvian volunteer organisations in Kurzeme helping refugees, especially the sick and the hungry. The Germans, for their part, tolerated these groups. Thanks to the cooperation of Sweden, approximately 3,000 Latvian refugees fled to that country in small fishing boats during the autumn of 1944. Then the Germans closed down the maritime border. All refugee ships and boats were heavily guarded and ordered to set sail for Germany.⁶

Vaira remembers the trip from Rīga to Kurzeme as the first terrifying experience of her war years. "The caravans of refugees were bombed by the Soviet air force, and to save our lives, we had to throw ourselves into ditches at the side of the road — just the way you now see in war movies," she says. "We spent the first night with some farmers in Kurzeme, and they were not happy at all when the convoy rolled up to their door. The bombing of Liepāja started the same night we arrived and, if I remember correctly, three ammunition trains were blown up. The air raid sirens were screaming, there was shrapnel in the air. We hid in the cellar of a brewery. My father ran out to grab our things, but he couldn't make it back in time and spent the air raid hiding in a huge empty barrel on the brewery grounds. He couldn't hear a thing for the next three days because the reverberations in the barrel were so loud they damaged his hearing. We thought he would be deaf for life but, thank God, his hearing returned."

In the late autumn of 1944, before leaving Latvia, Vaira Viķe's family spent a few months in Liepāja, then in the village of Ziemupe, and then again in Liepāja. As fate would have it, she left Latvia from Kurzeme on one of the last refugee ships that had not been bombed during Soviet air raids. The President remembers having been told that when the sea began to wash up the bodies of people from the destroyed ships, her grandmother would walk along the shoreline near Nīca, Kurzeme, to see whether her relatives might not be amongst the dead.

As refugees, Vaira's family first stopped in the town of Gottenhafen (now Gdina) in Poland and then moved on to the German towns of Parchim, Schwerin and Wismar. Finally, in October 1945, they arrived at the village of Herrenwyk, near Lübeck. At a Latvian refugee camp

there, Vaira finally started school. Like many people who have lived through the terror of war, she found herself living with a constant sense of danger, fear, and uncertainty about the future. The President says today that the war and the loss of her homeland were the primary events of her childhood — something which inevitably affected the rest of her life. “I lost my fatherland, I spent much of my childhood being cold and hungry, as we wandered from one place to another. We were terrified of the air raids and the bombs that fell night after night. At the end of the war we were living in a building that only had three of the four walls still standing.”⁷

After World War II, a very large number of refugees flooded into western Germany. Quite a few Latvian refugee camps were established with some support from Latvians who had arrived in Germany earlier or who had been sent to labour camps at the beginning of the war. After the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact delineating their respective spheres of influence, more than 55,000 Latvian citizens left Latvia between 1939 and 1941. The vast majority were Germans, but there were also approximately 1,000 ethnic Latvians. Between 1941 and 1943, when Latvia was a part of the German war economy, some 20,000 Latvians were sent to Germany to augment the labour force. The German government, through the Deutsche Arbeitsfront, the German labour front, provided non-Germans in the country with certain guarantees in terms of their ethnic cultures, especially if new arrivals themselves organised the cultural initiatives.

Between 1944 and 1945, an unprecedented number of Latvian refugees flowed into Germany. Statistics from German government institutions and from Latvian organizations as to the precise number of refugees differ considerably. Experts on the history of Latvian refugees estimate there were about 190,000 Latvian refugees in Germany at this time and that they lived in some 400 Latvian camps (some of which existed only briefly). The Latvian Refugee Board⁸ was established with

⁷ Rožukalne A. and Peipiņa A. “Pirmā prezidente” (The First Female President), Interview *Santa*, No. 9, 1999, p. 20.

⁸ Veigners I. Latvieši ārzemēs (Latvians Abroad. The Association “Latvia and the World’s Latvians”), Riga: *Latvijas Enciklopēdija* (1993), pp. 144-146.



In the garden of the German millionaire Pangl, temporarily expropriated by the British occupying forces in Lübeck, 1946

the goal of maintaining contact among the various camps and of meeting at least minimal Latvian cultural and educational needs. During the period between 1946 and 1949, what came to be known as "Little Latvia" emerged, a time of particularly active social and cultural life among Latvians in Germany, and this period coincides almost exactly with the time that the Hermanovič family spent there. All larger refugee camps organised schools where lessons were taught in Latvian. Along with the central organisations of Latvian refugees, organisations for children and adolescents were established (or, more precisely, re-established after being closed down in now-occupied Latvia), among them the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. Vaira Viķe was still too young to join the Girl Guides, but could witness older girls' solemn swearing-in ceremonies: "I promise on my honour to strive with all my strength to be faithful to God and Latvia, to help others at all things and to obey the Guide Law." She joined the 3rd Brownie pack at the refugee camp in Lübeck, which was called "Liepavots", or "Spring by the Lindens".

It is evident from memoirs and documents of contemporaries of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga that "there were contradictory feelings among

refugees". People were happy they had survived the war, but grieved for the relatives they had lost, or who had been left behind in Latvia. These feelings were exacerbated by uncertainty, because at that time there was basically no communication between West Germany and Latvia. Many refugees lived with the illusion that they would not be in exile for very long, once the war was over the western world would liberate the Baltic States from Stalin's terror and then the refugees could return home without any reprisals.⁹ Today, of course, we know that Britain and the United States had agreed with Stalin on a different view of post-war Europe. Latvians came to understand they would not be going home any time soon and an unbearably depressing mood pervaded the refugee camps, particularly when older people died and had to be buried in exile — one after another, without the three handfuls of Latvian soil traditionally tossed on to coffins. This despair could not help but affect the youngest generation of refugees, Vaira among them, and to affect their perception of the world.

The Law Of Never-Ending Love

Émigré Latvians have their individual, specific longings and memories, such as yearning for the loved ones who had stayed behind in Latvia, or missing items from your daily life, which had to be left behind because you couldn't carry everything. People longed for the familiar landscapes of home, for familiar possessions normally considered of little importance. Vaira's dreams of her homeland brought back to her the banks of the river Daugava and her Dunika grandmother. At the beginning of the refugee period, when Vaira was constantly hungry, her memories of Latvia were often awakened by the feeling of being famished. She imagined her grandmother standing in front of a big black pot, boiling potatoes for the pigs, but also giving her some of them to eat. In her mind's eye she saw her grandmother making jam, and the clouds of wasps and flies, which showed up on the farm along with the scent of fruit and berries in August.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Vaira speaks of the death of her little sister Mārīte as undoubtedly the most painful experience that she and her parents had while in the refugee camps in Germany. Under normal circumstances the little girl's life might have been saved, and knowing this only intensified her parents' grief. For Vaira's mother, this was the second cruel blow in just a few years. Soon after Vaira's birth, the infant's father was lost in the Atlantic Ocean. Now she had lost the little girl who had been born from her second marriage. Soon after this tragedy, however, Vaira's brother was born. Post-war Germany, with such contradictions, was marked in the mind of the little girl as a place where the mysteries of life and death were played out, but also as a place where she experienced fulfilling human relationships. She found that she could rely on the undying love of her parents that withstood any test. Vaira, as the first and oldest child in the family, developed an older sister's feelings of protectiveness and care toward her siblings. A little sister was lost but replaced by a little brother. Once again, Vaira had someone to care for.

Many years later, when writing a review of Agate Nesaule's novel "A Woman in Amber" (1995), Vaira Viķe-Freiberga reflected on her experience in wartime Germany, emphasising that the Western world seemed to know little and care even less about the non-Russian people of Eastern Europe — Latvians among them — very little about their tragic experiences during World War II. "In the collective consciousness of the Americans — and of the entire English-speaking world — World War II and its consequences established a very specific and very limited "mental model" in which certain conceptual stereotypes have a very important role to play. These include the changes in society caused by the war effort, the Allied battles and ensuing victory on the Western front, and, of course, the Holocaust. In this model, the destinies and efforts of the Eastern Europeans simply do not exist. For the entire English-speaking world, there is a sort of mental 'blind spot' when it comes to the non-Russian nations of Eastern Europe."¹⁰

World War II and the healing of its traumas is a major leitmotif in post-war European literature and in contemporary social anthropology.

¹⁰ Viķe-Freiberga V. "Sieviete dzintarā" (A Woman in Amber), *Laiks*, 23 March 1996, p. 3.

Writing about Agate Nesaule's novel, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga stressed that the book introduced a new era in Latvian literature, representing as it did the experiences and sufferings of the generation of people who had left Latvia as small children. She pointed out that the prevailing attitudes within Latvian émigré society were primarily established by those who had left their native land as adults and that this world view left virtually no room for the experiences of the younger generation. On the contrary, the older generation kept focusing on its own experiences, complaining that their children lacked compassion and did not really understand or sufficiently acknowledge their parents' suffering.

Nesaule wrote her book to help heal the traumas she had suffered during the war with the darkest passages of her text referring to her family's attempt to flee the Russians. Nesaule writes about the extreme brutality of the Russian Red Army in the Eastern zone of Germany. Vaira, however, never observed this personally. Nesaule writes that despite building a successful professional career in America, the moral and psychological traumas of her childhood led to an unhappy and unfulfilled personal life. She found it difficult to develop intimate relationships. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga pointed out that from a psychological perspective, along with the undeniably traumatic consequences of external events, the lack of trust in her parents played a no less important role in Agate Nesaule's life. Agate had to come to terms with her mother's "sins" or rather her mother's suffering because of a husband who had abandoned her and the children at crucial times during the war.

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga completed her review of Agate Nesaule's novel with a psychologist's conclusion that, in different circumstances, the same external events and situations can affect human lives in very different ways, resulting in very different outcomes. Thus she proposes that the very contrary of Nesaule's thesis is equally possible: that some of the younger generation of Latvian émigrés might have found that the experiences of the war and the post-war period made them psychologically stronger and spiritually richer. In a certain sense, she ranks herself among these. This unexpected shift in thinking is reminiscent of the paradoxical statement by Alexander Solzhenytsin, the author of "The Gulag Archipelago", who wrote the following words about his existential experience in the death camps of Siberia: "I am grateful that

I ended up at this camp, but I am even more grateful that I endured it and survived."

In order to explain her own views, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga made reference to recent psychological research that showed that "in addition to the well-known weak and easily injured child, scientists have now also discovered the resilient and tough child — the child who can successfully overcome unimaginable obstacles, impoverishment and harm in his or her life." ¹¹

Dual Vision

Vaira Viķe began her schooling at a Latvian refugee camp in Herrenwyk, near Lübeck, in October 1945. The President has spoken ironically about her early days in school: "At Latvian school, recess was my favourite subject. I spent a lot of time being punished, standing in the corner because I talked too much during class."¹² The girl had learned to read when she was four years old. Upon starting school, she was put into Grade one, where other children were just learning the alphabet. She reports that the teacher found her unbearable, and she was expelled from the class on the very next day. The network of Latvian refugee schools in Germany was well developed, but sometimes children of various ages with differing levels of skill and knowledge found themselves in the same classroom. Vaira was afraid and uncertain for a few days, but the school took mercy on her and she was promoted to the Second grade. There, in turn, the program of study was too difficult for her. Only later did Vaira become an outstanding student, while attending the French school in Daourat and a girls' College in Casablanca, Morocco.

Despite the depressing psychological atmosphere in the Displaced Persons camps (known as DP camps) in Germany and elsewhere, the publishing of books and periodicals was vitally important in maintaining and developing Latvian spiritual and cultural values. Between 1946

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Latviešu literatūras darbinieki rietumu pasaulē, *op. cit.*, p. 356.



At a Girl Guide camp in Germany, 1947

and 1949, there were approximately 90 Latvian publishers in Germany alone, publishing some 800 books, as well as several dozen periodicals.¹³ These facts about the Latvian refugee camps and their lively literary and cultural life are worth noting in relation to Vaira if only because the young girl received her first, most vivid literary impressions in these camps. At Christmas 1945, Vaira received from the Latvian school in Herrenwyk a present — the newly published version of the epic drama "Uguns un Nakts" (Fire and Night) by the foremost Latvian national poet Rainis. This epic transported Vaira out of her drab and dreary daily existence. Losing herself in this colourful world of poetry and fantasy helped her forget the daily hardships of life in a refugee camp. Other vivid literary memories from this period in Germany include the tales of Kārlis Skalbe, the trilogy "Dievs, Daba, Darbs" (God, Nature, Work) by Anna Brigadere, and the epic legends of two Baltic nations — "Kalevala" from Estonia and "Lāčplēsis" (Bear Slayer) by the Latvian poet Andrejs Pumpurs¹⁴. Vaira was also deeply impressed by the plays staged by Latvian refugees in Lübeck. It is also noteworthy

¹³ Veigners, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

¹⁴ Being the inspiration for "Fire and Night".

that her first published article appeared in the German refugee newspaper "Latvija", although she wrote it when she was already in Morocco.

While still in Germany, Vaira Viķe's family spent a considerable amount of time living outside the refugee camps, developing closer contacts with the local German community. This broadened Vaira's view of life and helped her learn German. Outside the camps, she saw the Germans in a completely different light from that in which they were portrayed inside the refugee camps. From the outside, Vaira could also see the Latvian refugees in a different light than the refugees saw themselves. As a result, she feels that she has developed a sense of "dual vision", and whether as a curse or a gift, this perception has stayed with her throughout her life.

MOROCCO

"When I See Palm Trees, My Heart Melts"

In the spring of 1949, the Hermanovičs family moved from Germany to Morocco. Why Morocco? Not very many Latvian refugees ended up in this particular country. Today, however, exotic-sounding places such as Morocco, Rabat and Casablanca are highlighted as places where the Latvian President lived during her refugee years after the Second World War.

It is Vaira's parents who chose Morocco of course, because she herself was much too young for such decisions. When they arrived in this North African country, she was only 11 years old. As is often the case with decision points in life, the choice to go to Morocco was dictated by a combination of chance and deliberation. A commission looking for workers to construct a hydroelectric power station in French Morocco visited the refugee camp. Her father thought he could get a job there to support his family. He also felt that North Africa was not all that far from Latvia — certainly much closer than the United States or Australia, which lay far across the oceans of the world, and yet were the destinations of many émigré Latvian families at that time. In the late 1940s though, many refugees still cherished the hope that they would soon be able to return home.

Near the village of
Daourat, Morocco,
1949



"The stereotype of Morocco among Latvians was a country of either deserts or overgrown jungles, with black indigenous people. At least that's what I thought, going there. My first impressions on African shores — at the Oran airport in Algeria — were surprisingly pleasant. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the brightly coloured and well-tended gardens with many tropical plants. I had left Germany only a few hours earlier, where it had been snowing and freezing. Here there was nothing to remind me of the war we had recently lived through. People seemed to be well-off and happy." These words were written by the 15-year-old Vaira Viķe in the spring of 1953 after she had lived in French Morocco for four years. They were written about a year before her family moved to Canada.¹⁵ The quote comes from the future President's first newspaper article. It was titled "A land where no one knows

¹⁵ Viķe V. "Zeme, kur Latviju nepazīst. Divas Marokas. Vēstule Latvijai no Kasablankas" (A land where no one knows Latvia. Two Moroccos. A letter to Latvia from Casablanca), *Latvija*, 7 March 1953, p. 4.

Latvia”, and it had two equally important sub-headings: “Two Moroccos” and “A letter to Latvia from Casablanca”. The article was published in the Latvian language newspaper *Latvija*, in Germany.

If all the world's countries were to be divided up into two groups — those who know about Latvia and those who do not, then Morocco would be one of the latter, and in this they would not be exceptional. Vaira Viķe became used to this idea as a teenager and came to realise that Latvia was not the centre of the Universe. Vaira's love of her homeland didn't keep her from understanding and even falling in love with other countries, though. Forty years later, already President of Latvia, she waxed poetic when remembering her days in Africa: “Oh, when I see palm trees, my heart immediately melts. When I see a turban, my heart also melts, for these are fond memories of my childhood.”

A school-age child should go to school, but there weren't any Latvian refugee camps in Morocco, or Latvian schools, or cultural centres. Vaira spent her first year of schooling at a French primary school in Daourat, a village housing the workers who built the dam and the power station. Needless to say, neither the young pupil nor her teacher found it easy. There was only one teacher in charge of a tiny classroom with around thirty children of various ages. Initially, the lady was against accepting this “deaf and dumb child” in her classroom, this girl who did not speak French. There was, however, a Russian aristocrat on hand who was willing to give this “deaf and dumb” girl private French lessons, and as a result Vaira was admitted to the school. Now, this brings up the question of which language the young girl and her private tutor used to communicate. It turned out that the Russian aristocrat had had French and German governesses in her childhood, and Vaira had learned German while in Germany. Voilà — the two of them had found a common language. The tutor's name was Madame Bluckette and she had left Russia for China during the Revolution. After China fell to the Communists, she and her family had to leave again and eventually wound up in Morocco.

Life in Daourat was quite an experience in more ways than one. Among other things, it revealed to Vaira the many unexpected ways in which solutions could be found to seemingly unsolvable problems. To

In Casablanca,
Morocco, Vaira (L)
with her mother, 1950



this day she thinks of Mme Bluckette as a fairy Godmother whose kindness helped her to complete her primary education and continue her schooling.

For her secondary education Vaira was admitted to a girls' school in Casablanca, and except for constant worries about money, the President has only fond memories of this time in her life. She was the top student in her class, and received books as prizes for various accomplishments. This made her particularly happy because her family could not afford to buy books. "I felt that my soul had found its true home," she wrote. "The teachers were strict, with demanding educational standards, but they were also fair. They knew how to both criticise and praise."¹⁶ The school offered ballet classes and had a choir, and there was a youth association which focused on classical music. Vaira joined this latter group so she could attend excellent concerts at a great

¹⁶ Latviešu literatūras darbinieki rietumu pasaule, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

discount. She was so enthusiastic about the French language and its literature during secondary school that at the age of 14 she began to think about becoming a writer.

Her first published work "A land where no one knows Latvia" presented Morocco as a kind of model for the world which brought together both good and evil. The young author reveals a childish idealism, a powerful desire to improve the world and the lives of its people. A place in the world had to be found for Latvia, too. The style in which Vaira Vīķe described Morocco of that period is unassuming and purposeful. It reflects a worldly outlook on life, and one who reads the newspaper "Latvija" article now cannot help but think that it was the work of a seasoned reporter covering the climate and plants of a little-known African country, the contrasts inherent in everyday life, the national and social contradictions of post-war Morocco.

Two Moroccos

"Where are the natives? Where are the Arabs?" Vaira asks in her letter from Casablanca to the readership of Latvians in exile. Three telling photographs appear with the article that provide a visual response to this question: The captions read: "The pride and joy of Morocco — the colonial army", "The French government has modernized Arab agriculture" and "Poor Arabs work the land using the methods of their ancestors". The young author's article reveals an undeniable talent for observation and reporting. She conjures up the rural landscape and the realities of urban environments in North Africa. Once again, it is noteworthy that the description contrasts sharply with the way nature is usually portrayed in Latvian literature, and it is precisely her sensitivity to other ways of life that inspires Vaira's first literary essay: "The Europeans, who have farms with artificial irrigation and modern machinery, are very well off because they can reap several harvests each year. The Arabs, who lease their tiny plots of land from a local landlord — as was the case with Latvian peasants in the Middle Ages — have meagre harvests because the soil dries out during the summer and nothing grows. The farming methods and tools used are extremely primitive.

They use small wooden ploughs often pulled by a camel and a donkey harnessed together. The plough is the only thing of value the natives possess, but it will not penetrate the rocky soil deeper than 10 centimetres.

"Sometimes there are sandstorms coming from the south, from across the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara Desert," she continues. "In three years I have experienced these storms twice. The straw huts of the villagers were blown off the ground, one after the other, and flew away. A few days later, however, the village had been rebuilt." In writing about the peculiarities of native quarters in the cities, the author concedes that "there is no way to describe the exotic, narrow, winding streets of the locals. Nearly all homes have a built-in shaft in the centre of the structure to let light in — windows are a rarity. Those who live on the lower floors have virtually no air or light."

The social class structure was very marked in Morocco at that time. Europeans had countless privileges as compared to the indigenous Arabs and Berbers, but not all Europeans were equally respected or valued by the employers. The French were the leading class in the Moroccan protectorate, and they received paid holidays in France. Other Europeans, who were not French citizens, had no such privileges and had to make do. Vaira's stepfather was one such European.

Five years after arriving in Morocco, the Hermanovičs family left, largely for safety reasons. An independence movement was born in Morocco, and acts of terrorism and the killing of Europeans accompanied it. Preparing the documents necessary for emigration to Canada provided Vaira Viķe with her first experience of government institutions and officials. Her stepfather was working overtime to earn money for the trip, and her mother did not speak French. At the age of 15, the teenage girl was responsible for and executed successfully this by far from easy task, as well as making all the complicated travel arrangements.

Among her less happy memories of her school days in Morocco is the corporal punishment that was meted out in the primary school in Daourat, not just for bad behaviour, but often for wrong answers to the teacher's questions. Witnessing this was very distressing to Vaira, who did not believe that knowledge could be beaten into a student. On the contrary, each blow only made the child less able to respond. She

also noticed that the children of the more prominent officials from the local power station were very seldom slapped or struck with a ruler, because the teacher took greater pains to understand them or to make excuses for them.

Later, in High-school, she was shocked by the cavalier way in which her history book only mentioned in passing that after World War I the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania broke off from Russia, only to add, with some satisfaction, that since 1945 the three countries were once again part of the Soviet Union.

The French stood aloof from other nationalities and this protected the non-French against the threat of assimilation, but it was also a source of loneliness. Vaira Viķe's letter to Latvia from Casablanca ended with a sad admission and a request: "I feel very lonely, because I have almost no contact with French people outside of school. I would be very, very happy about every letter I receive from young Latvians in other countries. My address is: Avenue de Mazagan, Cité Schneider, Villa 4, Casablanca, Maroc."

When the article was first published, young Latvians from every continent sent many letters to Morocco. Sadly, says the President, these letters have been lost over the course of time. At the same time, though, she remembers that this exchange of letters contained vivid examples of the emotional life of the younger generation of exiled Latvians — something that has been inadequately documented in émigré literature. Scattered around the world, these young Latvians had their own visions of the future, their own thoughts about Latvia. The letters could also have provided clear evidence of the role of the émigré Latvian press in salvaging and preserving Latvian values and ways of life, and in helping to establish contacts among émigré Latvians in different parts of the world. Contacts with the young Latvian girl in the "jungles of Morocco" involved not just letters, but also the printed word, and it involved not just one, but several generations of Latvians. A notable example is the poem dedicated to Vaira Viķe by Pēteris Ērmanis — it was called "Three News Items About One Girl". In it he followed Vaira's life in Latvian newspaper reports from the appeal of a homesick fifteen-year-old girl in Morocco for pen pals, through emigration to Canada, to her marriage and the birth of her first child:

*A little bird reported in the newspaper:
There was a Latvian girl, a lovely girl,
So lonely in Casablanca.
She suffered, the nightmares in Morocco wore her down —
She was young, only fifteen summers had passed.
The bird reported a second time:
The girl had escaped from the witch's cauldron,
And was already at university!
The years flew by with thunder and a roar.
The bird reported a third time:
This girl has become a wife in Canada,
Her first son has already been baptized!
I, a stranger in exile,
Have gleaned this scanty news and made it the story of a life.
I can only wish with all my heart:
May the future be kind to the girl,
To the girl who once suffered from the nightmare of Morocco.*

Pēteris Ērmanis was as famous among émigré Latvians as he was unknown in Soviet Latvia. A distant stranger, he called himself. This was the first (but not the last) poem to be dedicated to the future President of Latvia and was written by a doyen of Latvian literature. It was written in 1964, when Pēteris Ērmanis was already more than 70 years old, living in a retirement home in Germany. As a young man, however — just like the Latvian girl of “only fifteen summers” mentioned in the poem, he had been forced to leave home at an early age, to find himself among strangers, and to change his places of residence many times. The first newspaper article by Vaira Viķe had struck a chord deep in the old man’s heart, impressing him so much that he kept monitoring the papers for news about the girl’s subsequent life and fate in Canada. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga says that this well-intentioned poem was a source of some embarrassment to her. The kindly author had misinterpreted the adolescent’s attempts to describe the exoticism of Morocco to Latvian eyes, and was left with the mistaken impression that her life in Morocco had been absolute hell. She did not consider

her years in Morocco as unhappy, even though they were difficult. On the contrary, her first years in Canada were cold and lonely and Morocco seemed to be the distant, sunny land where she had left all her friends.

That does not, however, take away from the significance of the poem, but it does remind us that reality and the written word can shift in meaning depending on the context in which things are written and read. Why did Vaira choose to write about the life and social problems of the people in Morocco? Why did she leave so very much unsaid about herself? The emphasis in “A land where no one knows Latvia” was on a different Morocco, on more important problems than the private joys and sorrows of a young girl. Vaira Viķe's very first published article provides a remarkable example of her strategic thinking, of her feel for the target audience. Pēteris Ērmanis, however, sought and discovered more in the article — nostalgia for his own youth, the rather dim prospects of recent émigré Latvians, which is hardly surprising. If anyone tried to draw rational conclusions from the poem about the significance of Morocco to Vaira, they would be misled. The poem is not and cannot be a sufficient source of information about her life in Morocco, nor about her first years in Canada. First of all, it does not deal with a crucial aspect of the President's biography — the presence of the Moroccan sun and of the spirit and the light of French culture in her early life, the significance of these in the development of her personality. Second, it creates a false impression of living conditions during the first years in Canada, suggesting that she suddenly felt much better and that after the “nightmare of Morocco” she came to a land of milk and honey where she was received with open arms.

Undoubtedly, the experiences that the young girl went through during her early refugee days in Germany and the years in Morocco left lasting impressions that are reflected in her first literary efforts. Vaira Viķe's first publications emerge at the crossroads of different nations, languages and cultures. Her first article was published in the Latvian refugee newspaper “Latvija”, printed in Germany, about the lives of people in Morocco, but spoke of a young girl's longing for something Latvian. Her experiences in Morocco also encouraged Vaira to write

her first and only attempt at fiction — the short story “Surprise de Noël” (in French) about terrorist attacks during the Moroccan independence struggle. The story was written when she was 18, just a few years after the article “A land where no one knows Latvia”, and was published in 1956 in “Acta Victoriana”, a literary magazine at Victoria College, University of Toronto. The ability to experience and to feel things deeply, the desire to understand, to evaluate, to express a viewpoint were evident even when the President was a child and a teenager.

II

LIFE IN CANADA AND ACADEMIC CAREER

Vaira Viķe arrived in Canada in the autumn of 1954. For the first six years, she lived in Toronto but then moved to Montreal, where she established an outstanding academic career at the University of Montreal and enjoyed a solid reputation among Canada's academics. She became Vice President of the Canadian Science Council, a body advising the Canadian government on science policy and popularising science among the general public. In 1960, Vaira Viķe married computer scientist Imants Freibergs. Their children, son Kārlis Roberts and daughter Indra Karolīne, were born in Canada in 1963 and 1967, respectively. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs both made a significant contribution to the academic, social and cultural universe of émigré Latvians. In 1998 Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was awarded the title of Professor Emerita at the University of Montreal, the same year she returned to make Latvia her permanent home.

Starting All Over Again

Vaïra Viķe moved to Canada in 1954 when she was sixteen years old. She had already lived in Latvia, Germany and Morocco. Now she faced her third migration, her third continent, her fourth country and fifth language. She already spoke Latvian, German, French and she had been taking Arabic in High-school. In Canada she learned English from her environment and Spanish in University classes. By moving from Morocco to Canada, it becomes evident that Vaira's parents had



With parents at her graduation from the University of Toronto, Canada, 1958

come to accept the idea that they would not be returning to Latvia in the foreseeable future. The first six years of immigration to Canada were difficult, both physically and psychologically. Canada was not to blame, but the President has said that she felt "spiritually amputated" during her first years in the new country, and it took her some time before she adjusted and became fond of it.

As soon as she arrived in Canada, Vaira looked for work so that she could help her parents pay back the money they had borrowed for their passage, and to help the family put food on the table. Even though she only knew some English, she found full-time work as a cashier at a bank in Toronto, while taking English and three other subjects at evening classes. On weekends she worked on her Ontario provincial correspondence courses to finish high school. In the summer of 1955, she took two weeks vacation from her work at the bank and sat for the Grade 13 Ontario High school graduation examinations.

At the age of seventeen, she was accepted at the University of Toronto. For years, after her sister's death in a German refugee camp, Vaira had had the intention to study medicine so that she could fight

disease and save lives. She remembered the thousands of refugees who had died because of the lack of elementary medical care, including her baby sister. At the University of Toronto, after receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in General studies in 1958, Vaira was accepted into the Faculty of Medicine. At the last moment, she changed her mind and decided instead on clinical and experimental psychology. Her intellectual interests were influenced by broadly philosophical questions arising out of her life experiences: what are the causes of violence and conflict? What allows tyrannies to endure? What is the genesis of evil? In what way are the mental diseases of individuals and societies related? How can psychological conflicts be healed? How can the effects of misfortune and suffering be treated? These questions were certainly not answered in her graduate training in experimental psychology, but they led her to maintain an active interest in social consciousness, literature, art and folklore.

In 1958, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Victoria College, University of Toronto. In 1960, she was awarded a Master of Arts degree in psychology from the same university. In 1965, she received a Ph.D. in experimental psychology at McGill University, in Montreal. Vaira did not experience a carefree youth during her student years. She had to work during her studies because she had not attended a Canadian secondary school full-time and was not eligible for any scholarships available to students in the General Arts courses. In 1965, Vaira Viķe became an assistant professor at the University of Montreal, but before that she had worked as a bank teller, a supervisor at the Branksome Hall School for Girls in Toronto, a Spanish language translator at the Confederate Life insurance company, a Spanish language teacher at the private Ontario Ladies' College and a private French tutor for children. During Christmas holidays she worked at the post office, sorting mail. She also spent some time editing and translating manuscripts for a Latvian television journalist into English.¹

Another new factor in Vaira's life in Canada was the existence of a Latvian émigré society, which was both positive and negative. When

¹ Latviešu literatūras darbinieki rietumu pasaulē, *op.cit.*, p. 358.



Vaira Viķe and friend Rūta Kļaviņa in the countryside near Toronto, 1959

she lived in refugee camps in Germany, she had been too young to fully understand émigré society. The five years in Morocco essentially had kept her away from any kind of Latvian society, thus saving her from its inherent psychological collisions. But if the period in Morocco protected her somewhat and even offered some benefits, there were also drawbacks. During her teenage years, Vaira had not had the opportunity to study the Latvian language and to develop skills in this, her native language. She felt that the "old Latvians" in émigré society were tactless in the manner they wished to keep up the standards of the Latvian language. "The older generation expected that young people of my generation would speak fluent Latvian (as if I could have learned it from thin air), and when that was not the case, they expressed their disapproval and dislike vigorously," she observed.²

In the 1950s, three major Latvian centres had established themselves in North America: Toronto, Chicago and New York, each with some 10,000 Latvians. The central organisation of émigré Latvians, the World Federation of Free Latvians was located in Washington, D.C., as was the Latvian embassy, which the United States government recognized even after the Soviet occupation of the country. However, Toronto was often called the "capital of Latvians in exile". The origins of the Latvian colony in Toronto can be traced back to the 1920s. After World War II, the community was swelled very significantly by waves of immigrants arriving mostly between 1948 and 1950. There were some 50 different organizations in this large and well-structured community — associations, congregations, choirs, secular Saturday schools, church-based Sunday schools, Boy Scout and Girl Guide troops, student fraternities and more. The professional activities of Latvians in Toronto were so extensive that a Latvian could receive virtually any service from other Latvians. The guiding principle was "Latvian money for Latvians!"

This ethnic ghetto did its best to keep apart from Canadian society at large. It was a world apart, closed in upon itself, and extremely hard to penetrate to those Latvians who arrived there in later years from other countries. The Hermanovič family, including daughter Vaira, had settled in Toronto, one of the epicentres of economic and cultural life for émigré Latvians. But for the first year in Canada, their only friends were those they had already known from the refugee camps in Germany.

One of the most active hubs of Latvian social life in Toronto was St. Andrew's Church, which was located Downtown. Latvians and Estonians had bought the church in the early 1950s. Like other North American churches, St. Andrew's was a church that not only had space for religious services, but also room for all kinds of other activities — theatrical performances, concerts, Christmas gift markets, Sunday and Saturday schools, Boy Scout and Girl Guide meetings and so on. Some 45 kilometres from Toronto, on an estate with a river flowing through it, the congregation of St. Andrew's owned 27 hectares of land. The property, known as "Sidrabene", had a village of 80 private summer homes, a summer camp for children and teenagers that could house 150, an open-air church, a stage and a variety of sports facilities, including



Brunis and Biruta Rubess congratulate the young couple, 1960

a soccer field³. Large crowds of Latvians gathered at "Sidrabene" to celebrate the traditional Summer Solstice festival of "Jāņi" and for other major events — often as many as 2,500 people. The Latvian Lutheran congregation of St. John's owned a similar place, "Saulaine", near Barrie, Ontario. Vaira Viķe's debut in Latvian society in Canada occurred in 1955, about a year after her arrival. She was confirmed into the Lutheran faith at St. Andrew's Church, along with some twenty other young people.

A turning point in Vaira's professional and personal life occurred in 1960 and 1961, when she began her professional career. First she worked as a clinical psychologist at the Toronto Psychiatric Hospital. Later she moved to Montreal for her doctoral studies at McGill University. In 1965, after the obtaining of her doctorate, the University of Montreal hired her and the future President's entire subsequent academic and scientific career in Canada was closely linked to that university.

On July 16, 1960, Vaira Viķe married Imants Freibergs. The Reverend Arnolds Lūsis, who later became Archbishop of the émigré Latvian Lutheran church, officiated at the ceremony. The new family became Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's foundation in terms of emotional fulfilment and firm support for her creative efforts. Her husband Imants was born on March 12, 1934, in Valmiera, Latvia. Until the age of ten, he lived with his parents in Jelgava and with his grandparents in Rīga. He began his schooling at the Primary school of the Jelgava Pedagogical Institute. Vaira and Imants only met in Toronto, but their lives as refugees have a surprising amount in common; after they left Latvia, their lives followed almost parallel paths. Imants Freibergs and his parents also left Latvia at the end of World War II, in November 1944. Until 1948, they lived in various refugee camps in Germany. Next came six years of life and education in France, where he went to High school in Angers (College Chevrollier) and assimilated the French language and culture, as his future wife had done in Morocco. Imants arrived in Canada in the summer of 1954, the same year as Vaira Viķe did. He too was a student at the University of Toronto, in Engineering physics, and completed a Master's degree in Engineering in 1961. After she married Imants, Vaira realised that her personal life would forever be closely intertwined between her professional activities in science, and her cultural and political activities among Latvians, and that both aspects would overlap.

As she adapted to the new linguistic environment in which she was now living, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga had suspended the literary activity she had begun in her youth. It was only five years later, in 1961, that she began once again to publish in both Latvian and English. The subject matter now dealt with psychology, with her research at the University of Toronto and with the realities of her new life. Her first scientific publication was called "The Effect of Practice on the Utilization of Information from Positive and Negative Instances in Concept Identification" an article published in the Canadian Journal of Psychology in collaboration with the Estonian-born Professor Endel Tulving. In Latvian, she published an article on "Psychological conflict situations in Latvian education in an émigré environment".

Beginning in the early 1970s, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga became more and more active by publishing papers in English language academic



Vaira and Imants
at the Mont Royal park
in Montreal, 1962

and scientific journals. She not only published articles dealing with psychology, but also with linguistics and with the poetics of Latvian folk songs, known as dainas. In these publications, she drew parallels and presented positive reciprocal links between modern psychological concepts and their relationship to the realities of daily life, between modern cultural theories and their application to the study and revitalization of the Latvian cultural heritage, between the demands of the academic environment and the aspirations of a national culture. This was to become the leitmotif for Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga's creative output. In the Latvian émigré cultural magazine "Jaunā Gaita" and in other émigré newspapers and magazines, she became an increasingly regular contributor of articles written in Latvian, although even in the late 1980s she was still admitting that it was by no means easy for her to write in her mother tongue. "I would be lying if I said that expressing myself in Latvian is particularly easy or effortless. At the University we

work in French. I publish articles in English. Both languages are used at the official institutions in Ottawa. It is not easy to express oneself in an equally fluent and persuasive manner in two languages that are stylistically very different, to constantly switch back and forth between them. It is even more difficult to maintain a third language at the same level, even if it is my native tongue. It is risky to write in a language in which one has not received sufficient education as a young person." But Vaira Viķe-Freiberga did take the plunge, and the risk was clearly worth it.

A Log Can't Burn By Itself

There is a Latvian saying that a log cannot burn by itself. By this Latvians imply that when it comes to a quarrel, seldom is only one side at fault. The daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law each have their own version of the truth, as does one neighbour and the other. One of the most active people in Toronto's Latvian society, Brunis Rubess, puts it this way: "You need several items to light a campfire. It's not enough to have logs and kindling. You also need someone who possesses the spiritual light to set others on fire. For us, that person was Vaira."

Brunis Rubess, a member of the advisory council of the Latvian Central Bank at the time of writing, was interviewed in Room 524 of Hotel Riga. This is the room he always takes — with a view of the Latvian National Opera and the Freedom Monument. When I rang him, he was more than happy to talk about Vaira Viķe-Freiberga. "You want me to talk about the times we shared with Vaira and Imants in Canada? Absolutely, any time. I don't really have time ... but wait, why don't you come right over?"

As soon as I closed the door behind me, Rubess wound up an alarm clock and asked me not to be offended. He had to attend a meeting with the top management of the Central bank in a couple of hours' time. In the evening, he was going to a performance of the opera "Salome", in which his grandson Dzintars was taking part. The alarm clock would ring after 45 minutes, he said, and then we would know that the conversation would have to end 15 minutes later. We could then spend the last few minutes going over the main issues.

"I moved from Germany to Canada in the spring of 1953", Brunis Rubess remembers. "In the summer of 1957, we had a youth event at Niagara Falls, and around ten youth activists were present. We decided to organize the first Latvian Youth Festival in Toronto in 1959. I was entrusted with chairing the Organizing committee for the festival, and in order to plan the event properly, we decided to ask all Latvian youth organizations to nominate their representatives for membership on the committee. The Latvian Student Club at the University of Toronto sent a very serious young woman called Vaira Viķe. She took charge of finding prizes for the winners of the various competitions — choir singing, folk dancing, theatre performances, sports events, public speaking (which Vaira Viķe won) and so forth. This was no easy task and required a good deal of imagination and resourcefulness. We had hardly any money to spend for this particular purpose. Another student organization, meanwhile, had sent Imants Freibergs to help us." And the spark was lit.

It took about two years to plan the festival, and the result was phenomenal — around 6,000 young people from Canada and the United States participated. Transatlantic travel at that time was very expensive, but there were even participants from Europe⁵. The main objectives of the first Youth Festival were to heighten the sense of being Latvian amongst Latvian émigrés, and to answer one question: What is good about being a Latvian in emigration? Brunis Rubess thinks that the first Latvian Youth Festival was of great significance to émigré society, and compares it to the first Latvian Song Festival in 1873 at the village of Dikļi in what was then still tsarist Russia, and to the Congress of the Latvian Association of Creative Arts of 1988 in Rīga, where for the first time in the history of Soviet Latvia, a delegate spoke openly of the fact that Latvia had been occupied illegally in 1940 by the Soviet Union, thus marking a seminal turning point for what eventually developed into the Latvian independence movement.

The official slogan for the festival in Toronto was "The Future of Latvia Summons Us!" while the unofficial one was "Let's congregate,

⁴ Rubess B., Ikstena N. "Brīnumainā kārtā" (An amazing turn of events) Rīga, *Nordik*, 1999, p. 190.

have fun, and get married!" (Pulcēsimies, priecāsimies, precēsimies). Rubess remembers that the two slogans appeared to make equally deep impressions on the delegates. During the festival, ideas for major projects were proposed, and a number of strong Latvian families emerged from the organizing committee and amongst the festival participants, including Vaira and Imants Freibergs.

Why did Vaira choose Imants? She doesn't deny that she was quite popular among boys when she was young, and some of them had been ready to swear eternal devotion from the moment they set eyes on her. Imants was different from other admirers; he was more reticent and calm, and also more persistent. This was what won Vaira's respect, her love and her loyalty.

Canada's Latvians could obtain virtually any kind of service from other Latvians. When it came to weddings, limousines had to be found for the trip to the church. Vaira Viķe and Imants Freibergs exchanged their marriage vows at the student chapel of the University of Toronto in July 1960. Brunis Rubess had obtained a limousine from a Mercedes-Benz dealer in Canada and it was perfect for Vaira and Imants' first trip as husband and wife. Brunis was greatly honoured to chauffeur the happy couple around on their wedding day.

Latvian Math: 2x2 and 3x3

One of the ideas that emerged from the first Toronto Latvian Youth Festival in 1959 was that there should be activities every summer dedicated to promoting and maintaining Latvian culture in exile. These events would bring together young people to learn about the basic tenets of Latvian culture and to get acquainted. The premise was that these basic maxims should be as familiar to Latvians as multiplication tables are to primary school students — as simple as 2×2 . This simple comparison generated a decades-long series of camps called 2×2 and 3×3 , the latter of which still being organised in Latvia and abroad. The 2×2 camps were about two weeks long, and they brought together Latvian-Americans and Latvian-Canadians between the ages of 18 and 30 — not just those who lived in major émigré centres, but also those

who lived in communities that were isolated from regular Latvian events. Thus, the camps were of great importance in consolidating the Latvian émigré community and in conserving a Latvian identity among those in exile⁵. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs devoted a great deal of time and effort to the 2 x 2 and 3 x 3 movement, as lecturers, organizers and camp leaders.

The first 2 x 2 camp took place in the summer of 1964 under the leadership of Brunis Rubess. It lasted for a week and could accommodate no more than 100 participants. The first lecturers who tried to instill Latvian youth with enthusiasm for their Latvian heritage were grand old men of émigré Latvian society — Arnolds Spekke, a history professor and Latvia's ambassador to the United States, Vilis Hāzners from the organization of Latvian veterans "Daugavas Vanagi", the Archbishop Arnolds Lūsis, the former council chairman of the Bank of Latvia Ādolfs Klive, the artist and leader of the Latvian pre-Christian religion, known as Dievturi, Arvīds Brastiņš — they were all there⁶.

In 1965, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was invited to speak at the camp as a psychologist and as a representative of the younger generation. Subsequently organizers would arrange for the presence of the most distinguished émigré activists — such as poets, writers, musicians and historians. The participants enjoyed unique opportunities to interact with these 'luminaries', which would not have been possible otherwise in the émigré society. The areas of study available at these retreats included politics, language, literature, music, jewellery making, Latvian cuisine and even "Latvian hanging out" after 10:00 p.m. All had a good time, and many friendships and partnerships for life were formed.

Vaira became involved in this movement from the very beginning, and eventually took on various positions, approaching each task with a great sense of responsibility. She prepared and edited materials about cultural heritage published by the 2 x 2 board. She wrote the introduction to and the bibliography of the 2 x 2 folklore album "Latvju raksti" (Latvian ornamental patterns). Unusually for the émigré period,

⁵ Zariņš V. "Trimdas nākotne un Divreiz divi" (The future of émigré society and 2x2), *Universitas* (34), 1974, p. 47.

⁶ Rubess B., Ikstena N., *op. cit.* p. 216.

⁷ Zariņš V., *op. cit.* p. 48



At a sugar cane plantation in Brazil during a 2 x 2 camp in 1979

the bibliography included materials that had been published in Soviet Latvia, such as "Latviešu etnogrāfija" (Latvian Ethnography), issued by the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Soviet Latvia, and three volumes of "Latviešu tautas māksla" (The Folk Art of the Latvians), edited by Mārgers Stepermanis. She published summaries of her own lectures on "Latvian folk songs" and "Latvian folk tales", among others. In her introduction to "Latvju raksti", Vaira addressed the basic rules of aesthetics that help to understand Latvians' taste and their sense of beauty, emphasizing the particular significance of folk costumes in Latvian ethnography. "For various reasons they contain the greatest wealth of information about the unwritten aesthetic canons of Latvians. The costumes from different regions provide a wide variety of examples of form and colour composition. The fundamental characteristics of Latvian ornamentation were taken from these examples. And that's



At the 2 x 2 camp in Quebec, Canada. Front row, from the left: daughter Indra Freiberga, Jānis Trapāns, Solveiga Miezite, Lalita Muižniece and Vaira Vilke-Freiberga, 1979

not all. The rules of wearing costumes, their geographical dispersion, historical changes and other factors provide us with an endless stream of information about the Latvian people in the psychological, sociological and even economic sense." At the beginning of the Latvian national renaissance, as the period immediately preceding the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991 is known, people in Latvia were surprised and delighted that émigré Latvians had been preparing folk costumes that were ethnographically correct and had obviously been sewn with great care and love. The lectures that were taught at 2 x 2 camps on the aesthetics of folk costumes and on their creation contributed significantly to this outcome.

The 3 x 3 camps were created later, and catered to whole families rather than just young individuals. Under the leadership of Līga Ruperte from the USA, they became immensely successful and continue to be held every year, in Latvia as well as in other countries. At 3 x 3 camps, as was the case at 2 x 2 events, intellectual activities were largely

based on the work of émigré academic circles and Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs were also among those who regularly participated by leading study groups in folklore, literature and personal growth.

The Global Sorority Spīdolas

Any émigré could incorporate Latvian into his or her daily life and have Latvian friends, regardless of profession, age or gender. At the same time, however, a number of organizations were formed with the goal of promoting academic life and work amongst the émigré community. Student fraternities and sororities known as korporācijas were particularly significant.

In most cases these Latvian student organizations date back to pre-war times, some going back to the period before World War I. By the end of the 1940s, several had renewed their activities in exile, but other new ones were founded, the women's sorority Spīdola among them. Its origins date from 1947 in Pinneberg, Germany. In honour of Spīdola's 50th anniversary, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga noted in her keynote address that the sorority emerged "from the ruins of post-war Germany, in the cold of hunger and poverty, out of refugee girls' thirst for knowledge and the yearning for a Latvian environment".

We must make particular note of the name Spīdola. This choice shows a certain amount of daring, because Spīdola is a major character in the epic drama "Fire and Night" written by the Latvian nationalist poet Rainis where he describes Spīdola's spiritual power and beauty.

This keynote address by Vaira Viķe-Freiberga could be considered as typical of the innumerable speeches and lectures she has given at various Latvian public events, but it can also be seen as a testament to her deep sense of belonging to her sorority Spīdola. Vaira joined Spīdola quite soon after she arrived in Canada, earning the organization's trust as she fulfilled assigned tasks with enthusiasm. One would be hard pressed to find any major sorority event where the future President of Latvia did not take part. At the sorority's 20th anniversary celebration,



Vaira (L) and her friend Ausma, Canada, 1959, wearing the symbolic sashes of their student sorority

she delivered the academic address on "The Psychology of Women". At the 30th anniversary celebration, she delivered another keynote academic address — "Symbols of enlightenment in Latvian folklore and literature".

A student sorority is a closed organization with its own internal discipline and hierarchy. I asked the President how she could accept these stringent rules, she herself being an open-minded, nonjudgmental person. She paused, and then reminded me that student organizations had a particular mission to perform in the émigré community. No system can exist in isolation, without the free will and participation of those involved in it. Everything, or nearly everything that happens or does not happen in a fraternity or sorority depends on the wishes and understanding of its members. These academic bodies first and foremost focus on the discipline of the mind, the activity of the spirit, the encouragement to focus on academic achievement and in the love of one's native land, the encouragement to develop the best in yourself and to share it with others.

At the celebration
of the 20th
anniversary of
Spīdola in Toronto,
1967



The President spoke about the special role of the sorority, emphasizing the importance not just of the academic, but also the purely feminine environment to the development of a young woman's character: "The sororities create an environment which promotes solidarity amongst women of various ages. A young student finds role models to follow — successful and educated predecessors, many more than could ever be found among one's own family members, friends or acquaintances. In a sorority, a woman builds her own self-respect through her respect for the other members."

As a very young member of Spīdola, Vaira Viķe remembers a fund-raising dance organised jointly by all Latvian sororities, at which invited gentlemen were to be present. The dress she usually wore to sorority meetings was a regulation black dress that had seen better days. It was clearly inappropriate for a dance. The only party dress she had, however, was bright red. In violation of sorority traditions, Vaira dared show up at the event in this red dress, rather than her worn-out black knit. She was promptly asked to leave by request of the ladies from the oldest

Latvian sorority, Daugaviete,— this despite her being accompanied by a young man from the Latvia fraternity (one Imants Freibergs) for whom she had already bought the tickets. Her sorority sister Astra Roze saved the day by rushing home and lending Vaira an “old” black dress that was more appropriate for this occasion.

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is one of the Spīdolas from the West who has taken care that women from academic circles in Latvia also join and become involved with the sorority. In the summer of 1991, a number of Latvian scientists from around the world gathered in what was still Soviet Latvia for the first Global Congress of Latvian Scientists. Vaira and her sorority sisters from abroad used the occasion to meet with influential women academics in Latvia and to found the first chapter of Spīdola in Latvia.

The President resembles Rainis' character Spīdola in her flexibility, her many different modes of expression, her sense of style and her awareness, her belief in joy and harmony, her praise of the communal, stressing friendship and compatibility regardless of any seeming dis-harmony. Her address at Spīdola's golden anniversary confirms that even though she is a scientist and an intellectual, she is also a superb orator, genuine and persuasive. She emphasized the richness of friendship between sorority sisters and the need for self-development and change.

Viķe-Freiberga is also known for a number of addresses delivered at various Latvian Song Festivals to the followers of Dievturi, a revival of the ancient Latvian belief system. These and most of her Latvian language speeches and articles draw heavily from the world of the Latvian folk songs dainas. The interpretation of recorded texts from this oral tradition has elicited many controversies over the past two centuries. There has been much debate about the relative contribution of Christian and pre-Christian elements in Latvian mythology and traditions. In her own studies of the dainas Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has steadfastly rejected any sectarian interpretations of this tradition, concentrating instead on its poetics and aesthetics, or again on its socio-psychological aspects. She believes that the positive centripetal forces of the Sun Symbol, itself incorporating and attesting to the existence of the Great Creator and the harmony of the All, are all-powerful.

Positions, Degrees, Titles — And The Honour Of Presidency

However emotionally satisfying her activities within Latvian exile society may have been, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's real job, and the most important one during her life in Canada, was her work at the University of Montreal. She started there, as an assistant professor in 1965, and by 1979 she had become a full professor of psychology. Over the years, she has published many papers on experimental psychology in English and in French, some in psycholinguistics, others on the effects of drugs on cognitive processes. The authority which she possessed among Canadian psychologists was obvious when in 1980 she was elected President of the Canadian Psychological Association. At the end of her professorial career at the University of Montreal, she had written manuscripts in French: "Introduction to Psychopharmacology" and "Introduction to Psycholinguistics", which were being prepared for publication. Both projects had to be abandoned as she took up the challenge of returning to Latvia in 1998.

In the mid-1970s, Viķe-Freiberga served on the board of the Canadian Psychological Association, as well as on Committees of the Canadian National Research Council. In the spring of 1979, she was elected President of the Canadian Social Sciences Federation. In line with the Federation's internal regulations, she took over the post in the spring of 1980. With outstanding success, she ran two major national organizations simultaneously. Over the course of the preceding 40 years, she was only the third woman to serve as the leader of these organizations. The Canadian Social Sciences Federation is a broadly based umbrella organization, which unites representatives from various research institutes and societies — psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, lawyers, political scientists and representatives of other sectors. Its main duty is to coordinate the development of these scientific sectors in Canada, maintaining links with the government, the research world and the public, supporting popular scientific activities and encouraging researchers not to isolate themselves in a world of issues only they understand. Instead, says the council, academics must learn to translate their research into language that can be understood by the layman,

thus making their results more accessible. Another goal of the Canadian Social Sciences Federation is to work with the Humanities Federation in administering government financial aid for academic publications.⁸

Between 1984 and 1989, she was the Vice President of the Canadian Science Council — a salaried position to which she was appointed by the Prime Minister's Office of Canada. This post offered her many opportunities to travel all across Canada, which made her aware of how much she had become attached to this big country.

As a psychology professor at the University of Montreal, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga built bridges between the Canadian government, the academic world and the general public. She also represented Canada's interests at the international level, serving as Canada's representative and later chairperson of the Human Factors panel of the NATO scientific programme in Brussels. That was the first time in the then twenty-year history of the NATO Science Program that a woman had chaired any of the alliance's special commissions.⁹

Viķe-Freiberga's distinguished career and her prominence in Canada also increased her authority among émigré Latvians. This is particularly true within the Latvian academic environment, which formed the core of the Baltic academic world in the West. Academic cooperation among émigrés of the three Baltic nations is worthy of attention because in many aspects it was more extensive and effective than academic cooperation among scientists in the Soviet Baltic republics. In 1968, the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS) was founded in New York, and in the same year it launched its periodical, the *Journal of Baltic Studies*. Initially the AABS had 150 members, but by the early 1970s the membership had expanded to 700 scholars worldwide and the number of members has continued to grow. The AABS collaborates with prominent universities in North America to organize biannual interdisciplinary conferences. The working language there is usually English or German and, since the 1980s, researchers from Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania have taken part regularly.

⁸ *Universitas* — 1981, (47), p. 62.

⁹ Roze A. "The Psychologist Vaira Viķe-Freiberga", *Universitas* — 1980, (77), pp.77-8.



Jac. Guy
Montreal

An official portrait from the University of Montreal — the young Ph. D. in psychology,
Vaira Viķe-Freiberga



After an AABS conference with the Baltic philologists Maija Baltiņa, Daina Nitiņa and Lilita Kadaša, Canada, 1992

Between 1982 and 1988, Viķe-Freiberga was a member of the AABS board, and between 1984 and 1986 she served as its President. She was the editor of folklore and literature for the *Journal of Baltic Studies*, where many of her articles on Latvian literature, folklore and identity were published.

One of the most difficult but also most appealing aspects of scientific research is the attendance at international scientific conferences and forums where a researcher meets peers from around the world and, simultaneously, learns about the nature, life and culture of other countries. Through such opportunities Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs were able to establish a worldwide network of friendships in addition to professional contacts. They have had the chance to visit major museums in many countries. They have travelled far beyond Europe and the Americas, always keen to learn about other cultures, with a particular interest in folk art and archaeology.

Among Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's many journeys, two particularly stand out — both visits to Australia. She rang in the New Year of 1980

by addressing Latvian communities in a number of Australian cities. This trip was followed by a joint expedition with her husband to Australia and New Zealand in 1988 during which they lectured at local universities as well as Latvian communities in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Canberra, Brisbane, in Australia, and Auckland, Hamilton, Christchurch and Wellington in New Zealand.

Approaches To Research, The Dainas, And Émigré Society

When Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was being considered as a candidate for the Latvian presidency and when people talk about her remarkable personality today, they often stress that she comes from academic circles. This background automatically carries with it a doctoral level of education, years of teaching and mountains of publications both read and written. When we hear the words "scientist" and "professor" we also have certain images about their appearance and behaviour. The stereotypical professor has thick glasses, does not care about his appearance, is able to think only when forced to, has a narrow field of specialisation and uses that fact as an excuse for not being interested in anything outside his own field. In other words, the professor is out of touch with reality. When it comes to scientists — we usually think of a man.

Professor Viķe-Freiberga has written about the role and the responsibility of the scientist to society and indeed to the whole human race. She has also mocked some of the popular stereotypes about scientists, such as the Walt Disney character — the Absent-Minded Professor. "For years he has tortured himself with unsuccessful experiments, until the day comes when a small child or even a tame monkey throws some chemicals into a test tube and — Boom! — the long-sought-after miracle cure is discovered." She concludes that this caricature arises from the fear and uncertainty that people feel when faced with a keen intellect or excessively-specialised knowledge. For shortsighted politicians, this image of a scientist is very convenient to justify under-funding, allowing them to claim that the general public is indifferent to science and its development.

Another nearly universal stereotype is the Mad Scientist — “the evil genius whose insatiable yearning to rule nature has led him to such outrageous arrogance and a desire for power that culminate in the paranoid need to become lord and master of humanity and the entire universe,” according to Professor Vīķe-Freiberga. She reminds us that the stereotypes encoded in an individual's daily consciousness are a sort of contemporary folklore. The image of a female scientist is uncommon; it has only really emerged recently. Instead, female scientists are often depicted in the mass media as being “a slavishly devoted laboratory assistant who sees her boss, the male scientist, as God, and is forever gazing at him adoringly”. If a woman has achieved a certain amount of authority in the sciences, then she is depicted “either as ugly or cold and unpleasant, or both”.

In her own person, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga as a professor and a researcher offers a bold challenge to this negative stereotype of the female scientist. She is attractive, distinctly sociable in her temperament, and links to the real world have always been of great concern to her. She stresses that specialization in one field should not deter a scientist from taking an interest and assuming responsibility for life in the world around her: “It is all well and good if people understand the limits of their competence and do not meddle in matters of which they know nothing, but excessively narrow specialization reduces one's interests and responsibility to overly narrow parameters — such specialization is nothing more than a disguise for weakness and a lack of responsibility.”

She has published a book addressing émigré psychology and issues of Latvian identity, called “*Pret straumi*” (Against the Current, published in Canada in 1993 and in Latvia in 1995). The book is lovingly devoted to “my son Kārlis and the convictions that led him, born in Canada, to work and to live in Latvia”. The book contains speeches and articles about Latvian issues written between 1968 and 1991, which bring out a fundamentally important dimension in the President's life history — a bright personality organically steeped in traditional Latvian culture, yet also a challenging personality, an émigré forced to leave Latvia as a result of World War II.

“Against the Current” is divided into three chapters: “For the Fatherland: Variations on the Subject of Being Latvian” — here the author addresses the psychology of émigré society, Latvian identity in exile, young people and society; “For Freedom: Variations on the Theme of November 18” — speeches which the future President of Latvia delivered on various continents on November 18, anniversary of Latvia's independence day, in 1968, 1977, 1978 and 1988; and “For the Future: Opening Speeches and Addresses” — the opening and closing speeches at several major exile Latvian cultural events and Song festivals. The book evolves as an intense dialogue with the more active elements of society. Many of the ideas contained in it resonated powerfully in émigré Latvian society and were often controversial.

In her introduction to “Against the Current”, Professor Viķe-Freiberga thanks all those who supported her in many different ways over the course of the years, adding: “To be honest, I must also thank all those who were not my friends, who stimulated my intellect and recharged me emotionally with their opposition. That was probably not their intention, but their actions helped me. I was not allowed to sink into the misguided self-satisfaction or drowsiness which can afflict you if life becomes too easy.” She stresses that her attitudes toward the Latvian cultural heritage and the realities of life, her thinking and ability to judge were shaped by “the governing intellectual traditions of universities in the West — an analytical and critical approach to the issue being considered, the demand that one actively consider and evaluate things oneself and come to one's own conclusion rather than accept without question only those things the authorities have deemed acceptable.”

She makes a strong distinction between the concepts of “national conviction” and “authoritarian thinking”. This reminds us that national positivism under the rule of Kārlis Ulmanis, one of the most prominent political figures during Latvia's first independence and the man who served as a relatively benevolent dictator from 1934 until the Soviet occupation, manifested itself in a fairly narrow and authoritarian manner. The consequences of this period can be felt strongly in the ideology of émigré Latvians. When it comes to the ability of Latvians to maintain their existential and cultural identity today, Vaira

Vilke-Freiberga says that the main factor is freedom both in one's consciousness and in one's creativity. We must provide comprehensive educational opportunities for everyone in Latvia, regardless of their wealth or poverty. She has stressed that Latvians must do everything possible to increase "the critical mass of our common spiritual strength", the only guarantee of survival for the Latvians as a nation. Like all her works, "Against the Current", in spite of its critical approach, leaves one with a sense of affirmation. It demonstrates a clear conviction that "life always offers us a choice: to yield to negative and non-adaptive trends that eventually cause a nation to wither away, or to follow the positive and creative trends of growth so that we can improve and flourish."

All ideologies are tested when they confront reality. Between the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Soviet Union, one of the realities that caused a great deal of discomfort for the leading ideologues among émigré Latvians, and that caused arguments between them and those émigré Latvians who were more open-minded, was the existence of Soviet Latvia and its citizens. Passions on the subject of what it means to be a Latvian were particularly inflamed by the émigré literary magazine "*Jaunā Gaita*". As early as the 1960s, its editors demonstrated a serious interest in literary and cultural events in Soviet Latvia. The work of contemporary Soviet Latvian authors, especially poets, was published regularly, and reviewed. Vaira Vilke-Freiberga published her provocative ideas about being a Latvian in the magazine. In the introduction to "Against the Current" she wrote that the long-time editor of "*Jaunā Gaita*", Laimonis Zandbergs, was most directly responsible for her starting to write and publish her speeches. One of the magazine's slogans translates as: "Don't be a sheep, get yourself a '*Jaunā Gaita*'", and this makes it clear that people who bought and read the magazine were open-minded. The title translates as "the new path", and the magazine was a litmus test for those with positive or negative views of the new path that some émigré Latvians were taking. Vilke-Freiberga was one of the most courageous and intellectually rigorous followers of this new path.

She also began to study Latvian folk songs because she was stimulated by issues of Latvian cultural identity and the self-confidence of

Latvians as a nation. Human beings are interested in things that affect them. How could children born in emigration be interested by the ancient folklore of a distant country? This was the challenge she faced as she was giving lectures on identity and folklore at the 2 x 2 camps. At first glance, the world of Latvian folk songs — literally millions of folk songs, most of them quatrains, collectively known as dainas — seems an archaic one that will not mean much to a young person who has grown up in the modern world. As a researcher, she took a fresh look at the world of the dainas, going beyond the concrete details that once were characteristic of rural Latvian life. She looked at the more universal and humanitarian principles expressed in them, at the manner in which the singers used their art to give sense and meaning to their lives.

Asked when she first began to understand the magical power of poetry, Vaira said that it was “in early childhood, I think. It came from the words, which my mother, my aunt and my grandmother spoke and sang. [...] There were many musically gifted people in my mother's family; they were good singers and orators. My mother had a lovely mezzo-soprano voice, she not only sang beautifully, but also played the violin. Her brother played several instruments too, though he had never really studied music. [...] I guess that the beauty of language, the fluidity of the spoken word, were things I took in with my mother's milk. For a very long time now I have felt a sense of obligation to continue this oral tradition. [...] I have often thought that the poverty I experienced in my childhood was actually my wealth.”

The information found in the dainas and their poetry, inspired Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and her husband, Imants, to reveal to Canadian academic circles that Latvian dainas are unique and worthy of research by specialists in the humanities and the social sciences, and worthy, too, of financial support. The results of their efforts have benefited scholarship on oral literature in the largest sense of the word.

The legendary collector of folksongs, Krišjānis Barons, began working with the thousands of dainas known today in the middle of the 19th century. His method of systematizing the song texts is quite astonishing in scientific and practical terms. Barons classified the dainas according to their keywords and concepts, as well as the context in which they were sung and recited throughout the centuries. Barons classified song texts according to the cycle of the seasons and the cycle

of family celebrations: birth, Christening, wedding, funeral, as well as various types of agricultural activities (cattle herding, ploughing, sowing, harvesting, etc.). But these texts could be classified in other ways as well, and this is what Vaira and Imants Freibergs did in their computer-accessible corpus of over 4000 Latvian folk songs about the sun.

On September 22, 1988, the Writer's Union of then still Soviet Latvia took the daring step of organising a book-launching soirée for a book published in Canada by two émigré authors, the seminal study "Saules dainas" (Sun-songs), by Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs. In her presentation of the book, poet Māra Zālīte took up the theme of orphan-hood in the "Sun-songs". To compensate the sense of orphan-hood, the Latvian turns to one of the more than 60 venerable Mothers created by Latvian mythology, one of which is the Sun. "The Latvian seeks help from the sun, not from his fellow man," said Zālīte. "He seeks abstraction, not concreteness. The Latvian loves the abstract. The Latvian loves his nation (an abstraction) but not his neighbour (concreteness). He loves freedom and truth (abstractions), but all his problems begin when these concepts become concrete". The poet stressed that in contrast to the feelings of "child-like orphans" which Latvians experience because of their long years of oppression, the appearance of "Sun-songs" could be seen as "affirmation of the spiritual maturity of our people, that our nation has attained adulthood (and is still maturing)". Zālīte also expressed the conviction that the publication of "Sun-songs" introduced a new era in the contemporary study of Latvian folklore.

The "Sun-songs" (Saules dainas) and the subsequent publication of three volumes of "The Threefold Sun" (Trejādas saules) were all based on the Sun-song corpus, where Vaira Viķe-Freiberga explored the motif of the sun in all its diversity of context and meaning, both concrete manifestations and philosophical generalisations.

Even as they were working on the Sun-song corpus, the Freibergs team also laid the groundwork of a bigger long term project, namely the transcription of the whole daina corpus into computer-readable form. The practical aspects, the reasoning behind computerising the daina texts and the history of the project have been described by

Imants Freibergs, who was a professor of informatics at the University of Quebec in Montreal before moving to Latvia. His first attempts at computerising the dainas were made in March 1966. The aim was to convert the dainas to modern technologies, feeding the texts of the quatrains and longer songs from the printed page into electronic memory, thereby making the song collections accessible to computers for selecting songs containing representative keywords. With the support of the Canadian Research Council, Imants Freibergs began the dainas project in a laboratory at McGill University in Montreal in 1967. The work continued at Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's laboratory at the University of Montreal with further financial support from the Canadian Research Council. She received a special grant from the Canadian Cultural Council allowing her to concentrate on her work on the "Sun-songs" while on sabbatical leave in Montpellier, France.

By presenting the results of their research at scientific conferences in Europe and the Americas, Imants Freibergs and Vaira Viķe-Freiberga have managed to attract the attention and involvement of other specialists in Baltic studies and information technologies. In 1974, Imants spoke at a Latvian folklore seminar at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo where he met Valdis Bērziņš, a doctoral student in Computer science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Bērziņš looked at what the Freibergs couple had done, recognized its significance and potential, and launched a dainas project in his hometown of Boston. In attendance at the seminar was also a doctoral student from Australia, Baiba Kangere, and at the initiative of Velta Rūķe-Draviņa, the head of the Baltic Languages Department at Stockholm University, their paths would soon cross again. In the summer of 1975, at the 3rd Baltic Studies Conference in Stockholm, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga presented a lecture on the first compilation of "Sun-songs". She spoke about new methodological opportunities in the semantic analysis of the words "balts" (white) and "bāls" (pale) within the Sun-songs. A year later she was back at Stockholm University as a guest lecturer, delivering a series of lectures on her research.

These new initiatives and breakthroughs in daina research thus spread rapidly in the 1970s. "Our long term goal is to introduce

the Western world to the existence and the value of the dainas. This cannot be achieved directly through translations because even the best translation cannot fully render the intricate poetic language of the dainas. If, however, they were to be used as a point of entry for exciting research using modern methods in various areas of specialisation, then people in scholarly circles would gradually become acquainted with the existence and value of this corpus of oral literature” Imants Freibergs wrote. “In addition, as an information scientist, I was interested in the information processing problems involving the massive amounts of text.” Freibergs was writing in 1985 about the achievements to date in the computerisation of the dainas and about next stage projects.

Over the years, the Freibergs team kept receiving increasingly substantial research grants from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This continuing support was due to their ability to submit interesting and well-presented projects, as well as to the steady stream of publications arising out of their research. The authors reached out to an ever widening audience: in addition to participating in psychological congresses and annual meetings of scholarly organisations, and the area studies audience of Baltic studies, they also became contributors to congresses of anthropologists and started participating regularly at meetings of the International Ballad Conferences.

When “Saules dainas” was first published in book form, the Sun-songs became accessible to non-academic readers as well as to non-Latvian specialists. Indeed, requests for the book were received from as far away as Japan. The first reviews of the book showed a mixed reception by Latvian folklore specialists in the West. In some sense, the very complaints from some academic circles about the book's very unconventional approach just underscored to what extent the “Sun-songs” marked a new phase in the study of Latvian folklore, especially in their methodology of classifying and presenting texts. While not denying the advantages of computer technologies as useful tools for researchers at some time in the future, sceptics felt it necessary to point out that even the smartest computers do not think for themselves, at least for now. The Stockholm University linguist, professor Velta Rūķe-Draviņa was somewhat disappointed in the work. She emphasized that any researcher



With the future Latvian culture minister, Ramona Umblīja, 1989

approaching the dainas could not hope to manage without extensive professional knowledge in Latvian linguistics, paleolinguistics and dialectology. She felt that the decision to spell the name of the mythological Sun with a capital was questionable, since it amounted to tampering with the spelling of the great Barons himself, in some cases. She also noted, quite correctly, that the authors had not had the benefit of a sufficiently professional Latvian language proofreader for the text of their scholarly introduction to the volume. She objected to the authors seeming to presume that all song texts were at some time sung (rather than just recited) and explained that as due to the fact that the researchers were not close enough to folklore and the living language of the ancient Latvian people.

Debate in the wake of the publication of any academic work is to be expected. However, speaking of the essence and language of the dainas, we must remember that even the texts recorded by Barons himself cannot be considered to be completely accurate. As for researchers lacking direct contact with folklore and the living language of the time, of course the distance between the present and Barons' world is greater

with each generation. Nevertheless, revision of the dainas cannot eradicate the inherent truths about every aspect of a person's life, from cradle to grave.

Barons had devoted his whole life to collecting and organizing the dainas. Without a doubt, his work has greatly inspired the Freibergs' achievements in the field of folklore. An international symposium organized by Vaira Viķe-Freiberga on the great man's work was held at the University of Montreal in 1984, in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Barons' birth. Here in an address, she emphasized the scholarly importance of Barons' work. She said, "it would be hard to find any collection of folklore anywhere in the world containing as much information as Barons' 'Latvju dainas'. The system that Barons developed was a marvel of logic, lucidity and coherence. The ingenious solution he devised for presenting masses of related and partly similar texts has never been equalled for sheer efficiency in presenting staggering amounts of information in a clear concise, and incredibly economic way on the printed page."

The University if Wisconsin linguist Valdis Zeps on the other hand, hails the publication of the "Sun-songs" as an outstanding achievement in the study of Latvian folklore, as well as offering a balanced evaluation of the pluses and minuses of one or another manner of dealing with certain technicalities of text transcription and classification.

A researcher can use various methods to uncover and interpret the content of a text. In order to reveal the dainas' full content, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has mastered the logical and poetic structures of the dainas to the finest nuance and, through her interpretation, brings the splendour, diversity and intimacy of the daina world to life. She brings a remarkable contemporary reality to her interpretation of the dainas, going beyond the Latvian milieu and social mores. In the chapter on "Rain words" in "The Threefold Sun", for example, she wonders if, in most cases, storms in the Latvian province of Vidzeme really do move from east to west, as stated in the dainas, because in Quebec she had experienced quite the opposite — storms usually came from the west and moved east.

In order to better understand the ancient Latvian Sun-myth, she has invested a lot of work and effort into clarifying the other aspects of the sun in Latvian folklore. To date, she has published three volumes in Latvian that present a detailed analysis of themes and motifs linked to the Cosmological Sun, the Chronological Sun, or sun as heavenly time-piece and the Meteorological Sun. It is only after the end of her second four-year term as President of Latvia that she will be able to complete this major project with a planned volume on the Mythological Sun. Professor Vīķe-Freiberga had to carve out her own unique field of academic research in using an interdisciplinary approach that cuts across a wide range of traditional academic disciplines. She has never hidden that this has not been easy. She has never been known to hold back or to spare herself — one task followed another and many overlapped. Her obligations to her family and her children, of course, demanded time and attention as well. After their son Kārlis and daughter Indra were born, Vaira and Imants both held very responsible University positions, and were also engaged in serious research projects.

Imants explained that they had employed nannies to mind the children. The first one was Mrs. Freimanis, a Latvian woman, who was hired so as to allow the children to learn Latvian as their first tongue. Later, however, they were happy to have a young woman called Brenda Alexander come into the family. She had arrived in Canada from Trinidad for the World's Fair in Montreal in 1967, but stayed on in order to pursue a career as a dancer. Because dancers usually work in the evening, she could mind the children while the mother herself was at the university.

The pace of Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga's life and the diversity of her activities are hinted at in a thumb-nail sketch by the Latvian-Canadian writer and artist T. Kīķauka in the early 1980s: "We are in Montreal. It is the dead of winter. It is morning and Vaira races down the stairs. In a few moments her children find out what they're going to have for lunch because Vaira is in a hurry. There is a class of students waiting for her at the University of Montreal. [...] Now it is evening and we are sitting at a table in a restaurant at the top of Place Ville Marie with Montreal below us. Vaira is wearing a black velvet dress, and it is very

cold outside, only -32°C (-25°F). We have red wine in our glasses, and outside the chimneys are belching clouds of white smoke into the air. Around us people are speaking French, English and Latvian. It strikes me that Vaira is living several different lives at once.”¹⁰

Several lives... Vaira and Imants both say they believe in reincarnation. I respond that I don't know much about that theory, but that I believe in the immortality of the soul and the spirit and that thoughts and feelings protect us — those which unite us with our loved ones in our daily life, and those which live in literature and art. Imants adds that this is more or less the same thing.

Aeroflot — Destination Montreal

Now that many different airlines land in Rīga, and dozens of flights take off from the city's international airport daily, and business trips abroad are not that unusual for many Latvians, it is hard to remember when a trip outside the U.S.S.R. was an extraordinary event. The route to the West always began in the opposite direction — first one had to fly east to Moscow and then fly back across Latvia. “Prophylactic measures” were taken upon leaving Soviet Latvia, followed by three days of prophylactic measures in Moscow, and you needed written proof of your reliability — references of “political trustworthiness”, “moral reliability” and more. Then you were given a little foreign currency so that you could pay for more than one or two visits to a public lavatory. This was absolutely beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. Even if you had saved up your own money, you were not allowed to take it with you. The exchange rate for the Soviet rouble was ridiculously high against the American dollar, as much as 6 to 1. Soviet institutions were not wasteful. If a Soviet wanted to travel abroad, the hosts could pick up the bill.

¹⁰ Kīkauka T. “Iepazīsimies ar JG redaktoriem” (Let's meet the *Jaunā Gaita* editors), *Jaunā Gaita*, No. 133, 1981, p. 48.



With guests from Soviet Latvia Valdis Muktupāvels (r) and Edgars Liepiņš
at a Japanese restaurant in Montreal, 1989

When Soviet Latvians began to travel abroad to visit relatives or to travel with the nobler goal of forging cultural ties with their fellow Latvians in emigration, a new chapter in the history of the Latvian people began. This has been documented frequently to both dramatic and comic effect. The Freibergs' home in Montreal was a stopping point for many visitors from Soviet Latvia in the years before Latvia's renewed independence. Imants Freibergs reminds us that Soviet flights always stopped in Montreal and went no further west. To reach the United States or some other Canadian city, one had to change planes. Montreal was the final destination for Aeroflot, and became something of a filter. The Freibergs are nostalgic about the visits that writers, artists, folklorists, musicians and actors from Soviet Latvia paid to their home in Canada. They prefer not to discuss the practical chores of these visits — picking up people at the airport, chauffeuring them around, feeding them, accompanying them, putting them up in hotels or providing a bed for them at their own home, helping the Soviet Latvians grapple with escalators, automatic doors and other, to them

unfamiliar conveniences. "Let's just say that our home in Montreal was 'Hotel Latvia' for a number of years," observes Vaira.

She does, however, like to reminisce about some of the more curious episodes experienced during these visits. When the composer and pianist Raimonds Pauls and the actor and singer Imants Skrastiņš visited Canada and the United States in the autumn of 1981, Vaira and Imants helped to organize some of their activities. As hosts, they actively participated in each event, from managing a recital to consulting on shopping excursions. "Skrastiņš mesmerized the audiences in Canada, and over the course of a few days he achieved miracles. The halls were literally overflowing with crowds at his concerts," says Vaira. "In order to hear Pauls and Skrastiņš one more time, we both went with them to New York, and I can relate to you an anecdote from my 'illustrious career' as a shopping consultant. Like most visitors, our new friends clearly needed to buy gifts to bring back home. In New York, Raimonds Pauls announced that he would like to buy snakeskin shoes for his wife. We found the store, we even found the snakeskin shoes, and then I asked about his wife's foot size. Raimonds Pauls didn't have a clue. "She's about the same size as that saleslady over there," he said, pointing. Very helpful!"

"I've Shed Three Tears Of Which I Am Not Ashamed"

I asked the popular actor and singer Imants Skrastiņš to tell me something about the hospitality and kindness of the Freibergs' household back in the days when a Soviet citizen landing on Western shores felt like an alien adrift and utterly lost in the universe. The essay is called "Three tears I've shed of which I am not ashamed", and it was written on behalf of many Soviet Latvian travellers when the Iron Curtain still held.

"To our dear friends Imants and Rita, with love from Canada, Vaira and Imants." That is the inscription in the copy of "Sun-songs" on my bookshelf. I don't mention this dedicace intending to brag that famous people consider me their friend. Rather I mention it so that I can get to the story of the three tears. There's no sense in pretending, though — I'm proud that such honest, just, wise and sincere people consider me their friend.



With the actor and singer Imants Skrastiņš in New York, 1981

"Every friendship has a beginning. It was September 1981 in Moscow. Two Latvians, neither of them Communists, neither of them alcoholics (foreigners might find this suspect), spent three days being 'prepared' for a trip to visit their compatriots in Canada and the United States. On the fourth day, when the wisdom of the whole thing was becoming doubtful, these two Soviet Latvians did manage to board the plane after all. After eleven hours of chasing the sun, they landed at the airport in Montreal. I remember that afternoon of September 22nd as if it were yesterday. A lovely woman extended her hand to me. I took it. I saw the kindness in her eyes, and she said simply — 'Vaira'.

"I was extremely excited, of course, to be in a capitalist country for the first time in my life, and here I was, shaking hands with an émigré Latvian. Then the gentleman standing next to her grabbed me around the shoulders and said: "My name is also Imants." I felt as if an invisible wall had collapsed, and despite all the horror stories I had heard in Moscow, I knew that I could step across the threshold of this house without any fear. I had no idea who Vaira Viķe-Freiberga or Imants Freibergs were at that time.

"We drove through forests of maple trees with leaves the colour of red fire engines. We passed limousines, an absolute miracle to those who were under the impression that the 'Volga' is the most sophisticated car in the world. I was dumbstruck. I'm glad that my colleague from Rīga was, and is, a non-judgmental man. He always speaks his mind and on that trip he couldn't help exclaiming from time to time: 'Oh, wow — just look at those cars!'

"I don't remember what our new acquaintances were telling us on the way home because we were too busy staring at everything. I don't think it's difficult to understand what Montreal meant to a Latvian who had just arrived from the Soviet Union in 1981.

"My colleague was one of the most famous musicians in Latvia and his name and his songs were widely known and popular even in other countries, but I was a complete unknown. The only plus for me was that I was not a card-carrying Communist. Given that fact I am now surprised that we were allowed to travel at all with the kind of musical program we were presenting. I suppose I can thank my musician friend Raimonds Pauls for that. The head censors in Moscow didn't understand anything anyway.

"The first concert took place the following evening, and Vaira and Imants had organized it. Clearly, there was tension on both sides. We were nervous about how we would be received. They were worried that the event might be used for propaganda purposes, either by Soviet propaganda on our part, or by protests from hard-line anti-Soviet émigrés. We were delicately warned that the audience might be sparse because there are not all that many Latvians in Montreal. But lots of people turned up — a great many people. That really lifted our spirits and gave us a high.

"Then the fateful moment was upon us. The lights went out in the hall and Pauls started to play a song called 'The High Hills behind the Lake' in his inimitable style. I couldn't wait for the moment when I would be able to sing freely, to free Latvians in the free world for the first time:

*There are four and a half billion people
In the world!
Of them a million and a half are Latvians —
Just a million and a half.*

*That's like a drop and a half in the sea.
What can a drop and a half sing about the Sun?
And still,
In the world
There is a land called Latvia.
In the world
There is a nation — the Latvians!
In the world
The nation sings a song about the Sun:
'Rise early in the morning, dear Sun,
Set on time in the evening,
Warm us in the morning,
Take pity upon us in the evening.¹¹*

"When the song was over, all I could say was 'Please accept this greeting from the fatherland and consider us as one of your own.' Then my voice broke. They say that eyes are the dampest place for actors. I got a lump in my throat, and had to clench my teeth so that the audience wouldn't see my tears. They weren't tears for what they had suffered, or for what we had suffered. They weren't tears for them living here and us living there. No, they were tears of joy and an affirmation of our existence and our common feeling for Latvia!"

"I experienced similar feelings only twice more in my life. One of them was during the Baltic Way (an event on August 23, 1989, in which more than two million Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians joined hands in a human chain from the Estonian capital of Tallinn through the Latvian capital of Rīga, to the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius), the other was when, for the first time, I heard our national anthem in a newly independent Latvia. I am grateful to Vaira and Imants for these feelings and thank them for daring to take on the responsibility for a completely unknown actor. Perhaps that tear brought us closer together, who knows? The audience certainly accepted the hand I had extended, and didn't let it go until the end of the concert, and not for a long time after."

¹¹ The text comes from a poem by Māris Čaklais.

"The barrier built by mutual lack of understanding and trust had broken down. They welcomed us as their own. The hopes of the Committee for Cultural Contacts (the Soviet institution with links to the KGB, which sought to establish contacts with émigré Latvians for their own ends) were dashed. Their aims in sending us across the ocean had been entirely different. Although, I have to add — and hats off to those who did this — that no one really imposed such plans on us in a direct and explicit way when we were still in Riga. Of course, we had someone accompany us from the "relevant institution" (the KGB). Poor guy — two's company and he made the crowd on that trip. But as the Latvians later said, it was the best of all possible evils. His unenviable job was to watch our every move, to attend every concert and to make sure that Skrastiņš didn't say anything inappropriate. Much to our amazement, however, he announced 'Boys, I trust you', attended the first concert and then didn't burden us or anyone else with his presence any more. That was a courageous and wise thing to do.

"I have to say that Vaira and Imants always stood far above these various sub-plots. For the course of the three weeks, I did not see a single gesture on their part that would have humiliated our 'supervisor', even though his mission was clear, and he did not hide it. As Raimonds Pauls put it, 'Don't talk to us about politics, we have our specialist here.' And they respected that — hats off again.

"Why am I telling you such a long story? I want you to understand that the circumstances under which our friendship emerged were by no means easy. People get to know one another well when times are tough, though, when adversity brings people together instead of pushing them apart and if you feel that you can trust the other person — well, that's when a friendship is born.

"A pleasant lady and a respectable gentleman met us at the airport in Montreal but — I still remember it, over the next few days we got to know a dazzling creature with a modern, extravagant hairstyle and a gentleman who kept filling our hotel room with mountains of fruit and all kinds of goodies we had never tasted before. Another good deed on their part was to expend enormous effort in getting permission for us to enter the United States because in Moscow we had only been issued visas for Canada.

"I remember how all four of us laughed hysterically in the middle of the day, when Imants and Vaira grabbed us on the street and pushed us into one of those automated photo booths, because we needed photographs for our visas. The camera photographed each of us four times very quickly, snap, snap, but when the pictures came out of the machine, only two of the four frames showed Raimonds Pauls. The other two showed the face of some unknown woman. Pauls is an impatient man and had come out of the booth after just two shots. Then the woman next in line had gone in. By the way, thanks to the selfless assistance of Vaira and Imants, the Russian artists in the group we were travelling with also got to visit the USA that time.

"Our new friends Vaira and Imants did not abandon us in the U.S. either. We had grown so close, that once in New York, I allowed myself to become practical and selfish. Everyone who remembers those years knows perfectly well what could not be bought in the Soviet Union. We had received quite a bit of money from our concerts — a fortune as far as we were concerned — and I decided that if a Soviet actor suddenly found himself in the land of plenty, surely he could dress himself properly. Vaira took me to just the right store and helped me select everything my heart desired. I'm sad to say that the superb black suit I bought then is now a bit too tight. I wore it for years to various important events, but now it is one of the few things that I kept as a reminder of my acting career. I also have three ties that Vaira sent me and I still wear them from time to time.

"After three emotionally charged weeks, we parted as true friends. Need I tell you how you feel when you don't know if you will ever see each other again? At best, it might happen if they were allowed to visit Latvia. But we became highly doubtful of our own chances of ever returning there when we, the two Soviet Latvians from our group, were banned from leaving the hotel on the last night before departing for home. For 24 hours we were treated like prisoners and even our last performance in Washington had to be cancelled. We could only guess why (did our Soviet minders fear our defection?), but the atmosphere was horrendous and fuelled all kinds of suspicions."

The Song Motif In Vaira's Life

A nation and its song has been one of the main research themes of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's creative life. Songs and singing have had their role in shaping Latvian history and songs are still an important part of every Latvian's life, for songs enrich every individual's life and play a role in the destiny of nations. The songs performed by Raimonds Pauls and Imants Skrastiņš melted the hearts of émigré Latvians in Canada and the United States — the very people who had been taught to hate everything from the Soviet Union. The vitality of émigré Latvians and their unaffected love for their native land were first brought home to Soviet Latvians in the 1960s by the pop musical group "Čikāgas Piecīši" (The Chicago Five) and the songs written by their leader Alberts Legzdiņš. Years later, on June 26, 1989, the group performed in a concert before 35,000 people on an open-air stage in Rīga in what was then still Soviet Latvia. This was one of the high points of what later became known as the "singing revolution".

When it comes to folksongs, incidentally, a debate has arisen in Soviet Latvia: How could one tell a 'genuine' folk song from a popular song called a "ziņge" that was considered by many in the Latvian *intelligentsia* as an undesirable remnant of the German culture that had once dominated the nation. Knowing that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga loves to sing, I asked whether this dilemma had ever troubled her. She answered that it was "Čikāgas Piecīši" who had partly resolved the problem for her. Vaira and Imants both remember first hearing the group during a Latvian Youth Festival in Toronto in 1959. "We wanted our festival to be more than just weeping over our lost fatherland, its white birches that we would never see again, or over the horrors perpetrated by the Communists. We wanted our meetings to be more cheerful and if there could be some humour as well, then so much the better! That's what we all got from The Chicago Five, and they, in turn, were met with a vast amount of enthusiasm from all of us. They brought humour and satire back into our lives and the ability to laugh at ourselves, which neutralized some of the weepy sentimentality and pathos that tended to dominate at most exile Latvian events. Their songs loosened us up and made us more relaxed about being Latvian.



Gvido and Imants Kokars, choir conductors from Latvia,
at a Latvian song festival in Los Angeles, 1989

"But the fact is that spontaneous group singing at informal get-togethers was still quite common when I was young. I remember friends with recreation rooms in the basement who would invite a whole crowd to their home after a dance or other social affair. We sometimes stuffed seven people into the back seat of a car in order to get there, and then we would sit around singing until dawn. We sang every kind of song, anything and everything. I just loved those occasions."

Songs have led Vaira Viķe-Freiberga to both expected and unexpected encounters. She described one such encounter in an article in the leading Latvian émigré newspaper "Laiks" in 1979. Under the heading "An unexpected meeting", she wrote an article that revealed a little-known aspect of her talent and versatility. The article begins in a Greek bank in Athens and ends with the review of a musical performance. It seems that in November 1979, her husband Imants dropped into a bank in Greece to exchange some money, and a pile of brochures lying on the counter caught his eye. He noticed a photograph of a group of men in tails and thought: "that looks almost like a Latvian choir", and

the accompanying text identified them indeed as the Latvian men's choir "Dziedonis". Sure enough, with the financial support of this bank, an international choir festival was underway in Athens, and "Dziedonis" from Soviet Latvia was one of the participating choirs, with Imants Kokars conducting.

This was certainly not an opportunity the Freibergs were going to pass up. The hall at the Hilton Hotel in Athens was packed. It was already 10:00 p.m. but the concert had not yet begun. The emcee announced that the choir from Latvia had been delayed unexpectedly at some airport. Then, after an intermission, there came an impressive wave of sound from backstage — 'Now it's my turn, now I can cheer!' sang the choir in Latvian. The curtain opened and there stood 55 singers along with their conductor. They were received with wild cheers from the audience," Vaira Viķe-Freiberga wrote. Next she listed the repertoire and appraised the performance and its quality: "As far as the music of composer Marģeris Zariņš is concerned, the best that can be said about it is that it was loud. [...] The situation improved considerably with the 'War Ballad' by V. Kaminskis (unfortunately the librettist was not cited in the program). This music was clearly propagandistic, but the poetic quality of the text helped to transcend it into art. [...] Then there was a certain letdown with a Russian folk song arranged by A. Sveshnyikov. This song allowed the choir to demonstrate a nicely developed crescendo and de-crescendo, although they might have done exactly the same with the Latvian folksong 'Pūt Vējiņi'. Reviewer Viķe-Freiberga praised "Litany" by Veljo Tõrmis, the piece she considered to be the most interesting part of the concert. She wrote that it contained examples of "modern-sounding glissando", and "expressive forte sections", "its rhythm devilishly fast and syncopated." She concluded that the "Dziedonis" concert was "unbelievably good" and that "we can be proud of this performance by our Latvian brothers and hope they will continue to keep the spirit of the Latvian people alive through song."

III

RETURNING TO THE LAND OF HER BIRTH

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga visited Soviet Latvia for the first time in 1969. After years of absence, she returned to the land of her birth on her own, so that she could retrace the steps of her childhood and be alone when the great pain of all she had lost hit her.

Her first official visit to Latvia took place in June 1973, when she visited the Folklore Section of the Latvian Academy of Arts and Sciences Institute of Latvian Language and Literature. This time her family — husband Imants, son Kārlis and daughter Indra — accompanied her. This was the beginning of a serious and lasting professional cooperation with artists and scientists in Soviet Latvia. These contacts with her homeland seemed to give her new energy to do something for her native country Latvia. In due time, the Latvian Writers Union, the University of Latvia, the Latvian Cultural Foundation, the monthly cultural magazine "Karogs" and many other institutions and publications also benefited from her responsiveness and goodwill. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's name gained particular renown in 1988 among the Soviet Latvian intelligentsia, when an event was held at the Writers Union in honour of the publication of "Saules dainas" (Sun-songs). Both authors, Vaira and Imants, were present as well at the Centennial of the epic Latvian poem "Lāčplēsis" (Bear slayer) in the Latvian town of Lielvārde on the Daugava River. By the early 1990s, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was regarded as 'one of us' by many in Latvia, and she gave speeches and presented papers in Rīga and in many other places throughout Latvia. After her permanent return in 1998, she took on the position of Director of the Latvian Institute. When she was elected to the presidency, her work at the Institute was taken over by the former Latvian ambassador to the United States, Ojārs Kalnītīš.



At the Freedom Monument in Rīga, 1985

Not Beyond The City Limits Of Rīga

Despite the ideological contradictions and biases that divided émigré Latvians from Soviet Latvians, every visit to her homeland and every encounter with the Latvian land and its people was a powerful, though not necessarily positive experience for both sides. As Vaira Viķe-Freiberga reminds us, "a return to the fatherland, if only for a few days with a group of tourists, is an emotionally shattering and physically exhausting experience for any émigré Latvian. During the visit one's feelings shift from euphoria to depression, even if one is usually well-balanced. It creates a variety of emotional conflicts that cannot be resolved, and leads to heavy existential thoughts about the meaning and mission of one's life, about human destiny, and about justice in the world."¹

Until the late 1980's these emotional tensions were exacerbated by a rule that was applied to émigré Latvians visiting Soviet Latvia — they could not leave the city limits of Rīga. If you did, it could only happen in the company of official "authorities". Otherwise you'd create great problems for yourself and for your relatives. Even in Rīga, a resident Latvian could not just head off freely in any direction. All émigré Latvian visitors were assigned to the Hotel Rīga, which had been specially 'appointed' for them with strict controls at the doors, a watcher on duty on every floor, and listening devices built into the room telephones. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and her family remember many experiences and adventures linked to this residence.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Viķe-Freiberga was on her first expeditions to Latvia, she discovered a lack of information, and disinformation on both sides. Disinformation was often the rule of the day, both among émigré Latvians about actual life in Soviet Latvia and among Soviet Latvians about daily life in other countries. Agitation and propaganda had made their mark on both sides of the invisible wall. Émigré Latvians believed that they could only trust their relatives,

¹ Viķe-Freiberga V. Pret straumi (Against the Current), Rīga: Karogs (1993), p. 39.

and not even all of them, and that everyone else was a communist or a 'communist lapdog'. It was believed that any contact with the Soviets, especially with writers and artists, could only result in the émigré Latvian becoming a tool of Soviet propaganda back in the émigré community. As can be seen in the biography of émigré poet Velta Toma, and other examples, some of those who visited the fatherland were denounced as communist collaborators by other émigré Latvians, often finding themselves ostracised as a result. Visiting Soviet Latvia was a serious threat to one's reputation.

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's first visit to Soviet Latvia took place relatively early, in 1969. I asked her about the impressions and memories she associates with it. "My first trip in 1969 didn't really become public knowledge. I went and returned quite peacefully", she says. "In 1973 the whole family went, and this trip was a source of some debate in émigré society. There was a certain reaction, but not immediately.

"The eventual split within émigré society came from nowhere, it seemed. Scapegoats were sought. The entire younger generation, basically anyone who wanted changes or new influences in émigré society, was accused of betraying the nation and even labelled a communist. [It must be understood that this was the most damning accusation possible in Latvian émigré society.] We were actually accused of endangering émigré society. I was one of those accused. It was such a peculiar phenomenon that I even thought of studying it at one time," says the President. "This woman had been in Soviet Latvia, and not just alone, but with her husband and children, you see. One day a member of the Spīdola sorority phoned me and said that people in a particular American city had been planning to invite me to make a speech on November 18th but that now the invitation was being reconsidered. The local chairman of 'Daugavas Vanagi' [an organization of World War II veterans] had alerted Spīdola members: didn't they know that Viķe-Freiberga's children had been to a Pioneer camp in Latvia and were now walking around with red neckerchiefs [the Pioneers was the main children's organization in the Soviet Union]. How could such a woman be invited to speak at a celebration of Latvia's Independence?"

Convinced that émigré children would never have been allowed to attend a Pioneer camp in Latvia, I asked the President if the things

the man from “Daugavas Vanagi” had said were true. “Of course not,” she said, and continued her story.

“At one point, word of how dangerous I was also resulted in the retraction of an invitation to deliver a speech on a national anniversary of Latvia’s independence in Toronto, even though I had declined other invitations to be in Toronto for the occasion. After all, my parents, some relatives and many friends were there. The basis for the retracted invitation was a speech I had given at a Song festival in 1976. To my mind it was completely innocuous, but some found it revolutionary, proof that I was a communist. It went so far that my mother called me one day and asked if it was true that I, her daughter, was a communist. She had been told, you see, that anyone who travelled to Soviet Latvia could only do so in collaboration with the KGB, since it was not possible to get a visa otherwise. Even my mother and I ended up in an unpleasant conflict over the issue of Soviet Latvia. She said I had betrayed my nation and the Latvians who had fought for Latvia’s freedom. She also said that I had brought shame onto my relatives in Latvia, even though all my relatives had been thrilled to see me and could not understand why my parents were not planning to visit Latvia. I, in turn, was so offended by this accusation that I broke off contact with my mother for a while. It was an enormously difficult period for me — even my own mother believed these lies and was criticising me.”

Seven years later, nevertheless, Vaira’s parents visited Soviet Latvia for the first and last time. What brought about this change? How could parents allow themselves to do something for which they had so harshly criticized their child? The President explains these sweeping changes as alterations in the psychological atmosphere and the social milieu: “Lots of people began to travel to Latvia, and the problem simply disappeared. People were saying one thing but their feet were taking them in another direction. People voted with the feet that carried them off to the airplanes that took them to Latvia. In the Toronto Latvian Society, for instance, there was a poet and active community worker, Biruta Senkēviča. She was a great patriot and very friendly with me. When people began to denounce the Latvian émigré poet Velta Toma about her contacts with our native land, one of the loudest and harshest critics was Biruta Senkēviča. I remember something that illustrates these

events very well. I was in Rīga in 1973, and in the corridors of our hotel I heard an unmistakably familiar voice. I could not believe my eyes! Here was good old Biruta, large as life, she who had been so unwavering in her denunciation of those who travelled to Soviet Latvia. 'Is it possible that you're here too?' I asked. She felt terribly uncomfortable, of course, and tried to make all kinds of excuses. Well, yes, she said, her husband had died and she had no alternative but to come to Latvia to discuss inheritance issues with his relatives. She was no exception. Many other 'super-patriots' from the older generation who had once said that any visit to Soviet Latvia was a great sin were now making the trip themselves. And so my parents, too, decided to go at last and to meet one last time with those of their relatives who were still living."

Talking about the feelings she had experienced at the Hotel Rīga and about the emotions felt by the relatives visiting her there, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga does not mince words: "Anyone who entered or left the hotel was closely watched. Anyone who met those of us from abroad had to register and leave their documents at the front desk. Sometimes, by the way, our visitors were registered erroneously. Once, shortly after we had visited Rīga, my cousin's son was called in for an interrogation. What did he have in common with foreigners? What had he been doing at the Hotel Rīga on such and such a day? He had not been at the Hotel that day, and he had never even met us. He had documents to back him up. He was an officer in the Soviet army, and his unit confirmed that he had been at the barracks on the day in question, that he had been on the job. In other words, the list of my visitors included the name of someone who had not even met me. That is a crucial point if we think about the meaning of the files of the former KGB. [People implicated in the KGB files can be prevented from taking up certain positions of responsibility in independent Latvia.] Here is proof that things written down by the KGB were sometimes false. I met my cousin's son many years later. Initially he himself had been avoiding us, because he did not want to compromise his military career. As we know, relatives from abroad were considered to be a black mark against Soviet citizens and nobody advertised such connections in his or her résumé.

"At the hotel, it was completely clear that we were being watched and listened to at every opportunity. A particularly bothersome and



On her way to the Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Canada, 1956



Vaira, Kārlis and Indra (in the pram), Montreal, 1967



Vaira's birthday at home in Montreal, 1984



At an ancient wall in Machu Picchu, Peru, 1978



With Mudite Layt, a friend from Lübeck,
in Sydney, Australia, 1988



At a zoo in Melbourne, Australia, 1988



At a Latvian Song Festival parade in Vancouver, marching with
members of the camp 2x2, 1985



In Puerto Vallarta Mexico, Christmas 1991



In the Australian desert near Ayers Rock (Uluru) in the background, 1988

stupid practice was their habit of phoning rooms in the middle of the night to make sure the guests were in residence. If you are disturbed just as you are falling asleep, then your whole night's sleep can be disrupted. That used to really annoy me."

Despite the ban against foreigners travelling beyond the city limits of Riga, on her first visit back Vaira Viķe-Freiberga managed to return to the haunts of her childhood in Dole and Salaspils. She walked along paths that would be gone just a few years later. Today she says that God took pity on her by making such a thing possible and is grateful to the Secretary of the Soviet Latvian Academy of Sciences, Vilis Samsons, for making this memorable experience possible. In the latter half of the 1960s, the township of Vaira's paternal relatives was flooded because of the construction of a major power dam on the Daugava River to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the USSR. Before the area was flooded, however, archaeological digs were carried out, and a trip to the site could be classified as "scientific tourism" or as an excursion to a historically significant archaeological site related to the foreigner's field of research.

Academic Recognition In Soviet Latvia

For Latvian émigrés, academic life was largely centred on the name and established traditions of the University of independent Latvia. The catalogue of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's achievements notes that in September 1969, in Cleveland, Ohio, she gave the commemorative address at the University of Latvia's 50th anniversary celebrations. It is curious, then, that when she returned to Latvia for the first time, her first point of contact was the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR, an institution that had been founded by the Soviet government on June 18, 1945, and not the University of Latvia, which was the *alma mater* and former employer of many émigré Latvian academics who had left the country during World War II out of fear of reprisals.

The Academy of Sciences (or LZA) and its related institutes were higher than the University of Latvia in the academic hierarchy of Soviet Latvia. Today, when universities are autonomous and academic freedom

prevails, the University of Latvia can pursue its academic aims once again without the supervision of the Academy of Sciences. Back then, there was strict ideological censorship of speeches, articles and research, and this was true both at the University and at the Academy. It would seem, though, that the atmosphere in the high-rise that housed the Academy of Sciences was not only “higher”, but also more free, perhaps because the Academy didn't have many ties with undergraduates, and thus bore little responsibility for educating undergraduates in the spirit of communist idealism. Compared to the hordes that flowed through the halls of the University of Latvia, people at the Academy of Sciences “boiled in their own juices”, as the Latvian saying would have it, or were left to their own devices. The undesirable “stink of an émigré” could be more easily contained at the Academy, so that it could not reach the nostrils of impressionable students. Of course, “their own juices” were not always bad juices. Professor Viķe-Freiberga finally crossed the Soviet threshold of the Department of Philology at the University of Latvia only in the late 1980s as a guest lecturer on the “Saules dainas”, (Sun-songs) and even so, this first visit to the University was part of yet another working stint at the Academy of Sciences.

Her achievements in the study and popularisation of the dainas had been honoured not just in Canadian academic circles, but also by the émigré Latvian community. She was honoured by the Cultural Foundation of the World Federation of Free Latvians (1989) and was a recipient of the Professor Anna Ābele memorial prize (together with Imants Freibergs) back in 1979.

The Freibergs received their first honours in their homeland from the Latvian Academy of Sciences. On July 5, 1990 Vaira Viķe-Freiberga became one of the first foreign members of the Academy; and in 1991, Imants Freibergs was awarded an Honorary doctorate in Informatics by the Academy. In 1997, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga received the Great Medal of the Latvian Academy of Sciences for her work in studying and popularising the dainas. The depth of her academic interests, her willingness to serve science and her fatherland at all times and the extent to which academics in Latvia trust her, all this was demonstrated during the Soviet putsch in August of 1991. Had it been necessary, she and other foreign members of the LZA were ready to defend the Academy's



UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL
Département de psychologie

1981. gada 23. decembrī

Mīlie tautieši!

Sirsniģi pateicos par Jūsu laipnību atceroties manu lūgumu -
Jūsu š.g. sākumā sūtītās pacīpas ar Literatūras un Mākslas
numuriem pienāca tikai mazliet apbružatas un visumā labā
stāvoklī.

Ja kavējos ar atbildi un pateicību, tas nebija nepatei-
cības, bet gan līdz šim manā mūžā vēl nepiedzīvotas nevajadzī-
dības. Bija sakrājušies, blakus kārtējam darbam universitātē,
dažadi blakus pienākumi čupu čupam, un visi vienā laikā.
Gandrīz tikpat daudz laika pavadīju lidlaukos, lidmašīnās
un svešas pilsētas, dažadas sēdes, kongresos un konferencēs,
neki Montreales birojā, par mājām nemaz nerunājot. Lietas
vēl turpināsies sādā pat tempā līdz nāk. g. jūnijam, tad man
pienākās (un vīram arī) gada atvalinājums kā veltāms tikai
pētniecības darbam. Tai laikā ceru uzrakstīt grāmatu angļu
valodā par dainu strukturu.

Starplaikā esmu domājusi par Jums, lasot dažādos profes-
sionālos grāmatu katalogus, ko man pa laikam izdevēji piesūta.
Jaāzīstās, nekā tāda nevarēju saskaitīt, kas atlīstu Jūsu
vispārējam interesēm. Būtu loti pateicīga, ja Jūs varētu
man dot kādas tuvākas norādes: autoru vārdus, specifisku tē-
matiku... Vai Jums interesētu Kanadas gleznotāju reprodukcijas?
Iedzīmto inuitu vai īndiānu mākslu? Lūdzu, lūdzu, izsakāties
brīvi, citādi es nekā nespēšu padarīt.

Žēl gan, ka toreiz Montrealā tik nelaimīgi sanāca, ka
mums nebija laiks pat uz brīdi satikties un iepazīties. Pat-
laban loloju ieceri braukt uz Rīgu 1982. gada oktobra beigās
vai novembrī. Ja tas Istenosies, tad varbūt spēsim Rīga
pagūt to, kas Montrealā neiznāca. Tādā gadījumā es loti vēlētos
arī kādu Džemmas Skulmes gleznu iegādāties. Vai tas pie patlabā-
nējiem likumiem un reglamentiem būtu iespējams? Ja nē, tad
tomēr loti ceru, ka būtu iespējams apciemot Jūsu darbnīcu un
apskatīt Jūsu darbus.

Novembrī tiksamotien jāmu,
laimi, seviņi un veselība Jaunajā
pēdam,

Sissiņi,
Vaira Viķe-Freiberga

Case postale 6128, Montréal 101

A letter which Vaira Viķe-Freiberga sent to her colleagues in Soviet Latvia in 1981. She writes of her plans to visit Riga in October or November 1982 and calls on her colleagues to be frank about ways in which she can help them in terms of providing books and other literature. "Please, please speak freely," she writes. "Otherwise I will not be able to do anything." The future President also writes that, if at all possible, she would like to buy a painting by the distinguished artist Džemma Skulme.

interests in the West. As long-time LZA President, Jānis Stradiņš put it, “if the normal activities of the LZA had been paralysed, if there had been a coup in the Soviet Union resulting in external aggression and if the LZA had been kept from expressing its views freely, then the views of the LZA would have been publicized by its foreign members — Viķe-Freiberga, Dreimanis, Klavīns, Padegs and Balabkins.”²

On the long road back to her homeland, Professor Viķe-Freiberga had two more significant reference points in Rīga, namely the Latvian Writers' Union, at that time headed by leading poet [and later the first Latvian ambassador to post-Soviet Russia] Jānis Peters, and the literary magazine “Karogs”, edited by the playwright and poet Māra Zālīte. The latter published Viķe-Freiberga's most important speeches and articles from the 1990s. The publishing house of this magazine also published her books “Against the Current” (1993) and “The Threefold Sun” (three volumes published between 1997 and 2002). Finally on September 28, 2000, when Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was already President of Latvia, the University of Latvia awarded her an Honorary doctorate for outstanding achievements in the study of Latvian folklore and in the development of the humanities. The rector of the University Ivars Lācis presented her with the diploma during the annual celebration of the founding of the University.

Inspiration

The names of the Montreal professors Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs became ever more familiar in Soviet Latvia in the late 1980s, after their book on the Sun-songs had been published in Montreal. Émigré Latvians and certain circles in Soviet Latvia were well aware that the massive task of digitising the daina folk song texts had already been underway for more than 10 years in North America. However, most of the folklore specialists in Latvia remained aloof from the project.

² Stradiņš J. Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmija: izcelsme, vēsture, pārvērtības (The Latvian Academy of Sciences: Origins, History and Transformations), Riga: Zinātne (1998), p. 423.

Knowing that émigré Latvians were feeding the dainas into some strange apparatus seemed somewhat disconcerting to many of them. What was it they were really doing, and what purpose would it serve? Some writers were even more shocked than the scholars: the very idea of somehow mixing computers with poetry seemed to them a sort of sacrilege. Soviet academics at the epicentre of Latvian academic life now claim that in the 1970s folklore specialists and philologists at the Latvian Academy of Sciences who had undergone traditional training could not use computer technology for research purposes for purely practical reasons — there weren't any computers available, nor did they know what they could be used for. LZA Secretary Vilis Samsons writes "20 years later [in the 1980s] when the Freibergs arrived as warmly welcomed visitors in Latvia, bringing with them dainas on floppy disks, some of the directors of institutes at the Academy still managed to find excuses for refusing this invaluable gift."³

History repeats itself and this is apparent in the study of Latvian folk songs. Krišjānis Barons was collecting and systematising the dainas in St. Petersburg, in tsarist Russia, in the 1880s. He made sure that the songs would not be forgotten and would be available to posterity by transferring them to the printed medium. One hundred years later, the dainas were transferred for the second time, in the 1980s, in North America, to the electronic medium, making their contents easily accessible and available to all. This time again the initial work was executed outside of Latvia.

In the late 1980s, Professor Freibergs convinced his colleague, informatics professor Harijs Bondars at the University of Latvia to put his students and staff to work to digitise all the folk song texts from the Barons' volumes. After participating in presentations by the Montreal professors, the late leading folklorist Kārlis Arājs from the LZA also took an active interest in the potential of modern methods and had a leading role in creating several useful indexes of the Barons' daina collection (substantives, informants).

³ Samsons V. "Atmiņas par jauno Latvijas valsts prezidenti" (Recollections of the new President of Latvia), *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze*, 30 June 1999, p. 3.

Barons found the world in all its diversity reflected in the dainas. His classification of the folk songs became an important framework for research of a nation's history, language and thought, as well as an endless source of inspiration for contemporary culture. But his classification, brilliant as it was in its execution, remained constrained within the two-dimensionality of the printed page. Once digitised, however, the corpus became an open system that could be re-classified at will by every single researcher according to his own needs and interests.

The thematic corpus of Sun-songs developed by the Freibergs, not only illustrated the new technical possibilities of re-classification; it also included additional material from various sources, not contained in the Barons' corpus. Most of all, the scholarly work based on it opened up new avenues in text analysis and interpretation.

Yet the active use of the folk songs in a living culture is just as significant as their classification and storage. To the general public in Latvia, the Sun-song corpus took on a symbolic and emotional meaning that melded perfectly with the exaltation of the Singing Revolution of the late eighties. The demand for the book was such, that it was reissued in Latvia in 10,000 copies. This second edition of the "Sun-songs" in Latvia proved to be exciting not just to scholars, but to laymen as well, who like to read their folk songs and even to create their own compilations on a theme, not necessarily aspiring to serious research. The Sun-songs fitted in nicely with a series of folk song collections that had been published in Latvia in the mid-eighties, called "Mana tautasdziesma" (My folk song), which sought to illustrate the breadth of interests that could find their echo in the immense diversity of the dainas.

Indirectly, all this activity had a certain influence on contemporary Latvian poetry. There was a resurgence of poets using motifs and poetic structures of the dainas in their writing. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga also inspired poets directly, and several dedicated their work to her. In 1983, Māris Čaklais wrote "Liepu lokā" (In a Circle of Lindens) for Vaira:

*You pressed your forehead against the linden tree,
And the great distances faded away,
Wars lay down like dogs,
You wept in a circle of lindens.*

*It was around the time of the rising sap,
When the stones slowly grow warmer,
When there is still so much mud on the ground,
But one starts longing to go barefoot.*

*You pressed your forehead against the linden tree,
I did not hear what you said.
Let it be something between the two of you.
Who taught what to whom?*

*Standing in the same circle,
I felt a current flowing
From one life to another,
Not in conquest, in oblivion of death.
The native land — to lose and to regain it,
To lose but still to be able
To weep encircled by linden trees,
To weep in a circle of lindens.*

In Lugano Before The Declaration Of Independence

In 1990, a few weeks before Latvia's historically significant declaration of independence from the Soviet Union on May 4th, a major political and cultural event had been organized in the Swiss city of Lugano. Émigré activists, Professor Viķe-Freiberga among them, took part along with high-ranking government officials, artists and intellectuals from Soviet Latvia. The forum, held in the Lugano Palais des Congrès, was called "Forum Lugano: La Lettonia in Europa", (The Lugano Forum: Latvia in Europe) and it was organized with support from the Swiss and Soviet Latvian governments and with financing from the city of Lugano. Vita Matisa, professor of political science and international relations at the University of Geneva, devoted a great deal of time and effort to organize the forum.

This was one of the first significant steps that Soviet Latvia took in re-entering Europe during the period known as the “Singing Revolution.” What’s more, the event reinforced the conviction that Latvia’s cultural and spiritual home was Europe, since Rainis and his wife Aspazija, both renowned Latvian playwrights and poets, had found refuge in Lugano as political exiles during the last years of tsarist Russia, between 1905 and 1920. The curators of the Rainis and Aspazija Museum near Lugano greeted the forum participants warmly. This museum may perhaps be the most attentive to Latvian culture in all of Europe today. One of the curators, Mr. Antonio Gigli, has visited Latvia to discuss plans for another major cultural forum in Lugano in 2006 that would mark the 100th anniversary of Rainis and Aspazija’s arrival in Switzerland. A contemporary play by Latvian-Canadian playwright Baņuta Rubess, called “Tango Lugano”, transports both poets from Lugano to a modern setting.

The chairman of the Latvian Supreme Council and member of the Soviet Supreme Council, Anatolijs Gorbunovs, welcomed the forum participants on behalf of the Soviet Latvian government and also gave the opening address. Gunārs Meierovics, chairman of the World Federation of Free Latvians, gave a second opening address on behalf of émigré Latvians. Then Dainis Īvāns, chairman of the Latvian Popular Front, the main umbrella organization lobbying for independence in the late 1980s, presented a paper on “Rainis and the present-day democratic national revolution”, while the poet Jānis Peters, also a member of the Soviet Supreme Council, spoke on the subject “From the singing revolution to a revolution of the intellect.”

Artists, playwrights, poets, literary critics, filmmakers, academicians, journalists, actors, opera singers and other representatives from cultural, academic and arts circles in what was still Soviet Latvia attended the forum. A boys’ choir from the Rīga Music High School performed for the guests, documentary films were shown, and playwright and director Pēteris Pēters put on a dramatic happening.

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga presented a paper called “Latvian culture in the context of Europe” and Edvīns Inkēns, one of the hosts of the wildly popular Soviet Latvian television programme “Labvakar” (Good evening) led a formal debate on the subject “Will Cinderella make it to the European ball?” This formulation of the theme gave Vaira Viķe-



With Imants Freibergs and poet Pēteris Zirnītis (r) in Lugano, Switzerland, 1990

Freiberga an opportunity to show one of her particular talents: to convey a conceptually crucial argument that Latvia belongs in the European community of nations through imagery derived from folklore. She began her address with a fairy tale: "Once upon a time there was a little orphan girl whose stepmother made her do the nastiest housework, dressed her in the ugliest clothes and made her sit in the cinders by the stove. That is why she has come to be known as *Cinderella*, *Cendrillon*, *Cenerentola*, *Aschenputtel* and, in Latvian, *Pelnrušķīte*. She might just as well be called Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Just as families sometimes have stepchildren, communities sometimes have entire groups of people who are pushed aside, whose fate it is to play the role of stepchildren among other nations." Viķe-Freiberga continued by speaking about the lawful rights of nations, emphasizing the importance of Cinderella's role over the fairy godmother's in terms of the positive shift in the girl's fortunes: "The fairy godmother does not cause Cinderella's transformation, she is just an intermediary." She was addressing Latvia's own role, the "princess-like" characteristics that a Cinderella-country should display at the European ball or, in other words, take its rightful place in the European community of nations.



With Māra Zālīte and Māris Skuja at the Lugano Forum, 1990

Important parts of the Lugano Forum were the informal discussions that went on until the wee hours of the morning. The Soviet Latvian participants went home from Lugano with stories about the event that included the Latvian émigrés Vaira and Imants, who had been more than happy to make friends with them, spending many hours together and finding common ground. During one late-night discussion, a group of delegates concluded that there was no reason to postpone the proclamation of Latvia's independence one moment longer and submitted a petition to the artist Džemma Skulme, who was at that time a member of the Soviet Council of People's Deputies. "Here is the time to declare independent Latvia", read the text of the petition with the signatures of Vaira and Imants immediately under it. This was written spontaneously on the back of a post-card, produced by the photographer Juris Krieviņš — also present — showing a symphony of storks against a misty Latvian lake.

Indeed, a few weeks later, on May 4, 1990, the Republic of Latvia was officially declared independent again, after 50 years of Soviet occupation, by a dramatic vote in the Supreme Soviet Parliament of Latvia. Real

Te ir los laicos proklamēt
Molnaričgo Lugoje!

Daina Vīķe - Freiberga
Gundega Čintys
Sānīcele Čulpe
Peteris Zariņš
„Baltijas cilvēki” grupa

Pēteris Jansons
Inārs Trīnīns
Lilija Dzece
Andris Vičķis
JURIS KRIEVĀNS
KRĀVU IELA 10 dz. A
RĪGA 220000 LATVIA
Tatjana Dzineca - Melngailē

The petition that was submitted to Džemma Skulme,
a deputy of the Supreme Council of the USSR, during the Lugano Forum, 1990

independence was achieved a year later, after the failed Moscow coup of August 1991, and fully finalised after the withdrawal of all Soviet military forces from Latvian territory in 1994.

Academic — Does That Have To Mean Staid?

Do not give brains to the wise man,
He will walk around thinking.

The saying quoted above comes from a Latvian daina, and expresses one of the basic principles of all totalitarian regimes and ideologies in terms of their attitude towards a nation's wisdom and towards the rationality of science. In July 1991, a Global Congress of Latvian Scientists was held in Riga, bringing together distinguished scientists of Latvian origin from all over the world. This was a very important step in terms of understanding the intellectual resources of the newly independent Latvia. The plenary session took place at the Latvian Theatre Daile in Riga and Professor Vaira Viķe-Freiberga from the University of Montreal presented the keynote address "*Scientia et sapientia*." She compared modern science (*scientia*) with traditional wisdom (*sapientia*), arguing

that if the motto of Latvian science — *Scientiae et patriae* (For science and the fatherland) — was to be truly realized, it should implicitly include *sapientia* as well.

In her speech, the Professor integrated both an affirmation and a criticism of science, and the self-critical aspect represented a wind of change in the intellectual atmosphere of the restored Latvian state. During the Soviet regime, the humanities had adopted the totalitarian government's attitudes and its authoritarian versions of the "truth." Throughout her life, Vilke-Freiberga has shown interest in a wide range of fields of enquiry, including cognitive processes, analysis of discourse, poetics, psycholinguistics, psychopharmacology, epistemology and the history of science, technology and society, culture, values, ethnicity, national beliefs and traditions. She incorporated knowledge from all these areas of interest, except for psychopharmacology, in her address. She has stressed in discussions of her research that the common thread in her interests has been the processes of the mind. The study of poetics, psycholinguistics, traditional beliefs and modern technologies all play a role in understanding thought processes since each of these disciplines approaches the manifestations of processes of the mind from a different angle. Vaira Vilke-Freiberga presented a thumbnail history of science, beginning — as one should — with Aristotle. She emphasized that the evolution of scientific thinking has gone hand in hand with the evolution of the humanities, and that the historical processes of democratisation and European-style democracy as such are basically a product of the scientific mode of thinking. At the same time, however, the speaker criticised some aspects of science, counting on the audience's understanding as she presented examples from the history of the sciences in Europe and from contemporary scientific developments that do not speak well of science. The roots of these negative aspects were to be found in science itself, she explained, not outside it.

One of the central tenets of her lecture held that serving one's nation also means serving society. This is a reflection of the ethics Vilke-Freiberga encountered at the Canadian Science Council regarding the responsibilities of science and technology to society. When she referred to the Middle Ages, she reminded her audience that "mouldy parchments" were copied from generation to generation, full of "wild

and untested foolishness." In the early years of the European universities, she argued, authorised knowledge "had degenerated into petty disputes" and intellectual debates "were reduced to claims from each side based on quotations from ancient authorities, each side trying to line up as many dead supporters for their views as possible." What's more, the recognized authorities of the day frequently oppressed their colleagues with their power and authority (when they did not persecute them). The history of scientific discovery has been, to a great extent, a battle against authorities, real or bogus, throughout human history. As a result, many of the world's greatest thinkers have suffered tragic fates. The Professor's remarks about science in the Middle Ages resonated powerfully with the more recent history of the humanities and the social sciences in the Soviet Union. The USSR claimed to be the embodiment of a scientific worldview, and yet was anti-humanistic in orientation.

The audience was reminded that these were not problems limited to the Soviet era or the Middle Ages, but a deeply rooted tendency that is a fundamental part of science and scientists to this day. "Scientists are most fond of posing as 'scientific authorities,'" she said. "They bitterly denounce other kinds of knowledge and ridicule scientific evidence as unsubstantiated and misleading, as if science could presume to offer absolute truths. Such attitudes are actually incompatible with the tentative nature and inevitable ambiguity of scientific discoveries, which are often controversial and are constantly being replaced by others." Excessive 'scientism', said the future President, is particularly dangerous in countries "governed by political short-sightedness and economic greed, where science and technology are subject to irresponsible and irrational mandates." She also discussed social self-defence mechanisms that offer protection against abuses of scientific discovery or application. She reminded her audience that even in the "so-called developed countries, there is an overall disposition toward science that is, at best, ambivalent."

Her lecture "*Scientia et sapientia*," exemplified the scientific thinking of an individual steeped in it, who understands, both the strengths and weaknesses of this style of thought processes. Only the wise and strong dare to be self-critical and the same must apply to science if it is to succeed.

Two distinguished scientists at the plenary session of the global forum of Latvian science were, in a sense, competing with each other — Academician Jānis Stradiņš from Latvia, and Professor Vaira Viķe-Freiberga representing the world. Both focused on the contemporary implementation of the motto “For fatherland and for science.” They were professional, outspoken and serious presentations, but often laughter rippled through the audience, which meant, of course, that they were interesting as well.

Speaking Out: That's Just How We Are And There's Nothing We Can Do About It

An indication of how much authority Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's name carried in the early 1990s in Latvia was the invitation to speak at the Latvian Cultural Fund's “Spīdola” (named after Rainis' heroine just like the eponymous sorority) awards ceremony in December 1994. These awards were of particular importance because they were unique in honouring Latvia's creative talent and served as a culmination of the year's cultural events. They are the largest monetary awards in Latvia with recipients receiving at least 5,000 lats (\$8,500. US). The most distinguished representatives from the arts and sciences gathered for these annual awards. Free thinkers, intellectuals and, sometimes, government officials, were guest speakers. The event was broadcast on Latvian radio and television and covered extensively in the Latvian press. The provocative speech that she delivered at the “Spīdola” awards ceremony in 1994 created waves of both outrage and enthusiasm, and can be considered as her first and most colourful step on to the Latvian political stage. Her speech was the topic *du jour* and reverberated across the oceans to every continent. The risk-taking chair of the Latvian Cultural Fund, Ramona Umblija, was responsible for inviting two indomitable women who could be merciless in their intellectual candour. These were the writer Gundega Repše and Professor Vaira Viķe-Freiberga.

The “Spīdola” awards had been founded the previous year, and were awarded in the field of the humanities. The first recipients were Ābrams

Feldhūns for his translation of the Medieval chronicle *Heinrici Chronikon* from the Latin and Ēvalds Mugurēvičs for the preface and scholarly commentary in the same publication. In 1994 the award went to Jānis Graudonis for his dictionary of archaeology. The arts award went to Jaunais Rīgas Teātris (the New Riga Theatre) and its directors Alvis Hermanis, Māra Ķimele and Juris Rījnieks.

The "Spīdola" awards ceremony was well thought out and the letter Umblīja sent to Imants Rakins, the Director general of Latvian Television on November 25, 1994 shows how important the ceremony is:

"The Latvian Cultural Fund is organizing the annual Spīdola awards ceremony to take place on December 4th of this year in the Golden Hall of the Rīga Latvian Society House. Following the classical pattern set by European foundations, we have invited well-known representatives from the cultural sphere — scientists and artists — to speak on what they currently consider to be the most immediate and significant issues in a particular cultural sector, or in the country as a whole. This year Vaira Viķe-Freiberga (arriving from Canada especially for this event), will head the foursome. Jānis Stradiņš will present 'Culture and science in countries large and small', Gundega Repše will talk about 'Contemporary moods and feelings about the times we live in', and Elmārs Grēns will close the series with an address on 'The world of the virus — a view from the inside?'. Visually impressive, computerized moving images will supplement the final lecture."

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was the first and only émigré Latvian to be invited to address the awards ceremony and, since it was broadcast nationwide, the people of Latvia. The speeches by the writer and the professor were by no means simply ceremonial addresses. Each in her own way tried to identify the reasons for Latvia's post-renaissance depression. Repše, with good reason, spoke harshly about the failings of government, while Viķe-Freiberga addressed the nation itself and the roots of its helplessness and depression. She did not spare the *intelligentsia*, who often consider themselves as the very embodiment of this term. The criticisms launched by both women were justified, but their candour, especially in Viķe-Freiberga's case, did not endear them to the audience. But the future President had clearly hit home. After

the speech was published in the émigré Latvian newspaper *Laiks* in New York on November 19, 1994, an unprecedented number of other Latvian language newspapers reprinted it.

An abridged version of the speech follows. Originally titled “That’s the kind of people we are and there’s nothing we can do about it.” *Laiks* added a sub-heading: “Vaira Viķe-Freiberga on Latvians, Latvia, faith, hope and love.” The original version was written in the literary style of émigré Latvians, and is markedly different from the style currently popular in Latvia. Some excerpts follow:

“For the fourth time since the restoration of Latvia’s independence, we are celebrating November 18 (Latvian independence day), and now we find ourselves standing before a peculiar paradox. The Latvian nation has regained what it had hoped for and expected for so long, but the satisfaction of these desires has not brought us the contentment, joy, enthusiasm, or pride in achievement that we — perhaps a little naively — might have expected. Disappointment, dissatisfaction and, in many people, even great bitterness are instead the rule of the day.

“It seems people have forgotten, with surprising speed, that over the course of just a few years, Latvians have participated in what may be the greatest social and political revolution in the history of the world. An enormous and powerful totalitarian empire, armed to its teeth, has collapsed in a few short years, and Latvians regained their freedom without much spilled blood, without the genocide and mass murder that continue to this day in so many parts of the world. You would think that we would be happy and grateful for such a destiny, which, after all, has been remarkably merciful. Latvia has regained international recognition; it has been admitted to the United Nations. It has received presidents, kings and the Pope on official visits, and many different countries are more or less prepared to offer Latvia assistance. Everything Latvian patriots had demanded and waited for so long, albeit with little hope, has finally been achieved. If that is the case, then why have these enormous and significant achievements not had the hoped for effects on the nation?

“Ask anyone. Many people will tell you that in the old system, daily life was better. How odd it is that people so seldom remember the things that were worse back then. Everyone feels those things that are worse now,



At the Latvian Academy of Sciences, beside the massive cabinet in which Barons' legendary collection of *dainas* is kept, 1985



At the "Sun-songs" seminar at the Latvian Writers' Association,
with prominent Latvian poets Jānis Peters and Māra Zālīte, 1988



At the centenary celebrations of Andrejs Pumpurs's epic poem "Lāčplēsis"
(Bear slayer), in Liehvārde 1988, with professor Velta Rūķe-Dravīna
and Silvestrs Gaizuns



Imants Freibergs, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Kārlis Freibergs, 1991



After the awarding of an honorary doctorate to Imants Freibergs
by the Latvian Academy of Sciences in 1991



At the monument to Kronvalda Atis, one of the founders of the late 19th Century Latvian renaissance, in Vecpiebalga, 1991



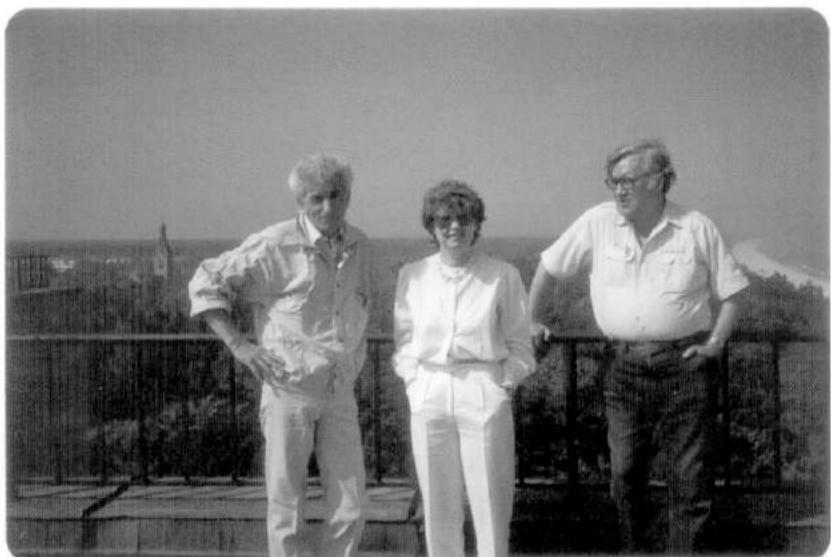
With composer Raimonds Pauls and his wife Svetlana
at the Āraiši church, 1985



With Latvian authors Jānis Peters and Lilija Dzene at "Incēni", the birthplace of one of the founders of the Latvian literary tradition, Kārlis Skalbe, in the 1980s



With Māra Zālīte at the grave of Ojārs Vācietis, Latvia's most outspoken poet of the Soviet era, in the late 1980s



At Jūrmala, Riga's seaside suburb, with poets Imants Ziedonis and Olafs Stumbris, 1985



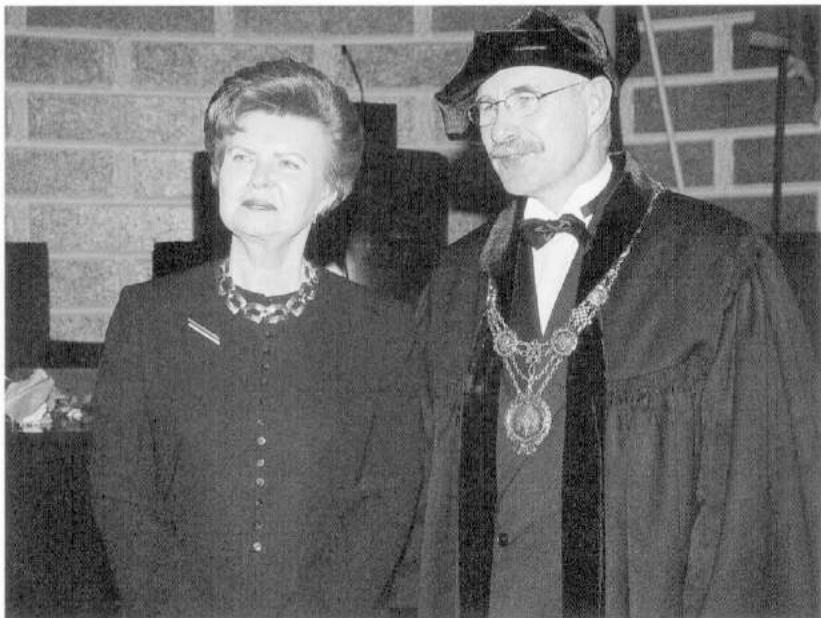
At the centenary celebrations of Andrejs Pumpurs' epic poem "Lāčplēsis" (Bear slayer), in Lielvārde 1988, with Ivars Riekstiņš and Jāzeps Rudzītis



At the Riga Film studios with Latvia's best-loved actor Ēvals Valters, 1993



At the Latvian Academy of Sciences, 1994. From the left, academicians Daina Šveica, Viktors Hausmanis, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, Jānis Stradiņš, Tālis Millers, Juris Ekmanis



After the awarding of an honorary doctorate to Vaira Viķe-Freiberga by
the University of Latvia, 28 September 2000, with Rector Ivars Lācis

and they feel it harshly. This brings us to a sad paradox. The period, which émigré Latvians in the West were used to calling the suffering of the people, the period of oppression and of no freedom — that period in Latvia is now often called ‘the good old days’. How can this possibly be explained?

“To date, all the great achievements of this Second Republic have manifested themselves only in life’s higher spheres — at the official and state level. By comparison, the quality of life for the average person has been in a dangerous downward spiral ever since the restoration of the country’s independence. A depressingly large majority of the people finds it harder and harder to exist on a day-to-day basis, their futures are less secure, and any prospects for improvement soon grow paler and more hopeless. The joy people felt so recently has not only diminished, it has all but disappeared. Most people look at their personal lives and think that someone has pulled the rug out from under their feet. They get little satisfaction from that which has been achieved at the state level, because they don’t see any positive effect in their own lives. The enthusiasm, diligence and initiative of the singing revolution have been replaced by negativism and pessimism. Instead of happiness and hope, disappointment, confusion and glum hopelessness prevail. In the past people could say that they were doing badly because they were not free. Now it turns out that we are free, but many of us are worse off than before. What is the reason for this misfortune?

“We have discovered that the freedom we have regained is only a relative concept. There is no such thing as absolute freedom. It is an ideal, a dream that can never fully be achieved in practice. For 45 years the Communist Party ruled Latvia on behalf of the Soviet Union, combining the practices of feudal aristocracy with those of organized crime. Now the Soviet Union has collapsed and the party has fallen apart, but in place of the former government mafia, openly anti-social criminality and a private mafia are flourishing rapidly. The official structures and institutions of the independent state have simply been unable to control the situation, and that is no surprise. In Latvia, as in all the former countries of the Soviet empire, lack of responsibility, along with corruption on a truly grandiose scale, are still rife at every level, from the highest to the lowest. What is more, many very responsible positions are still held by fervent supporters of the old regime, who may well be more interested in destroying

the new system than supporting it. The dragon of the old regime has been officially slain, but its body, like a rotting corpse, still lies across the whole of Latvia, smothering it. If Latvia used to be ruled by political and ideological tyranny, upheld by the army and the secret police, then the current trends, if they continue to develop, threaten the emergence of an anarchy encouraged by social irresponsibility and the gluttonous drive for money. Where there should have been progress and improvements on a daily basis, we see only the flowers of destruction blossoming in ever-greater numbers with ever more colour. It turns out that since the restoration of freedom, the forces of darkness have shown more vitality and sustainability than the forces of light. They continue to grow, unhindered, to expand and to take root. Like the corrupt cells of a malignant tumour, they are infiltrating and taking over more and more the tissue of the body politic.

"Increasingly, people in Latvia are attributing the current problems to the new influences of the 'rotten West', not to the rotted remains of the system which prevailed until recently. People think they are seeing living proof of what communist propaganda had been telling them for years. Where once the state provided at least minimal security for people, the safety nets have disappeared, and the government has been reduced to telling people they are now free to take care of themselves, to make do as best they can. Communist party functionaries and those in the upper echelons of the 'nomenclature' used to enjoy various privileges in a fairly discreet way — behind high walls and locked doors. Now, by contrast, the nouveau riche, the opportunists, the upstarts — and the functionaries they have bribed and bought — these people are flaunting their wealth loudly, vulgarly and obnoxiously, despite any suspicions aroused by the extremely rapid acquisition of wealth. Pensioners, meanwhile, who have toiled arduously for all their lives, are now relegated to tiny, unheated rooms and, in some cases, even begging on the streets.

"Given these extreme contrasts, how can anyone believe in freedom, democracy, private property or the advantages of the free market? This enduring transitional phase where the national economy seems stuck in limbo is becoming completely untenable for the average resident. What's worse, the absurd manifestations of this transition foster hopelessness, apathy and defeatism. The fear is that these attitudes will slow down, if not completely halt, the fundamental changes that are most needed. It

becomes a vicious circle. Negative circumstances create negative feelings, which, in turn, create more negative circumstances. And so it continues...

"This stalemate threatens not only the interests of the Latvians, but also the future of democracy and even the country's sovereignty. It has been forgotten quickly that the economic system was not established by a newly independent Latvia. Rather, it was inherited from the Soviet Union, and its structure has collapsed. The old manufacturing base cannot withstand international competition, even those aspects of the system that have not yet been demolished, stripped by thieves, "privatised" or laid waste. The Soviet production networks were a part of that old system, in which geographically scattered enterprises were centrally controlled to irrational but mutual dependence. The collapse of that network hinders the emergence of effective and competitive manufacturing, but it also opens the door to international industrial blackmail.

"As for the existing social structures — laws, bureaucracies, channels of communication between central and local governments — unfortunately in Latvia, these combine some of the worst aspects of communism and of capitalism. That is not something we would have wanted, of course.

"However, perhaps the worst part of our inheritance from the 'good old days' (whose loss is still mourned by so many), is the crippling of the nation's soul brought about by decades of living in the 'worker's paradise'. If you don't tend your garden, it will be taken over by weeds. Similarly, the communist system has produced several generations of people with a heavily damaged and dysfunctional understanding of an individual's attitudes and ties to society. These crippled relations with society first and foremost damaged the individual's personal value system, as well as the individual's understanding of things such as personal integrity and ethics. Ancient Latvian culture was strongly founded on principles such as honesty, keeping one's word and regard for one's own reputation and those of one's family or one's profession. These principles have been shaken to the core. It must be remembered, however, that they are not frivolous decorations, nor are they luxuries. These principles are not circus tricks, they are Latvian staples, the very bread and salt of our society. When a society starts lacking spiritual bread and salt, it means that society is in crisis.

"The quality of a social environment can be determined using an elementary statistical ratio — that between those citizens who are socialized,

who are good and honest people, on the one hand, and those who are anti-social on the other. As soon as the latter group gains the upper hand over the former group, the social environment begins to slip towards anarchy. This process has a direct effect on the material aspects of life, too. A society emerges in which resources are unnaturally concentrated in just a few hands. The gap between the haves and the have-nots grows wider, eroding the soil in which democratic processes are supposed to take root.

"Latvians have always been able to blame all their problems on external influences. The Latvian people have been victims for so long and to such a great extent that they have adopted the role of the victim as a leit-motif. If things went wrong, then the Latvian could blame someone else (if not out loud, then at least privately, among friends or in the depths of one's own heart). Latvians could blame the regime, 'stagnation', immigrants, and foreigners. Now, however, that so much is determined by Latvians themselves, if things go wrong, there is no alternative but to admit that, too often, we only have ourselves to blame.

"If we want the situation in Latvia to improve, then we must take the first step and admit that we share responsibility for everything that happens, just as the first step toward recovery for an alcoholic is the admission that he is addicted. As a nation, we cannot spend the rest of eternity whining and complaining about how merciless destiny has been, how unfairly the world has treated us and how much we have suffered. Yes, destiny has been merciless to our people, and terribly cruel. Yes, the world has treated us unfairly. Sometimes, it still treats us unfairly. And yes, we are suffering, we really are suffering. And then? What then? Are we going to sit under the weeping willows and sob, wringing our hands forever? Are we going to crawl into our coffins ahead of time, pull the lids over our heads and proclaim: goodbye, cruel world!?"

"The quality of human life is shaped by a continuous interaction between the individual, his biological drives and psychological needs, and the society where that individual lives. Society shapes the individual, but he in turn upon reaching adulthood, contributes in his turn to shaping society. A dysfunctional society is one that creates structural contingencies within, where the system of rewards and punishments gives greater benefits to the wolves rather than the lambs. A healthy, or at least a tolerable society is one where the predator faces unpleasant consequences and

punishments, while actions that benefit the common good lead to personal reward. Nobody's actions in life are programmed in advance, as is the case with one's biological drives. Our actions are rooted in our experience and learned from society. The things that have been learned, moreover, can be unlearned or learned differently, if the system of rewards and punishments that prevail in a society can be transformed. If we want to change the overall climate in a community, we must systematically, pragmatically and consistently evaluate and transform accordingly every societal mechanism that impacts on human activity. We have already had our singing revolution, now we urgently need a revolution in our daily lives and our daily work. It is not enough to sing, to celebrate and to occasionally wave the flag, if we just go back to doing things the same way we always did.

"Social structures can be better or worse, more or less fair, more or less humane. Outside of brutally totalitarian systems, however, quality of life is not dictated by the structures themselves. Rather, the calibre of the individuals who operate within the framework of these structures is the determining factor. Totalitarianism forces people to obey orders blindly, but democracy places a completely different burden on its citizens — individuals are held responsible for their own actions and for the way in which these actions affect the community in which they live. In other words, if a society is to change, then changes must affect all levels at once, from the top to the bottom. It is not enough to change the very top of the pyramid, the foundations must also change. It is not enough to change a government or a system, the people must also change. If the same old people simply become turncoats and repackage themselves, they are still the same old people. If life is to be different, then the relationships between the individual and society that prevailed before must also change. As long as the readiness to change has not reached the necessary critical mass in society, we cannot expect any fundamental changes. Each member of the nation contributes something to the whole. Whether the result is pigs' swill or manna from heaven depends on what each member of the society tosses into the pot.

"This is a seemingly simple idea, but not one that is readily accepted. It is all the more difficult to transform the principle into action. We're going to have to do it, however — there is no alternative. It will not be easy, it will not happen quickly, but until it happens, the overall mood of

the people in Latvia will be described with the same words — disappointment, anger and hopelessness, and of these, hopelessness will be the most significant. This idea crystallized in my mind after a recent conversation. My partner in dialogue, over the course of several hours, kept sighing in a resigned way, repeating the phrase ‘That’s what we’re like — and there is nothing we can do about it! We have a pretty good sense of what we are like, but then what? Where do we go from there? Sadly, people are all too ready to say that there is nothing that can be done about it, end of story.

“This fatalistic passivity, this apathetic pessimism is known in psychology as learned helplessness. In a famous experiment with laboratory rats, psychologists compared two groups of animals that faced equal amounts of extreme stress for equally long periods of time. The rats in one group could change their circumstances at least slightly by virtue of their own actions. In the other group, nothing that the animals did could change the situation in any way. Eventually the helpless rats became so apathetic they didn’t do anything at all when placed in a new situation, one that would have allowed them to escape stress and pain. Initially, these animals were only reacting to a truly hopeless situation, but eventually they accepted helplessness and passivity as a general and consistent reaction toward everything.

“Subsequent clinical research demonstrated that this model of learned helplessness observed in the laboratory could be applied equally to people who become passive and apathetic under certain conditions. Exactly these conditions prevailed in the Soviet Union and continue to prevail under other totalitarian regimes. Under the communist system, the entire state structure was nothing more than an enormous, enduring and effective experiment in terms of systematically forcing this helplessness up on the population. The individual is nothing. ‘The people’ are everything. But ‘the people’ — that is really the Party, after all. The needy individual needs to passively subject himself to the ‘generous’ Party. A totalitarian system requires an obedient, yielding and amorphous mass of ‘workers. It has no use for individuals who might exhibit too much determination, ambition and personal initiative. A totalitarian system more willingly tolerates incompetence, irresponsibility, helplessness and time wasting than any excessive self-assurance or any demand for individual rights. Similarly, a totalitarian system fears any structures that are based on lateral or horizontal (rather

than hierarchical) links within society and operate on principles of equality and voluntary cooperation, because in that case strong interest groups could form to defend their interests and present demands. The very words for this in Latvian have come to have a mocking connotation, because they are often used for demands of doubtful justification or legality. The entire structure in a totalitarian system is vertical and hierarchical. Everything is subordinated to the state and the individual is trained to expect everything from the state and from the goodwill of the ruling Party. /.../

"After half a century of this type of societal training, this dysfunctional reflex of passivity and dependency remains as a heavy burden on the psyche of the Latvian people, and not the Latvian people alone. How are we to find a treatment for this syndrome? How can we reawaken a collective 'joie de vivre' within society? How can we fire up the spark of initiative, how can we instil the faith that change is possible and that we can do something to bring it about?

"While in Latvia, I have asked people from various professions and trades to tell me what they are personally ready to do in order to improve the situation in Latvia. Oddly enough, I have received very many evasive responses: 'The government should ...', 'The relevant institutions...', 'The appropriate authorities...', 'The ministries...', 'The local governments...', 'The commissions'. Clearly, many people are not yet ready to undertake personal responsibility. Responsibility is turned over to an official person or institution.

"At the same time, however, people have very negative opinions about those who hold power in Latvia. One might even speak of a crisis of faith and trust — one that not only creates an overall, psychologically oppressive atmosphere, but one that in some ways threatens the future of democracy and the survival of the nation. A classical example of this emerged in the spring of 1993, shortly before the parliamentary elections. The newspaper "Literatūra un Māksla" (Literature and Art) published an article in which the vice-chairman of the Writers' Union announced that he would pay no attention whatsoever to politics and that he would not be voting in the election because it was all far too dirty for him.

"If that is the attitude of someone who is an educated man of culture, then what should the average citizen say? If the writer is so squeaky-clean that he cannot participate in the political processes he considers so dirty, then

who will be those dirty enough to take his place? We might as well phone Moscow and say to them, ‘Hey, you know what? We Latvians are too pure and unsullied to deal with politics. Come back!!! You Russians have experience with politics; you have better skills in ruling over us.’ Is that what we really want?

“The same people who only a few years ago were prepared to risk their lives on the barricades [during the failed putsch], the same people who joined hands in hope along the Baltic Way: these are the same people who now curse their elected representatives and call all politicians — without any party differentiation — crooks and cheats. They have given up looking into the barrel to see how many good apples there are among the bad. People now believe that anyone who gets into power is immediately going to become a big, fat hog pushing its way to the public trough. Sadly, there is no shortage of examples in Latvia to validate this cynical view. Nearly every day the newspapers write of yet another instance of what appears to be a serious violation of ethics and professionalism. /.../

“The English have a saying that undeniably, is open to debate: ‘people get the kind of government they deserve’. Isn’t that a rather horrifying thought? It also says that if we want better people in government, then the entire nation must improve itself. If we want people in government who really know how to resolve the problems, which face the country and its people, then every member of the public ought to know something about the resolution of these problems. /.../

“This means that people must be consistent in what they do. You must understand that a failure to do anything and a belief that you cannot do anything is a choice in itself. You choose not to do anything and not to be able to do anything. No one is dictating to you from above or from the sidelines, are they? Do the prevailing circumstances influence this decision? Perhaps, but it is in no way forced upon you, it is by no means pre-determined. Yes, it is probably easier to complain about darkness than it is to light even one candle or to screw in even one light bulb in the dark. But complaining alone will not make the darkness go away. Or is it any use to expect others to come and disperse the darkness in our stead. It is a serious illusion to dream that some magical helper, some mystical saviour, some ideal, superhuman Hero or Leader, will come and do everything for us and meet all our childlike needs. We will sleep comfortably in our beds while he, like St. George, slays all our dragons.

"Disappointment, anger and hopelessness may be the words that describe the mood in Latvia at this time. That is the way we are — disappointed, angry, offended and often bereft of hope. But there are other words we could use to describe ourselves. So many others... If nothing else, these words from the New Testament, which need not be taken in any confessional or traditionally religious sense, but in their deepest and most universal sense: 'And now there remain faith, hope and charity; these three, and the greatest of these is charity'. Charity, which means love.

"It is through love that we are born to our parents and to our nation. Nurtured by love, we grow up, for ourselves and for our people. I, you, all of us — we all grow and develop together. The nation shapes us, and we shape the nation. That is the way we are, but, God willing, there is so much that we can do about it."

Then came the unofficial part of the evening. Usually guest speakers were congratulated and thanked for their participation but this time Vaira Viķe-Freiberga drank her coffee in noble isolation, with only a handful of brave souls stepping forward to approach her. The "wall" between Latvians in Latvia and Latvians "over there", between "us" and "them" was still very much in place at that time. But significantly, even people who had known Vaira for years or who have visited in her home, avoided her eyes and did not talk to her that evening.

Intense, but by no means unanimous reactions to Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's lectures and writings were nothing new for the future President. She had faced the same mixed reactions on many occasions in émigré society, but always remained convinced that the important thing was not whether the audience agreed or disagreed with what she said, but rather "if the things I have said help even a little bit in guiding someone to think actively and to determine his or her own viewpoint, then my efforts will not have been in vain."

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, albeit a frequent guest in Latvia, was still a resident of Canada in 1994 at the time of the awards ceremony. The text of the speech, though, was based on things she had heard or observed in Latvia. She made direct reference to an acquaintance who had inspired the title of the speech — "That's just how we are and there's nothing we can do about it," expressing the mood of pessimism in

the newly independent country. She was speaking of the relationship of mutual influence between the system (or the state) and the individual. Indeed, this was the first time that a Latvian from the West had spoken so frankly in public about the more absurd aspects of post-Soviet life, which could have been changed without waiting for instructions "from above." This was unheard of from émigré Latvians. The speech was received by a groundswell of approval and enthusiasm from Latvians across the world, including Latvia itself, who exclaimed that the author had absolutely hit the nail on the head. Yet there many post-Soviets in Latvia who perceived it as advice from the outside, from a well-fed and nurtured person who had never experienced the absurdities of the Soviet system in her daily life but was only too ready to offer advice and instruction about issues she did not really understand. The speech was daring and provocative, and drew within a coherent whole the simple realities of everyday life, ideology, politics and the relationship between the individual and society.

The Nation's Self-confidence

In September 1997, the World Federation of Free Latvians held a conference under the heading "Latvians and National Self-confidence" at the Riga Latvian Society House. Many thought this subject boring. More often than not, discussions about national confidence tend to awaken dormant complexes and memories of historical injustice rather than optimism. This conference, however, caused an unexpected stir and had to be moved to a larger hall because of the unexpectedly large audience.

Professor Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was once again invited to speak at the conference, and this time the title of her speech was quite benign: "The nation's self-assurance: problems and possibilities." Nobody questioned the idea that there were problems, but what of the possibilities? Did they really still exist? As soon as the speaker took the floor, however, everything fell into place. One had the strange feeling that the self-confidence of the audience and, by extension, of the nation as a whole was growing then and there.

Rarely do public speakers present anything surprising, but one of these exceptions is Vaira Viķe-Freiberga. Here she was, yet again reawakening awareness and confidence, repeating the work she has undertaken for decades with émigré Latvians. The previous speeches at the Global Congress of Latvian Scientists in July 1991 and the "Spīdola" awards in December 1994 had caused a great deal of controversy, but the address at the conference for the World Federation of Free Latvians marked a new phase in the speaker's history of oratory. Latvian mass media had already begun to suggest Vaira Viķe-Freiberga as a potential President of Latvia. Also, she was no longer talking about how the nation as a whole was feeling and explaining the roots of these feelings as she had done in her speech "That's how we are", but was taking an in-depth look specifically at Latvia's economy. Her speech confirmed that she had studied the realities of the post-Soviet Latvian economy and had also considered its historic context. Despite all the negative indicators, she could see a light at the end of the tunnel. Later, after a year in the presidency, she announced with great conviction that if any of the political parties represented in Parliament did not table a draft law on initial declarations of income by government officials soon, she would have to draft the law herself. She would ensure that the law that was so necessary for the revitalisation of Latvia's economic life and moral climate would take effect as soon as possible. In her speech in 1997, she combined the basic principles of patriotism and nationalism, accenting the dialectics of relations between the state and its citizens and pointing to the reasons patriotism had not yet taken root in the nation's collective consciousness. As some people pointed out at the time, she spoke in a way that a President might speak.

When was Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's name first mentioned in relation to the presidency? Imants Skrastiņš, the same actor with the black suit, and Lia Gulevska, both producers on Radio Latvia, say this occurred in the summer of 1996 during one of her regular visits to Latvia. They had interviewed Viķe-Freiberga and posed the following question: "Many émigré Latvians think that you are a potential President of Latvia. [Businesswoman Baiba Rubesa, for one, has proposed the idea]. Would you be ready to take the job?" There was a fairly long pause, but the answer

was direct and without any of the false modesty or mincing of words that is so common among Latvians. "Yes", she said. "I could do the job."

The future President's 1997 speech on the self-confidence of the nation was printed in at least five Latvian language publications in Latvia and abroad. It is reprinted here, abridged by about one-third.

/.../

"Patriotic Latvians have always believed that an independent and sovereign Latvian state would provide the most favourable political framework for promoting the interests and furthering the development of the Latvian people. It would allow the state to make use of the resources that are at its disposal, to support the development of a national social environment and culture, while at the same time caring for the fundamental social well being of the people."

"One of Latvia's achievements at this time is that democracy, freedom of the press and civil peace among the country's citizens prevail. These are already enormous achievements and we can only rejoice that we have them. We can also be happy about a number of the country's economic indicators. At the same time, though, if the country's wealth is progressively concentrated in the hands of an increasingly narrow elite, if the country's treasury is losing massive amounts of money that would flow into the treasury if laws were observed, if the intelligentsia and the middle class hover around the poverty level, if the masses of Latvia's residents are being increasingly pauperised, then it is clear that the independent state has not really done its job. In such conditions, an unhealthy atmosphere arises, one in which the average citizen does not believe the state and its structures are caring for him. Citizens do not feel that they are being given the proper level of respect. On the contrary, average people in Latvia feel disappointed, exploited and abandoned. Their self-respect has suffered severe damage. Pride and respect for one's homeland cannot emerge under these circumstances. /.../

"In a democratic society, the main task of the state is to ensure that communal resources are distributed fairly and that the government responds to the nation's needs and demands on two separate levels. First, the state must ensure that every newborn child has reasonable prospects in terms of health, security, education, work, and personal development. Second, at

the level of spiritual necessities, the state must ensure that the basic demands of society also incorporate higher spiritual values. A civilized society is one in which culture, like education, is one of the fundamental rights.

"When the quality of life in various countries is evaluated and compared, specialists usually follow those economic indicators that reveal the extent to which a country's circumstances are humane and favourable to personal development. How would Latvia fare in such ratings? Here are a few examples. This year in a UNICEF publication, it says that 50% of all Latvia's children live below the poverty level. Every second child lives below the poverty level. Should we Latvians be proud of this fact? Thousands of children in Latvia do not go to school. Will illiterate people be the ones who ensure Latvia's future prospects in the information age? Here's another example. The director of the National Social Insurance Fund has just announced that nearly a quarter of those residents of Latvia who are able to work do not qualify for any kind of social welfare payment because their employers have not filed information about the wages that have actually been paid to them nor made the statutory contributions to the Social Welfare fund. Do these news items increase our confidence?

'Here's yet another all too typical example. I just read in the newspaper "Lauku Avīze" [a widely-read national newspaper focused mostly on rural issues] that the largest grain processing company in Zemgale [one of Latvia's provinces], Dobeles Dzirnavnieks, announced shortly before the beginning of the harvest, that it would be reducing the amount of grain it was purchasing from farmers by a half. What does that mean for Latvian farmers? In many cases, it may mean desperation.

"But that's not all. It turns out that at the beginning of last year, Dobeles Dzirnavnieks suffered financial losses of 146,814 lats [around 257,000 US dollars]. What happened? Well, the company which does not want to buy grain from Latvian farmers had signed a contract to import grain from Ukraine to the value of half a million American dollars. With astonishing eagerness and speed, the management of Dobeles Dzirnavnieks prepaid the money — not to Ukrainian grain suppliers, but to an intermediary company, 'Arra', which is registered in the Jelgava District [in the Latvian province of Zemgale]. This move is all the more amazing if we bear in mind that Latvian grain processors often don't pay Latvian farmers even after the grain has been delivered. Companies refuse to buy any

grain at all from Latvian farmers if the farmers don't sign contracts in advance waiving the right to receive immediate payment for their produce. If they don't sign, well, they can keep their grain. This means that grain-processing companies in Latvia are blackmailing Latvian grain farmers, effectively forcing them to grant interest-free loans to the processors for months on end. Farmers who must borrow from banks, meanwhile, have to repay their loans at very high interest rates. The bottom line is that the Latvian farmer today is being treated in the same way that indentured tenants were treated by German barons in the late 18th century. We would do well to remember that back then, this inequality led to the famous peasant uprising of Kaugari.

"Now, this is not the end to the story about the grain. What happened next is an all too familiar tale. The grain from Ukraine, that was worth half a million US dollars and for which the company had paid in advance, never did get delivered in full. Only half of it ever arrived at Dobeles Dzirnavnieks. I'll give you three guesses about what happened next. Of course the money that was paid to the intermediary company could not be recouped, because the intermediary company, cleverly enough, had become insolvent and declared bankruptcy in the interim. End of story.

"You are sitting here thinking this is just another example of fraud, one among countless others. That may be so. At the same time, though, I could use different words to describe the situation: Economic sabotage — malicious sabotage of Latvia's wellbeing. These may well be politically motivated actions with very serious and far-reaching consequences that work against the interests of the Latvian people. The majority of ethnic Latvians still live in the countryside. Destroy the foundations of their livelihood and you will have done a lot to weaken the future prospects of an independent Latvia.

"Independent Latvia, in principle, should be able to defend the general interests of the Latvian people and their economic and cultural development. Has that happened? Let me be frank here. I have read recent issues of Latvia's newspapers, and I feel quite absurd standing here before you with my prepared theories about Latvian identity and national self-confidence. At the same time, it is evident that we do need to sit down and talk about the things that are happening to us to try and understand

the situation better. Only then can we hope to determine the right actions that would lead to changes in the future.

"If our goal is to strengthen the Latvian nation, and if we understand that it needs national confidence to be able better to defend its own interests, then what are the most important things we must do? I would propose that we have to work on three different fronts simultaneously. The first basic goal is to ensure that all Latvia's citizens, regardless of their ethnic group or place of origin, identify this country as their own, promote Latvia's interests, respect its laws and are loyal citizens. /.../

"The second challenge is for the ethnic Latvians who live in Latvia to publicize the national aspirations of Latvians internationally. That is not an easy thing to do. Latvia should have prepared a White Paper long ago with clear and graphic descriptions of the harmful consequences of the German and Russian occupations, setting current situations within their historical context and outlining current aspirations and priorities.

"Most nations in the West do not have the same understanding of the relationship between culture, nationalism and national sovereignty that nationally-leaning Latvians possess. Other nations seemingly cannot and certainly do not want to understand the fears and even desperation of Latvians about the prospects of survival for the Latvian language and culture in the land of their ancestors. /.../

"The third and, in a sense, most important challenge for the newly independent Latvia is that Latvians themselves must reach agreement on the most important goals for the future. Ours is now an independent country in which people can engage in public debate and discussions very openly, without any fear of repression. People can present, defend and re-evaluate the widest possible variety of viewpoints. If this exchange of ideas is to rise above the level of empty blather, however, sooner or later it will have to merge with debates at the political level. Distinct political parties must clearly represent various views and strategies so that voters can make a realistic and meaningful choice on Election Day. Where too few political parties are able to present serious platforms, there the lists of candidates in elections are politically vacuous and more or less randomly assembled. Being without real political convictions or viewpoints, some members of parliament start moving from one party to another immediately after their election, seeking the best personal grazing grounds, without

any sense of responsibility toward the voters or the ‘platforms’ that led to their election. This would happen much less often if each deputy were elected by a separate voting district and was responsible to a known group of voters. In a democratic system, if the state is to be responsive to the demands of residents, citizens must know, understand and decide what those demands really are and what obstacles prevent the implementation of those interests. Citizens must be willing and able to participate in the discussion of national issues; they must be ready to become actively involved in the political process. This, too, is a part of national self-confidence.

“Consciousness and self-confidence, both in ethnic and in national terms, are products of culture. Over the course of history they are collectively shaped and re-shaped. During the lifetime of every member of an ethnic group these can be learned and implemented, to a greater or lesser extent, as part of an individual’s personal development. What is it that helps people form their individual consciousness, their ontogenesis? What are the ideological trends that shaped the consciousness of ‘being Latvian’ through its historical development? /.../

“In order to prove that Latvia was worthy to stand with other nations, the Latvians of the first national awakening at the end of the 19th century had to create a culture which could catch up as quickly as possible to what the long-established nations of Europe had developed over the course of many centuries. Latvians had to establish a culture that was, at one and the same time, specifically Latvian and impeccably international, one that would form a synthesis of traditional and modern elements. This Latvian culture and Latvian value system, then, would become the cornerstone of Latvian self-confidence. Only later — in time — people began to think about an independent national state as a logical and natural manifestation and embodiment of this national self-assurance.

“Circumstances today are not that radically different and two of the original goals are still very much in force — to comprehend all the changes that have taken place in the rest of the world over the last 50 years and to construct an appropriate synthesis between the national and the international.

“The existing tensions between idealists and materialists are also not very different from the ones that prevailed during the first Latvian National Awakening. The great idealists whose names we still extol today were exceptional people. During this historical period, as in any other period,

many gifted and hard-working Latvians focused entirely on their careers, not identifying with any larger whole and, thus, not having any sense of loyalty or obligation toward other members of their nation. The only conscious goal in life for such people was to improve their material and social circumstances at the individual level. For this, they were ready to sacrifice everything, including their Latvian identity and the interests of their nation. If necessary, they could become very active and aggressive defenders of the Germanisation and Russification policies that Latvia was enduring at that time. /.../

"Today, in the post-Soviet period of rapid transition from communism to the free market and unbridled capitalism, unprincipled materialists may find themselves in even more favourable circumstances. The number of global corporations in the contemporary world economy has risen to the point where maintaining a government's role as an economic leader becomes increasingly difficult. The annual budgets of some multinational companies far exceed the budgets of many sovereign countries. A democratic country is responsible to its voters. A corporation, by contrast, is only responsible for earning money for its investors and shareholders. Supranational political structures such as the European Community and its parliament play an important role in facilitating stability, economic growth and peace, but they can also provide a healthy and politically responsible counterforce to the excessive freedoms of multinational companies, international banks and other financial forces. A massive conglomerate can easily bribe a corrupt government official. If this leads to the signing of contracts that are only advantageous to the large corporation and disadvantageous to the state, then the residents of the state will have to pay the price — deterioration in their standard of living, possibly for many years.

"Democratic processes and the rights of a nation are seriously threatened in countries such as Russia and Colombia, where trade in weapons and drugs, as well as more mundane forms of organized crime, involve sums of money that exceed the national budget. Money, physical threats and terror can be used to put pressure on strategically chosen individuals at all levels of legislative and executive authority in the country, from the top to the bottom.

"So, in what direction has Latvia gone since the restoration of its independence — that of a corrupt country or that of a country where the rule

of law prevails? One way or another, this is the country where our children and grandchildren will live. If the country has no rule of law and no responsibility to its citizens, then it is clear that instead of patriotism, we will see the onset of cynicism, bitterness and apathy. Nobody will see any point in developing national convictions. /.../

"In émigré society, the concept of being Latvian has evolved into being active in 'Latvian affairs', which at times can become something of a cosmic black hole — one into which one must constantly dump enormous quantities of money and effort to keep the beast alive. Those émigrés who do not simply withdraw from Latvian society have experienced their Latvian identity with a burden of obligations so heavy that very few other ethnic groups around the world could match it. It could be matched by Latvian patriots in exile have been cultivating for decades a form of Latvian consciousness, which demands that its followers masochistically sacrifice themselves on the altar of the Latvian community. Normally, an individual living in his or her own country would not be expected to meet obligations that are so high and so demanding. /.../

"What kind of patriotism, then, would be acceptable to all sides? What kind of patriotism would be seen as real and true, and what must we do as a community in order to nurture such patriotism among our people? There is so much to do that any initiative aimed at raising Latvian self-confidence, by any member of the community, is bound to be beneficial. The way I see it, we must all put in some effort, each in his or her own setting or community, each in his or her own appropriate and achievable way. National self-confidence should be the natural outgrowth of a satisfying existence. It cannot be forced upon the nation from above and it cannot be attached to the nation artificially. Self-confidence cannot be created by decree, but conditions can be created where self-confidence is fostered.

"The best thing about self-assurance is that nobody can take it away from you. Once you have it, it is yours, no matter what anyone else says. As for myself — a feeling for the Latvian sense of beauty, a Latvian code of honour and a Latvian sense of morality has nurtured me since childhood. I feel pain when other Latvians suffer, I shiver when they are cold, and I feel hungry when they are starving. I know what is meant in the folk song "I wipe the sweat from my brow as I work, the tears from my eyes

when I'm standing still." I blush at the shame of my nation; I am crushed by my nation's dishonour.

"My nation so very much needs each and every citizen to be able to respect humanity for its own sake, both one's own and that of others. This is the only way one can stop mistreating himself and the nation. Only then can one truly love one's nation."

"The Latvian people are the flesh of my flesh and I feel at one with them. My fondest wish is for them to thrive, to grow in vigour, beauty, wisdom and happiness. I only wish I had the tongues of angels and the might of prophets to express to my people how much potential for power and beauty lies waiting within them, how much light and radiance, and how much truth. How much yearning for fulfilment and what a future, that lies before them, open and bright."

Linden Planks Across The Abyss

Patriotism comes from the Latin *pater*, for "father" and has masculine origins representing the readiness of men to protect the freedom of their fatherland, to shed blood and to sacrifice everything, including their lives. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga in developing her own system of values, could fall back on a tradition where women are seen as strong as well as beautiful, a strength that does not diminish the strength of men, but rather enhances and augments it. The poets and writers Aspazija, Anna Brigadere, Vizma Belševica, Māra Zālīte and Ārija Elksne, among others have portrayed the strength of character and patriotism of Latvian women.

I have just looked at something written by Ārija Elksne, a poet very popular in Soviet Latvia for her shrewd observations. In the collection "Vēl vienai upei pāri" (Across Yet Another River), she combines the sources of strength for the womanly and the patriotic, and faith in the future of her nation:

*That girl's grandmother
Must have known incantations.
That girl's grandmother
Must have given her rain words.*

*The girl walked in beauty, all white,
Though tar rained downed from the heavens.
She kept her own feet clean,
And muddied no one else's.*

*Where other women sank and got stuck,
Unable to get ahead,
There the girl always got across
As lightly as a bird.*

*If I were her mother,
I wouldn't worry about her.
I'd calmly let her do anything,
Even plant potatoes in Hell itself.*

*Because there are forces
(Besides power and money)
Which through the centuries
Carry nations through.*

Vaira Vilke-Freiberga has lived all over the world, is successful, leads an orderly life and finds substance and fulfilment in her relationships. Her family life and her professional life are at once scholarly and social, Latvian and international, creative and administrative, sophisticated and humble, rational and spiritual. The colour and diversity of her world is evident not only in the written word, but particularly in her relationships with people, in her generosity and unfeigned simplicity.

She is a thinker and writer for whom human closeness has always been critically important and she has a sincere desire to live not only on the pages of a book but to live life among people. Her personality overflows with unfeigned *joie de vivre* as well as delight in quiet contemplation. Even as an émigré she forged hundreds of links with people in her homeland because of her love for her native country. No matter how invincible the barriers were between émigré Latvians and Soviet Latvians, her love for her people overcame them long before the independence movement began.

Vaira is surprising as a person because of the poise she has achieved from dealing with so many diverse demands in such a variety of settings. She has managed to defeat mountains of work and to cross so many abysses to form personal relationships. She is so very international and, simultaneously, so very Latvian. On behalf of her people and her country, she is indeed 'ready to go plant potatoes in Hell itself'.

IV

THE PRESIDENCY

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was elected President of the Republic of Latvia for a four-year term on June 17, 1999. She took office on July 8, the first woman to achieve her country's highest office, something unprecedented in the whole of Eastern Europe at the time. She is not a member of any political party. On June 20, 2003 she was re-elected President for another term in office as the only candidate.

So Many Candidates: Two Vairas And Other Candidates

Just before candidates were nominated for the presidency in Latvia, there was something of a calm before the storm. The media were silent about the candidates the governing political parties were considering for the presidency. That is, until favoured candidate Anatolijs Gorbunovs, the former Parliamentary speaker, former member of the Soviet Supreme Council and chairman of the Soviet Latvian Supreme Council before that, surprised many by declaring that he would not be standing for election. The poet Māra Zālīte greeted this news with a sharply polemical article:

"Gorbunovs, as a decent man, understood very well, that as the most visible representative of the old regime, one which denied the right of this state to exist, he does not have the moral right to be the highest-ranking official of the Latvian state he had formerly disowned. He cannot be the person chosen by the Latvian state to display its political, civic and ethical ideals, or at least, belief in those ideals. Gorbunov's

refusal to stand for office only increased my respect for him, especially because he withdrew for moral reasons, all the more so because the concept of ‘moral considerations’ is so very seldom a part of Latvian politics.”¹ Zālīte concluded that the political party Latvia’s Way, of which Gorbunovs was a member, had asked him to undertake an inappropriate role, a cynical demonstration that the party’s own interests stood above those of the state.

Even though political parties in Latvia have often spoken about the need for a dialogue with the general public to sound out their views before an important vote in Parliament, in this case, there was a tendency to refrain from public debate. The media sought to showcase the presidential candidates and present their views on the country’s future. This was particularly true of the newspaper “Diena”, which posed the following questions to all the candidates officially presented by the political parties, so that it could inform its readers about them. All the questions related to Latvia’s fundamental problems and their possible solutions: “Considering the low level of democracy in Latvia and the high level of lawlessness, what are the three subjects you would bring up for debate on domestic policy?”, “What will you try to change in domestic politics?”, “How will you reduce conflict between ethnic Latvians and others?”, “Did you actively oppose the totalitarian state and the Soviet occupation? If so, what did you do, and what do you think now of the contribution you made?”, “How active a role will you play in setting foreign policy?”, “Which international politicians do you view as role models?” and “What languages do you speak?”

Not all the candidates were prepared to answer all the questions. The editor of “Diena”, Sarmīte Ēlerte, argued that politicians have no right to avoid public debate, while commentator Aivars Ozoliņš wrote that the refusal of some candidates to answer the questions represented a clear sense of conceit and superiority vis-à-vis society and the nation: “When I am elected,” replied Ozoliņš ironically, “then I will deign to talk to ‘ordinary people’!”

¹ Zālīte M. “Gorbunovs nesaudzē” (Gorbunovs unsparing), *Diena*, 4 July 1999, p. 2.

By Election Day in Parliament, June 17, 1999 there were five nominations for President, one from each of the parliamentary factions except for the left wing party PCTVL (For Human Rights in a United Latvia). It was a record high for the number of candidates proposed in the whole history of presidential elections in Latvia. At this point Vaira Viķe-Freiberga did not have the official backing of any political party, but had been publicly mentioned as a potential candidate. The parties officially nominated the following candidates:

Anatolijs Gorbunovs by "Latvijas ceļš", the Latvia's Way party, was born in 1942 in rural Latvia. He studied at Rīga Polytechnic Institute and the Social Sciences Academy in Moscow. He worked as a construction worker and an instructor at Riga Polytechnic Institute. In the 1970s and 1980s he held various posts in the Riga branch committee and Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Latvian SSR. In 1988, he became chairman of the Presidium of the Latvian Supreme Council [the name of the parliament in the Soviet period]. He was Latvia's Way's leading candidate in three subsequent post-Soviet parliamentary elections. At the time of his nomination, he was serving as deputy prime minister and transport minister. According to public opinion surveys, he was the most popular politician in Latvia.

Arnis Kalniņš by LSDSP, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party, was born in 1935 in rural Latvia. Professor Kalniņš held a doctorate in economics and was an academician at the Latvian Academy of Sciences. He had been a Soviet people's deputy, had worked for the government in the Latvian SSR and then in independent Latvia, when he had been the deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, focusing on economic affairs. He had been minister for economic reforms and was a member of the Latvian Parliament at the time of his nomination.

Vaira Paegle by "Tautas partija", the People's Party, was born in 1942 in Rīga, from where she and her family fled to Germany and then to the United States. She lived in America until 1998, when she moved back to Latvia. In the United States, she earned a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in international relations. She was active in a number of émigré Latvian organizations. For four years she was the chairwoman of the board of the World Federation of Free Latvians. She had visited Latvians in Siberia and may be the only émigré Latvian ever to

have made that kind of a trip on behalf of her people. She, too, was a Member of Parliament at the time of her nomination.

Raimonds Pauls by "Jaunā partija", the New Party, was born in 1936 in Rīga. He is internationally renowned and beloved as a composer and pianist. A graduate of the Latvian Conservatory of Music, he worked for the National Radio and Television Committee of the Latvian SSR. He was a Soviet people's deputy and, in post-independent Latvia, the minister of culture and an advisor to President Guntis Ulmanis on cultural issues. In the election that brought him to Parliament in 1998, he was the New Party's most popular candidate. [This is the same composer who had befriended the Freibergs in Montreal and toured North America.]

Jānis Priedkalns by "Tērvzemei un brīvībai", the party For the Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK, was born in rural Latvia in 1934 and spent the occupation years abroad. He is a doctor of veterinary medicine and has studied and taught at universities in Germany, England, France, Australia and the United States. He is a full member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Jānis Priedkalns returned to Latvia in 1995, when he was elected to Parliament. In late 1997 he was appointed Latvia's ambassador to the United Nations in New York.

The Latvian constitution states that the president must be at least 40 years old. Anatolijs Gorbunovs and Vaira Paegle, both 57 at the time, were the youngest candidates, Viķe-Freiberga — though not yet nominated in this round — was 61, and the remaining three were all a little older. Of these five, Anatolijs Gorbunovs and Raimonds Pauls underwent a true baptism of fire in the media before the election, proving that many people in Latvia were by no means as politically dispassionate as the political parties might have hoped.

Even though the numerically most influential political forces in the Parliament had nominated their candidates earlier, the final presidential election procedure and protocol were only approved on June 3rd, two weeks before the event. That delay may have occurred because the parties of the governing coalition had not been able to agree on any one single candidate. According to the rules of the Parliament, candidates could be nominated right up until the moment the vote was to be taken, so those who favoured Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's nomination still had hope.

The Election Campaign That Never Was

During the pre-election period members of the Latvian *intelligentsia* wrote an open letter to the Members of Parliament recommending that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga be elected President. The letter, which was published in the newspaper "Diena", argued that she was obviously a better candidate than those nominated by the political parties. The letter can be considered a decisive factor in Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's election because, even though the general public, through influential supporters in the community, in the government and the press, had mentioned her name as a potential candidate, her nomination had not been suggested officially to the members of Parliament. The open letter represented a rational political choice and a lack of trust in the political parties and their Parliamentarians. [In fact, the Government fell due to a vote of non-confidence a week after the President was elected.] In the heated atmosphere of the pre-election period, the letter proved to be effective both psychologically and politically, even though the governing parties did not openly react to it.

Less than a month before the election, at the end of May 1999, "Diena" began to publish a column called "President?" A number of well known personalities and political analysts discussed the qualities that a President of Latvia should have. No candidates were named specifically, but it soon became obvious that the proposed prerequisites matched those expressed in the open letter to the MP's, and that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, of all the candidates, met those requirements most closely.

Here is the text of the open letter:

"After following the debate about the nominees for the presidency of Latvia, we conclude that none of the candidates nominated by the political parties has the qualifications necessary to fill the position of our country's highest-ranking office. We call on Parliament to admit this and to sacrifice political ambition in the interests of the nation. We call on deputies not to lose faith in the ideals of the Latvian state and not to undervalue the role the President can play in upholding and strengthening these ideals.

"We believe that under the current governing majority, the President must be non-partisan. That person must be highly educated, must have

personally experienced Western democracy and must be a respected citizen and patriot. We can propose such an individual.

“We recommend Vaira Viķe-Freiberga for the presidency of Latvia, currently director of the Latvian Institute, member of the Latvian Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Canadian Academy of Sciences, formerly president of the Canadian Psychological Association, the Canadian Federation of Social Sciences and the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies and vice-chairman of the Canadian Science Council. She has taken part in NATO’s scientific programs and has been a consultant to various Canadian government institutions, ministries and specialist commissions. In Latvia Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is best known as a distinguished researcher and author in the field of Latvian folklore. She is respected by Latvians throughout the world.

“Vaira Viķe-Freiberga speaks English, German and French fluently, is conversant in Spanish and Portuguese. As she spent a part of her childhood in Morocco, she has had contacts with the Arab language and culture. We consider her capable of commanding international respect at the highest levels.

“She has always maintained strong ties with our nation and believed in an independent Latvia. Since the early 1980s, she has visited Latvia regularly and was an active participant in the national renaissance. She knows the country’s civic, political and social realities. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is educated in the exact sciences and oriented to the humanities. We are of the opinion that she has the character to unite Latvia’s society and make it more humane on the basis of humanitarian and democratic values.

“Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is charismatic, an inspired public speaker, and skilled in debate and argumentation through her many years as a lecturer and professor. From the point of view of both internal and external politics, we believe she is the most appropriate candidate for the presidency and we recommend her. We call on Members of Parliament to surmount party interests for the sake of a free, democratic and humane Latvia in the 21st century.”

The open letter was written by the poet and playwright Māra Zālīte, and it was signed by 22 members of the *intelligentsia*, including university professors, actors and directors, medical specialists, composers, painters, mathematicians, theologians among others.

The formal signing took place at the Rīga Latvian Society House. Jānis Škapars, a former member of the Latvian Popular Front and a Member of Parliament for the People's Party, assumed responsibility for delivering the letter to the press.

The final few days before the election were enormously tense. The cultural community, unlike the politicians, had chosen its candidate and stood behind her. Once the letter to the MPs had been published in "Diena", many other letters of support appeared. The *intelligentsia* was again acting as the voice of the people, just as they had done earlier during the fight for independence. However, along with disgust at the intrigues of the political arena, doubts remained about the ability of the *intelligentsia* to really influence events.² Nevertheless, pessimism about the dearth of good candidates was countered by the conviction that they did in fact exist.

The Election

The parliamentary session to elect the President began at 9:00 a.m. on June 17th, 1999 and continued until a few minutes before midnight, making this the longest working day of the four-year term of the Parliament. As political analysts had predicted, none of the candidates won the necessary 51 votes in the first round. The next rounds, too, did not produce a winner. Raimonds Pauls of the New Party had the most votes (33), but in the end he withdrew his candidacy after he failed to win the necessary 51 votes after five rounds of voting.

When the list of nominees had been exhausted the presidium decided, with unexpected haste, to re-open the list for nominations. After several hours of wheeling and dealing, three of the parliamentary parties — the People's Party, For the Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK and the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party — threw their weight behind Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga and nominated her as candidate for the presidency. She was up against two other candidates: Ingrīda Ūdre of

² Līce A. *Diena*, 14 June, 1999, p. 11.

the New Party and Valdis Birkavs of Latvia's Way. Ūdre, born in 1959, knowing full well that she had no chance of being elected, was nonetheless nominated as a "spoiler" candidate by a party that had been formed shortly before the parliamentary elections of 1998, while Birkavs, born in 1942, had a long political history. Indeed, he was one of the most visible politicians in the newly independent Latvia, a founding member and first chairman of Latvia's Way. He had served in all of the sessions of the Latvian parliament from the beginning of renewed independence until 2002 as prime minister, foreign minister and justice minister respectively. The hidden agenda of Latvia's way had been all along to nominate him and get him elected in the second round.

The first vote for the three candidates proved inconclusive because one ballot was spoiled. The presidium and representatives of the parliamentary factions decided to take another vote. On what turned out to be the seventh vote of the day, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga received a majority of 53 votes by the three parties who had nominated her. She was elected only a few hours after her nomination.

What Did The President Have In Her Handbag?

Seven candidates, seven rounds of voting, and Vaira Viķe-Freiberga won. Why? Was this an accident, or was it simply a twist of fate? When something decisive happens in the history of a country or a nation, one automatically thinks of destiny, and in fact the concept of "a decisive occurrence" and "a fateful occurrence" is almost synonymous in Latvian. Perhaps the visionary Eižens Finks, who was Latvia's answer to Nostradamus in the 1930s, was right when he wrote that the restoration of Latvia's independence would occur when the year could be read forwards and backwards (as is the case with 1991), then there would be some slips and stumbles, but the country would begin to flourish again when a woman became Head of State.

When the results of the vote were announced shortly before midnight and the winner was asked to step up to the podium to say a few words, people watching television observed a seemingly insignificant but nevertheless noteworthy moment. There was a bit of a fuss over the newly

elected President's handbag as a misguided woman tried to free the newly elected President of this unseemly prop. The new President would not give in and was still carrying the handbag when she took her place at the podium. Presidents don't usually march around with handbags on their arms. For female Presidents, however, the handbag is an inseparable part of the image. This issue would come up again later, when people began think about the President's image and what kind of person a woman who has been elected to that role should be. Nobody had much doubt about the proper appearance of a male President, but where should a female look for a role model? How could the image combine two contradictory concepts — "the female President" and "the President of Latvia"?

So what did the President have in her handbag? What was so precious that she could not bear to part with it? It turns out the purse contained an ornamental folk costume belt from the district of Lielvārde, woven in silvery grey especially for her as a good luck talisman.

June 17th To The Oath Of Office On July 8th

After the election was over, and the newly elected President had made her first broadcast, the nation was elated. People cried for joy, they toasted each other with champagne; they were euphoric and congratulated one another. Latvians across the land and abroad were celebrating this great surprise victory.

June 17th will be remembered as the day Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was elected President of Latvia, but the date has a unique place in the history of Soviet Latvia as well, because this was the day in 1940 when the Soviet Red Army marched into the Dome Square, the historic centre of Riga. Later it was renamed June 17th Square by the Soviet ideologues to commemorate the occasion.

At any rate, after a very tense day, June 17, 1999 ended happily. Many people felt as if a burden had been lifted, almost as if the air were fresher in the streets of Rīga. The Summer Solstice festival "Jāņi", June 24th, was approaching, and all this heightened the celebratory mood. On the longest night of the year, Latvians, who are known for being

fairly reticent people, let their hair down, forgetting about everyday cares and get ready to share in the joy of life with anyone and everyone. The Latvian is ready to live, to love, to integrate and to be integrated.

When she took up her post, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga became the fifth elected President of Latvia. Before her were Jānis Čakste (1922-1927), Gustavs Zemgals (1927-1930), Alberts Kviesis (1930-1936) during the first independence, as well as Guntis Ulmanis who was the first post-Soviet Latvian President and held the post for two terms between 1993 and 1999. The President from 1936 until the Soviet occupation was Kārlis Ulmanis (Guntis Ulmanis' great-uncle) but in 1934 he lead a political coup against the existing government and became a self-appointed benevolent Leader ("Vadonis"). It was Kārlis Ulmanis who conceded the authority of the office to the Soviet-appointed Augsts Kirhenšteins in 1940.

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga took office in 1999 after the "second Ulmanis era." She arrived in office with the sense of a new epoch, knowing that she would lead Latvia into the new millennium. Many people had great hopes for her. This was particularly true of the émigrés — at long last they were truly a part of Latvian political life. As the diplomat and politician Sandra Kalniete wrote in a book about the restoration of Latvia's independence, "By electing Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, who had never had any ties to the Communist Party, our post-Soviet era had ended."

Thinking about Viķe-Freiberga as a President for the new century and the new millennium, the words of academician Jānis Stradiņš about her predecessors come to mind: "Jānis Čakste was a man of the 19th century in comparison to Kārlis Ulmanis, who was 18 years younger than him, a man whose personality had emerged through the first truly nationalist traditions. Kārlis Ulmanis, by contrast, grew up in the early 20th century, in Latvia and the United States" [He spent 10 years in the United States, pursuing his education at the University of Nebraska].

To go into a new century fully aware, that person obviously has to have grown up in the previous century. Even though Viķe-Freiberga's personality matured in the 20th century, she clearly has the perspective of a 21st century person, perhaps more so than some of the elected officials in Latvia who are considerably younger than she. The Latvian state

has not been independent for very long — just 22 years before World War II and now since 1991. Isn't it wonderful that we have been able to see Presidents in action from three different centuries?

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga is the fifth woman to assume the presidency of a European country, after Vigdís Finnbogadóttir of Iceland, Agata Barbara of Malta, and Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese of Ireland. Tarja Halonen became President of Finland a few months after Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga's election. Among the ruling monarchies of Europe, there are several very distinguished women — Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, of course, who has been on the throne since 1953, Denmark's Queen Margarethe II (as of 1972) and the Queen of the Netherlands, Beatrix (since 1980).

Why Don't Latvia's Politicians "Know" Anything About Her?

Shortly before the presidential election, the newspaper "Diena" had posed a series of questions to all of the potential candidates, including "What would you change in domestic politics?" Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga had answered: "corruption, lack of responsibility and incompetence." She emphasized the organic links among these three, arguing "they are the three heads of a single monster, obstructing development and prosperity." All too soon she would find out the truth of those words and she would have to face the monster herself.

The first statements made by politicians in the wake of the election showed that many were having trouble coming to terms with what had happened. Political opponents expressed cynical and harsh criticism that showed confusion and a lack of political sophistication. Some tried very hard to find out something about the newly elected President to use against her, to damage the positive image she had so quickly established.

The day after the presidential election, the chairman of the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party, Juris Bojārs, announced that during the election campaign his party had been offered a bribe of 30,000 lats [around 52,000 US dollars] if they would agree to vote for the candidate

of Latvia's Way. When the Latvia's Way party nominated its second candidate, Valdis Birkavs, Bojārs claimed the Social Democrats were promised anything they wanted for their support. Debates over the politician's scandalous allegations continued for some time as the media covered the proceedings and many people were sceptical about the allegations. Bojārs threatened to go to the prosecutor's office but never dared name those who had allegedly offered the bribes. All he would say later was that he had wanted to begin a fight against political corruption in Latvia.

Politicians who did not fully support Viķe-Freiberga and thought she would not do well in office focused on the fact that she was not a 'local', that she had not lived in Latvia during the Soviet era. They claimed she did not understand the true situation in Latvia, that she could never understand those who had lived under Soviet occupation, that her true agenda wasn't known and no one knew what to expect of her. The Prime Minister at the time, Vilis Krištopans of the Latvia's Way party, remarked wryly, "I don't know anything about her." The new President responded quickly: "I don't know every basketball player either," making reference to Mr. Krištopan's earlier professional career in sports.

The claim by some politicians that they "knew nothing about" Vaira Viķe-Freiberga showed that they didn't really care to know about this Professor turned President. One never actually heard any debate from them about which specific issues the new President supposedly knew nothing about. They continued to believe that the determining factor in government operations should be the 'old boys' network of personal contacts and unregulated relationships that had been in place since Soviet times. Competence, the rule of law and being guided by the spirit of the law were all secondary issues to them.

Soon enough the chorus of voices crying "who is she?" was joined by some political scientists and journalists who used terms such as "dark horse" and "Alice in Wonderland" to describe the new President. That Viķe-Freiberga was unknown in her own country spread abroad as well. The German newspaper "Tages Anzeiger", among many foreign newspapers, wrote: "If someone had asked the day before yesterday who is

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, even in Latvia that person would have received the response, 'No idea.'³

It was as if Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga had fallen out of the sky on June 17, 1999. Six years earlier, when Guntis Ulmanis was elected to the presidency, nobody knew much about him either, except that his great-uncle had been President at one time. However, nobody suggested that he had materialized out of thin air.

Foreign newspapers stressed the surprise element in Vīķe-Freiberga's election, but also noted that the new President had been a Professor of psychology in Montreal and that she had just relinquished her Canadian citizenship. Newspapers also stressed that she was the first woman to achieve such a high office in Eastern Europe and the second émigré, after Lithuanian's Valdas Adamkus, to gain the presidency of a Baltic country.

Should it be seen as a mark against the President not to have lived in the Soviet Union? Her actions prove that she sees through the system and is not afraid to speak frankly and openly about corruption, the lack of responsibility and incompetence. These issues would arise time after time in her term. The matter of the "KGB bags" came up, the collection of documents from the Soviet-era secret services that had been locked away despite demands by some that they be opened to the public. Would the President hand over the key? There was a scandal about several high-ranking Latvian politicians falsely accused of paedophilia. There was the so-called Russian problem. The matter of the Latvian Legion, a conscripted military unit in World War II that fought with Nazi Germany against the Red Army was an issue, and there was the Holocaust that wiped out the vast majority of Latvia's pre-war Jewish population. These are inherited, complex post-communist realities that are often politicised deliberately to nefarious and Machiavellian ends. These issues inevitably end up on the President's desk.

Representatives of the "old guard" in Latvian politics were suspicious of the President because she was not a mudslinger, she would not sing their song and she would never join them. Some offered backhanded

³ Quoted in *Latvijas Vēstnesis* [The Latvian Herald, official government newspaper], 22 June 1999, p. 36.

compliments: "Oh, she is simply too good to become a politician." Vaira had responded to those ten years earlier during the fight for independence: "Well, if that is what an educated man of culture thinks, then what should the average citizen say? If the author is so squeaky clean that he cannot participate in the dirty political process, then which dirty people will do it for him? We might as well call Moscow and say to them, 'Hey, you know what? We Latvians are too squeaky clean to deal with politics. Come back. You've got experience with politics, you have better skills in ruling over us.'"

Unlike some politicians, the general population was enormously excited about her election. Newspapers were flooded with letters, the majority of them very positive. There were a few thorny barbs, however. The first conflict occurred when she, quite unexpectedly, announced that she would be hiring her son to work part-time as an English and French language translator, speechwriter and editor in the presidential Chancery. Although Latvian law does not prohibit this, some people objected. One reader, in a letter to the editor, titled "The President's choice", glumly predicted that the President would lose the nation's trust: "People are watching the activities of the newly elected President with great interest. People attach enormous importance to all her public announcements."

The concerns are understandable. Family members in the President's immediate office? Aha! That must mean that she wants to smooth the path for the many-headed monster of corruption, which she herself promised to battle! It apparently didn't occur to the critics that the President's family members would be an asset in the Chancery, and if out of duty and family loyalty they would be willing to work for the low wages of the public sector, then everyone would benefit, especially if they are the best qualified to do the job. It also did not occur to them that the new President could do with at least one familiar face in the Chancery that she could trust completely, given that she did not know anybody of the staff left over from her predecessor's tenure.

Vike-Freiberga's election to the presidency meant that her life was altered beyond recognition but she never lost her sense of humour. Asked by the press about what she had not anticipated when she agreed to run for the presidency, she answered: "When I left the parliament

building, I had planned to walk home because my little room was just a few steps away, across the Dome Square. But my bodyguards were there right away and I had to climb into the presidential car. That certainly was a surprise."

Although many people welcomed her election, it still came as a surprise to many of her closest friends. They have had to adjust to the fact that their friend is now the President. Actor Imants Skrastiņš, a friend of the Freibergs family ever since his 1981 tour of Canada, remembers: "When they opened up the second round of nominations and Vaira was summoned to Parliament, I sensed that we would not be meeting simply as friends for some years. That's what has happened. I have seen her in official and semi-official circumstances, but there has never been a moment when I have been able to say, 'Hey, how are you doing?' So I have lost one of my modes of expression. For a long time now I've had the habit of giving a little peck on the cheek to all of my favourite people when I meet them. I made this mistake right at the beginning of her presidency. We ran into each other at Radio Latvia. Happy to see her, I wanted to give her the traditional kiss. Nope. All of a sudden there were two imposing men standing next to her. What can you do? How many friendly kisses have I lost, how many will I still lose? I don't care, though. What do my kisses matter if Latvia finally has such a wonderful President?"?

The Oath Of Office

The Latvian constitution states the newly elected President must take the oath of office at the next meeting of Parliament after the presidential election. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga did so on July 8, 1999:

"I solemnly swear that all my efforts will be dedicated to the benefit of the Latvian people. I shall do everything in my power to promote the welfare of the Latvian state and its people. I shall consider the Latvian constitution and the laws of Latvia to be holy, and I shall abide by them. I shall treat everyone with fairness, and I shall carry out my obligations to the best of my abilities."

After she had been sworn in as President and the Latvian national anthem had been played, she then addressed Members of Parliament and the nation. The new President expressed gratitude to her predecessor, Guntis Ulmanis, for the outstanding work he had done to reinvigorate the institution of the presidency in Latvia. She thanked Parliament for the trust they had shown. She acknowledged the foreign governments that had sent their congratulations, along with expressions of support for Latvia's endeavours. The President clearly addressed not just ethnic Latvians, but all the country's population. The following text was particularly inspiring:

"We are heirs to our history, but we are not slaves to it, doomed to live in servitude to the shadows of the past. We are the shapers of our own future, and we have been given an opportunity to shape it according to our own will and convictions. Let us join forces. Let us be astute and far-sighted. Let us move forward with dedication and efficiency toward the goals that are the most important for us right now. We all know what those goals are. We must have economic growth, we must have social justice, and we must have legislative and ethical order. Latvia must become a partner in negotiations for accession to the European Union. Latvia must become a member of NATO.

"Don't let anyone convince us that we are feeble, weak and infirm. Don't let anyone convince us that we cannot deal with our own problems. Don't let anyone stifle our joy in living, nor the spirit of initiative that we have inherited from our ancestors. A clergyman from Rūjiena, Gustav Bergman, said it best 200 years ago: 'Latvia is not a vale of sorrow; Latvia is the Garden of Eden. Latvia is a wealthy land. It is rich in its beauty, its wisdom, its skills and talents, its resolve and its strength.'

"I call on every citizen and every resident of Latvia to remember the enormous creative potential that is inside every human being, the potential that can always be awakened. /.../ I call on every citizen and resident of Latvia to remember that our destinies are inseparably woven together, that we will all walk side by side through the course of our lives. We live under the same sun and on the same earth. The same sea washes our feet. Let us live so that we respect one another, that we understand one another, that we enrich one another. Let us live in such a way that, with the grace of God, the generations to come will be proud of us."

July 8, 1999 was an important day in the history of the Latvian presidency, but Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga has stressed that for her it was just another working day. She had started her duties as president-elect early the next morning after she was elected. She had met with foreign ambassadors and government officials. She had granted a long list of major interviews to the media. During the time between her election and her taking office, the President had found herself in an intensively busy, but also a curiously odd position.

She was immediately treated as president-to-be, but there wasn't any infrastructure other than bodyguards to support her activities. The staff of the presidential Chancery kept serving the outgoing President Guntis Ulmanis. The new President was left alone, high and dry. She received so little or no assistance from the staff of the Chancery during the transition period between her election on June 17 and taking office on July 8, that she did not feel very confident of the support that she might expect later on. With a very few exceptions, the attitude of the Chancery staff had been uncooperative and distant to the President-elect. The head of the Chancery, Ivars Millers, was ready to meet the new President briefly only a whole week after the election, on June 23rd.

Meanwhile, the phones had started ringing the night of the election and the foreign press as well as the Latvian media and government ministers were clamouring for attention and for interviews. Fortunately, at the time of the election the future President was also Director of the Latvian Institute. She was thus able to use her office there and have the receptionist at the Institute answer the phone and schedule some of the many appointments. Even minimal office space with a telephone at the Chancery was not offered to her. In the meantime, hundreds of letters kept piling up, some congratulating the new President, others pouring their heart out, others complaining about their problems with the bureaucracy, the police, the courts, and asking the President to solve them, others offering advice as how to best run the country, etc. No secretarial staff from the Chancery would be available to handle the mountains of mail until after July 8 and her immediate family had to chip in with long working hours to bring the situation under some semblance of control. The director of Chancery had quit on the very same day as the outgoing president Guntis Ulmanis, to be followed by the assistant

director, the press secretary, some presidential advisors and much of the staff at the presidential Residence a few days later. This was the first transition of office between the outgoing and incoming presidents since the renewal of independence, and no one had thought ahead about the practicalities of it. The remaining staff of the Chancery acted utterly surprised and under total paralysis. The new Chancery team had to be assembled in a hurry.

The Palace Ball

When it comes to major events such as a presidential inauguration, the available buildings in Rīga are simply too small for such an occasion. There is a superb great hall on the top floor of the Rīga castle that was used for such festive occasions before the war, but that has unfortunately been declared unsafe for gatherings, because of the state of disrepair of the castle. The new President's inauguration ball took place on July 8, 1999, at the Rundāle Palace, about 80 km outside of Rīga. Rundāle is a splendid palace, designed by the famous 18th century architect Rastrelli, offered by tsarina Catherine the Great to her favourite, Biron, Duke of Courland. Rastrelli is the same architect who built the St. Petersburg palaces for the Tsarina.

Hundreds of people attended the ball to greet President Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and the new "first gentleman", Imants Freibergs. A great number of people from the arts were on hand. Every corner of the palace was put to use in all its diversity, including the formal gardens. Poet Ludmila Azarova captured the mood at the ball: "It was wonderful. I can't remember when I felt more uplifted. The ambience was so refreshing I cannot begin to describe it. People were particularly happy because they now had hope that something new and good would emerge from the present hardships and chaos."

Prime Minister Vilis Krištopans had resigned only a few days earlier, on July 5th, but anxiety about a change in government could not dampen the festive mood at the ball. The President's relaxed smile put everyone at ease and her toast inspired hope and faith in our own abilities:

“Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies:

“I am grateful that you have come to celebrate the inauguration of this new presidency. We are here in a very beautiful room and in a building that is a testament to the achievements of past cultures. The rulers who built this palace have long since been lost in the mists of history, but the masterpieces of art and the work of skilled craftsmen have survived them for centuries. And they will continue to be a source of joy to all who view them for many years to come.

“If I could express only one personal desire about what I would like to see achieved in Latvia during my presidency, then it would be the desire that the talents, creative spirit, power of intellect and culture might once again flourish, be honoured and respected in every possible way.

“If I had three magical wishes for my country and my people, then the first would be that Latvia be secure and that this country be governed forever by peace and harmony among its residents. My second wish would be that our country achieves prosperity so that there would never again be the gap between those dressing up for a palace ball and those who cannot afford to attend. My final wish for Latvia is that it regains the place to which it belongs — the European community — and become an indissoluble part of it, as a partner of equal standing among other nations and states.

“Let us toast our land and our country! May Latvia live as long as the sun!”

It is significant that the President opened her toast by praising the place where her inauguration ball was held. Her statement surely helped to dispel any sense of alienation her guests — sons and daughters of the traditional farm culture of the Latvians — might have felt in the enormously ornate palace. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga had written about Latvia's mansions and castles as a specific aspect of the Latvian cultural heritage in the early 1990s, and the Latvian authors of a book called “The History of Ideas in Latvia” (1995) used one of her statements as a leitmotif. The future President had written, “it would be a mistake to consider farm life as an absolute synonym of Latvian life, the only life that deserves to be rescued from oblivion. The things that have been built by others on Latvia's land for centuries have not appeared without a tie to the Latvian people. The Rundāle palace is as much a part of

the Latvian people's heritage as is the palace at Versailles for the French people."

Guests at the president's ball were not split up among various political parties and beliefs, but there were two distinct factions — those who danced and those who did not. Those who wanted to dance did so, regardless of age. Those couples that could dance the tango fared best of all. You can sort of slip and slide around in other kinds of dances, but not the Viennese waltz and the tango — you have to know how to dance those. Émigré Latvians at the event demonstrated their skills, the new President among them. Understandably gentlemen stood in line to dance with her — when would they ever have another opportunity?

Such moments ultimately become a part of the nation's cultural heritage, and they will be carried forward through family sagas and legends for generations to come. The professor of philosophy Jānis Vējs likes to tell the story of his grandfather dancing, long ago, with the great poet and playwright Aspazija in the Latvian town of Jelgava. The grandfather had always talked to his children and grandchildren about the significance of this event. Perhaps some years from now there will be a grandfather who will talk about the inauguration ball of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga at the Rundale Palace. The grandfather will say that this was one of the greatest sources of joy and patriotism of his life, and he will be proud to tell his grandchildren that he danced with the President.

I watched the happy dancers, and I thought of two items of popular folklore that each teaches a different lesson. One is a cautious folk song, which tells young men to "seek a wife wherever you want, but do not look for a wife at the dance..." Then there is something I heard an old man say in Soviet Latvia — more an urban truism, but a truism nonetheless: "Learn to dance, my girl," he said. "Life will teach you how to work."

The First Year

No matter how dedicated a President is, it is not possible to reverse the country's economic situation, to improve the nation's quality of life, or to change the country's demographics in just a few short years.

Nor is it possible to wave a magic wand and resolve all the serious foreign policy problems that have arisen because of Latvia's post-Soviet status. If we look at the first year of Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga's presidency, however, we see that on the whole, she achieved much of importance in terms of both domestic and foreign policy.

The Latvian constitution states that one of the duties of the President is to proclaim into law bills that have been passed by Parliament. She has also a veto right over them, meaning that she can send them back to the Parliament to reconsider. One of the very first laws she had to evaluate was a new law on the official language of the state. Left-wing reactionaries objected to stipulations in the law that were intended to protect the Latvian language, as did the High commissioner on minority issues of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Mr. Max van der Stoel, who stated his objections in a personal letter to President Vīķe-Freiberga. After extensive consultations with language specialists and lawyers, she announced on July 14th that she would send the law back to Parliament for review.

Was this the right thing for the President to do? According to the right wing of the political spectrum, there are so few Latvians left in the world that both Russian and English would eventually predominate and Latvian would disappear without strict laws to protect the linguistic rights of the indigenous population. Others, especially the supporters of the left-wing political movement For Human Rights in a United Latvia (PCTVL) did not overtly welcome the President's decision either, and used the situation to aggravate the dissatisfaction of the Russian speakers in Latvia and to question whether Russian speakers really needed to learn Latvian. The commonly used phrase "Russian speakers", incidentally, comes from the Soviet-era lexicon.

The decision to send the law back was by no means an easy one for the President. Along with many other émigré Latvians, she had experienced the paradoxical situation in which an ethnic Latvian could not manage even the simplest things in life without speaking Russian in an independent Latvia. At the time of the restoration of the country's independence and for some time after that, Russians in the service sector would not accept the possibility that even a single person in Latvia could not speak Russian. It was common for a salesperson who was addressed

in Latvian to simply turn her back on the customer. Post-Soviet Latvians can speak Russian without any serious difficulties, and most don't have any qualms about doing so. Those who do not speak Russian, however, face a different situation.

In an interview with Ainārs Dimants, the editor of the periodical "Tagad" (Now), Vaira Viķe-Freiberga explained: "I have had fairly difficult encounters when I have gone into a shop in Rīga and tried to be served in Latvian. I could write entire novels about my adventures on trams, trolley buses and in other public places, when I naively attempted to get by with Latvian alone." Remembering an incident involving a taxi driver, she continued: "We were driving down Barona Street, in Rīga. He drove right past the place where I needed to go. I could not get him to stop. Here was a man offering a public service who could not understand a single word of Latvian and that was at the beginning of 1999!"

The National Program for Latvian Language Learning, which has received financing from the Latvian government, from the Scandinavian countries and from the European Union, has made a great investment in social integration and in fostering the use of Latvian in the post-occupation period. Much remains to be done, however, because of psychological barriers. It is clear that one cannot be forced to learn another language. Although her political opponents disagree, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga continues to insist that it is in the interests of non-Latvians in Latvia to learn Latvian: "The usual reason to learn a language is to communicate with people who speak the language," she has said. If someone does not learn the language, then "that person will not have a spiritual link with the founding nation of the society. That would be a sad lack of communication, a sad lack of intellectual contact. I think that it would be an enormous loss for anyone who has decided to live in this country."

"In order to improve the situation," said the President, "the state must care for the rights and well-being of non-Latvians, while at the same time protecting the linguistic rights and well-being of the indigenous population. Every school in every Latvian school district in every province must offer children the opportunity to learn Latvian." On this basis the President decided to veto the language law and to send it back to Parliament. She ignored political pressures from both ends of the political spectrum and requested that the law be improved to adhere

more closely to the standards of the European Union and eliminate any textual legal ambiguities.

The government of Prime Minister Vilis Krištopans fell in the first week after the presidential election and Vīķe-Freiberga was faced with another crucial decision — whom would she nominate as the next prime minister? Vilis Krištopans had announced his resignation on the morning of July 5, and Guntis Ulmanis served as President until midnight on July 7. Theoretically, he could have named the next prime minister but he did not exercise that prerogative. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga decided to nominate the energetic leader of the People's Party, Andris Šķēle, who had served as prime minister twice before. The stated priority of all three of his governments was balancing the national budget and moving the country towards inclusion into the Western structures of NATO and the European Union.

The Šķēle government did not last out the year and the President had to name yet another prime minister. This time her choice was the mayor of Rīga, Andris Bērziņš from the party Latvia's Way.

Looking back at the President's first week in office — a very busy week indeed — the newspaper "Diena" wrote rightly that she did not enjoy the benefit of a "warm-up period." In the very first few days in office she had to make several critical decisions, of the kind which do not arise that often within a whole presidential mandate.

Vīķe-Freiberga had more than domestic upheaval to contend with during the first months of her term. Her first foray into the European arena concerned issues about the need to resolve military conflicts. In late July 1999, the President travelled to Sarajevo, where Latvian peace-keeping forces had been operating for some time. She attended a meeting as an observer when a Stability pact was signed between the European Union and the Balkan countries. At the invitation of the President of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga had travelled to Sarajevo on the Finnish President's plane. Finland was the presiding country of the EU at that time. Also on board were Estonian President Lennart Meri and Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus. This meant that the three Baltic presidents were together for a second time — this time in the air, having already met in Rīga during President Ulmanis' farewell meetings and dinner.

In her speech in Sarajevo on July 29, 1999, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga said the following:

"In this beautiful and historic city of Sarajevo, in this wonderful country of Bosnia-Herzegovina, we see ruins, abandoned buildings and people, physical scars created by armed conflict. Even worse than these, however, are the psychological scars left behind by centuries of conflict and strife. Wars arise, after all, from the lust for power, which sows the seeds of strife, and they are directed and intensified by self-righteousness, prejudice and hatred.

"The problem in areas of conflict is not nationalism because healthy nationalism honours and contributes to its country. The basic problem is not religion because true religion means a belief in God and a preservation of moral values. The problem lies in authoritarianism, in fanaticism. The problem lies in imperialism, both open and covert.

"The collapse of any authoritarian and intolerant regime leaves behind deep psychological scars. These scars, in turn, have a demoralizing and destructive effect on the social order. The rule of law disappears, the application of justice is twisted, and it becomes unbearably difficult to plan the future."

In the early 1980s the President had worked within NATO's scientific programs, but had never had any direct contact with military matters. Now, as the President, she has become the Commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and according to the Latvian constitution had the right to appoint a military commander during times of war. Such responsibilities in no way conflict with the President's personal views on such matters. A few years before she was elected to the presidency, a newspaper asked her whether she would call on the nation for armed defence if Latvia's security were threatened. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga answered: "Freedom is the highest value, because it includes all other values within itself. Freedom must be defended to the very last. One must sacrifice one's life for freedom if necessary, because that means defending one's own rights and those of one's nation, defending one's own values and those of one's nation. Anyone who cannot defend his own values must live under someone else's values. Someone who cannot defend his own rights loses all rights and becomes someone else's servant. Anyone who

wants to live as a free individual with full rights must be prepared to defend what he believes, armed if necessary, sacrificing his life if necessary. Nothing of value in life comes without cost. Sooner or later we have to fight for everything that is important. One has to be ready to fight, and that requires courage. As the folk song would have it, 'The coward had five sons, none wanted to go to war'. If there were no alternative, I would be prepared to order an attack. I would be ready to go into battle myself, just like the sister of the cowards in the same folk song: 'The daughter went off to war, her shawl streaming behind her'.⁴

Mercifully there have not been any military conflicts in newly independent Latvia, but when she spoke in Sarajevo about psychological scars, about the lack of justice, about nationalism and about the unbearable difficulties of planning for the future, the President was clearly thinking about life in post-Soviet Latvia as well as elsewhere in the world.

Latvia, especially its capital Rīga and its eastern province of Latgale, has always been multicultural. Centuries-old Latvian folk songs bear historic proof of the many ethnicities on Latvian soil. Russians, Jews, Lithuanians, Poles, Estonians, Germans, Roma and others are often mentioned in these songs, and more recently we have had access to census statistics. For example, a study conducted in the 1930s found that in 1935 the country was populated by 1,472,612 Latvians, 206,499 Russians, 93,479 Jews, 62,144 Germans, 48,949 Poles, 26,867 Byelorussians, 22,913 Lithuanians, 7,014 Estonians, 3,839 Roma and smaller numbers of Ukrainians, Livonians, Danes, Swedes, Frenchmen, Czechs, Finns and Greeks. Rīga, specifically, in 1935 was made up of: 63% Latvians, 11.3% Jews, 10% Germans, 8.6% Russians, 4.1% Poles, 1.5% Lithuanians and 0.6% Estonians.

The Soviet occupation changed these statistics radically. At the end of the 20th century, Latvia had 1.39 million Latvians making that total only 55.7% of the population. In addition there were 719,000 Russians, 100,000 Byelorussians, 66,000 Ukrainians, 62,000 Poles, 35,000 Lithuanians, 12,000 Jews, 8,000 Roma, 4,000 Germans, 3,500 Tatars,

⁴ "Vai jūs aicinātu ar ieročiem aizstāvēt Latviju, ja tā būtu briesmās?" Would you call the nation to arms if Latvia was in danger?), *Diena*, 12 November 1994, p.13.

3,000 Estonians and representatives of 136 other nationalities. This diversity is a national treasure for Latvia but unfortunately it is easily manipulated as a potential threat to Latvia's peace and stability. The President has to keep this in mind in both domestic and foreign affairs, because in the era of globalisation, domestic and foreign issues are more closely linked than ever before and frequently they overlap. This is particularly true when it comes to Latvia's relationship with Russia. In the bilateral relationship between the two countries, social tensions Russian-Latvians experience particularly with regard to language are often included in discussions about other issues.

The numbers cited above show that the largest changes in ethnic makeup during the Soviet period affected ethnic Latvians, as well as Russians, Germans and Jews. In comparison with the pre-World War II period, the number of ethnic Latvians in the country has shrunk from 1.5 million to 1.3 million, a dramatic drop where normally growth should have been expected instead. The proportional drop in the number of Jews in the country is even more dramatic: from 93,000 in 1935 to 12,000 in 1999, obviously as a result of the Holocaust. The Germans have almost disappeared from the scene, because of repatriation in answer to Hitler's call in 1939. The number of Russians in contrast, has more than tripled, going from around 206,000 in 1939 to 719,000. The Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Poles and others, most of whom use Russian rather than Latvian as their language of communication, further swell the numbers of the Russian-speaking population.

One can appreciate the psychological difficulties of these people who settled in Soviet-annexed Latvia as part of the conquering master race, enjoying for decades a variety of privileges, only to wake up one day in an independent, Latvian-speaking country. The government of Latvia has done much to help the resident minorities. There are many cultural associations in Latvia for ethnic minorities. No one is prevented from respecting his or her national language, culture and ancient traditions. The government provides financial support to no less than 330 ethnic minority schools. Most of these are Russian schools, but also included in this number are six Polish, two Ukrainian, two Jewish, one Lithuanian, one Estonian and one Byelorussian school. Several schools also have special classes for Roma children.



Margaret Chase Smith



The symbolic handing over of the keys to the Riga Castle. Alongside President Vīķe-Freiberga is the outgoing President, Guntis Ulmanis



The composer and politician Raimonds Pauls congratulates the President in July 1999



The President takes her oath of office on July 8, 1999



Meeting with Finnish Foreign Minister
(now President) Tarja Halonen
at the Riga Castle in July 1999



Meeting with Finnish Prime Minister Martti Ahtisaari (left) and the Latvian
ambassador to Finland, Alberts Sarkansis, in Helsinki in July 1999



After the Inauguration Ball at Rundāle Palace, July 1999



STABILITY





Sarajevo, July 1999



The Sarajevo market, July 1999



At Vilnius University,
September 1999



World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia
and Related Intolerance, Durban, September 2001



With Father Alexander of the Orthodox Church during
a visit to his church in the autumn of 1999





The President and members of the traditional folk singing group "Suitu Sievas", October 1999



Latvia's senior rabbi Natāns Barkāns greets President Vaira Vike-Freiberga
on the 81st anniversary of Latvia's independence, November 18, 1999



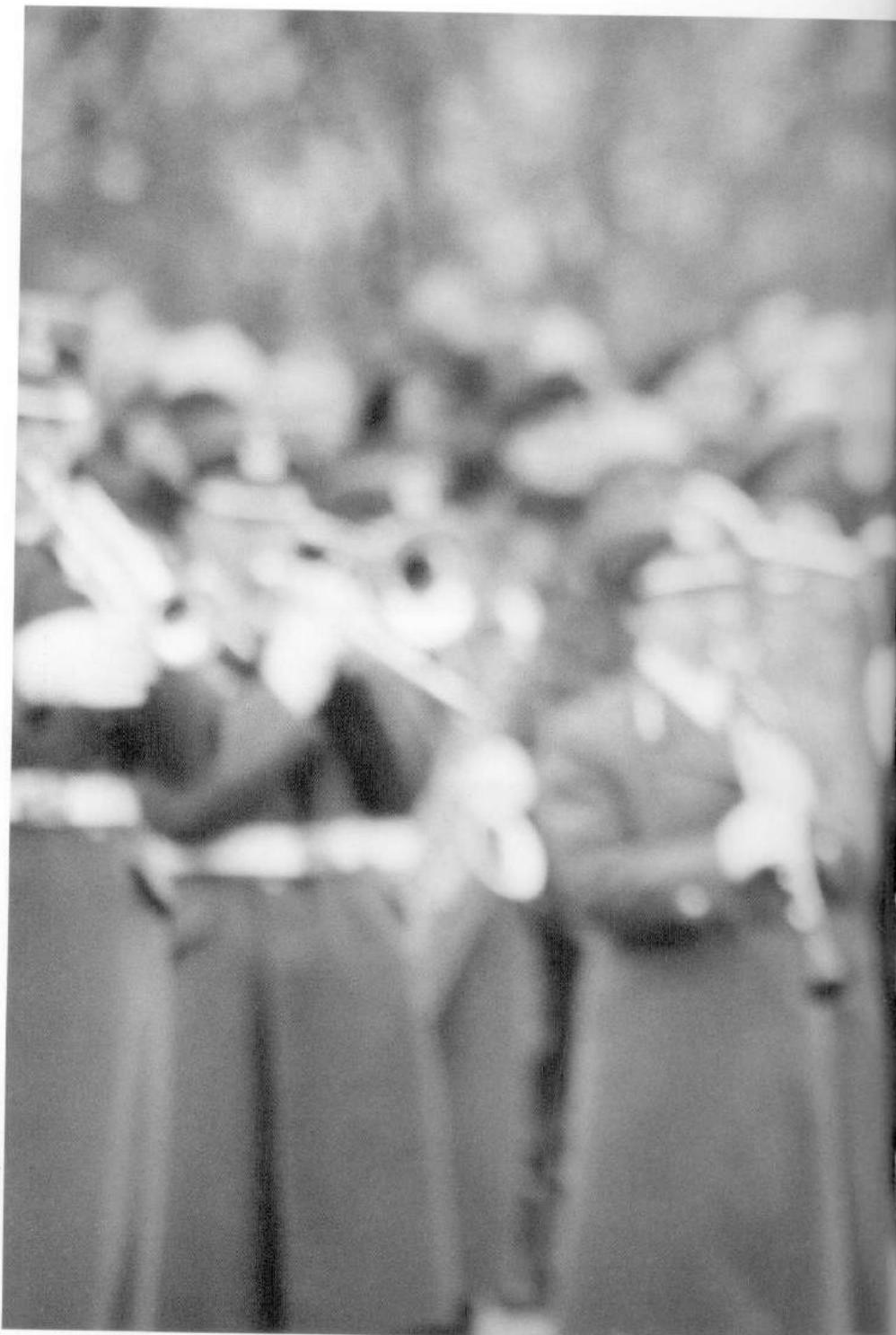
With the European Commission's President Romano Prodi
and Commissioner Günther Verheugen at the Riga Castle, February 12, 2000



At the Freedom Monument, November 18, 1999

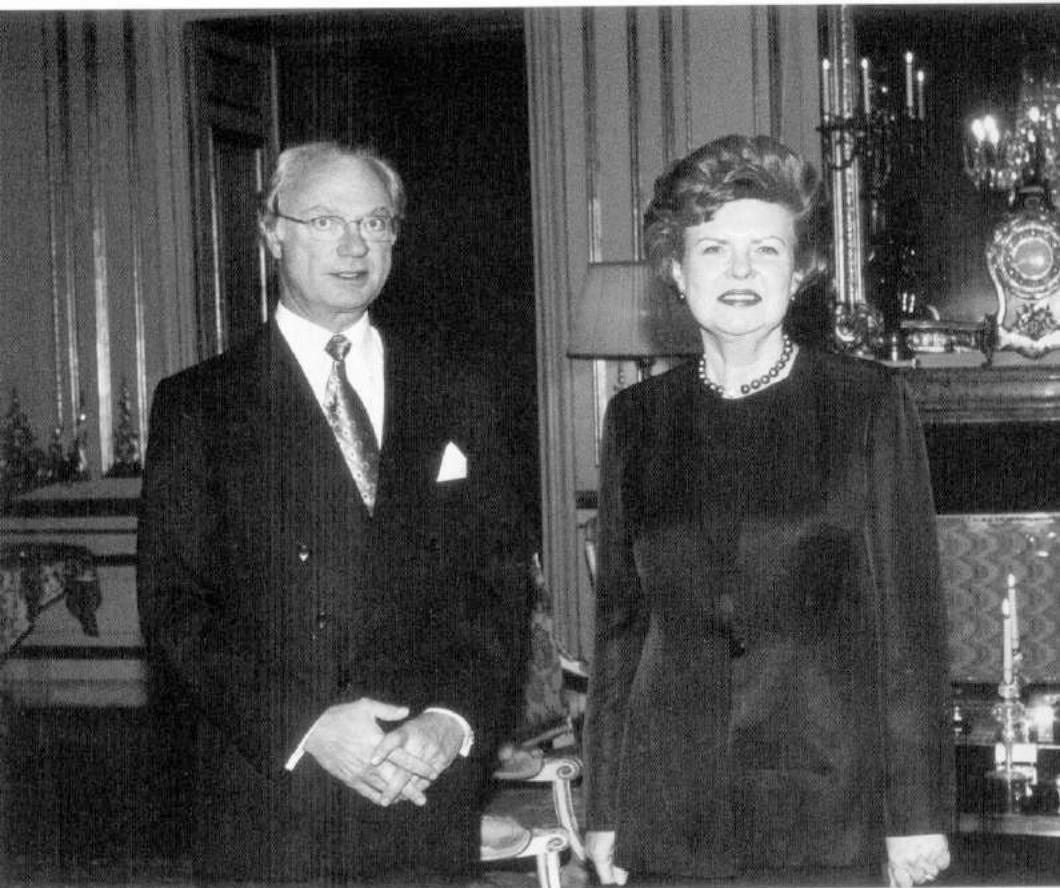


President Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Prime Minister Andris Šķēle honour those who fell victim to a Soviet special forces attack in Riga in January 1991, January 20, 1999





At a military parade on November 11, 1999, in Riga. November 11 is the day on which Latvia commemorates its military veterans



With the Swedish King Karl XVI Gustav at the Royal Palace in Stockholm, December 1999



The family of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga with members of the Beītiks family from rural Latvia at the Riga Castle during the Christmas season in 1999



Receiving Latvian Television's "Person of the Year" award, December 27, 1999





With recipients of the Order of Three Stars and members of the order's governing council at Riga Latvian Society House, May 2000



In the garden of Riga Castle on New Year's Eve at midnight, 1999



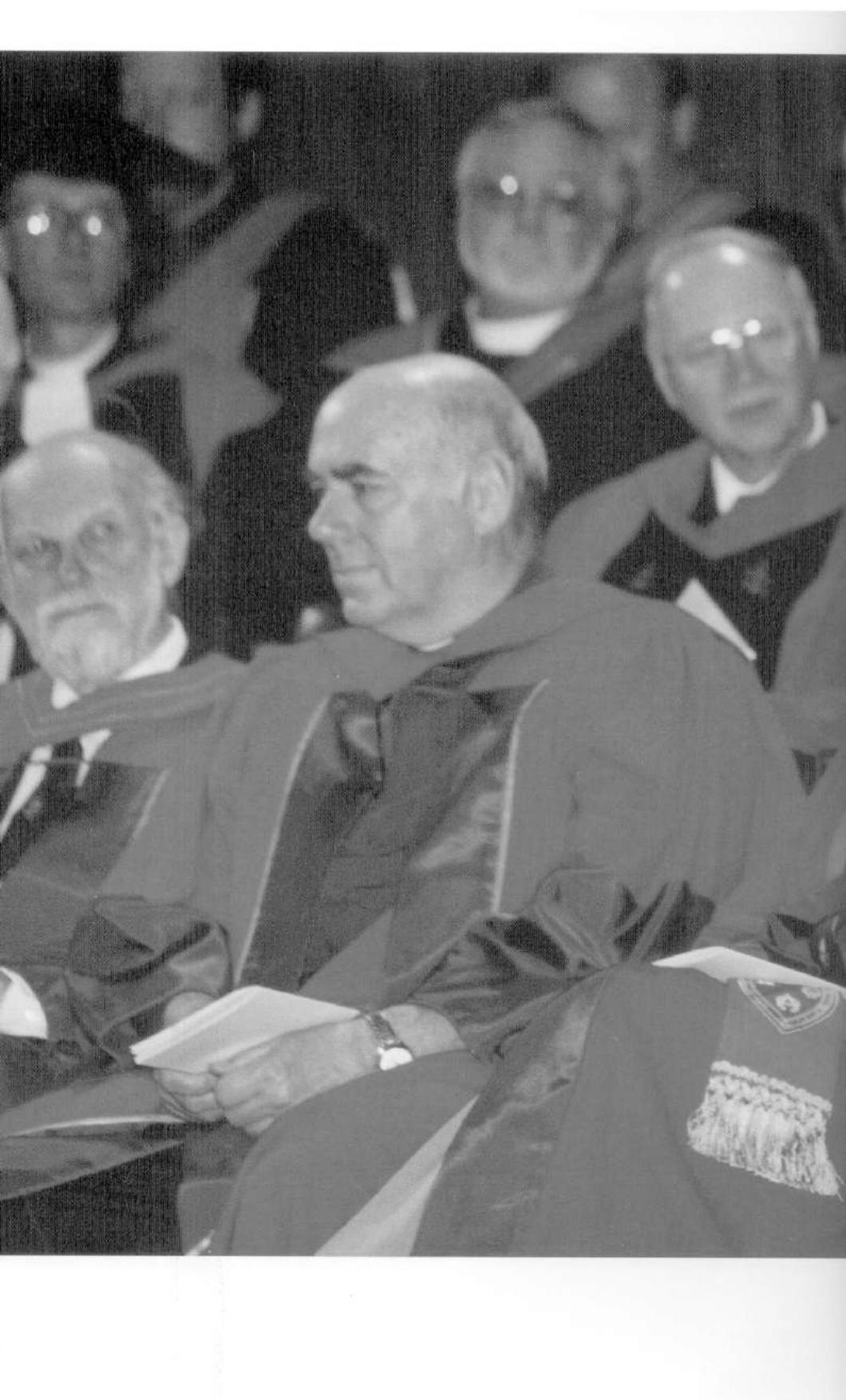
On Lithuanian independence day, February 16, 2000, with the Lithuanian ambassador to Latvia, Petras Vaitiekūnas and the writers Valdis Rūmnieks and Knuts Skujenieks



Ventspils Mayor Aivars Lembergs greets the President
at the city boundary, April 2000



During military exercises at Ādaži, April 2000





During the ceremony at which Vaira Viķe-Freiberga received an honorary doctorate from the Victoria University at the University of Toronto, May 2000



At the longest food tasting table in Riga with Riga Mayor Andris Ārgalis
(right) and businessman Sol Buckingholtz, June 22, 2000



With members of the President's student sorority, Spidola,
at the Toronto Latvian Centre, May 2000



Jāņi, Summer Solstice in the parish of Zosēni, June 23, 2000



After the presentation of the Order of Three Stars to people who demonstrated heroism in protecting Jews from Nazi genocide during World War II



In Tallinn with Estonian President Lennart Meri



With German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder
at the opening of Latvia's new embassy in Berlin, July 2000





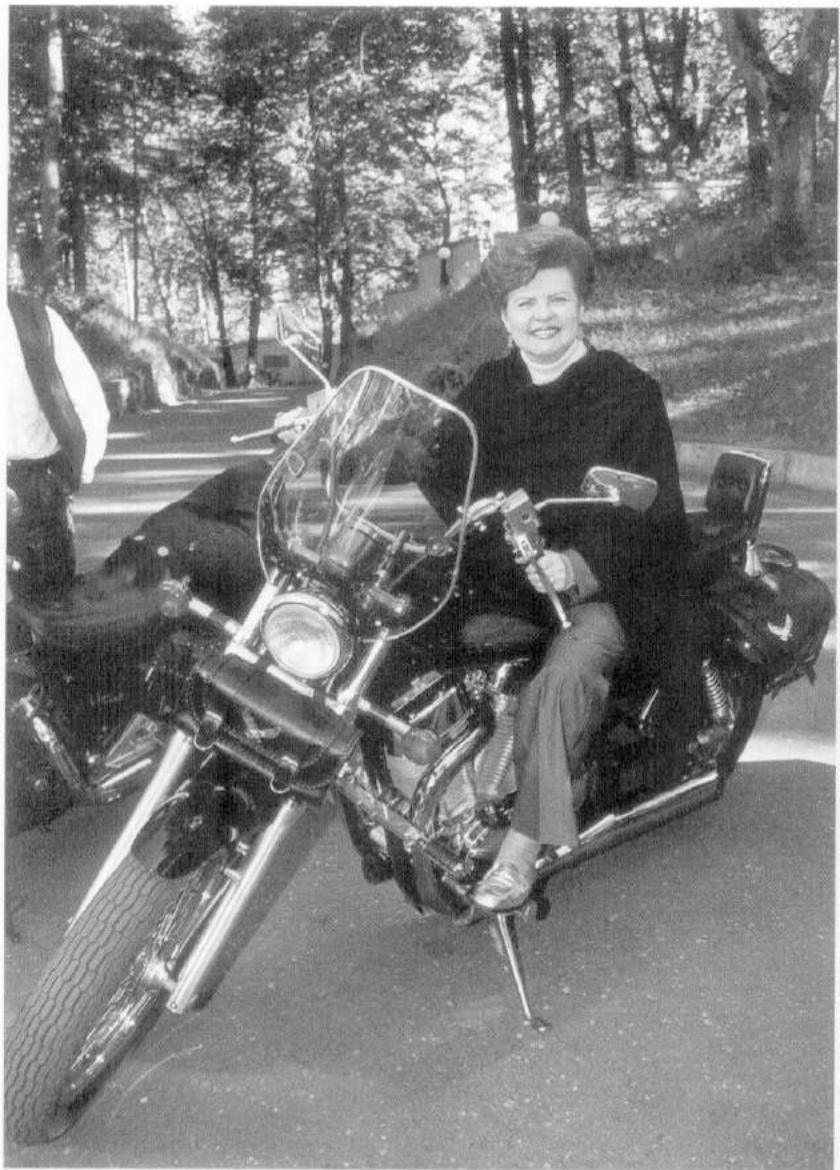
At the "Baltica" folklore festival in Turaida, July 2000



At an official welcoming ceremony in Berlin,
with German President Johannes Rau, July 2000



At the celebration of the President's 40th wedding anniversary,
Vaira Viķe-Freiberga looks on as her daughter, Indra,
welcomes the actress Ausma Kantāne and the poet Imants Ziedonis



At the President's residence in Jūrmala, June 2000

There is no discrimination in Latvia against Russian speakers in the labour market or in the public, sports or cultural arenas, nor are there any conflicts between Russians and Latvians on a daily, societal level. Yet certain politicians have found reasons to raise the alleged problem of the Russian language again and again. The Latvian publicist Pēteris Bankovskis has written the following: "At present Latvians and Russians interact at various levels, but not at the level of intellectual discussion. Relationships exist, but range from complete apathy to wariness or even active dislike based on historical mistreatment, prejudices, misunderstandings and differences in culture and attitudes." Bankovskis expressed the hope that "those Russians who see themselves as Europeans will dictate the mindset in Latvia." He adds, however, that he doubts "if that is really possible."⁵

The President's speeches and articles indicate that she has studied this matter in great depth and has a high degree of understanding of the relevant issues. She always addresses all the people of Latvia, not just ethnic Latvians, as exemplified by the speech she made on Latvian Independence Day, November 18, 1999:

"I would like to invite all Latvian citizens: let us be loyal to our country! Let us display the same respect toward our country and its symbols that we, as individuals, expect from our fellow human beings. This is our country, this is our state. We ourselves are Latvia.

"I would also like to invite all Latvians to think in national terms and to unite around the aims that we hold in common. The interests of the state stand above all partisan interests. If the country is to flourish and develop, decisions must be made that benefit the entire country, not just some individual, village, club, Party, or financial interest group. Thinking along national lines does not demand such enormous or superhuman effort. It only requires of us to think beyond the present and look a little beyond our backyard fence. However, these two things it does require. If people think only of themselves, then there can be no state and no civilization. Our country is unusual in that a large number of its residents are not citizens. I should like to call on everyone who has lived in Latvia for a long time

⁵ Bankovskis P. "Krievu jautājums jeb vērtības, kas mūs šķir" (The Russian question, or values that separate us), *Diena*, 30 August 2000, p. 2.

to choose. Ask yourselves — do I belong to this country or am I a guest here? /.../ Latvia is not the waiting room of a railway station; it is not a corridor through which one comes and goes. Latvia is a land with an ancient culture, with an ancient language, it is a country with unique and ancient traditions. Latvia is prepared to accept everyone who can respect these traditions and embrace them. Latvia does not want to reject anyone who is ready to serve the country. Everyone who is ready to stand under our red-white-red flag, everyone who is ready to bear this flag on the world stage — Latvia is ready to welcome them as her sons and daughters. To anyone who feels goodwill toward Latvia as an independent state, I can say honestly — choose! Choose Latvia and become one of our citizens. No one will take away your native language; no one will take away your soul or your traditions. Let us live alongside one another as brothers and sisters; let us respect each other in our differences. Let us enrich one another through our variety. /.../

"Let us try to understand how, when, where and what we must do to put our house in order. Let us not point our finger at the entire nation or the entire country each time an individual does something wrong. The future of our country can be only as great as our own dreams. Let us not be afraid to dream about the kind of Latvia we want to see. /.../

"I believe in the Latvia of the future. I believe in the people of Latvia. I believe in you who are listening to me and hearing my voice. You are the one that Latvia needs. Latvia awaits you. Yes, you."

If anyone has the right to express such ideas and to hope they are heard, it is Vaira Viķe-Freiberga. She spent her childhood, adolescence and adulthood as a refugee and émigré in Germany, Morocco and Canada. She learned foreign languages to allow her to become integrated into those cultures but never lost her Latvian identity. We should note that, in 1999, unlike previous years, the ceremony to commemorate Latvia's independence was held not in the National Theatre with relatively few selected guests in attendance, but rather in the Dome Square, packed with thousands of people, with the President speaking from the balcony of the Radio Latvia building. This was not a speech meant only for the elite few. She was speaking to the entire nation. She wanted Independence Day to be a celebration for all the people of Latvia, and she took the first

steps in that direction by signalling her readiness to be with them in Dome Square.

The general public had come to simply regard national celebrations as an extra day off, and not even that for many in the retail and service sectors. Some felt a certain nostalgia for the “bad old days” not because Soviet traditions of celebration should be continued as such, but rather because back then the people actually celebrated — if necessary, they were forced to! I remember how our dear old instructors used to come into lecture halls at the university with long lists of names to ensure that there would be sufficient numbers of people to march in parades to commemorate the October revolution or May Day. I remember that sometimes I asked my classmates to go in my place if I had to be out of the city, since they lived in Rīga. “Totalitarianism”, I hear you grumble, but there was also an element of instilling a patriotic spirit, albeit in the peculiar understanding of democracy, which existed at that time. These forceful methods did let us enjoy the pomp of a Soviet-style celebration in all its carnival-like glory and colour — flags, marches, and “icons” of state leaders. When we marched past the podiums, someone would shout into the microphone, “Long live Soviet students! Long live Soviet women! Long live, long live.” One could only think, “My God, so many things and so many exhortations to live long!” Young people concluded there was no other option than to live a long life.

When we graduated from university and were no longer obliged to attend the marches, we could, still as loyal citizens of the state, take advantage of the day off to do other things. On May Day, farmers would be in the fields — spreading manure, planting potatoes (there were still some single-family farms). As we watched the exaltation of Soviet celebrations in Rīga, Moscow and other capital cities of the Soviet republics, we felt we were watching some parallel, completely surreal world.

Celebration with pomp and circumstance has become somewhat suspect in Latvia. Festive occasions can be celebrated frugally, but no less joyously and patriotically. There is reason to think that a new tradition was born on November 18, 1999, thanks to the new President — the country’s anniversary was celebrated not just in the corridors of power or government circles but in the presence of the entire nation, with the aim of rejuvenating a celebratory public spirit.

The Tragic Events Of 4 July 1941 And The Holocaust

During her first year in office — representing the state at every national celebration and Memorial Day as the President — in effect she relived the nation's history in a very concentrated manner. Among Latvia's list of national holidays are many that require black ribbons of mourning draped across the red-white-red national flag. One of the most painful of these occasions is the tragedy of the Jewish people in Latvia during World War II.

Soviet-era dictionaries of foreign terminology never included the word Holocaust, and the Latvian Soviet Encyclopaedia omitted it as well. Even now, as I write the word Holocaust in Latvian, the spell checker on my computer does not recognise it. A more recent Latvian dictionary of foreign terms notes that the word comes from the Latin for "everything has been burned to the ground" and defines it as "the mass destruction of the Jews, as conducted by the Germans between 1939 and 1945." July 4th is an official day of mourning in the Latvian calendar and commemorates the occasion when the Nazis herded hundreds of Jews in 1941 into a synagogue on Gogola Street in Rīga and burned it down, sending the victims to an agonizing, torturous death.

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga addressed the commemorators on July 4, 2000:

"Latvia's independence has for the first time opened up the opportunity for us to evaluate our past in an honest way. It is important not only to research those episodes in the tragedy of the Holocaust that are not yet known to us but also to research the participation of Latvian citizens in these crimes. We must try to overcome the negative consequences that ignoring these facts has had on the morality of our society."

"We fully comprehend that the time is upon us when the events of the Holocaust are being transformed from memories into history. If we do not know how to guide this transformation in the right way, then in the future we may be revisited by evil again. That is why today I want to speak about the serious need for education about the Holocaust in Latvia's schools. Only that way can we help ensure stable democracy in the future."

“On the day when we remember the genocide that was waged against the Jewish people, I express to all Jewish people my deepest sympathy in remembering this horrible calamity. I ask everyone to bow their heads and join in a moment of silence to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust in Latvia and the rest of the world.”

The President not only expressed her great sorrow at what had happened and her deep sympathy for the Jewish people but also reminded Latvia's historians of their urgent task. Teachers and historians in Latvia do not have to start from scratch. The émigré historian Andrievs Ezergailis published a voluminous, factual, well-argued and emotionally engaging book called “The Holocaust in German-Occupied Latvia”, issued in 1996 in English and translated into Latvian in 1999. Ezergailis wrote: “This book is written in the belief that the truth cannot be split in half, that the Latvians and the Jews see one and the same sun.” It was wrong, that the world could learn more about the Holocaust in Latvia elsewhere in the world than the Latvians knew themselves. He expressed the hope that “the truth, weakened and riddled with bullets, on crutches, will emerge from the smoke of battle.”

Demonstrating her goodwill and the government's interest in finding a positive solution to issues relating to the Holocaust, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has addressed international gatherings, such as a large international forum, “Education, Research and Commemoration of the Holocaust”, on January 27, 2000 that was organized by the Swedish government and intellectuals in Stockholm. In her address, the President affirmed that Latvia has denounced the Holocaust. She reminded the audience of the unquestionably favourable conditions for Jewish life in Latvia that are now forgotten. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for instance, Latvia was one of the few places in the Russian Empire where pogroms against the Jews did not occur. Viķe-Freiberga stressed that Latvia accepts responsibility for things that happened in Latvia until June 17, 1940, when it was an independent country with its own government, and that the Holocaust had not taken place in Latvia prior to this date. On the contrary, Latvia was among the few countries that opened its doors to Jews who were fleeing persecution from other countries in the late 1930s. The President's speech, slightly abridged, follows:

"Beginning with the 16th century, the first Jewish traders and craftsmen arrived in the territories that are now Latvia. Fleeing from repression in other parts of Europe, they were accepted there and found their place in the local economy and cultural life. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Latvia could pride itself as one of the few dominions of the Russian Empire where pogroms simply did not happen.

"Latvia's first period as a nation state, from 1918 to 1940 was a time of peace and prosperity for our Jewish population. Together with other ethnic minorities, the Jews enjoyed a degree of cultural autonomy that would be considered progressive even by today's standards. It certainly surpassed anything Latvia's western neighbours offered their minorities at the time. Latvia's Jews were entitled to state-subsidized education in Hebrew and Yiddish. They were active participants in the country's cultural and political life and made important contributions to its economy.

"Most notably, during the late 1930s Latvia chose to implement an open-door policy and provided sanctuary for European Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. Latvia is proud to be one of the very few countries to have done so, while many others closed their frontiers to the flow of desperate Jewish refugees.

"Unfortunately, the signing of the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 smoothed the way for Latvia's occupation and annexation by Soviet Russian forces in June 1940. Over the following year, a period known as the Red Terror ensued. Arbitrary arrests, torture, executions and deportations cost the lives of tens of thousands of Latvia's citizens, including 3,000 Jews.

"Between 1941 and 1945, the Nazi Germany occupation forces planned, organized and oversaw the mass murder of more than 100,000 Latvian citizens out of a pre-war population of 1.5 million. At least 60,000 of those killed were either fully or partly of Jewish origin. Another 18,000 were ethnic Latvians, 2,000 were Roma and 3,000 were mentally handicapped with no recorded nationality. The Germans shipped an additional 21,000 Jewish prisoners to Latvia from other parts of Europe, and more than half of these prisoners were then executed on Latvian soil. As a result of the Holocaust, Latvia lost more than 90% of its pre-war Jewish population. This is an enduring sorrow.

"With Latvia having ceased to exist as a country at the time, the occupying power of Nazi Germany bears the ultimate responsibility for the

crimes they committed or instigated on Latvian soil. We as Latvians denounce the mass murders of the Holocaust as uniquely heinous crimes against humanity. We condemn genocide as a horror and an abomination, and we condemn and unconditionally renounce the individuals who have perpetrated such crimes. We accept no excuse for their actions. We accept no mitigation of their guilt.

"In 1990, shortly after the official declaration of our intention to secede from the Soviet Union, Latvia's parliament openly condemned the events of the Holocaust in Latvia and expressed deep regret that individual Latvians had participated in it. Latvia has assumed its responsibility in condemning the Holocaust.

"At this moment in history, Latvia is engaged in consolidating a free, open and democratic society, for only democracy allows us to shape our future and to make our own free choices. We need to remember the past, to understand it, to tame it, to make it truly ours. We need to re-evaluate it so that we may learn from its lessons and ensure that the worst mistakes of the past can never be repeated.

"May I take this opportunity to congratulate the Swedish, British and US governments for their initiative in establishing the 'Task Force for International Cooperation in Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research'. I am pleased to confirm Latvia's readiness to take part in its activities."

In her role as President, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga also had the opportunity to congratulate the Rīga Jewish Community on the 10th anniversary of its homecoming on October 8, 1999. She presented the country's highest honour, the Order of the Three Stars, to Bruno Rozentāls, Jadviga Orcehovska, Olga Krūmiņa and Juris Bērziņš, individuals who had demonstrated great bravery in protecting Jews from the German genocide during the war at the peril of their own lives.

The Deportations Of 14 June 1941

As the accounts of history are settled, we must never forget that this war brought terrible losses and tragedies for other Latvians as well. On June 14, 2000, at the commemoration of the very night in 1941 when literally thousands of Latvia's people were shipped off to Siberia

by the Soviet occupation forces, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga spoke at the Latvian Freedom Monument:

"We have gathered on this day of national sorrow, when we commemorate the first mass deportations that were directed against our people and our land. On the night of June 13 to June 14, 1941, innocent civilians were simply taken away like criminals, without any judicial process, without any legal accusations, dragged away and sent on a tortuous path to unknown distant places in Siberia, where many of them lost their lives. The others spent long and harrowing years in subhuman conditions. Those who eventually came home often did so with damaged health. In their native land, they found that their property had been appropriated. Their place had been taken by strangers. Their former friends, acquaintances and colleagues often turned their backs on them and refused to help.

"It was a crime. It was a crime that involved genocide. We are talking about crimes against humanity. There is no statute of limitations on these crimes in Latvian law or in international practice. These are crimes that can be punished ceaselessly, as long as anyone who took part in them is still alive and can be brought before a court to face any evidence that can be found. Let nobody make the excuse that someone who is brought before the court is an elderly person with trembling hands. As one of the victims has pointed out, when the criminal signed the deportation order his hand did not tremble. The same laws, which are in effect to prosecute Nazi war criminals, to prosecute those who took part in the Holocaust and those who committed crimes against humanity during the Nazi occupation — these same laws are in effect against the crimes that were committed during the Soviet occupation.

"We are gathered here today to express our indignation to the rest of the world, our protest against these acts of inhumanity."

Social Contrasts

In addition to these historical events of mistreatment and cruelty, one of the most serious problems in Latvia today is poverty and the extreme social contrasts associated with it. Fewer children are being

born and this is obvious even without doing any research. In Latvia they say that only the very rich and the very poor have many children. A study called "Who in Latvia is impoverished and where?" showed that the majority of those living below the poverty line consists of families with three or more children. The state doesn't provide any social protection to such families at present and it means that by having children they risk poverty. The *nouveau riche* are at best apathetic toward poverty, at worst they accuse the poor of having only themselves to blame if they have many children — often expressing it in a demeaning manner as if to demonstrate their presumed superiority at the expense of the poor. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has never tolerated this arrogance of the wealthy. Instead she has tried to change attitudes through her speeches, articles and interviews. In one speech she noted that a *nouveau riche* class had emerged very rapidly in Latvia, adding, "In this stratum of the *nouveau riche*, people are very much oriented toward the enjoyment of their personal lives. They pamper and minister to themselves narcissistically with no interest or desire to contribute to society. In the West, those in high income brackets understand that such privileges also hold responsibilities."

The birth rate in post-Soviet Latvia has deteriorated catastrophically and urgent steps need to be taken to regenerate the population. But not every child born in Latvia is a wanted child. Many children cannot go to school or live normal lives because of their parents' poverty.

Then there are Latvia's pensioners. At present, most of them, after working hard for their entire lives, receive a pension that leaves them below the poverty line. The President has repeatedly stressed that the elimination of poverty and the provision of basic social safety nets are enormously urgent issues, because without these fundamental guarantees democracy cannot survive. That some people in this world die from overeating while others starve to death is not Latvia's problem alone. It is an unhealthy situation, which threatens peace and stability around the world. Balanced development programs are being implemented worldwide in response. If this problem is global, then surely the world must fight against it!

In her first year in office, the President visited all of Latvia's provinces, including the towns of Ventspils, Liepāja, Valmiera, Cēsis,

Daugavpils and Limbaži, as well as countless small towns and villages. She visited schools, orphanages, nursing homes and other facilities, listened to people's concerns and sought to mobilize public thinking toward action, to resolve the urgent problems of the country.

A Most Popular President

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga had also to think about ways to draw attention to the positive aspects in society, to ensure that Latvians do not brood relentlessly about their bitter past and difficult present. As Christmas approached in 1999, she invited the largest and most meritorious families from all regions of Latvia to visit her at her official residence, the Rīga castle. Thus, in the season of joy, she affirmed the role of the family in the rebirth of the nation and in the shaping of healthy individuals.

On December 27, 1999, the President attended a pre-New Year's celebration in Rīga at a popular restaurant owned by Gunārs Kirsons. The event was particularly enjoyable, because she received an award from Latvian Television as the year's most popular person in Latvia. Where was the President on New Year's Eve 1999 when the clock struck midnight and announced the arrival of the new century and new millennium? She was with the most important people of her entourage. Employees of the presidential chancery and members of their families, from the oldest to the youngest, accepted her invitation to ring in the New Year at the Rīga castle. The children at the party probably experienced the greatest event of their young lives and it was reported afterwards that when morning came, quite a few little party-goers were found asleep under the portraits of Latvia's former presidents.

The President of Latvia usually does not spend the summer solstice festivities, on June 23rd, alone with her family, because there are so many people all across Latvia who would like to spend this most popular celebration with her. In 2000, she was near the town of Piebalga, where reputedly the largest ferns can be found in the Zosēnu hills. Latvian tradition holds that on the night of the summer solstice, some ferns will bloom, and anyone who finds a blooming fern will find love and fortune.

Despite her busy schedule, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has not lost contact with Latvia's academic and intellectual milieu. The President has found time to be present at new book presentations and at conferences organised by academic associations. Her presence shows support and appreciation of the creative work scholars perform under extremely difficult financial conditions. She hasn't forgotten the 3x3 camps either. Speaking at a recent camp near the town of Jaunpils, she began with these words: "I am very sorry that I have only been able to come and see you at the end of the camp. I know you must have had a wonderful time."

A president is also a human being. A president, like anyone else, has a birthday and a name-day each year. These are joyous family celebrations. On July 16th, 2000, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and her husband Imants celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary. Relatives and friends from Latvia and Canada alike were on hand for the festivities. Some of them had been present at the couple's wedding in Canada in 1960.

Viewed statistically, in the first year of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's presidency, she signed and proclaimed 208 laws. She sent four of those laws back to Parliament for revisions. Two governments fell, and she nominated two prime ministers. The Latvian constitution allows the President to pardon and to reduce sentences of those serving prison terms and, in the first year of her presidency; she did this in 29 cases. During the course of the year, she went abroad 17 times on state visits or working visits. Her meeting with French President Jacques Chirac was a noteworthy success. This was the first time a Latvian president had ever addressed the French parliament. After their meeting, Chirac affirmed France's support for Latvia's admission to the European Union, admitting that France had not demonstrated much interest so far in the Baltic republics or northern Europe. Viķe-Freiberga granted interviews to approximately 100 foreign media representatives and many more, of course, to the Latvian television, radio and press.

Media Reactions

On July 8, 2000, the newspaper "Diena" summarized the President's first year in office under the headline "The independent President has, for good reason, gained the trust of the nation." The rest

of the article, however, was not as optimistic in tone. There were some innuendos with the journalist quoting Latvia's political leaders and parliamentary deputies. There were many recycled phrases such as "not well-known to people," "does not understand Latvia's situation well," "had an almost personal desire to spend the nation's money," "the political elite are worried" and "The President's statements and public image together indicate that she evaluates her performance very positively and from political circles one hears unofficially that this may not always facilitate cooperation."

One deputy who was quoted in the article said: "Particularly at the beginning of her term in office, the President's statements about the need to care for the disadvantaged could have created the wrong impression that the government has ignored certain concerns." Here we must remember that the President was not expressing her subjective views but was concentrating on social conditions in Latvia and that the public concurred with her assessment. The collapse of totalitarianism also led to the collapse of Latvia's social security system, and important benefits in such areas as education, health care and employment fell by the wayside. The duty of the new country was to ensure that stable social assistance would be re-established and the President's comments on social conditions reminded the government of their social and also political responsibility. Clearly Vaira Viķe-Freiberga intended to reduce social tensions and to prevent any threats against democracy.

Statements by politicians about the President's foreign policy, reported the newspaper "Diena", were even less complimentary in some cases, especially those made by some socialists in Parliament.

Perhaps such an article should not come as a surprise, though. From the very beginning of her presidency, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has steadfastly enjoyed the highest popularity rating of any political figure in Latvia, and the sympathies of the nation have little in common with those of the political elite. During her first year in office, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga demonstrated that she was ready to do more than just the formal requirements of her job. She embodies leadership and charm, ensuring greater international recognition for Latvia and greater international support for the country. She has attracted the attention of those with the widest variety of views in politics and other areas of

endeavour. In terms of domestic policy, she has upheld a moral position that is a very important alternative as the country moves from totalitarianism and a planned economy to a democratic society and a market economy. However, as suggested by the "Diena" article, among others, her political opponents had launched a campaign against her as soon as she took office and that campaign continued throughout most of the first year. This infers that she was doing the right things and speaking up with authority for the right causes.

When discussing her presidency, Vilēke-Freiberga often repeats that she sees it as a unique opportunity to serve the public interest and to learn to work at a job that is also her calling and conforms to her inner convictions. Every new experience, however, is accompanied by unexpected outcomes and unpredictable circumstances. If at the very beginning of her term she could joke that she had lost the privilege of crossing the Dome Square on foot or of taking the bus, then, quite soon, matters took a much more serious turn. Complaints began to appear in the press about issues that were not actually covered by her job description. Watching from the sidelines, one is reminded of the centrifugal experiment with the marmalade bucket in the President's childhood.

A highbrow monthly, "Rīgas Laiks" (Riga Time), was among those to take the President to task. Their journalist posed this question in an interview: "The press recently published a letter from your supporters which stated, bluntly, 'Hands off our President!' Do you consider this to be a positive sentiment?" The President replied: "Yes, I do. I believed at that time the press had accused me of things I have never done. This letter brought us back to earth."

The journalist continued: "A large number of people were pleased about your election, but during the period we are discussing, they did not understand why you were doing certain things, why you did not explain the reasons for your actions. That applied to you having bodyguards, to the alleged wish to order an armoured car, to the decision to hire your son, to the selection of employees for your chancery. No one could understand why you gave such curt answers when questioned about these matters. The answer 'Because I am the President' seemed to stop the discussion."

"Well, that depends on what you consider to be curt. I think that the questions put to me at that time were also quite curt. My job was not created yesterday. The presidency of Mr. Guntis Ulmanis set precedents. The furniture had been arranged, the curtains had been hung, and this whole system had been created before me. On the day I took office, the national language law arrived on my desk. The language law was my priority; I addressed it. And the next law and the one after that and the one after that one. Then there are all the official visits. I do the work that I have to do. I don't run around tearing down the curtains and fixing what is not broken, changing things that work well: the security system, for instance. The so-called "armoured" car in question was chosen during Guntis Ulmanis' time. His chancery decided that the President needed a new vehicle, the specifications were written during his term in office and everything had been agreed. As to the question of security, I would like to point out that Mr. Ulmanis is built "like a bull". Mr. Straume [the Parliamentary speaker] is built like two bulls. They have the same kind of security arrangements that I do, but nobody thinks twice about that." Why would a woman president all of a sudden need less security?

What does it mean to say, "Because I'm the President," full stop? This fairly strained interview with journalist Ieva Lešinska was published toward the end of 1999. "As ever, it is the issue of attitudes," Vaira Viķe-Freiberga says. "I had not anticipated that kind of attitude toward me, especially from the press. The media was fed disinformation with malicious intent against me, I felt. Fundamentally, I am a logical and rational person and was surprised at how illogical it all was, without any causal relationship, without motivation. I hadn't really done anything yet; I had not had time to create enemies or opponents. I could understand or predict a reaction to having proclaimed or vetoed a law, to having made an unfavourable decision affecting a particular group, who then reacted to that decision. In particular, it was the lack of motivation that surprised me, the attempts to sling mud at the President, and using disinformation, no less. I could not understand why this was being done or who benefited by it. I do not understand it to this day."

The sudden austerity campaign waged against the presidency really was curious, all the more so considering that six months previously,

the press had been full of reports that President Ulmanis had overspent his budget. They concluded that this was why the new President had to save money. And she did.

One of the greatest works in the history of Latvian literature is the 19th century novel “Mērnieku laiki” (The Time of the Surveyors) by Brāji Kaudziši. One of the characters in the novel has the illogical tendency to beat his horses before his carriage sets off. “If it doesn’t help, it won’t do any harm either,” says the character. Something similar happened in the case of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga during her first year in office. Politicians tried to strong-arm her into refraining from making independent decisions. They wanted to reinforce that they alone had the power to make decisions. Anyone who tried to oppose them would quickly be put in their place.

The strength of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga’s character came to the fore during this early battle, as did her humane and professional qualities. The distinguished émigré Latvian economist and professor Gundars Ķeniņš-Kings said during this difficult period that he could not possibly imagine a better president for Latvia, having considered the other candidates. He still holds the same opinion: “There is no question that Dr. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, the President of Latvia, is setting the best example in terms of increasing Latvia’s social capital,” said the professor in the autumn of 2000. “We can say that her sharp intellect, the clarity of her speech and the courage of her actions are the most valuable investments to date by any one person in the restoration of the Latvian state and its people.” Prof. Ķeniņš-Kings added that in a parliamentary republic a constitutionally mandated president is not entrusted with real power, but an outstanding individual who finds herself in that office can exert great moral strength. “Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is an intelligent woman. Nothing can be forced upon her.”

The Latvian constitution states, “The President bears no political responsibility for his or her work.” At a time when every facet of human activity is becoming politicised, this statement sounds somewhat misleading, even if it only refers to a very narrow understanding of responsibility and politics. What does the phrase “political responsibility” mean? Before whom is a president responsible — before the people,

before the government, before the European Parliament, before her own conscience? All citizens in a democratic society are politically responsible for what they do.

The New President — Her Image And Reflections

There are tragedies that knock the air out of one — the loss of the space shuttle Challenger in 2003, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, live air raids in Kabul and Baghdad, in 2002 and 2003. Then, there are the global events that unite vast audiences — the opening ceremonies of the Olympic games, the Pope's blessing at Easter. On a Latvian scale one such occasion when many, many people were glued to their television sets was the election of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga to the presidency.

She was a new face in Latvian politics, and her constitutionally mandated term in office meant that politicians would have to deal with her for an entire four years. One can understand the desire of politicians to ensure that the voters, "those whom we call the nation," see each politician in the right light. At the same time, however, the election of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was quite unexpected, and that created an urgent problem for politicians: how do we present this image to the outside world?

First of all, she is the first female President in the history of Latvia. And second, a woman's image on the political stage is noticed much more than is a man's. I assume that to be the country's highest-ranking official is a source of constant pressure. For a woman, the questions are obvious — what to do with my hands, what to do with my feet, where to put my purse? And what about my eyes? A woman cannot afford to put her elbow on the table and her head in her hand during an official meeting, no matter how weary she is at the end of a long day. She cannot strike a pose in the parliamentary dining room and raise her arms above her head in a stretch that seeks to relieve the tensions of the day. These are attitudes toward women, which have emerged through centuries of traditions, and they are probably not entirely without justification. "Beauty will save the world," said Dostoyevski. The truth is that beauty saves the world at least a little bit every day. If everyone wore

black suits with a shirt and tie, the world would be a sad and totalitarian place. A woman needs to think about her appearance and her behaviour twice. She must remember what she wore at every event so as to ensure that she does not turn up among the same people in the same dress. She cannot walk around with the same purse on a day-to-day basis.

A journalist from the up-scale monthly "Rīgas Laiks" (Riga Time), avidly read by the "upper crust", told the President "in recent photographs you have started to look like Margaret Thatcher. Are you aware of that?" "That's amazing," said the President in response. The media and those who believe in a firm hand as the right form of leadership were probably disappointed when she continued: "I don't know very much about Mrs. Thatcher. She appeared in the mass media in Canada far less often than she did in Europe, more frequently during the war in the Falkland Islands. I remember, though, that when I was at Oxford and mentioned her name, the academics started to foam at the mouth. She was seen as the woman who destroyed research in England by withdrawing government support. Intellectuals were very hostile toward her, arguing that she was a radical member of the right wing, very conservative and not at all intellectual." Even if the journalist had meant well in comparing Vaira Vike-Freiberga to the "iron lady", the image of Margaret Thatcher as an idol was destroyed on the spot. Never again has anyone tried to compare the Latvian President to someone else.

In Latvia and elsewhere in the world, women have been seen on the political stage. The media have made it clear that these women would be appropriate role models for the President because they were already in power. The new Latvian President, however, projects an image that suggests freedom and self-assurance more than a wish for power. She has dealt with this public issue in a businesslike manner and compassionately. A journalist once asked her if she accepts that so many commentators stress the fact that she is a woman, even though this is often done in a positive way. "Given the current historical moment," the President said, "yes, I do. From the point of view of Latvia's national interests, it is a very positive factor, a form of advertising that attracted attention to Latvia and brought Latvia's name into the world. As a woman, however, I might wish that eventually this fact did not attract any particular attention."

The word “womanly” certainly carries an ambiguous connotation with it, especially if it is used to describe someone’s nature. When someone says that a man is manly, that is seen as a compliment. Russia still awards a state prize that is called “For manliness”, and it is awarded to people — irrespective of gender — who have engaged in particularly important jobs. The award is often granted posthumously. The sailors on the ill-fated submarine Kursk were all given one after they died.

If you tell a man that he is womanly or feminine, however, you will probably offend him. By contrast, the gender identity of a spiritually strong and courageous woman is often put under question, especially if the woman is praised for being manly or masculine. The great Latvian poet Aspazija has been praised by literary specialists for her supposed manliness, although that description differs from the writer’s visual image and her lyrical and dramatic history. If you say about a woman that she is sort of womanly or feminine, that is not always a compliment either, especially if you’re talking about her professional or work qualifications. That is true despite the fact that the process of raising children provides a woman with skills and qualities that would be useful in almost any kind of job imaginable.

Asked if she considers herself to be womanly, Vaira Vike-Freiberga answers that she does. “I definitely think of myself as womanly. I am a wife and mother and, as a result, my life has given me great emotional satisfaction. Why should a woman devote her entire life to her children only?” she asks rhetorically. “For me, that is an artificial choice that is forced on a woman — choose between your career and your family. That is an abnormal, unjustified and illogical demand. You may just as well ask a woman which of her children she will sacrifice or which limb of her body she will allow you to amputate. Why should there be any amputation? A woman with a career and a family can be a perfectly healthy individual.”

The image and nature of a president, irrespective of whether the president is a man or a woman, is of key importance in the eyes of the public. Older people who have never had much of an interest in politics and who do not know much about what politicians have done will certainly remember the presidents themselves. Elderly Latvians will tell you all about the kind of person that the first president Jānis Čakste or

the last pre-war president Kārlis Ulmanis was. Historians have written that Čakste was a great democrat, that he protected the country's laws. The people will remember that he had a large and happy family, that he was a kindly man who smiled a lot. The Freedom Monument in the centre of Rīga and the monument to Jānis Čakste in one of the city's cemeteries — those were the symbols of Latvia's independence that were visited during the Soviet occupation by people who wanted to lay down some flowers or light a candle. They did so despite the constant threat of persecution by the authorities. Čakste is still seen today as someone who embodied all of the properties that a head of state needs.

The private lives of statesmen have also attracted much historical attention, and conclusions are drawn from those private lives, which speak to a politician's political activities, not just his family life. Historian Ilga Kreituse, for instance, has written that the success of Čakste's presidency can be attributed to "a good education, work experience, the fact that the president did not have financial worries and the fact that he had a stable family". The family — something that the historian sees as having been of importance in the way in which Čakste's personality was developed.

Now, did this particular historian take a woman's view of what is important in someone's life? No, indeed. Men have followed suit. Professor Aivars Stranga, also an historian, has reminded us that the private lives of high-ranking government officials are often used to create ideological myths, especially under authoritarian regimes.

"After the 1934 coup by Kārlis Ulmanis, the ideologists conjured up the myth that this leader did not have a family because he had given all of himself to 'the people', keeping nothing for himself. That was authoritarian nonsense, which covered up a dangerous phenomenon — Ulmanis only had one life. His was a political life, he wanted power, and there was nothing else. When he started to lose power, he organized a coup to protect his only life."

Jānis Čakste never did develop a cult of personality around him, despite the fact that he made a massive investment in the development of the Latvian state. He is not seen as a mythological being in popular memory today.

The biography of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga shows us that she had already lived several happy and fulfilled lives before she became President of Latvia. She did not fight tooth and nail for this position; she did not need it to compensate for something missing in her personal life. After her election to the presidency, she had this to say: "I wasn't intent on winning at all costs. My self-respect did not depend on winning or losing the election. I have many things to do in life that interest me and, I hope, would benefit other people." There is good reason to believe her. When she took over the presidency, she may have regretted having to push her research work on to the back burner. With very few exceptions, the President has had no time to pursue such work or to publish. That is unfortunate, because Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was extremely active in publishing before her election. The Karogs publishing house issued "Meteoroloģiskā saule" (The Meteorological Sun), the third volume of her trilogy "Trejādas saules" (The Threefold Sun). She was working on a book called "Par kultūru" (On Culture) in Latvian, as well as on several books in English, "The Logic of Poetry", "On Structure and Function in the Latvian Dainas" and "Latvian Sun-song Melodies" [with original texts in Latvian and their English translation].

The articles that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has written in English are particularly important to the international recognisability of Latvia and its culture. In 2001, UNESCO included the cabinet of Latvian folk songs (Dainu skapis) into the Memory of the World Register. This was an initiative on Latvia's part, but there would have been no chance of inclusion on the prestigious UNESCO list had the dainas not been known around the world, not just by Latvians. The uniqueness of the dainas must be discovered anew by every Latvian, but they must also be presented on a global scale in a language understood internationally. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs have made an inestimable contribution in this area, and they should be proud of their achievement.

If we talk about presidential traditions in Latvia passed on from one president to the next, then in Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's case we must look back to the first president, Jānis Čakste. He was a professor at the University of Latvia before turning to politics. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is the second professor in the country's history to become president, and the first female professor. On May 1, 2000, on the 80th anniversary

of the opening of the Latvian Constitutional Convention, she addressed an audience gathered at Čakste's memorial in the Cemetery of Heroes (Braļu kapi):

"Although he was the direct heir to the ideals of the first national awakening, Jānis Čakste was a political modernist in his time. [...] The circumstances demanded a leader who could unite disparate forces and even out the political differences of opinion on the concept of the Latvian state. Jānis Čakste, with his moral and professional standing, was just such a person — a highly qualified lawyer, a determined democrat, and a man who united his faith with his wishes.

Čakste's contemporaries always emphasized his humanitarian and moral characteristics, his nobility of spirit, his self-denial, his particularly bright and optimistic personality and his ability to be a statesman and a man of honour simultaneously. The composer Jāzeps Vītols spoke of 'this most fortunate synthesis of a political realist and a political idealist'. The poet Aspazija, speaking at Čakste's funeral, said: 'His spirit will live on in the people, and many will warm themselves by his flame'." Indeed, this has come to pass.

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga did not refer to historians or politicians as she explored the reasons why Čakste was so beloved. Instead, in her speech she considered how artists viewed Čakste, emphasizing him as a political modernist of his time and as someone who combined political realism and idealism. She too, has this fortunate synthesis. Even as a child Vaira possessed a rational mind, which would never allow her to pander to someone else's national romantic image of a president.

How Do We Know One Another?

I knew her immediately, right away
From her stride and a well tended force.

The Latvian poet Imants Ziedonis dedicated his "Poēma par pienu" (A Poem about Milk) to his mother and to "girls who are strong in life." Coincidentally, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga wrote the epilogue to the 8th volume of Ziedonis' collected works, calling it "On milk, bread and

survival.” She wrote the text as an authority in poetics, before she became the President of Latvia. Ziedonis’ lines from the poem quoted above introduce the question of how Latvians recognize each other.

Could Latvians have known about Vaira Viķe-Freiberga when she lived in Canada and they lived in the Soviet Union? Long before she moved back to Latvia permanently, Latvians learned about her from her articles and later from her books. She was no stranger to anyone in Latvia who worked in the field of culture or the humanities, and not just folklorists or psychologists. Anyone who read one of her articles eagerly awaited the next one. Her speech “That’s how we are,” reprinted in five different publications in Latvia and in one Latvian newspaper in New York, is proof of that popularity. Her originality in style and thought engages people. This is something she has mastered so perfectly that it seems made to measure. With the method known as structuralism, Vaira was able to unravel the structure of the dainas and also interpret their spiritual dimension. She did this so convincingly that even the layman could understand the ideas, regardless of his level of expertise. Only gifted scholars have this talent. Einstein once said to his fellow scientists: “What point is there to all your theories if you cannot explain their essence in a few minutes to a housewife?” This truism leaves no room for doubt about the theory or the standing of housewives.

Viķe-Freiberga’s work in folklore helped define a national identity for her. This was a strong link that tied her to Latvians in Latvia and abroad. She helped Latvians throughout the world discover that we have very much in common — far too much for us to remain strangers. That would be a terrible loss for everyone.

She lived most of her life as an émigré with astonishing faith and strength, focusing on the independent Latvian state in the past and in the future. That was the greatest surprise to me when I read her works for the first time. Latvia was not the only country in the world whose nation was included into the territory of an alien force. Latvia was deep in the heart of everyone, and I assume that also applies to non-Latvians who have lived in Latvia for generations. I, however, was among those citizens of the Soviet Union for whom the independent Latvian state could rise again only in a symbolic sense. When the massive choir of the Latvian Song and Dance Festival belted out the majestic “Castle of

Light" by the poet Auseklis and the composer Jāzeps Vitols, the image of Latvia rising again was seen by everyone in the audience, even in the bitterest years of the Soviet stagnation. The conductors always made quite sure of that.

I would be lying, however if I said that I never met anyone as dedicated to the idea of Latvia's rebirth as Vaira right here in Soviet Latvia, even though this dedication was manifested in very different ways here. When I was a child, everyone had to spend a week on the potato fields for the harvest, and when the day was done, neighbours sat down at the dinner table and spent some time drinking beer, which they had brewed themselves. It sounds like something from the last century. It *is* something from the last century. Those around the table usually went through the whole repertoire of patriotic Latvian songs, including the poet Tirzmaliete's beautiful "I shall sing of you, land of my fathers" and Jānis Steiks' "These bones, this flesh, this spirit and this heart". The songs were sung by men and women who had lived in independent Latvia, by men who had fought under different flags, by people who often had close relatives in emigration. One of my father's brothers had gone to Australia; another had been deported to Siberia. My own father, the youngest child in his family, was saved by fate; he did not have to leave his country. Maybe that is why he sang those songs at the dinner table in such a heartfelt way. He was singing not only for himself, but also for his brothers who were far, far away.

As the beer mugs began to empty, people started to talk openly and to make predictions. "Don't make any mistake about it," someone would say. "The Americans and the British will come to help us". These words were received with joy or with scepticism, depending on the listener. These were the kinds of discussions that took place during every potato-harvesting week, especially if the farmer in question was not stingy with the beer.

The other time that relatives and neighbours always came together was the summer solstice festival in June, but there was no such talk at these gatherings. There is a good reason for this. The potato week was in the late autumn, and it got dark outside quite early. The work was hard, and people loved to sit around in the evening, to fill their stomachs and do nothing else. The summer solstice, however, occurs

during the near white nights of Latvia. The flowers are in full bloom, and Latvian tradition holds that one must enjoy the festivities until the light of day — “Who slept on summer solstice night will sleep all summer,” goes the saying. There are countless special songs, there is dancing, young people leap over the campfire and go looking for that blossoming fern. Every kind of grass and flower is held to have magical properties on summer solstice night, the fern especially — find a flowering one, and you will be lucky for the rest of your life. Clearly, this is not a night for politics.

When I was a child, the things that I was taught in school made me believe that the dream of an independent Latvia was just that — a dream. How could otherwise logical people say such things, even if they are drunk, I wondered. I was a good little Pioneer [a Soviet “scout”], and I decided that my elders simply lacked knowledge. Many of the men who sat at that table are long dead, many died before the dream came true, but they died in the belief that independence would eventually be restored. They were right. The talk over the beer glasses provided me with my first lessons in the theory of discourse, even though the word “discourse” appeared in Latvia’s academic lexicon only 30 years later.

Possibly this is why Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, always so busy with her academic life, so renowned in her field, took the time to go out among the people at the 2x2 and 3x3 camps, at folklore festivals, at Independence Day ceremonies all over the world. She found her vocation in tending to individual and national self-esteem.

The whole country watched the metamorphoses in and around the new President after her election. When I began to work on this book, I thought it would be interesting to talk with some people from the world of arts, who were not directly involved in politics at that time. I asked them their views about Vaira, about her character and how they thought she was doing. I chose three of Latvia’s most distinguished cultural icons who had known Vaira for years: the Latvian poet and former parliamentarian Imants Ziedonis, the renowned painter Džemma Skulme, who comes from a long line of painters, and the distinguished Russian-Latvian writer Roalds Dobrovenskis.

Imants Ziedonis certainly should know Vaira Viķe-Freiberga. They worked together at the Latvian Institute, they both read the dainas,

albeit each on a different continent. The first thing Ziedonis offered was a typical “Ziedonism”: “I don’t know the President.” There was a pause: “I used to know Vaira.”

I added that I didn’t know her either. I had only seen her on television recently, and before that we knew each other largely through texts, conferences and other events where one could enjoy her company. On this note, in an interview in the newspaper “Diena”, the political commentator, Aivars Ozoliņš, asked her a question: “In some interviews we have sensed an undertone in your answers that smacks of psychological therapy for the nation. Do you do that on purpose?”

Ziedonis and I met at a café in the Museum of Natural History in Riga on July 6, 2000. He talked so fast that I could hardly get it all down:

“We were known as publicists back then and to me she was a publicist for the world’s Latvians. She had studied the destiny of the nation; she had ironclad consistency in all her speeches and attitudes, from one speech to the next and from one year to the next. I cannot say that I followed her work chronologically, but we did keep up with the lively émigré Latvian minds — let me repeat — lively, as in living. We had “Dzimtenes Balss” [Voice of the Fatherland, a newspaper that was published in Soviet Latvia with émigré Latvians as the target audience]; we had the newspapers that were published over there. I was attracted to the great serenity of her patriotic speeches. I got the sense that this composure came from her deep convictions. Calm and collected speakers can be explained in two ways — either they are trained demagogues and cretins who talk nonsense and enjoy it because they believe in their nonsense or they have been blessed. I felt the latter in Vaira Viķe-Freiberga’s speeches, articles and conversations, some kind of deeper basis where she found her conviction. A strong, classical education is the simplest explanation, but one of the depths, the source of her refreshing calm, could have been her knowledge of the lives of the Latvian people. In “Jaunā Gaita” we read that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga had once again appeared at a 3x3 camp, had once again taken part in some popular event where everyone got carried away like teenagers. She was always present, even though she was not a party girl herself as far as I can tell. That told me something. It told me that she understands the meaning

of ritual and the importance of nurturing ritual. The national, mythical ritual, I think. It must be tended regardless of current trends.

"I met her personally here in Riga; sometimes we'd go for a walk in Jūrmala and take some photographs. Aesthetic pleasure was part of the experience — she's a beautiful woman and was quite sweet before she became President. Such calm wisdom and beauty.

"Later, when we worked together at the Latvian Institute after Vaira came back to live here, when she spoke at the "Spīdola" awards ceremony of the Latvian Cultural Fund at the Rīga Latvian Society House, I was struck by her sharp wit, because for all her calm, she spoke about fairly weighty political matters. That was true when she worked at the Latvian Institute, too. She went to ministries where no one really knew who she was. Civil servants were not used to such academic and intellectual abilities. She never offends anyone's intellect, or the intellectual judgment of a stupid person — or a bureaucrat, or a stuffy person. She simply did not allow herself to engage in such conversations, and that is a sign of a disciplined person. She did not allow herself to become subordinated to the Foreign Ministry, because she understood the importance of the Latvian Institute as a public institution. She did not allow political parties to dictate terms or positions. She was already a polished diplomat. This is vital in order to be able to stand up against the rules of the civil service. I have to admit, I could never have done it myself. I don't have the calm approach of the diplomat and become irritated quickly. That's not the way to get things done. After visiting the umpteenth ministry, we'd stand on the steps of the Parliament and she smiled and joked. This is the same political independence and diplomatic skill I see in her now.

"Why did we — a very small group of people, even fewer than the signatories — cook up this thing? [The reference is to the open letter in which Latvia's cultural community recommended Vaira Viķe-Freiberga for the presidency.] I can't speak about the motivations of others, but at the time Latvia really did need a representative president, a president needed by a patriotic Latvia, one who is needed by a globally integrated Latvia. I thought Vaira not only understood the process of globalisation but also, in understanding those processes, would find a way for Latvia to fit into this picture naturally — a way that would clarify how and where Latvia fits into the process, how it can become a partner, how to ensure partnership

and proudly present its own abilities. The achievements of a nation or a state are not dictated by global horizontal vectors alone nor by inter-global information, but also by the presence of cosmic logic. We would have to spend several days at a conference to talk about this in detail, but I was convinced that Vaira understands the global processes of civilisation — let's call them horizontal processes as they relate to the vertical processes — vertical information, the all-encompassing energies and information that dictate the evolution of the world. I felt that she had acquired this instinctive knowledge and had been “blessed” in some way with respect to that knowledge [Imants Ziedonis instructed me to put the word “blessed” in quotation marks.] That was my inner motivation.

“I have no doubt at all that the election of the President was ordained by a higher power, just like the Latvian national renaissance was ordained by a higher force. It was not motivated by linear logic. A presidency is a mission delegated by the nation and, God willing, the President is accompanied by the nation’s spiritual soul and good will.

“You see, I know her only strategically, in terms of the nation’s destiny. In personal terms, she has all the positive and negative characteristics of an aristocrat. It is a very interesting mixture, because the status of a noble brings with it an existential sense of moderation. I have surpassed the boundary of what I am allowed to consider, though, and was getting into very personal feelings, outside the bounds of our strategic acquaintance.”

We spoke for several hours and when we went back outside we found that it had started to rain. Ziedonis did not have an umbrella. We walked to the Rome Hotel under one umbrella.

I wasn't all that sure about Džemma Skulme's contacts with Vaira Viķe-Freiberga. I was positive they had shaken hands and exchanged pleasantries at some point, because two such visible women must have crossed paths. Beginning in the 1970s both women had shown deep interest in Latvian folk songs. Džemma Skulme translated the dainas into the language of modern art, while Professor Viķe-Freiberga at the University of Montreal translated them into the language of modern science. In the 1970s, one of Džemma Skulme's major motifs began to appear in her paintings — “Cariatide.” This ancient word appears in the titles of many of the artist's paintings, which feature young women

in Latvian folk costumes. In classical and Renaissance architecture, the word “cariatide” was used to describe a statue or sculpture of a woman that holds up the roof but has decorative functions as well. *Cariatides* in Džemma Skulme’s paintings can be seen as self-portraits of the artist, and sometimes as Latvian archetypal reflections of the modern woman as a pillar of support for the world — an archetypal, folkloric, national and feminist motif. My intuition did not fail me. Džemma Skulme began the interview.

“I thought I had known Vaira since the 1970s, but when I checked the chaos that is my correspondence, I found that in fact we had met first only in the autumn of 1982 in Riga. I had all kinds of information from other friends abroad about what Vaira and Imants were doing. Those were the years when I was particularly interested in people who considered the Latvian folk song and our written folklore in the larger context of the world, the universe, eternity and the spiritual qualities beyond the human ones. I was looking to discover what it is that is unique to us Latvians alone — why has it happened like that and why do I feel it, too. What is the key to this miracle? I looked for sources, but I was more interested in the creative processes which occur when I am creating [Džemma asked that the word “creating” be put in quotation marks, but I don’t think that’s necessary at all] and how these processes relate to everything in folklore. I felt all this intuitively, but there wasn’t anyone with whom I could discuss this very creative aspect of life. To some extent Imants Ziedonis and I touched upon these feelings.

“My first conversation with Vaira was in my studio, probably in the autumn of 1982. I had prepared myself inwardly for the conversation. She was wearing a dark blue dress with something like a white collar which, as far as I could tell, was a part of her outfit, but that’s not important. Vaira approached the work of art appraisingly and she immediately took in the content and the symbolic meaning. I had a painting with a girl in a folk costume and her headdress was raised a little above her head, as if to take it off, as if to put it on. Vaira looked at the painting and explained it in a way no one had ever done before, least of all myself. There were a few other women in the painting who had shawls in their hands, as if they were ready to dress the young woman. Vaira put in words all

the hidden content so masterfully that I myself was surprised. I had painted intuitively, but in those paintings were things that could be confirmed theoretically. I dare to think that when Vaira saw where and how I produce my work, she found confirmation for her beliefs as well. Vaira was a wealth of knowledge and information, and in my studio she sought and, to some extent, also found who she is. We bonded in half-sentences, the keys were in our hands, my soul opened up. I showed her everything. I argued with her. There was an animalistic portrait of Ojārs [the painter Ojārs Ābols]; there was a girl in a folk costume whose headdress had been ripped off, who had been raped.

"We kept right on talking each time we met. For the most part I asked, and she answered. And the time came when I gradually began to move away from that which can be depicted visually to that which could be spoken in words (the subject had been visually exhausted). Then a difficult time began for me, and you all know about what I did. [Džemma Skulme has always been an artist with a distinctly public personality. She was chair of the board of the Latvian Artists Union, she was an award-winning painter of the Latvian SSR and the USSR, she was a deputy to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, an activist in the Latvian Popular Front, an honorary member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, president of the Latvian Innovation Fund and more. When she says that, she is probably talking about her various public and political activities.] Has Latvia really understood what Vaira and Imants have constructed? That is why only Vaira had the right to make that speech, 'That's just how we are,' the one that caused such a great fuss. Once we talked about how that speech made waves in Latvian society. From that conversation I came to understand that her vision would change our history.

"In 1990, in Lugano, during the poets' Rainis and Aspazija event, I was with Vaira and Imants very late one night. Even then, our conversation focused on politics and what needed to be done for the nation. [Here Džemma Skulme brought out an important and cherished souvenir from the Lugano forum — the postcard that was handed to her as a member of the Soviet Council of People's Deputies which read 'Now the time has come to declare Latvia's independence' and was signed by 14 people who had taken part in a late night discussion with Vaira Viķe-Freiberga of Canada. This declaration of independence in Lugano was

written a short time before Latvia actually proclaimed its independence on May 4, 1990.] Vaira's thinking has been built up over the course of many years, and it has formidable fundamentals. The great advantage her thinking has is that it is unique. Her words find the right place, and there are no unessential words of the kind that we all use as people from the Soviet era. It is simply a joy to watch this intensive thought process. The men who are in power here should hang their heads in shame before the President for the many things that they have failed to do, for their lack of breeding, for their cynicism, for their all too obvious lust for power.

"Before Vaira arrived I had a sense of imminent serendipity that a leader would appear, and that it would be a woman. Destiny sent us this person and we have been elevated to a higher plane. We should be able to appreciate this."

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was a phenomenon in politics in 1999, as was the ethnic Russian-Latvian writer Roalds Dobrovenskis in Latvian literature that same year. He published a novel called "Rainis and his Brothers".⁶ Latvia's national culture and the founding of the state are common themes in the lives and works of Latvia's most distinguished poets, the husband and wife team of Rainis and Aspazija. Roalds Dobrovenskis joined 106 authors from 43 different countries on what was known as the "European Express" in 2001. This was a big cultural project set to tour throughout Europe over the course of a month or so, stopping in the major capitals, including Riga on June 28, and culminating with the publication of a book of impressions about the trip.

We agreed to meet at a restaurant, and although Roalds was the last person I interviewed for this book, he was my most anticipated interviewee. He was fresh off the "European Express," with dozens of unread e-mails from writers he had met along the way. It was a rainy morning, and he came in with a dripping umbrella. Roalds was happy to talk, and he was proud that he had had an opportunity to present his novel to the President.

⁶ Dobrovenskis R. Rainis un viņa brāļi. Viena dzejnieka septīnas dzīves (Rainis and his brothers: One Poet's Seven Lives). Rīga: Karogs (1999), 656 pp. Translated from the Russian by V. Eisule. The novel was published in Russian by the same publishing house a year later.

"I met Vaira Viķe-Freiberga for the first time in the summer of 1990 at the summer home of a well-known Latvian poet. I had been working on my book about Rainis for four years and had collected a huge pile of references. I had been able to look through books that had been published abroad, especially in Stockholm. My Latvian colleagues, particularly Māris Čaklais [the poet], helped me."

"I knew only one 'foreign' Latvian at that time — Olafs Stumbrs, who lived in the USA. Now that was a poet. He was a big and handsome man, as truthful as a small child. He had left Latvia at the age of 14, but before that he had gone to school in Rīga, at a school that was about 50 metres away from my home. I can't forget that once he was visiting us, and he stayed until around 4:00 AM. On the way back to where he was staying, he suddenly spotted his school, and he did a little dance right there on the street, combining the heaviness of a big bear with an amazing amount of gracefulness. Like the Freibergs couple, Stumbrs was one of the first émigré Latvians who dared set up links with his fatherland. I have been told that when he was in Latvia, the 'art specialists in civilian dress' [the KGB] dogged his every footprint, and the first human contacts were made more difficult by mutual distrust and fear. In emigration, too, there was no shortage of people who were ready to denounce anyone who dared visit Rīga as an enemy of the Latvian people. There were fortress walls between the two worlds, and people on both sides added new bricks to those walls with quasi-religious fervour. Anyone who tried to cross the line required a great deal of courage."

"We talked for a long time, we talked about Rainis. I remember Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was, for some reason, curious about the Russian word 'parikmaher' [barber, hairdresser]. She wanted to know about its origins. I explained that the word had come from the reforms of Tsar Peter the Great. Once he had personally cut off the beards and hair of his noblemen and they had to order powdered wigs in place of the hair, as was the fashion in the West. The wigs [parik] and the men who made them [maher] — 'parikmaher' is a Russian word that borrowed from German — were in enormous demand. I never did consult the etymological dictionary, but I am sure that I am right about the word. Anyway, since that meeting, I have never missed a single publication by Vaira Viķe-Freiberga that has come to my attention."

"I got to know her better after I had read two of the three books of the "Trejādas saules" (The Threecold Sun) set. I was not surprised by her erudition, by her deep knowledge of the subject, nor by her independence or her courage in making her scientific judgments. I had expected nothing less. What was surprising and enjoyable for me, however, was her inner freedom, her ability to describe images, the precision of her language and — the main thing — her sense of humour, unforced and always present. While reading the books, I began to think (and I am admitting this now for the first time) that I should put everything else aside and translate the books into Russian. I knew right away, however, that this would be impossible. In translation, the dainas lose the meanings and relationships that were the subject of Viķe-Freiberga's research."

"I had an opportunity to present a copy of the Latvian version of "Rainis and his Brothers" to Vaira after she had already become President of Latvia. I remember that in the inscription, I wrote that her arrival in the President's castle was, to a certain extent, the fulfilment of my hero's narcissistic dream. Rainis very much wanted to become the President of Latvia in the 1920s and if the stars had been right, he might well have done so. At any rate, no other president in the history of Latvia has come so close to the kind of person and politician that Rainis was, and in the history of modern Europe, there have only been a few such people."

"As far as I can tell, the Latvian President's job is not an easy one. There is enormous pressure from political forces that want to see Vaira Viķe-Freiberga as the President of a 'Latvian Latvia' only, of a country that only caters to the interests of ethnic Latvians and excludes Russian-Latvians. The Head of state, however, has to be a figure that can unite, and if the interests of a part of Latvia's population were ignored, that would mean that Latvia would lose part of its population. The very significant speech Vaira Viķe-Freiberga made from the balcony of Radio Latvia [on Latvia's independence day, November 18, 1999] gave many people a clear signal — Latvia needs everyone who is ready to work and live as part of its future."

"If we speak of the multinational and multilingual country that is Latvia, then there is bitter opposition to the very idea of such a country. Sometimes it seems there are two sets of camps for mutually exclusive ideas, even in the President's castle, in the President herself. This is

a dramatic, perhaps even tragic conflict, which could become the driving force of Latvia's contemporary history but could also become an insurmountable obstacle in the path of that history. If it were up to me, I'd order banners for the entranceway to the President's castle and for every street in the city, emblazoned with the words of Christ: 'And if a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand' (Mark 3:24).

"Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is first and foremost a woman of culture. She is an outstanding representative of the national Latvian culture and she is equally an embodiment of Western — not entirely, though mostly European — culture. People like her as a politician because she can't be bought. She is non-partisan and this is unquestionably a very important thing for a president. The President's thought processes and her intellectual grasp have developed mostly from her scientific work. Science is, at root, an uncompromising process and it usually represents a search for dramatic truths.

"She is a beginner in politics, which has its pluses and minuses. An inflexible position in defending one's scientific findings and views on life from which one does not retreat is not always appropriate in politics. Courage and directness are commendable in personal life, but in diplomacy they can produce quite the opposite affect. Still, a politician at that level cannot avoid being a diplomat.

"The President has not lost her sense of humour, and she absolutely must not lose it. The President has faith in herself. This is a form of 'western' self-confidence, which sometimes includes elements of self-promotion. This is something that people in Eastern Europe are not used to, and it is not really necessary here. The President knows how to learn. This is an enviable but vitally necessary skill. The President has not yet succeeded in surrounding herself with people who are smarter and more competent than she is in their own areas of specialization.

"Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has succeeded most in the field of foreign policy. Her visits to France, Germany and Ukraine were a triumph. But her greatest setback has also been in foreign policy and now I am talking about our relations with Russia. It is in Latvia's best interests not to teach, scold or denounce Russia or any other country. America, Germany and Great Britain hardly ever allow themselves to make such statements in public. /.../ I am convinced that if Vaira Viķe-Freiberga were to visit

Russia, it would be a historical turning point in the relationship between the two neighbours, and at this time no one else could accomplish that.”

At the end of conversation, Dobrovenskis added: “The things I have just said may seem not so tactful but I’m not speaking with Mrs. Viķe-Freiberga, I’m trusting you, and I am answering all your questions as directly as I can.” I, for my part, have decided to trust my readers. At the beginning of our conversation, Roalds, like all of my partners in conversation about the President, gazed at me thoughtfully but not suspiciously. One of them said that it is very difficult to write a book about a living person. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is very alive, and in so many different ways but that is exactly why this book was necessary. When Roalds Dobrovenskis and I talked, we did not know that the book about the Latvian President would also be in demand among the Russian speaking public and that Dobrovenskis would do the translation. We did not know that in December 2002 the Latvian embassy in Moscow would organize a presentation of the book, inviting the author and the translator to participate. This was a somewhat difficult, but also beautiful and unforgettable episode in our own biographies.

I thought it very important to talk about the President with people from the realm of culture about their views. As a result, there were no outstanding new discoveries, but we did talk about some seemingly self-evident human factors. I wanted to grasp something of the obvious, in my own mind, and in the minds of people who see Vaira Viķe-Freiberga not just in the light of short-term political conjuncture, but also in a broader context. This context seemed significant to me — the environment, the time, the mood when these conversations took place. My partners in conversation are all highly prominent in Latvian cultural life; they are close in age to the President. What do they think, what do they feel when they speak and think about our present and our future? I was a little afraid that the new status and image of the President would mean too much respect being shown toward someone who had taken power. I had no reason to be afraid. The conversations were free and relaxed.

To talk about the life of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga means to talk about many other lives in Latvia and abroad. Everyone has a story about Vaira

but all those stories include a unifying element that would never allow us to confuse her life with any other. Any private conversation about Vaira inevitably turns into a conversation about Vaira and Imants, about the Freibergs couple. Likewise in discussing her research, because without the technical assistance provided by her husband, Vaira would never have been able to engage in her fundamental research of the dainas. A conversation about Vaira and Imants, for its part, is always a conversation about Latvia and about Latvians, about their Latvian identity regardless of the prevailing social conditions or the political state of affairs in Latvia and abroad.

The achievements of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga have always been inspiring. That is evident from the conversations that are recounted here. It is evident in her articles, speeches and books. She inspires one to search, think and act and if some of these creative impulses have not come to fruition immediately and led to success, then they have not disappeared but have left behind important thoughts for the future. That may be why Roalds Dobrovenskis, after reading the first two volumes of "The Threefold Sun", had the urge to sit down and translate them into Russian. I discovered that people are like novels. The great Latin American writer Gabriel García Márquez has written that we read not to learn something new but to confirm something we already know. My study of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and my conversations with her contemporaries confirmed something that I already knew: human capital is what counts and it is not conferred by degrees or titles or noble birth. Human capital cannot be increased at the expense of other human beings.

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is a great human being, great because of the work that she did before she became the President of Latvia. There is no need to mythologize her just to conjure up traits that people supposedly require of their president. That is clear, but that is exactly what encouraged me to examine the myths that were published in the media about Vaira when she took office — that she is a stranger, that she was too well-off in emigration ever to understand the people of Latvia, that she should stick to foreign affairs and never get involved in domestic affairs because she will never understand them. *That* is the myth.

"A President Of Whom Any Superpower Could Be Proud" — What Will Latvia Do?

The results of domestic policy activity are difficult to prove in the short term and their benefits only appear later. Perhaps that is why people particularly emphasise the President's undeniable contribution to foreign policy — promoting Latvia's name in the world, where immediate benefits are more visible. When Vaira Viķe-Freiberga visited France, President Jacques Chirac dubbed her "a president of whom any superpower could be proud." Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is a strong personality and a born leader, but the Soviets were taught to fear individualism. Individualists were executed or sent into exile to Siberia. This helped form an impression that a born leader is likely to be manipulative and devious and to attempt to play with people's destinies.

The very foundation of Soviet ideology created cognitive dissonance among the people. The regime assigned opposite meanings to commonly used terms. The occupation of Latvia was called "liberation", for instance. Socialist romanticism was dubbed Socialist realism. Ruthless dictators were called leaders. Totalitarianism was called democracy.

One of the main tools President Vaira Viķe-Freiberga uses to great effect is the spoken word. She is direct in her speech, and has, with good reason, earned the trust of the nation. She favours creative thought, the critical mind and social justice. It is said that a politician differs from a statesman, because a politician uses the State for his own personal benefit, while a statesman devotes himself to the benefit of the State. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is prepared to continue the work of those statesmen who have devoted their efforts to the benefit of their country.



With Russian President Vladimir Putin, Austria, February 2001



With US President George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice, 22 April 2001





With the royal couple of Norway at the Royal Palace in Oslo, September 2000



With other delegates to the ZONTU Conference in Gothenburg, July 2002



At the memorial to Latvian poets Rainis and Aspazija
in Lugano, October 2000



The NATO Conference, Prague, November 2002



Paris, April 2003



Post-inauguration speech, Doma Cathedral Square, Rīga, 20 June 2003



Inauguration Ball, Rundāle Palace, July 2003



The President's residence at Jūrmala, June 2003



Portrait of Mrs. John Gutfreund
Chairwoman of Salomon Brothers Inc.
Photo by Peter A. Lippmann

V

A CELEBRATION OF DIFFERENCE

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was elected to a second four-year term as President of Latvia by a very convincing vote in the Latvian parliament on June 20, 2003. A total of 88 of 100 deputies voted in favour of her re-election, only six MPs voted against. Four years earlier she had been elected as a somewhat surprising compromise figure after seven rounds of voting, and she had won out over seven other candidates for the presidency. This time, however, there were no surprises. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga's relentless work, her talents as a politician and her human charm were all important. Even those who criticize her know perfectly well that nobody else could represent Latvia at the international level as well as she does. Her contribution has represented the best and strongest political capital which Latvia has had in the recent past.

Running For Re-election To The Presidency

Any nation must know about the life of its President — that goes without saying. This book was initially intended as a reaction to those Latvian politicians who were sceptical about Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, who considered her to be politically illiterate, to be someone from the outside — a "pretty alien". Some politicians claimed that no one in Latvia knew her, that she was probably not appropriate for the high office she was seeking.

At the same time, I have felt that the human values, which are revealed in the President's life story, are so important that so-called less highbrow readers should be introduced to them, as well. I did so with

a clear understanding of the fact that although each individual has just one life, there is no single aspect of that life that can be seen as the only the right one, one that will be recorded for eternity. Time and history enrich each biography, adjustments are made in relation to the judgments that have been produced and to the way in which someone's life has been reported. I believe that the secret behind Vīķe-Freiberga's strength, no matter how it is seen, is her life story. If we think about her childhood, her adolescence and her young adulthood, and if we assume that she could not have known that eventually she would have a distinguished academic career that would be crowned with the presidency of Latvia, then we can say with certainty that no one would voluntarily undergo the same difficult experiences that Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga did. It is possible that her personal qualities would never have emerged if she had experienced a very normal and ordinary life.

In writing this new concluding section to the biography, I would like to remind the reader that the first edition was written immediately after Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga had completed her first year in the presidency. The book was based on the things which I saw and felt at that specific time. My focus was on the way in which Professor Vīķe-Freiberga, who was an intellectual authority for me, became the President of the country. Four years have elapsed since then, lots of water has passed under the bridge. This has been a period during which many important things have happened not just to our President, but also to Latvia, Europe and the whole world. Over her first four years in office, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga travelled abroad 83 times — to the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Russia, Lithuania, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Great Britain, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Iceland, Greece, Slovenia and Hungary, South Africa and more. Her meetings with the leaders of the world's major powers — American President George Bush, French President Jacques Chirac, and Russian President Vladimir Putin — gained great resonance throughout the world. These aspects of the President's life would require a very different book, perhaps an entirely new book if we were to look at the way in which these factors have become a part of her life experience. For the purposes of this book, I will simply provide a brief look at some of the highlights of the President's

international achievements and her relentless domestic policy work in relation to Latvia's movement toward the European Union and NATO. I will also touch on the philosophy behind her work. As she herself has said, this philosophy is based "on a rock of political conviction, not on the flowing sands of uncertainty".

According to the President's Chancery, Vīķe-Freiberga took part in an average of 800 different events each year during her first four year term in office — more than 3,265 events in all. We must remember that these were not events at which the President simply sat and smiled. At each one she was expected to perform. She delivered speeches, she delivered introductory remarks, she held and led discussions. Sometimes she delivered extensive lectures. A good many of her addresses were written by the President herself, they represented the individuality of her creative thought and are of timely political and ongoing cultural and historical importance. Others were not written down beforehand, only transcribed from recordings of the actual speeches that she made.

Latvia is a parliamentary republic, and its constitution specifies that the President of the country has a balancing role to play between the legislature, the executive branch of government and the courts. These, in turn, work to ensure that the country's laws are applied in the same way toward everyone, that everyone enjoys the same benefits of justice, as must be the case in a democratic country. The duty of the President is to observe this process and to consider the national perspective which stands above the political parties that are represented in Parliament, the interests which these parties represent, the various government institutions which exist. Latvia's political system is highly splintered among political parties and cliques¹, and the President is a unifying force when it comes to the overall political goals. In the interests of the country's security and development, Vīķe-Freiberga has never hesitated in becoming involved in everyday politics. She has often pointed to the negligence, shortcomings or violations of those in the executive or judicial branches of government. One instrument that

¹ There are 59 officially registered political parties in Latvia at this writing. Twenty parties stood for election to the session of the Saeima which re-elected Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga to the presidency on June 20, 2003, and six were elected.

is at her disposal is the constitutional right to proclaim laws or to send them back to Parliament for reconsideration. She also has the right to propose new laws. President Vīķe-Freiberga has sent 17 laws back to the Saeima for secondary consideration. The first was a law on the state language in Latvia, and she returned that law just a few days after she took office. She has also submitted six major legislative initiatives to the Saeima.

One of the Latvian President's specific duties is chairing the council which considers requests for pardons and reductions of sentence from people who have been sentenced to prison. During her first term in office, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga considered 545 such requests and issued 131 pardons and sentence reductions. In an interview with the analytical weekly magazine "*Nedēļa*", the President had this to say: "This is a very serious responsibility, one which is extremely important to me. That is why the process moves forward slowly. For what reason would I do this if the court has sentenced the individual to this many years or that many years? Our constitution and our laws do not provide any guidance on this function, it is purely a matter of the president's conscience. It is the responsibility of the president to obtain as extensive legal consultations and evaluations as possible. I have had to elaborate these criteria myself as a part of my job, working together with the legal staff of my advisory council, but generally speaking this is a duty which rests on the president's conscience, and it represents a very serious responsibility."²

The President also chairs the National Security Council, the Council of Historians, the National Language Commission and the council which awards the Order of Three Stars — the country's highest honour. The extent to which President Vīķe-Freiberga is seen as an authority in Latvia, the extent to which people trust her logic, her sense of justice and her ability to help — is demonstrated by the number of letters which she received during her first four years in office — 13,971 letters from individuals and 23,541 letters from organisations. These are very high numbers indeed in relation to Latvia's size and population. The President has said that she has read a significant number of the letters

² Benfelde S. and Zanders M. "The choice between good and evil", *Nedēļa*, 17 April 2003.

and prepared answers to them herself, so as to gain a clear sense of reality and of the desires and problems of the country's residents.

In a lecture which focused on Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's experiences as President and on the institution of the presidency in the new Europe and the global space in which Europe exists, she had this to say: "After my election I noticed that journalists were not shy about saying that in a parliamentary republic, the president has no power, that the job is decorative and representative, that the holder of the post sometimes parades before the people, perhaps allows herself to be photographed in certain situations, but does not play any significant role at all. I can tell you from personal experience that the president in this parliamentary republic has quite enough work to do, that the president works 12 or 16 hours a day".³

All of this applies mostly to the President's everyday work in the domestic arena of politics. I am not a political analyst, but as a representative of the people, I feel safe in saying that the effect of her work in relation to enhancing people's understanding of a democratic society and a country that is based on the rule of law has been enormous and cannot be overstated. That is particularly true when it comes to the culture of "internal" political dialogue. President Viķe-Freiberga has taken advantage of every opportunity that has come before her to put forth wise and tolerant, direct and indirect ways in which people can think about these issues, in which people can come to understand why these matters are of importance to every honest individual and to the country at large. The President has taken clear positions on all major issues, she has formulated her attitudes with lucidity, and she has never failed to remind us that "we do not live in a totalitarian country, this is not a country in which the president will tell everyone what to think".⁴

I feel that this fact must be emphasised specifically because members of Parliament, of political parties and of the government (with the help of journalists who played the same tune) have said, in evaluating

³ From the lecture "The President and the Presidency in the New Europe and Global Space", University of Latvia, May 20, 2003.

⁴ Lulle, B. and Bērziņš A. "A President with the power of the word", *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze*, 19 June 2003.

the President's first year in office and the entire period before her re-election that although she must be praised for her activities in representing Latvia abroad, she has not devoted sufficient attention to domestic matters, arguing that in the future she should focus more on this particular aspect of her work. To be sure, the things that we include under the concept "foreign policy" and "domestic policy" are a matter of philosophy. In the era of globalisation, this is an excessively mechanical division, not just at the theoretical, but also at the purely practical level. When we consider such issues as smuggling, corruption, regional development, the country's language policies, Latvia's integration into Europe's economic and market structures — these are all matters in which domestic and foreign policy aspects flow together and overlap.

Oligarchic groupings and representatives of political parties probably were thinking of something different when they talked about domestic policy. Perhaps they expected some other type of assistance from the President. This could be seen on the day before her re-election, when journalists were able to ask questions. One of these focused on why the President had not become involved in debates over the privatisation of a particular institution — the bank Latvijas Krājbanka. Her response applied not only to this specific instance, but showed her general philosophy on such matters: "Yes, I declined to become involved in discussions where people were pointing fingers at one another. I do not think that this is the duty of the president, nor is it a way of resolving problems. I have indeed tried to avoid situations in which the institution of the presidency is used as a club with which to beat an opponent about the head."⁵

On the basis of all of this, I must conclude that the local press, political competitors and those who do not like the President have not always been generous in evaluating her work. On the contrary — people have been watching every step that she takes, as if they were waiting for her to trip up or fall. She has not worked in an atmosphere of general friendliness or admiration — the kind of situation which

one might have expected on the basis of the official election results and the President's consistently high popularity ratings. Despite the fact that she is not a member of any political party and thus has not had the backing of a strong party at difficult times, no shield behind which most high-ranking politicians can hide, her consistent positions and hard work have allowed her to maintain and increase the respect and authority she enjoys among the public.

Ladies And Gentlemen, Do Not Think Of Them In The Bureaucratic And Abstract Way That You Normally Do

The post-Soviet audience which heard the first public speeches which Vaira Viķe-Freiberga delivered upon her return to Latvia was by no means an easy one to face. These were people who were accustomed to being addressed primarily in the form of political demagoguery. Any public address was received with a degree of suspicion, people looked for mistakes of logic therein. The Soviet person was perfectly well trained to say one thing and to do another, and when he found himself in the role of the listener, he always tried to decide whether the speaker was subject to yet another ideological process, whether the speaker was really addressing the heart of the matter. There was a lack of high-quality politicians, because politics, of course, were handled in Moscow. This was one of the reasons why Viķe-Freiberga distinguished herself and gained popularity against the general political background in Latvia. Her advantage has always been and continues to be the fact that she is different. She can take common topics of conversation and turn them in a radically different direction and give them a new perspective. Instead of focusing on the wounds of the past, the sorrow about historical offences that have been committed against the Latvian people, she would turn to the present and the future, to the human values that are part of every individual.

It has also become clear that her thinking and her way of speaking have resonated powerfully in the international arena. How else could we explain her rapidly growing international popularity in the West? This, too, may be part of the phenomenon of her being different from other leaders of the post-Soviet countries of the former Eastern Bloc. New Europe has been divided by some people into zones — "Eastern

Europe”, “Southern Europe”, “Central Europe”. Each of these associates with a “territorial ethos”, one might say. Eastern Europe is a territory in which military, economic, ideological, linguistic and other barriers were in place for half a century, cutting it off from the “real Europe”. For this reason, it is seen as a periphery, as a place of little intellectual or moral potential. The presence of President Vīķe-Freiberga makes it clear that this is not true. She is an outstanding public speaker, and she can address people without difficulty in English, French, German and also Spanish (but not Russian).

One of the first times that the voice of Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was heard on behalf of women in Latvia, in all three Baltic States and, in a sense, in all of Eastern Europe, was at a conference called “Women and Democracy at the Dawn of the New Millennium”, which took place in Reykjavik, Iceland, on October 8, 1999. At the beginning of her speech, the President thanked two of the world’s most distinguished women — Hillary Clinton and the American secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, thus emphasising the importance of the event. President Vīķe-Freiberga thanked the two women for their initiative and their strong personal support. She reminded the audience that she and the two American political figures had talked about the upcoming Reykjavik conference when she had recently visited Washington.

In discussing the issue of political participation and gender equality for women in her region, she took the opportunity to remind everyone that Latvia was one of the first countries in the world to grant suffrage for women — from the moment when the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed in 1918, women had the right to vote. The fact that a woman had been elected president of one of the Baltic States in a democratic process — that alone demonstrated the high standards of democracy which the three countries have achieved since the restoration of their independence, she said.

One of the most important elements in the public speeches which the Latvian President delivers is the fact that the speaker is able to evaluate any situation on its merits, no matter what. Intellectual honesty and positive thinking — these are the secrets behind the President’s popularity. She has been a public spokeswoman during her long years among émigrés in the West and, during the “singing revolution” of

the late 1980s, in Latvia. Now her way and quality of thinking are gaining recognition in international circles. She speaks of things in the way they are, and her speeches make it clear that as an EU candidate country, Latvia is not a valley of sorrow, it is not a poor relation, a fifth wheel, a victim of history or “unnecessary burden”, which the new Europe must tolerate on its way toward greater progress. On the contrary, Latvia’s history and its present-day condition can serve as important resources and support elements in the emergence of the new Europe. This is true in terms of human resources, natural treasures and cultural values.

In her speech at Reykjavik, the President stressed that despite some difficulties, Latvia had become a dynamic and developing Northern European country, one which had achieved considerable success. If this successful progress were to continue and if issues concerning gender equality were to be addressed, however, the Baltic States needed the support and assistance of the developed European countries: “They could make do, however, without a growing demand for commercialised intimate services and pornographic materials. This growing pressure from western countries, when taken together with radical differences in standards of living, has created a dangerous and debasing international trade in human flesh. This has affected not only adult women, but children of both genders throughout the eastern regions of the European continent. Blame is far too often placed on the victim. Instead we require unified efforts at the international level to protect children against sexual violence and women against sexual exploitation,” said the Latvian President.

When it comes to the President’s biography, at least three of her international speeches have become important and, to some extent, legendary. In chronological order these are the address which she made at the Third World Conference Against Racial Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, South Africa, September 2001), her speech at the opening of a conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on Refugees (Geneva, December 2001), and her address at the NATO summit meeting in Prague on the launch of membership negotiations with Latvia and six other candidate countries (November 2002). Viķe-Freiberga said that she decided on

what to say at the last of these three speeches only while she was being driven to the summit hall. She spoke freely and from her heart, telling people what the event meant to her as the President and to the people of Latvia. She knew that others would be reading from prepared and formal texts. The President's speech gained great resonance in the United States, and it helped to open the door of the White House, where President George W. Bush later welcomed her. The official record of the NATO speech is worth quoting and considering:

"On behalf of the people of Latvia, I thank the leaders and the governments of NATO's 19 member states for making a truly historic decision and for inviting Latvia and six other European democracies to join them as full members of the Alliance.

"This decision represents a significant step forward in righting the wrongs of the past and in realising our common dream of a united, stable and prosperous Europe. Latvia's candle of freedom, along with those of Estonia and Lithuania, was brutally extinguished in 1940. For five long decades, our nations had to endure the nightmare of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. Other countries in Central and Eastern Europe were also subjugated by these same foreign powers. Now Latvia and her neighbours have re-emerged as stable democracies and as reliable partners that are ready to assume their rightful place among Europe's family of free and prosperous nations.

"We stand ready to contribute in a meaningful manner to Europe's stability and security and to maintain the commitments that we have already undertaken with our NATO partners, including participation in NATO-led peacekeeping operations.

"Latvia will continue to spend at least 2% of its GDP on defence and is prepared to work with its NATO partners to adapt to the latest threats to world security.

"Latvia will work responsibly within the Alliance and within the NATO-Russia Council. We will be constructive in building consensus — a skill we have acquired through extensive cooperation in the Baltic Sea region.

"We welcome the leadership role taken by the United States on the issue of NATO enlargement. I am sure that the close transatlantic

partnership between North America and Europe will be reinforced in the years to come. I invite your legislatures to proceed with the ratification process and to ensure that today's decisions receive swift final approval.

"Secretary General, Presidents and Prime Ministers!

"This is a momentous day for all Europeans. The divided Europe of the last century is being re-united. No more walls, no more curtains. Thank you again for today's memorable decision and for contributing to the realization of a Europe whole and free."

If at the NATO conference in Prague, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was speaking on behalf of and about Latvia, then her speech at the United Nations conference in Geneva made enormously clear the importance of her presence, her ability to represent and address people not only in Latvia, but throughout the world. The genre of her address at this conference-opening event was different, the speech was much more emotionally powerful. It is said that the translators who sat in their cabins to translate the speech into other languages had tears in their eyes while they were doing so:

"I stand here in front of you on this high podium not so much as President of a small country which for only ten years has recovered its independence after half a century of repression, but I like to think of myself here as a voice of all those who have been displaced from their homeland for a variety of reasons. No one leaves their home willingly or gladly. When people leave en masse the place of their birth, the place where they live, it means there is something very deeply wrong with the circumstances in that country. We should never take lightly these flights of refugees fleeing across borders. They are a sign, they are a symptom, and they are proof that something is very wrong somewhere on the international scene. When the moment comes to leave your home, it is a painful moment.

"My parents had a choice to stay behind and risk the deportations that they had already witnessed in 1941 and that, indeed, were to follow in Latvia after the war, year after year, until 1949. They had to choose whether to risk being put into cattle cars after having been awakened in the middle of the night and shipped off to Siberia, or to just walk out of their homes with what they could carry in their two hands. They walked off into the unknown, but with a hope of freedom possibly awaiting them,

with a hope of saving their lives, and with a choice at least that was theirs to make, little as it was at the time. It can be a costly choice.

"Three weeks and three days after my family left the shores of Latvia, my little sister died. We buried her by the roadside, we were never able to return or put a flower on her grave. And I like to think that I stand here today as a survivor who speaks for all those who died by the roadside, some buried by their families and others not, and for all those millions across the world today who do not have a voice, who cannot be heard, but who are also human beings, who also suffer, who also have their hopes, their dreams and their aspirations. Most of all they dream of a normal life.

"I remember as a child throughout the hunger, the fear, the cold, the unknown, each day wondering where we would lay our head to rest the next evening. I had to think of that line I had heard in church about the birds having their nests and the foxes their dens and burrows, but where is a child of man to lay down his or her head? It is a painful condition not to know where you are going to lay your head, to look at the lights shining in distant windows, to think of people living their normal lives, sleeping in their own beds, eating at their own table, living under their own roof.

"And later, when you come to refugee camps — and some people spend decades and much of their lives in refugee camps — you are living outside of space and of time, you have no roots, you have no past, you don't know whether you have a future. You have no rights, you have no voice, you have nowhere to participate in, you are not a citizen, you have no papers, sometimes you haven't even got your name, and you have to pinch yourself for reassurance — that yes, I am alive, I am me, I am a human being, I am a person. Do I count in this world? I don't know, I'll wait until tomorrow.

"Ladies and gentlemen, when I was a child, a refugee of the Second World War, this Convention of Geneva had not yet been signed. But there were bodies created already, the International Refugee Organization, and I'd like to thank all those who participated in that effort as well. I like to think that I speak in the name of all those millions before the signing of this Geneva Convention, all those who were fleeing their homes throughout the 50 years that this Convention has been in effect and who today — 21 million, 22 million, we have lost count — are fleeing their homes and don't know what awaits them tomorrow, what their rights are, when they

will have a normal life, a normal home, a normal future, what lies in store for them. Are they human beings like you and me and everybody else who is a citizen of a country and who has rights, or do they stand outside of space and time and rights? What are they? Who are they? It is up to bodies such as this to make that decision.

"It is up to the governments sitting here, represented by you, ladies and gentlemen, holding high office in your countries. Their fate lies in your hands. They are out there in the tents, by the roadsides, starving, freezing, waiting, and hoping for someone to extend a helping hand. They are out there waiting on your decisions, on your actions, on your creativity, on your ability to find a way of extending that helpful hand which can make the difference between life and death, between having a future and having none. Between being a human being with dignity or being less than the beasts of the field, trodden under into the dust of this world.

"I entreat you, ladies and gentlemen, when you think about the problems of refugees, think of them not in the abstract, think of them not in the bureaucratic language of decisions and declarations and priorities in the sense that you normally think of things. I entreat you, think of the human beings who are touched by your decisions, think of the lives who wait on your help.

"I thank here all those who throughout the decades of my life have extended a helpful hand to their fellow man, near or far, with large help or small. Big interventions and projects, small gifts from very ordinary people, very plain people, used clothes from their homes and from their backs, thank you to all of you. I have worn those worn clothes. I have survived because somebody sent a parcel when we were starving. Thank you to all of those who have helped in the past and who are helping today; and you, ladies and gentlemen who hold high office, thank you too for your understanding.

"I wish you well at this conference. I wish you and your countries well in your understanding of the problems facing this world. We would not have refugees today if the world followed the principles of the United Nations. Do let's work together to see what we can do to bring this change about. I don't know whether we can do it in the next five years or 50 or 100, but I do know we have no choice, we must act, we must do something, and we must start today. Thank you."

The extent to which Vīķe-Freiberga's work has been noticed in international circles was evidenced in 2001 when, during a visit to Great Britain, she received the Golden Plate award from the American Academy of Achievement. This award is given to global leaders in politics, the sciences, the arts and other fields of achievement. Among Eastern European politicians, other recipients include the leader of the former Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the former President of Poland, Lech Wałęsa.

Western commentators who have talked about the Latvian President's speeches at global summits and her answers to questions during press conferences have stressed her courage and fearlessness. It must be said that her public speaking can be characterized not only by courage and creative spontaneity, but also by her ability to produce analytical and balanced arguments to support her theories. This is not a matter of raw courage, it is not an attempt to seek sensationalism for the sake of sensationalism. Rather, she helps in expanding the context and information base of any issue which she chooses to discuss. This in turn requires a certain intellectual investment on the part of her audience. The South African journal "Business Day", in commenting on the Third Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban in September 2001 and about Vīķe-Freiberga's speech there, headlined the story: "Self-satisfied audience did not have sobriety to listen". The correspondent wrote: "When Latvian President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga addressed the plenary at the world conference against racism last week, the 10,000-strong audience was polite but damp".⁶ Perhaps we can be less damp and look at the speech which she made:

"I am particularly pleased to be addressing you today at this Third World Conference, where Latvia is participating for the first time as an independent state. On behalf of my country, I take this opportunity to express our active and wholehearted support to the international effort to curb racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance."

⁶ Steinberg J. "Self-satisfied audience did not have sobriety to listen", *Business Day*, 6 September 2001.

"These phenomena, alas, are widespread and enduring. Like prejudice, injustice and violence, they are a part of human nature, but they need not be an inevitable part of it. They stem in part from our biological heritage, for suspicion and mistrust arise out of the same arousal mechanisms as the wariness and alertness that allow the detection of danger. We have all been implanted with biologically programmed survival mechanisms for fight and flight, which sometimes can translate into the intense emotions of fear, hatred and the impulse to destroy. We have also been implanted with an instinct for getting our own way, which among the strongest can easily translate into a thirst for power.

"Yet we are not doomed by this heritage, for nature can be shaped and modified by nurture. Through training and upbringing, the human child acquires not just a consciousness, but also a conscience. Each culture faces the challenge of containing the aggressive, anti-social and exploitative tendencies among its members, of channelling them into socially acceptable outlets. Too often, this is done by forbidding aggression or oppression towards members of the in-group, but allowing or even encouraging it toward non-members of the group.

"Historically, such in-groups in human societies have been defined according to a variety of criteria — race, skin colour, religion, cultural traditions, ethnic origin, linguistic background, caste, social class, profession or sexual orientation.

*"The formulation of in-groups and out-groups according to such criteria is the root cause of racism and other forms of intolerance and discrimination. It results in a simplistic and dualistic categorization of humans into those who are deemed worthy of respect and equal treatment and those who are not. In extreme cases, such an *a priori* form of labelling can lead to a manipulation of how we define humanity itself — we are truly human, but they are not.*

"Slavery in one form or another, which has been practiced in most parts of the world for millennia, is the classical example of such dehumanisation. One of the most horrifying and large-scale examples of dehumanisation took place in Europe less than six decades ago. This was the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich, culminating in the mass murders of the Holocaust as an extreme manifestation of xenophobia and intolerance.

"Another odious form of dehumanisation, apartheid, entrenched itself here in our host country of South Africa shortly after the end of

the Holocaust. The severe restriction of the rights of non-white South Africans went against the most fundamental principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Racial discrimination in one form or another has been practiced in numerous parts of the world and regrettably continues to occur on an unofficial basis in many places to this very day.

“Discrimination based on ethnicity, caste, class or military conquest has also been a prevalent phenomenon worldwide, including Europe. Latvia has suffered from various forms of it under foreign rule through the centuries. Under serfdom, Latvian peasants (like those of many other European countries) were practically slaves of their feudal landlord. Under a variety of foreign occupations, Latvians were severely discriminated against. After a brief period of independence following 1918, the Second World War led to both Nazi German and Soviet Communist occupations.

“The Soviets began their fifty-year era of totalitarian rule by labelling thousands of people as bourgeois reactionaries and enemies of the Revolution, simply for having lived in an independent Latvia as statesmen, parliamentarians, army officers, civil servants, professors, teachers, farmers or shopkeepers. Many were killed and tortured, tens of thousands, including babies and young children, the sick and the old, were arrested in the middle of the night, loaded into cattle cars and deported to Siberia in wave after wave of mass deportations.

“In later years under Soviet rule in Latvia, one’s social antecedents or the simple fact of having relatives in exile could be sufficient to block access to higher education, professional training or just getting a job and a place to live. Under a systematic program of Russification, Latvians became a minority in many parts of their own country, going from over 80% of the population in 1939 to barely 50% by 1989.

“The fates of such distant and distinct countries as Latvia and South Africa have taken remarkably similar turns, particularly during the last ten years, which have been a period of radical transformation and significant achievements for both of our nations.

“Ladies and gentlemen, many of the countries participating in this conference have suffered greatly as a result of past injustices. It is our duty to learn from the heavy legacy of our history, but our past must not overshadow our willingness to act with a view to the future. I firmly believe that it would not be productive to single out specific countries and ideologies

for criticism and therefore urge the participating countries in this conference to refrain from doing so. Otherwise it will be difficult, if not impossible, for us to arrive at a common declaration by the end of this conference.

“What we must all agree on are the principles upon which the global fight against racism, discrimination and intolerance must be founded. The first and most fundamental of these is that of the sanctity of human life. It is not an easy principle to apply, yet without it, there is little hope of maintaining civilization.

“We must accept every human being’s inalienable right to be considered as human and to be treated according to the second fundamental principle, which is that of equality. All people are created equal, not necessarily in their physical and intellectual abilities, but in their inherent value as human beings.

“Oppression in all its forms, and especially long-standing armed violence against civilian populations should be of serious concern to the international community, but so should prejudice in all its forms, which starts with negative emotions — fear, distrust, resentment, anger, which then in turn lead to prejudiced or aggressive actions. The only way to eradicate prejudice and animosity is to cultivate their contraries — the positive emotions of empathy, sympathy, compassion, tolerance and understanding. This is a slow, difficult and never-ending process, but it has to be done. If not, then the thirst for revenge or retribution only leads to endless cycles of violence, to vendettas that will never stop.

“The challenge is to accept diversity and difference without being threatened by it. Diversity can be a source of mutual enrichment rather than oppression, difference can be the basis of complementarity rather than confrontation.”

The Euro-realists: Joining The European Union Is Not The Same As Entering Paradise

Even though Latvia’s official course toward the West had been a part of the country’s policy since the restoration of independence, Latvia’s prospects in terms of integration into the EU and NATO were still rather uncertain when Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga took over the presidency in 1999. European countries did not want to spoil relations with Russia, which had

fundamental objections against the inclusion of the Baltic States into NATO, and so their own attitude toward the process was not all that positive in many cases. Many Western European politicians decided to wait at least until the full accession of the candidate countries into the European Union. During the presidency of Bill Clinton, the United States for a while considered admitting only one of the Baltic States.

Before the referendum on joining the European Union which took place on September 20, 2003, and before Latvia's inclusion into NATO, there were quite a few so-called Eurosceptics in Latvia, people who intended to vote against accession. President Vīķe-Freiberga never hid her concern over this fact. At a speech which she delivered at the Latvian Academy of Agriculture on February 10, 2003, she delivered a lecture which marked the start of a cycle of speeches called "Latvia's statehood and identity in the new Europe". Over the subsequent six months, she visited all of the country's regional universities and colleges. The culmination took place at the University of Latvia just before the parliamentary vote on Vīķe-Freiberga's re-election to the presidency. The meeting was attended not just by academic circles — students and professors — but also by local government leaders and other people. She always faced packed halls. Because she wanted to make sure that people in Latvia have information which would allow them to take an informed stand on EU membership, the President talked about the history of the European Union as a "success story". She discussed the EU's modern-day operating principles and warned against the consequences of a "no" vote on September 20. Her language was full of images and very expressive, she sought to eliminate primitive ideas and stereotypes about the EU as a place where fortune is guaranteed. She explained why some people in EU candidate countries were using these various ideas for speculative purposes, so as to sow mistrust in relation to the EU enlargement process.

At the Academy in Jelgava, she had this to say: "We must understand that joining the European Union is not the same thing as entering Paradise. This union of countries is no gold mine, manna does not fall from heaven, and roast piglets do not soar through the air with forks stuck in their sides. People work, people struggle, there are rich and poor people, there are sick and healthy people, and there are those

who work and those who are unemployed. Everyone struggles with the difficulties of life, but they do so in a much more orderly and favourable environment than the one which prevails in most of the world's other countries". The President also stressed that the average citizen in an EU member state knew little about the various candidate countries, that member state residents were worried about the millions of people to whom the doors would now be open — doors which lead to the building of community and welfare that had been built up through such a long, hard and careful process.

During her speaking tour, President Vīķe-Freiberga also touched upon such issues as the self-esteem and self-confidence of the Latvian nation, underscoring our readiness to undertake responsibility for our own history and insisting that this is the only way in which the Latvians can gain respect in the eyes of the world. She reminded her audiences of the bitter truth that certain political circles and foreign journalists were describing Latvia in rather negative terms as a new country which had obtained its freedom only recently. In the foreign media, Latvia was often described in fairly derogatory terms — it was a former Soviet republic. It was a country which might be known for the merciless Holocaust that took place in it. It was a country which oppressed its minorities, its "Russian speakers", a country with dangerous tendencies to nationalism, with corruption and questionable opportunities for economic development.

"It was a tone of attack, a tone of aggression," the President said in the great hall of the University of Latvia. "The aim was to make us ashamed about the fact that we exist, that we are alive, that we have goals and aspirations." She stressed that this negative recognition was sharply in contrast to the way in which she herself had presented her country: "That was not a Latvia which resembled a lame duck with a shotgun wound in its wing, a duck that dragged along on the ground alongside its neighbours in Estonia — the country which back then was known as the 'Baltic tiger', " she said.

Along with her lecture tour through Latvia's various regions, President Vīķe-Freiberga also continued to carry out her everyday duties. Often she was interviewed by journalists, and the questions that they posed may have had much to do with her political activities during

the speaking tour — her aim was to expose the true goals and intentions of the Eurosceptics. One of the trump cards which opponents to EU membership often brandished was speculation over issues of the possible loss of the national language and the issue of national identity. Others claimed that Latvia would partly lose its independence — in the Soviet Union yesterday, in the European Union tomorrow. In terms of attitudes toward the EU, this was specifically the issue with which some people tried to divide Latvia's ethnic minorities.

Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga never denied the important and debatable issues of language and identity in the enlargement of the EU and in the context of globalisation as such, but she did talk about the true motivations of those who objected to Latvia's accession to the EU, given the situation that prevailed in Latvia at that time. Her thinking was economic in nature, not nationalist or patriotic. When a journalist asked whether the President thought that there were serious forces or influential groups in Latvia which wanted to see disharmony between Latvia and the EU and were therefore agitating against it, she answered: "Yes, I think that there may be such groups, for various considerations. Smugglers might be one such group, life will be harder for them. When Latvia joins the European Union, when we improve our legislative system on excise taxes, on value added taxes and on customs procedures, that might be a hindrance to those people." In other words, the opponents were not chauvinistic Russians or ultra-nationalist Latvians, they were smugglers. Smuggling, not national identity. This statement clearly shows the President's sense of diplomacy, as well as her significance in terms of the ethnic and social integration of Latvia's society.

One of the priority directions of Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga's domestic policy work has involved an understanding of the importance that education plays in the emergence of a humane and democratic society, in the upholding of common European values, in the development of human resources and in the development of Latvia's education and science policies. She has stressed that even if the EU began its life as a union of six countries which had common economic interests — mostly in the areas of coal and steel — then today economic issues, albeit very significant under conditions of global competition, make up only one part of the fundamental aspects of the European Union

and its objectives. In an address to pedagogy students and their instructors at the Liepāja Academy of Pedagogy, she stressed that the enlargement of the European Union is a fundamental and, in a certain sense, an ethical issue when it comes to seeking out philosophical values, common European identities and the languages and lexicons which allow European countries and peoples to communicate with one another.

The President understands the role which universities play in forming a common European identity, and she has done everything in her power in addressing the country's academic community. She has been present at a great many scientific forums and academic activities that are of international importance. The common thread which has run through all of these events has been Europe — its culture, its history and its future prospects. She has delivered opening speeches at many of these events, and these addresses have never been a mere formality in which the leader of the country puts in a token appearance. Rather, she has confirmed her trust in the highly respected academic community. She has always stimulated the ability of her audience to think and to engage in intellectual debate. One event at which she spoke was the presentation of a massive European Commission-financed project called Creating Links and Innovative Overviews to Enhance Historical Perspective in European Culture (CLIOHnet) at the University of Latvia. The project was first registered at the University of Pisa, and at the academic conference which was held in its honour in Latvia, she addressed academic officials from 53 European universities:

"I am truly pleased to congratulate you on the opening of this event, which reconfirms that Rīga has something special to contribute to academic thought and education in Europe, by presenting the specific and unique aspects of Latvia and by emphasizing the shared European features that have through centuries linked us together."

"In the present age we are witnesses to a new birth of Europe. In Athens, in the birthplace of democracy where lies the cradle of European philosophy, wisdom and values, this spring we witnessed Europe entering a new phase of its history. We, 25 countries, are now standing on the threshold of the future, each carrying our own different heritage — our language, identity and customs, and our specific features that we would

like to take with us into the future. Latvia is among them, enthusiastically wishing to contribute and to work together, because we are aware of the foundations and values that we treasure, that we, in Europe, are ready to defend, and that we are ready to work for.

“We must admit that in Europe science has been international from the very outset. Although universities emerged in some specific countries, the common language of instruction was Latin, which all educated people could speak. Thus both professors and students could move from country to country.

“In this domain there were no borders in Europe, knowledge knew no borders in spite of the difficulties of communication. Any discovery in one European country quickly reached the others. That is the model that we are coming back to; one could truly say that in our ideas, from the perspective and with the innovations of the present age, we are renewing the old vision of Europe without borders, without obstacles and barriers to our coming closer and understanding each other and through understanding, learning to respect each other better. We need contacts in order to disperse suspicion and doubt, for people to be able to develop mutual understanding and tolerance.

“Through political, economic and cultural participation in the life of the new Europe, Latvia also contributes its academic potential. Today Latvia lays hopes on and believes in its researchers and students. The young minds are developing now as personalities and intellectuals and have begun actively to integrate into the intellectual environment of Europe. It is symbolic that in Latvia we speak about the analysis of European history from today’s perspective; therefore I am glad that during these days Riga will be home for professors and students from all over Europe.

“May you reach the promising radiance of the future by travelling through the labyrinths of the past, and may each of you find the fulfilment of the European spirit in your lives in your part of Europe!”

On the road toward a unified European territory, old Europe and the candidate countries still stood on opposite sides of the process. Old Europe spoke of “enlargement”, while the newcomers used the concept of “accession”. President Vike-Freiberga spent much time in thinking about the paths and crossroads of European history. She had been present in discussions of the future of Europe at global summit

meetings and conferences. She had travelled all through Latvia and listened to her people. On April 16, 2003, in Athens, at the ceremony where the European Union's treaty was signed, she could speak from the bottom of her heart and with all of her conviction in saying this:

"We have gathered here from the distant parts of Europe, from the shores of the Baltic Sea which were only recently still covered by snow, from the sunny islands of the Mediterranean. We have come together here in Athens, the place where democracy was born, where the cradle of European philosophy, European wisdom and European values was first hung.

"We Latvians have passed through a long and hard road to get here. We have passed through the twists and turns of history, through the pain and tests of destiny. Here we wish to express our desire and our readiness to join the European Union — a union which has not taken us over with power, falsehood and brutal force. This is a union which we join of our own free will, on the basis of our own free choice. We want to join this community of free and wealthy nations because it has been successful, because it has proven itself. We want to adopt the values for which it stands, which it represents. We believe in the same values, and these are the value of human life, the rights of the individual and the power of law.

"We stand now before the future, these 25 countries that have come together, and each of us brings a different heritage to the table — each our own language, our identity, our traditions, our face. We want to keep this heritage in the future, too, but we also bring to the table the will to work together, because we all understand the foundations and values which we hold to be dear, which we are all ready to defend, on behalf of which we are all prepared to work.

"In the history of Europe, it is not the Latvians alone who have suffered through dark and difficult times. There is no nation in Europe which does not have something tragic that it would like to leave behind and forget. Now we stand before the future — a future that we will all shape together, where we will also have to encounter danger, threats, challenges and quarrels. That is all a part of life. If we all stand together against these challenges, it will certainly be easier for us to find solutions and answers. We Latvians are happy to be in the family. We believe in Europe, we believe in Europe's future!"

Relations With Russia — And More

This book is not a discourse on personal relationships, nor is it the goal or mission of this book to discuss international relations from various perspectives. But this is certainly not an issue which suddenly became a part of Vaira Vike-Freiberga's life in the last moments before her re-election. Soon after she took over the presidency, she learned that there is no universal or generally accepted recipe for international relations that would be useful in Latvia's relations with Russia⁷. On the other hand, maybe that's not completely true. One might rather say that she did not become convinced that this was true, she couldn't be convinced of it. In relations with Russia, she did try to use generally accepted standards of relationships, and I think that at this very moment she is still not completely convinced that there is no point to the process. At the aforementioned lecture to the academic community at the University of Latvia in May 2003, when she spoke of the enlargement of NATO, she reminded her audience of questions that had been posed to her in a more or less direct way, questions that had been put to her with a tone of amazement: "How can you Latvians dare to express the desire to join the NATO alliance if you are a former Soviet republic and live right next to Russia? Russia is not and will not be pleased about this." She went on: "And then I had to ask in return, 'So do you think that the Lord has put the Latvian people on this earth for just one reason and with one purpose — to please Russia, to do things that Russia will like?'" Now, this may seem a bit naive, but the fact is that the President was making a fundamentally important point. What's more, this can be seen as a new phase in the relationship between the two countries, at least in terms of the understanding of those relations, if not the relationship as such.

NATO, the "Russian speakers" in Latvia, the fact that Russia to this very day has refused to ratify the border treaty with Latvia — these are the three major issues where Russia and Latvia have had differences of opinion. The Latvian President has always been interested in finding

a positive solution to all three questions. In speaking of the “Russian speakers” and Latvia’s ethnic minorities, it must be remembered that it was precisely at the President’s initiative that the Latvian government liberalised its election and language laws in line with European standards, so as to eliminate any elements of discrimination. There were quite a few ethnic Latvians who could not understand why these changes were necessary, some people denounced the President for her initiative. She turned to everyday terminology and language in order to explain her position in a way that was both politically wise and humorous. She was asked how the Latvian parliament would ever get work done if each deputy spoke a different language, and in response she said that ours is a democratic society and this is a matter of choice for that democratic society. If a group in society believes that it is best represented by a deputy who is deaf and who speaks no language, then society has the right to elect that person to parliament.

Russia and Latvia have always exchanged points of view and complaints, as have Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Vladimir Putin. These exchanges have not always been full of praise or pleasant, but the fact is that during her first term in office, the two presidents met twice. Putin agreed to see Viķe-Freiberga in Austria in February 2001, and they met again when St. Petersburg celebrated its 300th anniversary. At that event, the Latvian President took the opportunity to sit down with Putin while the world’s leaders were taking a cruise and to chat with him in a free and relaxed atmosphere. There was also a conversation with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov during the ceremonial banquet. The homepage of the Latvian President’s chancery reports that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and her husband Imants are learning Russian. That, too, is a positive sign.

Of course, countries and societies on the opposite sides of the Baltic Sea have been watching. On June 20, 1993, the German newspaper “Frankfurter Rundschau” wrote that “there can be no doubt about her patriotism” and that “she protects her country against all unfair attacks, whether they come from journalists or from Russian President Vladimir Putin”. People in Latvia and beyond have had several chances to observe that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is fully able to address, listen to and even engage in adversarial dialogue with those

who oppose her views and those who seek to provoke her. One widely discussed example is the interview which she granted to the BBC journalist Tim Sebastian on the program "Hard Talk". There was no question at all that the Latvian President came out victorious in her duel of words with the journalist, and she did so very elegantly, never trying to impinge upon her eager opponent's authority or human respect.

It is no secret that the relationship between Latvia and the Baltic States on the one hand and Russia on the other depends in very large part on the relationship between the Baltic States with the United States of America and other Western countries. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga is fully aware of this fact, and she has made an invaluable contribution to the relationship with Washington in particular. During visits to America in April 2001 and February 2003, she met with American President George Bush, with his national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, and with other high-ranking White House officials. These conversations were based on mutual interest, understanding and favour. The Latvian President gained particular publicity in America when she visited the White House at the invitation of President Bush on February 17, 2003. As part of the Presidents' Day ceremonies, she had been asked to deliver an address at a conference organized on that day, although the conference ended up being cancelled because of a major snow-storm. Instead, she became the first leader of a NATO candidate country to meet bilaterally with President Bush since the NATO summit in Prague and Bush's first visit to Eastern Europe. This meeting was particularly important in that it took place at a time when the world was highly tense and sharply divided over the crisis in Iraq. The conflict between old Europe and the United States was certainly not something which Latvia and the other candidate countries had wanted. Latvian public opinion was split, as well. Public opinion largely opposed the war in Iraq or, to put it more precisely, war as such, as a way of dealing with international relations.

When it came to the issue whether Iraq and its dictator, Saddam Hussein, had to obey and comply with the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga considered the issue and agreed with the position taken by the Latvian government, which

she could also justify in her own name and in that of her country. Speaking of the fight against global terrorism and of the need for Iraq to comply with the international security conventions to which it was party, the Latvian President joined the group of world leaders who took an affirmative position in support of the Americans during the Iraqi crisis. She supported the overthrow of the bloody dictator Saddam Hussein's regime and the disarmament of Iraq. Leaders of old Europe reacted sharply and denounced the so-called "Vilnius 10" candidate countries for what they considered to be an excessively hasty process of expressing support for the United States, and these complaints applied to Vīķe-Freiberga as well. One especially remembers the barbed phrase of French President Jacques Chirac — that the candidate countries "did not take advantage of an excellent opportunity to keep quiet". Journalists in Latvia tried to present that particular statement as one which the French President had addressed specifically to his Latvian colleague, but this was not really the case.

How to respond to this challenge? How would old Europe and the Latvian mass media respond? The Latvian President answered in a way that was unquestionably diplomatic. She said that Jacques Chirac was a wise and far-sighted politician who was friendly toward her and toward Latvia, but she also reminded her French colleague that friends can hold differing views on some questions.

Standing Guard Over That Which The Latvian President Must Do

When Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga addressed the Latvian parliament on June 20, 2003, shortly after she had taken her second oath of office, she did not make a long speech. She thanked everyone who had supported her during her first presidential term. She expressed her faith in the Latvian people, the Latvian state and its future. It must be stressed that the concept "the Latvian people" is one which she uses to stress the multicultural nature of Latvia as an important value: "Latvia is proud of each of her sons and daughters who is loyal to Latvia, who

believes in Latvia, who considers Latvia to be his or her mother. We hold in high regard every nationality that has found a home in Latvia. Latvia is open to all of its residents who wish to become citizens. Ours is an open country and an open society".

Asked about her priorities for the future, she said this: "I will continue my work and stand guard over the things that the president must do. My first and last duty is to think about what will benefit the state." She said that Latvia in the subsequent four years would have to complete the process of integration into international institutions, but she added that this was not a foreign policy goal alone. A domestic policy goal was to bring order and security to the country. She accented several of the serious problems in Latvia that she would consider to be her focus in her second term in office — family matters, social guarantees for people, human relationships and living conditions, physical and moral hygiene.

One can say without any doubt that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga did more than the Latvian constitution formally requires of the country's president in her term in office and that she would continue to work without any thought to her own needs in the future, too.

The "Territorial Ethos" Of Eastern Europe

When journalists try to present portraits of rising stars in the political world, they often try to attach catchy definitions or metaphors to them. Often these come from the mouths of other influential politicians. If the statements prove to be more or less on target, they can accompany a politician throughout his or her career; sometimes they go down in history.

How then to shape and present the public image of the Latvian President after she was elected? This was certainly a problem for the Latvian mass media, journalists and politicians. There were a number of attempts, but the dynamic image of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has not yielded easily to any attempt to standardise it. Many people simply call her "Vaira", or VVF, which is a friendly approach, suggesting that she is considered to be of the people.

The name of the Latvian President has been on the tips of people all over the world, and the Western mass media have also tried to put her into a box that conforms to commonly held political stereotypes. The main problem for the Latvian mass media at first was the fact that the image of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga had to be positioned in a distinctly patriarchal gallery of Latvian presidents. No woman had ever held the office before. Another difficult issue was that although Vaira Viķe-Freiberga was born in Latvia, she was also a stranger from a foreign land. This double identity — one of our own, but someone from Eastern Europe — seems to bemuse Western commentators, too. There are more extensive opportunities in the West to compare Vaira Viķe-Freiberga to others, and commentators use both western and eastern examples for this purpose. In thinking about the West and the line of female politicians in the West, most people come up with the legendary Margaret Thatcher, the “iron lady” for their first comparison. There have been headlines in Western newspapers that have called her “the iron lady of the Baltics”. This might be seen as a complimentary comparison if one thinks of the country’s stability and sustainable development, but when it comes to the persona of President Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and to modern times, the comparison seems a bit old-fashioned. The Iron Age in politics has ended, after all, but it seems to me that in the case of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga we may be dealing with an alloy in which iron is just one of many components.

Then there are those who have been nostalgic for the moral authority that Czech President Vaclav Havel represented in Eastern Europe, and the fact that Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is a free thinker with a particular political temperament and very human charm has caused many people to compare her to Havel. The chairman of the U.S. NATO Committee, Bruce Jackson, helped this process along when, after Vaira Viķe-Freiberga’s visit in the United States in April 2003, he said this: “Many believe, I think correctly, that the Latvian President has emerged as the moral and political successor to President Vaclav Havel”. Although Havel is a man and Viķe-Freiberga is a woman, I think that Havel’s political views, ideals and working principles are quite firmly in line with the personal code of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga.

If we simply cannot make do without mythology, which has a great deal of historical energy, and if we accept the idea that every distinguished politician has earned a portion of that particular energy, then we can look for comparisons in the deeper annals of European culture and history. In the case of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, the Maid of Orleans, Jeanne d'Arc, comes to my mind. Perhaps in this sense I am "honouring" French President Jacques Chirac, who has kissed our President's hand so elegantly and who has devoted unforgettable and politically perceptive compliments to her. As presented by the Latvian author Andrejs Upītis, Jeanne d'Arc is one of the most vivid female images in Latvian drama. Vaira and Jeanne are separated by centuries, and the associations cannot be excessively direct or general. The two women, however, are joined by a series of values and sources of strength that stand above historical specificity and actual politics — social justice, love of life and freedom and a deep sense of patriotism. These are timeless forces which stand above power and money. Along with the common market and an appropriate military potential, they must be put into the very foundations of the new Europe. Perhaps it is symbolic that the resources in terms of these forces which have been created as the respective territorial ethos of the "global West" and Eastern Europe have, happily enough, met one another.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LATVIA

If the Mediterranean is considered to be the cradle of civilization — a place where various nations and cultures have met since ancient times, then the Baltic region to which Latvia belongs is seen more as cool and peripheral — a godforsaken place on the borders of civilised Europe. A look at Latvia's history, however, shows that this is by no means true. Yes, the Latvian environment can be harsh. Countless catastrophes, wars and revolutions have crossed this land. Latvians, however, have survived and developed, absorbing a wealth of cultural knowledge from the West and the East without losing their own unique character.

The French history books used at the Mers-Sultan College in Morocco were not alone in presenting a cursory and condescending history of Latvia in their pages. Until the 20th century, most Europeans didn't even know that Estonians, Lithuanians and Latvians existed. During World War II, Latvia's name, and that of the other two Baltic countries was erased from maps as quickly as they had appeared after the First World War. Thus the country's historical recognisability and its issues of identity really have been problematic, and not just during the time when Vaira Viķe was going to school.

Here are a few general facts about the country.

Latvia is a small European country on the southeastern shore of the Baltic Sea, situated between the two other Baltic countries — Lithuania to the south and Estonia to the north. Latvia's territory covers 64,000 km², and it is larger than Estonia, Denmark, Switzerland and other small countries. The country's population is about 2.4 million people, of whom 55.7% are Latvians, 32.3% are Russians, 3.9% are Belorussians, 2.9% are Ukrainians, 1.2% are Poles, 1.3% are Lithuanians and 1.7% are other nationalities. The capital is Rīga, which has some

800,000 residents. The largest river in the country is the Daugava, which flows north through the country into the Gulf of Rīga. Latvia has a moderate climate, thanks to its proximity to the sea. The national language, Latvian, originates from the Indo-European branch of languages. Latvian and Lithuanian are the last two Baltic languages that survive today (Galindian, Jatvingian and Ancient Prussian have long since disappeared). Religions practised in Latvia include Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism, Russian Orthodoxy, the faith of the so-called Russian Old Believers and Judaism. The country is a democratic parliamentary republic.

Here are a few historical facts about Latvia:

1201: The Latvian capital city of Rīga was founded.

1237-1561: Two governing structures emerged on the territory that is now Latvia — the German Crusader-formed Livland and Kurland (Courland).

1561: Livland fell under Polish control.

1585/1586: The literary Latvian language began to emerge with the publication of the first two books in Latvian — Lutheran and Roman Catholic catechisms.

1629-1721: Livland was part of the Swedish empire.

1685-1691: The Bible was translated and published in Latvian by a Baltic German clergyman called Ernst Glück. He worked from the Greek original but kept a German translation by Martin Luther close at hand.

1721-1918: Livland fell under the rule of Russia, becoming the “window on Europe” of the Russian Empire.

1763: The first known periodical in Latvian was published — an almanac titled “A book of new and old Latvian times and events”.

1795-1918: Kurland was also included in the Russian Empire, which meant that the whole of Latvia was under tsarist rule.

1796: The first scientific encyclopaedia in Latvian was published — Gottfried Friedrich Stender’s “A book of high wisdom from the world and nature”.

1887: The teaching of the Latvian language in schools was banned, and a policy of active russification begun in the Baltic provinces.

1888: Poet Andrejs Pumpurs released his epic “Lāčplēsis” (Bear slayer) — a testament to the war fought by Latvians against the German

Crusaders in the 13th century and an example of National Romanticism. The epic bore testimony to the Latvian yearning for freedom, proclaiming that the Latvian people could not be oppressed forever.

1894-1915: The prodigious Krišjānis Barons published eight volumes (600 to 800 pages each) of over 200,000 Latvian folk song texts. In 2001, this collection was included in the UNESCO "Memory of the World" register, thus acknowledging its importance. As a result of the initiatives of Professor Imants Freibergs, the collection was digitised in the 1980s and is now available on the Internet.

1904: The Latvian Social Democratic Labour Party was established.

November 18, 1918: The Republic of Latvia proclaimed its independence.

1918-1940: The independent Latvian Republic existed.

1919: Lenin acknowledged the *de facto* existence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania separate from the Russian Empire.

1920: Soviet Russia concluded peace treaties with the three Baltic States, recognizing their independence "for all time" and renouncing "all sovereign rights" over Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

1922: The Latvian Saeima, or parliament, approved the country's Constitution, known as the Satversme. It defined Latvia's status as a democratic parliamentary republic.

August 23, 1939: The German and Soviet foreign ministers signed the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which contained secret protocols on the division of Eastern Europe between Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR. Latvia was included in the Soviet "sphere of influence".

1939-1941: At Hitler's invitation, Latvia's Baltic Germans "repatriated" — 64,000 people left for Germany.

1940: The Soviet Union occupied Latvia, suspended the constitution and forced Latvia to become a Soviet Republic.

1941: Thousands of people were deported to Siberia. During the night of June 13 alone, 14,392 people were deported to the death camps.

1941: Latvia was occupied and governed by Nazi Germany. Concentration camps were constructed at Salaspils, Mežaparks, Saldus and the Strazdi baronial estate. Several villages were destroyed for their opposition to the Nazi regime. There was a merciless attack on the Jewish population as part of the Holocaust.

- 1944: The Soviet army entered Riga.
- 1944-1990: Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union.
- 1949: Another round of mass deportations to Siberia occurred — 42,133 people were put on trains heading East on a single night — March 24.
- 1951: The American government began its “Voice of America” broadcasts, which have now been discontinued.
- 1979: A group of Baltic dissidents sent a memorandum to the Soviet government and to the Secretary General of the United Nations, demanding that the UN consider the issue of decolonisation and independence for the Baltic States.
- 1983: The European Parliament approved a “Resolution on the Situation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania”.
- 1988: Two mass political movements emerged — the Latvian Popular Front and the Latvian National Independence Movement.
- May 4, 1990:** The Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR approved a declaration “On the restoration of the independence of the Republic of Latvia”.
- 1991: A referendum was held on the restoration of Latvia’s national statehood, and 73.8% of Latvia’s residents voted in favour.
- 1991: Latvia withdrew from the Soviet Union. The independence of the country was recognised by the Soviet parliament and the Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Latvia joined the United Nations.
- 1993: The 5th session of the Saeima began after democratic elections and the 1922 constitution was reinstated.
- 1994: A citizenship law was adopted stating that anyone who was a citizen of Latvia as of June 17, 1940 (when the Soviet occupation began), as well as the descendants of such people, could receive citizenship.
- 1995: The Latvian President and Prime Minister signed an official request to have Latvia admitted to the European Union.
- 2002: Latvia was invited to join NATO together with six other European countries.
- 2003: Latvia signed the accession treaty with the European Union together with nine other candidate countries.

EPILOGUE

Latvian presidents and statesmen have not been described in any great depth in Latvian history and literature. Professor Edgars Dunsdorfs wrote an inspired monograph on Kārlis Ulmanis, which was published in 1978, more than three decades after Ulmanis' death, and which I studied in preparation for writing this book. Dunsdorfs looks at Kārlis Ulmanis' life and work in the context of the political realities in Latvia in his day and in terms of his domestic and foreign policies.

I had more modest aims. I wanted eyewitnesses to share their memories and impressions about our recent past and to reflect on the first year of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's presidency. Inevitably, her new job has meant that she has had to distance herself from her academic environment and her work at the Latvian Institute. Regardless of a president's life prior to taking office, stepping on to the brightly lit public stage means leaving many facets of that life backstage.

Every life story, including a president's, is an inseparable component of the destiny of a nation, and the life and work of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga has much to do with the science, politics and culture of Latvia. She made a major contribution to the humanities and social sciences of Latvians in emigration as well, and this is something that has not yet been properly studied. We cannot forget Vaira's work in folklore, psychology and linguistic poetics because her political work is now predominant. Her list of publications is voluminous, and will always remind us of her work in the sciences and humanities. Hopefully the fact that she is President will not preclude discussion of her research work in an unbiased and dispassionate manner.

Many people felt that the election of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga to the Latvian presidency in 1999 was one of the greatest events in the modern history of the country. I spent a summer thinking about my

president, and then I wrote this text in the genre of post-modern patriotism. I first wanted to call the book “In the Name of Freedom, but not of Power”, but it was suggested that the word “but” points to a conflict, a contradiction. However, this story is about just that, a bright and obvious dissonance. A spiritually free person has appeared among those who are obsessed with power. She has come to serve Latvia in the name of freedom, but not of power. Let that then be our title for today and for eternity — Vaira Viķe-Freiberga — in the name of freedom.

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I thank all the people who are close to Vaira Viķe-Freiberga for the time they gave me during the preparation of this book, for sharing their thoughts and reminiscences about her life and her early days as Latvia's President. I hope for their understanding in that it was not possible to include everything they shared with me in the form that the book eventually took, but their contribution was invaluable.

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I especially thank Imants Freibergs without whose unselfish assistance this book could not have been written. I thank him for letting me look through his family's photograph albums, and for letting me choose the pictures which so eloquently illustrate the text. I thank him for sitting in on my discussions with the President, his readiness to answer questions and to look through the manuscript, to clarify the less-known facts and events of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's life story.

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Vaira Viķe-Freiberga is a President of whom any super-power could be proud.

Jacques Chirac, President of France

Many believe, I think correctly, that the Latvian President (Vaira Viķe-Freiberga) has emerged as a moral and political successor to former Czech President Vaclav Havel.

Bruce Jackson, Chairman of the U.S. NATO Committee

Viķe-Freiberga's charisma is unquestioned. She confidently slugged it out with Tim Sebastian, host of the BBC television program "Hard Talk", in her 2000 interview.

J. Michael Lyons, The Baltic Times

What is this story about? It is about a spiritually-free person surrounded by those obsessed with power. About a person who has come to serve Latvia, not for the sake of power, but in the name of freedom. Let that then be our title — "In the Name of Freedom", so that we may understand now, and always.

Ausma Cimdiņa

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