

## MAPPING LIFE STORIES OF EXILED LATVIANS

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**Abstract.** By using the framework of digital humanities and narrative research, I will discuss why and how to map life stories of exiled Latvians, what problems can occur during the mapping oral history, and what are the first/main results and visualizations of the ongoing research. Thereby, the basis of the article is the fundamental research in humanities whose approach regarding the use of IT will be twofold: (1) applicatory – employing IT tools and digital humanities methods for data procession, visualization and analysis; (2) reflexive – bringing under scrutiny the opportunities of digital scholarship in oral history. This will allow sharing the new knowledge and ways of research about oral history and migration issues in Latvia.

**Keywords:** oral history, migration, narrative cartography, mapping

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### 1. Introduction

Since 2005 when Google released the Google Maps, mapping has become a common practice of our daily life – we add missing places, edit information (such as phone numbers and addresses of places), add pictures of places, write reviews and validate information added by other people. Therefore, maps seem to be the “conceptual glue linking the tangible world of buildings, cities and landscapes with the intangible world of social networks” (Hall and Abrams 2006:12).

Researchers working in the digital humanities have also become interested in the possibilities afforded by interactive mapping technologies. On his blog in 2011, digital historian John Levin began collecting links to academic digital humanities GIS (Geographic Information Systems) projects in order to “see how space and place are being analyzed” in the digital humanities domain, “and what technologies are being used to do so” (Stadler et al. 2016:19). By September 2018, Levin had collected links to more than 218 projects (<http://anterotesis.com/wordpress/mapping-resources/dh-gis-projects/>). Currently, the interest in maps

and their use in different contexts has become so persistent that as William Buckingham and Samuel Dennis argue “a new world of spatial information” (Buckingham and Dennis 2009:61), promising increased dialogue among cartography, geography, the humanities, and citizens, has been created.

Influenced by the growing interest in digital humanities, oral history researchers have begun a wide variety of oral history mapping projects (Caquard 2011, High 2016) by bringing to the forefront the interaction between place, memory, identity and sense of belonging (see, for example, The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project 2014; Mapping Memories: Experiences of Refugee Youth 2007). One such project, with the goal of studying the migration of exiled Latvians, is being conducted at the University of Latvia’s Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art. The project “Empowering knowledge society: interdisciplinary perspectives on public involvement in the production of digital cultural heritage” aims to carry out research on interaction dynamics of Digital Humanities (DH) and the development of knowledge society by developing a virtual research and involvement laboratory with integrated DH research and participatory tools. One of the research work packages intends mapping culture multimodally. The objective of this workgroup is to create and test the functionality of an IT tool for analyzing and visualizing geospatial data. The tool will be used for analysis of different types of sources of humanities, and thus, the group has representatives from several branches in humanities (folkloristics, oral history and literary studies). In the field of oral history, the mapping is closely linked with the study of examining the importance of a sense of belonging that roots a person in particular space/environment, and how changes in or the loss of a geographic space is experienced. In order to explore these changes, this article will focus on the life stories of those Latvians, who fearing the return of the Soviet Armed forces and a new wave of terror, fled from Latvia during World War II, especially in 1944.

## **2. Mapping qualitative data**

The so-called spatial turn in the humanities was in large part closely linked with the rise of the geographic information systems (GIS). It took, however, several decades until the system was adapted to the mapping of qualitative data (interviews, life stories, literary texts, images and sound), thus earning the name qualitative geographic information system (QGIS). Today, QGIS is employed not only for the integration of qualitative data; it also provides qualitative data analysis methods, such as grounded analysis or discourse analysis (Elwood and Cope 2009, Knigge and Cope 2006). This has allowed researchers to generate knowledge about society and historical, cultural and social processes taking place within society. As a result, in place of performing quantitative spatial analyses, QGIS is more likely to be used to interpret and understand people’s lived experience (Kwan and Ding 2008).

In step with QGIS, cartography also developed by addressing its relationship not only with the related topics of geography and the use of maps, but also by reviewing key words in the field, especially the notion of ‘place’. The understanding of place as a “geographical space that is defined by meanings, sentiments and stories rather than by a set of coordinates” (Opp and Walsh 2010:5) has recast the role of memory (Hague 2005, Tasker 1999). Highlighting the role of memory in creating the meaning of a place, which not only enacts on but is itself embedded in memory, inscribed and shaped by landscapes, topographies and environment, Gastón Gordillo concludes that “every memory is, in a fundamental way, the memory of a place” (Gordillo 2004:4). This memory is then expressed, for example, via memorial plaques and instruments of cultural memory and, particularly, through stories. In agreement with geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, who argues that “narrative produces place, and place in turn fosters and produces narrative” (Tuan 1991), cartographers quite shortly almost unanimously acknowledged that the meaning of a place consists of its geographical coordinates, as well as its historical development and the people and stories associated with it (Gordillo 2004, Hague 2005, Linhard 2019, Opp and Walsh 2010, Pearce 2008).

Since the end of the 20th century, the map and mapping has also become an analytical tool in history studies, where maps are supplemented especially by personal narratives such as oral histories, life stories, and biographies (Knopf 2014, Knowles et al. 2015, Kwan and Ding 2008, Linhard 2019, Madden and Ross 2009). For example, “for indigenous communities, where oral traditions have mythical, historical, and spatial functions, map becomes the tangible link between the oral story and the ancestral occupation of the land” (Caquard and Dimitrov 2017:17). This idea can be applied to other geographical processes, such as migration that takes people away along certain paths, places, borders. However, researchers go beyond geographical information. They listen to personal narratives to find out “the factors that explain why they crossed at specific points, how they reached these points, who was or was not with them, how they traveled, and how the actual outcome of their border crossing differed from the expected outcome” (Linhard 2019:124).

### **3. Migration and narration**

Tabea Linhard and Timothy H. Parsons have stated that “migration does not just take place, it takes place between spaces, and it is in the precarious and often difficult position of the ‘in-between’ where most migration stories emerge” (Linhard and Parsons 2019:4). The stories are full of powerful, living memories about life in the native land, about the narrators’ fates and migration to other countries, about the difficulties in settling into a new life, about the ups and downs. The position of the ‘in-between’ also raises the question of what it is that connects a person to a certain place/environment and how changes in – or even the

loss of – that geographic space are experienced. This can also be seen in the case of exile Latvians.

In the middle of the 20th century the most common reason for leaving for another country was the Second World War and the subsequent occupation of Latvia. As a result of the Soviet occupation, approximately 200,000–250,000 refugees fled from Latvia at the end of the Second World War – it was around 10 per cent of the population (Strods 2006, Veigners 2009). Approximately 120,000 refugees ended up in Germany's Western occupation zones (Kangeris 2000), and more than 4,000 refugees fled in boats to Sweden (Jansone and Robežniece 2008, Lasmane 1993). As a result, the largest diasporas of Latvians were established in the United States, Canada, Sweden, Germany, Great Britain and Australia.

Narrated memories play a special role in the creation of a diaspora. Many crucial characteristics of a diaspora – such as the history of leaving the homeland, memories of home and a strong group consciousness – are largely created through narration (Bela et al. 2016). As well as a new experience which also has to be included in some form of cultural expression, most often – narratives. When listening to life stories of Latvians living abroad, we can see that memories of the first years of life in exile – the so-called transition period, when most people still hoped to return to Latvia – are composed of individual events, usually without creating a broader and more detailed narrative. However, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1983) has pointed out – every exile has a story to tell. First days, months, and years were filled with new experiences – often traumatic, confusing and cumbersome, hence giving rise to countless jokes and anecdotes about culture shock, name change, linguistic and cultural incomprehensibility, poverty and oddities in immigrant nature.

Therefore, stories play a large role in the lives of Latvian exiles, because they allow them to discover, see and define themselves, especially at a time when they had lost everything: their homes, families, livelihoods. In addition, the stories also provide a crucial perspective on the present and the future, serving as the guides for how to exist and how to continue living. Telling stories in the exile community is a very important phenomenon both socially and culturally, because it does not only establish a united perspective on the past but also strengthens group identity. At the same time, telling stories is a process in which narrators recreate events, express their identity, confirm their own values and voice their own hopes and desires (Bula 2002). Thus the stories of the Latvian diaspora express the cultural traditions that define its members as a group that is recognizable not only by the people of the country in which they live but also by those who have remained in their native land.

To conclude, these memories established a bridge between parts of a nation that had been divided by the occupation. Memories become a historical source with high moral status, because these memories belonged to people who were actually there, people who experienced the events first-hand. Life stories hold particular significance in historical situations when a large part of a nation's population has not lived in their native land for half a century (Zirnīte 2001).

#### 4. Mapping exiled Latvian narratives

A year after the “Empowering knowledge society: interdisciplinary perspectives on public involvement in the production of digital cultural heritage” project had begun, a study concept, a database of locations and a tool to geocode and map a variety of cultural content have been developed in close cooperation with the programmers and implementers of other project activities. The task of the researchers is to create representative corpora of research sources (folklore, life stories, and literary texts) and analyze them with the newly created tool to test its functionality.

The textual corpus that was created for this purpose consisted of a hundred life stories. These stories (1) reflect the diversity in the paths/geography of Latvian migration; and (2) the number of mapped life stories of exiled Latvians corresponds to the proportion of recordings by exiled Latvians from various different countries held in the *garamantas.lv* National Oral History collection. In other words, the selected stories comprise 70 units from the United States and Canada, ten from England, ten from Sweden, four from Australia, three from Germany and three from Norway. Interviews were made between 1990 and 2016 by the researchers of the National Oral History (NOH) archive in collaboration with the American Latvian Association’s Oral History project (Hinkle 2005). There are 48 men and 51 women among narrators. 29 of them were born before 1920, 60 – between 1921 and 1940, 7 – after 1941; in 4 cases the date of birth is unknown. The average length of a life story interview is 180 minutes. In total, almost 300 hours of narration (or 2400 transcribed pages) are selected for mapping and further analysis.

Analyzing the corpora, three main place types can be identified: (1) Event places – such as place of birth, place of residence, etc.; (2) Episodic places, which do not carry significant meaning in the narrator’s life, but they allow to see the whole picture of narrator’s geographic perspective; and the last one (3) Projected places – real, existing places where the narrator him- or herself has never been and which are usually known only through the stories of parents or grandparents or other cultural issues, for example, photographs, books, and letters. For example, Anda (born in 1937) left Latvia with her parents at the age of seven. She spent the first years, after becoming a refugee, in Denmark. Later she joins her father, who had a job in England. In 1963 the family had the opportunity to move to Norway. At the end of the interview when asked whether she feels any ties with Latvia, she said:

*Yes, very lively. When we were refugees, my mother bought a lot of books. The paper was very bad, but I read all of them. And then a picture from Latvia began to emerge (NMV-205).*

The mapping of these places is not easy – places in a life story can take on varied and subtle forms that are often difficult to identify and even describe. Some places are the setting for events in the story, others are simply mentioned; some place names are specific (e.g. the name of a city), others are generic (e.g. the lake,

the neighborhood); some place names are geographically precise (e.g. an address), others are much less so (e.g. a country); some places are described in rich detail by the narrator, while others are simply named; some place names have disappeared, and others have been modified (Caquard and Dimitrovas 2017).

Nevertheless, an analysis of the body of mappable texts reveals that places in Latvia are mentioned quite precisely, often even including house and apartment numbers. However, as the narrators move beyond Latvia's borders as refugees, less attention is paid to place names. Of importance is the place from which the path began and the main places where the Latvians stayed along the way. For example, although narrators typically mention several longer stops along the way, crossing Germany as refugees at the end of the war is very difficult to visualize because the narrators often provide a precise geographic name only for the end points in their journey, places where they spent a longer time and became relatively settled, such as the displaced persons (DP) camps.

Thus, Marta, who was born in 1906 in Riga, provides considerable detail and nuance as she tells about her childhood, youth and early days of employment until the outbreak of the Second World War. She lists event locations quite precisely:

*I taught history in the gymnasium [secondary school]. [---] It was a private school. [---] And I worked there until the school was merged with the other German schools – with the Beaterē [school], with the Draudziņa [school] – and was renamed the City Secondary School No. 5. Our classrooms were opposite the Opera House, the Valters-Rapa store. Secondary School No. 7 was on Brīvībasiela at the intersection with Stabuīela, across from the Cheka... (NMV-35)*

During the Second World War, Marta's husband was conscripted into the Legion; the rest of the family decided to go to Kurzeme, to Liepāja and from there to Germany (see Figure 1). When asked how they ended up in Germany, she answers:

*By horse to Liepāja. And by ship from Liepāja to Danzig. And in Germany, I lived in that first camp for a whole month (NMV-35).*

She describes her subsequent journey in broad strokes, providing names for only a few stops along the way:

*I didn't know anything about my husband's relatives, what had happened to them. But in the end we somehow contacted each other. They had gone to Swabia. Alright, so now we'll go there. But we don't have a horse or anything else. With a small cart, a little backpack on [my] back, we're pushing that little cart, the baby is in the cart, [my] mother is also next to me. The bombs come, the Communists are bombarding the road. Dropping bombs, no armies here at all, just people. I even put [my] little girl down on the ground for a moment and lay down on top of her – let the shrapnel fall on me then, but none did. Thank God. [---] That was in February of 1946. We were barely dragging ourselves along through the snow, half-starved, and we made it to Friedland, where people were being allowed across the border; it was Americans and British there. There they gave hot coffee to the adults and porridge to the children. Then I collapsed and began weeping. It was like day and night. The humaneness*

*and serenity. It was a huge difference. When things are too difficult, you can't cry or anything – you're like a tree, you just walk – but here the humanity appeared. [---] And then we headed further south. To Swabia. And then we had the opportunity to arrange travel by train for a part of the way. Life was already somewhat better there. And then we arrived in Swabia. [---] In the morning I got a horse and driver to that farm to pick up my mother-in-law. And then from there we headed for the camps quite quickly, because the refugee camps were already being established. Our first one was in Offenbach (NMV-35).*

The analysis of Marta's description of her journey as well as descriptions in other mapped life stories reveal the spatial structures of stories. Event places are most frequently mentioned in the life stories – each story contains an average of 35 geographically knowable places: homes, neighborhoods, buildings (schools, stations), districts, country. Frequency is followed by mentions of episodic places ~ 10; uncommon – mentions of projected places ~ 3 in each story. Most often projected places appear to be parents' or grandparents' home, parish or county; they are often accompanied by an inherited sense of belonging, thus becoming the intimate and domestic spaces.

However, as Barbara Piatti (2009) argues, the mapping is not an end in itself but a research tool that should help the investigation of many new questions, for example, what do we achieve by mapping oral history; how to map journeys of the



Figure 1. Marta's journey. January 15, 1944 – September 20, 1948

narrators if the only information the life story delivers are some indications about stopovers or intermediate stations – while the rest of the route stays literally in the dark? Likewise, my goal is not just to map geospatial information, although it could be a rewarding process and the practical marking of geographical places on a map could yield useful information. The issue at hand is the relationship between a person and his or her space – the perception and experience of a space – which is usually examined within the fields of human geography, cultural geography, environmental humanities, folklore studies, anthropology and many others.

### 5. Meaning of place

The various spatial expressions that embody our personal experience of the surrounding environment and help develop an understanding of these places (Caquard 2011:136) create so-called story maps (MacFarlane 2007). In these story maps, memory and emotional episodes are linked with specific physical or imagined locations, thereby making these places qualitatively different centers of meaning (Reinsons 2017), first of all at the time of the interview and again later if the place is digitized. It should be noted that British digital humanities researcher Stuart Dunn believes that digitizing a location (for example, from cartographic and/or textual sources) changes its nature from object to concept, usually created of human experience, perception and memories (Dunn 2017). Following this line of thinking, not only are houses, apartments, streets, neighborhoods, villages and municipalities created as places in the stories of Latvian exiles, but often referring to Latvia as a whole. Digitizing or mapping locations therefore becomes a method to conceptualize Latvia as a country or as a nation-state instead of a territorial location. Thus, for example, Valida says:

*I, too, have dreamt a great deal about Latvia. And most of all I've seen our house there, covered in snow. And the moon is shining. And I think to myself that I ought to paint that scene right away. But I still haven't gotten around to it (NMV-56).*

The temporal aspect is also important to understand the meaning or importance of place. We cannot speak of places as isolated from the past events associated with them – each place in a story is linked both to an event and the chronological boundaries of this event. Therefore, places mentioned in life stories – whether event locations, projected locations or merely episodic locations – are recorded along with a time period. However, at the moment of narration, narrators often do not remember exactly when and where they were or simply do not consider this information worthy of mention.

The time in a narrative can be precise or vague (Caquard and Dimitrovas 2017). For example, a soldier from the 15<sup>th</sup> Division of the Latvian Legion spoke in considerable detail about moving around within Germany; however, without mentioning the regiment in which he served, it is impossible to determine when and how long he was in which place. He mentions a few times that “we were there

until spring” (NMV-204), but most of the time, temporal markers are missing. Yet, the blank spaces in the chronology of his movements do not prevent a landscape of his story to emerge, because the process of moving is as important as the actual arrival or departure (Tilley 1994). The element of time, however, carries a different meaning when the narrator speaks about projected places. In such cases, the category of time becomes quite unclear and nebulous, just carrying an almost symbolic meaning. For example, a time frame may be referred to as ‘during my parents’ youth’ or ‘before they left Latvia’. Thus, these segments of time include the feeling of a lost home/homeland.

As a result, the mapped narrative could be envisioned “as integrations of space and time; as spatio-temporal events” (Massey 2005:130). By adding an event and the element of time to a seemingly simple point on the map, we are no longer speaking about isolated locations but rather a landscape as a body of relational places in which the geographical, biographical (Kwan and Ding 2008:449) and historical planes intersect. In addition, no matter whether the places are individually or collectively experienced (for example, the refugee camps in Germany or boat landing sites on the Swedish coast), they do not only link the respective places with the past/history (Tilley 1994) but also create their meanings in the present (Massey 1991). Often it is only considerably later that we can evaluate the meaning of a specific place in the experience of exiled Latvians, whether it was merely a site in transit (Tilley 1994) or a shorter or longer pause in lived space.

The case of Latvians in Sweden is interesting from this point of view. For nearly 4,000 civilian Latvians, who went across the Baltic Sea between 1943 and 1945, Sweden was the land of hope and possibility. However, after climbing out of the boat and onto dry land, and after the kind welcome they received, their opinions of Sweden as a land of hope and possibility gradually changed. Many found it difficult to find suitable and reasonably well-paid work. The Swedish government’s decision to repatriate military refugees, as per the Soviet Union’s request, was a signal to many to continue their search for a safe haven in some other country. Thus, many eventually settled in England, Canada and Australia. In fact, after arriving in Sweden, Latvians did not rush to settle down as they hoped to return home soon. This hope helped them emotionally, but not always practically, as it can be seen in one of the stories:

*We were waiting for the start of the Third World War when the British and the Americans will release the Baltic and we will be able to go home. And we lived with this naïve hope from year to year for several decades (NMV-445).*

This and many other stories testify that for many of the narrators Sweden was in fact merely a transit port, where they would remain only until the border will be opened and they could travel back to Latvia. Only later, due to the daily life and its needs, people adapted to the new land and its traditions because an individual’s daily life is closely related to such areas as the language of communication, eating habits, work, and, of course, the social life.

## 6. Conclusions

Oral history forms a bridge between individual experience and society, it changes viewpoints of history, and it opens up new fields of study. Attention is paid not only to what a certain individual has experienced, but also to the way in which that person understands, is aware of and narrates events and experiences as the consequences of those events. Therefore, life stories of exiled Latvians formed not only the basis of perceptions of Latvian culture and statehood, but also the exile diaspora self-confidence and a sense of the community. Namely, creating and narrating life stories, sharing the memories about homeland, recent history and common experiences within the circles of families and friends was one of the ways how to create and maintain Latvian identity. At the same time, the life stories in the studies of diaspora are used to create an understanding of the complex nature and changes of travelling memories (Bela et al. 2016) experienced by both travelling in time and space, and crossing the political and community boundaries.

Mapping the geospatial information included in the life stories is of particular importance in the studies of Latvian emigration and diaspora formation in USA, Great Britain, Sweden, Germany and other countries after World War II. The question is, what do we achieve by mapping oral history?

Maps are regularly used to study the geographic nature of stories and are used to ground the story in real places (Caquard and Cartwright 2014:101). Agreeing with Malcolm Bradbury, who in his *Atlas of Literature* has observed that “[a] very large part of our writing is a story of its roots in a place: a landscape, region, village, city, nation or continent” (Bradbury 1996:7), it can be concluded that life story is a story of its roots in a place, too. However, the points or lines on the map are just the beginning of the story: the real challenge, quoting Margaret Pearce is to get “the geographies of human experience and place in the map” (Pearce 2008:17).

The mapping of exiled Latvians’ life stories allows us to observe, first, the geographic structure of life stories, which is linked with individually significant spatial places (residences, places of education and employment, points of crossing the borders and points of social activity). They are narrated as real places and are most often connected to a particular event and time period. Secondly, the projected landscapes, which are followed by the inherited sense of belonging and therefore make Latvia a homeland for those Latvians who have never been there. These mappings in turn take place in two different ways: (1) matter-of-factly, using IT instruments and digital humanities methods for the processing, visualization and analysis of data, and (2) reflexively, by examining the possibilities of digital study in the field of oral history.

Why map these locations? It could all be inferred without mapping, just by reading the stories. However, the maps let us see the big picture (Caquard and Cartwright 2014, Corbeil 2019, Linhard 2019), making the experience of exiled Latvians more visible and, thus, more tangible.

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