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A LATVIAN VALIANT

A Story of a Resilient Second Generation of Exiles, Told in Rust and Peeling Paint

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Photo credit: The “wedding car” at the center of a Latvian-American wedding in 1985. Collection of the “Latvians Abroad – Museum and Research Center”, Free access - no reuse

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In 2018, Juris Bļodnieks donated a 1971 Plymouth Valiant to the Latvians Abroad Museum – it was spray-painted, inoperable and had been parked under a tarpaulin for two decades. The car tells the story of Latvian exile culture in North America, of protest, patriotism and the creative expressiveness of the second generation abroad.

The car's backstory begins decades earlier, with the wave of Latvians who fled westward during World War II to escape the Soviet advance. Around 180,000 Latvians ended up in displaced persons (DP) camps across Europe. Most initially believed their exile would be short-lived and held out hope for a free Latvia. In these refugee communities, Latvians built their cultural life anew – organizing makeshift schools, craft workshops, publishing houses, touring theatrical ensembles and even national song festivals.

Political advocacy formed a significant part of this cultural life. In 1947, the Central Council of Latvia in the Meerbeck DP camp issued a " Charter for Latvians in Exile

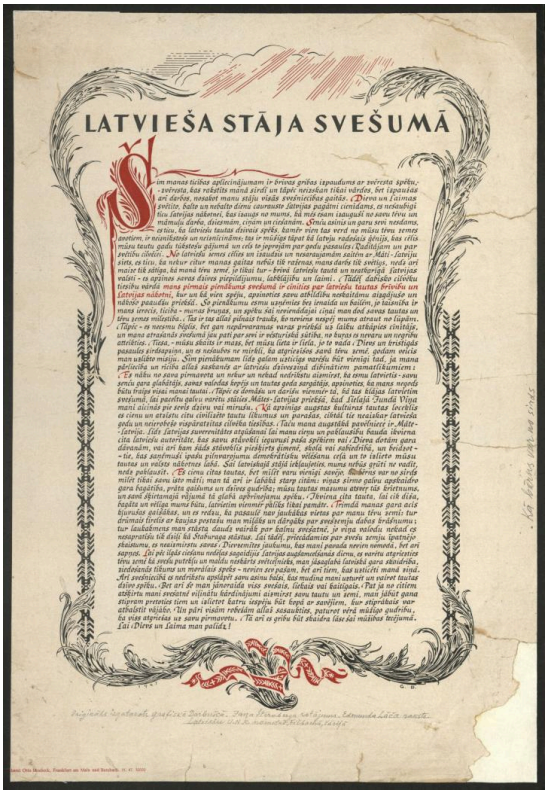
Charter for Latvians in Exile

The Charter for Latvians in Exile, adopted at the extraordinary meeting of the Latvian Central Council in Meerbeck, Germany, in April 1947, is considered the unofficial constitution of the Latvian exile community and the basis for its identity and activities. The final version of the charter was later produced in the graphic arts workshop of the Latvian DP camp in Fischbach, with Jānis Šternbergs creating the decorative frame and Edmunds Lācis contributing the calligraphy.

". More than a policy paper, it was a poetic call to action:

> *My first duty in exile is to fight for the freedom of the Latvian people and the future of Latvia wherever and however I still can, fully aware of my responsibility before the countless generations past and yet to come.*

Švābe, Arveds. Latvieša stāja svešumā. 1947. Latvians Abroad - Museum and Research Centre collection, Rīga.



Charter for Latvians in Exile, published by Arveds Švābe, illustrations by Janis Šternbergs, calligraphy by Edmunds Lācis. Meerbeck, 1947 / Free access - no reuse

> *....So that after long weeks of suffering I may one day witness the resurrection of Latvia and return as a pilgrim untouched by foreign dust and delusion, I must preserve the clarity of the Latvian spirit, the virtue of self-sacrifice, and moral strength.*
>
> ***Švābe, Arveds. Latvieša stāja svešumā. 1947. Latvians Abroad - Museum and Research Centre collection, Rīga.***

The Charter was illustrated by Latvian artists, printed, and distributed among refugees. Many carried it with them when they emigrated to the USA, Canada, Australia, and South America. It expressed an expectation: that Latvians in exile would not simply survive abroad, but continue to live as Latvians abroad until their triumphant return to the motherland:

The principles of the Charter were actively maintained by many who moved to rebuild their lives in new host countries. After completing obligatory work contracts in remote areas, Latvians congregated in larger centers where Latvian communities were established, community properties were purchased, and regular social and community events became a part of the weekly routine of living in exile.

Initiation of the next generation

Many of the second generation – children of the displaced – grew up shaped by this mission. At home, they spoke Latvian. On weekends, they went to Latvian school instead of playing sports with their peers. There, they learned Latvian history, folklore, and geography – about a country they often had never visited. Although they lived in democratic countries, their identity was shaped by political injustice and cultural obligation.

Children were brought to political demonstrations from a young age – the new generation grew up influenced by their parents' political stance and sense of purpose. Sarma Muižniece, born in 1960, remembers preparing for a political protest at her Latvian summer camp in 1975 as a rite of passage:

> *Pēteris Graube arrived at the Kursa summer high school and prepared us. He sat us down and told us that we needed to be sure about the color proportions of different flags, because we were intending to burn the Soviet flag. He told us that we shouldn't't use synthetic materials that would either melt or not catch fire. He told us how to approach people who could be aggressive about us demonstrating. He told us all these demonstration tactics in a grown-up way. And of course, in that moment, we grew up. We were no longer children who were dragged along, just because our parents wanted to demonstrate.*
>
> ***Muižniece Liepiņa, Sarma. Nyet, Nyet Soviet. Stāsti par latviešu politiskajām demonstrācijām trimdā, eds. Marianna Auliciema, Kristīne Beķere, Maija Hinkle, Arta Savdona, Brigita Tamuža, Ieva Vītola, Juris Zalāns, Lilita Zaļkalne, Latvieši pasaulē - muzejs un pētniecības centrs, 2018, 86.***

Though diaspora communities typically see cultural engagement decline with each generation, many second-generation Latvians stayed deeply involved. They met regularly at summer camps, youth congresses, and song festivals, travelling long distances to participate. Some even attended the Latvian Gymnasium in Münster, Germany, which provided full high school education in Latvian - many North Americans attending for only one final (13th) year. Their parents supported this tight-knit social network, including funding travel and participation in Latvian events in distant destinations – often with the hope that their children would intermarry within the community and raise the third generation of Latvian exiles.

Students and teachers from a Latvian summer camp demonstrate in Olympia, Washington State, on July 30, 1975. Collection of the "Latvians Abroad – Museum and Research Center", Free access - no reuse

From "Wedding-mobile" to Protest Vehicle

One such community celebration was a wedding in the early 1980s that inspired Juris Bļodnieks to paint his car. Influenced by the 1978 comedy Animal House, which featured a customized "Death-mobile," Juris and his friends turned his second-hand Plymouth Valiant

Plymouth Valiant

also: Valiant automobile, DeSoto Rebel, Chrysler Valiant, Valiant

The Plymouth Valiant was a car model (model series) produced between 1959 and 1976 by the Plymouth brand belonging to the US Chrysler Group. It was distributed on the North American market as a mid-range or compact sedan and was a popular everyday vehicle due to its reliability, simple technology, and durability. In Europe, it was considered a large car. The car was also produced or assembled in Argentina, Canada, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. The local versions often differed from the models for the US market. Until 1960, it was sold in the US, and later mainly in other American countries under the Valiant brand, in Australia, New Zealand, and in South Africa as Chrysler.

into a “Wedding-mobile.” Painted with lyrics of Latvian folk songs, humorous slogans, and a giant heart bearing the couple’s names, it became a tribute to Latvian love in exile, inspired by American pop-culture.

As the Cold War dragged on and memory of Latvia’s independence faded from global attention, the mission became harder. Vita Tērauda, a Latvian American activist, recalled the frustration of talking to American friends about the Latvian occupation:

> *Not only did they not know about Latvia, but they assumed that everyone in the Soviet Union was Russian. A simple assumption that there is one nationality, one language – that everyone has assimilated.*
>
> *Pelecis, Mara, director. Valiant! A Car, a Cause, and the Cold War. Latvians Abroad - Museum and Research Centre, 2022*

Latvian American youth began to stage increasingly bold actions to bring attention to the plight of a country few could locate on a map. In 1980, during the Madrid Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Madrid Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe

The Madrid Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (1980–1983) was a follow-up conference to the 1975 Helsinki Accords, at which European states, the US, Canada, and the Soviet Union came together to review compliance with human rights and security commitments. The situation of the occupied Baltic states was raised by Western delegations at the Madrid Conference as evidence of human rights violations by the Soviet Union and the unresolved status of their forced incorporation.

, a group of young Latvians broke into the Bernabéu Stadium

Santiago Bernabéu Stadium

Soccer stadium built between 1944 and 1947 and expanded several times since then, located in the north of the Spanish capital Madrid. The stadium has a capacity of over 78,000 seats, is the home ground of Real Madrid and one of the most famous soccer stadiums in the world.

to hang a bedsheet reading LIBRE = LETTONIE opposite the conference building. They were arrested and jailed for the duration of the event. The most attention-grabbing protest was staged by Reverend Māris Ķirsons of Philadelphia. Standing alone outside the entrance to the hall, he removed the stoppers from catheters inserted into his arms and bled onto a Soviet flag. The dramatic act was covered by global media, including Time magazine.

The “wedding car” at the center of a Latvian-American wedding in 1985. Collection of the “Latvians Abroad – Museum and Research Center”, Free access - no reuse

Reverend Māris Ķirsons bleeds on the Soviet flag in Madrid, November 11, 1980. Collection of the “Latvians Abroad – Museum and Research Center”, Free access - no reuse

Political Graffiti on Wheels

Inspired by such acts, Juris transformed his Valiant into a protest car in the late 1980s. Wedding decorations were painted over with political slogans. On the hood: a portrait of Gorbachev captioned “GO(rbachev) TO HELL.” A crossed-out Soviet hammer and sickle appeared on the door. The Latvian evening star, Auseklis

Auseklis star

Octagonal star (octagram) as the Latvian symbol for the morning star or the Latvian god Auseklis, the personification of the morning star in Latvian mythology; also used as a symbol of good luck.

, symbol of the pro-independence Popular Front, adorned the roof, while the trunk displayed

the text: “RUSSIA GET OUT OF ESTONIA LATVIA LITHUANIA!”

Juris drove the car to demonstrations across New York and New Jersey but also used it for daily errands. He laughs:

> *The police pulled me over almost every week! They stopped me, we had a chat. At least [afterwards] they knew about the Latvian situation even if they didn’t know where it was!*
>
> ***Bļodnieks, Juris. Nyet, Nyet Soviet. Stāsti par latviešu politiskajām demonstrācijām trimdā, eds. Marianna Auliciema, Kristīne Beķere, Maija Hinkle, Arta Savdona, Brigita Tamuža, Ieva Vītola, Juris Zalāns, Lilita Zaļkalne, Latvieši pasaulē - muzejs un pētniecības centrs, 2018, 262.***

The Valiant became a regular fixture at political protests, Latvian song festivals, and other youth gatherings in North America. It cemented the political conviction of the group of young people who congregated around and inside it. The car was also an exhilarating ride. Ilga Bērzkalns, active in the American Latvian Youth Association

American Latvian Youth Association

The American Latvian Youth Association (Amerikas Latviešu Jaunatnes Apvienība – ALJA) was founded in 1952 and is an organization that brings together Latvian-American youth to promote Latvian culture, language, and community life in the United States. It organizes cultural events, leadership programs, and international exchange programs to strengthen ties between Latvian youth in the US and Latvia.

, remembers:

> *Juris was a fast driver – and riding in the car was always great fun. …When we drove across the George Washington Bridge in New York, the wind was blowing through the open windows, and not just one, but several motorcyclists honked at us! And we felt so proud of our political conviction, that, look, we have stood up for something — for democracy, for freedom, for something that's not the Soviet Union!*
>
> ***Pelecis, Mara, director. Valiant! A Car, a Cause, and the Cold War. Latvians Abroad - Museum and Research Centre, 2022***

Juris Bļodnieks and Ivars Slokenbergs protesting on the Valiant in New York in the late 1980s. Collection of the "Latvians Abroad – Museum and Research Center", Free access - no reuse

Juris Bļodnieks at the wheel of the Valiant in New York, late 1980s. Collection of the "Latvians Abroad – Museum and Research Center", Free access - no reuse

A Convertible Finale

After Latvia regained independence in 1991, the car eventually returned to its previous role: it was painted red and repurposed for a Latvian American wedding at the Catskills in New York State – this time as a convertible. Juris and his friends had sawed off the roof with a chainsaw. The new "open-air" design was thrilling but unstable. Riders were encouraged to wear helmets.

It was only a matter of time before the Valiant was retired permanently behind Juris' parents' house and covered with a tarp. The car became a shelf for tomato plants and a shelter for

stray cats.

Resurrecting the Valiant

In 2013, Juris offered to donate the Valiant to “Latvians Abroad”. When the museum team visited in 2016, the car was in a sorry state: rusted floor, dead engine, faded layers of protest and celebration mingling like palimpsests.

Despite the condition, the museum recognized the car’s potential as a cultural artifact that told the story of exile activism in a uniquely visual and visceral way. Arrangements began to be made to transfer the car to the museum in Riga, Latvia. Juris was determined to get it running again, and his repair efforts – at times earnest, at times comic – were documented in a film produced by the museum: Valiant! A Car, a Cause, and the Cold War (2022), directed by Latvian American filmmaker Māra Pelēcis.

Once it had been transported to Latvia, the car underwent partial restoration, with automotive specialists stabilizing the paint and structure. It made its public debut in the Latvians Abroad museum’s curated exhibition Nyet Nyet Soviet! Political protests and demonstrations outside Latvia 1945-1991 at the Latvian National Railway Museum exhibition hall in 2022. The exhibition opened just months after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine – an unsettling reminder that the threats once protested by Latvian exiles had not vanished.

What had initially been included as a historical symbol of Soviet occupation suddenly gained renewed relevance. The Valiant stood not only as a relic of Cold War-era activism, but as a powerful testament to the enduring role of diaspora communities in defending freedom and democratic values on the world stage.[1]

The Valiant at the center of the exhibition "Nyet, Nyet Soviet!" in Riga in 2022. Mārtiņš Zīders / Collection of the "Latvians Abroad – Museum and Research Center", Free access - no reuse

Footnotes

1. Parts of this article have been shortened and edited using AI-powered tools.