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HISTORY**

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CHANGING HISTORICAL CULTURES, CHANGING APPRAISALS OF BALTIC GERMANS' PLACE IN LATVIA'S HISTORY²

This article analyzes changes in contemporary Latvian historical culture as regards the place it assigns to Baltic Germans in the country's past. During most of the twentieth century, their past presence in the region was represented as not really important. German noblemen and burghers were reckoned to the exploitative classes and, as such, received negative appraisal. After Latvia became independent from the USSR, German heritage came to be cherished as a symbol of Latvia's Europeanness and a major attraction for international tourists, which is especially visible in Riga. In smaller towns, such as Koknese, partnership with a German town may originate from historic ties linking former Baltic Germans to the place, but this does not necessarily involve a historical policy emphasizing their positive presence in the history of the town. In the rural community of Irši, a transformation of the local historical culture largely takes place under the influence of the so-called 'homesick tourists' from Germany who come to visit the former German colony Hirschenhof that existed between 1766 and 1939.

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The article was prepared within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

Factors affecting the historical consciousness of people in cities, small towns and in rural settlements are presumably different. Changes in politics, economy and society which may lead to changes in peoples' ideas of the past are believed to be slower in rural communities. The media impact is presumably different not only in quantitative³ but, above all, in qualitative terms: inhabitants of large cities see 'themselves' and 'their' history on television more often than do villagers. Therefore, city dwellers have more reasons to regard themselves as the target audience of the media's changing historical discourse, which may cause them to embrace new practices of consuming history-based infotainment products and get involved in the media-facilitated speeding-up of historical time. The intellectual construction of new understandings of history and new discourses on the relation between the past and the future seems hardly likely to be found in rural communities where the intellectual social stratum usually is rudimentary. Factors associated with the changing material environment could perhaps make villagers aware of history as transformation, but it is difficult to imagine a peasant saving, for example, an old house solely as a historical monument. Empirical studies are needed to test and adjust such assumptions.

And finally, when we talk about the 'invention' or 'social construction' of history and its specific phenomena, in a rural community we hardly assume a variety of subcultures, institutions and actors whose reflection and / or spontaneous creativity would be able provide for a process of social construction characterized by dynamics comparable to those in a city. Instead, we would expect delayed and partial borrowing of such constructs from urban culture, with the pace and specific nature of this borrowing being determined by the compatibility of the imported historical knowledge with the tradition existing in the village.

To test the viability of this view, I shall describe changes in the historical culture of residents of one small rural community in Latvia and compare them with changes in a city and in a small town with regard to one particular subject matter, namely the appraisal of Baltic Germans' role in the history of the respective locality.

Of course, assumptions cited above cannot be proved or disproved based on one case study. Therefore, what follows is just an example showing in what ways they may have to be modified when applied to empirical material. Field material was collected during a trip to Latvia in June 2012, where I accompanied a group of German tourists visiting Riga and Irši Parish and talked to them. Before and after this trip, I interviewed via email two persons in Germany who took part in this trip and/or other similar ones, and one local activist in Latvia. For privacy reasons, all persons were interviewed on condition of anonymity.

For an adequate understanding of changes that happened in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in Latvians' attitudes on Baltic Germans' role in the history of their country, it is necessary briefly to recapitulate this history.

The coexistence of Baltic Germans and Latvians lasted for many centuries, and throughout this time their relationship was not exactly rosy. Initially, this was due to the fact that the territory, where the ancestors of Latvians lived for more than three thousand years, came to be 'colonized' by Germans since the end of the twelfth century in what was a mixture of peaceful migration and military conquest of the pagan Baltic by the Livonian / Teutonic Order. The colonists and the Crusaders came as invaders and enemies of the native faith who instilled Christianity in Latvians by force and turned them into serfs. Unlike other regions of the North-Eastern Europe, such as Prussia, Poznan, Pomerania, where German colonists were mostly peasants who occupied land for agriculture, in what is now Latvia Germans were mostly warriors, noblemen, clerics, craftsmen and merchants who mainly dwelled in towns and cities. In fact, they founded many of

³ The difference between urban and country life in terms of access to and uses of the media is rapidly declining as almost every household in Europe has TV and radio sets, and in an increasing number of regions, Internet access is equally available to urban and rural dwellers thanks to mobile devices. Technically this makes everyone, no matter where they live, potential or actual participants in the same mass communications.

them, including Riga. They were the largest ethnic group in the middle and upper strata of burghers as well as nobility and clergy. While German aristocrats were not numerous, they owned sizable estates and large numbers of serfs (Dukhanov, 1970; Dukhanov, 1978). Germans never had more than 10% of the population of Courland and Livonia but dominated the economic and cultural life of the region.

Following the periods of Polish and Swedish rule, at the end of the Great Northern War in 1721 most of Livonia became part of the Russian Empire. Livonian territories which belonged to Poland were occupied by Russia after the partitions of Poland in 1772-1795. Baltic Germans, who were subjects of Swedish and Polish kings, became Russian subjects and faithful servants of the Russian Empire, which guaranteed them their traditional rights and privileges.

Soon after her accession to the throne, the young Empress Catherine II, herself a German, launched a campaign to recruit settlers from German lands suffering from overpopulation. In her manifesto Catherine invited German peasants to settle in the vast depopulated territories in the south of Russia, where they were provided large plots with fertile soil. Tens of thousands of families followed her call. They gathered in Lübeck to be shipped to Russia where Oranienbaum near St Petersburg served as a transshipment point. While the bulk of immigrants was then sent to the Volga region and to the regions near the Black Sea, some two hundred families of peasants and artisans were ordered to settle in Livonia in order to populate two estates belonging to the crown. Colonists, who arrived in 1766, were assigned big plots of land on which farms were built. This was the beginning of what was a unique phenomenon in Livonia: two German agricultural colonies.⁴ In what follows we will focus on one of these, called Hirschenhof in German and Irši in Latvian.

Germans in Hirschenhof lived side by side with Latvians, but their coexistence was not a symbiosis.⁵ The colonists enjoyed a higher legal and social status because they were nobody's serfs but direct subjects of the crown and proprietors of their land (although entail meant that their sons except for the oldest ones were landless and had to rent land from others, even from Latvian farmers), while Latvian peasants were in bondage until the abolition of serfdom in 1816-1819.⁶ Even after the emancipation, inequality and segregation were obvious to all, and no efforts were taken to smoothen them throughout the history of the colony. The Germans and the Latvians understood each other in terms of language inasmuch as it was necessary for doing business, but they were governed by separate administration bodies (up to the 1880s), and had separate schools. Not even did the common religion bring them together: they went to different churches, even though the pastors in the Latvian church were Germans. Mixed marriages were extremely rare until the beginning of the twentieth century. In the few cases reported, landless German men who were tenants or employees of wealthy Latvian farmers married their daughters, which was looked askance at by their fellow colonists but still considered less of a disgrace than a German girl marrying a Latvian man.

Despite the fact that Baltic Germans for the most part had always been loyal subjects of the Russian Empire, in 1916, as German troops entered Russia's Baltic provinces, the colonists were deemed unreliable elements and deported to the interior of Russia. In 1918, during the German occupation of Latvia, they returned to Hirschenhof and found their farmsteads devastated. This

⁴ The principal works on the history of this colony are (Conze, 1934) and Gangnus, 2003). Hereinafter I rely on these two books in my representation of the history of Hirschenhof prior to 1939.

⁵ For an analysis of tensions between Germans and Latvians, see (Kirchanov, 2009). Kirchanov points out that German barons and pastors played an ambivalent role as exploiters on the one hand and bringers of culture, on the other. This hardly applies to farmers and artisans (who aren't mentioned in this book), but otherwise the accounts cited by Kirchanov aptly describe the relationships that existed between the inhabitants of German and Latvian farmsteads in Hirschenhof. For the role of Germans in the history and culture of Baltic peoples as seen from the German point of view, see (Pistohlkors, 1992).

⁶ Asymmetry and distance were indicated, among other things, by the terms used by Germans: *Kolonisten* (colonists, settlers) for themselves and *Bauern* (peasants, rustics) for Latvians. The distinction was upheld well into the twentieth century despite the fact that during the second half of the nineteenth century the colonists were deprived of their special legal status and the Latvian serfs were emancipated.

added tension to the relations between them and the Latvians, as did the fact that in those same years, against the backdrop of the rising nationalist sentiment in Latvia, plans were publicly discussed to establish on its territory a "United Baltic Duchy" under the auspices of the German occupation administration. The land that the Baltic German nobility was ready to render for this purpose was planned to accommodate a large number of new German settlers. Though the plan was never implemented, after the end of the German occupation and the proclamation of an independent Republic of Latvia, this initiative of the Baltic German aristocrats was regarded as treasonous, and even though Hirschenhof colonists had nothing to do with the project, their relationship with their Latvian neighbors further deteriorated. Indeed, not all Germans were just as loyal to the nationalist Latvian state as they had been to the multiethnic Russian Empire: in 1919, many of them voluntarily joined the *Freikorps* fighting first against the Bolsheviks and then against the new Riga government.

In independent Latvia the life of the colonists was not easy⁷, but the Hirschenhof colony persisted and gradually recovered from the shock of the war. The colonists were lucky to retain their farmsteads, unlike German noble landowners whose estates during the land reform in 1920 were massively expropriated and redistributed in favor of landless Latvian peasants, causing many aristocrats who had relatives and/or property in Germany to emigrate. In fact, quite a few Baltic Germans left in 1920s, but Hirschenhof emigration to Germany was low in those years. This is explained not only by the fact that migrant farmers or craftsmen would not be able to provide for themselves in the post-war crisis-stricken Weimar Republic but also by the lack of affinity to Germany. The colonists were descendants of people who left Alsace, Hesse and Rhineland-Palatinate long before the emergence of a German nationalism and maintained no contact either to their former home countries or to nationalist intellectuals. After settling down in Latvia, they continued regarding themselves as 'Alsations', 'Hessians' and 'Palatines' until these three groups melted together. By the early twentieth century even the knowledge of where exactly their ancestors had lived effaced almost completely: one of the last living Hirschenhof-born persons now living in Germany told me he "never met anyone [of his fellow countrymen] who knew from what village their family stemmed: they vaguely remembered it was 'from the Palatinate' (even in families that actually came from Holstein)."⁸ It was only by way of distinction from Latvians or Russians that colonists identified themselves as 'Germans'. Even the language spoken in Hirschenhof⁹, a unique mixture of several dialects that evolved in isolation from German-speaking areas, was not very similar to the High German written and spoken in Germany or in the German-speaking milieu of Riga and St. Petersburg in the twentieth century.¹⁰

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth century, many young men from Hirschenhof who inherited no land moved to cities of the Russian Empire such as Riga, St. Petersburg, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Moscow etc., establishing and strengthening ties between the colony and the rest of Russia rather than Germany. The people of Hirschenhof weren't sensitive to the imperial German nationalist ideology, nor did they identify themselves with the German empire politically, even though they were suspected by the Russian government to be prone to act as German agents during the First World War. After Latvia separated from Russia following the 1917 revolution, the ties were largely cut off. Rather than turning to Germany, many colonists adopted a new identity as Latvian dwellers or even citizens, especially since a descendant of a Hirschenhof family, Robert Erhardt, who was a former member of the

⁷ This is why Dorothea Neander compared the entire prewar generation of Hirschenhof residents to the biblical Job: cf. (Neander, 2009).

⁸ Personal email, received on September 30, 2016.

⁹ In 1923, Walther Mitzka tried to figure out where the ancestors of Hirschenhof colonists had come from by studying the dialect they spoke in the colony at his time, and arrived at a wrong conclusion. Archival research conducted later on showed that settlers came not from one but from several different regions of western Germany. As time passed, their original dialects merged into a single mixed idiom which differed considerably from all of them. Cf. (Mitzka, 1923).

¹⁰ Cf. a collection of folklore texts in Hirschenhof dialect published by a daughter of a German colonist family: (Lutz, 1927).

Russian State Duma, became finance minister in the second and third Latvian cabinet (1919-1920).

Some nationalist German secondary-school and university students from Riga made unsuccessful attempts to render economic aid to Hirschenhof colonists and by the same token foster their feeling of belonging to the German people. After the First World War and the ensuing collapse of the German empire and separation of territories with German population, the Association for Germanness Abroad (VdA) sent teachers to the Baltic countries so as to support German schools there. Although many of these teachers were nationally-minded and brought along textbooks and other reading materials that were designed to train nationally-minded young Germans, their activity barely reached Hirschenhof children because the colony school didn't work regularly at that time. Most children received basic education in families and only a few of them took interest in books brought by teachers arriving from Germany.

Before and after 1933, German National Socialists made attempts to attract the 'racially valuable' Baltic Germans to their movement but never achieved much success as far as the Hirschenhof colonists were concerned. In mid-1930s, it was mainly parts of the Hirschenhof youth who, under the influence of school teachers sent from Germany, sympathized with Hitler, but young people didn't have sway over the traditionalist peasant community.

Things changed radically in 1939, following the publication of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact and Hitler's declaration that all Baltic Germans should return "home to the Reich", because otherwise they would be conquered by the Soviets. An agreement was reached between the German government and the governments of Estonia and Latvia on the resettlement of ethnic Germans. The attitude of Latvians is well illustrated by President Ulmanis' sentence: "Let them go. But there shall be no comeback." (Schmidt, 1997) The conditions were not discussed with those subject to resettlement. They were ordered to sell all their property, livestock, agricultural machinery etc. to a specially appointed government commission at low prices in order to get a corresponding worth of land and equipment at the new location. The campaign was carried out very quickly. By the end of 1939, more than 50,000 Germans were resettled from Latvia to formerly Polish regions of Warthegau and West Prussia. Another 10,000 followed them in 1940 and 1941.

There is no reliable data as to the overall number of Germans who remained in Latvia at that time. Between 1941–1945, the situation changed several times, resulting in indefinite numbers of ethnic Germans leaving or being forced to leave Latvia for Germany or Siberia immediately after the war. As for Hirschenhof/Irši, some data could be secured, though. Germans made up 92% of the population of Irši Parish (as against 10% or less in the rest of Latvia, except for Kuldīga) according to the 1935 census. The next census showed Germans only amounting to 4.7% per cent of the population of Aizkraukle District, which includes Irši Parish (Mežs, Németh, 2001). The total population of the parish diminished dramatically as a result of their emigration and did not recover ever since, according to official information on the website <http://www.koknese.lv/?s=88>. The former German farmsteads were partially abandoned forever, partially transferred to Latvian collective farmers resettled here from different districts of Latgale. Therefore – and this is important for a correct understanding of what follows – the majority of the new Irši population had no memories connected with this place dating back before World War II.

The three colonists who refused to follow Hitler's call were persons married to Latvians and reluctant to break up with them. Abandoning the historical isolationist attitude, they adopted Latvian citizenship and Latvian spelling for their names. I talked with two descendants of such mixed families. One family nearly broke up in 1939 when the German man who wanted to stay with his Latvian wife and children in Hirschenhof experienced a powerful pressure on the part of his German kin who urged him to leave his non-Aryan wife and go to the Reich, while the woman was exposed to an equally strong pressure on the part of her Latvian kin who urged her

to remain. After major disputes and quarrels the couple and their children emigrated together, damaging their relations with relatives on both sides. Another mixed family, on the contrary, remained in full, damaging their relations with their emigrating German relatives and fellow colonists.

After the emigration of the Germans in 1939/41, several eras came and went, including the pre-war Soviet occupation, then the Second World War, then the post-war socialist period as part of the USSR. Throughout these decades, Baltic Germans as part of Latvia's historic, cultural and economic life almost vanished from the public sphere and to a great extent from historical memory, too. Thus, according to a lady pensioner interviewed in Koknese, her German teacher told the schoolchildren about the Germans who had lived there long ago, but by and large, this subject was taboo until the early 1990's, which resulted in memories of German colonists fading away to some extent also from the unofficial, private collective consciousness of Latvians and from their kitchen table talk. While the degree of oblivion is not measurable, though, it couldn't possibly have been complete, given the abundance of German surnames all over the place.

The historically existing tensions between Latvians and Germans were stressed and strengthened by the Soviet anti-German propaganda. In the course of socialist transformation in post-war Latvia, most of the few remaining German farmers were persecuted as a 'bourgeois element,' 'landlords,' 'kulaks' and 'Nazi collaborators', with their property being redistributed again. Some former German farmsteads were maintained well by the Latvian collective farmers moving in, while others were just used but not taken care of. Void houses and household outbuildings gradually decayed, the German cemetery was unkempt, and the German church was turned into a fertilizer barn. By the turn of the 1980/90's, the image of the German colonists who had left fifty years earlier was barely present in the collective historical memory of Irši residents. During the Cold War there seem to have been no contacts whatsoever between Latvian dwellers of Irši and the former Hirschenhof residents who had left for Germany. This comes as no surprise given the not exactly friendly relationships between the two ethnic groups and between the two political systems both sides of the iron curtain.

It might seem a bit more surprising that, at least in all cases I know of, descendants of Hirschenhof German families who had left the colony for Riga or other cities in Latvia, Byelorussia, Ukraine or Russia did not seem to be eager to visit their old home again or keep in touch with their former neighbors. For example, a Hirschenhof-born German salesman, according to his daughter (born in Kiev in 1906)¹¹, left the colony for good, married a wealthy Latvian farmer's daughter, then moved with her to the city of Mogilev as early as the 1880s and then lived in various Russian cities until his death in 1946. He never traveled to Hirschenhof again, although until World War I he accepted money transfers from his father-in-law and frequently hosted his own kin and relatives-in-law coming to visit him and his family. His wife, by contrast, did visit her relatives who lived scattered over several farmsteads near Irši and elsewhere. Their children, except for the oldest son (born in Mogilev in 1891), never went to Latvia, nor did they maintain any contacts with their kin there. Other descendants of Hirschenhof colonists who moved to Russian cities demonstrated, especially after World War II, a variety of avoidance patterns ranging from rejecting their Germanness (e.g. adopting new names etc.) to visiting their old home region without disclosing their identity to local residents.

As for the former colonists who left for Germany, after 1945 they lived for a long time in total isolation from their former homeland, compactly settled in the district of Gifhorn near Wolfsburg (Lower Saxony). They were well organized, having their associations of fellow-countrymen that helped them to stick together and preserve their identity. Such associations were quite numerous in West Germany in the postwar decades, as long as first and second generation displaced persons and forced migrants were alive, many of whom hoped to return. They gradually disappeared, especially after in the beginning of the 1970s treaties were signed between the

¹¹ Information received in a private conversation in 1988.

Federal Republic of Germany and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe by which West Germany renounced any claims to former German territories and recognized the inviolability of existing borders. The authorities in Poland and the USSR denied exiled Germans the right to return, leaving them with memories of and nostalgia for their old homes. Hirschenhof became a reminiscence, a lieu de memoir, as it were, inaccessible as a geographical destination but present in the minds of former colonists and their children and even grandchildren born in Germany. Despite the political freedom, the comparatively friendly human environment and the very favorable conditions of life in West Germany after the 'economic miracle' allowing former Hirschenhof farmers to enjoy a degree of wealth that was incomparable to the one they had or could have ever dreamt of in the Baltics, homesickness and the desire to again see their old homes remained strong and stable in them as in many other ex-Baltic Germans. However, the 'Iron Curtain' would not allow them even to visit Irši. At best, they were granted Soviet tourist visas that permitted them to travel to Riga and/or Tallinn and have guided tours there.

The situation changed quickly and radically in the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially after the declaration of Latvia's independence from the USSR. Major changes affected many areas, but for us here two major changes are relevant. First, the borders were opened and trips from Germany to Latvia became possible (and cheap!). Secondly, a process of recalling, rethinking and revising national history gained momentum both on official and private levels.

The ways in which these changes in social historical memory were and are occurring in the capital differ from those in the province. In Riga, a purposeful historical policy has been pursued by the national government as well as by the municipal authorities and, quite visibly, it is the Western European heritage that the Latvian establishment has tended to emphasize.¹² Therefore, considerable amounts of energy and money have been invested particularly in the restoration of monuments that are related to the Baltic German aspect of the city's and the country's history. Monuments and events commemorating the Hanseatic League, the German merchants and craftsmen of Riga are major attractions for tourists from all over the world and particularly from Germany, thanks to which international tourism in Riga is booming, helping the city to survive economic crisis. Restoration of dilapidated or even completely destroyed historic buildings such as the House of the Blackheads (Hackmann, 2006), exhibitions¹³, book publications (Milicers, 2009), conferences and other activities aimed at studying and re-actualizing the history of past centuries (Schwidtal, 2001; Balaško, 2013) bear witness of political, scientific, historical and commercial interests of Latvia, Germany¹⁴ and EU converging to one vector pointing towards creation of a new image for Riga and its past in which Baltic Germans are assigned an important and positive role. The memory of German culture dominating the city is regarded by the Latvian government today as a valuable asset since it emphasizes that the country and especially its capital were part of the Western world and not (or not only) a province of Russia. Today, Riga, with its large share of Russian-speaking and Soviet-oriented population, pursues a historical policy that instrumentalizes legacy of a German past to underscore a Latvian present and future and emphasize Latvia's being part of the European Union and not Soviet Union, or Russia, for that matter.

It is important to underscore here that the historic German presence is being reenacted in the public space without relying primarily on personal or family memory: there remained too few

¹² The Historic Centre of Riga was among the first architectural objects in Latvia to be inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 1997 – cf. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/852> (last accessed on November 24, 2014). The Historic Centre of Kuldīga, which historically was linked with the Teutonic Order and with the Hanseatic League and was second to Riga as to the number of German merchants, entrepreneurs and craftsmen well into the twentieth century, was included in the UNESCO World Heritage Latvian Tentative List in 2011. Cf. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5609/> (last accessed on November 24, 2014).

¹³ For example, the Latvian National Library in Riga hosted an exhibition on 'German Bookprinting in Riga in the 19th and twentieth centuries' ("Vācu Grāmatniecība Rīgā 19. - 20. gadsimtā") in 2001.

¹⁴ For German businesses' share in Latvia's economy, see (Deutsch-Baltische Handelskammer in Estland, Lettland, Litauen (AHK), 2002–2005).

traces such as cultural practices and too few old people who remember their pre-war German neighbors and can contribute their memories to the newly-formed fund of social memory in Riga.

In small towns of Latvia, much more important are individual initiatives and contacts, but they only have a good chance of success if and to the extent in which they are consistent with the political agenda of local authorities. This was the case in Koknese, a township not far from Irši. Koknese is now a twin town of Wittingen, the township in Germany where many descendants of former Hirschenhof colonists live. According to a brochure (KOKNESE — VITINGENA partneri Eiropā, 2006) describing the partnership, it began in 1993, when a Witting resident named Siegfried Escher, born in 1936 in Latvia, visited Koknese to take possession of the house he inherited from his grandfather, a German colonist who refused to leave back in 1939. Because the house had not been sold, the owner's grandson was entitled to it according to the Latvian restitution law. Having made acquaintance and then even friends with Escher, the mayor of Koknese suggested establishing regular contacts and eventually a partnership between Koknese and Wittingen. Following an exchange of delegations and formal negotiations, an partnership agreement was signed in 1996. The key role in the establishment of friendship between the twin towns' residents was played, from the Latvian side, by the elderly German teacher Rasma Nowika, who had a reach stock of memories and was able to narrate them well, and from the German side by Wilhelm Rothweiler who spoke Latvian and whose surname clearly indicated that his ancestors lived in Hirschenhof, even if his grandfather or father might have moved from the colony to the nearby town of Kokenhusen/Koknese.¹⁵ The brochure mentions "continuous joint projects", "exchange of delegations," and "friendly interpersonal contacts" filling the subsequent ten years. The joint activities described include folk and classical music performances, tours to the ruins of a medieval castle, picnics etc. The brochure published in 2006 fails to mention either the former German colony of Hirschenhof which was located very close to Koknese and to which some of the partnership's champions had a direct relationship, or the German name of the town (Kokenhusen), or, indeed, anything at all that has to do with the historical German presence in the area. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that this subject was never mentioned in conversations during all the time of partnership. Rather, it seems that the municipal authorities behind the brochure preferred not to tackle in it the memories of the Latvian-German relationships in the past centuries, because they were sometimes less than amicable. Instead, they concentrated on the new, trouble-free partnership between the two towns, which, according to the mayor of Koknese, facilitated the integration of Latvians into the European Union: for example, in 1999 Koknese farmers visited Wittingen for training within the framework of the PHARE-TACIS program. The people of Wittingen donated a gym to Koknese, etc. Thus, originating at least partly from nostalgic feelings of an individual, the official new relationship between the two towns (and, perhaps, the informal friendships between their people, too) is now primarily present and future-oriented. As for the past, it is represented in this dialog of twin towns either in an abstract form of traditional music that has no local bindings, or through guided tours and cosplay events against the backdrop of castle ruins and other 'medieval' activities which no person living today can associate with their own family history. By now, 10 years after the brochure under discussion was published, the relations between Koknese and Wittingen have lost that scant local historical component which used to be embodied by the elderly Rasma Nowika and Wilhelm Rothweiler, the only ones to remember the pre-war times.

In the rural areas the situation is different. The government's historical policy initiatives and projects aimed at the European integration of Latvia barely reach the countryside. In areas where the presence of Germans was less marked in the past and where fewer attractions for Western tourists exist today, new efforts to revive the memory of this presence are less noticeable.

¹⁵ Names of Hirschenhof colonists are listed in (Gangnus, 2003).

Therefore, in rural areas the ‘memory work’ and the transformation of historical culture are much more spontaneous, reflecting common people’s feelings and wishes. Given the absence of ‘elites’, the intensity and direction of these processes largely depend on individuals such as heads of local self-government bodies, school teachers, museum directors, or local entrepreneurs. No pecuniary interests are involved, because the tourist trade is barely developed in rural areas of Latvia today. Such political or ideological aims as European integration, fight against the Soviet past, etc., play a much smaller role in the countryside than in the capital. To learn more about the changing attitude of Latvian and German men and women to their common past and present, it is necessary to analyze it at the grassroots level in a rural setting.¹⁶

The changes began when in the years of perestroika doors in the Iron Curtain began to open. For the history of Hirschenhof these changes were to a large extent associated with the activities of Gustav Gangnus¹⁷ who, having been born in the colony, was taken to Germany in 1939 as an eighteen-months-old child and at a mature age became interested in the past of his family. His family history research led him to a number of West German archives where he learned exactly where his (and not just his) ancestors had lived before emigration and how they arrived in Livonia in the mid-1760s. Members of the German-Baltic Society in Darmstadt pitched an idea for him to shift from a purely genealogical research to local history. The Baltic Historical Commission in Göttingen, where he gave a talk, supported his project, which enabled him in 1987 to make his first trip to Riga. There he gave a talk at the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR presenting his first findings and met his distant relatives and countrymen who lived in Latvia. One of them took him (in violation of the visa regime) to Irši and vicinity. They discovered that the German church in Liepkalne / Lindau and the cemetery next to it still existed but were in a neglected and dilapidated state. After almost half a century, the contact between former colonists and the former colony was thus resumed.

After Latvia broke away from the Soviet Union and it became possible for Western tourists to visit the country safely and independently, choosing their destinations and routes by themselves, among the first to come were those who had left Latvia half a century earlier and their families. According to eyewitness accounts, the first appearance of German tourists in Hirschenhof caused some concern among local residents who did not know the details of the 1939 deal but had heard about the new Latvian restitution laws. The Germans (many of them still spoke some Latvian) reassured them that the farmsteads had been not requisitioned but sold voluntarily and legally, ruling out any restitution claims, and that it was not their intention to reclaim their former property. All they wanted was just see it all again and show it to their children. And they really left the same evening.

Those visits were part of a movement labeled *Heimwehtourismus* (homesick touring) that developed after the former homes of exiled or emigrated Germans became accessible again (Marschall, 2015). Small groups and whole busloads of homesick Germans began to come every summer. The fact that such journeys take place in the summertime is significant because it shows that people traveling all the way from Germany to see their old homes regard their trip not as ‘coming home’ but as a holiday tour for which nice weather is of importance since it makes sightseeing more pleasant and convenient: given that many country roads in Latvia are unpaved, a tourist bus can easily get stuck on them when they are covered with mud or snow.

Typically, tourist groups of 20-30 people include people from different places of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and their younger relatives. Their routes are arranged so as to visit major cities, especially Riga and Tallinn, the most interesting provincial touristic attractions and, of

¹⁶ For the best of my knowledge, such practices haven’t been studied at the level of everyday interpersonal relations in Baltic countries. For an overview of historiography, see (Pistohlkors, 2010). Works on a related subject that deal with post-war expellees visiting their former homes in Poland, exist, though: see (Picard, Di Giovine, 2014; Marschall, 2015; Marschall, 2016).

¹⁷ The information in this paragraph was received from Hirschenhof-born Germans in personal conversations and letters between 1995 and 2016.

course, all the localities where the group participants or their ancestors once lived. This gives the fellow travelers an opportunity not only to visit 'their' own places but also to show them to each other and share their memories and experiences.

What is it these homesick tourists can see when coming to Irši? Most of the buildings built by colonists are occupied by new tenants or destroyed to some extent and represent a sad picture of desolation.

What is it one can do when coming to Irši, especially given that with the dying-out of the older generation a language barrier arises between Germans and Latvians that impedes communication? Latvians usually don't invite strangers to come in, and entering strangers' homes without invitation is not common of Germans, so the tourists usually don't get into their former houses if those are inhabited, but walking around the farms is no problem. Of course, tour participants naturally take pictures of what remained of the old times and of themselves against the backdrop of houses and barns. They explore abandoned buildings, recalling and telling each other what used to be in there before. During one of his first visits to Liepkalne/Lindau church turned into a fertilizer barn, a former colonist picked up a baluster fallen off the preacher's pulpit stairs and took it to Germany as a souvenir...

Over the years, with the older generation losing mobility and the younger one acquiring mobile phones, another important activity emerged: tour participants call their elderly relatives who had to stay at home and allow them to virtually participate in the trip in real-time mode: "Aunt Erna, we have already passed the Grand Alley and are now heading for the church. Then we will go to the cemetery."

Pretty soon, however, the 'homesick tourists' realized that just visiting and seeing the place where their old home used to be was not enough for them to satisfy their homesickness. After decades of non-being and oblivion, they felt it was necessary to create a permanent sign reminding of the German colony. As one Hirschenhof-born German activist told me later, he made a point of designing a landmark which, while clearly not claiming any part of today's Irši back, would be just as clearly reclaiming the presence of German colonists in the history of this place. A fast and successful fundraising campaign within the old Hirschenhof community made it possible in August 1992 to erect a memorial stone near the former German colony administration building (now hosting apartments) that luckily was preserved better than others. The stone bears no epitaphs, appeals or images. The lapidary inscription on it merely states that for 170 years Hirschenhof was a German settlement¹⁸:

HIRSCHENHOF
DEUTSCHE KOLONIE
1766–1939

Another participant in the unveiling ceremony, though, told me that the inscription in German was meant to visually fix the spirit of Germanness (*Deutschtum*) at the place where no Germans lived anymore. This reading suggests that at least for some, the claim to presence applied not just for the distant past but also to the present day.

Who is supposed to be the target audience of this reminder? Those who can read German, of course, and that means primarily tourists themselves, not the local residents whose knowledge of German is mostly scant. By not duplicating the inscription in Latvian, the sponsors of the memorial stone deliberately or unwittingly perpetuated the memory of the colony for themselves and their descendants rather than for anybody else.

However, the unveiling of the memorial was not a 'Germans only' event but became an event of national scope in Latvia because it was attended by a cabinet minister (himself a descendant of Hirschenhof German colonists) and a national TV crew reported about it in the news. For

¹⁸ The Latvian pendant that stands not far away, on the main square, bears an even more lapidary inscription: IRŠI.

residents of Irši and its surroundings this, among other things, was a signal that times had changed and the new authorities looked favorably on reviving the memory of the German colony and giving it a positive turn.

There began a gradual transformation of the historical memory of the local inhabitants – at least some of them. Two ladies who took interest in local lore now started to pay more and more attention to the history of the German colony. Because they speak German, they are the key contact persons, dialogue partners, guides and assistants on site for tourists from Germany. When asked about the source of her motivation, one of the ladies answered that she had studied German philology at the university which fostered her historical consciousness and encouraged her to restore the knowledge of the past which, for the reasons mentioned above, was lost or faded.

Over the past 25 years, the visits of ‘homesick tourists’ became an important part of the travel industry in Latvia. Guides, interpreters, owners of hotels and cafes benefit from them greatly. But the tourist traffic mainly goes to the cities, especially Riga, and famous castles rather than to poor rural areas where the infrastructure is underdeveloped and no hyped sights exist. Attracting tourists to Irši is not a goal for the time being since there are no facilities to accommodate them in Irši Parish: no hotel for tourists to sleep or even a restaurant for them to eat; there is only a tiny cafe with a couple of tables, unable to seat a tourist group of 20. The ‘experience industry’ here is represented by a couple of picture postcards on sale at the local post office, none of them showing views of Irši itself, let alone anything associated with the former German colony. The nearest tourist center being situated 20 km away, in Koknese, guests only spend a couple of hours in Irši and don’t even have an opportunity to spend money there. The activists’ efforts aimed at reviving and maintaining a collective memory of the former German colony is therefore devoid of commercial component.

Inspired and powered by sheer enthusiasm, these efforts little by little lead to important results. Friendly relations have been established at the official level. Unlike Koknese and Wittingen, no delegations are exchanged, but groups of German tourist coming to Irši are received by the lady mayor in the administration building. She knows that people in front of her are neither diplomats nor potential investors but mostly lower-middle-class persons, many of them pensioners or housewives. Nevertheless, Ms. Mayor invites them to the assembly hall where chairs and tables are arranged specially for them, and delivers a welcome speech in which she emphasizes the importance of the common past. The guests are treated to tea, cheese and biscuits. By the standards of the local budget this is a banquet because Irši is not a rich municipality, lacking noteworthy tax-paying businesses. Still, in 2016 it managed to sponsor a feast on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the German colony. The event was again attended by high-ranking officials (including the minister and a bishop) and a TV crew. This time, according to participants’ accounts, the jubilee was generally perceived as a joint celebration of Latvians and Germans.¹⁹

Tentative informal personal contacts are established, too. When a bus from Germany arrives, the first to meet it are charity boys from the local orphanage who approach foreigners in the hope of cigarettes, chewing gum, or even a couple of euros, but then a woman with a little boy comes up and says through an interpreter that he, too, is a descendant of a colonist and was named Edgar after his German greatgrandfather. A kind of small talk ensues. Then the guests visit a farmstead now owned by the granddaughter of a colonist who refused to leave in 1939. The family has survived all the hard times, and today this farm looks prosperous compared to the neighboring ones. The lady of the house puts two huge bowls of strawberries on a large table in the garden and shows photos from the family album. She doesn’t speak any German and has a Latvian flag on a flagpole in front of her house. Because her grandfather married a Latvian woman, became a

¹⁹ Tellingly, only Germans from Germany: the Latvian Germans’ Union (Latvijas Vācu Savienības / Verband der Deutschen in Lettland) neither attended the event nor covered it on its website www.verband.lv.

citizen of Latvia and refused to resettle to Germany, opting for assimilation instead, the relations between him and the rest of the colonist community were broken. Since the onset of 'homesickness touring', however, the once painful breakup seems to be slowly losing its acuteness and regular visits of German guests to her place have already become a tradition. Visitors go sightseeing about the farm as a kind of open-air museum. As many members of the group are new to this place, the team leader, himself born in Hirschenhof, offers a small guided tour through this farmstead and its surroundings, showing the typical kinds of farm buildings, recalling place names once used by the Germans and telling who lives in their homes now. His own former house, for instance, is divided to host three households. Nobody comes out or looks out the window. The old man suggests several reasons for that, animosity being not among them. He supposes that one tenant is probably drunk, another one is out, and the third one embarrassed by her poverty. It becomes clear that he knows all these people personally or has at least found out all the details about them. Although this is certainly not a full-fledged relationship, let alone friendship, it is a step towards one. According to a local resident, there are families in Irši that exchange letters with descendants of Hirschenhof colonists in Germany but I have no possibility to estimate the volume and intensity of this correspondence.

While it is the care of the memory that is behind the efforts of both the German and the Latvian activists, they have different kinds of memory. The descendants of the colonists have maintained for decades a personal, family, ancestral memory of the past life in Hirschenhof, whereas the majority of Latvians living there now have little or no memories associated with the colony because most families arrived after the Germans had left. However, some of the dwellers of Irši and neighboring settlements do have a historical consciousness and think that the past matters regardless whether one remembers it oneself or acquires the knowledge of it from without. Over the past quarter century, these people have adopted the idea that the history of the place they live has a German chapter and that this chapter is important and positive.

I asked a Hirschenhof-born German what he thought the content of this chapter should be, according to the wishes of former colonists and their families. In fact, his answer was formulated long before my question. Having learned Latvian from his mother, he was able to literally write this chapter and insert it as a historical section in the Latvian Wikipedia article on Irši Parish (Iršu pagasts), adding a photograph of the German church. The text contains no facts or appraisals that explicitly run against the established modern Latvian version of local history. Rather than offering an alternative, it merely draws the attention of Latvian readership to the internal history of the German colony that could otherwise be easily overlooked given the scarcity of literature on the topic in Latvian. Interactions between the colonists and the rest of the local population are barely mentioned, and the relationship between them is not thematized in the text, and maybe it was precisely this inward nature of the German chapter of local history that made it so easy for the Latvian side to accept. So far, nobody seems to have tried to remove the article from Wikipedia or change it. The lawn around the memorial stone is well-groomed, there are flowers in vases. A local activist told me in an interview that residents of Irši are "proud to have such an interesting history." While it has yet to be found out exactly what the word "interesting" means here, it seems evident from this statement that the people living in Irši have appropriated a history that includes Hirschenhof and proudly regard it as their own even though this does not seem to bring them any advantages in coping with the hardships of life in the crisis-stricken Latvia of today.

This new attitude leads to new action. Little by little, small, but symbolically important steps are taken to provide the material basis for the recreated historical memory. Local residents cleaned the former German church of chemical fertilizer, so that one can enter the building. We are not talking restoration, which would cost millions, and the dilapidated building is still at risk of collapsing, but it has become accessible. In front of the church residents of Liepkalne / Lindau installed a glazed plaque with a text in four languages telling about the history of the parish and the church itself. It is overgrown with bushes and the glass on it is broken, and yet it is there. Its

target audience is unclear: Latvians do not need information in foreign languages, while foreigners coming here for sightseeing are the 'homesick tourists' who know more about the history of this place than the text on the plaque tells thanks to the family memory and the books by Werner Conze and Gustav Gangnus.²⁰ Moreover, what they seek is a different sort of information, e.g. the burial place of their ancestors.

Residents of Irši can show them where the cemetery is. "On your left is the normal cemetery, over there on your right the German one", the guide says, unwittingly showing that "German" has been excluded from "normal" for a long time and this division still lives on in the everyday language. Finding a grave is not an easy task: the German cemetery is unkempt, overgrown, most of the crosses and tombstones have collapsed or tumbled down. Having failed to find the graves of their closest kin, the visitors turn their attention to a new grave. To them, it has a symbolic meaning: if someone today buries their dead in the German cemetery, the connection is not completely broken. But the name of the deceased is not familiar to anyone in the group. It becomes clear that the cemetery in its current form is unable to serve as a place for meaningful meetings with the past, for it shows more gaps than tissue linking people who now live in Germany with their ancestors who lived in Hirschenhof. Something else is needed, some better functioning information and communication institution: a museum.

The school teachers and their pupils in Irši have long been collecting materials for a future museum of local history. Gradually, a special section devoted to the German colony began taking shape. The government wouldn't allocate money for it, private sponsors could not be found either, so the museum is being made on a pro-bono work basis.²¹ Things are moving very slowly. Speaking of exhibits relating to the history of the German colony, the holdings of the museum include so far the aforementioned baluster (donated by the person who once took it from the church), a number of photographs and copies of books and articles about the history of Baltic Germans. Visitors from Germany keep contributing photographs and copies of documents. Some donate small amounts of money. As yet, not nearly enough money has been accumulated for the museum to be established in proper premises and with all the necessary equipment. Two potential rooms for it are being considered. One is a former barn with solid and beautiful stone walls, an authentic German building directly associated with Hirschenhof colony, which makes it look ideal for a museum at first sight. But it is filled with garbage, has neither electricity nor heating, nor sanitation, its rotten wooden roof and floor need a thorough and expensive renovation. Therefore, pragmatic considerations speak in favor of a different solution. Because of depopulation the local school has a spare classroom previously used for handicrafts lessons. It needs renovation too, but a less encompassing one. Little by little, volunteering parents work on it.

Recently, a new initiative came from a former minister in the Latvian government and now Latvia's envoy to Brussels, himself a descendant of Hirschenhof colonists, who purchased one of the extant German houses in Irši and is now establishing a sort of German-Latvian club in it, potentially offering room for a museum, too.

²⁰ (Conze, 1934) contains a map of Hirschenhof on which the individual families' farmsteads are specified (but hard to use since the map is not georeferenced), while (Gangnus, 2003) provides rich information on genealogy and life trajectories of colonists, allowing to trace marital ties between families over generations.

²¹ For comparison, in Russia there are about 30 museums (temporary and permanent, state-run, municipal and private ones, some of them founded during the Soviet era) fully or partly dealing with the Russian Germans and/or individual German settlements or institutions. In addition, a web-based virtual museum was created in 2011 (<http://www.rusdeutsch.ru/?museum=4>) under the auspices of the Moscow Goethe Institute, the International German Culture Union, supported by the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation and funded by the federal targeted program "Socio-economic and ethno-cultural development of Russian Germans in 2008-2012." In Germany, there is a museum of cultural history of Russian Germans in Detmold, established in 1996 by immigrants from the former Soviet Union. It is funded by the Association for the Support of Christian Schools of Lippe, which was founded in 1986 also by Germans repatriating from the Soviet Union. In 2011, thanks to support from the Government of North Rhine-Westphalia, the museum received a large new building worth 1 mio euros. Not far from Rostock (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) there is a museum-estate of Volhynian Germans who moved here in 1939 from Ukraine. In Latvia, as far as I know, today there are no permanent museums or exhibitions dedicated specially to Baltic Germans.

Slowly but surely, information about the new developments in Irši is spreading. Individual tourists from the rest of Latvia (and at least in one case from Russia) who have ancestral or other links to Hirschenhof are now coming, asking questions and seeking for information, which confirms the necessity to institutionalize the new historical culture of this place and make it more suitable for search and exchange of information.

What kind of future might this – now joint German-Latvian – past have? Due to natural causes the number of bearers of personal memories is rapidly decreasing, but the family, ancestral and historical memory and interest are not necessarily fading as a result. In part, on the contrary, they are being strengthened by the new technologies such as email, web forums and blogs, etc. which bring the communicational side of this historical culture on a whole new level and make it more easily accessible for a broader – and younger – audience. Whether or not an onsite museum would really play a major role in supporting and spreading this historical culture, is not clear yet. But if the museum offered some printed matters such as brochures, maps, picture cards etc. dedicated to Hirschenhof, it probably would contribute a lot to visitors getting a more lasting positive experience.

Summing up, we can draw three conclusions:

First, I believe this case study has shown that a local collective historical memory can be transformed under the influence of factors other than mass media or education. New chapters (which, actually, are old but for a long time de-actualized ones) can be added to it with as well as without a purposeful historical policy of the state, with or without a material base provided by the government or private sponsors, with or without a prospect of commercial or political gain. What may be sufficient is an external factor in the form of annual visits of ‘homesick tourists’ coming in groups with varying composition, who bring along little money but great interest and care for the place, supplemented by an internal factor represented by two local activists and two public events in 25 years, attended by prominent persons and television. An important trait of the German visitors’ peculiar interest for certain pages of Irši’s past is that it is devoid of any aggressive, revanchist component or restitution claims. This goes a long way to gradually convince more and more local residents to share in a revised version of the settlement’s history, a one in which the presence of German colonists is assigned a major and positive role.

Second, the restored chapter which in chronological terms is long enough (more than 170 years), can be very succinct as regards its contents: in the case under discussion, it only says that a German colony named Hirschenhof existed between 1766 and 1939 in the territory of today’s Irši and this is something good and interesting. This chapter contains no narrative, no moral, no role models, no reference points relevant for today’s business or politics (the difference to Riga and Koknese cases). This makes it less disputable and facilitates its effect in bringing about a new historical culture in Irši.

Third, it is unclear yet what function this new historical culture has for the Latvian population there. Unlike the descendants of Germans colonists, they are not satisfying their *Heimweh*. Unlike the town fathers of Koknese, they cannot rely on this historical culture in establishing good relations with a German twin town to help them cope with the EU integration challenges. Unlike Riga authorities and businesses, they cannot count on revenues from tourist traffic. My supposition is that, precisely due to the lack of grand commercial and political prospects for Irši, a new historical culture allowing the locals to take a new pride in their settlement’s past provides a welcome invigoration to them in the present.

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