

Vivi on Verbeke: A Study of Identities, Narratives, and Memories of a Latvian American
Family Story After World War II

Family stories pass down and so do culture norms. For many natives who live in their homelands for a lifetime, it seems common to take this tradition for granted when storytelling as an intrinsic channel for family narratives become inherited from one generation to another. In the eyes of immigrants, there is always another layer added to their tones of such a storytelling where the sense of home chronically haunts their memories. Their consciousness travels back and forth from the past to present, navigating the unity of a peaceful mind and their earned identities. For those who escape their mother lands in pursuit of survival in another site inevitably have one more dimension in their narratives — exile and return.

Vivian Brandler, born in southwestern Pennsylvania in the United States, is an artist of Latvian descent. Her parents escaped Soviet Occupation in the late 1940s to a displaced persons camp in Germany and eventually emigrated to the United States in 1950. By studying her family story through her oral narratives of her parents' anecdotes before and after the immigration as well as her personal experiences ranging from adolescent to adulthood, I discovered a unique portrait of her family story from different perspectives of two generations. This collection of stories also plays an important role in enveloping a period in exploring historical snapshots in Latvian American immigrant literatures, "focusing on the first and second generation of World War II refugees from Latvia, who emigrated to the USA around 1950 and formed still active communities-in-exile period."¹ This historical phase in constituting the shared memory of Latvian heritage and reconfiguring an autochthonous identity of being a Latvian is of vital importance. "When the Soviet Army returned to Latvia and absorbed it into the Soviet Union in

¹ Maija Hinkle, "Latvian-Americans in the Post-Soviet Era: Cultural Factors on Return Migration in Oral History Interviews," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2006): 48.

1944, about a tenth of the population (some 200,000 people) left Latvia for the West. After refugee camps in Germany, the largest number (40,000) eventually settled in the United States.”²

By arguing that these communities were defined “mainly by their common heritage and language, not necessary by geographical space,” Hinkle explains:

Since life in Soviet Latvia was very different from that in Latvian American communities, and since contacts between the two sides were by necessity very limited, especially from the Soviet side, the communities had developed very different lifestyles, expectations, coping strategies. In addition, many in the émigré community saw themselves as the true embodiment of Latvian identity, rather than the people in Latvia since in Soviet Latvia, this was being suppressed and distorted.³

Such a “true embodiment of Latvian identity” is evident in Brandler’s family narratives.

The Latvian representation inside of their family life becomes the epitome of a cultural landscape in its displacement while living in the United States. Their spoken languages, holiday traditions, family educations, and lifestyles resonate the nature of ethnic values inherited from Latvian culture. “The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-91 created an opportunity for return migration for peoples who had been displaced by political forces during the conflict more than half a century before.”⁴ However, many immigrants chose to live at their second homeland and didn’t return to Latvia after its independence. The complexities of these considerations and concerns are significant in their family narratives which become part of the repertoire in their family memories and have an enduring impact on their identification as Latvian Americans. “These immigrant narratives provide an opportunity to examine processes that also operate in other sociocultural situations where change is less radical.”⁵ Somers, therefore, argues that narratives consistently shape the formation of identities; she explains:

² Hinkle, “Latvian-Americans,” 48.

³ Ibid., 49.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Culture shock and narrative creativity,” *Folklore in the Modern World* (1978): 120.

People construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted [sic] stories; that “experience” is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.⁶

Storytelling is a universally shared gift. “As human beings we are natural storytellers, and the stories that we tell others about ourselves help to define our sense of who we are.”⁷ I learned the highlight of Brandler’s family story the first day I met her at her studio when she introduced herself. Her salient memory of who she is and where she comes from anchor her Latvian cultural background as a second immigrant generation. Such narratives are responsibilities that represent their family values and worldviews. Without those narratives, their life story is not complete even though the second generations’ bond to their motherlands are not directly built on their personal experiences. Instead, family narratives bridge generational gaps where memory that involves genesis and cultural heritages cast light to their identities and cultural creativity. “If not for creative expressions of the past, that once were the present, there would be no poetry, music, art, sweet memories of shared celebrations and grand meals.”⁸ Brandler’s family narratives are not sculptures with the fixed frameworks that limit the flames of her imaginations. However, those narratives are lively colors, actively engaging with the memory brushes and dancing on the canvas, making an extraordinary fluid artwork. Like all the fluid-art paintings Brandler showed to me during my fieldwork at her studio, there pieces are produced and consistently reconstructed by the collaborations between her memories and emotions. “[M]emory is subtly

⁶ Margaret Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 614.

⁷ Ilze Arielle Matiss, “Revisiting Second-Generation Latvian-Canadian Women's Stories About Lives in Changing Contexts,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 98.

⁸ Lidija Kūlmane Stērste and Andrejs Stērste, “Introduction,” in *Dzeja*, (Rīga Nordik, 2012), 9.

shifting, affected by personal needs and social situations. As such, it is constructed rather than reproduced. Used effectively, memory can illuminate and infuse history with authenticity. Memory can be selective, just as history can be written from a particular perspective.”⁹ In this manner, Brandler’s narratives are merely expected to serve as a perspective of how to read history rather than historical texts that read facts and events.

In exploring the meaning of family and personal experience narratives, Dolby-Stahl argues that “the ‘text’ is alive, and textual criticism must contend with the unpredictable moods of a living creature, the variable acts of speaker and listeners, writers and researchers.”¹⁰ On the one hand, as Borland, Sawin and Tye argue: “As folklorists, we recognize story as something other than mere conversation or communicative competence; it is a heightened, intentional way of expressing an attitude that exists within and beyond the words spoken.”¹¹ Therefore, examining the textual structures without consulting the underlying meaning embedded in cultural context and personal profile is inadequate to address the nuanced relationship between narratives and narrators. To have a comprehensive understanding and a reliable knowledge about the narrators, it is necessary to have a well-grounded participation in their regular lives. Entering the field is not simply setting up the recording devices and diving into question and answer sessions. A solid ethnographic fieldwork requires researchers’ patient preparation to navigate conversational opportunities, their willingness to have serious interaction with informants, and the careful documentation of the climate during the collaboration with informants in creating

⁹ David Thelen, *Memory and American History*, ix, vii–xiii; see also Schrager, “What Is Social,” 76–97; and Tonkin, *Narrating Our Past*, 105: “nobody’s ability to recall is independent of social milieu,” and 112: “Memory is part of cognitive empowering and a means to being; it is developed through social interaction; it is medium as well as message.”

¹⁰ Sandra K. Dolby-Stahl, “A Literary Folkloristic Methodology for the Study of Meaning in Personal Narrative,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 22, no. 1 (1985): 46.

¹¹ Katherine Borland, Patricia Sawin, and Diane Tye. “Introduction: Difference and Dialogism in Family Narratives,” *Journal of American Folklore* 130, no. 518 (2017): 378.

narratives. Capturing the moments that envelope the emotion through body languages, facial expressions and speaking tones are critical in analyzing the storyteller's narratives.

On the other hand, the reflexivity is an essential element in marking researchers' positions in their fieldwork and the documenting process. "From a social-constructivist point of view, our very identity is formed during the interactions with others and the stories that we tell of ourselves. Thus, our sense of who we are as well as the stories that we tell about ourselves may well change over time and are greatly influenced by who the listener is and the context in which we tell them."¹² The reflexivity is related to how the stories are being told and how to connect the reciprocal process between the interviewer and informants. This kind of dynamic drives the conversational exchange into a productive manner while it keeps the interactional opportunities stabilizing the identities between storytellers and listeners. Thus, nurturing a healthy social relationship with informants is instrumental in continuing the fieldwork and documenting trustworthy narratives with an easy access to their repertoires. Brandler and I, since our very first meeting, have formed a tradition by setting up a tea talk as a format for our conversations.

While survival as one of the primary themes prevails in Brandler's storytelling, it also becomes the main connection between generations in her family cultures. "[P]ast events that are embedded in traumatic narration provide an important path to the development of social identities across generations."¹³ Such traumatic narratives are usually resulted from people's childhood memories and influence the development of their social identities. "The value of oral narrative for the transference of trauma is thus one significant dynamic of traumatic inheritance."¹⁴ This inheritance echoes the conflicts between different cultural environments and

¹² Matiss, "Revisiting," 98.

¹³ Janet Jacobs, "Family Narratives and the Social Construction of Descendant Identity." In *The Holocaust Across Generations: Trauma and Its Inheritance Among Descendants of Survivors*, 39. New York: NYU Press.

¹⁴ Jacobs, "Family Narratives," 39.

the sense of alienation followed it in terms of the immigration thinking. Meanwhile, it carries the sense of responsibility on the shoulder of each family member to remember their family stories.

“In some instances, it was mothers and grandmothers who spoke repeatedly about the past, while in other cases it was fathers and grandfathers who conveyed and recollected the experiences of captivity and survival.”¹⁵ As Jacobs argues: “Through the interweaving of memory with historical events, the narratives of survivors provided a sense of time, place, and lived experience that became part of the knowledge and feeling-states of the descendants.”¹⁶

From one of Brandler’s earliest memory about her family, she delivers the following narrative:

The moment I first realized I was “different” was when I was a toddler growing up in Camp Hill, across the Susquehanna River. There were neighborhood children riding bikes that were speaking a language foreign to me: English. I did not know they were Americans. I just felt they were different. My parents and grandmother spoke Latvian. That was my first language. Imagine that. An immigrant’s small child thinking Americans were “foreign.” Because my family was steeped in Latvian tradition and held on to their traditions, I grew up practicing many Latvian customs. I suppose having real candles in a Christmas tree was novel for Americans, but it was traditionally Latvian. At Easter, we celebrated the Spring Solstice, not the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were not practicing Christians. They did not go to church. Their church was nature. My parents spent a lot of time outside, with nature, growing beautiful flowers and planting many trees. They would not have been considered true pagans, but they honored ancient Latvian folklore, songs, poetry, art and music. I grew up with my grandmother in my house and every evening I was told to tell her goodnight and she would have me sit and listen to her speak about our Latvian family history.¹⁷

The family’s efforts of keeping the memory of being Latvians is significant in Brandler’s narrative. The concepts of *Self* and *Others* developed at the early stage in her memory from her own observation and storytelling as a family tradition. “Families have beliefs that represent the way they construct the social world and are reflected in the narrative content and style of the

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Vivian Brandler (a Latvian-American artist) in discussion with the author, February 7, 2020.

interview.”¹⁸ Those different traditions and beliefs in Brandler’s family affect the ideological filter in her narratives by identifying all the different traditions and memories since her childhood. Those values, similarly, constitute her identity and lived experience of being a Latvian descendant. “Through the interweaving of memory with historical events, the narratives of survivors provided a sense of time, place, and lived experience that became part of the knowledge and feeling-states of the descendants.”¹⁹ The difference of *Latvianness* and *Americanness* are concretely laid out in her life story and vividly participate in her personal experience narratives. This way, she did only *feel* the differences but *see* them. Being a witness of what it means to be an immigrant plays a significant role in portraying the image of what accounts for family memories. “Family narratives can be considered across three different dimensions: coherence, interaction, and beliefs. These narratives involve the process of creating a coherent statement about family events, the exchange of information among family members, and the attribution of meaning to family experiences.”²⁰ The coherence of Brandler’s Latvian cultural heritage, her family education and traditions, and the attachment to nature in their family belief are critical components of family memories among generations. These components, on the other hand, are building up contracts in retaining and scrutinizing their own narratives. Wolf-Knuts, in his fieldwork of Swedish-speaking Finns in South Africa, argues from ethnological and folkloristic angles that “time, place, social relations, and sensations serve as recurrent analytical tools.”²¹ Thus, the interpretation of folk narratives should also respect the essence of temporality, spatiality, and sensations from the perspective of narrators. “Qualitative biographical methods in

¹⁸ Barbara H. Fiese and Arnold J. Sameroff. “The Family Narrative Consortium: A Multidimensional Approach to Narratives,” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 64, no. 2 (1999): 14.

¹⁹ Jacobs, “Family Narratives,” 16.

²⁰ Fiese and Sameroff, “The Family Narrative Consortium,” 16.

²¹ Ulrika Wolf-Knuts, “Contrasts as a Narrative Technique in Emigrant Accounts,” *Folklore* 114, no. 1 (2003): 95.

the form of life story narratives and oral history interviews can have a valuable role not only in probing motivations, but also in émigré identity reevaluation and, in a small way, in processes of reconciliation and bridge-building.”²²

In another narrative, Brandler gives an account of her personal bond to the land of Latvia.

She recalls:

I suppose I felt as though I was listening and watching through a window of time when they [my parents and my grandmother] spoke of their Latvian heritage. I don't even think I realized how important it was as far as the traumatic war stories and losses until I was in my teens. When I was small and absorbing these talks in my family, I basically listened but my little legs just wanted to go out and play. Later on, while I was raising my own family, I was distanced from the connections we used to have with other Latvian relatives we had in the United States as they died, one by one and I only had another spark of interest when the Soviet block broke up in 1990 and I was able to go see Latvia for the first time. The trip back was an abstract mess of denial, in my mind. I got to see places I may have inherited or returned, to be sold so that my parents could afford housing in the United States. I kept telling myself that if it hadn't been for the war and the fact that they came to the United States, I may have never been born at all.²³

Brandler's narrative not only unveils how she treats her Latvian traditions but also reveals her struggles of keeping this legacy while under the pressure of her parents. Regarding the complexity of inheriting the Latvian legacy and the sense of community, Garda-Rozenberga argues:

[L]ife 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 experienced by both travelling in time and space, and crossing the political and community boundaries.²⁴

²² Hinkle, “Latvian-Americans,” 49.

²³ Vivian Brandler (a Latvian-American artist) in discussion with the author, March 6, 2020.

²⁴ Ieva Garda-Rozenberga, “Mapping life stories of exiled Latvians,” *Trames: A Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 23, no. 2 (2019): 154.

Brandler's sentiment reaches to its peak when she connects her birth to one of the consequences followed by her family immigration. "[B]y exploiting the tools of speech representation and the possibilities for manipulating the narrative pattern, narrators can bridge the temporal distance on an emotional level."²⁵ This complicated emotional bondage from her Latvian descent challenges her keenness of embracing her *Latvianness* while the identity of being an American reassures her sense of being. If her parents escaped Latvia because of the political turmoil, Brandler's escape is driven by her confrontation of identity crisis in terms of being a Latvian descendent. "Given how powerfully cultural scripts of the perfect family work on individual families, identifying aspects of family dynamics that are challenging, conflictual, or even dysfunctional can feel like throwing some of the people closest to you under the bus."²⁶ Dissecting Brandler's emotions in her narrative, her relationship with her parents becomes the strongest tie that connects her to her Latvian identity. During her storytelling, the topics mentioned the most are her parents and her mom's secret writing.

Her family's taste of art has a significant impact on Brandler's interest and inspired her to pursue her own career as an artist. Her father, Mr. Sterste, taught classic piano lessons for over 60 years in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Brandler's mother kept writing quietly during her lifetime. All that anyone would know was that she wrote long extended letters to her friends. Only after she passed away, the huge quantity of written material was discovered in six large drawers. All the poems were written in Latvian and the other genres are mainly in English. Brandler and her father worked together and published her mother's poems in a book in memory of her. These words later become an essential portion of her memory and storytelling about her family and

²⁵ Camilla Asplund Ingemark, "Retelling the Past: Distance, Voice, and Time in the Narrative Shaping of History in Finland-Swedish Legends of the Finnish War," *Folklore* 127, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 321.

²⁶ Borland, Sawin and Tye, "Introduction," 386.

Latvian heritage. Brandler translated some of the pieces into English and below is one titled *Practical Talk*.

I am not looking for an eternal home
 I live here, while I still can...
 When once I go with the storm and wind
 I will be sorry for what I did not finish doing...
 Do you want coffee or tea?
 Very important question —
 We always have to untangle...²⁷

Words carry memories. “Memory infuses warmth and meaning into dry documents, creating a human story.”²⁸ In Jane Beck’s fieldwork of Daisy Turner’s family narrative, “The Turner narrative portrays some large personalities and bequeaths a distinctive family voice that resonates and conveys understanding about the journey of one American family.”²⁹ In Brandler’s family narrative, it provides a roadmap of how their Latvian identity passes down from one generation to another and how second generations’ memory becomes dependable on the first generations’ narratives to trace their Latvian cultural legacies and collective memories. “While memory can be unreliable, it is always meaningful. Understanding how it is meaningful offers another way of framing historic material and thereby gaining additional insight.”³⁰ Furthermore, Beck argues: “In addition to gaining insight into a narrator’s inner feelings, if we can verify the historical record and critically assess the narrative, oral tradition can greatly enrich our understanding of the past... The oral narrative also serves as a road map for the discovery of archival sources, pointing in unforeseen directions and suggesting meanings behind the record.”³¹ Listening one’s memory always help us to better understand a piece of history in one

²⁷ Stērste, *Dzeja*, 63.

²⁸ Beck, Jane C. *Daisy Turner's Kin: An African American Family Saga*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰ See Spindel, “Assessing Memory,” 247–61; see also Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*. Portelli points out that oral history tells us less about events than about meaning.

³¹ Beck, *Daisy Turner*, 9.

way or another. For example, “often memory will record an incident that is otherwise unknown or provide hidden aspects of a documented event.”³²

Between generations, although “there is loss and compression of material through forgetting and misunderstanding, often causing distortion,”³³ the examination and discussion of these conflicts, memories, and personal experience narratives always help to illustrate the complexity and dynamics between generational communication of cultural values and historical events. “A family narrative, or life story, incorporates different voices down the generations, and its purpose is to maintain the family’s distinctive identity, unity, and continuity.”³⁴ From the fieldwork of Brandler’s family narrative, I learned that her family values, cultural beliefs, and immigration memories are strongly tied to their family education and personal experience narratives, which in turn shapes her identification, comprises her family unity, and determines what it means to be a Latvian American in every generation’s mind. Even though each generation has its memory and narratives, the first-generation’s narratives are often referred to as authoritative in the following generation’s storytelling and their Latvian identity. Having a close look at Brandler’s family story and her personal experience narratives gives me the privilege to ponder the dilemma between exile and return, denial and acceptance, respect and contempt that surrounding Latvian immigrants and their family’s memory and constitute the complexity of their identity and the memory of survival. Each act of creative Brandler’s storytelling is a form of prayer; each narrative unifies her family’s memory of where they come from.

³² Alessandro Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 50. An example of a hidden aspect of an event is the raid on the Gouldin plantation undertaken by Broderick. Alec emphasizes stealing food from the plantation and the killing of the overseer.

³³ Beck, *Daisy Turner*, 3.

³⁴ Lewis A. Coser, *Maurice Halbwachs on Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 83.

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