

The Lost Place of Childhood: Writer Indra Gubiņa's Memories, Life and the Literary Geographical Aspect

Prarastoji vaikystės vieta: rašytojos Indros Gubiņas atsiminimai, gyvenimas ir literatūros geografinis aspektas

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Abstract: Researching Latvian literature in exile is a relatively new phenomenon that emerged in Latvia at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. As the writers' archives became accessible, new opportunities for research opened up. In this article,¹ I look into the historical situation in the context of World War II, marking out potential directions of my research and a theoretical basis. Using the archives of the Latvian writer in exile, Indra Gubiņa, I focus on the city of her childhood, Jelgava, as a lost place that acquired a symbolic significance in author's memories, the course of her life and literary geography. The article explores the nuances of Gubiņa's double belonging, her connection to the place of her childhood and the Latvian language. The methodology used in my research marks out the potential and prospective approach to the creative oeuvre of Gubiņa from the theoretical point of view of lost place, the topography of childhood and literary geography. This kind of research on the life and works of a single writer serves as a possibility to widen the field of investigation in studying literature, taking into consideration a broader spatial context, and working with the new tools of research.

Keywords: Indra Gubiņa, exile, lost places, literary geography, memory(ies).

Santrauka: Latvių išėivių literatūros tyrinėjimai yra palyginti naujas reiškinys, atsiradęs Latvijoje XX a. 9-ojo ir 10-ojo dešimtmečių sandūroje. Tapus prieinamiems rašytojų archyvams, atsivėrė naujos tyrimų galimybės. Šiame straipsnyje, pasitelkus latvių išėivių rašytojos Indros Gubiņas archyvus, daugiausia dėmesio skiriama

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jos vaikystės miesto Jelgavos reprezentacijai rašytojos prisiminimuose kaip vietai, turinčiai simbolinę reikšmę, taip pat Gubiņos gyvenimo ir literatūrinei geografijai, Straipsnyje išryškinama istorinė situacija Antrojo pasaulinio karo kontekste, nužymimos galimos Gubiņos palikimo tyrimų kryptys ir teorinis jų pagrindimas. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama dviguba autorės priklausomybė: santykis su savo vaikystės vieta ir latvių kalba. Tyrime taikoma metodologija yra perspektyvi tyrinėjant Gubiņos kūrybą prarastos vietos, vaikystės topografijos ir literatūrinės geografijos aspektais. Tokia vieno rašytojo gyvenimo ir kūrybos analizė yra puiki galimybė išplėsti literatūros tyrimų lauką, dėmesį kreipiant į platesnį erdvinį kontekstą, taikant naujas tyrimo priemones.

Raktažodžiai: Indra Gubiņa, egzodas, prarasta vieta, literatūros geografija, atsiminimai.

Introduction

The tragic and dramatic events of the 20th century that took place in Latvia over a short period of time: the loss of independence in 1940, the deportations of Latvian population in 1941 and 1949, the occupation by the Germans, World War II and its consequences, the outflow of refugees to Germany and Sweden and later their exodus to the USA, Canada, Australia and other countries,² have altered the narrative and literary paradigm of Latvian literature. For many years, Latvian literature had developed along two streams: in Soviet Latvia and in exile. It was written in the Latvian language, and the language became an essential mark of identity. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, writers who revealed their experiences, observations, pain and longing in the pages of literary works, thus in their own way documenting the time and the place / space, was of significant importance. The literature of Latvian refugees and exiles maps a wide spatial and geographical landscape, expands the geographical poetics, and displays contrasts and distinctiveness of Latvian literature. However, the Latvian space, places, towns, and landscape etc. from the past are just as integral to every Latvian refugee and exile as they are to the Latvians living in Latvia.

2 In late summer of 1944, more than 10% of the Latvian population fled the country as refugees, thus establishing a demarcation between Latvians in exile and Latvians in occupied Latvia, a status quo that lasted for many years.

It is not unusual, when living under the conditions of exile, to turn to one's memories in an illusory and nostalgic attempt to return to the world, the milieu that has been lost and disappeared, including one's youth. What is it that we remember and what is it that we wish to forget? We may speak of autobiographical recall, about memories of childhood and the days of our youth, but the sense of belonging to a place that contributes to the formation of an essential cultural and historical layer of memory, which also includes mundane everyday components, constitutes an integral part of one's identity. By returning to the events and places from their childhood and youth, the narrators symbolically turn back the time, make an attempt to restore what they have once experienced, including places and environments. Literary scholar Valija Ruņģe considers that "[I]n published memoirs, readers search for traces of time that has gone by, time that occasionally they themselves have lived through, thus seeking validation, or enhancement of the pattern of their life. Historians look into memory literature seeking material for their research. The more precise and truthful memories, the greater their value" (Ruņģe 1995: 58–59).

The Latvian writer in exile, Indra Gubiņa (1927–2017),³ whose personality and creative works are at the center of this article, was of the opinion that each human being is shaped by their own era, society and geographical location. Her eventual arrival in Canada did offer her freedom, the opportunity to travel and to see the world, and presented new creative impulses; however, the road back home to Latvia was denied to her. It was not until 1975 that she visited Soviet Latvia for the first time. After 1990, she returned to Latvia more often; nonetheless, she was unable to establish a real sense of belonging. The places that had been lost, the ones that represented a purely symbolic link with Latvia, remained "alive" only in Gubiņa's memories, notes and imagination.

3 Indra Gubiņa left Latvia before she finished the secondary school. Later she graduated from the Latvian gymnasium in Lübeck (1947). In 1948, she emigrated to England, where she attended Bradford Polytechnic College. Gubiņa turned to literature while living in England. In 1952, she departed for Canada, settling in Toronto. She studied at the University of Toronto, earning a BA in the arts and an MA in library studies. After her studies, Gubiņa worked in the university library. Central to her works are themes related to the social and quotidian life of Latvians in exile, both in England and Canada, impressions of an alien environment, human relationships, relationships within the family and marital problems, woman's internal world and intergenerational relationships. Gubiņa is the author of 27 books: novels, short stories, poetry and travel writing. The autobiographical aspect, as well as psychological realism dominate her works. Her poetry manifests a romantic and resigned mood of personal emotional experience.

A Few Theoretical Aspects of the Geography of Writer's Life and Works

The consequences of World War II had a profound impact on the countries of Eastern Europe. They lost their independence, their citizens were subjected to repressions, deportations and life under Soviet ideology, which transformed people's inner world, their freedom of expression and literary freedom. That is why individual remembering is embedded in the large cultural framework of collective remembering, creating the prerequisites for a collective identity that builds bridges between past, present and future (Bałdys et al. 2015). Of interest to researchers is the aspect of urban space⁴ (Mażmierska 2015: 107–117) in biographical and collective memory. There is a discussion about the necessity of mapping the geography of memory (Sywenky 2015: 25–44) and imagination (Rao 2017: 115–124). Aleida Assmann,⁵ when discussing the urban place of birth and speaking of the space and history of the city, concludes that it is vital to be aware of how history “inscribes itself” into the urban environment, how it vanishes or transforms in an urban environment, and how it is revitalized through memories and reconstruction (Assmann 2012). According to Elisabeth Bronfen, literary discussions about exile are suspended in tension between reality and metaphor (Bronfen 1994: 72). Anthony D. Kauder highlights the theme of emotional geography of lost space (Kauder 2012: 193–207) in the context of World War II. The concept of lost space resonates with the emotional experience of being a refugee and exile of the Latvian writer Gubiņa, the focal point of this article.

Ruņģe notes that from the 1940s onwards, the Latvian people have lived under extraordinary circumstances and that they continue to live in an ‘unfinished past’ and in an ‘unfinished present’ (Ruņģe 1995: 58). The long shadows of the past and tragic historical and political events influence the present life as well.

4 Mażmierska has listed several aspects when analysing the relationship between biographical and collective memory and the inhabited space. “Space, where we spent our childhood, played with and met our peers etc., plays a unique role in individual memory” (Mażmierska 2015:109).

5 Assmann proposes to consider the link between space, time, memory and identity concentrating on four points: 1) the relationship between space and place; 2) the city as a palimpsest; 3) the forms of reconstruction; and 4) historical longevity (*Nachhaltigkeit*) (see Assman 2021:71).

Autobiographical works and literary works based on memories, where what has been lost continues to “live,” are closely intertwined with the ‘unfinished past.’

When speaking about herself, Gubiņa said:

I am the so-called ‘writer in exile,’ having departed from Latvia in the summer of 1944, *when I left behind my beloved early childhood town Jelgava, burnt down and razed to the ground* [here and thereafter, the emphasis is mine—IDS], I have turned 17 years along the way. Deprived of safe and secure home, the care of my parents, and school, I was thrown into the mayhem of war—with practically nothing, because from Jelgava I escaped with only my school bag containing a couple of schoolbooks and a couple of pieces of clothing. I still have this bag—a symbol and a remembrance. (RMM 455091)

For Gubiņa, Latvia and Jelgava, the city so dear to her, form a kind of intersection between the spacial memory and the place (environment). The space of memories, belonging to a place of one’s birth and city of childhood, as well as other theoretical aspects are also discussed and analysed in other national literatures (see more: Damir-Geilsdorf et al. 2005; Eigler et al. 2012; Fuge et al. 2014). It is revealed in writer’s correspondence, archival materials and literary texts. In this way, a correlation is formed between geography and literature (Westphal 2011), memory studies, the topography of literary geography and childhood, the concept of the liminal space of exile society (Turner 1969) and also the metaphorical meaning of lost place.

Within the research that brings closer the humanities and the exact sciences, new possibilities have emerged in the research of writers’ creative oeuvre. Gradually these new approaches have established themselves in the research undertaken by Latvian literary scholars: data related to the lives of writers as well as events have been collected, text corpora created, spaces and places mentioned in literary texts mapped, etc. (Kalnačs et al. 2019; Daukste-Silasproģe 2020; Daukste-Silasproģe 2022). The poetic landscape of literary texts and writers’ works has been gaining an increasing importance in the research of literature, linking their biographies with specific geographical places and the space of their lives. Literary scholar Barbara Piatti for the first time sought to render the potential of literary geography into something theoretical and also practical. When analyzing the geography of literary texts, she pointed out that writers often feel attracted to certain places and landscapes, especially

those referring to their childhood impressions. And often these places become venues for literary works (Piatti 2009: 15). Keeping in mind the scope of this article, I have not undertaken any data mapping, rather I have tried to point out a possible theoretical plurality, the direction of research, thinking of a broader context—the linkage to a geographical location, a town, or in my case, how Jelgava, or more precisely, Jelgava in one's memories, might be portrayed in Latvian literature of exile.⁶

The Historical and Biographical Context: Jelgava and the Reminiscences of It in Gubiņa's Life and Works

In the geography of Gubiņa's life, the town of Jelgava, a cultural and historical centre of Zemgale region (lat. *novads*), occupies a special place.⁷ It is the city where she lived from 1928 until July 1944. Here she started the model primary school of Jelgava Teachers' Institute, here she completed her first year at the gymnasium. It is also the town which she had to abandon as a refugee. Jelgava is connected with author's childhood and the early days of her youth, first love, and the surrounding environment: various sounds and smells, the banks of the rivers, Lielupe and Driksa, the wooden bridges spanning the river, parks, places for strolls and the romance of youth. Symbolically, the lost (destroyed) town also includes the notion of lost home. It is possible to speak of the topography of childhood, which opens new prospects for the landscape of childhood⁸ (Piatti 2014: 83–102) from the view point of space (Roeder 2014). It allows to reconstruct and discuss the place(s) and space(s) that are vital in the life and works of Gubiņa.

6 Several other Latvian authors in exile have links with Jelgava: Gunars Saliņš (1924–2010), Rita Gāle (1925), Aina Zemdega (1924–2006), Ernests Aistars (1899–1998), Benita Veisberga (1928–2019) and others. The town also plays a significant part in their works.

7 Jelgava, formerly German Mitau or Russian Mitava, is the city in Latvia that sits on the Lielupe River, southwest of Riga. In 1226, the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, a religious and military order, built the castle of Mitau there; the town status was conferred on the settlement in 1376. In 1561, when the Order of the Brothers of the Sword was dissolved, Jelgava became the capital of the dukes of Courland. In 1795, after the third partition of the Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth, the town became part of the Russian Empire. The city suffered severe damage from fighting in 1919 and 1944.

8 Barbara Piatti highlights a particular significance of childhood memories being projected onto a particular place. She speaks of the cartography of childhood.

In July 1944, the armed forces entered the Latvian territory: the Soviet front approached Jelgava from the side of Šiauliai, town in Lithuania. At the time, Jelgava was left without any defense, there were no armed troops to resist the attack. Over the period of 27, 28 and 29 July, 1944, the Soviet forces occupied Jelgava, burning down 90% of the town.⁹ An intensive bombardment resulted in the incineration of the entire ancient wooden town; many architectural monuments, including Jelgava Palace,¹⁰ the City Hall, Villa Medem, the old institution of learning, Academia Petrina,¹¹ churches, the building of the *Latviešu biedrība*—Latvian Society, buildings in classicist style, many other objects of cultural and historical value, and every vestige of the urban heritage had perished (Grosmane 2010). All that was left was ruins and devastation. The historic centre of the town, even the bridges over the rivers Lielupe and Driksa were completely destroyed.

On 26 July, 1944, Gubiņa packed her belongings into a box, including a school album containing dedications and photos. It was planned that on the next day, her relatives would take the box to the country. But it was not meant to be.

At the time I gathered all my treasured items crying, because it felt as though it was a coffin into which I was placing my loved ones. In fact—that is how things turned out. I had never saw those books and albums of mine again, it had been a farewell. But the words were lodged in my heart. Those school years that I'd experienced did stay forever in my memory. (Gubiņa 1978: 101)

Gubiņa, together with her mother and middle sister Biruta, fled the burning Jelgava. For just under three months, they roamed around the region of Kurzeme until October 1944, when they boarded a ship in the port of Liepāja and were taken to Germany. During this period, they had no news of their father, who was mobilised and served as the chief book-keeper in the infantry of Jelgava. They reunited again much later in Germany.

9 Dresden, Hamburg and partly Berlin experienced a similar extent of devastation during World War II.

10 Jelgava (Mitau) Palace building (1738) is the main symbol of the city. The Palace was designed by the Italian architect, Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli (1700–1771).

11 The Duke's Palace, currently known as Academia Petrina, is the oldest building in the city (1696). In 1775, Peter's Academy, the first university on Latvia's territory, was established there.

Gubiņa wrote about the flight from Jelgava ablaze in the poem “Jelgava 27. VII 1944” published many years later in the Latvian newspaper *Latvija Amerikā* in Toronto on 27 July, 1957. By means of poetic devices, the verse lays bare the urgency, the turbulence, the fear and the departure from the town the poet loved, the city that was being destroyed, the city ablaze. As they leave, all bridges and links with home have been symbolically incinerated. Fire, flames, rubble and death permeate poet’s emotions. The historic Jelgava, together with other lost places, remains alive only in Gubiņa’s memories, as do atmosphere, sensations, observations, colours, scent and events.

Gubiņa’s family home was on the outskirts of Jelgava. Family’s standard of living was modest, as revealed in a letter: “We didn’t have any hot and cold running water in Jelgava, and on Saturdays, Mamma would wash me in a wooden tub next to the stove; but did this mean that I walked around grubby, that anyone was unhappy?” (ZA FB RK 11664, 5, 18) Nonetheless the heart-wrenching dream about home that has been lost continues to live throughout the entire writer’s exile. Using her reminiscences and poetization of the town so dear to her, Gubiņa creates her own narrative of history. In some way, her literary texts become part of the history. In the December 1973 letter addressed to her former classmate, Gubiņa tells what happened after they left Jelgava:

A dreadful traipsing around Kurzeme some 6–10 km ahead of the frontline. Everything stayed behind in Jelgava, all I had with me was a small bag containing some summer clothes, as if I’d been at the seaside. And of course—the winter had arrived. In September, we slogged our way back to Riga, later to Liepāja, and then to Germany. It was a bitter and difficult time. (ZA FB RK 11662, 3, 2)

In a letter of 14 January, 1966 to the writer Gunars Janovskis (1916–2000), Gubiņa reveals her nagging ache—a yearning for Jelgava:

And, you know, I desperately want to go back home. From Riga I would definitely get to Jelgava, even on foot. Our little apple trees that were still so small, although they already yielded fruit, by now would be large trees. And maybe the piano is still in my room, the desk with the picture of Napoleon (it was given to me as a gift when I didn’t know anything about him yet) and perhaps my school exercise books are still in the attic. They would be like pleasing scraps of history that I’d like to collect so

that something awakens again, hurts once more, that won't let me give in to peace. But then I'd be a traitor,¹² wouldn't I—and there would be no place for me, neither there nor here. (ZA FB RK 11663, 4, 20)

In another letter of 26 July, 1966 to the same addressee the writer continues:

Good morning! [...] 26 July. Therefore—exactly 22 years since I left Jelgava. I remember those days to the minute, nothing, absolutely nothing has been forgotten, even that in the cupboard, in a large bowl, we left glace cherries behind. 22 years. Should have shaken off the past ages ago and started living but—I can't, I simply cannot. (ZA FB RK 11663, 4, 29)

Another 10 years, almost 10 years, would pass before Gubiņa visits Latvia, even though her male cousin has already invited her in 1966:

The summers of my childhood come to mind in a great rush, the seaside, and I so want to be there that I cannot bear it any longer. [...] And I almost want to say—yes. How would it be if next Jāņi [Midsummer Festival—IDS] I was in Riga, but very likely I wouldn't get to Jelgava though. (ZA FB RK 11663, 4, 27)

But at the same time, the writer's letters reveal doubts about going to Soviet Latvia (perhaps even the possibility of getting to Jelgava), because she fears losing the dream that gave her strength to survive exile. A dream of Jelgava that once was, even though Gubiņa might have had a vague notion that *her* Jelgava no longer existed. All the same, Gubiņa wants to see the country of her birth from the bottom of her heart, despite worries about the contact with the Latvians that have been living under Soviet ideology and rule for a long time.

Every so often, the aching and desperate longing for home creeps into Gubiņa's poetry, a yearning for lost Jelgava, which is likened to a mother that she would like to nestle up to: "I want to be back home / Back to my childhood. / I do know that there no longer is / a road like that / which can carry me back across the years" (ZA FB RK 11664, 5, 2).

12 At the time, among Latvian society in exile there were widely divergent opinions as to whether people should travel to Soviet Latvia and meet the writers there. The attitude of some became polarised to such an extent that they opposed any traveling and contacts.

Throughout the entire Gubiņa's creative career, the loss of home, having to leave her beloved Jelgava during the closing stages of World War II, is marked in her works by a sense of loss and emptiness of varying degrees of intensity. It is also heightened by dreams of a lost youth and premature growing up. When reading Gubiņa's literary texts and archival material, it is possible to map her creative life and symbolically, her inner space and place that of a writer and exile, the places that have featured in her life, as well as the extensive geography of her travels.¹³ Another potential reading of a prospective literary work, including an autobiographical work or the work based on memories, is to analyse just how important or essential in those works is the precise characterisation of places, how the geography of a specific location merges into the literary work and becomes intrinsic to the literary style of the author.

The writer lived in the Canadian city, Toronto, for 65 years, all this time considering it only as her place of residence. Once Gubiņa conceded: "I have always said that my home is in Jelgava. The one in Toronto—that's just a place where I live. And yet now I feel that it's not quite like that. That's where my loved ones are, that's where my home is!" (Gubiņa 1984: 191) The memories of home and Jelgava hold her firmly in their power, although in the poem "Uz mājām!" ("Home!"), the poet is compelled to admit: "The road is grown over with nettles / the ditches with reeds / the eyes—with memories. [...] How to get home? / The soul stands naked in the forest of memories."¹⁴

The reminiscences of a childhood in Jelgava resurface in 2006, in writer's impressions of the past published in the exile Latvian newspaper, *Laiks*:

I have always liked the golden leaves of autumn, and each year I wanted to gather them, press them, hold them in my hands, look at them in winter. It's been like that since childhood, when we lived in Jelgava near Grebnera Park. There, the leaves of the maples turned yellow, or sort of variegated: yellow, green, and red. Were there any that were really red, bright orange, like here in Canada? I don't remember. In my thoughts, I see myself as a little girl running around Grebnera Park. I would have been about five or six years old. Both of my sisters were already going to school, and during the day I was able to enjoy myself in the park on my own as long as I liked. What a beautiful childhood! [...] For children it was a whole paradise. Immediately

13 See more: <https://www.literatura.lv/lv/person/Indra-Gubina/871749> [Accessed 22 06 2022].

14 Published in: *Universitas*, No. 74, 1995.

behind our garden a small ditch separated us from a meadow encircled by trees. When in the summer the grass was mown, I watched with interest the hay being loaded onto carts and taken away. Where the grand gates of the park were located, I'd never seen, I only knew: somewhere across the wide ditch. I was not permitted to go there. I was only allowed to play in the meadow, which had tall thujas along one side, and on the other side, an enormous circle of huge fir trees, then the ditch that children were only allowed to cross in the company of adults. And then that little pond! [...] In winter, we would skate there to our hearts content and ride around on toboggans until we were chilled through. (Gubiņa 2006)

The statement of Tally Jr. concurs with Gubiņa's mapping of the place that was dear to her:

Narrative itself is a form of mapping, organizing the data of life into recognizable patterns with it understood that the result is a fiction, a mere representation of space and place, which function is to help the viewer or mapmaker, like the reader or writer, make sense of the world. (Tally 2011)

When traveling and getting to know new countries, every exile searches for some kind of wonderful world. What is this land they are seeking? In the book of travel writings, *Kaza kāpa debesīs* (1984), Gubiņa finds the answer: they are the years of childhood sunk into the past, left behind in the birth country. While standing next to Minnamurra Falls in New South Wales, listening to stories of bushfires, she is reminded of "the days when the skies that were similarly smoke-laden and blanketed the brightness of the sun, while Jelgava was burning. Ruins and ashes remaining, ruined lives and lost lives" (Gubiņa 1984: 192). An encounter with the past appears in Gubiņa's notes from her trip to Scotland. Her narrative about a tourist coach that halts at the ancient wayside inn where everything is old-fashioned also depicts a smell of smoke and tranquillity.

This elicits an association:

Together with this odd, inexplicable scent of peace, the days of my childhood returned to me; it seemed as though all I needed to do was to stretch out my hand and I would be able to touch that time long gone. Something within me had been stirred. Childhood! It had the scent of woodsmoke, of large saucepans, wood plank floors, simplicity and peacefulness! (Gubiņa 1984: 138)

The act of remembering the past for a person in exile becomes an act of overcoming the present. Thus in a letter written in 1970, Gubiņa writes of Latvia's birthday celebration that once took place in Jelgava:

[...] 30 years have passed since we celebrated the 18th of November in a free Latvia for the last time. 30 years! Together with the whole family we went to Jelgava to watch. We stopped by the bridge over Lielupe and watched the palace which was not decorated with any bright lights but was only illuminated by searchlights, and in the nocturnal blackness it looked infinitely white, so beautiful! It was reflected in the river Lielupe. [...] It was a strange, painful light, and we all stood on the bridge for a good long while and merely gazed. Of course, we were children at the time, and my mama was not yet at the age that I am today. And then drifting along the streets of Jelgava. Everybody that evening wanted to be in the centre, to see the decorations, to experience this unique excitement. My precious Jelgava, how it pulsed from this awed, excited, happy stream of people. There was no pomp nor any long speeches, but the people felt that it was a celebration, there was a sense of elation. [...] I too want to be home! I want to be standing on the bridge across the Lielupe again and watching into the reflection of the palace and its gleam. Two banks, on both banks—home, and both homes hurt ... (ZA FB RK 11668, 9, 54)

The City of Dreams, Childhood, Early Youth and Lost Town

After living in a foreign country for over 20 years, in January 1975, the writer received a letter from her former teacher in Jelgava. Gubiņa wrote about it the following:

My teacher sent me from Jelgava some leaves that she had pressed in the summer, they were from a linden tree that my papa had planted by our house. She said—the old linden tree. At that time, it was a young sapling. What could it be like after 30 years? I don't know, I breathed the scent of a green leaf and wept, simply wept, I'm still so sentimental. *But that leaf is from that linden tree!* [emphasis is Gubiņa's—IDS] You understand that the trifling details such as these can either hurt, or be cheering. (ZA FB RK 11666, 7, 40)

In the same year, Gubiņa visited Latvia for the first time since the war. On the one hand, the trip aroused in her pain and yearning, and on the other hand, a wish to stay there. The issue of home and belonging was aggravated:

...it is deeply painful to part, and all that I've seen is deeply painful, perhaps because I would, after all, like to stay there. [...] I don't believe in everything that was, but I was back in my home. If only I hadn't gone! Now, before my eyes, destruction is in place of the previous beauty and order. But friends, friends, they are the same as they were 30 years ago, and this I believe,

Gubiņa wrote in a letter to Janovskis after her visit on 4 June, 1975 (ZA FB RK 11667, 7, 52). Yet the trip clearly and starkly reinforced the feeling that “there is no home any longer”—the dream of Jelgava was over. It is very possible that because of this feeling Gubiņa returned to Latvia only after the restoration of the independent state. She was seeking a sense of belonging to her native country, to the Latvian cultural space and Latvian literature.

Over time, the reminiscences of writer's visits to Latvia became more frequent; however, her dream continued to be in dissonance with reality. In July 1992, she wrote:

Now we are seeking the way back to our real home, to be with the greater proportion of our nation who for many long years did not even have a chance of knowing what we have been doing and how. [...] I wanted to know whether through my works I can hold my own in an English-speaking world as well. I sent in some stories and poems to a couple of literary journals. All of them were published. However, I didn't see any point in trying to break into English literature, because there are hundreds of prose writers in English, whereas here among us in exile, there's hardly any emerging at all. I think and I feel in Latvian and I can express myself fully only in Latvian. I have written quite a lot, but what will last and where it will remain—the time will tell. (RMM 455091)

Gubiņa was visiting Latvia when the 1991 coup took place.¹⁵ That time she was forced to cut her visit short and leave for Canada in a hurry. She was fleeing

15 On 19–21 August, 1991, the Soviet Union failed at the attempt to occupy Latvia once again. Latvian citizens were called for non-violent resistance.

for the second time, and from Jelgava too, which by now had become an utterly *different city*:

And once more I fled, and again from Jelgava. That time—47 years ago—I left behind a town I loved, my childhood, my home went up in smoke, on fire during a hot summer. Now it is summer again, but I leave behind an alien Jelgava, with buildings hastily constructed in the aftermath of war, potholed streets, rundown, uncared-for houses, gardens running wild, devastated parks, with only a few buildings that I still recognised; left behind the rivers Lielupe [and] Driksa, the palace, desperate people overcome by uncertainty stayed behind, a grey, rainy day stayed behind. No, this time around I wasn't sorry to leave Jelgava, because it is no longer my Jelgava. [...] I'd wanted to trace the footsteps of my childhood. They're there and they're not there. I recognise and I don't recognise it, I am unable to accept what exists, I was seeing everything as if with two sets of eyes. (Gubiņa 1991b)

Despite this dissonance, Gubiņa admits: “I still however wanted to see our house, the house that my father built, where I spent the beautiful years of my childhood and early youth” (Gubiņa 1991a). In the now unfamiliar Jelgava, she finds her former home, she recognises the old gate. But in the house a family of strangers lives, the garden is overgrown, and the surroundings are unrecognisable: “Actually I was running away from the overgrown garden that no longer held anything at all of my childhood” (Gubiņa 1991b). Over the years, the feeling of disappointment and not fitting in grows stronger in Gubiņa. When in 1994, she is in Latvia again, she participates in poetry readings and meets her readers. After one such meeting in Jelgava, the denial replaces her dream. She reveals this in a letter:

But Jelgava itself, my dearly beloved Jelgaviņa, seems like the most horrid town in the world! No, I don't want to live there anymore. [...] We have been away for too long, we don't belong—neither there nor here! Nowhere. [...] Visiting Latvia is different to living there. (ZA FB RK 11669, 10, 30)

In the unstoppable race of time, Gubiņa became increasingly aware that the dream of her lost home, her lost Jelgava, had been exhausted. She reveals this in her poem “Atpakaļ” (“Back”):

But each day drives the next day forward.
 It drives me further away from home,
 Further away from that childhood of mine,
 Further, further onward.¹⁶

Over the years, the image of Jelgava has transformed and the dream of Latvia as a home that has been lost has become more generalised. Not only has the home become derelict, the dream itself has died away. After her visit to Latvia in 1991, Gubiņa writes to the author and translator, Rita Liepa, in New York:

I was in Latvia this summer. I met very many [people], saw a lot, felt much. But everything inside me has tangled up, has overturned. This was—you could say—a summer that was both happy and bitter. [...] [Is] Latvia free? Well—no! My dreams, the dreams of home throughout these long years—shattered. The old has been thrown away, there isn't a new one to replace it. Emptiness. Within me. But—I draw a breath, pick up a beautiful red maple leaf or two, cast a smile at the moon and go on living. I live? (LVA f. 2436, apr. 1v, lieta nr. 3, 43. dok.)

Conclusion

The historical events of the 20th century for many European nations were traumatic, especially when viewed in the context of war and oppression. The ordeals of Latvian refugees during World War II and their experience of the post-war period formed a set of traumatic feelings which looking from one side, was extremely individual and personal, and from the other side, displayed similarities and common emotional ordeals. A sense of belonging to a place is of vital importance in such experiences. For a refugee and exile the lost home as a symbol remains with them for the rest of their lives, while at the same time, maintaining an illusory link with the past.

The primary source used in the preparation of this article was the Latvian writer Indra Gubiņa's letters, archival material and literary texts. They broaden the horizon of her life space and bring new colours to her literary style.

16 *Latvija Amerikā*, 4 January, 1967.

The geographical aspect of the writer's life as well as the topographical aspect of her childhood present a prospective opportunity in the research of Gubiņa as a literary figure, utilising the mapping of a literary text, places and spaces, and creation of a linguistic corpus and its analysis.

Although the world in which Gubiņa lived was open, offering opportunities denied to those living in Soviet Latvia, the breadth of the world and freedom could not assuage that longing and ache caused by the home she had lost. After the restoration of independent Latvia, Gubiņa often returned to the country of her birth. During those trips, she visited her beloved Jelgava, which had undergone a complete transformation, participated in literary events and enjoyed the reprints of her books. Yet the sense of not belonging and not fitting in continued to gnaw at her. In Gubiņa's life geography, Jelgava is of great importance, even though the town was destroyed at the end of World War II. For Gubiņa, this town meant home, now completely lost. All that was left was a dream of home.

The 21st century with its new technologies and digital possibilities has widened and facilitated the field of research; however, I am convinced that studying writers' archival material and the analysis of literary texts is still the field of primary research, while the advances of this century are merely an additional tool or instrument for research.

Translated by Terēze Svilāne

ABBREVIATIONS IN BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION AND ARCHIVES SOURCES:

RMM – Museum of Literature and Music – archive name, inventory number, leaf number
Indra's Gubiņa's collection: RMM 455091.

LVA – National Archives of Latvia – archive name, inventory number, description number, case number, document number or leaf number
Indra's Gubiņa's fund: LVA f. 2436, apr.1v, lieta nr. 3, 43. dok.

ZA FB – old term: Fundamental Library of the Academy of Sciences, contemporary Academic Library of the University of Latvia – archive name, inventory number, folder number
Indra's Gubiņa's fund: ZA FB RK 11662, 3, 2; ZA FB RK 11663, 4, 20; ZA FB RK 11663, 4, 27; ZA FB RK 11663, 4, 29; ZA FB RK 11664, 5, 2; ZA FB RK 11664, 5, 18; ZA FB RK 11666, 7, 40; ZA FB RK 11667, 7, 52; ZA FB RK 11668, 9, 54; ZA FB RK 11669, 10, 30.

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