

A President For His Country

by Antra Celmins

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October 7, 1939

Karlis Ulmanis, President of the Republic of Latvia, knew what the future held. He was certain of it the moment he had been forced to accede to the Latvian-Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty. But he had suspected it before.

He had already been planning for such an eventuality. He knew that the end was near when he no longer heard from his sources in Moscow. Latvian leaders in the Soviet Union had all vanished without a trace in the last two years. It had only been a matter of time before the Soviet Union would come to gobble them up once again. And with the world focused on the Nazi blitzkrieg through Poland and looming armies in Western Europe, no one was paying attention to what the Soviets were doing in the East.

It was almost as if Stalin and Hitler had planned it that way... which they had. Ulmanis knew that. He had even had spies at that fateful meeting between Molotov and Ribbentrop. From his early days, he had studied statecraft and the machinations of all of the great leaders of history. Caesar, Bismarck, Catherine the Great, even Jefferson, Lincoln and other Americans. Not because he intended to follow in their footsteps – really, all he had wanted was to farm – but when his people called on him to lead, he'd answered, and he would not abandon them to obscurity. His people were his reason for living.

Ulmanis was well aware the Western Allies were in no position to help the Baltics, like they had at the end of the war twenty years previous. He could only count on his people, whose futures he had to prepare for. He was lost, that much was painfully clear. He would not survive the war. Neither would most of his generation. But the future, the future generations...

There was a hope for them, and he had already planted the seeds for it, with the assistance of his most trusted advisers. He knew the Soviets would have a huge surprise on their hands when they entered Riga and seized key facilities.

Now, for the last part of the plan. He wrote out his final letter, sealed it and called his secretary's deputy, a young man by the name of Vilis Veisbergs.

"Sir?" Veisbergs said, coming into the room.

"I have one last assignment for you. The last shipment. And you must take this to my daughter." He held out the letter and a small box.

"Your daughter, sir?!"

"Yes. She'll be about your age. She's in America. She was born there."

"Does anyone else know about her?"

"I haven't told a soul in this country. I've always routed my correspondence to her through intermediaries in other countries. You carry a great secret."

"All for our people?"

"Yes. Take this to my daughter, and stay in America. Whatever you hear, whatever you read, don't come back. Don't come back until our people are free again. You know what we've hidden. This is the key."

"I will, sir. Thank you. I will not fail."

Veisbergs bowed and left the room quickly. Ulmanis sat back in his chair and stared at the pennant on the opposite wall, from a school in the state where he'd spent few years, but forever held a piece of his heart.

His daughter, Minna. In Nebraska. In the United States. The future welfare of his people all depended on her and the enduring memory of one of the Founding Fathers of the United States: Thomas Jefferson.

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Present Day

"So how soon can you come here?"

"Excuse me?"

"My grandmother is 100 years old. She told me a fantastical story, but she has the paperwork to prove it. I can't do this on my own – I need someone experienced in Latvian research to do it."

Latvian-Canadian genealogist Aila Rudzite stared at her phone, listening to the story that her newest client, Jolene Spritzer, was telling her. According to Jolene, her 100-year old grandmother was the daughter of a Latvian statesman who had entrusted her with secrets that would save the country.

Aila had heard stories like this before, of course. People getting into genealogy are often trying to find a connection to famous people. One of Aila's first jobs was usually telling her clients that her Latvian ancestors were more than likely peasants. Furthermore, in the case of Jolene's grandmother, who would have been born around 1909, Latvia was not even a country

at that point. And Jolene's grandmother had been born in the United States and had never left it.

But still. Aila was never one to turn down an all-expenses-paid trip. Being a young genealogist – not yet thirty – meant that Aila had the flexibility to pursue jobs at will, without worrying about a spouse, children or a mortgage, but also with the corresponding difficulties of needing to pay her rent as a genealogist younger in years than most of her colleagues had in experience. So she moonlighted as a private investigator when working out of Toronto, and as a museum professional when working out of Riga. Both of these jobs were flexible enough that she could pursue genealogy assignments in other locales when not working on a specific case.

And she was not currently working on a case.

“Ms Rudzite? Are you still there?”

“Yes, yes. I can come tomorrow if you like. I'll email you the details you'll need to purchase the plane ticket. Will you meet me at the airport?”

“I will. Thank you, Ms Rudzite. Grandma Minna can't wait to meet you.”

Aila clicked off her phone and sent out her details before realizing she hadn't even asked Jolene where she was going. Oh well, once she got her itinerary she would find out soon enough. Meanwhile, she had to consult her closet to see what she had to wear that would not frighten a 100-year old lady. For Aila was not only a genealogist, she was also a Goth. She didn't usually wear makeup, but she would dress the part when it suited her – plenty of blacks, dark reds and the occasional white or pink accent when appropriate. And of course the tattoos. She had three.

There was nothing she could do about the tattoos – some of those would be showing – but otherwise Aila selected some non-descript black pants and shirts, and shoes that weren't as high as her normal platform boots. By the time she finished packing her bag, an email itinerary had arrived from Jolene.

Aila was on her way to Lincoln, Nebraska.

Nebraska.

Nebraska.

Something nudged at Aila's memory. A distant memory of something Latvian in Nebraska.

Fingers flying on her laptop, she threw together search terms, looking for her quarry. Within a few clicks, she had her answer.

Grandma Minna might not be crazy after all. Jolene hadn't said that her grandmother grew up with her father. Just that her father was a Latvian statesman.

And not just any statesman. He was THE statesman. Well, formerly, anyways.

There was a possibility that Grandma Minna was the daughter of interwar Latvian President Karlis Ulmanis, who spent his early thirties living and studying in the United States – Lincoln, Nebraska, to be precise – and then returned to Latvia before the First World War, ending up perfectly positioned to lead the newly independent country.

His legacy was a controversial one – hailed as a hero by some as a dictator by others. Initially a Latvian intellectual and writer during the Russian Empire era, he was forced to flee after the 1905 Revolution, and settled in the United States. During his time there, he attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for several semesters and then bought a dairy farm in Texas.

Following the declaration of an amnesty, Ulmanis returned to Latvia and became a founding member of the Latvian Farmer's Union political party and the Latvian People's Council, the body that proclaimed Latvian independence on November 18, 1918. After serving several terms as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, in 1934 he became concerned about the possibility of a government takeover by right-wing extremists, and seized power for himself in a bloodless coup, dissolving the Saeima (Parliament). He suppressed political activity and detained political activists of all stripes, but his development of the economy and education made him popular amongst the citizenry.

When the Soviet Union invaded in 1940, Ulmanis was arrested and deported to the far reaches of the Soviet Union, and was believed to have died in prison in Krasnovodsk (now Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan) in 1942. According to established reports, he had no wife or children, since his dedication was to his country, but the news from Nebraska had Aila wondering.

What if he did have a child while living in the United States, and what if she did have secrets that could change everything?

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Early the next morning, Aila was on her way to Lincoln, Nebraska, by way of Washington DC and Chicago. It was mid-afternoon when she landed in Lincoln.

Exiting the arrivals area, Aila spotted a woman looking to be in her mid-forties holding a sign with her name on it. The woman was not looking at her, instead scrutinizing all of the older women who were coming out of the arrivals door.

Aila walked up to the woman and put out her hand. "Ms Spritzer? I'm Aila Rudzite."

The woman blinked a few times and then shook Aila's hand. "Jolene Spritzer. Welcome to Lincoln. I confess, you don't look like who I expected."

"I get that a lot. I assure you, I am fully capable and properly experienced to do this work."

"Let's get going then. Grandmother is expecting us."

They drove out of the city to a small farm on the outskirts of town. Waiting for them on the front porch was a frail-looking elderly woman who stood up to meet them as they left the car and walked up the path. Unlike Jolene, the woman showed no surprise as to Aila's

appearance.

“Ms Rudzite! Sveiki!” she greeted Aila in Latvian.

“Sveiki, Mrs... I’m sorry, Jolene never mentioned your last name.”

“Just call me Minna, dear. Come in, I have tea waiting for you.”

Jolene hovered in the background, unsure as to what to do, and confused about her grandmother’s lack of reaction to Aila’s unorthodox appearance.

“You too, Jo! Come inside and stop looking like a gaping fish.” Minna turned to Aila. “I was the one who found you, I just had Jolene make the call. She may have been unaware of your age and other interests, but I made sure to do my research. I wasn’t going to entrust my family secrets to just anybody.”

“And I met your approval?”

“Oh yes. You are not afraid to be yourself. And you are committed to Latvia. Committed to helping our people. Just like Papa was.”

“May I ask... who your father was?”

“We’re getting to that. Tea first, then the story.”

Minna served Aila and Jolene tea, and the women sat around her kitchen table, eating some cookies with their tea, while Minna told them the story.

“My name is Minna Grieta Veisbergs. My maiden name is Ulmann, but that was the Germanized form that in use when I was born in 1909. The Latvian version was Ulmanis. I suppose you recognize this name, don’t you, Aila?”

“I do.”

“Then you know who my father was. I don’t have many memories of him – after all, he returned to Latvia when I was only four – but he wrote me letters regularly. He was a loving father, but his first love was always Latvia. He was so happy when Latvia became an independent country. So happy that he could participate in such a historical process.”

“How is it that the world never knew he had a daughter?”

“Leverage, I imagine. Latvia was still surrounded by large empires, empires that always longed for Latvian territory, as I’m sure you’re aware. He was afraid that if it became known that he had a child, it would become a weakness that could be exploited by his enemies. I think he also always imagined he might need someone on the outside who could help restore Latvia’s freedom if he no longer could.”

“Did he send those letters directly? Someone certainly could have figured it out.”

“No. He always sent them through intermediaries outside the country – often school friends in Germany, or his school friends here. Only once did a messenger come directly here. And he stayed. That was the last I heard from my father.”

“Oh?”

“It was late 1939. The war had already started in Poland. Latvia had been forced to sign the Non-Aggression Pact with the Soviet Union – the first step to eroding Latvian sovereignty. My father saw it for what it was, and had already suspected that something like that would occur. So he sent his last messenger out of the country, straight to me, with the secret that brings us here today. That messenger was a young man by the name of Vilis Veisbergs.”

“Your husband?”

“Yes. He delivered the box and my father’s last letter to me. Having been told not to return to Latvia, he stayed and worked on my and my mother’s farm, and then we ended up marrying a year later. Jolene’s mother Amalia was born the next year.”

“What did the letter say?”

“I’ll show it to you. Come.”

Aila followed Minna over to a writing desk. She opened a box, which Aila saw was full of letters. She lifted the top one out and held it out.

Aila quickly put on her white cotton gloves, used for handling archival material, and took the letter.

October 7, 1939

My dearest daughter,

My time on this Earth is coming to an end. I can feel it. As the Germans rush across Poland, the Russians are amassing on our borders. These twenty years of freedom for our people have been marvelous, and I have been privileged to lead them, but freedom was still only a fleeting dream. I only hope that in the future our people will rise again, and build a world for themselves once more.

I’ve taken out an insurance policy to that effect. My trusted advisers have hidden our nation’s wealth – that of it kept in Latvian banks – and all departed from this country before they could be picked up by Russian agents who are seeking to learn these secrets. One last member of my trusted circle knows the truth, and that is the man bearing this letter and last gift to you.

But it is not so much a gift as a responsibility. This gift holds the key to recovering our people’s wealth. Reveal it only to someone you trust, and only when freedom is within grasp once more. Return it to the people – not the government, because the government can misuse it and the power it wields.

No one knows that power corrupts better than I do. Preserve my words, preserve my memory and make sure my people know that all I ever did was for them. It was not enough, but I tried. I only wish I could have been a better father. But I hope that you understand why I did what I have done, and that you will forgive me and see to it that our people have the freedom and security that I was not able to give them.

Your father,

Karlis Augusts Vilhelms Ulmanis.

Aila took a deep breath and looked up from the letter. “Wow. That is certainly something worth hiding with great secrecy.”

“Indeed.”

“Why didn’t you reveal this twenty years ago, when Latvia was about to regain its independence? It would have significantly boosted Latvia’s economic recovery.”

“I was not confident that things would unfold positively. I didn’t want to let it go until I knew it was necessary. But independence was solidified, Latvia joined the European Union, and I thought maybe I didn’t need to drop an explosive secret like this into everything. Then the economic crisis came. I thought maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, but then young Latvians started fleeing the country because of the economy, and I thought if any time was right it would be now – Papa wanted Latvians to be able to live in a free and prosperous Latvia. It isn’t right if there is freedom, but people are still leaving. So if this money they hid can help prevent that, now is the time.”

“And your 100th birthday? That’s when you revealed it?”

“It seemed appropriate. But only to Jolene. None of my children or other grandchildren know. She was always the one who was interested in our history. I searched for someone experienced with Latvian research, and I found you. I asked Jolene to make the call, and you know the rest.”

“So what is this gift that your husband brought to you?”

Minna returned to the writing desk and pulled a wooden box out from a compartment in the back. She set it down on the table carefully and opened the lid.

Aila peered inside and saw a row of disks strung together on a dowel. The disks had letters written on them. It was a code tool of some sort, but Aila was not completely sure of its origins.

“This is what my father sent me. He always admired Thomas Jefferson and his commitment to the founding of the United States. He wanted to be Latvia’s Jefferson.”

“Did he steal this from some museum?”

Minna laughed. “I’d imagine not. It has Latvian letters on it, so it can’t have been a Jefferson

original. The only one of those known is in the museum in Monticello.”

“May I?”

“Please.”

Aila lifted the device from the box, turning some of the wheels this way and that. Minna was right – the letters on the disks were the Latvian alphabet, not the English one. The alphabets were mostly the same; while Latvian did not have Q, W, X or Y, it did have a few extra letters with diacritic marks. The alphabet was not in order on any of the disks.

She turned one of the knobs on the ends of the dowel, and saw that it came off, revealing a number stamped into the side of the end disk. She separated the disks gently, seeing that each disk was numbered.

“Had you noticed these numbers before?”

Minna put on her glasses and looked closely. “No, I haven’t. What do you think they could mean?”

“It is unlikely that they hid the hoard of wealth in one place. Possibly rearranging the disks would lead to the different locations.”

“Do you think the locations are all in Latvia?”

“I would imagine so. Too risky to take so much abroad.”

“Maybe not... let me show you something else my husband brought with him to America.”

Aila and Jolene followed Minna upstairs to her bedroom. Minna opened the bottom drawer of her dresser, moved some clothes aside, and revealed ten bars of solid gold.

“Vilis brought these with him. He said they were the last of the collection.”

“Okay, um, wow. These would be part of it, but look at the letter – he said he sent his advisers out of the country after they had hidden the wealth. This is probably just so that you believed him.”

“Maybe. But we should decipher the disks first before going. Any idea where to start?”

“Let’s go back downstairs so I can take a closer look.”

Aila examined the disk wheel some more. She wrote down the letters in order as they appeared on each of the twenty-four disks. She did some math.

“Well, we can rule out guessing. There are billions of possible combinations here. Did your father leave any idea as to where the clues to solve it might be hidden?”

“Not really. Sent them out of the country with his advisers, I’d imagine.”

“Do you know their names?”

“No. This could be an impossible task. Who knows where they all are now.”

“Wait. It might not be so impossible. I remember reading something online...”

Aila pulled out her phone and did some quick searches.

“Yes. I was right. It could be that the key is just a few short miles from here.”

“All this time?”

“Well, not the whole time since you received this, but since 1981, it is possible.”

“Oh! I know what you’re referring to. The university. They were given some of Papa’s papers. But I was always afraid to look at them.”

“Why?”

“Papa always wanted me to remain a secret. Going to look at the papers might have revealed me, if some stray letter didn’t already. If the codes are hidden there, then that means anyone interested in them might be watching, waiting to see if the key would be revealed.”

Jolene rolled her eyes. “Grandma reads too many mystery novels.”

“I don’t know about that... surely someone is interested in knowing where all that gold went.” Aila replied.

“So can you look, Aila?” Minna asked. “You have no connection to me. The key will remain safe; if you just take a look at the papers, you’ll be able to find something, I’m certain of it.”

“I’ll look. Where is the library?”

“Just a few blocks from the hotel I have reserved for you.” Jolene said. “You can start in the morning.”

“All right. In the meantime, lock your doors. Do not let anyone in. If you’re right and there are people paying attention, they may have already been paying attention to me. Not many people to call on for Latvian research-related things. And they might know where I was today.”

“Don’t worry about me, dear.” Minna reached under the table and pulled out a shotgun. “I’m ready for anything they throw at me.”

Jolene smirked. “She has another one by her bed. Ain’t nobody going to come near Grandma.”

“If you’re sure...”

“I am. Be safe yourself. Let me know when you find something.”

Jolene drove Aila to the hotel, where she checked in and went to her room. She entered the information from the notes she had taken at Minna's home into a spreadsheet and destroyed the piece of paper that she had written on, to make sure no copies would be out of her sight. She flushed the pieces down the toilet.

After encrypting the file and stashing it in a folder of old schoolwork, Aila locked the computer in the room safe and went out to eat.

The next morning, Aila presented herself at the Archives and Special Collections room of the Love Library, ready to begin her research.

The Ulmanis collection was large, but Aila started with just the first four boxes of materials – these Ulmanis' own correspondence, rather than material about him.

It was a process that took several days, but finally just before closing on the third day, Aila struck paydirt. It could have been easy to miss – the page was a simple letter dated April 18, 1938, and had been sent to a Mr John Kleege in Lincoln. Aila remembered this name from a backgrounder on Ulmanis – the Kleege family had been neighbours and associates of his, both in Latvia and in Nebraska. The letter discussed common themes – state of agriculture, the dairy that Kleege was running – but there was an emphasis on a number of numbers and letters scattered throughout the letter, as if he had purposefully traced them over again and again. Aila copied down these letters, and did the same from several other missives in the same group of documents. There was no doubt that these were the documents she was looking for.

When she was finished, she looked down at the page in front of her:

5-3-14-16-13-17-19-22-24-20-7-1-6-18-2-4-9
ĢĶŠVURĶFKZUHŽTNĪP

23-8-21-11-10-12-16-15-19-13-18-24-20-22-7-6-2
FSLBZMJHŪKMBRHĢĶĶ

14-12-3-19-9-11-15-20-23-1-17-2-7-21-24-5-16-22-13-4
ĒDĒĢCUKUOĢFĢĢKMGŅĪŠ

10-6-8-18-14-20-3-9-12-23-19-17-1-11-4-21-15-5-24-2-13-22
CKŪHNĻRĒEAZĢUERŠĢEHRĢFŪ

7-16-3-17-1-2-13-9-8-20-12-23-10-15-19-6-11-22-14-5
ĢŪĢĢBMJAKZLĢĢITVLĒI

As Aila was packing the documents back into the box at closing time, she noticed something odd. The documents, as in several archives, were numbered, to aid in putting them back in order. The letters she had looked at had been together in the box, but their numbers were completely out of order.

Someone else had been looking for them. And found them. Minna was right – there was

someone watching. Waiting. Looking for the key.

Feeling as if she was being watched right at that moment, Aila hurriedly put the box back together, nodded a thank you to the reading room attendant and dashed out. Back in the main halls of the library, she contemplated her next move.

She had to assume she was under surveillance now, and probably had been since ordering the Ulmanis collection. She couldn't contact Minna and Jolene, not without putting them in danger as well. She hadn't been in touch since their meeting, assuring them she would contact them as soon as she had a clue. But now that seemed like a bad decision.

But wait – if she was being watched, they had surely checked her hotel reservation. Which had been made by Jolene. They might not be onto Minna, but Jolene was certainly in danger.

Aila walked quickly out of the library and down towards the hotel. While she was walking, she dialed Jolene's number.

“Jolene. It's Aila. I've found something. Pack your bag. Get down to your grandmother's. Lock yourselves in. I'll be along when it is safe.”

“You sound as paranoid as my grandmother.”

“There's a good reason. Do it. Now. I'll get there as soon as I can.”

Aila hung up her phone and slowed her stride, keeping pace with the student traffic, observing her surroundings. She wasn't sure how much anyone could have found with her name. Her website only mentioned her genealogy work, since private investigation was all about discretion. Companies would rarely publish the names of their investigators. Right now, that was her only advantage.

As she turned onto a cross street, she saw a car pull out into traffic. It turned the same corner she did and pulled ahead, pulling into a parking spot a block up. If no one was paying attention – and usually people weren't, Aila knew that people were often oblivious regarding their surroundings – they wouldn't have noticed. But she was paying attention, and she knew that there are very few people who sit in cars, pull out into traffic, travel two blocks, and then pull over and sit in the car again.

She didn't want to give away her advantage, so she kept walking as if nothing was going on, pausing to evaluate the different restaurants she encountered. Once she reached the position of the surveillance car, she noted the appearance of the driver from the corner of her eye, and saw the car start to edge back out into traffic.

When she saw the car start moving, she turned into the restaurant directly opposite the parking spot. She knew the car would have to keep going, because even someone oblivious would notice a car pulling back into a spot it was just vacating.

As Aila entered the restaurant she watched the car pull out into traffic and head out to presumably go around the block. As the car turn the corner, she darted out of the restaurant and into the university building next door. She knew the building had multiple exits, and

called a taxi to pick her up at one of the doors on the other side of the building.

Aila walked quickly up to the second floor, and watched through a window as the surveillance car came back around the block, pulling into the same space it had vacated just minutes before. Aila watched the driver get out of the vehicle and head into the restaurant.

She dashed back down the stairs and across the building, knowing that she'd have only seconds before the driver realized she wasn't in there. She flew out the door and into the waiting taxi, giving her hotel address. It was only a few blocks, but she was too recognizable on foot with a pursuing car.

Once she arrived at the hotel, she asked the driver to wait. Aila ran up the stairs two at a time, cleared her things out of her room and hurriedly checked out. She returned to the taxi and asked him to take her to the nearest car rental agency.

Twenty minutes later, Aila was on her way to Minna's house, hoping that the surveillance team had not followed her or Jolene to the property. She did not see any cars in pursuit as she turned down the country roads.

Once Aila pulled into Minna's farm, she approached the house carefully, calling out for the women.

"Minna? Jolene? It's Aila. Please let me in."

She heard a creaking noise from the second storey, and saw a shotgun pulling back from the window. The front door cracked open.

"Come on, get in!" Jolene called.

Aila entered the house as Minna came down the stairs, shotgun in hand.

"Now what's going on, missy? Jolene's in a right state, saying you called her and that she better get over here?"

"There were people watching me. They probably started watching me as soon as I started accessing the Ulmanis collection. They started following me today, but I was able to shake them long enough to get here. But we should go now. We need to get to the airport. Let's go now, and worry about the plane tickets on the way."

"Where are we going?" Jolene asked.

"Latvia's our best bet right now, hopefully we'll have a more detailed bearing by the time we get there."

"Are you ready to go, grandma?" Jolene asked.

"Am I ready? Jo, I've been ready to go for seven decades! Had a passport ready the whole time. Better late than never!"

Minna produced a suitcase from the next room. “I’m leaving this gun here, but I’ve got another one packed in here. And the disks. I buried the gold in the barn, under the muck that the pigs roll around in. They’ll protect it, all right.”

Aila just shook her head and herded the women out the door. They took Aila’s rental, but Jolene drove while Aila looked for flights.

“Where should we fly out of? Lincoln might be compromised, since they know I am there.”

“Well, we can risk going back towards Lincoln and head northeast to Omaha, that’s closest. Otherwise we can go southeast to Kansas City or west to Denver, though that will be a long haul.”

“Let’s go with Denver. It’s the furthest and we don’t need to go back through Lincoln. I’ll look for flights that don’t hit major chokepoints, to try and avoid running into the people chasing us, if they decide to head there as well.”

“Go for it.”

By the time they hit Denver just before midnight, Aila had booked a roundabout trip to Riga via Dallas, New York and Helsinki, where they would rent a car, take the ferry across to Tallinn and then head down through Estonia to Latvia.

They caught a few hours of sleep in a roadside motel near the Denver airport. When checking in for their flight, Aila let Minna field the questions as to why a 100-year-old lady who had never flown before was traveling with a shotgun in her checked baggage. She said it was a matter of national security, and when the TSA agent gently informed her that the FBI and CIA did not recruit centenarians, she matter-of-factly said “I didn’t say it was this nation, did I, sonny?”

At which point the agent decided to leave it alone and admitted her suitcase. At least the metal detectors proved that she was not carrying a pistol in her purse as well.

As soon as the plane door was closed, Aila requested the disks from Minna and placed the container surreptitiously in her purse, with the disks facing up. She hoped to get several of the ciphers solved before they left U.S. soil, just to ensure that they were going in the right direction by flying to Europe.

By the time they landed in Dallas, Aila had solved two of the five puzzles. When they disembarked in New York, she had solved all five. Minna and Jolene were eager for the solutions, but Aila shook her head, waiting until she had surveyed the area, ensuring they weren’t being watched. She did not see the surveillance car driver, but that did not mean that there weren’t others, so caution was still essential.

Aila took them to a secluded corner behind a coffee shop. She put her finger to her lips and held out the piece of paper. Minna and Jolene examined it closely.

*AKMEŅI, ANCES PAGASTS
BŪDAS, BĒRZES PAGASTS*

CELMIŅI, CIRGAĻU PAGASTS
DĀBOLIŅI, DIGNĀJAS PAGASTS
ESENE, EZERNIEKU PAGASTS

“Pagasts means parish.” Aila explained quietly for Jolene’s benefit. “These are five farmsteads in five parishes – alphabetical, interestingly enough – and each one is one of the five historical regions of Latvia – Kurzeme, Zemgale, Vidzeme, Selija and Latgale, in that order.”

“Which should we go to first?” Minna whispered.

“I’d say this one.” Aila pointed to Celmiņi. “This will be closest for the direction we’re coming from. Let’s sit down and I’ll find their precise locations in my maps.”

Aila folded up the list of names and slipped it into a secret pocket on her blouse. By the time they boarded the flight to Helsinki, Aila had located all five farmsteads, and planned their route from Tallinn to the Celmiņi farm in Cirgaļi parish.

Once they boarded the ferry to Helsinki early the next morning, Aila had the feeling that they were being watched again. She kept Jolene and Minna close, and did not tell them – both out of concern for Jolene’s nerves and out of fear that Minna might pull her shotgun out of the ever-present suitcase by her side. She hoped that the disembarking procedure would put their watchers behind them, and make it impossible to catch their tail once they were on the ground in Tallinn.

Unfortunately, by the time they made it past Old Town, Aila knew they were being tailed. She was left with the big decision – evade now, and make their way to Celmiņi farm on the back roads, starting by taking the ring road to the highway to Tartu, or head directly south in the direction of Riga without making any evasive actions, and hope that their pursuers got comfortable enough coasting along that they wouldn’t notice an evasive maneuver later on.

Keeping her eyes ahead, she voiced her options to the others. Jolene became a bundle of frazzled nerves, but Minna was direct.

“Go in the direction of Riga. It is much more likely that they will get bored and complacent in the drive that you’ll be able to evade them more easily later on.”

So it was decided. Aila was hoping that the bright sun would hold for the rest of the day – Aila had been down this highway before, and she knew that the sun could reflect off the asphalt and make driving difficult. She had brought her sunglasses, but she hoped their pursuers did not, as this would give her more breathing room.

She knew the road that she was going to take. It was just south of Parnu, and with any luck a traffic light or three in Parnu could help them out to put some extra distance between them and their pursuers.

They did indeed lose their tail in Parnu, and once outside the city limits, Aila stepped on the gas, accelerating towards the junction before their tail could catch up. She eased off on the gas as she took the turn, and stepped back on it as soon as the road straightened out again. She kept a close eye on the rearview mirror, and did not see any other cars behind her for a

number of kilometres, and when she did finally see cars, they were not the tail car she had seen before, and changed frequently as drivers turned off and on into the different villages along the way.

They crossed the Latvian-Estonian border in early afternoon. The trio ate lunch in Valka, and continued along towards the Celmiņi farm.

“Now what are we going to do when we get there?” Jolene asked. “This might be someone’s home. They’re going to think we’re crazy.”

“They won’t.” Minna said firmly. “I’m sure Papa had plans in place. He didn’t know how long this would have taken, so he had to have a plan.”

Aila was unsure, but as long as Minna remained committed to the chase, so was she.

As they drove into the driveway of Celmiņi farm, Aila knew at once that it was occupied. There was an old barn, but the dwelling house was new. A wisp of smoke came out of the chimney. Once they pulled in, they saw a middle-aged man come out of the house.

Aila addressed him in Latvian. “Sveiki! Kā klājās?” *Hello! How are you?*

“Labi, ko Jūs ceļotāji šeit dariet?” *Good, what are you travelers doing here?* He must have seen the Finnish license plate.

Aila detected a familiar accent. It was not the Latvian accent she was used to hearing on the streets of Riga or other Latvian towns. It was the accent she grew up speaking in Canada, the accent spoken by Latvian emigres of the Second World War era. He had grown up in the West.

She decided to take a gamble. “Mēs meklējam Latvijas vērtību.” *We are looking for Latvia’s wealth.*

“And that brings you here?” The man switched to unaccented English, confirming her hunch, looking at the other two women in the car and their quizzical looks.

“Yes. And my feeling is you know why.” She saw his eyes flit over to Minna.

He sighed. “I do. Please, come inside.”

The three women went inside. Minna was still clutching her suitcase, refusing the man’s attempts to take it for her.

“Please, sit.” He showed them to the table. “My name is Aigars Dzintarnieks. My father was Ojārs Dzintarnieks, an associate of President Karlis Ulmanis.”

“You were born in the West.”

“I was. My father went to the United States in 1939. I was born in New York in 1949. He left Latvia before the war, carrying a big secret.”

“But you came back.”

“Of course. My father had told me the stories growing up. I had to see for myself. But he also told me to wait. To wait until the heir came. Are one of you the heir?”

“I suppose I am.” Minna said, sitting up straight. “Minna Grieta Veisbergs, maiden name Ulmanis.”

“The President was your father? How? When?”

“I was born in Nebraska in 1909, while he was a student there. He kept me a secret from everyone in Latvia. Planning for a situation – well, a situation like this.”

“So you’ve come to reclaim the wealth of the nation. I’m sure you know that the economic situation here is not great. Otherwise I would have been inclined to return it myself.”

“We’re not giving it to the government. We’re going to put it to use where it is most necessary.”

Aigars nodded. “That was my hope.”

“Do you know the other... keepers, I suppose?” Aila asked.

“No. My father never talked about them, though I suppose he probably knew. It could be that I grew up right alongside their heirs as well, and we never knew it.”

“Do you think they would have returned as well?”

“I think it is quite likely, yes. Do you want to see it?”

“Well, we’ve come all this way, it would be silly not to.” Jolene said.

Aigars led the women out to the barn. He had just begun brushing the floor of the barn when they heard another car pulling into the driveway.

Aila looked at Aigars. “Expecting anyone?”

He shook his head slowly, eyes on the door. Aila edged towards the side of the barn to peek through the cracks in the walls. It appeared that their tail had found them after all. She saw three large men get out of the car and approach the barn. She moved behind the door, hoping that she could get the element of surprise on them as they came in.

As they got to the door, Aila swung the door hard and slammed it shut, clocking the lead man in the nose. She heard him swear in Russian as she and Aigars put the bar across the door.

“There is no way out!” one of the men yelled with a thick Russian accent. “The gold belongs to us!”

“Keep dreaming.” Aila responded.

She heard a click nearby, then a smooth voice. “You will give it to us.” This voice had an American accent. As she turned, she recognized the reading room attendant from the Love Library, holding a gun to Jolene’s head. Aila saw a hole in the far barn wall, where he must have crawled in while their attention was on the other three men. Aigars was standing with his hands up. Minna was nowhere to be seen. Had he taken her out already?

“Now. Slowly. Remove that bar and let my friends in. You think I didn’t see what you were working on? We’ve been waiting too long for this.”

Aila and Aigars removed the bar, and the other three men came in the door. The lead man shoved Aila and Aigars to their knees and the other two tied their hands behind their backs.

“This is important day.” The lead man said. “I am Bogdan. My grandfather was one of men sent to secure Latvian bank when we first came to protect you from the Nazis.”

“Occupied, you mean.” Aila retorted, earning her a cuff to the side of the head.

“But when he get there, it was empty. There was supposed to be gold. What to do now? They had to tell Stalin no gold. Stalin was not happy.”

“It wasn’t his to take.” Aigars said, and one of the henchmen sent him sprawling into the dirt.

“It belonged to the Soviet Union. But grandfather and the rest of the soldiers in the unit were shamed for not bringing the gold back. My family lives with that shame. We come to fix that.”

“There is no Soviet Union anymore. Give it up.” Aila said.

Bogdan hauled her up by the neck and pinned her to the wall. “It belongs to Russia! Everything here belongs to Russia. We restore honour! Russia has been laughed at for too long. This gold will bring glory back to our people.”

Aila spat in his face and kicked him in the crotch. He released her and fell to the ground. The gunman swung around to aim at Aila, but she moved out of the way just in time, feeling the bullet whiz by and embed itself in the wood behind her. Then she heard a new spray of gunfire, this time coming from behind a pile of crates. The gunman and the other two henchmen were dropped to the ground by the gunfire that hit them in the kneecaps.

Jolene grabbed the gunman’s gun and tossed it away. Minna emerged from behind the crates, shotgun in hand, and approached Bogdan, putting her small foot on his windpipe and aiming the shotgun at his face.

“This gold will restore OUR country’s pride and joy – its people. Its spirit. I feel for the ordinary Russians who suffer under your government, but that is for your people to fix. Not for you to steal from others. Latvia was occupied. That is what happened. Your Soviets destroyed the country and oppressed its people. Now we are free again. And we intend to stay that way. No more are we going to be under the yoke of a foreign government. We want peace. Freedom. Justice.”

Minna kept her foot on Bogdan's windpipe while Jolene untied Aila and Aigars, using the bonds to tie up the three henchmen. A last piece of rope was saved for Bogdan, and once his men were tied up, Minna released him and tied his arms behind his back as well.

Aigars went inside to call the police. He returned quickly, and picked up his broom as nothing had happened. It took a few minutes, but soon a trapdoor was revealed. He beckoned the women over.

"Here it is."

He opened the trapdoor, which creaked with age. The three of them peeked inside, and saw a vast store of gold bars stretching out the length of the barn. Minna picked one up and hefted it in her hand.

"Looks like the ones I have at home," Minna said. "They're real."

She brought it over to Bogdan and showed him the Latvian coat of arms stamped on the bar.

"See? Latvia. Instead of spending your life watching and waiting to steal from others, you should work on your own country. Make it better. Maybe you can start that while you're in prison."

Bogdan was silent. Fifteen minutes later, several police cars pulled into Aigars' driveway and he led them into the barn, explaining the situation. None of the four mentioned the other stashes hidden across the country. Not yet. There was no telling of who the police officers were.

The officers marveled over the stash of gold bars, and put the four Russians in the back of the police cars. They got in touch with the Bank of Latvia and the History Museum. By sundown, a squadron of national police officers was guarding the barn, while Aila, Minna, Jolene and Aigars sat down with officials from the bank and museum.

It was an altogether unheard of situation. The bank official, of course, knew the story of the missing World War Two gold and verified a brick, confirming that it was real solid gold. But they had never dreamed that it would resurface. This horde was worth about 7.5 million Latvian lats, approximately 10.5 million euros. It had been missing for so long that while it did ostensibly belong to the Bank of Latvia, there were also other concerns about what would happen to such a large sum of money.

Minna, as always, cut straight to the point.

"My father told me that this was to be saved and given to the people of Latvia. Not the government. Not anyone in power. To the people."

"You are suggesting we give each Latvian person about three lats? That hardly seems worth it." The bank official said.

"No. We create something of enduring value. Something that lasts. This is not the only cache like this. If each of them have as much as here, then that's about 37 and a half million lats.

That's enough to create opportunities. Create meaning. Stop the flight of young educated people.”

“What do you propose, ma'am?” a museum official asked.

Minna outlined her plan. Eventually, all were in agreement. Seventy years later, the money would go where it was needed most.

~~*~*~*

Three years later

Ever since assisting in the recovery of the greatest modern-day gold find, Aila had been busy. But she always made time in her schedule to participate in all of the institutions that Minna had spearheaded the creation of.

Agricultural schools, farm equipment co-ops, land grants, libraries... Minna had done it all. She more than anyone had studied the history of her father's agricultural ambitions for Latvia – small farms had been the backbone of the nation's history and culture for centuries, and that was the way it was going to remain.

While large agri-businesses took over in other countries, Minna's efforts meant that Latvian farms preserved their traditional character, but with modern efficiencies that meant that yields were higher and the work was not back-breaking. The sharing of farm equipment meant that the farmers would not need to spend huge sums on each piece of equipment themselves. Young people who wanted to start their own farms were provided with grants of land and the partnership of an older mentor to assist them in their dreams.

With seventy-five percent of Latvian families participating in farming – either on a day-to-day basis or on the weekend while they lived in the city – national stress levels were down. Grants had made it possible for unemployed city dwellers to relocate to a farm, providing them with sustenance and a marketable product. Latvian food exports were bigger than they had ever been.

With people moving to the country, small villages, previously ghost towns, were re-invigorated as local markets flourished and vendors of non-farm goods joined in as well. Schools, with well-funded libraries, returned to the villages, and children had new technology in every classroom.

The initial funding from the recovered caches was long gone, but as the economic fortunes of the people improved, there was a constant flow of money to improve services and offerings in local communities. As people's reliance on themselves and their communities grew, the government had to adapt as well. Corruption was at record low levels. The country was returning to an economic prosperity not seen in decades.

All because of one Nebraskan woman who had not given up on the stories told to her by her father. And that was the woman they were now here to remember.

Three years to the day of them finding the gold cache on Aigars' farm, Minna passed away

peacefully in her sleep while staying in her father's old farmstead in southern Latvia. She would be buried there in a new family graveyard.

Aila stepped out of her car and joined the queue of mourners that had arrived to pay their respects. When she reached the family, she gave Jolene a big hug and was introduced to the rest of Minna's children and grandchildren.

After the service, a new monument was unveiled in front of the old house – a metal statue that had been cast based on a photograph that Minna had held dear. A photograph of herself as a small child, walking hand in hand with her father.

A simple plaque on the monument said it all – “Through the Generations, Hope brings Prosperity.”

Aila placed her bouquet of flowers at the foot of the monument. She stepped back to really take a look at her surroundings – the forests rustling in the wind, the clear sky, the abundant fields. She smiled, thinking of everything that was made possible through one woman's commitment to her family. It was such a simple thing, but so easily forgotten in the modern world, with the rush towards more and more, rather than better and stronger. Latvia had reversed that trend. Maybe other countries would follow suit. She knew they would. She could feel it in the air.

Hope.