The Livs

Dainis Stalts

The Livs, an ancient Finno-Ugric people, today live in various concentrations in the country of Latvia. Known as White Indians (*baltie indiāņi*) in reference to American Indians, with whom they believe they share some cultural attributes and historical experiences, they strive to preserve their language and traditions.

Some of these traditions are extraordinarily beautiful, such as the Rite of Spring, which is held at the top of the highest sandy elevation on the seashore. The tradition reflects the belief that in waking returning migrant birds with special songs and rituals on the first day of spring, Livs communicate with the souls of their ancestors, which have been embodied in tiny birds called *tshitshorljinlists*. With the birds' return also returns hope.

The Livs may have inhabited Latvian territory for more than 5,000 years. The earliest records of the Livs are inscriptions on 7th- and 8th-century Scandinavian rune stones. Artifacts uncovered at grave sites attest to the Livs' skills as craftsmen, makers of tools, weapons, and builders of ships. Letters and chronicles mention the prosperity that existed in Liv-dominated regions around the 12th century. This relative prosperity, however, attracted marauders and pillagers; in the early 13th century the first Teutonic Crusaders subjugated the indigenous people in the name of Christianity, acquiring lands and creating a ruling class which prevailed in the territory of Latvia for over 700 years. During these centuries the majority of the Livs died in wars, of bubonic plague, and of hardship.

After the abolition of serfdom in the 19th century, the rebirth of the Liv nation, who then numbered 3,000, began. The first Liv-language books and the first Liv dictionary were published. But after World War I, only 1,500 Livs remained.

Latvia's declaration of independence in 1918 inspired a second Liv renaissance. Livs organized themselves in communities and established choral societies and associations for Livs and friends of Livs. They produced a newspaper and built a cultural center. Along the Latvian shore in the Kurzeme region, some local schools began to teach the Liv language.

The renaissance was disrupted by the 1940–1941 invasion of Latvia by the Soviet Union. The Liv societies were dissolved, the cultural center closed, and language teaching banned. Deportations to Siberian gulags and flight to the West reduced the Liv population in Latvia by more than half. During their 50 years of occupation, the Soviets made every effort to ban Livs from the dozen or so fishing villages in the northern part of Kurzeme that were their ancestral homes. Fishing boats and equipment were destroyed, schools closed, and the people evacuated to all parts of Latvia. Only at certain Liv folk festivals could the scattered members of the nation meet and celebrate with their music and dance ensembles.

Traditional Liv singers. **Photo by Imants Predelis**

With the collapse of the Soviet regime, the region along the Baltic seashore was returned to the Livs; they were recognized officially as an ancient founding member of the Latvian people in the new laws of the republic.

The prospect of keeping Liv alive as a spoken language is rather bleak. No more than several dozen people speak it and only one family, mine, is known to speak it at home. Still, the Livs can hold their sacred rites by the seashore, communicate with the souls of their ancestors, and celebrate their traditions with their relatives and friends. Livs, today numbering 500, can freely utter their ancient pledge, "*Minaa un Livli. Min rou un min out*" (I am a Liv. My people is my honor).

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