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Life Writing: Latvian Poet Veronika Strēlerte

Gyvenimo pasakojimas: latvių poetė Veronika Strėlertė

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Abstract: The article addresses the general concept of life writing, which refers to the creation of a text that focuses on the life and life experiences of a writer or another person. It centres on the poet Veronika Strēlerte's self-reflection in her childhood recollections and on two people's, who are close to her—her son Pāvils Johansons and the poet Margita Gūtmane, memories. The concepts of memory, experience, and identity offered by American scholars, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, proved instrumental in addressing life writing and its realisation through depictions and memories.

The article explores the motivations that prompted Strēlerte to revisit the images of her childhood memories, describes the relationship between the real and the fictional, and the narrative strategies (author's and protagonist's voices).

In discussing the two memoirs, the commonalities (belonging to the same generation) and differences (a sense of family, motherhood, and home) that define authors' perspectives on the poet's personality are examined. Johansons' memoirs provide an insight into his family: his mother, a poet, and his father Andrejs Johansons, a cultural historian, religious studies scholar, essayist, and their relationship with him. They also vividly describe his parents' inner circle, the Latvian intelligentsia in exile, and as such are important cultural and historical source. In her memoirs, Gūtmane portrays Strēlerte as a poet and as a "mere mortal," thus creating a vibrant and versatile account of Strēlerte's personality. She elaborates on the theme of exile,

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which was important for both Strēlerte and the memoirist, emphasising the inability of those who ended in exile to take root and find a home.

Strēlerte's childhood memoirs significantly contribute to the autobiographical genre of Latvian literature. It can also be considered a part of Latvian children's literature. The memoirs about her are not only artistically enjoyable but also a valuable material for the study of writer's life and poetry.

Keywords: Veronika Strēlerte, autobiographical representation, memoires, life writing, exile.

Santrauka: Straipsnyje, pasitelkus „gyvenimo pasakojimo" (Life writing) konceptą, susitelkiama į latvių poetės Veronikos Strėlertės (Strēlerte) savirefleksiją vaizduojant vaikystės prisiminimus bei į dviejų jai artimų žmonių – sūnaus Povilo Johansono (Pāvils Johansons) bei poetės Margitos Gūtmanės – atsiminimus apie ją, motiną ir poetę. Gyvenimo pasakojimo ir jo realizavimo atsiminimuose tyrimui svarbus amerikiečių literatūros ir autobiografinius pasakojimus tiriančių mokslininkių Sidonie Smith ir Julia Watson siūlomas instrumentarijus – sąvokos atmintis, patirtis ir tapatybė, glaustai pristatomas straipsnyje. Tyrinėjama motyvacija, paskatinusi poetą Strėlertę atsidėti vaikystės prisiminimų užrašymui, gilinamasi į realybės ir fikcijos santykį juose, pasakojimo apibūdinimą (autorės ar protagonistės balsas), daroma išvada, jog poetė pavaizdavo savo brendimo istoriją.

Kalbant apie atsiminimų autorius nurodoma, kas jiems yra bendra (priklausymas tai pačiai kartai) ir skirtinga (šeimos, motinos, namų jausmas), kas lemia jų požiūrį į poetės asmenybę. Johansono prisiminimai leidžia pažvelgti į jo šeimos – poetės motinos, kultūros istoriko, religijų tyrėjo ir eseisto tėvo Andrejaus Johansono – požiūrių ypatumus ir santykius su sūnumi. Iškalbus artimiausių tėvų giminaičių rato, egzilyje atsidūrusios latvių inteligentijos aprašymas svarbus kaip kultūros istorijos medžiaga. Atsiminimų knygoje Gūtmanė pasakoja apie Strėlertę kaip apie „paprastą mirtingą žmogų", sukurdama gyvą ir pilnakraujį Strėlertės asmenybės vaizdą, praplėsdama egzilio išgyvenimo temą, svarbią ir jai kaip atsiminimų autorei, ir Strėlertei, pabrėždama Strėlertės nesugebėjimą įsišaknyti ir atrasti namus.

Strėlertės vaikystės prisiminimai svarbiai papildo latvių autobiografinės literatūros žanrą, o atsiminimai apie ją ne tik meniškai įtaigūs, bet ir yra pravarti medžiaga poetės gyvenimo ir kūrybos tyrinėjimams.

Raktažodžiai: Veronika Strėlertė, autobiografinė reprezentacija, atsiminimai, gyvenimo pasakojimas, egzilis.

The article focuses on the life writing of poet Veronika Strēlerte (1912–1995) as expressed in her childhood recollections and as reflected by others in their memoirs, narrowing down the circle of "others" to people, who were close to her and knew her well, namely her son, poet, teacher, and songwriter Pāvils

Johansons (Johansson, 1947–2024) and the poet Margita Gūtmane (b. 1943). The analysis of Strēlerte's short prose reveals how by including certain bibliographical elements in her memoirs, she construed them from psychological and philosophical perspectives. The reflections of "others," however, alongside the undoubtedly subjective memories of Strēlerte—a mother and a poet herself, tellingly show how in writing about Strēlerte the authors of the memoirs uncover themselves, because they also write about their own lives.

The term life writing is a general label for the texts that focus on a writer's own life or the life experience of another person. A text can be autobiographical, biographical, fictional, historical, philosophical, etc. Life writing refers to a wide range of genres (autobiography, biography, memoirs, diaries, letters, etc.). It also covers the expression of a person's self-representation in various media: print (in the press as well as literature), visual, audio, and audio-visual media, also the new internet media advanced by new technologies (weblogs or blogs). The fields of media research (literary, cultural, historical, trauma studies, postcolonialism, feminism, etc.) are as diverse as the media themselves.

The debate on life writing in Western literary studies has been ranging from how to define it, what the term means, tracing the genesis of life writing, i.e., looking for its origins (and locating them in autobiography as a precursor), to observations on the evolution of life writing, the historical expansion of the pool of writers (including women, writers of different skin colour and/or of different social class), where the twenty-first century (and the twentieth century), with the advent of new technologies and new perspectives, such as postcolonial or feminist, which have significantly expanded the concept, has proved particularly important.

With a wide range of disciplinary interests, research on life writing is far-reaching. In the context of this article, the work of American literary scholars and long-time researchers of life writing Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Smith, Watson 2010) proved instrumental. Both scholars propose approaching life writing (autobiography, as well as memoir as a genre) with several conceptual tools that help to understand its sources and dynamic processes to which the autobiographical subject (or a writer) is subjected, that is, choosing three of the six instances of life writing as the most relevant: *memory*, *experience*, and *identity*.

For one to be able to narrate the past and to place past events in one's "history," in one's life story, one needs access to *memory* and memories (not always, especially in the case of traumatic life experiences, it is so self-evident). Remembering always entails an interpretation of the past, involving the attribution of meaning or significance to past events. Smith and Watson refer to the American psychologist and memory researcher Daniel L. Schacter's *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* who writes: "Memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves" (Schacter 1996: 6). Both authors are of the opinion that the autobiographical narrative is construed from those memory records (fragments), that it is variable and depends on a person's age and, on his changing life experiences, which is why memories (and the meanings attributed to them) tend to vary at different stages of life (Smith, Watson 2010: 22). Remembering is always contextual, there is something (be it a gathering of relatives, an anniversary, a celebration, or children and grandchildren's interest in their parents' or grandparents' lives) that triggers memories.

The context of remembrance / memory can also be politically and collectively tinted, depending on what a social group, community (religious, national, or sexual), or nation wants to remember and what it wants to forget (Smith, Watson 2010: 24). Although memory seems so ethereal and intangible, it is, in fact, deeply rooted in the material world and linked to the workings of the human brain (the material) and nervous system. Often, memories "pop up" precisely because of human senses: touch, smell, taste, hearing, and/or sight. Remembering and accessing memories in the case of traumatic experiences (genocide, torture, sexual violence, etc.) can be difficult, because language fails to mediate between the horrors experienced and the survival in the aftermath. Yet it is the verbalisation of traumatic experiences that is most needed, and trauma studies address this issue.

The human *experience* is seemingly simple. It is made up of everything the person has experienced, and the person simply has it. The reality is different: the person does not exist before the experience; the experience is the process by which the person becomes an individual with his own socially constructed identity(s) that draws on material, cultural, economic, and psychological relations.

Experience is discursive. Every day, a person is exposed to different realities and situations in which he experiences himself, and this shapes him as a person.

Alongside the social discourse, there is also the "bodily" discourse—what the body feels as it is constantly affected by the material world (hunger, thirst, pain, cold, etc.), and how it stores these physical senses (or sensory sensations) in memory. Imbuing events with meaning, giving them the status of experience requires self-reflection, in which what has happened is processed linguistically—captured in a narrative, are told. An objective story is impossible, events are always interpreted—the narrator "reads" what has happened to him within a certain social and cultural framework.

The attribution of Strēlerte's childhood depictions to the genre of memoirs already tells that the dominant narrator, who also gives voice to the protagonist, is the author herself. The existence of two different narrators frees the poet from the need to stylise the child's world or pretend to be a child. At the same time, it allows her to bring to light the child's naivety, the desire to explore the world and accumulate experience, and to draw generalisations from the author's knowledgeable perspective, because the author already knows the life path.

The narrator is the only authority in the story, while the reader of the story (recollections, autobiography, memoir, etc.) has to trust in what he is being told. Often, it is the name of the memoirist, especially if he is a well-known public figure that guarantees the credibility of the writing. It is very important for the memoirist to maintain the trust of his readers and to satisfy their expectations.

The *identity* claimed by the memoirist and expressed in various categories (gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, generation, family genealogy, religious affiliation, etc.) also helps to create, secure, and sustain the connection with the reader. Identity is discursively fluid, context-dependent (historically and culturally), socially constructed, language-bound, and never entirely settled. Thus, in her childhood memoirs, Strēlerte first defines herself as a child, depicting the story of a child growing up. In her son Pāvils' memoirs, she is first a "good mother" and only then a member of exile society. Meanwhile, Gūtmane is interested in Strēlerte as an exile, as a poet and as a "mere mortal," with her weaknesses. This image is very remotely related to the image of the poet as it has been constructed in the public eye.

However, in writing about Strēlerte's life, the memoirists also write about themselves, marking their own identity (Johansons is a Latvian boy raised among Swedish children, a son of famous parents, a young man brought up in Sweden,

forced by the unwritten rules of exile society to be Latvian, even when choosing a spouse) or the tormented search for it (Gūtmane's search for her "self" and her identity, while in exile in Germany, is particularly difficult because of her missing mother, the lack of family and language ties).

Motivation and the Significance of Life Writing

To better understand the motivations for writing memoirs and to place each writer in the writing process, an insight into their life story is needed. Strēlerte belongs to the generation of Latvian writers who lived through the greatest historical cataclysms of the twentieth-century Latvian history: the First and Second World Wars and the first Soviet occupation in 1940 and 1941. She was saved from the second Soviet occupation by going into exile in Sweden, leaving the Kurzeme coast on one of the last refugee boats at the very end of the war on 8 May 1945. She spent fifty years in exile, passing away on 6 May 1995. Exile, a separation from one's homeland, one's family, and one's readers (two collections of Strēlerte's poems were published in the interwar period, in the late 1930s), was a wound that time had sealed with a protective layer in order to endure life. However, it never healed, with the passing years only deepening the sense of alienation and lack of belonging, and gradually leading to her decline as a poet, as evidenced by the years[1] of publication of her books and the increasingly rare publications of her poems in periodicals.

Nevertheless, in her seventies, Strēlerte decided to write her childhood memories and compile them in a book. What might have motivated this decision? Various reasons. One of them might be related to the desire to maintain the Latvian language and Latvian identity for her grandsons, Niklāvs (b. 1971) and Benedikts (b. 1976), or rather to "teach the Latvian," and to do so not didactically but by taking literature as a guide. Strēlerte was aware of the difficulties that arise

1 The first collection in exile, *Moon River* (*Mēness upe*), was published in 1945, the second, *Deserts of Light* (*Gaismas tuksneši*), in 1951, and the third, *Years of Grace* (*Žēlastības gadi*), ten years later. Eleven more years would pass before the last book, bearing a telling title *Half-Words* (*Pusvārdiem*), came out. Had it not been for the constant urging of Margita Gūtmane, a close acquaintance of Strēlerte, to collect the poems written after 1961, it would have hardly been published at all.

when a child lives in a bilingual world. At school, abstract thinking is shaped in a foreign language, while at home, the knowledge of Latvian often does not exceed the level of practical "kitchen language," such as "come to the table," "when will you be home," "put on clean clothes" and so on. She saw one way of extending the limits of everyday Latvian through reading Latvian books and discussing what she read, explaining to the child incomprehensible words, and talking about unfamiliar realities (Strēlerte 1958: 483–484).[2]

Likely, Strēlerte's idea of writing her childhood memoirs was also encouraged by the editors of newspapers in exile, who felt that these would also be attractive to readers, as her poetry was beloved by many. The poet was not a diligent writer, so presumably the editorial invitations and her own resolution were sufficient motivation to produce a sketch of her memories at least for Christmas or New Year.

In the late 1970s, when the first recollections were written, many members of Strēlerte's large family were no longer alive. Perhaps the desire to return to childhood, where everyone was still healthy and living together also motivated her to look back at the early years of her life.

Unfortunately, all poet's childhood memories remained on newspaper pages,[3] because the contemplated book was neither compiled from existing memories nor supplemented with the new childhood sketches. The childhood memories can now be read in volume three of Strēlerte's *Collected Works* (Strēlerte 2022: 327–368).

Pāvils Johansons was born in exile in Sweden to Veronika Strēlerte and a cultural historian, religious researcher, and essayist Andrejs Johansons (1922–1983) two years after the war. He was closely connected to two communities, Latvian and Swedish, and was bilingual. He got to know the Latvian community

2 During the exile, Strēlerte taught Latvian in several Latvian after-schools in Sweden, both to children and to their parents born in exile. She often visited Latvian settlements, talked about her life and literary work, and read poetry (see Cimdiņa 2004, 185–187). The poet's concern for preserving Latvian children's connection with Latvian culture and language is also reflected in her arranged Latvian folk songs, collections of tales and fairy tales, and pedagogical observations in journalistic articles.

3 Between 8 January 1977 and 4 January 1984, ten "fragments of memoirs," as they were called in the subtitles, were written. Three of them were published in the newspaper *Latvija* (Strēlerte 1977a, Strēlerte 1977b, Strēlerte 1978a), and the others in the newspaper *Laiks* (Strēlerte 1977c, Strēlerte 1978b, Strēlerte 1979, Strēlerte 1980, Strēlerte 1982a, Strēlerte 1983, Strēlerte 1984).

through his family and his family relations with Latvian exiles. He had been actively involved in the life of exiles, participating in youth congresses, song festivals, various gatherings, singing and giving lectures, also on Latvian literature, publishing articles, visiting exiles in Europe, America, and Australia, and since 1973, regularly visiting Latvia. He formed and played in several Latvian youth bands and wrote songs. He also wrote poetry, which was published in three collections: *Silver Quarter* (*Sudraba ceturksnis*, 1968), *Vowels and Consonants* (*Patskaņi un līdzskaņi*, 1976) and *Tides* (*Paisums un bēgums*, 2016). Johansons got to know Swedish society as a child, making friends with his Swedish peers. He went to school in Sweden and graduated from Stockholm University, started working in a Swedish school and later, in a school with many immigrants. He became the school principal and worked hard to ensure that children of thirty-three nationalities could also learn their mother tongue.

Johansons dedicated two articles to his mother (and his father). He called his first memoir *From Hägersten to Segeltorp: Rhapsodic Fragments of Memories about Mother Veronika Strēlerte and Father Andrejs Johansons* (*No Hēgerstēnas uz Segeltorpu: Rapsodiski atmiņu fragmenti pat māti Veroniku Strēlerti un tēvu Andreju Johansonu*, Johansons 2000–2001) rhapsodic. The epithet "rhapsodic" refers not only to the world of music, which has been important to Johansons, it also indicates the nature of the memories themselves: they are loosely composed, fairly coherent, also unsystematic and disconnected. At the same time, they aptly express memory itself, from which depths the memories often emerge arbitrarily, without really submitting to one's will. A rhapsody is also a skilful, thematically developed instrumental piece on the themes of another piece—in this particular case, it is son's instrumentation of his mother's (and his father's) life. As a genre, those memories would correspond to a memoir—a realistic and subjectively emotional first-person narrative united by a theme: events significant to the writer, related to his parents, which shaped his experience and were integrated into his own life.

The second account was made in 2016, following the request of the author of this article for the third volume of Strēlerte's *Collected Works* (Johansons 2022: 399–427). Johansons has called his memoirs a more personal and intimate, and also more open account allowing a reader a get a glimpse of the moments of Strēlerte's life that are rarely public, as well as highlighting some unflattering aspects of exile. There is a third source, a Johansons' article "Veronika Strēlerte's

Life" (Johansons 1982: 77–96) published in the collection *Veronika Strēlerte* and dedicated to Strēlerte's seventieth birthday (Gūtmane 1982) with a note at the end: "Source: narrative by VS." This third narrative is based on the facts of life and not on the subjective interpretation; it is informative as a reference material, although not always factually accurate.

Margita Gūtmane's life journey as a poet, writer, and translator began in Latvia. However, she had no conscious memories of this period of her life, because her maternal aunt took her, only a few months old baby then, from her native Jelgava to Germany on the last train. It was planned that Gūtmane's mother would follow them, but because of the war, this was no longer possible. Thus, mother and daughter never met again. Gūtmane grew up in German environment, but the rebellious character of the fifteen-year-old and the disagreements with her aunt led her to the Latvian Gymnasium in Münster. Here, she spent many hours in the rich library of the gymnasium with the enthusiastic teacher of Latvian language and literature, Austra Rudzīte (1911–1991), who also designed the memorial room for Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962) and created the Latvian Refugee Archive. There, in Münster, Latvia was awakened (the language that had to be learned almost from the beginning, literature, history, and culture) in a young woman, accompanied by an increasingly acute and tragic sense of exile. It was there in 1962, that Gūtmane met Strēlerte for the first time—during the Latvian Culture Days, where the poet received the Latvian Culture Foundation Prize for her collection *Years of Grace* and read poetry. The restrained, detached manner in which Strēlerte read her poems was exactly what drew the young student and created a sense of coherence with what she heard:

> Poem after poem, [she] spoke of danger, betrayal, destroyed harmony, of the constant destruction, and re-evaluation of values. ... Not a word was wasted, and that was why they could be trusted. ... This feeling of closeness did not arise because we shared a common experience—that could not be. It was a strange, uncharted dark space, and suddenly I felt that I had been in this space before, that there were all sorts of traces coming from somewhere far away, and what seemed dark was, in fact, a strange lightness. (Gūtmane 2012: 10)

In the years leading up to Strēlerte's passing, Gūtmane kept a diary about their meetings that later on formed the factual and emotionally contemplative

basis for a book of memories about the poet, *Life Is a Devil's Invention* (*Dzīve ir viens vella izgudrojums*, Gūtmane 2012). The diary records the episodes, the poet's words, her attitude to life, and Gūtmane's observations at the time, which would otherwise have been lost. This reassures the reader of the reliability Gūtmane's memory.

Both Strēlerte's childhood recollections and the life writing in her son Pāvils' and Gūtmane's memoirs are first of all, valuable works in their own right, examples of good, even excellent writing, as well as rich cultural and historical material about the life of Latvian intellectuals in exile that delves into the understanding and sense of exile. Secondly, another feature enhances the value of those works: Strēlerte's archive is rather sparse in terms of her personal life; it contains practically no material, such as diaries and notes, that would give a glimpse into her inward life and its collisions. Although the corpus of available letters is quite extensive, their content, with a few exceptions, is mostly practical, more concerned with external events or everyday life. This is especially true for poet's childhood and adolescence (from around 1915 to the early 1920s), when the only source of knowledge has been her childhood memoirs or some brief comments in interviews. While living in Stockholm, Strēlerte corresponded with her sister and granddaughter in Latvia (Strēlerte 2022: 479–641); however, her letters about life in exile were self-censored, as she was aware that they were being read and, therefore, she was concerned for the safety of her relatives. Conversations that were more open probably took place when Strēlerte visited Riga in the summer of 1972. Johansons' and Gūtmane's writings fill this void to a certain extent, contributing to a deeper understanding of Strēlerte in exile, and is rewarding not only as a source of aesthetic enjoyment but also useful as a guide for all those who intend to write about the poet.

Strēlerte's Childhood Recollections

Strēlerte reflects on her childhood and early youth from the age of three, four to eleven, twelve, or so. Historically, this is the First World War and the first post-war years in the newly established Republic of Latvia. It is the period

when the family traveled as refugees to Valka, Russia, and the Ukrainian town of Chukhuevo, and afterwards, returned to Latvia settling in Džūkste, Jelgava, and later, in Auce. It was the time of war and post-war hardships. In response to Gūtmane's question, whether Strēlerte's childhood was happy, the poet said:

> ... it is wrong to use a single word to say that childhood was happy or unhappy. Looking from the outside, let's say, Jaunsudrabiņš' childhood[4] was unhappy. He was a poor servant's child, but he didn't live through it that way. (Gūtmane 2002: 35–36)

She continues:

> ... such big changes as, let's say, the refugee years, when we flew to Russia, I didn't experience them as extraordinary events at all, they were something completely natural. [You] Live where you are. And I didn't experience any hardships, let's say, that there was a lack of food or amenities or whatever, it didn't bother me at all. (Gūtmane 2002: 35)

The First World War did not leave painful memories, but the Second World War did. On 3 February 1945, while working for a Latvian newspaper in Berlin, Strēlerte lived through an Allied air raid on the city, in which her colleagues were killed. She wrote about it in a letter (undated) to her close friend, the literary critic Ofēlija Sproģere (1915–2002):

> Last Saturday's air raid is still a terrible nightmare that cannot be forgotten. On that day, we lost 3 people from the editorial staff ... In the street nearby, a bomb exploded, killing 28 people and seriously wounding many. I will never forget the horrible sights I had to witness during the removal of the bodies and the rescue work. (Strēlerte 2012: 500)

4 Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962), Latvian writer and painter, lost his father in his early childhood, leaving his mother, a simple farmhand, the only breadwinner in the family. He got to know the bitter fate of a servant's child early on. Later, after becoming a writer, Jaunsudrabiņš wrote bright and engaging portrayals about his childhood, which were collected in *The White Book* (*Baltā grāmata*, 1914). Today his recollections belong to the classics of Latvian literature.

The experience of psychologists and psychotherapists, as well as other mental health specialists working with people affected by war trauma shows that one of the paths to recovery is to be able to talk about the traumatic event and integrate it into the narrative, into one's own story. Strēlerte is aware of the horrors of war, but the experience of it always accompanies her, breaking through, for example, in her painfully tragic poem "1945: Berlin" (Strēlerte 2022: 49). Her son Pāvils also remembers his mother's fear of thunder, even a distant one, which he mocked as a child, only later realising that thunderbolts and lightning reminded her of the Berlin bombing.

It is worth highlighting Strēlerte's words "looking from the outside" that refer to Jaunsudrabiņš' childhood. They mark a fundamental issue of a place / position of the narrator in memoirs and life writing: the view of a person in autobiographical / biographical texts will always be (1) from the outside and (2) directed from the present to the past, enclosed by the contemplator's personal life experience, moral, philosophical, and political views, and empathic capacity. On the other hand, as it is also true of Strēlerte's childhood memoirs, the focus is mixed—it is the most immediate and at the same time, the most distant, mediated by experiences that separate it from the events of childhood. The narrator will always be more experienced and wiser than the person he is telling about. The memoir alternates the experience and the worldview of a little girl's "I" with the experience of Strēlerte, who places the events of her childhood in a broader context. It allows her to see generalised "laws" and patterns of life in the daily events experienced by a child. For example, the first sentence of "The Unattainable" reads

> I knew at an early age that there were things in the world that I would never get, no matter how much I wanted them, walking past toy windows where huge dolls with bright yellow or dark hair, rosy, round cheeks and eyes that knew how to close and open made me clench the hand I was clinging to tightly and slow my pace. ... none of those dolls became mine. (Strēlerte 1983, Strēlerte 2022: 361)

After describing other desirable things (clothes or shoes that would not be bought a few sizes too big, silk stockings, and a beautiful velvet dress) that were not always appropriate for a girl's age, Strēlerte admits that "it was not so that only money made the desirable unattainable" (Strēlerte 2022: 363). To expand

on this insight, the poet weaves a comic situation into her message. During a long stay in a clinic after the appendix removal, she is placed in the same room with a Jewish girl:

> For a whole day she worked her way through her long, voluminous hair, brushing it incessantly. Now and then, she looked at the comb, gave it a flick of her thumb, and there was a beautiful pop. How I envied her! (Strēlerte 2022: 364)

The protagonist finds lice so desirable, because getting them would shorten her time in the hospital, that she asks for one and lets it into her hair: "The effort was futile. The lice died, like some other good idea of mine" (Strēlerte 2022: 364).

The narrative also reveals the peculiarities of the narrator's "voice"—it is slightly ironic and resigned, i.e., it understands that there are inevitable things in the world that one has to accept and come to terms with. This kind of restrained (self-)irony is also characteristic of Strēlerte's poetry, and it is also present in the letters to her family, especially those written in the 1930s. This suggests that pulling one's leg, seeing the comical in one another's actions also prevailed in Strēlerte's family (Strēlerte 2008: 217–249). Irony also helps Strēlerte to avoid blatant didacticism in her childhood representations. The scenes are usually concluded with an insight that illuminates the meaning of the story.

The images in Strēlerte's memories (as well as the entire rich body of Latvian literature's childhood memoirs) raise another question about their authenticity and fictionality. Often, when contemplating the relationship between the fact and the fiction in autobiographical works, one is tempted to refer to Jaunsudrabiņš' observation that what is depicted in his works is far removed from what one observes in life, as a linen shirt is distance apart from a blooming field of flax. In Strēlerte's recollections, it is the factual accuracy that increases the degree of credibility of the poet's autobiographical images and steers them towards autobiography. Every image is based on fact. The family did live in Džūkste and Jelgava on Svētes Street; Veronika went to Miss Kleinberga's private school on Zaļā Street; there was a clinic of Dr Tančers in Jelgava, where the future poet had the appendix removed. The family also lived in Auce, and it is quite certain that the girl was taken to Riga. The people mentioned: the father, the mother, the maternal aunt Malvīne, sisters Olga and Helma, the unnamed older sister,

brother and his fiancée, later wife, cousins, teacher Kleinberga, etc., are all real. The time is also based on real historical events—the flight of the inhabitants of Zemgale, the first post-war years in the newly established state with its restrictions and deprivations as reflected in a household of a hardly prosperous family of a court clerk.

The historical time is present in almost every scene, and Strēlerte skilfully subordinates it to her own intentions. For example, in "Treats," while emphasising that "treats have always fascinated me, only the substance of the concept was changing" (Strēlerte 2022: 327), the poet traces the experience of learning new tastes. This journey from one taste to another runs parallel to the change of locations, which covers a fairly wide geographical area and is conditioned by the exigencies of life and helps to sketch the traits of the times. Thus, in Valka, where the Strēlertes live for a short time, the protagonist's greedy eye is drawn to a colourful artificial fruit, which she is finally allowed to taste. It turns out to be a combination of starch, dye, and sugar that leaves a sickly taste in the girl's mouth. The disappointment makes her to distrust the served cream toffee candy and, fearing to be embarrassed and disappointed again, she enjoys it in the bushes. Meanwhile, *semechka* (sunflower seeds) and *morozhenoe* (ice cream) appear on the list of treats in Chukhuevo, when describing the Russian environment of this former military training site.

After returning to Latvia to live in their mother's home in Smulkas, where the adults see to their most important task—to provide daily food rather than treats, the children feast on cherry and plum resin. In the urban environment of Jelgava, the "Tobago" chocolates are the most desirable, but the girl's eye is delighted by the gorgeous cakes: "The most tempting were the Pavasars' on Lielā Street, the Krūskop's apple cakes on Pasta Street, which seemed unassuming to look at but were unparalleled in taste" (Strēlerte 2022: 331). The cake served to the girl through the window of the Jelgava Castle Park café by a German woman (Jelgava had a large and wealthy German minority, which retained "gentlemanly manners") marks a sense of national antagonism that is not only deeply rooted in the Latvians but is also taught to the child. The sister knocks the cake from the girl's hands, shouting at the woman: "We are not paupers!" This gap between Latvians and Germans is also characterised by the poet's mother's attitude—the family lives in a house owned by a German, and in the garden outside the house, according to the mother, only "German flowers" grow. Strēlerte corrects the

facts: "In the spring, she [the mother] did plant "Latvian flowers" in the big bed: pansies, asters, lily of the valley, she planted marigolds and resedas" (Strēlerte 2022: 330).

Returning to the question of fictionality, the plotting of situations, the portrayal of people, providing them with the flesh and blood, and the dialogues most likely originated in the poet's imagination.[5] Although the book of childhood memories is an unrealised project and therefore, does not form an artistic compositional whole, the volume of texts is sufficient to draw some conclusions. The individual episodes are arranged as the strings of memories, each tied together by a single theme: the aforementioned "treats" or "living pictures" (small theatrical performances as one of the first experiences of the art world) (Strēlerte 1977c, Strēlerte 2022; 337–340), schooldays (Strēlerte 1979, Strēlerte 1980, Strēlerte 2022: 350–353, 354–355), card playing (Strēlerte 1982, Strēlerte 2022: 357–360), also the child's loneliness (Strēlerte 1978b, Strēlerte 2022: 345–349), and socialising (Strēlerte 1984, Strēlerte 2022: 365–368). The narrator is both the author (describing the situation) and the protagonist, speaking about herself in the first person, defining herself in the family and social environment (e.g., school), and expressing feelings and emotions (joy, shame, confusion, frustration, etc.). Strēlerte's childhood memories reveal the development of child's identity and the system of values.

Johansons' and Gūtmane's Memories: A Mother and A Poet

Johansons' and Gūtmane's memories are linked by their belonging to a different but at the same time, in terms of years, to the same generation which grew up and was formed in exile. As such, they inevitably faced the problem of "fathers and sons," when the older generation tried to preserve and maintain what it believed in, its system of values, sometimes not understanding and accepting the younger generation's different worldview. Johansons and Gūtmane have

5 The poet's reply also sheds light on this issue: "I think that at that age, at the age that I am [now], one remembers one's childhood very clearly ... So it's the right time to write a childhood memoir. And I remember the important things very clearly. But they may not be absolutely true, there's this and that ... I'm trying to create a fable, so that it's not so boring to read, otherwise such memoirs are terribly boring" (Gūtmane 2002: 35).

different perspectives not only because one is the son and the other a close acquaintance of Strēlerte, but also because they grew up and were brought up in different environment. Johansons among a loving family, which gave the child and later, the teenager, a much-needed sense of security; whereas Gūtmane—in a strained relationship with her aunt and later, with her mother in Latvia, when she started receiving letters from her, also in a German boarding school, where she began writing a diary in Latvian, so that no one could read it. The separation from her mother equals the absence of her mother tongue, the language that could be her safe haven:

> You know, it's not your language that I speak. It was never yours. My mother tongue stayed with you in Latvia. At the last moment. Forever. You never taught it to me. How will I ever communicate with you? And most importantly, where? ... You don't understand what it means to be at home. To be at home in language. (Gūtmane 1998: 70)

Johansons' focus on Strēlerte—a mother and indirectly, a poet, is natural and understandable. Gūtmane, on the other hand, writes about Strēlerte as an exile, a poet and, to use Sproģere's term, a "mere mortal," who are separated by a gap: "This gap was almost numbing. It took me a long time to reconcile the two Strēlertes in one person" (Gūtmane 2012: 41).

Obviously, life experiences of the two memoirists differ from Strēlerte's. The dividing line, Gūtmane agrees, is the Baltic Sea, i.e., the Second World War and going into exile, an experience that is almost impossible to acquire or inherit without having lived through it oneself. Gūtmane writes:

> ... my word conceptions do not reach her reality. The war, the machinery of destruction, transcends all conceptions. Therefore, silence. ... Hence, the overwhelming sense of helplessness and emptiness. What can you say and ask when the other is silenced in another reality? (Gūtmane 2012: 16)

In Gūtmane's memoir, one can also see the reference to Strēlerte's interview given to Jānis Rudzītis (1909–1970) in the early 1950s: "There is a feeling of writing into the void. There is no audience, no contact with readers" (Rudzītis 1951a), because the reader remained in her homeland. Strēlerte was aware that

the sharpness of the loss of homeland might be incomprehensible to the younger generation. In a letter to Gūtmane, dated 23 October 1980, she writes:

> First of all, I thought that after reading *Moon River*[6] you would bless me with rather devastating comments because that was the impression I was left with after our telephone conversation. It would not be surprising or worrying, because for your generation all these events are unreal and their experience may seem pathetically exaggerated or, to use Sodums' term, which Irbe is so fond of repeating, like "compulsory mourning." It is good that you have understood that it is not about mourning but about despair, which I personally have still not gotten rid of. (Strēlerte 2022: 460)

Gūtmane seems to have come closest and most intimately to understanding the exile Strēlerte and the poetry she wrote in exile in the pages of her memoir (see, for example, Gūtmane 2012: 10–11, 167–171, etc.). Poet's life after leaving Latvia was a life "in the afterlife" "in no-man's land" (these are the titles of her poems in the collection *Years of Grace* (1961)), without ever settling in Sweden and never again in Latvia, trying to do so in the early 1990s: "Exile means losing one's place in the world" (Gūtmane 2012: 181). The poet expressed this feeling in her poem "No Grounds" ("Bez pamata"):

> There are no grounds for despair,
> If there are no grounds at all.
> If you can sway to the rootless dance,
> Stay in wave apartments,

6 *Moon River* (1945) is the first collection of poems published in exile; its two chapters are inspired by the experience of war, the fate of the nation and Latvian soldiers (legionnaires), and the pain of losing one's homeland while already in exile. The content of the conversation mentioned by Strēlerte is unknown, but thirty years later Gūtmane writes: "'Moon River'—a border for life. Thrown out into a strange world where everything familiar changes in a single gust. All values have collapsed—how many times have they not collapsed for Latvians in the last century. From this moment on, life is divided in two, and the borderline runs through the book. Words were saved, they could not be banned, but what good were free words if they were moving faster and faster towards being silenced" (Gūtmane 2012: 169–170). These examples, the conversation Strēlerte refers to and Gūtmane's memoir, demonstrate the mutability of perception and thus, of memories as the accumulated experience changes.

Live without life
There are no grounds for despair,
If the grounds have been washed away.[7]
(Strēlerte 1982b: 59)

Johansons' and Gūtmane's memories are determined by their temporal and spatial location: Johansons' life runs closely alongside his mother's, while Gūtmane gets to know the poet through letters, phone calls, longer or shorter encounters. For Gūtmane, the image of Strēlerte is twofold, based on opposites: Strēlerte the poet and Strēlerte a mere mortal. A considerable number of pages are devoted to "mortal" Strēlerte, describing the poet's relations with and thoughts about the exiles—not always flattering, revealing her weaknesses (sweets, slot machines, her fondness for gossiping about acquaintances, etc.), her characteristic way of communicating—her desire to often bypass unpleasant, painful, and uncomfortable topics by telling an anecdote or emphasising the comic side of an event.

Gūtmane also recounts the last years of Strēlerte's life, when she grew increasingly tired of life, when her physical abilities deteriorated, her depressive moods increased and age-related illnesses set in. In her portrayal of Strēlerte as a poet and cultural practitioner, Gūtmane does not shy away from touching upon the complex internal relations of exiles in terms of political views and intrigues, attitudes towards and contacts with occupied Latvia, the ambition of some exiles, and the relationship between exiles and writers of the restored Latvia (Gūtmane 2012: 137–146), revealing how all of the above affected Strēlerte (e.g., Strēlerte's "fascist" case[8] (Gūtmane 2012: 18–23)).

7 Nav pamata būt izmisušam, / Ja vispār nav pamatu. / Ja vari šūpoties bezsaķņu dejā, / Apmesties viļņu dzīvokļos, / Dzīvot bez dzīves. / Nav pamata būt izmisušam, / Ja pamati izskaloti.

8 On 25 October 1945, a publication appeared in the Swedish newspaper *Morgontidningen*, which said "Latvian fascists are spreading dark propaganda. Attacks on well-known democrats in Sweden". The anonymous article was dedicated to Latvian Social Democratic leader Bruno Kalniņš (1899–1990) and directed against those Latvians who viewed Ulmanis' authoritarian regime (the regime banned the party) with sympathy and found Kalniņš' collaboration with the Soviet occupation regime in 1940–1941 unacceptable. Likewise, Kalniņš believed that Latvians should not join the Latvian Legion, strengthening the Nazi German army, while part of Latvians, including Strēlerte, believed that the soldiers of the Legion, fighting against the Soviet army, were actually fighting for Latvia's independence. Strelerte expressed her opinion publicly, which was considered fascist by the Swedish press. Due to these political accusations, at the beginning of her exile, Strelerte was denied the opportunity to live in Stockholm. She did not get a job in the archive and had to work a low-paid job.

> When I talked to Ofelija Sproģere about Strēlerte's eagerness to hear good things about herself—how elegantly she managed to prompt them—Sproģere agreed that yes, it was true. "Veronika suffers a lot from getting so little recognition." Viktors Avotiņš [then the chairman of the Latvian Writers' Union] said before the memorial event at the Writers' Union: "Not many will attend, rather very few, because nobody knows what to say about her." (Gūtmane 2012: 65)

There is another motive in Gūtmane's book that drives the author in her quest. Apart from the aforementioned desire to understand the feelings of an exile, and one's own, to define not only Strēlerte but also herself, and to search for her own identity in the space of two or even several cultures (Latvian, German, and Spanish), one can sense the longing for the mother Gūtmane has never really had in her life. To some extent, the image and expectations of a mother had been transferred from her own mother to Strēlerte. She does so subconsciously, perhaps even competing with the poet's son Pāvils:

> In a private conversation, Pāvils said that I have far more contact with Strēlerte than he does. – Isn't it common that the relationships between children and parents are much more complicated than with an outsider? From Strēlerte's notes, however, one could see that her as mother's love was far from blind. She was able to appreciate her son with surprising clarity. (Gūtmane 2012: 132)

Gūtmane's other strengths as a memoirist include her ability to make the poet's image "three-dimensional," versatile, and human and to get closer to her personality and poetry. "It's strange, there's no other person I've ever wanted to meet so much," says Gūtmane, when hearing the quiet and hopeful reply, "Yes, maybe not everything I've written has been in vain" (Gūtmane 2012: 65).

The first article by Strēlerte's son Pāvils, "The Life of Veronika Strēlerte," was published in the collection *Veronika Strēlerte* dedicated to the poet's seventieth anniversary (Johansons 1982: 77–96). Based on the poet's narrative, it can be considered a factual account of her life, an extended curriculum vitae. The two other memoirs by Johansons, *From Hägersten to Segeltorpss* and *Memories and Reflections on Mother Veronika Strēlerte* (Strēlerte 2022: 379–427), show an increased personal perspective, telling the story of his mother, and revealing the author himself. He is not shying away from writing about the painful things in

his own life and perhaps still incomprehensible things of his mother's life and character. The personal moment is intensified by the very fact that Strēlerte has passed away, making it not easy but necessary to look back.

Johansons begins his *Memories and Reflections* with the story of two glasses of water: one he passes to his mother as she lies waiting for the ambulance to arrive, when the boy is only a few years old; the other, forty-five years later, when she is lying in an aged-care home in Ersta, suffering from Alzheimer's disease. "A pang in my chest that my mother, once so vital with very exceptional creative gifts is now about to step over the inevitable threshold" (Strēlerte 2022: 399). Between these two points, the two glasses of water, there are events that had been etched in the author's memory: events connected with his parents, daily occurences and family habits, which painted the portrait of parents so different in character (the father—meticulous, affectionate, and eager to devote time to his son, even if he is tired from his night work, focused on his creative work; the mother, who has shouldered the burden of domestic life, selflessly sacrificing time that could have been used for creative work; she is a "good mother" who loves her son immensely, and this is how she appears in her son's memories). In her memoirs, Gūtmane, while noting a certain controversy between herself and Pāvils Johansons, when contemplating the question of who is in closer contact with Strēlerte and acknowledging Strēlerte's critical attitude towards her son, agrees with Rudzītis' review of the poet's collection *Deserts of Light* (1951):

> The only real closeness Strēlerte shares is with her mother and her child ... Strēlerte's patriotic lyricism, which in "Deserts of Light," as in her previous books, occupies a good share of the most beautiful pages, is perhaps for this reason so extraordinarily pure, so real and profound, that the same commitment exists in the poet's relationship with her people and her country that exists in a child's relationship with a mother in their reciprocal love. (Rudzītis 1951b)

Pāvils recollections show the lives of poor Latvian exiles after the war, occasionally bringing to the fore the story of the father who loved to have fun but generally lived a private life, guarding the right to his own room and his own space:

> My father needed peace. He had his own room to work and sleep in, while my mother and I slept in a "big" room. Alongside her daily work, my mother worked in

> the kitchen, the heart of the family, both cooking and writing if she had a moment to spare. That is where "Deserts of Light" and "Years of Grace," several translations, anthologies, and articles for newspapers were written. She was constantly proofreading, a job she didn't particularly appreciate. Now and then she would mutter away: "That wretch doesn't know how to write." (Strēlerte 2022: 381)

The observations of friends and acquaintances of author's parents, both when he was a child and later, are captured in the apt portraits of Swedish exiles: Niklāvs (1894–1966) and Olga (1899–1986) Strunke, Arveds (1888–1959) and Lidija (1918–1996) Švābe, Uldis Ģērmanis (1915–1997), Andrejs Eglītis (1912–2006) and later, in the so-called "krancīša/mongrel" nights and also others. However, the depiction of those experiences also bears witness to how Latvian identity was shaped in Pāvils:

> [Niklāvs Strunke] put on a 78 RPM record with "God bless Latvia!" We got to our feet and sang along. ... When the anthem was sung, some secretly wiped a tear away. ... At that moment, I felt that I had my own identity, my own belonging to something sacrosanct, perhaps unattainable, to a dream that was not only retrospective but also nascent. (Strēlerte 2022: 388)

Johansons' and Gūtmane's memoirs are also valuable for their critical perspective on exile. Perhaps the desire to reflect—both memoirs were written in the new millennium—was also conditioned by the fact that exile as a phenomenon, and a political one as well, had ceased to exist; for instance, Johansons' critical attitude towards an exaggerated Latvianness, which was forged in the clash between the views of the older generation, including his parents, and those of a young man growing up in a democratic country. For some, the value of the nation tops the value system; it is something to be preserved and nurtured at all costs. For others, the most important thing is the human being, to whom national belonging is subordinate. With a certain bitterness, even harshness, Johansons writes in his memoirs:

> A small family sticks together. *We* [italics by the author—*I. K.*] are superior to others. If one is Latvian, one is good. The survival instinct is so strong that every interference from the outside or, even worse, from "inside" to break out was like a death sentence.

> I wonder how many times I have heard judgments about contemporaries who have "left our cause." (Strēlerte 2022: 385)

Johansons' portrait of Strēlerte is unique, because only he can truly write about his mother as a poet, showing his love, respect, and appreciation for what she has invested in him to help to become an independent personality, capable of realising his talents in poetry and music.

Conclusion

The article explores the life writing of Latvian poet Veronika Strēlerte, focusing on her self-reflection through her childhood memories and how others, particularly her son Pāvils Johansons and poet Margita Gūtmane, have remembered her. Strēlerte's short prose is analysed to reveal how she transformed the biographical facts into psychological and philosophical narratives. The reflections by Johansons and Gūtmane, while subjective, also give away their own identities, as they write about Strēlerte.

Strēlerte's life, marked by significant historical upheavals (the First and Second World Wars), exile, and a deep sense of alienation, motivated her to write her childhood memoirs in the 1970s. Johansons, born in Sweden after the war, navigates dual identities in his writings, blending Latvian and Swedish cultural influences. His memoirs of Strēlerte, presented in a rhapsodic style, reveal both his and his mother's lives, offering valuable insight into their experiences in exile. Gūtmane, who was exiled to Germany as a child, first encountered Strēlerte's work in 1962, sparking a deep connection. Her later memoirs, based on diary, provide a contemplative account of her interactions with Strēlerte, adding emotional depth to the narrative.

Strēlerte's reflections bring to light the complexity of childhood memory, where the narrator—now older and wiser—looks back with a mix of immediacy and distance, weaving her current knowledge and understanding into her childhood experiences. Her memoirs are marked by a nuanced blend of (self-) irony, making her recollections both poignant and insightful.

In contrast to her son, who remembers Strēlerte primarily as a mother, Gūtmane, a close acquaintance of the poet, offers a more complex image

of Strēlerte as both a poet and an exile. Gūtmane's memoirs explore the generational divide and the challenges of understanding the trauma of exile. She grapples with the duality of Strēlerte's identity—the public figure and the private individual—seeking to reconcile these aspects within her narrative. Johansons and Gūtmane provide valuable perspectives on Strēlerte, reflecting on their different relationships with her. While Johansons' memoirs are more personal and rooted in familial bond, Gūtmane's account delves into the broader implications of exile and the poet's struggle with the sense of displacement and loss. The memoirs paint a rich and multifaceted portrait of Veronika Strēlerte, capturing the tensions and complexities of her life and legacy.

Translated from Latvian
by Margarita Spirida

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