



Library podcast

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[00:00:35] Good evening everyone. I'm Leszek Chudzinski senior librarian. Welcome to the Central Library. Thank you all for joining us tonight. It's my pleasure to welcome you that is them to The Seattle Public Library to discuss her new book, "Among the Living and the Dead. Thank you to Elliott Bay Book Company for presenting this event and being here with a very slim. Nukes. Books for sale. We thank the Seattle Times for generous promotional support for library programs. And our author serious sponsor Gary Kunis. Finally this event is supported by The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library to provide free programs. And services to touch the lives of everyone in our community. So to the library foundation donors here tonight we say thank you very much for your support. In our very limited SXSW essays and journalism have appeared in such publications as New York Times Magazine Tin House the Atlantic the Iowa review and creative nonfiction. She she's a Pushcart Prize winner and the recipient of Rona Jaffe writer's award as well as the finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing in our mix teaches creative nonfiction at the University of Iowa. She lives in Iowa City. There are important books and great books and the book among the living and the dead a tale of exile and homecoming on the war roads of Europe is above. It's not only an important book it's also a beautiful book that one cannot put down. Like Gabriel Garcia Marquez in one hundred years of solitude and Isabel and in my invented country. In her book. In other verses nukes creates a country she never knew. A country made of peace gongs and singing old family pictures.

[00:02:54] Grandma was most memories Lambie a family foreign which it turns out means laugh.

[00:03:04] It must have been love that moved the author to create this great book and the country called you know that is a mix will read answer some questions. Dan will sign books at the front table. Now. Please join me to welcome in out that as I'm new to this year of public life. Thank you

[00:03:32] Thank you all very much. Thank you for that lovely introduction. Thank you to the library until the library foundation for giving me the opportunity to read from the book tonight. I also just want to thank all of you who have come to listen. I am absolutely stunned and overwhelmed and overjoyed

to see so many different people. Who have had such an impact on my life in so many significant ways. I feel like looking out into the audience is a sort of mini tour of turning points that brought me to write this book. I see people that I know from college. I see the publisher of the University of Washington's daily who recruited me to write for the college newspaper and attend the University of Washington. Family is here as well and that is especially significant to me. Family is here today. I am here today because of my grandmother Livia. And the way that she responded to the circumstances of war. The fact that she chose to sacrifice her comfort her daily life to attempt to out run the forces of war

[00:04:53] To find a way to create some kind of peace and refuge for future generations which she had not yet even met. And that's the thing that I think is so significant about any refugee story is that war often removes every possible choice and the only choice that remains is to decide to interrupt your own life to sacrifice your own personal potential and future for the possibility and the hope of. Generations yet to come. That you will never have the opportunity to maybe see the things that they create the things that they do because of your decisions. For example me standing here tonight me writing these words behind me you'll see a picture of me with my grandmother Livia who raised me and she was the one who instilled in me a love of reading of words. She was the first person to teach me that lives and worlds could endure through words. I lived with her from when I was 2 until I was 8 and she was constantly giving me her memories telling me stories of the country that she had had to leave behind making it something that felt so vivid to me as if I could step inside of it.

[00:06:17] It wasn't until much later after my grandmother had dies that I finally tried to trace her path back to the village where she had come from. And there was able to meet her sister asthma. Who had remained behind in Latvia. And I began to go back to my grandmother's village for several years. Ultimately five consecutive years I would live there in the summer and I would gradually begin to unschooled the memories of my grandmother's sister and attempt to reconstruct what had happened what had happened to the sister who remains behind and what had happened to the sister who had chosen to flee in my grandmother's case the decision to flee in the wake of World War 2 meant one very specific sacrifice and that was to grab my father who at that point was three weeks old and to grab my aunt moderator who at that point was two years old and to just take them and run and leave everything behind for the sister who remains behind the sacrifice was to try to hold on to the family farm

[00:07:29] But as a result of that very specific choice of attempting to hang on to that land. She and her other family members were exiled to Siberia in 1949 in an effort by the then occupying government to collect revise the country's farmlands. There was sort of a bureaucratic decision made that it was far easier to just simply send people away. So essentially put them on trains and to send them out to the remote areas of Siberia. And leave them on their own to survive with whatever it was that they had in hand.

[00:08:04] Neither sister knew for many many years what had happened to the other each endured the repercussions of war in their own way in isolation alone and while eventually they were able to

reconnect again after Latvia regained its independence. Even then there were illusions there were gaps there were places that their stories still could not go. And that became in essence my rule.

[00:08:34] Returning now to Latvia trying to pull these stories together. I was looking for a way to try to fill in those gaps to in essence reveal each side of the story in full. Tonight I wanted to read from a section of the book that dealt specifically with the refugee experience because I felt that the echoes of that we feel even now today with an eerie resonance and one that I think in many ways gets to the heart of why I feel Latvia has significance that past we can embed in the current unfolding present to give us a sense of not just history but where do we want to go in the future.

[00:09:22] With these questions once long ago in the region of Latvia where my grandmother is from there was a man named TS who for a time before he came into his true calling lived as a beggar. One day a man approached the beggar tis How about a drink. The man said and TI's given his current situation could see no reason to decline. Back and forth. The men passed a jug between them feeling the edges of themselves blur. The man offered to make a toast to teas to which teas had no objection. Maybe it would change his fortunes when the man had finished. He raised the jug as if to take a nap but instead blew through his lips into its neck.

[00:10:09] Three exhalation as you will become like me he whispered before placing the vessel back in Tessa's hands and waited for him to drink and that's how you became a werewolf. Asked one of the judges who had hauled teeth in for questioning. Yes said tease. He didn't pause or hesitate. It was the year sixteen ninety one by this time tease was in his 80s and had been werewolf thing for most of his life. His neighbors confirmed his assertion. Everyone knows teases a werewolf. They said they stated it matter of factly the way someone would state a thing. Everyone knows cows have a hard time eating Thistle or stalks hiss and jet. Just what does one do when one is a werewolf. The judges wanted to know. Well he said at certain times of year he and his other werewolf friends shed their clothing and assumed the form of wolves. What then. They eat farm animals sometimes. Mostly they traveled to hell which could be reached through a swamp located about a 20 km walk from the village. They went to hell to retrieve the people's blessings of their crops that had been stolen by wizards and delivered to the double. Sometimes this resulted in battles this past year he had managed to slip into Helen retrieved barley oats and rye which meant there would be a good harvest come fall.

[00:11:36] So you admit that you consort with the devil the judges pressed. No. Insisted ts. He and other werewolves worked against the devil. Maybe there was a better way to describe them he said hounds of God but do you go to church and say your prayers. T sad to confess he did not. He was an old man and these were things that were beyond his capacity to understand. Who knew where souls went. All he knew was that since he had turned into a werewolf he knew how to say just the right words in just the right way so that he could send his words to hell to to fetch back the souls the devil has taken. And in this way he would raise sick horses and cows from the floors of their stalls and whither failing crops. Yes his neighbors agreed TS was a healer of considerable reputation who could use the same words that you or I would use regular words but he could arrange them in such a way as to stop a cuts weeping or to chase wolves from the woods on the subject of what the judges meant

and what T.S. meant when they each said the same word werewolf. This would never be satisfactorily resolved in court that day did TS truly believe that he could assume another's form.

[00:12:56] Or was he saying in his own way with regular words arranged in just the right order that imagination can also be its own form of transcendence a kind of survival TS would never get another chance to explain the judges had reached a verdict as they saw it T's in his words were dangerous and confusing and the words needed to stop. And the only way they could see to stop him and stop his words from spreading any further was to forever a forever separate him from the context of his stories. To render ts and his words. Place less and so it came to pass that they were now living in the days that followed the wars end the days of place looseness when more than 30 million people had been scattered across Europe and had lost their words for home all of them insisting for wildly different reasons that they could no more return to where they had just come than bombs can be and dropped the numbers on arms can be un inked than death centres sentences for collaborating with the enemy not because you believed in fascism but only because you wanted so badly to stop communism could be UN issued the same shorthand was used to refer to all of them DPD as in displaced persons an estimated 200000 to 250000 Latvians fled for the West during the war years of that number more than 100000 were ultimately forced to make the trip back because they were recaptured by the Soviets or returned by Western forces or died along the way and were buried in unmarked graves that left about 120000 Latvians who remained DPD.

[00:14:53] They took the acronym and used its letters to construct an alternate term for themselves. D of a put name you. D of from D ofs as in the Latvian word for God put me as in the diminutive for bird. Little Birds. As in that which is ungrounded as in that which can foretell sorrow but also hope. As in being in an endless state of passage when finally my grandmother and her two children my father nine months old and my aunt. Moderator then three finally passed through the steel gates of Camp 2 6 9 U N and u n r r a pinup burg where thirty eight hundred of the place lists mostly Latvians had been assigned temporary shelter. My father had only just found his capacity for speech the ability to name himself and the things around him. Little bird. Lost Boy at night curled in on himself as if making himself as small as possible to give others more room.

[00:16:03] My father the baby who had absorbed the flight paths of the bombers from his mother's arms now dreamed in a barracks that had billeted young Luftwaffe pilots where once they had absorbed lessons in the principles of aerodynamics and aerospace engineering and how to navigate by the position of the stars he now played on the floor with scraps of paper that he made glide and twitch with his breath as if they could take wing. It was a life defined by waiting. Wherever you found yourself. Whether assigned to scratchy cots wedged inside stalls that until recently birthed saddle horses for the German cavalry or boarded in bunks installed in former surgical suites that still smelled faintly of amputations cauterized wounds. Mothers approach toddlers in their rooms absorbed in quiet play only to discover them gumming what looked like scraps of exploded ordnance. Those early days passed in an endless stretch of unstructured hours the monotony of small temporary rooms together they were cleansed in clouds of DDT. The babies sometimes laughing into the fog trying to catch it in their mouths like snowfall. The women instructed to kneel slightly as if in curtsy and to lift the hem of their skirts just enough to accommodate the delay passers nozzle with its puff of air and the fine

dusting that would drive away the lice and their typhus. For hours afterward each step. Each brush of one thigh against the other would release the chemical smell hints of burned marzipan. No others said more like Bush lice were not the only named fear.

[00:17:57] Also. Dysentery rickets diphtheria syphilis TB scabies. Polio. They learned to surrender themselves for Redick regular medical inspections pass their health record books to the nurses and doctors to initial without thought for privacy. Their lives now. A running count of coughs and infections lung spots and fevers. On the days of the mass inoculations hundreds of the camp's children injected at once the nurses punching the flesh of one twitching buttock after another. The mothers helped skin their babies from their chunky wool tights rabbit pants. The Latvians called them. But for all the shots sickness still found them one morning my grandmother Livia lifted my aunt moderator from sheets sweated wet. In time they would learn she had contracted polio. But on that day all they knew was the source of her fever that she was listless unable to sip water without distress. A nurse came and perhaps thinking it was something that could be cured with a dose of antibiotics. She decided to administer a shot a quick punch and a wriggle of the rabbit's haunch whether out of haste or ignorance or both. She chose to slip the needle into the center of Monaco's buttock and pierced her sciatic nerve. Almost immediately muttered his leg on that side went limp the ankle flapping as if attached to the foot by a thing tongue of skin. Between this and the effects of the polio Madrazo would ultimately struggle to take a single step her legs bound in braces pushing a walker. And eventually though still years in the future but already starting again in the camp.

[00:19:46] As she tried and failed to grasp the hands of the other children whose mothers encouraged them to circle up in the week sun to sing and dance as a distraction from the guard towers and the phlegm colored soup and the fact that they were swaddled not in diapers but in fliers instructing the refugees on the regulations of the camp the muscles of all four of her limbs starting to shrink atrophying until one day would which which would mark the beginning of her last days. The only comfortable place for her was bed. These were the unnamed fears that you you were the reason this happened that you were the one to blame that the moment you pushed the door closed on your former life. The moment you took to the road chose flight over your family and the farm all the while telling yourself that you were making the right choice. The only choice you might have been mistaken. And now this. Your little boy. His sudden not speaking like an envelope quietly sealing itself shut. What did my father understand of their life. Among the places he would have been too young to remember the wars of the refugee processing centers that they pass through covered with the names of family members whose whereabouts are unknown. Sometimes a photo if photos had come with the refugee. Have you seen. But he most likely heard the nightly broadcasts that played on the camp radio. The voices of children old enough to recall their names and from where they had come sending their words out in search of lost parents.

[00:21:22] Perhaps he even understood the pitch of their pleas if not the actual meaning. Did he know his own father was missing. Like so many of the men who were there but weren't there. A number written then crossed out on their wives intake forms. He turned one then two before he even learned what the word father meant. At least what it meant in relationship to his own life. The shape that had occupied its silence save for the scrape of rough hands Jack hitting you for a trip outside the

impatient clapping tempo of a walk to fast for small legs the cresting of one weeping I on the subject of where my grandfather Amos had been for the last two years and what had happened to him in the war. He appeared to have drawn a line through his memories as if he were a document from which hundreds of pages had suddenly been redacted. He simply appeared one day at the camp but the rage that sometimes gripped him and filled the little room that they shared that rattled the tins of dried milk and sardines and sent rolling from the table the cigarettes that came in the refugees boxes of rations and which everyone traded on the black market for the things they really needed like soap and sewing supplies said enough for his family and to suspect. He'd never really returned from wherever it was he'd gone what he did not say.

[00:22:54] After the doctors had picked bone fragments from the hole in his head and sutured it shut. Then fitted the pit of his skulls orbit with as I made of glass after my grandfather had finally emerged from the coma induced by his injuries. The German military hospital in which he recuperated was seized by the allies. At this point. My grandfather was transferred to a prisoner of war camp in Belgium where the allies tried to make sense of men who wore the uniforms of Nazis but who insisted they were not Nazis at all. Only conscripts forced to join the army of their occupier. There were interrogations and inside those interrogation rooms if the stories of the men who were held there to be believed the kinds of reckonings that accompany wars and the release of collective anger and rage and fear in the end after months of questioning allied investigators ruled that he was not a criminal and let him go. But from the larger moral question of what constitutes collaboration he would never feel he was entirely released once again. My grandmother corrected her calculations restoring the original number of family members to include her husband but only because there was no other way to record the presence of someone who is back. But not back. He was not her first experience with a lost love but she had learned she had learned from her first experience not to expect too much. And so when her second lost love returned to her she understood that she would be grateful for whatever remained the skin laced fine with kilo aids the lumbering pace the square jaw grinding awake or asleep she had heard enough resurrection stories myths that celebrate the possibility of regeneration.

[00:24:48] To know that there is almost always a hidden cost almost always something that is held back in exchange for the right to some. For someone to return from the other side when he spoke his voice sounded like the tip of a match drawn across phosphorus. Mostly he didn't speak. He could disappear at any moment even as he lay right beside her. She could feel him stuttering about inside himself travelling years and miles before abruptly returning to their bed to look at her in a way that told her she might be the only thing tethering him to this room to her to the two children asleep on their cots at their feet. My grandmother listened to him breathe himself back to calm the four of them suspended in the night sounds of the barracks the sounds of secrets uncontained slipping through the loose weave of the blankets hung as partitions between the suitcases stacked in imitation of walls. Who is loving whom. Who is striking whom who is sick on homebrew who neglects their children who calls out in their nightmares who thrashes in silence like this she would remind him without words. Being alive is like this. A year after my grandfather's return my grandmother gave birth to another child a boy.

[00:26:08] This time my grandmother grandfather was there to hold his second son now with a brother. My father began to find his voice again to whisper to him to tell him all he thought he should know about their home its secrets and wonders and dangers the pedals of oil and floating garbage at the camp's periphery that could be lanced with sticks. The older boys who stole and fought and ran from the police and who once blamed my father for their supposed crimes when an officer stopped to talk to them so that my father ran to and burrowed beneath a mattress for a very long time before he realized in opinion king of confusion and fear. That no one was looking for him at all by now most of the refugees had lived nearly three years in circumstances only ever meant to be temporary. On the question of where the hundreds of thousands in Europe displaced by war should go next. The rest of the worlds had remained decidedly silent. Only great Britain Australia and Canada had come forward offering to help in any substantive way. Where would you be willing to be resettled. A form from that period had asked Canada. My grandfather had written his handwriting less certain than his answer but even still. Restrictions were such that all available spots would likely go only to young single men and women few countries seemed to want to resettle families with more small children let alone families who might be supporting someone with a disability. The war maimed the chronically ill the elderly in the United States Congress shut down all attempts to relocate any refugees citing possible quote shortages of housing and consumer goods.

[00:27:54] Fear of re conversion unemployment and apprehension as to the type of persons who were inmates of the DP camps in Europe and in this way the impermanent became mistaken for the indefinite life in the indefinite was to scale piles of war rebel for sport to root through the grit for anything that could be turned into toys fragments of magnet webs of cloth unburned books. Miraculously once a spoon it was to push donated baby dolls and donated baby carriages across reclaimed fields that had been originally graded to accommodate soldiers for inspection to run naked on your mother's orders so that the sun on your bare skin might somehow help unbolt the bend to your legs unthinking the bones in your wrist that had begun to bulge beneath the skin.

[00:28:46] The first sign of rickets it was to pretend the smears of gut and grease in the basement were not from the pig reported stolen from a nearby farm. It was to see nothing when seeing nothing was required. As if you two had rinsed your gums with some of the black market liquor that was said to sometimes cause blindness. Life in the indefinite was to leave the Dulce to meetings where they argued over the preservation of the language the loosening of grammar the loss of the old words for things that had no equivalent in this new life.

[00:29:23] They should resist becoming like potatoes with old eyes. One farmer put it never to be replanted so they searched for a word that would embody the state of remaining ready for the possibility of return even as they prepared for the unlikelihood that they could ever go back. By day they completed questionnaires and enrolled in English lessons and submitted themselves to certification tests so that they could prove themselves skilled at something sewing or typing or factory work anything that might convince a potential host nation that they were worthy of sponsorship ready to contribute in any way needed.

[00:30:03] At night they danced and folk collectives taught their children the words to the old national anthem an organized choir recitals where a song begging the wind to carry them back to Latvia became exiles new unofficial anthem they hacked gardens from the fields where soldiers once drilled so they could follow along with the seasons as they would have back home marking each day not in the usual increments of time but by what is growing or what is not growing or what will soon grow and the chemists who had fled with the contents of their laboratories unable to bear the thought of leaving their life's work behind. Florence flasks and Bunsen burners test tubes and crucible tongs. The librarians who arrived with arm loads of their treasured first editions the members of the National Theatre Company who unlocked suitcases to reveal wigs and costumes. The printer who unloaded a working press. They all began to share their passions with their camp mates. They published newspapers and printed books. The former academics recreated their lesson plans hosting night classes for the refugees in their native languages are history and folklore statistics and physics. So many classes that the academics would eventually open their own university. Among the faculty of the new Baltic university as it was called. My grandfather. The former economics professor. His old formulas awakening in him once more Lecter. He noted on his camp papers whenever occupation was required and inside the family's small room he took to stacking all the books he could find that might be relative to his classes.

[00:31:52] Adam Smith's an inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations self administration in England and Wales. Statistics one in English which he read with the help of a dictionary given to him by one of the British officers who were running the camp. Before long he was named chair of economic theory and the family was Walden on all sides as they eight or as the adults made love with their hands over each other's mouths. The children wouldn't hear or as they fought or told the children not to fight. By books offering concrete theories as to how and why people make the choices they do in this way the camp residents gave themselves jobs when there were none but for the lecturing and the farming and the dancing and the singing they received no salary. Occasionally there were tasks to be done around the camp for what amounted to pocket money. Never much. Still. Sometimes it was enough pocket money that you might decide maybe today to bake something sweet enough money anyway to send your boys in search of a lemon lemons aren't very sweet said My father once they were outside. Let's get candy instead. Said his little brother. No. Let's get an orange. Said my father. Oranges are better. Yes agreed his brother. An Orange will be much better a surprise than a lemon it was their first attempt at a present she did not scold them merely set aside what she had started of the dough then quarter the orange and let the smell of the pith fill the room as if this too could be a kind of celebration. There were other outings once with their father to the market just outside the camp in search of a fish that could feed all five of them.

[00:33:46] The boys insisted on one so fresh they could see his gills still bellowing pleading as they walked back to camp. The fish wrapped loosely in newspapers. The boys began to beg. Please can we put him in the bathtub to see if you will swim. Their father wasn't having it. This fish was to eat besides the bathtub was not theirs to put fish in as they pleased. He told them they shared it with all the other residents on the barracks floor they begged all the way home. Finally he gave in to them but only for an hour he said. And then it's dinner. But an hour became a day and a night and another day and soon they were all listening for the approaching footsteps then rushing ahead to slam the

communal bathroom door shut so they could scoop the fish from the bathtub and into a pail reading the empty basin of roping strands of shit his errant scales all yours. They would say trying not to splash the water as they carried the pail back to their room. It wasn't long before word of the fish finning back and forth in the barracks bathtub spread. But rather than insist on its removal everyone seemed charmed by the presence of the unlikely pet. Soon all the bathers were transferring the fish to its pail while they washed then sloshing him back over the lip of the tub. When they finished. They took to filling their bathrobe pockets with crumbs chumming the water with bits of stale bread encouraging the fish to rise to now the watery nonsense in their direction.

[00:35:25] Fish speak for good morning or thank you or you will find him soon or she says she forgives you for not saying goodbye or you will leave this place very soon or whatever it was they imagined they needed to hear in order to get through the next day one of the little boys in the barracks thought he heard the fish say Help me I'm tired I want to keep swimming. So we went and found a knife and pressed the point into the fish's back nudging him along. Again the fish said again. Thank you I'm so tired you've forgotten how to move what are these marks on your back. The bathers asked washing the fish lurch into his pail turning like a capsized boat to show his bleached belly taking much too long to write himself again. I just wanted to help the boy said when the fish stopped moving altogether his eyes clouded over the color of old fat pooled in the bottom of the pan. His back stapled with gashes. He seemed so quiet. I was just trying to help make sure he wasn't dead moderate sized missing from these stories from their daily life.

[00:36:37] When my aunt's polio infection was eventually diagnosed she was sent to the nearest hospital outside the camp kept for months in the children's ward where at the time it was thought that it would be very disruptive to the young patients recovery and rehabilitation if their parents visited them too often they were barred from seeing her for more than a few hours each weekend. They arranged for day passes walked stiffly through the camp gates past the guards silently preparing themselves for this endless re-enactment of separation. Her tears her building rage. They were losing her. Even though the nurses comment on her progress she will not look at them tries to role herself so she will face the wall. As if she has decided it is somehow less painful to imagine they never came because then at least she would not have to watch them leave her here all by herself again and again back at the camp. They watched family after family leave. Their number now just a few hundred refugees. The old the broken those whose bodies did not work in the way a sponsoring nation tends to dream of use grudgingly the United States had begun to reconsider its earlier quote apprehension as to the types of persons who were inmates of the DP camps in Europe. And favored in the end were those refugees who could work as farmhands in the country's Midwest and its south. Their prospects debated in such publications as Congressional Quarterly which became a kind of scouting report for refugees quotes in Iowa where the population has declined by 83000 since 1940. A statewide survey showed that several thousand displaced persons could be welcomed there immediately.

[00:38:29] Kentucky is estimated to have a capacity to absorb over 5000 in Minnesota governor young doors commission which included representatives of agriculture labor and welfare groups has reported that the state has now places for 8000 such news gave them the faintest possibility of hope.

And enough specific detail that they could at last begin to realistically imagine alternative existences for themselves. They pulled atlases from the shelves of the camp libraries made notes on elevation and climate collected anecdotes from the camps U.S. raised United Nations staff. And from this jumble of amateur intelligence gathering gossip and supposition. They built their own imagined realities of resettlement revealed to themselves their desires and their fears maybe today they were wind chapped and numb dis articulating the dimpled carcasses of pellets at a poultry processing plant in northern Michigan. Or as when rumors spread of possible spots in California. Maybe the next day they were squinting against the sun shedding burned skin like snakes thinning the dates from medieval palms. Iowa is about the same elevation as Latvia they noted. And from there it was an easy walk to the cornfields the flat shimmering heat like a hand pressed against the backs of their necks the itchy perfume of hot loam and manure for my grandparents. It made no difference which future version of themselves they allowed themselves to hope for or hope against. No invitations came from Iowa or California or Minnesota or anywhere else. Another year passed then another as more and more refugees left. There was no more need for so many classes at the Baltic university and my grandfather received a letter that his services were no longer needed.

[00:40:30] As a lecturer my daughter returned from the hospital to finally live at home again pale and weak and distant and then the seizures started. As she pitched and twisted her head rationing on the floor of their room. My grandmother trying to hold her to still her pressing moderates to her stomach swollen now with her own fourth child. They could feel their worry pitch and ratchet with her. What had the neighbors heard. Would they tell someone thinking perhaps that to highlight anyone else's unfitnes might raise their prospects of resettlement should spots ever open up again. And finally the spots do come under increasing pressure the United States has agreed to admit 400000 additional refugees for resettlement. There are conditions as outlined in official documents and debriefings by staff from the International Refugee Organization which has been created by the United Nations to take over administration of the camps and their refugees. To be eligible for consideration each refugee requires a sponsor someone stateside who will be willing to guarantee that there will be a place for them to live. That they will not take jobs from Americans. Once a sponsor is secured the refugee must then submit to a 22 step screening process. Their files reviewed by the FBI by the encounter intelligence corps of the U.S. Army by the CIA CIA by the provost marshal general of the U.S. Army in Germany Germany as well as by special liaison investigators from British intelligence. Their fingerprints will be checked against the fingerprint records center in Heidelberg. Their names referenced against all the holdings of the Berlin documents Center which houses all the Nazi files.

[00:42:23] They must sit for tests measuring physical mental and occupational fitness. But perhaps most critical of all this opportunity will ends in a little less than two years. On December 30 first 1951 Refugees must complete all these steps within that time. Only those whose applications are approved before the deadline will be eligible for this offer. This is what the officials told them. Here is what the refugees heard.

[00:42:57] This is your last chance to leave thank you very much thank you.

[00:43:12] I will be more than happy to take questions now I have to bear with me a little bit because for the podcast when I'm gonna do is repeat the questions so that we're sure that it's recorded. But before I take questions I just wanted to share something that I have been ticking along with me to all these readings. But it's also been something that has been with me every step of the process of researching this book writing this book through a series of now just synchronicities. Some people might say meant to be's. I came in possession of a scarf from my grandmother.

[00:43:47] My dad was cleaning out my grandparents home and I tend to be the kind of person that people feel that they can give orphan things to things that maybe you don't want to give to Goodwill but you feel like it has some sort of significance but you don't know what and you don't feel you should throw it out. So he gave me a box of these orphan things and one of the things inside the box was the scarf. And and it was very important to me because it more than anything smelled like my grandmother and I had no idea you know I'd never seen her where it's I'd never seen it out. My dad also didn't know but it just seemed like the kind of thing that shouldn't be thrown away anyway. I happens by studying photographs and to realize that this was a scarf that my grandmother wore when she fled from Latvia one of the few things she literally sort of had on her body and in her possession and I had made the journey from Latvia to the states and she had obviously secret hid it away in a drawer and kept it obviously as a reminder of her journey and just sort of amazingly it happened to come back to me as I began the process of working on this book. So later when we sign I've been telling people I don't know how woo woo you are but some people have been asking to Lake have their book wrapped in the scarf. I'm happy to oblige. So

[00:45:09] I would love love to take your questions. Yes in the back row

[00:45:15] I would be really wonderful. I would love that. One of the questions that has emerged is of course a Latvian translation which would be my fondest dream.

[00:45:25] The interesting thing is that I'm finding out that the kind of foreign rights for in translation worlds is it's a funny little worlds and people bulk a little bit at literary translations because they're a little bit more involved and I've been joking with people that had a written something closer to like 50 Shades of Grey.

[00:45:47] It might be a little bit easier to get a translation we could just kind of Google translate it but but because it's more involved I think people are sort of wanting to see if it has legs in the States. So I suppose keep buying and then maybe that will help make sure that there's a Latvian translation there. Thank you. Best yes. Yeah. The question is what language that I speak as a little girl. Was I fluent in Latvian. I went to live with my grandmother I was 2 and Latvian was the language of home. That was the month it was the mother tongue. And so yes when I was with my grandmother and grandfather that is what we spoke. And I went to Latvian school on the weekends less less so as I got older because I was playing soccer and doing other things. But I went very religiously to Latvian summer camp and every year up through my teens there is a beautiful camp that the Latvians pooled their resources in order to buy and create in Shelton Washington which is really truly a magical place but is kind of it's a little strange when Americans find it a little strange when they hear about it because the

buildings are gorgeous and they're made to look like old buildings from the Latvian countryside and everything is conducted in the Latvian language. And so you know I remember having aerobics lessons and you know in Latvian and if you got caught speaking English you'd have to do 10 pushups. And so anyway Americans just forget it. I got a kick out of hearing these stories. Yeah.

[00:47:15] Oh boy. OK.

[00:47:18] Paul Deus use I said vis a shade show that got out of my name. Thank you very much. That all of you are here tonight with me. I can I can keep taking requests if you like.

[00:47:30] Oh yes in a very back so the question is Is it true that there is a woman who left Latvia as a little girl as a refugee and then went back to become the president of Latvia.

[00:47:41] Yes it is true. And a beautiful story. And she also is just an incredible human being who also happens to be a brilliant scholar and one of the renowned experts on the Latvian poetry folk song collection that represents the collective knowledge of the country she is. She

[00:48:01] Is one of the foremost scholars and translators yes in the second room.

[00:48:08] Excellent question. So the first question is how long did it take me to write this book. And one version is my whole life. But in a little more distilled form I I was a journalist.

[00:48:25] I mean I still do journalistic work but I worked as a daily newspaper reporter for more than 13 years and I was kind of one of those little kids that I suppose someone must have given me the specific word. But because of this fact that stories were a currency in my life my grandmother's memories so vivid and I saw the way that they recreated lives and words and made them come alive. I was very predisposed to other people's stories. So someone at some point must have said to me if that is what you like to do you should be a journalist. So you know my family talks about me being like basically almost second grade and saying I want to be a reporter when I grow up. And and that was really what I saw as my calling that my calling was to tell other people's stories. And I was really not situated in the frame. And yet it's interesting because and was laughing a little bit yesterday I was in Portland where I used to work as a journalist and I was often kind of getting in trouble. And that may sound a little severe but for being too present in my journalistic stories and I eventually left journalism and decided that I wanted to go back to school and get my MFA and to study creative nonfiction and in the creative nonfiction world and MFA lands when I was going into workshops. The constant refrain was Where are you. Where are you. You're nowhere in this story you're floating above it. And the second part of your question was essentially where am I situated in this story. What is my place within it. So when I originally went to get my MFA I thought I would be writing about other people I had a journalistic projects and I had some incredible teachers and I have been very fortunate to continually somehow find incredible teachers who have a way of bringing out things in me that I had not.

[00:50:20] Yet seen in myself and in this case I had a teacher who kind of kept pushing me and sort of thing you already know how to do that we should really focus on is what you don't really feel

comfortable doing which might be writing about yourself. And so I originally had an idea that I would write about my grandmother's sister. I'd been back to Latvia. I had connected with my grandmother's sister Ouse and it was incredible personal experience. I was very moved by the stories of the special exiles. And so I thought. I sort of sort of me but not me. I'll dodge it I'll still write about someone else and then quickly I realized I could not write about her story without writing about my grandmother's story wouldn't make sense. Why am I writing about her. But then I realized of course I could not write about my grandmother story without writing about me my investments. Why was it so important for me to retrace these two women's stories all of that said you know my presence had become much more prominent within the book. I personally am very interested in memoirs which are much much less about the writer herself and more about a writer's exploration of that which exists outside of her and through that process. You learn about her so maybe kind of still a little interacts if that quite answers your question.

[00:51:39] Thank you.

[00:51:39] I saw a hand Yes straight here in this absolutely which is in some ways very deliberately why I read this section that I did.

[00:51:49] I have of course because of this awareness of coming from a family of refugees it has been something that I have always felt very sensitive to. But certainly researching the book really amplified my feelings on this particular subject. And I just you know cannot underscore enough I look at my grandmother's story and heard. Decisions were really decisions that were about essentially sacrificing interrupting the comfort of her day to day existence literally throwing herself into extreme danger and trauma on the off chance that she might be able to one day find comfort refuge and security for her children and maybe her grandchildren. There is a tremendous amount of love in that acts. There is a tremendous amount of power in that acts and to me I find it really difficult to imagine I as a country we would not want to bring that kind of power and love here. Yes when I first wrote

[00:52:58] How much time was the question how much time I spent writing the book. What is the time when I write so I'll answer that in two parts.

[00:53:06] One is that I worked on that I began working on the book in earnest in 2010 but that was really research and of course I was writing even as I was researching but the book was really only completed essentially in 2016. And once you finish a book and it's like a nine month process once your manuscript is turned in for it to reach the world it's just endless. It is. It is not a decision that one should undertake. If you're like Taipei and have issues with impatience and it goes very slowly but then embedded within that perhaps I'll also address another question which is like when when do you write. And and I think the answer that most writers realize that they have to give is when ever the heck I have a chance. You kind of have these visions when you finally reach a point where you're able to say I am a writer that like your day will be eight hours of writing and you will have this beautiful writing studio and yet unless you are lucky enough to marry rich or have a trust fund you usually have to have a few other side jobs.

[00:54:12] In my case it's teaching and that's incredibly demanding. And so I write when I have a moment and sometimes that isn't eight hours that's an hour. Yeah.

[00:54:26] Thank you so much for clarifying So what is the period of time that I am writing about. So we have now dealt with all forms of time that you could possibly want. So in terms of the history so this is are that period of time. I actually and am certainly focusing intensely on the period leading up to World War 2 I feel that context is very important and then also the sort of after effects of World War Two. But one of the things that I quickly realized was that there was no way to talk about the history of Latvia in essence without those particular excuse me those particular was no way to talk about those particular pieces of Latvian history without addressing in essence the kind of eternal history of the country and to address the fact that how even the sort of concepts of a country that existed without borders for a very long time emerged.

[00:55:20] And how significant that becomes in understanding the series of occupations that the country has endured and what that means in terms of for example people's attachment to the land but also in particular their attachment to language how important language becomes is kind of form of resistance and survival and language itself but kinds becomes a kind of country and identity when one does not exist yes in the very back row yes you.

[00:55:51] Thank you so much. Very good question.

[00:55:54] What are some of my experiences and connections to modern day Latvia. So I and I began I first visited Latvia in 2009. That was my first time. And and just to provide a little context for that I obviously could have gone you know at any point in time. But I always had a kind of answer to myself which was I'm extremely busy with my journalism job or money or time. But I think now if I interrogate and that I think there was a part of me that was very hesitant to find anything that was different than my grandmother's memories I was hesitant to sort of. I understood in some ways that to go there would be to test the borders of those memories and perhaps to find contradictions or even still to find out perhaps why she wanted me to focus on those memories as opposed to what I might find there.

[00:56:46] And so I began to go to Latvia and I stayed in the summer and for like five consecutive summers I went in the winters whenever I could basically get breaks in the academic calendar. And I think it's important for me to stress that you mentioned modern Latvia. I was living out in the countryside and I recognized that that is a very different experience than what one experiences for example in the capital city in Riga today. And. Yeah it is. And yet you know one of the things that I was really interested in was the way in which and trying to represent what the modern experience feels like even as the countryside in many ways sometimes feels like a place where time stood still.

[00:57:35] So the question is how how did I navigate questions of research particularly when we imagine that there have been different occupying governments for example that would have sort of archive to write their own series of documents or got rid of other documents. How did I deal with some of those questions. Boy I had thought that I was prepared as a result of having been a reporter and kind of knowing my I was never an investigative reporter but I paid attention to them and I felt like

I learned some things from them and I I thought I could handle archives. And in Latvia was like a completely different universe. And I quickly discovered that like our ideas of open records are you know not the same in every country and one of the first hurdles was essentially for example trying to access my families. What were secret files that were that the evidence that sent them to Siberia. I essentially had to prove lineage. I had to have birth certificates and show through family tree that I was a descendant and therefore should have access to those records. And and thank goodness I happen to have all those things on me. You know otherwise you end up all the way in another country and realize that the doors of slam shut on you other things that happen though for example were trying to track down war records relating to my grandfather's unit in the Latvian legion and showing up and being so excited because you know and studying the books of what they had in the archive they had their stuff there.

[00:59:06] And then I start digging through it and it's Sol in German and I don't speak German you know. So what do you do in that moment. I was very fortunate with the secret files for example that as many many Latvians speak many languages which is extremely helpful. But I had relatives who were very fluent in Russian and so we're able to translate those for me. The German documents real trick here you know they take photos and you call in other people who can help you sift through them but that was difficult and there are there are missing trails that you can't you can't necessarily find your way through unless you find other people who can tell you the unspoken rules of how to get a hold of those things.

[00:59:45] Thank you.

[00:59:47] Thank you everyone.

[00:59:52] Thank you so much. And

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