

LANDSCAPE as AN INDICATOR OF ART LIFE in Latvia During the Period of Nazi Occupation

Jānis Kalnačs

The period of a comparatively short – less than four years (June 1941–October 1944, and 6 more months in the Western part of Latvia, Kurzeme) – Nazi occupation must still be recognised as a not yet fully explored period in the history of Latvian art. Naturally, we have no reason to assert that war and occupation caused cardinal changes in Latvian art. However, considering the fact that at the end of the war a great number of artists were forced to leave their homeland (many of them were afraid of new Soviet repressions), as well as that this period was succeeded by a much longer period of Soviet occupation, it is justified to examine the role of at least one specific genre in such a situation.

This period started with gratefulness for the interruption of the Soviet terror and with the expectations of the possible restoration of the Latvian State, but these hopes were soon transformed, for most of the population, into incredulity and a sense of helplessness. These feelings were further intensified by a lack of many essential goods, and by anxiety about the fate of individuals and the whole country after the inevitable defeat of Hitler's regime.

If we try to characterise this period, we must stress that people lived in a small and restricted area. Everybody had to obtain permission from the occupational authorities even for travelling across the country. Such facts are confirmed by travel passes issued by the Fine Arts Artists' Cooperative Society to the artists who wanted to leave Riga.

But for people living in such a physically and spiritually restricted territory, culture gained functions it did not have to fulfil during peacetime. Art, as well as literature and theatre, were able to offer a kind of spiritual compensation. It must be stressed that it was not easy to purchase tickets to theatrical performances or to buy good books. Among the latter were also art books and albums that were published in larger editions than ever before.

The role of visual art as an instrument, able to give spiritual strength to people, could be characterised by the opinion expressed by a woman in a local newspaper after visiting an exhibition in a small Latvian village, Vandzene, in July 1944: "In war time, art exhibitions are like underground hideouts. People like to visit them, because it is an opportunity to leave behind some overly obtrusive self-invited guests. Let me enter into silence and visit my relatives. These are the words you could hear from the spectators of an art exhibition, if they had not fallen silent while meeting the artistic personalities and letting them talk." (Zemdedze 1944.)

The biggest Latvian art museums were almost closed. The Latvian State Art Museum had no room for permanent expositions. The premises of the Riga City Art Museum, which had for a short period been renamed Deutsches Landesmuseum (Museum of German Land), had several times been used for exhibitions clearly demonstrating Nationalsocialist propagandistic achievements of German culture, its fruitful influence on Latvian culture, the superiority of the Nazi regime and Nationalsocialism over Communist power; some exhibitions also encouraged people to economise. The titles of these shows are eloquent – "The Year of Bolshevik Rule," "The Fate of Europe Will Be Decided in the East," "Toward the Future," "How to Economise" and others. Close to such ideological purposes was also an exhibition of drawings and paintings made by German artists of Ostland (the term used by occupational powers to denote the Baltic states and a part of Byelorussia) in 1944, where a number of Estonian landscapes were exhibited as well.

The number of spectators who visited two All-Latvian art exhibitions at the Riga City Art Museum demonstrates a surprising interest, if we compare it with the number of visitors at contemporary art exhibitions. In 1942, the exhibitions were visited by more than 19 000 spectators, and in 1943, by more than 15 000 spectators. The 70th anniversary exhibition of the *grand old man* of Latvian art – landscape painter Vilhelms Purvītis (his previous solo exhibition had taken place in 1911), which was open in two spring months in 1942, was visited by almost 17 000 spectators (Konstants 2000: 147).

Another characteristic feature of the period was the unprecedented purchasing of works of art, particularly from exhibitions. For example, about one fourth of the more than 300 works displayed at the All-Latvian art exhibition in 1943 were sold (LSA 1943). This phenomenon is related to the activities of mainly

private art galleries opened in Riga and in smaller towns. Works of art were bought by local people as well as by Germans. Some of these works were exhibited at shows organised by Latvian artists living in refugee camps in Germany in the first post-war years. Several of the galleries were not only engaged in selling works of art, but also regularly organised exhibitions.

We cannot deny that, on the one hand, such large-scale purchasing of works of art helped many Latvian artists to survive. But on the other hand, this process encouraged less talented artists to participate in the art scene and offer their more trivial works for sale. These years did not favour artistic experiments. It is also characteristic to the period of 1942–1944 that among the great number of solo exhibitions there were many first exhibitions of young artists who had never before displayed their works. At the same time, it is hard to find any works by the modernist members of a Riga artists' group, except an exhibition by landscape painter Konrāds Ubāns, in Cēsis. Art critics wrote that the younger generation of artists was too quiet and more influenced by the 17th century Flemish or 19th century realists than by 20th century art.

The most favourite art genres were landscape and still life. Landscape was especially popular. The fact is also confirmed by the *Daugava* exhibition – named after Latvian "river of fortune" – the first exhibition devoted to one special theme, organised by the gallery *Zinta* in 1942. The initiator of this exhibition was Zelma Mierkalne – a former student of the Department of Geography at the Latvian State University.

The vast amount of landscape paintings, oils as well as water-colours, made during the war years can be characterised by the words of painter Jēkabs Bīne: "Landscape can be recognised as the most popular genre of contemporary painting. Its position can be endangered only by colour photography, which will expel from the art market if not all such works, then at least the sketches which are now in such great demand, just as it happened some time ago when painted portraits were replaced by photo portraits." (Bīne 1944: 47.)

In this period, the role of landscape genre differed from the one it played at general art exhibitions of the second half of the 1930s organised by the official institutions of the Republic of Latvia. It was of course one of the most favoured genres, but its popularity can be compared with that of pictures depicting everyday life, especially in the countryside, and also ethnographic or historic plots from pre-Christian times or the time of the struggle for independence after

World War I. It corresponds to the officially popularised image of Latvia as an agricultural country.

In contrast to that, at the same time, it is difficult to find depictions of actual subjects from the contemporary everyday life of this period. Of course, there were works reflecting the tasks dictated by the occupational powers, such as posters or cartoons. But for example, at the All-Latvian art exhibition of 1942, there were only two works turning to some kind of actual subject – Emma Baltmane's painting depicting a wartime goods van in a railway station and Elza Pakalne's work, *Grandmother*, where an old woman was mending a soldier's uniform.

One of the topics frequently discussed by the press was how to actualise art. Occupational authorities were of the opinion that art had rather utilitarian tasks – it had to be tranquil and to amuse the soldiers, workers and peasants.

We must emphasise that only rare examples showing the direct influence of National Socialist ideology (portraits of Adolf Hitler, etc.), as well as works directly influenced by war events can be found in the art of this period. Among such themes, the most wide-spread one was a cityscape with the ruins of St. Peter's Church, the House of Black Heads' Guild and the Town Hall in Old Riga, destroyed at the beginning of the war.

A number of representatives of occupational powers and some critics published articles in newspapers and magazines, encouraging the artists to turn their attention to actual subjects, such as the invasion of the Red Army, repression by the Tscheka, the struggle of national partisans, Latvian legionaries fighting at the Eastern front, the production of goods and collecting winter clothes for German soldiers, etc. Such themes were still extremely rarely executed. The avoidance of themes from actual life and turning to others, such as landscapes, still-lives and ethnographical motives cannot be treated as a protest of Latvian artists against the realities of everyday life – this fact just shows how they loathed the idea of participating in obtrusive propaganda and preferred to try and solve pure artistic problems.

Latvian art critics suggested that artists should find ways for expressing the tragic and pain of the time, and show the struggles of war, just as Jāzeps Grosvalds and Jēkabs Kazaks had done during World War I. We can believe that it was really difficult to express such thoughts and feelings in an occupied country. It can be compared with the situation in the second half of the 1940s, when

painter Niklāvs Strunke asked his fellow-artists living outside occupied native land to document the life of post-war refugees and the best-known Latvian artists answered that it would take more than the subject to make a good painting, and that such serious tasks would need some temporal distance.

Another, perhaps an unexpected feature of the wartime art life is the conclusion that it seems to have been more active outside Riga. This statement can be confirmed by several projects of opening art museums in small towns or even villages; some of them were carried out, some remained only projects. The most striking fact is connected with Irlava and Dr. Krišjānis Katlaps, who established one of the best collections of Latvian paintings, sculptures and works of graphic art in only a few years. Typically, he did not always pay the artists in German Reichsmarks, which were of little value, but more often purchased the works with food grown in the country. His collection of about 100 selected works contained 37 landscapes, 16 of which had been made during the years of Nazi occupation.

In their speeches, given at different festivities, Nazi officials often opposed the Western culture to Jewish, communist and Americanised culture; they dwelt upon the favourable influence of German culture on Latvian culture, and emphasised the care lavished upon the culture of small Latvia at the time of total war. For example, the General Commissar of the whole territory of Latvia, Otto Drechsler, stressed in his inaugural address to the Riga Song Festival in 1943: "Proceeding from the viewpoint of Europe [*resp.* Great Germany – *J.K.*], it is clear that after the liberation of this country from Bolshevism we gave the Latvian people all opportunities to liquidate the chaos of the Bolshevik culture and to start building their own institutions of art and culture." (Drechsler 1943.) Of course, these fatherly intonations hardly differed from the characteristic Soviet propaganda theses about the cultural liberation of Latvia from the national bourgeoisie or Nazi occupants.

One of the reasons for such a liberal attitude might be connected with the thesis often used by the representatives of occupational authorities that only thanks to the German military offensive, Latvian culture may freely develop after the year of Soviet repression. But a more substantial opinion is that in the 1930s, the majority of Latvian artists worked in the manner of conventional realism, as well as that in the last pre-war years the official cultural policy of Latvia promoted the depiction of country life. This was quite close to the idea advo-

cated by the national socialist nostalgic understanding of the country as a harmonious place, opposed to the city, ripped by international influences. Painter and art critic Juris Soikāns states that "Latvian art of the pre-war period – in opposition to the German art of this period – did not show experimental research and leaning towards extreme art trends; its subjects as well as its methods were stabilised in the framework of "honest conservatism"." (Soikāns 1991: 158.)

"The place of the landscape genre in the art of the National Socialist period can be characterised by English researcher Peters Adam's conclusion that this genre, which dominated at all official "German Art Exhibitions" in Munich was the kind of painting the artists could do without declaring too much allegiance to National Socialist theories; on the other hand, it was seen as the genre in which the German soul could best be expressed in opposite to some expressionist-favoured urban motives." (Adam 1992: 129–130.)

We cannot deny that landscape as a genre also had a patriotic, although not always directly implied meaning at this period. During the last year of war, the German authorities allowed the mass media to speak more directly about Latvia and the defence of its territory against the Red Army and Bolsheviks to strengthen the spirit of Latvian soldiers. The first issue of the *Nākotne* magazine ["The Future"], with the motto "For Homeland and Freedom," was published in the spring of 1944. It was illustrated with reproductions of landscape paintings made by Latvian artists. The author of its editorial declared: "Our first issue is devoted to our native land and its guards – men and youths, who shielded, are shielding and will shield this land with unremitting, admirable toughness and selflessness" (*Nākotne* 1944: 1). It is known that the legionaries pinned up reproductions of works by Latvian artists on the walls of their dug-outs at the Eastern front; and we know that Latvian artists, members of the Fine Arts Artists' Cooperative Society, gave their works to Latvian soldiers as presents. In general, the artists understood art and culture as forms of maintaining national identity. For example, landscape painter Jānis Kalmīte stressed in one of the presentations: "We must take pains to preserve the high level of Latvian culture, because its decline and breakdown would signify the defeat of the nation's spiritual life" (nso 1944).

The Latvian Cultural Foundation, which had been closed along with other institutions during the period of Soviet occupation, was re-established in the spring of 1943. The Foundation was allotted 5 pfennigs from the price of every

cinema show ticket, as well as sums from other public activities. The fact that German occupational authorities sometimes favoured good art could be confirmed by the prizes awarded by the Cultural Foundation for the works made during the period from July 1941 to December 1943: its decisions were backed by the General Commissariat. Twelve Latvian artists (painters, sculptors, graphic artists and makers of applied art) were awarded the prizes. It is possible that the attitude might have been different if the situation at the Eastern front had been more successful for German troops. Among other artists, whose work did not display any obedience to the dictate of occupational authorities, the re-established Cultural Foundation awarded prizes to graphic artists Pēteris Upītis and Voldemārs Krastiņš, evaluating their landscapes – Upītis found merit for his woodcut series devoted to the small town of Tukums, and Krastiņš, for his etching *Valley of the Gauja River* (Kultūras fonda godalgas 1944: 239).

Only some facts, demonstrating direct interference in art processes, are known from the period, but they cannot be compared with the stronger censure over the press or the work of publishing houses.

Naturally, the period of Nazi occupation was characterised by a more or less direct monitoring of art, especially of art exhibitions. Even Purvītis, the professor and landscape painter, who was held in high esteem by the representatives of German civil authorities, has told that some of his later, more expressive works might be recognised as examples of "degenerate art," hated by National Socialist ideologists. German art critic Valter Bloem's description of his impression of Purvītis's pictures of the 1920s and 1930s rather resembles a description of abstract paintings instead of naturalistic depictions of landscapes beloved by national socialists. "Colours are step-by-step getting untied from the subjects, they are becoming self-contained and start to live their own independent life. In this period, it is getting more and more difficult to find a real subject in the works of the old master. They are filled up with performances staged by colour and light, which in joyful ardency enjoy their newly found freedom and it seems that they have forgotten their previous connection with trees, flowers and lines." (Bloem 1942: 2.)

The situation was specific for famous painter Purvītis, who for more than ten years had been the rector of the Latvian State Academy of Art, as well as the long-time head of the Landscape Department of the Academy. He was also the director of the Riga City Art Museum and he had a large number of followers among the younger generation of Latvian artists. He was the one Latvian artist

well-known abroad since the end of the 19th century. Shortly after the occupation of Latvia by German forces, many streets and parks of Riga were renamed in honour of events, places and historic names related to the German invasion in Latvia. The only exception was the renaming of a street, which previously had had the name of a Latvian poet from the period of national awakening in the 19th century, from Auseklis to V. Purvītis Street. This episode still cannot be taken as the acknowledgement of the value of Latvian culture; it was rather caused by the fact that during his Reval period before World War I Purvītis had been a teacher of the ideologist of National Socialism, Ostland Minister of State Alfred Rosenberg.

Purvītis's 70th anniversary exhibition at the Riga City Museum was opened with a letter of greeting by Rosenberg. He wrote some slightly provocative words: "I remember the time when you taught me drawing and painting, as well as our later meetings in St. Petersburg, Moscow and Munich. I wish you many years of fruitful pedagogical work in your homeland, which owes much to your personality." (G.J. 1944.)

Sometimes it seems that too much has been spoken and written about Purvītis. Everybody admires him. But nobody really knows what he had painted in the 1920s and 1930s.

The period of Nazi occupation can also be characterised as the years of unrealised ideas and irreparable losses. One of the most tragic losses is related to Purvītis's artistic heritage, and one of the unrealised projects is a monograph about Purvītis. The visitors of his 70th anniversary exhibition subscribed for the book, which should, according to the announcement, have been published after approximately a half of a year. Two problems had to be solved before its printing. The first concerned Purvītis's dissatisfaction with the quality of wartime reproductions of his works, the other problem was about the authors of the text. At the beginning, a contract had been signed by art critic and teacher at the Latvian Academy of Art Jānis Siliņš, but soon the preparations for the book were interrupted by a proposal made by representative of General of Board of Directors to ask German art historian and director of the Lübeck art museum Professor Hans Schröder, representing the Riga General Commissariat to write a part of it.. The conflict was settled only in the spring of 1944, after which Siliņš finished the text of the monograph.

Purvītis wrote a letter on the 28th of June 1944, finally agreeing to print this

monograph: the letter is like his last will before leaving his homeland. "Considering my age and my not very good health, I believe that this exhibition was my last exhibition, and that I am very close to the end of my life. Therefore, the publication of this monograph initiated by the General Board of Directors [the institution of Latvian self-government – *J.K.*] has a special importance to me, because it will give an official evaluation of my whole artistic career." (LSA 1944.) The Soviet Army reached the territory of Latvia only one month later. Many of Purvītis's paintings were burnt in a fire when Jelgava was reoccupied, others were sent to Germany where they were lost. Now only about 150 paintings by Purvītis have been preserved, forming an extremely small part of his creative work, which included approximately 2000 works. Purvītis died in Germany four months before the end of the war. If the monograph had been published, it could have contained almost a hundred reproductions of his paintings from the period after World War I, which is less known than the first decades of his artistic career.

Analysing the effect of Nazi occupational powers on Latvian art, we cannot avoid facing similar processes during Soviet occupation, especially in the first post-war years. It is undeniable that the Nazis were more tolerant towards Latvian art than the Communists.

The general situation changed radically after the end of World War II. The Latvian artists who stayed in their homeland were forced to use the method of Socialist realism. They could not exhibit landscapes, since these paintings did not depict optimistic "Soviet reality." As a result, many landscape artists were forced to add a strong plot to their works. Those who continued to work in the way they had worked before the war and during the wartime, for instance Leo Svemps, Jānis Pauļuks, and Ansis Artums, were criticised for their formalism. Some others, such as Valdis Kalnroze, were even expelled from the Artists' Union of the Latvian Socialist Republic, or had to leave the Latvian Academy of Art, as happened to Ubāns (Nodieva 1991: 57–60).

World War II, in contrast to World War I, which had given rise to Dadaism, was not a very creative period in art history. Riva Castleman, the curator of the exhibition *Art of the Forties*, organised at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, wrote: "The forties was the period of old ideas and values held onto for reasons of security in the face of disbelief, disgust and destruction" (Castleman 1991: 11). This statement partly holds if we analyse Latvian art of the pe-

riod of Nazi occupation, but with an additional peculiarity that this time was followed by approximately ten years of a more archaic understanding of art's tasks and stricter ways of meeting these tasks.

Without idealising the period under discussion, we have to admit that the majority of Latvian artists were able to work without essentially giving up their artistic ideals during these years, resulting in a number of valuable paintings and works of graphic art, including landscapes. We can mention, for example, the intimate landscapes by Ubāns, Kalnroze, realistic depictions by Kārlis Miesnieks and Ārijs Skride, and more expressive works by Svemps, Artums, Uga Skulme, as well as etchings by Krastiņš, woodcuts by Upītis, watercolours by Francis Bange, Bruno Jaunzems, Laimdonis Grasmanis and many works by other artists.

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