

GOD'S COUNTRY

by Mirdza Jaunzemis

My parents were born in Latvia, Father in Pērkone (in 1898) near Liepaja, Mother in Karosta,(in 1903) a suburb of Liepaja. After my father's first marriage came to an end, he travelled to Canada in 1928 to seek his fortune and to have some adventures. He worked as a carpenter, a farmer, a paper hanger and a general handyman, and travelled as far west as Saskatchewan. He was a gregarious, charming fellow, who played the guitar and sang, and made friends easily. He found Latvians in many places: Montreal, Toronto and Northern Ontario; they had immigrated to Canada around 1908. Near Matheson he met several Latvian farmers, one of whom was called Roberts Wilfs. As the roaring twenties came to an end and the Great Depression set in across Canada, father was forced to abandon any plans he had and to return to Latvia in 1933, broke and discouraged. He decided to settle down and built a house on the outskirts of Pērkone. In his late thirties he met and married my mother. Their early years together were quite tragic, in that their first child, Andrejs lived only until the age of three and one half (he died of diphtheria and pneumonia) and their second child was stillborn. Their third child, my oldest sister Aina, was born in 1943.

The political situation in Latvia at this time was very grave, and when Aina was about one and a half years old my parents decided to flee from their homeland to Germany, a country that at that time was taking in many refugees fleeing from the Communist wave sweeping across eastern Europe. While the family stayed in various DP (Displaced Persons) camps, my other sister Mara was born in 1945 in Elmshorn and I was born in 1947 in Gluckstadt. During Father's time in Germany, because of his proficiency in German and English (and obviously Latvian), he became an interpreter for the British army. He had studied the two foreign languages in school in Latvia. The family lived in Germany for about three years, and finally immigrated to Canada in October of 1948. We were luckier than many, because we had a sponsor: Roberts Wilfs from the Matheson area. He was a kind, trusting man who had guaranteed that we would have a place to live, and that we would not become burdens of the Canadian government.

Thus began my family's life in Canada. At this point, because of my father's background in English from his time spent in Canada during his youth, this ability was a definite asset. Although Mother, who was of Polish extraction, could speak

Polish, German, Russian and Latvian, she could not speak English, and all her life she struggled to use it, and became quite proficient, although always speaking with a heavy accent. After an arduous crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, and arriving in Halifax, eventually we all got to Northern Ontario. My parents' first jobs were work in a lumber camp: Mother was the cook, and father was the general helper (or "bull-cook"). Soon afterwards they were able to rent a house with some land in Anthony from another Latvian family, the Wismans, and started farming. However, not long after that the Wismans said they needed the property for their own use and we were forced to move. During his first visit to Canada Father had become acquainted with some other Latvian people living in the area: Mrs. Amalija Purnis (Veitch) and Mr. Ernie Dambrowitz. They lived in Matheson, a town nearby. Father worked for a while for Mr. Dambrowitz who was a general contractor and farmer. Amalija Veitch (who had married a Scotsman) had a brother, Teodors Purnis, who owned a piece of land with a house and barn that had been built by his parents at the turn of the century, about four miles south of Matheson. He agreed to sell this property to us for \$500, a huge sum of money at the time. I believe it took many years for my parents to pay this debt, but Teodors Purnis was understanding, and I'm sure that since we were also Latvian, this made a difference in his mind. My parents were penniless and with three small children; they did not have many options open to them. Their ages were also a factor, in that Father was already in his fifties, and Mother was in her mid-forties.

We lived there until I was almost ten years old. Aina had started school while we still lived in Anthony at the Wisman property, and when we first moved to Matheson, she walked about a mile (by herself at age seven) to the nearest neighbours, the Lindsays, and together they walked the rest of the way – three more miles – to Matheson. But this situation could not continue, and the parents in the neighbourhood had to look around for another solution. For a while a taxi brought the pupils to school. But the local school board was able to arrange a unique form of transport for us to get to and from school in Ramore, a town about six miles south of the farm. We would walk about a quarter mile to #11 Highway, where a bus taking miners home from their night shift would give us a ride to school; then in the afternoon, this same bus would take us, along with the miners going in for the evening shift, and drop us off at the end of our road. We were allowed to leave the school one half hour before all the classes were finished in the afternoon, so that we could catch our ride home. (The other neighbouring students took this same bus.) Once we girls missed the bus and the

grader man who was ploughing the road gave us a lift to school in his cab. Mr. Charlie Veitch (Mrs. Veitch's estranged husband) lived in a little house at the end of our road, and in the winters he would put on his snowshoes and widen the narrow path through the woods for us to use. He would also allow us to stay in his house in the winter months (for warmth) until the bus came by and picked us up.

The elementary school in Ramore that we attended was a one-room school with all eight grades being taught by one teacher, Mrs. Bye. She had to run a daily three-ring circus, and many times the different students in different classes had to help each other. I usually had about three students in my class, but Mara was always by herself in her grade until she reached grade seven and we moved south. Aina had three students in her class, one of whom was Diane Birch, and we spend time every summer with her and her family even now, while visiting our homestead. I remember that Aina was to watch over us, as she was the oldest, and was to report to Mother about our misbehaviour. But she involved herself in some bad behaviour too: we were not allowed to chew gum at home, but when a student gave it to us, we would chew it and then place it in a hiding spot near the base of a poplar on the way home, and then pick it up to rechew the next day on the way to school.

We had a very healthy, albeit isolated upbringing. We had no car, but we had a horse and buggy (and a sleigh for use in the winter). We never did get a car while we lived there. Once a week Father would go into town with a list of necessary items that we would need. Our only income at the start was the baby bonus cheques that arrived monthly (\$5 per child). Father became acquainted with a storekeeper in Matheson, Mr. Moore, who operated a grocery store in town. Dad arranged to sell him the excess produce and dairy from our farm in return for necessities such as soap, sugar, flour, fruit and tea. Mr. Moore was always very kind to us, helping in many ways. I still remember cookies we got that were well past their "best-before" date. I also remember that our bed sheets were made of sugar or flour bags. In those days one could buy a hundred-pound bag of these items, and the bags were made of cotton; our mother made the sheets. We had cattle, which provided milk: Mom used it to make butter, sour cream and cheese. We girls helped with the churning of the butter. We had a large garden which allowed us to have all sorts of vegetables, which Mother canned or stored for use in the winter. We picked wild blueberries, strawberries, cherries and raspberries, and Mother made jam. She loved to go into

the woods to pick mushrooms, and my sister Mara became interested in doing this, and continued to do so for many years after Mother died.

We gave names to all the animals on our farm, since they were our "pets". At first we had pigs, but later we had only cattle. This became difficult and painful to us when in the fall some of our cattle had to be slaughtered. Mr. Veitch usually came during a school day to kill the "chosen" animal so that we would not have to witness this (Father also had trouble with the killing part). Dad had become acquainted with some Latvians in Timmins who came to help butcher the animals, and who also got some of the meat. I do remember that on one occasion a pig was killed on a Saturday, because I remember the squeal of the pig and that there was blood everywhere. We always had chickens and extra eggs were taken to market. Mother canned meat from the animals and once made sausages and smoked them in our chimney; they were stored in our cellar for use during the winter. The sausage casings came from the pig's intestines, and mother painstakingly washed them clean – and we had no running water in the house. (And we still don't).

We all helped in many ways to keep the farm going: we all milked a cow before going to school in the mornings, we collected eggs, we went berry picking, we cut thistles out of fields, we helped with planting and weeded the gardens and picked potato bugs off the potato plants. As to the planting of potatoes, Father had a plow which he hooked on behind the horse; Mother would lead the horse while Father made sure that the furrow was made straight. We looked after and herded the cattle, and we helped with the haying; father had two work horses, Black and Queen, and a big wagon with a hay rick, (also a mower pulled by the horses). I remember being on top of the hay wagon tamping down the hay that was thrown on pitchforks to me. There were no hay balers then. We had fields of grain, and the various farmers in the area took turns using a threshing machine to harvest the grains. We also ground chicory to make "coffee". In the fall we harvested the potatoes and earned one cent per six-quart basket, and two cents for an eleven-quart basket. (In addition, we each received an allowance of 25 cents per week, which we spent on penny candy at the variety store in Ramore.) On winter evenings we would help with shelling dried peas in the kitchen while Father told us fantastic stories.

In 1954 Hurricane Hazel hit southern Ontario, and the rain from that storm reached as far north as Matheson. On that day (I was seven) Dad had taken me

with the horse and buggy into town to the dentist. On the way back it was raining so hard, and the sky was green in colour, that although we had a tarp to cover us, Father decided that we must turn into a neighbour's house because he did not know how long this downpour would last, or if it would get worse. The neighbour was Mr. Pearce, and this property is now a golf course part-way between Matheson and our house.

About the house: the downstairs was insulated, but the attic was not – and this is still the case today. Downstairs there were two rooms: the bedroom was where we all slept with a closet as a partial partition between our beds and that of our parents. We girls had two beds: Aina slept in one, and Mara and I shared the other. The other room was the everything else room: cooking, dining, living, working, studying, playing, etc. In the winter we all slept downstairs, but in the summer we girls could sleep in the attic, especially when visitors came from Timmins to stay with us. At the beginning we had no electricity and used an oil lamp and had a wood stove. (I remember the chimney catching on fire from time to time in the winter, and we all had to go outside and hope the house did not burn down.) Our refrigeration in the winter was the porch (which was not insulated), the upstairs and the cellar. I remember that one winter we had a side of beef hanging in the freezing cold stairwell leading to the upstairs – I was afraid to go by it – it was blood red and awful!

In the porch there was a trapdoor leading to the cellar. This door was placed about ten inches from the threshold leading from the main room of the house and we had to be warned when someone had gone down to the cellar, because otherwise one could just step and fall right in. The drop was about five feet. This would almost happen from time to time, and we would be left hanging on to the door latch until someone came to rescue us, or we somehow regained our footing. One time Father was in the cellar with the trapdoor open, and Mara was coming in from the outside, carrying an armload of her dolls and doll clothes, as it was raining. Since she had come from the light outside into the darkened porch, she did not see where she was stepping. Down the cellar steps she fell with all her dolls, dresses and blankets! Father was very upset, and Mara was crying, but was not seriously hurt. We remembered this and then were very careful (most of the time) about going into this area of the porch.

We had one battery-operated radio which was used very sparingly – mainly to hear the news and weather reports. It was a rechargeable type of battery, which Father took to town when necessary. After some years had passed, Dad had to pay to have electric poles installed along our road – a distance of about a quarter-mile. Finally we would have light! I still remember taking turns sitting by the light switch waiting for it to get dark enough to turn on the light. Now we were able to listen to some radio programmes and soap operas, also some country and western music on the CBC. But of course, we never had a phone.

We had a well on the property, but no running water in the house, and we still don't have any (and the well eventually dried up). Of course, because of this, we had an outhouse – and we still have it today. In the summer we caught rain in barrels and in the winter we brought in snow and put it on the wood stove to melt. Winters were VERY cold, sometimes reaching 50 degrees Fahrenheit below zero, (once even 70 below, according to Father's diary), but we girls did not notice the cold – we still played outside in the fresh air. In the summer the temperature could soar to 120 above zero. Before we had electricity our mother would wash all of our clothes by hand over a washboard in a big tub, and hang them on the line outside to dry – winter and summer. In the winter the clothes would come in all stiff with ice and would then thaw and dry in the warmth of the room – with that wonderful fresh scent. (Afterwards she had an electric wringer washer, which made things a bit easier.) Any ironing was done by heating the iron on top of the wood stove and hoping you did not burn the cloth. When it was time to have baths, (once a week – water was precious) we used the same washtub and Mother heated water on the stove. I was the smallest, so bath time began with me, then my sisters, then Mother, then Father; we all bathed in the same water – Father, of course, had the worst of it. I guess hot water was added as needed.

Our closest neighbour was Mr. Veitch, whose son Bob lived across on the other side of highway #11; his wife Joan had been crippled by polio as a child, but they had five children. Bob had to do the farm work as well as raise the children. He was a very kind and helpful man who kept an eye on our farm when we moved away; he also used the fields for hay and grain. In the other direction there were the Judds, again genuine and supportive people. The Latvians that Father had met during his first visit to Canada still lived in the area: in Matheson Mrs. Amalie Purnis/Veitch became a good friend, also the Dambrowitzes, Ernie and Jessie (who was Scottish). The Wismans were still nearby, and Roberts Wilfs and his

family continued to live on their farm. Amalie had eight children whom she raised single-handedly after leaving her abusive husband. Ernie and Jessie had ten children. Back in those days many children were necessary since everyone helped on the farm. In Timmins there were the Henkusens, the Pukulis and the Ivanovs families, all Latvians. In the summer they would sometimes drive out to visit us, and we would have some exciting times. The children of these families really enjoyed getting out into the country in the summer, and we were happy to have some company other than each other. (Our road was never plowed in the winter.) They especially enjoyed going across to the rocky hills, and getting rides with the horse and buggy. It would be very quiet around the farm when they all left. I remember that I went to Timmins only once – when one of these families took me back with them for a few days. On St. John's day (the Summer Solstice) we would have a big celebration and the Latvians would come and have a great time. Father would burn a tire which was suspended from a gallows-like structure – what an awful smell! Lots of food and singing, and lots of fun!

Father still kept in touch with his nephew (Žanis Rāva) and with a close friend (Jānis Rolavs) and their families in Toronto – they each had one son. Once they all drove up to visit with us, and kept exclaiming that this part of Ontario reminded them greatly of Latvia. Once even my godmother and a friend drove up from Detroit to visit with us. There were some other people that Father wrote to, one of whom was Kristīne Krīgeris in Toronto, and from time to time we would receive a "care package" of used clothing: furs , purses, fancy dresses, etc. Kristīne got these items from the families she used to work for. When the Timmins families came to visit, we and the other girls would have a "fashion show", modeling this finery – it was really not very practical clothing to be used on the farm, but I'm sure that those people's hearts were in the right place.

We had a dog – Dadzis. He often growled, but never bit us. Sometimes we would dress him in people clothes – he would growl all during this fun. We would also have barn cats, and we sometimes dressed them too in dolls' clothes. Mara and I would try to take them for a ride in a doll carriage, but they would take off across the field, still wearing their outfits. To entertain ourselves, we would read, colour, take walks, play cards, do puzzles. We had no radio for ourselves, nor did we have a record player. Our favourite "playground" in the summer was the rocky hills across the road from the house; we would spend hours there, making mud pies, looking for frogs in the spring, enjoying nature, being in our own world. Mara and

I often had make-believe families: as I remember, we made them up based on the people found in Eaton's Catalogue; we had great conversations play-acting the various parts. Twice a year the parents would order needed items from this same Eaton's catalogue: shoes, pants, etc. And I used to play "teacher" with Aina and Mara who were the pupils. (I already had teacher-like tendencies.) Mara walked around on her knees (because she was taller than me); I gave them exercises to do, and then marked them. We rarely visited neighbours – farm people are always working, and of course, we had no car. And we never went trick-or-treating. One of the work horses, Queen, (we called her "Queenie") was a gentle animal who let us ride her – with no saddle, just a halter and a bit. In the winter we went sledding, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing. On very cold mornings we could go out and walk on top of the snow; overnight it had formed a heavy partially-frozen layer on the top, but as the sun warmed it, it became soft snow again. In winter evenings (it got dark very early) when we girls had to use the outhouse, which was attached to the barn, we would go there two at a time. We used cut-up newspapers as toilet paper, but also, we took matches with us and burned some of this newsprint for light, and for a bit of warmth. We could have burned down the whole barn along with the outhouse – but I guess we were lucky...

Father had built a granary which sat behind the barn and the haystacks, and my sisters slept there one fall night before the grain was put there. They can still remember that night: there was a full and extremely bright harvest moon. Somehow the cattle from a neighbour's farm off Highway #11 had broken through a fence and the girls could hear them passing by the granary. They chased after them, but the animals seemed to know how to get back to their own farm without too much prodding. This was quite a long way for the cattle to come – maybe they were moonstruck! Also, Aina and Mara walked along the highway and through the stretch of woods in order to get back home. Quite a midnight adventure – but the night was as bright as day!

School was important to us, and we spent much time doing homework, etc. Our parents had the European idea of schooling, meaning that we were taught to read and write and count before entering school. My two sisters began to go to school before me, and I started to learn English from them. I remember that I was too small to attend in the winter because the snow was too deep, so I started school in May; because Father had taught me to read and write at home already, I was

able to finish grade one by the end of that June. (By the age of four I was able to read, but I don't know if I understood what I was reading.) The next September I went to school until the snow came because I was still quite small, and then I took correspondence courses (with help from Dad) until I was able to go back to school in the spring. That year I managed to finish the required work for grades two and three, so upon my return the next September I was in grade four at age seven.

Father organized a "Latvian school" for us: every Saturday morning we had lessons. We learned to read and write in Latvian, sing songs, and retell stories in our own words; of course this meant that during the week we had to do some preparation for our lessons. I insisted that Father grade our work – thinking like a teacher. This was done according to the European method: 5 was the top mark, and so on down. We decided that "5+" was like "A+" (as opposed to just "5"). It was expected that we speak Latvian in the house, especially with our parents. After we had learned English, we found it easier to talk amongst ourselves in our new language, and this led to some arguments and scolding from the parents. Some weekend evenings when all the work was done, we would have sing-alongs – both my parents had good voices. And Father also taught us how to dance in that same "everything" room – the music must have come from the radio.

Father considered Sunday to be our day of rest and he did no work except for the necessities: milking, checking the fields and fences with the dog, watering and feeding the cattle. Meals still had to be prepared, but otherwise Sunday was a quiet day. Father also arranged for us to have "church" on Sunday mornings. We would all sit around the dining table and Father would teach us some Latvian hymns, read from the Bible, and sometimes from a religious book, and taught us the Lord's prayer. We also had "vespers": some hymns and a prayer in the evening.

Although it seems that Dad ran our lives, Mom did all the housework: cooking, mending, sewing, baking bread, making kvass (a fermented non-alcoholic drink with brown bread as the main ingredient), washing, hanging out the laundry to dry, cleaning, canning. We helped when we could. We did not have fancy appliances, just a wood stove. Just about everything had to be done by hand: mixing, sweeping (no vacuuming) , milking cows, churning butter, etc. We always had tasty and nutritious meals since Mother was an excellent cook. However, since we always had sandwiches for lunch during the week at school (and even

throughout high school), I am not eager to eat sandwiches to this day. On our birthdays Mother would make a delicious cake (nothing from the store), and for Christmas and Easter we helped her with making special treats: cookies, bacon buns, sweet breads, buns, etc.

In the summer everyone had outside work to do, but in the winter things slowed down a bit. We spent our days at school, Father worked in the woods cutting down trees for firewood, and Mom spent her time with housework and cooking. Father had made many of our pieces of furniture: the dining room table, benches large and small, shelving, the picket fence around the flower garden, etc. He could become quite creative: he would go into the woods and find the appropriate type of curved branch which he then peeled and whittled into the size and shape of a door handle, allowed it to dry and attached it to the door. He also made wooden towel racks from suitable branches, a large bolt for the outside door, and any other small things that were needed. He had decided that since an area in the near woods had a lot of birch trees (these trees are loved by Latvians), he chopped out all the other trees; this Birch Grove made for a lovely place in which to take walks. He also built a lean-to shed next to the barn.

We had a herd of about twelve cattle, and at one point Father had acquired a young steer – with an attitude. He liked to jump fences, and he was quite vicious-looking – but he was afraid of our dog. In order to keep him from jumping the single-strand barb-wire fences, Father had placed a heavy chain around his neck with a large piece of wood attached, so that if he tried to jump, he would be stopped by this contraption. One fall evening (when I was six), our parents were milking the cows and we were to keep our eyes on the calves. The steer seemed to be leading the herd to a fenced-in corner where the dog stopped him. He tried to jump this fence, and got his leg across it, but it got caught ; the dog started to chase him and he bolted. As he was running, he tore the fence off the insulators that attached the wire to the posts, and raced across the field with the fence trailing and twisting behind. As the steer tore past, I tripped and was caught by the fence and fell into the barbed wire; I was carried along with no control and no way of saving myself. Finally the animal was stopped by a big hay stack, and I was able to jump out and run into the house, with my legs bleeding very badly. We were all in shock, but my mother knew what to do: she sat me down, put my feet into a bowl, washed my legs (I still remember that the water in that bowl was red), and wrapped them, first in waxed paper, then in bandages. Since we did not

have a car, I was not able to go to the hospital right away. We all had a bad night, and the next morning Father took me with the horse and buggy to Matheson hospital. Two doctors spent six hours stitching me up with many, many stitches, even some in the crook of my right arm. Since the wounds had already begun to heal, the doctors were not able to close them all properly, and to this day I have wide scars and the dots from the stitches on both of my legs, mainly on the insides of my thighs and the backs of my knees. Only after all this trauma did we realize that Aina also had quite a gash on her right leg near her ankle, and since she did not have stitches, her scar is also quite prominent. Mara was unscathed – just a little scratch. As I was recovering, my sisters had made a promise that they would not tease me ever again -- yeah, right!...

This was one farm accident; the next one was just as traumatic. Since Father had no sons, he needed us girls to help him with the farm work. One fall day during our last year there when Aina was thirteen years old, she was out riding the mower (its blades would move back and forth very quickly) while Father was driving a tractor that he had rented: there had been quite a bit of rain previously, so the wheat was very wet and had flattened. This was the only time he was using a tractor for this, because he was trying to salvage some of his crop. The stalks would get caught in the blades of the mower, Father would stop the tractor and Aina would jump off and lift the wheat out of the way of the blades. He did not turn off the tractor's motor, nor did he disengage the gear, because they had to do this very frequently; he just waited with the engine running while Aina did this. Nor did Aina put the gear of the mower into neutral. At one point, while she was doing this, the tractor jerked ahead for a split second, and Aina's left thumb was cut off just above the first joint by the blade as it went back and forth. Aina cried out: "You cut off my thumb!" She started to run in front of the tractor and then began to writhe on the ground. Dad had some binder twine with which he made a tourniquet to stop the blood from spurting out. (One of us went and found the bit of thumb, in case it was possible to reattach it). Father was beside himself, yelling and crying to the point where Frank Judd heard him and came to see what had happened. He whisked Aina off to the hospital – she did not want her bit of thumb. I remember Mother throwing it into the fire of the stove – after having kept it in a cupboard for two days. Aina's thumb healed and she has been able to do almost everything she has needed to do with the stub that was left. Father never forgave himself for doing this to his child.

Because of these farm accidents, and because there was no secondary school nearby (the closest ones at the time were in Timmins or Kirkland Lake – a bus ride of about one and one-half hours), things needed to change. Aina had almost finished elementary school. In 1957 our parents decided to move south to a Latvian camp near Barrie – Saulaine. It was difficult to leave: we had to liquidate all the livestock and some furniture. Frank Judd had a van and we all crowded into it with all our worldly goods and our cat and our dog for the trip to our new home. After six years near Barrie, the family moved to Toronto. About four years later, in 1967, Aina and Uldis and Mara and Indulis drove back up to Matheson to see what was happening to our property (the parents had never sold it). They were shocked to see the small size of the house and barn – how did we all manage to live there? That was the "renaissance" of the old homestead. Of course it needed some work, and it still does, but it is our first and now second home.

I called this memoir "God's Country" because many people in Northern Ontario still call it that: clean air, unspoiled nature, far less polluted than the cities and towns down south. (The Southerners would also enviously use this term.) It was an excellent place in which to grow up; we were always warm with good food and shelter, but ours was not like the childhoods of many of our friends. The next two generations have always enjoyed our visits up there every summer. Upon arrival, my sisters' kids would run out to the pea patch for some excellent peas, right off the vines. After the parents retired, they would make the trip up to Matheson in May and return to Toronto in October. Father built a play-house for the grandchildren and made other toys for them. We still maintain the farmhouse, but the barn is beginning to crumble. Every summer improvements are made: a new outhouse, a new roof, filling in the cellar, new flooring, new wooden shingles, etc. We still go blueberry and mushroom picking, but we can now drive to the different spots to get the best ones. We can go swimming and revisiting old friends and neighbours. We have campfires every night as long as it is not raining, and every day is enjoyed with work, play and feasting.