

This book may well have never come to be without the childhood years spent at the kitchen table with my great-aunt Laura Strautzels (1905–2003), a remarkable storyteller with a joyous love of words in four languages (Latvian, German, Russian, and English, plus the occasional Ovid fragment recalled from high school). Aunt Laura's photographic memory, wry humor, keen intelligence, and elegant narrative style brought to life for me the vanished landscapes of pre-Soviet Europe, through her accounts of life on our family's prosperous farmstead, as a university student in Riga and a provincial schoolteacher during the interwar First Republic, and during two world wars and two exiles (the second to America; the first to Tver in Russia, where she lost a beloved little sister, made friends with Russian classmates, and rose to first in her class at the Rimskaya-Korsakova School for Girls). Because of Aunt Laura, the past has always seemed to me like a foreign country still open to visitors.

When I began working on this project, I talked about it with Aunt Laura during my visits to the family home in Cleveland. As always, she listened with acute interest. At some point she noted that my research themes made her think about the family farmstead, Strautzelas, where she grew up and to which she returned often in adulthood as the *de facto* head of household, taking over for her less practically inclined mother. I asked her to tell me more, but she said she needed to think about it. The following morning she announced that she was ready to talk, and I sat down with my tape recorder. I ask the reader's indulgence in reproducing here the narrative she delivered to me on that September morning in 1997, not only because it will serve as the only published testimony to her astonishing memory and verbal gifts, but also because it encapsulates so many of the themes of this book. (As always, alas, much of the beauty is lost in translation.) Like the agrarian memoirs discussed in chapter 1, her story begins with idyllic childhood memories of the Strautzelas farmstead, but it concludes with the despoliation of her own personal ethnoscape by the forces of wetland drainage (*meliorācija*) during the late 1930s, at the zenith of agrarian nationalist productivism and on the eve of World

War II and the Soviet occupation of Latvia. "Do you know what title I want to give it?" Aunt Laura asked me before she began narrating. "The ditch."

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Strautzeļas was a farmstead. The fields were primarily for grain. All the fields were divided into geometric shapes, squares or triangles or some other shape, with the help of ditches. And these ditches were the only drainage. This drainage was very primitive. The fields were a little bit sloped, and there was a sort of low-lying area. That was left as an uncultivated meadow, and it stretched the entire length of the property along that edge—about two kilometers. No one fertilized it or mowed it, there was no hay—they just kept it. And a little stream flowed through the meadow, a little meandering stream. And on the banks of the stream were tree stands in two places. We had the Big Grove and the Little Grove. And funnily enough these groves formed themselves—very little work had to be done in them. We all very much loved the near one—not just the children, but the entire household loved it, and if people came from Riga, or sometimes guests from Jelgava, then we would eat breakfast and—"Let's go to the grove."

The biggest event for the Strautzeļas household and for this stream was springtime. My, how we awaited the spring! It occurs to me to compare it to provincial towns in America awaiting the arrival of a touring performance by the Metropolitan Opera. The performances run for maybe two weeks. And everyone waits nervously before it, and enthuses after they've left, and then there is something to talk about and remember. That's how at Strautzeļas every year you awaited the same old springtime. Every year. Everyone—not just the children. The children most of all, but also for example the farmhands and herders—everyone went to check the pond. (There was also a pond in the meadow, and a well and a sauna, and also one farmhands' house, where the laborers could live.) And you went to see whether spring had arrived, so as not to miss the very beginning. First the pond thawed, full of frogs croaking. Then you looked—yes, the eggs have been laid. The eggs weren't one by one, but in clumps that were called spawn. And the children went to watch how the spawn grew. But there would still be snow here and there. Suddenly the stream swelled—it rose up and was no longer calmly blanketed with its layer of winter snow, but began to split, and water began to appear here and there, and then it jostled, and the snow also started to push around. Well, and that was the culmination.

Then the "visitors" began to arrive—the songbirds. That was called the nesting time, and they all had it at around the same time. The starlings had already arrived before them. They lived in little man-made wooden houses, attached to ap-

ple trees in the orchard, which were inspected before the spring arrival to see if they were still in good shape, or whether a new little board needed to be attached for the bird to sit on when he sings in front of his house. And the starlings began to whistle.

It sounds like bells in the sky—you look: blue skies, you don't see anything, but everything is ringing, ringing, it sounds like either a stringed instrument, or silver bells. What is it? The skylarks. They hover as high as they can in the sky. But why do they sing, and why do they hover right there, above the gray field? There is nothing on the field, or maybe there is a thin green layer of winter grain (rye and wheat were planted in the fall). They hover up there and sing because down in that bare field is the mother on her eggs. My, how beautiful those skylarks are!

The biggest tree in the grove, which stood apart from the others, had its top cut off and a wheel had been attached horizontally, and that's where the storks were awaited. They came in pairs, sometimes two pairs, sometimes only one. When the storks arrived, they tested the wheel themselves, jumping on the rim to see if it held.

And then also all sorts of little birds. Once they arrived, then quite soon the whole land, the whole grove, and the whole meadow suddenly was one great carpet of flowers—exactly like a carpet. In the low places, right by the banks of the stream, there were yellow marsh marigolds. Everything was carpeted with marsh marigolds. In the shadier places were anemone flowers, also yellow. Then higher up were yellow primroses and purple swallow-wort. And it all looked like a carpet, throughout the entire meadow.

There were some old trees, and they had lots of hollow places. Birds nested in all the hollow trees. And we were taught that you could look, but you couldn't breathe on them, and you couldn't show your teeth or talk: then the bird would abandon the nest. And we three sisters would go from tree to tree—we knew where the old trees were. What were these old trees? They were rowan trees and crab apple trees. And the branches were knotted, and often water would gather in the knots, and there the birds had made their nests. We lifted each other up as best as we could in order to see, because the nest was a little too high for us.

The little grove was especially beautiful on this side, where we brought guests. It was mostly birches. And under the birches almost nothing grew on its own, except for the junipers. The birches—well, it was a park, just like a park. The birches would already have leaves. A little farther along the stream bank, where the birches ended, were hazelnut trees, which let out a spray of golden pollen when they blossomed. Then with the birches there were also rowans, and another wonderful tree—the bird-cherry, and that was blossoming too. The nut trees first.

And even before the nut trees, the pussy willow catkins—already in late February they were bright silver, and the branch was a sort of bright brown color.

So the storks were making their nest, and the meadow was full of little baby frogs, and they all had food, and all the birds had food. And there were all sorts of insects, sort of a natural jungle, and they had good pastures there. When the bird-cherries had started to bud out, one lovely evening the nightingales began to sing. Wonderful! They would sing all night. They say about the nightingale that when she's singing she suddenly loses her voice, and you think she's gotten tired of it. No! She gets so carried away that sometimes she has a heart attack—a heart attack from ecstasy. The mother hatches the eggs, the father sings. All night until the light of dawn, and the bird-cherries are getting ready to bud out, to blossom.

And that was the "touring performance," and it lasted around a month. The storks had arrived from Africa, where they had been waiting to return to their homeland. The majority of these birds came back to their place of birth. Sometimes the very same storks come and come—suddenly one comes back alone. His partner had probably died on the journey. Sometimes he lives alone, he can't get a new partner. He lives out the summer alone in the nest, without children. . . .

But, well, life progresses, doesn't it? [As an adult] I start to get called in to the township council. "We have a project and you must participate in the project. We want to drain the fields, and you must give your one-and-a-half-kilometer stream in your meadow, so that a drainage ditch can be dug there. And you must join the drainage society." I refuse. They ask me why, and I say, "That is the most beautiful place," and I tell them about it. I say—when visitors come from Riga and other cities, then we go to the grove and everyone likes it there very much, and it's beautiful there in late summer too. "That's unacceptable," they say, and, "Nowadays everyone is draining, and everyone needs that drainage ditch, and you and your farmstead are backward, and the way that grove looks—I'm ashamed to drive by it!" I don't listen, and for a good long while I don't listen.

Well, finally I have to listen after all. I agreed to join the drainage society. That's how it is—progress, everyone wants artificial fertilizers, everyone needs the drainage ditch, and they all run their ditches into the big ditch. And I saw how the ditch was dug; it was around two meters wide, fairly deep. And so it happened.

And it's funny—from that very summer we notice that we no longer have flowers, that nothing grows there anymore. Everything starts to change. And here and there a tree dies. And we are surprised to see owls showing up in the apple orchard. One time, for example, we were sleeping in the attic room, the windows were opened outward, and I see on the wall something like the shadow of a bottle. I turn my head to see what it could be—an owl is looking right at me! An owl com-

ing into the bedroom! Another time I go to the window downstairs to see what's shining there. Two owls in the cherry orchard. It was strange—owls started coming to the house. They lived in the woods, in the groves. We noticed them for several summers. And then the nightingales started singing right in the yard. And they sang all night. We kept the windows open at night, and one night my mother awakens me and says, "Can you sleep? I can't sleep when the nightingale comes so close to sing." It had come right up to her window.

So we started wondering, what is this? At first we didn't really notice the changes—well, only that the ditch was ugly. Only that much. And then everyone began to talk about how the grove dwellers were coming to our yard at night, as if to complain. And we talked about it and decided—something is going to happen, something terrible. In the old days, when forest birds and forest animals come to people's houses, that means war is coming.

Well, and that's how it ended. And all this time I still thought about the ditch and the changes in that grove, and the birds' strange behavior, when they began staying in the yard right by the windows—I identified it with a prophecy of disaster from God. I was convinced that the old folks were right! That if a forest owl comes to the house, it means war. Until here [in America] I started hearing about ecology, about the Amazon River, and how they cleared the forests improperly there, and so on. It occurred to me that the change in that grove, and everything that happened, was ecology. At that time I didn't know about this ecology. And so our "wetland" was transformed into nothing. Into nothing. It had to be drained and planted with wheat and rye. And all around there wasn't a single grove—ours had been the only one. Everyone was draining, and it kept getting worse and worse in that grove, and one after another the trees died. And then in the Communist times they rode over it with bulldozers and flattened the grove.