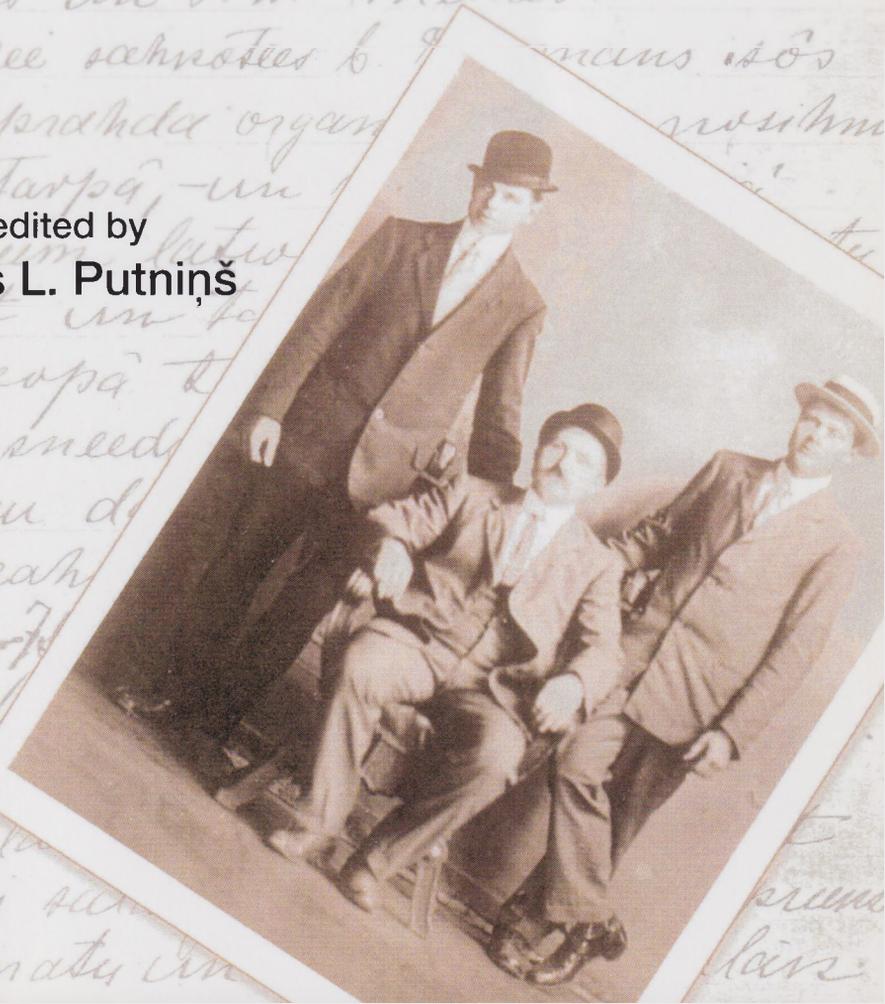


EARLY LATVIAN SETTLERS IN AUSTRALIA

edited by
Aldis L. Putniņš



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Sterling Star

First published in 2010 by Sterling Star Pty Ltd

Sterling Star
PO Box 6219
South Yarra, Victoria 3141 Australia

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www.laikraksts.com

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Title: Early Latvian settlers in Australia / edited by Aldis L Putniņš.

ISBN: 9780646546803 (pbk.)

Subjects: Latvians — Australia — History.

Immigrants — Australia — History.

Other Authors/Contributors: Putniņš, Aldis L.

Dewey Number: 994.0049193

Printed and bound by *Digital Print Australia*

Front cover: minutes of the inaugural meeting of the Lettish Association of Sydney; Walter Zihrul (seated) — first chairman of the Lettish Association of Sydney — to the right is his brother.

Back cover: Captain Herman Thomson, a Latvian from Port Pirie.

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Latvian Anzacs

Elena Govor

The territory of present-day Latvia was originally home to 157 men who served in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the First World War. They, together with all other servicemen born in the Russian Empire, were the subject of my study *Russian Anzacs in Australian History* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005). Former Russian subjects in the AIF numbered around 1,000 servicemen, of whom Latvian-born Anzacs were a significant proportion. This study looks more closely at the Latvian-born group, particularly at the ethnic Latvians and Livs (also known as Livonians), the ancient inhabitants of what today is the Republic of Latvia. By the early twentieth century Latvia's territory was divided between three provinces of the Russian Empire, viz. Livland, Courland and Vitebsk. Russia took control of much of these lands in the early eighteenth century as a result of the Russo-Swedish war and by the end of the century had full control. Since the Middle Ages these territories were ruled by German crusaders, followed by the kingdoms of Poland and Sweden. Under Russian rule the territory developed rapidly, attracting new settlers, especially to its main port Riga, the second largest port in the Russian Empire. All this determined a complex ethnic composition of the population.

Ethnic breakdown and complexities

Among the 157 Latvian-born Anzacs, 11 were Jewish, 14 were Slavs, two were British (though born in Rīga), and at least 18 were Baltic Germans, while the rest — 112 men — were predominantly of Latvian and Livonian background, with some admixture of German or other European parentage. Determining their ethnicity is not always simple as Latvians, per-

haps more than other emigrants, usually 'Westernised' their names. This was partly due to the complexity of the spelling of Latvian surnames, but also because many of them went to sea at an early age without passports. Not constrained by existing identity documents, they could easily simplify their names or take English names. Also, Latvian names were often corrupted by enlisting clerks. Here the main name used is either the name that the person was naturalised under in Australia or, if they were not naturalised, the name used for service records and alien registration.

Many people, especially from such multinational city-ports as Rīga, did not fit the shackles of one nationality. Latvian identity had to struggle to oppose first Germanisation and then Russification of the Latvian territories. The influences of Russian language and culture came via different avenues — education, army service and involvement in revolutionary struggle. The last sometimes led to imprisonment, exile to Siberia and torturous escape to Australia, as was the case with Rudolph Mahlit, a political refugee. His letters addressed to another Latvian, Jacob Silin, who came to Australia ahead of him, are written in a mixture of both languages — Russian and Latvian.¹ Similarly, Edward (Ted) Seltin's son tells about Russian influences: 'Dad came from a poor Latvian family but he could also speak good Russian, as that was the official language of the governing authorities at that time. [...] One had to become a bit bilingual to survive, I suppose. He did not appear to have any animosity to the Russians as such, although he told me there was an abortive revolution in Russia in 1905, he would have been about 12 then, and the Cossacks arrived in the area to maintain order and discipline. [...] He regarded them as cruel oppressors of the Latvian people, and the Russian people too, I suppose.'²

Several Latvians seem to have genuinely taken on a dual ethnic identity. Ian Rosing certainly seemed to be one — a Latvian (though in his naturalisation papers he claimed Omsk in Siberia was his birthplace) who served three years in the Russian army, he felt strong connections with both sides and after the war made attempts to officially represent both Latvian and Russian interests in Australia. His son Jack Rosing told me that his real Latvian name was Rozītis and described how 'he was very fond of Russia and Latvia. I remember my dad meeting some Russian people and some Latvian people and Latvians said, "Your dad speaks



Ian (Jānis) Rosing

perfect Latvian, he has no foreign accent”, and I have heard the same from Russian people that my dad spoke perfect Russian.³

Convoluting ethnic origins were quite common among Latvian-born Anzacs. Edward Sendon, his grandson told me, ‘was a Latvian, but he was actually a Scotchman before that, like his father was Scotch, and his father owned a shipping company. He went as first mate, jumped ship here in Australia. He could still talk Latvian when he was here.’⁴ A birthplace is not always what it seems either. Latvians from country areas — like Ted Seltin — commonly gave Rīga as their birthplace for official records. Even

though he was born, his son said, in the small Latvian town of Rūjiņa, ‘he always used “Rīga, Latvia” as his place of birth because Rīga, being a city, it had more chances of meaning something to the general population’. In a few cases Russians (for instance John Noscov from the Ural Mountains and Ivan Odloff from Nizhny Novgorod) and Estonians gave Rīga as their alternative birthplace, though they are not included in this study. In total, 82 per cent of those from present-day Latvia claimed its three largest port cities — Rīga, Liepāja (often recorded as Libava) and Ventspils (often recorded as Vindava) — as their birthplaces.

Social and occupational background

The most telling characteristic of Latvian Anzacs is their social-professional background. Among the 157 Latvian-born Anzacs, 99 were employed in seafaring-related occupations as sailors, firemen, ship's carpenters, sail-makers, riggers, and a ship's first mate. Although some enlisted stating their occupations as labourers or miners, their tattoos, painstakingly described by the enlisting officials, betray their seafaring past. They landed here by either discharging at Australian ports or deserting their ships. The occupational breakdown of the remaining Anzacs is as follows: 25 were labourers, including miners, timber workers and farm hands; 25 were engaged in various trades such as engine driver, fitter, barber, and painter. There were also three farmers and five educated professionals — two teachers, an artist, a clerk, and a medical student. A number of educated people were found in all the categories. For example, John Skalberg and Nicolas Rehrick graduated from secondary schools in Latvia, Theodor Lambahirt studied at the school of commerce in Riga, and John de Raupak-Ropenberg attended a nautical school in Russia, trained further after the war at Leith Nautical College in Scotland, and served as a ship's officer. Ian Rosing's language skills were noted in his service records: 'can speak and write German and English fluently, speaks modern Greek, good scholar in Russian'.⁵ His ability to speak Latvian was omitted. Perhaps it was too obscure a language.

Reasons for emigration

Seafarers predominated among the Latvians who came to Australia. Young males usually left home as teenagers to seek employment on ships. The reasons included pressure to make a living, the romance of seafaring life, family traditions, and easily available employment. Thus, John Ivanoff left Liepāja at about 12 while John August Pankoff, another boy from Liepāja, 'left home when he was 13 before the turn of the century and he never went back', as his son John Stuart recalls. 'He left the Baltic on a Russian schooner taking pit props to South Shields for use in the coal mines of Northern England. [...] Later he joined the crew of large square-rig ships sailing to all parts of the world. He went around Cape Horn seven times westward, eight times eastward on sailing ships carrying cargo to and from nitrate ports in Chile and Peru and wheat and wool from South Australian

and Victorian ports.⁶ Ernest Otto Brutton's career at sea began at 15 years of age with a voyage to Argentina. William Stauwer, from a village near Riga, went to sea in 1897 at 18 years of age, finally settling in Port Pirie ten years later. Even the young Jewish lad Dave Libman opted for this untraditional calling for Jews; at 13 he ran away from his home in Rīga and changed his name to Frank Payton, signing onto a boat.

Others were forced to emigrate owing to their involvement in the struggle for social justice and national identity, among them two Latvians — Rudolph Mahlit and August Maren. A teacher in Latvia, from 1904 Mahlit was — according to information supplied by the Australian military commandant where he joined up — 'a member of the Revolutionary Party operating against the Russian government. In fear of being exiled to Siberia he escaped to Japan from Vladivostok.' After several years in Japan and the Philippines he arrived in Australia in 1912, where he worked as a timber-hewer on the railways, and enlisted at the beginning of 1915, ending up at Gallipoli.⁷

August Maren was another teacher who took up revolutionary activities in Latvia and later served in the AIF. He spent two years in prison in Latvia before moving to London in 1909, where he was involved with the Latvian terrorist group *Leesma* (Flame) headed by Peter the Painter. Leesma's group murdered three London policemen in the winter of 1910, which led to the sensational 1911 'Siege of Sidney Street'. Maren fled England for Western Australia, having been nominated as a migrant by his friend Ernest Dreger. He travelled out together with Dreger's brothers Frederick and Adolf from Latvia and Ernest's fiancée, Sarah Ligum, an 18-year-old Latvian Jewish woman whom Ernest had met in London. According to local police reports, tensions subsequently arose between Maren and Ernest Dreger over young Sarah while they were working at a farm in Kellerberrin, Western Australia.

Dreger's daughter Elaine has a different version of events, claiming that at this time Ernest came into contact with some politically radical Latvians. 'Because he didn't agree with their views and so became a danger to them, they sought to rid themselves of him by selling him a gun that they had stolen and then informing the police. Although Ernest protested his innocence, he was jailed at Rottneest Island prison for 3 months.'

In prison, an embittered Dreger told Australian authorities about Maren's connection with Leesma and Maren was arrested, amid rumours that he was the elusive Peter the Painter. Maren defended himself determinedly, and after a few months had to be released due to lack of evidence. Assuming a new name, Peter Johnson, he put his past behind him, joined the AIF and served on the Western Front, where he was wounded at Villers-Bretonneux. He died in a traffic accident in Sydney in 1929.

Ernest Dreger, after his release from prison, married Sarah. For Ernest and Sarah their pioneering life in Australia began in tents around Toodjay, where Ernest worked as a labourer. In 1914 when they naturalised, they already had two boys: 'Both Ernest and Sarah were very proud to be Australian citizens and always stressed to the family that we were Australian', Elaine recalls.⁸ It was not long before they were to prove their dedication to their adopted country when Ernest joined the AIF.

Military experience

Another characteristic shared by many of the young Latvian males was their quite low rate of service in the Russian Army. Perhaps a desire to avoid compulsory service in the ill-famed Russian army could have been one of the factors that induced them to leave the country early. The unusually short service of some of them in the Russian Army could have been due to their taking 'French leave' from this Army. Thus, Charles Smith served just six weeks in the Russian artillery, Charles Gorgensen spent eight months in the Russian infantry, while Walter Meesit and John Kensman served eighteen months in the Light Horse Dragoons and the Russian Army respectively. A few served the full term of three years: Edward Beglot in the artillery, George Lihpin (enlisted in the AIF as George Haak) in the infantry, Rosing in the cavalry, while Charles Grieve, Anthony Minkshlin, and Edwin (Ned) Rowehl merely stated that they had served in the Russian army. In the Russian army Rowehl received the rank of sergeant while Rosing was promoted to officer. Nicholas d'Orloff claimed that he fought in the Russo-Japanese war, but any statements made by him should be treated with care.⁹ Several Latvians studied in military colleges. For example, Carl Collath served for eighteen months in the Russian cadets and Ivan Selman was educated in the Military College in St Petersburg.

The seafaring backgrounds of some Latvian Anzacs extended to their previous military service: Fritz Jacobson served ten years in the Russian Navy, Nicholai Upeneeck served in Russian submarines, and Ivan Miconi served in the Russian Volunteer Fleet. Moreover, these sea wanderers sometimes had experience of the naval services of other countries. Thus, Alexander Stuhrit served four years in the American Navy while Carl Carlson served three years in the US Infantry forces and two years as a marine in the American Navy. Charles Campman had the most interesting experience — he stated that he participated in the Boer War in South Africa, serving in Colonel Gordon's Flying Column. Francis Dyson, a Latvia-born Britisher, served with the Cape mounted police in South Africa.

Language

Latvian Anzacs usually went to sea at a young age, often spent years working on cargo boats travelling the world and, in many cases, rarely or never returning home. In these circumstances, and because ship's crews were often made up of many nationalities, they acquired some knowledge of English and other languages. As John Pankoff's son remembered: 'He could speak 10 languages with varying degrees of fluency. This resulted from his crewing on ships of different nationalities in the last days of the sailing ship era. He used to say one way to learn a language quickly was to be put in a situation where it was necessary to understand and be understood, for example, on board a sailing ship in bad weather.'¹⁰ Their service records indicate that their English language capacities ranged between 'speaks English with a marked foreign accent' (Martin Brasche) to 'spoke English with a slightly foreign accent' (John Reineke). Ted Seltin, according to his son, picked up his English in the trenches: 'Ted told me that he learned English by studying comics of all things in the trenches with his little dictionary, and picking up words and learning, and he became fairly competent in English'.¹¹ With some English and experience of life in other countries it was easier for them in comparison with other Russian immigrants to blend into the young Australian nation.

The foreign language skills of some of the Latvian Anzacs were put to good use during their service. Gustav Puring from Rīga, for instance, took an Intelligence course at Divisional Headquarters in 1917 and was later used as a German interpreter.

Arrival, connections

Statistics regarding their arrival in Australia, which are available for 105 Latvian Anzacs, are similar to the general pattern of pre-WWI immigration, with a sharp rise during the four years immediately before the war. But the seafaring background of Latvian Anzacs resulted in a broader spread around this period. Thus, their immigration rose steadily from 1906 and waned only in 1917.

Nevertheless, some of them landed on Australia's shores well before 1906. For instance, Henry Fisher stated that he came to Australia in 1887. He lived in Port Pirie, South Australia, working as a carpenter and stevedore. Born in 1860, he was the oldest Latvian Anzac; by the time he enlisted he was a widower with three children. John Borsoff, who arrived around 1892, was a miner working in Marble Bar in Western Australia, one of the hottest places in the country.

Martin Aide, another Westralian who landed here in 1900, travelled all over the south-west of the state and at enlistment was farming at Denmark near Albany. John Bunke, who was living on a fishing boat in Geraldton, spent 25 years at sea before deserting his ship in Busselton, Western Australia.

Although from Liepāja, he described himself as either 'Dutch American' or 'Russian Finn'. Edward Sendon jumped ship in 1903 and when war broke out was mining at Mount Morgan in Queensland. Two Jewish Latvian old-timers, Jacob Gensberg and Samuel Paltie, lived in Melbourne and Sydney respectively and were engaged in trade. Many of these old-timers were discharged from the army as medically unfit, but the fact that they enlisted is noteworthy.

The seafaring background of many Latvian Anzacs tended to concentrate single men in their 20s; only 15 of them had wives in Australia. A few had brothers or cousins in Australia who also joined the AIF.

Thus, brothers Andrew and John Putre and Armen and Edwin Rowehl served in the AIF, while Ian Rosing had two cousins in the AIF — John (Jānis) Amolin and John Krauklys. Sometimes instead of immediate family friends enlisted together. This was the case with Ted Seltin, Oscar Strauberg and Alexander Mentze (enlisted as Mentse), who deserted their ship and joined the AIF together. John Krauklys, Wilhelm Lundfend, and Carl Prinz, although coming to Australia at different

times, came across each other while sharing accommodation in Millers Point, Sydney, and enlisted together.

Friendships sometimes crossed ethnic borders. For instance, John de Raupak-Ropenberg and Emerick Schimkovitch arrived in Australia, enlisted and served together. Although Schimkovitch, an ethnic Pole, was born near Kaunas and formally does not belong to Latvian Anzacs, he might have had a strong Latvian connection as his father lived in Liepāja.

Similarly, Fritz Winnin from Rīga and Valdimar Hektor from Võru (in the Estonian part of Livland Province) were probably friends and enlisted close together in Newcastle. It was also very common at enlistment for Baltic seamen to nominate Australian women as their next-of-kin. Sometimes these women were girlfriends, sometimes de facto wives, and sometimes landladies or just acquaintances. Arabella Rosewear wrote how John Blankenberg used to visit their place and 'always made our home his home when out of camp'.



Fritz Winnin

Enlistment

The 157 Latvian-born men enlisted in the AIF comprise a significant proportion of the 978 Russian-born Anzacs whose exact place of birth is known. Breaking down these Anzacs' places of birth by province (or *gubernia* — the main territorial unit in the Russian Empire) shows that the province of Livland alone gave 155 servicemen, of which 104 came from the Latvian part of the province, while the rest were from the Estonian part. This is the highest number of Anzacs for one province in the whole

Russian Empire. It was followed by two southern Finnish provinces (86 and 85 men) and another Latvian province, Courland (49 men).

Although it is tempting to assume that a high proportion of Latvians enlisted in the AIF out of patriotic sentiment toward Australia, it is more likely that their seafaring background was a determining factor. Many enlisted for pragmatic reasons. With the outbreak of war seamen became stranded in Australia; because of the threat to shipping, trade declined, many ships terminated their voyages in Australia, and often whole crews were discharged. Desertion was also not uncommon. Seamen who found themselves without work soon joined the army, many within days of arriving in the country. Among them were Andrew Kairi and John Ivanoff from Liepāja, Karl Alksen from Ventspils, Ian Gaisman, David Martinson, and Fritz Winnin from Rīga.

Russian consuls also pressed Russian subjects in Australia to enlist in the Australian Army. In Russia military service was compulsory and all Russian reservists 'between ages of 21 and 38 years [were] to immediately rejoin the colours'. Those who were unable to return to Russia from abroad were, 'required to join the ranks of the armies of the Allied Nations'.¹² Ted Seltin's son recounts: 'Ted and two of his comrades deserted their ship in Adelaide and they went along to the consul in Adelaide and said, "we jumped this ship, it's gone, and what are we going to do?" And the consul said, "Well, you blokes are in great big trouble here. You'll be locked up and put in jail [...]" because deserting the ship was a very serious crime. They were suggested that perhaps joining the army might be a way out, being an adventure, being something quite different. So he and Oscar Strauberg, his friend, two of them, joined the army [...] I don't think Ted had any great patriotic ideas about fighting dreaded Germans or anything like that. He was just an adventurous young man and, having deserted the ship in a strange country, and the strange language — joining the army would have been quite all right, it seems, as an adventure and a way out of trouble.'¹³

Although many local German settlers and their Australian-born descendants experienced discrimination and internment as enemy aliens in war-time Australia, Baltic Germans had a different experience. As Russian subjects, the Baltic Germans had no difficulty joining the AIF, even if they were not naturalised in Australia. Furthermore, once in the Aus-

tralian army Baltic Germans seldom suffered because of their ethnicity — unlike the ethnic Russians who, ironically, were often treated with considerable suspicion in the army. The Baltic Germans proved worthy of this trust and I did not encounter a single case of disloyalty by them to Australia. Nevertheless, when speaking with the descendants of Anzacs of German origin, I discovered that Germans, more than any other national group, tended to conceal their ethnic identity. Of the early life of his father — Ernest Brutton, who came from Lubāna — his son Harold knew little, saying, ‘I think he did not want to discuss that part of his life’. Harold commented, ‘I think he was German, because he spoke with a very guttural voice as the Germans do’.

Still, not all enlisted in the AIF solely for pragmatic reasons. Among the young men who had come to Australia from Latvia as children in the years before the war, a feeling of duty towards Australia, similar to that of



Ernest Dreger

their Australian-born friends, intertwined perhaps with a spirit of adventure, was developing. For instance, John Trinkoon, born in Rīga in about 1898, came to Australia in 1911 with his parents. After two years in cadets he enlisted in the army in 1915, adding to his age ‘because he was anxious to join the army’.¹⁴ For Ernest Dreger, whom we left in a tent near Toodjay with his young wife and two small sons, the time had come to prove how he felt about Australia. As his daughter Betty tells it: ‘then the war came and with Sarah again pregnant, Ernest was very loath to leave her, but he felt he should be prepared to defend the country they had adopted

as their own'.¹⁵ Others were eager to go to the battlefields out of a spirit of adventure. John Pankoff's son relates the story of his father's enlistment: 'Because he had gone to sea at 13 as a deck boy and cook, he enlisted as a cook and was posted to Seymour in South Australia. Two drafts left the camp to go overseas and my father asked why he was still there. An officer told him the reason was that he was too good a cook. On hearing this, he volunteered to join the Vickers Machine Gun Corps, which was known in those days as "The Suicide Squad".'¹⁶ He was fortunate in surviving nearly two years at the Western Front.

Enlistment by state shows that the largest numbers were from New South Wales (49) and Victoria (46), followed by South Australia (26) and Western Australia (22). The smallest number was from Queensland (14). These statistics differ from the breakdown for all Russian-born Anzacs, and particularly for ethnic Russians, whose highest proportion of enlistees was from Queensland. As most Latvian Anzacs were recent arrivals connected with the sea it is not surprising that most of them lived and enlisted in the state capital port cities. Only a handful, mostly old-timers, came from more remote areas. Among the Queenslanders, five came from the sugarcane areas of Rockhampton and Townsville, enlisting at the end of the sugarcane season when jobs were slack.

Gallipoli

The first Latvians to enlist were sent to Egypt and Gallipoli. At least 28 Latvian Anzacs fought at Gallipoli — the first major battle of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) — and at least 9 of them participated in the landing on 25 April, the first day of the campaign. They were Francis Dyson, Martin Antin, Julajs Beern, Martin Hamann, Charles Reppe, Fritz Zeeman, John Hendrickson, Arnold Sander and Rudolph Mahlit. A brief entry in Hendrickson's service records tells us that on that day 'naturalisation papers lost at Gallipoli'; no doubt he had more pressing matters to attend to at the time. In May they were joined by Henry Adjutant, Arvid Berkis, Rudolf Danberg and John Amolin, and two men allotted to the Light Horse brigade — John Reineke and Didrich Rozenfeld. Nearly all of them became casualties — Beern was wounded at landing and Mahlit and Reppe (both in the 16th Battalion) were wounded a few days later at the battle for 'Bloody Angle' at Quinn's Post. Hamman

was wounded at the end of May, while Sander, a sailor from Rīga, was killed on 27 May and buried at Beach Cemetery, being the first Latvian in the AIF to fall at Gallipoli. Berkis, a former seaman who 'worked in the forest and in copper mines' in Australia, was wounded a day after arriving at Gallipoli in the charge at Krithia. After recovering in Egypt he re-joined his battalion and was severely wounded again in the fight for 'German Officers' Trench' in July. He died of his wounds aboard the ship returning him to Egypt and was buried at sea — a sailor's fate. The famous Lone Pine battle in August took the lives of two former sailors — Theodor Lambahirt and Vlas Kozakovshonok. The latter was killed a couple of days after landing with reinforcements to his 4th Battalion. Two more Latvians to fall in August were seaman John Amolin and former teacher and political émigré Rudolph Mahlit. The latter re-joined his unit after being wounded at the battle for Bloody Angle, only to die not long after during the attack on Hill 60.



Portrait of John Amolin published in The Daily Telegraph (Sydney) after he fell at Gallipoli

Egypt

At the end of 1915 all Australian troops were evacuated from Gallipoli to Egypt and from there to the Western Front in Europe. A number of Latvians remained in Egypt and Palestine, some of them forever. Charles Jacobsen from Rīga, a strong man, scarred with stab-wounds, who had made a living in Western Australia carting and kangaroo-shooting, got a head-wound at Gallipoli at the very end of the campaign. Although he recovered in Egypt, his wound re-opened just before he was due to leave for the Western Front and he died from a cerebral abscess.

Other Latvians were left in Egypt as part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force and served in the Light Horse regiments and the Camel Corps. These included: John Reineke, a Gallipoli veteran; Franc Matzonas; Ivan

Miconi (aged 45 years — one of the oldest Latvian Anzacs) arrived in January 1916, got sick and was invalided to Australia where he served in the Home Service for the rest of the war; John Trinkoon, one of the youngest, arrived in March 1917; John Michelson arrived in December 1917; and Henry Adjutant arrived in April 1918 after recovering from wounds received in Gallipoli. The Latvians took part in all the major battles fought by Australian troops in Egypt. One of them was the famous raid on Beersheba on 31 October 1917. Among the casualties in the raid was John Reineke from Liepāja, a man described as being ‘very strong’, and most probably of German descent. Reineke had worked as a labourer at Greenvale, north of Melbourne, and was among the first Latvians to enlist in the AIF. Corporal Smith described what happened to Reineke in the Beersheba raid: ‘I was in the same charge myself on the 31st October 1917. He was with the first line charging into Beersheba and was hit in the stomach with a bullet whilst charging.’ In the evening he died at a field ambulance station. His comrade Lance-corporal Tomkins added, ‘He was a fine chap in the Unit and remarked as he was dying “It is jolly hard to die like this after having gone through so much of the War”.’¹⁷ A few days later Franc Matzonas, a former sailor from Rīga, was killed in the raid at Tel el Khuweilfe. Reineke and Matzonas are both buried at the Beersheba War Cemetery.

Ernest Tomrop, known as Tom, a former seaman from Ventspils, also served in Egypt. His great granddaughter tells about his service: ‘He found himself on land in Egypt and Palestine with the Royal Australian Naval Bridging Train, rebuilding railway bridges smashed by the Turks. This bunch of wild riggers was disbanded in 1917 when their job was done. They were given the option of returning to Australia, or of joining any unit of their choice. Tom chose the Australian Flying Corps. In those early days of aviation, planes were made of wood and canvas and wire, and good riggers were much in demand’.¹⁸

Two more Latvians served in the Flying Squadron. Edward Sevald from Rīga, who had studied at aviation school in Russia, had a successful career with the 3rd Flying Squadron in France as a sergeant mechanic. Frederick Dambelis, also from Rīga — a former rigger who ‘understood motor car driving’ — became an air-mechanic. But the war was over before he reached the Western Front.

Western Front

In all, the number of Latvian-born servicemen that arrived on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918 was at least 108 and over 70 of them landed there in 1916. They served in many infantry battalions, pioneer and tunnelling battalions, and in field artillery. There was hardly a major battle without several Latvians participating in it and often sacrificing their lives.

The first battles they experienced were in the Armentières sector in Belgium. Among the first Latvian casualties at Wimereux were two men



Andreas (Andrejs) Voitkun

from Western Australia — Fritz Schilling and Martin Renaud. In June 1916 they received severe wounds and were evacuated to Australia. Renaud, a former seaman from Rīga, had served at Gallipoli and proved that what he wrote in 1911 after receiving his naturalisation certificate from the Australian authorities was no empty boast: 'I am very proud to count myself as one of yours now and I will try to make myself worthy of it'.¹⁹ The advance on the Sugar-loaf salient (near Fromelles) in July 1916 brought new casualties. Two labourers from Port Pirie — William Stauwer and Andreas Voitkun — were wounded.

Voitkun was taken prisoner and survived two and a half years in German camps before returning to Australia to reunite with his wife and five children.

Meanwhile further south, Australian troops engaged at the Somme. In the battle for Pozières and Mouquet Farm two Latvians lost their lives

— Jacob Kapost, enlisted as Ernest Anderson, a former seaman from Rīga who worked as a sleeper cutter in Western Australia, and George Berzin from Port Pirie. Berzin fought in Gallipoli and was promoted to the rank of lance-corporal; his personal possessions included a diary which was sent to his uncle in Rīga, but unfortunately his uncle could not be located. Wounded in this battle were Baltic Germans and Latvians Adolf Drager, Atti (Otto) Weinberg, Charles Reppe and Martin Wiseman, as well as Jews Leo Oberman from Kuldīga (whose name was misspelled in service records as Abramam) and Frank Payton, the seaman. While Weinberg was invalided to Australia the rest of the men rejoined their units after recovery.



William Stauwer

Among the casualties at Mouquet Farm was Louis Pasvally, an 18-year-old Jewish boy from Perth who had formerly been a metal-polisher. He was born in Opotsk (Opochka) in Russia and statistically he is beyond the borders of our study, but his family was from nearby Ludza in Latvia, where his brother Isidore Walters and nephew Philip Walters were born; both also joined the AIF. Pasvally was ‘a very bright little Russian’, according to his comrades, and only 5 feet 2 inches tall, with dark curly hair. The court of enquiry was told that four men including Pasvally (whom his comrades called Charlie Chaplin): ‘were killed together at Mouquet Farm on Sept. 3rd while digging in. As we came back for cover again I was asking about Charlie Chaplin, and was told that the four men were working together when a shell blew them all up.’ Another man added, ‘I was told by one of my pals [...] that Pasvally (whom we nicknamed “Charlie Chaplin”) “went for a ride on a shell”, by which I under-

stand that he was blown to pieces'.²⁰ In the face of death they tried to avoid sentimentality.

While resting in the quieter sector of the front at Ypres, in Belgium, Latvians had further casualties: Charles Mathewy was killed in action, Fritz Zeeman, Gallipoli veteran and former fireman from Ventspils, was wounded in the field through the carelessness of another soldier and invalided to Australia, while Ludwig Edward Ahbol, a machine-gunner promoted to the rank of lance-corporal, died of pneumonia a few weeks after arriving at the front. Ahbol left his native Kuldīga in 1897 and for nearly twenty years was seafaring as William Andersen, restoring his true name while in the AIF. In late October 1916 most Australian divisions were moved back to the Somme. It was a grim return: under the autumn rains much of the battlefield turned into a bog — the trenches filled with water and mud. The casualties were many and four Latvians lost their lives in this battle: Richard Leksman, Ernest Upmal, Jan Kulmar (all former seamen) and Alexander Gedwillo, a former carpenter from Rīga who served in the Australian Field Ambulance. Martin Hamann, a seaman from Rīga, twice wounded at Gallipoli, was killed a few months later in February 1917.

The sudden withdrawal in late February 1917 of German troops behind their newly built Hindenburg Line some 30 kilometres east of their former positions was the impetus for an Allied pursuit, to which the Germans put up strong resistance. During this advance the Latvians suffered several casualties. On April 2 at the battle for Noreuil, in the middle of no-man's-land August Makewitz's right foot was hit by a shell-fragment. 'He had to lay (sic) out in rain for 24 hours. He crawled back a couple of miles and was then [taken] to ambulance'. His medical card records that his leg was amputated 'owing to onset of gas gangrene'. He lived long enough to receive his war medals in 1922, dying a few months afterwards.²¹

One of the bloodiest Australian attacks on the Hindenburg Line was east of Bullecourt. In one day, on 11 April 1917, Latvians had three casualties: Jules Levinski was wounded, Fritz Jacobson was killed and Charles Reppe, a ship's fireman from Rīga, was wounded and taken prisoner of war. By this time Reppe had been wounded three times — at Gallipoli (twice) and at Mouquet Farm. None of that prevented him taking ten

years off his age and re-enlisting in the 2nd AIF during the Second World War. Jacobson, a former seaman who had worked as a labourer in Western Australia, applied for naturalisation twice before enlisting, but sadly was denied. He died for Australia as a Russian subject.

The second attack at Bullecourt, in May, had six Latvian casualties. One of them was Edward Baschbauer, a millhand from Jarrahwood in Western Australia, about whom an Australian policeman wrote: 'he appeared to me to be rather a superior individual in his dress and manner'. His right hand was amputated, but this did not save him; he died of sepsis a month later. The lot of Martin Aide, another Westralian wounded here, was luckier; he was found after initially being reported missing. Recovering from wounds he returned to his unit and was appointed lance-corporal. Another casualty was John Ivanoff, a daredevil Russian and a Gallipoli veteran, whose service records had a number of entries about his absences without leave and court martials for misbehaviour. According to the transcript of Ivanoff's evidence, while in England 'he was boarded to go back to Australia but he ran away from the camp and joined some reinforcements to come back to France'.²² Disobedience and heroism mixed in his blood as it did in the blood of the legendary Anzacs.

In the battle for Messines in June were four more Latvian casualties. Alexander Huslen, a sailor from Rīga, and Martin Abolin, a former timber worker from Upesgrīva, were killed here. Sergeant Ian Rosing, who joined the AIF in December 1915 three days after arriving in Australia and was wounded in January 1917, showed 'conspicuous gallantry' at Messines, for which he was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal. At a critical moment, when his officers 'had become casualties', he took command 'capturing the objective and re-organising his men against possible attacks'.²³ Julajs Beern, a former seaman from Rīga and one of the first Latvians to enlist, was wounded here as well. After being wounded at the Gallipoli landing he was brought to London to recover, where he married a London girl; he returned to the trenches in September 1915. While again convalescing in English hospitals he briefly reunited with his wife before being invalided back to Australia. He died a year later in a Melbourne hospital, still intending to go to London to bring his wife out. She died only a couple of weeks after him, leaving behind a young son.

During the ensuing fight at Menin Road and the taking of Polygon Wood in late September five more Latvians became casualties. Rudolf Danberg, twice wounded at Gallipoli, and Michael Paegle, wounded at Bullecourt, were killed. John Johnson, a labourer from Coonabarabran, New South Wales, received his second head wound here. His first, from March 1917, did nothing to stop him rejoining his unit. It was probably in this same battle that Ernest Dreger won his Military Medal. Elaine Dreger, his daughter, explains the circumstances of his award: 'I remember we would ask how our father received the Military Medal for bravery during the First World War. He told us how the Australians were pinned down by some Germans from a particular vantage point. He went quite close and then ordered them to come out and charge. Because he spoke such good German and had a commanding voice the Germans charged out and were captured by the Australians. We would say "Wasn't that sneaky?" but he always maintained he always looked for prisoners and not bodies. On a second occasion the Australians were inadvertently being fired upon by the British forces. Our father volunteered to try to get across the no-mans-land and alert the allies to the situation. This he was successful in doing.'²⁴ Dreger knew what he was fighting for: in Australia his wife was waiting for him with their three young children.

The last battle of 1917, for Passchendaele, had ten Latvian casualties. Among them Eugene Greig, a gunner and former seaman from Rīga, was killed in action; Vladimer Valichea, who came to Brisbane with his parents as a teenager, was taken prisoner; Ernest Brutton and Ernest Fraser, a former sailor from Liepāja and Gallipoli veteran, were gassed; Ian Gaisman, another former seaman, was severely wounded in his left leg and invalided to Australia. This campaign had its Latvian heroes, too. Besides Dreger, the Military Medal was awarded to Edward Abelskaln (Abelskaln), a Gallipoli veteran now serving in the Anzac Provost Corps; he organised traffic under heavy shelling on the Bellewaarde Plank Road where it had been blocked by a shell crater. Courage was also shown by gunner Charles Gedgawd, who 'did repeatedly carry out wounded comrades under very heavy shell fire, and also carried quantities of ammunition under heavy fire to the Machine gun battery to which he was attached. By his courage and devotion to duty he set a splendid example to his comrades'. Corporal Karl Paulin in the Battle for Passchendaele on 12

October 1917 exhibited 'conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. [...] When all his company stretcher bearers had become casualties he volunteered for duty and worked continuously for 48 hours under heavy enemy artillery and machine gun fire bandaging and carrying back wounded in some cases to a distance of 2,000 yards over extremely difficult country. In spite of exhaustion he refused to leave the line and continued on duty for 6 days'.²⁵

1918

Australian troops spent the winter of 1917-18 in the quieter Messines sector. Nevertheless, the strain of war was so hard that some Latvians fell ill with rheumatism and trench foot. James Barr, an Englishman born in Riga who worked in Australia as an accountant, was poisoned with gas at Hill 60, Hollebeke, and was invalided to Australia; earlier he was wounded at Gallipoli and served at the Headquarters of 12th Brigade, reaching the rank of sergeant. With Russia's withdrawal from the war after the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917, Germany was able to move its troops from the Eastern Front and build up considerable forces along the Western Front. Australian troops were brought forward, fighting this time in close collaboration with British troops and dispersed in different sectors of the front. Among Latvian casualties at the battle for Hazebrouck (an important railway centre) was Fedor (Teodor) Stenger, an artist and planter from Riga whose family stayed in India. Australian troops had the major role in the counter-attack at Villers-Bretonneux in April 1918. Sergeant Francis Dyson, another Englishman born in Riga, was killed here while 'out with convoy proceeding to the Batteries with ammunition when a shell exploded 10 yard away, a portion of it striking Dyson near heart'.²⁶ A widower, he left a young daughter orphaned. Another casualty here was Ernest Dreger's brother, Adolf Drager, wounded for the third time; this time he lost his leg. His niece Elaine Dreger tells how she remembers her father Ernest and her uncle Fred talking about her uncle Dolph losing his leg: 'As I recall, after the incident the medical team went through but uncle Dolph was thought to be dead. On the third day the Salvation Army were still looking for survivors, and finding Dolph still alive brought him back. The leg had become fly-blown, but this was said to have saved his life because the maggots had eaten the



Adolf Drager

rotten flesh and saved the wound from becoming gangrenous. Unfortunately, he had to be operated on three times so that finally he had a very high amputation.²⁷

Throughout May-July 1918 the Australian divisions remained in the Amiens sector. John Hendrickson, a former labourer from South Australia, was one of the casualties among Latvian Anzacs here. He was wounded, but recovered and rejoined his unit. This was his second service. Earlier he fought at Gallipoli until he became sick and was discharged as medically unfit in Australia; though five months later he re-enlisted. Nicolas Rehrick, a former seaman from Liepāja, described by an Australian police inspector as 'an alert, intelligent man, of High School education in Latvia', was severely wounded here. Rehrick joined the Intelligence Police in

July 1917. Martin Brasche, character-

ised by a police inspector as a 'hardworking, very decent, straightforward man',²⁸ was gassed too, but recovered and returned to his unit. John de Raupak-Ropenberg, by that time a lance-corporal, also survived this gas attack.

At this period the Anzacs became famous for their constant attacks on German positions, gradually pushing the enemy back from the positions they occupied during the advance of the previous spring. Among those who performed well in this work was John Ivanoff, back with his unit after being wounded at Bullecourt. Wounded again at Hazebrouck, he remained on duty and received a commendation from his divisional commander 'for excellent sniping work'.²⁹ Another hero of these months was John Blankenberg, a former seaman of German origin from Rīga. In March 1918 he had been gassed when his 24th Battalion came under mus-

tard-gas attack. Soon after rejoining his unit he took part in the attack on Ville-sur-Ancre, near Albert on the night of 19 May, during which 'he showed a total disregard of all danger' and 'outstanding gallantry', according to the citation for his Military Medal. It stated: 'he was always found on the forefront of the fighting with his platoon officer. When the attacking party was temporarily held up and casualties inflicted by an enemy machine gun he threw a bomb into the post and then helped two of our wounded out of danger. When his party advanced again he helped his officer to rush another post, put the crew out of action and captured a gun.'

The same incidents featured in C.E.W. Bean's *Official History*: '[Lieutenant] Edgerton and his batman [a commissioned officer's personal servant/orderly], a Russian named Blankenberg, at once threw bombs in the direction of the sound and half a dozen stick-grenades burst about them in reply. Four men were wounded'. Again, when 'Edgerton with his batman as companion' were out on reconnaissance, they came upon a German post; they 'had only one bomb left; but he took the chance, threw the bomb, and, under cover of its burst, dashed for the post. When he was five yards away the Germans began to put out their heads again. The first was shot by Edgerton and his Russian, and the remainder surrendered. [...] Edgerton sent [back] the prisoners and the machine-gun in charge of Blankenberg.'

The citation also mentioned some additional mopping-up Blankenberg assisted in when daylight came, which resulted in the capture of a second gun. Blankenberg had reason to be merciless towards the enemy. According to a letter he wrote to his Australian girlfriend, during the war one of his brothers was 'shot, another wounded, third and mother burnt, as their village was burnt'.³⁰ Although the award was made, Blankenberg did not live long enough to receive his medal; he was killed in October. Eric Edgerton, the young officer he served as batman, a university student, was killed in August 1918.

On 8 August the Allies started a major counter-attack south of the Somme near Amiens, using tanks in the fog in the early hours of the morning. They had not yet reached their objective when the fog cleared and the Germans opened fire directly on the approaching infantry and tanks. Here John Ivanoff came to the fore again. His commanding officer

wrote, 'On the morning of the 8th August, 1918, during the attack on the Warfusee line, east of Amiens, an enemy machine gun greatly hampered the advance. This soldier on his own initiative outflanked and bombed the gun single-handed, which he captured, killing the crew of five.' His heroism during this advance earned him the Military Medal.³¹ Among the wounded and injured here were Wilhelm Lundfend, Charles Bockmelder (Seltin's friend), and Ian Rosing. For Rosing this was his third casualty at the Western Front; he was wounded at Amiens and Passchendaele in 1917.

On 22-23 August the Australians successfully advanced to the north and south of the Somme, towards Bray and Chuignes. In this advance Lance-corporal John Putre, a former sailor from Liepāja, won a Military Medal for his bravery. He had been in France since September 1916 and had already been twice wounded. According to his citation: 'He led his patrol capably, showing skill, initiative and daring and it was due to information gathered from his patrol report that this company was enabled to advance so quickly and with so few casualties'.³²

In accordance with General John Monash's plan, troops moved across the Somme to its northern side in preparation for the assault on Mont St Quentin, which dominated Péronne. The 37th Battalion played a significant role in the fighting of 29-30 August. Captain Towl's company encountered fierce resistance during their night advance on the German positions and John Krauklys from Rīga (Bean mistakenly calls him a Finn) was one of their number who made the supreme sacrifice on this high bank of the Somme. Bean describes what happened: 'Private Krauklys, a Finn, was sent with a Lewis gun and two riflemen to keep them off. Germans were now firing from front and both flanks. Krauklys' gun jammed, but he ran out and secured a German machine-gun with ammunition. Lieut. Ashmead on the left had another, the Lewis gun was going, and a German counter-attack from the front was beaten off.' It wasn't long before Ashmead was mortally wounded and by morning their exposed situation had deteriorated. They were cut off from the rest of the battalion by intense enemy fire and 'Towl could not get a runner through — all were shot including the Finn, Krauklys, who offered to make the run'. Towl's men only managed to get back through the German lines with their captured prisoners at dusk, half of their company having been

hit. Krauklys was a seaman and enlisted three days after landing in Sydney in January 1917. He joined up with two of his Latvian friends, Lundfend and Prinz, but on arrival in France applied to be transferred to the 37th Battalion in which his cousin Ian Rosing served.³³ Krauklys was mentioned in dispatches for his bravery there.

Another hero of the battle for St Quentin was Sergeant Philip Walters from the Jewish family of Pasvally-Walters, which migrated to Perth from Ludza and its environs. In the advance east of Mont St Quentin, wrote his commander, Walters 'was engaged with a bombing party in bombing the enemy out of a portion of trench required to establish our line. His officer being killed early in the operation, he took charge of his party, and when it was held up by heavy machine gun fire, he decided to go forward himself, with one volunteer, to attack the position. By great courage and daring, he attacked and dispersed the enemy, thus allowing his party to establish a post at the required position.'³⁴ Walters also was fighting for his young uncles Louis Pasvally, killed at Mouquet Farm in 1916, and Isidore Walters, wounded at Bullecourt in 1917.

Among the fallen at the battle for Péronne were two heavily tattooed former seamen from Latvia — John Costin and William Brining; both had been labourers in north-east NSW. Costin was gassed at Villers-Bretonneux but rejoined his unit. The fate of these vagabonds dying on the crippled earth seems especially tragic. John Ivanoff was wounded here for the third time when his 20th Battalion had to clear German trenches 'for a mile in depth, using bombs and rifles alone' on the night of 30–31 August.³⁵ He was evacuated to England, no doubt glad to rejoin the wife he had only recently married there. John Janus, another Latvian labourer from New South Wales who enlisted at Narrandera, received his second wound at Péronne.

The last major Australian engagements with the enemy were in late September and early October south of Péronne, followed by the assault on the Hindenburg Line. John Putre, who had won his Military Medal at Chuignes, was wounded again — his third time. His younger brother Andrew, who was with the 1st Pioneer Battalion, had been wounded a few days earlier — his second wound. Jules Levinski received his third and most severe wound here. To save his life his right leg was amputated. Here we again meet John Blankenberg, though for the last time. On 5

October, during the attack on the village of Montbrehain, he was accompanying Lieutenant Clough. Bean records what happened next. 'Pushing through a hedge Lt. Clough actually hit his helmet against the muzzle of a machine-gun. His batman, a Russian, J.W. Blankenberg, shot its crew as "cowards".'³⁶ It was not long after this that Blankenberg himself was killed. Alksen and Gedgawd were gassed during these last battles. Alksen, a seaman in his forties from Ventspils, had obviously had a tempestuous life. His enlistment form indicates that he was covered with tattoos, scars and bullet wound marks; this was his third casualty and second gassing. For Gedgawd, the hero of Passchendaele, this was his second casualty, and luckily it was the last among Latvian soldiers.

On 11 November 1918 the war ended; Germany, weakened further by



*Anthony Minkshlin in North Russia
(Imperial War Museum, London –
3450 86/86/1 Allfrey)*

revolution and military mutinies, had no choice but to accept the conditions imposed by the Allies. Not long before his death in 1993 Ted Seltin, a former seaman from Rūjiena, recalled his feelings at the end of war: 'We were overjoyed that the hideous slaughter had finally ended and we were thankful that we were the lucky ones that had managed somehow to survive. Some months previously I had been wounded by a German sniper's bullet [at Messines] and had rejoined my battalion at the front and I was pleased my good luck had held out till it was all over. Many others weren't lucky. My friends and I celebrated Armistice Day 1918 with a good quantity of French wine, both red and white. We were grant-

ed leave within a few days and I arrived in London four days after the armistice and found people were still celebrating and dancing in the streets. It was an unforgettable time.³⁷

The last Latvian Anzacs to leave the battlefields of war-torn Europe were Robert Meerin and Anthony Minkshlin, both former seamen from Rīga and Liepāja respectively. Meerin, after serving with the AIF in France in 1917-1918, enlisted in the British army's Middlesex Regiment in 1919 as an interpreter, while Minkshlin, after three years on the Western Front, joined the Royal Fusiliers as an A/Sergeant. They served with the North Russian Relief Force in the Archangel area, fighting against the pro-Bolshevik forces. Minkshlin was awarded a Meritorious Service Medal for this campaign.

Summary

Of 157 Latvian-born men who enlisted in the AIF, 130 were sent overseas; at least 28 fought at Gallipoli, six in Egypt Expeditionary Forces, and at least 108 were on the Western Front (some served in two theatres). Every fifth man (32 men) on active service lost their life; five were killed at Gallipoli, two more died at sea and in Egypt of wounds received at Gallipoli; two were killed in action in Palestine; 19 were killed in action on the Western Front, one died of wounds in England; one, Didrich Rozenfeld, a former sailor from Liepāja, died as the result of an accident while on the Western Front; Ludwig Ahbol died there of pneumonia; and Frederick Bremer (Bember), died of pneumonia soon after arriving in England. Among 27 servicemen who had not been on active service, 20 were discharged soon after enlisting (usually as medically unfit), five deserted, and two were employed by the AIF. The last two were John Hanson (his real name was Wahzsemneek), who worked as a sailor on transport ships delivering Australian troops to the fronts, and Arthur Greenberg, a former sailor, who worked as a tentmaker at Broadmeadows Military Camp.

Becoming Australians

The story of Latvian-born Anzacs is an important part of the Anzac legend. Reading their service records or listening to the tales of their children we can see this legend in the making. It would be tempting to

say that while these men went to war as Latvians, or Baltic Germans, or Jews, or Russians and Poles, they returned from the war as Australians. For some this was indeed the case, while for others it took years to blend in.

Andreas Voitkun, while a prisoner of war and not yet been naturalised, in this letters to the Red Cross seems to have had no hesitation in identifying himself as an Australian: 'I am an Australian', he says, 'and a good bit from home'. This is how his 'comrade', an English fellow-prisoner, also sees him: 'There is here an Australian married with a family of 5 children who speaks German, Russian and French', he writes to his sister. 'He acts as interpreter for us English to the Russian Doctors and so in an indirect way is doing his bit to better the lot of us wounded.'³⁸ This identity as an Australian Anzac, and more broadly as an Australian, would rapidly emerge and mature on the battlefields.

However, a contrary example is the case of Edward Janshewsky, a Pole from Liepāja. He left home when he was 17 and worked as a fireman on steamships, along the way collecting tattoos on his arms — butterfly, cross, heart and anchor, skull and snake, clasped hands, dagger, US flag and girl — which seemed to express something about his fears and aspirations. When he landed in Australia on a voyage from South America to Russia, the Russian consul in Australia made him enlist in the AIF. But his service did not go well. Court-martialled for going absent without leave in December 1917, his explanation to the court was: 'I am a Russian and consequently was not much liked in the Coy. I consequently took to drink and went away.' I believe that in his case, and in a number of other cases, Russianness was only one of the factors contributing to a soldier's unpopularity. Janshewsky, though he enlisted in September 1915 and was in France until May 1918 when he deserted, saw hardly any service with his unit (1st Pioneer Battalion), spending most of his time in hospitals, at base depots, being absent without leave and in detention. Later, he was found not to be eligible for war medals. It will take him years to become an Australian. When the Second World War began he joined up again and served well for four years as a corporal. In 1947, when he applied for naturalisation he had a single conviction against his name — he had been arrested in 1942 for drunkenness while 'celebrating with friends'.³⁹ Obviously his relationship with his comrades had improved

from what it had been in 1917; having a drink with mates — this was part of Australianness.

Whatever Latvian-born Anzacs felt themselves, their building an Australian identity would not always protect them. Language was sometimes an obstacle. Ian Rosing had a quite good command of English and was a sergeant by the time he embarked. At the front he reached the rank of company sergeant major (WO2) — the highest among Latvian Anzacs. Nevertheless, his son tells about an incident during the war when his father got lost in the trenches at night. 'He was detained by British soldiers [...] and they asked him from where he was and he said "I am Australian, I am in the Australian army". Then this fellow says, "You are wearing the Australian uniform, but you've got a Russian accent". And they got somebody who could speak Russian and my dad spoke perfect Russian to them, and he got suspicious, and then my dad got in touch with his commanding officer and this commanding officer said to the British commanding officer, "Please, release that man, he is one of my best men, let him go", and my dad abused them.'⁴⁰

Martin Antin, a former seaman from Rīga, on whose arm the English flag was next to the Russian flag, went through Gallipoli and was twice wounded at the Western Front fighting with the 4th Machine Gun Battalion; but when in England he suddenly deserted. He was apprehended and at his court martial stated, 'I enlisted in November 1914 under the name of Fritz Lepin. When I went to France in 1916 they all called me a German. In January 1918 I sent papers from France to London to have my name changed to my right name which is Martin Mikkel Antin. My alteration of name was read out on parade but my comrades still called me Fritz. Then I got gassed and was sent to England. [...] I wanted to explain my case to a Court Martial so I stayed away.' The court was unbiased enough to reduce the initial charge of desertion to being absent without leave; Antin was sentenced to eight months, but six months were remitted 'on the grounds of the matter contained in his evidence and his long service'.⁴¹ After the war he will get into trouble more than once and his application for naturalisation would not be approved.

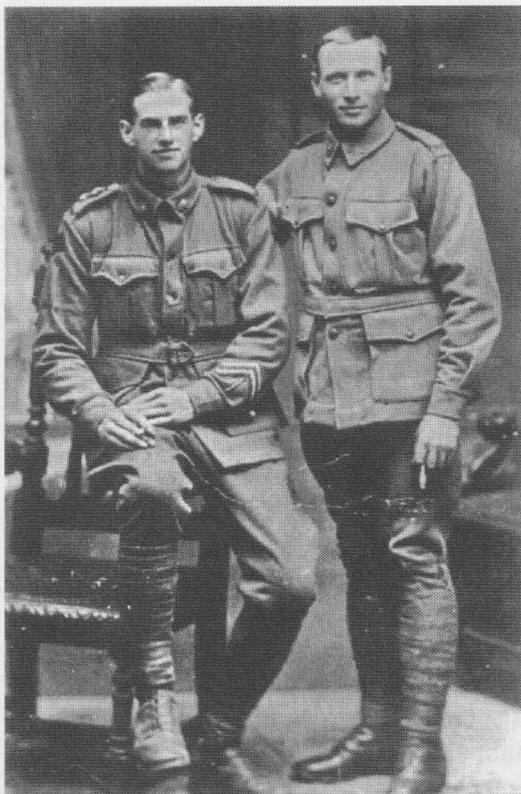
Indirect evidence of difficulties for Latvian-born servicemen to 'settle' among Anzacs can be found in their quite high rate of discharge from the Army. Besides the extreme forms of failing to settle in, such as

Janshewsky's and Antin's 'desertions', there were many less obvious cases. Oscar Yurak, a former labourer from Salacgrīva, argued in April 1917: 'I enlisted in Australia on the assurance of the Russian consul in Sydney that I would be transferred to the Russian Army on my arrival in Europe', but his request was refused. He added, 'I believe [...] in battlefield, every soldier to be amongst his own people' and affirmed that he did not 'intend to soldier with the Australian Army'. No disciplinary action was taken against him, however, and he was returned to Australia in September 1917.⁴² A number of Latvian-born men — Edward Beglot, Charles Greive, Harry Johnson, John Olsen, Charles Pulpe — deserted the Army soon after enlistment, probably feeling 'alien' among Australians. Peter Robin-sky, a sailor from Rīga, who worked in Australia as a gardener and was, according to a police report, 'an intelligent, well-educated man with a knowledge of several languages', enlisted in the AIF twice. After the first enlistment (under the name of Peter Robaky) he deserted, but eventually rejoined and fought on the Western Front.

After the war

Statistics about Latvian Anzacs' settlement after the war testifies to their attachment to Australia. Out of 125 Latvian-born men who survived the war, about 100, or 80 per cent, stayed in Australia. This is a very high rate considering the vagabond backgrounds common to our heroes and that after the war their native land attained independence. A few, such as Edward Abelscaln, the hero of Passchendaele, returned to Latvia after the war. About twenty men disappeared from Australian records, some of them might have returned to Latvia.

Naturalisation was one of the manifestations of their new allegiance to Australia. At least half of the Latvian Anzacs, 71 men, naturalised in Australia. The first, in 1899, was Jacob Gensberg, the last, in 1967, was Andrei Berskaln. Most naturalised immediately after the war, but some considered that taking an oath of allegiance to the king at enlistment dispensed with the need to take another oath for naturalisation — in the words of Peter Swirgsdin, who had been severely wounded at Passchendaele in 1917, 'I have taken the Oath of Allegiance to His Majesty the King once and I consider it true for all times'.⁴³



Carl Collath (right) and friend

A number of Anzacs — Julajs Beern, August Makewitz, Ivan Miconi and Vladimer Valichea — died soon after returning to Australia. Robert Arnst (who at the end of the war took his correct name, Robert Ernst) while at the front developed tubercular bone infection and died in 1930. The war affected them in different ways. Carl Collath joined up in late 1915 but was frequently ill on the Western Front with neurasthenia and finally, in early 1918, was discharged suffering from shell-shock and with a stammer and invalided back to Australia. He continued to suffer badly from the effects of shell-shock

and would go on long 'walkabouts' for months on end.

Those who recovered from war wounds worked all over Australia. Many seamen took a long time to settle. After the war, Frank Payton — who was wounded four times on the Western Front — worked in Western Australia as a wharfie, a whaler, and a prospector. When the Second World War broke out he worked on the wharves in Darwin. Peter Abolin, a seaman from Rīga and one of the few Latvian Anzacs who soldiered three years on the Western Front unscathed, worked on the waterfront in Sydney. Ted Seltin for a while worked as a coal-lumper and later, when coal-lumping ended in 1926, joined the trams, starting as a tram conduc-

tor and later becoming a driver. Otto Brutton served as a gunner at the Western Front until he was gassed at Ypres. On returning to Australia, he tried various things: he was a milk vendor, worked on coastal vessels, then tried tobacco-farming and cane-cutting, and finally ended up on the waterfront at Cairns. John Ivanoff, after working for several years stevedoring on the Sydney wharves, became a shop-keeper in Alexandria and then had a fruit run for some years at Newtown involving his whole family. Finally, owing to the Depression, 'they moved to Berowra, where John worked on the Pacific Highway operating the jack-hammer at the construction site of the S-bends at Mt Kuring-gai'.⁴⁴

Some settled on the land. John Victor Michelson, who served in Egypt with the Light Horse, pioneered on a farm near Talia, on the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia. Albert Alexejew, whose father worked in a theatre in Rīga, took land at Macedon, Victoria. Alexejew was wounded twice in 1917 on the Western Front, the second time, at Bullecourt. He suffered from shell shock and nervous exhaustion — he had been buried by an explosion. Edmund Filip, who served as sapper at Field Company Engineers, returned to Murrumbena in Gippsland. Ernest Dreger, his daughter tells, 'was suffering from the effects of being gassed and the doctors could only advise him to go to a dry, warm part of the State. Firstly, he went to Geraldton but this was not the answer so his last resort was to try our farm, where he spent the rest of his life.' That farm was at the limits of European settlement, about 200 km southeast of Geraldton, via Mullewa.⁴⁵ John Pankoff, who also suffered from gas poisoning, applied for a job as a rigger, using his experience on sailing ships. He worked at a power station in Brisbane, was gold-prospecting during the Depression and finally got employment at a saw-mill in Ipswich.

Many married during the war in England or upon return to Australia and brought up their children as Australians. They eagerly blended into Australian society, beginning with their names. For instance Fridrich Grusausky, an orchardist from Rīga who was severely wounded in June 1918 at Villers-Brettonneux, after returning to Australia changed his surname to Russell. This might have been caused by the suspicions of pro-German sentiments that his brother, Edward Otto Grusausky, who studied at the Australian Missionary College in Cooranbong, NSW, had experienced during the war. Edward later moved to the Solomon Islands.

Another manifestation of assimilation was abandoning their native tongue in preference for English. In many cases this was accompanied by reluctance to speak about their past lives in Latvia. Although Ernest Dreger 'spoke Lettish [i.e., Latvian], German, French and English, he insisted all the family spoke English'. It was a similar story in the Drager family. Adolf Drager 'never spoke of his family or his youth in Rīga and always insisted that he'd forgotten his native language', according to his daughter. He also 'did not talk about his homeland and he did not talk about the war. And of course we just grew up with this and we never thought anything of it. We never queried it.'⁴⁶ Ted Seltin explains the attitudes of his father: 'Father never taught me one word of Latvian. He did not want me to be sort of half-Latvian, half-Australian. He just wanted me to be an Australian boy, which I found was very good because, going to school, if you were any way different, particularly in those days, you were picked on and life became rather unpleasant. [...] As far as anyone at school was concerned, I was just an average Australian boy, probably of British ancestry. I did not go rushing around telling everyone I had a Latvian father because, not that I wasn't proud of him, it wasn't like that, but it would have only caused trouble for me and it did not really matter anyway to me.'⁴⁷

Latvian Anzacs, probably more than any other émigrés from Latvia, became the bridge between Australia and their native Latvia. Carl (Karl) Michael Alksne was a consular agent (later vice-consul) for Latvia in Australia. Alksne, a former ship's carpenter, was wounded at Passchendaele in 1917 and was invalided back to Australia. Ian Rosing aspired to take over Alksne's consular position, but was unsuccessful. Instead he became a trade representative for Soviet Russia.

The Australian government did not forget its obligations to the parents, usually widowed mothers, of the fallen Latvian Anzacs and paid them pensions.

The Latvian Anzacs who stayed in Australia accepted this country as their home. This attachment could be expressed through association with Australian icons — for instance the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which was completed in 1932. John Bepper, twice wounded at Armentieres and Passchendaele, after the war trained as a painter and decorator and settled in Sydney with his English wife. In 1932 he wrote a song called 'Our

Harbour Bridge' — a hymn to the Australian people — of which the following is one verse:

*From North to South it links the soil.
The massive Bridge o'er water blue;
It's manly toil that links that soil
O Sydney Bridge we're proud of you.*⁴⁸

In 1982 journalist Richard Raxworthy wrote about one of the bridge heroes: 'Of all the remarkable men who came to light during the 50th anniversary of the Sydney Harbour Bridge the most remarkable would have to be Harry Tomrop. Tom to his mates, he is the last known survivor of the "Tin Hares", the 12 steel erectors who built the Bridge.'⁴⁹ This was Latvian rigger Ernest Tomrop.

WWII

The Second World War was another opportunity for surviving Latvian Anzacs to express their ties to Australia. Thirteen of them enlisted in the 2nd AIF, among a total of at least 45 Latvian-born servicemen.

Harry Isaacs (real name — Isakovitch), a hairdresser from Jēkabpils, whose WWI service was not long because his wife became sick and he was discharged, now changed his year of birth from 1889 to 1901 and was sent with the Australian Army to Kantara in Greece.

Probably due to their ages, the others served only in Australia. John Skalberg from Valmiera, wounded at Camiers in May 1918, reduced his age by three years and enlisted in the Army, serving as a sergeant in the Army pay corps. Ian Rosing was employed as a clerk at headquarters. Philip Walters, who received the Military Medal for his heroism at the battle for St Quentin, served in the audit section. His uncle, Isidore Walters, served as a cook in the Volunteer Defence Corps in Western Australia and died while enlisted. Edward Janshewsky, who by that time had changed his occupation from sailor to boot-maker, worked in the Army in the boot repair section. Frederick Skudrin, a former seaman from Riga, fought for three years on the Western Front and was wounded during the advance to the Hindenburg line in March 1917; his mates spoke of him as 'a good soldier and a firm friend'.⁵⁰ Now he enlisted again, serving in garrison battalions and the School of Military Engineering. Andrew Putre,

Charles Reppe and John Michelson served in garrison battalions as well. John Pankoff, his son relates, was in the Volunteer Defence Corps in Queensland: 'My father joined in April 1942 and served part-time, that is 2 nights per week and weekends, instructing on the Vickers machine gun'.⁵¹

In some families children enlisted together with their Latvian Anzac fathers. Thus, John Ivanoff served 'in the Garrison at Hay Internment Camp, guarding Italian and Japanese POWs. [...] He could converse in many languages.'⁵² His son, Ronald, served in the Royal Australian Navy, as did Ronald's brother Reginald later on in the Korean War. The Dregers gave three servicemen: Ernest himself was in the Geraldton Voluntary Defence Corps battalion, dying during service; his eldest son Charles



John Michelson served again during WWII

served in the 11th Battalion, AIF (the same battalion in which Ernest had left for the Western Front in 1916), while Rudolph was in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). After the war Fritz Winnin married the widow of his friend Valdimar Hektor, an Estonian Anzac killed in the war, and had a large family. While his three sons enlisted in the army and the RAAF, he was employed by the Water Board and was threatened with the sack for being an alien (he had not naturalised). Edward Sendon's children, Leonard and Erle, served in New Britain and Carl Collath's son, Lawrence, served in New Guinea. Ted Seltin's son, Edward, recounts how, 'In 1942 on my 18th birthday I joined the airforce. Father did not mind, but he didn't urge me, too. I was in aircrew and served in England. I was one of the lucky ones, but a lot of them were not.'⁵³

Edward (Ted) Seltin died in 1993, just a few days short of his 100th birthday. On his deathbed he told his son about his early years in faraway Latvia. His son Edward preserved the tape, not only for himself but for all Latvians, so that the story of Latvian Anzacs in Australia could continue.

Notes

- 1 Karlis [Rudolph Mahlit] to Jacob Silin, 18.12.1908, 26.01.1909, 4.06.1909, 4.10.1909, 28.11.1909, 26.12.1909, Margaret Mueller's archives, Melbourne. Mahlit initially used the passport of his friend Charles (Karlis) Girgens.
- 2 Seltin, Edward Robert (son of Edward Seltin), tape, 26.10.2001, EGA.
- 3 Jack Rosing, interview, 18.11.2001, EGA.
- 4 N. Sendon, interview, 9.10.2001, EGA.
- 5 Service records, which provide most of the information in this study, are available in digital format from the National Archives of Australia (NAA), searching for name in series B2455.
- 6 J.S. Pankoff, *Memories of my father John August Pankoff*, 2000, Pankoff archive, Ipswich.
- 7 NAA: A1, 1915/347, Rudolph Mahlit – Naturalisation.
- 8 Elaine Dreger, Ernest Michael Dreger, Elaine Dreger' archives, Perth. For an account of Maren's activities and his involvement with the Dregers, see Clarke, F.G. (1983). *Will-o'-the-wisp: Peter the Painter and the anti-tsarist terrorists in Britain and Australia*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- 9 The man who claimed to be Count Nicholas d'Orloff enlisted in the AIF in 1915 but was soon discharged from the army because of his absence without leave and was interned in a concentration camp for Germans at Liverpool on suspicions of his pro-German sympathies. He was deported from Australia in 1919.
- 10 Pankoff, *Memories of my father*.
- 11 Seltin, tape.
- 12 23.11/6.12.1915 N. d'Abaza to Minister of Defence, in NAA: MP367/1, 592/4/55.
- 13 Seltin, tape.
- 14 NAA: A471, 930, Trinkoon, I.
- 15 Betty Dreger, *Caring for Others Giving her Best*, 2001, Betty Dreger's archive, Perth.

- 16 Pankoff, Memories of my father.
- 17 AWM: 1DRL/428, wounded and missing. 741 Trooper John Reineke.
- 18 Harry Tomrop — Last of the 'Tin Hares'. —
<http://www.tyroga.com/?p=302=1>
- 19 NAA: A1, 1911/18584, Martin Nicolay Renaud — Naturalisation.
- 20 AWM: 1DRL/428, wounded and missing. 4872 Pte Louis Pasvasky.
- 21 NAA: B2455, Makewitz, A.
- 22 NAA: A471, 5191, Ivanoff, J.; NAA: B2455, Ivanoff, J.
- 23 NAA: B2455, Rosing, I.
- 24 Dreger, Ernest Michael Dreger.
- 25 AWM28, 96 L/Sgt Edward Abelscaln; 520 Pte Charles Gedgawd;
1879 Pte Karl Fritz Paulin.
- 26 NAA: B2455, Dyson, F.W.
- 27 Dreger, Ernest Michael Dreger.
- 28 NAA: A1, 1919/16218, Martin Brasche — Application for Naturalisation.
- 29 NAA: B2455, Ivanoff, J.
- 30 AWM28, 4363 Pte John William Blankenberg; Bean, C.E.W. (1983).
The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, vol. VI. St
Lucia: UQP, pp.119, 120, 134; NAA: B2455, Blankenberg J.W.
- 31 AWM28, 1624 Private John Ivanoff.
- 32 NAA: B2455, Putre, J.
- 33 Bean, *The Official History*, vol. VI, pp.798–99, 801–02; NAA:
B2455, Krauklys, J.R.
- 34 AWM28, 6763 Sgt Philip Walters.
- 35 Bean, C.E.W. (1993). *Anzac to Amiens*. Ringwood, Australia: Pen-
guin Books, p. 480.
- 36 Bean, *The Official History*, vol. VI, p.1037.
- 37 'Armistice Day — a time to remember', *Camden Haven Courier*, 7
Nov. 1990.
- 38 NAA: B2455, Voitkun, A.; AWM 3DRL/428 POW, Box 214. 2134 Pte
Andrew Voitkun.
- 39 NAA: A435, 1947/4/1339, Janshewsky, Edward Rudolph; B2455,
Janshewsky, E.R.; A471, 18385, Janshewsky, E.
- 40 Rosing, interview, 18.11.2001, EGA.
- 41 NAA: A471, 13462, Antin, M.M.
- 42 NAA: B2455, Yurak, O.
- 43 NAA: A1, 1923/21304, Swirgsdin, P. — Naturalisation.
- 44 Joy Ivanoff, letter, 16.10.2001.
- 45 Dreger, Ernest Michael Dreger.

- 46 Dreger, Ernest Michael Dreger; Gillies, Shirley, interviews 14.08.2001, 14.09.2001 and letter 14.08.2001, EGA.
- 47 Seltin, tape.
- 48 NAA: A1336, 21993.
- 49 Harry Tomrop – Last of the ‘Tin Hares’. – <http://www.tyroga.com/?p=302=1>
- 50 NAA: A1, 1921/9922, Frederick Skudrin – Naturalisation.
- 51 Pankoff, Memories of my father.
- 52 Ivanoff, Joy, letter, 16.10.2001, EGA.
- 53 Seltin, tape.

Abbreviations

- AWM – Australian War Memorial
- EGA – Elena Govor’s archive
- NAA – National Archives of Australia