

This is an electronic copy of an essay published in:

Margolis, R., & Anders, E. (2008). The Linkimer diary: How 11 Jews survived the Holocaust. In A. Caune, A. Stranga, & M. Vestermanis, Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia, vol. 23 (pp. 48-68). Riga, Latvia: Institute of Latvian Historians. Available online at:  
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## The Linkimer Diary: How 11 Jews Survived the Holocaust

### Introduction

To survive the Holocaust took not one but several miracles. At least one of these miracles usually involved a Gentile Rescuer who, risking his freedom if not his life, stepped forward to save a Jew.

One of the most remarkable rescuers in Latvia was the Liepāja janitor Roberts Seduls (1906–1945). An audacious daredevil, he and his wife Johanna (1910–1987) hid 11 Jews in the cellar of an apartment building in the center of town from 1943 to 1945. All survived the war but tragically Seduls did not: he was killed by a Soviet bomb on 10 March 1945.

One of the Jews, the teacher Kalman Linkimer (1913–1988), had kept a diary from the first day of the war (22.6.1941) but was forced to abandon it in April 1944 when he fled from the Paplaka military camp to Seduls' cellar. There he resumed his diary, producing a day-by-day account from 29 April 1944 to 20 February 1945 and reconstructing the lost pages for at least the first, bloodiest year of the German occupation, from 29 June 1941 to the establishment of the Liepāja ghetto on 1 July 1942. He also recorded the escape stories of the other Jews who had reached the cellar in October–December 1943. Thus, his 80'000-word diary gives a rather complete account of the Nazi occupation of Liepāja from the perspective of 11 Jews who were in mortal danger every one of these 1410 days.

The original Yiddish diary of 315 handwritten pages is in the possession of Igor Skutel'sky in Liepāja, son of Linkimer's half-sister Sophie Skutel'sky. At Mr. Skutel'sky's request we produced an English translation (RM translated, EA edited and annotated). This translation is being published by the Museum "Jews in Latvia" in Riga.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike most Holocaust memoirs, which were written long after the war, much of the Linkimer diary is a "real-time" account, set down within hours of the events. Thus,

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Robert Seduls in 1942

it captures the thoughts, emotions, and tensions of the moment – neither mellowed nor smoothed by the passage of time. Even the reminiscences of the first two years that were reconstructed in 1944/45 were written in the shadow of the ever-present Damocles sword. The neatness of the manuscript suggests that it was copied from an original draft. The first 44 pages, dealing with 1941/42, seem to have been copied after the war: paper and ink are different, the pages are numbered (unlike the rest of the manuscript), and a post-war street name appears in one place. That name also appears once in another section, so perhaps Linkimer recopied the entire manuscript.

Another unique aspect of the diary is that these Jews had a radio provided by Seduls. Unlike prisoners in camps who were totally cut off from news except for an occasional, often false rumour, these 11 Jews were able to follow military and political events hour by hour, recording their thoughts every day. Like millions of other Europeans they eagerly awaited liberation, but with an urgency felt only by people facing imminent death.

There exists a supplement to the diary: a long article by journalists E. Berg[er]s and Z. Eiduss, published in 24 installments in the Liepāja newspaper *Komunisti* in 1965.<sup>2</sup> This article is based on interviews with most of the survivors (curiously omitting Johanna



Soldier Linkimer

Seduls and her daughters), but is heavily embellished with clumsy Soviet *agitprop* as well as fictional events and dialogues. Thankfully, the crudity of these embellishments makes it easy to strip them from the story. The remaining material is rather valuable, being based on interviews only 20 years after the war, when the survivors were still in the prime of life. It is available in a critically annotated English translation.<sup>3</sup> There also exists a shorter account written by the surviving author Bergers in 1993, after restoration of Latvian independence.<sup>4</sup> Although cleansed of *agitprop* and most of the fictional material, it contains several errors that are pointed out in the English translation. Another relevant source is the account by Aron Westermann, who was in the cellar with Linkimer.<sup>5</sup>

### **The first year of the German occupation: 29 June 1941–1 July 1942**

There exist several historians' accounts of Holocaust events in Liepāja. Vestermanis<sup>6</sup> and Borgert<sup>7</sup> cover the first few months only whereas Ezergailis,<sup>8</sup> Levin,<sup>9</sup> and Anders<sup>10</sup> extend coverage to late 1943 and May 1945, respectively. In contrast to these rather detached accounts, Linkimer presents an intensely personal "grass-roots" narrative, vividly describing his own narrow escapes from the Nazi meat-grinder and the fates of less fortunate Jews.

Nazi murders began on the first day of the occupation. The victims included an opera conductor from Vienna, an accountant who came to his daughter's defence when an SD officer tried to rape her, and a number of Jews suspected of belonging to the Workers' Guard that had fought in the city's defence. Linkimer and other Jews later were ordered to dig up the bodies and rebury them in the Jewish cemetery. All Jewish men 16–60 had to report for work daily on the Firehouse Square, where they were abused and humiliated by SD-men. Most were then sent off to work, but every day some number were taken to the Women's Prison for further abuse and torture, followed by transport to an execution site near the beach.

Several times Linkimer was swept up in the daily manhunts. Realizing that only essential craftsmen would be spared, he had quickly become a glazier, replacing windows broken by the bombing. That indeed saved his life. But other, less essential Jews were shot. The killing reached a climax in late July, when a unit of the notorious Arājs Commando arrived from Riga and shot 1100 Jewish men in three days.

Yet many Jews remained in denial, clinging to the hope that the men were merely deported to work camps in the countryside. This false hope was fostered by the Nazis, who forced some of the doomed Jews to write letters to their families, claiming that they were building roads or railway lines, etc., and asking the family to send them money, warm clothes, or gold items for barter. Linkimer had arranged with his brother-in-law that if one of them was arrested and knew that he would be shot, he would ask for white underwear (symbolizing a shroud). Sure enough, a Latvian policeman brought a letter: *"I find myself near Embūte doing roadwork. I am well. Send money, clothes, and white underwear."*

Word got around and some Jews tried to flee. But few if any succeeded. Some tried to get a fisherman to take them to Sweden, only 140 km away, but there seem to have been no successful escapes. In one case mentioned by Linkimer, when two Jews showed up at the agreed meeting place, the SD was waiting for them. Linkimer himself almost fell into a trap, when a Latvian communist acquaintance offered to introduce him to partisans who would take him to the woods. But at the last moment a friend warned him that the two people he was to meet in the communist's apartment were not partisans but Latvian policemen.

From late September on, the killing was no longer confined to men but extended to women, especially elderly ones. A Latvian SD platoon was established in Liepāja to conduct executions, which until then had been carried out by Germans (except for the 22–25 July shootings by the Arājs Commando from Riga). Nearly one half of the Jews had been killed by November. But in late November the survivors began to worry about rumours of a big ditch that was being dug by Latvian policemen on the Army shooting

range at Šķēde. Pessimists thought it was to be a mass grave for Jews, but others did not believe it, as until now, Jews had to dig their own graves. At last a Jewish woman learned from a Latvian policeman that the ditch was being dug for the remaining Jews of Liepāja.

Soon a notice appeared in the local newspaper that Jews were not to leave their homes on 15 and 16 December, whereupon a dozen Jews, realizing what was in store for them, committed suicide. Starting at 4 a.m., teams of Latvian policemen methodically went from house to house, arresting every Jew who was on their list. The prisoners were taken to the Women's Prison and then driven or marched to the Šķēde execution site, some 12 km away. There they had to undress – most young women completely, others to their underwear – and walk in groups of ten to the seaward side of the ditch. Three firing squads of 20 men – two Latvian and one German – took turns shooting them, two bullets per victim. By the time the *Aktion* ended on 17 December, 2749 Jews were dead, leaving about 1050 in town. Several scores of the latter had been saved by Friedrich Kroll, a German Navy official in charge of the Navy's Uniform Warehouse in the former cork factory, where some 100 Jews worked. On the first morning of the *Aktion*, he and his assistants rushed off to the Women's Prison, demanding that all their workers be released. Kroll then urged them to stay in the warehouse overnight, but as some still went home to their families, he repeated his rescue trip to the prison the next two mornings.

Nearly all of the surviving 1050 Jews had been spared because they or the head of their family were working for the German military or even the SD. The SD had chosen some of the best craftsmen – electricians, auto mechanics, goldsmiths, boot-makers, tailors, etc. – some for equipment maintenance, others for producing luxury goods for the SD men and their families. But soon SD-chief Wolfgang Kügler received orders to further reduce the number of Jews, and allegedly said: "One-half will be done away with and the rest will be put in a ghetto."

In mid-February he ordered another mass arrest involving about 170 Jews. However, he had learned from his spies that most of the gentile population of Liepāja had been dismayed by the December killings, as stated in his biweekly report to his superior Dietrich: "*The execution of Jews carried out during the report period still is the conversation topic of the local population. The fate of the Jews is widely deplored, and thus far few voices have been heard in favour of the elimination of the Jews.*"<sup>11</sup> Kügler therefore began the next *Aktion* on 15 February 1942 in the middle of the night, during the nightly curfew and blackout. Jews were quietly taken to Šķēde on horse-drawn sleds and shot after daybreak. But 16 Jews on one sled overpowered the guards and driver and escaped.<sup>12</sup> Fourteen of them evaded recapture but only one survived the war.



David Zivcon hiding place

Among the Jews to be shot the next day was Ida Fleischmann, a skilled runner. She, her mother, and her sister had already stripped naked, waiting for their turn to be led to the ditch. But Ida, noticing that the guards were not too attentive, began to sprint through the snow, away from the murder site. She was more than 100 m away before the guard leader, *SS-Oberscharführer* August Kaiser, noticed her escape. By his own account according to Linkimer, his nerves were rather strained after killing some 400 Jews, making him think at first he was seeing a ghost. But the shouts of the other policemen awakened him from his reverie, whereupon they gave chase. Unable to catch up, they lost sight of her after more than three km and called for reinforcements. By Kaiser's account, they finally found her late in the evening hidden in the attic of a barn. She again sprinted off, but they sicked dogs on her that surrounded and caught her. By another account she had fled into a Navy barracks, where the sailors agreed to hide her. But when the SD men threatened them with harsh punishment, the sailors surrendered her. She was shot a few days later.

Another killing of several dozen Jews was thoughtfully carried out on Hitler's birthday, 20 April 1942. Now a ghetto was being prepared for the remaining 832 Jews, who were to move in on 1 July 1942. Many must have thought of going into hiding, but only a very few had an opportunity.

Easily the most skilled craftsman working for the SD was the electrician David Zivcon, a mechanical genius. Being indispensable to the Nazis, he managed to gain the release of several arrested Jews by rounding up the bribes demanded: a Leica camera, a kilogram of gold, or a quantity of tobacco. One day he was ordered to install an electric outlet in the quarters of SS-*Oberscharführer* Sobeck and happened to notice a roll of film – pictures of the 15 December Šķēde executions! A Jew working in the SD darkroom quickly copied them, and David hid them in the wall of the SD garage, hoping to use them as evidence against the murderers after the war.

One evening in June David visited his old friend Roberts Seduls, a former sailor who now worked as janitor in a large apartment building at Tirgoņu iela 14 in the centre of the town. Roberts, deeply resentful about the murders of Jews, had conceived a plan to save David and his wife. The basement of the apartment building was a maze of walls, niches, machinery, etc.; and in one place three walls formed a deep, U-shaped recess. Roberts suggested that this could be made into a hiding place by building a fourth wall across the U, leaving an opening just big enough to crawl through. This opening could be camouflaged by a workbench and assorted clutter.

Roberts offered to build the wall, using bricks he had salvaged from the nearby synagogue that had been torn down on Nazi orders in July 1941. “These are sacred bricks”, he said, “they will save you.” All David had to do was run electrical wiring under the plaster into the hiding place. This hiding place would be available whenever David needed it.

### **The ghetto, 1 July 1942 to 8 October 1943**

The diary largely skips the ghetto period, except for the weeks before and after the closing, which are covered in the escape stories. A major reason for this omission may be the lack of killings or other dramatic events. The commandant of the ghetto, *Meister der Schutzpolizei* Franz Kerscher (1894–1959), was a very humane person, who occasionally revealed his sympathies with the Jews by remarks such as *Gott sei Dank* (Thank God) or *Leider Gottes* (most unfortunately). He repeatedly averted troubles by bribing the SD with valuables solicited from Jews for this purpose. Despite contrary rumours, the widow of one of the Jewish elders is sure that Kerscher kept little or nothing for himself.

Kerscher's finest hour came in September 1943. Alarmed by rumours of the imminent liquidation of the ghetto and its inmates, some of the Jews working at the SD decided to resist. They managed to smuggle several boxes of Soviet handguns

into the ghetto with the help of Trofim Torbik, a Russian ex-POW. Pretending to be a simpleton, he now worked for the SD as a carter, regularly delivering supplies to the ghetto. The Jews hid the guns in a half-collapsed shed on the ghetto grounds, but the guards accidentally discovered the weapons cache during one of their periodic searches.

In Riga and in other ghettos, such weapons finds were punished by mass executions and other draconian reprisals, but oddly, nothing whatsoever happened in Liepāja. Most likely, Kerscher managed to persuade the SD to keep quiet about the matter, arguing that the weapons may have been left behind by the Soviets in 1941 and that it was best not to let the Jews know.

More detailed coverage of the ghetto period is available in references 8–10 as well as in survivor accounts.

## **Two couples escape, 5 October 1943**

In September 1943, the Liepāja Jews did not yet know that three months earlier Himmler had ordered all ghettos in the East to be closed. This order was not welcomed by the civil administration: Dr. Dorffel from the *Gebietskomissariat* protested to the SD that the Jewish workers were absolutely essential to the local economy and would have to be replaced with an equal number of Latvian workers, and Franz Kerscher offered to house the Jews at their work places if the ghetto buildings were needed for other purposes. To no avail, of course. Some rumours of these efforts had reached the Jews, who now feared that “liquidation” meant them as well as the ghetto. Many tried to barter their belongings for *Veronal* sleeping pills, preferring a gentle death by their own hand to the cruel methods the Nazis might have in store for them. On 5 October David Zivcon was called to repair the teletypewriter of the SD, which had stalled in the middle of a message. Zivcon had to leave the room as soon as the machine resumed reception, but managed to catch the phrase “liquidate 8 Oct...”.

David and his wife Henny decided to flee that very evening, accompanied by Michael and Hilde Skutelsky. They bid farewell to Henny’s mother (59) and gave her a vial of *Veronal*, which she took a few days later. While Michael engaged a guard in a long conversation, David cut through multiple rows of barbed wire, finally enabling them to crawl out one by one. They reached Seduls’ house at Tirgoņu 14, about 500 m away, and spent the next few days in the attic while Seduls put the finishing touches on their hiding place. Meanwhile, on 8 October the remaining ~800 Jews were loaded into 16 freight cars and sent eastward to an unknown destination and fate.

### **Three doomed craftsmen escape, 1 December 1943**

The SD had ordered three craftsmen to stay behind, although their wives and children had been deported: Jeweler Michael Libauer and shoemakers Josef Mendelstamm and Shmerl Skutelsky (no relation to Michael Skutelsky, who had fled to Seduls on 5 October 1943). They were housed in the attic of the SD building, with orders to remove their yellow stars and not to show themselves in the street, as Liepāja had been officially declared *judenfrei* (free of Jews). Their task was to make jewelry, shoes, and boots – some for the SD men but most as Christmas presents for their families in Germany.

For ten days these three craftsmen had to sort Jewish belongings from the ghetto. The choicest items were taken by the SD men (who often physically fought over them, as vividly described by Linkimer), the lesser ones were shared by the *Schutzpolizei* and the Latvian guards, and the rest were used for black-market barter or for resale to civilians in a special shop. That job completed, the craftsmen turned to custom orders for the SD. From time to time they saw prisoners being loaded onto a truck carrying shovels and bleaching powder, evidently bound for Šķēde. Warned by some sympathetic civilian workers at the SD and a drunken guard, they realized that this would be their fate, too, once the Christmas orders were done.

Trofim Torbik, the Russian horse groom who had smuggled handguns into the ghetto, came up with an escape plan. They could flee through the hayloft where he would “forget” to lock the door and a hatch and to remove a ladder nearby. Then they could climb down to the second floor and jump down to the street. Indeed, on 1 December it became clear that the Nazis wanted to get rid of them that very day: their unfinished work was taken away from them, the Šķēde truck appeared in the yard, and the SD guards were assembling. Two of the three craftsmen deftly climbed down, but Mendelstamm caught his foot and fell, badly spraining his ankle. Libauer went straight to Seduls while Mendelstamm and Skutelsky stayed with a Latvian woman for a few days until Seduls came to pick them up.

### **Riva Zivcun saves herself and her four-year-old daughter Ada, December 1943**

This is the most involved and most dramatic of the four escape stories. Riva and Ada left the ghetto with ~800 other Jews at 5 a.m. on 8 October 1943 and boarded a freight train to an unknown destination, allegedly for work. But remembering how many

Jews had been sent off to “work” that consisted of digging their own graves, most of them feared that they would be killed en route or at the destination. Panic broke out when the train stopped along the way and again at 2 a.m. in a forest adjoining the Kaiserwald concentration camp near Riga. There the dreaded “selection” began the next day: single adults and children over 12 to one barrack, old or handicapped people and women with children under 12 to another barrack. The Jews knew what was in store for the second group; surely the Germans would not provide children’s or old age homes. Several women left their small children with an older relative and joined the “fit-for-work” group, but most mothers stayed with their children, ready to share their grim fate.

A truck arrived, allegedly to take them to the Riga ghetto, but defying the orders of the SS-men, the women did not board, convinced that this would be their last journey. Finally, they yielded in a spirit of fatalism, but two of them poisoned themselves on the truck. To their amazement, the women soon saw the skyline of Riga, and then the barbed wire of the ghetto. For once the Germans had told them the truth. Little did the women know that most of them would be dead a month later.

More selections followed. The Riga ghetto was to be emptied by quartering able-bodied women without children or with children over 12 at various military warehouses but shipping off to death women with younger children. Riva cleverly evaded selection, and then tried to sneak onto trucks heading for warehouses. A Mr. Meller who knew ghetto procedures tried to help her and other women, but they were caught every time. At last Mr. Meller came to her with a Latvian policeman, Corporal Avots, who offered to take her out of the ghetto. At the gate he said crisply and confidently, “Corporal Avots with wife and child”, and was waved on.

Avots continued to take care of her. When she failed to find a pre-war friend [V-S-T-N; possibly Vēstnis?<sup>13</sup>] at his former address, Avots took her to his girlfriend’s apartment, claiming that she was Russian. But when the girlfriend discovered a few days later that Ada spoke only Yiddish, she did not want to keep them any longer. Avots finally tracked down VSTN who agreed to hide her briefly while he tried to contact the underground – without success, as it turned out. She got sick and stayed for two weeks, but then decided to return to Liepāja and try her luck there, although such travel was quite risky without identity papers. In Liepāja the people with Jewish connections (half-Jews or Jewish wives of Latvians) were afraid to take her, and Seduls did not want to risk hiding a 4-year old child who might betray them all by crying. But Riva was able to stay with her former janitor and finally found a Latvian widow, Otilija Šimelpfenigs, who was willing to take Ada. After a futile return trip to Riga, Riva went back to Liepāja where Seduls now agreed to hide her.

## **Linkimer and two friends escape, 28 April 1944**

Some 32 Jews from the Liepāja ghetto, including Linkimer, had been sent to the Paplaka military base in early 1943, to renovate barracks where many Latvian legionnaires and Ukrainian auxiliaries were soon to be housed. The Jews stayed there even after the liquidation of the Liepāja ghetto. But on 28 April an SD car arrived with four SD men, presumably to take the Jews away. Linkimer had long been prepared for such an event, and with two friends (Zelig Hirschberg and Aron Westermann) took off for the Brūvers farmhouse nearby. They hid in the hayloft for a few hours while Mrs. Brūvers reconnoitered, but on her return she reported that the Germans were searching with dogs for three escaped Jews and were already at the next farmhouse. Linkimer and comrades decided to walk the ~30 km to Liepāja overnight. Only he and Hirschberg knew that they could find shelter with Seduls.

They had numerous scares on the way that necessitated long detours: an SD car searching farmhouses for them; a heavily guarded camp for Soviet POWs; barking dogs in farmhouses, armed sentries, checkpoints, etc. But they reached Liepāja at 5 a.m. and soon arrived at Seduls' place, receiving a warm welcome and breakfast. Then they were led into the cellar for an emotional reunion with the eight Jews who had preceded them.

The newcomers were amazed by the well-designed hiding place. A staircase into the cellar led into a workroom, connected to a back room that contained the boiler and a workbench along the back wall. The workbench concealed a small opening in the wall through which one could crawl into the "cave". It consisted of two small rooms with three bunks for the women; the men slept on the floor. There also were six handguns provided by Seduls, ensuring the Jews against being taken alive. But by thus protecting their dignity, he had forfeited his and his family's life.

The cave was hot as there was a bakery oven directly above. The heat made it hard to sleep, but if they uncovered themselves, flies bit them. During the day the Jews therefore stayed in the front or back room whenever it was safe to do so. A signal lamp wired to Seduls' apartment enabled him to transmit warnings or instructions. The cave was remarkably well equipped, thanks to the mechanical genius David Zivcon. It had a pantry with an emergency food supply, a water reservoir, electricity, a home-made radio with headphones, and shovels and axes to dig their way out if the building was struck by a bomb. The Jews took turns doing guard duty in the front room every night. There were several maps on the wall, on which the position of the front was marked every day.

There also was a picture of Stalin, drawn by David Zivcon. Being blue-collar workers, these Jews had not been persecuted by the Soviets in 1940/41, and now that the USSR was their only plausible liberator, they had an unreservedly positive view of it. However, their enthusiasm later was dampened by the realities of the second Soviet occupation. For example, David Zivcon resisted all entreaties to join the Communist Party, at some disadvantage to himself and his family.

## May–August 1944

Warm friendship develops between Seduls and the Jews. He often visits them, sometimes staying until 3 a. m. Having to shop daily for 15 people, he worries that he is running low on cash and barter items. One of the Jews tells him where he has buried some valuables, Seduls digs them up during a dark and stormy night, and returns with a glass jar containing 40 watches and some gold items. Now their food supply seems assured for some time.

When money again runs short, Robert and his wife – remembering that their wards are skilled craftsmen – announce a repair service for clothes, shoes, and jewelry. Soon business booms as word spreads of the Seduls' "golden hands." But every few days there is some nerve-racking scare: people pounding at the cellar door, bakers chasing rats that have fled into the cellar, a dog barking incessantly because it has smelled the bacon in their pantry, etc.

The Jews cheer the Normandy landings on 6 June 1944, but Allied advances there remain very slow for the next seven weeks. They pin their hopes on the Soviet summer offensive, which finally starts on 22 June. Linkimer poignantly expresses his worries about liberation:

*We will be spiritually crushed, only then will come the reactions of the soul that will very severely affect some of us. For the moment, we are still like shipwrecked people battling the waves that threaten to swallow us; while swimming we cannot yet rise above what the waves have swallowed. This will wear us down and we will need all our strength to swim to the shore. Only then, when we have reached the shore and have solid ground under our feet, only then will we begin to grasp what has happened to us, what we have lost in this boiling cauldron. Some of us will not be able to overcome this first reaction by ourselves. We might set out on the wrong path, seek some way to take revenge that could lead to outrages.*

On 1 July, Roberts brings a young, attractive woman to the cellar: Tonija Pļūkše, wife of a fireman. It is not clear why she, of all people, needs to know that there are Jews in hiding, but soon it becomes apparent that a romantic relationship is developing between Roberts and her. Roberts sends his wife and daughters Indra (7) and Irida (4)

off to the countryside for several weeks and is quite displeased when she unexpectedly returns. Later he partitions off part of one of the front rooms outside the cave for his trysts with Tonija.

As the weeks pass, tempers are getting short and occasional quarrels flare up. Daily scares continue. Seduls assures the Jews that he wants no money for saving them, but – in a strange premonition – asks that they help his wife and children in time of need. The Red Army crosses the Latvian border in July. More radio reports on the Holocaust that deeply touch the Jews. A ray of hope comes with the first confused reports about the 20 July 1944 coup against Hitler, followed by a letdown when the coup is crushed. Seduls' superior Mrs. Strauts reports him to the police because he cooks a suspiciously large pot of food every day, and the Jews fear that they will have to flee at once. Luckily just then there is panic in town because the Red Army has broken through the German lines in late July and may reach Liepāja that very night. The Red Army's advance is halted, yet the local police are distracted and do not come for Seduls.

Linkimer is tormented by nightmares involving his friends and relatives. Night after night he is unable to sleep in the hot, smelly cave, and during the day he is often overwhelmed by thoughts about past, present, and future murders of Jews – primarily his relatives but also Jews everywhere, as reported by Radio Moscow and the BBC. He and others are deeply worried about their relatives that were deported to Riga on 8 October 1943. From Radio Moscow they hear over and over that the Germans killed the last Jews in each town before retreating. Will that also be the fate of the Riga Jews?

In early August, Roberts learns that 1100 Jews (including some 60 from Liepāja) have arrived from Riga and are being held under dismal conditions in the plywood factory. Roberts and "his" Jews suspect that they will be killed soon and want to free them, but realize that with their six handguns they have no chance of overpowering the heavy guard.

The Allied sweep across France in August 1944 and the fall of Paris are great news. David's hand becomes badly infected after an insect bite, but household remedies do not help and a visit to a doctor would endanger them all. The Jews are prepared to amputate David's hand, although for a man who lives by his extraordinarily skilled hands, this would be a terrible disaster. Fortunately David recovers. Then the Jews read a chilling newspaper report about seven Riga Jews who were hidden in a cellar by a female janitor, Alma Polis; all were caught in late August "when liberation was at the door" and shot promptly.

Their thoughts of life after the war are fixated mainly on revenge (by courts, not by mob action). Linkimer fervently believes that he has a sacred duty to stay alive in order to bring the murderers to justice. They prepare lists of German and Latvian murderers.

Then they start planning an organizational structure for pursuing revenge after liberation, and devise a 12-point plan for a “work collective” headed by a three-person committee. Naively misjudging possibilities under the Soviet regime, they plan to get this collective officially incorporated, enabling its members to apply for weapons permits. None of them is to go out anywhere alone and without weapons. They will sever all relations with Latvians “without exception”, but in individual cases the whole collective must decide whether the person “has murder on his conscience”. Searches for relatives are to be made only by three trustworthy members of the collective. Only if this search is unsuccessful may individuals conduct their own searches with the approval of the committee. Evidently their world had shrunk during the months of isolation, causing them to make quite unrealistic plans.

Linkimer and at least some of his comrades have a sweepingly negative view of the Latvian nation, despite the kindness they have experienced from individual Latvians, such as the farmers near Paplaka and above all the Seduls couple. This attitude is not surprising, as such ethnic stereotyping was the norm all over Eastern Europe and reached its most extreme expression in the Nazi Holocaust. A poignant illustration of this mindset is the following exchange between Seduls and Linkimer, prompted by a BBC appeal on 6 July 1944 to help save the remaining Jews of Hungary and Poland. Linkimer tells Seduls of this appeal, who replies.

*“I took you on without being asked. I did not wait for you to come to me, I went to find you. I did not seek your money or your belongings. I wanted to save you because David was my good friend, and because I simply am willing to take great risks for such causes. And now I want to say something serious to you. I know that the time of Latvian liberation is approaching. How and what will happen, I do not know. I only know that you want to take revenge on the murderers, and you have a right, even an obligation, to this. But I ask of you one thing: that no more innocent [people] suffer. And when an innocent person comes to you, don’t shut the door to him, do help him, don’t let yourself become carried away [by blind revenge]; remember that I also helped you only because you are innocent.”*

Linkimer’s tortured soul apparently is so overwhelmed by thoughts of revenge that it cannot yet free itself of ethnic stereotypes or agree to help innocent Latvians:

*“Robert,” I answer him, “We Jews and also the Russians have never had a program to exterminate a people because their forefathers were Latvians, Lithuanians, or Gypsies. In our eyes, every person has a right to live, but only as long as he does not lay his hands on the life of an innocent person – then he must be punished. We have no interest in pursuing innocent people. You Latvians must, however, protect yourselves primarily from your own Latvians because one seeks to bury the other in order to ingratiate themselves with the Germans.”*

Fortunately the Jews keep some balance in their lives. They start teaching each other Latvian, Russian, and Hebrew as well as electricity and mathematics. In their spare time they play chess and checkers with home-made pieces, and they read books and magazines supplied by Roberts.. They also dig an escape tunnel.

## September to October 1944

The German military situation deteriorates. Although the Allied advance in the West has nearly stalled after liberation of France and Belgium, the Soviets continue to make progress. The Red Army occupies most of Estonia, Lithuania, and Eastern Latvia, trapping the 28 divisions of German Army Group North in Courland (Kurzeme), the westernmost Latvian province where Liepāja is located. That province, now called "Fortress Courland", remains in German hands until the end of the war.

The war comes closer to Liepāja. In early September, civilians are sent out daily to dig trenches in the countryside east of Liepāja. All men previously deferred from military duty must report to the draft commission, where almost everyone, including cripples and sick people, is inducted. Roberts has also been summoned, and the Jews are deeply worried what will become of them if he is drafted. A new janitor will discover their hatch in a matter of days. They fill up their water tank and are prepared to live in the cave on their two-month supply of dried bread. But Roberts, who had been deferred because of thrombosis in his leg, has a solution. He asks David to put concentrated acetic acid on the scarred area to reopen the wound. After such treatment for several days the wound looks fearsome, and the draft commission rejects him.

The food situation is much tighter now. They live mainly on black bread and potatoes, some days only one of them or neither. Most of the 11 have diarrhea, the others have abscessed teeth. Major air raids are happening at ever-increasing frequency, first on industrial and military targets on the outskirts but then also on the centre of town. The town is abuzz with rumours that civilians will be forcibly evacuated by ship and that buildings will be mined and blown up. Roberts and the Jews plan to shoot any mine setters and disarm the mines. They also consider what to do if the building catches fire. They decide to split up into three groups, each going to a designated location and then reconnecting later.

The Jews are overjoyed when the Red Army captures Riga on 13 October 1944. They hope that some of their relatives have survived, not knowing yet that many were killed in selections in 1943/44 and the rest were sent to Stutthof, where most would perish. But the 11 now think that the fall of Riga will free up two Soviet armies for a final assault on Courland, and indeed, Radio Moscow claims that "liberation" is only a

matter of several days. But that does not happen. Most of the Soviet units are moved south for the final assault on Germany, and the remaining forces make only very slow progress.

Many gendarmes have appeared in town and, using dogs, search house after house for deserters. Roberts and the Jews try to mask any scents around the hatch, first with kerosene and then with garlic. The gendarmes also engage in a man-hunt, rounding up able-bodied civilians on the streets for immediate shipment to Germany, regardless of any children or other family members left behind.

## **November–December 1944**

Although the front is fairly stable, the atmosphere in town becomes ever more gloomy and oppressive. Everybody except essential workers is to be evacuated, either to Germany or to the countryside. Man-hunts continue, and the pressure rises for “voluntary” evacuation to Germany. Roberts manages to get the coveted red permit slip, certifying that he is a mechanic for the bakery. Somehow he also gets a blank red slip for Tonija.

The last bombing raid has cracked the ceiling of the cave and some water pipes in the bakery upstairs, causing hot and cold water to gush into the sleeping area. The Jews stay up all night, incessantly bailing out the water with buckets. The flood continues for a week during which the Jews get little or no sleep. They first fight the flood with mops and buckets, but finally install a gutter emptying into a bucket.

Because of the air raids, cellar space has become very desirable real estate. Roberts has moved his bed into the cellar and Tonija sleeps there too, claiming that she is afraid to be seized by gendarmes if she sleeps at home. One of the tenants in the building asks Roberts if the two rooms outside the cave are available but Roberts puts him off by claiming that they are full of firewood. Several times each day and night, people tear at the door, causing great strain on the Jews. Sometimes it is the bakers.

Roberts’ nerves also are shot. He yells and makes a racket, and when someone tries to calm him down, he raises his voice: “I want to yell so that the whole house hears. Let the police come on my account. Let it cost me my head and your heads, too.” Regrettably, the warm friendship of the summer is gone, replaced by a tense, hostile relationship punctuated by frequent outbursts. But the relations among the Jews have also deteriorated badly: they are quick to take offense, argue, trade accusations, and sulk.

Roberts has obtained some massive, 20 cm wooden beams, and the Jews now cut them into pillars to support the ceiling. Not enough in case of a direct hit, but better than

nothing. Gendarmes who regularly visit a prostitute upstairs hear the noise and search the building but fail to find the Jews. The air raids sometimes have delayed effects: one afternoon a gas pipe cracks, causing all the Jews and Tonija in the front room to pass out, but fortunately Linkimer and Hirschberg who were in the cave discover them in time and revive them.\*

Roberts decides that he and Tonija will completely relocate themselves to the cellar, and orders the Jews to build shelves, cupboards, and new beds for them. They are worried about the noise made by all this carpentry work, but Roberts insists.

As the Red Army inches forward, new trenches must be dug. Most of the people left in town are essential workers who have the prized red slip, but now they are required to dig trenches for some number of days in order to have their red slips revalidated by a special stamp. The newspaper warns that anyone shirking this duty will be severely punished, even shot. On a single errand, Roberts was stopped eight times for a check of his papers. People are seized in the street and immediately put on ships.

Months ago, Roberts had sent his wife Johanna and the children to Asīte in the countryside. He gets word that with the front approaching, they are hiding in a potato storage pit to await the Red Army. A few days later they are caught by Germans and returned to Liepāja, where she is to board the next ship to Germany. But Roberts throws her out of the cellar and forbids her to come down again. She does not yet know about Tonija but is desperate and considers suicide until David Zivcon succeeds in talking her out of it. All the Jewish men take her side and promise to provide for her and the children once Liepāja is liberated. Oddly, the three women all greet Johanna quite coldly and take Roberts' side, which leads to huge quarrels among the Jews. Linkimer is furious at the women, who seem to have forgotten all that Johanna has done for them.

One morning Linkimer is awakened by suspicious voices and realizes that the hatch is still open. He peers out, sees the green coat of a Latvian policeman, and fears that they have been discovered. But reassured by the calm tone of the conversation, he waits until the policeman has moved away from the hatch and then carefully closes it. It turns out that Roberts had overslept and let some people into the cellar without waking and alerting the Jews.

Manhunts in the town are intensifying. 1500 people are taken from their workplaces and homes and put on a ship to Germany. All women born between 1906 and 1928 would be forcibly evacuated the next day. There are persistent rumors about a nearly total forced evacuation of civilians.

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\* Household gas in Latvia was made from coal and contained a large amount of poisonous carbon monoxide.

Tonija wants to go back to her husband, and Roberts is distraught. He talks of suicide, but he also says to the Jews: "I am, after all, not bound to you. I will go my way and let my wife take over your care." Linkimer realizes that the mass evacuations may force Johanna and her children to hide in the cellar. (Tonija would then have to pretend to be the Jews' acquaintance but she does not agree.) To have young children in the cellar would be very dangerous, but Linkimer thinks "we must risk it because [Johanna] has risked enough for us." His resolve is strengthened by Tonija's remark: "[Johanna] would have left Roberts long ago but she must take you into consideration."

Finally, Johanna agrees that she cannot hide in the cellar because the children might make a fuss. (Actually the real reason is that Roberts wants her out of the way). She offers to go to Germany, but decides, on David's suggestion, to go to friends in Dunika, 25 km away on the other side of Lake Liepāja. Linkimer's heart aches for her: she warmly welcomed the Jews, risking her life, and now there is no room in the cellar for her and the children. Soon it is Tonija's name day, for which she contributes two bottles of vodka. Linkimer is expected to say a few words, but feeling great compassion for Johanna, he decides to present his oration in verse, "so as not to say more to Tonija than he feels".

Some ugly episodes follow. Johanna has found out about Tonija and threatens to tell her husband. So does Tonija's mother, who wants to go to Germany with Tonija and her eight-year-old son. Tonija responds cryptically that this would cost her and her mother's lives, presumably for knowing about Jews in hiding. One of the tenants in the building tells Johanna that "Roberts should restrain himself because he knows that he has a secret. At some point the gendarmes will break down his doors and discover everything". All tenants in the building resent Roberts' infidelity and his treatment of Johanna.

Two massive air raids on 14 December severely damage the building, sparing the cave but blowing out doors and windows, smashing the contents of the front rooms and even flattening aluminum pots. One bomb had struck 3 m from the building, another had fallen across the street. The Jews spend days repairing the worst of the damage. They have no bread for at least four days and live on black *Ersatz*-coffee. More heavy air raids almost every day, shaking the walls of the cellar; one bomb lands right at the building wall but does not explode. Gendarmes repeatedly search the entire building, kicking in doors and checking documents.

Almost everybody has been brought close to or past the breaking point by the growing pressures: air raids, lack of food, forced evacuation, etc. Roberts has been appointed building manager for the entire 2nd police precinct and is responsible for finding vacant buildings for the Germans, in addition to repairing bomb damage in "his" building. His affair with Tonija is generating ever more problems and dangers: her angry

husband, Tonija's wish to go to Germany, dark hints from tenants that Roberts has a secret. Tonija out of jealousy forbids Roberts to support his wife and children. The Jews, too, are beginning to crack: hysterical outbursts by two of the women, quarrels by the men, and a growing disregard of precautions against discovery. They hammer and saw, not caring that Roberts alone could not make these noises simultaneously.

It gets worse in January. Several people more or less explicitly accuse Roberts of hiding Jews. Johanna, starving and freezing with her children for lack of firewood, writes a note to Roberts, begging him not to leave them in this difficult time. But if he continues in his heartless ways, he should not forget his old sin that has been overlooked up to now only because he has a wife and children. Roberts threatens to abandon the Jews if she "causes trouble", and Johanna, in her saintly kindness, yields to his blackmail. The Jews promise to share with her any bits of food that Roberts brings them. Tonija gets a letter from her ex-husband, warning that Roberts will "soon have to deal with the police who will discover all of his secrets". Emma, Johanna's sister, reproaches Roberts but gets thrown out. Then he orders Linkimer to ghost-write a letter to mollify Emma. Tonija moves out but only to prevent loss of her belongings in case Roberts is arrested.

The food situation goes from bad to worse, as the Red Army noose around the city continues to tighten. Roberts now has to provide for 19 people, including Tonija and her family, but food prices are going through the roof. Roberts brings a kilogram of horse meat, but it is full of maggots and is thrown out. Horses' feet – complete with horseshoes but devoid of meat – are made into "cavalry soup". They cook a thin oat gruel but when they notice that it is full of worms, most stop eating whereas Linkimer fishes out the biggest worms, pretends that the rest are tiny noodles, and eats this "living soup" with gusto for the next three meals.

The diary ends on 20 February 1945, Roberts' birthday. Less than three weeks later, on 10 March, Roberts goes to his apartment and sits down to lunch. But a Soviet shell fragment flies in through the window and tears him to pieces. His wife, children, and the Jews are absolutely shattered, but life must go on. Johanna applies for the janitor's job and gets it, but clearly cannot handle both the work and the procurement of food for everybody. She invites the librarian Arvids Skara to help her, after cleverly testing his dependability (see ref. 2–4). Liepāja is occupied by the Red Army only after the end of the war, on 9 May 1945, and the last few months are particularly hard. But all survive, although several of the Jews are down to half their normal weight. Riva is reunited with her daughter Ada.

The 11 Jews remain deeply grateful to the Seduls couple, see Johanna socially, and visit Roberts' grave. But the Seduls family gets no recognition from the government or public during the second Soviet occupation. In the 1970s, Roberts and Johanna were

recognized by Yad Vashem as *Righteous Among the Nations*. In 2004, plaques were installed at Tirgoņu 22 (formerly 14), with the text of a little poem written by Linkimer in the cellar:

“Šinī namā Roberts un Johana Seduli slēpa un izglāba 11 ebrejus 1943.–1945. g.  
**Tāpēc vārds Roberts Seduls**

**Paliks mūsu atcerē**

**Un ar zelta burtiem ieies**

**Liepājas žīdu vēsturē”.**

“In this building Roberts and Johanna Seduls hid 11 Jews 1943–1945, thereby saving their lives

**That’s why Roberts Seduls’ name**

**Will stay in our memory**

**Entering with golden letters**

**In Liepāja Jews’ history”.**

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- <sup>2</sup> E. Bergs and Z. Eiduss, *Kur tu biji, cilvēk?* [Where Were You, Man?]. *Komunisti*, serialized in 24 installments (April, 1965).
- <sup>3</sup> E. Bergs and Z. Eiduss, *Where Were You, Man?* Abridged and annotated English translation by Edward Anders of *Kur tu biji, cilvēk?* Unpublished manuscript.
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- <sup>7</sup> Heinz-Ludger Borgert, “Die Kriegsmarine und das Unternehmen “Barbarossa””, *Mitteilungen aus dem Bundesarchiv* 1999:1 (1999), pp. 52–66.
- <sup>8</sup> Andrew Ezergailis, “The Holocaust in Latvia 1941–1944” (Riga and Washington: The Historical Institute of Latvia, 1996), pp. 286–298.
- <sup>9</sup> Dov Levin, “Liepāja” in *Pinkas Hakehillot Latvia v’Estonia* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988), pp. 180–186. An English translation of the Liepāja chapter (*Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities, Latvia and Estonia*) by Shalom Bronstein is available at [http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/Pinkas\\_latvia/lat\\_00170.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/Pinkas_latvia/lat_00170.html)

<sup>10</sup> Edward Anders, "Liepāja", in *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, Vol. 2*, US Holocaust Memorial Museum (to be published about 2010).

<sup>11</sup> USHMM, RG-18.002M (LVVA), file 83-1-22.

<sup>12</sup> LVVA, Schutzpolizei Libau, Report of 16 February 1942. P-83-1-207, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Yiddish, like Hebrew, is usually written without vowels, and thus the consonants VSTN alone do not suffice for an unambiguous reading of the name.

*Rebeka Margoliss, Edvards Andersss*

## **Linkimera dienasgrāmata: kā vienpadsmit ebreji pārdzīvoja holokaustu**

### **Kopsavilkums**

Viens no ievērojamākajiem ebreju glābējiem Latvijā bija Liepājas sētnieks Roberts Seduls (1906–1945), kurš kopā ar sievu Johannu Sedulu (1910–1987) slēpa vienpadsmit ebrejus dzīvojamās mājas pagrabā pilsētas centrā no 1943. gada līdz 1945. gadam. Visi pārdzīvoja karu, vienīgi pats glābējs R. Seduls traģiski gāja bojā padomju bombardēšanas laikā 1945. gada 10. martā.

Viens no izglābtajiem ebrejiem – skolotājs Kalmans Linkimers (1913–1988) kopš pašas pirmās kara dienas 1941. gada 22. jūnijā rakstīja dienasgrāmatu, bet bija spiests to pamest 1944. gada aprīlī, kad aizbēga no Paplakas militārās nometnes uz Sedulu pagrabu. Šeit viņš atsāka rakstīt dienasgrāmatu, dienu pa dienai sniedzot pārskatu par pieredzēto no 1944. gada 29. aprīļa līdz 1945. gada 20. februārim un restaurējot zudušās lappuses, kas vēstīja par nacistu okupācijas pirmo – visasiņaināko gadu no 1941. gada 29. jūnija līdz Liepājas geto izveidošanai 1942. gada 1. jūlijā. K. Linkimers pierakstīja arī to ebreju izglābšanās stāstus, kuri sasniegta Sedulu pagrabu 1943. gada oktobrī–decembrī. Tā tapa jidišā rakstīta dienasgrāmata – 80 000 vārdu, 315 rokraksta lappuses, kas sniedz diezgan pilnīgu vērojumu par nacistu okupāciju Liepājā, ko skatīja vienpadsmit ebreju acis, nemitīgos nāves draudos dzīvojot šīs 1410 dienas.

Atšķirībā no vairuma holokausta atmiņu, kas rakstītas ilgi pēc kara, K. Linkimera dienasgrāmatas liela daļa tapusi notikumu norises laikā vai tūlīt pēc tiem. Tādēļ tajā saglabāts spilgts pārdzīvojums, konkrētā brīdī radušās domas, izjūtas un sasprindzinājums, ko nav nogludinājis laika plūdums. Pat pirmo divu gadu restaurētās atmiņas ir rakstītas vienmēr klātesošo nāves draudu ēnā.

Vēl kā izņēmums ir jāmin tas, ka šiem vienpadsmit ebrejiem bija pieejams Sedulu sagādāts radioaparāts. Atšķirībā no nometņu gūstekņiem, kuriem bija liegta jebkāda pieeja ziņām un informācijai, izņemot atsevišķus gadījumus – bieži vien nepatiesas baumas, vienpadsmit Liepājas ebrejiem bija iespēja sekot militārajiem un politiskajiem notikumiem ik stundu.