

CHAPTER SIX: BALTIC GARDENERS: FROM MEDIEVAL LITHUANIAN FORESTS TO TROPICAL RAINFORESTS

Unstable identities are history's prey. There was, I knew, blood beneath the verdure and tombs in the deep glades of oak and fir. The fields and forests and rivers had seen war and terror, elation and desperation; death and resurrection; Lithuanian kings and Teutonic knights; partisan and Jews; Nazi Gestapo and Stalinist NKVD. It is a haunted land where greatcoat buttons from six generations of fallen soldiers can be discovered lying amidst the woodland ferns.¹

The Lithuanian forests are imbued with landscape myths about the Teutonic culture. These primeval forests were seen as the site of tribal affirmations set against the perceived softness and decadence of Roman culture. For the Teutonic knights, the forested landscape was a place for stoicism, a site of purity worthy of preservation rather than a commodity to be plundered. The Teutons were the fathers of forestry, but not as controlled nature. They valued their forests as places of glory and terror with

ash, aspen, maple, oak, linden, willow birch, elm, hornbeams and spindle trees, pine and fir, all growing in a crazed jumble, amidst a vast botanical charnel house of rotting trunks, roots and limbs. The irregularity [of the forest] was dreadful, sublime, perfectly imperfect.²

Not all the forested landscapes were the subject of such exalted prose. In the *Story of Pan Tadeusz*, the Lithuanian poet, Adam Mickiewicz contrasts the trees in the Lithuanian landscape with the trees of warmer climates south of the Baltic States.

*The overrated cypress and the dwarfish lemon with its golden ball,
And lacquered leaves, in shape so short and stumpy,
Like a small woman, ugly, rich and dumpy,
How could it compare with the honest birch, a fairer one,
That's like a peasant weeping for her son.³*

Fierce pride and national identity were associated with the Lithuanian forests. National identity derived from pure landscapes have a tainted history in the 20th century, where racist values have been justified through analogies with the value of the German wilderness landscape. Nevertheless there is a Teutonic landscape heritage that is common to the people of the Baltic States of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia which transcends German nationalism.

The 'Balts', as they were known in Australia, in the 1950s were the first non-British group of migrants to arrive under the post World War II program. They had been selected because they had fair skin, blue eyes and were considered to look most like the Australians of the 1950s.⁴

The Baltic mariners, however, had much earlier intentions for Australia. In the early 17th century, they entertained romantic ideas of sailing the southern seas and colonising the great south land. It was not until the late 17th century, however, that

Baltic seamen from Latvia set foot on Terra Australis when they were part of the crew of the Dutch expedition in 1697.⁵

Despite the stories they brought back, few came to Australia as settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Instead the Baltic people displayed a strong commitment to their country, their landscape and their independence. There was, nevertheless, an abortive uprising in the Baltic States in 1905, which resulted in a few political refugees coming to Australia.

During the 1939-1945 war, the Baltic States experienced a number of invasions. In 1940, the Soviet Red Army invaded Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia in an attempt to get a port on the Baltic Sea. This was a time when many atrocities were committed against the Baltic people including sending large numbers to Russian concentration camps. One year later the German troops took over, but by 1944, the Russian troops, anxious to regain their Baltic ports, took over Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania again. Many Lithuanians and Latvians fled into Germany, fearing a return of the atrocities under Stalinist Russia. They were housed in Displaced Persons Camps awaiting either repatriation or migration.

A number of these people came to Australia in the late 1940s. They generally were absorbed into the mainstream Australian community and did not have the visible presence of other post World War II migrant groups. It is therefore interesting that there has been a small community of Latvian and other Baltic people at Amity Point on North Stradbroke Island off the southern Queensland coast. The community became established by word of mouth from the early weekend anglers from Brisbane who were predominantly Baltic people.

One such fisherman is Martin who was born on the border between Lithuania and Germany. Like many Lithuanian men he has a love of forests. The Lithuanian forests in many ways symbolised the ideological struggle between the Russians and the Germans. There were many savage crusades by the Teutonic people against the Baltic people in the 13th century. The forests were not only the sites of these battles but they also symbolised the complexity of 'pure nature' and resulted in hunting and forestry being highly valued activities. Martin has been a hunter, a gamekeeper and a forester.

As a boy of 14 he was forced to dig bunkers for the German troops. Later when the Russians invaded, they released the boys so that they could find their parents. Martin found his father, who advised him to become a farmer, a fisherman or a gamekeeper because if he returned to school he would be conscripted into the army. So Martin decided to be a farmer and a gamekeeper, obtaining his hunting licence and entering into an apprenticeship as an assistant farm inspector. By 1944, he was fully trained and began working as a farm inspector. In 1948, he was working for a farmer when the German currency was devalued resulting in everyone being sacked on the farm. After working for a while in a nail factory he found a job as an arboriculturalist, pruning fruit trees. The economic conditions were still not good, so he decided to migrate. He could have gone to Argentina or New Guinea, but in the end chose Australia because, in Germany, so little was known about it.

He arrived in 1950 and worked as an interpreter in Brisbane until he was told about share-farming. He did two years labouring to build up some capital and in 1952 started to share farm on the edge of Brisbane. Ten years later he bought a small cottage at Amity Point. He originally bought the place for his father in the hope that they could be reunited, but by this time his father was too elderly to travel. Although Martin made a garden for his house on the share-farm, he was too busy to maintain it. Instead if he had any recreation time he went hunting. He would go pigeon shooting or hunting kangaroo. Often he would set off on a Sunday morning on his push bike with his gun, a shovel, and an axe on his back. The police, who wanted to know where he was going with these implements, stopped him. When he told them that he was hunting, the police informed him that he was not supposed to carry a rifle because it was forbidden to kill on a Sunday in Queensland. He was most surprised as in Lithuania and Germany, one always hunted on Sundays.

In 1970 Martin had an accident while farming and was badly injured. As a result of the accident he ceased farming. He extended his house at Amity Point and started to fish. Today, his wife has created an attractive flower garden around their house in Brisbane but at Amity Point, Martin has his own garden consisting mostly of native trees and shrubs, which bring the birds. He has kept the original coastal forest and has added a few new trees such as the South African Tulip Tree, which brings different birds and some eucalypts to bring the koalas. For Martin, the joy of his garden is in creating a habitat for native animals. There is, however, a small vegetable garden at the front fence with beans, tomatoes and strawberries; all of which he grew back in Europe. Martin is a keen fisherman and has a fine reputation for his smoked mullet roe. He has built a smoke house in the garden and has experimented with different timbers. The mixture of timber for the smoking process is very important. When Martin first tried to smoke his fish he thought the local cypress pine was a hardwood. The resulting fish tasted 'like kerosene' because of the resins in the timber. His favourite timbers for smoking are the coastal eucalypts and the she-oaks.

Martin's 'Amity Caviar'

Clean fresh fish (mullet) and soak in brine.

Remove and dry, then coat in a salt/sugar mixture.

Place in smoker.

Set the fire with coastal box, she-oak, scribbley gum, particularly sawdust from these trees.

Smoke gently for three days.

Martin's pleasure is in hunting and fishing and yet his keen interest in the native plants and animals does not seem contradictory to him. He speaks of his heritage and experience as a gamekeeper and forester in Europe where care for nature includes hunting and fishing. Martin's garden conveys the sense of a clearing in the forest, similar to a gamekeeper's cottage in Europe.

Valentine and Edgar's Garden

Valentine and Edgar's garden at Amity Point is similarly under the canopy of the existing eucalypts. Valentine and Edgar are one of the fourteen Latvian couples who settled at Amity Point. Both Valentine and Edgar grew up in cities in Latvia, however they met in Brisbane.

Edgar grew up in Liepaja, a city near the Baltic Sea. His family lived in a flat in Liepaja and hired a small allotment garden. From an early age he helped his mother in the allotment garden where they grew onions, beetroot, sweet peas, potatoes, cabbage, dill and cucumber. Edgar also worked as a cowherd from the age of 11, bringing in the cows to the dairy every evening. At the age of 16 he started working in a factory while at the same time both going to night school as well as continuing to help his mother with the allotment garden. He remembers fondly the farms outside his village with their beautiful orchards of apples, pears, cherries, and the low red, black and white currant bushes.

By the time Edgar was 25, this idyllic landscape was a battlefield. Edgar was called up by the German army to fight the Russians. He spent three months in the war until he was wounded. For the next 13 months he was moved from one camp to another, finally being placed in a German camp in Hamburg. When the currency was devalued, there was a desire to repatriate all aliens in order to relieve the unemployment problem. The few jobs that were available were for the Germans. As a result, the aliens could either return to their countries, now under communism, or migrate.

Edgar considered a number of countries including Canada, England, France, and Venezuela. Australia, however, placed the least restrictions on potential migrants. As a result he migrated to Australia in 1949. As a single man he was sent to Greta Migrant Camp at Newcastle where he waited for six weeks while the government determined the nature of his two year contract. All Displaced Persons were required to work for two years, usually as manual workers, in order to pay for their passage to Australia. Edgar was sent to Goondiwindi in Central Queensland where he worked to clear 25 square miles of land by ring-barking trees and burning logs. The land belonged to large cattle and sheep holdings. For two years he lived in a tent and was paid five pounds a week.

He lived with six other stockmen and their families. There were six Latvians, one Polish worker and one Russian. No-one could speak English; however Edgar had learnt German at school and they all managed to communicate. When it came to communicating with the farmer, Edgar drew pictures in the sand as a form of communication. The farmer suggested that he learn English by correspondence school. After seven months of doing the assignments and getting good grades, Edgar came to Brisbane only to find that although he could talk to people, he could not understand their replies. Much to his disappointment they frequently could not understand the way he pronounced his recently acquired English.

In 1952, after he completed his two year labouring contract, Edgar came to Brisbane to work at UK Motors. He had been an apprentice mechanic in Latvia working with 1st class Mercedes Benz engineers. At this time he bought a motor cycle and a gun in order to supplement his income by shooting kangaroo.

In 1954, he met Valentine. Valentine had grown up in Riga, the capital city of Latvia. Her family lived in the town where they rented half a private house. Valentine's memory of their city garden is vague. But she has vivid recollections of the trees in Riga- the apples, cherries, pears, plums in the orchards and the elms, oaks, chestnuts and maples which gave syrup and the birch whose sap was sometimes used to make an alcoholic drink somewhat like gin. Valentine also remembers that strawberries, gooseberries and blackberries grew in the woods as well as delicious mushrooms.

The Latvian landscape is gently rolling. It has been glaciated so the landscape has been worn into U-shaped open valleys with smooth glaciated stones, granite from Sweden and local limestone. Generally the soil is a sandy loam in the cultivated valleys. In the towns and cities, lilacs are grown in the gardens and sometimes in the street. In the springtime the countryside of rolling hills are dotted with rows of white apple blossom. In contrast, the forests are dark, mostly dense pine with occasional deciduous trees and an understory of rhododendron.

At the age of 14, her family was told they had to leave the beautiful landscape of Latvia. The Germans constantly relocated them. First they insisted that they go to Germany. They travelled by horse, then by ship. They were taken through Berlin and on to Bavaria where they stayed for three to four years. There were no jobs and there was barely enough to eat. Just as Edgar did, her family considered migrating to Canada, England, France or Venezuela because the Venezuelans would take families. However Australia did not impose constraints other than health checks so they came to Australia.

They arrived in 1949 and spent four weeks at Nelson's Bay after which they were moved to a hostel in Burwood, Sydney. Valentine's father worked in a saw-mill, while Valentine and her mother did piece work for a cellophane factory, both at the factory and at home. They spent their time folding cellophane bags to be used for packaging goods. The family wanted to leave the hostel. They wanted to be able to eat their own food and live together as a family. It was difficult to get enough money to buy a house so they pooled their money with some other Latvians and bought at Yeerongpilly in Brisbane. The Latvian community bought a number of small houses, which were very close together. All the front gardens were kept 'Australian', but at the back of their tropical houses they established a healthy vegetable garden where they grew carrots, dill and cucumber; all vegetables used to salt over winter.

After Edgar and Valentine married in 1957 they built a new house in Rocklea, Brisbane. Edgar was too busy to garden, but he tilled the garden, which consisted of rich chocolate soil, so that Valentine's mother could plant the traditional dill and cucumber for salted winter vegetables. She also put in rosellas to make jam. In the front they had a rose garden. Most prized of all, however, were the Crepe Myrtles which they called 'mirte'. The plants both Edgar and Valentine loved in Latvia were the lilacs. Unfortunately they only grow in the coldest climates of Australia. Crepe Myrtle reminded them of the lilac so Edgar planted a number of them across the front of the garden.

In 1959, they bought the little fishing cottage at Amity Point. Here Edgar planted another row of Crepe Myrtle across the front of the house. At the end of May, Edgar

prunes the Crepe Myrtle quite severely so that by spring the trees flower prolifically much like their beloved Latvian lilac.

Although the seaside is not as accessible in Latvia as in Australia, Edgar had lived in a harbour town on the Baltic Sea and loved to swim and fish. Edgar and Valentine enjoyed the Latvian village life at Amity Point. They liked the fact that they can walk to the shops and the beach along roads which are still dirt. They do not know how the village of Amity Point became a focus for the Latvian community but they suspect it was just by word of mouth from the first Latvian weekend anglers.

When they bought their cottage thirty years ago, it was just a shed. Since then Edgar has gradually improved and extended the cottage and now they live there in their retirement. The garden at Amity Point is different from the garden at Rocklea. The soil is sandy in contrast to the rich chocolate soil of Rocklea and the remnant coastal forest of callitris pines, eucalypts and paperbarks create a heavily shaded garden in contrast to the bright sunlight of their other garden. Edgar has removed a few of the large trees, but he has ensured that they continue to live in a forest by replacing them with a number of rainforest trees including an Indian coral tree, frangipani, mango and macadamia. He has also brought a peppercorn from the garden at Rocklea. Under the trees is a large collection of pots which contain cuttings from friends as well as some herbs, in particular shallots and dill. When Edgar first established the garden he grew vegetables, however he has stopped growing vegetables because it is cheaper to buy them in the shops.

The garden is also a working garden with a fish cleaning table, cleverly made from a modified kitchen sink, and a smoker. Edgar smokes the fish he catches including taylor, bream, mullet, mackerel and occasionally tuna. There is some outdoor seating and a table which Edgar has made from aluminium offcuts saved when he worked for an aluminium factory. Both Edgar and Valentine love the native birds found on North Stradbroke Island. They grow plants which encourage the birds to come into the garden. Their garden is similar to Martin's garden in that it sits within a natural forest. For them, the desire to have the trees is greater than the desire to have sunlight for vegetables.

Both Edgar and Valentine like to cook. Edgar commented that when he first came to Australia in 1949 he could never find the sour milk he loved in Latvia. He remembered that in the migrant camp, the Latvian men tried to make sour milk. A neighbour at Amity point who also was at Greta corroborated this story indicating that the cleaners in the camp reported the smell from the small containers of milk in the Latvian migrants' rooms. The Australian doctors confiscated the sour milk, declaring it to be poison. Valentine makes a special cheese which used to be made with the sour milk but now is made with cottage cheese. The cheese is always served with rye bread on 'Janos' Day on 24th June at Midsummer. Valentine inherited these recipes from her family.

MIDSUMMER SPECIALTY: Janu Siers

Valentine's Amity Point Cheese

1 kg baker's cheese

500 gms Unity cottage cheese

250 gms mozzarella cheese

250 gms butter

*Mix cheese, butter, caraway seeds and salt together, add 2 litres of warm milk, keep stirring over gentle heat, not exceeding 80 degrees.
When the milk starts to separate and go watery then drain through a cheese cloth and squeeze excess moisture out. Leave for 24 hours.
Serve cheese with a glass of beer and buttered Valentine's family rye bread.*

Ryebread was an important part of the Latvian diet but in Australia in the 1950s it was extremely difficult to get rye flour to make the bread. The only place the Latvians could obtain rye was at the produce warehouse which supplied rye to the chicken farms, known as 'chook' farms.

Valentine's Rye Bread

To make the bread, it is necessary to start with some sour dough which is a small piece of dough from the last baking. This is combined with stone ground rye flour, yeast, plain flour, sugar and salt and mixed with a spoon until well combined. The dough is covered and left for 2 hours. It is then kneaded with more flour and more yeast. After the mixture has risen further, it is placed in a warm oven (200 °) and bake for 2 hours at 150 °

Winter food is an important part of Latvian culture and although the climate in Australia is different, the Latvian migrants still longed for their familiar food, much of which could not be obtained in Australia in the 1950s. They could not get pickled fish and pickled cucumbers or even their basic sauerkraut. So Edgar and Valentine prepared their own sauerkraut.

Edgar and Valentine's Sauerkraut

They cut up a whole cabbage into fine shreds and placed shredded and salted cabbage in a wooden keg with fresh dill including the seeds. Using a wooden stamp, they pounded the cabbage mixture until it was juicy. They kept filling the keg with the cabbage mixture and pounding it until the juice has reached the top of the keg. They would leave it for a week and then place the cabbage mixture in sealed jars. The sauerkraut kept for months.

Valentine and Edgar's garden tells the story of their Latvian heritage and their new life in a sub-tropical place. It also tells the story of hard work and the pleasures of retirement in a fishing village on the east coast of Australia. As well, there is the Baltic heritage of the love of the forest. Both Edgar and Valentine grew up in cities in Latvia unlike Martin who lived in the country and yet there is a strong similarity in their gardens. This differs from many other migrant gardens where the native trees have been cleared to be replaced by productive trees.

Karl's Garden

Another Latvian gardener in Brisbane, Karl, grew up on a farm outside an old city called Kuldiga. Like Martin he attended an agriculture college instead of high school because he intended to be a farmer. His family had been farmers for as long as he could remember. When he graduated from agricultural college he worked on tobacco farms for practical experience. His family farm was a mixed farm of 150 hectares which was large by European standards. The mixed farm consisted of a dairy of 20 milking cows, a bull and calves, crops of grain, potatoes and sugar beet and a forest of Baltic pine which was used for construction timber and firewood. The firewood was essential as they had no electricity.

His family always had a garden around the house. There was a small area for flowers, vegetables and bushes but mostly it consisted of fruit trees. The orchard was considered to be part of the garden rather than the farm, because the fruit was used for family consumption, not as commercial crops. The fruit trees were typical cold climate pears, apples, cherries, plums as well as raspberry, gooseberry, and current bushes and some nut trees. Cranberries and blueberries grew wild as did hazelnuts. The vegetable garden had summer lettuce and tomatoes, which due to the short summer were grown under glass, potatoes and lots of cabbage which was preserved as sauerkraut in late autumn. There were also a few herbs such as dill and parsley.

They had hens and pigs for their own use. The pigs were slaughtered in late autumn for sausages and salt pork. They also had a few sheep for wool to make jumpers and socks, needed for the cold Latvian winters. The farm was not near the sea so they caught fish in the lake. This was life in Latvia as Karl grew up.

When Karl was 16 the Russians occupied Latvia. By 1941, the Russians were fighting Germany but because Karl was a farmer he was not conscripted. By 1945, the war was over, but the Russians continued to occupy Latvia. They took Karl's family farm as no-one was allowed to own land. Subsequently, apart from losing the farm, the family lost all their savings when the currency was devalued. In 1947 Karl found himself in an American Army labour camp. He felt that there was no future in Germany and did not want to live under the Russians in Latvia, so by 1948 he decided to leave. At that time he could either go to the coal mines in Belgium or the coal mines in England or he could go to Australia. The Australian government was looking for young unmarried people or couples with children. By this time Karl was married and at the first opportunity he applied to migrate to Australia.

He arrived in Melbourne 1948 at the age of 24. Karl knew nothing about Australia when he came and his first impression was one of shock. He thought it seemed like a backward country after Europe. He and his wife were taken to Bonegilla Migrant Camp where they stayed for a month until he received a two year contract to cut cane in Innisfail in Queensland. In Innisfail, they lived in the barracks and for the first year his wife cooked for the canecutters. The cane season only lasted six to seven months which meant that for the rest of the year they were without an income. He did odd jobs for the cane farmers and after the first year came to Brisbane and bought the house in which he still lives. His wife and their first child lived in the house while he returned to the cane fields. He continued cane-cutting for five seasons. When his two year contract was up he was sent to a tobacco farm which suited him very well because of his agricultural college training. Later he came to Brisbane and worked as a spray painter and then a storeman until he retired.

When he first bought the house it was incomplete. It had been assembled from prefabricated parts which had been shipped from France; Australia at the time was experiencing a severe shortage of building materials. The frame of the house was made of high tension steel. The garage was makeshift and during a storm the roof lifted falling back onto his new car. He obtained what was called a 'minor plan' from the building inspector from Council and rebuilt the garage into the fine structure it is today.

Karl's Garden

The back garden is where Karl spends most of his time. The house opens onto the back garden via a shady terrace. His first task in the garden was to plant the boundary trees. He planted the Queensland macadamia and tried to grow European oak and plum and the much loved hazelnut. The oak and plum were not successful and gradually he had to replace the European trees with tropical fruit trees. He also planted azaleas, rhododendron and a European jasmine because they reminded him of Latvia. The back garden is so shady that the lawn consists of carpet grass and there is a dense underplanting of bromeliads, ferns, and ginger with white daisies where filtered sunlight comes through. The garden is dark and tropical, so he does not grow vegetables, however there is a narrow retaining wall defining the back terrace which receives full sun and here he has flower boxes which are full of flowers all year.

On the terrace which has a shady roof, he grows a number of beautiful lilies and begonias in pots. The begonias are his favourites. They are highly prized in Latvia where they are called 'ice flowers'. The cactus that he has on the terrace would be grown indoors in Latvia.

Along the side of the house is a driveway leading to the garage. The driveway is bordered by Crepe Myrtle trees with an underplanting of perennial balsam and blue agapanthus. Towards the front is a fine row of healthy roses.

The front garden originally had a prolifically flowering rose bed behind the front fence with colourful flowers planted outside the fence. He used to win the '*best footpath plantings*' prizes thirty five years ago. About thirty years ago, he planted a row of white bauhinias outside the front fence. At first the Council tried to stop him planting his own trees outside his boundary but as the trees grew, he was allowed to keep them. He loves the white Bauhinias which remind him of the apple blossoms in the Latvian landscape. Similarly he loves the crepe myrtle which reminds him of the lilacs in Latvia. When he first saw the crepe myrtle in gardens in Brisbane they reminded him of the purple lilac and he thought '*That's the tree for me!*'

The front garden has gone through many changes as the trees have grown and competed with the roses. As in the back garden, the European plants have gradually been replaced with tropical shrubs and vines; the roses being replaced with tropical hibiscus. There is now a spectacular bright red croton near the front door. It is so colourful that people stop and photograph it. Karl has three different coloured bougainvilleas growing together; gold, red and purple. In the middle of the front lawn is a large leopardwood tree. This tree has a smooth white trunk with leopard like spots. Karl's front garden stands out as a heavily planted feature garden in its Brisbane suburban street of neatly manicured lawns.

Although the gardeners, Martin, Valentine, Edgar and Karl, have had different experiences as migrants, the three gardens all have the common connection back to the Baltic region and the deep respect for forest trees. The two Latvian gardens also show how treasured elements of the Latvian landscape such as the lilac and the white apple blossom can be transformed into the crepe myrtle and white bauhinia in tropical Queensland.

Endnotes

1. Schama, S. 1995. *Landscape & Memory*. HarperCollins: UK. 24.
2. Ibid. 50.
3. *The Story of Pan Tadeusz*, a woodland nativism, by Adam Mickiewicz. Ibid. 58.
4. Murphy, B. 1993. *The Other Australia*. Cambridge Press: UK.
5. Jupp, J. 1988. *The Australian People*. Angus & Robertson: Sydney. 664.