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On the cover

A photo reminder of the trains that took Latvian victims to Siberia lies with masses of flowers at the country's Freedom Monument. "To Siberian Tundra" it says. Erik Hill took the photo. Story begins on page 4.

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FEATURES

The curtain rises

The Berlin Wall fell and the iron curtain rose across Europe in 1989. For a few McClatchy employees, who have lived in Eastern Europe or have family there, these events were more than just news stories. Some of these employees tell of their own first-hand experiences with life in this different world. Read their tales beginning on page 4.

They do our homework

When we need to know who our readers are, or who they could be, McClatchy's Western Research Group can tell us. Read about who they are and what they do beginning on page 10.

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THE CURTAIN RISES

The world watched in amazement last year as the Berlin Wall fell and governments in Eastern Europe toppled. For some McClatchy employees, these events were more than just distant news stories. They evoked memories and changed their lives or the lives of their loved ones. Here, a few of these employees share their own stories.

When the Russians invaded Latvia in 1940, Erik Hill's grandparents and their three children, including Hill's mother, fled in the night. The drive for freedom was so strong they left behind the farmhouse Hill's grandfather had built and most of their family treasures to live as refugees, first in Germany, and, finally, when the war was over, in Oregon.

Through the half-century that followed, these refugee Latvians kept in touch, as best they could, with the family still in the homeland. Only one elderly relative was allowed to visit from Latvia, and, wary of the danger, Hill's American family did not return. It was Hill, who, nearly 40 years later, was the first to go home.

He was a student in Vienna in 1977 when he finally was able to travel to Latvia and meet the family he knew only from photographs and letters. Twenty relatives greeted him at the train, he says, "with piles of flowers and lots of tears."

He was allowed to stay only in Riga, the capital, so his relatives from the countryside had to visit him there. But they did visit, for all kinds of huge gatherings, and Hill, now a photographer for the Anchorage Daily News, was overwhelmed by their warmth and their welcome.

"I grew up speaking Latvian and taking Latvian classes," he says. "But when I arrived in Latvia, I realized there was another whole identity that I had never fully understood, that was definitely a part of me. I felt a sense of home just being there."

He also was overwhelmed, he says, and outraged, by something



Latvians, some in native dress, demonstrate against Soviet occupation on the 49th anniversary of the invasion. It was the first open demonstration against the invasion.

else: the clear Soviet domination he saw around him.

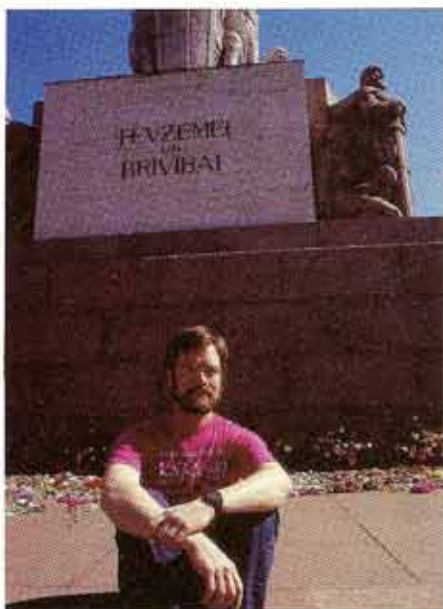
"At that time, things in Latvia were not very open. You sensed the Soviet military presence. It wasn't a very happy place. In 1977, nobody could speak out about anything. Nobody would talk about anything political, anything controversial, even at home."

Hill figured he was being watched, but he didn't figure on being interrogated by the KGB.

"I got a postcard in the mail asking me to report to some government office with my passport in hand," he says. "I figured it was some sort of checking-in procedure. The only relative who had a car drove me over. I ended up in a little room with two



This Latvian woman now lives on Erik Hill's grandfather's rundown farm. Below left, Hill relaxes beneath the Freedom Monument in Riga.



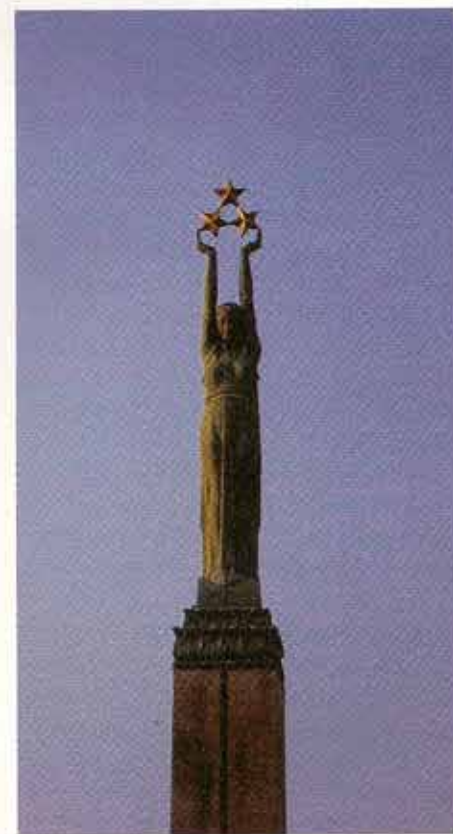
KGB officials. They asked me questions about Latvian life and culture in the U.S. I just gave 'yes' and 'no' answers, disbelieving that this was really happening to me.

"Toward the end they asked about the impressions I was getting in Latvia. I said something about all the soldiers and their guns. They assured me that the Soviet Union wanted nothing more than world peace and harmony among nations. I finally said, 'Well, if that's so, explain to me this May Day parade you have in Moscow every year where you parade tanks and rockets.' They replied that there was no such parade, no such display of military hardware."

A lot has changed in a decade. Since Hill's first trip, four of his Latvian relatives have been allowed to visit the family in Oregon, and a fifth will come this summer. Two years ago, Hill's mother went to Latvia and was able to travel beyond

Riga to the family farm. Last year, Hill, with his wife, Robin, made his second trip back and found the changes startling but gratifying.

They didn't have to wait to arrive in Latvia to see them. When they landed in Moscow, the new Congress was holding its first session. "As we were walking around," Hill says, "we could see people carrying radios and watching TVs and could hear people talking about politics. It gave me hope that things in Latvia were a little better, too."



A monument celebrating Latvian freedom from Russia in 1918 soars into the sky.



An early-morning stop soon after their train crossed the Latvian border made them even more hopeful. "It turned out," says Hill, "that some Latvian deputies to the Congress were on our train. They were met by a full-dress Latvian chorus and bands. It gave me a certain feeling of excitement and anticipation that was certainly missing on my first visit."

In Riga, they were met again by a gathering of relatives—he had

brought 41 packages of gifts for them. But he was driven home in the same little car they'd had in 1977, still the only car among all his relatives.

The rickety vehicle was his first indication that, as in other East European countries, all was not yet completely well in the modern Latvia.

"Things were not as good economically as they had been in 1977," Hill says. "My relatives said that since then another couple-

hundred-thousand Russians had moved into Latvia and it was just a strain on the system."

The standard of living—Latvia is the richest of the Soviet republics—isn't as high as it was, Hill says, and soap and sugar were being rationed. In sharp contrast to his previous visit, and because of strong anti-drinking efforts by Gorbachev, little alcohol was served on this trip.

He did find one piece of good

Letters from East Germany tell of new joys

Art Nauman's father was born in what is now East Germany, and his aunt Irma, his father's sister, still lives there, in Meissen. Nauman, ombudsman for The Sacramento Bee, has visited Irma and her family in East Germany three times, frequently exchanged correspondence with her, and has observed first-hand life behind the wall. Irma has written two letters to Nauman since the wall fell, and he shares them here along with some memories of his own.

The first of the two letters was dated the day before the border opened. "It was full of joy and excitement," Nauman says, "but had she waited even one more day to write, it undoubtedly would have contained even more joy."

He translated from the German as he read: "At last we can speak our minds now and not worry about it."

On his visits there, Nauman says, the family was careful what they said even in their own homes. When they wanted to talk, they would close the windows and lower their voices. If people weren't careful, he says, "measures would be taken against them or they would disappear."

The letter continued: "Before now, we would only buy our local newspaper for the TV listings and recipes. Suddenly we have found that our newspapers are worth reading again. They are speaking in a different language."

Many East Germans keep their TV antennas pointed toward the west and thrive on Western news and



programs, Nauman says. He discovered how much this was true a few years ago. As he was leaving Meissen, his aunt and uncle were packing for a trip to East Berlin. He asked why they would vacation in East Berlin, and they responded that their weather had been bad lately and they had lost touch with Western broadcasts and Western news. They were going to spend a few days catching up.

The family learned from Western broadcasts that vacationing East Germans were fleeing from Hungary into Austria. "At that moment," wrote Irma, "what our media was telling us was how wonderful we had it and how our economy was growing stronger. It was a giant lie. We knew different."

Nauman recalls that his aunt used to tell him, "We live in the world's

biggest zoo. You can come visit us, but we can't leave." They could visit relatives in West Germany for special occasions, but Irma and her husband, Siegfried, could never go together or take their children with them.

Irma's sister, Elfrieda, escaped from Berlin in the 1950s with her husband, then a student radical with a price on his head. They live now in the Black Forest. Irma and Siegfried will visit them together for the first time this summer.

Among Irma's new joys is the purchase of a new East German car. They had been on a waiting list for 20 years.

In her next letter, after the March 2 elections, Irma wrote: "A breath of fresh air is blowing through our country. It feels so good. We've had our elections, and I hope we've done it right."

But changes are coming slowly. "It's still chaotic," Irma wrote. "In fact, in our places of work, not much has changed. The same people who owed their positions to the Communist party are still there. All the good, young, bright managers under them who did not owe their assignments to the party, they are the people who have left in discouragement."

Irma and Siegfried and their married son, Olaf, whose family has finally been able to move from a cramped apartment to a larger one, say they will not leave East Germany. "This is our homeland," Irma says. But their daughter, Helfried, a dancer, will marry and move to Stuttgart.

economic news: A cousin, who, with her husband, had raised two children in a one-room apartment with no hot water, had finally moved to a new apartment. But her family had to contribute 200 hours of labor to help build it.

The economic downturn, Hill says, has not, however, dampened the people's spirits about their new freedoms.

"It was a much more cheerful place. People were talking openly about politics and the news of the day. They are very optimistic—quite a contrast to my earlier visit—and there was lots of open discussion. It was a total change from my previous visit." Another change was even more stirring. "We actually saw the Latvian flag flying on buildings around town," Hill says. "Up until nine months before our trip, it would have been illegal to show the Latvian flag."

And in 1977, he says, a freedom monument in Riga, celebrating Latvia's independence from Russian

rule in 1918, was unadorned and ignored. Last summer, the monument was covered with flowers and people stood at its base to talk about politics.

Newspapers are selling out as fast as they're printed now, and television is being watched more avidly, too. Once a week, the country broadcasts "Labvakar" ("Good Night"), an extremely popular Latvian version of our "60 Minutes." A team of reporters presents stories of current issues and past events that could never before be shown on TV.

"Once a week," Hill says, "the country grinds to a halt and everybody's staring at the tube. They're catching up on 50 years worth of news."

Hill also watched a show about the new Miss Latvia, the first since before the war. She was joined by the last Miss Latvia, by now a grandmother.

Hill, like his mother, was allowed this time to visit his family's farm in Rauna. He found it sadly rundown, the barn fallen and the farmhouse

converted to apartments. Only one of the tenants was Latvian, a woman who had known his family.

He also attended a service in the church where his mother had worshipped as a girl. It had been closed since the war but now is being restored. And he was able to witness a ceremony in which a new plaque was unveiled for the town's freedom monument. The plaque, which reads "God Bless Latvia," had been destroyed nearly 40 years before by the Russians.

The young people he met, Hill says, are optimistic that complete freedom for Latvia will be a reality by 1992. After that, they say, the country will need about 10 years to get its economy in good shape again.

"I have to be optimistic, too," Hill says, "just to see the changes that have taken place. I came away last year with a sense that these people really had something, a vital cause, to live and work for. I found that very exciting."

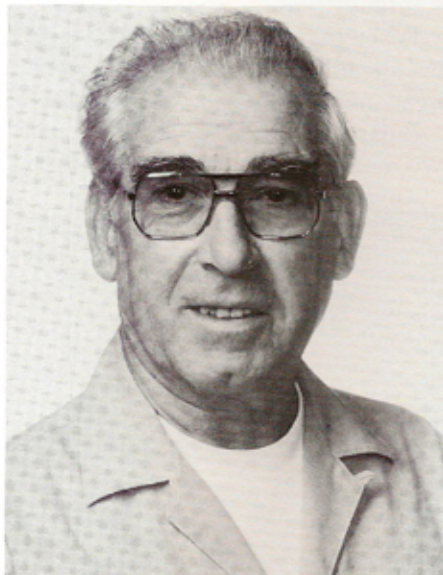
Former German soldier: Unification too fast

Ernie Koch, machinist with The Sacramento Bee, grew up in Hitler's Germany. His family never supported the Nazis, but Koch, like all German boys, was a member of Hitler's youth groups. When he was old enough, in November 1944, he was inducted into the Germany army and sent to Russia. He was captured and spent more than four years in a Russian prison camp. In 1953, he followed his sister to the United States, never dreaming he would live to see the day the two Germanys would reunite.

"Unification is exciting," he says. "I live here now, but no matter how long you're out of a country, you still feel a little bit for your roots."

He is concerned only that the two countries are moving together too fast. Relatives in West Germany, he says, worry that some East Germans "want to have already the same life it took West Germany 40 years to get."

"The East Germans have the notion that they've got to have everything right now, that they shouldn't have to



wait," he says. "Then they worry that they're losing their state-subsidized things—education, medical care and so forth. Unification's not going to be easy."

He dismisses the fear that a whole Germany will be too powerful.

"All this negative reporting really

gets me. You read in the paper that the two Germanys want to come together, and, oh my god, here comes the Fourth Reich. But a whole new generation in Germany has been brought up in freedom. It's different now."

Koch sometimes hears criticism of German people for not taking a stand against Hitler. "But," he says, "it is hard for people today to understand what it was like under the Nazis. It was an exciting time for us. I didn't like the political indoctrination, but there was a lot of feeling of patriotism and helping each other."

After he had been in the camp two years, he learned in a letter that his sister had married an American soldier and moved to the United States.

"I was mad, disgusted," he says. "How can she marry the enemy? But another guy in the camp told me, 'No, no. You never know what it might be good for.'"

Kidnap, escape, reunion

Margo Bujaki, assistant to the Executive Editor of The Sacramento Bee, knows first-hand of life without freedom.

A Canadian citizen, born of Hungarian parents, Bujaki went to stay with her grandparents in Hungary in 1948, after graduating from high school, and found herself trapped there for nearly 10 years. When she was finally able to escape in 1957, she had to leave her 3-year-old son behind. It would be 22 years before she saw him again.

"About two years after I got there," Bujaki says, "Hungary became a Communist country. Then I couldn't get out even though I was Canadian. They confiscated my passport. They told me I couldn't leave because I was Hungarian."

She earned a degree in Hungarian literature from the University of Budapest, worked for Radio Budapest as an English-language broadcaster, married a young Hungarian military officer, had a son and divorced. "It was quite a to-do to get a divorce in Hungary," she says, but she was granted custody of her son, Tamas.

Under communism, Bujaki says, "we lived in terror. The secret police were always around, no matter where you went. You never knew who was going to report you. Many of my friends disappeared."

Eventually Bujaki remarried, and she had a second son. In 1956, the Hungarians revolted against Communist rule. The Soviet army crushed the rebellion and restricted freedoms in Hungary even more severely. Bujaki and her husband decided they had to escape.

"Thousands were escaping," she says. "It was chaos. But I never thought I would be able to leave because I had no passport."

It was more practical to go separately, so her husband left first without her. "At the time," Bujaki says, "most of the Hungarian men who were on the streets were being



Margo Bujaki, left. Her son Tamas on his visit to California in 1978, above.

captured by the Russians and put in railway cars and taken away. The authorities knew that an awful lot of the men were escaping. They actually walked from Budapest to Austria. My husband went into Austria and eventually wound up in Germany."

When the authorities questioned her, she told them he had gone out for bread and simply had not come back.

Bujaki was finally able to get out two months later with documents she

got from the Canadian legation and some she had bribed from Hungarian officials.

But, shortly before she was ready to go, her first husband kidnapped their son. "He had visitation rights," she says, "and he never gave him back." He would not allow Bujaki to see the child or know of his whereabouts.

Bujaki had no choice but to flee without him. She traveled to Vienna, where the Canadian Embassy took



Margo Bujaki strolls the streets of Budapest with her son Tamas, her grandson and her daughter-in-law on her first visit back to Hungary in 1979.

care of her and helped her get back to Canada and a reunion with her husband.

But the joy of her return was clouded by the pain of losing her son. "I had an awful lot of guilt for leaving," she says. "I was always worried about him."

On the advice of a psychiatrist, Bujaki never spoke of her lost son. Not even her second son and her daughter knew they had a brother in Hungary. And not for 22 years would she have any word of Tamas again. Her first husband prevented her and everyone in her family from contacting him, and his relatives in Hungary could not visit him. The boy, brought up by an aunt, was told his stepmother was his mother. Even his birth certificate was altered.

Tamas may never have known the

truth but for a friendly drinking bout with one of his father's friends. He was 17 at the time. "This friend told Tamas, 'I know your real mother,'" Bujaki says. "Tamas said, 'She's at home,' and the man said, 'No, I mean your real mother.'" When he asked, his father denied it, but, Bujaki says, Tamas knew in his heart it was true.

Still, it would be nearly eight years before he would find his mother.

"Through some freakish thing," Bujaki says, "Tamas was allowed to visit his father's relatives in Canada. As soon as he got off the plane, he told them he wanted to see his mother."

With the help of his Canadian aunt and uncle, he contacted Bujaki's father, still in Canada, who in turn called Bujaki in California. She sent him a plane ticket, and they were able

to spend three days together in Sacramento.

"There was an immediate bond between us," Bujaki says. "He said he had never felt so much love till he met me. He said that was the first time in his life he had ever felt that he was really at home. He had always felt that something was missing."

The following year, Bujaki went to Hungary to meet her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. She has returned many times, but her son has not been allowed out of Hungary again. He has never met his brother and sister in America.

Last summer, her grandchildren, now 14 and 17, were able to stay with her for two months, savoring California's riches. After a summer of Disneyland, beaches and ice cream sundaes, they didn't want to go home.

New freedoms but still a hard life in Poland

Stan Ordon, paperhandler for The Sacramento Bee, grew up in Poland with parents who opposed communism and never joined the Communist party. When he left at 17 to live with an aunt in the United States, his father encouraged him to go "make a better life for myself."

His parents still live in Poland. Like Art Nauman's relatives in East Germany, Ordon's family welcomes most the new republic's freedoms of speech and the press.

"My father is really surprised at what he sees in the newspapers and on radio and TV," Ordon says. "They tell you everything. Before, if you wanted to get the real news, you had to listen to Radio Free Europe. Now they get everything right on their news and in the newspaper. He can't believe it."

Another new freedom for the Poles is the freedom to choose where to live.

"Before, if you were a farmer," Ordon says, "you couldn't move to the city unless you got an OK from the police. The government wanted to keep farmers on the farms. Now, it might take a long time to get an apartment, but you can move. You don't need permission any more."



Ordon's father eked out his living by farming 30 scattered acres of land and doing odd jobs. He plowed his fields with horses until Ordon's brother-in-law bought him a tractor four years ago. He could not get a good job because he would not join the Communist party.

Ironically, the family's farm has become a valuable asset as the country has moved from a controlled economy to a free-market one.

"Inflation went up 300 percent one week," Ordon says. "Prices are so high. My parents have food, and whatever they have they own. But people in the cities, they're hurting."

The high prices are discouraging some people, Ordon says. "They say right away they want to give in. But I told my parents, you can't have everything right away when you've been in a hole for 45 years."

One unifying force in Poland has been the Catholic Church, which still claims most of the people as members, Ordon says. "That's the only thing that keeps them going. The Communists controlled the country, but they couldn't control the people. That was proved by how the people went to church. They couldn't shut the churches down."

The future, Ordon says, lies in 1992, the year Western Europe unites into one economy. "I think Europe's market is going to have to include Eastern Europe in 1992," he says. "That's the only way they're going to survive, if everyone works together. Everybody's got a lot to offer. Nobody wants to start any wars. Nobody wants to die."