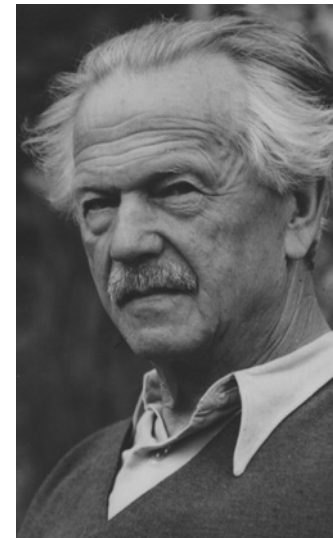


JJ

THE UNTOLD STORY OF A RENOWNED WRITER

WORDS BY MAX WEINLAND AND DAINA WEINLAND
PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAINA WEINLAND

Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš — this name always meant something to me. My mother Daina and her six siblings sometimes talk about him. He was a mystery that only slowly began to reveal itself to me through naive questions I would ask my mother. I knew it had something to do with my family's connection to Latvia, something I often wondered about. To me, the country and its culture were elusive — a weeklong trip to Riga, Liepāja, and Kuldīga with my girlfriend a little over a year ago and the commission to tell the untold story of JJ's life with my family while in German exile have been a big expedition into vaguely known territory. When my mother and I started to go through her tremendous physical and mental archive of photographs, personal letters, notes, sketches, books, pictures, stories, and memories, I was overwhelmed by the history that shaped my family so intensely. As a graphic designer, I was enthralled also because I see graphic design as sort of an archaeological and journalistic process of finding, sorting, and putting things into context. This is like a digging site, an entity that shows me the historicity of things and how they all lead up to the present. So here we are, Jānis.



JJ's daughter Lilija, her husband Willi, and JJ in Mohnesee, Germany.

As a young man, my father Willi Stöppler traveled to Mediterranean and African countries. Between journeys he would return to his birthplace and hometown, Bielefeld, Germany. In 1927, my father went to Capri, where he met the notable Latvian writer Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš, his second wife Elizebete, and Lilija Marija Jaunsudrabiņš, his daughter with his first wife. There were actors, visual artists, and journalists living and working periodically and permanently on the island. Some of them were dropouts who were no longer free in their countries of origin and saw no future in their homelands. Others met on Capri to participate in the very lively cultural exchange and to get inspired, free from political regulations and restrictions. For a long time, it was the island of celebrities and culture-makers from all over the world.

The warm, dry climate of the the Amalfi Coast makes it a fine place for people with bad health. Lilija, Jānis's only daughter, had been seriously ill in Latvia and suffered from a lung gland inflammation. They all traveled to Capri, because Jānis was seeking inspiration from the island and the life there. This was how his book *Kapri* came into being. When my father met Lilija, who had not yet regained her health, but was nonetheless a beautiful and interesting young woman and an actress, they fell in love. My father wanted to make her happy: her, the woman who had become so sad and sick over the early loss of her mother. They married on Capri in 1927, before moving to Germany and then to Latvia in 1928. Thanks to Lilija, my father learned the Latvian language very quickly and thoroughly, and could soon translate some of JJ's texts to German. He became highly valued professionally; his work at Walters & Rapa in Riga and his journalistic and translating skills were very much in demand.

In 1939, when the Soviets invaded Latvia, my father and Lilija had to leave because they were Baltic Germans, and they were moved to Łódź. In 1942, my father was drafted into the infantry, got wounded during the invasion of the Mediterranean, and taken as a prisoner of war. Through the German Red Cross, Lilija found out about his imprisonment in La Vallette, France. They started to write each other frequently, and Jānis and Nate, Jānis's fourth wife, also kept frequent contact with him.

In 1947, when my father returned to Bielefeld, Germany, where he saw Lilija, Jānis, and Nate again, he met my mother, Ursula Gessner. Lilija and my mother were already familiar and liked each other. The marriage of Lilija and my father had remained childless. My father and my mother fell in love. Both wanted children very much. My parents got married in 1952, soon after Willi's



TOP Lilija and Willi playing with Latvian clay flutes pīlītes.



BOTTOM JJ in his garden in Latvia. Summer 1936. Photo courtesy of the Latvian Literature and Music Museum.



TOP JJ with Liliija and his son-in-law Willi before yet another fishing spree. At Lake Möhnesee, Germany, 1950s. Photo courtesy of the Academic Library of the University of Latvia.

BOTTOM Jānis and Nate Jausudrabiņi (first row, fourth and fifth from the right) on Midsummer's Eve in 1947 in Greven, Germany. Photography by Jānis Vinters, courtesy of the Academic Library of the University of Latvia.

divorce from Liliija, and in the same year their first child, my brother Jan, named after Jānis, was born. From 1952 to 1960 six other children were born: Arvid, Uldis, Liliija Margarete, named after Liliija, Ilga Anne, me, and Dagnija Ieva. My mother liked these Latvian names very much. Liliija, Jānis, and Nate felt like they had gotten seven grandchildren. The promise my father made to Jānis on Capri that he would always be there for Liliija, had to be kept. Even Liliija and my father's divorce didn't end their strong friendship, and she lived with my father, our mother Ursula, and us seven children in Steinhagen for five years, when she needed our care after a serious injury from a car crash she'd gotten into while with my father. She even became friends with my mother.

When I was little, I always thought Liliija was our grandmother. She was often very serious but happy whenever she could spend some time with my father and speak Latvian with him. She enjoyed having us children around. Even though she was sad not to have any children of her own, she welcomed us. Still, she missed the life she'd had with my father before, so in 1966, Liliija moved to her own apartment in Bielefeld. I spent a lot of time with her there.

Her apartment was very Latvian. Old, beautiful furniture surrounded by very numerous Latvian utensils and jewelry; black-and-white photos of her as a very beautiful young woman and actress, some of her with my father; photos of her family; paintings by JJ; several Latvian clay flutes or pīlītes; hand-woven, small Latvian doilies and ribbons; hand-knitted Latvian gloves lying in a basket. On the heaters she hung paper bags in which she collected potato skins and dry bread for the production of homemade beer before St. John's festival or Jāņi. There was also a small vessel containing leftover tea leaves, which she collected for the cleaning of the Latvian wool carpet. The drawer in the living room was full of small souvenirs, letters, and maps from Latvia. In this drawer there was always something to eat. I was allowed to open it and look for a little snack or candy whenever I



JJ with his fourth wife Nate in Möhnesee.

sang a Latvian song correctly or said a difficult Latvian sentence. Sometimes I helped her with housework or with her insulin shots and also got rewarded that



Willi Stöppler in the 1950s.

way. This stock of treats usually consisted of biscuits, dried fruit, and something very special called "Great Jan Jockel". They were only for special occasions and would serve as rewards only for great deeds. We children came up with this name. The "Great Jan" was, of course, Jānis, and "Jockel" was our usual term for sweets; the origin of the latter word remains unknown to me.

One of Lilija's preferred educational methods was giving rewards. This method was unknown in my home as my siblings and I seldom got rewards. Lilija's other favourite means of education were certain

forms of punishment. She did not beat us, but we had to perform certain tasks as punishments. She could be quite relentless and harsh. I did not know such methods from my parents or siblings and learned about people's different ideas of raising children from her. Lilija had a great longing for Latvia and she would have liked to work as an actress and director again. She wanted at least one of us girls to become an actress like her, so she tried to teach us to "walk like a lady". It was very theatrical.

In 1944, JJ and his fourth wife, Nate, fled to Germany and came to Bielefeld, where my father's family lived. Möhneseesee and the Moonlight House was the one place where JJ could feel light and happy. I often accompanied him there, and with time, I came to understand when to talk to him and when to mind my own business and just be there with him in silence. Meals were very important to Jānis and Nate. It was a very special atmosphere when my father and Lilija would come by, very familiar and lively. Jānis was like a different person then. He was cheery, sociable, funny, talkative, and somehow more confident. Jānis and Nate loved it when I got flowers from the garden and put them in one of the Latvian clay vases on the table. At the end of such happy nights I couldn't sleep at all. When I went to bed finally, they used to stroke my hair and say, "Ar labu nakti," to which I always replied. They taught me something Latvian every day.



Willi and JJ were alike in terms of being two very original personalities. They weren't pretentious. They were who they were, whether others liked it or not.



TOP Willi had seven children and they were all given Latvian names. Pictured here are six of them. Left to right: Uldis, Arvid, Daina, Ilga, Lilija, Lilija Margarete (named after Lilija), and Jan (named after Jānis), in 1961.

BOTTOM LEFT Lilija in Pļaviņas, Latvia.

BOTTOM RIGHT Willi cradling his son Jan in 1952.

I always had the feeling that JJ was waiting for something great and important that never came. Every time visitors came by, he was full of anticipation. During the visits he was tense but joyful. After the visitors left, it always took two to three days for him to be quiet and serious again. Nate often scolded him. She wanted him to be more patient and to lower his expectations. After all, they were unknown in Germany. Nate told him just to write and everything would go well. There were enough things for him to do, after all. The roof needed to be repaired constantly; the wood for the fireplace needed to be chopped and stacked. She couldn't stand it when he behaved like a stubborn, helpless child, insulted and hardly approachable. JJ often responded angrily to her scolding and withdrew even more.

I liked to look at JJ while he painted. It was exciting to see a painting slowly take shape and it worried me to see him take long breaks from painting. Whenever I examined his canvases to see if he'd made any progress, he would tell me something about the paintings. He didn't finish his last one. When I last saw it, it was very dusty. A still-life with a vase and flowers. It was quite normal for me to see him writing, painting, and drawing; it gave me a sense of freedom. I learned a lot from it. You want to express something in words or pictures so you set yourself a task. You suddenly have something very important to do. So I began drawing and painting very early, and it has become my vocation.

Today, I think JJ was a broken man who hadn't been able to leave Latvia behind but was forced to start all over again in Germany. In Latvia, the world was at his feet. But here? He had no access to his royalties, since they were frozen in the Soviet Union. As an exiled writer and painter, he was a traitor to the Soviet Union. Jānis and Nate had very little money in Germany. This, too, stifled and paralyzed him. Nate was always trying to master life with him. She accepted the circumstances in which she lived much better than JJ and was very pragmatic in dealing with the situation. She was able to conjure up a delicious meal from a few ingredients and prepare it nicely. JJ hardly seemed to appreciate this. I never heard a 'thank you' from him for what Nate put on the table every day. Sometimes I saw Nate secretly crying and talking quietly in Latvian.

My father and JJ were alike in terms of being two very original personalities. They weren't pretentious. They were who they were, whether others liked it or not. This is something I have especially appreciated. Both loved nature very much. When my father lived with Lilija, JJ, and the family in Pļaviņas, Latvia, he

was particularly fond of living in a country with such a primordial nature. The recipes handed down in the family for very refined and tasty dishes consisted almost entirely of self-grown ingredients gathered throughout the year. From the surrounding farms they received what they couldn't grow themselves. They caught all the fish they needed themselves. They harvested wild fruits, special herbs, mushrooms, birch water, and much more, and they processed these cautiously to make delicious food as well as medicinal supplies. They often exchanged experiences, insights, and adventures in nature. My father liked JJ's stories very much, especially because he was able to closely observe nature and weave those observations into his tales. Thus JJ and my father were very united when it came to translating Latvian texts into German and descriptions of nature precisely and figuratively. They worked together in good agreement and with great sympathy for each other. I remember that I could spend time with both of them in peace, with few words spoken.



JJ at his desk in 1937. Photo courtesy of the Latvian Literature and Music Museum.

Our house was full of Latvian things. There was even a bust of JJ on a shelf next to a collection of Latvian books. I remember the smell of the room. It smelled like Lilija's perfume, the same fragrance that her apartment in Bielefeld used to smell of. I also remember the tiny Latvian glove dangling from the glass cabinet in our living room that served as some kind of talisman. Not only did we eat traditional Latvian dishes often, we also used traditional healing methods sometimes. Whenever we got small wounds from playing in the

nearby quarry, my father would use the dried powder of little puffballs he had collected from the forest, which he would put on strings as home medicine.

It wasn't easy for my mother to deal with all these circumstances. She went along with all of it out of love for my father and us children, and for the friendship she had with JJ, Nate, and Lilija. It was a rough time after the war for my not-exactly-well-situated parents, raising seven children without any subsidies or welfare, plus we always had a dog. It was a big household and it had to be mastered. Lilija had to be taken care of as well, and when my father got diabetes, my mother became the only person physically able to manage all of this. Of course, she hardly found any time for herself. But she still found



TOP JJ with his only daughter Lilija and beloved dog Zuzite with a guest at their house. Midsummer's Eve in 1961. Photography by Jānis Vinters, courtesy of the Academic Library of the University of Latvia.

BOTTOM Willi with his children in 1956 sporting lush oak tree crowns — traditional headpieces worn on Midsummer's Eve in Latvia.



TOP Willi with Ursula, his second wife and mother of his seven children, in the 1980s.

BOTTOM September 20, 1954. JJ at his office in Möhnese. "I always had the feeling that JJ was waiting for something great and important that never came." Photography by Jānis Vinters, courtesy of the Academic Library of the University of Latvia.



TOP Daina with brother Uldis and husband Guenter during their journey in Riga, 1986.

BOTTOM A Riga that JJ saw no more, 1986.

pleasure in singing us the Latvian lullaby “Aijā žūžū lāča bērni” very often. After all that time, my mother felt ignored and unappreciated by the Latvian community, especially because all of her work was so essential to the survival and wellbeing of JJ and Nate. And of course, because our mother had a hard time, we children had a hard time too. After my father’s death, my mother banned most of my father’s Latvian legacy from her life.

At the Latvian gymnasium and boarding school in Münster they called me Jaunsudrabiņa mazmeita, Jaunsudrabiņš’s granddaughter. When important visitors came, I was often summoned, told to dress up, be particularly friendly and, to the best of my abilities, speak Latvian. It was kind of absurd to me because I wasn’t actually JJ’s granddaughter. And what about my mother? Her existence was denied in this way and it hurt me. My mother, who lived long after my father’s death, could not answer my questions. After I quit school at 17 I was relieved that I no longer had to speak Latvian every day and deal with the burden of having to play JJ’s mazmeita. I was free.

My family and I have been taking care of some of JJ, Nate, and Lilija’s things. I have an ancient green Latvian vase that I have been keeping for a while now. I often have bouquets of flowers or small branches in this vase. I know it from the time I spent in the Moonlight House. It reminds me of it.

On the internet, most entries about JJ omit his life in exile. Apart from her name, JJ’s wife Nate is not mentioned, and their daughter Lilija is not brought up at all. There is hardly any indication of their period of exile in Germany. It’s like someone put together three pieces of a 100-piece puzzle and said: “It’s finished.” The Wikipedia entries on my father are also incomplete and partly wrong. My brother Uldis recently became a Wikipedia author and is working on the correction and completion of this information.

In times of great global migration, when people are forced to leave their homes and cultures and often start at zero in completely different countries, JJ’s story shows how difficult it all is. The discipline, hope, motivation, and courage it takes to permanently move somewhere are enormous. Now I understand a lot better why it was so important that this Latvian school in Münster existed for the children of exiled Latvians in Western Europe. It gave them the chance to retain their connection to their home, in a way. Thanks to this period of my childhood, I’ve also learned how important it is to have an inner home that does not depend on a place.



On the train to Riga. Daina and Uldis cherishing their memories of JJ, 1986.