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Some Aspects of the Image of a Soviet Latvian Woman in Latvian Prose in the 1960s and 1970s

Daži padomju sievietes tēla aspekti latviešu prozā 20. gadsimta 60. un 70. gados

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Summary In the era of late socialism, literary works played an important role in shaping public behavior models, controlling culture, and influencing social interactions. Additionally, literature contributed to the dissemination of the principles of the "socialist way of life". In this context, Latvian literature helped Soviet institutional authorities to construct the ideal image of a socialist woman. This female ideal played a crucial role in popularizing socialist ideas among Latvians and supporting the efforts of the Communist Party to reorient the competition with the West. Unable to compete on the level of material living conditions, the Soviet Union prioritized hard-to-measure concepts – moral, ethics, and personal and emotional values. In their writings of the 1960s and 1970s, Latvian authors portrayed a modern woman's image, encouraging the readers to contemplate a woman's social role, lifestyle, education, career, etc. While the female images created by writers served as a paragon of the ideal Soviet woman, the literary works also provide a rather honest description of the Soviet reality where material values were also important. The literary texts show the complicated socioeconomic conditions of the time, such as poverty, lack of career possibilities, and the constant government surveillance.

Kopsavilkums Vēlīnā sociālisma laikmetā literārajiem darbiem bija būtiska loma sabiedrības uzvedības modeļa veidošanā, kultūras un sociālās prakses vadīšanā, kā arī sociālās mijiedarbības ietekmēšanā. Literatūra bija arī daļa no "sociālistiskā dzīvesveida" komunicēšanas procesa. Šajā kontekstā latviešu literatūra palīdzēja padomju institucionālajām varas iestādēm izplatīt priekšstatus par sociālistiskās sievietes ideālo tēlu, kas savā ziņā kļuva par sabiedroto sociālisma ideju īstenošanā latviešu ikdienas dzīvē, atbalstot komunistiskās partijas centienus pārorientēt konkurenci ar Rietumiem. Nespējot konkurēt dzīves līmeņa ziņā, Padomju Savienība par prioritāru izvirzīja konkurenci grūti izmērāmu konceptu – morāles, ētikas, personisko un emocionālo vērtību – jomā. Latviešu rakstnieki 20. gadsimta 60. un 70. gadu darbos ataino laikmetīgu sievietes tēlu, mudinot lasītājus domāt par sievietes sociālo lomu, izglītību, profesijas izvēli u. tml. Rakstnieku radītie sieviešu tēli kalpo par ideālas padomju sievietes paraugu, tomēr literārie darbi visnotaļ godīgi ataino padomju realitāti, kurā būtiskas ir arī materiālās vērtības. Literārie teksti liecina par aplūkotā laika perioda sarežģīto sociālekonomisko situāciju – nabadzību, ierobežotām karjeras iespējām, varas iestāžu nerimstošu pārraudzību.

Introduction

Pertinent to this article's focus on late socialism is the fact that its author represents a generation that several researchers refer to as "the last Soviet generation" when speaking about those citizens of the USSR who were born and raised during the so-called Brezhnev Era (Raleigh 2012; Yurchak 2006). It has to be noted that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a certain sentimental longing for the Soviet past has been often expressed in public discourse, ignoring the real problems of the Soviet era. At the same time, contemporary Latvian literature looks back to the past without any sentimental longing for the Soviet time, focusing on the gender roles of women in the Soviet period – Nora Ikstena's *Mātes piens* (Soviet Milk, 2015; in English translation 2018), Dace Rukšāne's *Krieva āda* (Russian Skin, 2020), Andra Manfelde's *Virsnieku sievas* (The Officers' Wives, 2016), etc. All of this has stimulated my interest to study how Latvian prose in the 1960s and 1970s reflects the late socialism era, and to focus on the literary representations of women, including their social roles, employment chances, daily routines, etc. This study examines the literary works of the era of late socialism in order to develop a concept of some aspects of the image of a "Soviet Latvian woman" in real life and literature.

In the 1960s and 1970s most of Latvian novels were published in exile, not in the occupied Latvia. A significant part of the novels in Latvia were published in periodicals, sometimes only fragments. Most of the texts researched in this article were written by female authors. When choosing the corpus of texts for this study, it was essential to select the most popular works of the most recognized authors (Regīna Ezera, Zigmunds Skujiņš) of this period, as well as to compare these texts to the works of lesser-known and less-popular authors (Ints Lubējs, Lija Brīdaka).

1. **Regīna Ezera** (1930–2002); novel ***Aka*** (The Well) – 1972; other editions (included in a selection of Ezera's works) 1979, 2000, 2007; translated into Russian 1978, German 1986, Italian 2019.

2. **Regīna Ezera**; novel ***Varmācība*** (Violence) – 1982, 2nd edition 2001; translated into Russian 1986, Lithuanian 1992.

3. **Zigmunds Skujiņš** (1926–2022); novel ***Kolumba mazdēli*** (The Grandsons of Columbus) – 1961, other editions 1962, 1966; translated into Russian 1961 (three editions), Lithuanian 1963, Ukrainian 1963, Estonian 1964, Georgian 1971, Bulgarian 1979.

4. **Ilze Indrāne** (1927); novel ***Lazdu laipa*** (The Hazel Footbridge) – 1963, other editions 1964, 1974, 1981; translated into Russian 1963, Lithuanian 1964, Estonian 1965.

5. **Lija Brīdaka** (1932–2022); novella ***Dienas prasa atbildi...*** (The Days Demand an Answer...) – 1964; translated into Lithuanian 1966.

6. **Vizma Belševica** (1931–2005); short story ***Nelaime mājās*** (Trouble at Home) – first publication 1979, 2nd edition 2001; translated into Russian 1984.

7. **Dagnija Zigmonte** (1931–1997); novel ***Raganas māju remontēs*** (The Witch House will Be Repaired) – 1969; has not been translated into other languages.

8. **Ints Lubējs** (1931–2022); collection of short stories ***Satikšanās*** (Meetings) – 1959; has not been translated into other languages.

At the center of all the selected texts are the choices made in everyday life and life experiences, as well as the question of how exactly (in the context of gender studies) women fit or do not fit into the mold of the behavioral model of the "socialist way of life" etc.

Western society had few chances to learn about what was going on in the Soviet Union during the time period under debate. A collection of works by various Russian researchers, *The Image of Women in Contemporary Soviet Fiction*, was translated and published in English in 1989. Here is an excerpt from the preface:

> In the process, the stories reveal a number of circumstances mostly unfamiliar to people in the West, but important for an understanding of the contemporary Soviet mentality: the material and demographic consequences of the Second World War (poverty, hunger, single-mother families); the closeness of family ties; the material difficulties of daily life. While the literary scholar will be offered a sampling of aesthetically interesting works, the sociologist, political scientist, and historian will find material that illustrates some of the attitudes and values, thought patterns, and expectations of the Soviet people (McLaughlin 1989: xii).

In some ways, readers and literary scholars today are in the same position as Western society in the second half of the 20th century, because so much knowledge about Soviet daily life and "thought patterns and expectations of the Soviet people" comes from literary works. There is much anthropological and social science research being done on Soviet-era women (for example: Denisova 2010; Ilic 2018; Ilic 2020; McKinney 2020). Studies have been conducted on literary texts, visual arts, films, and women's magazines as depictions of Soviet realities, particularly in relation to women's social roles and the socialist way of life (for example: Attwood 1993; Attwood 1999; Baločkaitė 2011; Golubev, Smolyak 2013; Giustino 2015). There are still relatively few such studies in Latvia – more has been done in the field of history and social sciences; however, there still remains much room for study in the area of literary representations of women during the Soviet era.

The principles of socialist way of life

Describing the era of late socialism, it is essential to understand the principles of the worldview and everyday life that were established in the Soviet Union. As Marc Elie and Isabelle Ohaynon note: "Stagnation, Gorbachev's term, has long been rejected; 'developed' or 'real socialism,' the regime's own favored label, can only be used with scare quotes. The idea of applying the period names and concepts used in Western Europe and North America – the Sixties and Seventies – not only fails to reflect the wholeness of the Brezhnev period, but, not least, for all their practical use, these terms rapidly come up against limitations: Brezhnev's Sixties were a continuation of the reforming optimism of the Soviet Fifties, rather than belonging to the triumph of consumer society as paraded by the market-economy countries" (Elie, Ohaynon 2013: 29). And yet, during this period, there was both stagnation of the economy created by the Soviet regime, and the related shortage of goods and services. At the same time, there was a desire for higher material welfare, which often significantly prevailed over the moral posture of the Soviet citizen that was highlighted in official rhetoric, whereby the abandonment of material values was seen as an essential feature of the firmness of one's character.

Since the Soviet Union was not capable to satisfy the welfare expectations of its citizens, while at the same time there was a strong need to demonstrate the superiority of the socialist system in its competition with the West, the principle of the so-called "socialist way of life" was established: "Articulated in response to the political disappointments of the late 1960s as well as the economic reversals of the mid-1970s, the concept of the 'socialist way of life' allowed the Soviet Communist Party to refocus competition with the West not on material conditions and standards of living, but on qualities that were far more difficult to measure directly – morals, values, emotional, interpersonal, or ethical" (Evans 2015: 544). Since the 1970s, the subject of how to comprehend the "socialist way of life" has been discussed in Western scientific thought. It may be viewed as a theoretical study of the Cold War environment, but even the Soviet side itself talked about this socialist way of life, its ideals, and how every Soviet citizen must be aware of them. In the 1970s the Latvian SSR also produced several publications dedicated to this topic, most notably a series of small brochures *Palīgmateriāls lektoriem* (Auxiliary Material for Lecturers). The book *Sociālistiskā dzīves veida būtība un struktūra* (The Nature and Structure of the Socialist Lifestyle) by Antons Straustiņš, which is a part of this series, explores the differences between the bourgeois, capitalist lifestyle and the socialist way of life, including everyday well-being, standard of living, and quality of life. The article claims that adopting a socialist lifestyle will actually enable people to enjoy greater levels of financial prosperity (Straustiņš 1975).

The portrayal of female characters in the late socialism literature

The introduction of morally ethical principles suitable to a Soviet citizen in their everyday domestic practices was also a particular concern for writers. It might seem that didactic guidelines were no longer represented in the literature of the second half of the 20th century; however, the principles set up by the Soviet system had to be taken into account. One of the most important Latvian writers of the analyzed period is, undeniably, Regīna Ezera. One of her most well-known works is the novel *Aka*. The novel's popularity was also greatly influenced by the 1976 premiere of the film *Ezera sonāte* (The Lake Sonata) which was based on this book. Looking at the Latvian literature of this period, one can see a clearly marked transition from the canon of Socialist Realism and the general mood of didactically instructive themes (for example, in Ilze Indrāne's novel *Lazdu laipa* or the novella *Dienas prasa atbildi...* by Lija Brīdaka, as well as in Zigmunds Skujiņš's novel *Kolumba mazdēli*) to a more free expression of thought and a deviation from the accolade of the reality of socialism, particularly in such works as Dagnija Zigmonte's novel *Raganas māju remontēs* and Regīna Ezera's novel *Aka*.

What is remarkable in Indrāne's novel in terms of the images of women, is that most of the described schoolgirls live in a boarding school and their lives are as similar to each other's as the clay vases on their bedside tables: "Once a girl put a white porcelain dish in place of the vase, just like that – for a change, and pushed the brown thing behind the mirror. The teacher noticed this on the next morning. 'What's that?' she asked, very disappointed. 'Did you break it? Then you have to try to buy the same thing.' The girls understood and removed the items in silence. Everybody has the same bed, the same bedspread, the same table and mirrors, the same apron and hat..." (Indrāne 1974: 242). (Here and elsewhere – translations by the author of the article.) The literary texts show an undeniable desire to get rid of the leveling imposed during the first Soviet years; however, the texts still continue to retain the didactics and modeling of the "right choice". The Latvian fiction of the described era is a compelling material for reflection on the reality of Soviet life, social gender issues, lifestyle, education, occupation, and family patterns, specifically highlighting the images of women.

In the 1970s, the respect for the canon of Socialist Realism had already subsided, but even during this period there was still a claim for art as a pillar of the ethics and morality of an austere Soviet citizen: a text of fiction had to become the perfect model of the Soviet ideals. The existence of such a requirement is not just a hypothetical assumption, but it is also confirmed by historical evidence, such as the proposal written by the literary scholar Ilgonis Bērsons to admit Regīna Ezera into the Latvian Soviet Writers' Union: "The first deepest impression – that the member of the Young Communist League R. E. is evolving into a serious writer – has remained

with me to this day. Ezera writes about the fighters of the Great Patriotic War [World War II], about today's heroes, politically and morally strong people, and strives to influence the consciousness of backward people" (Bērsons n. d.). A similar reference was made in the minutes of a meeting at the Writers' Union in 1961, discussing the candidacy of Regīna Ezera. The poet Ojārs Vācietis describes the new writer as follows: "One of the strongest and most sympathetic qualities of her talent – an energetic quest and its fundamentality. The principles of this quest – an effort towards a true and complete representation of our contemporaries, a fight against 'pseudo-modernity' where the era is the background for very anachronic performances. There are failures and exaggerations in this direction, but the direction of the expression of talent is quite right" (Vācietis n. d.). "The right principle" means the attempt to shift the reader's ethical focus from material values to the superiority of the already mentioned moral and ethical principles, highlighted as suitable for the Soviet citizen. This pattern encourages the reading of fictional texts with a focus on focus on the representation of elements of everyday life which both reflect the principle of the socialist way of life and allow for a deeper understanding and more accurate characterization of women's images. The depiction of everyday life in literary texts reveals the issues of social roles, education, professional careers, and material well-being of female characters as the dominant ones.

Education and career choice Although the Soviet Union officially propagated gender equality, the prose texts often reveal a completely different scene where men are better educated than women, do more intellectual work and hold higher positions. This is the case in Ezera's novel *Aka* (the novel's protagonist Rūdolfs is a doctor, and "[goes] to a conference in Moscow" (Ezera 2000: 121)) and in Dagnija Zigmonte's novel *Raganas māju remontēs* ("'My husband is a journalist,' Guna said. 'I am a mere mortal. I work in a store [..]'" (Zigmonte 1969: 16)). The literary texts discussed here show a number of saleswomen, secretaries, also housewives. The described characters convey a message that higher education is less desirable for young women than for young men who make their own choices and plan to become architects, engineers, or aviators. Meanwhile, girls after graduating from high school follow their parents' requirements – working as salespersons, in agriculture, etc. (Brīdaka 1964: 221–222). The female characters who study also choose their field according to their parents' wishes: the professions of a doctor or actress are mentioned as suitable careers for a young Soviet woman (however, talent and certain personality traits are necessary, so not every girl can take these paths), as well as the career of a teacher. The teacher's noble task of raising the "New Soviet Citizens"

is emphasized, for example, in Indrāne's novel *Lazdu laipa*, as well as in Brīdaka's novella *Dienas prasa atbildi…*, in Ezera's novel *Aka*, etc.

Both male and female literary characters typically choose the career of a teacher. A teacher is seen as embodying high moral and ethical standards and as a representative of the ideological foundations of the Soviet authority. Moreover, the teacher acts as a propagandist. However, the image of the teacher frequently exposes the false morality of the ruling elite. In this perspective, the period's marginal texts are fascinating. They may not have received much attention when they were first published, but now they can provide some highly intriguing research material. For example, Ints Lubējs's collection of stories *Satikšanās* was published in 15,000 copies (notably, Lija Brīdaka's novella *Dienas prasa atbildi…* was published in twice as many copies – 30,000). The story *Izbalējušais aizkars* (Faded Curtains) from this collection portrays an elderly female teacher Kalnupe. This teacher is characterized as being straight, honest, and professional: "There was never a smirk on her face – neither nasty, sharp, nor with a sense of superiority; the old teacher either smiled clearly and openly, looking calm and contented, or looked with a cool, offended gaze" (Lubējs 1959: 30). But with this direct attitude, the teacher is not fit for the Soviet system, so the system seeks to re-educate her, supervise her, and look after her. She is accused of misrepresenting history because a politically neutral interpretation of historical facts in the eyes of the Soviet authorities is unacceptable, even harmful: "'But… I'm sorry,' Kalnupe's voice sounded still kind, just a little hoarse. 'I don't understand, the facts of history remain unchanged whether they were taught fifty years ago or will be taught in the future.' 'Of course! But everyone knows that these unchangeable facts might be misrepresented, or, we can say, highlighted in different ways: even incompletely, one-sidedly… wrong'" (Lubējs 1959: 21). The teacher's lack of adherence to the Soviet model of behavior and professional attitude in the narrative is explained by her refusal to embrace the new reality by clinging to the ideas of the past – and through the symbol of faded curtains that hide the new world and turn her living space gray. Towards the end of the story the reader is given a clear indication that teacher Kalnupe will adapt to fit into the socialist way of life.

In the texts dicussed in this paper, one of a woman's duties is to maintain a high moral standard, or, to put it another way, to aspire to the ideal of a socialist woman. A woman must be beautiful and well-groomed, well-educated, an interesting interlocutor, a skilled housewife, and a politically reliable member of the Komsomol or the Communist Party. During the Soviet era, party membership played an important role in career development. The literary works as well as the concept of the socialist way of life also make explicit reference to the Communist Party's demands and standards, including a warning that disobedience might result in punishment, for example:

"The party needs personalities who are honest with each other about their imperfections and are not afraid to admit them. Unfortunately, there are still self-interested individuals in our community who only enjoy their party membership privileges without providing any kind of reciprocity. We will get rid of them" (Brīdaka 1964: 115). The proportion of women in the Communist Party in the 1960s and 1970s was below 40 percent. "There are several reasons why women engage in political activity less than men do. These reasons include a lack of enthusiasm and obligations to their families and children. This problem is significant in the context under discussion since there were fewer chances for women to hold leadership roles within the Communist Party due to their lower representation. This connection is obvious, as seen by the data on women's representation at various levels of government. Of course, this is just one factor among many, as women's lower participation in political parties and state power structures may also be influenced by other factors, such as their deliberate refusal to participate in the occupation power system or their political activity related to other values and priorities" (Bleiere 2015: 111). In Brīdaka's novella, atypically for that time and therefore very noticeably and instructively, the female images have been assigned "leadership roles": a woman chairs the executive committee of a small city (an essential position in Soviet power structure) and a young teacher becomes the school principal. However, the appropriateness of both women's positions is directly questioned, and the husband of the school principal points out: "This is what happens when girls are appointed as principals and they start to get dizzy from their success…" (Brīdaka 1964: 136). In addition, the word "girl" in the Latvian text is used in the diminutive form expressing contempt. "Men still make up the majority of the official Soviet elite, including the Communist Party and the highest state administration. [..] In the reality of Soviet life and its discourse, the woman in the political and public sphere of the state was secondary. At the same time, in both formal and daily discourse, women were delegated full responsibility for the well-being of the family, children, the household, as well as the professional achievements and morals of men" (Zelče 2002: 55). Consequently, in the literary texts it is pointed out that although equality is formally supported, the woman is not suited for a high position and level of responsibility because she is too emotional, too open-minded, or childish.

In Zigmonte's novel *Raganas māju remontēs*, protagonist Guna (a bookshop saleswoman) reprimands her husband, a journalist: "[I]t was so silly of you to marry me. Intellectually, I'm so far behind you" (Zigmonte 1969: 220). Intellectual inequalities between women and men characters are reflected both in their professional choices and careers and in aspects of everyday life issues, including, for example, the selection of reading material – men's desks and shelves are filled with a serious literature and scientific texts, while women read just some "pulp fiction" (Zigmonte

1969: 428). Laura, the main character in Regīna Ezera's novel *Aka*, is a teacher, yet she does not read books. She also subscribes to a number of press publications, but neither reads them nor gives them any special significance. Meanwhile Rūdolfs, the primary male character, brings "John Updike's *Centaur* in the original" (Ezera 2000: 64) with him on the vacation trip to the countryside. It should be noted that Rūdolfs does not begin reading this book either, but this mention is significant in the story as an indication of his intellectual superiority.

Those female characters who have not been educated and hold "ordinary jobs" are sometimes portrayed as rather down-to-earth, sometimes even narrow-minded in their aspirations. For instance, an opportunity to move up from a food kiosk in the outskirts of Riga to a sales position in one of the city center luxury shops is depicted as the highest point in the career desired by a character in Zigmonte's novel *Raganas māju remontēs*:

> "Sarma, why do you work as a salesperson? At the factory, the salary is higher. And when winter comes, oh, you will be freezing in that kiosk!"

The girl hesitates for a moment and then, as if revealing a great secret, says:

> "I like being a salesperson… I would like one day to be at a department store or at *Sakta* [then the most luxurious store in Rīga – S. K.]…"

Sarma has a white work coat and a white headscarf. The *Sakta* girls all have identic beautiful gowns, their hair done and their lips colored in different shades of pink; they swirl around their mirrored kingdom. One can believe that a girl from an outskirts kiosk dreams about this (Zigmonte 1969: 153).

In the same novel, Guna is a saleswoman in a bookshop and admits: "I know, we can't live without sausages and butter, but I wouldn't be able to sell them. Maybe only bread… But books! [..] I was told I might be able to transfer to the science bookstore" (Zigmonte 1969: 125). This reflects the internal hierarchy of the profession, which is typical of people working in the same field.

Everyday practices The rejection of religious affiliation was one of the areas where a Soviet woman had to take care of both her own and her husband's moral standing. It is rare for the literary works from the analyzed period to discuss the place of religion in a Soviet woman's life. Instead, these books frequently caricature religious ideas and people who cling to unnecessary remnants of the past, and emphasize how incompatible religious beliefs are with good education and a modern worldview. "But the bride and groom did not come. Only later did they find out that

Nikolai and Regina had done it on another day – quietly and without any company or celebrations. [..] Everybody has their own preferences. May they live happily ever after! And then everyone was shattered as if by a bombshell – the Orehovs had been married at the Ilūkste church. Church! Regina is a member of Komsomol, a young specialist with a secondary education! Nikolai, who had just returned from the war and had seen the world, was no country bumpkin either. [..] How could this happen?" (Bušmane 1965: 15). After the Russian Civil War, Soviet authorities introduced new public holidays as well as "red baptisms", "red weddings" and "red funerals" to replace the religious rites of passage. By the beginning of the 1930s, these new private rituals had fallen into disuse and were restored only in the late 1950s (McDowell 1974: 267). The crackdown on religious practices intensified in the 1960s. "During the war years the Soviet government effected a reconciliation with the Russian Orthodox Church, and the newly introduced Soviet private ceremonies appeared to be a thing of the past. This "peaceful" period lasted until the late 1950s when a new attack on the churches was launched, and with that attack began the most sophisticated attempt to introduce new Soviet rituals. This attempt originated in the Baltic Republics [..]" (McDowell 1974: 268). Among the new Soviet rituals, only funerals maintained a conservative connection with the time of Latvia's past independence – including religious practices and traditions. "Only after the mourners had begun to pour out through the gate the bell fell silent. [..] Obligations to the departed were met, and customs were followed. The conversation went smoothly, with self-suppressed laughter as the minds were tired from the proximity of death. [..] When the first glasses of liquor washed away the last grief, we all felt hungry like wolves, and everything seemed so delicious" (Ezera 2001: 286–287). The portrayals of numerous holidays in fiction emphasizing the role of women in the family – cooking, being creative, upholding traditions – also highlight another significant societal issue of the late socialism era, namely alcoholism.

Everyone drinks – both women and men. They drink heavily and often. The choice of alcoholic beverages shows their socioeconomic status and community belonging. In Ezera's novel *Aka*, one of the factors contributing to the conflict is alcohol. Laura's husband, a drunkard, commits a crime that results in his imprisonment. Alcohol is gradually becoming a problem for Laura's sister-in-law Vija as well, since she sees holidays and partying as the only escape from her depressing everyday existence. When Vija discusses fishing with the doctor Rūdolfs, who is from a higher socioeconomic level, she makes it clear that she is interested in this hobby only as a group activity "with bonfires, shashliks, and..." which Rūdolfs continues with "... and wine". But Vija, perceiving the nuance of his comment, says: "With vodka, Doctor!" (Ezera 2000: 120). In this way, Vija positions herself in a lower social status.

Both a woman who drinks alcohol herself and a woman who encourages a man to drink are viewed as questionable or perhaps unworthy. "However, ladies brought another bottle and generously treated the guys who were already barely standing up. [..] Ladies treated..." (Zigmonte 1969: 165). The meaning encoded in the ellipsis contextually indicates a condemnation.

Alcohol-related episodes in fiction echo the severe alcoholism issues in the Soviet Union. The first anti-alcohol campaign after World War II began in 1958, but it was difficult to lower the drinking levels. The next attempt to cut back on drinking followed in 1972, but it was equally unsuccessful because, in a deficit economy, alcohol was frequently used as a means of payment for services or as a bribe to gain access to various commodities. An expensive, elite, or fashionable drink was often positioned as a good gift for a woman to gain favor – sexual or communicative. "Only once did I have to stand up to go to the next room for glasses when he took a bottle of wine out of his backpack. May we live happily – as he said. [..] Cherry-flavored sweet and light wine. [..] We ate and drank. He drank the wine like water, and when the bottle was empty, he went to his backpack and pulled out the 'Crystal' [vodka]" (Belševica 2001: 116–117). The literary texts show a significant difference in the tradition of alcohol consumption – what is permissible for a man is by no means allowed for a woman (female alcoholism is more severely condemned); moreover, it is often the woman who must take responsibility for her drinking husband.

In the juxtaposition of the center and periphery, there are descriptions of a screaming social inequality. The small town in Brīdaka's novella and the outskirts of Riga in Zigmonte's novel are portrayed as having long-unrepaired houses, backyards full of weeds and poverty, goods purchased at a food kiosk and down-to-earth dreams about prosperity: "[Y]ou have to save, you have to save in every step of the way, you have to eat fried potatoes, and have to redo the same dress three times" (Zigmonte 1969: 192). This limited advantage can be contrasted with the principles of a Riga-center girl – the fashion model Judīte in Zigmunds Skujiņš's novel *Kolumba mazdēli*: "I am used to living an easy life, I need a lot of things, I would not know how to wear cotton dresses and wash the sink in a communal kitchen [..]" (Skujiņš 1966: 348).

Austerity and limited financial means describe a typical Soviet woman's world. (It is opposed to some fellow citizens' opportunity of dressing up or purchasing a car, while an average Soviet citizen looks at it askance and with undisguised envy.) And it is the women who are doing extra work at home and in their garden to make more money: growing vegetables to be sold at the market, doing handcrafts to make their own clothes, and altering old and worn-out dresses several times (Zigmonte 1969). The main character Laura's sister-in-law, Vija, in Regīna Ezera's novel makes this

principle clear in one sentence: "You cannot even tell that this fabric is turned inside out" (Ezera 2000: 52). According to studies on the Soviet realities during the time period under discussion, this portrayal of a woman's professional choice, everyday living restrictions and poverty is quite accurate. "The expansion of the service sector that occurred at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s began to draw them into the world of work, but the inequalities persisted. In spite of a substantial improvement in their level of education, women continued to do the least qualified and least paid jobs. In the 1980s there was a strong female presence in sectors such as health, education, retail sales, and catering, where wages were 20 to 30% below the national average. They were over-represented in the lower levels of all sectors of activity and all branches of industry. More than 90% of the least well-paid workers were women" (Mespoulet 2006: n. p.).

Representation of sexuality issues in the fiction of that period would be worth a separate in-depth study. Several of the texts under discussion describe the lives of divorced or broken families and the choices that must be made to keep the existing family together or build new relationships. Although the moral stance of a Soviet citizen should be to give up any sexual interest outside a legally confirmed partnership, the texts reflect a reality of life that does not fit in the norms of "the correct behavior". In this respect, the novel by Ezera should be noted: the family life of its protagonist Laura has been distorted because her husband is in prison. He is also intellectually and emotionally inappropriate for his wife who is an educated, professional teacher. Whereas Rūdolfs – Laura's passion for one summer – is a highly professional doctor who happens to be vacationing in the neighborhood. Laura, however, is strong in her sense of duty and moral stance, and while she is aware of the hopelessness of her situation, at the end of the novel she merely remarks: "Why are we all unhappy?" (Ezera 2000: 219). It verbalizes the notion that the right and morally ethical choices are not the ones that make someone's life easier or happy. The statements in the book *Audzināšanas un pašaudzināšanas loma personības veidošanā* (The Role of Upbringing and Self-Education in Personality Development, 1975), written by Skaidrīte Lasmane and Augusts Milts within the above-mentioned series *Auxiliary Material for Lecturers*, echoes this: "While in traditional upbringing adults served as role models for children to imitate, the contemporary upbringing demands to raise better, wiser people than the educators themselves. In these circumstances, the role of self-education is becoming particularly important. The educator is mainly a model of self-education. [..] Personality begins with self-education, with a certain amount of self-choice and the opportunity to be responsible for that choice" (Lasmane, Milts 1975: 13). Laura (and it is important that Laura is a teacher) is a striking example of such decisions and self-education, since she maintains a mindset of tolerance,

does not object, accepts and obeys the circumstances, and does not waver in her choices. In the novel, Laura never eats or sleeps to her liking, never speaks openly, practices continuous self-restraint, and never encounters sincere, genuine, wholehearted love. Everything is and remains within the bounds of tolerance. And she teaches her kids these boundaries by setting an example for them, while verbally expressing her disagreement with the educational system's current inclination to place children at the center of attention.

Mothers of young women and men in fiction are also worried about the choices made by their children. In addition to sexual desire or emotional and intellectual compatibility, a question is also raised about the material welfare aspect in the potential marriages. Mothers urge their children to reflect on the consequences of the decisions they make: to secure their future or to give in to feelings and to risk leading their future lives into poverty (here, too, there is a contradiction with the opportunities for young families proclaimed in the official Soviet rhetoric). Skujiņš's novel *Kolumba mazdēli* presents the following dilemma: the young and beautiful Judīte has decided to marry the old but wealthy Šumskis (who, by the way, is still a married father of two children, but his desire for the young woman seems to be stronger than the nuptial tie). She rejects Lipsts, the protagonist of the novel who has made the right socialist choices: "If you knew how I didn't want to! But you don't know my mother [..]. On the one hand, she is right: you and I, we are not meant for each other. [..] You're still very young. You still have to learn and to conquer your position in society. We would be fighting poverty and arguing every day about money. I know myself, Lipsts. When counting kopecks, women age prematurely, they get ugly" (Skujiņš 1966: 348). Consequently, the choice of the young woman is also linked to her own desire to continue to live comfortably – to enjoy the opportunities provided by material well-being and various informal contacts which even in the Soviet system allow to overcome the general shortage of goods and services and to obtain a variety of additional benefits and (including the desired clothes or expensive drinks brought from abroad which are so coveted by the Soviet citizen).

Conclusion During the socialist era, literary works played a vital role in shaping people's behavior, directing cultural and social practices, influencing social interactions, and constructing gender identities. Literature was an important part of building the "socialist way of life". In this context, Latvian literature assisted Soviet institutional authorities in communicating the concept of the ideal socialist woman. This ideal woman became a crucial ally in implementing socialist ideas in the everyday lives of Latvians, as the Soviet Communist Party aimed to refocus the competition

with the West from material conditions and standards of living to qualities that were far more difficult to measure directly – emotional, personal, and ethical morals and values. However, the descriptions of the daily life of a Soviet citizen in the literary works examined here reflect the reality where material values were undeniably essential and, no matter how committed and poetical the depiction of the "right choices of the Soviet citizen" were, it contradicted with the people's desire, at least in their everyday life, to strive for satisfaction and fulfillment.

Female writers – for example, Regīna Ezera and Dagnija Zigmonte – played an important role in Latvian literature of the 1960s and 1970s. They actualized the image of the contemporary woman in their works, encouraging to contemplate a woman's social role, behavior, lifestyle, education, profession choice, and so on. The fictional women became a paragon of the ideal Soviet woman, but nevertheless the literary works in the 1960s and 1970s portrayed Soviet realities quite true to life.

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