

Dual Doubles

by Ivars Balkits

“How are you doing, Roger?” No, not Roger.

So with the new haircut I am double now of someone else in town. Changed look, new look-alike. It used to be the guy who organizes the street party on Halloween. I can only guess who Roger might be.

Once wavy, now spikey. I used to be Spanish moss, now I’m palm canopy. Seagrass, now wheat field. Hippie to hipster or somewhere between; former-Marine look, not once a former Marine. It’s a big deal and no deal at all, surface tension.

I have a phrase and anecdote about my haircut I repeat too often for my taste even. To every friend, co-worker, town denizen met since then, who recognized me before with a nod or hello, I say “I had to face at last that my freak flag had become threadbare.” It might take another six years before it no longer requires or receives commentary.

What do I tell? I tell of my time by the Gauja River in Latvia.

Yes, friend, I got it cut in Latvia (my friends know where that is). Agapi and I were there for almost 6 weeks in summer 2018. Indeed, it really was transformative to be there, the country both my parents came from just after World War II. My beloved and I went to attend the national Song and Dance Festival in Rīga, the capital city. My great-grandfather Indriķis Zīle was director and co-conductor of the first one held in 1873. It had a choir then of 1,000 singers. That year 12,000 were up on stage simultaneously in the Mežaparks amphitheater, 30,000 in the audience.

I usually get a “wow” then.

“Wow.”

We went first to Cēsis by the Gauja. My mother Silvija hitchhiked there in June 1942. I have a letter by her to her mother Herta describing that adventure. The Grīnups family had vacationed regularly in Cēsis. Mamma seemed to be with me in spirit by the river one day. I embellish the anecdote, saying I heard her telling me to get a haircut, as she had done repeatedly and tediously in life. Really it was because I had grown tired of pulling it back into a ponytail to hide where it was growing thin. And that, when let down, it looked to me like the wispy shredded do of the Creature from the Crypt.

By the Gauja I asked myself: “How can one feel a sense of return to a place one has never been?”

I had/have no answer to that.

I made an appointment that day at the Royal Dandy Barber Shop in Cēsis. They would see me at 4, no, 4:30. The women working there seemed to be passing me off to each other: “Hippie, probably wants a trim.” When I told them, at the time of the appointment: “No, all off,” well, then clapping of hands, cheers, and they want to take before-and-after pictures.

The barber did a noble job at the Royal Dandy. Meticulous about the line around the ears, dabbed the buzzer at my ears, and no, oh okay, yes, an eyebrow trim as well. The hair has since then the form of what men much younger than I might appreciate. Not to say I don’t appreciate the effect it has had on my own twenty-something children and beloved wife. “It makes you look younger.” And “It makes you look ten years younger,” say some friendly people I know. And I want to respond, “So, what age does that make me?” (They may not know my chronological age, and may accidentally flatter me.)

Blush.

So from “Almost cut my hair...” to cut off almost all my hair.

I’ve gotten used to the image only slightly. Mostly I’ve forgotten what I used to look like, really have. So, gotten, forgotten, begotten a new identity? I retort, “My politics have not changed.” Still, I seem to be shaving my face more regularly. The stubbly look went well with the wild locks but now discomfits me somehow. The face and head in the mirror look poorly collaged. I will probably get over it.

I am at last my own doppelgänger. I am what I was, looking the same (relatively) at age 10, whittling my hemlock stick in Latvian Evangelical-Lutheran summer camp in the Catskills. I’m referring to a portrait of me in a black and white photograph.

I am also, incidentally, a dual citizen, though that is not as apparent as my haircut.

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Yes, friend and neighbor, 8 years ago I attained dual citizenship. It was first made available in 1991 when the three Baltic States tore away from their SSR status non-violently, throwing off the Russian Bear, and re-establishing themselves as Republics. Descendants unto the third generation of Latvians who had sought refuge just after WWII from Soviet Russian domination could now opt to be dual. My Latvian parents, following different paths, ended up in New York City in the late 1940s and met at Mt. Sinai Hospital, my father working in the laundry room and my mother clerking. That is how I became Latvian-American.

Since then I have lost my hyphen.

I did not bother applying in 1991, not interested then. All my life, I resented the indoctrination by this émigré community of mine and their insistence I regard myself as Latvian first, and American as other. At age 25 (1975), I broke completely with them, moved out of New York City, left behind all 66,000 of them, never returned except to visit my family. Though everywhere I continued to make people pronounce my name correctly (first name at least), I was American. Hippie-American.

After 1995, the opportunity to be both Latvian and American was no longer available, temporarily. In the intervening years unto 2011, however, pressure mounted among Latvian immigrant workers in Ireland and elsewhere in the EU to have their offspring who were born there recognized as citizens of Latvia as well. So the door reopened in October 2011 for first-generation sons and daughters of WWII exiles also, and two years later I applied. It took a while.

I received my personas kods on March 16, 2016.

I call it my trapdoor out.

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I am so sad for America – so full of anger and fear, paranoia and suspicion, alienation from neighbor and often from family. Duped, deceived, and miserable. Deluded and in decline. Really nothing seems to have slowed the deterioration since the 1980s. Inequality, inhumanity, hate and a kind of numbness descends like fog on our populace. Deliberately ignorant of the lies told and freedoms lost. Striking out at phantoms, propping up autocrats. The rest of the world looks on and can't believe its eyes.

As I watch these United States splinter and decline I worry that it may become unbearable here for me and my family. Through my Latvian citizenship, I want all of them to be able to exit with me to Europe if or when this nation goes berserker totalitarian. If that seems paranoiac, remember that my parents' history gives me justification for the feeling that things can turn around fast. It is beginning to look like empire here and there is increasing acceptance at top levels for fascism, oligarchy, racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

The deep state is right out in the open now – a deep state that says it is fighting the deep state. We are in deep (state) doo-doo.

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I could try hiding out. Google my name and you will find an “ivars balkits” who is not me. Rather, it is the title, in lowercase, of a musical CD put out by my friends the Jarts, who asked me if they could use my name for that purpose. I guess it's because the name is so mysterious, so other, so non-centric in this society we label America (just guessing, friends). I doubt it will throw off the FBI. Facebook does keep track of my politics. And the FBI actually has a file on me, as I discovered one day in the office of the school district I used to substitute teach in. It's likely there because I was once a war tax resister.

Despite the government's recommendation not to hire me, I was not let go. The district kept me on three years after they received this memorandum. Substitute teachers were and still are at a premium in rural Ohio schools. Premium, if not paid well.

I could hide out in my community, a very liberal college town and an adjacent countryside containing a number of progressive intentional communities based on the back-to-land movement of the 1970s. Our bubble. I've lived here 30 years now. It's just the pressure of knowing that the rest of the country could find its way here that makes me afraid – the militias, supremacists, jingoists, prosperity pastors – that makes me think I need a plan A.

When will it be too late to leave? When will the borders close and the wall go up running the full length of our lost freedoms?

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Am I a traitor to both countries? By belonging, eek, "belonging," to the other as well. Two-timer, twice owned? It is about who gets to own me, isn't it? Frightfully fragmented at the moment wondering who should get to own me, and I don't want ever to be owned. I want to be entirely free of citizenship. Even "world citizen" implies a state and its attendant violence and coercion. Borders are the means of control of the meek by the powerful. They are for keeping labor from crossing into better circumstances.

Plus, there's the haircut.

Okay, it's just a haircut. Skin, hair, muscular frame, symmetry, all your toes. It's superficial, but it's real how people interact with you and what they assume are your attitudes about life, politics, philosophy, religion – and likely you consciously frame your head with hair to let people know what those attitudes are. Though since the 1970s it has become less clear what you mean by your looks. Once it was clear that if you removed all your head hair you were a skinhead and what that meant. Now you may mean business; now you might be a female celebrity; now you are the hip offspring of Mr. Clean, the soap giant. With long hair, you could like country, jazz, classical, grunge, folk, and fantasy football. Anything hairs. We are pluralistic about hair now.

Hair, beautiful hair. I laugh at myself. I look in the mirror and laugh.

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Agapi, my beloved wife, wakes earlier than I do and reads by the light over the movable chair. Despite that spot being the best light in the house, her eyes have gotten awfully blurry. While preparing coffee in the kitchen, she looks into the living room at me and says, "There are two of you." Her eyes are so unfocused she is seeing an overlapping double, as I used to see before I got my prescription glasses. I say, "Has one of me still got long hair?"