



LATVIJAS VALSTS PREZIDENTS

**Address at the East Prussian Museum when opening a discussion  
“80 years after the Departure of the Baltic Germans. The Identity of Baltic  
Germans Today”  
Lüneburg, 23 February 2019**

The Republic of Latvia celebrated its centenary last year. Yet, the way to an independent country was much longer.

For many centuries, the Latvian elite spoke German, and Latvia belonged to the German cultural space. It had its own unique identity rooted in its close links with religious, economic, and cultural development here in Germany. The Baltic German community called Latvia and our neighbouring country, Estonia, their homeland once.

The cultural heritage generated by the Baltic Germans for centuries is still being explored and studied because the ruling ideology has not always allowed focusing on this task. The material evidence marks the Baltic German heritage very well such as castles, palaces, estates, churches, and other architectural monuments in Latvia. The evidence of intercultural interaction is also found in our language, beliefs, and traditions.

However, looking back at the time when statehood of Latvia was shaped, the most significant influence of the Baltic Germans has been exactly intangible.

In the 18th century, the Baltic Germans were the ones who spread the ideas of the so-called folk enlightenment from Germany in the Baltics by preludeing the broad processes of education and the resulting self-confidence of Latvian people.

In its turn, the Baltic Germans published the first Latvian newspapers, started collecting Latvian folk songs and laid the foundations for research of Latvian culture in the 19th century. The outstanding Baltic Germans including Publicist Garlieb Merkel and Priest August Bielenstein inspired the century of Latvian national awakening.

With an independent state of Latvia established, the Baltic Germans became involved in the formation of a new state based on a democratic Constitution. Lawyer, journalist, and

politician Paul Schiemann had excellent credit therein. It is deeply symbolic that he chose to complete his life in his native country without being subject to National Socialism and standing up against the Holocaust.

Unfortunately, World War 2 tore the Baltic German community away from their homeland for a long time. The expatriation in 1939-1941 was determined by a criminal agreement between the Communist and the National Socialist regimes. Could 60,000 Baltic Germans not leave? Unfortunately, no. Those 1,500 Latvian citizens who had stayed at their homeland selflessly became the victims of Soviet repression because of their origin and were forced to hide their family roots and heritage for decades.

The Soviet occupation made it impossible even to think about returning home from exile. In Latvia, it imposed a notion of apparent contradictions and eternal hatred against the Baltic Germans on several generations.

Almost 30 years have passed since the end of the Soviet occupation, and the need for a new look at the common past has matured in the Latvian society. Literary works by Baltic German authors are translated into Latvian and published, scientists are working on various studies, and several theatre performances have been created. On February 7, I also had the opportunity to watch the premiere of the historical drama "Baltic Ring" at the National Theatre. Meanwhile, in the countryside of Latvia ruined estates and other lost cultural symbols are restored often thanks to private initiative.

Latvians and Baltic Germans share not only common origin from the provinces of ancient Livonia or Kurzeme, Vidzeme, and Estonia but also belonging to a united Europe that breaks down the old dividing lines. Thus, there are opportunities for close cooperation between Latvia, Germany, and other European countries.

The 21st century is a favourable time for Latvia's growth. Our country is an equal partner in the European Union and NATO, and the people of Latvia enjoy unprecedented freedom, security, and prosperity. Modern conditions are encouraging to help to rebuild and to strengthen the ties of the Baltic German community with Latvia.

I hope very much that the discussion on the identity of Baltic Germans will contribute to strengthening the public sense of belonging and will create the conditions for its revival in the younger generations.

I sincerely thank everyone who contributes to the cooperation between the Baltic Germans and Latvia and takes care of our common historical heritage! I wish you a rewarding and forward-looking discussion!