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HELMARS RUDZITIS

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PASSAGE ON "THE GENERAL HALSEY"

NASH: Today is May 16, 1974. I am in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, New York, and I am visiting with a man who was born in Riga, Latvia in the year 1903. His name is Helmars Rudzitis and he is going to tell us the story of how he came to the United States in the year 1949 at the age of 46. He is now 70 and he doesn't look it.

RUDZITIS: Thank you. So, as already told, my name is Helmars Rudzitis and I am born in Riga, Latvia in 1903. At that time Latvia was a part of Russia, and during the First World War when the Germans came in our country many of the Latvians escaped to Russia, and I was one of them. I was only a boy and I spent about five years in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, Russia. In 1920 I returned to Latvia, which was then already dependent country, and I continued my education.

I got my degree from the University of Latvia in law and I started my own publishing business in 1926.

NASH: Cam you describe Riga, your earliest memories of Riga?

RUDZITIS: Riga in the beginning of the '20s was not so beautiful as the city was in the later years because the First World War made quite a damage to the city and we had very much to rebuild. But it went pretty soon and already by the end of the '20s, Riga was a beautiful city with nice parks, very good streets, new homes were going up everywhere, and it was a very pleasant city. There was much entertainment. We had a very good opera, we had many theaters, and some people were talking that Riga was a small Paris of the East.

NASH: And what did your father do for a living?

RUDZITIS: My father was a cook. He worked in a hotel in Riga, Hotel Del Romas, it was called at that time, and he had a very good job there. But, of course, he was only an employee and we were a quite well-off family, but not an affluent family. So I started my publishing business with practically nothing.

NASH: How many brothers and sister did you have?

RUDZITIS: I am the only child in the family. I have no brothers and sisters.

NASH: Could you describe St. Petersburg in those days?

RUDZITIS: Oh, St. Petersburg, when I came there in 1915 was quite nice. The war hadn't touched it and it also was a very nice city, with all the palaces and big churches and very good theaters, but it deteriorated very fast during the war and especially after the revolution. When the Communists came to power the city had no anymore food. Famine was there, it was no more heating and everything. It was very, very, very bad, and so many people were arrested and some were shot and everything. So in 1920 we had a possibility to return to Latvia and we came back to Latvia.

NASH: So you went with your whole family to St. Petersburg?

RUDZITIS: Yes.

NASH: How did it happen that you were able to start a publishing business then?

RUDZITIS: I was interested in books all of my life. I had read very many books and in school I published a school magazine and so and I was interested in this and so I started this business. There is very, very little money, but I had a good idea. The books were very expensive in Latvia at that time because they appeared in very small circulations. And I made such a revolutionary move of books which were selling then at about five or six Lots, Lot was the denomination of Latvian money was, and I calculated that I could get a big situation, I could give the books much cheaper. So I put a book for one Lot. That is about here the pocketbooks. It was not in hard cover, but it was in the size of the hard cover books. They were good novels from Latvian writers, also from--translations from all fellow languages, and I put it out on subscription basis. And it immediately had a very big success. Usually the books came out in Latvia about a thousand, two thousand copies, and that was the limit. And I got my first book 18,000 subscribers, so I was immediately established. And the first year I published every month two books, 24 books, and we started more and more, all kinds of popular science and non-fiction books. And at the end of the '20, already '29, '30, I was publishing

about a hundred books a year and I had my own plant where they were printed on book binding. Just the manuscript came and the paper came in and the heavy books went out. It was very good so until 1940. The Communists came in our country and they confiscated everything.

NASH: How did that happen?

RUDZITIS: They just when (?) mad the pact, the Germans sold to the Russian the Baltic States and on June 17 of 1940, the Russians just made an ultimatum that they would occupy the countries and they came in, all the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. And they, of course, said it would only be such an occupation, but immediately they changed the government and out in a government that was only hearing to the Russians and everything was nationalized to the smallest store.

NASH: Do you remember the first few days when they came in?

RUDZITIS: Oh yes, I remember it very vividly. It was very dramatic when they came in, the Russian tanks were coming in from all the sides in the region, the streets, and the people

were very afraid. But, of course, there were some elements that went out to the Russians and said, "Oh, you are our saviors and we are impressed," and so and so, and brought them even flowers. But the Russians were so afraid themselves, the soldiers, that they were told not to make contact with everybody. They threw the flowers, they ran the tanks over the flowers. Even wanted to crush the people who brought them the flowers. And in a couple of days everything changed. Everything changed, horse, police were changed. They put in their own militia and all the elements that were very destructive, they come to the top now. But mostly the Commissars and all these managers for all the businesses and properties that they nationalized came mostly from Russia.

NASH: And how did it affect your business? What changes did you have to make? Who told you what to do? What did you have to do?

RUDZITIS: I was told to go out. One man came in and showed his credentials that he is a Commissar now of this and he is a Commissar for some other publishing houses also and he established one of the girls that was in the mailing department and said she will be now the manager here and you have nothing

to do there so you take your hat and go out, and that was it.

NASH: You had no connection with your business anymore?

RUDZITIS: Anymore, not at all, not at all. And the same happened to other businesses and also if you had a house, you can only own a very small house. If it was a little larger than two or three rooms, it also was nationalized. Even the small stores like delicatessen stores. They nationalized everything in the beginning. Everything belonged to the state.

NASH: Could you believe that it was happening? It must have seemed like a nightmare.

RUDZITIS: It was a nightmare, but I could believe that it was happening. Other people, no, because I saw the same thing in St. Petersburg during the revolution in 1917, '18, '19 when the Bolsheviks did the same thing there.

NASH: Had that affected you in any way, when you were there?

RUDZITIS: No. When I was there I was still a boy and my father was only working so it didn't affect me.

NASH: Were you married at this time? I am speaking of in Latvia, were you married by then?

RUDZITIS: Yes, I was married then, yes.

NASH: How did you meet your wife?

RUDZITIS: How did I meet my wife? I met my wife in a radio studio. You see, I had also at this time not only this publishing business, I had also a recording business. I started it in 1931. I bought in Germany a defunct plant for making gramophone records. At that time you know the records were only the small ten inch and they lasted three minutes. Not the long-playing records, but the record business was very popular then. Mostly, of course, dancing records and so because there was not so much dancing on the radio, no television, of course. And I was producing these records. And in the State radio studios we were making all recordings and my wife was an employee there at the State radio and I met her there during one of the recordings in the recording studio.

NASH: So when the Russians took over--Riga, was that where you were living when they took over--

RUDZITIS: Yes.

NASH:" In Riga, you were married. Did you have to move? How did your wife react to all of that?

RUDZITIS: No, we moved to a smaller apartment. We moved to a smaller apartment and I got a small job at this recording factory because they didn't know how to do the things. It was very complicated. Only such factory in the whole Baltic States. And I got there a small job, so I was working there and had a small apartment during the year they were in Latvia. 1941, when the war started, the Germans threw them out, and the Germans came and occupied our country.

NASH: This was next?

RUDZITIS: That was next, yes.

NASH: And what was that transition like?

RUDZITIS: Oh, that transition was a very jubilant I would say. Germans, when they came in, everybody was so happy and everybody was meeting the Germans with a big hello. Of course, this soon also again was different because the Germans also didn't behave good. They were also occupants, but everybody was at that moment very happy that they get rid of the Communists because that was a tragic thing. They arrested so many people in one night from June 13th to June 14th. That was a week before the war between Russia and Germany started. They deported from Latvia alone about 30,000 people to Siberia. It was a big action prepared in the night. Big trucks came to all parts of the city and also in the country and the people had to come out, whole families, with just something to take with you and in ten minutes you have to go on the truck, and long trains were prepared in the stations with the boxcars and they put separately in them, men in different trains and women in different trains and transported them to Siberia, mostly never returned and some were liberated and returned after the war, but mostly they didn't return at all.

NASH: Why did they do that?

RUDZITIS: That was in Stalin's time, and in Stalin's times they destroyed people as much as they could. Of course, they knew that the Latvian population was not loving the Communists and that they were against Communists. Mostly what they deported, of course, were people who were well-situated before the Communists time. They deported all the Army officers and all kinds of lawyers

and civil servants, but also many plain working people that somebody had renounced that he told something against Communists and so on. So the people were just put in boxcars and deported.

NASH:           What happened next?

RUDZITIS:       Next, we had three years of German occupation, '41 to '44.

NASH:           I should ask you, just why do you think you weren't deported?

RUDZITIS:       Why I was not deported. I was on the list for deporting, but I was out of town and I left with my family. It was a miracle. Two nights before this big deportation. I was working, as I told, in this gramophone factory and now they wanted me to take a job in the State Publishing House, but there it was very, very, the atmosphere there was terrible. One of the publishers who was put on the job make suicide. He jumped from a window there. And now they wanted me to go also to work there, and they called me several times. I said, "I have to work here because this is a place where nobody knows how to do that and so." They said, "If you don't want, we'll get you anyhow." So I (?) take me there

and I thought I'll ask first for a vacation. I had to come to me two weeks vacation. And I asked for the vacation now in June, in the beginning of June, and I got these two weeks vacation and with my family we went out in the country. It is only about 20 miles from Riga on the seaside there, and two night after that they come to our apartment and look for us. Next morning I get a message about it. Then we started hiding. We hide first in one place another place there outside Riga and it was very dangerous, and then we ca,me back to Riga.

NASH: How did you hide?

RUDZITIS: At friends. One night we were in one friend's house, another night in another friend's house, and then we came to a friend of my wife's to Riga, in a small apartment. I was then married and I had just my son. My daughter was not born at that time. And we hide in this apartment and then I thought so how long can you hide. I have to go and report myself. It is no use. I am only an abuse to other people and how can I hide. And then on the radio, suddenly, on the 21st I hear the war started between Germany, and the Germans are advancing, and I said now we have to wait, maybe it is some hope. I will not go and report myself. So we waited and on July 1st, it was only a week after the war, the Germans came in, and so I am alive here today only because the war was going so quick

and so I would not be alive for years already if it wouldn't happen. But then, of course, when the Germans came in the first weeks it was quite okay, but then after the military went farther away and the civil government, German, came in, they started to press the people and so it was not good. But for all other people than the Jews, it was still better than the Communist time. If you were not in the politics thing, they didn't touch you.

NASH: The Germans were kinder to the--not kind, but the Germans did not oppress the Jews the way the Communists did?

RUDZITIS: No, the Germans oppressed the Jews. They arrested the Jews, they put them in ghettos and destroyed them and so forth. Jews it was terrible. It was terrible. But for other people, if you mixed into politics, if you were against Germans, you went to the concentration camp. But if you didn't mix in politics and had nothing to do, they didn't touch you.

NASH: Were there many Jews in Latvia?

RUDZITIS: Yes. We had about five percent of our population was Jewish, about five percent. And mostly they were destroyed, mostly. Some, of course, escaped, some good friends of mine and here in the United States, who managed to outlive this terror that was the biggest part (?) was finished. So, 1944, the same story came again. The Russians starting to come nearer and nearer back.

We always thought that these would never come back. And now the thing was happening. They were coming back nearer and nearer. And so the Germans started to evacuate. Everybody who would like to go out, they gave possibilities to go to Germany, of course, to work for them. And so many people left, and finally I left too in the end of September '44, and already eleven days after that Riga fell in the Russian hands. And so we started--first of all we landed in Austria near the Italian border and lived there for some months, and then the war turned so that the Russians started coming also there. They came in in Austria and from Vienna advancing to the Italian side, and they were also near the Yugoslavian border, so Tito with his army also coming from the other side. So we had to look again for another place. So we went more west and we landed in a small Bavarian village, Muhnnow, not far from Garmisch-Partenkirchen, and after five days we were there the American Army came in and so we were under American protection.

NASH:           When you were moving through Austria to Germany, were you moving on your own?

RUDZITIS:       Yes, on our own. They got some transportation there. There were all kinds of means if you had something with you to give people. Money was nothing then, only some articles and then you could move.

NASH:           Did people of all different nationalities kind of flee--did

you meet lots of different people who were fleeing from different places?

RUDZITIS: Oh, yes. It was a mixture of all kinds of people. They were from Baltic States, there were people from Poland and from Czechoslovakia, there were people from Ukrainian, from Russia, so many Russians also who came out of Russia when the German armies came back and who didn't want to go back to the Communists, but they were forcibly after that sent back. Also, that was against all the Geneva Convention and even against the Yalta Agreement, and the army then together with the Russian-Czech or so, however you can say, they put it through that thousands and thousands of people were deported back in Russian hands and, of course, they landed up in Siberia. There is an interesting book now by a man, Epstein, who worked fourteen years and he just published this book, where war crimes of the allies against these people who were forcibly sent to death in Russian hands, who didn't want to return. Now they acknowledge that this was wrong, but at that time, of course, it was such a mix-up after the armistice and everything, and it was done.

NASH: When did you have occasion to meet all these different

people who were fleeing?

RUDZITIS: You see, all the displaced persons from different countries, the Americans in the American zones, the British in the British zones, the French in the French zones, in Germany organized camps. And the camps were in some parts were in old army barracks or so and in some places in parts of cities where the Germans were thrown out of their quarters, especially the Nazis and the refugees were put in these, so they lived in a very mixed society in all these camps.

NASH: Did people feel something in common or did they feel they were kind of in the same boat together or was there a lot of friction?

RUDZITIS: They were, of course, you know, in the same boat, but friction between the nations were always. That is because every nation is different, like people are different also the nations are different. And later on the camps were organized mostly so that only in each camp, there was only one nationality. There were Latvian camps, there were Estonian camps, there were Polish camps and so on.

NASH: Then they each all had their own character?

RUDZITIS: Yes, yes. I would say so. They were different, of course.

And in Germany in about 1948 they started the immigration. The first immigration was to England, but they were taking only single people for heavy work or single women for domestic work, and so the Belgians were taking young men, also for very heavy work, also single work. And then started the immigration to Canada, Australia and last also to the United States, and they were taking the whole families. Here under Truman that was a (?) Act that gets through the Congress, and under this Act about 250,000 people came to the United States. And my family was one that came then. So we had to get here somebody who would give us a place to live and a job, but mostly all these people had here friends, already came, and the church organizations here were taking these assurances from well-to-do people, just proforma, and sending them and when the people came here they had no obligations, they were on their own. They came here maybe for a week or so (?) sponsor and find a job and started to do something.

NASH: Do you remember the day you left?

RUDZITIS: Yes, I left on the boat from Germany, we left on April 14th and we arrived in here in Boston on April 24th 1949.

NASH: How did it feel when you left Europe?

RUDZITIS: Oh, it was quite sad. I thought I would never see it again, Europe, and it was so sad. I didn't know what would happen in the United States, I have never been there. I know all Europe. I travel so much before the war on business and so I have been nearly in all countries of Europe, but I have never been in the United States, so it was an experience for me to come here.

NASH: Did you choose to come to the United States or was that the only place that you could come?

RUDZITIS: No, I choose it, I choose it. I waited that I had opportunity to go to Canada, but I didn't want to go. I wanted always to go to the United States. And I waited until I got a possibility to get here and then I left.

NASH: Why did you want to come to the United States?

RUDZITIS: I thought that this was a bigger country, it was much more opportunity, and I thought there is more farmland, and so I was such expression, and many people went also to Australia. I didn't want to go there at all. It is so far away, and I think I did right, that I came to the United States. It

is the best country there is for people to start a new life.

I think it still is the best country.

NASH: What was your trip like on the boat?

RUDZITIS: The trip was awful. It was an old Army ship. It was General Halsey, was the name, and people were sleeping in three bunks, one over the other. In the Channel it was quite choppy and most of the people were seasick for two, three days and so, and then the last days there again, better, people get over the seasickness and so we arrive in Boston. We were met there even by an orchestra, an orchestra was playing, and it was very interesting to see. I said, what is an Army orchestra, you know, with all these red uniforms, you know. And now that every college and every high school nearly has such an orchestra. We were met by this orchestra and everything. And mostly the people came to New York, so there was a special train directly where the ships landed, and we put all our belonging to the train, and the same morning we were already in New York. And a friend of mine whose father-in-law had a house in Rockaway Beach, met us and we went there and there we stayed the first days.

NASH: How did you feel when you finally got to the house in Rockaway Beach?

RUDZITIS: Oh, I liked it very much, I liked it very much. Of course,

I like the ocean, but we have in Riga the same. It is not ocean, it is the Baltic Sea, but there are very beautiful white sandy beaches and everything. I liked it very good.

And the first month or so I liked New York very much. The nicest part of it, let's say Fifth Avenue and Hotel Plaza and all these nice--what I didn't like that disturbed me very much was these apartment houses with all these fire escapes outside, and they were mostly the houses were dark and dirty, and fire escapes also so on the streets and everything. I haven't seen such a thing in Europe. In Europe mostly the houses are painted, they paint the houses.

They do not leave the open breakers here and they do not have fire escapes, not in a house. And that was so disturbing. Now I don't see it anymore because I am used to it, but the first impression when you come to a city and especially a street where the houses look very poor, it is depressing, depressing. So I started to live here. I don't know what I will do here, but I had quite a family then. I had my wife, I had two children, I had my father and my mother here with me, so there were six people. and I had a little money, that was all the thing from before the war.

NASH: How were you able to get it out?

RUDZITIS: No, it was here. It was here in a bank.

NASH: When did you send it?

RUDZITIS: When I was still in Riga. But it was just nothing. It was a couple of thousand dollars, only it was nothing, but I had it here and during the war it was, of course, the money was frozen, but when I got here they unfroze it. I could use the money. And so I thought now I have to go in my own business. I have to go in my own business. It was difficult to start with the books because I didn't think that people who came here who have to look for a job and so they will not be interested so much in books, but they need a newspaper. They need a newspaper because the language barrier, it was very strong. Mostly the people came that didn't know the English language.

NASH: Were there many Latvians before that time in New York?

RUDZITIS: Oh, I don't know how many there were. Nobody knows, but not too many, but in that time, 1949, 1950 and '51, about 60,000 Latvians came to the whole United States. That is

all that there is. And about 25,000 came to Canada. And that was my audience, to whom I had to cater. So I said a newspaper is needed and I started the newspaper in November of '49. Of course, in the beginning it was very difficult, we all worked long hours and I had luck. I get one of the best editors that was a good editor also in Latvia already, and he still is editor in my newspaper now. And so we started and the paper started to grow and grow and the situation went up and up.

NASH: Could you tell us the name of your newspaper and why you chose the name?

RUDZITIS: The newspaper is The Latvian Newspaper Likes. Likes means times. I think it is quite a name that expresses the times we came here, the time--so I put this name. And also why I put this name, during my stay in Germany for the four years I also was publishing some books and a literary magazine, and the name of the literary magazine was also Likes the same, so I continued the same name here in the newspaper, as the American government gave me such permission to publish Latvian books in Germany, in the camps also, and they gave us paper and I was working all the time there too. The

success of the paper was that because all the generation that came here, all the people, they know me, since 1926 everybody knows my name and knows the name of the publishing house that was (?), who published the books in Latvia. It means friend of books, and they believe in me. They trusted me, and so they subscribed to the paper. And soon we reached a very nice circulation. Our circulation was 13,000 copies.

That, for such a limited number of people here, is a very good circulation. And it is still now over 12,000 copies in the 25th year of publication.

NASH: Does that mean that new people are reading it? What about the second generation?

RUDZITIS: Second generation is difficult. Not many of them read it. Some read, but the generations that still are now in their 40s and so they still read, and in the 30s, but children who are born in this country already, they speak Latvian families, but they have difficulties to read and so they go to to Sunday Schools and church here, but they do not learn enough and it is easier for them to read English than to read Latvian and many of them do not want to do their part and so, of course, the paper will die. If nothing

happens, it will die. I don't know how long it will take, but some day it will be that it will not be any more possible to publish it, if all the old generation and the middle generation will be gone. But until now we still have quite a lot of readers. Latvians are very good readers. They read very much. Before the war when they published the statistics about how many books in every country use per capita, so Latvia was in the second place always in number of books published per population. The first place always went to Denmark. Denmark was the first, Latvia was the second.

NASH: (?)

RUDZITIS: I don't know. No, it was all over the world. America was very far away then before the war. I have not seen the statistics here. If such statistics exist, now America should be much more advanced because as I see how many books now come out. But before the Second World War, it was a different story. I had many American publishers whom I know and to whom I spoke and so they say it is a difference between the time before the Second World War and after the Second World War is quite a lot, see. More people read, as I say,

television is now taking off on reading and still people read more now than they read before.

NASH: Is it always published completely in the Latvian language?

RUDZITIS: What I am publishing?

NASH: Yes.

RUDZITIS: Yes, the paper is all in the Latvian language. And a year after I started the paper here, I started again to publish books. And now I publish each year about, between 20 and 30 books, how it comes. Mostly, it is original Latvian writers who escaped from there, but a number of Latvian writers in this country also are diminishing. They are all gone, are passing away, and there are only a couple of new writers that came up in the last 20 years, who are writing the Latvian language, very few. Of course, I do also translations, the most important books. Now I am preparing The Gulag Archipelago from Solzhenitsyn. It is already, say a quarter of it is translated in the Latvian language, yes, and it is set already and the book will appear in July in the Latvian language. So we are going with the time and

giving the people all that we can get.

NASH: Well, when did you come to Bayridge?

RUDZITIS: I came to Bayridge the first--I lived in Rockaway Beach, as I told, and I was looking for some place to rent for myself and I looked in the newspaper and there was a--at that time in 1949, it was a shortage of apartments. It was very difficult to get an apartment, and there was advertising small houses for rent in Bergen Place. I didn't know where was Bergen Place. I looked on the map and it was here in Bayridge. It is not far from here, about eight blocks from here, small, small street. and I went there and this was really a small house and there were a couple of people who also wanted an apartment, but the owner of the house liked somehow me and that I came from a different country and he rented to me. And so we rented the house and in that house I started the publishing business for the newspaper. I lived there, upstairs there was a very small three bedrooms upstairs and downstairs, also downstairs was the office of the newspaper then. And then 1951, two years after that, I bought this house where we are sitting now. And also here on this first floor where we are sitting, there was the office

of the newspaper. We lived all upstairs. And so (?) the office was here downstairs, and then in 1962 we moved the office to the same house we before that already had my typesetting and everything in that house. The upper floors were rented there and we couldn't get out the occupants and then we get them out and the office went there and I had the house here all for me. Then we were still six people, but after that my parents passed away, my son married, my daughter married, and the big house where the office and all the family, we are now only two of us, my wife and me.

NASH: How old were your parents when they passed away?

RUDZITIS: My mother passed away when she was 75 and my father passed away six years ago. He was 93.

NASH: And are there many Latvians who live in this community?

RUDZITIS: Now quite a lot of them. Not too many because Latvians are scattered all over the city. In New York it is so that the Germans live in one part and the Polish people and then the Italians live in one part, but Latvians live all over. And our family was the first to come to Bayridge. There was

not one family, but now there are quite a lot of Latvians already in Bayridge in these years.

NASH: You think it is a nice place to have--

RUDZITIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I like very much Bayridge. It is a residential section and the people are very nice here. It is mostly Scandinavian people, Irish people, also some Syrians live here in the neighborhood. So the neighborhood is still good. Of course, it is not anymore that that it was years ago. Also, at night you can't walk around feeling nothing will happen to you, but it is much better than other neighborhoods.

NASH: Do you belong to other organizations?

RUDZITIS: Only to Latvian organizations, not to any American organizations.

NASH: Which ones?

RUDZITIS: I belong to the Latvian Anglican Lutheran Church, I belong to the American Latvian Association, and to Latvian Society of New York, and that is it.

NASH: And how about your children? What are they doing?

RUDZITIS: My son is now continuing my business. He is married and he has four children. He lives in Port Washington on Long Island, and he is working, has all the administrative part of the business. I am now mostly in charge of the books. I am looking through the manuscripts, looking for new books and so. And my daughter is married to a Latvian. He is an engineer. She has three children and they live in Connecticut.

NASH: Is there anything else you would like to say about having immigrated to the United States?

RUDZITIS: Oh, I am very happy that I chose this country. I like this country very much and I hope that this country that has now such turbulent days, that it will get out of it again and that it will be more stabilized and America should again get her first-place abroad. Of course, it is not so easy now because the Communists are all over the world will make it difficult for Americans in every part of the world, but let's hope that this country will still live and prosper in the future.

NASH:        Thank you very much.