

LESBIAN LIVES IN SOVIET LATVIA: THE NARRATIVES

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This article employs narrative analysis to examine three testimonies provided by individuals who were contemporaries of lesbians in Soviet Latvia. The author's research is based on two oral history interviews and the diary entries of a homosexual man, dating between the 1950s and 1980s. The research was carried out in four stages: (1) story analysis; (2) identification of main topics and characters; (3) identification of main terms and tone; and (4) extraction of three key narratives. The findings demonstrate, firstly, the lack of terminology to describe homosexual/non-heterosexual relationships between women when referencing the Soviet time. This indicates that contemporary terms used by the LGBTQI+ community may not be valid for analysing the experiences of non-heterosexual people in Soviet Latvia. Secondly, the testimonies described in this article view same-sex women's relationships through heteronormative lens as deviating from the norm. Thirdly, the article highlights how rigid expectations of "manly" and "womanly" behaviour and traits are used to judge compliance with or deviation from societal norms. The understanding of non-heterosexual relationships between women, as evidenced by the sources, cannot be standardised. While the testimonies reference non-heterosexual relationships between women, they also mention same-sex relationships, which may have formed due to socioeconomic conditions and different intimate bonds.

Keywords: oral history, narratives, lesbians, Soviet Latvia, same-sex sexuality

Introduction

In the Baltic states, lesbians' lives were deeply influenced by what sociologist Francesca Stella referred to as "the Soviet gender order". Women's lives were

shaped by the standard of “working mother contract” and “monogamous heterosexuality harnessed to the reproductive needs of the socialist state”.¹ This article aims to explore the lives of lesbians in Soviet Latvia. It will do so by analysing the narratives about homosexual women through the eyes of their contemporaries. Prior to this article, only one source had been published, which was journalist Rita Ruduša’s project. Between 2010 and 2012, Ruduša interviewed homosexuals who had experienced Soviet times in Latvia. The life stories based on interviews include the testimony of one lesbian, Signe, on her experiences from the 1990s. Another self-identified lesbian, Līga, declined the publication of her life story due to fears of being recognised, and therefore, only a few paragraphs containing Ruduša’s impression are available.² Whereas Ruduša’s book provides no knowledge of the lives of lesbians’ lives in Soviet-day Latvia.

By relying on two interviews and diary entries of a homosexual man, dated between the 1950 and 1980s, as well as an extensive historiography analysis, the article presents three narratives on women’s homosexuality in Soviet Latvia. All three sources used in the article were contemporaries of homosexual women. Only the author of the diary, Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996), was practicing queer sexuality. This fact also highlights a shortcoming of the article and leaves room for future research. At the same time, the recent publication of a scholar of gender studies Rebeka Põldsam’s doctoral dissertation on the history of discourses on non-normative sex-gender subjects in Estonia explains that she “managed to talk to women who had same-sex relationships only in the 1990s”, however, her interlocutors “did not know any living women who had had homosexual relationships earlier and who would agree to speak to me”.³

The article does not intend to reconstruct things “such as they happened”, and due to the limited sources used for this research, it would not be possible. However, it does observe specific traces of information⁴ to form a subjective understanding of same-sex relationships and desires between women, as well as the identity markers and character traits attributed to homosexual women. It also examines the appearance and visibility of such women in public spaces in Soviet Latvia. By critically examining the sources, the article only begins to explore narrative possibilities on lesbian lives in Soviet Latvia, leaving ample room for further inquiry.

1 Stella 2015, 19.

2 Ruduša 2014, 97.

3 Põldsam 2023, 46.

4 Ricoeur 1965, 23.

State-of-art research on lesbians who experienced socialism

Historiography was the catalyst that propelled me to inquire how same-sex relationships were perceived in Soviet Latvia. Stella's academic work, which I read first, inspired this article. Her work on lesbian lives in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia shows how two simultaneous forces discriminated against homosexuality. The first one is what she calls "the Soviet gender order".⁵ State control over economic resources emphasised the inherent connection between sexuality, reproduction, and the traditional nuclear family. This allowed the government to exert control over the intimate lives of its citizens.⁶ The second, equally important force was the families themselves reinforcing women's gender roles to fulfil the "natural calling", which was considered the most important contribution of any woman to society.⁷ The consequence of such an order is summarised by the scholar of gender studies Tuula Juvonen, who writes about Finnish homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s in Tampere. She writes that men could separate between the spheres of life and move between them freely, creating space for alternative sexual encounters. However, "women, for whom home, work, and leisure often fell together, were most of the time much more intensely socially monitored".⁸ It is evident that women in such circumstances may have concealed their true desires and lived outwardly heterosexual lives, only hinting at their same-sex desires through the traces of information they have left for future generations.⁹ As shown by Põldsam and Arumetsa in the case of Estonia, the emancipation of LGBTQ+ people became possible gradually after the regaining of independence – even if the national political elites dismissed the minorities as they were not falling comfortably with the nation building project.¹⁰ Ruduša made similar observations in the case of post-Soviet Latvia, saying that the Latvian society reacted to the first Pride in Latvia in March 2005 "in the classic spirit of the old Criminal Code¹¹ and Dr. Zālītis".¹²

At the same time, I have come across more accounts highlighting the impact of state socialism on the lives of lesbians. For instance, historian Věra Sokolová

5 Stella 2015, 19.

6 Ibid., 33.

7 Ibid., 31–32.

8 Juvonen 2006, 64.

9 Taavetti 2019, 205.

10 Põldsam, Arumetsa 2023.

11 The 1961 Criminal Code of the Latvian SSR imposed on a man guilty of male same-sex intercourse imprisonment for up to five years. See: Lipša 2021, 429.

12 Ruduša 2014, 11.

emphasised that during the socialist era in the satellite state of Czechoslovakia, discussions about gender and sexuality were inadequate in addressing and moving beyond the established norms that concealed non-heterosexual experiences.¹³ This also meant that the “lesbian”, “gay”, “transgender”, and “homosexual” people did not use the terms to talk about themselves before 1989. Coming from this perspective, Sokolová collects accounts of the discovery of an individual’s non-heterosexuality, their same-sex experiences and how the regime has shaped their identities.¹⁴ Sokolová’s insights clarified for me why I encountered avoidant behaviour when asking my interviewees about contemporary sexual identity labels. Some even appeared disgusted as I raised this question, perhaps seeing it as perverse. Realising my initial approach was ill-fitted, I inquired more about “same-sex relationships” in a broader sense in my interviews. This proved to be more productive. It seems that the context for relationships in Soviet Latvia may have created many forms of caring and loving links, not all of which were forged by intercourse and sexual desire.

Aspects of historiography are important in examining the narratives as it allows us to explain why women’s same-sex attraction was considered not only immoral but also unnatural and, therefore, had to be concealed. Homophobia historically has been rooted in the Latvian society by criminalising male anal sex. It was first put in place in the Russian Empire in 1832.¹⁵ Homophobia was amplified by the perception that same-sex desire among men and women was directly associated with prison camps, where it could be expressed and tolerated as a substitute for heterosexual relationships.¹⁶ Besides the prejudice, the Soviet Latvian society had little to go by when it came to sex education. In 1981, the first sexual education book by Jānis Zālītis entitled *In the Name of Love* (in Latvian – *Mīlestības vārdā*) was published in the Latvian SSR.¹⁷ In his book, Zālītis describes male and female homosexuality as criminal and deviant, which leads Lipša to conclude that Zālītis “simply hated homosexuals”.¹⁸ In the case of socialist Czechoslovakia, historian Kateřina Lišková notes female sexual deviance was absent from the scholarship of sexology. It only came under scrutiny if the criminal activity was punishable by law and could imprison the person.¹⁹

13 Sokolová 2014, 243–284; Sokolová 2021, 40–49, 149–173.

14 Ibid., 7.

15 Lipša 2017, 5.

16 Stella 2015, 34.

17 Lipša 2022, 99; Navickaite 2023.

18 Ibid., 113.

19 Lišková 2018, 234.

Stella explains that for older homosexual women, it is often difficult to define themselves in contemporary LGBTQ+ terms used by the community. Their experiences were often complicated, including heterosexual elements such as marriage to a man.²⁰ Therefore, recounts or observations of “lesbian” experiences are difficult to gather and systematise. As women’s sexuality was also considered outside the realm of “normal”, albeit to a much lesser extent than the lives of homosexual men who faced pathologising and criminalisation for practicing their sexuality, many women are not ready to testify about their experiences today. Historian Galina Zelenina has carried out a survey of Russian lesbians and concludes that “the lesbian self-identification in approximately one third of cases remains on private life level; it is an individual and private identification, not social or civil or cultural”. She summarises the prevailing position: “My orientation is my private business, for myself and my other half.”²¹ I claim that such internalised homophobia also prevails in Latvia and, therefore, prevents historical inquiry into lesbian lives.

Finally, I also questioned if lesbians “really had it that bad”, considering that only male homosexual activity was criminalised. Historian Dan Healey shows that the Soviet police did not view lesbians as a security threat to the same degree as male homosexuals did. Nevertheless, he also states that “they were prosecuted under various laws if political or behavioural non-conformity drew attention to their sexuality”.²² Furthermore, historian Rustam Alexander even shows that during the drafting of the Criminal Code of the Latvian SSR in 1960, the Latvian SSR considered criminalising female same-sex relations. However, he puts forth that it “seems probable that the proposals to criminalise lesbianism were rejected, perhaps by the authorities in Moscow”.²³ The existence of a criminal clause allows for the precise documentation of men being persecuted for homosexual activity in the USSR. However, we know nearly nothing about women who may have suffered various forms of punishment from society.

Sources: oral history and written testimonies of contemporaries

For this article, I collected narratives by analysing the findings of two interviews conducted between May 2022 and May 2023. The respondents were women

20 Ibid., 33.

21 Zelenina 2007.

22 Healey 2018, 76.

23 Alexander 2018, 35.

born in 1934 and 1949 who identified as heterosexual. They shared their stories and opinions on same-sex relationships they witnessed between women. A second source used for this article was the diary entries of a homosexual man.

The first respondent – a contemporary of a same-sex loving couple – was identified by accidentally coming across a recount of such a relationship in the book *Cilvēkglābējs Žanis Lipke* [Saviour – Žanis Lipke], published in 2018.²⁴ In a 2016 interview, Žanis Lipke's lifelong neighbour Silvija Zenta Kraukle and his daughter-in-law Ārija Lipke tell the story of their experience in the Ķīpsala district of Rīga.²⁵ Telling about life in Ķīpsala, they start the interview by mentioning that Lipke's family lived next to a lesbian couple.²⁶ I interviewed Ārija Lipke in 2022, in a follow-up meeting, to learn more about her perception and experience with the said couple.²⁷ Thus, the 2016 interview was the third oral history source which I analysed to compare the knowledge on the female same-sex relations obtained in 2016 and in 2022. The second respondent is Zane, a long-standing Latvian Academy of Arts employee.²⁸

I relied on previous knowledge about the individuals and common acquaintances to enlist the participants for the interviews. I reached out to Lipke through a common acquaintance – the editor of the book that her interview was published in, Lolita Tomšone. Zane and her family were known for their inclusive attitudes towards contemporary gender politics in Latvia. This might be the reason why she eagerly responded to my text message. She was also known for having many acquaintances in Rīga's "creative circles", where both homosexual men and women found solace during the Soviet era.

I also used a particular primary source, the personal diary of Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996) who practiced queer sexuality. Historian Ineta Lipša, who wrote scientific commentaries for the first volume (1927–1949) of the diary published in 2021, points out at the beginning of the diary that it is a unique source for understanding the past of homosexuals in Latvia, and also on the broader geopolitical areal – the Soviet Union after the Second World War.²⁹

24 Tomšone 2018. For this article, I use the English translation of the book. See Tomšone 2020.

25 The book focuses on the life story of Lipke, who saved 55 Jews from the Nazis during the occupation of Latvia between 1941–1944.

26 Zandere, Tomšone 2020, 211. If neighbours knew something, they kept their mouths shut. Inese Zandere and Lolita Tomšone interview Silvia Zenta Kraukle with the participation of Ārija Lipke.

27 SBK008.

28 SBK009.

29 Lipša 2021, 11.

In this article, I have critically examined the sources that were used. Despite the potential for narrativity and partiality to be recognised as flaws of oral history sources, I claim that they can be interpreted as strengths.³⁰ Firstly, the two interviews used in the analysis of this article present two different perspectives on homosexuality. Lipke's formative years were the 1940s and 1950s, which saw Soviet policy solidify the perception that homosexuality was dangerous and detrimental and, therefore, criminalised under the Latvian SSR Criminal Code. Although Zane has spent most of her life in Soviet Latvia, she is an art historian who is well-versed in both past and present academic and political discussions about homosexuality. Her views cannot be considered "standard" for her generation, as she has been exposed to progressive ideas during her long-standing career at the Academy of Art. For instance, she emphasises that the transgression of sexual norms and homoeroticism is a normal part of an artist's creative process. However, it is precisely this perspective on inspiration and creation, as merged with the artists' sexuality, which leads Zane to negate homosexuality or lesbianism as a separate form of relationship. She sees them as part of the wider societal processes in Soviet Latvia that facilitated an increase in same-sex relationships.

Second, Irbe's diary entries are reflective, uncovering his knowledge, spontaneous thoughts, and profound feelings. However, they are short and contain a maximum of two paragraphs in every instance – often mentioning the sighting of lesbians only in one sentence. The diary in question, therefore, only partially reveals the life perspective of the writer on same sex loving women;³¹ however, it still allows us to trace certain narratives that reflect Irbe's observations and perceptions.

The method

In my research, I use narrative inquiry and view the narrative as a method and a phenomenon. According to historian Kevin P. Murphy et al., the practice of oral history holds inherent queer potential through a focus on non-hegemonic storytelling and its emphasis on the ongoing and incomplete nature of narrativity.³² For individuals, narratives serve as instruments for making sense of and understanding their lived experiences and help them explain how they fit into

30 Murphy, Pierce, Ruiz 2016, 2.

31 Summerfield 2018, 50.

32 Murphy, Pierce, Ruiz 2016, 2.

their current worldview.³³ Narrative analysis is the most appropriate method for examining my sources as it allows for exploring different forms of the stories – as in my case, personal experiences and observation narratives on lesbians, which I derived from the interviews with two heterosexual women and the diary of Irbe. Borrowing from sociologist Ken Plummer, I am not looking at the structure of the narratives reviewed in this article but rather their meaning.³⁴ Specifically, I am examining the understanding of same-sex relationships, identity markers and character traits that are perceived as “lesbian”, as well as the visibility of lesbians in public spaces as perceived by their contemporaries. This approach contextualises knowledge traces within the larger sociopolitical environment that described sexual subcultures in Soviet Latvia.

Considering that I could use only three sources for this paper – which characterises the overall silence surrounding homosexuality in the Soviet era – I relied on a four-step approach to analysis, which is loosely based on Crossley’s narrative analysis model.³⁵ The four steps are as follows: (1) *Story analysis*. By employing a critical perspective, I first read the transcripts and extracted the core story of the testimony. (2) *Identification of main characters and topics*. In this stage, I identified the key figures spoken about in the interviews and any critical themes that emerged. (3) *Identification of main terms and tone*. While writing the article, I paid attention to the demeanour of the respondents’ stories and any specific terms used to carry over the narrative. The terms identified were mostly linked to their perception of lesbian sexuality, identity, and self-expression. (4) *Extraction of three key narratives*. After analysing the story, I identified each testimony’s main topics, characters, and specific terms and tone. I then described key narratives in each testimony and systematically analysed them in the following sections of this paper.

Zane’s story. Same-sex intimacy not bound by sex

Zane’s story focuses on her observations within the “creative circles” of Latvia. She clearly states that the environment at the Academy of Art was entirely different from what I understood as Soviet normativity. She believes that “it’s not the duty of an artist to comply with totalitarianism...”.³⁶ Located in central Riga,

33 Clandinin, Rosiek 2007.

34 Plummer 2002, 19.

35 Corssley 2000, 35.

36 SBK009.

the Academy is known for its annual Carnivals³⁷ with themes that mock social normativity and stage provocations.

However, she notes that even in the artist circles, homosexuality was an open secret and was only “discussed in the Carnivals. As some provocations.”³⁸ During the interview, Zane avoided mentioning any individuals by name, abiding by a self-enforced code of confidentiality to protect her acquaintances and friends’ secrets. She hinted about some public personalities in her social circle, hoping that I could guess who they were and thus bear the responsibility of “outing” these people. Her hour-long story consisted of observations and reflections on how the Soviet system affected the sexuality of people, particularly women. However, she remained sceptical of defining “same-sex loving women” or “same-sex subcultures”, especially when I mentioned contemporary terminology, such as “gay” or “lesbian”, as used in this paper. For her, intimacy cannot be reduced to mere genital sexual activity, as this might undermine other essential aspects of same-sex relationships – and she emphasised that such efforts are pointless. She considers progressive academics’ fixation on the topics of identity as banal and lacking depth. She quotes examples from antique cultures and art, where homosexuality was a common practice, but not a central subject of study, to support her argument.

Zane knows sodomy was punishable by law during the Soviet times. She does not deny that same-sex relationships existed and emphasises that the topic of homosexuality was completely taboo. She, however, sees sexuality as a part of artistic curiosity, as “the need to touch, therefore [it is a feeling of] sensuality on the border of erotic”, potentially enticing sexual desire.³⁹ Zane considers artists aesthetically and sensually superior in their ability to appreciate beauty “as a phenomenon itself”. Their artistic vision requires them to touch and feel the subject of study. This leads her to believe that “same-sex relationships” may be “artificially constructed” and misunderstood.

She also separates sexual activity involving genitalia from intimate relationships. Where same-sex intimacy exists, Zane argues it may be a by-product of the systematic circumstances, especially in the 1940s and 1950s. She explains that “right after the war, there was a pronounced lack of men, if you did not want to go to bed with anyone who approached you. This created a problem. There were a lot of smart women, having studied during “Latvia’s time”⁴⁰, they were eman-

37 The Academy of Art of Latvia has a decades-long tradition of an Annual Carnival.

38 SBK009.

39 SBK009.

40 During the independent Latvia (1918–1940) before the Soviet occupation in 1940.

cipated women with a different way of thinking”.⁴¹ Zane’s view reminded me of Herzog’s conclusion, saying that lesbianism remained less visible as, according to her, “when remarked upon at all, it was more seen as a ‘second best’ arrangement arising due to the death of men; very rarely was it imagined as titillating”.⁴² Furthermore, according to Zane: “ (...) there was the absolute, total lack of apartments. Yes, people lived in some kind of common hostels and communal flats. Some parents of a classmate may have taken someone in. The conditions, therefore, promoted these relationships. Maybe intimacy was created both from spiritual fusion and because of the need for it.”⁴³ Thus, Zane’s perception of deep and meaningful female relationships is devoid of physical sex. Zane’s perspective on female cohabitation is similar to that of Yaseneva and Davydova in their elaboration of Boston Marriages. They argue that women’s cohabitation often takes place, mediated, but not exclusively linked to economic factors. They also note that “emotional intensity and commitment in such relationships were unprecedented”.⁴⁴ However, there is controversy around whether such romantic friendships can be interpreted as lesbian relationships “in disguise” or as another form of intimacy between women. Despite the controversy, this concept can be a useful tool for analysing and explaining some of the same-sex loving (but not necessarily sexual) relationships encountered by Zane. Intimacy is therefore understood as a form of “being close”, and it may be distinguished from other forms of intimacy, such as love, care, and physical intimacy.⁴⁵

Zane adds another factor which connects female sexuality with the “natural” link to reproduction popularised by the Soviet state. She notes that “every normal woman has a mother instinct inside” and, therefore, needs to care for someone. For her, it explains why women may have chosen to live with other women without a suitable male partner. Zane, like Stella, notes that intimacy was intricately linked to the socialist state during the Soviet period, as it aimed to control the private lives of citizens through the economy and politics. Zane does not provide specific details about the later Soviet period characterised by the proliferation of mass housing projects in Latvia. However, Stella claims that the “private lives of citizens were re-privatised in the late Soviet period” due to the onset of large-scale housing construction. The private domain and personal relationships within families were considered a place for genuine expression and

41 SBK009.

42 Herzog 2011, 117.

43 SBK009.

44 Yaseneva, Davydova 2020, 320–322.

45 Jamieson 1998, 157.

a refuge away from the Soviet government.⁴⁶ Therefore, Zane's observations may only offer a partial explanation of this "early" Soviet period in Latvia.

The narratives in Zane's story show that women's non-heterosexual relationships were not perceived as homosexual by default. To her, the relationships were formed out of a need for connection and material hardship, as well as the expectations of the socialist state. In addition, Zane perceives human sexuality as a potent force for aesthetic creation instead of just procreation, which is vital for the artistic process. Transgressing the common norms of "decency" is, therefore, something that may lead to same-sex attraction. This observation creates her scepticism about contemporary terminology and conceptualisation of same-sex relationships. As this was one of my first interviews, I learned the importance of seeking alternative descriptors to explore the configurations of non-heterosexual relationships between women and men in Soviet Latvia.

Ārija Lipke. Clothing as an identity marker

In their book *Saviour – Žanis Lipke*, Kraukle and Lipke compare Ķīpsala to a "parish" or a reservoir, where "all neighbours had to be greeted" by Kraukle.⁴⁷ Lipke, born in 1934, moved to Ķīpsala in 1956 after marrying Žanis and Ārija Lipke's son Zigfrīds. In a 2016 interview, Kraukle mentioned three neighbours, the women Vera, Elvīra, and Zina, who lived on the other side of their fence. The topographical location of Lipke's dwelling plays a crucial role in the story. It allowed for observations of the women and their character assessment. To gain further insight, I requested a follow-up interview, which she agreed to in Ķīpsala in 2022. We met in Lipke's living room, which stands just a few meters away from where the house of the three women used to be.

Lipke based her assumption that Vera and Elvīra were in a romantic same-sex relationship on the information provided by her mother-in-law. "People knew they were huddling together (...) living like a husband and a wife," she says with some discomfort in her voice. The language she uses to describe the relationship is somewhat juvenile and sounds like she does not have the proper terms to explain what this "huddling together" entailed. Her tone is casual. She and Kraukle use the term "lesbian" in their interview. However, it seems that the term

46 Stella 2015, 31.

47 Zandere, Tomsone 2020, 213.

may have been applied retroactively to the case as Lipke explicitly states that the two women “were lesbians ... or how are they called these days”.⁴⁸

An informal exchange with Lolita Tomšone, the book editor of the publication containing the 2016 interview, presents a different perspective on Lipke’s testimony. Tomšone notes that Lipke may have changed her views over time, but in 2013, she did not like the couple, especially Vera, whom she perceived as different, not least because of the unusual and conspicuous clothing choices. Elvīra’s image receives much less scrutiny as she dresses conventionally, appropriate for a woman at the time.

“Vera was a half-man,” Lipke says in her 2016 interview. “In early April, she was walking around in sports shorts and a T-shirt and digging in the garden.” Lipke provides additional insights to complement her observations in a follow-up interview conducted in 2022: “She did not have a soft, womanly voice. She was a *grubaya zenschina* [from Russian – a rough woman]. Not to say she was rude! But her voice was deep. She was a little different than the rest of us, women...”⁴⁹ She describes Vera as rather nosy, “one who knows everything about everyone”, yet has never spoken about her knowledge of Lipke’s family activities to the Gestapo. “She told me [after the Soviet reoccupation in 1944], “Young Ms. Lipke, I know everything, I know that your father-in-law was hiding the Jews! (...) In the German times, I saw a smallish man with a scarf on his head and the cattail of Johanna on his shoulders, weeding your garden!”⁵⁰

Kraukle reiterates the observations on Vera’s manly appearance: “Vera looked like a man, she had stringy legs, short hair, she was always wearing pants.” However, in the next sentence, she describes her as educated and competent: “She was a learned woman, she was a governess, a smart woman, but not nice at all. She taught me everything – Latvian and Russian when Russians had already arrived.” It is apparent that Kraukle sees Vera in a more favourable light than Lipke due to personal interactions with her. Unfortunately, she has since passed, and I could not further elaborate on their differing perspectives. Note that in the interview dating back to 2016, almost nothing is said about Elvīra. When asked about her in the follow-up interview in 2022, Lipke stated that she was “more like us, women”.

Reading the interview of 2016, it appears that Lipke and Kraukle hold differing opinions regarding their trust in Vera. In the interview dating back to 2016, Kraukle notes: “If we would have been bad neighbours, I do not know,

48 SBK008.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

what would be the outcome of this!” A little further in the interview, she notes that Vera, Elvīra, and Zina were the Lipke family’s only direct neighbours. “Even if the neighbours knew something, they kept their mouths shut.”⁵¹ Yet, in our follow-up interview, Lipke contradicts Kraukle. She notes a perceived “womanly” characteristic of Vera and says she thought that if they had known, they would have reported the family to the Gestapo. She explains: “After all, women are such blabbermouths...”⁵²

When asked if Lipke had ever visited the women, she replied that she had not. Lipke remembers at least two rooms in the wooden house, which were typical of the architecture of Ķīpsala. Vera and Elvīra were the lesbian couple and the main protagonists in her story. They lived in one room, while Zina, Elvīra’s sister, lived separately. Lipke explains that she sometimes bought flower bulbs from the couple, as it was how they were making money, and exchanged occasional polite phrases over the fence, such as asking about each other’s health.

Overall, Lipke’s observations show that there were no profound interactions with Vera and Elvīra beyond the mannerisms. Therefore, Vera’s mannish traits are primarily assessed based on her appearance. A contradiction exists in Lipke’s description of Vera’s physical appearance, often compared to a man’s, whereas, her negative character traits associated with women. Lipke’s narrative reinforces traditional gender stereotypes of women and how they should – or should not – behave. Lipke describes Vera’s behaviour as “mannish” due to her gender performance. At the same time, both Kraukle and Lipke refer to Vera as a woman because of her profession, intellect, and talkative and nosy nature. Perhaps if Kraukle were interviewed again, a different image of Vera would emerge, as a difference in opinion between Lipke and Kraukle was already evident in the previous interview from 2016.

An astonishing conclusion from the testimony is the deviance from heterosexual norms, which were woven into Ķīpsala’s social life. People have known about the women’s relationship to be the same as “between a husband and a wife”. However, Vera’s seemingly masculine gender performance caused the locals to raise eyebrows and perceive her as unlikable. At the same time, there is little mention of Elvīra, whose appearance did not differ much from what was expected of women back in the day.

51 Zandere, Tomsone 2020, 213.

52 SBK008.

Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe. Lesbian appearances in Soviet Latvia

Non-normative performance of gender and non-standard fashion choices as an attribute of lesbians is also noted in Irbe's diary. This section uses ten entries from Irbe's diary, dating from the 1950s and 1980s, documenting his observations and perceptions, including references to lesbian affection and even sex in public spaces. During the Soviet era, Irbe lived in Dubulti district of the city of Jūrmala. The diary entries include Irbe's observations, thoughts, and feelings about his surroundings. Being a well-read man, he also references foreign literature and scholarly research. Irbe is constantly doubting and justifying the normality of male homosexuality in his diary and continue to convince himself of its normalcy.⁵³ Considering this, when reading the entries, I do not mine for specific facts. Instead, I critically assess the narrative Irbe constructs about Soviet lesbians. In this way, I also engage in what Healey calls a critical reading of a "self-fashioning exercise".⁵⁴

Irbe uses the term "tribāde" [in Eng. – tribade] to refer to lesbians and when describing women in manly outfits and displaying "boyish looks". He perceives such appearance as identity markers of lesbians and observes them in several instances. Irbe believes that he has exclusive knowledge and recognition of same-sex loving women, noting in 1980: "They thought that nobody understands – does not know their relationship."⁵⁵ However, Irbe did notice, and believes that he is also recognised as homosexual by onlooking lesbians. In 1956, while shopping for strawberries at Bulduri, district of Jūrmala city market, he notes: "Another very manly, youngish woman was buying [strawberries]. She was looking at me understandingly. Without a doubt, she is a tribade [lesbian] – that is why she understood me just by looking at me..."⁵⁶

In July of the same year, he visits a friend – Š.– whose son's daughter is visiting. He records his assumption: "There was Š.'s son's daughter – pretty, of a boyish look. She does gymnastics. Perhaps she is a tribade?"⁵⁷ In 1963, Irbe notes his experience in Riga: "I was at the L. family, who were renting the little house during the German and the first Russian times⁵⁸. Then, there was a young boy and a girl. Now the eldest daughter already has a child. The youngest girl resembles

53 SBK008, 415-442.

54 Healey 2020, 201.

55 Irbe, 01.09.1980.

56 Irbe, 10.07.1956.

57 Irbe, 23.07.1956.

58 During the Nazi occupation (1941–1944/1945) and the first Soviet occupation (1940–1941) in the Second World War.

a boy. She also dresses in a masculine pantsuit. Obviously – a tribade.”⁵⁹ Irbe’s entries suggest that if the person’s appearance and behaviour, such as manner of walking, were not, according to him “gender appropriate”, they communicated a different sexual desire.

Stella recounts lesbian spaces in Moscow and provincial Ul’ianovsk, as well as women’s wit to carve out “lesbian” spaces in semi-public settings.⁶⁰ Irbe’s observations offer insight into the experiences of lesbians who lacked formal spaces for interaction in Soviet Latvia. In the 1980s, he spots two women openly engaging in same-sex lovemaking on the beach of Jūrmala. In this passage, he first justifies same-sex attraction. He mentions that even “foreign researchers in the sexual field also recognise that normal sexual satisfaction is what is desired, and that the basis of sexuality is not mere reproduction”.⁶¹ He speaks of two women, around 20 years of age, “kissing gently, rubbing noses”.⁶² He continues, elaborating on their appearance: “One of them was hard to distinguish from a slim boy – masculine clothes, hairstyle. The other was very feminine looking.”⁶³

There are three instances when he makes notes on blatant sexual acts in public he witnessed or overheard. In early 1964, he writes: “Rasma said that an acquaintance of that friend saw two girls indulging in lesbian love last summer on the riverbank – kissing, licking (genital organs – oral sex).”⁶⁴ In 1955, he describes another interaction: “I met the driver and the known soldier [in Mežparks, Riga]. I helped the driver pick pink mushrooms. Told his adventures. They saw a wom. with a wom. Then a man with a man who drank and indulged in the most disgusting debauchery (...).”⁶⁵ Whereas the limited evidence does not provide a holistic understanding of lesbian sexual practices in public spaces, it shows that some lesbians found ways around the lack of private space and the scrutiny of their private lives. In these instances, women could have used these ways to establish alternative lifestyles that differed from what was expected of them.⁶⁶

Irbe’s memories bring some insight into how homosexual women may have understood and expressed their identity. They would often openly display attributes that allowed other homosexual women to recognise them. Non-normative

59 Irbe, 22.09.1963.

60 Stella 2015, 15.

61 Irbe, 01.09.1980.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Irbe, 07.04.1964.

65 Irbe, 11.10.1955.

66 Takács 2015, 171.

clothing and gender performance seem to be essential aspects of lesbian perception, as also noted by Lipke and Kraukle. Furthermore, the public sighting Irbe describes shows that lesbians may have been seeking to live a fulfilling life by actively pursuing their desires in semi-public spaces. An important element, however, is that Irbe himself was practicing queer sexuality and had a much better comprehension of non-traditional sexuality. He was, therefore, not only more competent at naming and describing his observations but also admitting that sexual expression for non-reproductive purposes – regardless of one’s gender – is normal.

Conclusion: the narratives

Based on the analysis presented in this paper, several general observations can be made. Firstly, there seems to be a lack of terminology to describe homosexual/non-heterosexual relationships between women. The more recent sexual identification categories that are used to refer to “lesbians” today are replaced by alternative descriptors, such as “intimacy”, “living as husband and wife”, and “friendship” in the interviews. The term “lesbian” is applied retroactively, and “homosexual women” was never used. In the first two testimonies, only Irbe was using the term “tribade” to refer to lesbians. Yet his ability to specifically define a certain sexual identity is linked to his own belonging to and practicing queer sexuality.

The testimonies described in this article contrasted same-sex women’s relationships with heteronormative subjectivity. Whereas neither Zane’s nor Lipke’s testimonies explicitly reference heterosexual relations as the norm. Their understanding of same-sex relations between women is seen as outside the realm of “normal”. However, Lipke is lacking words to describe the relationship between the protagonists, Zina and Elvīra. On the other hand, Zane confidently explains that loving, intimate relationships may emerge because of reasons other than what I understand as “homosexuality”.

A substantial and apparent topic is the binary understanding of what it means to be a woman and a man. The two sexes receive descriptions by proxy attributing stereotypical “manly” and “womanly” traits to the characters in Lipke’s and Irbe’s stories. Even Zane believes that women have an inherent need to care for someone – which, to her, explains why, in the absence of men, a woman may start a caring relationship with another woman. On some occasions, the exterior appearance, not corresponding to heteronormative looks or behaviour, is the “proof” of a person’s sexual desires, which is especially prominent in Irbe’s diary entries.

Importantly, it is impossible to standardise the understanding of the non-heterosexual relationships between women based on the sources analysed for this paper. Only in Irbe's case could one draw similarities with the contemporary understanding of lesbian relationships. Zane's testimony also suggests that many female close companionships may or may not entail sexual relationships between same-sex couples.

Even though little evidence supports the idea that this was practiced beyond the identified cases, Kraukle, Lipke, and Irbe observe lesbian women who dress in masculine clothing or display manly behaviour. Furthermore, the accounts of Lipke and Zane show that the lives of non-heterosexual couples were an "open secret". It is unclear if the non-heterosexual relations between the women may have led to a judgemental attitude towards them. For example, Lipke's negative attitude towards Vera also indicates that the knowledge of their sexuality was stigmatised. It is likely that many non-heterosexual couples tried to conceal their relationship to avoid public judgement.

Irbe makes notes on overt sexual acts that he witnesses or overhears in public spaces. Although it is difficult to prove that lesbians carved out their own semi-public or public spaces in Riga, a knowing eye – like Irbe, who describes the identity markers of lesbians in detail – can recognise public displays of lesbian love and desire.

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LESBIEŠU DZĪVE PADOMJU LATVIJĀ: NARATĪVU ANALĪZE

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Zinātniskās intereses: kvīru vēsture Latvijā, lesbiešu vēsture, mutvārdu vēsture

Pētījuma mērķis ir atklāt dažus lesbiešu dzīves aspektus padomju Latvijā, kā avotu izmantojot divu heteroseksuālu sieviešu mutvārdu vēstures intervijas, kā arī homoseksuāla vīrieša dienasgrāmatas ierakstus, kas tapuši no 20. gadsimta 50. līdz 80. gadiem. Pētījumā papildus salīdzinošo analīzi bija iespējams veikt, pateicoties vienas respondentes iepriekš publicētai intervijai. Ievadā raksturotas līdzšinējās zināšanas par viendzimuma seksualitātes vēsturi Padomju Savienībā un citās sociālistiskās nometnes valstīs, tās kontekstualizējot ar padomju Latvijas praksi. Izmantojot naratīvo analīzi, intervijās pētīti heteroseksuālo sieviešu novērojumi un pārdomas par sieviešu viendzimuma attiecībām padomju Latvijā. Analizējot interviju stāstus, identificētas galvenās stāstījumu tēmas un to personas, lietotā retorika un stāstījumu emocionālā izpausme. Galarezultātā tiek izdalīti trīs galvenie stāstījumu sižeti.

Atslēgas vārdi: mutvārdu vēsture, naratīvi, lesbietes, padomju Latvija, viendzimuma seksualitāte

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā izmantoto avotu izpēte liecina, ka cilvēkiem trūkst jēdzienu, lai aprakstītu padomju laikā notikušās homoseksuālās/neheteroseksuālās attiecības starp sievietēm. Seksualitātes kategorijas, kuras mūsdienās izmanto LGBT+ kopiena, lai apzīmētu “lesbietes”, intervijās tika aizstātas ar alternatīviem raksturotājevārdiem, piemēram, “tuvība”, “dzīvo kā vīrs un sieva” un “draudzība”. Termins “lesbiete”, šķiet, tiek lietots retrospektīvi, bet termins “homoseksuālas sievietes” šajā rakstā ievāktu liecību ietvaros neparādās nevienu reizi. Tikai homoseksuāla dienasgrāmatā fiksēts termins “tribāde”, lai apzīmētu lesbietes. Tomēr viņa spēja atpazīt sieviešu viendzimuma seksuālo identitāti ir saistīta ar viņa paša homoseksualitāti un tās praktizēšanu. Intervētās pretstatīja viendzimuma sieviešu attiecības heteronormatīvajam analogam. Kaut gan intervijās heteroseksuālas attiecības nav skaidri raksturotas kā norma, respondentes uztvēra viendzimuma attiecības starp sievietēm kā kaut ko ārpus normas. Tas konstatējams gan no alternatīvu frāžu izmantojuma, lai raksturotu viendzimuma attiecības starp sievietēm, gan no skaidrojuma, ka mīlošas, intīmas attiecības padomju laikos varēja rasties citu iemeslu dēļ, nevis aiz viendzimuma seksa alkām jeb “homoseksualitātes”. Izpēte liecina par pastāvošo bināro skatījumu uz to, ko nozīmē būt “sievietei” un “vīrietim”. Dažkārt

stereotipiskajam heteronormatīvajam izskatam vai uzvedībai neatbilstoša āriene tika uztverta kā cilvēka netradicionālo dzimumtieksmju “pierādījums”, kas īpaši uzsvērts homoseksuāļa dienasgrāmatā.

Kopumā nav iespējams standartizēt intervēto izpratni par neheteroseksuālām attiecībām starp sievietēm padomju laikos. Viena respondente uzsvēra, ka intīmas un mīlošas sievietes viendzimuma attiecības var nebūt vienlīdzīgas ar romantiskām, seksuālām attiecībām starp viendzimuma pāriem. Savukārt homoseksuāļa Irbes dienasgrāmatas analizē iespējams saskatīt līdzības ar mūsdienu izpratni par lesbiešu attiecībām. Irbe pierakstījis liecības par atklātām seksuālām darbībām starp sievietēm sabiedriskās vietās, kurām viņš kļuvis par aculiecinieku vai par kurām dzirdējis. Lai gan ir grūti pierādīt, ka lesbietes Rīgā padomju laikos ir izveidojušas “savas” daļēji publiskās vai publiskās telpas, Irbe, kurš savā dienasgrāmatā detalizēti apraksta lesbiešu identitātes marķierus, uzskata, ka spēj atpazīt publisku lesbiešu mīlestību un iekāres izpausmes. Intervētās sievietes norāda, ka neheteroseksuālu pāru attiecības bija “atklāts noslēpums”. No viņu teiktā nav secināms, ka neheteroseksuālās attiecības starp sievietēm būtu izraisījušas nosodošu attieksmi sabiedrībā, tomēr vienlaikus zināšanas par lesbiešu seksualitāti bija stigmatizētas.

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