

THE ROLE OF THE ETHNIC FAMILY IN MAINTAINING ETHNIC IDENTITY

VIESTURS P. KARNUPS

Many Baltic writers and thinkers have stressed the importance of the family in maintaining ethnic identity in exile. (For example, Šmugajs 1964; Dunsdorfs, 1968.) Essentially this is because the institution of the family has been traditionally seen as the main vehicle for the socialisation of the young. Socialisation refers to the learning of expectations, habits, skills, values, beliefs and other requirements for effective participation in society. Socialisation of the young by the family transmits the culture of the society and prepares the child for participation in the adult world. For the Baltic communities in exile, however, a basic problem has been to identify the model of the ethnic family which is to be emulated for the maintenance of ethnic identity. That is, do we look to the family as it was in the country of origin as a guide for the effective socialisation of the young today, or do we look elsewhere? Can we assume that the structure of the Baltic family today is the same as it was then? It was in trying to answer questions such as these that I engaged in research in 1975 regarding assimilation and the structure of Latvian families in Melbourne.

As part of this study I constructed a model of the typical Latvian family of the late 1930's. Latvia between the World Wars was essentially an agrarian country. Towns and cities were small and the total estimated urban population was some 35% (included in this estimate are towns and villages with populations as low as 1000). Thus, the Latvian family structure was developed from an essentially rural base and the typical Latvian family had much in common with other traditional peasant families of pre-industrial nations. Despite a rising middle-class and increased industrialisation in the late 1930's, the essential features of the traditional family were preserved throughout the country; though a trend towards smaller, nuclear families was observed, especially in the cities. The essential features of the typical Latvian family were:

1) *A large number of children.* The prevailing ideal espoused in Latvia was for the establishment of families with large numbers of children. Whilst people in Latvia tended to marry late — the average age for women in 1938 being 24 years old and for men 25 years — it would appear that by the late 1930's between three and six children was generally the case for the rural areas and between two and five in the urban areas. The average number of children was four.

2) *Close solidarity with kinfolk and neighbourhood.* Contact with kinfolk was frequent due partly to geographical propinquity and partly to the economic demands of peasant farming. For similar reasons ties with neighbours were also very strong. Following from this close solidarity with kinfolk and neighbourhood was a resulting acknowledgement of the right of kin and community to prescribe what constitutes proper family behaviour.

3) *The transmission between generations of a traditional concept of family roles and of one's place in society.* The family was seen as the essential unit for the socialisation of children. Within an agrarian society most socialisation functions are in fact carried out within the family as the institutions of the state rarely impinge outside of the education system. In Latvian families there was a somewhat strict segregation of sex roles with the father's main concern being with things outside the home and the mother's with things inside the home.

4) *Strong ties of dependence between family members.* As most families in Latvia were agrarian-based, the maintenance of the family farm was an important factor in the closeness of family ties. In urban areas these ties of dependence took the form of nepotism.

5) *Members' acceptance of family control over their behaviour and of authority within it.* Certainly, the authority of the father was paramount in Latvian families. The Latvian family was "a rightful patriarchy" (Faulding, 1957). That is, the control exercised by the father was rightful in that it was a form of control exercised with the consent of those concerned and adopted on principle. The father was seen as the rightful head of the family. The mother's obligation was to be a

homemaker while it was up to the father to battle with the world and steer the family through political, economic and social complexities. Children, of course, had little control over their lives independent of the family power structure.

6) *A high valuation on family life and unity.* The family in Latvia was seen as the repository of all that was good in Latvian life. It was the main vehicle for the socialisation of children and, given the economic aspects of rural life, the main source of economic as well as social well-being. Families were very close-knit and the unity of the family was seen to be the most important aspect of a person's life.

Having established this model of the typical Latvian family I then proceeded to interview Latvian families in Melbourne to ascertain the degree to which these families were similar to the model family. The interviewed families were divided into two groups. One group I termed +Latvians and the other -Latvians. The +Latvians were defined as those families which the Latvian community (as evidenced by the opinions of community leaders and others) regarded as very Latvian families in ethnic terms, whilst -Latvians were defined as those regarded as borderline Latvian families.

In comparing the interviewed families with the model family, I found that the first feature no longer obtained. Most families had between two and three children. The second feature obtained but only partially. That is, although close contact with kinfolk was maintained, the depth of relatives contacted seldom extended beyond the parents' families of origin and their siblings' families. Certainly no pattern of geographical propinquity emerged. However, solidarity with those kinfolk who were in contact was marked, with relationships extending into most aspects of family life. Contact with friends tended to be less intense. Most +Latvians tended to have closer ties with other Latvians and in most cases had little or no contact with Australians. For -Latvians the reverse was true. Despite a fairly long time of residence in their present homes, contact with neighbours was slight and was carried out mainly by -Latvians.

The third feature also obtained, but to a greatly diminished extent. In general, the division of labour followed the traditional pattern of sex roles. The husband was the breadwinner and the wife the homemaker. Most couples felt that this was right and proper. A trend towards a partnership family arrangement was noted in regard to child care, but again this was only a trend with most tasks being left to the mother. The fourth feature obtained mainly for +Latvian families. The basis of these ties of dependence was different from that of the model family. The basis of those ties was partly economic in that there was only one source of income in the family, and partly because of the need for a Latvian home atmosphere to reinforce the identification with Latvianism. The fifth feature also obtained, but again only for the +Latvian families. Most family members accepted family control of their behaviour as well as a system of rightful patriarchy, although the latter was not based upon strict authoritarianism as was the case in Latvia. The sixth feature again mainly obtained only in the +Latvian families. There was a strong emphasis on family unity and togetherness. This also seemed to be a function of the need to reinforce Latvianism in the home.

It is clear from the above that the Latvian family in Melbourne is no longer the same as it was 40 years ago. Whilst retaining many of the features of the traditional family, the basis of those features has changed due to the circumstances of living in Australia. The most important factor for change has been the transition from an essentially rural environment, with concomitant systems of values, to an industrialised, urban environment with different systems of values. The most important factor for durability has been that of ethnic identity. Thus, for example, the smaller number of children and the lack of depth of contact with kinfolk could be attributed to ongoing patterns of behaviour in Western industrialised societies. On the other hand, the lack of social contact with non-Latvians, the strength of ties within the family, and the emphasis on family unity and togetherness could be attributed to the need for maintenance of ethnic identity; that is, to reinforce perceived differences between Latvian and Australian family life and thus reinforce ethnicity.

In a pluralistic industrialised society with different ethnic groups competing with the core culture for the allegiance of the young, the role of the ethnic family is crucial in maintaining ethnic identity. In industrialised societies, such as Australia, many of the traditional socialisation functions of the family have been taken over by the society as a whole, through its agents such as schools, etc. This means that the ethnic community has to set up parallel socialising agencies if it wishes to compete on an equal footing. In the case of the Baltic ethnic communities the parallel socialising agencies for the young are weak and thus the main agent of socialisation into the ethnic community becomes the ethnic family.

Aldis Putninš, in a paper presented to the first Baltic Youth Seminar (Putninš, 1976), defined the essential elements of Latvian ethnicity as identification and language. That is, regarding oneself as being a Latvian, seeing oneself as being similar to some general conception of what a Latvian is, and being able to understand and speak Latvian. From the above analysis of the Latvian ethnic family in Melbourne, it is clear that the main way in which the family attempts to reinforce both these elements is to structure its socialisation of the young in a pattern of social isolation from the exponents of the core culture and of strengthening ties within the family itself. This reinforces identification in terms of providing non-conflicting models of behaviour as well as non-conflicting language models.

It could be argued that social isolation from non-Latvians and language maintenance of a non-core culture language creates psychological and social problems for the individual. I would argue that the role of the ethnic family in maintaining ethnic identity does not imply social and/or psychological isolation of the individual. I would suggest that it is possible for the ethnic family as a unit to maintain ethnic boundaries in relation to the core culture, but that the individual members of the family are free to cross the boundaries at will. That is, ethnicity is seen as a group rather than an individual phenomenon. The individual's ethnic identity is an expression of identification with the group, not necessarily an

expression of Self. Thus, the role of the ethnic family is to provide the supportive structure for the former but not to inhibit the latter. Of course, in many cases the factors converge and become indistinguishable. That is, the group identification is an expression of Self. This could be termed total socialisation into the ethnic community. Certainly, the ethnic family as a unit must have the support of the ethnic community as a whole and must itself be involved in the ethnic community. An ethnic family operating in a social vacuum becomes a guaranteed candidate for assimilation and loss of ethnic identity.

REFERENCES

Dundsdorfs, E. (1968) *Trešā*, Melbourne.

Fallding, H. (1957) 'Inside the Australian family' in *Marriage and the Family in Australia*, A.P. Elkin (ed.), Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

Putninš, A.L. (1976) 'Latvian Youth: Psychological Perspectives', *Proceedings: First Baltic Youth Seminar*, Adelaide.

Šmugajs, E. (1964) 'Gimenes loma audzināšanā agrāk un tagad', *Katolu Kalendars*, 1964.