

SUMMARY

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*An Escape to the West on a Trawler  
from the Fishing Kolkhoz “Boļševiks”  
in January 1953: Reasons, Process and  
the Reaction of the Authorities*

On 20 January 1953 a fishing trawler with five crew members left the fishing kolkhoz “Boļševiks” near Liepāja. On the trawler, two persons were kept in hiding under a floor – Lilija Nīcis and her eighteen-year-old brother Gunārs Čukurs. Lilija’s husband Žanis with their two-year-old daughter Inese hid in an empty water reservoir in the engine room. Shortly after leaving, the captain locked his crew in a cabin, released the hidden refugees and took course to Gotland, Sweden. Unfortunately, the little girl died from asphyxiation due to a lack of oxygen. The refugees stayed in Sweden, but the crew returned to Liepāja. The KGB, in turn, repressed the relatives of refugees as well as the crew. In the conditions of the Cold War, both Western special services and the KGB attempted to use the refugees for their own interests.

According to KGB files, there were thirty successful cases of escape from Latvia from 1950 until 1986. Prior to the defection discussed in this article, already in summer 1952, five fishermen successfully fled from the same kolkhoz “Boļševiks”, and in 1957, four more people followed. These three cases of defection were the only successful examples where a fishing trawler was used. However, none of the three defections on trawlers was so carefully organised, dramatic in the course of events and, possibly, controversial as the escape led by Žanis Nīcis on 20 January 1953.

This case was only partially politically motivated. Of course, there was the typical fear of repression characteristic for the Stalin period, but also recent contacts with Latvian emigres and the recent successful experience of another trawler’s defection to Sweden motivated Nīcis to take the risk, even if there is no data concerning an imminent threat of repression against his family. He must have been severely frustrated by the conditions of life in the Latvian SSR. However, taking into account the risky way of escaping that resulted in the death of Inese and the understanding that most certainly repressions would be directed against their relatives in the Latvian SSR, his action is at least questionable.

Persecutions against the relatives of defectors were implemented according to the principles of Stalinist ethics. The relatives were harshly punished simply for their failure to report preparations for the defection to the authorities. Actually, Soviet legislation demanded relatives to take immoral actions against their kin. However, in this case, the relatives were also accused of

additional crimes, such as service in Latvian SS-legion and hiding anti-Soviet literature. Subsequently, they were accused according to Paragraphs 58<sup>ra</sup> and 58<sup>ro</sup> of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR. Thus, five members of the Čukurs family were sentenced to various prison terms from 10 to 25 years.

Any escape of Soviet citizens was extremely unpleasant for the Soviet authorities. In spite of all the attempts to establish a total system of control in order to prevent such actions of taking place, the system proved to be helpless when confronted with determined people like Nicis. The authorities searched for responsible persons among the administration of the kolkhoz, the port security workers, the border guards and other KGB officials. The escape was discussed on all levels of the Latvian Communist Party starting from the party cell of the kolkhoz up to the Latvian Central Committee that met already on 26 January 1953 with the highest officials of the Latvian SSR, executives of repressive bodies, leaders of Liepāja region and city party organisations present.

*Der Autor würde sich über jegliche Information über geglückte oder gescheiterte Fluchtversuche mit Fischerbooten aus der Estnischen und der Litauischen SSR freuen. Dabei geht es ihm nicht um die Massenflucht am Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs, sondern um die Versuche seit den späten 1940er Jahren. Nachrichten werden erbeten an die folgende E-Mail-Adresse: [janis.keruss@lu.lv](mailto:janis.keruss@lu.lv).*