

The Story of Godmother's Blouse

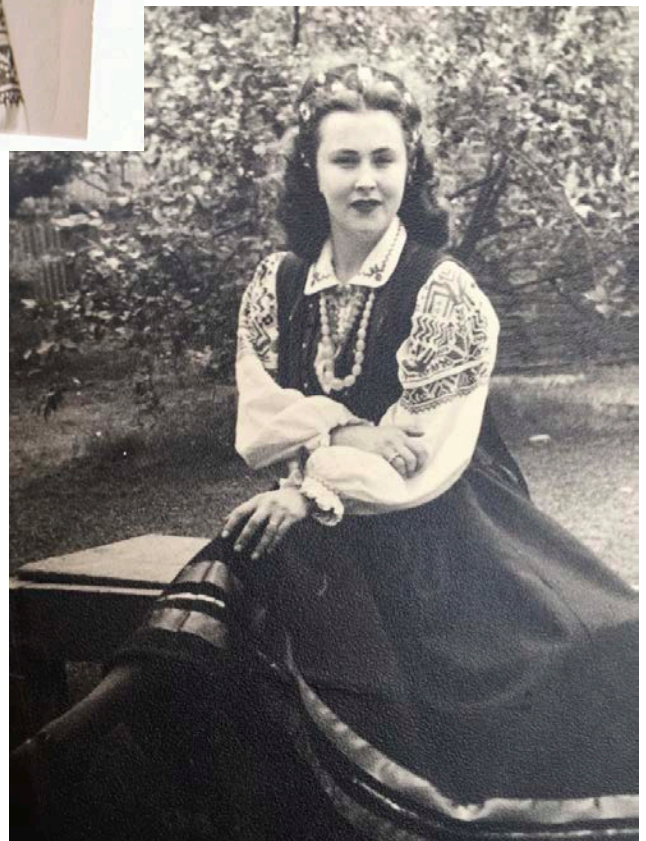
My godmother, Irīna Guna Pūpēdis, had to leave her birth country due to the political situation in Latvia at the end of WW2. At 19, living in a refugee camp in Germany, she decided to sew her first Latvian costume. Her meagre weekly wages were supplemented by 4 packs of US cigarettes, which she traded for the required materials from the local Germans. Under the mentorship of the older Latvian women around her, she produced a beautiful costume. The blouse, embroidered with tiny cross-stitches of deep red on white, was simply stunning.



This photo was taken in Melbourne, not long after my godmother arrived in Australia on ANZAC Day in 1948. The national costume had a rich life: the new arrivals could not afford the extravagance of wedding gowns, so it was lent to four brides for their Melbourne weddings.

On the right is Irīna's sister, Dace, wearing the costume on her wedding day in 1949.

However, as the immigrants found footing in their new country, they chose modern fashions and the blouse, along with the rest of the costume, was packed away.



In the late 1960's the blouse came back into use: as part of the Latvian folk dancing costume for Dace's daughter Dagmāra. This photo of Dagmāra was taken on the eve of the folk-dancing concert at the Latvian Australian Youth Festival in Adelaide in 1970.

Unfortunately, this was also the evening before Dagmāra's tragic death. She and two other Latvian Australian girls died in a terrible car accident the next day.



The costume was packed away again, until, as a teenager, I joined the same Latvian dancing group, Ritenītis. My mum had a national costume sewn for me, but the blouse, being so intricate, was not made. Instead, my godmother lent me her blouse. Here is a picture of me, wearing my new costume and Irīna's blouse, with my mum, Anna Ziedars in the late 1970's.

I eventually outgrew folk dancing and packed away the costume. Decades passed again and in the 2000's my daughter, Antra, needed a folk costume. I located the rest of the outfit, but the blouse was not to be found! It only occurred to me then, that my godmother had *lent* me the blouse. I searched, but finally I had to visit my godmother to tell her I'd lost it. She was sad, but showed no anger. I felt terrible.

A few years ago, at a Latvian community event, whilst watching my daughter dance in my costume, but with a plain blouse, I was suffering a migraine when, through my gloom, I thought I saw my godmother's blouse dance past. I was not sure: it had been decades since I had last seen it...

Some days later, I plucked up the courage to ring the young girl's mum to question the origin of her daughter's blouse. This mum thought the blouse belonged to her family, but we agreed that I would send the above photo to her. The mum called back immediately saying that I should come to pick up my godmother's blouse! The photo had made it clear that this was indeed the long lost blouse. The blouses from the same regions of Latvia are similar, but no two craft person's blouses are identical.

This mum and I had both been in the same *kokle* (Latvian zither) and folk dancing groups in the 1980s and had travelled Australia performing in national costumes. Although neither of us could remember how it had occurred, the blouse had probably changed hands in a backstage rush. We were both genuinely ecstatic that this piece of history could go back to its rightful home.



I drove straight to my godmother's with this surprise. We sat down to lovely tea and cake and talked about how this Latvian blouse was created in post war Germany and served generations of new migrants in Australia.

This is my godmother with her granddaughter Lija helping with the Latvian-English translations for the Australian Latvian Artisans' Exhibition in December 2016, where her well-travelled blouse was exhibited. She is still a vibrant raconteur who has spent a life-time mastering many crafts, as well as bring up a family, undertaking a university degree and being a professional maths teacher. Her stained glass windows adorn many Melbourne establishments, including Latvian House and the Latvian Retirement Village chapel.

A New Life in Metal

I love this story and I want to honour my godmother, and the blouse which represents the resilience of old values in new circumstances. I designed a range of contemporary, Latvian-inspired jewellery celebrating the journey of this wonderful blouse.

The pattern on the sleeve of every Rucava blouse depicts an auseklis, or morning star. Auseklis is a very popular Latvian symbol depicting light (hope and direction) in times of darkness.



I experimented with a wide range of media in order to capture the pattern and texture of the actual blouse in metal. Both the processes I have used, and the design of the pieces, lend a feeling of movement and flow to the metal in imitation of cloth. The jewellery from the range called “Godmother’s Blouse” all features deep texturing derived from the amazing blouse which started life in 1944.



Examples from
the series
*Godmother’s
blouse*. Sterling
silver and bronze.

Ilze Svarcs January, 2017