

# ANDRIS

*where are you?*

RON CROSBY

craigpottonpublishing

Published in 2013 by Craig Potton Publishing

Craig Potton Publishing  
98 Vickerman Street, PO Box 555, Nelson, New Zealand  
www.craigpotton.co.nz

© R.D. Crosby & A. Apse

ISBN 978 1 877517 97 6

Printed by Astra Print Ltd, Wellington, New Zealand

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without the permission of the publishers.

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
1 FROM ONE WAR TO THE NEXT	11
2 THE SHOCK OF WAR	25
3 THE LIVONIAN	45
4 THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM	52
5 THE PROLONGED AGONY OF WAR	65
6 FINAL SEPARATION – THE LAST MONTHS OF WAR	82
7 FROM EUROPE TO NEW ZEALAND	92
8 DIFFICULT AND NEW EXPERIENCES	99
9 A NEW CAREER	124
10 SURVIVAL FOR VOLDEMARS	136
11 THE SHOCK OF DISCOVERY	149
12 REUNION	166
13 THE CLOSING CHAPTERS OF LIFE	181
14 THE NEW ERA	195
EPILOGUE	218
APPENDIX 1	221
APPENDIX 2	228
NOTES	234
MAP	238
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	240
BIBLIOGRAPHY	243
INDEX	244

## INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the turmoil towards the end of the Second World War a massive displacement of peoples occurred in Eastern Europe as people fled west to avoid the onrush of the Soviet armies into the East European states and Germany. In the years after the war many smaller 'waves', or more accurately, ripples, of some of those East Europeans arrived as assisted immigrants in New Zealand. That process occurred as part of the international recognition of the humanitarian need to cope with the hundreds of thousands of stateless people living in refugee camps in Europe. They arrived in New Zealand still as refugees, usually unable even to speak English, impoverished and lacking any access to capital.

This book is an account of the experiences of the Latvian family of Andris Apse, one of these new types of immigrants. It tells of his early childhood half a world away and his parents' experiences both in Europe, and then later, in his mother's case, in New Zealand, as the terribly sad circumstances they endured led to his arrival here as a five year old. Andris Apse has since become one of New Zealand's most recognised landscape photographers, his particular field of interest being the rugged wilderness of Fiordland, the images of which have taken him decades to capture. He has many photographic books to his credit, and one of those, *New Zealand Landscapes*, is among the highest selling photographic books ever published in New Zealand.

What makes the tale of this family absorbing is the human tragedy and destruction of families as a result of the pursuit of power through war. In the maelstrom of the final days of the war, Kamilla Apse found herself with her eighteen-month-old son, Andris, in southern Germany. Her husband, Voldemars, had disappeared in the fighting in Kurzeme in west Latvia. Kamilla heard no further news of him after a short letter in March 1945 as he returned to Latvia. All she could find out was that the Latvian Legion had suffered massive losses, and that the survivors had disappeared into the horrors of the Soviet Gulag prison system. She waited for four years in refugee camps in Germany hoping for word of Voldemars, but no news came. By 1949 Kamilla had to accept



Voldemars and Kamilla Apse, c. 1942 and 1991

he had been killed and she took up the opportunity of a new life in New Zealand for her and Andris when it was offered by the New Zealand Government.

Kamilla did not have an easy life in New Zealand, finding employment difficult to obtain when she had a young child to care for as well. Her various difficulties were such that Andris had to be placed in an orphanage on a number of occasions. She experienced a most unhappy marriage to a Latvian immigrant with whom she had four children. He did not welcome Andris at all, and proved to be very abusive to him, Kamilla, and her other children. From a young age Andris had to make his own way in life, and much later his mother divorced. After many decades they both ended up living in Rangiora, in North Canterbury, where Andris himself lived with his wife and three children.

Then in 1990, after glasnost was introduced in the Soviet Union, a bombshell arrived when news came from Latvia that Voldemars had survived the war and was still alive. After much hardship and suffering in Soviet imprisonment he had returned to Latvia and tried to find his young wife and family. In the end he also had had to accept they must have died in the last stages of the war, and in due course he too had established a new relationship.

So at the age of 47 Andris Apse found that his father, whom he could not remember at all, was alive, and he and his mother contemplated what might have been. After much difficulty over visas and travel permits, Andris and his mother travelled back to Latvia in 1991. The two of them then had the most intense, bittersweet experience of meeting Voldemars and all their old and new relatives over the next few weeks in what by any standards is a heart-wrenching tale.

For Andris Apse, the experience in 1991 of visiting a country like Latvia raised as many questions as it answered. He was unsettled by the repressive lifestyle and terrible tales of family exile and tragedy. For him, one thing above all else in all these tales was missing—freedom; a sense of freedom of association, of expression and communication, of movement, of lifestyle and work style, and of location of living. The fundamental freedom of choice in all those things had been lost to these people for two generations. In New Zealand, all that had been an expected and essentially unappreciated part of his life. Suddenly for Andris Apse, it had now assumed a very real significance, as he mulled the advantages and disadvantages of the respective lives he could have lived and did in fact live. As time passed, and notwithstanding a return trip with his mother's ashes to a more free society in Latvia in 1997, he concluded that while fate had played a dreadful hand in life to his parents and to him by depriving them of a father and family, the ability to enjoy freedom meant he had been played a kinder hand.

The tale of the life of Andris Apse and his parents is an example of the fundamental importance of freedom. It is a tale of the depth of tragedy imposed on ordinary people caught up in the consequences of the pursuit of ultimate power by ruthless leaders. Over the course of history Latvia has experienced time and again the heavy hand of covetous neighbours, be they Viking, Swedish, Lithuanian, German, Polish or Russian. The periods where Latvians have truly been living in freedom under their own control have been dreadfully short. In the Second World War Latvia was invaded first by Soviet Russia, then by Nazi Germany, and finally by the Soviet regime again. Those bitter experiences left the unfortunate individual Latvian, such as Andris Apse's parents, with literally a choice between two evils. Their lives were no longer their own, and they had no altruistic government to which they could turn for support.

One of the longstanding frustrations for those Latvians who of necessity had to make New Zealand their home was that they knew they had arrived as refugees from a reign of state terror imposed under Stalin that was every bit as ruthless and destructive as that imposed by Nazi Germany under Hitler. Yet as they came to learn their new language and to mix with New Zealanders, they found they were living in a country which still regarded the Russian war effort against the Germans in the Second World War as having assisted in freeing Europe from the Nazi yoke. The fact that for Latvia the end of the war brought not freedom but a harsh oppressive occupation went completely unnoticed in their new adopted country. To their chagrin they even heard and read of Stalin being referred to as 'Uncle Joe' in commentaries on the war years. To them, with their knowledge of the horror of life under Stalin's regime, a less avuncular figure could not be imagined.

Latvia finally obtained its independence from Russia in 1991, but its freedom has remained somewhat tenuous, despite the development in Russia of a

freer society, reflected in the concept of glasnost. That insecurity is in large part derived from an unfortunate continuing association in Russian minds between the large Latvian Legion that fought on the German side in the Second World War and the fascist regime of Nazi Germany that so wounded Russia in the war. The Latvian Legion's resistance of the Russian advance was not motivated by any grand fascist aim, however; rather it arose from the desire by Latvians to attempt to regain their independence and to resist the reimposition of Russian terror after their experience of Russian invasion and occupation in 1940 and 1941. Not surprisingly, given the extreme harshness of the subsequent Russian occupation of nearly 50 years' duration, Latvians for their part have since reacted negatively to Russian influences. Those tensions are currently deepening in Latvian-Russian relations. The Latvian delight to see the President of the United States visit their Freedom Monument on a visit to Latvia in May 2005 on his way to Russia to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War reflected the fervent desire of Latvia to strengthen its links with the Western democracies as a protection against Russian pressure once more.

The story of Kamilla Apse and her son Andris is also an example of the ability of immigrants to become absolutely absorbed into New Zealand society. Those who know Andris only passingly will be surprised to read of his background, as his common name of Andy gives no clue at all to his East European origin. His manner of speech has no hint of an accent, and his demeanour and manner are common to many of his generation of fellow New Zealanders. He has done a range of the normal 'Kiwi' things expected of his generation. He has played sport at school, worked in the New Zealand Forest Service for years, spent literally decades in the New Zealand bush country (mostly in Fiordland), and then has carved a career for himself as one of New Zealand's leading landscape photographers. Possibly most importantly, in a social sense he exhibits (some might think somewhat keenly) the laconic and rather cynical sense of humour often found in New Zealanders. To some, Andris Apse may not be considered a native New Zealander, having arrived here as a five-year-old East European refugee speaking only Latvian and having no family or tradition here, but his subsequent dedication and valuable contribution to our society entitles him to consider himself a Kiwi.

The colour of the human tragedy involved for this family is accentuated by the survival of a number of written contemporary sources from the people involved. Voldemars Apse kept a detailed diary from January 1937 until 8 February 1944, which Kamilla (or Millija, as Voldemars called her) later translated into English before she knew he had survived. The diaries demonstrate the close affinity he felt with the beauty of nature and its changing seasons, an affinity naturally shared by his own son in a new country decades later. The diaries also contain many pensive philosophical musings by Voldemars, which

is particularly impressive given that he was only 19 at the time that the diaries commenced. His reflections displayed a maturity beyond his years as he struggled to come to terms with what fate had handed out to him as a consequence of the First World War, and what fate subsequently delivered up to him in the Second World War.

The wealth of human feelings conveyed by the diaries of this reluctant young soldier through those troubled times as war loomed were supplemented significantly by two shorter volumes of accounts that Kamilla herself penned in her later years for Andris and a short diary she kept in 1991. Those contain details of the family backgrounds of herself and Voldemars, her memories of her journey with Andris from Latvia to New Zealand over a period of some five years, and her impressions on her return in 1991.

Equally important as a source was the exchange of correspondence between Kamilla and Voldemars when they first became aware of the survival of the other in 1990, a lifetime after they had last corresponded.

The ongoing tension between Latvia and Russia has a deeply personal significance for Andris, as it must be remembered that members of his family, including his father, still live in Latvia. Sadly, though, as a result of the vicissitudes of war, Andris Apse will always remain separated from his father and family there by the gulf of different cultures, language and distance.

## 1. FROM ONE WAR TO THE NEXT

Voldemars Apse was one of many thousands of young Latvian men whose families were affected by the aftermath of the First World War. That Great War also inflicted upon them massive political, economic and educational changes. He had been born on 12 July 1917 at Melluzos near Riga, the capital of Latvia, just after the Russians had sued for peace with the Germans in the First World War. His parents died before he was five years old and he was brought up on two neighbouring farm properties called Dambji and Eglaji near the small town of Smarde, which lies just south of Tukums in Kurzeme (or Courland) to the northwest of Riga.

The whole experience of war and its disruptive aftermath in Latvia has been extreme. As a result of the two cataclysmic conflicts of the First and Second World Wars, hundreds of thousands of survivors had to flee their homes, with many experiencing for years afterwards the misery of being stateless refugees. War, and its consequences, directly affected many families in New Zealand in the first half of the twentieth century through the loss of loved ones in action overseas. For the post-Second World War generations that loss has been far less direct, being heard only as accounts of long-lost relatives lying in some foreign field. But for all New Zealanders, those consequences have not involved the other harsher realities of war suffered in countries where the actual conflicts have occurred. By contrast, the inhabitants of countries such as Latvia have suffered much more directly as they themselves, or their close friends and relatives, have been wounded, traumatised or killed.

Even for those able to stay in or return to their homes, it was often to find that their houses and places of employment had been destroyed or ransacked, and personal possessions lost, stolen, looted or destroyed. Savings were lost, and all sense of security. Individual parents often had to struggle on their own to raise a family if one parent had been killed. In many tragic situations, as in the case of the family of Voldemars Apse, in the event of the loss of both parents, families of children had to be broken up, as relatives or friends accepted the burden of raising the children.

In countries such as Latvia, located as it is between two great militaristic peoples in the Germans and the Russians, this harsh experience of war and its effects has been suffered by generation after generation. Added to the human misery caused by the direct experience of repetitive warfare on Latvian soil has been the loss of freedom as a result of occupation. Against that background of war and occupation, Latvian people had never prior to the First World War enjoyed the luxury of deciding their own future, either as a nation or individually. Those decisions were always made for them by more powerful foreign states nearby.

In the First World War Latvia and its people suffered greatly. For two years the front line between the opposing German and Russian armies ran through the centre of Latvia on the line of the Daugava river, after the Germans had initially occupied Kurzeme, northwest of Riga, and then advanced east from there. However, at the end of the war, owing to the defeat of the Germans by the Western nations and the relative weakness of the incipient Russian revolutionary government, for the first time in centuries Latvia was able to enjoy a breath of fresh air by gaining a hard-won independence after a period of military struggle. The Freedom Monument in the centre of Riga is still almost hallowed ground for Latvians, commemorating as it does the liberation of Latvia from Russian control on two occasions. The first of those occurred after the First World War as a result of a military struggle, and the second in 1991 after the more peaceful declaration of independence as the monolithic USSR crumbled into oblivion. Not surprisingly the monument is still proudly honoured by the Latvians with a constant military guard and is often bedecked at its base with bunches of flowers.

By the end of the First World War, Latvia had spent nearly two centuries under the Russian yoke. (Most of Latvia had been a province of Tsarist Russia since about 1720, and all of it from 1795.) Before the First World War a significant proportion of its population had survived on the land for generations in a peasant style of serfdom, with ownership of most of the countryside being still held in the hands of wealthy German and Russian families. Latvian people in the country areas were often forced to rely on the resources of wood and game available in its widespread forested areas as they eked out a living on the land. Education among the native Latvian people in their impoverished state was very limited. Furthermore, the Russian pre-war Tsarist government actively discouraged the teaching of Latvian and forced a 'Russification' through elevation of the Russian language, particularly in official documents. That was also particularly so in tertiary education, as Russian was the only language allowed at that level.

After independence the new Latvian government responded by breaking up the old German- and Russian-owned estates, thus providing the opportunity for tens of thousands of families to own small blocks of farmland on which they practised a form of subsistence farming. At the same time Latvia actively encouraged nationwide educational opportunities as well as the development

of the Latvian language at all levels. Having been born in 1917, Voldemars Apse lived the whole of his young life until adulthood under this new independent Latvian social 'revolution'.

## The diaries

The diaries that Voldemars Apse kept in his early years are a rare and valuable source of information as to the direct personal experience of those effects of independence on the average youth in Latvia in this short period of peace between the two wars. His philosophical musings, mixed with personal accounts, provide a picture of his character that suggests that had fate not dealt him such a terrible hand, he may well have developed creatively in some way. But that opportunity was to be denied him by the circumstances in which he had to actually live his life, because of the traumatic experiences he had to undergo in the Second World War, and in the following Russian occupation. Together those events dominated the rest of his life from 1940 on. Time and again the pages of the diaries pose questions, or raise hopes, which seem tragic when read with the benefit of hindsight.

In the eyes of the 19-year-old Voldemars Apse, the first year of his 1937 diary was just one more difficult year in his unsettled young life. The diary commences on 3 January 1937 with a hopeful note that was soon to change.

3.1 It is still dark and very still outside. The only sound comes from the telephone lines and it takes me back to my childhood memories. Then I was still able to cry. I would cry when upset, laugh when happy. But the past has taken its course and one must not try to recall it. Let us live and enjoy because time is never long, but short.

7.1 I have crossed out one more day of the calendar. It means that a day has gone and been done with. I am looking forward towards the future and hope that all my dreams and wishes come true. I long to get away from here. You (foster parents mostly) all are wrong to think that I would not be able to survive amongst strangers. Why do you think that—when I have lived with you. Do my dreams not matter?

As if all the tragic family background were not enough, the 1937 diary reveals that Voldemars at this time was still feeling a deep sense of loss from the relatively recent death of his older sister Emma. She had died of tuberculosis when only in her early twenties.

18.9 ... I visited Emma's grave. I prayed for peace, for I feel unhappy and restless.

17.10 ... People live and die so that others can take their place. I feel so empty and lonely ... What has fate decided for me? Time will tell.

18.10 What has happened to me, I can't write any more.

19.10 ... I will go tonight to the lake, for the moon shines so brightly and on the way back I will try to stop at Emma's grave. My heart is so full.

This week or so appears in the diary to be almost a decisive period in his early life. At one stage he fleetingly nearly surrendered to his despair before bouncing back, but his poor relationship with his foster parents dominated.

22.10 ... I had a sort of argument with my foster father. I am thinking of leaving this so called 'home'. Last night I slept at Varkali<sup>1</sup> and felt so peaceful. I will do with the help of my god. Goodbye my lake, no more will I walk your shores. Goodbye white birches. Goodbye old oak. Goodbye forest, through you I will walk no longer.

25.10 How dark the morning is. I was excited by the waves. My bike broke down and I had to walk back. I know that the trees lose their leaves, I know the wind blows and after that would be silence and the mist will be everywhere. But I didn't know that the forest would become so bare and transparent ... still the birch trees in the cemetery sparkle silver in the daylight.

22.11 I think of my childhood. I had so little happiness. I have shed so many tears. Nobody really cared for me, only as much as they promised—to keep me alive. I have been pushed around so many times by those people who ought to bring some sunshine into my life. I have grown up without love or being loved, and maybe that is why I long for it now. But I might well find it some day. I remember my mother when she was ill and after she had died. I did not understand the cruel ways of one's life and death ...

In these despairing comments in 1937 there were some common threads with the perplexed state of many young people of his age the world over. They included a recently broken youthful romance, a lack of financial independence, and the perceived loneliness of life for a young man still living at home. In his case the last factor was made harder by the toughness of the physical rural work in the cold as winter loomed.

It is apparent from the diary entries for the period from 1937 to early 1940 that Voldemars worked with his foster father on the two adjoining properties called Eglaji and Dambji. Rural life for him and his foster family appeared to

involve a range of cropping, stock and forestry activities. All of those activities were conducted at a very limited productive level, as there were no tractors or machinery involved other than horse-drawn machinery. In a physical sense, the work involved long hours of physical endeavour, which clearly hardened Voldemars and his generation to the rigours of outdoor life, particularly in the harsher autumn and winter conditions. That hardening process was fortuitous in that it was to be crucial to their ability to survive the hardships that, unknown to them at the time, they were to endure if they were to survive the experiences of war and captivity that were looming.

## Effects of the First World War on the Apse family

Voldemars' deeper unhappiness reflected the ultimate results of the effects of the First World War on his natural parents and their family. His parents had both died by 1921, leaving him as the youngest sibling of five children in the care of foster parents Zelma and Alfonzes Zebergs. The first tragedy of war suffered by the Apse family had occurred when his parents' home of Melluzos, near Smarde, where he had been born, was hit by artillery fire and burnt down during the war. Some of Voldemars' earliest memories were of them having to live temporarily in a bunker abandoned by the German army in the Smarde area, and playing with the egg-shaped German trench-bombs. But then after the war the family faced even greater tragedy when his father, Andrejs-Augusts Apse, went missing during the fighting for independence in Latvia in 1918–19. As if the children had not suffered enough, Voldemars' mother, Anna, died of tuberculosis in 1921



'Dambji' where Voldemars and Kamilla were married on 31 December 1942

while he was still only four years old. He and his older sister Emma were then taken in and fostered by family friends, the Zebergs family, on the jointly operated farms called Dambji and Eglaji. In addition to the farms, his foster parents owned large forest areas, and the family traded in timber as well as carrying on a farming operation.

Voldemars' foster mother, Zelma, was a graduate of the Leningrad University and had worked as a teacher at the Smarde school where she had met her husband, Alfones. The 'home' farms on which they lived and farmed as they raised their own family, and fostered Voldemars and his sister Emma, comprised two properties of about 135 hectares in total.

The five children of Voldemars' family were split up principally between Voldemars' foster parents, with whom he and his older sister Emma lived, and Mrs Zebergs senior, who was a friend of his parents. She was the mother of Alfones Zebergs, Voldemars' foster father. Two of the older siblings, Augusts and Lina, lived with her until adulthood at a place called Varkali near Tukums, although later in 1937 Mrs Zebergs senior was to die. The fifth child of the family was another older sister, called Lidia, and she was fostered with another family, again in Tukums.

## Interest in nature

A sense of youthful despair and negativity was reflected intermittently throughout the entries in 1937, but it was also offset by a number of positive factors referred to with increasing frequency later in the year, despite the onset of winter. The first and most consistent of those positive interests was an abiding interest Voldemars demonstrated in the whole range of moods and experiences he observed in the natural world surrounding him. Whether he was enthusing 'Look at the millions of stars and believe that there is a God!', or 'Some ice flowers have formed on the window panes ...' or '... It's snowing. The earth mellows, trees are all covered with a blanket of snow. There are more ice flowers on the window panes', the images cast by Mother Nature plainly provided an uplift for him.

The changing of the seasons in Latvia was a marked process as the snow-covered landscape changed dramatically with the advent of spring. In 1937 Voldemars was often working in the forest and he observed the changes in the seasons at first hand. In March 1937 his delight at the advent of spring was reflected both in his personal entries and the small verses of poetry he often quoted in his diary:

22.3 I heard a little bird singing  
About some hopes and dreams

And the fragrance of the Earth  
Under the sun and stars

... I am observing the sky where the clouds seem to be chasing other clouds.

23.3 The sun is shining again. I was strolling by the lake, picking some spring blue flowers. I pressed the small petals against my face and felt the spring. Some bits and pieces of ice were floating on the lake. It's amazing how the weather had changed in such a short time. There is spring in the air ... When I was by the lake I saw some ducks happily occupying the water. All around there is life and spring promises. There are different shaped and sized insects creeping and crawling everywhere. Life is so wonderful.

1.4 The sun is out, and even the pigeons.

The full flight of summer gave rise to many similar happy entries and quotations before the onset of winter introduced a more sombre note.

23.5 I see some birch trees  
Moving in the wind,  
My steps getting slower  
To march with it.

Why do clouds hurry  
Moved by the wind?  
Where is the end,  
What is the reason  
And further and faster,  
You run without a stop,  
As thrown by the wind,  
And the reason's unknown.

I have been wandering in the forest, not thinking of anything. The skies are clear. I have asked God for peace of mind and received it.

19.9 The skies are silver. It is hard to believe the fact that autumn is here again. But looking at the fallen leaves one must believe that it is so. I wish I had wings, so I could fly away from here ...

21.9 Here I am sitting  
And thinking and wishing



To recall the Past  
And memories of Yesterday  
And forests and flowers  
And midsummer wind.

To forget the sadness  
To enjoy Today  
For gone is the Past  
But coming is the Future

29.9 Strong winds are blowing. This is one of 'those' autumn days. Great sadness has overcome me. I feel so alone.

14.10 Summer has fallen. How I miss it. A tear has dried. The autumn beauty has gone in a single night. It all makes me to wonder that a man is like a season. He is born and some last only for a short time.

9.12 ... So quiet. Slowly fly the snowflakes. I can see 2 does searching for food in the snow covered rye fields. Evening is closing in. The parting of daylight makes the ice flowers on the window sparkle and quiver. I watch them for a long time. With my outstretched hand I want to lift them off but with the warmth of my skin, they disappear and become water.

Similar changing sentiments were apparent as he rather whimsically dallied in the summer of 1937 in passing relationships with two girlfriends, Austra and Erika. The relationships may have been circumscribed in terms of opportunity for meetings, but the diary at this stage reflected both the obsessive time Voldemars spent dwelling on his feelings for each of these young women and his general musing on the ultimate meaning of life.

4.7 Oh this great silence! Oh, you great and wonderful world and you Erika! What are you and what am I? Why do we have to exist? Why does the wind blow and shift the clouds? I breathe in the fragrance of the majestic earth and realise that we will have to become dust again.

That they were but passing relationships became clear as mention of these two young women slowly disappeared from the diaries over the next few months.

## Horizons widen for Voldemars

By 1934 the continued worldwide economic depression had also hit Latvia hard. Premier Karlis Ulmanis, a Latvian hero of the independence struggle, had unilaterally seized power in a bloodless coup in the face of perceived political unrest from left-wing elements. He dissolved the Saeima (Parliament) and established a right-wing government over which he presided as President. For the time being, from then on, democracy no longer existed in Latvia under his relatively benign style of Latvian autocratic government. Although one should be guarded in using a term such as 'benign' for any description of the conduct of a dictator who has seized power and imprisoned opponents, it can be used here in comparison to the later Russian and German occupations which by contrast were malignant in the extreme.

Around the end of 1937, Voldemars' world had started to broaden as he commenced recording a mixture of interest, anxieties and pride in the political situation faced by Latvia. Possibly responding to the temporary suspension of democratic rights, Voldemars' diary entries reflected a growing unease from this time on.

17.11 Tomorrow is our country's Independence Day. I am thinking what would it be if we did not have this day to be reminded of. We can be proud of our ancestors who made all that possible. Many of them had slaved under unjust laws hoping that their children might have more freedom, justice and a better life ...

8.12 ... Too often I feel I am alive only and not living. What does the future hold for me?

16.12 It will be Christmas very soon. What will it bring to the whole nation? Will it bring peace or unrest?

19.12 ... People live and work, and all have goals for which they strive. Only I have none, I live only for today and await the coming days. I ask myself why, but don't receive any answer.

As the new year of 1938 opened, Hitler's strength had grown at the head of a rampantly resurgent German nation to a level where in that year, emboldened by earlier international political successes, he was to annex Austria, and then the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. But in Latvia as the new year developed it became apparent that Voldemars was starting to think of broader matters than himself, his girlfriends or his relationships with his family. Or perhaps it was as a reaction to his perceived difficulties in those areas that he wrote:

2.3 It's raining. Yesterday I went to the office to find out about registration for the Army. Training is in order. It looks like it will begin in April ...

In fact he was not to take up army training for nearly another year but in the interim, as he waited to join up, the tone of the diary entries over this ensuing year of 1938 reflected an increasing self-confidence and maturity. He started to refer over this period, without too much rancour, to an apparent obligation that he felt to his foster parents to work for little personal wages beyond his keep, to repay them for advances made by them to his brother Augusts and to enable him to send small amounts of savings to his brother and sister to help them. Other entries recounted his feelings as he encountered young women, a brief trip to Estonia, and increasingly frequent trips to visit his siblings at the towns where they were then living.

In July 1938 he turned 21, or as he termed it, 'full-aged', and within days entries of a more positive or mature note showed that his philosophising habit had not left him.

30.7 Tomorrow is Sunday. I have not made any plans for tomorrow yet. I wonder about the world, the whole universe, the sun and the summer. I wonder also about the birds with their song, the earth with its goodness. Still the nights are dark and oppressive, but when the moon is up, the starry skies look like they are covered with a silvery glitter.

31.7 My heart feels heavy. I long for a close friend. Work is the only thing that makes me want to survive. Often I don't see the necessity for living. Life itself is like a riddle, something sweet, but mostly bittersweet. And at the end we all will become dust. We have got to believe while we live, or living would be completely hopeless.

Within a few months the first of many references to the outside world of politics commenced, as Voldemars became more aware of greater events starting to crowd in on his country. Events in western Europe were gaining dramatic speed in 1938. In March, Hitler marched into Austria and annexed that country into the Greater German Reich. And further west the long-running Spanish Civil War ground on. General Franco's forces were inexorably gaining control throughout the year in this bitter civil war, with Hitler and Mussolini providing Franco with aerial support.

In September international tensions continued to mount as Hitler's demands grew over the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, culminating on 30 September in Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, and Daladier, the French Premier, accepting the infamous appeasement agreement at Munich that temporarily

staved off war but also opened the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia to immediate annexation by Hitler.

In September 1938, with no background lead-up, Voldemars unexpectedly added the following feelings at the end of an entry about the onset of autumn.

10.9 ... Lately I feel sympathetic towards our leader—President Ulmanis. He could be called 'the Father of our Nation'. What would happen to him if this government got another leader? Would we ever again get a leader of this strength?

17.9 I feel autumn in my heart, just like it is in nature. The warmth, the sunshine, the light all is slowly moving away. The world is beginning to get involved in a dreadful war. Some people are turning into beasts by planning war but they themselves wouldn't do the dirty work to fight. As it has always been—the innocent are the ones who suffer. The word 'war' sounds terrible.

Five days later, as tensions in Czechoslovakia rose even higher and war seemed a very real likelihood, he noted:

22.9 ... The news about war is getting worse.

The release of tension after the Munich Agreement on 30 September was reflected by entries in October and November.

13.10 ... There are so many things happening in this world. It would be impossible to write about them all. I plan to order more books ...

23.10 ... I have got to learn German and to my own surprise I find that it isn't too hard to learn. I read a lot and it means going to bed late.

17.11 Tomorrow is our country's Independence Day. Our free country is 20 years old. One wonders for how long we will be having our independence? Our forefathers had begun to build this country with sweat and tears and now it is up to us to defend our land from any enemies. I feel grateful to our Leader.

Voldemars was right to ponder the future of his country's independence. Had he but known it, Latvia was to enjoy only one more Independence Day before it became embroiled in the growing international intrigues in Europe. Within 18 months of Voldemars posing his question, Russian armies had poured across Latvia's borders. From that time on it was to be another 50 years before Latvia again enjoyed an Independence Day.

## Joining the army

The very next day, 18 November 1938, he attended a dance at the local hall where President Ulmanis spoke. Voldemars excitedly recounted this and commented that 'I felt very touched.' Possibly not surprisingly, the next week he again recorded that he was looking forward to joining the Army, although for him that was not to occur until May 1939, a further six months away. In a very abbreviated entry for him, he observed at the end of 1938:

29.12 Will there be peace and happiness next year?

This was the first of many times where he displayed an ability to pose questions that in retrospect seem repetitively prescient, for 1939 was to witness the eruption of the Second World War. The most exciting development in his personal life that year was the advent of electricity for the first time in their house. In early February 1939, as a consequence of his turning 21, Voldemars recorded his gratitude on receiving a small inheritance from his mother's estate:

10.2 I whispered thanks to my mother. I am remembering years gone by, not with sorrow but with joy. From now on I am looking forward to joining the Army.

On 24 February he travelled to Tukums to sign up in the Army but still had to return home to await his final posting orders. During this period, ominous events were gathering at an even more dramatic pace further west in Europe. On 15 March 1939, Hitler's forces marched into the remnant of the state of Czechoslovakia on the pretext of preventing attacks on Germans in Czechoslovakia. Voldemars expressed his feelings as follows:

18.3 Czechoslovakia has lost its independence. Germany has taken over. It is terrible to lose freedom.

On 22 March Lithuania succumbed to German threats and demands to deliver up to it the area of Memel bordering Eastern Prussia, in which there was a considerable German-speaking population.

From 26 March onwards, news would have become much more readily available in the Zebergs' household as Voldemars recorded that on that day they obtained a radio for the first time. The news they heard in ensuing days would hardly have lifted their hearts. On 28 March the fascist forces of General Franco marched triumphantly into Madrid after a long siege, and on 31 March Chamberlain announced a formal guarantee by Great Britain of Poland's

sovereignty against outside aggression in the face of growing threats by Germany against it. On 13 April, Mussolini and the Italians invaded Albania, and Great Britain and France extended their guarantee of sovereignty to include Greece. Then in May, Italy and Germany signed the so-called Pact of Steel.

Among all this frenetic international activity, pressures mounted in the area of the Baltic States as well. Voldemars' diary reflected the growing anxiety, and in May he left at last to join the Army.

18.4 In the autumn Czechoslovakia was taken over by the Germans. Now there is unrest in Lithuania. Our country is still free and let us hope it will stay that way.

9.5 Hello and goodbye to my previous life. I feel happy and sad right now. Whatever happens in the future I will have to accept. And now I have got to leave this place. So goodbye.

The next few months clearly flew by for Voldemars as he commented in one diary entry that 'they' kept him so busy at training that he barely had time to write in his diary. He was initially assigned to Battery No. 6 of the Kurzeme Artillery Regiment based at Liepaja, a major port city on the Baltic coast. The regiment was under the command of a Captain Didrihsons. Most of the few entries over this period of initial training lament the loss of freedom to wander in the forest or to visit the seaside in summer. As the end of his basic training neared he wrote:

27.8 The summer's going without anything particular to report. Just thoughts about the future and thoughts about the past. I ask myself what am I to do after I finish training in the Army? Our Country needs patriots who would be ready to defend it when the enemy plans to take it over.

## Outbreak of war

He was not to have much time to reflect on life after peacetime training. On 23 August 1939 the world was stunned by the news that the two great dictatorships of Russia and Germany, which had previously been openly antagonistic to each other, had signed a Non-Aggression Pact. The obvious reality was that Poland could now be attacked by Germany without fear of response from Russia. It is interesting to note that, initially at least, Voldemars' diary did not disclose any great level of anxiety at the news of war.

3.9 The people are uneasy! There is a war on between Germany and Poland. I am not happy or sad it is no burden to me, I have such peace.

However, his hope or belief that the war between Germany and Poland would not affect him was about to be rudely shattered. Voldemars and the rest of the world were not to know that behind the German-Russian Non-Aggression Pact there was a secret protocol of four articles giving the Russians the right to occupy eastern Poland, Finland, and Latvia and Estonia of the Baltic States.<sup>2</sup> From that moment on, the fate of Latvia, and for that matter of Voldemars Apse and his family, was sealed. The process of his discovering that fate, however, was to be tragically and agonisingly drawn out for him over the next five years of war.

## 2. THE SHOCK OF WAR

Despite the prospect that the outbreak of a major world war in 1939 could envelop the Baltic States, including Latvia, for a time at least it seemed that that might not occur. Certainly the United Kingdom and its Dominions and Empire had, together with France, declared war on Germany, but Germany appeared to be able to treat that threat with disdain, as it continued to pour its forces across the border in a massive attack on Poland. The Non-Aggression Pact with Russia had obviously provided the Germans with the necessary confidence that their blitzkrieg assault on Poland would not trigger a war with Russia, and there was no feasible way in which the British and French could practically provide succour to the Poles. To that extent, then, on the face of matters it all appeared a somewhat distant threat to Voldemars, which might explain why he wrote on 3 September that despite the German attack on Poland he felt secure in Latvia.

From the paucity of diary entries over the next few months it would appear that Voldemars' training was now absorbing most of his attention over the rest of 1939.

In retrospect, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that the diary did not have a detailed entry referring to the Russian invasion of eastern Poland, which Russia launched on 17 September 1939 relying on the terms of one of the secret protocols<sup>3</sup> of the Non-Aggression Pact. Even more surprising is the absence of direct mention of a Russian action that was even more ominous for Latvia. This was the treaty forced on Latvia by the USSR on 5 October 1939, which provided the Russians with the right to establish some military bases on the Baltic coast of Latvia, ostensibly to enable Russia to protect the only seaports giving it all-winter access to the Baltic Sea. Those ports, Ventspils and Liepaja, were both in Latvian territory. The problem for Latvia was simply that, unless it agreed, the Russians would clearly invade, as they had just done so treacherously in Poland with no retaliation possible from France or Great Britain at all.

Nor initially was there any diary entry at this time by Voldemars referring to another Russian attack even closer at hand—the all-out assault launched on 30