

## Original article

International Journal of Documentary Heritage  
(Int J Docum Herit, IJODH) 2024 December,  
Vol.1 No.1, Article 5  
<https://doi.org/10.71278/IJODH.2024.1.1.5>

**Received:** September 08, 2024

**Revised:** November 25, 2024

**Accepted:** December 05, 2024

**Published:** December 30, 2024

## Nomination as an Agent of Change: Letters Written on Birch Bark in Siberia 1941-1965

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### Abstract

In 2009 the nomination of the “Letters Written on Birch Bark in Siberia 1941-1965” was for the first time inscribed in the Latvian National Register of the “Memory of the World” programme. New items were added to it during the following years, including through an invitation to the other two Baltic states to work jointly towards achieving international recognition. In 2017 the multinational nomination was first submitted to the International Register of the “Memory of the World” programme and in 2023 for the second time, now also encompassing documents from Ukraine and Poland. The history of the preparation of the nomination is not only “tangible proof of evidence” to an endeavour of cooperation but, more importantly, a path and a showcase of how a nomination process to the International Register of the “Memory of the World” programme can serve as an agent of change.

The idea of the nomination was initially proposed by director of the Tukums Museum, Latvia, Agrita Ozola in 2008. At that time the history of Soviet deportations was mainly approached as a collective memory, except for very few individual acts, with not much follow-up. The individual experiences of these deportations were little addressed, apart from uncertainty about how to approach and present individual agency within such a horrific past. Hence, when in 2009 Ozola invited various Latvian museums to work together to address this painful history through creating a collection of letters written on birch bark in Siberia, she unintentionally through her initiative and the work that followed, began a very complex yet healing process of reckoning with history. Her initiative sought to demonstrate by the letters on birch bark and missives they contain that these people were not merely objects of the regime (nor objects of the larger collective) but subjects who stood up for themselves and were agents of their own destiny.

### Keywords

Birch bark documents, Siberia, Change agent, Nomination, the Baltics, National Register of the “Memory of the World” programme.

### Introduction

In June 1940, the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic States, initiating a period of extensive terror in various forms that persisted for the next fifty years<sup>1</sup>. Notably, in 1941 and 1949, two large-scale deportations were carried out simultaneously across all three Baltic states, with the aim of forcibly relocating significant portions of the population to remote regions of the Soviet Union, primarily Siberia. Additional major deportations occurred from Lithuania in 1948 and 1951 (Anušauskas, 2015). During this series of deportations, families were stripped of their property, often separated, and relocated with minimal belongings. They faced various restrictions,

<sup>1</sup> The Baltic States were occupied by the USSR from June 1940 until July 1941, then from July 1941 until 1944 they were under the occupation of Nazi Germany, and then again from Fall 1944/ May 1945 until 1990/1991 under the Soviet occupation.

### OPEN ACCESS

pISSN : 3058-9428

eISSN : 3058-9061

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including prohibitions on leaving the designated area and limitations on correspondence. While many perished, a significant number survived, continuing their lives in enforced exile, often forming new families, friendships, and communities.

After the death of Stalin in 1953, most of these individuals, as soon as they were allowed, returned home at the earliest opportunity. A very, very few were actually rehabilitated, the rest remained falsely repressed. All the crimes of mass repressions were attributed to the cult of Stalinism, accrediting sole blame to Stalin himself, with no subsequent accountability for individuals with responsibility involved, or any kind of further destalinization (Applebaum, 2003).

The deportations left an indelible and painful wound in the collective memory of Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, and other ethnic groups. Under Soviet occupation, this aspect of history was suppressed, associated with feelings of shame among both those who had been deported, as well as those who had remained. The Soviet regime had branded deportees as enemies of the state, burdening them with formal criminal records, denying them access to education, restricting their return to their original homes, and prohibiting them from occupying certain professions, or living in major cities. Consequently, their stories and experiences remained largely untold. Discussions of Siberia and the deportations were considered taboo, inspiring fear, as even into the 1980s, individuals could still face arrest or deportation for various perceived offenses against the Soviet regime.

The Tukums Museum in Latvia received its first letter written on birch bark in Siberia in 1989 (Ozola, 2023). With the emergence of the independence movement, these suppressed memories resurfaced, as if the long-awaited moment for disclosure had arrived. People began to share and uncover hidden aspects of their past, unearthing related objects and relics. Museums as memory institutions, played a particularly significant role in this process, being among the first institutions to engage in dialogue about previously silenced or outright banned subjects, by hosting commemorative events, exhibitions, and organizing sharing and recording of these memories.

In the 1990s, multiple remembrance days were established, over 400 memorial sculptures and plaques were erected, and numerous autobiographical accounts were recorded and published in Latvia alone. Similar processes took place also in Lithuania and Estonia, including founding of museums devoted to histories of occupation (Norris, 2020). All these governments initiated focused research projects to collect, study, and analyze every available Soviet directive related to deportations, as well as to document the names of all deported individuals. Many of those who had been repressed were finally able to return to their former homes, or the homes of deceased relatives through privatization and denationalization<sup>2</sup>, and they received compensation. The newly re-established states sought to demonstrate compassion by providing monthly pensions, various allowances, and also openness and curiosity.

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<sup>2</sup> Restitution of private property in Latvia began in 1990. A multitude of privatization and denationalization laws were enacted between 1990 and 1994. In general, the laws provided for restitution *in rem* but when that was not possible, former owners were given substitute property or compensation vouchers.

While the deportations have typically been approached as a collective memory, except in a few instances individual agency was not addressed. Hence in 2008, when the director of Tukums Museum, Agrita Ozola suggested that various Latvian museums work together to create a collection of letters written on birch bark in Siberia, she unintentionally became an agent of change. Her initiative was to tell the story of individuals behind the deportations through establishing a collection of letters written on birch bark, and demonstrating that these people were not merely objects of the regime (nor of the larger collective) but rather subjects who stood up for themselves and had their own agency. The window of opportunity she saw was the call to nominate this collection to the National Register of the “Memory of the World” programme.

### Strategic Challenges

In 2009, when Agrita Ozola offered to focus on the seemingly insignificant letters written on birch bark, she was met with astonishment from her fellow museum professionals in Latvia (Ozola, 2023)<sup>3</sup>. While they did not openly oppose her idea, they were quietly perplexed. At the time, there were already established frameworks for interpreting this historical period: the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia was actively recording oral histories and engaging with the public, while archival research, which was considered to hold more substantial documentation, was ongoing. Moreover, in 1998, the President of Latvia had established the Commission of Historians to investigate the nature and consequences of the two occupations (by the Soviet Union (1940-1941, 1944/1945-1991) and Nazi Germany (1941-1944/1945)) that the country endured during and after World War II, with a particular focus on the Holocaust and the various forms of repression implemented by the Soviet Communist regime (Plakans, 2018). The prevailing historiographical approach was rooted in the methodology of Leopold von Ranke, emphasizing an understanding of the past “as it actually was,” with research conducted exclusively by trained and authorized historians (von Ranke, 2011).

Agrita’s initiative, which sought to introduce a new resource and impetus for confronting this uncomfortable past was, at the time, perceived as profoundly disruptive. Moreover, the Tukums Museum, which Agrita directed, was not considered particularly influential in shaping the collective memory of Soviet repressions; this task was already being undertaken by experts in the capital city of Riga. Agrita’s proposal challenged the existing narrative, inviting her peers in museums to become part of this “otherhood” and actively contribute to the creation of a new layer of memory and a broader movement:

- To find, collect and create a collection of letters written on birch bark in Siberia, scattered across various institutions around Latvia (mainly provincial museums), proving the significance of these particular documents (until then, with very few exceptions, perceived as artifacts rather than historical sources), and giving weight to them in the construction of

<sup>3</sup> Agrita Ozola made a call inspired by the discussions organised in various regions around Latvia by the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO in preparation of the National Register of the “Memory of the World” Programme, and asked all museums in Latvia if in their collections they had any text written on birch bark from Siberia.

collective memory and the reckoning with the past.

- To extend this new layer of collective memory to broader groups in Latvia and beyond our national awareness, using the collection as a vehicle to mobilize the Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine, etc., in a mutual act.
- To initiate a process of acknowledgment of this past pain, recognition that it actually took place and caused harm, and to seek an apology and recognition from the perpetrators.

In a sense, Agrita was not proposing anything revolutionary; she was merely advocating that the interpretation of this harrowing past should also be constructed using elements that highlighted the resilience and humanity of the survivors, rather than focusing on the brutality of the Soviet regime. She shifted the spotlight away from the large collective of perpetrators, and instead illuminated the strength of the human spirit that continued to demonstrate by act of writing, independent thought, love of life and care for dear ones even in the terrible conditions brought about by repressions and deprivation of human rights. With her museological background, she recognized that while the focus on acknowledging the victims had served the generation that lived through these experiences, it would not suffice for the future generations. As a member of the so-called second generation (born after Stalin's death), Agrita effectively positioned herself as a catalyst or bridge for this complex transformation process.

As a museum professional, Agrita was well-equipped to address the communication needs of the third and fourth generations, enabling them to reconnect with this past (Ozola, 2018b). Despite the emotional and compelling nature of the official narratives and collective memory representations of the Siberian experiences—particularly in forms such as novels and films that strongly resonated with the call of “Never again!”—there remained a crucial gap: an understanding of “How it was?” and “How to survive if this happens again?” The existing narratives, often stark and graphic, emphasized the omnipresence of violence, inadvertently reinforcing a sense of the inevitability of such a future. To offer hope to the Angel of History, as described by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1966), it was essential to shift the focus from the atrocities inflicted on the victims to the resilience and strength they exhibited.

Previously, historians had largely dismissed these letters, except for those from a few correspondents from Vyatlag<sup>4</sup>, as most of them were believed to contain little significant factual information, and were regarded more as curiosities than credible historical sources. As such they were not considered part of the official records or archival sources documenting Soviet repressions. However these letters were recognised and collected by museums, often accompanied by recorded oral histories provided by the donors and thus telling most remarkable stories, capturing raw emotions and personal experiences. By reframing these letters through the lens of heritage value, the collection suddenly acquired new significance and opened up new avenues for further research (Blouin Jr., Francis X., Rosenberg W.G., 2011).

In 2010, the collection was successfully inscribed on the Latvian National Register of the “Memory of the World” programme, encompassing 19 letters written on birch bark from six

<sup>4</sup> An abbreviated name of a gulag that was located in the Vyatka district.

museums across Latvia (Ozola, 2009). This achievement, along with subsequent events, encouraged further exploration of the context and connections surrounding these documents, leading to more robust interpretations. Instead of dwelling solely on the tragedy and suffering, these letters emerged as enlightening examples of documentary heritage that showcase the remarkable resilience and humanity of individuals under the most inhumane circumstances, and the relevance of the act of writing for maintaining mental strength, humanity, self-expression and self-respect. As well, they inspired a broader search for additional birch bark letters written in Siberia and fostered international cooperation.

## **The Critical Mass**

Despite the growing awareness of this unique documentary heritage and ongoing initiatives to search for additional documents, letters written on birch bark remained extremely rare. While the use of birch bark as a writing material was known in Siberia during the Second World War and the immediate post-war years, due to censorship and various other circumstances, many letters either never reached their intended recipients or were not preserved. Some letters were deliberately destroyed by their owners or recipients, who feared that these documents might reveal their connection to the deported, or their own history of repressions. Others were simply never preserved. Also birch bark being a natural material is vulnerable because it naturally deteriorates and undergoes various changes (e.g. acquiring cracks, crumbles, peeling, disintegrating etc.). Nevertheless, the collection of documents written on birch bark in Siberia was gradually growing.

The Latvian collection was enriched by new letters discovered and identified in 2011, 2014, 2016, and subsequent years. Both scientific and popular publications were produced (primarily by the museums involved), press coverage increased, and traveling exhibitions were actively showcased, including one at the European Parliament in Brussels in 2011, and another at the National Library of Latvia in 2016<sup>5</sup>. In 2018, Agrita Ozola published a catalogue of 45 letters written on birch bark in Siberia, safeguarded in eight different museums in Latvia, complete with transcriptions and commentary (Ozola, 2018a).

Furthermore, in 2015, “Documents on Birch Bark (Letters of Siberian Deportees)” were also recognized and inscribed in the Lithuanian National Register of the “Memory of the World” programme. This marked a significant moment to consider the next steps forward.

The accumulation of momentum and a critical mass of documents were not merely factors for success; they created a pivotal opportunity to utilize the framework of the “Memory of the World” programme. This initiative aimed not only to free present and future generations from the “anxiety of influence” (Bloom, 1973) caused by traumatic memories and an unspoken past, but also to establish a clear, openly discussed platform that would enlighten collective memory (Assmann, 2011) and facilitate a more profound reckoning with the past.

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<sup>5</sup> Exhibition “One cannot not write!”, 2016-2017, National Library of Latvia.

## Nomination to the International Register of the “Memory of the World” Programme

Although there had previously been Baltic regional professional conferences addressing relevant questions on the historical period, such as deportations, Soviet repressions, and related topics, many issues remained unaddressed. However, with the emergence of the collection of letters on birch bark and the growing involvement of a wider network of memory institutions, these unresolved questions, particularly the aspect of individual agency, began to surface. This collection mobilized and encouraged change advocates within various memory institutions, extending beyond professionals in archives and history departments, to engage with letters written on birch bark not only as unusual and rare objects, but also as ‘sites of memories’ of those repressed.

Through the very strong symbolism of birch bark as a carrier, and the message it contains, a platform was provided that highlighted the dignity of the individuals that had suffered the Soviet repressions. The act of writing was a way to maintain something personal, something of one’s own in a situation where everything was collective and any expression of individualism was forbidden, even if it required the reinvention of paper from birch bark. Therefore, when the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO proposed an international nomination in 2015, it was evident that the nomination should also serve to legitimize the change agents and their insights into how to reckon with this painful past. Tukums Museum and Agrita Ozola, as the instigators of this idea, were particularly keen on broadening the scope to include a more comprehensive narrative and more diverse voices.

The question arose: what collective are we addressing when considering these letters as symbols for remembering all human tragedies under totalitarian regimes, while also commemorating individual stories of suffering and acknowledging their endurance? Should it be the Baltics alone? The Baltics and Poland? The Baltics, Poland, and Ukraine? Or perhaps the Baltics, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and Finland? Ultimately, it was decided to first create a nomination by the Baltic States, building on our shared history—such as the nomination of the “Baltic Way – Human Chain Linking Three States in Their Drive for Freedom,” which was inscribed in the International Register of the “Memory of the World” programme in 2009—and our mutual symbolic appreciation of birch trees in our cultural identity, as well as the desire to reinforce the ideal (or perhaps the myth) of “the three Baltic sisters.”

The nomination was first submitted for inscription on the International Register of the “Memory of the World” programme at the end of 2016 by Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. It focused not only on the extremely unusual and rare medium—birch bark—but also on the phenomenon of writing as a means of maintaining a sense of self and upkeeping hope under inhumane conditions. The nomination elucidated the cultural roots, sense of identity, and the sustenance of hope and love—the agency of people and their endurance. The Statement of World Significance (Chapter 5.2. of the Nomination Form) elaborates:

*“The collection testifies to the strength of the human spirit that continued to demonstrate by act of writing independent thought, love of life and care for dear ones even in fierce conditions brought about by repressions and deprivation of human rights. Through individual voices this collection tells a story of prevailing humanism in the face of the enduring atrocities and honours the mental strength of the people who confronted and withstood the repressions. These personal letters on birch bark emphasize the importance of individual experiences over propaganda that aimed to shape the memory of the people. (Baltina, 2017)”*

Unfortunately, the nomination was not inscribed in the International Register on the first attempt. Although it received a positive recommendation for inscription by the Register Sub-Committee, it was not supported by the International Advisory Committee due to political constraints.

In 2023, a nomination now also containing documents on birch bark from Poland and Ukraine, was proposed for inscription on the International “Memory of the World” Register. The nomination was expanded and renamed “Letters on birch bark from the Gulag (1940-1965)”, now containing 148 rare documents on birch bark. It highlights even more that the nomination exemplifies freedom of speech, human rights and dialogue as paving the path to reckoning with the past. As the nomination focuses on the agency of the individuals who had written these documents, it only concerns the submitting countries. Yet it also sympathizes with all the victims from other countries, who also suffered as a result of Soviet repressions, whose missives written on birch bark as yet remain unknown. By the end of 2024 the nomination was recognised as admissible by the Register Sub-Committee and is undergoing evaluation by experts.

## **The Challenge**

The protagonists of these letters, and the collection as a whole, are individuals. The letters written on birch bark represent writing as a crucial strategy that enabled individuals to survive, most importantly, at a mental and spiritual level, the most difficult of circumstances. Communicating with loved ones and friends provided a means of rising above the harsh daily realities and fostering a sense of belonging to one’s cultural space. Equally, the act of writing served as a means to preserve something personal, something inherently one’s own, in a situation where everything was collectivized and any expression of individualism was forbidden. This practice became a mental escape, requiring the efforts of thinking, remembering, and dreaming.

If we recognize that the victims were not an anonymous mass and that they possessed agency, then we must also acknowledge that the perpetrators were real persons, with their own thoughts, memories, and dreams. However, in much of historiography, the perpetrators almost do not exist as individuals; they are often portrayed as part of a large collective within descriptive accounts of the Soviet repression system. This nomination similarly distances itself from the perpetrators, refraining from giving them any platform, voice or stage. Yet it clearly

conveys the message that responsibility of the atrocities lies with them, asserting that they must take action to address their own culpability (Cels, 2015).

The challenge for the nominators is that, despite the complexity and the long, cumbersome process of change necessary for success, there is an essential need to include the perpetrators in this process, to engage with them as moral peers, and to maintain a dialogue with the society of the “oppressors” (Cels, 2015). This nomination serves as a means to ensure that the traumatic past is not silenced or trivialized as mere ‘hate speech’, and actually advances the steps towards reconciliation.

Including the perpetrators in this process has proven more challenging than anticipated. The attempt to enhance the approach to past violence and its legacies through the perspective of letters written on birch bark—highlighting the moral strength and the act of writing by the victims—was well-intended as a mutual foundation for initiating dialogue. However, it did not yield the expected results concerning the perpetrators. For meaningful progress, it requires that the perpetrators at least acknowledge that these events occurred, caused harm, and were morally wrong (Cels, 2015). In response to this complexity, Dr. Botakoz Kassymbekova, a Kazakh historian specializing in Soviet and Russian imperial history, explores the concept of “Imperial Innocence.” She elucidates the twisted character of the victim mentality among Soviet perpetrators, noting that instead of engaging in the necessary steps of acknowledgment, they often perceive any discussion as an attack. This defensiveness leads them to degrade anyone calling for dialogue, thereby obstructing any process of reckoning on both sides (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022).

## Conclusion

What Agrita Ozola initiated in 2008—collecting letters written on birch bark in Siberia from her museological perspective—has over the years evolved into a significant example of activism in the field of historical research, heritage and memory studies. Her initiative has laid the foundation for new areas of historical inquiry, raising critical questions and encouraging the exploration of new types of historical resources, such as the letters on birch bark. Furthermore, it has catalyzed the development of innovative forms of exhibitions and dialogue, fostering international cooperation and stimulating a new kind of international debate, interpretation and reckoning with a traumatic past.

The efforts embodied in this nomination, aimed at fostering compassion and acknowledging past wrongdoings, have also breathed new life into the Memory of the World programme. If safeguarded from baseless contestations, the programme has the potential to serve as a platform for mutually respectful historical reckoning, enabling collective engagement with history on shared, ethical grounds.



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