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Delineating Women’s Historical Lives through Textiles: A Latvian Knitter’s Narrative of Memory

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We weave narratives like cloth, creating multi-patterned garments that we inhabit as memory.

Cavanaugh and Warne, *Telling Tales*

In presenting and analyzing the narrative of a woman who knitted for survival, I engage two continuing marginalizations in mainstream history; that the lives of ‘everyday’ women are poorly delineated and that the realm of textiles is undervalued as a source of knowledge.

Outside the visual art domain the status and potential of textile study, with its associations of domesticity and craft, is little valued. Yet textiles have a history of being associated with many other aspects of women’s lives, a relationship that is slowly being probed for the knowledge it may hold (Parker, 1984; Tickner, 1988; Ulrich, 2001). Through oral history and the study of objects imbued with memory, we gain access to additional topics, issues and aspects of identities; we hear the stories that clothe, illumine and enhance what we know of women’s historical lives. Such is the case, presented here, of one woman’s attachment to the tools of her trade. They provided the means to preserve family and culture, to enact her agency, when confronted with the inexorable force of historical circumstance.

When Anna Vipulis Samens¹ was faced with fleeing her home once again, she was a determined woman. “The knitting machine is my life; I will not take a step without it” (*Glenbow Archives*, 1979). In her Latvian homeland Samens operated her factory in the capital of Riga through the First World War, Russian Revolution, German occupation and Soviet expropriation. As the Soviets approached to reoccupy Riga in 1944, the Samens family buried family valuables; china, silver and a stamp collection. Anna’s husband had sold a race horse for three gold czar’s coins which secured an open truck for a hurried escape for the family of five with a few of their possessions. On October 4th the knitting machine chosen for the journey, a lighter commercial model was placed in a coffin-like box with extra parts. In preparation for another temporary displacement, Anna took the key to her factory, some business papers, a small sewing machine, patterns, yarns and the box. It took four of the five family members to carry the box.

Anna Vipulis (1892-1979) was “born into the trade”. Ilga Samens outlines family history to me [personal communications March 3, June 16, 2005 and June 17, 2006 in Arial font) to explain how her mother came to be managing a factory at a young age. Anna’s father had a grocery store and a knitting factory where Anna trained in 1909 at age 17. She managed the factory from 1910-1915 at which time the young woman married August Samens and received three knitting machines of her own as a wedding present. It was a momentous year for the young couple who fled a German occupation of Riga to St. Petersburg, Russia. “They thought they were leaving Riga for a few hours and were gone five years”.

Anna Samens was reminded of this period of her life, during which the displaced couple supported the Russian monarchy, when in her seventies, she saw the movie *Dr. Zhivago*. Anna remarked to her daughter, “Why didn’t they show me? I was putting sandbags by the Czar’s palace!”

¹ Adapted from unpublished MA thesis: Wheeler, Eileen: *Engaging Women’s History through Textiles: Enhancing Curricula with Narratives of Historical Memory*, University of British Columbia, 2005.

While her husband served in the Czar's army, Anna Samens undertook to use her skills to alleviate dire circumstances. She machine knitted and exchanged her goods for food and other items on the black market until it was possible for her to return to Latvia. August Samens survived the annihilation of much of the army and walked back to his homeland to join her, returning gaunt and bearded.

After the five year hiatus, the Samens knitting business was operational in 1921 with Anna overseeing the production of gloves, socks, caps, scarves and sweaters. She had a master knitter's certificate from the artisan's guild that qualified her to train qualified knitters. The business expanded over twenty years with Anna employing her brother and sister and other employees "who stayed and stayed" and numbered 50-55 by 1945.

The skilled knitwear designer also operated a custom design business and sold sweaters, exclusive in design, for \$50.00 each in 1939 when a top wage for a select few knitters was \$5.00 per day. The growing business was housed in a factory in a city block ringed by shops that included the beautifully appointed Samens retail outlet.

When I inquire as to the roles in managing a family firm, the business acumen is clearly attributed to Mrs. Samens. Ilga Samens outlines her parents "beautiful marriage" that lasted nearly 65 years. "My mother was a marvellous person...very smart, a real businesswoman. My Dad was very nice". Anna gave August the bank deposits to deliver and family lore has her asking "How can it take three hours to go to the bank?" A gregarious man, "he had to talk to everyone". There were no serious pressures for it to be otherwise.

With a successful business, Anna's family included three teenaged children as the forties dawned. They enjoyed a comfortable life with nannies, maids and a summer house with extensive property 30 kilometres away. Ilga describes her mother as a 'giver'. One wall of the storefront was filled with certificates and awards for charitable giving; one of Anna Samens' awards was a 'Scouts' medal—one of only eleven in the country to be awarded.



*Figure 1. August and Anna Samens in Riga on their return from Russia, 1920.
Photo courtesy of I. Samens.*

The family photograph of 1943 (fig. 2) presents a prosperous family who in their business and private lives cope with the demands of another German occupation of Latvia. From 1941, German occupying forces require that two-thirds of the Samens factory output supply the army. During this period, the Germans took Jewish businesses away; Anna Samens buys one, a wholesale enterprise. While the parents are engaged in business, Anna's eldest daughter leads a 'social' life and is contemplating dentistry. The middle child, a son, is described by his younger sister Ilga as "frail and brilliant" with an interest in rare stamps. Ilga wants to be a vet and has been identified by her mother as the one with business potential and is encouraging business school before other training.

As Russian forces advance daily in October, 1944 the family evades certain reprisal and flee for their lives. Instead of the anticipated Russian retreat and quick return home, they catch the last German boat leaving Riga for Danzig as Latvia is once again occupied. As flüchtling, their flight from the advancing Russian army is through Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia. They number 26 Displaced Persons who bargain for a boxcar as a means of escape along a rail line by exchanging the women's jewellery with the stationmaster.



Figure 2. The Samens family in 1943. Photo courtesy of I. Samens.

Fourteen at the time, Ilga Samens recalls when the railcar stopped in Bavaria they were told, "This is as far as you can go". Mrs. Samens knew someone in the boxcar from a village; this opportune encounter gave them a lead as to where to turn next. In Hawangen, a village of 800, they found shelter that split the family between two farmers' homes. "The mayor of the town told the German farmers to give half their rooms to the DP's."

The knitting machine came out of the box and Anna Samens got to work setting up in a partitioned room of a farmhouse. Ilga Samens recalls the details of daily commerce:

We traded on the black market in Germany to survive". Anna took an order for a sweater. "She would ask for a lamb for it. The lamb would be killed and hidden in the bushes. I would go out at night, always at night, and the exchange would be made. I came back with a lamb over my shoulder ...If you're caught then it's the end..."

Mrs. Samens knitted with an expanding underground business that was supported by their generous hosts. Over time Anna registered her business and converted any profits into food.

Photographs of this time depict the family (self-described as “scrawny”) underscoring the essential nature of this commerce.

Prolonged stress affects Anna’s family. Her younger daughter has bleeding ulcers and her delicate son suffers during bombings as their lodging is located near a German air force base that draws Allied fire. (In 2005, Ilga Samens vocalizes the distinctive and unforgettable sound of a fully loaded bomber flying overhead, recalling April of 1945.) Anna’s son, aged eighteen, does not survive the *flüchtling* experience dying of a heart attack during shooting in the American occupation.

The utility of Anna’s contribution to their welfare during these refugee days revolved around the value of her products on the black market. “Three cigarettes could be traded for an egg”... and so on in exchange that risked their application to Canada. At one point an exchange for shoelaces attracted the attention of the police prompting Anna to lament, “We will miss Canada over shoelaces?” Once papers to emigrate were secured, all black market trade ceased, as they awaited a coupon to travel.

Anna and her family entered Canada as Displaced Persons in 1948 settling first in Drumheller, Alberta. “We didn’t speak a word of English... the first years in Canada were terrible; there was no welfare in those days... we never quit”. During these lean times, Anna washed dishes in the *Crystal Café* and knitted goods for farmers and coal miners. Finding employment more appropriate to her skills, Anna went to work for the *White Ram Knitting Co.* in S.E. Calgary for some years. The owner was highly impressed with her talents but Anna Samens was limited by her poor English, the gruelling two hours’ travel by streetcar to work and her age.

Approaching her senior years, Anna joined her daughter Ilga to work at the *Baker Sanatorium* that was much closer to the home they had managed to purchase outside Calgary. She undertook heavy laundry work operating a mangle, work that would have been done by household maids in Riga. The sanatorium forced Anna to retire at 65 but there was no pension until age 70. She turned to her knitting machine, which had made the same journey she had from Latvia.

People of the Morley Indian Reserve had discovered Anna’s Norwegian styled heavy knee socks. “They were so warm”. The knitter secured “odds and ends of 3 and 4 ply yarn inexpensively from the White Ram Mill” then made “very colourful socks that appealed to the Indians”. For this work Anna managed a profit, but refused to take more than \$2.00 per pair for her socks. “She was a fast knitter, always trying different patterns; she used a hook like crochet” [to create patterning in machine knitting]. She tried to teach her daughter Ilga, but Ilga herself concludes; “When it came to knitting, she was it!”

In spite of hardships that contrasted her life in interwar Europe, Anna Samens thought Canada to be “a wonderful land”. In our discussion of luck and fate, her daughter recounts how the family caught the last ship out of Riga and missed the bombing of Dresden as their train spent 10 days on the track in a tunnel. She comments that realistically, had her brother lived, his health would have excluded their admission to Canada.

Toward the end of her life, Anna wanted to return to Latvia. Ilga who had become an x-ray technician says, “I told her there is nothing left in Latvia. You can go and cry or we can go to Hawaii.” Anna took her spending money saved from sock knitting for the trip. It was a success. Ilga remembers her mother’s comment, “To have such a lovely Christmas...I can die in peace”.

The *Glenbow Museum* archive records a tribute from the husband who shared the same history and partnered Anna in a happy marriage until his death in 1975. “He once remarked that if making a living had been up to him, they would have all starved.”

To put the narrative of Anna Samens in context and to glean as much as possible from its oral history origins, I turn to the recent approaches of social history and material culture. Most traditional histories that would provide the backdrop to the life of Anna Samens are political accounts of the collapse of empires and the logistics of war that afford scant detailing of the lives of women. A Latvian Canadian scholar Modris Eksteins (1999) recounts the whirlwind of violence that was Latvia’s political disintegration but also provides a compelling picture of the buffeted life of the Latvian refugee in flight that includes the family-saving tactics undertaken by women who included his mother. It parallels and provides an accredited documentary support to the knitter’s narrative and clarifies the historical circumstance in which she lived; to be Latvian in the first half of the twentieth century was life threatening to all comers.

Making the work of women central not peripheral to a historical narrative, as accomplished by Laurel Thayer Ulrich (2001), challenges notions of conventional history. To place women and their stories that are spun around a textile focus at the centre is not to attribute an essentialized ability based on gender but to learn from the close historical association with textiles that many women have experienced through opportunity. Women’s Studies emerita Gerda Lerner (1997) articulates that women are in a unique condition in relation to their own history in that “...for five thousand years, they have been excluded from constructing history as a cultural tradition and from giving it meaning...” (p. 121). Analyzing the story of Anna Samens demonstrates what such narratives offer in terms of constructing a history of one’s own. It reveals the ways women (and their descendents) may have selected and articulated memory through their relationships with textiles.



Figure 3. Anna Vipulis, right, on her confirmation c. 1908-1910. Photo courtesy of I. Samens.

Studies that draw on material culture consider how we remember, what is deemed of historical worth and the inadequacy of traditional sources to fully realize historical understanding

(Kavanagh, 2000; Kwint, Breward, & Aynsley, 1999; Tilley, 1999, 2001). In this approach artifacts are used more liberally to understand the past (Lubar & Kingery, 1993). As well there is recognition that we mediate our personal and cultural histories through images including photographic records as well as personal art forms (Sturken, 1999); all are valid sources that are a means to construct identity and negotiate (a sometimes traumatic) history that is “framed and reframed” in the telling (p. 2). Consequently to increase knowledge of women’s lives we can turn our gaze to newly legitimated sources of history. Photographs, textiles and the tools of their production are now deemed to engage the past through personal or cultural memory that they may hold knowledge of the past as does the Samens narrative.

The material form of photographs offer visual meanings (Edwards, 1999) that clothe Anna’s story further. Studio photographs, such as this one in a romantic tradition, present a conscious ‘framing’ of the subject for public scrutiny that are sources of documentary evidence (Walton, 2002). The studio photograph of Anna Vipulis with her ‘very wealthy’ godmother (figure 4) that records her religious confirmation is likely from her later teens (c1908-1910) about the time she was training in her family’s textile factory. It is a testament to the ‘cultural capital’ (Edwards, 1999) with which she began life and indicates that her professional training was not out of economic necessity.

The photograph, a memory selected for preservation, records a life passage of a valued daughter. Chronologically, it is followed by the sober presentation in a more realistic vein of a young married couple in 1920, Anna and August dressed simply, who have survived the Russian Revolution and are reunited in their homeland.



Figure 4. Anna Samens, left, her sister, husband August and factory workers, late 1920s. Photo courtesy of I. Samens.

It is a small photograph in an exhibit in Alberta’s *Glenbow Museum* (2004-2005) that initially draws my attention to Anna Samens. It appears that both she and the photographer have placed her in the foreground central to the ‘framing’ of the photograph. August Samens sits with a neutral bearing to have his portrait taken, somewhat to the side. Anna is engaged, exuding pride in her still small operation and her knitters that suggests that the photo taking is at her behest. All sources confirm that the factory is essentially *her* operation, based on a family endowment and her managerial force. This allows for a story with a textile focus to emerge that

has an economic, managerial and domestic blending at its centre, an alternative to usual women's histories.

The factory photograph is taken in the late 1920s when Anna is a mother and 'in her stride' in her early thirties. In contrast to the romanticism of the studio photograph, she has purposefully clustered her staff around the machines which are the source of their livelihood in daily life. Such use of objects suggests that they are not neutral props in this setting down of memory (Edwards, 1999). The prominence of the knitting machine at this early date reinforces the 'rightness' of her decision to choose it as her singular object of affective meaning, an attachment that surfaces repeatedly in her life.

As a "conduit of memory" photographs are objects that allow us "to unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values" (Edwards, 1999, p. 221 and D. Miller quoted by Edwards, p. 223). Given what followed historically, the Samens family could look back on what was. The photograph as an object serves three purposes in the Western tradition: it constitutes or furnishes our picture of the past, stimulates remembering and creates a record analogous to human memory (Kwint et al., 1999). The photograph of 1932 recounts an interwar period of some security and leisure; it records an outing of an extended family skiing together before the diaspora. They are well dressed sporting ski sweaters and fine gauge knitwear from the business. It also portrays the son and brother, Vilnis, who did not survive. Like all souvenirs, keeping photographs is "an act of faith in the future" (Edwards, 1999, p. 222). They are returned to in the present evoking a mix of emotion and memory. These photographs are in the album rescued by Ilga as a young teen; it made the journey of the displaced and continues to be a valued possession. In the family narrative they have been selected both by the initial act of picture taking and in their subsequent preservation as memory.



Figure 5. Samens family ski outing in 1932 wearing factory knitwear. From the left, August, a cousin, Anna, Skaidrite, two cousins and Vilnis seated. Photo courtesy of I. Samens.

I selected the photograph (figure 6) from Ilga Samens' collection; it depicts Anna at the pinnacle of her business years in Latvia. A possibly impromptu snapshot, it is minimally

arranged by the subjects if at all. The background is the finely crafted mahogany millwork that houses the knits in the retail shop fronting the factory. The photographer seems torn as to where the focus should be. August is at a podium where he interacts with the public, a role in which he excelled. Anna has her eye affixed to the business at hand, possibly on orders or figures. It is dated to the early 1940s which means the business is largely serving the German occupiers, a position together with their bourgeois status that will be untenable when the Russians sweep in. The photograph marks the turning point in the narrative.



*Figure 6. August and Anna Samens in the storefront in Riga, early 1940s
Photo courtesy of I. Samens.*

As well as the photographs, customary sources of family memory, the Samens family treasure the object critically important to its original owner, a knitting machine and its paraphernalia that accompanied the family's flight from Europe. It is interesting to consider that these were the items chosen as the family made a hasty exit from their lives in Riga; family lore records Anna's insistence on the packing of this collection of business items. The financial papers, patterns, advertisements and tools signified the growth of her business over 30 years, but were not valuable themselves as were the items buried by Latvians en masse. When I enquire as to the type of knitting that Anna Samens did in Russia in an earlier exile long before the birth of her children, her daughter confirms that it was by machine. Possibly one of the machines Anna had just received as a wedding gift accompanied her to St. Petersburg and ensured their food supply; this necessitates an elastic reading of the family phrase that they were leaving Riga for 'a few hours' in 1915. That too was expected to be a short exile.

The truck loaded three decades later, consequently, held the items that Anna deemed would ensure survival *in case* they were not back in their home within two weeks as expected as well as pieces that documented a successful business. The ball gowns coveted by the incoming communists were eschewed for practical items. As Ilga, aged 14, ran back into the house to grab a cherished family photo album, Anna called out to her daughter to pick a shawl hanging at the back door for "it might be cold on the coast.."

In June of 2005, Ilga Samens unfolds the shawl. It is an aged teal coloured textile with a subtle pattern that a few moths have visited. "No one will care about this...it doesn't look like

anything.” Ilga demonstrates its usage, folding the metre and a half square in half to make a triangular scarf that covers the head, is crossed ‘farmer’ style in the front and tied under the arms at the back. To her mother Anna, it became the last textile she possessed that had been produced in her factory. The value of objects is in its *transferral* value, the esteem it attracts whether through monetary exchange, attached sentiment or functional value (Schoeser, 2002). Knowing its importance to her mother, Ilga struggles to express its value now. It has importance because she gave you the memory attached to it, I suggest. “Yes. Yes!”

When Anna Samens uttered, “The knitting machine is my life; I will not take a step without it” in 1944, she articulated its importance to her that was reinforced as it once again became the means for survival. With her remembered skills and the memory of bartering her knits in Russia she determined to support her family whatever befell them. As such it was an embodiment of her agency; it allowed the knitter to provide for her family in desperate times or to provide *more* when each food item or commodity was almost unattainable. During exiles, Anna’s husband and later her children joined the ranks of labour which were abundant. Hers was the specialized skill that could provide a service and items that were in demand. Stripped of all else, she was able to act on her family’s behalf resisting the helplessness that characterized the DP experience. The knitting machine performed functional and emotional roles to the end of her life easing the immigrant experience in Canada where her ‘cultural capital’ bore little resemblance to her earlier life. When she took her ‘sock money’ to Hawaii near the end of her life, unbeknownst to her family, she paid for their New Year’s feast. “You see, I too can do something”, she later explained.

If history is the purposeful shaping of the past so as to create meaning (Lerner, 1997), we can construct a past that more fully includes women, or any of the marginalized, using the tool of memory. Its knowledge and meaning may reside in the newly legitimated sources of oral history, textiles, photographs or objects of significance. The initial framing and subsequent selection and preservation of photographs (and their animated discussion over tea and Latvian buns) has helped to illuminate the life of Anna Samens.

A woman’s life can also leave an historical imprint on her possessions that make them historical sources (Ulrich, 2001). During her lifetime, the Latvian *émigré* clearly selected her knitting machine as her prized possession in a purposeful arrangement of memory, as done with photographs, that has been termed ‘authorial ordering’ (Edwards, 1999 citing Glenn Willumson, p. 231). Anna’s daughters Skaidrite Krause and Ilga Samens recognized the object was laden with meaning and in spite of a ready buyer, donated it to the *Glenbow* where it memorializes and makes visible to others, their mother’s story.

Narratives help us interpret the world (McEwan & Egan, 1995a) and to interpret them anew. Anna’s daughter Ilga notes pointedly, in a lament for what has befallen her homeland under communism, that “history has not been rewritten yet”. Her mother’s narrative from the ‘everyday’ perspective provides knowledge that delineates history with the nuances of a human story. An individual narrative, it serves as a witness challenging ‘official’ history and authoritarianism (Hirsch & Smith, 2002, p.7, Starn, 1999) that precluded such voices from being heard.

The Latvian knitter’s story simultaneously affirms memory, the means by which we remember who we are (Sturken, 1997). Through her determined attachment to her knitting machine and the knits she produced throughout her adult life, Anna Samens found a conduit for agency as she negotiated life. In this way she sustained individual identity and through her, the collective identity of her family and her culture as she literally knitted for their survival.

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