**Transcription sponsored by Jan Krehel Mishin in honor of my dear friend, Silvija Rutenbergs**

**Matt Seaman** [00:00:01] Hi, I'm Matt Seaman at Cleveland State University, facilitating is Kieth Peppers, and we are interviewing today, 11/30/2009, Silvija Rutenbergs. If you could introduce yourself, please.

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:00:14] Yes, my name is Silvija Rutenbergs, and I'm of Latvian... Actually, I was born in Latvia.

**Matt Seaman** [00:00:23] If you could just tell us a little bit about yourself. You just had mentioned that you're from Latvia. When did you come over? Did you come straight to Cleveland?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:00:33] I was born in 1939. Our... The Latvian history revolves, or recent history revolves around the Second World War. We left Latvia in 1944 from the advancing Russian communist forces. We were in western Germany, eventually ended up in western Germany in displaced persons camps, DP camps. And in 1956, we could immigrate to the United States. So I came to the United States in 1956 to Lincoln, Nebraska. Went for one year to Lincoln High School, graduated, started at the University of Nebraska. After a year we moved to Minneapolis, and I graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1962.

**Matt Seaman** [00:01:37] And when you say we, is that your whole family?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:01:40] Yes, it includes my parents and my brothers. That was our family.

**Matt Seaman** [00:01:47] How did you end up in Nebraska?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:01:51] At that time, and that is in the 1960s—no 1950s, 1950s—immigrants needed a sponsor, a sponsor who would vouch that the immigrant will be not a burden on the state. So by that time, we had friends, Latvian friends, who had immigrated earlier, and they were kind enough to find an American family who were willing to be our sponsors. Really took the word of our friends. So that was how we ended up in Nebraska. Plus. we did have a Latvian friend already there, and then moved to Minneapolis, came because of the job situation for my father. He couldn't find any more work. At first he was a draftsman and then he could find work and then Minneapolis was a little bit larger city and he was able to work there. So that's why we moved.

**Matt Seaman** [00:02:58] So how did you come to Cleveland then from Minneapolis?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:03:03] Then I graduated from the University of Minnesota in Dietetics or, yeah, Dietetics, and I needed an internship. In order to work, you need... One year of internship was usually required after a bachelors degree. So we could apply to several places which had internships, hospitals mostly, and I applied to several. Actually, I wanted to come east, like New York or so. But Cleveland was also... I mean, I just applied to a hospital in Cleveland and say it was St. Luke's Hospital at the time. And they answered very quickly and gave me the internship. And I thought, I am coming 800 miles east, but I ended up still in the Midwest.

**Matt Seaman** [00:03:59] Did your...

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:04:00] And that's how I got to Cleveland with the internship, and then I met my future husband and have stayed here since 1962, so it's 40-some more years.

**Matt Seaman** [00:04:16] Did your family follow you? Are they still...

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:04:18] No, they stayed in Minneapolis. And my brother stayed in St. Paul.

**Matt Seaman** [00:04:30] So you're... You met your husband here in Cleveland and decided to stay?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:04:34] Decided to stay, yes.

**Matt Seaman** [00:04:37] So, I know that it wasn't until 2006 the Latvian Garden was established, but prior to that, did you have any experience with the Cultural Gardens? Did you know of them? Do you have any first experiences with the Gardens themselves?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:04:53] Well, we knew about them, but there wasn't very much activity, and actually our garden was established in 2006. But we started to work in order to get a garden in 1999. So it took us almost ten years to get to that point. Yes, it was not very much attention really paid previously to that. We didn't pay that much attention to the Gardens. Plus they were ... not that pretty.

**Matt Seaman** [00:05:33] So do you have early memories? Did you... What's your first memory of the garden, trying to establish the Latvian Garden, per se, or did you ever walk through them with your husband?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:05:44] Yes, because he was, you know, at the university. Actually, he was a graduate of Case Western Reserve, so we were... We knew this area quite well, and we lived in Cleveland Heights and we got married. I don't have any particular, really, memory except that we knew we were [inaudible]. And that is, I'm talking, that is in 1964, so it took another almost thirty years to think about the gardens.

**Matt Seaman** [00:06:22] Is there a large Latvian community in Cleveland, in the Cleveland area?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:06:29] Mmm, there was one after the First World War. And they eventually, well, assimilated, and then after the Second World War, there was another of a wave of immigration once the United States started accepting refugees. And I think for the time, there were maybe between two or three thousand Latvians here who most came as refugees from the Second World War. Now we have our... Our congregation has about, around 500 members. And maybe active, they've got about 300, perhaps. So it's not, not... At this time, it's not any more a particularly large community, and there are not many new immigrants coming here. You know, time takes its toll.

**Matt Seaman** [00:07:42] And I never asked you this. I apologize. How are you involved with the Latvin Cultural Garden and the Cleveland Cultural Gardens?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:07:51] Well, once I had, we had children, I started to work [at] the Latvian Sunday school, but it was not only a Sunday school, it was also a language school. So basically, we called it the school with history and language and geography and folk music, dancing, and so on. And then for a while, for a few years, I was directing the school and then I got involved and was a song festival chairperson and then eventually the chairperson of the Latvian Association of Cleveland. And well, the idea of the garden really stemmed from the Latvian Association, from the... sort of the board talking about the need of getting a little bit more visibility for Latvia and Latvians. And I think that the Cultural Gardens are a wonderful and unique place because they have all the nationalities together. It's not like there's one little remembrance or one little monument here and there, but they're all together. So that really gave us the impetus that we should be part of it, too, especially since there is a Lithuanian and there is an Estonian garden. Oh, so we started it from the Latvian Association, came to the main drive to establish a garden. Most Latvians live on the west side of Cleveland. The east side seemed a little bit scary because of. you know, the gardens for a while didn't, I mean... had become neglected, so people were very hesitant about doing anything on the east side. You know, it's one city, but many people just don't come here. So we had, well, had some lobbying and some persuading, persuading to do and so to work on the garden and to start it and get ... get people involved. And it has been a ten-year project.

**Matt Seaman** [00:10:32] Is... You've said it was a ten-year project. Was it just because of the east-west kind of, they're scared to come to the east side? Or can you talk about that?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:10:49] No, not really. It, I mean... There was a certain group of people who did support the gardens who understood the idea that we should be part of it as well. The ten years came from really the Garden Federation and the City of Cleveland. There was no... There had[n't] been any new land allotted for about twenty years. So no one really knew what to do, you know, and we kept kept asking. I have in the collection, you know, I have lots of letters which I wrote to the Director of Parks, to the Mayor of... several mayors of Cleveland, and trying to... And with the Garden Federation, you know, trying to sort of get guidelines. How should we approach this project? You know, we have to start with land. And it was always a little bit, show us some wealth, show us some funds. But we said how can we have funds if we don't have any place or nothing to point to people where we might have something? So it was a lot of maybe juggling or diplomatic work, to try, to try to get our spot, our place. That was the first thing. And then finally, finally, we got to the point where the Federation got more organized on this because then there was talk suddenly that there were some other groups who were interested in your gardens. And so, so actually our our project, the search started in 2005, once we had the land, once we had all the preliminary permits or so from the City of Cleveland. And actually, to some extent, it was lucky because they were about eleven places established which could be used for gardens. But we had the first choice. At that time we had already, you know, gotten the idea underway. So that the the place we chose, which is, well, on the west side of Martin Luther King, close to Dryden Road, but it was a sort of a tiny little hill which reminded us of Latvia, which has a lot of the hills like this, which were previously forts for, well, different tribes and so. So we called out our own little hill or fort. And, well, from that on, you know, we worked on several directions. You know, the first one was... Should I go on and tell the story, how the whole garden project got started?

**Matt Seaman** [00:14:08] Definitely.

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:14:08] We worked in order to convince our people, too, that it's a worthwhile project. We worked with the Federation to have plans established. We had to work on fundraising, of course, and there was a... There were... We were originally four people, an architect and a community, you know, involved person, and two people from the Latvian Association. We were sort of the core group who then met with a landscape architect and eventually developed sort of a succession of steps which we should be taking. So we started out having limited competition between four, among four sculptors. Two were from the United States. Two were from Latvia. Of course, the ones from United States were also Latvian or of Latvian descent. And we approached those; they all four agreed; they all four sent in their projects. And we selected someone from Latvia, which seemed... And they're interesting, I think interesting guidelines for the projects in the first place. You know, it had to be something which is kind of visible from the street because there is a lot of traffic and many people just have a glance at the gardens. So we wanted to make it so that it, you know, maybe would make, create more interest or curiosity what it is about. And then it had to be something which a Latvian could recognize as being Latvian, and we would think that the general population would find it appealing and interesting to investigate more. So those were the main... And of course, it had to be durable for this climate and of, you know, artistic, professional quality and so on. So then we find... Once we had the design, we had the place, we had the design and then fundraising became a little bit easier. And but our main thrust for fundraising was also that Latvia needed needed an image here in Cleveland. You know, Latvians had been, in fact, in 1997, we celebrated 100 years of an organized Latvian community in the Cleveland area. So we felt that it is important, especially since independence was reestablished in 1991, that Latvia should be represented because Latvians have been in the Cleveland area and we felt had contributed then and have, you know, established their homes and their activities here. So the fundraising efforts was and became the main, the main sort of line of work for us once we had the design and the place and then... And, well, there were of course fundraising. Had all kinds of little imaginative events where you try to get people together and try to persuade them to donate money and... But one of our projects which I think turned out very well was that we said that we would have a collection of all the materials and they would be deposited in the Western Reserve Historical Society and Latvian Archives in Riga, Latvia, and the Garden Federation, and one copy would be, would stay with the Latvian Association. So we were planning on having full copies made and of course one would be a little bit more original, but, you know. And we invited people to leave their history, their family history. So whatever they felt like leaving, but for one page we kind of asked them to donate one thousand dollars.

**Matt Seaman** [00:19:15] Was it very successful?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:19:16] It was successful. They had the... And then of course there were also smaller amounts like half a page or so on. And so we have a list of the people. This was around 20, 25 people who did donate that and those written histories are also, I think, a very important part of the Latvian community as such. Of course, it's not everybody and so, but it gives a little bit of an overview and a sense people have been able to, well, you know, we had no nothing, no guidelines what they had to write, except it had to be acceptable. Now, some wrote, well, a variety of opinions, so that's fine. Then, of course, we had bake sales and a random variety of parties and so on, and we got the money together. And on two oh six, 2006, it was time that we could get our first sculptures here. The sculptor was in Latvia. Actually, I went there several times and he... With the help of modern Internet and so we could communicate, communicate quite well. But it was an interesting time, you know, for him and for us too, you know, he put it together and once the sculpture was... the sculptures were done, then all the transportation then and the formalities. And so it was quite an undertaking, and once we got here, then again the garden had to be, well, sort of made ready for putting the sculptures in. And actually, you know, the big container came and the crane took it off and the tons and tons of granite were taken out and put together. I thought, okay, actually, one day once everything was prepared, and that was in September 2006.

**Matt Seaman** [00:21:44] So all that culmination.

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:21:46] And yes.

**Matt Seaman** [00:21:48] An hour to put it together?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:21:48] No, a day, a day. Did I say an hour.

**Matt Seaman** [00:21:51] No, I...

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:21:51] I'm sorry, it took a day. It took a day to put it together. Yeah. And that also... We had... We collected soil in Latvia from the four regions of Latvia and sort of had the ceremonials of mixing it in Latvia. And then it was sent over to the United States through this approval of the Department of Agriculture. They inspected or sterilized it or whatever the requirements are. And on the... Actually, in 2006, we wanted to call it, not really the dedication, but the establishment of the garden. Well, it's... On all the records it's now the dedication. But at that time we used some of this soil to sort of ask people to sprinkle it in the garden, and that was quite successful. I think. It was kind of, you know, interested in doing it. At least we had a good response for that. You know, just, just a little sprinkle. There wasn't very much soil because we only could send about three pounds or so.

**Matt Seaman** [00:23:12] How did you get that idea?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:23:14] Well, it's sort of by discussing, you know, and, you know, to make it somehow more appealing. Actually, the idea is a little bit also from Latvia. There is a church, an Anglican church and they, when it was built in the 1800s, at the end of the 1800s, there was a barge of soils from England brought in and it was spread at the foundation of the church. So apparently the church was eventually, was originally built more for the British sailors and so who came in because it's very visible as you come into the port. And, but the point that they could say was that the church is built on British soil. So we kind of copied that idea a little bit. Of course, we had a sprinkling of soil only, but we could say, well, there is Latvian soil in the Latvian garden. And then the other part of the soil we used at teh later ceremony. So this dedication was done in 2006, and then, you know, we had a good, very good response from our community, a little bit outside the community as well. We got a few grants from a few, well, a few Latvian organizations. And then we kind of thought we can proceed to phase two, which a sculptor originally had planned, and sort of to make the garden a little bit more complete. So we kept on, you know, fundraising and and then the second phase was done by the sculptor and his son, who at that time was already a student in art at College of Arts in Riga. And that was done by... It had been finished by 2008, and there again we went through the whole process of getting the container and loading it up and unloading it here. It was a little bit easier. It wasn't quite as involved. Here are only two pieces the first time, while we had to put some pieces together. So right now we have a bench which is considered a sculpture. It is representing sort of a bolt since Latvia has lots of water on the Baltic Sea. And then the main sculpture has a silhouette of a woman in traditional Latvian dress, and that was one of the parts of our requirement that a Latvian could recognize it. And some other people might see something else but the silhouette, but then the silhouette of the granite arch, it's sort of the granite is an endurance, strength, endurance of the nation, really, of the people, and the silhouette of that woman is sort of light that the souls... Strength of spirit. So it kind of combines the spirit and the strength. And the other bench, the newer one which was brought in 2008, we call it the stream. It's sort of a sculpted bench. It's part sculpture, but it is really not that impossible to sit on it. It is kind of more comfortable than it looks. And the last stone represents a very traditional Latvian sort of a woven design. And we put in a little inscription so that people, you know, who do come have a little bit of an idea of where Latvia is on the Baltic Sea. And it is a very ancient country. As before we know, several thousand years before Christ, there have been, you know, people living there already and so the culture can be traced back and is quite old and has survived. And so that is, that's complete. And then we put in a little grove of birch trees because they are very representative of Latvia.

**Matt Seaman** [00:28:18] You had mentioned that you tried to make the garden fun for non-Latvians, land I find it very fun, the colored flagstones. The sculptures aren't of people, they're very symbolic of your country, which I find very interesting because the older Cultural Gardens all have busts and sculptures of men and women, whose... Can you... Was there a real conscious effort to have the types of sculptures that you have in your garden compared to the older gardens, or was it kind of just a natural undertaking and that's what, how they came to be? Was the... Did the federation have any say in what type of sculptures that you were allowed to put in the garden?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:29:15] Oh, well, the Federation has to approve every design, and we really worked, you know, we spent a lot of time with the design committee at that time, and I'm very, very thankful that they spent so much time. But it was all new to them as well, because I say there was... No new garden had been established. The Indian Garden was about the same time, but the Indian garden had already the soil allotted to them a long time ago. So, but we had to start everything from scratch and as I said no one really knew what to do. But with the design, the design committee really helped. As far as... We have a very distinct, you know, folk art with folk designs, which almost, I mean, are known to Lativans, and they would recognize it. So we thought that that is really more of our culture than a person as such. Plus, it is a small country and we have outstanding cultural personalities, but they are not known to the greater world community. It's not quite so large a nation, so [not] very well-known artists and writers. And so we felt that it would take a lot of explanation if we did put in someone, you know really represented somebody. And since our folk art is so prominent and so well-known to everyone of every... of the Latvians, so we kind of felt that it would be more representative of our cultures [inaudible].

**Matt Seaman** [00:31:16] Very interesting. Did the... You said you were the first of this new wave of Cultural Gardens coming in. Did any other communities reach out to you as far as the... that followed because you were the first to deal with the Federation and kind of weed out all the problems that were going on?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:31:44] Yeah, well, I mean, maybe maybe not particularly, although, I mean, everyone has been very supportive and really helpful. But it's really the administration of the Federation, you know, who was the ones who can counsel and who can give advice. And so, privately, there have been some discussions but nothing very formal, you know, that we would present something. The new gardens, I think everyone wants, and [when] a group decides that they want a garden, I think by that time they're already quite familiar with the gardens and the requirements and so on.

**Matt Seaman** [00:32:33] So it was really the Federation organizing?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:32:39] Mm hmm, which really, yeah. The Federation is sort of the lead organization which oversees the well, how how every group or every ethnic group, you know, how they will work and how they will... What they will do, including the Federation also, you know, is interested in the funding, how a group can fund their gardens.

**Matt Seaman** [00:33:13] And you may have mentioned this, and if you did, my apologies, are you delegate on the Latvian...?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:33:19] I'm a delegate, yes.

**Matt Seaman** [00:33:21] Do you go to meetings often?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:33:23] I do go to meetings often, yes. Yes.

**Matt Seaman** [00:33:26] In a previous interview this morning, one of... Another delegate had mentioned that there were a lot of communities coming forward wishing to possibly pursue a garden in the Cultural Gardens. Can you speak of that? Do you know what communities are looking for a garden? How that's going?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:33:50] Well, one of the communities which really is had had... Is the African American community. They had the land for a long time, and it seems like now that Mayor Jackson is involved that they might really get the whole project going. But really new ones are Armen community, actually the Azerbaijan community, which was also, I mean, an interesting sort of happening because there is not much of an Azerbaijani group in Cleveland as far as we know, or we were not aware of. And then the Croatian group, I think, and the Serbians came after us, who... They, I think developed their garden very, very quickly with very, well, extensive fundraising. Who else is new? Albanian and... No, Albanian, I think. I'm sorry, I guess Albania is a group which is ready to... I mean fundraising for a garden.

**Matt Seaman** [00:35:07] We're supposed to ask this question that every person we interviewed, so it's a little philosophical, but do you consider the gardens plural or singular? Meaning do you see them as a collection or each garden doing their own thing?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:35:29] I definitely consider them plural, and I think that is the uniqueness about it, that there are so many ethnic groups represented. And philosophically, I think that the gardens are absolutely unique in the world. I have seen a few places which don't nearly come quite as closely as something of this in Utah near Salt Lake City, but it's not nearly as, actually as high-quality as well as these. Of course, it's now a little bit more difficult to keep the quality up because I guess in older times it was maybe easier to use all the materials and so. But I wish for the gardens that we can keep up a standard of quality and also artisanship. They are unique in the world, and actually I have started to investigate. I think it could be one of the—what is the terminology?— one of the World Heritage places which UNESCO recognizes? These World Heritage places are very popular in Europe because there is so much old architecture which is so unique and, but for example, Latvians have a collection of folks... well, they are called folk songs. They are really more like separate little poems which, I don't.... Fifty thousand or so. But they are handed down from generation to generation just aurally, and they are recognized as one of the World Heritage nonmaterial items. So I think that it would be worthwhile to investigate and I'm... Of course someone should do it, but I think they are so unique I don't... There is nothing like this any place in the world. So I'm, to go back to your question, I'm thinking of the gardens in plural as a wonderful example, really, of representing the cultures of a variety of nations. And going back to also the newer gardens, as some of the older gardens are getting more involved again. For example, the Hungarian Garden is redoing their garden and the Irish community, again, redesigned it and improved on their garden I think. So that is, I think, part of the revival of the Gardens which is happening right now.

**Matt Seaman** [00:39:02] You seem so personally invested in Latvian Garden. When it was finally up and you established it, can you describe your feelings for me? How was it for you seeing, you know, all the ten years and then finally it's up and it's beautiful and you can walk through it?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:39:31] Well, I was, of course, very gratified. But the main point is it was really not so much the garden as it was the people who supported it. And I was... That really was the greatest satisfaction. Plus, you know, our... And there are several people who were extremely, I mean really for our community, gave large amounts of money, but also our... It wasn't only the culture for us, really. It was also a little bit representing our country. And that is why we feel that the flags are so important and we feel that the Latvian, having the Latvian flag there is very important. And whenever we have any dignitaries coming to Cleveland, we try to arrange to visit the gardens and of course, specifically to Latvian Garden. And even if we can do it, you know, with some flowers that as a flag as sort of a celebration, that we do have a free and independent country again. And the most, well I suppose most famous was the president of Latvia, who came here and in the spring of 2008 and visited the Gardens. So that is really for us also a place of, well, of pride and of sort of national recognition that there is, you know, there are only a few places in the United States there's a Latvian flag flying on, you know, on public property. So there again, you know, it is something unique, and that is besides this cultural part, you know, that sort of representing our state, we feel is also another important part. And now we just on November 18th, we mark our Independence Day, so a few days before the 15th, we gathered and put the arrangement of flowers and wished Latvia well.

**Matt Seaman** [00:41:56] Thank you so much for doing this interview.

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:41:59] My pleasure.

**Matt Seaman** [00:42:00] Just one more, one more question for you. Dr. George Paris was the president of the Federation for many years. How do you see his contributions to the gardens, [from] where they were to where they are now?

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:42:17] I think he was very involved and he was very, really sort of intellectually involved with the Gardens. And his main contribution I see [is] that he tried to keep up the artistic standard as well as, well, the whole, you know, upkeep or repairs, which [were] needed, but he was very insistent that it had to be as close or actually corresponding to the original level. So I think that is how we... That was our guideline for our garden as well, that, you know, it had to be professional, it had to be professionally done. And I think I felt that it was his greatest contribution from my point of view.

**Matt Seaman** [00:43:18] Thank you so much. Kieth, do you have any further questions?

**Kieth Peppers** [00:43:22] I don't think I have any questions.

**Matt Seaman** [00:43:25] Okay. Great. Well, thanks again for doing this interview.

**Silvija Rutenbergs** [00:43:29] You're welcome.

**Matt Seaman** [00:43:30] And thank you. That's it. That's all.