

Latvian Cultural Association TILTS

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This article aims to introduce readers to the Latvian Cultural Association TILTS and to provide insights into the challenges of organizing Latvian cultural events and tours across the U.S. and Canada.

History

In 1968, a group of Latvians in Poughkeepsie, New York (less than a two-hour drive north of New York City) gathered locally to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of Latvia with a large event held at Vassar College, hoping to familiarize the American public with Latvia, at the time lost behind the Iron Curtain and largely forgotten in the West.

The event proved successful, and the organizers decided they should continue their work to foster awareness among the area's Latvians. Thus, TILTS formally began its work in 1969 as the "Poughkeepsie Latvian Association." As its activities expanded over a wider geographical area, covering the Hudson valley down to New York City, the association changed its name in 1988 to the "Mid-Hudson Latvian Association."

Leading up to Latvia's "Third National Awakening" of the 1980's, the association operated mainly in the vicinity of Poughkeepsie and New York City, organizing cultural and Latvian Independence Day (November 18th) events and actively participating in the defense of Latvian interests—demonstrations against Soviet Communism, letter-writing campaigns, and preparation and delivery of radio programs about Latvia.

A tenet of the association was that consciousness of one's roots was essential to preserving Latvian identity in exile. Thus, the association began informal contacts with Latvians in Soviet-occupied Latvia in the 1980s, at a time when the Latvian émigré community still saw only Communists, hence an enemy. Despite their inherently divisive nature, the initial visits of association members to Latvia nevertheless revealed how important such connections were to boost Latvian morale, foster unity, and strengthen hope for the future. At times these ties could be quite symbolic, as when a recording of Raimonds Pauls' song "Liepāja" was played during a 1980's November 18th event organized by TILTS. Pauls was Latvian composer and performer of popular music who was much beloved throughout the USSR and Eastern Europe.

Ties with Latvia became increasingly important to exile Latvian identity and flourished during the Awakening. TILTS became an official supporter of the Latvian Cultural Foundation (*Latvijas Kultūras fonds*, LKF, founded April 1987 and organized a visit to the USA for representatives of



Andris Padegs
(1929~2024)

the LKF: its head, Imants Ziedonis, Gunārs Janaišs, and Ieva Akurātere in January 1989. Working with the LKF, TILTS subsequently organized sending books to Latvia; under the leadership of Anita Padega Bataraga, TILTS collected and sent three shipping containers with books and magazines (in total over 100,000), which were then distributed to schools and libraries all across Latvia. The largest project TILTS undertook in support of the LKF was to procure and ship a newspaper printing plant to Latvia in 1991, at a cost of \$39,000 (over \$90,000 in 2026 dollars).

This was at a time when major Latvian exiles' political organizations were struggling with how to deal with the evolving situation in Latvia. Only a month earlier, in December 1988, the American Latvian Association (ALA) held a conference in Washington DC to define new priorities and strategies; it was a surprise to many when two members of the ("Communist") Popular Front of Latvia (*Latvijas Tautas fronte, LTF*, active 1988–1999), Sandra Kalniete and Edvīns Inkēns, attended, albeit without voting rights.

Returning to 1989, it was a seminal year in that TILTS representatives attended the National Awakening activist conference at the Gananoque resort (Ontario, Canada), held April 7–9, which gathered 23 representatives of LTF and representatives of Latvian exiles' organizations from the U.S. and Canada. TILTS representatives also participated in the LTF working group in New York.

Before the Awakening, TILTS' concerts and theatrical performances featured artists primarily from the U.S. and Canada, through with exceptions, such as an extensive tour for Australia's *Saules Josta* ensemble and then during the Awakening, with *Skandinieki* and other folklore ensembles. The declared restoration of Latvia's independence in 1990 (and recognized by the USSR in 1991) opened a new chapter in the association's history. In order to more formally reflect the changing nature of the association and its new efforts to cooperate "across the pond" with Latvia in the field of culture, in November 1993 the association accepted the proposal of then chairman Ģirts Zeidenbergs to change its name to "Latvian Cultural Association TILTS" (*tilts* meaning "bridge"), or simply "TILTS."

Current activities

TILTS is a non-profit organization incorporated in the U.S. with the aim of supporting Latvian culture and education both in Latvia and the diaspora, as described in its statutes:

- To promote the preservation of the identity of the Latvian people both in Latvia and abroad, placing special emphasis on supporting the efforts of schools and young people in Latvia.
- To introduce Americans to Latvia and its achievements.
- To build a bridge between the Latvian people in Latvia and the diaspora in the field of culture.

Related activities are carried out by a large board, elected annually, and which works without remuneration. The board has at time included more than 100 individuals from Latvian centers in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Australia, as including. This network of board members selects artists and organizes tours. One or more board members are responsible for each major

project, such as a tour, with others assisting as needed. Some projects are ongoing, such as TILTS' Outstanding Young Talent Fund. Others address specific needs, such as computerization of the Latvian History Museum, completed in 1999. TILTS' current chairman is Ģirts Zeidenbergs; former chairmen include : Jānis Aperāns, Edmunds Brigmanis, Ints Dzelzgalvis, Andris Padegs, Jānis Siliņš and Māris Stūrāns.

Building on Awakening cooperation with Latvia, TILTS launched a project in 1994 to improve Latvian schools. Over the following 15 years, led by Lauma Upelniece Katis, Pēteris Zariņš and Edīte Irbe in cooperation with the Latvian school management, TILTS sent about 500 computers and other teaching aids worth about \$350,000 to about 150 Latvian schools as well as three Latvian schools in Siberia. Initially, TILTS' agreement with the Latvian Ministry of Education stipulated that TILTS would supply computers while the Ministry of Education would take care of their installation. Later, TILTS sent computers directly to schools requesting them, especially in less well-off areas outside the big cities.

The TILTS Outstanding Young Talent Fund, which launched in 1997 and is still operating under the leadership of Laila Robiņa, has supported the education of more than 30 young Latvian artists at Western universities and conservatories, awarding them a total of over \$150,000 in scholarships and school expenses. TILTS special projects have included support for Anna Gigure's books "Viņi. Ceļā" (*They. On the Road*, 2009) and "Viņi. Svešos pagalmos" (*They. In Foreign Forecourts*, 2012)



TILTS Senior Vice President Dace Aperāne and Treasurers Jānis Melgalvis and Juris Baidiņš

about the Displaced Persons' (DP) camps, and support for the International Master Courses for Young Latvian Musicians, which take place every other year in Latvia.

The mid-summer assembly of world Latvians in Rīga, organized by TILTS, has almost become a tradition, bringing together 200 to 400 Latvian visitors and their relatives and friends. TILTS publishes an annual report on the previous year's activities in Latvian and English.

In recent years, TILTS has had 300-400 members. TILTS receives about \$14,000 in annual fees and general donations. Funds for special projects are collected separately from donations for general activities. Donations can be directed to support specific schools, special projects, and ongoing projects including (as of 2026) the Young Outstanding Talent Fund and Musical Camp Fund. Income for the Young Outstanding Talent Fund is also generated through charity concerts, including two concerts by Gidon Kremer with his orchestra "Kremerata" in 2002 and

2004. The Young Outstanding Talent Fund also receives significant donations from outside the Latvian community.

In 2013, TILTS' total income was \$57,170, with \$4,733 spent on administration and fundraising, including the publication and distribution of the annual report. Much of tours' finances are depend on other than TILTS' box office; by prior arrangement partner show organizers often pay royalties and travel expenses directly to the artists. If TILTS' income were to include all tour travel expenses and royalties (but not the performance budget), TILTS' 2013 income would have been \$87,893 of which the administration and donation collection expenses share would be 5.4%. TILTS ranks among the most cost-effective U.S. charities.

TILTS works with Latvian government institutions (including the Ministry of Culture; the Embassies to the United States and to the United Nations; and the state body responsible for awarding Latvia's national orders and decorations), as well as with the World Federation of Free Latvians (*Pasaules brīvo latviešu apvienība*, PBLA), the American Latvian Association (*Amerikas Latviešu apvienība*, ALA), and *Daugavas Vanagi* ("Hawks of the Daugava," DV).

Organizing tours

One of TILTS' main activities since its inception has been the organization of theatrical and musical tours for Latvian centers in the U.S. and Canada. TILTS is the primary organizer of such tours. In recent years many tours are of artists from Latvia, connecting them to audiences in the diaspora.

TILTS hosts the overall tour; individual performances in each location are organized by local Latvian societies which provide premises, arrange accommodation and reception for artists, as well as determine the price of entrance to the performance. TILTS' main tasks are:

- **Choice of ensemble.** Artists occasionally apply to TILTS, but for the most part the choice is made on the basis of reviews and personal contacts. There are several important rules for theatrical performances: you need a suitable play, props should be minimal, and owing to travel expenses, it is important that the ensemble not be large—no more than 5 or 6 people. Several TILTS board members personally watch a theatrical performance in Latvia before considering an ensemble for a tour. In planning concert tours, TILTS solicits input from Latvian concert associations on potential performing artists.
- **Identification of centers and development of a plan.** As the ensemble and possible schedule is negotiated, the tour manager develops a possible sequence of routes and performances and reaches out to organizations in Latvian centers. The possible date, duration and finances of the tour determine at the outset how extensive a U.S. tour can be—whether or not it can include both coasts and how many cities in the mid-America and/or Canada. Travel time and possible specific wishes of artists must be accounted for. TILTS handles overall advertising.
- **Budgeting.** Shows increasingly fail to cover associated expenses. TILTS attempts to balance the total income and expenses of the tour, but shortfalls often run into several thousand dollars. The main expenses are transport on planes and cars, royalties, visa and petition expenses, advertisements and accommodation in hotels. As a rule, locals in Latvian centers

welcome artists to stay with them for free, but this is not possible in stop-overs between venues. Tour income consists of fees paid by the Latvian centers, typically around \$1,500 per performance, sometimes more, often less.

- **Preparation of the U.S. entry petition.** In recent years, the U.S. government and trade unions have demanded very detailed information about the planned tour before issuing an entry permit and visa. TILTS submits the entry petition and secures work visas and medical insurance.

TILTS organizes several tours per year. In order to justify high travel expenses from Latvia, each ensemble ideally holds at least 10-12 events. For individual musicians, who might only be available for a shorter period of time, a tour can cover several cities in a limited area. The budget for a full theater tour with 4-6 people is up to \$35,000, not including finances of individual locales. With large ensembles, such as the tour organized in 2000 with the Rīga Dome Boys Choir under the leadership of Astra Zemzare, the budget was over \$90,000. This tour was especially appreciated by the American public and was particularly significant in enhancing Latvia's image among the world's musicians.

Recent tours

TILTS tries to organize at least one theatrical tour per year. Since 2000, they have usually been ensembles from Latvia. Board member Marcis Voldiņš organizes TILTeS' theatrical tours.



TILTS Board Chair Girts Zeidenbergs and Senior Vice President Dace Aperāne

TILTS maintains contacts with all popular, as well as lesser-known, theatres in Latvia. In recent years, numerous ensemble have visited America: from the National Theatre (Gunārs Priede's *Zilā*, "In the Blue," in 2006, Inta Tirole's solo performances in 2003, Pauls Putniņš' *Kvēli ilgotā*, "Fervent Desire," in 2002), Dailes Theatre (Raimonds Staprāns' *Gūsteknis pilī*, "Prisoner in the Palace," in 2012, Jānis Jurkāns' *Dzīvīte*, *dzīvīte*, "Life, life" in 2007, Māra Zālīte's *Zemes nodoklis*, "Land tax," in 2004), Liepāja Theatre (Miro Gavrana's *Viss par vīriešiem*, "Everything About Men," in

2009), Valmiera Drama Theatre (Anšlavs Eglītis' *Bezkaunīgie veci*, "Shameless Old Men," in 2013), New Rīga Theatre (Jānis Tatje's *Brīvais kritiens*, "Free Fall," in 2001), and Māra Theatre (Lelde Stumbra's *Kronis*, "Crown," twice, in 2008 and 2011). The exception was *Mazais Teātris*'s, the "Little Theatre's," San Francisco tour with native Californian Raimonds Staprāns' play *Meli un to piedošana*, "Lies and their Forgiveness," in 2008.

Classical music artists' tours are organized by Dace Aperāne, with assistance from other board members. TILTS has worked closely with the Latvian Embassy and Ambassador to the U.S. (Andrejs Pildegovičs in 2015) to ensure so that visiting artists can also contribute to representing Latvia to wider audiences, for example, the concerts of the well-known Latvian pianist Vestards Šimkus (Vestard Shimkus) in 2010 and the concert of the Latvian violinist Vineta Sareika at the Kennedy Center in 2008.

Some others in recent years events with prominent Latvian artists: organist Kristīne Adamaite and saxophonist Artis Šīmanis (2013), performance of *Pasaka par ziediem*, "A Tale of Flowers," by Anna Saxe and Valta Pūce with flautist Dita Krenbergs, pianist Valta Pūcis and actor Gundars Clover, organized in cooperation with *Latvijas Koncertiem*, "For Latvia's Concerts" (2012), composer and pianist Pēteris Plakidis (2011), Latvian pianist from Chile Armands Ābols (2009), whose tour was organized by Astra Zemzare, and the women's vocal ensemble *Putni*, "Birds," with a 15-city tour, organized with the assistance of Līga Aldiņa (2006). There have also been tours with Latvian musicians living in the U.S., including violinist Una Tone (2012) and mezzo-soprano Laila Saliņš (2011).

Over the decade from the RIX Piano Quartet's nine-concert tour in 2004 to the Amber Flute Quartet's nine-concert tour in 2014, TILTS organized a total of 16 classical music tours. While Latvian theater and other spoken performances are limited to a Latvian audience, TILTS' classical music tours appeal to and are often also organized for American and Canadian audiences.

There is always great enthusiasm for the popular music concerts, which are usually organized by Jānis Students, formerly together with Jānis Bībelnieks. In recent years, all the artists have been from Latvia, including *Lauku muzikanti*, "Countryside Musicians," with Normunds Ķietis and Inita Āboliņa (2012 and 2005) and the classic schlager group *Zēlli*, "The Chaps" (2007). TILTS has organized three very popular tours for the ensemble *Trīs Tenori*, "The Three Tenors," featuring Latvian National Opera soloists Miervaldis Jenčs, Nauris Puntulis and Guntars Ruņģis, accompanied by Gints Bērziņš; the last tour taken place in 2009 with 18 concerts. Marija Naumova's concert tour in 2003 was notable for having a larger than usual audience of post-Soviet era "new" diaspora—individuals and families who have transplanted from Latvia in recent years. people who had arrived from Latvia in recent years. An ethnographic trio tour organized by Maruta Kārkle, featuring Ivars Cinkuss, Zane Šmite, Kristīne Kārkle and Edgars Kārklis, took place in 2013; concerts by the folklore ensemble *Teiksma*, "Legend," were held in 2010 and 2013, and by *Vilki*, "Wolves," in 2006.

Target audience and touring logistics

While TILTS strives to bring awareness of Latvian culture to a wider audience, its core audience remains those with Latvian roots, with the goal to foster cultural connection and appreciation.

The majority of TILTS tour audiences come from or are directly connected to the post-Second World War "exile" generations, *trimdinieki*. Estimates are that there are less than 100,000 individuals of self-identified Latvian heritage in the U.S. [The current estimate as of 2026 is approximately 85,000.] The map below shows the twenty most populous centers with a large enough potential Latvian audience to be a candidate for a TILTS-organized tour.



Twenty most populous Latvian centers in North America (the U.S. and Canada)

The largest audience turn-out can be expected in Toronto, around 200. The Latvian population

Example: Audience in 14 Latvian centers for Raimonds Staprāns' play *The Prisoner in the Castle*, performed by Dailies Theatre from 20 August to 20 September 2012, **Total: 1,283.**

Portland	48	Cleveland	81
Seattle	68	Indianapolis.....	31
San Francisco	92	Toronto	182
Los Angeles.....	98	Boston.....	127
Minneapolis.....	77	New York	104
Detroit	66	Washington DC ...	113
Kalamazoo.....	93	Priedaine.....	101

in the New York metropolitan area is larger but with more available event venues: Long Island, New York City (mainly Manhattan), Yonkers, and a bit further away, the *Priedaine* (“The Pines”) Latvian American cultural center in Freehold, New Jersey. The audience here tends to attend events held closest to home, under 100 attendees and in cases seating for less than 50. Owing to the time and funds which would be required, no tour can encompass all possible Latvian venues.

We usually expect the total number of spectators for a tour with a theatrical performance to be over 1000; one of the largest in recent years was the 2013 tour with Anšlavs Eglīšs' “Shameless Old Men” performed by Valmiera Drama Theatre, where the performance was seen by a total audience of about 1,600 in 14 cities.

East Coast locales – Boston, New York, Priedaine, Philadelphia, Washington – are a few hundred kilometers or less from each other and are easily accessible by car. As far west as Chicago and environs is still accessible, although one has to take into account that the drive from New York to Chicago takes at least a full day. Travel to Lincoln, Denver, cities on the West Coast, or St. Petersburg in Florida requires flying, substantially increasing costs.

Sample traveling distances for multi-city tours (kilometers):

New York – Boston.....	350
New York – Washington DC ..	365
New York – St. Petersburg .	1,850
New York – Chicago	1,270
Chicago – Denver	1,615
New York – San Francisco ..	4,680

These logistical considerations constrain a typical one-month tour to a maximum of 14-15 cities. Theatrical performances bring additional challenges with the transportation of scenery and props, requiring renting larger vehicles for ground transport for actors and props. Tours including plane travel add extra baggage fees or air freight requirements, additional insurance for costumes and props, and so on.

Tour finances

Almost no tour with Latvian cultural events can now cover its expenses because of the small audience size. One of the most popular events is tours with performances of the Latvian theatre ensemble, but these tours can also cover their expenses only in exceptional cases where there is a well-known play with a small number of actors. There have been no such tours in recent years. For example:

- For the 2013 tour with Anšlavs Eglītis' *Shameless Old Men* performed by Valmiera Drama Theatre, expenses were \$27,645 and income from 14 performances was \$20,325. The difference was covered by ALA (\$5,000) and TILTS (\$2,315).
- For the 2012 tour of Raimonds Staprans' play *Prisoner in the Palace*, the Daile Theatre's performance was \$33,471 and the income from 14 performances was \$20,000. The shortfall was covered by ALA (\$5,000), Latvian Foundation (\$4,650), Latvian Culture Capital Foundation (\$1,429) and TILTS (\$4,921).
- For the 2012 tour with writer Anne Saxe's musical performance *A Tale of Flowers*, expenses were \$15,825 and income from five performances was around \$5500. The shortfall was covered by a fund in memory of Ruth Ravine (\$5310) and TILTS (about \$5000).

TILTS attempts to include smaller Latvian centers in tours as well, but this is difficult to achieve: large centers cannot be replaced by small ones, because small ones cannot afford an average fee of \$1500 per show, and usually the tour cannot be extended because of limited time. It takes 60 viewers for \$25 to cover the cost of the show, and usually organizers have to take into account other expenses as well, such as renting a room and hosting artists. Performances in small centers are sometimes partially covered by special support from ALAs.

The tour manager and local show organizers always try to arrange accommodation for artists for free in the homes of locals, but this is increasingly difficult to do. A hotel stay requires at least \$120 per day for a room for two people (the business trip allowance allowed in Latvia is around \$250 per day per person!). This means that for an ensemble of six people a one-month hotel can easily cost \$10,000, assuming all artists can be accommodated in two rooms, and not counting meals or other travel-related expenses. [2015 prices]

It should also be taken into account that Latvian artists, especially theatre actors, receive very small royalties for performing on American tours; their royalties are usually a small portion of the total tour budget. TILTS tries to bring together quality ensembles and artists for whom profit is not the main goal of the American tour. Therefore, TILTS is grateful to artists from Latvia who are willing to give high-quality performances without asking for “market price.” On the “Prisoner in the Palace” tour, the royalty for each actor came out \$71 per show (there

was no extra charge for food). If a higher royalty could be afforded, TILTS would have access to a wider range of suitable theatrical performances for a tour.

Sources of funding include:

- **The American Latvian Association (ALA)** has recently supported two TILTS tours a year with \$5,000 each. This is vital support, yet it still limits tours to small ensembles that visit only the largest Latvian centers.
- **The Latvian Foundation (LF)** has given up to \$5,000 in support in recent years, but this is not something TILTS can count on because all LF members vote for on allocations of support individually, thus there is no guarantee of tourfunding.
- **TILTS** has contributed several thousand dollars each from its treasury to most tours in recent years. This money comes from donations to TILTS and annual fees of TILTS participants, limiting TILTS' ability to financially support tours.
- **The Latvian State Culture Capital Foundation** has supported the travel of some artists to the U.S.s, but most of the tours organized by TILTS have not had access to this support.

U.S. Entry Formalities

While tourists from Latvia can now enter the U.S. without visas, there are strict requirements for foreign artists performing in America – they need consent from a union of actors or musicians, permission from the Department of Homeland Security and a work visa. The request form for the Department of Homeland Security requires very detailed information and can cover 40 or more pages. The service of a professional lawyer would require thousands of dollars to prepare and file such a petition; in order to save money, TILTS handles the petition on its own. Normally, the petition process takes about half a year, requiring \$1,550 for an expedited permit. This becomes a practical necessity to shorten the period between completing tour planning and obtaining visa approval, only after which a tour can begin to be advertised. [As of March 2026, the fee for an expedited P-3 visa, “Artist or Entertainer Coming to Be Part of a Culturally Unique Program,” will rise from \$2,805 to \$2,965. A single application covers the entire touring group.] Not only is obtaining an entry permit a tortuous process, but there is no guarantee of approval; and the petition process has no mechanism for contacting the authorizing party or parties.

Also driving the need for expedited permits is that the agreements with actors or musicians on a tour are typically concluded less than half a year before the start of the tour. But even when paying for expedited processing, deadlines are never clear. A prime example of the laborious nature of the process was the case with the actors of the play *Paris-Rīga-Paris* in August 2014.

When consent was received from the actors' union on July 23, TILTS filed a petition with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office, paying the expedited response fee. In order to ensure a quick response, TILTS (through the Latvian Embassy in the USA) also approached the Latvian Desk of the U.S. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asking for help for the assessment as soon as possible. On August 13, TILTS received a request for additional information—proof that the show was ethnically unique and other documents. TILTS provided these within two days, including a letter with a detailed explanation from the Latvian Ministry of Culture. A response

was now expected 15 days later—on August 30. But the actors were supposed to depart Rīga on August 20!

After persistent attempts, Ģirts Zeidenbergs finally reached the TILTS application evaluator in Vermont by phone and received a positive response by email on August 18. On August 19, the actors completed their request for a work visa at the computer of the U.S. consul in Rīga, but an answer could not be received until the following day, since before issuing the visa, the computer system had to confirm information about the actors across various U.S. information and security databases. The U.S. consul in Rīga was so accommodating he came in to work on August 20 at seven in the morning to discharge the actors' visas so they could board their flight *two hours later* at nine.

Concluding reflections

TILTS remains committed to organizing tours of Latvian culture across the U.S. and Canada. We sustain the Latvian environment cherished by earlier generations of exiles and provide a cultural anchor for a new generation of immigrants.

Our work, however, faces persistent and significant financial challenges. Unlike domestic events, these tours involve transatlantic travel for artists, complex entry procedures, and an audience scattered across a vast continent. Consequently, even with paid admission and the voluntary efforts of organizers, ticket revenue consistently falls short of expenses. Performers themselves participate largely as a gift to the Latvian community, often for minimal remuneration. Historically, diaspora Latvian organizations have stepped in to cover this financial deficit.

During Latvia's time of need, TILTS directed resources wherever needed to aid the recovery of the country's cultural infrastructure—and continues to support cultural activities in Latvia. With Latvia economically and financially stabilized, the time has come for a reciprocal commitment, for Latvia to financially support diaspora compatriots in preserving their Latvian identity.

[As of 2026, both the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Culture provide support to diaspora cultural organizations and to projects preserving Latvian diaspora history.]

Translated with annotations. January 2026, Pēters Vecrumba