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All roads lead to the Pansionāts: State care as a socio-spatial fix
in an emptying rural Latvia

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Zusammenfassung

Diese Dissertation untersucht mit einem ethnografischen Ansatz, wie Pflege und Leere in einem Pflegeheim für ältere Menschen, das lokal als *Pansionāts* bezeichnet wird, im heutigen Lettland ineinandergreifen.

In einer ländlichen Region gelegen, die durch Bevölkerungsrückgang aufgrund von Abwanderung und Überalterung gekennzeichnet ist, fragt die Dissertation: 1. welche Rolle solche Pflegeeinrichtungen im Leben vor Ort spielen; 2. wie das Altern angesichts der Besorgnis über den Bevölkerungsrückgang und die Zukunft Lettlands verstanden und bewertet wird; und 3. wie Bewohner:innen, Mitarbeiter:innen und Einheimische die Pflege innerhalb und außerhalb der Einrichtung erleben und gestalten; und 4. was Leere an diesem Ort und für diese Menschen bedeutet.

Ausgehend von einer langjährigen ethnografischen Feldforschung (2020–2024) erkundet die Dissertation, wie das *Pansionāts* – oft als Symbol persönlichen und nationalen Niedergangs angesehen – auch als ein wichtiger Anker für die Kontinuität eines Ortes und des Lebens auf dem Land dient. Während es in erster Linie als eine Einrichtung für ältere Menschen und Menschen mit Behinderungen ist, fungiert das *Pansionāts* ebenso als ein lokaler Angelpunkt, der Arbeitsplätze schafft, Kleinbauern unterstützt und soziale und wirtschaftliche Bindungen aufrechterhält. Für die Bewohner:innen ist es ein Ort des Verlusts und der Langeweile, aber auch der Sicherheit und Gemeinschaft. Für die Angestellten und die umliegende Gemeinde erzeugt es Stabilität und Sinn unter prekären Verhältnissen.

In konzeptueller Hinsicht behandelt die Dissertation Pflege als einen Prozess der gesellschaftlichen Organisation und begreift Leere sowohl als demografische Realität als auch als bewertender Vorbehalt, durch den Niedergang empfunden und gedeutet wird. Anhand nationaler Ängste, ländlicher Infrastrukturen, institutioneller Routinen und der Zeitlichkeit des hohen Alters stellt sie dar, wie Leere und Pflege sich fortlaufend gegenseitig beeinflussen. Diese Dynamiken zeigen sich auch in der Art und Weise, wie Menschen sich inmitten der Leere mit der Gestaltung eines Ortes befassen: kleine Akte der Geselligkeit, die Sorge um die Infrastruktur und alltägliche Praktiken im *Pansionāts* machen den Ort lebenswert, auch wenn er in der Öffentlichkeit als peripher oder im Abstieg befindlich dargestellt wird. Zusammengenommen beleuchten diese Muster das *Pansionāts* als einen sozio-räumlichen Fix – als eine Formation, die das Leben vor Ort stabilisiert, indem sie sich um diejenigen kümmert, die als „unproduktiv“ oder außerhalb der Zukunft der Nation stehend betrachtet werden. Diese rekursive Abhängigkeit, bei der der demografische Rückgang die Einrichtung füllt und die

Einrichtung diese Bewohner:innen zu einem Faktor lokaler Stabilität macht, steht im Mittelpunkt der Argumentation.

Indem sie die institutionelle Pflege neupositioniert – von einem marginalen Überbleibsel des Wohlfahrtsstaats zu einer zentralen Infrastruktur, durch die der demografische Wandel, wirtschaftliche Unsicherheit und moralische Fragen des Anspruchs gelebt und bewältigt werden – trägt die Dissertation zu anthropologischen Debatten über Pflege, Altern und gesellschaftliche Reproduktion bei. Sie zeigt, dass an Orten, die als leer betrachtet werden, bescheidene Praktiken der Versorgung und Beständigkeit das soziale Leben aufrechterhalten und Kontinuität ermöglichen.

Abstract

This dissertation ethnographically examines how care and emptiness intertwine in contemporary Latvia at a care home for older adults locally called the Pansionāts.

Set in a rural region marked by demographic decline resulting from outmigration and an aging population, the thesis asks: 1) what role such care institutions play in local life; 2) how aging is understood and valued amid concerns about population decline and the future of Latvia; 3) how residents, staff, and locals experience and shape care within and beyond the institution; 4) and what is emptiness in this place and for these people.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork (2020–2024), the dissertation traces how the Pansionāts – often imagined as a symbol of personal and national demise – also serves as a crucial anchor for continuity of place and life in the countryside. While primarily an institution for older adults and people with disabilities, it also functions as a local hub, providing employment, sustaining smallholder farms, and maintaining social and economic ties. For residents, it is a space of loss and boredom yet also of safety and companionship. For employees and the surrounding community, it generates stability and meaning under precarious conditions.

Conceptually, the dissertation approaches care as a process of social organization and understands emptiness as both a demographic reality and an evaluative condition through which decline is sensed and interpreted. Moving across national anxieties, rural infrastructures, institutional routines, and late-life temporalities, it shows how emptiness and care continually shape each other. These dynamics also appear in how people engage in place-making amid emptiness: small acts of sociality, concerns about infrastructure, and everyday practices at the Pansionāts make the locality livable even as it is publicly cast as peripheral or declining. Taken together, these patterns illuminate the Pansionāts as a socio-spatial fix – a formation that stabilizes local life by caring for those imagined as “unproductive” or outside the nation’s future. This recursive dependence, where demographic decline fills the institution and the institution converts this population into local stability, is central to the argument.

By repositioning institutional care from a marginal residue of the welfare state to a central infrastructure through which demographic change, economic uncertainty, and moral questions of deservingness are lived and managed, the dissertation contributes to anthropological debates on care, aging, and social reproduction. It shows that in places imagined as empty, modest practices of maintenance and endurance sustain social life and make continuity possible.

Kopsavilkums

Šajā promocijas darbā ar etnogrāfisko metodi pētīts, kā Latvijā ilgstošas sociālās aprūpes un sociālās rehabilitācijas institūcijā jeb pansionātā mūsdienās mijiedarbojas aprūpe un tukšošana.

Veicot pētījumu lauku apvidū, kurā novērojama emigrācijas un iedzīvotāju novecošanās izraisīta demogrāfiskā lejupslīde, vaicāju 1) kāda loma šādai aprūpes iestādei ir vietējo cilvēku dzīvē; 2) kā novecošanās tiek uztverta un vērtēta saistībā ar bažām par iedzīvotāju skaita samazināšanos un Latvijas nākotni; 3) kā pansionāta iemītnieki, personāls un vietējie iedzīvotāji uztver un veido aprūpi un rūpes iestādē un ārpus tās; un 4) ko tukšums nozīmē vietējiem cilvēkiem.

Balstoties ilgtermiņa etnogrāfiskā lauka darbā (2020–2024), promocijas darbs rāda, kā pansionāts, kas bieži iztēlots kā personiskas un nacionālas iznīcības simbols, vienlaikus kļūst par būtisku enkuru vietas un dzīves nepārtrauktībai laukos. Lai gan formāli būdama iestāde vecāka gadagājuma cilvēkiem un cilvēkiem ar invaliditāti, tā darbojas arī kā vietējais centrs, nodrošinot darbavietas, atbalstot mazos zemniekus un uzturot sociālās un ekonomiskās saites. Pansionāta iedzīvotājiem tā ir vieta, kur līdzās zaudējumiem un garlaicībai pastāv drošība un sociālās saites. Darbiniekiem un apkārtējai sabiedrībai tas rada stabilitāti un jēgu nedrošos apstākļos.

Konceptuāli disertācijā aprūpe tiek aplūkota kā sociālās organizācijas process, savukārt tukšošana gan kā demogrāfiska realitāte, gan kā vērtējošs apstāklis, caur kuru tiek uztverts un interpretēts sabiedrības novecošanās process. Pievēršoties nacionālā mēroga demogrāfiskām bažām, lauku infrastruktūrai, institucionālai rutīnai un vēlīnas dzīves temporalitātei, promocijas darbs rāda iztukšošanās un aprūpes nesaraucamu mijiedarbību. Šī dinamika atklājas cilvēku iesaistē tukšošana skartas vietas veidošanā, veicot nelielas socialitāti veidojošas darbības un/vai rūpes par infrastruktūru. Šādas ikdienas prakses padara pansionātu un apkaimi ap to dzīvojamo, pat ja publiskajā telpā šī vieta tiek raksturota kā nomaļa vai panīkusi. Minētās iezīmes izgaismo pansionātu kā sociāli telpisku “fīksu” (fix – angļu val.) – veidojumu, kas stabilizē vietējo dzīvi, rūpējoties par tiem, kurus nacionālā diskursā iztēlo kā “neproduktīvus” vai nepiederošus nācijas nākotnei. Šāda rekursīvā savstarpējā atkarība, kur demogrāfiskā lejupslīde piepilda institūciju un institūcija šo iedzīvotāju grupu pārvērš vietējā stabilitātē, ir galvenais disertācijas arguments.

Promocijas darbs paplašina antropoloģiskās debates par aprūpi, rūpēm, novecošanu un sociālo reprodukciju, pārvietojot institucionālo aprūpi valsts labklājības infrastruktūrā no

perifēras funkcijas līmenī, kurā tiek izdzīvotas un pārvaldītas demogrāfiskās pārmaiņas, ekonomiskā nenoteiktība un risināti morālie jautājumi, kurš ir vai nav pelnījis aprūpi. Tas parāda, ka vietās, kuras tiek iztēlotas kā tukšas, pieticīgas ikdienas rūpes un spēja izturēt sarežģījumus uztur sociālo dzīvi un padara tās nepārtrauktību iespējamu.

In memory of my beloved grandparents
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1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical stance: Anthropology of care, emptiness, and aging

As I was standing in a third-floor hallway in the eldercare home locally called the “*Pansionāts*,” Eduards, a resident of eleven years, came past, whistling. I did not recognize the tune, so I asked what this song – which I would later learn he had sung with the choir at the fiberglass factory where he worked – was about. He looked at me with a mysterious expression and a slight grin. “About youth! Love. A journey. And how it’s all gone now.” After pausing for a second, he continued. “You see, that’s life – all roads lead to the *Pansionāts*.” When I asked what this meant, he replied with another question: “Do you know the proverb that all roads lead to Rome?” I nodded. He smiled – “It’s the same here. All roads lead to the *Pansionāts*,” – and headed into his room for a nap.

I carried Eduards’s words with me throughout my fieldwork. At the time, I was struck by the matter-of-fact way he said them. This was neither a grand statement about rural decline nor a nostalgic lament, but simply what life looked like for someone who had lived in the *Pansionāts* for eleven years and made this place his home. In his words, there was humor and practical wisdom about how local lives converged in that institution. Only later did I begin to hear its deeper resonance, not only with individual trajectories but the *Pansionāts*’ place in the wider landscape.

Within a few weeks, we had gotten to know each other better and returned to that brief exchange in the hallway. Eduards, who had spent his entire life in villages near the *Pansionāts*, explained the saying in two ways. First, it spoke to the certainty that almost everyone will need a care home or assisted living at some point. Second, the *Pansionāts* was among the largest institutions and employers in this rural area, so all roads both literally and metaphorically led both residents and potential long-term employees to the *Pansionāts*. Some came there to live and some to work; several care workers did both. Lives converged around the care home.

Eduards’s perspective is crucial here but can be extended further. In this thesis, I show that the proverb carried a third, combined, meaning. The *Pansionāts* had become a local nexus: an anchor of economic and social life. It was not just a workplace and an institution of care but also a site where formal and informal economies met; where social distances were shortened and new ones created. On the one hand, it compensated for the sense of emptiness pressing in on the rural landscape; on the other, it remained bound to the very image of emptiness itself as it was not a factory or other institution capable of drawing people in from outside but a care home for older people with roots there.

The Pansionāts' primary task was caring for older adults, people with disabilities, and those struggling with various other disorders like addiction, but its influence extended far beyond its walls. In many ways, it mattered as much to employees as to residents, maybe even more. It provided stability and maintained a form of continuity, albeit one whose trajectory was ill-aligned with people's hopes or the futures they envisioned for themselves and the place they inhabited. I return to this tension throughout this thesis: since the stability was only sustained through a form of interdependence, the institution could only serve as a local anchor because it relied on a steady inflow of those in need of care – older adults and others often cast in public discourse as “burdens” or “challenges.” Their presence, in turn, became the very resource that sustained local life.

For residents, the Pansionāts's meaning was ambivalent: it was a place of loss, boredom, and loneliness, but also of relief, safety, and companionship. For workers, it meant income, belonging, togetherness, and stability – but sometimes also frustration. For the surrounding community, it was at once central and marginal, sustaining and emptying. Thus, this thesis is deliberately full of contradictions and offers no neat, black-and-white “diagnosis” of what the Pansionāts was and still is. Instead, it is a story of a place and of people living amidst intersecting forces of demographic aging, depopulation, precarity, marginalization, and hope. The main research questions that have guided me, then, are:

1. What role does a care home play in an emptying rural area?
2. How is aging understood and valued in relation to broader concerns about decline and the future of rural Latvia?
3. How do residents, staff, and locals experience and negotiate care within and beyond the institution?
4. What is emptiness in this place and for these people?

The goal of this study is to examine how institutional eldercare operates as a form of social, economic, and spatial organization in an emptying rural area of Latvia. Through long-term ethnographic research at a municipal care home, the Pansionāts, the study aims to analyze how state care both responds to and shapes conditions of demographic decline, aging, and perceived emptiness. By attending to how care is practiced, experienced, and valued by residents, staff, and local people, the study seeks to rethink the position of eldercare within rural life and local futures.

These questions and the goal of the study emerge from and contribute to long-standing anthropological debates on care, social reproduction, and decline. Anthropologists have long been concerned with how societies sustain life through care, reproduction, and social support. From feminist political theory to ethnographies of aging, disability, and health, care has been

approached as a moral and political practice (Tronto 1993) or practical morality-in-action (Mol 2008); as a set of everyday practices that form the complex forms of kinship, often pointing to precarious, exhausting, and ambivalent qualities of care (e.g. Carsten 2000; Garcia 2010; Han 2012; Heinemann 2014; Block 2014); and as an ontological principle of social life, including kinship (Borneman 1997). Such kinship-making practices are not confined to humans: Govindrajana (2018) has demonstrated how care extends across species, showing how interspecies intimacies between humans and animals sustain cultural identity and political belonging.

Eduards's remark that "all roads lead to the Pansionāts" was not a reflection on moral ideals but on the lived reality and the practical ways lives became entangled in and around the Pansionāts. Anthropological and feminist scholarship, however, has often approached care primarily as a moral or political value. A foundational point of departure for these debates is Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher's definition of care as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (1990, 40). However, they also acknowledge an important characteristic of care: that it is rarely a "gracefully unfolding" process, but rather "contains different components that often clash with each other" (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40). This expansive definition treats care as both practice and ethic, directed not only toward people but also toward environments, infrastructures, and collective worlds. Fisher and Tronto also identify four phases of care – caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving – each linked to ethical qualities of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (ibid. 1990). Crucially, Tronto has also framed care as not a private or feminine virtue but a political ethic that ought to organize democratic societies (1993). This intervention shifted it out of the domestic sphere and into broader debates about citizenship, politics, and power, and it has been central for framing care as a moral and civic ideal. These perspectives highlight the ethical and political significance of care; however, in this thesis, care appears less as an ideal and more as a contradictory process: it sustains people and places, but often under conditions of scarcity, boredom, and disinvestment.

Building on and critiquing Tronto's understanding of care, anthropologists have shown that care is never an ethical ideal alone, but also an ambivalent and contested practice. Scholars have examined how it can be a site of coercion, violence, abandonment, or exclusion as much as of nurture, protection, and maintenance. Buch (2013) demonstrates how commodified eldercare in the United States is shaped by market logics, producing precarious and undervalued forms of labor. Stevenson (2014), writing on tuberculosis and suicide epidemics among Canadian Inuit, highlights the ambivalence of care – its intentions, practices, and outcomes –

to show how state policies were adapted to populations but not individuals. Here, care became a formal and performative act rather than a practice addressing those in need. Similarly, Biehl (2009) and Nguyen (2010) trace how AIDS therapies and triage create politics of exclusion that often transform care into its performance. In Biehl's case, treatment was available only to those who could conform to institutional norms and become "good" patient-citizens. Nguyen shows how international aid agencies in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire privileged those willing to publicly narrate their "AIDS story." Rebecca Kay's (2011) research on social care in rural Russia illustrates how access was shaped by local moral definitions of deservingness: those regarded as self-sufficient were seemed worthy of support, while others were blamed for their poverty and exclusion. These ethnographies demonstrate how belonging and exclusion are produced through the distribution of care. During my fieldwork as well, such dynamics surfaced in everyday practices: when aspects typically associated with "good" state care, such as privacy, were scarce, staff allocated limited resources like single rooms based on their personal judgments of residents' moral deservingness. This parallel underscores how deeply care is implicated in politics, inequality, and moral hierarchies and that it must be approached as a site of power and ambivalence rather than simply as a virtue.

At the same time, scholarship on decline, abandonment, and emptiness has traced how demographic loss and structural precarity shape not only how people live but also how they imagine the future (e.g. Dzenovska 2018a; Ringel 2014; Navaro-Yashin 2012). This thesis engages both of these conversations while focusing on what happens when care and emptiness intersect in institutional eldercare. To situate my argument, I first turn to the broader scholarship that has examined care as practice and politics, and emptiness as a condition and form of life. This literature provides the groundwork for my analysis and contrasting examples to show what is distinctive about the Latvian case.

Anthropologists have approached abandonment and decline through various conceptual lenses. Stoler (2008) has written of "imperial debris" as material remnants of degraded ecologies and social wounds caused by past power that continue to shape the present that show how decline is not only an absence but a persistent and active presence. Thus, ruins are not inert objects from the past but the site of ongoing processes that people live in and with; they are never empty but thick with debris, memories, and inequities. Similarly, Navaro-Yashin's (2012) study of postwar Cyprus shows how abandoned houses and landscapes carry affective charge, producing geographies saturated with melancholy, loss, and political haunting.

Povinelli (2011) turns from ruins to endurance, asking how communities persist in conditions where renewal or expansive futures are foreclosed, highlighting the quiet labor of maintaining social belonging amid dispossession. Ringel (2014), writing on a shrinking German

city, similarly shifts attention from decline as rupture to the temporal practices of maintenance. Taken together, these works emphasize that abandonment and decline are not simply voids or endings but generate distinct forms of presence, affect, and temporality. They provide a vocabulary for understanding how loss is inhabited, sensed, and endured.

Alongside these accounts of abandonment and ruin, another body of scholarship has examined how people endure crisis and uncertainty when their futures appear blocked. Hage (2009) conceptualizes this as “stuckedness” – a loss of existential mobility in which waiting out crisis becomes normalized and endurance itself is valorized. Waiting out crisis becomes both a moral ideal and a mode of governmentality, disciplining citizens to endure immobility while stigmatizing those who refuse to “wait properly.” Rajković (2018) develops the idea of “demoralization” to capture how people persist with moral projects even when they know such projects are structurally undermined, living in the tension between commitment and futility. Morris (2016), in turn, offers the notion of “habitability” to describe how life is made provisionally livable in contexts of prolonged insecurity, not only through survival strategies or entrepreneurial self-making but through modest acts that allow one to stay.

Taken together, these perspectives illuminate the temporalities and effects of living with uncertainty: the ways people continue, endure, and make life livable, even when possibilities for certain futures are constrained. They help to understand how people inhabit conditions of loss, precarity, and limited possibilities. Yet while these accounts provide crucial insights, the Latvian case of state care for older adults and other residents in need calls for a more specific analytic lens. In what follows, I turn to three authors whose work anchors my theoretical approach: Tatjana Thelen, who reconceptualizes care as social organization (2015); Dace Dzenovska, who theorizes emptiness as both absence and form of life in post-socialist Eastern Europe (2020); and David Harvey, who shows how crises are stabilized, if only temporarily, through spatial fixes (2001a). Together, these approaches allow me to show how institutional eldercare in Latvia functions as a socio-spatial fix: it anchors livelihoods and social and economic continuity under precarious conditions by caring for those who are politically devalued figures of emptiness who nonetheless provide the very presence that sustains local life. While the Pansionāts functions as a socio-spatial fix at the level of employment and infrastructure, this fix is not sustained by formal arrangements alone. It acquires its lived force through ordinary, informal everyday practices like coffee drinking and intimate relationships that shape sociality, belonging, and the experience of place within and beyond the institution.

Building on Thelen (2015), this emphasis on everyday practices as analytically central leads me conceptualize care not as a moral disposition or a domain limited to kinship, but as a processual, open-ended set of practices that create, maintain, and sometimes dissolve relations,

thereby organizing social life at multiple scales. This perspective helps my analysis move beyond binaries of public/private, family/state, and good/bad by taking practices rather than pre-given relations as the analytical entry point and situating care within institutional and political-economic structures. In Thelen's terms, care is a "dimension of social security" whose outcomes are not predetermined (2015, 13). It may stabilize relations, reconfigure them, or undo them, depending on shifting expectations, resources, and norms. Care is thus a fundamental organizing principle of social life, shaping relations and institutions at multiple scales (Thelen 2021)

Two further aspects are crucial for my case. First, Thelen cautions against treating care as inherently positive: it can foster belonging but also reinforce difference and inequality (2021). In their study of Serbia, Thelen, Thiemann, and Roth (2014) demonstrate how paid eldercare renders the boundary work between family and state visible, while also allowing for the emergence of intimate, kin-like ties within poorly paid institutional settings. Second, focusing on care practices and relations (Thelen 2015) avoids normative and prescriptive perspectives and instead opens up possibilities for analyzing the complex and often contradictory processes through which care organizes social life. This perspective is indispensable for my case, where institutional eldercare organizes not only relations between caregivers and residents but also local economies, municipal budgets, and expectations about viable futures.

Thelen's theorization enables me to position care as an open-ended practice that organizes relations, institutions, and expectations of continuity, sometimes creating and sustaining and at other times reconfiguring, fracturing, or dissolving them. In my own ethnography, I show how care in the Pansionāts is as much marked by boredom, moral judgments of deservingness, humbleness, and frustration as by support, empathy, belonging, and stability. Yet in Latvia, this organizing work of care is also entangled with broader conditions of demographic decline and outmigration. To capture how such conditions are lived and narrated, I turn to Dzenovska's theorization of emptiness.

Dzenovska (2020) describes "emptiness" as a social formation comprising three interwoven dimensions: (1) an observable reality of declining populations, infrastructures, and services; (2) a form of life shaped by the experience of seemingly irreversible decline; and (3) an emic interpretive frame through which people describe and evaluate their condition. Emptiness thus signals not just demographic loss but also the broader spatiotemporal reordering of post-socialist Europe, in which capital, futures, and life itself are imagined to be produced elsewhere. At the same time, emptiness also means the loss of intensity of known and tangible social relations, thinning and disintegration of certain life worlds that are substituted by new

ones (2012, 29, 130–33). However, people still live there, sustaining life and crafting modest futures within it (Dzenovska 2018a; 2020). Thus, I further show in this dissertation that emptiness is not only about spatial decline but also about which lives are considered relevant to national futures. Nixon’s (2011) notion of “unimagined communities” sharpens this insight: just as modern nation-states sustain themselves by actively unimagining certain populations, so too in Latvia older adults and other care-home residents are rendered marginal to national regeneration projects. My contribution is to extend Dzenovska’s analysis on emptiness by showing that in Latvia emptiness is additionally understood through aging: in national discourse, aging figures as the ultimate form of emptiness. “Empty places” do not necessarily mean places without people, but rather places populated by those cast as biologically, economically, and even culturally non-reproductive. Yet those same people, deemed “empty,” in fact sustain social reproduction and the maintenance of place. Residents of the *Pansionāts*, though often framed as unimagined and devalued, provide the very basis for care that extends beyond the institution and possibilities for the future, however imperfectly. Emptiness as devalued presence shapes the politics of eldercare into what I call the “politics of humility,” even as care-home residents paradoxically become a resource for sustaining local life. This leads directly to my third analytical lens: state care as a socio-spatial fix.

Following this paradox, I turn to David Harvey’s theory of the “spatial fix” as a third analytical lens. Harvey argues that capitalism resolves recurrent crises of overaccumulation by “fixing” capital in built environments and infrastructures that tie accumulation to particular places (1981; 2000; 2001a). Such fixes are indispensable but temporary: they stabilize accumulation for a time, only to generate new contradictions and eventual decline (Harvey 2001a, 24–27). Importantly, the concept of “fix” carries a double meaning: to secure in place and to resolve a problem temporarily, which highlights the tension between the fixity of capital in the landscape and its need for mobility (ibid. 2001a, 23–25). This dynamic not only produces infrastructures of growth but also leaves behind landscapes of abandonment and decline, producing what Dzenovska (Dzenovska 2020) calls “emptiness.” In Latvia, this emptiness is closely tied to demographic loss and, following Nixon (2011), the “unimagination” of those deemed non-reproductive. Building on this resonance throughout the thesis, I extend Harvey’s notion of the capital’s spatial fix to the register of population and care: rather than absorbing surplus capital, the *Pansionāts* absorbs “surplus” or unimagined populations – older adults and people with disabilities cast as “unproductive” and as embodying the ultimate form of emptiness that is imagined to foreclose the future of the Latvian nation.¹

¹ I use the notion of “surplus populations” in analogy to Marx’s and Harvey’s concept of surplus capital. While Marx (2010, 621) theorized the “relative surplus population” as part of capitalism’s reserve army of labor and

In this way, I argue that the state care provided for the *Pansionāts*'s residents functions as a socio-spatial fix: pinning down economic activity, labor, and social organization in a rural locality otherwise marked by multilayer emptiness, the complex phenomenon Dzenovska (2011a; 2012; 2018a; 2020) describes in combination with emptiness as a re-generational "issue." Thus, the care home provides employment that helps sustain the rural life of smallholders and their *viensētas* (backyard farms), the shrinking population of Latvian Brown cows, infrastructural stability, strong social relations and a sense of stability. Yet, as Harvey's fixes, this stability is precarious: it secures the near future but cannot guarantee long-term transformation or growth. The socio-spatial fix of eldercare thus exposes a contradiction. It sustains the community by caring for those coded as in decline, but it remains fragile, dependent on state funding and a continuous inflow of residents. Like Harvey's built environments, it is both indispensable and crisis-prone, a necessary anchor that simultaneously materializes the limits of what kind of future can be imagined in these places. These dynamics form the conceptual foundation for the broader argument developed throughout the thesis.

This thesis demonstrates how care and emptiness intertwine in contemporary Latvia. I extend Thelen's conception of care as an open-ended process of social organization to show that care also functions as a socio-spatial fix. Drawing on Harvey, I show how institutional eldercare fixes livelihoods, labor, and continuity in rural localities, even as it remains precarious and crisis-prone. Building on Dzenovska, I argue that emptiness is not only absence but also a politically devalued presence: older adults are cast as the embodiment of emptiness, yet their presence sustains the very care institutions that hold local life together. Taken together, these insights reveal that care and emptiness are mutually constitutive: care anchors and stabilizes what is socially framed as emptiness, while emptiness, in turn, defines the value and horizons of care, keeping it oriented toward maintenance rather than expansive futures. Institutional eldercare thus emerges not as a marginal residue of the welfare state, but as a central site where demographic changes, economic uncertainties, infrastructural limitations and questions of futures for individuals, local places and the nations are managed and lived. Since these questions at their core concern older adults and the value attached to later life, this thesis also contributes to the anthropology of aging.

The anthropology of aging has shown how later life is shaped not only by biological processes but by cultural values, political-economic conditions, and moral discourses. Cohen has emphasized that aging is never a uniform or inevitable condition: social relations, lifestyles,

Harvey (1981; 2001a) examined how surplus capital is temporarily "fixed" in space, my analytical translation treats older adults and other residents as populations deemed surplus in national regeneration projects and illuminates how institutions like the *Pansionāts* function as socio-spatial fixes for managing demographic decline.

and cultural assumptions coproduce diverse experiences of growing older (2000). As he and others remind us, “the old” is not an ever-present category – age does and does not matter depending on social context (Cohen 2000; Lynch 2012). Sarah Lamb (2000) has highlighted how aging is central to constructions of personhood, gender, and morality, while Dossa (2017, 187) underscores that a person is always validated through social relationships, making aging persons and aging societies intimately connected.

Debates within the field have also focused on how to approach the global discourse of “population aging.” Aulino (2017) cautions that academic publications often begin with demographic forecasts, thereby reinscribing gerontological framings and casting later life primarily as a social problem. She cites Buch (2015a) as one example of this tendency, urging anthropology to go further by tracing how demographic discourse itself shapes subjectivities and intimate experience (Aulino 2017, 320). Yet Buch’s wider body of work (2015b; 2018b) remains crucial for understanding aging as lived paradox: she shows how later life in the United States is organized around thresholds of personhood and ideals of independence that are sustained only through care relations that recreate inequalities.

Other scholars have examined how aging becomes entangled with broader moral, political, and social projects. Jessica Robbins (2020) demonstrates in Poland how later life is bound up with national belonging and moral personhood, often casting older adults as simultaneously responsible and burdensome. Coe and Alber (2018) propose the concept of “age-inscriptions” to capture how age categories are continuously redefined through shifting social contexts. Work from Japan adds further nuance: Kavedžija (2021) highlights anxieties about decline alongside the search for meaning and purpose in late life, while Danely (2015) explores how mourning and maturity are negotiated as part of aging.

My contribution is to extend these insights to contemporary Latvia. I approach aging not only as a shifting social category but also as a key register through which emptiness is experienced and articulated. Several chapters pay close attention to what it meant for older people to live in the Pansionāts and inhabit its routines during the COVID-19 pandemic—how they spent their days, what brought them joy or sadness, what they desire, and how they made the institution into a place that at least partially belongs to them. Although the pandemic shaped our daily reality during my fieldwork, my interlocutors and I understood it less as a rupture than as an exacerbating circumstance that intensified existing conditions without creating wholly new ones. Thus, the thesis contributes to the anthropology of aging by showing how later life is simultaneously imagined as the embodiment of emptiness and lived as a source of continuity, care, and place-making. The chapters that follow develop these arguments ethnographically and

analytically, with each highlighting a different facet of how care, emptiness, and aging intersect in contemporary Latvia.

1.2. “Roads to the Pansionāts”: Chapter by chapter

Following this Introduction, Chapter 2 introduces the ethnographic core of the dissertation by situating the Pansionāts as more than just an institution for older adults. It shows how this care home functioned as a nexus of social and economic organization for the surrounding rural locality and created dense relational networks, formal employment, and enabling informal economies. Drawing on Harvey’s (1981) notion of a “fix,” I argue that the Pansionāts sustained life and served as an anchor in a place otherwise marked as “empty” by providing wages to employees, sustaining smallholder farms, and reproducing kinship and community ties. At the same time, these arrangements remained precarious because they relied on low-paid feminized labor, informal exchanges, and a continuous inflow of aging residents. This chapter thus establishes the first step in my broader argument that state care acted as a socio-spatial fix and quietly stabilized rural life while exposing its contradictions.

While Chapter 2 situated the Pansionāts as a local socio-spatial fix that sustains rural life, Chapter 3 turns to the national level by tracing how demographic anxieties shape public and political discourse in Latvia. Here, I introduce the concept of re-generational anxiety to describe a moral panic around demographic decline that ties concerns about low birth rates, aging, and emigration to fears about the disappearance of ethnic Latvians and Latvianness itself. By analyzing media, policy, and historical echoes of the interwar period, I show how aging is cast not simply as a demographic fact but as a national threat. The chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I examine political and media narratives of a “dying nation,” situating them in relation to both historical precedents and contemporary nationalist projects. Second, I analyze how these anxieties extend beyond people to non-human symbols such as the Latvian Brown cow and the *viensēta* (individual farmstead), which have become potent markers of cultural continuity and loss. Finally, I return to the care home, showing how older adults and their institutions are rendered “unimagined lives” (after Nixon 2011): present but devalued, and positioned as symbols of decline rather than as contributors to social reproduction. In this way, the chapter demonstrates how emptiness in Latvia is not only experienced as demographic decline or infrastructural abandonment but also articulated as a problem of regeneration that marks a crisis of both biological reproduction and cultural continuity. Older adults and the institutions that sustain them are recast as the “wrong kind of presence”: figures of survival who nonetheless fall outside the state’s vision of the future.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus back from national discourse to everyday rural life, exploring how emptiness is lived, negotiated, and contested in the civil parish where the Pansionāts is located. Beginning with a video of a famous “potato protest” against the government’s failure to repair a gravel road, I trace how infrastructures, institutions, and silences shape both recognition and erasure. Roads emerge as affective infrastructures that generate frustration and fatigue but also humor, intimacy, and fragile forms of political belonging. The local library became another cultural anchor and evidence of vitality that sustained memory and provided a platform for collective action. In contrast to these, the Pansionāts appears strikingly absent: though one of the largest employers in the area, it is symbolically peripheral and framed as maintenance rather than reproduction. Through these contrasts, the chapter develops the argument that emptiness is layered: some institutions (like schools and libraries) are narrated as carriers of continuity, while others (like care homes) remain invisible or detached from imagined futures. At the same time, I show how residents themselves drew on infrastructures such as roads and the library to assert political belonging and claims to the future, insisting that, in their words, “We’re still here.” This sets the stage for the following two chapters, which move inside the Pansionāts to explore the lives of older adults who are often absent from public narratives but central to sustaining local life.

Chapter 5 examines how aging is lived through modest expectations, boredom, and moral judgments about deservingness. I develop the notion of a “politics of humbleness” to capture how residents’ claims to care were shaped by institutional scarcity and cultural expectations that older adults should be grateful for even minimal support. Boredom, in such circumstances, becomes not just inactivity but an existential condition produced by the loss of social roles, the monotony of institutional life, and physical and cognitive decline. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these dynamics. Restrictions cut residents off from visitors and familiar activities, narrowing their horizons of belonging while framing their isolation as protection. In tracing these everyday experiences, the chapter shows how emptiness is not only a national discourse but also a lived condition of late life in institutional care.

Chapter 6 turns to the everyday practices through which residents reconfigured space and social life in the Pansionāts. Against narratives of stillness and passivity, it shows how humor, companionship, intimacy, and drinking alcohol animated institutional life and blurred the boundaries between public and private. Gatherings to drink coffee generated warmth, mutual support, and small zones of privacy that resonated with staff as well as residents. Romantic and sexual relationships, including those that transgressed spatial and social norms, further complicated institutional categories of intimacy and privacy, revealing how residents carved out autonomy within constraint. Drinking alcohol, meanwhile, functioned as a socio-spatial

practice that structured weekly rhythms, fostered festivity, and sustained informal economies, while also producing tensions and extra labor for caregivers. Together, these practices demonstrate that residents actively remade the institution into a lived social world: not a “prison” or static site of decline, but a place filled with humor, companionship, desire, and negotiation, in which everyday acts sustained both individual personhood and the socio-spatial fix of care.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I examine how both the Pansionāts and a “satellite” facility for adults with mental disorders called the Poplar Tree managed lives often considered marginal or “futile.” The case of Uldis, a long-term resident the staff considered a “slacker,” shows how care could provide quiet continuity without transformation and anchor both the individual and the institution through maintenance rather than change. In contrast, the Poplar Tree, established under Latvia’s EU-funded deinstitutionalization program, embodied a future-oriented vision of care, promising rehabilitation and inclusion for younger adults with mental disorders. Yet as staff skepticism and policy critiques revealed, this “community-based” model often reproduced institutional logics under another guise. Together, these cases illustrate how care functioned as a spatio-social fix: it sustained residents, stabilized institutions, and secured the municipality’s welfare infrastructure, but in highly uneven ways. Thus, investment in care became conditioned on the possibility of transformation – collectively scaffolded for some, demanded individually from others – which exposed the moral and political economies that differentiated which lives were seen as worth sustaining into the future, even at the care home.

Together, the chapters demonstrate how care and emptiness intertwine across multiple scales, from national discourses of demographic decline to local struggles over infrastructures and belonging to the intimate practices of older adults making life in the Pansionāts. They show that emptiness is not simply absence, but a devalued presence that national narratives characterize as decline even though it sustains local institutions and social worlds. At the same time, care emerges as both a socio-spatial fix and a practice of maintenance: indispensable for stabilizing rural life, yet always precarious and modest. By following care workers, older adults, and local infrastructures, the thesis argues that institutional eldercare is not a marginal residue of the welfare state but a central site where the contradictions of demographic change, economic uncertainty, and imagined futures are organized, negotiated, and lived.

Having outlined the conceptual contributions and structure of this dissertation, I now turn to the methodological dimension. My fieldwork at the Pansionāts was shaped not only by research questions and theoretical concerns but also by personal loss, the challenges of access, and the global upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic. These circumstances, along with the

relationships I formed in the field, profoundly influenced how I came to understand care, aging, and emptiness. The following section reflects on the particularities of this fieldwork.

1.3. On the particularities of fieldwork: Methodology, relationships and positionality

This fieldwork at the *Pansionāts* has been deeply personal in many ways. Even the process of finding and entering the field was shaped by that intimacy. In early February 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic was on the horizon but not yet affecting movement or contacts in Europe, I traveled to Latvia from Vienna for a one-month preliminary fieldwork trip. I knew it would not be easy to gain access to any long-term municipal care home for older adults at all in Latvia – let alone find the right one – given the still-widespread stigma around such institutions. It got even more complicated after the popular Latvian TV show *Aizliegtais paņēmiens* (“The Forbidden Method”) aired an episode on the subject in January 2020 (Aizliegtais paņēmiens 2020). This program, which is known for undercover investigative journalism and in-depth analysis, had sent a journalist posing as a care worker to infiltrate three different care homes over a period of six months. The results were unflattering, to put it mildly, and revealed emotional neglect, abusive behavior, and deep institutional failures within Latvia’s social care system.

While the show was intended to expose systemic issues, I worried that it had also made it nearly impossible for an outsider like me to gain access: no director of a care institution was likely to risk letting a researcher in after such public scrutiny. The episode threatened to deepen not only the stigma around care homes but also their isolation and staff mistrust toward anyone showing interest in their daily lives and care work. Although I already had conducted quite extensive research in a care home during my first master’s program (2012 to 2014) (Žabicka 2014) and had made some connections, I was fully aware of the challenges ahead.

My long-term engagement, which ultimately involved over seventy participants in various capacities, was shaped by both professional aims and personal circumstances. I had intended to stay with my grandmother, Anna, during the preliminary phase of my research in Riga in February 2020. My grandfather, Meletijs, had passed away when I was studying in the US in 2018, and I wanted to take advantage of any chance to spend more time with my grandmother, who had long been in poor health and who had been declining since her husband had died..

I arrived to find my whole family gathered around her, and it turned out that she had taken a rapid turn for the worse. She was lying on the sofa in the living room and did not move or even lift her head when I entered. I realized right away that there was not much time left and

that I would spend the coming days there with her, as I had not been able to do for my grandpa. At night, neither of us could sleep: Grandma's lungs were filling with fluid, and I was afraid that she was in pain or would stop breathing or fall out of bed. Meanwhile, I was emailing more than twenty rural care homes for older adults across the country and still hoping to advance my research, even though by that point it felt logistically and emotionally impossible.

My grandmother died in late February, just before the wave of panic, lockdowns, and border closures swept across the world. I felt empty and utterly exhausted, both emotionally and physically, after so many sleepless nights watching her slowly slip away. There was little peace in her dying. She struggled to breathe, drifted in and out of confusion, and was in pain, far from the gentle ending we like to imagine when we speak of "natural" death. In many ways, my grandparents' deaths – and even more so, their dying – and my response to it shaped my position in the field. My heart was broken, and although I feared it might make me less sensitive to what I would encounter at the care home, it instead made me more vulnerable and attuned (Behar 1996; Lipari 2014). In many ways, the Pansionāts and the people I met there broke my heart further before helping me to piece it back together.

These experiences affected me emotionally and also shaped the ontological stance I brought into the field. As Faubion (2011) suggests, the moral and affective relations anthropologists cultivate with their interlocutors are never separate from the ontological commitments on which they implicitly depend. Having just witnessed the death of someone I loved, who had shaped me in profound ways and whose death was neither peaceful nor easily narratable, I entered the field already attuned to the raw realities of aging and the complexities of care. Being directly involved in care relations further shaped my understanding of care as a deeply complex experience.

For years, I had read scholarship emphasizing that care relations are rarely free from pressure or shifting power dynamics. They are often deeply entangled with coercion, violence, or abandonment, whether on a personal or political level, and frequently shaped by conflicting notions of good care, systemic inequalities, or structural violence (for example (Garcia 2010; Biehl 2013; Gawande 2014; Stevenson 2014; Danely 2016; Goodwin-Hawkins and Dawson 2018; Varma 2020; Garcia 2024)). But it was through accompanying my grandmother's dying that brought this literature into sharp focus and made it personal. I believe this informed the way I later approached, observed, and interpreted practices of care in the Pansionāts. I also believed for long time that it had prepared me for fieldwork – and in many ways it probably did. However, at the Pansionāts I invited another level of "bold, unfiltered humanity" into my life, along with a kind of messiness that brought together joy and sorrow, as well as a strange

combination of privilege and power – for example, my freedom of mobility – and the devastating sense of powerlessness that often accompanied it (Carroll 2013).

After a surreal funeral, I flew back to Vienna to begin the second semester of my doctoral program. At that time, I still planned to return to Latvia in April or May to begin fieldwork, even though none of the more than twenty care homes I had contacted had responded positively. However, my plans shifted again – like everyone’s in 2020 – and the obstacles to fieldwork changed from stigma-related barriers to physical fear. COVID was sweeping through hospitals and care homes, and measures that were often based on wild speculation about how the virus spread being imposed. In mid-March, I was supposed to travel to the United States for a conference, but the country had just begun to cancel international flights: although some were still departing, there was a growing fear of getting stranded abroad. At the same time, the Schengen Zone countries were beginning to close their borders, and Latvia announced it would close to international travel after March 16.

I remember calling my supervisor because I thought I had to pack all my belongings, move out of my apartment in Vienna, and return to Latvia. I was afraid that once the borders closed, I would be stuck in Vienna and lose any remaining chance to begin my fieldwork more or less on time in April. She told me simply, “Just go.” So, I packed everything in two days, moved out, and bought a ticket on the last flight that would depart for Riga for months to come.

When I arrived, I returned to my grandparents’ apartment but was now alone there, surrounded by all their belongings from sixty years of cohabitation, marriage, and family – their entire lives. It felt both empty and overwhelming. I quarantined there for the required two weeks. My family stopped by and left food at the door as the boom in delivery services was yet to come; this way was also cheaper. During those weeks of isolation, I returned to the two big questions that now framed everything: where would my field site be, and would I even be allowed in, given the strict sequestration imposed on care homes?

I started calling again and contacted several care homes that had responded to at least one of my earlier emails. I had my written elevator pitch in front of me so I would not waste time if someone was actually willing to talk. This helped me explain everything – who I was, what anthropology is, what I wanted from them – as quickly as possible, so I would not lose their attention before even introducing myself. Three care home directors agreed to call me back after discussing it with their staff. Two did but apologized and declined to participate. The third never called back and my follow up call received the same polite rejection.

By April, I was nearing the end of my quarantine and reached out to a friend of a friend who worked as an accountant for a small rural care home. I did not know much else about the place, not even its location, and had not previously contacted them though I remembered having

considered it early on. One reason I had initially ruled it out was that I had been focusing on care homes located in the former buildings of schools that had closed during the post-2008 economic crisis (Sprinģe 2017a), and although the Pansionāts is also housed in a former school it has been there much longer. I had also wanted to capture what it meant to live and work in an often-stigmatized institution that was also located in a place that supposedly was emptying and the Pansionāts seemed too close – less than two hours (in winter) – from Riga, even though the poor road quality, landscape, and other factors described in Chapter 4 made it feel much further from the capital than it is. This, too, reflected my own imagination of “rurality.”

Eventually, though, it did become my field site. After I explained what I was looking for, my acquaintance agreed to speak to the Director Valters on my behalf – as I later learned, she told her I was “really cool” – and I forwarded all the necessary information about myself and my project, along with a signed copy of the University of Vienna’s code of research ethics. Soon, the Director emailed me to arrange a call, one thing led to another, and soon I was able to inform my supervisor that I thought I had found my field site. That acquaintance became a key figure in my entry into the field and eventually a friend.

Although the pandemic delayed the start of my fieldwork, we scheduled the start date for July 1, 2020, hoping (correctly, it turned out) that infection rates would decline by summer and restrictions on social contact would be eased. A few days before, I took a COVID-19 test and had my lungs X-rayed to ensure I did not have tuberculosis or any other communicable respiratory disease.

When I arrived, I moved into a recently renovated barn that had at times served as a warehouse and even a morgue. Located across the courtyard from the main buildings by the steam plant, it allowed me to maintain a continuous presence on the care home’s premises while also providing some much-needed privacy in the evenings.

My initial fieldwork lasted until the end of February 2021, a full eight months. My official contract with the Pansionāts defined my formal position as not only a researcher but also a volunteer, which was the only way my stay could comply with both internal and external regulations. This granted me full access to the premises, although I always made sure to respect the time and routines of each employee. At the beginning of my stay, I was officially introduced to both staff and residents and many of them would become key interlocutors.

Most participants were older residents at and employees of the Pansionāts, but some were local community members who helped me situate it within its broader social and geographic context. Residents’ ages ranged from the mid-forties to late nineties. Although it was officially a care home for older adults, the institution – as is often the case in Latvia – also accommodated

people with physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, neurological or mental health conditions, and alcoholism, who sometimes stayed there for weeks and sometimes for much longer.

While my research focused primarily on older adults, the thesis is not about the experience of aging as such. Rather, it explores what living in a municipal care home means to older adults in a rural area. Therefore, I also included conversations with younger residents, as these often shed additional light on everyday life in the Pansionāts, relationships between residents and staff, and broader structural issues within the Latvian social care system. These varied conversations not only enriched my understanding of institutional life but also highlighted the complexity of the relationships that formed in such settings.

Over the years, I have returned to the Pansionāts multiple times for stays of various lengths: about a week during the summer of 2021, then a few days around Christmas, and then all of February 2022 – when the pandemic finally caught up with us, despite everyone being double vaccinated. This was the first COVID-19 surge at the Pansionāts, which had watched from afar as many other municipal care homes suffered from serious outbreaks over the previous months. Thankfully, no one there became seriously ill. The staff, including me, was hit harder than the residents and I had to quarantine for about a week before I could return. By then, the care home was experiencing an extreme staff shortage. The entire kitchen team was out on sick leave, necessitating a complete reorganization of working hours and responsibilities. Many care workers had to take on double shifts, some were called back from their annual vacations, social workers filled in for direct care workers, and others stepped in to help prepare meals. This situation gave me an unexpected opportunity to engage more directly with the care home's daily operations. For example, I filled in for kitchen staff and helped prepare meals, which exposed me to a completely different world, and also offered glimpses of the informal economy. Despite the challenges of those days, the sight of me, a rehabilitation counselor, and their care workers cooking together seemed to amuse residents and to bring them a sense of warmth and even joy.

That summer, I returned to the Pansionāts for a few days, and I have tried to go back at least once or twice a year since then, sometimes just to visit and sometimes to follow up on questions that emerged during data analysis. My final “official” interview was in June 2024, with a former director who had served there for decades. These post-pandemic visits were not only a continuation of my fieldwork but also a way to maintain the relationships that had formed earlier and to deepen my understanding of institutional care and its evolving role in the area over time.

While most of the staff has remained the same, many of the residents who were central to my research – Maija, Lūcija, Eduards, Laima, Rasmiņa, Lilija, Ženija, Alfrēds, and others –

have now passed away. Some, like Rasmiņa, died in the first few months of my fieldwork; most after the initial phase of my research. I was unable to attend most of their funerals, but I have visited the graves of Maija, to whom I grew especially close, and Eduards. I still miss them.

During my research, I conducted, recorded (with permission) and transcribed twenty-four semi-structured interviews with employees of the Pansionāts. I also had countless informal conversations, which I tried to capture in writing in the evenings. I also carried out five semi-structured interviews with people from the surrounding community who were not directly involved with the Pansionāts, although some had family or other close connections. Two of these participants did not feel comfortable being recorded but allowed me to take notes and I had multiple conversations with three.

The dynamic with most of the residents was different. While formal interviews made up only a small part of my fieldwork, they proved ineffective with this group. Most found it difficult to concentrate during semi-structured interviews and spoke more stiffly and less naturally than in informal conversations. Thus, informal dialogue (with regular reminders that I was doing research) proved most fruitful. Almost all my conversations with the forty-one residents who agreed to talk to me in various ways (including fifteen who became key interlocutors) fell into this category, as it was impossible to compress the full scope of life at the Pansionāts or the relationships I built there into neatly structured recorded interviews on a single topic.

During the day, I took quick notes on my phone whenever possible. Occasionally, I recorded voice memos when (as I later realized) it was difficult to put events or emotions into coherent sentences and speaking felt easier than trying to force my experiences into a linear narrative before I had made sense of them. In the evenings or early mornings, I compiled all these notes into more coherent ethnographic documents. However, some only began to make sense a year or two later. This taught me the importance of patience, slow thinking, and not rushing to interpret observations too quickly and of remaining reflexive, reciprocal, and responsive to changes and events that emerged over time, sometimes over several years (Adams et al. 2014). Slow thinking and slow research shaped this thesis gradually, allowing insights to unfold step by step until it felt more or less ready to be written and then rewritten many times over.

I acknowledge, however, that having the time for long-term, in-person fieldwork was a serendipitous privilege. I carried out my research during a global pandemic that disrupted or entirely derailed many other researchers' fieldwork plans. It was also a privilege in the broader context of academia today, where long-term ethnographic research is increasingly out of reach for many, including me. Neo-liberal austerity, combined with personal care responsibilities,

professional demands, and financial constraints, has made long-term in-person fieldwork more difficult to pursue, and it is often giving way to what has been described as patchwork ethnography (Günel et al. 2020).

In addition to participant observation, conversations, more formal interviews, and the analysis of policy documents and media, I also took daily photographs during my research. While mostly for personal use, they remain relevant and important even now. They form part of my fieldnotes, capturing specific events, daily activities, and the domestic interiors of the Pansionāts. Still, I do not consider them developed pieces of ethnography like some photographs that have been used in collaborations between anthropologists and photographers (e.g. Biehl 2009; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). I also chose not to publish them to preserve the anonymity I had promised to my interlocutors.

In 2017, the anthropologist Jonathan Stillo told me, in a private conversation (Stillo 2019) that although he had pseudonymized his research site in Romania as “Pines” he was aware that it was impossible to fully disguise the place and the people in it. There were several reasons for that: there were only a handful of tuberculosis sanatoriums in Romania, and, besides, in medical circles there everyone knew everyone. The pseudonym he had chosen only helped so much (Jonathan Stillo, private conversation 2017).

During my fieldwork, and on every occasion I have spoken publicly about the Pansionāts, I have been aware that my own attempts at disguise – the anonymity we agreed upon in my voluntary contract with the Pansionāts, and the pseudonyms I used, including “the Pansionāts” itself – had its limits. Whenever people have asked where exactly in Latvia I did my fieldwork, I have never disclosed the location. The most specific information I have ever given is the region,² while always explaining why it was ethically important to keep the exact place protected.

Although I have never been particularly worried that the general public or even most journalists would recognize the Pansionāts from my articles or interviews, I have always known that certain people might, especially residents of the municipality and individuals who personally knew the Director Valters, such as other care home administrators from the region.

A more complicated issue has turned out to anonymizing research participants to each other. My research materials included informal conversations, field notes, and formal interviews with people who were often connected through formal or informal hierarchies – for example, the Director, social workers who managed direct care workers, and other employees. I also had to consider that residents and employees sometimes had complicated relationships

² There are five planning regions in Latvia: Riga, *Kurzeme*, *Latgale*, *Vidzeme*, and *Zemgale*.

that were shaped by subtle hierarchies and personal likes and dislikes. Sharing personal information, especially opinions about others, could potentially affect someone's daily life.

For a long time, I attempted to disguise individuals by blending several care workers or residents into composite characters (Arjomand 2022). However, I soon realized that in this context it would be nearly impossible – especially for key figures like the Director and individuals like Anda, Lelde, or Ivars whose specific roles and positions at the Pansionāts were not only central to their identities but also important to the arguments I was trying to make.

My attempts to disguise primary care workers also often failed because of the small staff. Even when I altered or merged demographic characteristics such as gender, certain expressions or details remained recognizable to their coworkers. The same was true of care home residents. In fact, whenever they saw something I had written in Latvian, they would try to guess who was who.

Eventually, I relinquished the idea of being able to fully anonymize people to each other. To minimize potential harm, I made careful decisions about what information to include or exclude from my writing. I have omitted several conversations and some information disclosed to me that could potentially harm people's relations with each other or leave any other unwanted impact. However, several vignettes I included – such as those in Chapter 5, which focuses on residents' autonomy – contain potentially sensitive material that I weighed with particular care. These choices reflect how ethics in anthropological research are rarely straightforward or final. Rather, they require ongoing attention, negotiation, and reflection throughout the research process.

On several occasions during my research, the Director of the Pansionāts chose to share with others that a researcher was present. I always respected this decision, despite sometimes worrying about the potential for misunderstanding, because this was an ongoing project with results yet to come and I had openly told Valters that I could not guarantee he would like everything I might write. On a few occasions, we also discussed articles that I had published in Latvian specifically to make my findings and ongoing reflections more accessible to research participants, who often did not speak English. It was also a way of giving something back to the people who had contributed so much to this research as many were older adults and I could not know who would still be around when I completed my thesis five or six years later. I distinctly remember one occasion when the Director told me that my published description of a particularly chaotic moment (Žabicka 2021a; a scene I also describe in Chapter 6) might suggest carelessness on the part of the care workers. We discussed this at length, and I explained that my intention had not been to imply misconduct but by showing the roughness of care work to also represent realities shaped by systemic limitations and resource constraints. This

exchange revealed several things. First, the research participants had been following my publications and public discussions on eldercare in Latvia over the years. Second, there were always possibilities for different interpretations and that I was a situated subject, a witness, and a narrator, whose voice implied a self (Narayan 2012, 96). Third, language mattered – what was clear to me might not have been for others.

Informed consent in fieldwork, like medical care, is an ongoing process that needs to be continuously negotiated with all involved research participants (Kuczewski and Marshall 2002). Over the years, I have often considered how different people and institutions (in different countries) may hold different interpretations of what research ethics means in practice (Wentzell 2013, 23). I was confident that all employees at the Pansionāts remembered that I was a researcher with a specific purpose. However, it is almost inevitable that relationships between researchers and their interlocutors will change over time during ethnographic research.

At first, I was a stranger, and some employees remained wary of me for months. For example, Alise, a direct care worker, agreed to an official interview only four months into my fieldwork. I was lucky to have the time to simply be there and wait. One day, she came up to me and said, “Okay, let’s do that interview.” By that time, we had already had many informal conversations, but her initiative in asking for a more in-depth interview confirmed that I was no longer seen as a complete stranger or threat, but as someone who could possibly be trusted. Whether that was also the moment that my presence among care workers stopped disrupting the everyday atmosphere or the one when they stopped adjusting their behavior because a stranger was present remains an open question. I am aware, however, that my presence, observation and participation, like any researcher’s, left a mark on daily life at the Pansionāts (Lawlor and Mattingly 2001, 147).

It was different with residents, however. Although I always reminded them that I was a researcher, repeatedly explained the topic of my research, clarified what their participation meant, and emphasized that they could opt out at any time, most tended to forget or perhaps found it unimportant that I was conducting research. For those older adults who did remember, the project often became a shared object of curiosity. They would ask how it was progressing and whether I had written anything new. If I had published any articles based on my fieldwork lately, I would bring large-print copies for them to read (Žabicka 2020; 2021b; 2021a; 2023). Yet even for them, I often felt that I was in the end just an ordinary person who took an interest in their lives.

As Stillo (2011) has poignantly and openly reflected³, one of the most complex aspects of fieldwork lies in how differently people may understand what it actually means to give informed consent. This includes how they perceive its potential consequences, both in the near and distant future, and what it means to share a relationship with a researcher whom they allow into their lives and, often, their homes. These relationships are formed in unique ways and often blend aspects of other types of relationship, like friendship, kinship, intimacy, professional connections, or even clinical interactions. The longer the fieldwork lasts, the more layered these relationships become, as shared experiences accumulate and relational dynamics evolve (Lawlor and Mattingly 2001, 147). At the same time, the relationships a researcher builds in the field, or at least their intensity, are often temporary and ephemeral, shaped by the duration of fieldwork and the uncertain possibility that some connections may evolve into long-term or even lifelong ties. (As I was writing these sentences, Astrīda, the local librarian, about whom I will have more to say in Chapter 3, called me to chat). (Menzies 2018). For this reason, I have tried to remain careful and continuously reflexive about my position in the field, especially when making ethical decisions about what information to include and what to leave out and what relationships to sustain and how.

Importantly, these relationships were not unidirectional: they affected and shaped me too. I witnessed human suffering – loneliness, feelings of abandonment, the experience of life slipping away, and illnesses that slowly overtook the body and mind. I also witnessed the deaths of people I had grown to care deeply about. After Rasmiņa, a resident of the Pansionāts, died in the fall of 2020 from a clot that developed following a hip fracture, Alise, a care worker, turned to me and said: “Anniņ,⁴ you can’t let it get to you like that,” something she understood from her own experience doing care work.

As Lawlor and Mattingly (2001, 152) point out, “boundary work consumes a huge amount of the relationship work” during the fieldwork. This boundary work applies to both the empathy that, in my experience, is integral to being an anthropologist and the effort of self-preservation. Empathy facilitates data collection (Enguix 2014, 83) but also shapes the entire field experience and can become emotionally draining if not navigated with self-care. There were many days when I quietly asked myself: “Am I working 24/7? Should I be emotionally, mentally, and socially available at all times and to everyone?” These questions stemmed from a deeper feeling that I began to refer to as “intrusion” in my notes – a sense that I was imposing on people’s lives by being there, asking questions, observing, and later writing about it all in private. At

³ The blog post by Jonathan Stillo was last accessed on January 13, 2019, and since then is no longer available online.

⁴ A diminutive of my name.

first, I tried to compensate by making myself constantly available just in case I was needed, unsure of where the boundaries of my presence should lie.

This ongoing boundary work was also driven by a fear of missing something. What if I did not show up and something ethnographically significant happened in my absence? At some point, this led to fieldwork fatigue and to some situations I did not want to be in – maybe not dangerous ones, but certainly very uncomfortable. Learning to set boundaries on my time, energy, and even my empathy was difficult. I had to learn how to focus empathy in ways that were meaningful not just for ethnographic insight but also my own wellbeing (Morris 2016, 218) This was especially challenging given my sense of privilege around being in the field during the pandemic. It was also shaped by a strong sense of responsibility toward people who had given me so much, both personally and professionally. I hope this feeling went both ways.

Last but not least, I want to reflect on doing ethnography “at home.” While this research was conducted in Latvia, the country where I was born and where I have lived most of my life, I hesitate to describe it as straightforwardly “anthropology at home.” Following Peirano (1998), the notion of “home” as opposed to “elsewhere” in anthropological research is far from self-evident. Just like distance, geographic, linguistic, or cultural proximity brings its own set of positional complexities. Positionality is better understood as a dynamic relationship than as a fixed attribute. Even within one’s own society, factors such as class, gender, race, political stance, or institutional affiliation can position a researcher as both insider and outsider at the same time.

My field site, a rural municipal care home, was in many ways distant from the urban experience I brought with me after being raised in Riga, Latvia’s capital. Although Latvian is my native language⁵ and I am culturally and socially embedded in the national context, my upbringing did not include rural lifeways or the everyday dynamics of small-town and agricultural communities.

In the field, I was identified as a “Riga girl” (*rīdziniece*), a label that carried a mix of amusement, distance, and subtle critique. It signaled an assumed unfamiliarity with the rhythms and values of rural life, including practices such as gardening, farming, and food preservation – things many locals took for granted. Yet not all locals actively engaged in agriculture, and my own partial exposure to allotment culture, an important form of secondary economy for many people in Soviet and early post-Soviet Latvia, offered a modest bridge across this divide. As for the care home itself, I had previously conducted research in a care home in Riga, so life at

⁵ Most of my communication and interviews were conducted in Latvian. With a few residents, we both spoke Russian – their native language – or I spoke Latvian and they responded in Russian.

the Pansionāts did not feel entirely foreign. Thus, I was neither a complete stranger nor entirely “at home.”

Rather than trying to resolve this ambiguity, I tried to approach it as an analytical resource. I understood fieldwork as a relational practice of ongoing negotiation of presence, perspective, and proximity, where being close could be just as epistemologically challenging as being distant. My position in the field was shaped by both familiarity and distance, and it required constant attentiveness to my relationships with research participants and to the institutional and moral landscapes through which I moved.

My thesis supervisor, Tatjana Thelen, once said to me in a critical but nonjudgmental tone, referring to my relationship with the residents and employees at the Pansionāts: “I have a feeling you really like them” (Tatjana Thelen, personal conversation, 2021). She did not say anything more, just that one brief phrase. I remember it vividly and have returned to it often. Over time, I came to acknowledge that yes, I did like them. Not every single person, of course, but many. I believe Thelen offered this as an invitation to reflect more deeply on my positionality, particularly my place within the moral landscape of the field. In many respects, I found myself aligned with the people living and working at the Pansionāts, rather than with those responsible for shaping the politics of aging – who, to be fair, were never my interlocutors.

I also made a deliberate choice to like my interlocutors. This was not about personal affinity or uncritical attachment, but rather an ethical orientation. Even when I disagreed with particular actions or views, an attitude grounded in empathy, compassion, and interpretive openness enabled me to engage with their lives attentively and to write about them with care and respect.

1.4. About the Pansionāts

This section provides a brief overview of the field site and its surroundings, introducing the Pansionāts as a physical setting, in which care, work, and everyday life intertwined. Understanding its spatial layout and connections to nearby places helps situate the ethnographic scenes that follow and the relationships through which care unfolded in everyday interactions.

The Pansionāts was located roughly an hour and a half to two hours from Latvia’s capital, Riga in a municipality of about 20,000 people after the 2021 municipal reform (Ministru kabinets 2021). Given the country’s small size (it covers 64,589 km², with a population of about 1.8 million) and the often-negative connotations associated with care homes, I have deliberately avoided revealing its exact location to protect research participants.

Despite its rural setting, the Pansionāts was not far from a regional town and not even particularly distant from Riga. Still, a sense of emptying was palpable among locals, as older residents passed away and younger generations moved to regional centers, the capital, or abroad.

Throughout this thesis, I refer to two nearby villages and a small town under pseudonyms: Pienenes, located about 5 kilometers (3 miles) from the Pansionāts; Dzirnas, about 8 kilometers (5 miles) away; and Zīle, the nearest small town, situated roughly 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) from the care home. Pienenes and Dzirnas lay along the same gravel road leading from the asphalted highway toward the Pansionāts. Dzirnas, being more populated than Pienenes, was the first settlement encountered along this road and eventually saw its section reconstructed – a development I discuss in Chapter 4. Zīle, by contrast, lay on the opposite side of the Pansionāts at the far end of the same partly gravel, partly chip-sealed route connecting all three places. Several care workers lived in Zīle or sent their children to school there, and it was also the closest location with a well-stocked grocery store.

The Pansionāts itself was situated along a small dirt road, roughly halfway between Dzirnas and Zīle. It consisted of several buildings that together formed the heart of daily life. The Upper Building was a three-story brick structure built in the first half of the twentieth century. Originally serving as a school, it was converted into a care facility in the early 1970s. Standing on a slight elevation above the Lower Building, it housed the majority of the less mobile residents.

On the first floor lived the most mobile of the Upper Building's residents. This floor also contained the kitchen and canteen, which doubled as a communal hall for gatherings and celebrations. The second floor accommodated residents who were more frail, bedridden, or living with dementia. Here, there was also a room for care workers and a small library that served multiple purposes it was used for physiotherapy exercises, board games, and rounds of *novuss*⁶ that a few men played with remarkable skill.

The third floor again housed relatively active residents, including those using wheelchairs. It also contained the nurse's room, the social worker's office, a rarely used gym, and a laundry and clothing room.

The Lower Building was built in the 1980s and consisted of separate apartments. The apartments on the first floor were converted into residents' rooms, ranging from single rooms to shared rooms accommodating up to four people. More mobile residents lived in the Lower Building. The second floor consisted of apartments for current and former employees, while

⁶ A two-player game that is closely related to carrom and pocket billiards. It originated in Latvia and Estonia in 1920s, and the game is sometimes informally referred to as "Baltic billiards".

one apartment was converted into the administrative office of the Pansionāts. For lunch, dinner, and supper, residents of the Lower Building made their way to the Upper Building.

Just across from the Lower Building stood the heating plant, in a former warehouse later converted into a kitchen where residents could independently continue their culinary workshops. Opposite this was a classroom building (once a barn), which had been recently renovated but remained empty during my initial fieldwork in 2020–2021. One of its classrooms became my “apartment” during my stay at the Pansionāts.

That summer, a newly constructed complex called the Poplar Tree opened. It consisted of eight modern, fully equipped studio apartments and soon welcomed its first residents – mostly young adults with mental disorders. Poplar Tree functioned as a halfway house within Latvia’s deinstitutionalization (DI) program. As part of this initiative, the classroom building was transformed into daily workshop spaces for woodworking and ceramics. Over time, it filled first with an assortment of clay figurines, pots, and wooden objects and eventually beautiful dishes and pieces of furniture crafted by the Poplar Tree residents.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, an outdoor veranda was also built between the Upper Building and Poplar Tree, creating a shared space for gatherings. Later, in 2024, a small, neat greenhouse was added, extending the area’s sense of care and cultivation.

Together, these buildings and paths formed not just the material premises of the Pansionāts, but the spatial framework of its social life.

1.5. A note on language and terminology

The title of this thesis contains the capitalized noun *Pansionāts*. In Latvian, a Baltic language⁷, the official term for what in English is often called a “care home” or “nursing home” is *sociālās aprūpes centrs* (social care center). More specific terms used in policy documents include *ilgstošas sociālās aprūpes centrs* (long-term social care center) and *sociālās rehabilitācijas centrs pieaugušajiem* (social rehabilitation center for adults). However, in everyday speech, such institutions – especially those for older adults – are most often called *pansionāti*. In my work, I use the capitalized singular form, *Pansionāts*, to refer to the particular institution that was the focus of my fieldwork. Not only is the noun *pansionāts* part of its official Latvian name but it is also what employees themselves informally call it, often even using

⁷Latvian is most closely related to the neighboring language Lithuanian. According to the Official Statistics Portal (2019), Latvian is the mother tongue of 60.8% of Latvia’s population, while 37.7% report Russian as their mother tongue. Latvian, however, is the country’s only official state language. In 2011, approximately 1.55 million people worldwide identified Latvian as their mother tongue, though this number has most likely declined since then (Vanags 2024).

diminutive forms such as *Pansītis* or *Pansis*. Moreover, the word carries culturally specific connotations that cannot be fully translated into English that I discuss further in Chapter 3. Throughout the thesis, I alternate between *the Pansionāts* and “the care home.” Unless I explicitly use the plural “care homes,” these should be understood as synonymous.

I also use the terms “care” (*rūpes*, *aprūpe*). In Latvian, these two words overlap in meaning but carry distinct connotations. *Rūpes* generally signals the emotional dimension of care and is often associated with kinship, family, or friends. To “care for” (*rūpēties par kādu*) or “care about” (*rūp kāds*) may involve obligation, exhaustion, or duty, but the noun *rūpes* still usually implies affective involvement. In contrast, *aprūpe* emphasizes activities and practices of caregiving, with the prefix “ap-” casting the caregiver and recipient in active and passive roles. It most often refers to institutional settings and can imply detachment, thereby reinforcing a dichotomy between “warm” family care and “cold” institutional care. For this reason, when writing about my fieldwork in Latvian, I have sometimes combined the two as *(ap)rūpe* to signal both dimensions simultaneously.

Finally, I use the terms “older adults” (*gados vecāki cilvēki*; *vecāka gadagājuma cilvēki*) and “late life” (*vēlīnā dzīve*). Here, it is an advantage to be writing in English since their Latvian equivalents are awkward and rarely used. The colloquial *veci cilvēki* (“old people”) has become increasingly impolite, and while the loanword “seniors” (*seniori*) has gained currency in academic, policy, and public discourse I never heard residents of the *Pansionāts* refer to themselves that way, only members of older adults’ associations more exposed to such language. The expression “late life” (*vēlīnā dzīve*) is even less common in Latvian and is seldom used at all.

2. The endangered Latvian: Emptiness as a re-generational problem in (rural) Latvia

Introduction

I interviewed Anda, a 62-year-old full-time Pansionāts employee tasked with purchasing, distributing, cleaning, and mending clothing and bed linens on a hot day in July 2020. Her third-floor office, with its vast and colorful collection of assorted clothes, fabrics, thread spools, and sewing machines, almost felt like a small boutique. Anda and her 75-year-old husband were smallholders and lived with their adult son on an isolated farmstead (*viensēta*)⁸ a few kilometers down the road from the Pansionāts. There, the three grew everything that could be imagined in a contemporary Latvian kitchen garden: berries and fruits, cucumbers, tomatoes, zucchini, pumpkins, and greens, which they ate fresh in the summer and preserved in the winter. Anda especially enjoyed the challenge of growing watermelons, a difficult crop in this climate, and experimented successfully with a number of varieties. They also grew potatoes and grains as food for both themselves and their chickens, ducks, pigs and dairy cows. Local dairy companies bought milk from them twice a month, which provided a steady income: the so-called “milk money.”

For a long time, Anda kept around ten dairy cows, including both black-and-white Holsteins and the Latvian Browns (*Latvijas brūnā*; LB, also known as Red-Brown Latvian) that – as this chapter will show – play a major role in visions of a prosperous Latvia and about Latvianness (*latvietība*) – what it means to be a Latvian.⁹ However, she had relatively recently reduced her herd to six cows in a calculated move to adapt to the farm’s changing workforce as she and her husband aged. In our conversation about her farm and life over the coming years, Anda spoke openly and with little sentimentality about her retirement, late life, and inevitable future. When asked if the future would entail reducing the farm’s size, she answered firmly, “No, not reduction. I’ll have to sell it.”

When I inquired whether somebody – maybe her daughter who had emigrated during the previous economic crisis and lived in the UK, or her son who had spent years at all sorts of jobs in Germany before returning – might be willing to take over when the time came, Anda just shook her head. “My daughter is not coming back. No. Maybe my son is willing, but he can’t,

⁸ A *viensēta* is an isolated farmhouse with several hectares of land and often a barn, stable or other auxiliary buildings in rural areas of Latvia. Usually, it is located some kilometers away from other farms and villages.

⁹ Latvianness (*latvietība*) is a term often used to describe Latvian identity and what makes Latvians different from all other ethnicities and nations. While there is a consensus that the primary characteristic of being Latvian is speaking the Latvian language, its other aspects are more contentious and varied. This has prompted numerous attempts in both culture and politics to address and even define the concept of Latvianness.

no, no. He doesn't have the other half! He's single. One person can't do anything... no, no, you need the other half." This indicated that family ties and personal relationships like a partner or a spouse were necessary, if insufficient, prerequisites to operate a *viensēta*.

With many young people leaving or having left the countryside, the traditional practice of gradually handing over a farm to the next generation, whether as a living space or as a productive enterprise, was no longer a viable option for many like Anda. Consequently, their difficult decisions to eventually sell farms were influenced by complex family and state relations, intertwined with demographic shifts of aging and out-migration, and often lost in public and political discourses of emptying rural areas as physical, cultural, and economic spaces. These factors have long been tied to national economic and political processes that have left rural residents in economically and socially precarious situations for years.

Given that rurality, especially living on a *viensēta*, was often viewed in the national imagination as the authentic core of Latvian cultural identity, the potential disappearance of the *viensēta* landscape and traditional practices like raising a few cows, preferably Latvian Browns has struck a deep chord in public and political sentimentality, reflecting romantic nationalist about rurality and raised the question of what remains of Latvia and Latvianness if Latvians lose their connection to the countryside, especially *viensēta*.

In this sense, the countryside has always been a "problem zone" both for Latvian regional policy, which sees rural areas as territories with social-economic problems, leading to "emptying," and in the national imagination, which sees them as a fading source of Latvianness, authenticity and power (Dzenovska 2012, 20–24). The interaction and collision of these two spheres is also problematic. That is, the fundamental imagined value and meaning of rurality in the formation of Latvian identity or Latvianness influence rural development policy, and vice versa (Raubiško 2012, 10). One example of how this tension plays out is a continual mismatch between the ideas of rural development held by policymakers and by people who live in the countryside. Explanations of development in various state documents are often ambiguous and contentious, and there is little coordinated action in implementing policies for achieving the declared development goals (Cimdiņa and Raubiško 2012b). Additionally, documents related to rural development often separate agricultural development plans from broader rural or regional development plans (Cimdiņa and Raubiško 2012a, 11). While the latest version of Latvia's Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan for 2023-2027 focuses on climate change, protection of natural resources, animal welfare, preservation of biodiversity and strengthening farmers' incomes – for example, through planning support systems for young farmers to start a business and investments in small farms (Zemkopības ministrija 2023) – the regional development plan tackles challenges concerned with regional economic development,

including non-agricultural production, employment and education in rural territories, support for rural communities, rural tourism and preservation of rural landscapes (Vides aizsardzības un reģionālās attīstības ministrija 2019). On one hand, there are objective reasons for keeping these strategies separate, as each tackles a vast array of issues. However, as Cimdiņa and Raubiško (2012a, 14–15) emphasized more than a decade ago, the lack of coordination between these development strategies means they have failed to respond to the interconnectedness of the various elements of rural life. In short, these strategies have often overlooked the fact that they are ultimately about the lives of people in the countryside.

For example, Anda, as a smallholder, relied heavily on area payments¹⁰ from the Latvian Rural Support Service while also working a full-time job at the care home to make ends meet. To avoid having to sell the farm in the future, she would need a strategy that addressed the socioeconomic rural precarity and demographic and political challenges of a declining population, enabling her adult son, a single individual, to financially and practically manage the small farm. Currently, the continuity of smallholder farms as centers of economic and cultural reproduction relies heavily on having additional steady income and on “familism”. While this term typically refers to a welfare system where care for those in need is considered a family responsibility (Ye et al. 2017), it here highlights the state’s confidence in strong family ties to sustain farm operations. Thus, Anda’s considerations about selling her farm serve as a complex example of rural life’s struggle with not only her own issues but the nation’s aging population, out-migration, balancing farming with a steady cash income from other jobs like the local care home, and the public and political imaginaries of the Latvian countryside that are undermined by ineffective regional and rural development strategies.

With this complex scene, I aim to explore the intersection of three key factors shaping the contemporary experiences of older adults, including aging Latvian farmers like Anda. In the following sections of this chapter, I focus on narratives and rhetoric around the notion of a “dying nation,” which is strongly linked to the ideas of Latvianness and the emptying countryside. I then connect these narratives to the public and political perceptions of older adults and the places that provide services for them, such as the Pansionāts.

In this chapter, I turn to the dissonance between that lived reality and the way such institutions are imagined at the national level. I trace how care homes and older adults are symbolically positioned as stagnant or burdensome, and how these perceptions emerge from broader demographic anxieties tied to reproduction. What emerges is a striking contradiction:

¹⁰ Area payments or *platību maksājumi* are annual financial support payments provided by the *Latvian Rural Support Service (Lauku atbalsta dienests, LAD)* on behalf of the Latvian state and the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). They are awarded to farmers or forest-land owners for each hectare of land they manage.

the very institutions that help sustain life in rural Latvia are often treated as evidence of its decline.

This chapter therefore provides the broader social, political, historical and demographic context against which the Pansionāts – explored in the following chapter – emerges as a central hub of social and economic relations and rural continuity. While Chapter 3 shows how the care home functions as a vital rural institution that supports social reproduction, sustains local economies, and enables intergenerational care, here I focus on the national imaginaries that render such institutions marginal or even emblematic of decline.

First, here I examine the historically and politically shaped moral panic around demographics in Latvia, which I refer to as *re-generational anxiety*. This concept captures political and public rhetoric about the aging population, blending concerns over future economic challenges posed by a shrinking society with deeper anxieties about the decline of the ethnic Latvian population and Latvianness itself. I begin by analyzing a 2011 news broadcast, “Latvians are dying out,” which explores demographic decline with the example of Čornaja, a small village in southeastern Latvia. By drawing connections to similar rhetoric from pre-war Latvia and contemporary policy documents and institutions that claim to address demographic concerns, I demonstrate that re-generational anxiety is neither a new phenomenon nor particularly effective in increasing birth rates. Rather, it is a morally charged nationalist discourse that by focusing rhetorically on “saving” Latvians and Latvianness, as both biological and cultural entities, from extinction has indirectly marginalized those who fall outside a narrow definition of reproductive value.

In the second section, I shift to how re-generational anxiety extends beyond people, to national symbols like the Latvian Brown cow and how its decline reflects broader fears about the nation’s fading (rural) identity. I examine how these concerns materialize in public and political discourses and in the everyday struggles of those navigating an aging countryside, particularly farmers who also work at the Pansionāts. By looking at farming and this breed of cow, which is now almost exclusively raised on *viensētas*, I explore how personal, political, and public narratives construct Latvianness and shape the experiences of aging farmers and how this breed of cow, long intertwined with Latvian cultural identity, has both a symbolic weight in national discourse and an intimate significance in the lives of my interlocutors.

Finally, I explore how re-generational anxiety and the national imaginary of nation’s reproduction or *tautas ataudze* have shaped public ideas and policy silences around older adults and care homes. I argue that these ideas contribute to a perception of aging as a threat to the nation, representing not just demographic decline, but the ultimate form of emptiness: not through absence, but through the wrong kind of presence. As a result, care homes are often

viewed as symbols of both personal failure and national decline, rather than as spaces that might capture the complex and unexpected outcomes of care – outcomes that could, in some cases, sustain rural life, preserve cultural continuity, or contribute to social reproduction. Drawing on discursive material, I show how care homes and their residents are rendered what Nixon (2011) has called *unimagined* or *underimagined communities* – present, yet excluded from dominant visions of the nation’s future.

This chapter provides a foundation for understanding how demographic concerns in Latvia have become entangled with moral, cultural, and national anxieties. The concept of re-generational anxiety captures how public and political narratives have fused concerns about reproduction, aging, and migration into broader questions of national identity and cultural survival. The countryside, often imagined as the heart of Latvianness, becomes a symbolic site where these anxieties converge – where aging people, disappearing farmsteads, and declining livestock numbers are read as signs of national decline. By tracing how these dynamics play out across policy, media, and everyday life, I show how the fear of disappearance is not only projected onto reproductive futures, but also onto material and symbolic losses in the present. What emerges is a picture of emptiness not as absence, but as a lingering presence that no longer fits the state’s vision of its future.

2.1. Birthing the *Latvian* nation: Re-generational anxiety in contemporary Latvia

In 2011, the television program *Panorāma*¹¹ devoted an episode called “Latvians are dying out” to the country’s declining population (*Panorāma* 2011). This is hardly the only news story about the aging Latvian society to use such an inflammatory statement as its title, but it caught my attention by unintentionally summarizing several intertwined public and political discourses about Latvia’s aging society, low birth rates, increasingly “greying” population, and out-migration, which are all deeply tied to both global and local political contexts. The episode exemplified what I call re-generational anxiety’s core elements: ethnically and morally charged public and political anxieties about demographic decline in Latvia, and specifically about a potential extinction of ethnic Latvians. Such alarmist headlines are part of re-generational anxiety, while also exposing a fundamental contradiction: while demographic concerns are framed as urgent, policy responses have remained largely rhetorical. A closer look at this news segment reveals how such anxieties are constructed and framed.

¹¹ One of the most popular news programs in Latvia. Established in 1958, it is run by the public broadcasting service *Latvijas Televīzija*.

In this sense, re-generational anxiety complements Dzenovska's (2011a; 2012; 2013; 2018b; 2020) analysis of emptiness by showing how emptiness itself is produced: aging bodies, care homes, and "non-reproductive" lives are cast as signs of demographic stagnation and thus come to stand for emptiness. Re-generational anxiety therefore helps explain how aging becomes imagined as emptiness in contemporary Latvia.

In what follows, I explore how re-generational anxiety is constructed through media and political discourse, how it echoes interwar narratives of demographic decline, and how it becomes institutionalized in contemporary policy while rendering older adults as marginal and non-reproductive lives.

First, the title "Latvians are dying out" can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, the news segment opened with a narrator declaring that "If the birth rate does not significantly improve in the next five years, in a hundred years the indigenous population (*pamatiedzīvotāji*) of Latvia will become a minority" (*Panorāma* 2011). She never further explained what she meant by *pamatiedzīvotāji*, but the most obvious interpretation is that she meant ethnic Latvians, in the sense of a Baltic ethnic group most commonly but not exclusively categorized by sharing the Latvian mother tongue.

On the other hand, Čornaja, the small village around which the news story was built, is located in the southeastern region of Latgale, whose population has the lowest proportion of ethnic Latvians to ethnic Russians and Russian speakers¹² (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde 2022) in the country,¹³ and where so-called Russian-speakers' parties consistently win the majority of the vote in parliamentary elections (Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija 2022). Except for one kindergarten teacher who spoke with the correspondent in Latvian, all the interviews were with Russian speakers. Consequently, "Latvians"¹⁴ might, after all, have meant all residents of Latvia regardless of their ethnic background or mother tongue, or at least all Latvian citizens.¹⁵

To muddle everything even more, when the documentary interviewed the demographer Ilmārs Mežs, he accused all *Latvians* with fewer than three children of supporting immigration

¹² Russian speakers (*krievvalodīgie*) in Latvia are a linguistic minority, which includes both members of the Russian national minority and others who use mainly Russian with each other and identify as Russian linguistically while preserving other ethnic cultures and ethnic identities to varying degrees.

¹³ Riga, the capital of Latvia, was a close second, with almost the same share of Russian-speaking residents.

¹⁴ I will use *Latvians* in italic when referring to all Latvian citizens and non-citizens or when the meaning of this word is left vague, and it is not clear whether those are ethnic Latvians.

¹⁵ "Non-citizens" (*nepilsoņi*) is the legal status of permanent residents in the Republic of Latvia who were citizens of the USSR and did become citizens of Latvia or any of the USSR's successor states. Non-citizens have different passports and lack political rights like voting. However, the constitution guarantees them the same civil rights, including education and health care, as citizens. According to The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (Pilsonības un migrācijas lietu pārvalde, PMLP), there are more than 200,000 non-citizens in Latvia (lvportals.lv 2019).

to replace the missing children (Panorāma 2011).¹⁶ This kind of inflammatory rhetoric, which seems at the same time to blame *Latvians* for failures of regeneration and to sow fear of future immigrants, has been popular with so-called conservative and nationalist political parties, who indirectly compare current and future immigrants and refugees to those relocated to the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the USSR's Russification policy. Thus, both a potential new wave of immigration and the loss of Latvians through negative birth rates and emigration have created anxiety about demography and contributed to the rise of populism in Latvia and Eastern Europe in general (Krastev 2018, 4). Such statements reflect broader anxieties about the country's demographic future, in which concerns about national identity intersect with concrete demographic trends. The problem of "dying out" encompasses both the biological loss of population through out-migration and aging – driven by a negative birth rate – as well as fears of the potential declining proportion of ethnic Latvians. These anxieties are not unfounded when placed in the context of long-term demographic shifts.

In 2024, Latvia had its lowest birth rate of the last century, with only 12,571 children born (1919 children or 13.2% less than in 2023), continuing a steady decline in birth rates (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde 2025). Although the data shows that in 2020-2022 death rates significantly increased most likely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the natural increase rate has been steadily negative since 1991 (lvportals.lv 2023; "Iedzīvotāju Skaitis Un Tā Izmaiņas | Oficiālās Statistikas Portāls" 2023). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvia's population decline has been steep, decreasing from 2.65 million people in early 1990s to 1.87 million people in 2024 (Oficiālās statistikas portāls 2024a).

In the 1990s, the abrupt change in the economic system resulted in unemployment, poverty and uncertainty about the future, contributing to a sudden drop in birth rates. Another factor in the decreasing population was out-migration: some of those who had arrived during the Soviet era (including Soviet troops and their families) and their descendants left Latvia following independence, but in the second half of the 1990s *Latvians* also increasingly emigrated to the West (Eglīte 2019, 21)¹⁷ due to post-social deindustrialization followed by a hasty and aggressive move towards capitalism (I will return to this in the second subchapter).

While the economic upheavals of the 1990s set the stage for demographic decline, later economic crises accelerated it further. In particular, the 2008 financial crisis triggered another wave of mass out-migration, compounding the effects of an aging population and reshaping the

¹⁶ "Visi latvieši, kas nav parūpējušies par trijiem bērniem, ir par iebraucējiem, ir par imigrantiem, kas iebrauks jau pēc vienas paaudzes viņu nedzimušo bērnu vietā", Ilmārs Mežs.

¹⁷ The decline in the number of inhabitants was also influenced by changes in demographic methodology (Eglīte 2019, 21).

social fabric of both urban and rural Latvia. This was reflected in the “Latvians are dying out” broadcast, which highlighted the impact of emigration and of an aging population on rural life (for more, see Bulderberga et al. 2012) as illustrated by the report from Čornaja village. It is a fact that rural areas have experienced an even more noticeable demographic trough (Hauka 2018), although even Riga has lost a significant number of residents and continues to lose population.¹⁸ In 2011, towards the end of the economic crisis, the death rate in Čornaja village was four times higher than the birth rate (Panorāma 2011).

The loss of population to continuous out-migration and aging was also deeply felt by my interlocutors in rural areas far from Čornaja. “Latvians are Dying Out” captured multiple overlapping realities of a shrinking Latvian society, particularly in rural areas. More than just a report on demographic decline, it serves as a lens through which to understand a broader phenomenon, re-generational anxiety, by which I mean a morally charged yet largely rhetorical discourse around population aging and strongly tied to ethnic and cultural survival of Latvians.

Public and political anxiety about a greying society in Latvia are neither new nor unique: despite vast unevenness in global life spans, aging populations and resulting challenges and anxieties exist in many parts of the world (Buch 2015a, 278). For this reason, such terms as “demographic panic,” which often refers to anxieties about economic, developmental, and social challenges faced by many aging societies in Eastern Europe and beyond (see, for example Krastev and Holmes 2019; Kröger 2019); “demographic anxieties,” which encompass fears and political discourses surrounding population changes, particularly those related to fertility decline, population aging, and the reproductive behaviors of specific social groups (De Zordo et al. 2022); and “anxieties about aging,” which describe a broad social concern manifesting at national, communal, interpersonal, and personal levels while encompassing fears about economic stability, social isolation, intergenerational care responsibilities, and existential questions of meaning in later life (Kavedžija 2016), have been used to capture different dimensions of these concerns.

At the same time, differences in how and why populations age in so-called core and semi-periphery countries, even within Europe, have often been overlooked (Blagojević-Hughson and Bobić 2014). While Latvia and the other Baltic states might not count as semi-periphery or transition states due to their EU membership (Blagojević-Hughson and Bobić 2014, 527), they still represents the “geopolitically in-between categor[y] of Global North-yet-East... neither developing, nor developed.” (Aistara 2018, 5) Among other things, Latvia’s demographic

¹⁸ Over the last 20 years, Riga proper has lost more than 134 000 people (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde 2020), even though the Riga metropolitan area (*Pierīga*) is one of the few areas that has experienced population growth in Latvia (Krisjane and Berzins 2012).

patterns resemble those of semi-periphery European countries, which include low birth rates, migration losses, high or moderate mortality, and unfavorable economic conditions, all factors contributing to depopulation that reinforce populist political tendencies. Additionally, Latvia's economy of care for children and older adults still relies heavily on women's resources, as is commonly seen in semi-periphery states (Blagojević-Hughson and Bobić 2014, 536).

Beyond these demographic and economic challenges, Latvia's historical experience with immigration and Russification under the Soviet regime, combined with its small population size and a shrinking ethnic Latvian demographic, has continued to fuel nationalist discourses of Latvian endangerment and the need to "save" the nation. Re-generational anxiety includes many features of Stanley Cohen's classic concept of moral panic (2011), including media amplification that leads to heightened public concern, moralizing rhetorics that serve a variety of political and ideological agendas, and identifying "folk devils" like immigrants or childfree or LGBTQ+ people. At the same time, re-generational anxiety is at its core not so much about deviance but rather the impending sense of emptiness: not enough Latvians being born, too many people aging or emigrating, rural areas being deserted. It is almost as if Latvians themselves are willingly digging their nation's grave. Therefore, demographic decline is not just statistical, but existential. Much as Krause (2001) describes in Italy, where low birthrates were framed as a national crisis and tied to fears of identity and continuity, Latvia's demographic concerns are embedded in broader anxieties about survival and national belonging.

Thus, I introduce the term 're-generational anxiety' not because there is no existing terminology but to capture the specific dynamics around the perceived existential threat to ethnic and cultural entity posed by insufficient re-generational reproduction. This concern is deeply entangled with both historical and contemporary power structures, including nationalism and globalization (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991). Unlike general demographic panic, which typically centers on economic and developmental concerns, re-generational anxiety centers on the preservation of cultural identity in an increasingly globalized and uncertain world and is thus embedded in a nationalist discourse that gives rise to episodes of moral panic.

However, concerns over national continuity, biological and cultural reproduction are not new. In fact, re-generational anxiety in Latvia has deep historical roots, with similar discourses about an impending "biological crisis" having emerged in the 1930s. The term "biological crisis" was first introduced in 1938 by the prominent professor of medicine Pauls Stradiņš (Stradiņš, 1938, as cited in Zelče 2006, 95) and gained traction among the so-called Latvian intelligentsia. Politicians, high-ranking officials, scientists, doctors, publicists, and writers echoed concerns over the decline of ethnic Latvians, reinforcing a long-standing pattern of re-generational anxieties that continue to shape national discourse today.

Although Latvia's population was growing in the 1930s, the rate of natural increase was slowly declining. Following a large number of deaths due to the First World War and 1918–1920 influenza pandemic, there was noticeable increase in the birth rate, but after 1925 it started to decline. By 1935, however, the number of *Latvian* citizens peaked at 1.95 million people, as did the proportion of ethnic Latvians within the citizen population. Despite this apparently high number, an overwhelmingly gloomy scenario based on demographic projections of the *Latvian* population and especially ethnic Latvians as far ahead as the year 2000 concluded that Latvia was dying out. (Zelče 2006, 94–95). In 1940, the demographer Oļģerts Piņķis wrote, based on his research on families with three or more children:

“Our nation [*tauta*] is dying out today. Our nation stands on the edge of the abyss. In our present time, a vast majority of people have appeared, who use “eternal Latvia” [*mūžīgā Latvija*] at the end of every word. But many of them have not thought that without Latvians there will be no eternal Latvia: there will be no Latvia at all. And many signs show that if the conditions do not change, there will be no Latvians. Eternal Latvia will remain the ugliest sound, the most insignificant word on a yellowed sheet of paper in the archive of the future. The harsh reality of statistical numbers puts a stop to naïve dreams and easy language about eternity” (Piņķis, 1940, as cited in Zelče 2006).¹⁹

Much like Piņķis in the 1930s, Ilmārs Mežs, the contemporary demographer interviewed about demographic challenges in the *Panorāma* broadcast from the village of Čornaja, has consistently emphasized individuals' responsibility toward the state, nation, and its future. Over the years, he has become the go-to expert on demographic issues for journalists and politicians alike. He has also frequently published opinion pieces in the media, warning that without drastic intervention the Latvian ethnic community could shrink from its current 1.3 million to less than half that number by 2050 (Mežs 2010).

Although in recent years Mežs has slightly shifted his focus toward critiquing the state's inadequate demographic policies, particularly the absence of comprehensive support for young parents and families with children who disproportionally are subjected to poverty (Mežs 2023; 2022; LSM.lv Ziņu redakcija 2019; Mežs 2016), he has also always stressed the role of individual moral responsibility, as well as the morals of the state. In his view, a lack of personal commitment to the nation has contributed to declining birth rates and, ultimately, to the gloomy fate of a Latvian nation whose land will be once again occupied by other ethnicities:

¹⁹ My translation from Latvian to English.

“Latvians are currently making a fateful choice on behalf of our children and grandchildren – whether to prioritize the fastest possible economic prosperity or to ensure the future of Latvia’s Latvianism [latviskums], language, and cultural vitality. So far, our choice has favored economic growth while ignoring the foreseeable decline of our nation. However, perhaps a small percentage of this growth should be invested in securing the continuation of the Latvian people? We have only the next 20 years left in which Latvians can ensure a minimal presence of their descendants in their own land; otherwise, it will be occupied by others. Are we truly indifferent to the fate of the Latvian people, state, language, and culture? The reasons for the low birth rate are both material and moral. Disorganized infrastructure, lack of kindergartens, tax system that does not support families and low welfare – all this reduces the birth rate. But the state’s action, or rather, inaction, also shows society’s own attitude towards its future – children. It is often too careless – it is characterized by low morals, materialistic selfishness, weakening of family ties, lack of religious and patriotic values, reluctance to undertake obligations and duties, the fulfillment of which would require giving up various types of pleasures and entertainment. Likewise, the mismanagement of state and public funds has extinguished many people’s hope for Latvia and its future, which has also not helped to build large, strong and patriotic families in Latvia” (Mežs 2010).

Since the regained independence in early 1990s, Latvia’s demographic policy has been coordinated through multiple state institutions, expert commissions, and advisory bodies. Since 1992, demographic governance has evolved with responsibilities shifting among ministries, parliament commissions, and the Council for Demographic Affairs (*Demogrāfisko lietu padome*, established in 2011) now playing a central role. However, in 2016 an additional platform called Demographic Affairs Center (*Demogrāfisko lietu centrs*) was established with the mission of facilitating expert collaboration with a particular focus on nation’s reproduction (*tautas ataudze*). Beyond developing recommendations for demographic policies, the center has consistently promoted a particular moral framework around reproduction, echoing Mežs’s emphasis on large families as the foundation of a strong nation, on reinforcing heteronormativity, and on underscoring the importance of marriage, among other values. The head of the now-dissolved center was a pro-natalist politician from the national-conservative

political party “National Alliance”²⁰, Imants Parādnieks, who for years have been one of the loudest voices concerning Latvia’s demographics.

In late 2022, shortly before its dissolution, the Demographic Affairs Center released its final strategy for increasing birth rates. The introduction to *The Nation’s Reproduction Strategy. Family–Latvia–2030 (2050) LET’S REPRODUCE!* (Demogrāfisko lietu centrs 2022)²¹, written by Imants Parādnieks, echoed the rhetoric of both Stradiņš and Piņķis, the 1930s demographer who similarly framed the Latvian population as endangered and reproduction as a moral duty of both the Latvian people and the state. Parādnieks wrote:

“Yes – ensuring the continuation of the Latvian nation [as ethnic group – A.Ž.] must become the top priority both in state policy and in society as a whole. During the Awakening period²², this fundamental truth was constantly emphasized because it was self-evident; later, it was forgotten. Now, it must be clearly brought to the forefront – a comprehensive and long-term national reproduction strategy must be purposefully implemented, looking toward the future and envisioning Latvia to at least 2050” (Demogrāfisko lietu centrs 2022, 3).

While in the strategy, Parādnieks, who similarly to the demographer Mežs has been a prominent supporter of big families, on one hand acknowledged that “[t]he decision to have a child is a personal choice, and undoubtedly, there are no right or wrong decisions in this regard,” the sixty-four page document does not mention same sex partnerships and families, for example, at all (Demogrāfisko lietu centrs 2022, 3). Although its policy section does specifically address the need for additional, tailored and inclusive state support for single-parent families and families raising children with disabilities to alleviate emotional burden as well as avert or reduce their risk of poverty, such families were not the main focus of this document. For example, it only briefly mentioned that flexible support for families raising children with disabilities was needed to “ensure that a lack of emotional, physical, or financial support does not lead to the family losing its functionality or discouraging them from having additional children,” thus once more stressing the goal of large families (Demogrāfisko lietu centrs 2022, 37). This was also emphasized by Parādnieks in the introduction:

“As a society, we must honestly acknowledge that a parent’s decision to have a child is not just a personal choice, responsibility, or source of joy. If we want to continue existing as a society, as the Latvian nation, and as a state, we all need

²⁰ Officially the National Alliance “All for Latvia!” – “For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK”.

²¹ Tautas ataudzes stratēģija ĢIMENE – LATVIJA – 2030 (2050) ATJAUNOJAMIES! ar valstiski jaunu pieeju ģimeņu atbalstam Latvijā plāna projekts 2023. – 2030.gadam.

²² The Awakening refers to the Third Latvian National Awakening (*latviešu tautas atmoda*) – a movement that led to the restoration of Latvia’s independence in the “Singing Revolution” of 1987–1991.

strong families – families in which children can grow up happy. This is the minimum condition for the state’s survival and the guarantee of each individual’s well-being” (Ibid. 2022, 3).

Similar morally charged ideas concerning the endangered Latvian population have been expressed in numerous public articles, particularly in opinion pieces written by conservative or right-wing politicians. For example, Jānis Dombrava, a long-term member of the national-conservative party *National Alliance*, voiced such concerns in an opinion piece written during the global economic crisis in 2009. He urged the government to take a long-term approach to the nation’s future, maintaining childbirth and child benefits despite the crisis and continuing to invest in health and education as the minimum foundation for nation’s reproduction. Although he acknowledged the necessity of social and economic policies to support young families across Latvia, he placed particular emphasis on the existential threat facing ethnic Latvians. He warned: “If we do not want no more than two million inhabitants to live in Latvia in 2025, of which less than 1.2 million would be [ethnic] Latvians, then it is time to clearly state that we do not want to die as a nation.”

This sense of demographic urgency has been reflected in national development policies, which have consistently framed two key solutions for rural Latvia and the survival of Latvianness: increasing the birth rate and encouraging remigration, particularly to the countryside, many of whose residents have moved away.

Although the National Development Plans (NDP) for 2014 – 2020 (Pārresoru koordinācijas centrs 2014) and 2021 – 2027 (Pārresoru koordinācijas centrs 2020) recognize the links between limited employment opportunities, low wages in rural areas, declining birth rates, and out-migration (Pārresoru koordinācijas centrs 2014, 34; 2020), they have heavily relied on the assumption that reversing these trends through birth rate policies and remigration would solve the problem of “dying out”. However, not only has this approach remained largely rhetorical and efforts to support families at risk of poverty, families with several children, or those raising children with disabilities have proved to be uneven at best, it has also overlooked those who fall outside the category of “reproductive subjects” – older adults and people approaching later life.

A telling example is the NDP 2014–2020, in which the word “aging” does not appear at all, just as if the national challenge of an aging society had not yet occurred (Pārresoru koordinācijas centrs 2014). Aging appears more frequently in the NDP 2027, likely due to EU influence and particularly the introduction of “active aging” frameworks in Latvia following the Ministry of Welfare’s 2016 policy document, *An Active Aging Strategy for Longer and Better Working Life in Latvia* (Labklājības ministrija 2016; Pārresoru koordinācijas centrs

2020). Despite this shift, both NDPs remain heavily focused on *tautas ataudze*, defined primarily through metrics such as increasing birth rates and successful remigration. Although rural development policies occasionally mention the need to improve the overall conditions for a livable life (Dzenovska 2012), they continue to rest on a nationalist and romantic vision that imagines cultural survival as dependent on biological reproduction and the return of emigrants to rural spaces. In this framing, the goal is not just to preserve ethnic Latvians as a population, but as a cultural form, whose authenticity is presumed to be rooted in rural life.

In practice, this narrow focus also contributes to what I later describe as a socio-spatial fix: those who have stayed behind – older adults, smallholders, and institutions like care homes – have absorbed the consequences of demographic decline without commensurate investment or reimagining of their roles.

The focus on *tautas ataudze* and remigration has therefore systematically disregarded those who do not fit neatly into the ideological framework of the nation's reproduction, particularly older adults and those who remained in rural areas after the 2008 economic crisis. In this chapter's opening vignette, I discussed Anda's considerations about selling her farm once she and her husband's age and health would no longer allow them to manage it. For Anda, remigration discourse had not resulted in her daughter's return, just as national reproduction policies had failed to address the reality that her unmarried, childless son was unlikely to take over the farm. If saving the endangered Latvians and preserving Latvianness depends not only on biological regeneration but also on cultural continuity, with rural life regarded as a core component, then do policies that ignore situations like Anda's paradoxically contribute to the very decline they claim to prevent? And if older adults, who can no longer reproduce biologically or sustain rural life, are instead relocated to care homes, what role, if any, are they imagined to play in the future of the nation? I will return to this question more fully in the third section, which examines how aging and institutional care come to symbolize the ultimate form of emptiness in the national imagination. But first, I will turn to another figure of loss, the Latvian Brown cow, whose disappearance reveals how re-generational anxiety is not limited to human reproduction, but extends to the cultural and material symbols through which Latvianness is imagined and reproduced.

The fading presence of the Latvian Brown cow illustrates how re-generational anxiety becomes anchored in everyday materiality. It is not only demographic trends that trigger these anxieties, but also the disappearance of animals and practices that have long grounded Latvianness in the countryside.

The Latvian Brown cow is one of the most enduring of these symbols. Once a thriving breed, it is now steadily vanishing, much like the traditional *viensētas* and small-scale farming

practices that shaped everyday life in the countryside. Just as Latvians are seen as “dying out,” so too are the cattle that have long been intertwined with national identity. When Anda sells her farm, it will not only mark the loss of another smallholding, but also of another Latvian Brown. For many, this raises a pressing question: if the countryside is stripped of its symbols and ways of life like smallholder farming, does Latvianness itself begin to fade? And if the older generations who sustain these traditions are aging, does this signal not just the decline of rural Latvia, but the gradual emptying of the nation as a whole?

In the next section, I turn to the decline of the Latvian Brown cow – a national symbol whose disappearance reflects broader anxieties about the fading of rural identity. By examining how this loss is narrated in public discourse and lived through by aging farmers, particularly those who also work at the Pansionāts, I explore how *Latvianness* is constructed, sustained, and contested through the intertwined practices of farming, care, and everyday life in the countryside.

2.2. “We haven’t even saved our cows”: Cows, *viensētas*, and Latvianness

As discussed in the previous subchapter, re-generational anxiety is deeply tied to concerns over cultural survival, including anxieties about the biological reproduction of Latvians and about the future of the countryside. This anxiety is not only about people but also about the symbols of rural life that are imagined as distinctly Latvian, particularly the *viensētas* and the Latvian Brown cow. These anxieties appear both in public discourse and in the daily realities of smallholders, who face the gradual disappearance of their way of life and the growing uncertainty of what will happen to their farms once they are no longer able to sustain them.

In this section, I examine how personal, political, and public narratives about the countryside, particularly those surrounding the Latvian Brown (LB) cow – which is now almost exclusively raised on *viensētas* – contribute to the construction of Latvianness and intersect with the personal experiences of aging farmers. Like the anxiety over Latvians not reproducing, the fate of the Latvian Brown cow is entangled in narratives about cultural survival. If Latvians disappear, who will keep these cows? And if the cows disappear, what happens to the countryside that is imagined as central to Latvian identity?

While Anda faced the prospect of selling her farm because the younger generation was unwilling or unable to take it over, Ivars, a local smallholder who worked as the driver for the Pansionāts, had another perspective on the struggles of aging farmers. His reflections on life in the countryside further illustrate this growing sense of loss, while also showing the resilience of these farmers as they adapt to changing circumstances.

Months after I first made Ivars's acquaintance, I finally met him for a more formal conversation about life in the countryside and the changes that he had witnessed as a local man born and raised there. It was not easy to get a grip on this man, whose gruff persona led me to keep some distance until he got used to me – I felt he had categorized me as a “city girl” who asked naïve questions about rural life. When I started with questions about what had changed there during his lifetime, he shot back: “Well, everything [has changed]. There’s nothing left. There are no people, no jobs. We are practically extinct. Pienenes [the nearest village] is extinct.” When asked what it is like to live in the countryside, he immediately answered: “Great!” (*forši*), but then became noticeably pensive. He contemplated his work and life routine out loud, as if no one else was around, questioning why he still did all the hard work and why he needed his cattle: “I don’t even know. I said ten years ago that I couldn’t ever live in a city, but now I don’t say that anymore. Many who have left say they are happy there. You go to your work, sit in the warm apartment in the evening... here you wrestle, tussle...” When I asked him whether he would not miss the vastness of the countryside in contrast to an apartment, Ivars replied that he could adapt to less space – it was the pace he would struggle with. That is, he would not know what to do in the evenings after coming home from work, because in the countryside that never ended: “You see, I get up at five. I go to sleep around ten, eleven in the evening. There’s always work. But I don’t say that [I would not move away] like I used to say... if it was getting too hard to stay and I couldn’t cope, then I would do that. Sell everything and buy an apartment. Do I need those cows? I don’t even know anymore. We are used to that [life] but does anyone [else] need it?”

After raising the question, “Do I need those cows?” Ivars suddenly switched from his personal experience of countryside life and work to the changing landscapes and practices of the countryside in general.

“You see, the thing is... People leave, go to cities... It’s a hard life in the countryside. Young people don’t want that anymore... So, everything changes. And when foreign tourists arrive... well, they don’t want to see a big farm like Blūms’s farm,²³ because they have farms ten times as modern. They want to see the milk can on the stool and how an old lady [*tantīņa*] is milking the cow in the meadow and how she’s straining milk through cheesecloth into a milk can They would like to see that, but if it no longer exists... Because they [Western European countries] no longer have it, but as I understand it now, they are striving to get back to it. And a huge effort must be made to get the young people to go and do it. We had it all, we

²³ Ivars reference to large cattle farms.

just destroyed it at full speed [mērkaža ātrumā]. Imagine, only 120 Latvian Brown cows in Latvia. We haven't even saved our cows.”

I listened to this recorded conversation over and over again, since it seemed to capture so much. It was not until six months later, in the winter of 2022, when I had a chance to follow up with Ivars on this issue. I read him the transcript and asked:

AŽ: Ivars, what did you mean when you said, “We had it all, we just destroyed it.”?

Ivars: That's exactly what I meant – everything! Look, thirty years ago, right, ok, we didn't want *kolkhozes* [Soviet collective farms] but why get rid of everything? There were structures, barns, systems that could be used now too. Now everybody owns everything! That's simply foolish [*dumji*].

AŽ: Do you mean that farmers could share tractors and stuff?

Ivars: Of course. Almost everybody now owns a full set of agricultural machinery – tractors, plows, combine harvesters, and threshers. Do you know how much they cost? Even used ones! The smart thing to do would be to organize collectives [*kolektīvs*] and share them. I know some who do that, in Kurzeme.²⁴ I know they do that.

Similarly, Ivars suggested that it would be wiser for farmers to sell their milk cooperatively and defend their rights as smallholders through a union. However, with few exceptions, this was not a common practice, due to what Ivars called the “absurd memory [of Soviet period] that we blindly follow.”

Thus, Ivars's statement in our first conversation that “We had it all, we just destroyed it” referred to multiple phenomena. First, he was alluding to the neo-liberal model of economic development that emerged in Latvia after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. During this period, Latvia transitioned from an authoritarian government to a democracy and from a centrally planned to a free-market economy. This shift led to post-socialist deindustrialization and the rise of post-Soviet agrarian capitalism, characterized as “simultaneously post-Soviet, nationalist, neoliberal, and European” (Dzenovska 2020, 14). This transformation involved the restoration of the interwar (1918-1940) property regime by returning collectivized properties to their pre-1940 owners or their descendants, privatizing factories that lacked sustainable production methods or knowledge of how to compete in a global economy, and a rash and imprudent dismantling of collective farms and privatization of their assets (Eglitis 2004; Dzenovska 2018a; 2020). For many people in rural areas, this led to limited business and almost no employment options opportunities except in municipal offices or local grocery stores, effects

²⁴ Kurzeme or Courland is one of the Historical Latvian Lands in western Latvia.

that in many places are still felt today (Dzenovska 2020). Additionally, the rash dismantling of every economic structure deemed “Soviet,” such as kolkhozes that could have been transformed into cooperatives, has led to the situation that Ivars described as “simply foolish” (*vienkārši dumji*) where every farmer has had to take out loans to buy the expensive machinery needed to work their fields.

“We had it all, we just destroyed it,” also referred to changes in rural areas after the 2008 worldwide economic crisis that destroyed many local businesses, cut down wages and put unbearable pressure on debtors. In our follow-up conversation, Ivars admitted that many things changed in rural areas during and after the crisis: “People just left, and can you blame them? You can’t keep a farm going with no [side] job, with no roads, with nothing.”

Ivars was right. At that time, given the harsh neoliberal austerity measures imposed by the government, the most noteworthy (though still somewhat passive) form of public resistance was mass out-migration, often referred to as “the great departure” (*lielā aizbraukšana*) (Dzenovska 2011b, 230; 2013; Ozoliņa 2019a; 2019b).²⁵ Since Latvia’s 2004 EU accession had granted Latvian citizens immediate access to the labor markets of the UK,²⁶ Ireland, Sweden and other countries, many people, especially from rural areas, left Latvia in search of jobs (Hazans 2019, 44).

While the EU has drained human resources through migration, it has also provided crucial support for those who stayed and continued to farm. Ivars, Anda and other smallholders I met at my field site praised this financial assistance, without which many smallholder farms would not have survived. However, many young and not-so-young people still did leave. (according to Ivars, these people also wanted to escape the hardships of rural life).²⁷ This meant many rural properties were either abandoned or sold to those who could afford land or had viable business plans. These complex processes, coupled with an aging population and changes in the global market, marked a turning point that accelerated the decline in the number of small farmsteads or *viensētas* (Šteinfelde 2021).

²⁵ Ozoliņa (2019a) has argued that the overall lack of public unrest in the face of extremely strict austerity policies in Latvia was shaped by understanding austerity as both a political and moral phenomenon, supported by a historically shaped moral economy. The Latvian government framed the post-crisis precarity as a matter of individual responsibility, influencing public perception and reducing resistance. Instead, economic hardship was turned into a personal challenge rather than a structural issue. Combined with a historical and cultural moral discourse of freedom that emerged from Latvia’s independence movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s and emphasized individual responsibility and freedom, Latvians accepted the austerity as yet another necessary sacrifice for greater economic stability, making it easier for the public to accept such policies.

²⁶ Until the United Kingdom left the EU.

²⁷ Ivars used terms “real” and “hard” work. There is potential for a broader discussion here on the concepts of “real” and “hard” work and their significance in Latvian society. I would suggest that these ideas are not only tied to the image of Latvians as a nation of farmers, but also to the virtue of hard labor itself.

Since 2001, when the first agricultural census took place after regaining independence in 1991, the total number of agricultural holdings in Latvia has halved. At the same time, the amount of agricultural land has actually increased slightly, according to the preliminary results of the 2020 agricultural census compiled by the Central Statistical Bureau, although the number of small farms (with less than 5 hectares of agricultural land) is decreasing every year (Šteinfelde 2021). This trend is the most evident in the significant decline in the number of dairy cows on farms with only one or two cows, which dropped by 75%, from 60,300 in 2005 to 15,200 in 2015. While the number of cows has also decreased on slightly larger farms with three to five and six to nineteen cows, the decline is less pronounced. Conversely, the number of dairy cows on farms with twenty or more has increased, with the most notable growth in large, industrial farms with 100 – 199 cows (Pilvere 2021). Since milk prices have not changed, the aforementioned economic and social factors must have been at play.

When Ivars referred to “Blūms’s farm” during our first conversation as one that would not interest tourists, he was not just alluding to that specific local large-farm owner (who has been named “Farmer of the Year” several times). “Blūms’s farm” served as a sarcastic and even bitter metonymy for rural areas’ ongoing transformation from predominantly individual smallholder farmsteads to large industrial farms. According to Ivars, these industrial farms lacked the cultural significance of Latvianness embodied in romanticized, picturesque scenes such as “an old lady ... milking the cow in the meadow.”

Ivars concluded that when galloping through post-socialist capitalism and adapting to the free market, Latvians had not even saved *their cows* – the Latvian Brown that was registered as a breed in 1922 and has since been celebrated as a national treasure (Sematovica et al. 2017). Experts in farming and farmers agree that the gradual but steady decrease in the numbers of Latvian Browns is directly related to a decline in small family farms, whose small herds mostly provide for the family and are not meant for large sales. In our conversation, Ivars – who had thirteen cows on the small farmstead he and his wife kept – explained the reasons for keeping mostly other kinds of cattle but simultaneously the importance of keeping at least one LB:

Ivars: But the quality of milk [of the LB] is better. It is primarily adapted to these climatic conditions. Durable, small. Here, we struggle with sickly black-and-white American²⁸ cows...

A.Ž.: But they produce more milk?

Ivars: Of course, of course... as long as we are paid for the quantity of milk, not the quality...

²⁸ Holstein dairy cows are actually a German breed.

A.Ž.: What kind of cows do you keep?

Ivars: Of course, [Holsteins], we also go along with the business. But I have one [LB], yes, yes – one for others to see [the LB; he says this with a vague smile but obvious pride]. Well, a tourist arrives, right? And they say – show me [the LB]. Well, Switzerland and all of them, right? They’ve preserved all [their traditional breeds] and they have huge gene pools. But in Latvia... well, tourists come, they say, I want to see your cows. I don’t even know where to take them... [it’s only] 120 cows we have...

A.Ž.: So, we need to preserve the LB for a gene pool and to show tourists...

Ivars: I heard that they already have frozen some [of the LB] genes because these cows can survive [in Latvia’s climate].... But it’s about everything, everything. Grains are different now than they used to be, Latvian pigs, and all those things. Well, people don’t like bacon anymore, so we take different [foreign] breeds....”

There is a lot to unpack here. On a very personal level, this conversation revealed Ivars’s choice to keep mostly Holsteins but also one Latvian Brown. It is true that the livestock numbers of the LB have dropped from around 500,000 in Soviet Latvia in the mid-to-late 1980s to 92,000 in 1992, to only approximately 30,000 animals in 2017 – of which only 130 are registered as purebred LB (Sematovica et al. 2017). It was probably the last of these numbers that Ivars meant when he repeatedly referred to only 120 LB cows, and in the Latvian media these 130 “genetically pure” cows are also usually represented as the total number belonging to the breed. This is not accurate but it accords with the anxiety about the LB as a breed on the verge of extinction.

However, Ivars was right about the practical reason behind the rapid reduction of the LB herd: lower milk production than in other breeds like Holsteins or brown-and-red cattle breeds, that were used to mix-breed with the LB to increase milk yield. Ivars also confirmed the experts’ opinion that the Latvian Brown is a highly resilient, hardy, and long-living breed, well-suited for Latvia’s changing and often harsh climate. Additionally, its milk has a higher average fat and protein content, making it particularly suitable for products like butter (Sematovica et al. 2017; Ambote 2019). These distinctions were also distinctions of care: LB cows were seen as animals one could live with, invest in, and care for over many years, whereas Holsteins demanded a different, more industrialized form of care tied to contemporary market pressures.

What intrigued me was Ivars’s complex reasoning in keeping just one Latvian Brown cow. If his only consideration had been the breed’s hardiness or higher quality milk, he would likely have kept more, despite their lower milk production. Instead, he kept only one, in which he took obvious pride. For him, the LB was not only a significant part of biological diversity

and the gene pool, but of “everything” – a word he repeated many times during our conversation. It struck me that he kept emphasizing the positive qualities of the Latvian Brown livestock breed (stable, durable, small and thus easy to care for, well-adapted to the Latvian climate, producing high-quality milk), while also repeating that that foreign tourists would love to see it, as something unique to Latvia. However, he also pointed out that the younger generations have grown up seeing mostly black-and-white cows in the fields rather than the endangered LB so that for them *every* cow symbolized rurality and Latvianness. His grandchildren might not care much about the color or breed of cows, but this was important to him because he “remembered how it was years ago”.

Repeated conversations with Ivars, Anda, their Pansionāts colleagues Alise, Lāsma, and several other local farmers, who had also decided to keep mostly black-and- Holstein dairy cows or red-and-white Charolais meat cattle but also one or two LB cows revealed similar thought patterns associating the LB with security, stability and Latvianness and suggesting that Latvians and the LB are alike. For example, Lāsma, a social worker at the Pansionāts, told me:

“The Latvian Browns... they are my darlings (*manas mīlulītes*). I have two of them. I’ve always had one or two Brownies (*brūnaļas*). They are like us Latvians: resistant, kind-natured... Yes, not so [productive] of milk... But you can rely on them! [They] always give milk. And they belong here [in Latvia] – they come from this land, like we, this is our breed. Darlings of mine.”

I suggest that amidst the current economic and social uncertainty and in a precarious rural context with few employment opportunities, depopulation, and a sense of social insecurity when approaching later life, which has been aggravated by the lasting memory of Soviet rule and the influence of post-Soviet agrarian capitalism that demanded changing the cattle breed, keeping one or two Latvian Brown cows became a way for individuals like Ivars, Lāsma, and Anda to adapt to ongoing changes. In this way, they tried to preserve a sense of stability, security, and cultural identity – Latvianness – while facing socioeconomic struggles and personal life changes such as aging and planning for an insecure future. Caring for LB cows thus became a way of caring for Latvianness – a small but meaningful act of sustaining a world imagined as fragile or endangered.

If demographic panic and re-generational anxiety framed rural Latvia as a place without a future, my interlocutors’ actions often pointed toward something else: keeping things going for a little while longer. For many, continuing to care for a few cows was a way of caring for the countryside itself, keeping alive forms of life that might otherwise disappear. Anda’s decision to maintain her farm until she was too old to manage it or Ivars’s choice to hold onto a few Latvian Brown cows despite the shrinking market, were not strategies of renewal or

growth but forms of endurance. They illustrate what Ringel (2014) calls “maintenance in times of change,” which offers an actual near future rather than waiting for something new “to emerge or to become” (2014, 67). In this temporality, continuity is sustained through small acts of persistence rather than expansive projects of transformation. Although such strategies could not resolve the uncertainties surrounding the future, they carved out modest forms of continuity. In this sense, emptiness is not only about decline and loss but also endurance, where land, cattle, or institutions like the Pansionāts are held intact long enough to allow survival, and sometimes even reproduction, even when larger narratives cast such efforts as futile. In Chapter 3, I extend this logic through the notion of a socio-spatial fix: a temporary stabilization of institutions and practices through Pansionāts’s care work that keeps rural life viable despite ongoing demographic and political abandonment. This endurance was fundamentally a matter of care: in tending to cows and land each day, people upheld not only their households but the tenuous socio-spatial fix that enabled rural life to continue in an emptying countryside.

At the same time, these forms of care were not only about sustaining livelihoods but also about sustaining meaning. The cow itself carried cultural and political weight, through its long association with Latvians’ self-image as a farming nation, that was sustained through policy, ritual, and performance.

The LB cow, and sometimes also dairy cows more generally, stands alongside the *viensēta* as a quintessential symbol of a Latvian countryside that continues to live through people like Ivars, Lāsma, and Anda. This portrayal of Latvians as a farming people is further reflected in rural development policies (Cimdiņa and Raubiško 2012a, 10) and reinforced through cultural events and media.

For example, right after the economic crisis and during the recovery the New Riga Theater (Jaunais Rīgas teātris) premiered the 2010 play Black Milk (*Melnais piens*) about the “true” Latvian identity, which apparently can be found in and is manifested through the countryside. The description of the play says:

The actors have concluded that true Latvian identity can be found not in the city but in the countryside. Only in the countryside is it obvious that Latvians are different from others. These differences disappear in the cities. Another conclusion is that the authentic countryside is characterized by the rural and agricultural way of life, which in Latvia definitely includes having livestock. The final conclusion: when the last Latvian grandmother hands over her last cow, authentic Latvia will be subject to the past. Therefore, the performance is also about the cows. (www.jrt.lv, n.d.)

The play was unofficially considered part of a series of performances called “Latvian stories” (*latviešu stāsti*)²⁹ that included several productions at the New Riga Theater over the years addressing questions about “being a Latvian.” The lesson that “the true Latvian identity can be found... in the countryside” and that “authentic countryside is characterized by... having livestock” is not exactly exclusive or groundbreaking, but it represents an aspect³⁰ of the broader idealized, nostalgic and potentially ideological public narrative of Latvianness and what constitutes it.

The Latvian director and publicist Liene Linde in her ironic 2021 essay “Are you a real Latvian?” (“*Vai tu esi īsts latvietis?*”) (2021) asked, among other tongue-in-cheek questions that supposedly would help to determine someone’s Latvianness, “Have you ever milked a cow?” and “Have you known a cow by name?” She continued: “Questions about cows introduce and conclude this test on purpose. *Gotiņa*³¹ is very important to a Latvian. We even put it on our two-lats coin, the most used coin, when we restored our currency.³² The Latvian Brown can be found only in our country and is, by the way, on the verge of complete extinction. Much like the rapidly shrinking Latvian nation. Unless, of course, this test proves otherwise.” Linde’s essay is one of the rare occasions where someone has addressed the decreasing number of both the Latvian Brown cow and Latvian citizens in an ironic way. In most cases, however, the LB and Latvians are tied together through symbolic narratives that emphasize cultural heritage, national identity, and the preservation of tradition in the face of decline.

Although it is true that farming has for centuries been one of the main economic activities in Latvian territories under various regimes, it seems the LB does not symbolize just any kind of rural landscape or lifestyle but a romanticized abundance that supposedly was historically only possible under the first independent Latvian government during the interwar period – that is to say, 1918-1941 and especially the 1930s, a period that many, including both much of the general public and some political parties, associate with a prosperity that has never returned.

²⁹ The general term describing Latvian stories was borrowed from a play with the same title *Latviešu stāsti*, premiered at the New Riga Theatre in 2004, that told stories about common people in Latvia: “The story of any person’s life is a much more powerful drama than all of Shakespeare’s plays combined. And every human drama deserves to be the cause of a theatrical performance to a much greater extent than any fantasy.” <https://www.jrt.lv/izrades/latviesu-stasti-8-10-11-stasts/>

³⁰ For example, Vasiļevska-Das’s (2020) dissertation explores another angle of people performing Latvianness through shaping the physical uprightness of children, their symmetry and “straight backs,” which correspond to the correct (straight, upright) “moral posture” [*morālā stāja*] of future Latvians – both Latvian and Russian-speaking, for that matter.

³¹ *Gotiņa* is the diminutive form of the word *govs*, (cow).

³² A picture of the LB appears on the two lats (national currency of the Republic of Latvia, in circulation 1922–1940 and 1993-2014) coin designed by the graphic artist Gunārs Lūsis and sculptor Jānis Strupulis as an emblem of land and soil (Ducmane 2022), as well as on a later commemorative two euro coin.

The LB was established as a breed in the interwar period and is thus associated not only with the successful production of butter for export (Karnups 2010, 7; 2022) but with the ideal of an independent and wealthy Latvia whose prosperity is based on agriculture (Sils 2023).³³ This persistent link between a cattle breed now raised on a shrinking number of small backyard farms, imagined and lost social and economic stability, and Latvianness demonstrates how “human pasts, presents, and futures are gathered with the pasts, presents, and futures of the multiplicity of nonhuman animals who share worlds with them” (Govindrajan 2018, 4).

Animals representing national identity – whether on a very intimate, individual level or even within national(istic) politics – is, of course, not unique to Latvia. Similar dynamics appear elsewhere. In her ethnography from India’s Central Himalayas, Govindrajan (2018, 62–89) shows how cows become morally and politically charged symbols of national identity and belonging. Villagers distinguished between indigenous Pahari cows and imported Jersey cows not only through abstract ideas, but through the embodied, everyday knowledge that arose from caring for them. Pahari cows were understood as hardy, rooted in local history and landscape, and linked to moral strength, whereas Jersey cows signified modernity, productivity, and external pressures. This resonates with how my interlocutors contrasted Latvian Browns and Holsteins: the LB cow represented Latvianness and the collective sense of loss tied to the imagined prosperity of pre-Soviet Latvia, while the Holstein cow reflected contemporary realities like the current economic system and the demands of the global market.

Like Govindrajan, Fozdar and Spittles (2014) have explored how cows were identified as distinctly Australian and became symbols of Australian national identity after an Australian investigative program exposed cruelty towards imported cattle in Indonesian abattoirs. The

³³ I repeatedly emphasize how Latvia’s interwar period (1918–1940) of independence is idealized as a time of imagined prosperity and flourishing but highlight that conditions during these twenty-two years were not uniform. After the declaration of independence in 1918, Latvia established a democratic government. However, on May 15, 1934, the Prime Minister, Kārlis Ulmanis, staged a self-coup against the parliamentary system. He took control of key state and party offices, proclaimed a state of emergency, suspended the Constitution, and dissolved all political parties and the Saeima (parliament). The subsequent period, from May 15, 1934 until the first Soviet occupation of Latvia on June 17, 1940, witnessed an authoritarian regime now often referred to as *Ulmanīlaiki* (Ulmanis’s times). This period is still frequently idealized, particularly among some political parties such as the National Association, as a period of prosperity for Latvia, including its countryside, and as a time of flourishing Latvianness. The principle of nationalism during this period led to the “Latvianization” of the economy and an increased role of the state. By the end of 1934, the nationalization of large companies, credit unions, and banks began, with compensation paid to the former owners. This significantly affected properties belonging to members of ethnic minorities, including Baltic Germans, Jews, and Russians. Nationalized companies were merged into state joint-stock companies, which became dominant in the manufacturing and financial sectors. The State Audit also covered agriculture, which Ulmanis personally considered crucial for strengthening Latvianness. The state became the largest buyer of agricultural produce, often subsidizing inefficient agricultural enterprises. While the regime significantly increased construction, export, and overall production, it was also marked by deep social and economic inequality and media censorship. Historians have heavily criticized this period for the regime’s propaganda, ideas of eugenics, and features adopted from fascism and German National Socialism, such as the cult of Ulmanis as a leader (*vadonis*) (Sils 2023; Stranga 2018; Zelče 2006).

program sparked public uproar and urgent calls for action to protect “Australian cattle.” This outrage was not just about animal welfare but also about reinforcing national identity and moral superiority. The term “Australian cattle” framed these animals as a part of the national heritage that deserved humane treatment and contrasted Australia’s supposed civilization and humanitarian values – which served as a basis for “Australianness” – with “barbaric” Indonesian practices, even as Australia’s own punitive treatment of asylum seekers faced significant criticism from the United Nations, academics, lawyers, and activists (Fozdar and Spittles 2014).

Although the LB breed has not been used as overtly in ideological politics as the Pahari or “Australian” cows, it still clearly seems to represent ethnic Latvians and their way of life. At the same time, its association with Latvians was not simply a case of nationalistic romanticism imposed on rural people and their practices from above. Rather, LB cattle served as a meaningful link between individuals and the nation. My interlocutors developed deep attachments to these animals that gave them a sense of belonging to an imagined, and often lost, version of a stable, prosperous nation-state rooted in the collective memory of interwar Latvia. These relationships also contributed to their sense of Latvianness in a rapidly globalizing world.

Although, none of the farmers/Pansionāts care workers were actually old enough to remember the interwar period, they had a strong sense of it as a time of lost abundance or, possibly, a promised but lost future. For example, Ivars, Lāsma and Anda all emphasized not only the LB’s qualities and similarity to Latvians, but also that it was bred during the period when Latvia was “flourishing, strong, with a good economy,” as Anda put it, and cultural events using this narrative locating authentic Latvianness in the countryside, *viensētas*, and dairy farming only reinforced this link. In this context, my interlocutors saw the LB as a direct connection to this lost imagined future endangered by the precarious contemporary world. Hence, the steadily declining numbers of *viensētas* and still more of LB cows brought a very intimate and also public worry of a potential loss of Latvianness to the surface or at least raised questions of what being a Latvian could mean without the traditional imagery of the countryside, agriculture, *viensētas* and the LB cow.

While Lāsma, Ivars, Anda and other smallholders/Pansionāts employees tried to preserve the LB on their farms and in the traditional landscape, the preservation of this “dying breed” had also become a national scientific effort. In 2017 a three-year project titled “Conservation of Genetic Resources of Cows in Latvia Using Embryo Transfer and Related Biotechnologies” at the Latvian University of Agriculture (Līdaks and Kanska 2017) began resembling programs across Europe that research and preserve biological samples from local breeds of farm animals in order to provide material to ensure genetic diversity, improve the efficiency of breeding,

preserve extant local breeds and restore extinct ones (“Lauksaimniecības dzīvnieku ģenētisko resursu saglabāšana | Zemkopības ministrija” 2022). At the same time, it seems that saving the Latvian Brown, as well as other breeds of animals like Latvian Blue cows and Latvian White pigs, is not just a contribution to biodiversity and the preservation of a gene pool but also a way of saving Latvianness and hence Latvians themselves. The Latvian Brown cow thus becomes a medium for a biological-cultural transmission and regeneration.

If one looks closely, subtle parallels between the looming extinction of the LB cow and the feared decline of the Latvian population appear in the language used to discuss them. Public discourse often connects cows with Latvianness, emphasizing a common concern for preserving cultural heritage. Although articles discussing the potential extinction of Latvians appear more frequently, local media occasionally highlight the LB’s decline using similar narratives. For instance, some headlines have warned that the Latvian Brown is losing its battle to the “milk machine” (Pelane 2003), becoming a rarity (Sproģe 2017), and dying out (Skagale 2012).³⁴ Meanwhile, from the media one also learns that “Latvians are dying out in their own country” (Preses Klubs 2019) and “the Latvian people are threatened by assimilation.” (Lēvalde 2010)³⁵

The scenarios of the endangered LB and the endangered Latvians that we see represented in newspaper titles, theater shows and lived practices are not only both gloomy but also both based on the nationalist romantic discourse of the countryside as the foundation of being a Latvian. The message is that if the traditional rural landscape – including the LB and individual farmsteads where the LB are usually kept – disappears, then will also Latvianness disappear.

Livestock plays an important role in constituting the narrative of the countryside as the core of being a Latvian. The sense of potentially losing a certain countryside life at *viensēta* – and thus of potentially losing Latvianness – is strengthened through the narrative of the importance of keeping cattle and especially the Latvian Brown.

The rural landscape is indeed changing. The continual loss of small homesteads marks not only an increasingly less biologically and culturally diverse rural landscape, but also significant changes in social relations and decreasing social security for people living in the countryside.

³⁴ Some other similar media titles include: “Latvian Brown is also threatened with extinction: scientists and enthusiasts in homesteads are trying to save the breed” (Ambote 2019), “Celebrating the anniversary of the Latvian Brown, it is becoming a rarity” (Prancāns 2020).

³⁵ Here are other titles from news broadcasts, public media articles, and interviews that throughout the years have used similar expressions of Latvians dying out: “Jānis Dombrava: We are dying out!” (Dombrava 2009); “Demographer Mežs on birth rate: “Latvians do not believe that we are dying” (jauns.lv 2011); “A resident shows how the population of Latvia is dying out” (nra.lv 2018); “Will Latvians [become] extinct or not? What do celebrities think about it”, “The land of the elderly: Schools are becoming nursing homes” (Hauka 2018); “A country for old men” (Sprīģe 2017a) “Latvia is aging; experts see problems, but no solutions” (Jansone 2021).

One way that smallholders have adapted to these changes is by shifting to Holstein cows to align with contemporary productivity demands. Ivars, like many others, has had to prioritize production, even though these cattle are less hardy, long-lived, and symbolically tied to Latvian heritage. On the one hand, Holstein cows and large-scale farms represent a pathway to economic viability, enabling farmers to remain competitive. On the other, for Ivars and others, these changes embody a deeper sense of loss – an erosion of cultural identity that had once persisted despite both Soviet collectivization and post-Soviet capitalist restructuring.

While younger generations may not distinguish between breeds of cows, for older farmers, the Latvian Brown remains a tangible link to the past. Whether through nostalgia or deliberate preservation, the myth of Latvians as introverts who live on *viensētas* and raise dairy cows continues to shape rural identity not just through cultural narratives but through everyday practices (as I argue further in Chapter 3 such practices were sustained by the Pansionāts). Choosing to keep even a single Latvian Brown cow was not merely an agricultural decision but an act to preserve a sense of identity and stability in an uncertain future.

The fear of losing Latvianness through lost traditional forms and landscapes of rural life was complemented and even exacerbated by locally shrinking populations of rural areas and by the nationally greying society. Although aging affects all parts of Latvia, the demographic trough is more pronounced in rural areas. It was not only Ivars's imaginary grandma milking a cow in a meadow who had become a rare sight in the countryside. According to experts, the declining population in rural areas in recent years means retiring farmers are not being replaced and endangers the whole agricultural sector (Bīders 2012). Anda's considerations about whether to downsize or even sell the farm when she and her husband are too old to work it – rather than bequeathing it to their son, who without a partner or state support would probably not be able to keep it up – serve as a poignant illustration of the practical decisions facing aging farmers.

Ironically enough, the public discourse of a fading traditional countryside, including grandmas, Latvian Brown cows, and hence Latvianness, has rarely translated into actual economic and development strategies for rural areas, apart from informal role of the Pansionāts (discussed in Chapter 3). As Cimdiņa and Raubiško (2012a, 13) have argued, smallholders have largely been excluded from national rural development plans because their ways of life do not match capitalist criteria for economic growth. This absence underscores a contradiction at the heart of re-generational anxiety: while the idealized image of rural Latvia as the cradle of Latvianness is deeply embedded in public narratives, state policies continue to favor industrial agriculture over smallholder survival.

Ivars's questions "Do I need those cows? ... We are used to that [life], but does anyone need it?" reflect a growing unease among smallholders about the practical realities of rural life today and uncertain future of farming and cultural identity. Ultimately, the extinction Ivars described was not so much about what has already disappeared – the closing of village institutions or the loss of neighbors – as about what will happen next. While he and other smallholders have continuously adapted by diversifying their sources of income (through work at the Pansionāts), relying on EU subsidies, adjusting herd sizes, or making pragmatic choices about what can be preserved and what must inevitably be let go, the reality of abandoning their farm slowly but steadily approaches. Holding on to one last Latvian Brown was not just about preserving a cattle breed. It was a quiet act of endurance and care, a way of maintaining a connection to a disappearing way of life, and a testament to the resilience of those who continued to navigate the uncertainties of rural Latvia. For many, caring for even a few cows was also a way of caring for the countryside itself, keeping it alive long after the economic rationale had eroded.

By focusing on the Latvian Brown cow in these narratives and practices, I have highlighted its strong symbolic ties to the idea of a "dying nation" and "endangered Latvians," as reflected in Latvian culture and politics. I have also explored how farmers who mostly kept black-and-white dairy cows retained one or two Latvian Brown cows to preserve a sense of stability and cultural identity in the face of socioeconomic precarity and personal transitions such as aging. Such care was part of what held rural life together – a modest but meaningful stabilization in an otherwise emptying countryside.

With these tensions in mind, in the next subchapter I will return to a question from my opening section: what role, if any, are older adults imagined to play in the future of the nation? While smallholders like Ivars held on to cattle breeds and rural practices as quiet acts of endurance and thus became a part of the nation's imagined future, older adults were often imagined as no longer contributing – biologically, economically, or culturally. If the Latvian Brown cow served as a symbol of cultural reproduction, the care home stood as a symbol of its perceived end. And yet, as I have shown in this subchapter, both persisted in close relations. In what follows, I examine how aging and institutional care came to embody not only demographic loss, but a deeper kind of emptiness – one rooted in national imaginaries of value, vitality and who is allowed to belong to the future.

2.3. Unimagined Lives: Aging as emptiness

In 2017, Inga Sprinģe of Re:Baltica, the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism, published an article titled "The Country for Old Men – Latvia's Ageing Dilemma" as part of a

six-article series exploring possible scenarios for Latvia's demographic future (Springe 2017a). Among the many texts written about demographic challenges in Latvia, Springe's article remains one of the most empirically grounded: in the near future, there will not be enough working-age adults to support the country's growing number of older people and the increasing costs of social welfare and healthcare.

Instead of indulging in optimistic visions of rising birth rates or the return of emigrants, one of the series' articles laid things out bluntly: too few children are being born, immigration and brain drain will continue, and weakening local governance will make Latvia less attractive for young and educated people, while the idea of expats returning will remain a pipe dream (Puriņa 2017b; 2017a). Rather than repeating the well-worn national demographic goals for the nation's reproduction, the series considered scenarios long avoided or even feared by politicians and policymakers – immigration and automation (Springe 2017b; 2017c). The tone was deliberately bleak, a wake-up call to politicians and policymakers lost in an impossible dream.

The article was accompanied by striking visual materials including a map of Latvia showing which schools had been converted into care homes for older adults and group photographs of pupils and teachers from 2011 and 2016 paired with 2017 images showing the same schools now operating as care homes. The old had replaced the young, a vivid example of Latvia's growing emptiness.

Like many other pieces on demographic decline, the article depicted a deserted landscape. "If nothing changes," it warned, "Latvia, where even today small towns are spookily empty in the evenings, will become even more quiet by 2030. There will be fewer people. The large portion of them will be old. It will change the country's mood and vibe. Politicians will have to focus on the conservative population, who are active voters, making the country even less attractive to the younger generation" (Springe 2017a). In this quote, aging and older adults are portrayed as static and homogenous – an inherently conservative population. Perhaps this framing is linked to the "brain drain" her colleague referred to (Puriņa 2017b). But more importantly, Springe's language framed the emotional and spatial feel of a country of the old: "spookily empty" and "quiet." There would still be people, just fewer of them, and mostly old. In this vision, Latvia was not empty because no one lived there, or even because depopulation had eroded or significantly changed social and material infrastructures (Dzenovska 2012, 130; 2020). It was empty because it was inhabited by older adults.

This framing marks a significant shift in how emptiness is imagined and felt. Not as absence, but as the wrong kind of presence (Nixon 2011, 165) – a presence that does not reproduce neither biologically, nor socially, culturally, or economically; does not contribute to future-oriented national projects and does not generate hope. This contrasts sharply with the

biocultural optimism embedded in visions of *tautas ataudze* and remigration. In this imaginary, aging itself becomes a symbol of suspended vitality, a stand-in for demographic and national decline.

Care homes for older people – institutions that are often viewed as sites of passive, almost maintenance-type care, rather than as settings in which care might unfold as a process with open-ended outcomes that can reproduce or dissolve relationships, shape national belonging, or legitimize and reinforce inequalities among care workers and residents (Thelen 2015; Thelen and Coe 2019; Thelen 2021) – come to embody a sense of stagnation, demise, and inevitable emptiness. They are not imagined as places from which anything new can emerge, but as locations that quietly absorb what is left.

This framing of late life as national loss is not new. It draws on deeper cultural and historical associations, particularly those attached to care homes themselves. To understand why care homes are still so heavily stigmatized and why they continue to signify failure rather than care, I briefly trace the local histories of institutional care and their enduring moral weight.

Care homes for older adults, or *pansionāti* in colloquial Latvia, have historically rarely carried positive associations in Latvian society. They are still often referred to as “poorhouses” (*nabagmājas*), reflecting their origins in the mid to late 19th century, when state-funded institutions for older people primarily served those without relatives, housing, or the financial means to care for themselves. This association persisted throughout the 20th century, including the Soviet era, and still lingers today. In this sense, the idea of institutional care for older adults did not differ significantly from that of orphanages, which still exist in Latvia and are widely regarded as remnants of the Soviet system. Until recently, both care homes and orphanages were understood as places for those without family members capable of providing care.

During the Soviet period, the socialist healthcare system guaranteed “universal” medical care as part of every citizen’s right to social security, alongside housing, employment, and education. These entitlements were central to how socialist states demonstrated that they “cared” for their citizens (Read 2007, 203). In 1974, for instance, the local newspaper of the municipality where the Pansionāts is located stated: “Soviet citizens have the right to material support in old age, in case of illness, or loss of a breadwinner.... Elderly citizens and persons with disabilities who are alone, have no legal guardians, and are unable to care for themselves are, upon their request, admitted to care homes under full state support” (Balevičs 1974).

At the same time, as Read (2007, 203) argues, socialist health care and social security were structured around ideals of being “rational, progressive, and scientific.” As a result, nursing care and care for older adults focused heavily on alleviating physical problems, while

the emotional and social dimensions of care were left to the private sphere, usually to women in families (Read 2007, 206).

Although ideas of (good) aging and (good) care vary across cultures, it is widely assumed, at least to some extent, that family members should care for one another in times of illness or hardship. This expectation is especially strong in relationships between adult children and their aging parents, particularly when the alternative is a “poorhouse,” a term that signals a disintegration in kinship ties. The enduring division between what is seen as “warm” family care and “cold” state care, where the state is perceived as addressing only physical needs and not emotional ones, continues to shape how care homes are viewed today (Read 2007; Thelen 2015). It functions as a “category of practice” (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2015, 36), influencing both public perceptions of care homes and the way care workers themselves understand their responsibilities.

These dominant care dichotomies shape the broader discourse around care homes, reinforcing the idea that care provided by relatives is superior to that provided by institutions. As a result, institutional care is often perceived not as a legitimate form of support, but as a solution for those without family – individuals whose social ties are seen as broken or absent. This moral framing shapes how care homes like the *Pansionāts* are regarded: not as places where care at its most complex form takes place, but as last resorts marked by stigma. The belief that a “good family” would never place an older relative in a care home remains widespread, reinforcing the view of institutional care as a form of social abandonment (Biehl 2013). The term “poorhouse” continues to serve as a powerful shorthand for this moral failure.

These notions are not only directed at families but are also deeply internalized by older adults themselves. Many strongly resist the idea of moving to a care home, not only because of fears about impersonal or technical care, but also because such a move might imply that their children have failed them or that they have failed as parents. It is only in recent years that tentative moral visions of eldercare as a core responsibility of the state, including the obligation to ensure social security for older people, have begun to circulate more widely in Latvia and beyond (Lamb 2018, 174–76). Despite these emerging shifts in public discourse, the dominant imaginaries surrounding aging and institutional care remain largely unchanged.

This positioning of care homes and their residents generates unimagined or underimagined communities (Nixon 2011, 165). Nixon (2011) develops this concept in the context of environmental displacement, describing how communities – often Indigenous or rural – are erased from the national imagination to make way for development projects like mega dams or mining operations. Their continued presence complicates the dominant story of progress and must therefore be rendered invisible, or “unimagined,” to legitimize their removal.

In the Latvian case, this logic unfolds differently but with similar effects. Older adults and care homes are not removed for infrastructural projects, but their presence is nonetheless framed as incompatible with national regeneration. Although older adults increasingly appear in media and policy documents, their visibility continues to signify burden, stagnation, or threat of the nation, rather than contribution to national vitality. Even recent discussions that draw attention to the quality of life in care homes and systemic issues like understaffing rarely address the role of care workers or the financial and emotional costs borne by families that ultimately also affect lives of older adults.

Spatially and emotionally, care homes remain marginal, shaped by the lingering stigma of the *nabagmāja*, institutions associated with dependence, abandonment, or even failure. As Martin and Yanagisako (2020, 647) stress, the very ascription of certain groups as “dependent” is never universal but historically and politically charged. The critical question, then, is how certain forms of interdependence come to be singled out as “dependence” and with what consequences.

In Latvia, this logic is visible in the ways care homes are represented and located. News reports on the closure of schools, for example, often describe or quote local voices that interpret their conversion into care homes as a sign of demographic aging – a symbolic reversal in which buildings once tied to national reproduction and youthful potential come to signify a future defined by decline. At the same time, care homes are frequently located in remote or peripheral areas, a spatial arrangement that reinforces their marginal status. Taken together, these representations and placements echo what Nixon (2010, 62–64) describes as “zones of administered invisibility”: tolerated but peripheral spaces whose contributions to sustaining families, rural livelihoods, and cultural practices are obscured precisely because they do not align with dominant ideals of productivity or regeneration.

By foregrounding aging and the everyday practices of care and endurance that sustain rural life, I extend Dzenovska’s (2012; 2018a; 2020) account of emptiness by showing how emptiness is produced not only through out-migration and economic decline, but also through the ways later life and care homes are imagined as marginal even as they hold the countryside together.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how demographic decline in Latvia is more than a statistical trend or policy challenge. By introducing the concept of re-generational anxiety, I have shown how concerns over birth rates, emigration, aging, and the future of Latvianness

become entangled with moral questions about who and what is imagined as mattering for and belonging to the nation's future.

Its three sections traced how this compounded anxiety takes shape not only in reproductive policy and public discourse, but in symbolic figures and everyday struggles. In the first section, I showed how media narratives like the 2011 broadcast "Latvians are dying out," alongside policy documents centered on *tautas ataudze*, construct a vision of nation's survival that is biologically narrow, culturally exclusive, and oriented toward biological reproduction. This vision reinforces a reproductive ideal that marginalizes older adults and overlooks complex forms and outcomes of care.

In the second section, I shifted the focus to the Latvian Brown cow, a symbol of national reproduction, smallholder resilience, and rural identity. The decline of this breed and of the *viensētas* that sustain the LB cow encapsulates anxieties not only about the end of a farming tradition, but about the erosion of cultural identity and continuity. As Anda and Ivars's stories illustrate, the disappearance of the Latvian Brown is not just a matter of agricultural economics or EU policy; it reflects a broader sense of loss, where a landscape, a way of life, and a sense of meaning are slowly slipping away. And yet, their continued work with these cows was grounded in long-standing relations of care; people continued to hold on, not out of nostalgia alone, but as a practical and symbolic act of endurance.

In the third and final section, I returned to older adults and care homes that support them. Drawing on Nixon's notion of unimagined communities (2011), I explored how older adults and the spaces they inhabit are not rendered marginal because they are absent, but because their presence disrupts the dominant future-oriented frameworks of national development. Care homes are rarely discussed as vital infrastructures, even though (as I will show in Chapter 3) they play a crucial role in sustaining rural communities: offering employment, anchoring social networks, and enabling intergenerational arrangements. Instead, they are framed as burdensome or residual – the endpoint of a life imagined as no longer productive.

What links these figures – the Latvian Brown cow, the aging smallholder, and the care home – is that they reveal the contradictions within the national imaginary. The Latvian Brown cow remains a powerful symbol of rural authenticity and cultural continuity. It embodies not only a nostalgic past but also a vision of what might still be preserved. Yet the actual conditions of smallholder life that sustain this symbol are increasingly precarious. Smallholders like Anda, Ivars, and Lāsma found themselves asking who needs their way of life – and who even needs the Latvian Brown cows they have worked so patiently to preserve. These ruminations were grounded in practical concerns and point toward likely futures in which their farms will be sold.

For the time being, however, their everyday realities were sustained in part by their employment at the Pansionāts (as explored in Chapter 3). Though they were still smallholders and care workers, they were not (except for possibly Ivars) far from becoming care home residents themselves. Older adults (except perhaps the idealized grandma milking a Latvian Brown cow in a sunlit meadow) and the institutions that supported them were rarely part of national imaginaries, and when they were, they appeared as burdens, symbols of decline, or markers of national emptiness. Taken together, these figures illustrate how visions of national regeneration selectively recognized certain forms of life while rendering others invisible. This disconnect between what existed and what was imagined to matter created a paradox: the very institutions and practices that helped hold rural life together were excluded from the narratives that sought to sustain and perhaps even reproduce it.

By weaving together policy analysis, media discourse, and in-depth ethnography, I have argued that re-generational anxiety in Latvia must be understood not only demographically, but also morally and imaginatively. It is not only about how many Latvians are born or how many leave or stay, but about who is seen as capable of biologically, culturally, and economically reproducing the nation and who is silently removed from that image.

In this chapter I have also shown that emptiness in Latvia is lived through multiple registers. Drawing on Dzenovska (2011a; 2012; 2018a; 2020), I have argued that emptiness is not only absence but also a form of life: a mode of inhabiting spaces where futures are imagined to lie elsewhere. Nixon's (2010; 2011) work helps further underscore that emptiness is not a void but a political designation that marks certain forms of life, such as that of older adults, as no longer belonging to the present or future. At the same time, my interlocutors' practices of keeping a few Latvian Brown cows, holding on to small farms, or continuing routines at the Pansionāts resonate with what Ringel (2014) calls endurance: stretching the present a little longer through modest acts of persistence. In this sense, emptiness in Latvia is both a discourse of decline and a practice of endurance, where people sustain life and place through small, humble continuities in the face of uncertainty. These dynamics form the backdrop for understanding why the Pansionāts, examined in the next chapter, becomes not a residue of emptiness but a central infrastructure through which rural life is sustained, relations are made, and futures are quietly held together, thus also contributing to preserving the imagined Latvianness.

These lives and places continue to shape both formal and informal economic and social networks, and to support rural infrastructures and cultural practices tied to national identity, as discussed in the previous subchapter on smallholders' ties with their cattle. In many ways, their value must be actively sidelined. Acknowledging the roles they play in maintaining social and

cultural life would complicate dominant narratives that equate national futurity with youth, biological reproduction, and a narrow model of economic contribution – one that routinely excludes care work. In this sense, their lives must be unimagined for these future-oriented frameworks to remain intact.

3. A place where things happen: Economic and social organization within and beyond the Pansionāts

Introduction

“Yes, that’s why I say... this is definitely the biggest workplace, there aren’t many other options. Of course, the farmsteads that exist here, they of course [could not] manage without the care home. You at least have the regular income,” Lāsma, a Pansionāts social worker and smallholder who kept cattle, told me during one of our many conversations. Despite her hard work at the care home and the daily challenges that shaped rural life – shifting relationships, managing an income, sustaining a farm – she also insisted on the Pansionāts’s wider importance. “You see, Anniņ, things happen here! [*Redzi, Anniņ, šeit lietas notiek!*]” Lāsma said this over morning coffee, as we talked through the usual dailies – the condition of the road, what had happened during the previous shift, and what was going on at her farm – while at the same time arranging a medical visit for one resident and preparing to admit a new one. It was an ordinary kind of busy – one that came and went.

Things indeed happened at the Pansionāts – not spectacular events, but small yet consequential acts that wove the institution into local life. People found steady work, took care of those in need, heard news they could not get elsewhere, celebrated someone’s birthday in the morning before the afternoon farm chores, or were given leftover food to feed their pigs. Seen together, these internal practices and relations reveal that it was not merely a home for older adults in need of state care but a vital local hub of economic and social organization that quietly anchored households, livelihoods, and futures – however vibrant or down-to-earth – in the surrounding countryside.

Building on these everyday practices, this chapter shows how the Pansionāts functioned as a site of care-based social and economic organization and sustained rural lives in three interconnected ways. This is also the first step in a broader argument I develop throughout this dissertation: state care in Latvia acted as a socio-spatial fix. I rework David Harvey’s (2000; 2001b; 2001a) concept of a “spatial fix,” which describes how capitalism temporarily stabilizes itself through investments in place, to show that here it was care for the marginalized that provided such stability and potential future. State care, as embodied in the Pansionāts, anchored people in place, enabled continuity, and sustained ways of life otherwise threatened by demographic and economic precarity. Later chapters will return to this idea of care as socio-spatial fix more explicitly and through different, multifaceted angles of the argument, but I will

begin by tracing how it emerged through the everyday “things that happened” at the Pansionāts. This argument unfolds across three sections.

In the first section, I show how the Pansionāts functioned as a relational hub, binding together residents, staff, and their families across generations. Rather than a total institution in Goffman’s (1961) sense, it operated as a social node where kinship, neighborhood, and work relationships converged. Employees lived alongside one another, and sometimes alongside residents; children played in the yard as part of everyday life; and family ties often extended into institutional care. These relations created a form of togetherness that did not erase distance: people valued being close but also “separate” and maintained boundaries even when relying on each other. This relational density complicates images of care homes as socially isolating or lifeless and instead shows how they generated continuity of kinship and local belonging.

The second section examines the Pansionāts as a source of formal employment and steady income. In a region where economic opportunities were scarce and precarious, the care home was one of the most reliable employers. Its regular wages, pension contributions, and flexible scheduling enabled employees to sustain households, support small farms, and remain in the countryside. By situating the Pansionāts in the wider rural economy, I argue that here state care infrastructure, which policy discourse often portrays as straining budgets, functioned as a stabilizing force. The care home not only offered jobs but underpinned a vision of the “good life” rooted in farming, land, and rural rhythms.

In the third section, I turn to the complementary informal economies that sustained life at and around the Pansionāts. Practices such as redistributing food, donating clothing, or helping with farm animals blurred the boundaries between institutional life, household economies, and community reciprocity. Far from being marginal or illicit, they were central to how care was organized and experienced. Informal exchanges reinforced the care home’s embeddedness in local networks of trust and illustrate how state care institution became a site for everyday place-making and mutual reliance.

Taken together, these three perspectives demonstrate that care at the Pansionāts was not confined to professional tasks or bureaucratic routines. With a variety of rich and dense ethnographic material, I show how the institution was not merely a workplace or welfare service but a vital element of material, social, and symbolic support structures in a place often imagined as empty or in decline. Through small, everyday acts, care became a form of quiet place-making that sustained rural lives, landscapes, and futures against all odds.

3.1. “Separately but together”: The Pansionāts as social networker

The first people I met when I arrived at the Pansionāts in July of 2020 were six children of various ages. They were playing in the courtyard, constructing makeshift apartment buildings from large cardboard boxes. The only boy, who was about twelve, was helping the youngest, a cheerful blond dark-eyed three-year-old girl, crawl into her newly crafted “apartment.” As I got out of the car, it struck me how at home they seemed there. It soon became clear that they were not just visiting grandparents or other relatives but were intimately familiar with the care home.

The children ran up asking who I was and why I was there and eagerly telling me about themselves – where they went to school, how many friends they had, how they were related to each other – and, of course, about the place. Two, aged three and seven, were sisters, daughters of a care worker and a local handyman and granddaughters of another care worker, and the whole family lived in the Lower Building in the Pansionāts complex. Another two were half-sisters, the daughter and stepdaughter of the care home’s cook. The boy was the grandson of a former cook, while another girl (and her brother, whom I met later) were the children of the manager and lived in the nearby village of Zīle. Some lived in the complex full time; some spent the summer visiting parents or grandparents who worked or had worked there; and still others accompanied their parents to work.

In many ways, perhaps without realizing it, the seven-year-old girl whose entire family were employees of the Pansionāts embodied the social and economic fabric of the Pansionāts, where care was embedded in maintenance and continuity. Trying to keep up with our sprawling conversation, I asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. Cheerfully, firmly, and somewhat proudly, she replied, “When I grow up, I want to be the cook at the Pansionāts! [*Kad izaugšu liela, es gribu būt Pansionāta pavārīte!*].” Though the future she imagined for herself was shaped by what she knew as a child, it still reflected the deep embeddedness of care in her everyday world. She did not yet imagine herself away from the care home, but firmly within it, woven into the rhythms of life and labor that surrounded her. Her world was saturated with care work: the routines of caregiving, the presence of grandparents, parents, and neighbors working side by side, and a sense of being “at home” in a place so often framed by public and political discourses as institutional, lifeless, or marginal. It was her home and the center of her world. This made her imagined future both ordinary and meaningful, not because it was exceptional but because it showed how care and continuity were sustained through everyday life there, even in a future imagined by a child.

The girl’s imagined future was just one example of how deeply lives were entangled in and around the care home. Over the following months, I gradually learned that at least half of the staff had connections to each other outside the care home, which seemed to me to reflect

not just their close-knit relationships but probably also their limited employment opportunities. Among the employees and residents were mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, siblings, cousins, nieces, partners, spouses, former lovers, long-time friends, parents of schoolmates, long-time neighbors, and staff whose relatives now lived in the Pansionāts as residents.

The girl's declaration made visible what I would come to see repeatedly during my fieldwork: the Pansionāts functioned as more than an institution for older adults: it was also a space where kinship and labor were interwoven across generations, where children grew up immersed in care work with all its patterns and ambiguities, absorbing its presence, and at some point, also limitations and challenges. Through formal employment and informal visits, shared routines and proximity, the care home connected people who lived separately yet remained bound together by care and shared space.

As I researched the history of the area and its surrounding districts in the local library, I discovered that many people shared surnames or maiden names. As one care home's resident and village native told me, "People have never married far away from here. We stay here, and then maybe some new people come in. Yes, yes, cousins used to marry and all that, that wasn't a problem." Seen in this light, the Pansionāts appeared less as a bounded institution than as a place of relational continuity, embedded in and contributing to local life.

This impression of a tightly bound social environment where people "stayed here" contrasted starkly with the realities many families now experienced. Children and grandchildren of the care home staff and other local people had left to work abroad and only returned for short visits. Some staff members had emigrated and later returned; others had left the countryside for larger towns and different opportunities. Many aging smallholders remained but were increasingly worried about their futures.

This tension between staying and leaving and continuity and departure shaped the social landscape of the area. While outward migration created gaps in families and communities, the Pansionāts countered this erosion by providing an enduring anchor. Amidst this gradual sense of emptying, shaped by the everyday precarity of farm maintenance, poor quality of roads, limited job opportunities, declining services and changing social ties, the Pansionāts offered a rare form of stability and sociality. It enabled a kind of togetherness in separateness, a way of being close, but not too close, holding together a social fabric that would likely fray without it.

This balance between proximity and distance was not just abstract but something many employees explicitly appreciated in their everyday lives. A rehabilitation counselor who had originally been hired in 2021 to work with older adults and started also working with people with mental disorders and intellectual disabilities after the care home expanded its services that year told me that one of the things she valued most about working at the Pansionāts was the

flexibility. She and her husband (who was a woodworking and carpentry teacher there), could coordinate their schedules around caring for their three children. Moreover, the job offered a feeling of balanced closeness and distance. Like most others working at the Pansionāts, she felt it had brought her closer to neighbors and colleagues while still allowing for the kind of separateness that many of my interlocutors described as essential to rural life. She described this way of living and working as being “separately but together” (*“kopā, bet atsevišķi”*).

Most of the time, this sense of closeness did not mean constant contact or lead to emotional overload,³⁶ and the necessary apartness had nothing to do with emptiness. Except for unexpected incidents like residents’ physical or mental health crises, the quarrels that sometimes erupted between care home residents, and COVID-19 related crises, the Pansionāts had a steady rhythm and routine. But the close living conditions and overlapping relationships between residents and staff, the presence of children, the mix of generations, and an institutional pace that blended regiment with a layer of informality also generated a kind of everyday buzz. This atmosphere contrasted with that at many other care homes I have visited over the years, where more rigid boundaries between staff and residents were maintained through separate living quarters or strict role divisions (Žabicka 2014). At the Pansionāts, however, some staff members lived there full time, an arrangement dating to the institution’s Soviet-era origins that was retained because it was still economically and socially useful to both the employees and, ultimately, the care home itself.

Several employees found the living space that the Pansionāts had provided from its early days essential. Anda, who lived on a farm a few kilometers away, told me that she (like many others who had come to work there in the late 1980s and 1990s, a tumultuous period during and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union) had been not only seeking employment (even at a low salary) but also a place to live with her children. For many, she said, that had been as important as the job itself. The Lower Building, constructed in the 1980s, had long offered inexpensive apartments for employees, a common practice in Soviet workplaces that remained in place after the USSR’s collapse, especially in remote areas where commuting was a challenge. The Pansionāts gradually also started to rent these apartments to former staff, extending its social role well beyond the formal boundaries of employment.

³⁶There were, of course, exceptions. The rehabilitation counselor, for instance, occasionally experienced “forced closeness” with some clients from the transitional living apartments who would call her at home in the evenings. The accountant was unable to take regular vacations due to the demands of the role. One care worker switched to working in the kitchen after finding direct care for older adults too emotionally taxing. Still, these moments of closeness were mostly intrinsic to specific roles rather than reflecting ongoing interpersonal social fatigue among colleagues – a dynamic not unlike that in many other professions where work sometimes follows people home.

This building was now a multipurpose structure. The ground-floor apartments had been remodeled as rooms for more mobile or physically fit clients, one upstairs apartment had been converted into administrative offices, and the others housed a mix of current and former employees. During my first research stay in 2020-2021, two care workers (a mother and daughter), some current and former handymen, a cook, a former cook, and a former care worker lived there full time. One nurse rented an apartment during the workweek and returned to her home about twelve kilometers away on her days off. She did not own a car and commuted by bicycle or using a bus route that only ran once a day, so living on site remained her most affordable and comfortable option. Another apartment was rented by a social worker Lāsma for her nearly hundred-year-old grandmother, whom she cared for together with another care worker living next door.

The Pansionāts, then, was not simply a place for caring for older adults or people with disabilities: it was a dynamic social institution, shaped by the intricate relationships between those who worked and lived there even if its daily rhythms felt slow. Its sociality was held together not only by professional roles but dense relational networks between colleagues, kin, former employees, and residents (Cohen 1982). What made such shared proximity possible was the ability to maintain degrees of apartness or the capacity to adapt to constant involvement in the care home's life – particularly for those for whom it was also a place to live.

After their shifts, many staff members returned to homes outside the Pansionāts's territory. Some lived on farms, others in houses without farmland, and still others in apartments in nearby villages. Several told me that living in the countryside with its open spaces and opportunities for solitude was essential to their well-being and daily routine. If the Pansionāts offered buzz, interaction, and emotionally demanding work, the rural setting balanced it out.

For those employees who lived on the premises, however, physical distance was not an option. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that they had developed their own ways of setting boundaries between work and private life, even if that life remained deeply embedded in the care home's rhythms. For example, the handyman ate lunch in the Pansionāts kitchen on the days he was working, but not on his days off. Still, he interacted and even occasionally spent time with residents on his days off. Care workers living on the premises also refrained from official care duties during their days off or while on vacation, when the residents imperceptibly became just neighbors.

These quiet negotiations of space and rhythm extended beyond the staff. Residents also experienced the Pansionāts as a place where life unfolded in cycles – sometimes lively, sometimes calm. Several residents enjoyed the buzz of children playing in the yard. One hot summer day in 2020, for instance, Valentīna, a care home's resident who lived on the first floor

of the Lower Building, told me, “It’s very calm here. So, I like to sit on this bench and watch them smile and play.” I often saw residents interacting with the children, for whom life at the Pansionāts – including encounters with older adults or people with disabilities – was simply part of daily life.

However, like much at the Pansionāts, this liveliness, too, followed its own cycle. In September, after nearly three months of summer break, most of the children returned to school or to other cities. Some were studying remotely due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. With the onset of colder weather, residents also gradually retreated indoors. The hum faded. The place grew quiet once more. Not empty but resting.

Still, even in these quieter seasons the Pansionāts steadily carried on, not only as a social world but as a workplace. When the seven-year-old girl at the beginning of my arrival told she wanted to be a cook at the Pansionāts, she was not just imagining her future but unknowingly describing a local reality. After all, nearly everyone around her worked at the care home in some capacity. Her vision reflected how deeply the Pansionāts was woven into the economic life of the area. For many, this was not only a place of social embeddedness, but a rare and valued source of formal employment that sustained households, anchored local routines, and offered economic security. Thus, in the following section, I explore the Pansionāts as a site of formal economy.

3.2. “You can’t not work here”: formal economy at the Pansionāts

Lelde had held two jobs at the Pansionāts. She worked as a warehouse manager for several years, then left to focus on her private accounting business as she “needed a change of pace.” In February 2020, she accepted a part-time clerk position the Director Valters had offered her. Lelde did not sound enthusiastic when she recounted this, so I asked why she had agreed to return. “If you live here, you can’t not work here,” she concisely replied. She explained that it was almost impossible to avoid working at the care home if you lived nearby. This was not only true for someone with an accounting degree and fluent English who was clearly overqualified as a clerk (she was promoted to accountant when her supervisor retired): for instance, many care workers were initially looking for work that was available and learned their skills on the job.

Compared to many other lived experiences of precarious conditions associated with unstable informal labor, poverty, famine, abandonment, displacement, and violence (see, for example Das and Randeria 2015; Han 2012; Biehl 2009), nothing overtly tragic happened in this particular rural place or at the care home. Precarity here was neither dramatic nor

spectacular, but quiet and mundane. Some people had not yet fully experienced it, but still anticipated it as part of the life course and of changing rurality. It was expressed through insecurities about the place's imagined future and navigated through everyday adaptations to shifting circumstances and potential vulnerabilities. To understand how people here “balanc[ed] the quotidian” (Hyde and Denyer Willis 2020), I have tried to “attune to the textures of vulnerability” (Han 2018, 341) that can be understood only through the fragility of relationships and through each person's mundane daily experiences (Das 2015). Daily experiences at the Pansionāts allowed me to observe and analyze the various entanglements between everyday life and emptiness, place-making, happenings, and resulting stability amidst and within precarity.

When looking closely, precarity in this rural area emerged through minor and often intangible details of everyday life (Trell et al. 2012), such as struggles to keep the library open (see Chapter No. 4) or rumors about a school or kindergarten closing that resulted in proactive action to transfer children to other schools thought to be more stable and thus better.³⁷ Precarity also sneaked into stories about what the place had once been, what it would become, and its future way of life with the youth leaving, the landscape changing, certain lifestyles disappearing, and old age approaching. Many of my interlocutors were actively thinking about and planning for a time when they would no longer be able to take care of their land or work their farms (see Chapter No. 2). More immediately, precarity manifested itself through limited employment opportunities and the compromises people made as a result. Several interlocutors stated that “there aren't many options around here” so “you have to take what you can find” or “what is offered” and “stick to that,” even if it might not be what they had once expected or imagined.

Under these circumstances, the Pansionāts became one of the few stable and expanding institutions in the area: an employer offering regular wages and accessible, flexible jobs that allowed many to navigate everyday precarity, hold on to what they had, and possibly even plan for the future. What sustained it was a broader demographic trend that on the national level was increasingly framed as a problem: the aging of Latvian society (as discussed in Chapter 2).

Despite all the changes and daily hardships in the area, the Pansionāts had persevered for over forty years, and it remained one of the largest and most reliable employers in the local

³⁷ People repeatedly told me that several teachers from the school in the nearby village Dzirnas had taken in foster children primarily to increase enrollment at the local school and prevent it from being closed. Since the policy at the time was to fund basic and secondary education based on the number of pupils (the financial model of “money follows the student”), this was presumably done to ensure the school had the minimum number of students and thus prove its regional utility. Several families in the area did, indeed, foster children, but I have no knowledge of their primary reasons or evidence that the rumors were true – what interests me is how they represented the pervasiveness of emptiness in everyday life. However, Latvia is expected to replace the “money follows the student” model of financing teachers' salaries with a new model, “money follows schools” 2025 (Apīne and Ozola-Balode 2024).

area: indeed, many people's lives revolved around it. One key reason for this institutional stability was the constant inflow of residents, a direct result of Latvia's aging population. As demand for late-life state care continued to rise (Veselības inspekcija and Labklājības ministrija 2021, 4–5), the Pansionāts rarely had more than one or two beds available. Families sometimes had to wait for openings to place a relative. Beyond providing care for older adults, the institution offered formal employment to more than thirty local people, supporting not only their incomes and pensions but also their ability to remain in the countryside, continue farming, and live the quiet rural life so many cherished.

Although there were grocery stores, dairy farms, a brewery, two schools, and a handful of other potential workplaces in nearby villages, the Pansionāts stood out as one of the largest and most stable among the area's limited employment options. This also helps explain the differences in employee turnover between urban social care institutions and the Pansionāts. For instance, the annual staff turnover rate in Riga Municipality's social care institutions was around 30–40 percent, and the fewer qualifications required for a position, the higher the rotation, with the highest turnover occurring in care homes for older adults (Dārziņa 2020). However, at the Pansionāts employee turnover was low, even among direct care workers. Some had worked there for five, ten, or even twenty to thirty years. As the social worker Lāsma noted, the longer someone worked there, the more likely they were to remain, which she connected to employees' geographical proximity to the institution. She also suggested that “the new girls” (as she called younger staff members) lacked older employees' sense of mission. Yet when I asked these long-term employees how they had ended up at the Pansionāts in the 1980s and 1990s, they had less to say about vocation than necessity: most described taking the job simply because it was available and allowed them to feed their children and keep a roof over their heads. A sense of “mission” may have developed later, but it was rarely the reason they had started working there.

Even at the time of my research, few people joined the staff out of a strong dedication to care work. Their reasons were typically pragmatic, shaped by personal circumstances and local opportunity. While most whom I interviewed also stated that helping people was among their motivations, it was rarely their primary reason for seeking the job. For example, one care worker hired in 2020 lived only one kilometer from the Pansionāts. She emphasized that while her husband had a good job it was seasonal and admitted that after her third child was born her feeling that it was time to return to work was not so much due to financial necessity as because she “wanted to do something, get out of the house.” Another care worker, who joined in November 2020, had previously worked part-time for a florist in the village of Zīle, but business

had slowed significantly during the pandemic. A friend who worked at the Pansionāts arranged an interview with the Director Valters for her and she was soon hired.

Such examples highlight how care work at the Pansionāts was accessible to local women, which over time has produced a strongly gendered workforce. Apart from the Director, handyman, and driver most long-term employees were women, who performed all the care work from direct assistance to food preparation; men only worked in support roles such as driving or maintenance. This gendered division of labor did not go unnoticed by the Director, who acknowledged the issue and had unsuccessfully tried to hire men as care workers, but reflected broader cultural norms that positioned care as women's work.

This feminization of care work reflected a broader global pattern in which gendered and cultural politics shape labor regimes, positioning women's labor as both "naturally" and "morally" suited to care and therefore systematically undervalued (Ong 1991; Glenn 1992; Tronto 1993; England and Folbre 1999; Gal and Kligman 2000, 113–16). Here, too, women's wages were modest yet indispensable. While policymakers imagined eldercare as a fiscal burden, the reality was that women's underpaid labor at the Pansionāts sustained households, made pension contributions, and kept farms afloat. The care of older adults thus became intertwined with the care of families and land, reproducing not only people but also places.

Part of what made this feminized labor force possible was the accessibility of care work itself. The lack of formal entry requirements meant that most newly hired workers learned their roles on the job. This made the position attractive to local residents and was also advantageous for the Director, who deliberately recruited from nearby communities both to support the locality and to reduce the challenges of commuting, which poor road conditions exacerbated. Requiring formal education or prior experience in direct care would likely have left many rural care homes understaffed. At the time of my research, only a basic level of compulsory education was required (Valsts izglītības satura centrs, n.d.; Noteikumi par obligāti piemērojamo profesiju standartu un profesionālās kvalifikācijas prasību sarakstu un tajā iekļauto profesiju standartu un profesionālās kvalifikācijas prasību publiskošanas kārtību 2018).

While low barriers to entry drew people to work at the Pansionāts, it was the stability of employment and the flexibility of the work that kept many of them there. Every employee I spoke to described the Pansionāts as providing steady, dependable work they had not been able to find elsewhere. According to the Director, two local sawmills had once lured some employees away with promises of higher wages, but this work was seasonal and both eventually closed. There were still private dairy farms in the area, but several who had worked there described the pay as unreliable and the working conditions as much harsher. According to one kitchen worker who had spent several years working on dairy farms, "At least it's warm [in the

Pansionāts]. The salary may not be high, but I can count on it every month. On the dairy farm, sometimes they wouldn't pay me a full month's salary, but I'd go to work anyway. Early mornings at four a.m., cows must be milked, they can't wait. No, no, it's so much better here.”

Although the Pansionāts received only a small subsidy from the municipality and mainly relied on fees paid by residents, its formal status as a municipal care home assured employees a critical security: paychecks arrived on time, and wage increases followed state-mandated changes to the minimum wage.³⁸ In a local economy marked by uncertainty and precarious conditions, it became an island of stability. This did not mean that all employees would have chosen care work under different circumstances. Several admitted that if they had completed higher education they would have pursued work that placed less strain on their bodies. For the time being, however, many considered it a good and reliable option.

Along with providing a steady income, the Pansionāts's flexible schedules helped workers maintain their ways of life. Most staff, including direct care workers, found the job compatible with their other commitments, such as family duties, farming, and side businesses like Lelde's private accounting work.

Most direct care workers preferred working a single twenty-four-hour shift every three days. Although they had previously worked eight-hour shifts, several years earlier they had convinced management to adopt the current schedule. They explained that this made life easier because “You kind of hand over your [eight-hour] shift to yourself.” Longer shifts allowed them to plan their time more freely, fitting in doctor's appointments, farm work, and other daily needs. However, twenty-four-hour shifts also created complications: on those days, tasks like picking up children from school or milking cows had to be handled by other family members. To manage these challenges, some employees, particularly those with significant farming responsibilities, negotiated more flexible or individualized arrangements.

The Pansionāts generally accommodated the needs of country life. Several employees half-jokingly admitted that the job sometimes even adapted to support their farming activities at the expense of the quality of care. A job there was not only an opportunity but could also be extremely convenient. During my fieldwork, I often felt that the daily rhythms of the care home had adapted to rural life: for example, the day started early – residents were awakened, washed, and dressed around five or six in the morning (although this is also quite typical for urban care homes) – and day shifts generally ended by four in the afternoon. To my surprise, birthday and name day celebrations among the staff were usually held in the mornings so that employees

³⁸ In late 2024, the Pansionāts was converted to a nonprofit limited liability company (LLC), gaining greater flexibility in decision-making compared to its previous status as a municipal care home. The assurance of stability, however, remained.

could enjoy a few drinks and still get home in time for afternoon farm work. Although not everyone had farms, many did. Their mornings often began even earlier, as they milked and fed their cows and other animals around five, started their Pansionāts shift at eight and returned to farm work after their shifts ended.

Over the years, most care workers had adjusted their work schedules to fit the demands of life outside the care home. They admitted that at many other workplaces this would not have been possible. Some had successfully negotiated individual arrangements to better balance employment and rural life. For example, Alise was one of a few direct care workers who preferred to work regular eight-hour shifts on weekdays and have weekends off. She thus transferred to providing care for only residents living in the Lower Building, who were more mobile and required less intensive assistance. This allowed her to maintain an eight-hour schedule and tend her cattle in the mornings and afternoons.

Similarly, Anda, who had previously worked as a direct care worker and later as a cook, transitioned into a social nurse³⁹ position in which she was primarily responsible for bed linens and clothing. This role allowed her to finish work by 5 p.m., giving her time to return home for evening farm work. During the summer of 2021, she also adjusted her vacation schedule: instead of taking her all of her twenty-eight vacation days at once, she spread them across two months, working only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the designated laundry days at the Pansionāts, and taking vacation days for the rest of the week. This arrangement allowed her to prioritize farm work during the busiest summer and early fall months. Both cases reflected how employees adapted their roles and schedules to sustain their rural ways of life alongside their work at the Pansionāts. These everyday negotiations between care work and rural life also revealed how the Pansionāts was not only a workplace, but part of a larger system of sustaining livelihoods in a countryside.

Stable employment at the Pansionāts also enabled employees to maintain particular visions of a good life, and not just materially but socially and emotionally. For instance, when Lelde, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this subchapter, agreed to return to the Pansionāts half-time, she did so on the condition that she could continue working for her private accounting clients. The Director Valters, who had personally recruited her to come back, agreed. Although the salary was modest, Lelde emphasized that the financial and social stability it offered compensated for the lower income.

However, in the summer of 2021, Lelde accepted the Director's offer of a permanent full-time position after the previous accountant retired. This decision came with compromises. Her

³⁹ A term "social nurse" (*sociālā māsa*) is sometimes used in care home settings in Latvia.

combined salary from the clerical and accounting duties would be lower than what she had been earning through part-time work and freelance accounting. However, the 2021 tax reforms (Valsts ieņēmumu dienests 2021) had made her freelance business increasingly complicated, exhausting, and bureaucratically demanding. Although she could have joined a larger urban accounting firm, that would have meant abandoning the “quiet life” (*“rimta dzīve”*) she valued – a life without “all the running around” (*“bez visādām skriešanām”*) or the pressure of “big careers” (*“bez lielām karjerām”*). Joining the Pansionāts full time was a decision carefully weighed: it offered financial security and also a way of living closer to the life she dreamed of. Yet even as she made this commitment, Lelde admitted a lingering fear of becoming too attached to the routines of the Pansionāts, the very familiarity that had once made her step away.

While individual choices like those of Alise, Anda, and Lelde were deeply personal, they were also part of a larger pattern in which the Pansionāts played a part in sustaining not only households and private visions of a “good life,” but entire ways of rural life, including smallholder farming and the associated symbols of Latvianness, such as the Latvian Brown cow (see Chapter 2).

For many whose farms provided them with food but not enough cash income to pay social security taxes and receive retirement pensions, the Pansionāts ensured this critical contribution. The care worker Alise and her husband Ivars, a driver at the Pansionāts, owned a small farm. A few years before I met Alise, she had left the Pansionāts to concentrate fully on farming. Within a year, however, they were running out of cash, and the financial strain forced her to return to work. Although Ivars maintained that the farm was more or less self-sufficient, the extra income was essential.

Anda had worked at the Pansionāts since 1985, and her salary and social tax payments were especially important as her husband was thirteen years older and already retired. Their farm income mostly consisted of biweekly “milk money” and EU area payments (*platību maksājumi*), which helped sustain the farm, but Anda’s stable salary would continue to be the backbone of their financial security for a while. For her, like many others, even a relatively low salary provided critical financial stability and ensured access to pension savings. When asked if they could manage without her salary, Anda replied that it would be possible at the moment but their future, especially in retirement, would be much more precarious. She worried about the day when she and her husband would no longer be able to work the land and eventually would have to sell their cattle and barn (more on this in Chapter No. 2). “Well, at least I’ll have my pension then,” she said.

For all these families, stable work at the Pansionāts was crucial to individual survival and maintaining the everyday life of a smallholder. A steady paycheck, social tax contributions, and

flexible scheduling made it possible for many to continue living on and working their small farms, even as broader rural economies became tenuous and other employment options disappeared.

Contrary to often heard public perception of care homes as burdens on the social budget, the Pansionāts functioned as an essential and largely unrecognized economic hub. Its role extended beyond providing wages: by anchoring families in the countryside and offering flexibility to manage both farm work and formal employment, it indirectly sustained farming practices, rural landscapes, and everyday rhythms that might otherwise have collapsed.

In this way, the Pansionāts unknowingly contributed to the continued existence of a particular vision of the Latvian countryside marked by smallholder farms, isolated farmsteads known as *viensētas*, and enduring ties to the land and the cattle. Among the clearest symbols of this continuity was the Latvian Brown cow, an emblem of endurance, tradition, and an agricultural way of life that many feared was disappearing. Although the breed had been steadily declining in popularity for decades, it remained a part of the farms sustained by care home employees. Through its indirect support, the Pansionāts helped sustain not only livelihoods but also elements of rural heritage often celebrated as core to Latvian national identity.

In this context, the care of older adults extended far beyond its immediate role. It became a reciprocal and open-ended process that quietly sustained multiple forms of life not only of older adults and local employees, but also agricultural practices and cultural landscapes. Care, in this setting, emerged as a dynamic, relational process through which social life could be organized and reproduced (Thelen 2015; 2021).

In this section, I have shown how the Pansionāts contributed to sustaining local livelihoods and rural ways of life. It offered employees financial stability, flexible schedules, and a rare opportunity to remain tied both to their land and to their imagined visions of a good life. In many ways, the Pansionāts relied on a broader demographic trend – population aging – that, at the national level, was framed as a source of precarity. Here, however, aging created a paradox: it sustained the Pansionāts and local livelihoods by ensuring a steady demand for care work, even as it remained a source of worry for older smallholders who, as they aged, faced uncertain futures for their farms. In this way, the Pansionāts became more than just a workplace: it quietly helped maintain the rural landscapes and everyday rhythms people had chosen.

Yet the Pansionāts supported local lives not only through formal wages and contracts, but also through the informal economic practices to which I will now turn.

3.3. “We have a shortcut here”: The informal economy at the Pansionāts

In February 2022, the COVID-19 virus first swept through the Pansionāts, leaving the institution severely short-staffed. Most employees, including direct care workers, cooks, and kitchen assistants, fell ill. Lelde, along with other office staff, began contacting off-duty employees and urging them to return to work. The shift schedule underwent significant changes, with many caregivers working double time. While the office staff managed to put together a replacement schedule for care workers, the kitchen proved a greater challenge: its entire staff was sick and hiring temporary cooks from local schools or kindergartens, a strategy sometimes used during vacation periods, was impossible under pandemic restrictions.

Consequently, it was decided that anyone who had even basic cooking skills would step in. Anda, who had initially joined the care home as a cook in the 1980s, was the first to be asked and reluctantly agreed to assist. Initially, I merely helped her chop vegetables and prep other ingredients. However, she could not keep up alone, especially while juggling cooking with her regular duties and we ultimately decided to organize teams to manage the kitchen, with Anda supervising as needed. The social rehabilitator and I formed the first team, with shifts from 6:00 a.m. to around 6:30 or 7:00 p.m. Although I had previously been in the kitchen for culinary workshops with residents, cooking three full daily meals for seventy people with various special diets (like difficulty swallowing), was a new challenge. This experience not only deepened my understanding of direct care at the care home but also introduced me to informal economic practices that were previously unknown to me.

At the end of my first workday, I realized there was no clearly marked garbage can for leftover food. After a year at the care home, I was still unfamiliar with the kitchen’s operations and did not know what to do with it, but Anda informed me that it was divided among two pails that were kept just outside the kitchen door by the back stairs to the yard and driveway. At the end of each day, either Anda or Ilona (a direct care worker) would take one home for the pigs. Given the amount of leftover food at the care home, I was pleasantly surprised by this efficient redistribution of food, even though it was against the sanitary rules.

When I expressed my pleasant surprise at the “zero waste” economy run by Anda and Ilona, Anda immediately explained that the dynamics had once been quite different. Local farmers, many of whom also worked at the care home had once supplied the Pansionāts with potatoes and a variety of vegetables, creating a full circle of local food distribution. This arrangement not only supported the local economy but also brought mutual benefits. I already knew that local smallholders no longer supplied food to the Pansionāts, but Anda explained that most only grew potatoes and vegetables for their own use, now, not to sell, and thus lacked the necessary certifications from the Food and Veterinary Service. Although well-acquainted with

food safety regulations – they routinely sold milk and meat to local companies – they no longer produced vegetables and potatoes in the quantities needed for larger or even medium-scale sale. Navigating the strict EU and Latvian certification process, with its regular inspections and compliance requirements, was neither practical nor economically viable for such producers. Meanwhile, although the care home still prioritized local suppliers, its procurement rules required accepting the lowest bid, which few local farmers could offer. Thus, the once-reciprocal flow of goods shifted and once formal exchange had become informal and increasingly unidirectional, with food flowing from the Pansionāts to farmsteads rather than the other way around.

The Pansionāts sustained and participated in a variety of informal economic practices, shaped by necessity, creativity, and longstanding relationships. These practices often blurred the boundaries between institutional care, household economies, and community reciprocity. By their nature, they were deeply embedded in everyday routines so basic and ordinary that one had to be closely involved in the social fabric of the Pansionāts to fully notice them. My earlier observation about leftover food is a telling example, as it took me over a year and a new job to notice such practices. However, these informal economies did not operate on the margins. Rather, they were fundamental to how care was organized and sustained and enabled relations that held the place together. I will now offer a series of ethnographic examples to show how informal flows of goods and labor were entangled with care.

Twice during my stay, the Pansionāts received large shipments of clothing. The first came from the Latvian Red Cross, and the second, in early January 2021, was a donation of brand-new, unclaimed, or slightly defective products from a large print-on-demand and warehousing company. These donations were one way the care home could provide clothing to its residents without relying on procurement budgets.

On the day the shipment from the printing company arrived, Lelde, the warehouse manager Krista, and I gathered in the warehouse to sort through six enormous boxes of donated clothes. “Anna, I think these are perfect for you!” Lelde said, laughing uncontrollably as she held up two black tee-shirts printed with Japanese characters, pictures of cherry blossoms, and the English words “life” and “death”. “Isn’t this what your research is about? Besides, we really can’t give the one that says “death” to the *vecīši* [grandparents],” she added, as she passed them to me with a mischievous smile. I still have these T-shirts.

This small moment visualizes the entanglement of informal economy and care. That day, our task was to inventory the donated clothing as official Pansionāts property and to sort it based on four criteria. First, we grouped items by type: T-shirts, long-sleeved shirts, hoodies, sweaters, pants, and accessories. Then we assessed quality and size, setting aside children’s

clothes, unusually small sizes, or anything damaged beyond use. Notably, the discard pile was the smallest.

Next, we judged appropriateness relying entirely on our own discretion. This involved a subtle yet deliberate form of care work. Garments emblazoned with vulgar or potentially upsetting imagery, such as the tee-shirt that read “death,” were gently removed from circulation. Though most residents did not speak English and some had dementia or other cognitive impairments, Lelde and Krista emphasized the importance of clothing that was not only clean and comfortable but also dignified. They were careful not to simply accept “whatever is given for free,” but instead made thoughtful choices that reflected a sense of respect for each resident.

All the clothing that was deemed usable but not suitable for older adults or other residents was offered to employees and their families. Anyone interested was welcome to take what they needed or liked. Employees were genuinely pleased with this opportunity. Some found clothes for their children, others for themselves. The gesture of employees considering their colleagues and their families while sorting through piles of donated clothes, after ensuring the residents’ needs were met was one example of the many acts of care among staff here. Such practices were neither marginal nor exceptional. They were central to how care was organized and lived through a dense network of reciprocity that underpinned the social life of the Pansionāts.

Many of these practices were so embedded in daily life that they were barely recognized as economic at all. They unfolded in conversations over coffee, in favors exchanged quietly, or in acts of mutual reliance that appeared too trivial to mention and yet were central to how things got done. As Lelde told me, “We have a shortcut [she used the English word] here.... Things just happen faster here. For example, I get to know things sooner here, because we come together, drink our morning and afternoon coffee, and talk about this and that. And I can get things [unrelated to work] done faster here too. I just ask someone for what I need... and usually people help or know someone who can help,” she told me. When I asked her for more details about what she meant, she replied: “It’s difficult because these are just daily little things. They’re self-explanatory.”

However, I understood what she meant. For example, Lelde did bookkeeping for Ilona, a direct care worker who also raised cattle and sheep. Both came out ahead: Ilona’s books were kept by a person she trusted, and Lelde gained a regular, if not especially lucrative, client. Another “shortcut” was the relationship between the Director and Anda. Every week, she brought the Director milk, and during the winter she also took care of his chickens since his barn had not been winterized.

Informal economic activities did not always equate to “paid” work, nor were they primarily about compensating for the limits of the formal economy or evading it through

envelope wages or shadow markets. Instead, they were overlapped with and were closely tied to other forms of social organization and trust networks embedded in and through the Pansionāts (Morris 2019). What I observed was a form of informal economy shaped by long-term relationships and care obligations, made possible not only by the care home's formal economic stability but also by the dense social ties formed around it. Even if some practices were not monetarily substantial, they held significance in people's lifeworlds and could lead to employment, access to services, or other commodified exchanges (Morris 2019, 17).

These informal exchanges often drew on relationships that spanned beyond the workplace among neighbors, friends, or extended family members. But the Pansionāts played a key role in activating and sustaining them. When I asked whether people would have offered these small services or supported each other during illness or hard times if they had not been colleagues, several employees said they "probably would." After all, they were neighbors. Still, they admitted that without the daily contact and casual conversations that came with sharing a workplace they might not have been as aware of each other's needs or might have learned about them too late for timely help. The flow of support, in other words, would have been more sporadic.

Through these activities of informal economy sustained by care acts, I came to understand why the long-time accountant Gunita, who owned a farm and was nearing retirement, repeatedly told me that she dreaded the day she would leave her job. "Afraid of falling out of the loop [*Bail izkrist no aprites*]," she said. She did not just mean missing tasks or meetings, but the informal morning coffee hours, the everyday exchanges, the small but steady stream of goods, services, and shared happenings that made up the social life of the Pansionāts. "Out of the loop" captured something more than just not being there, at work. It reflected a quiet worry about losing access to a web of mutual aid and social liveliness in rural area sustained by the rhythms of a state care institution.

While much of this informal economy unfolded among employees, care and reciprocity also extended outward through institutional leadership. The Director, in particular, often acted in ways that blurred the line between formal responsibility and personal investment in the community.

During the second round of COVID-19 vaccinations in late April 2021, a few clients and staff were only getting their first shots due to earlier health issues. Upon learning from the doctors that there might be extra doses, the Director extended the offer to former employees living in the Lower Building, as well as to one well-known local resident with no official ties to the care home. This gesture reflected more than logistical pragmatism; it showed how care at the Pansionāts went beyond contractual roles to encompass broader social bonds. Because

former employees shared a building with current staff and residents, ensuring that everyone was vaccinated regardless of their formal connection to the care home was crucial to the overall safety of residents and the staff. It also reinforced a sense of collective belonging. These practices were not merely strategic; they were embedded in care relationships that shaped the very organization of social life.

Even beyond the context of the pandemic, I frequently heard staff acknowledge the Director's commitment to the local community. (This is not to suggest a utopia: disagreements between staff and the Director did occur from time to time but they fall outside the scope of this argument.) One key expression of his care was through employment practices.

In the summer of 2021, after years of preparation, the care home expanded its services as part of an EU-sponsored deinstitutionalization project for adults with mental disorders (more on the halfway house Poplar Tree in Chapter 7). The program added eight independent living apartments and also required hiring additional staff. The Director recruited locally, offering jobs to people he knew personally or through acquaintances, including a young couple who had moved back to the area. He also transferred two existing employees to the new legal entity that administered the apartments, one with chronic back pain who needed less physically demanding work and another seeking relief from the emotional intensity of direct care. In both cases, these staffing decisions reflected care for employees as people, and for the institutional structure that kept the Pansionāts running.

Although the Pansionāts was one of the most reliable employers in the region, the Director Valters was well aware of the downsides, like low pay, physically and emotionally demanding tasks, and low social prestige, that made it more difficult to retain staff. Recruiting local people was a practical choice: the care home's remote location and the poor gravel roads made commuting difficult. The closer someone lived, the more likely they were to show up and stay. In this way, the Director's hiring decisions depended not just on labor availability, but on people living in so-called "empty" rural spaces, many of whom had experienced precarious or irregular employment. Yet hiring locally also cultivated care in and about the place. Whether long-time residents or newcomers, employees brought with them not only their needs for flexible, secure work but also attachments to land, routines, and community. These care relations were not simple or one-directional. They emerged from complex negotiations about people, work, and place that defied any neat division between good and bad outcomes, or between altruism and necessity.

This form of care also shaped the trajectory of the Pansionāts itself. The institution was expanding, becoming an even more foundational employer than it had been in previous decades. A place that was often associated with the most vulnerable members of society and frequently

imagined as closed, marginal, even empty, and symbolic of national decline was, in practice, bringing people together. This is not to deny the everyday struggles and vulnerabilities of those living and, in some cases, working there. Sometimes, the Pansionāts was not a dream job, but a compromise shaped by necessity. It was not a place of sunshine and rainbows, but had its tensions, compromises, and hard choices for those who lived there, and for those who worked there. And yet despite these hardships and tensions, it sustained both formal and informal economies and forged social ties that quietly held together lives and helped fix this rural locality in place.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the Pansionāts sustained a dense network of care relationships that extended far beyond its walls. Through everyday interactions, flexible work arrangements, and acts of mutual aid, it became a quiet but essential hub – a space where kinship, labor, and informal economies intersected and reproduced local life. What might appear from the outside as a closed, marginal, or declining institution was, in practice, a site of unexpected liveliness and entanglement.

In this context, care work did not end with the provision of formal services to older adults. It bound together workers, neighbors, and extended families through small, often imperceptible exchanges of goods, time, attention, favors, and information. Care at the Pansionāts was the foundation of “everyday acts of relatedness” (Sanghera et al. 2011), as well as of continual reproduction of strong-weak ties (Granovetter 1983) between people. Thus, the Pansionāts helped sustain the present: offering people the means to stay in place, support small farms, raise children, and remain connected to the land and each other. But it also, in small and often unrecognized ways, enabled continuity with the fragile possibility that something could be carried forward. Whether through the reproduction of rural knowledge, the preservation of kin networks, or simply the idea that rural life could still be worth choosing, the Pansionāts helped keep certain futures alive.

By tracing the formal and informal economies organized around the Pansionāts, in this chapter, I have argued that state care served as an infrastructural anchor for rural life. Far from draining the social budget, the Pansionāts contributed materially and socially to local stability. In doing so, it quietly challenged dominant national narratives that associate aging, rurality, and care homes with emptiness, decline, and economic irrelevance, which I discussed in depth in the previous chapter. Aging, paradoxically, was not only a sign of precarity here: it also enabled continuity and stability. In a landscape often imagined as fading, the Pansionāts remained, not

as a nostalgic relic but a living institution that held people, work, and futures together, even in the midst of uncertainty.

4. “We’re still here”: Emptiness, sociality, and place-making among those who did (not) matter

Introduction

*“Potato, potato!
Where are your brothers?
In the Riga market, Riga market!
There are my brothers!”
(Ļūdēns 1981).*

This popular children’s song was the background music for a viral Latvian video in 2017 showing people planting potatoes in the middle of a muddy, heavily rutted gravel road. In mid-March of that year, a bus had become stuck in the mud at 25 kilometers down a 31-kilometer (19 mi) gravel regional⁴⁰ road connecting several rural civil parishes to the nearest essential services as well as the main paved highway to Riga. Although people had for years endured roads that were muddy, slippery, snowy, slushy, potholed, rutted, or washboarded, depending on the season and weather, a stuck bus finally seemed serious enough to publicly call out the relevant authorities and bring national attention to this common everyday problem in rural Latvia.

As some locals planted potatoes in the road at the place where the bus had gotten stuck, others patiently explained how important an “artery of life and economy” this regional road was for the rural locality, at least when it was passable. “Unless the big bus sinks, we don’t expect anything. When only one load of gravel is needed, they don’t have any money. When five are needed, then it is too expensive,” one local man sarcastically commented. As the “potato song” continued to play in the background, a young woman read a satirical explanation of the action:

“We have decided to participate in the “Technology Transfer Program” project competition announced by the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (Latvijas Investīciju un Attīstības aģentūra)... on February 6, 2017 by developing a new technology. We are smallholders who actively think about innovations in their environment. With the support of Latvian State Roads (Latvijas Valsts ceļi), we have come up with an idea of how to use the opportunities given to us by the mud furrows [vagas], which have now become an indispensable identification mark of our road. Today is a great day to showcase this innovative technology to the public and hopefully gain their support. Our innovation is as follows: by turning a

⁴⁰ “[R]egional roads are the roads that link region administrative centers together or connect with state cities, or the capital city, or main or regional roads, or state cities together” (Latvijas Valsts Ceļi, n.d.).

household technological vehicle into an agricultural machine, we create less damage to the environment and a completely different vision of potato planting.”

Later, they shared the video with various local and national media outlets. When a local news outlet asked Latvian State Roads, the agency directly responsible for the construction and maintenance this type of road, to comment, their spokesperson responded that “Citizens’ activities and initiatives help draw attention to and actualize road problems, which is very important. However, road problems are present in all regions, especially now that there is slush on gravel roads, so a complex and sustainable solution is needed that is not just for individual roads” (delfi.lv 2017). In a way, this was correct: Latvian roads, especially in rural areas, were in generally in poor condition and my interlocutors’ frustrations were not unique. Yet despite this shared struggle, they felt isolated and unheard at both local and national political levels. This sense of being overlooked by the state also fostered a shared sense of sociality among them that the video captured vividly. Four days after its release, a road maintenance crew covered that part of the road with rubble and crushed stone, yet another short-term solution.

After I arrived at the care home in July 2020, the “bus incident” from 2017 was one of the first things the Director of the Pansionāts brought up when we were discussing the ongoing challenges road conditions posed for locals including its employees and residents. The “potato” video was not the only attempt by locals to draw attention to the road’s poor quality and the general hardships of rural life that was so closely tied to this infrastructure. A few years later, the Director of the Pansionāts (who had himself participated in the potato protest) filmed another video and sent it directly to both the municipal administration and Latvian State Roads. Filmed in summer with a dashboard-mounted camera, the footage showed how the car was bouncing along the washboard surface. A voiceover counted how many inhabited houses there were along or just off the road, emphasizing that this area was by no means empty but inhabited, full of life, and home to people who had long endured these physically and financially draining road conditions.

However, I noticed that the care home was not mentioned in either video, even though the road shown in both directly served the Pansionāts and its dirt road was only about 1.5 kilometers (0.9 mi) from the spot where the bus had gotten stuck. The gravel road was also the fastest route for local ambulances traveling between it and the two nearest hospitals (one of which was another 40 kilometers (25 mi) down another gravel road after a short stretch of asphalt). As this trip was often necessary, the road’s rough condition had a direct impact on the experiences of time and place of the older adults and employees who had to travel along it. During my fieldwork, many care home residents shared their memories of journeys along this road, often while suffering from heart attacks, open wounds with gangrene, dizziness, sickness,

and various altered mental states. Some rightfully feared it, while others described how these trips seemed to take forever. The road was indeed “the artery of life,” not just economically or socially but in its most literal, vulnerable, and essential form.

For this reason, I was surprised that neither video mentioned the Pansionāts, as if it – and the people within it – did not even exist. The omission is especially intriguing since several of the potato-planters were long-term care home employees with intimate knowledge of how crucial the road was to both them and the residents. This absence is my starting point for the chapter, which addresses not only what was shown in the videos but also what was conspicuously left out. What mattered, then, was not simply showing that people lived here, but showing the specific kind of life: households, families, and forms of productive continuity. The absence of the Pansionāts from these visual claims was therefore analytically revealing. To answer why the Pansionāts was not named in a video created by locals and care home workers, I trace the overlapping socialities and emptinesses of this rural place.

I begin with the roads themselves – infrastructures that at once connected and disconnected locals from each other and from wider services and institutions. The sociality of roads is therefore my first focus. Drawing on experiences shared by people living along the gravel road, I show how it shaped everyday life and generated both a sense of emptiness and a sociality born out of that condition. Locals, who were acutely aware of their marginal position as residents of an outlying civil parish in the municipality that received little investment and had been hollowed out by out-migration and aging, used the road for political leverage. By emphasizing its deterioration, they reminded the municipality and the state that people still lived here and that their lives continued, however precariously. The emptiness they described was closely tied to regional planning logics that had long marked rural areas as “problematic”: depopulated, economically weak, difficult to maintain (Dzenovska 2012, 23). It is this kind of emptiness that one of my interlocutors, who was also in the “potato” video, captured when she said: “They [politicians] don’t know what to do with us [country people; *laucinieki*]. One moment they think nobody lives here; the next it’s our fault that we do. Then, the countryside is supposedly important for all kinds of things... but we don’t see it. They just talk, talk, talk. Ugh.” Gravel roads, then, became both a material reminder of neglect and a shared ground of recognition: a sociality forged through being left behind.

From this, I turn to the contrast locals drew between those institutions seen as sustaining social and cultural continuity – schools, libraries, cultural centers – and those seen as detached from it, like care homes. I focus on a library that was the last public institution in the nearby village of Pienenes and the efforts to keep it open. Its survival was tied to the same emptiness embodied by the roads, and it served as political evidence for officials that the village still

existed and deserved services. But there was more to the library than that: it collected local history, offered social services, organized events, and connected people through lending books and home visits. For Astrīda, the librarian, and other residents, like Arnis, it anchored social life and testified that the village endured despite decline. Yet the way people described the library differed from how they spoke of the Pansionāts. The library was framed as reproducing local life; the care home, in contrast, was often imagined as a closed institution – necessary to but apart from the village’s vitality. This perception may help explain why it was absent from the potato video. Here, I explore ‘emptiness within emptiness’: a layered distinction in which some institutions (like the library) were recognized as carrying social continuity while others (like the Pansionāts) remained peripheral to how the community narrated itself.

Finally, in the chapter’s third section, I examine the Pansionāts’s ambiguous position more closely, asking how nonemployees who lived in its vicinity experienced it. In some respects, their views echoed broader public and political discourses casting care homes as places without reproduction or continuity. In other ways, however, they challenged these assumptions, pointing to the ways the institution quietly sustained livelihoods. Here, the road reappears as a subtle but powerful thread in the (un)making of place, signifying multiple layers of marginality – of institutions, of people, of rural localities themselves.

This chapter, then, does not so much resolve the silence around the Pansionāts as trace its contours. By following roads, libraries, and the care home, I show how emptiness and sociality constantly overlapped – sometimes named, sometimes unspoken, sometimes glaringly absent. These dynamics set the stage for the discussions that follow in Chapters 5 and 6, where I return to the Pansionāts’s role in the rural area.

4.1. “If we had roads, we’d have everything”: Roads, sociality, and belonging

The day before I began my fieldwork, I carefully washed my car in the yard of my summer cottage in hopes of making a good first impression on the people I would spend the next year with. Little did I know that this was a complete waste of time and water, or how soon – and how often – it would get dirty again. Turning off the main highway, I drove along the gravel road that stretched for over twenty kilometers towards the Pansionāts. It wound through a subtle yet striking landscape of dense forests, still lakes, open meadows and ripening fields of grain. On that warm July day, with dust rising lazily from the road in my rearview mirror, the drive felt oddly romantic and freeing, picturesque in its own rough, rural way. Even the three minutes of paved road in the village of Zīle, about eight kilometers (5 mi) from my destination, revealed a scene of quiet charm: a clear, mirror-like lake, a beautifully maintained old school painted

white, and tidy front yards lining the road. However, this road was only charming to an occasional traveler: for those who drove it daily, the dust, ruts, and long stretches of washboarding wore down both vehicles and bodies, gradually turning scenic distance into an embodied and temporal obstacle course. That day, it had not rained in over a week, the gravel was thick with dust, and by the time I arrived, the rear window was completely obscured.

Weeks later, when I shared my story about washing the car with the Director Valters, he chuckled at my naïveté. “Oh, Annin!... We don’t do that here! There’s absolutely no point in washing a car when you live here.” He was amused by my inexperience – and, of course, absolutely right.

During staff coffee breaks at the Pansionāts, few topics came up more than the current state of the road – the weather’s impact on it, and whether someone had already reported the latest issue to the road maintenance crew – which showed just how central the road was to everyday life. Here, roads were part of what Orlova (2021, 29) calls an *affective infrastructure* “capable of facilitating, enabling, or precluding the circulation of affect.” They fostered a sense of camaraderie and sociality among neighbors, as well as a kind of political self-identification among the people who felt left behind by the state and were daily reminders of marginality that also held traces of imagined or lost promises of modernity and development.

This section explores the affective and social entanglements of frustrating roads and the consequent mundane, repetitive, and often tedious negotiations with road crews, state authorities, and the road itself to show how roads shaped experiences of space and time and shaped local sociality: the ways people practiced and experienced social life. I also trace how locals mobilized roads (and later, the library; see Section 2.2) as political instruments for staking claims to the future and to place. Thus, I slowly delineate the Pansionāts’s positionality in this rural area.

These entanglements with the road were woven into daily routines and small interactions that made the road a constant, almost living presence in people’s lives. The affective infrastructure was most palpable during the everyday conversations among the staff. The following composite dialogue, drawn from many such exchanges I overheard or took part in, captures the texture and tone of these road-centered interactions:

- Did you see the grader this morning?
- Yes, it drove right ahead of me.
- Oh, no, you can’t grade in such weather, now it’s going to be even worse than it was! Did you notice there... by my driveway, [it’s] completely washed out again!
- Uh-huh. I barely managed to slow down, but the road shook me thoroughly even before that. The potholes are so frequent that there are two options: either go super

slowly at 30 km/h [19 mph], try to go around them, or just fly – whizzing over the potholes at 70 km/h [43 mph].

- Right? I've got this funny clattering sound under the car, I think something got knocked loose again.

- Hey, listen, the part they chipsealed⁴¹... now in winter, it's worse than the section that's still just dirt. They don't clear it at all! It's all ice and snow, I can't see the edges of the road anymore, everything's white, and they haven't covered the ice with gravel or anything. They just built it – here, take it, enjoy it, choke on it! But who's going to clean it? Maintain it?

The graders are road maintenance machinery used for creating a flat and smooth surface on dirt and gravel roads. For locals, the arrival of the grader could be the most anticipated or the most dreaded event of the day, depending on the weather. For grading to achieve optimal results, the weather cannot have been dry for too long or it will cause washboarding; meanwhile, if the road is too wet – for example, after several days of rain – the grader will deepen the potholes. The ideal time to grade a road and produce a long-lasting surface is a day after the rain has stopped and the ground is only damp. Locals were well aware of this, leading to a constant struggle (or at least ongoing frustration) with the road maintenance crews, who generally graded according to a fixed schedule or in response to emergencies like heavy rain, one situation that locals frequently reported. The difference between the road maintenance crews and the locals was that the latter not only knew the road but lived it.

During many conversations with employees and residents who traveled along the road in the care home's vehicles or by ambulance – and as I drove it myself each day – I learned to see it not a mere obstacle to be endured or overcome but an independent, almost autonomous agent with which one had to negotiate for a smooth passage. It was not just a route to travel along, but the topic of stories, warnings to others, and even jokes. It created a kind of moral and practical sociality among those who lived it and reorganized emotional labor.

Driving on the road always meant allowing extra time for the trip and knowing whom to call if there was an emergency like sliding off the icy road, getting stuck in mud, or hitting a wild animal. Sometimes, people tried to bargain with the roads as if they were living beings, whispering phrases like “Not today, okay? Just not today.” I also noticed the emotional adjustments people made in response to the road. Laughing about its condition or shrugging off the dangers of mud or ice were common reactions, shaped as much by necessity as by familiarity. With no real alternatives, people adapted. Some, especially older women, drove

⁴¹ Chipseal treatment is also known as a double bituminous surface treatment or asphaltic surface treatment. Chipseal treatment is less expensive than asphalt but also less durable and not intended for intensive or heavy traffic, such as regular use by logging equipment and trucks.

slowly and cautiously, attuned to every rut and bump. Others took the opposite approach, driving fast but decisively, as if they were taming the road and reasserting control and mastery over a terrain that refused to stay in the background. No matter which driving style a person adopted, everyone knew the road by heart and almost instinctively tracked how each segment or curve changed with the weather from one day to the next.

These shared experiences of the road were not just about individual adaptations but also sustained a sense of mutual experience. If someone saw a neighbor's car stuck or especially dangerous washboarding forming, it was common to stop and offer help or spread the word. Stories about whose car broke down and where it had happened circulated at morning coffee breaks, reinforcing a kind of local intimacy built on shared inconvenience. In this way, the road became a point of connection as much as it was an obstacle.

The ever-changing road also meant adopting practical adjustments. For example, I quickly learned always to keep a bucket of water in my trunk, but this was not to keep my car looking clean, just to clean the rear window enough to see through. Over the months, I also learned to always carry a shovel, a bag of ashes or sand, and a small handsaw to cut branches for traction. It was better to be prepared than caught off guard during seasons of mud, ice, or freezing rain. I somehow managed without studded tires, but I never left home without those other essentials in the trunk.

Many households also owned extra cars in case one broke down. An all-wheel-drive SUV was considered a smart choice, but many could not afford one, or had other priorities such as maintaining property. As a result, older vehicles were the norm. Here, cars were not status symbols for display but an everyday necessity.

Having an old car also meant that maintaining good relationships with local car mechanics was essential and it was little more than a month before I found myself visiting the mechanic for the first time. This constant need for maintenance and repairs partly explained why residents in this rural area so often voiced frustration about the high vehicle operation tax (*transportlīdzekļa ekspluatācijas nodoklis*) imposed on their aging vehicles. The irony stung: the tax was higher for older vehicles, yet “there was no road.” While the tax was officially intended to offset the damage cars caused to people, nature, and infrastructure, here it often felt like the opposite was true. Roads did more harm to cars and, at times, even to people. With ever-shifting conditions depending on the season and weather, residents regularly called road maintenance crews to report issues describing these calls as efforts “to remind them that we exist.”

Roads here seemed to have agency and be active, unpredictable, and at times obstinate participants in everyday life. Their perceived “willfulness” contrasted sharply with the common

view elsewhere of roads as infrastructure characterized by invisibility and inconspicuousness and becoming noticeable only when they fail (Star and Ruhleder 2016) or else enabling mobility and smooth flow of goods, services, and capital associated with progress, development and often a promise (or threat) of future connectivity (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012).

It was this kind of reasoning on which Ivars, a smallholder and a driver at the care home, based his vision of the place and the road. “Ideally, we will see asphalt here. Then everything will happen on its own! I don’t know how exactly it will happen, but I think that the local government and the state should try to move production plants to the countryside, not to Riga. The schools are empty, but the buildings are renovated... we need some kind of cookie factory inside [the empty buildings].”

Ivars’s conviction did not stem from naïveté, but from a widely shared infrastructural imagination in which roads were expected to transform emptiness into life by rendering it legible to the state and to collective imaginaries of the future. Yet the presence of the Pansionāts complicates this belief: here was a place where people, labor, and daily rhythms already existed, and still did not fully count.

Ivars’s projection of the road as a trigger for economic and social revival aligns with what David Harvey (2001b) has described as a “spatial fix” – a mechanism through which infrastructure investments are used to temporarily defer deeper contradictions in capitalist development by anchoring hope and capital in physical space. In this respect, roads were not only built structures but ideological instruments, seen as tangible signs of care, investment, and progress. They functioned as a promise of renewed vitality for a region otherwise marked by depopulation and uneven maintenance.

This sense of collective anticipation, in which residents imagined the road as a prerequisite for a better life, reflected a broader dynamic in which infrastructure embodies imagined futures and aspirations for stability, recognition, and improvement, even when such futures remain uncertain or deferred (Harvey 2000). For my interlocutors, smooth asphalt was not just about mobility but also economic inclusion and a longing to be seen and valued by the state.

And Ivars was not wrong to associate asphalted roads with a sense of possibility. Infrastructure, including roads, can have lasting effects on demographic and economic patterns. For example, data indicates that infrastructure, including road quality, has a lasting impact on demographic trends such as birth rates. Municipalities with higher birth rates tend to have better-developed infrastructure and more employment opportunities for parents. In contrast, poor road conditions are often cited as one of the most pressing challenges in rural areas, with severely deteriorated roads making local development difficult to implement. The availability

and frequency of public transport also play a crucial role in shaping a place's developmental prospects (Valsts kanceleja 2013, 94). Here, the chronic damage roads inflicted on cars and bodies disrupted the association between the road and progress. Instead of ushering in modernity, these roads often represented absence or felt abandonment by the state. This tension shaped how locals made sense of their lives and future.

These were some of the reasons people in the area so often talked about the road and fought for its maintenance. Regular phone calls and complaints to road services became not only acts of frustration about being cut off from expected modernity and the quality of life that was assumed to follow, but political gestures to remind about expected but failed care relations of the state. Over time, these daily negotiations with the road and the state also produced what I came to see as socialities of hope – shared visions of a place to be that were enacted in variety of ways, like fighting for better road conditions by planting potatoes in a washed-out road in order to draw media attention or taking action to keep the local library to open (see next section). Conversations with Ivars and others often began with complaints but drifted into dreams of smooth asphalt, new businesses, fuller schools, or simply fewer repairs. Even as people knew these visions might never materialize, they found solidarity in imagining them together.

Pēteris, a smallholder living near the care home, expressed this hope with striking clarity. While many interlocutors told me they did not believe asphalt roads could “reduce the emptiness” of the region on their own, they often suggested or hoped they might at least slow it down. Improved road quality, they argued, would ease everyday life by facilitating mobility for those traveling by car, bicycle, or on foot, and making access to services more predictable. When to tease Pēteris I asked whether paving the long gravel roads might ruin the romantic beauty of the landscape, he immediately pushed back: “That’s the sensibility of big city people talking... or those Sunday countryside lovers. They only face dust or potholes once or twice a year, but we live with them all the time.”

Living with roads in chronic disrepair and managing this condition day in and day out – had, for many locals, become more than just a hardship but a strong constitutive element of everyday sociality and a paradoxical marker of belonging. Sharing knowledge about the road's conditions, swapping repair tips, borrowing tools, and warning one another of washouts and icy patches were not just practical exchanges but expressions of care and local intimacy. Roads were woven into conversations, jokes, frustrations, and collective memories. In this way, the constant negotiation with the road and its dust, ice, ruts, and seasonal unpredictability was not simply endured but integrated into the rhythms of life. It was precisely through this repetition that a form of place-making emerged that was not grounded in idyllic rural imagery but in the shared labor of persistence and maintenance. As such, the road was not merely failed

infrastructure but a lived terrain through which people articulated what it meant to live in the countryside and to belong to it while also striving for political belonging.

This entanglement between road and belonging echoes Orlova's (2021, 28) study of broken roads (*razbitaia doroga*) in Siberia, which became affective infrastructures precisely through their dysfunction and Artiukh's (2022) similar study in parts of Ukraine. In Orlova's case, rutted, muddy, and nearly impassable roads were not only obstacles to services or mobility but also actively shaped social and political relations. For example, they served as informal ethnic filters, limiting visits from Roma residents of neighboring villages, while simultaneously generating strong feelings of exclusion, anger, and sadness among local Russians and Buryats. In this way, infrastructure failure not only reflected marginality but also produced it. Roads were not simply damaged: they became co-constitutive of what it meant to live on the margins. In the constant effort to control and overcome the road, people themselves became part of the infrastructure, sustaining its function through embodied and emotional labor (Orlova 2021, 47).

This analysis reminds us that infrastructural failure is not just a physical event but also about how people experience and relate to both infrastructure and the state. Thus, it is not inherent in the materials but emerges from a mismatch between expectations and everyday realities. Roads become "broken" not simply because they are muddy or rutted but because they no longer support what people see as acceptable standards of living or make them feel that the state has neglected its side of reciprocal care relations. This is where infrastructural failure becomes affective and social, interrupting the continuity of daily routines that have been taken for granted and prompting emotional, embodied responses and long-term relationships of frustration, adaptation, or even attachment.

Knox (2017, 10–11) proposes that moments of discontinuity when infrastructure fails or performs unexpectedly well are key to understanding how politics and social meaning emerge around infrastructure. In my field site, the rough and repetitive rhythms of daily travel were occasionally interrupted by surprisingly smooth rides. On days when the gravel road had just been graded or had dried out into firm ridges, my interlocutors (and I) experienced genuine joy over how fast and how easily we could drive. These moments, while fleeting, were deeply felt and always made the news during the morning coffee hour. Here, both breakdown and unexpected functionality became occasions for affective response and political reflection – what Knox (2017), reworking Nye's (1996) concept of technological sublime, calls the infrastructural sublime, when the road's performance becomes remarkable enough to demand recognition.

However, it was specifically the experience of broken roads and variations in condition from place to place that became political. As people repeatedly called road crews, shared

videos, or commented sarcastically on the taxes on broken cars and broken roads, they expressed their claim to political belonging. They were not just complaining about potholes but asserting their presence and reminding the state that “we exist,” even in this small, rural place that, because of the poor road quality, felt far more remote from Riga than the two hours it actually was.

These affective, social, and political investments in infrastructure as hope, as frustration, as the assertion of visibility and political belonging culminated in a rare moment of collective joy and public recognition in September 2021. After years of calls, complaints, satirical videos, and waiting patiently, the long-promised road work materialized in the form of a long-awaited chipseal treatment. In that moment, infrastructure briefly became aligned with expectations and locals celebrated with pride and anticipation. And in that alignment, politics again erupted.

Four years after the “potato” video – and after over a decade of recurrent promises to pave the gravel regional road with asphalt or chipseal – the renewed section of the road was officially opened. Several representatives from the Ministries of Transport and Environmental Protection and Regional Development, the board of Latvian State Roads, and the municipalities the road served, attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony. This was also a big day for the locals, who organized a parade of cars decorated with oak branches and Latvian flags. In the evening, those with and without cars both gathered in the village of Dzirnās for a concert by a local musician to celebrate. Later, official and unofficial commemorative photos and videos were distributed to local and national media. The joy that day echoed the title of this section, a quote from Ivars: “If we had roads, we’d have everything.”

Gupta (2018, 63) reminds us that infrastructure is always “shaping the present through a politics of anticipation.” This means that it is generally built as an investment in an anticipated future that, while envisioned and desired, has not yet been achieved. Thus, roads are largely built on calculations that they will be needed by the local population or with expectations that, for example (and as Ivars suggested), they would attract businesses and investment. However, the future is always unpredictable (Koselleck 2004). Keeping this in mind, I now turn to two issues, one that arose later and one that had already been present on the very day of ribbon-cutting and celebratory parades.

By spring of 2023, less than two years after being chipsealed, the road again became a source of frustration. What was intended as a long-term solution had led to a new set of problems. Due to poor maintenance during the winter, the road had started to deteriorate as early as late 2021 and was now riddled with deep potholes. Residents’ complaints to local parliamentary deputies who transmitted them to the regional headquarters of Latvian State Roads again became weekly rituals. In turn, the road officials blamed the mild winter weather

and the high level of logging activity in the area, even though they knew that chipseal was not suitable for heavy logging trucks.

From the residents' perspective, building road infrastructure was not a finished product but an open-ended process, something Gupta (2018, 62) identifies as a central feature of infrastructural lifecycles. Roads, just like the care home, required continual acts of care; mundane and repetitive work that was as much rooted in the present as in the future. By 2023, many locals had already experienced a full emotional cycle of hope, anticipation and pride followed by disillusionment and fatigue. In this way, the resurfaced road also illustrated the provisional nature of spatial fixes. While such investments can temporarily stabilize local economies and create the affective charge of progress, they are inherently limited in duration and scope (Harvey 2001b, 24–25). The chipseal that was already failing under the weight of the logging trucks became a new reminder that no infrastructural solution could permanently fix the broader political and economic abandonment residents felt.

For some, the disappointment had even begun before the road's grand opening. It had always been clear that everyone would not benefit equally from the project, but barely half of the 31-kilometer (19-mile) road leading from the highway to the village of Zīle was actually resurfaced. The new chipseal ended abruptly at Dzirnās and the section that served the care home and a small library (see next section) in the next village, Pienenes, remained untouched. Thus, people living beyond Dzirnās still had to live with the familiar washboarding and loose gravel, which cut off their dreams of connectivity and again shifted their sense of political belonging.

While the officials blamed this on disagreements between municipalities about funding, the reality seemed more complex. Both the completed and uncompleted sections of road were in the same municipality, which made the official explanation ring hollow. For locals, the decision to resurface only part of the road signaled that some places and people were considered more worthy of investment than others.

In the next section, I shift the focus to the small library in Pienenes, which for years had been threatened with closure, and the efforts some local residents made to keep it open. The decision to leave the road to the library unrepaired was yet another signal that the municipality and state did not see the library as important although some residents valued it and relied on it. At the same time, this library was often contrasted with the Pansionāts: While in the eyes of locals, both institutions were overlooked by officials, the care home occupied an even more ambiguous position, as it was both visible and invisible to its own residents.

To explore these layered experiences of being left behind and of political engagement, as well as the different textures of “emptiness,” I first turn to the efforts to preserve the library

despite the condition of the gravel road and the presence of a larger, better-resourced library nearby in Dzirnās.

4.2. “I wanted to protect something we already have”: Place-making and claims to the future

Confusingly, municipal road signs for Pienenes were located not only at the boundaries of that village but also almost eight kilometers (5 mi) away at the turn-off for the Pansionāts. Although the latter set had been placed there to slow traffic past the care home, they also seemed to mark other transformations: the once-lively village center had grown noticeably emptier and was now almost deserted. Passers-by rarely saw any people there, just a few buildings left from various historical and political periods that were mostly half-empty or decaying. The last that was still considered culturally and socially significant was the local library. Meanwhile, the Pansionāts, on a dirt side road just down the gravel road from the village, had become busy and populated, or so it seemed to those who lived and worked there. The new road signs marking Pienenes near the Pansionāts could be seen as symbolizing this shift, as if the village itself had rearranged itself around the care home and the people connected to it.

To explain why even for locals the Pansionāts was simultaneously seen and unseen, full and empty, in this section I first look at what remained of public life in Pienenes, focusing on its library. I start by sketching the “disappearing” village; then turn to the library that some residents saw as the last real institution still able to offer cultural and social continuity.

Other places in Pienenes had once also been a focus of local hopes for renewal. During the Soviet period, an 1820s former manor house housed a cinema and social club that many of my interlocutors remembered visibly. This building’s privatization after the Latvian restoration of independence most likely had saved it from becoming a ruin. For a long time, however, the owners’ business plan to restore it and attract an influx of people and jobs through rural tourism did not succeed. During the time of my research, the first floor had been furnished as a dwelling and event space, and the owners had again begun advertising the venue on various social media, mostly platforms aimed at tourism and wedding planning. This offered hope for the future.

Across the road from the manor house stood one of the area’s many half-collapsed buildings, most likely an old farmstead. Nearby, a recently closed retail store and pub in an early 19th-century building that was designated as an architectural monument of national importance, offered another reminder of a once busier life. Sneakers, shampoo bottles, and household cleaning products were still displayed in the dusty shop windows, as if nothing had changed. A bulletin board outside was covered with notices and advertisements: announcements of puppet shows and concerts and flyers for appliance repair, plowing, firewood

splitting, gravestone installation, potato delivery, and even one real estate offer that read, “We consider all asking prices, fast payment!” None was dated, and it was unclear whether these were relics or current offers. Probably some of each.

Older locals remembered the village and manor house as a small but bustling center and smiled gently when they told me about the “time when it was full of life,” which coincided with their youth. At every turn, the place spoke not only of what it was in that moment but also of what it used to be (Pine 2008, 104–5). Every building that had fallen into ruin was, at some point, remembered, mourned, or cherished by those who once inhabited and knew it, and it continued to be felt by those who encountered it today (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 171). Although the place exuded stillness, this was just a facade – the people who had stayed or moved here had adapted their lives to the changes. Life went on, but differently. Meanwhile, the noticeable changes had undeniably left many interlocutors questioning what the future held for this place and the people living here. In the following paragraphs, I describe how the librarian and another resident reflected on this question from their perspectives and shared their experiences and struggles to sustain a place they feared was disappearing. By focusing on their views of the library, another form of sociality emerged.

The library was located a couple hundred meters from the manor. It was small, housed in one of the village’s few apartment buildings, and run by Astrīda – an enthusiastic librarian in her late seventies who had moved there from Riga in 1986, on the same day as the Chernobyl disaster.⁴² When I asked why she and her husband had chosen this place to spend their lives, Astrīda told me it was “because of the dandelions (*pienes*) blooming across the fields.” (Hence, my pseudonym Pienes for the village.) The couple lived a short walk from the library, across an orchard where they grew quinces and sold dried fruit and syrup (with which she continued to supply me).

Astrīda, had revitalized this neglected library and for many years had been far more than just a clerk who checked out books. She knew her patrons well – what they liked, which titles they had already read, and what they hoped to read next – and had also attended to their non-literary needs since the 1990s, when she noticed that age, health, and farm work were keeping many local people from visiting the library. At that point, she had started filling a backpack with books and walking ten to fifteen kilometers (6-9 mi) a day to deliver them to people’s homes.

As Ruheni and Tate (2004) show in their discussion of libraries in rural development, librarians in resource-scarce and geographically isolated settings often assume roles that extend

⁴² The Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred on 26 April 1986 near the city of Pripyat in the north of the Ukrainian SSR in the Soviet Union.

far beyond formal information provision. In this sense, Astrīda became more than a librarian for many. People waited for her to arrive and sometimes offered her lunch, tea, or coffee and chatted with her if she had time. “I think that for many these rare conversations dispelled loneliness,” she told me in one of our first conversations. I experienced this firsthand a couple of months later. While I was visiting the library, a frail older woman came in, and Astrīda handed her a pre-selected package of books. When the woman left, Astrīda explained. “She isn’t an avid reader, so I prepared something light. Also, her eyesight’s very poor, but I found an old magnifying glass to lend her.” For another woman who had recently been assigned by social services to an apartment in the building where the library was housed (which people inaccurately called “public housing,”) Astrīda, through books and conversations, became her most direct connection to the new place.

I observed that Astrīda engaged similarly with the residents of the Pansionāts. She knew all the readers from the care home well and before the pandemic had gone there monthly to collect the books they had read, hand out new ones, and chat with readers about books and life itself – something several clients admitted to missing greatly. (After the care home was placed under strict quarantine in the spring of 2020, she could no longer enter and instead the driver made a monthly trip to the library until I took over this job in August 2020).

Astrīda always asked me how specific patrons were doing and what they would like to read. I brought mostly biographies to some, crime novels or family sagas and love stories to others, and magazine clippings of crossword puzzles, horoscopes, or anecdotes to yet others. Acknowledging not only her efforts and a life dedicated to this small library but also the potential meaning of the last public place open in Pienenes, I also tried to sign up new patrons for the library, mostly among those who had arrived at the care home during the pandemic and quarantine. I also allowed Astrīda to recommend and assign books to me, so I too became a library patron. Astrīda appreciated these efforts, saying that “we value every reader here” – a larger number of readers, like a larger number of pupils at local schools, was thought to demonstrate the local significance of the library to the municipal authorities and thus also signal the meaning and fullness of the place.

Latvia’s regulations on local library networks require municipalities to operate libraries in each parish – at least one for every two thousand inhabitants (*Vietējas nozīmes bibliotēku tīkla darbības noteikumi* 2001). Since Pienenes was only about four kilometers (2.4 mi) from a larger village in the same parish, Dzirnās, and their combined population was less than two thousand, they could have shared a single library. This would most likely have been the larger

one in Dzirnās, which with around 260 people,⁴³ a health clinic,⁴⁴ two small grocery stores, a church, and the local school would by most measures seem more likely to survive the emptying. Even there, however rumors – maybe based on experience – circulated that the school would also soon close. Some parents had already transferred their children to other schools in the former⁴⁵ municipal seat some twenty kilometers (12 mi) away or an adjacent municipality seventeen kilometers (10.5 mi) in the other direction. Although Dzirnās was larger and more stable than Pienenes, the sense of population loss was present there too, and several locals born in the 1980s told me the village had grown much emptier since their childhood.

There had been talk of closing Pienenes's library for a couple of years, but parish residents had collected over 130 signatures supporting keeping it open and reached a compromise with the municipality in 2019 that turned it into a branch of the Dzirnās's library and cut its budget for expenses such as the cost of new books.

When I asked several people in Pienenes if it would really be so difficult to drive a couple of kilometers to Dzirnās to pick up books, I soon learned that the distance often mattered less than what it signified. Consider Arnis, a journalist, translator, and teacher who had moved to the countryside from Riga with his wife, Lelde (an accountant at the Pansionāts), during the 2009 economic crisis. Arnis explained that although several villages were relatively close – as little as ten kilometers from his home – they did not reflect the identity of his neighborhood. For him, feeling a sense of belonging required something to be within walking distance (around three to seven kilometers or 1.8 to 4.3 mi). Pienenes, four kilometers away, still fell within that radius. Although in practice almost no one who owned a car ever walked anywhere because of the distances and road quality, the idea of proximity remained important to him.

Aware that schools are often seen as places of social and cultural continuity, I asked Arnis what connection he felt to the village of Zīle (where his child – like most Pansionāts care workers' children – attended school) in an adjacent municipality ten kilometers in the opposite direction from his house. Arnis thought for a moment and replied that Zīle, like Dzirnās, had too many people and did not reflect the life he valued or liked.⁴⁶ Living apart and having space

⁴³ Often, it is hard to determine a village's exact population because many people live in so-called *viensētas* or individual farmsteads that are usually several kilometers apart. Therefore, belonging to a certain village or to no village at all is often more a social and emotional than a strictly geographical matter, as Arnis's case later in this section will show.

⁴⁴ A general practitioner sees patients there twice a week.

⁴⁵ On July 1, 2021, the administrative-territorial reform came into force, and 43 new local governments were established in place of the previous 119. ("1. jūlijā stājas spēkā administratīvi teritoriālā reforma | Ministru kabinets," n.d.; "Administratīvi teritoriālā reforma Latvijā | Valsts zemes dienests," n.d.)

⁴⁶ Although Arnis often spoke of how he enjoyed peaceful rural life, his wife attested that he also missed the city's bustle and sense of togetherness.

(not to be confused with emptiness) were essential elements of country life, the kind that he and most of my interlocutors desired, as I have explained in Chapter 3.

Arnis's feelings about what particularly shaped his identity also partly explained why he felt so strongly about the small library in Pienenes. He argued that it was important and should be maintained precisely because it was the last public building in or close to Pienenes. "So, I wanted to protect something we already have [the library] from being shut down. Wanted to do everything I could and then watch what happened. And, of course, windmills spin... Emptying and aging, and there are such things. But why not complicate (*sarežģīt*) your life and do something that gives fulfillment?"

To protect the library from closing, Arnis felt he had to show its use and worth for local people by reviving the library's cultural and social significance. Before the pandemic, Arnis and Astrīda organized local events: slide shows of old photos that depicted local history and cultural heritage and gatherings for telling stories about contemporary events and happenings in the area.⁴⁷ Such evenings, at which a wide variety of local people were invited to speak, listen, and mingle with one another, not only brought people together but created, marked, and strengthened the place and its meaning. They also attracted media attention and a much-needed municipal recognition of the place and its people. Arnis told me that "the locals also said that if the library is taken away, the last thing we have will be taken away because it's the last expression of power [*vara*]." He continued: "Well, not even the manifestation of power, but of the municipality, the last return on the taxes we pay, the last visible thing that comes from the municipality to this part of the countryside."

Like the road, the library became a political instrument locals deployed against the marginality and emptiness that afflicted them. Arnis's statement also shows that how and for whom people and places came to matter was important for its existence and for place-making. For him, the library signified cultural richness and embeddedness and had the ability to maintain a connection to the meaningful cultural past and the events he organized demonstrated a liveliness in the place to assert its future and enable its social reproduction. These arguments for fighting to keep the library open and Pienenes "alive" are in accord with the idea that places are made in and through practices, such as people's interactions, and the institutions they generate, mobilize, and reproduce (Abu-Lughod 1997).

As I have shown, Astrīda had long ensured that the library served the locals in more ways than providing books: it was a social institution. It is "more personal, like visiting a person who has a lot of books at their home. And she is also ready to talk to you for an hour about your

⁴⁷Astrīda and Arnis enjoyed telling this story, just as Astrīda enjoyed talking about the library – this was, after all, her life's work. I was most certainly not the first person to hear the story of how the library was saved.

problems,” as Arnis explained. It was also an institution of memory, holding historical records about the origins of local family names, family connections, and place names, which I myself used in my research. Additionally, Astrīda maintained a comprehensive archive of news clippings about the parish and its people that recorded the life that was unfolding in front of her. Regular patrons of the library, most of whom had lived their entire lives in Pienenes and its surroundings, acknowledged Astrīda’s lifelong contribution and role there.

Despite all these efforts, time and time again there were new struggles and worries, including concern over who would replace Astrīda when she retired and even whether at that point the municipality would simply close the library down. Arnis once told me that “*this place* [my emphasis], exists because of her [Astrīda],” acknowledging the compelling force of individuals and the possibility that the village would fade away entirely without its own library and librarian. Although “this place” referred to the library, the looming emptiness blurred the border between it and the village for him. Arnis did not see the library as a mere “placiation of space” (Casey 1997, 268) – a generative enactment of subjective and lived aspects of space, as well as places becoming a part of ourselves (Casey 2001, 683) – but also recognized it as an important manifestation of power and a way to act against emptiness (Dzenovska 2012, 75–76).

However, the situation changed faster than anybody expected. On November 2, 2021, the Cabinet of Ministers issued a regulation requiring all government employees to have a COVID-19 vaccination or recovery certificate in order to work for the rest of the pandemic period (Epidemioloģiskās drošības pasākumi Covid-19 infekcijas izplatības ierobežošanai 2021; lvportals.lv 2021), which extended the mandate beyond the end of the state of emergency on February 28, 2022 (Par ārkārtējās situācijas izsludināšanu 2021). Astrīda refused to be vaccinated, so she had to leave the library. Another small-town librarian was appointed in her place.

These sudden changes added to the uncertainty about the fate of the library. Would the municipality see this as an opportunity to streamline the library network? Would the locals again fight for the library and/or look for a permanent replacement for Astrīda? Some even proposed Arnis as the best candidate. After all, he was the one who had initiated the original campaign against its closure and was also among the locals who felt the strongest connections between the library, his identity, and the future of the village.

In a changing social environment, Arnis and some other locals saw the library as an active agent of their identity rather than simply a “reflection[] of pre-existing ideas and socio-political relations” (Tilley 2006, 17–18). The “last public building” and the relationships it enabled marked the place and people’s significance on the national map. Current uncertainties and

contingencies there shaped senses of social identity and belonging, and thus connected to a known – and sometimes idealized – past and an imagined future (Tilley 2006, 17). In this view, the possible loss of the library portended a dire future for this rural locality, not in the sense of a homogeneous, bounded place and community but as a place “constituted by the activities of its inhabitants, operating within specific traditions in some conjunction with one another” (Lambek 2011, 215). Thus “being a local” was also “an instance of people addressing together the problems of their human and historical condition” (Ibid. 2011, 198), whether this meant a campaign to save the local library or a continuous struggle about the gravel roads I showed previously: both of these served as instruments to gain recognition and remind the municipality and the state of their existence and needs.

On that note, I must stress that not all locals experienced the emptying in the same way or attached this kind of meaning to the library or Pienenes. The few newcomers did not remember the place as it had been before, and their vision and expectations also differed. Many who had lived their entire life in Pienenes harbored fond nostalgic memories of the village and its parties, celebrations, post office, pub, and store – all the necessities of life. The library was just one among many public places there. But for many long-term local people now, life mostly continued at their homes and farms, which was also related to the increasing average age of residents. All had more or less successfully adapted their lives to the ongoing changes, whether relational or due to the closure of public institutions. The lack of job opportunities, the low quality gravel road, and the almost nonexistent public transportation remained the biggest problems. At the same time, Arnis, who although no longer was a newcomer still did not remember the place during the kolkhoz era or before the 2009 economic crisis, imagined a future for the village by meticulously narrating a past he had not himself shared. In such circumstances, and with varying experiences, expectations, and visions of the place, place-making meant not only clinging to the lost and holding on to what remained but also imagining the unknown yet to come (Hinkson 2017, 54–56).

“Imagining the unknown yet to come” inevitably leads back to the question I asked in the introduction of this chapter: why was the Pansionāts, a stable public institution that employed more than thirty local people, invisible in both the “potato” video and the one that counted people who lived along the road? In a time when the library and (what was left of) the village of Pienenes seemed to be becoming less reliable in “putting the place and us on the map,” as Arnis described it, why did locals not stress how important the Pansionāts was to the local area? After all, it was the most populated place between Dzirnās and Zīle and almost a small village in itself. Why did this place and the people who lived there did not count, even though children

and working adults also lived there? In the next section, I will briefly outline its liminality and ambiguity, setting the scene for a more in-depth answer in the following chapters.

4.3. Is Pansionāts the new Pienenes? Between maintenance and reproduction

Although the future of the library and the village of Pienenes had become increasingly uncertain, creating distances between populated places, the Pansionāts stood out as an apparent exception. Despite the uncertainty elsewhere, it had become a steady presence that over the years had provided reliable jobs and indirectly supported many local households. In a landscape of economic precarity and dwindling opportunities, it functioned as a secure anchor for employment, infrastructure, care, and everyday social life.

As shown before, this institutional presence was not necessarily accompanied by symbolic or social recognition. As I will show in this section, not all locals – not even those who had family members working there – saw the Pansionāts as a place that contributed to the social life or future of the region. It was valued for the employment it provided, but not necessarily imagined as a space of vitality, political leverage, or social belonging. As Arnis put it, “apart from the library there’s nothing else. So, the Pansionāts? Well, it’s so autonomous, on its own...”

In this section, I explore the seeming contradiction between the care home’s centrality and marginality. Why did an institution so deeply woven into everyday livelihoods remain symbolically peripheral? This pattern reflects broader dynamics I explore throughout this thesis: how a rural care home for older adults, though economically and socially embedded in the local area, remains tethered to narratives of decline and emptiness.

To address these questions, I combine local perspectives, ethnographic scenes, and theoretical insights into care, reproduction, and maintenance.⁴⁸ I argue that the Pansionāts, despite its vitality, was largely excluded from the dominant imaginaries of social reproduction. Its association with aging, illness, and death – topics I explored in Chapter 2 – contributed to its symbolic invisibility. Unlike schools, kindergartens, or libraries, public discourse rarely framed care homes as sites of continuity or hope. As I will show, this was not because the care home was lifeless, but because, in addition to its association with emptiness, the kind of work it did – maintaining bodies, sustaining routines, and holding together vulnerable lives – was not recognized as reproductive or future-oriented.

⁴⁸ I introduce the concept here to highlight how care work at the Pansionāts, often dismissed as static or routine, was in fact sustaining both lives and livelihoods. I frame maintenance as often invisible labor that keeps systems running without the promise of transformation.

This ambivalence was not limited to outside observers or policymakers but also voiced by some locals who expressed dissatisfaction with the visual and spatial presence of the Pansionāts. The newly added buildings and renovations, intended to improve functionality and capacity, were sometimes described as “unattractive” or “incompatible” with the rural landscape. These critiques were not necessarily about aesthetics per se but often reflected deeper tensions around how the institution was seen to sit within the moral and social landscape of the area. Others, similarly to Arnis, acknowledged the Pansionāts’s role in economic stability in the area: people could stay because stable jobs were available nearby. At the same time, affectively it remained distant, “on its own,” “closed off” (*noslēgta*), with limited integration into the local community and without a potential for development that would matter to local social and political life.

Additionally, trying to answer why locals who were very familiar with the Pansionāts and those who worked there still minimized its importance brings us back to the idea that many care homes still shared elements of total institutions, like peripheral locations and residents having limited contact with the “outside world” (Goffman 1961). Even though mixing and mingling between the Pansionāts residents and locals happened here more often than I observed in larger, mostly urban care homes, there was still a demarcation between “here” and “there,” “us” and “them,” “inside” and “outside” in place and with a few exceptions it was mostly employees who “breached” the walls of the care home (Žabicka 2014).

In other words, if infrastructures are usually seen as aspirational – carrying the promise of change, development, and modernity (often mixed with fears of unwelcome transformation and increased vulnerability) and weaving together social memory and future imaginaries in complex ways – in the eyes of some locals the Pansionāts did not embody such trajectories (Harvey and Knox 2015, 6). Rather than symbolizing progress or future-oriented investment, it appeared static: a site of maintenance, not (a promise of) development.

Even people who had family members employed at the care home or regularly interacted with staff sometimes left the Pansionāts out of their narratives of local life. In interviews and casual conversations, people spoke at length about places that symbolized community to them – the cinema, pub, library, grocery stores, and post office – even if they had long ago closed or been repurposed. The care home, despite being full of people and directly involved in local economy and social life for a long time, rarely came up unprompted. As I noted in the introduction of this chapter, it was also left out of the local video project documenting populated places in the area. This silence was not merely an oversight. It reflected boundaries between sites of continuity and those of containment and between institutions associated with futures and those imagined as endings.

As scholars of maintenance and infrastructure have argued (e.g. Jackson 2014; Denis and Pontille 2015), practices that sustain and stabilize are often rendered invisible, undervalued, or taken for granted, particularly when they do not produce visible progress or transformation. In biopolitical terms, as Murphy (2017) suggests, not all lives or spaces are considered equally worth sustaining. In the Latvian countryside, this devaluation of maintenance work within care works intersects with broader demographic anxieties (see Chapter 2), in which care for the old is routinely but inexplicitly contrasted with investment in youth, birthrates, and future productivity. The Pansionāts, then, was not seen as “unimportant” – many locals acknowledged its economic value – but it failed to fit the symbolic frame of an institution that projected a future. Its role in sustaining life was real but dormant. It maintained, rather than reproduced. And for that reason, it remained marginal, even while at the center.

For example, in one of our conversations Arnis reflected that, although the Pansionāts was “autonomous, on its own,” it was also one of the reasons why road maintenance crews came more or less regularly: “Okay, there’s the road [the regional gravel road]. Then, there’s the road [a smaller dirt road] to the Pansis,⁴⁹ the municipality cleans it, we see it.” For him, this maintenance signaled recognition of the institution’s importance. Without the Pansionāts, he argued, the road’s quality would likely have been worse. In this way, Arnis acknowledged the care home not only as an economic actor, providing stable employment, but also as a political one, shaping how local infrastructure was valued and maintained.

However, in my experience people did not invoke the care home as a special reason to maintain or improve the road, with the exception that when its staff (including Valters, the locally well-connected director) stressed that “we have old and sick people here” when reporting poor road conditions.

The first section of this chapter discussed in detail the regional gravel road that connected the highway to the care home. In the summer of 2021, a bit more than a half of the road had been chipsealed; however, the Pansionāts was located further down, beyond Dzirnās, and thus on “the other side” of the promised “modernity,” despite being one of the most stable and biggest local employers and with more than thirty people traveling to and from it every day. The fact that it was a place that cared for older adults, many of whom were vulnerable or ill, did not play a role either. The Pansionāts was the only place in the vicinity that required regular visits by a local ambulance team, which drove from the nearby village on the still-unsealed road for emergencies, similarly like the driver Ivars or the Director often took people to Riga or nearby hospitals for less urgent medical procedures. The municipality’s social workers and

⁴⁹ A shortened, colloquial form of the word “pansionāts” that many locals and employees used.

future residents' relatives also often drove fragile older adults to their future home at the Pansionāts. Over the months I spent there, I can recall far too many occasions when an ambulance or the care home's own driver had to take older adults to and from hospitals due to heart attacks, strokes, bedsores, recent amputations, and many other health problems. I heard older adults talk about how they feared this journey, as every pothole and every meter of washboard road added to their pain. Many became nauseous along the way, and it was up to the Pansionāts's nurses or paramedics to mitigate their symptoms and clean after them.

When rumors spread in 2020 about potential road construction, some staff members expressed cautious optimism, while others sarcastically responded, "Don't worry, that won't apply to us!" The condition of the gravel roads in general as well as the municipality's failure to pave this one with asphalt or chipseal point to a larger story about which territories, institutions, and people are deemed locally, regionally, and nationally important, valuable, or promising – and which are not. As Gupta (2018, 62) reminds us, "investments in infrastructure always involve calculations about the future." In comparison to Dzirnās, a village with a school, kindergarten, library, and other public institutions that symbolized continuity and future life, the Pansionāts appeared excluded from such imaginaries of modernity.

Even for locals, the care relations tied to the institution were often seen as forms of maintenance rather than reproduction. Maintaining bodies, sustaining routines, and holding together vulnerable lives were vital, but they did not carry the same positive associations of continuity or futurity as schools or libraries. However, this framing obscures what the Pansionāts actually did: it may not have "produced" children or new growth, but it reproduced social life in quieter but no less meaningful ways, sustaining households, supporting small farms, stabilizing employment, and holding together fragile forms of belonging. Although relegated to the margins of "empty" aging, in practice it was reproducing local life.

This helps explain why the Pansionāts was absent from local projects like the "potato video." Even as it sustained livelihoods and reproduced everyday life, it was symbolically framed as maintenance rather than as a site of future-making and thus remained invisible in narratives of continuity and vitality. Thus, although its invisibility was not intentional it was telling. The project set out to celebrate the vitality of the area by showing where people still lived, yet this care home – although full of people, daily life, and labor – did not come to mind, adding to my argument of aging as emptiness (Chapter 2) This quiet omission revealed the cultural frameworks that failed to recognize the care work at the Pansionāts as productive or future-oriented, something that sustained life not through providing services to young people or economic growth, but through care work for older adults, maintenance of the place itself, and continued presence at the margins.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how emptiness and sociality in rural Latvia emerge in layered and overlapping ways. Here, roads, the library, and the Pansionāts each became “intimately involved in political processes of change” (Fontein 2011, 717).

Beginning with roads, I traced how everyday negotiations with dust, mud, ruts, and graders became more than technical matters. Roads were affective infrastructures: they generated frustration and fatigue, but also intimacy, humor, and sociality. They were reminders of marginality but also instruments through which residents asserted their presence and claimed political belonging. Complaints, satirical videos, and collective celebrations revealed that it was precisely the dire condition of the roads – which was not unique to this area – that made them central to place-making.

Turning to the library in Pienenes, I explored how an institution on the verge of closure embodied continuity and cultural significance. For locals such as Astrīda and Arnis, the library was not just a place to borrow books but a social anchor, a keeper of memory, and a symbol of recognition within the municipality. In defending it, residents asserted that the village was still alive, even as emptiness pressed in. The library thus became a site where hopes for social reproduction and cultural vitality could be enacted, however precariously.

The Pansionāts presented a striking contrast. Though one of the largest and most stable employers in the area, it remained symbolically peripheral. Its association with aging, illness, and maintenance meant that it did not fit into local imaginaries of vitality or futurity. Even as it sustained livelihoods, stabilized households, and quietly reproduced social life, it was absent from the videos and conversations that sought to make the parish visible. Here, emptiness was not only about what was lost but also about what was not recognized. The silence around the Pansionāts revealed how certain forms of care and continuity, especially those tied to older adults, were rendered invisible or seen as disconnected from the future.

Taken together, these three sites illuminate the limits of infrastructural and institutional promises in places imagined as empty. Roads were repeatedly imagined as capable of undoing emptiness by restoring connectivity, investment, and recognition. The library, in turn, condensed hopes for continuity by symbolizing cultural life, memory, and a shared past that might still anchor a future. The Pansionāts, however, exposed a contradiction at the heart of these imaginaries. Even where life, labor, and infrastructure already existed – where people worked, cared, aged, and depended on one another – they did not automatically register as vitality or future. The care home revealed that not all forms of presence counted equally, and that maintenance and endurance could remain analytically and politically marginal even as they sustained local life.

Read together, these ethnographic sites unsettle the assumption that presence, activity, or infrastructure necessarily translate into social recognition or future-making. Repeated struggles over roads and public institutions rested on the hope that visibility would undo emptiness – that being seen and counted would secure a place in collective imaginaries of continuity. The Pansionāts complicates this expectation. Here, life was dense rather than absent, structured by labor, care, and institutional routine, yet it remained weakly articulated as vitality or promise. This disjuncture points to a deeper issue: emptiness is not only produced through loss or absence, but also through selective forms of recognition that render some kinds of life peripheral even as they sustain local worlds.

Roads, libraries, and the care home illuminate different registers of emptiness and sociality. Roads made marginality palpable and gave rise to political leverage. The library condensed memories, belonging, and claims to the future specifically through shared past. The Pansionāts, in turn, embodied maintenance and endurance, but rarely counted as a site of reproduction or future. These overlaps and silences remind us that emptiness is more than one, less than many, not unlike how Annemarie Mol has conceptualized a disease (2002). It is a layered, interconnected condition lived through infrastructures and institutions, mobilized as a political claim, and refracted through cultural frameworks of what and who counts.

This chapter has therefore mapped the contours of being “still here” in a rural parish imagined as empty. By following roads, libraries, and the care home, I have shown how people navigated both recognition and erasure through the “everyday politics of survival” (Abélès 2010), – including the quiet erasure already visible in the potato-planting video with which this chapter began – and how they practiced sociality in places that mattered differently.

In the chapters that follow, I move more directly into the Pansionāts itself, and examine how care, intimacy, and everyday practices within the institution further complicate these tensions between marginality and belonging, maintenance and reproduction, emptiness and endurance.

5. “Nothing really happens here”: The politics of humility

Introduction

“It’s very calm here. Nothing really happens here. It’s boring,” Dzidra told me one afternoon in the fall of 2020. Several other residents had also used that term, so I asked why it was so “boring” there. The retired teacher in her eighties, who had voluntarily moved to the Pansionāts after selling her house in the spring of 2020, looked at me, and sighed. “There’s nothing to do!” When I followed up with, “What would you like to do? What do you enjoy doing?” Dzidra explained her interests and sources of enjoyment in terms of the changes she had experienced since moving. “When guests came to my house, they would spend the entire afternoon. I would cook a meal, bake *plātsmaize* [a kind of sheet cake]. But here... how long will they sit on the side of my bed with nothing for them or me to do?” She felt forced into a passive role at the care home that contrasted sharply with her former active role as a host in her home and believed this had also changed her relationships with the relatives who visited her.

Despite feeling bored, Dzidra sought ways to keep busy and find enjoyment. She was an avid reader and knitter, enjoyed daily walks, and eagerly joined a small culinary workshop we started. Unlike many others, however, she also openly expressed her dissatisfaction with the Pansionāts, and particularly the lack of events and daily activities (partly due to COVID restrictions) that she and other residents hoped or expected to be provided as part of the care services.

Staff members often considered this criticism unfair, replying, “Are we some sort of resort (*kūrorts*) here?” This sarcastic answer implied that the home was intended to provide care, not entertainment. This remark reveals differing and sometimes conflicting understandings of what constitutes (good) care (Lemos Dekker 2019). While Dzidra’s dissatisfaction may have somewhat irritated the staff, they still made efforts to accommodate her as much as possible, by initially offering her one of the few single rooms and later moving her to a better one. Although caregivers occasionally voiced frustration over her “neediness” and “ingratitude,” Dzidra was generally respected and considered deserving of more comfortable accommodations – something the staff could provide, unlike the social activities that were limited by staffing constraints. This sense of deservingness was subtly influenced by her perceived social status compared to the “proletariat,” as they referred to the working-class residents, whom they saw as typically having more modest expectations of care.

In contrast to Dzidra’s vocal dissatisfaction, many residents appeared grateful for even the bare minimum, whether that meant a modestly furnished room or limited opportunities for

cognitive and social engagement. This gratitude, however, did not mean that their days felt full or eventful. And yet the sense that “nothing happens here” requires nuance. From time to time, something *did* happen – small activities that punctured the long afternoons. One of these was a weekly cooking workshop.

Despite the pandemic, we tried to salvage a bit of festivity during the Christmas season of 2020. I suggested we make our own gingerbread that year, using my grandmother’s recipe. The regular attendees, including Dzidra, gathered around the table to mix the ingredients and bake the first trays of gingerbread for the entire care home. I assigned tasks with a show of confidence, though inwardly I worried about proportions, timing, and how best to match each job to someone’s abilities. The kitchen filled with warmth and the thick, sweet smell of spices. Even before the first batch came out of the oven, the scent of eleven kilograms (twenty-four pounds) of gingerbread – enough to last until the summer – wafted down the hallway, pulling in curious noses and smiles.

For a moment, the room felt animated, with busy hands and a sense of purpose humming through the air. And yet for Dzidra, these moments only illuminated a deeper paradox. The care home was not devoid of events, but the events could not recreate the sociality, autonomy, or hosting roles that had once structured her everyday life. Baking gingerbread was a welcome interruption but could not make the days that followed feel less empty and boring.

Such moments of activity made the days feel a little less empty, yet they did not transform the underlying rhythms of institutional life. They were exceptions that highlighted, rather than resolving residents’ constrained expectations and the long-standing structural limits shaping late life in Latvia. These dynamics form the backdrop for this chapter: the experience of boredom, deservingness, and the altered sense of time during the COVID-19 pandemic that many residents described, and what I describe as the politics of humility.

As scholars have shown, existential boredom is never only a matter of having “nothing to do.” It is an affective and social condition that arises when people are unable to pursue valued roles, relationships, or forms of participation (Goodstein 2004; Musharbash 2007; Gardiner 2012). In institutional settings, boredom often reflects the shrinking of one’s world. It is not only through diminished responsibilities or limited options for activities, but often the loss of relational positions that once structured a person’s identity and even the loss of oneself. This understanding of boredom is crucial here, as it highlights how residents’ expressions of “nothing happening” point to deeper disruptions of personhood and social belonging.

Residents also described changes in how time was lived at the Pansionāts. Daily life unfolded through tightly structured institutional routines – early mornings, waiting for mealtimes, and evenings that in winter settled in almost as soon as daylight faded. Yet within

these routines, time often felt strangely suspended, reinforcing the sense of uneventfulness that many residents described. During the pandemic, these patterns intensified: visits disappeared, events were canceled, and days seemed to stretch while the future narrowed, producing a sense of both accelerated and diminished time. As I show later in Section 5.3, these altered temporalities were not merely background conditions but shaped how residents understood their relationships, vulnerabilities, and hopes, and how they grappled with the fear that their remaining time was slipping away. These dynamics also narrowed what many residents felt they could legitimately ask for, shaping a modest horizon of expectations that underpins the politics of humility.

The politics of humility, which is central to this chapter, arises from socioeconomically driven and politically reinforced ideas framing old age as a life stage requiring little beyond than basic needs like food, shelter, basic medications, and physical care. These notions shape both the residents' expectations and the staff's responses to the constraints of limited resources and opportunities. While economic factors such as the whole country's prosperity undeniably play a role, the long-standing neglect of policies addressing the needs of an aging population and aging individuals is equally significant. As I argued in the previous chapter, this stems from a perception of aging as a threat to Latvianness and the consequential framing of "emptiness" as not just (rural) depopulation but as a (re)generational problem. The absence of such policies results in limited opportunities for lifelong learning and employment, as well as a severe shortage of home-based services and assisted-living facilities catering to varying levels of independence and care. As Kavedžija (2019, 141) observes, "[w]hat one cares about is what has meaning. The kinds of care one is involved in, whether as a carer, a recipient, or a facilitator, as well as what one cares about and for whom, tell us much about what is meaningful and how a sense of meaning is created in the everyday." The absence of comprehensive policies for an aging society and aging individuals gives rise to a politics of humility affecting multiple aspects of an individual's life course. While profound in an individual's life and institutional settings, this remains mostly invisible to the public eye and is barely detectable in policy documents concerning older adults, revealing not only specific political configurations but also "how political belonging fluctuates over the life course, as older persons leave or enter privileged forms of citizenships" (Thelen and Coe 2019, 7). This chapter examines how this dynamic shapes the experiences of older adults at the Pansionāts and how staff members navigate these effects, often by juggling the demands of everyday life in the face of severely limited resources.

I begin by exploring how the politics of humility inevitably intertwines with notions of moral deservingness, which serve as a tool for allocating scarce resources. I illustrate this ethnographically through the distribution of the limited supply of single rooms and show that

the evaluations of moral deservingness used to decide which residents received one were closely linked to their perceived social status and behavior. Additionally, I show how some residents internalized this sense of humility while others resisted it, expressing their experiences as boredom or directly stating that they felt insignificant.

Next, I shift the focus to boredom as both an intensely personal and a deeply social and political experience, as seen in Dzidra's story. For years, political decisions and societal attitudes have shaped and reinforced the belief that little is required in late life. I argue that boredom is not merely a result of how the Pansionāts (and similar institutions) were managed but a multifaceted experience that emerges from a combination of physical and cognitive decline, the loss of meaningful relationships and activities, and the restrictive, monotonous living conditions at the Pansionāts, all of which eroded residents' sense of agency. In this context, boredom was closely tied to feelings of not belonging and loneliness as well as the broader constitution of personhood. I examine reported experiences of boredom as phenomena that are simultaneously embodied, relational, and political. This is underscored by the contrasting perspectives of staff – who frequently described the Pansionāts as “a place where things happen” (see Chapter No. 2), and residents – who often complained that “nothing really happens here.”

In the final section, I show how the politics of humility intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and merged with paternalistic ageism to heighten the experience of boredom among older adults. I focus on how public health restrictions that eliminated visiting rights and social events reshaped residents' perceptions of time, both narrowing and stretching their experience of it, and for some amplified feelings of isolation and unbelonging.

The politics of humility is not a distant policy framework but is lived and felt in the way residents measure their worth, in staff judgments about deservingness, and in the silences of long afternoons when boredom sets in. By following residents and caregivers through these mundane yet charged moments, I show how old age becomes defined by modest expectations and how boredom, far from trivial, signals deeper struggles with personhood and belonging. The ethnographic sections that follow explore these tensions in detail, starting with how deservingness of care is weighed and distributed in the everyday life of the Pansionāts.

5.1. “But what more do you need at your age?”: Deservingness and humility in late life

The first time I stepped into a three-person room in the Upper House, the atmosphere felt claustrophobic: beds only a few steps apart, a small window that often became the object of quiet quarrels – some wanting more fresh air, others fearing drafts – and just enough space for the narrow wardrobes that held people's remaining possessions. What struck me most, however,

was the near absence of privacy when someone needed to change their clothes, use the toilet, or have the bandages on their wounds replaced. These everyday moments made the limits of the room tangible. In such a space, privacy became a scarce resource, and the question of who received a single room took on outsized significance.

Scenes like this were not exceptions but part of everyday life shaped by the institution's material and financial constraints. It was also within these spatial limitations that judgments about who "deserved" better accommodation took shape – formed as much by scarcity as by moral assessment.

Although characterized by a relatively liberal management style, the Pansionāts faced many daily challenges that were typical for a municipal care home in Latvia, especially the struggle to operate with extremely limited funding. Most municipal care homes across Latvia lived hand-to-mouth, and the Pansionāts was no exception. The fees clients paid for services went entirely toward operating costs: wages, utilities, gas, food, hygiene products, and other essentials.⁵⁰ Little if anything was left for emergencies such as repairs after a storm, let alone much-needed planned renovations. To be fair, the municipality could allocate supplemental funding in such situations, but this was far from sufficient to meet ongoing demands. Naturally, this meant that something "extra" could rarely be planned or achieved unless additional funding was found.

The Pansionāts's limited revenue was also the main reason why so many of the approximately 65-70 residents still had to share rooms. As the Director Valters explained to me, "I'd love to offer only single rooms here, but we can't afford it, and neither can our clients." Pensions and salaries could not keep up with the rising fees charged by care facilities in Latvia, putting a bigger and bigger toll on people paying for the care home.⁵¹ Over the years, the Director had made efforts to provide more single or double rooms (some residents preferred to have company) and reduce the number of residents sharing a space. While some rooms still accommodated three or (due to the endless waitlist) occasionally even four residents, this was

⁵⁰ In 2020, when I started my fieldwork, the monthly fee for the care home was 560 euros. By 2024, it had reached 950 euros and there were plans to raise it even more. There were several reasons for this. First, the minimum wage rose from 430 euros in 2020 to 700 euros in 2024, significantly increasing operating costs. Second, inflation due to economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine especially affected energy and food prices (Kazāks 2022).

⁵¹ Payment for care homes in Latvia was structured as follows: 85% of the resident's pension was used to cover a portion of the cost, leaving 15% for their personal expenses (unless the resident had opted to contribute their entire pension (100%) toward the facility's fees). Since the average pension fell far short of covering the full cost, the resident's relatives had to pay the rest. If there were no relatives who were considered financially able to contribute, this would be paid by the municipality where the individual was registered, but for many lower- and middle-income families this remaining balance was a significant financial strain as in 2024 the average monthly salary in Latvia after taxes was 1,180 euros and many, particularly in rural areas, earned significantly less. (Centrālā statistikas pārvalde 2024).

becoming increasingly rare. However, some nearby rural care homes still offered beds in dormitories for six or more people.

Chronic underfunding created several persistent challenges for the Pansionāts, including limited access to services like physiotherapy, mental health counseling, and recreational activities – issues that were only partially acknowledged. It also led to significant infrastructure problems, as the premises needed to be renovated in addition to the shortage of single rooms. In this context, deciding how to allocate the few that were available and determine suitable room-sharing arrangements for two or three residents became a key concern. Beyond practical considerations, such as who preferred to live together or who might be a good match, moral deservingness played a crucial role in these decisions. Humility, in turn, was both an expected and often internalized trait. In the following paragraphs, I examine how single room allocation was shaped by notions of deservingness, intertwined with the dynamics of humility.

The first issue, allocating the highly sought single rooms, was addressed by evaluating residents' deservingness, a process shaped by "locally inflected moral discourses... which define and construct understandings of deservingness [and] acceptable standards of behavior" (Kay 2011, 32). Typically, these decisions were made at informal discussions that included the Director, social worker, direct caregivers, and sometimes care staff. The goal was to determine who was worthy of the best accommodation and who was likely to appreciate having a single room. Such discussions were informal in nature. Sometimes, staff members involved in the decision-making process would casually discuss potential candidates for a single room over coffee breaks. At other times, the social worker or head of direct care would go straight to the Director to recommend which resident, after careful consideration, was most deserving of the newly vacated room.

Several criteria influenced these decisions. For instance, Dzidra, whom I mentioned in the chapter's opening vignette, was given the first single room that opened up. This was most often attributed to her background as a former teacher, a respected profession that, although not well paid, suggested a high standard of moral character. Additionally, she had previously owned her home. Both of these facts elevated her social status and reinforced her moral deservingness, marking her as someone who not only deserved a better room but was also seen as capable of appreciating it.

In contrast, the residents categorized as "the proletariat" were often perceived as less likely to appreciate the privilege of a single room or higher-quality care services (which I will discuss in the next section on boredom). This did not mean they were never granted single rooms, but the decision depended more on their behavior. A "proletarian" resident – typically someone with no university degree, a history of unstable housing, and a background in irregular

blue-collar work – could still be deemed deserving of a single room if they adhered to certain social norms and demonstrated behavior that marked them as morally and socially respectable members of the community (Caldwell 2004, 182). Working-class residents, and even those with a criminal record, might also be considered deserving of a single room if they demonstrated recognized values, such as working hard, showing kindness, and actively participating in their own care – for example, by expressing a wish to find a hobby.

Andrejs, who lived in a single room in the Lower House, exemplifies this. He had been at the Pansionāts for several years following a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. Despite his blue-collar background and struggles with alcoholism, he was well-behaved, polite, and never complained. The staff not only considered him a relatively “good drinker” but even an exemplary resident because he kept to himself. Unlike many who drank and became involved in verbal or physical altercations or made messes in their rooms and hallways, when Andrejs was drunk he stayed in his room listening to music and consistently cleaned up after himself, acknowledging that this was not the care workers’ responsibility (see more on this in Chapter 6). Due to his calm demeanor and easy-going nature, Andrejs had long ago been granted a single room and was in no danger of losing it.

This example illustrates how judgments of (un)deservingness did not follow clearcut criteria. Besides cases like Andrejs, residents deemed too difficult or disruptive to share a space were sometimes allocated single rooms. In these instances, socially unacceptable behavior unexpectedly worked in their favor, though primarily as a measure to protect other residents from conflict. Thus, the single room here became more a tool for isolation than a reward to compensate for appropriate behavior. This was, however, rare.

Long-term residents and those who clearly valued solitude and struggled with communal living were also occasionally assigned single rooms. In these cases, the care staff and Director recognized that these individuals had already endured a lack of privacy for a considerable time and respected their need for personal space. This approach aligned with the Director’s view that, ideally, single rooms would be provided for all residents.

However, given the reality of limited resources, their allocation inevitably reflected the staff’s moral judgments about who was most deserving of better accommodation. These examples reveal that (un)deservingness was not determined by straightforward distinctions of deserving and undeserving individuals. Instead, it was shaped by a range of subtle, nuanced considerations, with social status and “good” behavior often emerging as the most decisive factors. Thus, care at the Pansionāts was not just a response to need but also a way to classify people as deserving/undeserving and thereby shaped inequality (Thelen 2021).

The second major challenge concerning the Pansionāts's premises was their general quality. The rooms were small and modest: each resident had a bed, a nightstand, a tiny closet for their few belongings and clothes, and perhaps a chair, all at least a few decades old. I often wondered whether I found residents lying in bed so frequently because they genuinely needed to rest, or simply because there was no comfortable place to sit, forcing them to lie down instead. The physical layout of the rooms shaped both existing and potential relationships, as when Dzidra asked where visitors would sit and what they would do if they came to see her. The cramped, simple space limited opportunities for interaction. The rooms themselves embodied the humility expected in old age.

Over the months of my fieldwork and in the years that followed as I returned to the Pansionāts, I observed that many residents, particularly those labeled as “the proletariat,” had internalized this sense of humility. This humility did not emerge only upon entering the Pansionāts. It was shaped over the life course, formed through decades of “managing with little” and navigating unstable living conditions. Many residents had arrived at the Pansionāts after years of precarious housing: some had lived in shelters after losing their homes, while others had endured hardship due to declining health, social isolation, and severe poverty. Even those who had previously owned homes, rented apartments, or lived on *viensētas* often struggled with deteriorating health exacerbated by their living conditions. Many relied on cold water from a well and heat from a wood stove, which made it difficult to maintain basic hygiene or cook hot meals. In some cases, a municipal social worker visited a few times a week to help with these tasks; in others, no support ever came, revealing how easily people slipped through the gaps of Latvia's social safety net. Over time, residents had learned not to ask for more than the minimum – whether from employers, officials, or kin – and arrived at the Pansionāts already accustomed to lowered expectations and restrained claims. These lifelong dispositions did not disappear in old age; they shaped how residents navigated the institution, what they felt entitled to, and how they made sense of what they received. For some, old age only deepened their sense that they deserved very little.

Thus, the Pansionāts not only anchored residents to the local area but also shaped the futures they could imagine – futures that were modest, localized, and largely confined to what could be sustained within and around the Pansionāts.

People who came from such unstable circumstances often spoke about the Pansionāts with gratitude. There was little room for ambitions or aspirations beyond meeting basic needs, and no reason to complain when one had experienced far worse. For example, Laima, who was 85 in 2020, repeatedly expressed how grateful she was for the opportunity to live there

(something also observed, for example, by Robbins (2020, 84) at social care centers for older adults in Poland):

“My dear heart, I don’t need much. Look at my hands – these hands have spent a lifetime working on the roads, digging ditches, pouring asphalt; these are hands shaped by labor. Now, I can’t even bend them anymore. The village [Laima’s term for the municipal representatives, including social service workers] took very good care of me. They would come to help light the stove and bring water, but I just didn’t have the strength left. That’s life – hard, my dear, hard, but I don’t complain. It’s beautiful, too. And what more do I need now? Just a roof over my head, warmth, a full belly. They feed us well here – sometimes there’s even more than enough. I never have to go to bed hungry.”

Laima’s story was one of many that revealed a lifetime of hardship, as did her gnarled fingers, twisted by arthritis. People like Laima did not have the same voice as Dzidra. They never complained loudly about boredom, the modest, shared rooms they lived in, or the repetitive (though usually tasty) food. They kept to themselves. I felt uneasy asking Laima about her hopes and desires – not wanting to cause her pain, yet curious about what laid beneath her quiet nature and humility. Her shared room, which she occupied with one or sometimes two other women, contained only a few personal belongings: some photos of herself and her family, all of whom had passed away, and a few delicate embroideries. “Did you make these?” I asked gently. Laima raised her hands, twisted and swollen, and replied, “Yes, a long time ago. Now my hands can’t do anything. It’s good to be here.”

Laima fit the public’s ideal image of a care home resident perfectly. She was humble, grateful, quiet, with no obvious ambitions or open complaints. She was single, not an alcoholic, and in many ways the “perfect” older adult – the kind of resident whose modest needs were supposedly easy to satisfy, and who lacked the inclination or means to voice dissatisfaction. This is not to suggest that the care home staff mistreated humble residents or preferred quieter, more compliant individuals. In fact, it was obvious that many care workers had their favorite clients, some of whom were far from humble. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that municipal care homes across Latvia were fundamentally shaped by the politics of humility. Humble clients were often seen as easier to manage and generally more likable, fitting comfortably within the expectations of what an “ideal” resident should be and what old age was presumed to entail. In comparison to Dzidra, there is no question that Laima was easier to care for, especially in terms of her approach to everyday care.

A clear example of this contrast is their differing attitudes towards personal care. In 2020, Dzidra was physically capable of bathing herself, but she believed that if she paid for care services, she was entitled to receive them fully, including being bathed by the staff instead of

doing it herself. As a result, she only had a full shower once a week, with the rest of the days limited to minor hygiene routines like brushing her teeth and washing her face. Yet rather than insisting that Dzidra bathe herself, the care workers complied with her request.

Dzidra's approach was quite different from that of many other residents, who despite their physical limitations made an effort to maintain their independence and autonomy for as long as possible, even if that compromised their hygiene. Laima made every effort to take care of herself, often hesitating to ask for assistance even when she genuinely needed it. These were usually small but important tasks that her arthritis made difficult, like reaching for an item, holding onto something, or blowing her nose when she had a cold. Laima explained her reluctance to ask for help as a desire to maintain her independence, but also as a conscious effort not to disturb the care workers, whom she knew were "very busy with people needing more urgent care."

The question posed in the title of this section – "But what more do you need at your age?" – echoed a sentiment I heard from both staff members and residents at the Pansionāts. It carries a weighty implication: that in late life, little is needed, and any expectations, whether of the state-provided care or of life itself, that extended beyond what the care home was already providing, were seen as unwarranted. Many staff members were themselves approaching or had already surpassed retirement age. When they posed this question rhetorically, it was often in moments of frustration with residents' complaints. In these instances, it seemed as though they were distancing themselves from the possibility of becoming care home residents themselves, despite frequently joking about being the next in line to live there.

Sometimes this question was directed at residents with higher social status, like Dzidra, and carried the subtext that expecting more from a care home was unreasonable – a similar sentiment to that expressed in the remark, "Are we some sort of resort here?" This blunt response reflected not only a specific understanding of what state-care should entail but also the harsh reality that despite serving people of various backgrounds care homes still functioned like poorhouses – not necessarily for the poor and not inexpensive, but because these institutions were bound by financial constraints that shaped the care they could provide.

In contrast, when posed to the so-called "proletariat" residents, the same question "But what more do you need at your age?" had a different connotation. It often implied that the care home's modest space and limited services were a considerable step up from the difficult and impoverished lives many had previously endured. This perspective was echoed by residents like Laima, whose long history of low income and poor health had tempered their desires and expectations.

In circumstances where physical space was limited and residents could not afford higher-quality services, deservingness became a practical tool for managing the care home, and internalized humility was both a lived reality for many and an expected form of behavior. This brings us to the experience of boredom, a feeling often voiced openly by residents like Dzidra, and more subtly acknowledged by others, whose dissatisfaction was rooted in deeper issues beyond unmet expectations.

5.2. “I’m bored”: Personhood and the slow accumulation of ordinary losses

Many afternoons at the Pansionāts unfolded in slow, muted rhythms. I often found residents lying in bed, listening to the faint sounds of televisions and footsteps drifting through the walls. Someone might leaf through a magazine or drift off from habit rather than sleepiness. Even I sometimes felt the slowness of the place settle onto my own body, as if time itself had thickened. “There’s nothing to do,” people would tell me not with frustration, but with a quiet resignation. This muted texture of everyday life was where residents’ descriptions of boredom took shape.

Boredom arises from having an excess of unstructured time, leading to a lack of activity and a struggle to find meaning. As Goodstein puts it, it is an “experience without qualities” (2004): it is not merely about having more time and being unsure how to fill it; rather, our experience of time has transformed into ways that foster boredom. When examined closely, the phenomenon reveals itself as far more complex and multifaceted: intertwining with various personal, cultural, and social aspects of life, including social structure, economic conditions, and cultural shifts. It also reflects societal anxieties and personal crises (Gardiner 2012). Several authors have explored the concept of boredom within the context of modernity,⁵² which is characterized by a labor-based valuation of time and trajectory of movement, improvement, and productivity that marks certain experiences of time as static, unwanted or wasted (Goodstein 2004; Eräsaari 2017). To pass the unwanted time, one has to wait – an activity often (but not exclusively) tied to boredom and filled with desires, hope (or its absence), frustrations, (unrealized) possibilities, or (unfulfilled) aspirations.

Furthermore, Schielke (2008, 256) reminds us to differentiate between the situational boredom that everyone experiences occasionally, such as “waiting for a bus, listening to an uninteresting lecture, or doing a repetitive and undemanding task at work,” and existential boredom that is filled with frustration and even despair. As many authors (Gardiner 2012;

⁵² I acknowledge that “modernity” is a diverse, contested, and context-specific phenomenon (Merrifield 2013); however, it is the subject neither of this chapter nor this thesis.

Musharbash 2007; Goodstein 2004; Jervis et al. 2003; Masquelier 2013; Mains 2007) have shown, existential boredom often is tightly linked to sociopolitical and economic issues, including economic instability, scarce and precarious employment opportunities, poverty, various crises, forced migration, and cultural disintegration. Often it is coupled with a feeling of being stuck (Hage 2009; Masquelier 2013; O'Neill 2014; Lems and Moderbacher 2016; Galkin 2020). As Hage (2009, 4) notes, physical or existential “stuckedness”⁵³ implies a lack of agency, a situation where a person faces both a scarcity of choices or alternatives and an inability to seize opportunities even when they arise. However, he also observes that in such circumstances, endurance can emerge, allowing individuals to assert some agency despite having limited control over their situation (Ibid. 2009, 4). For instance, Masquelier (2013) examines how young men in Niger cope with economic instability and unemployment, which leave them in prolonged states of waiting and inactivity, by forming youth clubs that serve as social spaces to engage in activities such as playing cards, listening to music, and sharing tea. These practices help create a sense of structure and purpose, countering the pervasive sense of boredom.

Considering all the above, I return to boredom experienced by the older adults in the Pansionāts. Drawing on experiences of several older adults from the Pansionāts, I ask what the boredom expressed by the care home’s residents meant?

Dzidra’s account of boredom, described in the opening vignette, stemmed from the spatial and social dislocations she faced upon entering the Pansionāts. Her words resonate with a broad literature that links boredom to the institutional nature of care homes, where tightly structured daily routines, limited opportunities for meaningful activity, spatial restrictions, and distinctive experiences of time profoundly shape residents’ everyday lives and mental wellbeing (e.g. Hazan et al. 1984; Gubrium 2012; Andersson et al. 2007; Wiersma 2012; Boyd et al. 2012; Benjamin et al. 2016; Panthi 2022). She was also no longer in control of her own space. Adapting to the new social environment, physical premises, and rules of the care home demanded significant strength and flexibility, which reveals the dialectical relationship between a place and a person, each affecting the other (Stafford 2003, 124). However, her boredom was rooted not only in a lack of stimulation but also in a deeper sense of unbelonging and a question of one’s personhood.

Personhood is inherently a social and processual phenomenon. It is continually (re)constructed and shaped through social interactions within meaningful cultural contexts

⁵³ From this point onward, I adopt Hage’s (2009) term “stuckedness” instead of the more commonly used “stuckness” to emphasize the condition of being stuck as a socially and culturally situated phenomenon, rather than merely a physical or emotional state.

(Carsten 2000; Dossa 2017, 187; Robbins-Ruszkowski 2014; Robbins 2020). From this perspective, it becomes clearer why Dzidra's boredom was so profound; it stemmed from the loss of significant social interactions and the roles that once defined her. In her new environment, the only thing she could offer her visitors was her company, welcoming them at her bedside or inviting them for a brief walk around the care home's premises. At first glance, this might not seem so bad – her relatives likely visited for her companionship. However, the change in circumstances deeply affected her sense of self. She was no longer the host, the grandmother who baked cake, or the homeowner. Moving to the Pansionāts had stripped her of these roles and the social dynamics they supported. Her relatives, including her grandchildren, still visited, but the care home setting could not recreate the lively atmosphere of past gatherings. Gone were the bustling get-togethers with overlapping conversations, the children playing or quarreling in the background, and the shared experience of cooking and setting the table together, leaving her with a diminished sense of connection and who she was.

Dzidra was one of the residents who took part in the weekly cooking workshop I initiated during my fieldwork and which the rehabilitation counselor continued after I left. Knowing that there were residents who enjoyed cooking, this seemed to me like a way to offer an activity that was both familiar and creative, providing a sense of novelty and togetherness and empowering their agency. It became a space where former hosts like Dzidra could showcase their skills and share their knowledge, while others had the opportunity to learn something new.

The idea behind the cooking workshop was that the boredom seeping through the hallways of the Pansionāts was not just due to a lack of stimulation or inclusive activities and events; it was also rooted in an inability to engage in familiar, meaningful tasks that had once brought joy or find a suitable replacement. For instance, Musharbash (2007) examines boredom within the context of cultural and lifestyle changes among Aboriginal Australians, noting how the shift from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle disrupted the rhythms of daily life, leading to a sense of ennui and disconnection from traditional practices. While this example might seem distant, moving to a care home also represented a profound social and cultural shift, contributing to previously unknown forms of boredom.

The cooking workshop became a well-liked and regularly anticipated activity, though it could not fully replace what residents had lost, like the role of host or the buzz of family get-togethers. Nonetheless, it seemed to help some of them make an emotional and social transition from their previous home life to the care home, especially when little else was happening day-to-day. While the workshop was relatively successful, I also learned that not all beloved and familiar activities could be easily adapted to the care home environment. There were several challenges, including practical limitations. To illustrate this, I turn to the case of gardening.

Several residents, mostly women, deeply missed their gardens – the places, tasks, and routines that had given their lives purpose. Gardening, like cooking and baking, had been a significant part of life for many older adults I met. Though they knew they could no longer tend their old gardens, finding a meaningful substitute was challenging. One solution introduced at the Pansionāts was acquiring mobile raised garden beds that had been designed with accessibility in mind so that residents with physical disabilities could garden while sitting or standing. Additionally, a greenhouse was added in the summer of 2024 that was accessible to both residents of both the care home and the Poplar Tree, a nearby halfway house for people with mental disabilities.

Despite these efforts, I only ever saw one care home resident, Marta, tending the garden beds, while the greenhouse seemed to primarily serve residents from the halfway house. Although the garden beds were in very short supply, some staff members speculated that the lack of interest in gardening or similar activities stemmed from a perceived sense of deservingness – an expectation that activities at the Pansionāts should be carried out for the residents rather than by them. According to these employees, this reflected a “proletarian” mindset, shaped by Soviet-era attitudes where provisions were expected without the need for personal effort. Essentially, residents were required to actively express their interest in using the garden beds before access would be granted and more garden beds constructed.

When I asked residents who had once loved gardening why they did not take up the elevated garden beds, their answers revealed a mix of factors. First, there had been no clear invitation or encouragement for them to get involved. Marta, who tended two beds full of cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, and summer flowers, was an exception: she had expressed her interest, was relatively mobile and lived in the Lower Building, which was conveniently close to the beds. For other women with limited mobility, especially those who used wheelchairs, practical barriers like understaffing made participation difficult. Who would be there to assist them with this hobby? The Pansionāts had only one rehabilitation counselor, and since the Poplar Tree had opened she divided her time between the care home and the new facility across the courtyard. During my follow-up visits in the subsequent years, several older adults mentioned that they had seen her less and less since the halfway house had been built, leaving them feeling somewhat neglected. Even Dzidra, whose health had declined over the years, shared this sentiment, although she and others refrained from voicing their complaints openly. This highlighted yet again the persistent issue of understaffing.

Additionally, there were concerns related to humility and the perception of what social care should provide – some residents hesitated to participate out of fear that their physical limitations would prevent them from fully engaging in gardening, while others could not even

imagine making such a request, once again highlighting the internalized sense of humility. Beyond these practical concerns also laid a deeper emotional barrier.

For many of the women I spoke with, gardening was much more than a hobby; it was a connection to their former homes and the lives they once led, filled with memories of loved ones, including late partners. While gardening can often help people maintain and transform relationships with those they have lost (Robbins and Seibel 2019), for several women at the Pansionāts, the idea of gardening in an unfamiliar setting was almost traumatic. Lilija, aged 94 and quite frail, told me she could not imagine gardening here: she still dreamed of her own garden, the one she had shared with her husband for many years. Her garden was not just a physical space: it was filled with memories of people now gone and a life that was slowly slipping away. The thought of tending the elevated beds at the care home, even with help, was unbearable as it brought back too many reminders of all she had lost.

On her late husband's birthday, Lilija asked me to bring her a few small branches of mock orange, her husband's favorite plant, to place in a vase. When I offered to help her pick the flowers herself, she declined, saying it would be too emotionally overwhelming, almost like bringing her husband back to life. Lilija had deliberately distanced herself from gardening⁵⁴ and, it seemed, even from living flowers. The only blooms she could tolerate emotionally were the cut ones in a vase beside her bed. By severing her connection to the act of gardening, she had reshaped her relationship with her husband into one of quiet, bittersweet remembrance.

Although Lilija's case is uniquely specific and deeply painful, it highlights the complexity of adapting an activity like gardening – once filled with kinship ties – to the care home setting. For many residents, gardening was inextricably and intimately tied to cherished relationships and memories that could not be easily transplanted into a new environment, particularly in the absence of encouragement to revisit this hobby, coupled with a lack of practical support due to understaffing. This made it difficult to reintroduce meaningful activities like gardening to alleviate the boredom that had directly resulted from their loss of social ties and changed sense of personhood. What Lilija's reluctance revealed was that it was not merely the activity itself that mattered, but the relationships and meanings it once held.

It is here that the relational dimension of care becomes crucial. Care, however, is not only a matter of physical assistance but a relational practice sustained through hosting, sharing, remembering, and tending to others – human or non-human. For many women, gardening had long been such a relational practice: a way of caring for loved ones, honoring memories, and maintaining continuity with earlier stages of life. When these practices could no longer be

⁵⁴ Of course, her frail health was another serious factor.

carried into the Pansionāts (whether because of mobility limitations, lack of encouragement, or emotional pain) the relational ties they once nurtured fell away. What disappeared with them were not only meaningful activities but the relationships, roles, and quiet mutuality that had anchored their days. In the absence of these forms of relational care, emptiness and boredom found space to settle in, filling the gaps left by the erosion of connection and familiarity.

In addition to lost care relations, limited space, a lack of events, and restricted opportunities, factors closely tied to the politics and policies regarding older adults in Latvia, boredom also arose from the residents' changing physical and cognitive abilities, which further limited their capacity to engage in activities they once enjoyed. This was evident not only in the case of gardening but extended to many other aspects of daily life. Someone who once loved climbing mountains might now struggle to walk, and someone who cherished reading might find it difficult to see.

In this context, the phrase “nothing really happens here,” often voiced by residents, takes on a deeper and more nuanced significance. Boredom in the care home was not simply about a lack of activities but reflected deeper struggles with aging bodies and minds, the loss of opportunities, and an altered sense of purpose. The interplay between physical and existential immobility (Lems and Moderbacher 2016) – shaped by the limitations of their aging bodies and the restrictive environment of a remote, underfunded care home – underscored the complex, multi-layered nature of boredom in this setting.

Some residents felt trapped in their own bodies, a state that had profound implications for their sense of self and agency and contributed to an overarching humility in their daily lives. Many described how aging's physical and cognitive limitations made it increasingly difficult to find interest and joy in life, which they saw as a kind of preparation for death. While some struggled deeply with the loss of opportunities to engage in activities that once brought them joy, others sought ways to alleviate monotony. A few established new routines, while others concentrated on a single hobby from their past that they were still capable of pursuing and that did not place many demands on employees' time.

Consider Sarmīte, who was 90 years old when we met. Sarmīte was one of the most articulate people I had ever encountered. Once an avid traveler, mountain climber, and gardener, she had been living at the Pansionāts for five years. After losing her left leg to cancer, she used a wheelchair and for unstated reasons generally stayed in her single room on the third floor. Although she maneuvered her wheelchair with ease, for the most part she spent her days alone, reading, preferred to eat in her room rather than in the cafeteria downstairs and seldom spoke to others. In some ways, it seemed she had withdrawn from the world. Yet, on the other hand, she was living life on her own terms, adapting to her circumstances in the way she wanted

by dedicating herself to reading. Sarmīte was among the residents at the Pansionāts who had, to some extent, adjusted to the emerging limitations imposed by her health and life in the care home. She managed to cope with her sense of boredom relatively successfully through her love of books, which was also an activity that did not require much of the employees. That said, boredom still crept in from time to time.

In 2020, Sarmīte read an impressive 133 books – roughly one every three days – and partly kept herself occupied by meticulously recording her reading in a small black notebook. Each entry was color-coded, with black ink for books borrowed from the local library, blue for those she had purchased herself (a nurse usually bought them for her in a nearby town), and red for gifts from others. She also enjoyed crossword puzzles, subscribed to several magazines, followed the news closely, and was well-informed about both Latvian and global affairs. In every sense, she remained mentally engaged and “present.” She especially enjoyed books by Latvian authors, favoring biographies, travelogues, and novels set during the time when, as she put it, she was “still participating in the world.”

Sarmīte was not the only resident I met at the Pansionāts who preferred Latvian authors to foreign ones. This preference had nothing to do with patriotism or a dismissal of global literature: it was tied to cognitive changes. Both Sarmīte and another avid reader on the first floor explained that it had become increasingly difficult to follow unfamiliar words or cultural references from foreign cultures. Similarly, Sarmīte’s choice of older authors and stories from times she was actively engaged in social life reflected not a rejection of modern literature or the present but an adaptation to her cognitive decline. She believed she had some form of dementia and, as she put it, often felt she was “losing words” and experiencing growing gaps in memory and understanding.

These challenges were evident in her everyday activities. She occasionally struggled to recall specific words or the names of well-known figures for her crossword puzzles, which prompted her to keep another notebook where she listed popular figures categorized by profession, such as actors, politicians, and TV personalities. Similarly, she found it difficult to follow news programs where people spoke too quickly or in a contemporary style where the many foreign words confused her. Her preference for “sticking to old times” was not a rejection of the new, as many would think, but rather a way of managing the interruptions in her cognitive flow.

For Sarmīte, reading was more than a pastime – it was her way of staying connected to the world, maintaining her mental acuity, and keeping boredom at bay. Familiar literature provided her with a sense of comfort and continuity, offering a culturally and cognitively accessible escape and enrichment. Attempts to read foreign authors often resulted in frustration,

further contributing to feelings of isolation. By choosing literature that resonated with her past, Sarmīte found a way to navigate her cognitive challenges and alleviate the boredom that could otherwise creep into her days. Her greatest fear was losing her eyesight, and this was justified: as it was happening to several other older adults at the Pansionāts who were also avid readers. This loss was particularly devastating given the extremely limited availability of audiobooks in the local library and throughout Latvia. The diminishing access to reading due to vision loss underscored yet another layer of the politics of humility, where systemic neglect amplified personal losses.

The boredom experienced by residents like Dzidra, Lilija, and Sarmīte at the Pansionāts was not just an individual “feeling.” Boredom was a multilayered phenomenon rooted in a combination of physical and cognitive decline, constrained social opportunities, and the challenges of adapting to a humble life in a care home that was shaped by poor funding and weak social policies on societal and individual aging.

These narratives reveal the multifaceted nature of boredom, reflecting the struggle to reconcile past identities with present limitations due to declining health and various aspects of the politics of humility. While some residents created meaningful routines, others grappled with feelings of stuckedness and unfulfilled desires. This slow accumulation of ordinary losses highlighted the emotional and social complexities of life in a care home, where boredom mirrored deeper struggles with selfhood, agency, and belonging. The mix of external constraints and internalized expectations blurred the lines between personal resignation and structural limitations, exposing how boredom could hollow out experiences and erode a sense of purpose.

Humility and boredom reinforced one another. Lifetimes of modest expectations shaped not only what residents felt entitled to request, but also how they experienced and articulated the uneventfulness of institutional life. Many expressed boredom lightly or with a shrug, softening its weight through humor or understatement, as if a stronger claim would exceed what they believed they should ask for. In this sense, boredom carried the affective imprint of humility: it marked the limits of scaled-down horizons while also reflecting the moral restraint that discouraged residents from wanting or demanding more. What appeared as quiet acceptance was therefore also the emotional cost of a world in which few alternatives felt imaginable or permissible.

In this sense, boredom revealed another layer of emptiness – an emptiness not only of events, but of recognition, agency, and the relational ties that once animated everyday life. More than mere inactivity, boredom exposed how the politics of humility shaped yet another form of emptiness: a slow drain of meaning that settled into daily life. This affective emptiness – comprised of boredom, loss, stuckedness, loneliness, and the restraint of humility – was not

only personal but deeply structural. It reflected how older adults, seemingly cut off from cycles of social and cultural reproduction, were positioned within a wider landscape in which aging itself was imagined as the ultimate emptiness: a life stage perceived as no longer contributing to the nation's continuity. After all, what kind of future can emerge when life, in its later stages, is (perceived as) losing its meaning?

This existential boredom and the effects it had on people became even more pronounced during the pandemic. As restrictions at the Pansionāts intensified, they amplified pre-existing vulnerabilities, further constraining social engagement and introducing additional complexities. The new limitations not only reshaped how residents experienced daily life but also altered their perception of time, further influencing their sense of belonging and intensifying feelings of loneliness. In many ways, the pandemic exposed and deepened the humility that had long shaped their lives, turning the care home into a stage where the tension between care, isolation, and aging played out more visibly than ever before.

5.3. Narrowing and expanding time during the COVID-19 pandemic

As highlighted in several recent studies (e.g. Singer and Rylko-Bauer 2021; Freidus and Shenk 2020; Buch and Robbins 2020; Ayalon et al. 2021; Manderson and Levine 2020; Galkin 2020) COVID-19 measures significantly affected social life for older adults across the world, and Latvia was no exception. In this section, I examine how these restrictions reshaped residents' perceptions of time, deeply influencing their sense of belonging and intensifying feelings of loneliness. I first detail how they affected daily life at the Pansionāts, examining both the changes and the continuities and emphasizing that the new measures exacerbated pre-existing dynamics of the politics of humility and personal family ruptures.

It is no surprise to those familiar with medical and social institutions that most are governed by specific routines. At the Pansionāts, mornings began early: bedridden residents were often awakened as early as 4:30 a.m. for diaper changes, face washing, teeth brushing and medication and to prepare for breakfast, which was served between 7:45 and 8:00 a.m. Evenings settled in just as early – sometimes I would already find both bedridden and relatively mobile residents in their nightgowns by 6:00 p.m. and fast asleep by 8:00, although some residents stayed awake longer depending on their medication schedules, level of mobility and activity and the friendships they had developed.

For most, daily life was shaped by the medicalized nature of care, including specific medication routines and physical care tasks like changing bed linens, washing, and feeding, all structured by the care home's schedule. Outside this structured rhythm, residents tried to fill

their time with various activities: helping around the premises, taking walks, fishing, socializing, reading, knitting, or resting. These activities varied with the seasons. By late fall and winter, residents became noticeably less active and more hesitant to step outside for fear of slipping on ice and seemed to adapt to the shorter daylight hours.

The winter of 2020 amplified the residents' sense of existential boredom to an unprecedented level. While all winters heightened feelings of monotony, that one layered additional restrictions onto an already constrained circumstance. By October 2020, both residents and staff had grown accustomed to the rhythms of quarantine: staff wore face masks (initially cloth, later FFP2 or KN95) and repeatedly disinfected the premises. Visitations and public events were canceled, and new or returning residents were required to undergo ten-day isolation periods (Epidemioloģiskās drošības pasākumi Covid-19 infekcijas izplatības ierobežošanai 2021).⁵⁵ These measures not only reinforced the structured nature of daily life at the Pansionāts but also further weakened residents' already limited social connections and the expectations tied to them.

Although social activities at the Pansionāts had always been modest, the absence of visits and concerts during the fall and winter of 2020 left a noticeable void. Christmas concerts, once so frequent that residents occasionally chose to skip them, were now sorely missed. For many, particularly those without close relatives or friends, these events had provided vital social interaction and a sense of connection to the outside world. The few remaining activities: weekly gymnastics and board games led by a physiotherapist, alongside the cooking classes and film evenings I organized, could not compensate for the loss. Even smaller disruptions, like restricting the weekly mobile grocery van to staff to minimize exposure to the virus, further eroded residents' sense of agency and engagement with the outside world.

Recognizing the impact of these restrictions, the Pansionāts adhered to government-issued measures but also adopted a relatively relaxed and flexible approach to their enforcement where possible. For example, when the state of emergency was temporarily lifted and restrictions eased during the summer of 2020, the institution quickly reinstated activities that could be safely managed. A small outdoor schlager concert and sports day offered a brief respite, bringing joy and a sense of togetherness to residents and staff alike. However, with the

⁵⁵ Sometimes the rules regarding mandatory quarantine after transferring between institutions reached absurd levels. One notable case involved a woman who was moved from one care home to the Pansionāts, only to be transferred shortly afterward to her permanent placement at a social care center for visually impaired individuals. Over the course of just one month, she spent at least 20 days in isolation, entirely by herself.

return of stricter measures in the fall, the fragile sense of normality faded, leaving a lasting imprint on the social lives of older adults and reshaping their experience of time.

For care workers, increased demands for planning and executing tasks left little room for breaks or rest. For residents, however, as I will illustrate further, the absence of anticipated events or interactions stretched the weeks into long and empty periods while shortening the overall sense of time they had left in this life. This deepened feelings of disorientation, monotony, and stuckness, fostering an escalating sense of anxiety and loss.

The sense of stuckness, loss, and anxiety at the Pansionāts reflected a shared experience of isolation felt by older adults during the pandemic. For example, Galkin (2020) describes how COVID restrictions trapped and isolated older adults in rural Karelia, limiting their ability to move, act, and socialize. Before these restrictions, they still had some degree of agency over how they lived with their disabilities, despite the constraints of inadequate village infrastructure (Galkin 2020, 193) In many ways, the experience of the Pansionāts residents mirrored Galkin's findings, yet the institutional setting introduced distinct nuances shaped by the long-standing politics of humility that predated the pandemic.

Like older adults in Karelia, many residents of the Pansionāts faced physical limitations that restricted their mobility. However, while older adults in Karelia often found ways to navigate their village's poor infrastructure, limited public transport and bad road conditions, this was rarely the case at the Pansionāts. Activities like running errands, visiting stores or pharmacies, or seeing relatives had been out of reach for most residents long before the pandemic. The reasons for this were not always straightforward. For some, declining health and disabilities were clear barriers. For others, the physical distance from their former homes played a role. Yet apart from these limitations, there was a prevailing sense that life beyond the care home was no longer accessible or even truly theirs. According to my interlocutors, once one lived at the Pansionāts, the external world felt distant, more like a memory than a possibility.

Thus, the primary impact of the pandemic was not on physical mobility but on the social connections that brought the outside world to the residents. Visits were banned, and communal activities – including concerts, local school performances, and even the weekly mobile grocery van – were suspended. The absence of these familiar events, coupled with the uncertainty of when visitations might resume, intensified residents' feelings of isolation and unease. For many, the loss of these small but vital touchpoints deepened their sense of disconnection, reinforcing the feeling that time stretched endlessly without meaningful engagement.

Residents' unease coexisted with an acute awareness of the risks of the virus. The overall attitude towards the disease, or "pestilence" as older adults usually referred to it, was serious. Most of them closely followed the news through the radio, newspapers, and television, and

rarely did they question the reality of the virus or the pandemic. Very often and especially after concerning news about another local care home from close vicinity, in which widespread outbreaks and mass deaths were announced, I heard that “it’s good that everything is fine with us” or that “it’s good that it hasn’t come all the way here” and “where can such a mess (*šmuce*) come from!” Such an attitude made it relatively easy for the managers of the care home to introduce the restrictions and later communicate the need for vaccination.⁵⁶ The very few “violations” of the quarantine rules that happened were mostly committed by relatives who appeared at the entrance with no advance warning or by residents who had engaged in a little bit of drinking that took an unexpected turn.

Despite residents’ serious attitude toward the pandemic and their desire to avoid both contracting the virus and potentially infecting others, older adults struggled with restrictions that stripped away the limited social engagement they still had. To analyze this, I draw on Long’s (2020) notion of a moral timeline among Japanese people nearing the end of their lives.

Long (2020) describes the moral timeline as the shifting ideas, values, and actions people adopt to maintain agency in the face of bodily changes and altered social circumstances. Her participants spoke of intensified concern about becoming a burden to relatives, growing self-awareness, and ongoing adaptation to change. As they neared the end of life, their focus shifted away from daily trivia toward the moral issues that mattered most, such as self-reflection, social and familial relationships, and a sense of belonging.

At the Pansionāts, I saw residents similarly prioritizing meaningful relationships, affirming their personhood, and contemplating their legacies. Who would remember them, and how? What would they leave behind? These reflections often manifested in small yet meaningful gestures, like engaging in heartfelt conversations or offering gifts – practices akin to those described by Marcoux (2001). It seemed to me that these acts provided residents with a sense of connection and purpose.

This is not to say that residents did not also engage in completely mundane daily activities, tasks that structured their days and were simply part of everyday life without necessarily inviting deeper reflection. However, the pandemic further disrupted the delicate yet ever changing balance between these recognized meaningful engagements in the face of bodily changes and specific social circumstances of the care home and the more routine aspects of life. I illustrate this in detail with cases of Laima and Lidiņa.

⁵⁶ The Pansionāts was among the first in the country that received the first dose of vaccines in February 2021, while several care homes in the same or neighboring municipalities had not provided the vaccination option until late Spring 2021.

One day, Laima, an 85-year-old woman who had been living in the care home for five years, asked me pointedly, “My dear, that virus... what can it do to me anymore? As an old person, my dear, you know, tears come on their own. There’s nothing left. I just think... I’ll never see them again. I don’t know if this virus will ever end.” She then explained to me that at her age she could die at any time from something completely unrelated to COVID-19 and would much rather see her friends again than hide from a potential physical risk. In her case friends were people from the social services in the village where she used to live.

The uncertainty about when the restrictions would be lifted contributed to Laima’s sense of time. One day, she told me “I am very grateful, my dear. I have a roof over my head here, I am taken care of, and I have everything I need, sweetheart. It’s not right to grumble, everyone here is so kind to me... But you see, I received a package, my village [people from the social services] sent it.” Slowly and laboriously, she pulled a fairly large neatly wrapped package out from under her bed. It contained packets of cookies, candies, and a bottle of Riga Black Balsam.⁵⁷ Struggling to hold the package in her hands, she continued: “They [the care home staff] held onto it for a few days first [in quarantine, according to the rules], but I got it today... Such a good village to me. But I would’ve liked to talk, to meet, to sit down and spend some time together... All I could do was wave through the window... But no one can predict how long the virus will rage. Look how long it’s already been. I wonder if I’ll live that long, sweetheart. Time is so precious, it flies by so quickly.” In this conversation, Laima shared her sense of time slipping away – how the prolonged rampage of the virus, coupled with the imposed restrictions, felt as though they were stealing precious moments from her life. As I listened, I asked how she was spending her days under such limitations, with no certainty about when they might be lifted. Laima, appearing either tired or sad, replied, “Days are all the same, my dear. But now you’re coming by, and we can chat – then the days feel shorter. I can talk if there’s someone who listens – life has been eventful enough to fill three books! I’d just like to see my village again.” Laima’s experience of time was shaped by a sense of monotony and longing, as the uncertainty of the pandemic restrictions made the future feel indefinite while simultaneously highlighting the fleeting nature of the present. While packages from her “village” offered comfort, they also highlighted the absence of meaningful connection, reinforcing her sense that time was slipping away, marked more by lonesomeness than by shared moments.

Laima was not alone in her feelings about changed sense of time. During the summer months and into September, when the restrictions were less blatant and the warm weather encouraged a more active, social lifestyle, residents often spent their days sitting in the yard

⁵⁷ Riga Black Balsam is a potent herbal liqueur, widely regarded as one of Latvia’s traditional alcoholic beverages and usually enjoyed during the winter months.

and chatting with each other. During these moments Lidija, another resident, often reminisced happily about her life and particularly her marriage, which she described as a source of immense happiness. Together with other residents, she recalled cultural and political events from times when they were “still active,” a phrase several residents used. While sorrow over lost relationships and a bygone life lingered, Lidija’s tearful conversations were less frequent during this period. However, my notes show a marked change during the colder months of October, November, and December, just before she was transferred to a nearby care home. Conversations when Lidija openly mourned her lost life and expressed grief that her daughter and granddaughter did not call often enough became more frequent. Two care workers who had close relationships with Lidija also voiced their concerns about her growing melancholy. Although the colder season typically brought a quieter pace of life and more subdued moods among residents, COVID added a layer of anxiety and sorrow. I increasingly heard residents express worries about the real possibility of never seeing their relatives and friends again.

Unlike Laima, who articulated her time-related anxieties more directly, Lidija’s experience was often communicated through subtle shifts in tone and the content of her conversations. In the summer, she spoke warmly about her granddaughter and great-granddaughter (whom I never saw visit) as sources of joy and motivation. By the fall, her tone had changed. Instead of being a source of hope, mentions of her family turned into reminders of absence. Visits were impossible, and calls from her daughter and granddaughter became infrequent. Lidija increasingly succumbed to feelings of despair.

One afternoon visit in late October 2020, I arrived to find Lidija visibly distressed. This was not the first time I had seen her crying, but this time she seemed so frustrated and lost in her world that she barely noticed that someone had entered her room. She was lying in bed on her left side and tightly gripping a little black dumbphone of a kind popular among older adults in Latvia. Based on previous experience, I asked her if she needed help charging it or turning it on. She shook her head and still staring blankly past me said, “It’s a terrible disease, this virus... [pause], they [her daughter and granddaughter] cannot come to visit me... [long pause]. But no one has canceled phones, right?” It turned out that her phone was charged and working. She was holding it in anticipation of receiving a call from her daughter or granddaughter, but no phone call came that day or in the days that followed. The little black phone became an object laden with hope and the hollowing effect of unrealized social connections. In the days that followed, Lidija sank deeper into melancholy and in a quiet voice, almost a gasp, confided to me, “I hope I won’t have to live long now.” It seemed as if she had resigned from life.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In December 2020, Lidija’s daughter and granddaughter transferred her to another care home that was closer to them and a bit less expensive. Approximately a month later, she died of COVID-19 or related complications.

Laima and Lidija's stories reveal how pandemic restrictions amplified existing vulnerabilities, leaving some residents longing for connection yet holding onto hope, while others felt increasingly abandoned by even their closest kin. The pandemic and resulting shifts in how time was experienced did not necessarily create new fractures in the moral timelines of Laima, Lidija, and other older adults but did intensify those that already existed. The sense of time slipping away grew more acute, narrowing opportunities to engage in what mattered most. At the same time, life within the care home seemed to stretch endlessly – long, unstructured days filled with boredom and reflections on family, past experiences, and the weight of isolation. Time dragged on, often devoid of the interactions and connections residents yearned for.

While residents quietly expressed frustration about boredom or feeling stuck, few openly protested the restrictions. Laima vocalized her grief over loss and the unsettling passage of time quite clearly, while Lidija's response was more inward, a silent coping mechanism where the absence of meaningful relationships gradually eroded her will to live. Although older adults rarely voiced their needs, they carried a quiet endurance shaped by lifetimes of hardship forged through sickness, war, and displacement. This endurance, as noted by gerontologists and anthropologists (e.g. Ayalon et al. 2021; Colenda et al. 2020; Lamb 2020), sustained many older adults during the pandemic. Yet, the pandemic introduced a different kind of challenge that even the most steadfast residents found disorienting. As Laima reflected, "I've seen everything in life, but this kind of evil... well, I've never seen anything like it. But we'll survive this one too." Her words captured both survival and the tension between enduring and feeling powerless.

This quiet but steadfast acceptance, sometimes as endurance, sometimes as resignation, reflected the humility and invisibility often imposed on older adults in institutional care what some anthropologists have described as benevolent (Verbruggen et al. 2020) or compassionate (Vervaecke and Meisner 2021) ageism. This framing casts older adults as inherently vulnerable, even incapable, reinforcing narratives of intergenerational solidarity and collective sacrifice for the perceived greater good of everyone and particularly the vulnerable population, including older adults. Ultimately, the restrictions meant to protect the most vulnerable reinforced the existing politics of humility, further diminishing residents' agency and deepening their isolation. The longing for connection, coupled with the fear of losing precious chances to see loved ones, intensified their uncertainty about the future that felt increasingly finite. This unease raised profound questions about what it means to live a meaningful life (Kavedžija 2019, 140).

Conclusion

The experiences of residents at the Pansionāts reveal the layered and often invisible dynamics of what I have termed the politics of humility. This concept extends beyond individual attitudes or institutional practices to reflect broader societal and political values about aging, care, and vulnerability. It influences decisions about resource allocation, social interactions, and even the way older adults perceive their own lives and worth.

Throughout this chapter, I have illustrated how humility – as resource allocation for older adults, social expectation, and internalized posture – shapes the daily experiences of older adults in institutional care. For instance, the distribution of single rooms reflected not just practical necessity but also implicit judgments of moral deservingness. Residents like Dzidra, whose social status and assertiveness marked them as more deserving, found their needs slightly prioritized, while others like Laima, quietly accepted their circumstances. However, I have sought to demonstrate that moral deservingness, which shaped the daily life of the Pansionāts under conditions of extreme resource scarcity, was not a rigid or binary concept. Instead, it functioned as a nuanced framework that also extended support to individuals from precarious backgrounds, as long as their behavior aligned with perceived notions of deservingness.

Boredom emerged as a recurring theme in the lives of Pansionāts residents, embodying more than a mere absence of activities. It reflected an existential condition rooted in the changes of personhood, the loss of meaningful roles and activities that once brought joy and meaning. Boredom in this context was not passive but charged with loss, grief, longing, and an acute awareness of time slipping away. As experienced by residents, it became a significant analytical category that transcended simple inactivity to reveal deeper existential and social disruptions. It was not merely an individual experience but carried the weight of moral and political dimensions, reflecting lives unseen and a stage in life regarded as empty.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these experiences, creating a paradoxical relationship with time. For many residents, the days stretched endlessly, filled with monotony and unstructured idleness. Yet, the broader trajectory of their lives seemed to accelerate, with shrinking opportunities to reconnect with loved ones or pursue meaningful experiences. Laima's reflection that the virus was "stealing time" underscores the tension between endurance as a form of humility and the fear that life's most significant moments were being lost to isolation. This dual experience of time – expanding and narrowing – illustrates the disorientation that the pandemic imposed on older adults affecting their moral timelines.

Ultimately, the politics of humility underscores how vulnerability, deservingness, and temporal experience coalesce in the lives of older adults. It is not simply a framework imposed from the outside but one that older adults, care workers, and institutions reproduce, negotiate,

endure and sometimes resist in subtle ways. In this sense, the quiet rhythms of life at the Pansionāts, marked by stillness and longing, reflected the broader politics of aging.

Emptiness, then, was not only demographic or spatial but profoundly affective: a thinning of possibility, recognition, and relation that shaped how late life was lived, felt, and imagined.

6. “It is their home; they have no other”: Reconfiguring space and social life through everyday practices

Introduction

*The roses bloomed; the carnations bloomed;
The forget-me-nots bloooooomed.
And so I called out: youth is beautiful.
Youth is beautiful, it will not return.
[..]
I once had a girl, eighteen years old.
And for those years, I felt great joy.
And so I called out: youth is beautiful.
Youth is beautiful, it will not return.
[..]
The roses withered; the carnations faded;
The girl left meeee.
And yet I called out: youth was beautiful.
Youth was beautiful, it will not return.

It will not, will not return. It will not come back.
Youth was beautiful, it will not return.
(I.Dzenis)⁵⁹*

At half past four one snowy Wednesday afternoon in February 2022, I was sitting in the Pansionāts's office on the second floor of the Lower Building, scribbling down field notes and drinking a glass of beer from a three-liter bucket the Director Valters had generously supplied. Wednesdays (and sometimes Thursdays) used to be good days for most people at the Pansionāts and probably still are. That was when the van rolled up to sell groceries and (unless COVID-19 restrictions interfered) one resident after another would make their way downstairs, eager to treat themselves to whatever small indulgence caught their eye, maybe even an alcoholic drink. However, this was not just any Wednesday but a festive one: everyone's pension had just been paid. Any cash that was left after the care home's fees had been deducted meant just one thing: louder voices, bigger smiles, and occasionally a little more mischief than usual.

So, there I was, at half past four, beer in hand. From somewhere downstairs, a voice – cheerful, bold, unbothered by the thick walls or the supposed institutional norms – floated up through the ventilation shafts, joyfully singing, “Youth was beautiful! It will not return....” I did not know the singer well, as he had arrived at the care home after the bulk of my fieldwork had already wrapped up, but I recognized the mood instantly. Singing, especially on Wednesdays, almost always signaled that someone somewhere had indulged in a little booze

⁵⁹ *Skaista ir jaunība* (Youth is beautiful) is a popular Latvian schlager song by Ilmārs Dzenis.

and was feeling as fantastic as I was that day. (Of course, sometimes things went wrong and a fight broke out, always a distinct possibility). Somebody somewhere was singing, and I was humming along.

Such moments revealed more than fleeting pleasures. They showed how residents, through everyday practices no different from those of people anywhere else, found joy, connection, and at times even chaos by carving out space and time for themselves within the institutional setting. Within the spatial, social, and temporal constraints of institutional life and the politics of humility explored in the previous chapter, these ordinary acts contributed to the care home's distinct character as a dynamic shared space. Therefore, this chapter explores how such seemingly ordinary activities like socializing and joking over a hot cup of coffee, forming intimate relationships, and consuming alcohol not only expressed individual agency but also collectively (re)shaped space and (re)defined sociality within the Pansionāts and contributed to the socio-spatial fixing of care.

At first sight, the spatial layout of the Pansionāts seemed to reflect an often-imagined division between staff and residents – those who worked and cared and those who lived and/or were cared for. As the previous chapters have shown, for employees the institution was a place where things happened and routines and responsibilities structured the day but residents often saw it as a place of waiting, a site of stillness where the rhythms of daily life seemed to unfold with little promise of change for them. However, at a closer glance this division, while pervasive, was not absolute.

The Pansionāts was not defined only by top-down rigid institutional norms and one-way care relationships between staff and residents but also by an intimate network of daily interactions between residents and moments of reversed power dynamics and mutual exchange between residents and employees. Thus, this chapter deliberately contrasts with the last. Here, life (more or less) unfolds for the residents and asserts itself through their agency, allowing them to be seen as more than mere “suffering subjects” (Robbins 2013). This perspective also reveals the layered and multifaceted dimensions of emptinesses and vitality that coexisted alongside each other, as I explore throughout this thesis.

To show how residents (re)shaped space and (re)defined sociality within the Pansionāts, I now turn to seemingly ordinary practices – sharing coffee and alcohol, birthday celebrations, sex – that are often overlooked or dismissed in accounts of care. These acts, while quotidian, were not trivial: they constituted significant forms of agency and autonomy. By rendering the institutional more personal, residents continually softened the distinctions between public and private, crafting lives that exceeded the limitations imposed by the politics of humility and institutional norms.

As Susan Gal (2002, 79) reminds us, metaphors of public and private do not simply map physical spaces but serve as tools for making arguments about social life. Public and private, she argues, are not static categories but context-dependent and fluid distinctions that reflect broader discursive processes. These categories are co-constitutive, folding into one another through the practices and relationships of those who navigate them (Gal and Kligman 2000). A house, often regarded as a private domain, can contain spaces that feel more public, while within an institution like a care home, communal spaces can be temporarily privatized through everyday interactions and rituals. However, care homes like many other institutions, especially residential ones, that apply a set of formal and informal rules and norms to many people, complicate this dynamic further.

As spaces of care and assistance, care homes collapse the distinction between the intimate and the public even further, exposing residents to regimes of observation. Still, I argue that residents continually reconfigured this division. Through mundane but meaningful practices, they carved out spheres of intimacy, transforming communal areas, however briefly, into home. Repetition of such practices complicated the assumption that institutional life was static. Drinking on Wednesdays or quietly forming intimate relationships became ways of remaking the environment, moments in which the institutional framework gave way to something more personal and vibrant. In doing so, residents actively shaped the Pansionāts as a social world, demonstrating that life, in all its complexity, persisted within its walls.

Gal's (2002) notion of fractal distinction provides a useful lens for understanding these processes. Public and private are not binary opposites, but distinctions that reproduce themselves at different scales. In the context of the Pansionāts, this fractal quality became particularly evident. A communal room might serve as a public space during the day but transform into something more intimate when residents gather for an evening drink. Similarly, a resident's personal quarters, while nominally private, remained subject to the gaze and intervention of care workers.

What emerged from these interactions was not resistance in the traditional sense but a form of place-making that disrupted the institutional categories of space. By personalizing communal areas through ordinary acts of living, residents blurred aspects of public and private, quietly inhabiting these spaces in ways that complicated the passivity often ascribed to older adults in care settings.

This blurring of already porous boundaries extended beyond the individual. The Pansionāts itself functioned as a site of sociality, anchoring the lives of residents within the broader rural community. Far from being an isolated space, the care home operated as a node of local interaction, shaped by the exchanges between staff, residents, and the wider social

landscape. By participating in this sociality, residents contributed to the stability and coherence of the institution, embedding it within the fabric of the surrounding area. The scenes described in this chapter were not exceptions but essential components of this process. They revealed how older adults, even in the face of institutional constraints, cultivated spaces of belonging and relationality. In doing so, they not only (re)shaped their environment but also challenged the broader assumptions that frame aging as a period of withdrawal and decline.

Although each section of this chapter centers on a specific practice – coffee and joking, intimate and romantic relationships, and drinking alcohol – the last of these permeates the whole chapter. While this does reflect alcohol’s pervasive presence at the Pansionāts in one form or another, it also distills my observations and highlights the constant interplay between public and private, institution and home, and employees and residents – who were sometimes also neighbors, but always, above all, human. I intend these vignettes to highlight not only the humor and liveliness of these interactions but also the profound questions they raised about autonomy, intimacy, and the ethics of care in institutional settings.

I start this chapter by paying attention to something very ordinary – three residents drinking coffee. What might appear as a simple daily routine here emerges as a mode of companionship, humor, and mutual care that shaped the temporal and social rhythms of life inside the Pansionāts and subtly counters the sense that “nothing happens here.” I explore how these repeated acts reconfigured both time and space, transforming the Pansionāts from a place of waiting into one of sociality and affirming residents’ moral personhood through ordinary routines.

In the second section, I turn to romantic and intimate relationships that actively transformed already blurry boundaries between public and private spaces. These encounters reshaped both space and care relations, showing how residents and staff negotiated what counted as communal or personal. Such practices reconfigured the care home into a site of unscripted living, challenging the idea that institutional life was fixed or unidirectional.

Finally, I explore alcohol use as a socio-spatial practice that most clearly exposed the porousness of institutional boundaries. While officially discouraged, drinking was tolerated and negotiated, turning hallways and rooms into spaces of conviviality, conflict, and companionship. Alcohol structured weekly rhythms, fostered informal economies, and reshaped relations between staff and residents, revealing how agency and sociality persisted despite all the constraints.

6.1. “A person needs good friends”: Coffee, friendship, and humor

I had spent a couple of months at the Pansionāts before making friends with Maija and Eduards and beginning to frequent their humorous, spirited, and fast-paced conversations (later shared with Lūcija, Maija’s roommate) over coffee. They all lived on the third floor of the Upper Building, and I had more than once found myself unintentionally eavesdropping on their sparkling conversations while lingering at the nurses’ station or returning from visiting other residents. Once, they discussed what to do if you happened to be attracted to someone other than your husband. (Maija had some advice for Lūcija about that). Another time, they delved into the unpredictable twists and turns between two lovers, the difficulty of truly moving on after losing a loved one, and how in some other countries two men or two women could marry each other. To this, Maija exclaimed, more surprised than offended, “That’s crazy!” (*tas ir dulli!*).

As I entered the staff room, with the eavesdropped conversation still fresh in my mind and a broad smile on my face, the caregivers quickly picked up on it. “Have you been to Maija and Eduards already?” one of them asked. When I shook my head, they responded in unison, “But you have to go and meet them! If anyone, you definitely need to meet Maija and Eduards. Look, it’s their coffee time right now!”

“Do they drink coffee every day at this time?” I asked.

“Oh yes, every day. Just like us, you know. We take a break, drink coffee, and make a cup for Kārlis.⁶⁰ Look, he’s already coming with his mug. We keep his coffee and sugar here to make it for him... And Maija and Eduards, they make their own coffee, same time every day. So, go on, meet them!” the care workers encouraged me. And so I went, little knowing that I was about to meet two of the most fun people in my fieldwork, to whom I would grow very close.

To understand how important their companionship later became, it helps to start with Maija’s arrival at the Pansionāts. She often said that Eduards had saved her in a way. She had arrived at the Pansionāts in 2018 straight from the hospital, after a fall in her apartment had left her lying on the floor for hours until a neighbor finally discovered her and called emergency services. She never returned: once social services became involved, there was little room for her to advocate for herself, or even to retrieve her belongings. Instead, she was transferred to

⁶⁰ Kārlis was a resident with intellectual disabilities in his fifties who initially lived in the Lower Building and was later transferred to one of the newly built apartments at Poplar Tree for adults with mental disabilities. This move was part of Latvia’s deinstitutionalization process, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, the final ethnographic chapter.

the Pansionāts with no personal items. This experience of arriving empty-handed, devoid of any tangible connection to her past, was echoed by several residents at the facility, one of many ways in which her arrival at the Pansionāts was not unique.

Eduards, according to Maija, was the first and only person who had reached out to her when she arrived. They quickly formed a close bond that became the subject of much speculation among other residents. Some, with a mix of playful warmth and good-natured jealousy, could not help but rumor and tease them that they were a couple, but Maija, with her strong and resilient character, never let such gossip or teasing bother her. Instead, she often laughed it off, joking that she was sixteen years older than Eduards and should maybe adopt him instead. Then he would dryly reply, with his trademark grumpy expression, “No. That would spoil everything.”

Eduards often could be gruff or quick-tempered, especially if he thought someone was mistreating Maija. However, this persona turned out to be a shell that once cracked revealed a sardonic but good-hearted man. Whatever the true nature of their relationship, their bond was undeniably close, and they shared a wicked sense of humor.

Their humor took many forms. Sometimes their jokes ranged from satirical political commentary to everyday teasing or humor rooted in their daily experiences. Other times, humor tacitly incorporated past suffering, such as the two times Maija had been deported to Siberia as a child and young woman.⁶¹ She recalled the experience with laughter: “That second deportation was a fine ride! A fine one, I tell you. I was there with all sorts of political prisoners, and we even had a toilet – we didn’t have to hang our bottoms over the side of the wagon anymore!”

Humor and laughter were also common when speaking of misfortunes or *non-happenings* – imagined and wished-for futures that never materialized, slowly transforming into a sense of loss. Maija, who had lost her fiancée when she was young and remained single, often spoke fondly of her close work relationships and of six lifelong friends, once remarked with her signature wit: “All six of my girlfriends are widows now. See, good girlfriends are more important than men in life, because men come and go and often die much earlier than their wives. So, a person needs good friends. Good friends and humor!” This remark that friends are more important than husbands carried an ironic undertone, reflecting endurance, resignation, but also appreciation for lasting companionships. Here too, she had found both a steadfast friend and the kind of humor that added warmth and brightness to her life. Maija and Eduards (whose

⁶¹ More than 15,400 Latvian citizens were deported from Latvia on June 14, 1941. Some were immediately arrested and taken to prisons, the rest resettled in Siberia and Kazakhstan. A second mass deportation of 42,125 people took place on March 25, 1949 (Bleiere, n.d.-a; n.d.-b).

own wife had died years before) provided each other with unwavering social and physical support and created their own unique space and time within the rhythms of daily care home life.

Scholars have long shown how humor is used to navigate hardship, suffering, and loss. By incorporating laughter into narratives of adversity, individuals can distance themselves from past traumas, transform their experiences into something sharable, and maintain a sense of control over their lives (Sandberg and Tutenges 2019). Humor can also be a strategic tool for making oppression visible and challenging societal norms (Downe 1999). In institutional settings such as a care home, humor can foster intimacy and facilitate relationships in otherwise impersonal environments, often by enhancing one's sense of agency and control (Solomon 1966).

Maija and Eduards's conversations, ranging from deep personal stories of hardship to lighthearted banter, were at the heart of their daily companionship and often centered around their cherished coffee. The daily coffee hour was initiated and routinized on their own terms and carried out with a strong sense of independence, suggesting their aspirations for a more home-like environment (Lemos Dekker and Pols 2020, 196–98). Every day around half past one, Eduards would come by with his mug and his coffee – “real” coffee, he liked to point out, not the instant coffee that Maija and Lūcija drank and most residents preferred – to pick up the electric kettle and get water from the shared bathroom nearby.

Despite some leg problems, Eduards was still the most mobile and active of the three, but his poor eyesight complicated the process each time he entered or exited the room. Maija often eased the challenge by becoming his eyes: as he stepped inside, she would guide him toward the kettle on the small chest of drawers beside Maija's bed, turning it so he could easily find and grasp the handle. Then, walking backward, he would slowly make his way out, counting his steps while following Maija's precise instructions. When his left shoulder bumped against the doorframe, Maija would say, “One more step, then turn left.” From there, he could manage the rest – finding the light switch, filling the kettle, and returning the same way.

Although both had health issues that limited their independence, the familiar environment and their well-timed mutual support enabled them to navigate aspects of daily life that would have been much harder otherwise. Simple acts like making coffee or guiding each other through daily movements did not diminish their autonomy but reinforced it, showing how care, when rooted in familiar physical settings, daily routines, and mutual understanding, could function as an enabler rather than merely a compensatory mechanism (Lynch 2012, 83). As Maija aptly put it, “You never know what [in your body] won't work today.” No longer able to fully rely on their own bodies, relying on each other, through trust, routine, repetition, and in a rhythm

dictated by their own terms rather than the institution's, became all the more vital in sustaining their sense of self.

Watching Maija and Eduards prepare coffee or take a stroll through the Pansionāts garden – Eduards pushed Maija's wheelchair and she steered – showed the depth of their bond. Although they never avoided talking about past hardships, their relationship was grounded in the present time and place and concentrated on the good things that were happening, including the surprising fact of meeting each other. Their relationship was shaped through repeated and mutual acts of caregiving and companionship, with humor playing an important role. As I got to know them better, it seemed to me that these everyday interactions not only strengthened their bond but also oriented them towards the future, which no longer felt dreary or empty but held the promise of meaningful social connections that constructed and affirmed their moral personhoods (Robbins 2020, 11–14; 85; 88–90). On a cold February day in 2021, Maija told me something she had held onto throughout her days: “Yes, this and that [of my body] doesn't work properly anymore, but I'm still young! And with Eduards right beside me... I want to see the dandelions bloom.”

The physical, mental, and social support Eduards and Maija provided for each other was accompanied by constant teasing that an outsider might view as being on the verge of a fight. Yet as Geertz reminds us, “to be teased is to be accepted” (Geertz 2005, 59). This effect was amplified by Eduards's introverted personality and impeccably straight-faced expression, which he maintained with precision and diligence. Only Maija could fully decipher it; for others it always left room for doubt. Was Eduards angry, grumpy, unimpressed, or the greatest joker of all? My bet is on the last. In fact, his grumpiness was often the target of Maija's teasing. Then, Eduards would pretend to be genuinely angry, only to later laugh about how he had fooled Maija after all. The following conversation Maija and I had just before the usual coffee break captures the aftermath of a “fight” between Maija and Eduards and offers a glimpse into the nature of their relationship:

Maija: You see, I've caught a cold, my snotters [*purdulis*, an old-fashioned colloquialism] are running all the way to the floor.

AŽ: Did you get a runny nose somewhere?

Lūcija: Say mucus, not snotters [*Saki puņķis, nevis purdulis*]

AŽ: No, you know, snotters sounds a little better. But where did you catch the cold?

Maija: I went outside! Walked in the cold! Because I wanted to die!

AŽ: You wanted to die? Why?

Maija: Because I was angry! To Eduards... he was being fresh with me yesterday, yeah, scolded me! I got angry and thought – well, I'll show him now, I'm gonna go outside to die! But I didn't die, I just got snotters.

AŽ: Wait, so instead of dying in a dramatic gesture, you just ended up with a runny nose?! It's a terrible failure!

Maija: Well, obviously a failure!

AŽ: So, how are things with Eduards now?

Lūcija: Oh, they're always fighting and cuddling (*kīvējas un mīlējas*).

Maija: Yes, yes. He's already helped me with everything here today. Listen, call him over for coffee, will you? I can already hear him whistling around the corner.

By the time of this conversation, I had already become a regular at their daily coffee gatherings, which we sometimes supplemented with a shot of brandy or a chocolate bar. A sense of closeness between Maija and me is also evident here. Despite our age difference, I joked back with her, leaning into her dark joke that she would die just to spite Eduards. Playing along with the content of jokes and what is considered acceptable signals closeness, a sense of belonging, and perhaps even a kind of relatedness (Masquelier 2024, 381; Lynch 2012, 84).

Through daily gatherings filled with conversation and jokes, Maija and Eduards, as well as Lūcija, were doing more than passing the time: they created a social space and structured time in a way that did not counter institutional rules but ran along institutional time frames – as did many other activities I discuss in this chapter. With the doors wide open, their laughter often spilled outside the room, catching the attention of passing carers and other residents, who sometimes lingered in the doorway for a while. Sometimes even people who were not particularly close to either of the two would shyly approach or step inside for coffee, as if drawn to the warmth and liveliness. I had the impression that the talk about Maija and Eduards being a couple sometimes stemmed from an envy of their closeness, openness, and infectious humor.

This coffee hour also seemed to command a certain respect from the staff. It was one of the few situations when I saw care workers knock before entering, a recognition the privacy and significance of this daily ritual. That quiet acknowledgment by the staff also showed how routines of residents and employees intersected: just as carers took their own coffee breaks in the staff room, they extended that pause to Maija and Eduards' ritual, as if to place it in parallel to their own.

One afternoon over coffee, Maija leaned in and whispered that she was planning a party for Eduards's seventy-sixth birthday that would feature coffee, sandwiches, and cognac. She asked if I could help her, repeatedly insisting, "I will pay for everything!" When I wholeheartedly agreed, Maija eagerly suggested inviting the Director Valters. Eduards was

skeptical, struggling to imagine the director of the care home actually attending his birthday party in such a small room. But Valters did come, along with a few carers who were working that day. Everyone drank the same shots of liquor together and, as Maija recalled the next day, for a moment it did not feel like a gathering in a care home but a celebration that could have taken place anywhere in the world.

Eduards and Maija's exchanges, whether humorous, nostalgic, or deeply reflective, made these gatherings a daily temporal landmark: a moment when time was full of liveliness and the usual rhythms of institutional life receded into the background. Spirited and witty, the three shaped a space of their own within the constraints of institutional routines, cramped living quarters, and the lingering sense of loss that came with leaving behind a home, a lifelong partner, or even the certainty of one's own body. Drinking coffee, talking, and joking were not just habits but subtle acts of reclaiming time and space in an environment where so much was regimented. These small, ordinary gatherings over a hot cup of coffee, filled with jokes, teasing, and moments of mirth, did more than sustain social bonds. They contributed to the fluid sphere of private and public within the Pansionāts, making an otherwise impersonal institution feel, even if fleetingly, their home. Through such daily practices, residents cared for one another, affirmed their personhood, and created a social world that quietly contradicted frequent claims that "nothing really happened here."

It also did not take long for me to see why the caregivers were so eager for me to meet them. The very fact that the caregivers directed me to Maija and Eduards and their daily coffee ritual underscored the significance of these seemingly mundane acts and the extraordinary bond between them. Their lively conversations, humor, and companionship not only shaped the time and space they inhabited, allowing them to reconfigure their relationship to the present, the future, and the place itself (the care home), and thus enabling them to aspire to a good life (Masquelier 2024, 382), but also contributed to the social fabric of the Pansionāts, or at least of their own floor.

This liveliness also contrasted with the sense of stillness and humility explored in the previous chapter, a stillness that was inseparable from the rural landscape in which the Pansionāts was situated. Seen against the wider emptiness that surrounded the care home and the shrinking social worlds many residents came from, these small scenes of companionship reveal a kind of "nested" emptiness. The Pansionāts stood in an emptying landscape, yet concentrated lives that might otherwise have unfolded in profound isolation. In this sense, vitality and emptiness were not opposites but interdependent conditions, with the Pansionāts gathering together forms of sociality that would have been impossible elsewhere.

In the next section, I explore other everyday activities, such as sex and drinking alcoholic beverages, to further illustrate how residents shaped the sociality of the Pansionāts and blurred private and public even further. While coffee gatherings and lively conversations already breached the institutional walls, the following discussion delves deeper into acts that more explicitly challenged these divisions, revealing other ways residents shaped and continuously (re)defined life within the facility.

6.2. Adaptive intimacies within the rhythms of institutional life

Early in my fieldwork, care workers discreetly mentioned to me that Ruta, 56, and Imants, 86, had “some sort of intimate relationship.” Ruta’s severe back problems limited her mobility, and she also suffered from head trauma and long-standing alcohol issues that, according to the care workers and her children made her prone to unpredictable mood swings. Despite this, she had found companionship with Imants, the oldest male resident, who had moved into the Pansionāts years ago following a double leg amputation. Ruta lived with two women on the second floor, while Imants shared a room with two men downstairs. Neither of their rooms offered the privacy they sought, so they adapted. Yet this was not a matter of fixed boundaries being deliberately transgressed; rather, the boundaries between public and private in the Pansionāts were already porous, shifting with circumstance, roles, and visibility. So, they drank together, spent time together and (as I soon discovered) had sex in one of the few private places available to them, a space under the main staircase by the elevator. Like clockwork, almost every other day around 3 p.m. they would meet there to take advantage of a brief window when most staff retreated to the office in the Lower Building or in the staff room for their afternoon coffee break. Their intimacy did not counter institutional rhythms but depended on them, unfolding precisely in the temporal gaps created by the staff’s daily routine.

One afternoon, the elevator broke down. As I made my way down the stairs to join the staff for afternoon coffee, I noticed the mechanics had already arrived. As I was greeting them, Imants came rolling confidently down the hall with Ruta trailing behind. She was loudly berating him, declaring that he was the absolute worst lover she had ever had. Imants, unperturbed, calmly responded that she was free to do as she pleased, but he was still heading to their usual spot. I glanced first at Ruta and Imants; then at the mechanics, who were clearly unprepared for what they were about to witness; and then rushed over to warn them. Imants, with a heavy sigh, slowly and reluctantly turned his wheelchair around. “Not gonna happen today,” he grumpily told Ruta, exasperated but accepting defeat. “Let’s just go to my room for

a drink.” Relieved, I greeted the mechanics, who stood there looking equally puzzled and oblivious.

When I returned an hour later, the atmosphere had shifted. It was Wednesday, when the mobile grocery van arrived, and the scene had begun to unravel in familiar, chaotic ways. Some residents were already singing boisterously, one man lay drunk on the floor blocking the doorway to the common area, and Ruta was crawling on the floor, laughing and loudly swearing at Imants. He tried to follow her in his wheelchair but got stuck in a doorway. “Come back!” he called after her, but she burst into laughter and continued to crawl slowly toward the cafeteria. Realizing he would not catch up, Imants gave up the chase and shifted his focus to looking for his misplaced vodka bottle.

At that point, a caregiver appeared beside me, looking at the scene unfolding before us. “So... what do we have here?” she asked casually. “Some kind of circus,” I replied, gently smiling. She stepped over the tall, bulky man who was still drunkenly sprawled across the entrance to the cafeteria, effectively barricading the way in. We both agreed it was safer to leave him for now, since he would only fall again. Then, she immediately helped Ruta to her feet and guided her back to her room. Meanwhile, I wheeled Imants back into his room, where he retrieved the lost bottle and cradled it like a newborn. It was a scene of pure, unfiltered care home life, equal parts comedy, concern, and quiet tragedy. But the tragedy here was not the excessive alcohol consumption but the unspoken limitations that life in an institution, however “good” or “bad,” inevitably created. In its absurdity and rawness, the moment of Ruta and Imants mirrored life outside, where the day-to-day and the unexpected constantly intertwined and yet distinctly represented privacy as something not to be protected and facilitated but something often foreclosed. Much like what Kulick and Rydström (2015) observed of the sexual lives of adults with disabilities in Sweden and Denmark, privacy here did not mark a domain to be supported, but one whose invocation served to ensure that intimacy often remained unacknowledged or unfulfilled (Kulick 2015). Only through the quiet creativity of individuals like Ruta and Imants did sexuality assert its presence, earning a kind of matter-of-fact acceptance: this expression of intimacy also existed, was alive, and was happening.

It is also for this reason that I have made the difficult decision to include the scene with Ruta and Imants in the chapter, both as unfolded at the time and as how I perceived it. My difficulty was how to avoid reducing it to mere comic relief. Although it was and still is undeniably funny, I have included it to highlight how privacy emerged even without institutional support, and how the liveliness it embodied, whether seen as “disorderly” or “transgressive,” contrasted starkly with the earlier sentiment that “nothing really happens here.”

Moments like these also exposed the porosity of institutional boundaries, where public and private were not fixed domains but continuously renegotiated through everyday practices.

In the care facility, it was not clear where the private ended and the public began, and the division between public and private was interpreted differently depending on one's role in the care home. Often, it was not only private acts that permeated into supposedly public spaces but also the other way around. Most of the residents, like Ruta and Imants, shared their rooms with one or two people, leaving little or no room for solitude. That meant that personal privacy was nearly unattainable for many. Institutional oversight frequently intruded into personal spaces. For residents, privacy was limited by the demands of physical care, shared living arrangements, and the constant presence of staff, who could and would enter rooms at any time without notice, marking accessibility as a part of the institutional framework. Basic care activities such as changing diapers, dressing, or medical procedures were often carried out in full view of roommates, with no privacy screen: a daily practice apparently intended to save time, given the high ratio of residents to direct care workers, but one that further dissolved the boundary between the personal and communal. Similarly, a knock on the door was rare, with exceptions for a few residents and practices, like Maija and Eduards's coffee hour. This aligns with the observation that the public/private dichotomy serves less as a spatial designation and more as a tool to organize, contest, and describe social life (Gal 2002, 80; Gal and Kligman 2000, 41).

Although I draw on Gal's (2002) work on public and private, it is important to note that residents themselves did not speak about their lives in these terms. They rarely articulated boundaries as problems, nor did they describe their practices as "private" or "public." The distinction emerges primarily in my analytic framing. At the same time, residents' everyday actions, such as choosing particular times and overlooked spaces for intimacy or hiding alcohol, demonstrate how privacy was actively produced in practice. Rather than marking stable domains that were later blurred, boundaries in the Pansionāts were already porous, shifting with roles, visibility, and the rhythms of care. These patterned, practical ways of carving out moments of seclusion are precisely what makes Gal's approach useful for understanding how boundaries operated in such settings.

The categories of public and private are co-constitutive, constantly folding into one another, shaped by the practices and relationships of those who navigate them (Gal and Kligman 2000). Gal's (2002, 79–80) notion of fractal distinction offers a useful lens here: public and private are not binary opposites but relational categories that reproduce themselves at different scales. At the Pansionāts, this fractal quality is particularly evident. A communal room might function as a public space during the day but take on a more intimate character in the evening, when residents gather to drink and talk. A resident's room, while nominally private, remains

open to the gaze and intervention of care workers. Thus, at the Pansionāts this fractal quality did not emerge from the breakdown of rigid boundaries but from the fact that boundaries were always situational and negotiated in practice. Through acts like sharing alcohol and having sex, they created spheres of intimacy that temporarily turned communal environments into their home, however shared and provisional. In doing so, they engaged in place-making that unsettled institutional spatial logics and showed the Pansionāts as a complex social space where older adults were anything but passive. What was “public” or “private” was not a predefined spatial property, but something enacted through opportunity, practice, attention, and timing.

In this environment, shaped by competing needs, desires, and understandings of where private ended and public began, tensions and conflicts were inevitable, yet this lack of clarity also created opportunities for constant renegotiation. The boundaries between public and private were never fixed but remained porous, taking shape through the daily interactions and practices of residents and staff alike.

Although drinking often complimented Imants and Ruta’s sexual encounters or served as an alternate activity when their plans failed (as in the opening vignette), they meticulously planned their trysts around staff breaks, timing intimacy to the rhythm of institutional labor. This shows how residents’ lives were entangled with workers’ schedules. Rather than passively accepting the institutional limits on privacy, Imants and Ruta transformed an overlooked area of the Pansionāts into a personal, intimate zone shaped not by institutional design but by the residents’ desires, needs, relationships, and actions. The space under the stairs, although technically public, for them became a site of temporary privacy and sexual autonomy.

The staff was well aware of the relationship and which physical space Ruta and Imants had chosen for their encounters. Sometimes the couple’s relationship came up during the everyday talk over coffee, a reminder that in some way the intimate lives of residents always carried over to the sociality of staff and vice versa. Employees’ opinions were generally tolerant and framed by an understanding of the lack of privacy in the care home, which was often a casual topic of conversation during coffee breaks. I never witnessed any measures to stop Imants and Ruta’s relationship. Instead, it became a daily routine that employees knew about and, in some ways, even respected, allowing it to blend into the fabric of daily life at the Pansionāts. However, I never heard discussions about how this issue of privacy might be addressed. Everybody knew that there were not enough single rooms, and repurposing one as a designated private space for intimate encounters was both financially unfeasible and likely to raise complex questions about the care responsibilities of already underpaid staff. Beyond logistical concerns, however, the issue extended far beyond this particular care home. At its

core, it was a question of who had the right to desire and consensually engage in sexual intimacy with another human being (Kulick and Rydström 2015).

While Ruta and Imants's relationship may have been the most visible and yet still a "secret," they were far from the only residents to navigate intimacy within institutional constraints. Others, too, found ways to build and maintain relationships, sometimes in ways that further challenged expectations of intimacy in later life.

Around 2022, a woman in her early sixties, who had an intellectual disability and lived in the Lower Building of the Pansionāts, started a relationship with a man who had recently moved in. After a period of courtship, they asked the Director to place them in a shared room together, a request that was swiftly accommodated. About a year later, during one of my visits, I learned that the woman, with her partner's full awareness and approval, had started seeing another man while maintaining her primary relationship (an arrangement in accordance with what is commonly referred to as an ethically non-monogamous relationship). All three confirmed that they had found what they were looking for. The staff, much like with Ruta and Imants, treated this relationship with amusement rather than concern, seeing no reason to interfere. As the Director Valters put it: "As long as everybody is happy, I have no objections, everyone here is an adult. If I had a suspicion of abuse, well, that's a different story. We keep our eyes and ears open."

The belief that "everyone here is an adult" also extended to another unexpected relationship that emerged in 2024 – this time between a resident, Andrejs, and one of the kitchen staff. In the evening, they could be found spending time together in Andrejs's room. Unlike other relationships, this one blurred not only the boundaries between private and public spaces but also between resident and employee, further complicating simplistic narratives of institutional life as stagnant and defined only by one-way care relations. Rather than a rigid system of control, the Pansionāts revealed itself as a space where residents and care workers alike continuously negotiated the boundaries of space, intimacy, and agency.

These relationships further exposed the fissures in the institutional framework, demonstrating that residents' agency was not entirely subsumed by structures of care and surveillance. Rather than being passive recipients of care, they reshaped their social and spatial environments, challenging narratives of aging in an institution as withdrawal. Whether through carefully planned rendezvous or unexpected partnerships, residents claimed intimacy on their own terms by adapting and sometimes resisting institutional norms in ways that blurred the lines between public and private, acceptable and deviant, and even resident and employee.

6.3. “This is not a prison”: Alcohol use as socio-spatial practice

In the early fall of 2020, Rasmiņa, who at 90 was one of the most beloved residents of the Pansionāts, leaned in and quietly whispered to me that she wanted to “celebrate life” (*svinēt dzīvi*). At first, I didn’t understand her. Seeing my puzzled expression, she attempted to flick her bent, arthritic fingers against her chin, an old-fashioned but familiar signaling an invitation to drink something alcoholic. At that time, I still felt like a newcomer to the Pansionāts and had been told that alcohol consumption in public spaces was discouraged and that the staff generally disapproved of it, even though it was not strictly forbidden. Wanting to respect Rasmiņa’s wish but uncertain about the rules, I felt obliged to ask the Director for permission. The moment he heard who had made the request and who I would be drinking with, Valters burst into laughter. “Rasmiņa?” he asked, grinning. “Well, if it’s her, go ahead. Just make sure no one sees.” With this quiet blessing, I went out and bought a bottle of the Latvian coffee liqueur Moka.

Later that day, I handed Rasmiņa the bottle and she passed me two small shot glasses. “One for me and one for you,” she said. I filled them both to the brim, about 25 ml in each. She threw back two small shots in quick succession; then, with a mischievous gleam in her eye, exclaimed, “Die, soul! I’ll drown you now!” (*Mirsti, dvēselīte! Nu es Tevi slīcināšu!*). I had never heard this expression before, whether from my generation or hers, and I asked what it meant. With an open smile, she explained that she had picked it up from her coworkers, mostly men as she had worked on road crews from the age of sixteen. This phrase was both playful and profound, acknowledging the fleeting joy of the moment while also nodding to the inevitable passage of time. It was also tied to many fond memories of her working life. Despite the physically demanding nature of the job, she spoke warmly of gatherings at work, something I often heard older adults reminisce about, regardless of their profession. She told me about the excursions, sports events, and parties while encouraging me to have a third shot of liqueur, but refused to drink another herself, saying with a laugh that she already felt like dancing. And so, we danced. Linking arms, we swayed slowly to the music as Rasmiņa tapped her cane against the floor in time. Her two roommates watched us, their faces lighting up with amusement. Later, buying alcohol for her became effortless and I no longer asked for permission. A small bottle of Riga Black Balsam or a splash of cognac would find its way to her or other residents who were seen as those who “knew how to drink” or at the very least “knew how to behave.”

Moments like this were not uncommon at the Pansionāts. While drinking was officially discouraged, alcohol consumption was woven into the fabric of everyday life, taking place in small semi-private corners, behind closed doors, and more overtly on special days, like the Wednesdays when the van came. Some drank to celebrate, some to recall a past that felt more vivid than the present, and others to simply lighten the weight of the long institutional days.

Though Rasmiņa's quiet and down-to-earth enjoyment of life contrasted with the more chaotic drinking that sometimes erupted elsewhere in the facility and that I will address in a short moment, in both cases alcohol was shaping the Pansionāts.

Residents drank both alone and together, whether like Ruta and Imants who went on benders, Maija, Eduards, and Rasmiņa, who would have a couple drinks, or staff members at birthday parties. Some preferred to drink quietly in their rooms; others were looking for a company or bartered for another bottle, sometimes leading to tensions that blurred the line between camaraderie and conflict. Whether done in solitude or company, drinking wove itself into the social fabric of the Pansionāts, shaping interactions, daily rhythms, and the way spaces were used and understood.

Although alcohol was never strictly policed at the Pansionāts, obtaining liquor required negotiation. This was mostly because of its remote location and the limited mobility opportunities due to both individual disabilities and the almost complete lack of public transport in the area. For extra food, treats and alcohol, most people relied on the weekly grocery van, which arrived every Wednesday and also sold slightly overpriced alcohol, always a highly anticipated event. Others found alternative means, asking staff members, handypersons, and even the locals who moonlighted as taxi drivers to procure bottles for them at a steep price.

As I showed previously, for residents like Rasmiņa as well as Maija and Eduards alcohol was an occasional treat associated with nostalgia and connection that brought back good memories of a life full of vitality. For others, it was a structured routine or even almost a survival strategy. Andrejs was one such resident. A heavy but quiet drinker, he mostly kept to himself and never got into fights or caused trouble for caretakers. His only vice besides alcohol was his passion for the Latvian schlager musician⁶² Aldis Drēģeris (1966–2005) and he liked to crank the volume, especially when he was drinking.

The morning after one of these drinking sessions, I was sitting on my bed⁶³, fresh out of the shower, when a sudden knock on my door startled me. It was 7:20 a.m. Before I could say anything, the door began to open. "I'm not dressed! I'm not dressed! close the door!" I shouted. Andrejs, still hung over from the previous night's celebration in honor of the mobile grocery van's visit, apologized and asked if he could return in half an hour.

At 8:00 a.m., I saw him again near the Lower Building, waiting impatiently. His restless but apologetic demeanor and shaking hands made it clear what he wanted, even before he spoke: the hair of the dog. In his room, he handed me a 20-euro bill. "The hangover is terrible. I

⁶² Latvian schlager music originated with translated covers of German songs, but it has long since grown into a popular genre with many bands playing originals.

⁶³ I lived across the courtyard from the main buildings in a recently renovated but not yet reused former barn.

shouldn't have drunk that wine," he admitted. The day before, after having imbibed half a liter of vodka, he had confessed to me that he had not drunk any wine in 20 years and was worried about how he would feel the next day if he did. I had tried to dissuade him but there was a plastic bottle of "Lolita", a cheap fortified wine lying next to the vodka bottle. On the label, a pin-up girl dressed in red stared at me blankly.

"Could you bring me something from the store? Anything! Maybe vodka, or at least one bottle of beer," he begged me. "Buy something for yourself with the change, some sweets maybe, or at least keep the change for the gas!" Later that afternoon, I saw him with two other men, one in an electric wheelchair, heading down the gravel road toward the nearby farmsteads, where another grocery van arrived on Thursdays. In this way, the partying usually continued until they ran out of money and had to wait for the next month's pension payment.

On other occasions when they fell short of alcohol, they would ask a couple of employees to bring some. Sometimes the handyman or building mechanic would gladly bring some beer or something stronger from the store eleven kilometers away. On summer evenings, I sometimes saw the former drinking with several residents on the bench in the courtyard.⁶⁴ He seemed to enjoy the company: after all, he too lived in the Lower Building and was thus not just an employee of the care home but also a neighbor to the residents. Furthermore, by providing the service of bringing the booze, he could keep the change or buy some for himself, just as Andrejs had suggested that I do. The bench became a quiet marker of normality. It was a site of slow companionship, a place where roles softened and distinctions between staff and resident and work and rest once again blurred just enough to allow something like a social life to take root.

When employees would not bring them liquor, residents turned to other neighbors who would provide either "taxi service" to or grocery delivery from the local store. These did not come cheap – it could cost 7 to 10 euros to get booze delivered to your doorstep. Thus, alcohol did not just shape social interactions at the Pansionāts but was also woven into a local informal economy built on favors, fees, and quiet understandings.

Although some staff saw drinking as a problem, it was never truly regulated. Residents like Rasmiņa were not considered drinkers at all. Those like Andrejs, although known for their drinking problems, remained in care workers' good graces because they were discreet and never caused trouble. Others, the so-called tough cases (*smagie gadījumi*), were not so easily

⁶⁴ This scene evoked what Kideckel (2004, 46) calls "*benchwork*" in post-socialist Romania. This was an informal relational labor and community-making among working-class neighbors in the wake of industrial collapse. While the dynamics at the Pansionāts differed significantly, the bench similarly served as a site where blurred roles, quiet favors, and shared routines structured everyday life. Though less about preserving class identity, these moments still carried traces of post-socialist working-class sociality in a new institutional setting.

tolerated, despite the limited options for regulating their drinking. Although every kind of drinking at the Pansionāts – either shaped by celebration and companionship, or addiction and escape – shaped the life and sociality, the “problematic drinking,” “heavy drinkers,” or “tough cases,” whom I will discuss further, were the ones whose behavior most shaped routines, relationships between the staff and residents and ultimately power dynamics within the institution.

While alcohol consumption in public spaces was officially prohibited by Latvian law, as this chapter shows it occupied a grey area at the Pansionāts – neither fully allowed nor strictly forbidden. Moreover, like situations involving intimate relationships, it always begged the question of whether the Pansionāts was a public or private space and, if it was public as a whole, which areas were private. This ambiguity not only highlighted the complex interplay between public and private boundaries but raised deeper questions about residents’ agency and the interplay of care relationships.

The Director embodied this contradiction, often expressing a laissez-faire attitude toward alcohol consumption: “Well, you see, this is not a prison. We have a drink ourselves from time to time. I generally don’t mind at all! They are adults. But then, we have all these tough cases... You’ll see it for yourself.” While excessive drinking was always discouraged, enforcement was inconsistent and patchy. From time to time, he unsuccessfully tried to get the owner of the grocery van to stop selling alcohol. Moreover, on national holidays like the summer solstice there was “official” beer, and something stronger during wintertime celebrations. This ambiguity allowed residents to form spaces of freedom and agency: by quietly sipping beer on a hot summer day on a bench in the yard, by organizing small birthday parties, or by going on benders, although the last had consequences for the care workers.

The Director also confirmed that the staff often used these ambiguous, blurred definitions of public and private to their advantage. For example, if people drank so heavily that there were serious fights and injuries, then he might play the card of declaring the whole Pansionāts a public place, including the private rooms, or even call the police. Most days, however, the shared spaces like hallways, canteen, and the yard stayed “private” spaces, rendering the Pansionāts a home where drinking was allowed. As he himself stated, “It is their home, they have no other.” Thus, excessive drinking, particularly by certain residents, was discouraged but rarely enforced in any consistent way. While this approach framed the Pansionāts as a space of relative freedom for residents, the care workers often bore the brunt of its consequences.

As one care worker put it, “It’s funny until someone gets hurt. Then it’s our problem.” This referred to the extra work of dealing with urine-soaked bed linens, broken noses from falls

and flashes of aggression or the unnerving quiet of someone lying unresponsive on a hallway floor after a bender.

For example, Alfrēds, in his mid-seventies and unstable on his feet even when sober, not only drank enough to aggravate his existing health problems but also enough to often cause him to injure himself. At least twice during my stay, he had fallen badly and hit his forehead and nose on the ground. Another common side effect was bed-wetting: he wore a urinary catheter that encumbered his movements, but under the influence of alcohol he neglected it, resulting in pain and urethral inflammation. After he spent a night drinking, the caregivers often had to change his urine-soaked bedding and sometimes even the mattress.

Fights that caused nosebleeds and shattered glasses also happened among men who drank, as did more serious health problems like undiagnosed mini strokes that occurred during drinking and neglected wounds or circulatory problems resulting in gangrene, an especially troublesome health problem at the care home because it was so difficult to treat. Therefore, care workers viewed most excessive alcohol consumption as a vice and resented how it added work to their responsibilities for which they had not signed up. As one put it, “I came here to care for sick people, not drunks.”

Indeed, direct care workers were often more vocal in their opposition to drinking than the administration. I frequently overheard them discuss potential measures to address excessive drinking. Some suggested fining heavy drinkers, arguing that this would compensate for the additional labor and emotional toll of dealing with the messes, rudeness, and occasional inappropriate behavior or even sexual assault.

Another source of tension emerged during the distribution of “helicopter money” during the pandemic. In the spring of 2021, the Latvian government provided one-time payments of 200 euros to families with children, seniors, and people with disabilities to help offset the impact of COVID-19 restrictions and individuals who qualified as both seniors and disabled received 400 euros (Tvnet / Leta 2021). For many residents, this was an unprecedented sum and sometimes even the most money they had ever held at one time.

This influx of funds created significant concern among care workers, particularly about how the “drunks” would spend the money. Many feared it would lead to increased drinking, escalating problems and more work for which they were not compensated. Some even argued that such payments should not have been distributed to residents prone to alcohol abuse at all, as it only compounded the challenges they faced on the job.

At the same time, care workers often navigated a delicate balance between the need to maintain order and personal empathy. Their frustrations were not simply about enforcing rules, but about minimizing chaos and the additional workload it created. Many could empathize with

the residents' longing for small celebrations or even the comfort of a drink, desires that, on some level, mirrored their own. Moreover, those who were not considered problem drinkers faced no barriers at all to enjoying a drink or two, sometimes with the explicit approval of or even encouragement from the staff. On rare occasions, care workers would even bring a small bottle of vodka to someone considered to have a serious drinking problem, hoping to ease their frustration and withdrawal symptoms. This usually happened between a care worker and a resident who had formed a friendly relationship that extended beyond formal physical care.

For example, one care worker shared her thoughts about a relatively young resident who had been living at the Pansionāts for some time due to a back injury that had left him paraplegic. Among the staff, he was known for episodes of heavy drinking that not only brought out his aggressive side but posed significant risks to his physical well-being. On several occasions, he had drunk so much that he fell out of his wheelchair, injuring his already-numb legs. Despite this, the care worker genuinely liked him and had a deep sympathy for him: "But can you imagine? He's only in his early 40s. He understands perfectly well that this is it – this care home is what his life has come to. I would drink too. I'd want to get drunk."

These relationships – marked by care workers' frustration over excessive drinking and the resulting extra work, alongside their emotional attachment to residents, including so-called "heavy drinkers" – highlight the inherent complexity of care work and the fluid, negotiated nature of institutional spaces. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, this dynamic also raises broader and more complex issues surrounding the undervalued nature of care work and critical questions about the boundaries, expectations, harms, and hierarchies of what care work entailed, including often neglected experiences of care workers (Buch 2018a, 126–50). It also underscored the inherent complexity of care relationships, where compassion frequently collided with differing, and often competing, ideas about what constituted (good) care (Lemos Dekker 2019).

While these are important discussions beyond the focus of this chapter, they nonetheless reinforce that residents actively shaped the spatial and social contours of the Pansionāts through their daily practices, and drinking was one of the most complex ways this took place. Alcohol consumption was neither fully allowed nor explicitly prohibited – it was sometimes frowned upon, sometimes tolerated, and sometimes even encouraged and celebrated. These shifting boundaries reflected the ongoing negotiation between residents and staff, demonstrating that institutional life was not merely imposed from above but continuously redefined from within.

Drinking was more than an individual escape or a disruptive habit to be managed by caregivers: it was a deeply social and spatial phenomenon that reconfigured the rhythms of institutional life. While it facilitated companionship, laughter, and moments of defiant pleasure,

it also bred tension, conflict, and suffering. By gathering for drinks, residents generated their own forms of sociality within the institutional setting, unsettling the orderly routines of care and introducing resident-driven rhythms into shared spaces. Thus, drinking was less an assertion of control than a way of inhabiting life together, revealing the tensions of collective living, where autonomy and dependence, pleasure and harm, self-determination and institutional limits constantly rubbed up against one another. This messiness, a combination of camaraderie, intimacy, fights, quiet self-destruction, and care relations, was central to how residents and the staff lived together, shaping both their relationships and the spatial dynamics of the Pansionāts.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how everyday practices of coffee drinking, alcohol sharing, and intimate relationships (re)shaped the social and spatial contours of the Pansionāts. These were not marginal diversions, but central to how residents made life there livable (Back 2015). By carving out spheres of intimacy, joy, and even disorder, residents turned the institution from a site marked by stillness and waiting into one shaped by relationality, vitality, and ongoing negotiation. Moreover, these practices did not occur apart from staff but were interwoven with their daily rhythms. The way they were seen, tolerated, sometimes celebrated and sometimes resented shows how residents and staff were always caught up in each other's lives.

This reshaping of space went far beyond private rooms or daily routines. It was not simply about blurred boundaries, but about how people, through their ordinary interactions, shifted the meanings of corridors, bedrooms, and stairwells. Without intending to assert ownership, residents remade the institution into a place they could inhabit. Since categories of public and private are not fixed binaries but fluid distinctions that fold into each other at different scales (Gal 2002), the fractal dynamic of the Pansionāts became particularly evident: communal spaces could become private through laughter and coffee, private rooms remained open to staff, stairwells turned into sites for intimacy. These shifts show that institutional space is never neutral or simply "just there" but is continually worked and reworked through everyday practice, generating layered and sometimes contradictory forms of belonging, intimacy, and care. What emerges is less resistance than an ongoing remaking of institutional life, in which familiar categories and routines softened, allowing humor, companionship, and intimacy to take root.

At the same time, these practices were never separate from the wider socio-political landscape. As I argue through the concept of the spatio-social fix, the small acts that made daily

life bearable or even enjoyable also helped sustain the Pansionāts as an institution with its own sociality in an emptying rural setting. By inhabiting spaces differently, residents sustained their own dignity and autonomy while also contributing to the institution's coherence and role in the community. Their micro-practices of drinking, joking, and seeking privacy were tied to larger dynamics of care, reproduction, and survival in a shrinking countryside.

At the same time, these practices unfolded within a broader condition of nested emptiness. The Pansionāts, located in an emptying rural landscape, brought together people whose social worlds had also contracted long before their arrival. Yet rather than simply reproducing this emptiness, the institution concentrated forms of sociality, care, and vitality that would not have existed had residents remained alone in their former homes. Emptiness and liveliness were thus intertwined rather than opposed, shaping the everyday life of the Pansionāts.

This chapter has contributed to the dissertation's larger argument in two ways. First, it shows that the politics of humility explored earlier was never total: alongside narratives of emptiness and decline, residents' practices nurtured vitality and relationality. Second, it demonstrates how the everyday actions of those who lived and worked at the Pansionāts continuously remade it into a home. While not a home in the conventional sense, it was a place where life – messy, humorous, intimate, sometimes chaotic – persisted and acquired meaning.

Seen in this way, institutional life cannot be reduced to control, waiting, or vulnerability. It is also a space where people improvise, negotiate care and intimacy, and reimagine the lines between public and private. The Pansionāts thus emerges not only as a site of care, but as a place continually made and remade through the lives of its residents, employees and the community that surrounds it.

7. Catching the “rejects”: The present and the future of the Pansionāts and its residents

Introduction

In many respects, life at the Pansionāts unfolded through tensions that reflected the ambivalent position of the institution and its residents. As I have shown throughout this thesis, this position is best understood as an interplay between emptiness, the politics of humility, and the Pansionāts’ centrality in local social reproduction. As shown in Chapter 3, the care home was materially and socially central to the region: it anchored employment, circulated resources, and built social networks, even as its importance remained understated in public discourse. In this sense, older adults themselves formed this centrality: their presence sustained employment, justified the institution’s role within the municipality, and anchored the rhythms of daily life. This ambivalence of centrality combined with discursive peripherality shaped how life was lived and understood there.

The surrounding emptiness, meanwhile, seemed to be growing on all sides. Limitations of geography and mobility made it difficult for most people who moved into the Pansionāts to reach their relatives, get to pharmacies, shops, or visit the graves of loved ones, including children. Many had to rely on relatives or friends to bring items they needed and occasionally take them to places where they wanted to go. For those who lacked such ties, it was harder still: getting small favors depended on having a good relationship with the staff, genuine friendship, sympathy, or willingness to respond to a quiet plea or gentle reminder to pick up something from the pharmacy or food store. Visiting relatives, whether living or dead, was often an unfulfilled wish.

Economically, residents also lived on the edge. Most relied on modest retirement pensions that rarely exceeded 300 euros a month, including the 85 percent paid directly to the Pansionāts for living expenses. This left them with virtually no disposable income and little ability to shape their lives materially beyond the institution’s routines. At the same time, life at the Pansionāts offered many a fragile sense of security that included housing, regular meals, preventive health services, and social contact, both wanted and unwanted.

Beyond these financial constraints, older adults and people with disabilities living in care homes were often sidelined from social and political life. They were rarely consulted about their needs and seldom visibly present (though visibility itself should not be mistaken for centrality or power). When they did become visible, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was typically as a single undifferentiated group defined by vulnerability. Although care home residents’

vulnerability was also linked to structural factors such as limited possibilities for privacy, it was more often framed as an inherent condition of aging or disability. Thus, dependence, weakness, fragility, or incapacity were seen as general attributes of those deemed “old” or “disabled,” with less attention given to socio-political arrangements that rendered some lives more vulnerable than others (Clark 2013, 6).

Yet vulnerability in institutional settings was not only a matter of limited autonomy but also of how people navigated these constraints in practice. Scholars working in other contexts have noted that people living in constrained institutional or infrastructural settings often inhabit positions that are relational rather than fixed. For example, Aceska et al. (2019), describe how residents of neglected urban areas navigate limited material possibilities through everyday negotiations and shifting forms of attachment, suggesting that marginality is not an all-or-nothing condition. Bankovskaya (2014) similarly emphasizes how people inhabit socially precarious situations through moral and practical adjustments rather than through clear-cut states of inclusion or exclusion.

The vulnerability of residents at the Pansionāts was tied to their humility, so it often did not appear simply as a result of individual “dependency” but reflected how such institutions were positioned within broader political and economic frameworks (see also Chapter 2). Although in recent years public and political debates have shifted toward discussing care facilities in terms of care quality rather than cost alone, this reframing has yet to catch up with the realities on the ground regarding either material conditions or how residents are seen and treated. In current settings, older adults and people with disabilities are still rarely asked about their needs or involved in decisions affecting their lives, and their presence in public discourse often remains limited to general references to “vulnerable groups.”

These broader dynamics shaped the everyday life of the Pansionāts. Residents lived within conditions that offered security but also routine; stability but also confinement; companionship that was sometimes chosen and sometimes imposed. They received partially or fully state-funded care, a place to live, meals, and cultural activities. Yet, as in many institutional and social settings, the scope of their participation in shaping daily arrangements was narrow, because organizational routines, resource constraints, and expectations of humility structured the forms of participation available to them. Their situation was not one of simple exclusion but of living within constraints produced by emptiness and institutional life. Rather than occupying fixed positions, residents navigated forms of belonging shaped by emptiness, institutional routines, and expectations of humility.

These tensions were visible in the subtle ways residents asserted their positions, many of which I discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Gestures like quietly negotiating for a little more sugar

in your tea or navigating the unspoken boundaries between staff and residents reflected a life lived within limits but not without agency. Such actions reveal how people sustained forms of belonging and personhood in conditions structured by emptiness, institutional routines, and expectations of humility.

Some had come to internalize politics of humility, folding it into their sense of what was right and expected. “Old people shouldn’t get in the way of the young,” said Sarmīte, who was already past ninety during my fieldwork. Her tone was quiet and matter of fact, with no sadness or resentment, just the steady assurance of someone stating what seemed to her like the natural order of things. For people like her, not getting in the way of the young meant accepting their stuckedness during the pandemic so the young could return to “normal life” as soon as possible. It also meant asking young people like me to get vaccinated first. (I had to convince Sarmīte that I would be able to do this because I lived in the care home alongside them). Taken together, these situations revealed not only a mutuality of care, where those deemed to be vulnerable also cared for others, but also the shifting quality of political belonging, where who is protected and how was not fixed.

Seen through this lens, residents’ lives were not defined by emptiness alone but by the ambivalent ways in which they lived within institutional, relational, and moral constraints shaped by emptiness, humility, and care. Engaging with those who lived and worked there reveals how social and spatial conditions intertwined as lived, relational processes through which people sustained life – their own and that of the Pansionāts – under constrained circumstances. These dynamics also shaped the emergence of new forms of care within the Pansionāts itself like the Poplar Tree, a new halfway house for adults with mental disorders to which I will return later in this chapter.

This becomes clearer when viewed through specific lives and institutional arrangements. In this final chapter, I focus on two cases that reveal the tension between emptiness, the politics of humility, and the Pansionāts’ role in local life. These tensions surface both in residents’ experiences and in the institution’s efforts to care for them, its employees, and the shared environment by investing in lives that might otherwise be regarded as un-investable.

I begin with Uldis, a long-term resident of the Pansionāts whose story illustrates how care could provide morally ambiguous continuity without projecting change or improvement. His life there captured the everyday ways in which residents who were often considered “complicated” were nonetheless sustained through institutional care. Uldis’s case reveals a form of care oriented toward maintenance and containment, a mode of support that secured his presence in the social world but seldom offered more. In this way, he helps in understanding how state care could stabilize lives in quiet, durable, and often overlooked ways and thus also

worked as to fix both people and place. These forms of maintenance not only secured his life at the Pansionāts but also sustained the institution's role as a central piece of (care) infrastructure in the region.

I then turn to the Poplar Tree, a halfway house created within the Pansionāts as part of Latvia's deinstitutionalization process. While administratively linked to the care home, it housed younger adults with mental disorders. Unlike its parent institution, this was designed as a future-oriented initiative that would provide residents with support, vocational training, and opportunities for greater independence. Its establishment was closely tied to EU funding and policy priorities, which framed it as a model for social and economic inclusion. It thus illustrates how care could also be mobilized as an investment in lives often considered un-investable and reimagine them as open, adaptable and aligned with broader political ideals. In this sense, it complements not only Uldis's story but those of the majority of older adults at the Pansionāts by showing how state care could stabilize lives through either quiet maintenance or projects carrying explicit promises of change. At the same time, public debates in Latvia increasingly framed older age through the discourse of "healthy aging," which I argue placed the burden of desirable transformation onto individuals rather than institutions or wider structures. By comparing these two cases, I show how different lives were rendered worthy of investment under shifting cultural and political-economic conditions, and how the Pansionāts and the Poplar Tree acted as spatio-social fixes in distinct ways, the former oriented toward sustaining presence, the latter toward imagining future trajectories. In doing so, both institutions stabilized not only people's lives but also the place itself, albeit always in selective and conditional ways.

7.1. Maintained lives and the quiet continuity of care

There were two main pathways through which new residents entered the Pansionāts. The first was a general waiting list of individuals from anywhere in Latvia whose relatives had contacted the institution to register them. The second was for individuals already in contact with the local social service and welfare institutions, typically older adults living alone in the municipality and receiving some form of social assistance. Many of these arrived directly from hospitals following health crises.

Among the individuals who entered the Pansionāts through social services, some had been deemed "complicated" or "problematic" by municipal authorities due to histories of unstable employment, precarious housing, alcohol-use disorders, or other circumstances that had brought them into repeated contact with the social care system. Importantly, not everyone referred by social services was of retirement age. This revealed one of the major shortcomings

of Latvia's social care and welfare infrastructure: a lack of appropriate services for people with diverse and complex needs. As a result, institutions originally intended for older adults frequently became homes, mostly temporary but sometimes permanent, for younger or middle-aged adults with physical or intellectual disabilities, chronic illnesses, housing precarity, unstable employment, or substance use disorders and related health or behavioral problems.

The Pansionāts housed all the above. Although care work with older adults was itself becoming increasingly challenging – for instance, staff lacked the necessary training, time, and design of the physical environment to adequately support residents with dementia, which often remained undiagnosed – they were even less prepared to meet the needs of younger adults (Day et al. 2000). These individuals presented additional challenges, as most care homes for older adults were neither designed nor equipped to provide appropriate support for them. While some younger residents simply needed stable housing to regain their footing, others, including those with intellectual disabilities or substance use disorders required specialized forms of assistance that staff were rarely able to deliver.

The diverse resident profile was shaped both by national policy gaps but also by the Pansionāts's particular position within the local care infrastructure, as it was scarcely the only care home for older adults in the municipality. Geographically, it had been located on the outskirts of the territory both before and after the 2021 administrative-territorial reform (Ministru kabinets 2021). According to the Director Valters, care homes located closer to the municipal center were able to be more selective with referrals from social services, especially when it came to rejection possible residents the municipality knew or considered to be "complicated." For the Pansionāts, this meant social services frequently called on them to take in not only older adults on the waiting list but also well-known problem cases, often for short-term stays related to alcohol rehabilitation. Thus, the Pansionāts not only provided services to older adults with a variety of health issues but also the "rejects" from more centrally located institutions that preferred not to deal with so-called "complicated," "problematic" or "tough" cases. These "rejects" included both people of retirement age and younger individuals whom the municipality did not know how to manage and therefore effectively sequestered at the Pansionāts and other care institutions.

Such a diverse pool of residents ideally required care workers to adapt to their routines and learn to support people with very different needs. However, the necessary training and resources for this were not available, so in practice only partial adjustments were made and genuinely tailored care was rarely possible. The diversity of the residents, many directed to the Pansionāts through municipal social services, suggests that who was placed there mattered little to the state and municipality so long as they were housed and accounted for. In this sense, state

care operated less as an individualized response to specific needs and more as a biopolitical logic of care that was more concerned with managing populations than addressing individual needs (Stevenson 2014, 3–4).

Uldis was unique among all the “complicated” people who had at some point entered (and in some cases later left) the Pansionāts, though in a rather unexpected way. When I began my fieldwork in 2020, he was around 56 years old and had been living in the Lower Building of the Pansionāts for fifteen years. He was tall and lean, had good manners, and was equal parts reserved and talkative, making him somewhat difficult to read. It was a struggle to place him in the context of the Pansionāts. He was not of retirement age,⁶⁵ did not appear to have any intellectual disabilities, and did not use a wheelchair or seem to be recovering from a stroke or living with any visible chronic health conditions. In short, he did not seem to require any kind of care or support typically associated with residents there.

As I soon learned, Uldis did have problems. At 41, he had lost about a third of each foot to frostbite, leaving him with a permanent disability that affected his balance. Still, he had adapted remarkably well and did not even wear special orthopedic shoes. While he certainly struggled with some daily tasks and there were kinds of jobs he was no longer able to do, it was an open question whether he truly needed to live in a remote rural care home for older adults or whether this was the best kind of support for him. He struck me as someone who had ended up in a care home due to the lack of more appropriate services.

If his long-term stay at the Pansionāts was not clearly due to health reasons, then he must have been considered one of the “complicated” cases. Yet although he did drink occasionally, I never saw him drunk. I never witnessed him getting into fights or being overtly rude to the staff. On the contrary, he came across as polite and was rather well read and interested in current political issues. So, I asked myself, why had he been living here for fifteen years? What was his story? Even if he had been struggling with a substance use disorder at the time of his arrival, why had not he left, as I saw other younger men do during my fieldwork? These questions lingered in my mind from the beginning, but for a while I avoided asking them directly, just as I initially refrained from asking staff members their opinions of other residents, fearing it would shape my own perceptions. I wanted to learn the place on my own terms for a while before I began engaging more directly with the narratives of others.

About two months after my arrival, I finally approached several staff members to inquire what Uldis’s story was. My question was met with a grin and a long pause, the kind that signaled the difficulty of explaining something, before one of the employees finally replied chuckled,

⁶⁵ In 2020, the retirement age in Latvia was 63 years and three months. As of 2025, the retirement age has been increased to 65 years (Labklājības ministrija 2020b).

“*Slaists viņš ir!*” – “He’s a slacker!” When I asked what she meant, the care worker explained: “There’s nothing wrong with him. He’s a young man, he could work, live his life. But no, he stays here and complains about everything! You’ll see for yourself. He only lifts a finger when Guna [the physiotherapist] is around, because he likes her. Then he wants to be a prince.”

The staff’s judgment of Uldis as a “slacker” went beyond frustration with the inadequacies of the social care system. Their tone carried disdain: in their view, Uldis simply “liked” living there, even though he did not actually need or deserve to. Care workers did not see him as someone misplaced or failed by the system, stuck in the wrong place with his life put on pause, but as a willfully lazy person who throughout his life had deliberately avoided hard work and had voluntarily chosen to live there and receive the full range of care services for “free.” In the eyes of the care workers, all this made him undeserving of those services. Their palpable resentment was not because of what he lacked but because he was seen as lacking nothing and still demanding everything. As another direct care worker put it: “Sometimes he doesn’t even wash his cup after making tea in his room! It’s not like he can’t do it. His hands work, no? And for such small tasks his feet are completely fine too, he just won’t. Others try to stay independent for as long as they can, people want to do things on their own. But Uldis? No. For him, this is a hotel. We are his servants.”

The way care workers saw Uldis’s undeservingness of such care services was complex. One aspect of this is tied to Thelen and Coe’s (2019) argument that within such a moral logic care is not merely a practice but a deeply meaningful act embedded in systems of reciprocity and political belonging. They point out that the perceived legitimacy of receiving care in later life often rests on a narrative of deferred reciprocity: the idea that care is deserved in return for earlier contributions to kin, community, or state. In this framework, care is not simply a right but a reward that is morally earned through labor, duty, and participation.

Uldis appeared to the staff to violate this logic. He was not known as a hard worker, a virtue (*tikums*) often praised in Latvian society. In fact, what was known about him was quite the opposite. Uldis came to the Pansionāts not only because of his disability but also because the municipal social workers regarded him – both before and after the amputation – as a “problematic” citizen, an alcoholic who was usually unemployed despite all their efforts to find him jobs. His unemployment or precarious employment was seen not as a structural but an individual problem: hence, his “slacker” designation. Because of his history of unstable employment and drinking problems, he was not seen at the Pansionāts as having paid into the moral or social ledger, but as expecting its returns without the requisite investment, despite his partial disability. His failure to contribute to society according to social norms before entering

the Pansionāts, to participate in self-care while living there, and to display modesty or gratitude clashed with the moral economy of caregiving, which often demanded certain virtues.

On top of that, saying that “For him, this is a hotel. We are his servants” encapsulated not only disdain based on lack of reciprocity, but an additional frustration rooted in the gendered dynamics of care work and care labor that often sustain it. Dominant narratives that frame care as an extension of love and moral obligation, particularly when performed by women, obscure the structural inequalities embedded in its provision (Romero and Pérez 2016). As a result, care for children, elders, or people with health issues becomes both essential and systematically devalued. Folbre (1995) describes this as the paradox of caring labor: because care is often motivated by obligation, affection, or long-term reciprocity rather than immediate monetary return, it is culturally cast as its own reward. Yet this very framing undermines demands for proper remuneration, regulation, or recognition, sustaining the economic and social invisibility of care workers.

For the care workers, who were all women engaged in physically demanding and emotionally complex labor – often while also juggling their own health issues, supporting children or grandchildren, taking care of their households or farms – Uldis embodied a familiar asymmetry: men receiving care and women providing it as a gendered obligation (di Leonardo 1987, 441; Fisher and Tronto 1990). Although care at the Pansionāts was formally a state-provided service, not a kin-based duty, the moral expectations of reciprocity endured. Staff experienced Uldis’s perceived sense of entitlement to care in the absence of reciprocal economic, moral, social, or emotional contributions as a violation of the unspoken care contract that structured daily life. Their labor, already low-paid and undervalued, was sustained by an ethic that framed care as something to be earned through demonstrated need, effort, or modesty. Within this moral economy that was shaped by the feminization of care, where value was tied to quiet endurance and gendered responsibility, Uldis’s refusal to participate or show gratitude disrupted the fragile sense of fairness that gave their work meaning. He was seen as not merely as undeserving but undermining the very logic of care that these women embodied through their labor, bodies, and aging selves.

Among the care workers there was a widely shared interpretation that Uldis had actively chosen a “lazy” life. To support this view, they often referred to his most recent visit from the State Medical Commission for the Assessment of Health Condition and Working Ability (VDEĀK), which determines disability status either temporarily or permanently. According to national regulations, permanent disability status due to a leg amputation requires the loss of either one foot above the Chopart joint or both feet above the Lisfranc joint (Prognozējamās invaliditātes, invaliditātes un darbspēju zaudējuma noteikšanas un invaliditāti apliecinoša

dokumenta izsniegšanas noteikumi 2014). Since 2015, eligibility for disability groups is also based on assessed work capacity, with Group I (severe disability) requiring an 80-100% loss. Uldis underwent this assessment every five years and according to several staff members, the most recent visit had been particularly revealing. Although he ordinarily moved around the care home without visible difficulty and did not use orthopedic shoes, he had surprised them by requesting a wheelchair for the evaluation. To them, this seemed like a performance, a strategic effort to maintain Group I status with its higher (though still meager) payments and to legitimize his claim to long-term residence in the care home.

After hearing how the care workers spoke about Uldis, I wanted to understand how he perceived his own situation. The staff's judgments about Uldis being a malingerer and slacker were grounded in their daily experiences and in broader moral expectations surrounding care, but I also knew that relationships between staff and residents were shaped by more than just formal protocols. Subtle sympathies and antipathies could render some residents more "deserving" than others in the eyes of the caregivers. It seemed possible that Uldis's failure to meet certain expectations might not necessarily be intentional if he had a different understanding of what it meant to be a care home resident. I did not discount the staff's assessments but still approached them with curiosity about the ways moral worth was negotiated on both sides of the care relationship. I also did not seek to verify whether the staff's characterizations were true, but to explore how Uldis, the Pansionāts, and the municipal social services had all, albeit for different reasons, come to see this institution as the right place for him.

Aside from occasionally remarking that "life is good here, except the food's always the same," Uldis never clearly articulated whether he genuinely liked living at the Pansionāts in either casual conversation or more formal interviews. Nor did he indicate whether his long stay reflected a deliberate choice or simply a chain of difficult circumstances he had learned to manage. His position differed from the demoralization sometimes observed among those who recognize the structural limits of ethical striving (Rajković 2018). Although there were apparent similarities between Uldis and the Serbian workers Rajković describes as simply enduring while mourning the loss of meaningful labor, creativity, and political integrity, Uldis neither expressed such losses nor seemed to measure himself against those ethical benchmarks (2018, 49, 61–63). If he felt trapped or longed for work, he never said so. Yet, if he benefited from the system, he did so quietly and without bravado and only secured a shared room at the care home and around sixty additional euros per month due to his classification in Disability Group 1 rather than 2 (Valsts sociālās apdrošināšanas aģentūra 2025). His presence reflected not ethical dissonance but a kind of pragmatic accommodation. Although I am not sure I ever truly

managed to place him, at least on the surface he seemed content with his life. Once, he told me, “It’s okay here. Quiet. Nobody bothers [me],” although I did see him annoyed a few times when the care workers were scolding him for “never lifting a finger.”

Regardless of how Uldis himself framed his condition or needs, two other actors contributed to his continued presence in the Pansionāts: the institution itself, and the municipality that was financing his stay. Over the years, the Pansionāts had initiated transfers for some residents whose needs they thought would be better addressed elsewhere. For example, two men in their forties, one with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and intellectual disabilities and another with behavioral issues caused by a long-ago traumatic brain injury, were eventually transferred to other institutions at the Pansionāts’s initiative. Occasionally, families also transferred residents for financial or geographical reasons. Still, transfers were rare; most residents who came here remained here.

By many measures, Uldis might have been a candidate for another kind of arrangement, yet after fifteen years he had become one of the most stable figures in the care home’s everyday life. Despite the staff’s quiet frustration with him, including that he received care services that care workers thought someone else might need more, neither the institution nor the municipality had ever tried to initiate a transfer. In this way, his presence reflected a kind of uneasy consensus among all involved, not necessarily because they agreed on the reasons, but because each, for their own purposes, found it workable that he remained.

In many ways, Uldis was an ideal resident from the perspective of the Pansionāts. While he was not always diligent about cleaning up after himself, he was largely self-sufficient: he did not require assistance with bathing, eating, or other daily tasks, which significantly lightened the everyday workload of primary care staff. He lived in the Lower Building, where the more mobile residents were housed, and was considered among the healthiest even within that group. Although many care workers viewed him as morally undeserving of care services, he was, in practical terms, an easy resident to care for.

Another perceived advantage was his age. Even after fifteen years in the Pansionāts, Uldis was still relatively young, which suggested a greater likelihood of remaining in good physical health for years to come. In this sense, he not only required little direct care, which aligned well with the overall unrushed pace of daily life and care routines there, but also represented a stable, long-term presence. Uldis’s presence sustained both the institution’s resident numbers and, indirectly, its staffing needs. Although no one ever said it explicitly, Uldis embodied a kind of ideal from the perspective of institutional continuity. Combined with the fact that Uldis himself did not seek alternative services or express dissatisfaction, his presence posed no complications for the institution. He fit in, not because he exemplified the moral values of the care workers or

because this was the most suitable care for him but because his quiet permanence worked well for the system as it was.

But it was not only the Pansionāts that benefited from Uldis's quiet permanence. From the perspective of the municipality, too, he represented a convenient solution to a long-standing problem. Known in the social services system as a "complicated case," Uldis had for years required attention and intervention, either because he did not fully conform to the services that were available or because the services he actually needed, social housing and daily assistance with practical tasks, were not in place. Although the municipality had to finance his rather expensive stay at the Pansionāts, this recurring cost seemed ultimately more manageable and more predictable than the ongoing entanglements of failed job placements, housing instability, or emergency interventions. Placing him in the care home offered a resolution – a fix – for the municipality, but also a certain understanding of care: he was provided with stability, he was housed, fed, and accounted for alongside others. He was not abandoned by the state in the manner ethnographers such as Biehl (2009; 2013) and Garcia (2024) have documented, but contained and removed from public and politically sensitive spaces. He was no longer a nuisance, but he was also not coerced. The act of care was fulfilled. In this framing, the state care was less about enabling Uldis's life and more about ensuring that certain lives framed as complicated, unpredictable, or administratively burdensome were excluded from the broader community. This was not necessarily punitive, at least not openly, but it combined the logics of care and control in ways that blurred the line between protection and sequestration.

In this sense, Uldis's long-term residence at the Pansionāts resembled what scholars of humanitarianism and migration have observed in very different settings: care that sustains life, while fixing certain people in place. Didier Fassin (2005) has described how humanitarian interventions, under the banner of compassion, can also operate as techniques of control, keeping recipients alive but contained within specific moral and spatial boundaries. Similarly, Miriam Ticktin (2011) has shown how care regimes often create and reinforce dependency, defining people through medical or social categories that both grant access to support and limit the possibility of moving beyond it. Although their work concerns migrants and asylum seekers, the underlying logic resonates here. In the Pansionāts, care for those that the municipality had deemed "complicated" or "undesirable" – people like Uldis who did not fit dominant ideals of productivity or reciprocity – was both a means of meeting immediate needs of care and a way of managing and sequestering individuals who posed ongoing challenges for municipal welfare systems. The Pansionāts anchored him in place, turning his stay there into a quiet solution for the municipality and a fix that stabilized the life of the care home.

Uldis might not have been typical of the public image of a care home resident, a frail older adult grateful for their accommodation. Even though Uldis's story does not fit neatly into the Pansionāts's image – or, for that matter, that of any care home for older adults – he was also not an exception but a window into how social care in Latvia functioned. Moreover, in comparison to the other residents that I have mentioned, the case of Uldis shows a more complex picture of how the Pansionāts functioned not only as a place that absorbed those labeled as social “rejects” or burdens but as an institution that in many ways, “depended” on them, and in the same way it “depended” on older adults. Such residents, whose lives did not align with dominant ideals of productivity, moral virtue, or even the role of the “grateful recipient” of care, nonetheless helped anchor the care home over time. Uldis's long-term presence, though often contested by staff and difficult to render legible in bureaucratic terms, contributed to sustaining employment, justifying public funding, and maintaining the institution's position within the municipality's care infrastructure. This was not an accidental outcome, or a situation that was merely tolerated, but central to how the system worked.

In the end, Uldis's story reveals how the Pansionāts survived not simply by caring for those who fit the image of frail, aging residents but also accommodating those whose lives unsettled the moral economy of care. His quiet permanence, while resented by staff, anchored the institution as much as it unsettled it. For care workers, his presence embodied a tension: he was easy to look after yet morally difficult to accept. For the municipality, he was both a financial burden and a convenient solution. His case made visible how the institution existed by housing people who fell between categories and were not easily placed elsewhere.

At the same time, Uldis was not alone in sustaining the Pansionāts. Alongside him were the many “ordinary” residents – older adults who entered because of illness, old age, or the absence of family care – who did not unsettle moral expectations in the same way, but whose presence ensured the continuity of daily rhythms and justified the institution's role within the local care infrastructure. Together, these different residents made the Pansionāts functional: the “ordinary” residents by reproducing the expected image of who belonged in such a place, and people like Uldis by embodying the ambiguities of care that could never be resolved.

7.2. “Poplar Tree”: Investable lives and the promise of change

On November 12, 2020, I took a photo from a third-floor hallway window in the Upper Building that showed a yellow crane next to two blue construction containers, a mobile toilet, a truck, and a few men in conversation. Most importantly, the frame of a one-story building is visible, including three unfinished rooms like small studio apartments and enough space for five more. Several older residents of the third floor also often stood at that window, watching

the slow progress with curiosity. As it was the first autumn of the pandemic, not much else was happening, and the construction offered a visible change in a familiar landscape.

The photo captured the early stages of a project tied to Latvia's deinstitutionalization (DI) program for adults with mental disorders. Thus, it visibly promised possible changes to social care in Latvia and a definite change in the scenery and social relations at the Pansionāts. The program was partly funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which between 2015 until 2023 contributed to its implementation by seventy-two local governments, including the construction of new buildings for various services, like up-to-date group homes and spaces for services like workshops and classes (Labklājības ministrija 2020a). The stated goal of the DI program was to "provide... a person with limited self-care capabilities with the necessary support to be able to live at home or in a family environment" (Labklājības ministrija 2020a). As well as shared housing for seven or eight people, the Pansionāts' new "Poplar Tree" complex included space for specialized workshops. The aim was to help these residents – most of whom were to be transferred from other institutions, mainly government-run long-term facilities – develop new everyday living skills, with support tailored to individual needs. Some learned basic skills like personal hygiene and cooking food, others financial planning and how to make choices independently. All were required to attend daily ceramics and woodworking classes to develop practical skills that might later be applied to employment and adjust to a structured work schedule.

At first, however, several Pansionāts care workers were quietly skeptic of DI. It was not clear to them whether the Poplar Tree was meant to function as a transitional housing, preparing residents for "independent" living in social housing with support services, or as a long-term group home. In practice, it turned out that it could be either, depending on the person. Still, the idea that people with mental disorders, many of whom had spent most or all of their lives in long-term care institutions with daily routines not unlike those at the Pansionāts, could be "reintegrated" into society through "community-based social services [and] public understanding of the human rights of people with mental disorders" as promoted by the DI campaign "A Person, Not a Diagnosis" (Labklājības ministrija, n.d.) seemed at odds with the project's location. The Poplar Tree was in a remote rural area where public transport was limited, employment opportunities scarce, and family visits rare. For some staff, this raised doubts about what "community-based" could realistically mean in such a setting. As one employee put it bluntly: "I just don't get it. What are they going to do here? Even we [locals] struggle to find work here." Another employee wryly remarked, "It's weird... they're building a new house for a project that's supposed to de-inst-..., you know, they'll all be living together

in one building! It's the same as our Pansītis, just fancier." Thus, for some the Poplar Tree seemed less like a transitional facility than a repackaging of institutional care.

Their skepticism was not completely unfounded. In 2018, three years after launching the DI project in Latvia, the State Audit Office released an report that called on the Ministry of Welfare (which was responsible for implementing and overseeing the program) "to focus not on absorbing EU Structural Fund resources, but on providing the necessary support to DI implementers to achieve the initially set monitoring indicators, thereby ensuring that as many people as possible receive community-based social services within the required scope" (Valsts kontrole 2018, 6). They stressed that DI's goal was not just to establish service locations but to deliver community-based services during implementation, ensuring target group members receive needed support and enabling people to begin living outside institutions (Valsts kontrole 2018).

The initial goal was that the DI process would result in the closure of three state-funded psychiatric hospitals and their 700 residents being transferred to community-based living; however, this officially changed several times, reducing the actual number of people who would benefit from the process before it ended in 2023. In April 2024, the Latvian Movement for Independent Living (LKNDz) criticized the process on Facebook, arguing that the institutional care system had not fundamentally changed and the main goal of the DI had thus not been achieved. The association also asked the Ministry of Welfare to clarify whether they saw DI as a project or a process. One main critique was that "people with mental disorders are still being placed in long-term care institutions because community-based services that meet their needs are not available" (Latvian Movement for Independent Living 2024). The Ministry of Welfare responded with a comment on the post noting that between 2015 and 2022, 483 people with mental disorders, including 225 who received services by specifically funded by the project, had moved from state-funded institutions to live in the community. This essentially conceded that the initial goal of 700 people had never been reached (Latvian Movement for Independent Living 2024).

The implementation of DI in Latvia echoed the dynamics described by Zakariás and colleagues (2025) in their study of how it was carried out for children in Hungary, where EU-funded reforms were often "domesticated" to fit local political and economic logics, producing hybrid models that appeared modern but retained core features of institutional care. In Latvia, DI was shaped not only by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified in 2010 but also EU funding and Europeanization discourses that cast "community-based services" as both a policy priority and a marker of European belonging (United Nations, n.d.). This framing underscored the assumption that post-Soviet Eastern European countries

required guidance from their Western counterparts to become fully “European” (Wolff 1994). As Dzenovska (2018c, 11–13) argues, the European Union, however complex, differentiated, and often incoherent as it is, does function as a politically and morally normative “civilizing” project. In this case, Europeanness entered Eastern Europe not only by pushing for welfare reforms but also by promoting openness and tolerance as liberal political virtues. While Dzenovska (2018c, 82–110) refers primarily to tolerance of ethnic, religious, and racial diversity, her argument can also be extended to people with mental disorders and even to older adults, whose inclusion has been framed in policy through DI and “healthy aging” initiatives (I return to the latter later in this section). Yet as Dzenovska (2018c) writes, this “school of Europeanness” for Latvians has sometimes been met with reluctance and pushback. For example, in 2018 the members of one municipal council near Riga were sharply divided over the location of a new EU-funded group home for people with mental disorders: some advocated for a central site to support accessibility and inclusion, while others pushed for a peripheral location, stoking fears among residents about a “madhouse” (Jauns.lv/LETA 2018). Such debates highlight how European ideals of welfare rarely translated smoothly on the ground, where local values, lived realities, and limited resources – especially once EU funding ended – shaped what actually could be achieved.

This convergence of EU inclusion rhetoric and local care realities suggests that the Poplar Tree’s future-building role was constrained less by the intentions of its staff than by the broader political economy of social care in Latvia. As in Hungary (Zakariás et al. 2025), DI funding was often directed to construction, a visible, measurable outcome, while the long-term, less tangible investments required to sustain autonomy and inclusion often remained underdeveloped (Valsts kontrole 2018). In this way, the Poplar Tree offered residents improved living conditions and new learning opportunities but also risked reproducing a pattern where architectural change occurred without fully dismantling the logics of institutional care.

That is not to say the Poplar Tree was an empty gesture. For residents that arrived there in early summer 2021, it offered genuine progress. For the first time, they were living in their own small apartments, had privacy, and were learning to do chores and many other things, though always with the needed assistance.

Kārlis, at 56, was the oldest resident of the Poplar Tree. He had lived at the Pansionāts for many years, initially with his aging and increasingly frail mother. After her death, he remained in the Lower Building, maintaining the routines of the life they had once shared. The Director selected Kārlis for the DI program not because he was expected to become fully independent but because he felt he had been “overcared” for, needed a chance to build a certain level of autonomy, and would benefit from an environment where staff had more time to teach,

not just do things for residents. Kārlis went along with this but had to learn even the most basic daily routines. When I first met him in 2020, he was wearing diapers as he needed help using the toilet and the care workers considered this most efficient way to supervise his hygiene. At the Poplar Tree he was slowly, though not without setbacks, learning to live more independently. His progress pointed not only to personal change but also to care that was structured, pedagogical, and future oriented. This contrasted with the often overstretched and reactive model at the Pansionāts.

The remaining residents, six other men and one woman, had come from state institutions across the region. Their selection was based on evaluations of who might either eventually move on to social housing, return to a family setting, or benefit the most from the crafts classes, demonstrating their capacity to learn new skills and return to workforce. Within community-based mental health care, employment, even volunteer work, is regarded as central because it provides distraction from illness, fosters independence, strengthens self-worth and helps prevent the monotony often linked with chronic conditions (Friedman 2009, 385).

However, each resident had individualized goals and for most full independence in the sense of living and working on their own with minimal assistance was not a likely outcome. The Director knew this early on and seemed content with it. However, questions still lingered among the staff about how and where residents would find outside work opportunities or social experiences, whether during or after their two years at the Poplar Tree. Funding added another layer of uncertainty: without continued support after the two-year ERDF period, many faced the risk of returning to long-term institutional care unless municipalities assumed the financial cost.

These doubts reinforced a broader perception that the Poplar Tree was less a departure from institutional life than an extension of it. Although it was formally independent, many residents and staff of the Pansionāts understood it as part of the same world. The overlap was structural as well as symbolic: both facilities were overseen by the same director and administration, effectively functioning as a “more-than-one, less-than-two” entity. Like the Pansionāts, the Poplar Tree drew on local labor, employing four direct care workers on 24-hour shifts, a rehabilitation counselor responsible for residents’ individual plans, and instructors who alternated between teaching woodworking and clay classes, thus expanding the role of the institution in the local area.

At first, the Director tried to address the gender imbalance between staff and residents by hiring a local man as a care worker, but he soon left. As a result, the only remaining male employee was the woodworking instructor. Most of the care workers had previously been employed at the Pansionāts. One was invited to join the Poplar Tree because of her experience

with people with mental disorders and chronic back pain, which made the less physically demanding work there more suitable for her. (Since residents were mostly capable of managing their own personal hygiene, the care work at the Poplar Tree required less physical strain). Another former Pansionāts worker accepted the position after her previous job became too emotionally exhausting. These “transfers” reflected not only pragmatic and sustainable use of local human resources but also practices of care: providing staff with alternative employment or moving them into less demanding roles. The rehabilitation counselor, Asnāte, also had a history with the Pansionāts, where she had started working in the winter of 2021 before taking on the Poplar Tree role, and she continued to work in both places.

The effects of Asnāte’s dual role at the Pansionāts and the Poplar Tree extended beyond staffing arrangements. For some older adults, her new position at the Poplar Tree reinforced a sense of being left behind. As one woman told me over coffee: “Now Asnāte is always there, she doesn’t have time for us anymore. I haven’t seen her in over a week.” Another Pansionāts resident said she understood that the young people, the Poplar Tree residents, needed Asnāte more, but she was sad that they did not see her as often as previously. In their view, the residents of the Poplar Tree had become a priority. On top of that, when Kārlis moved from the Lower Building into the Poplar Tree, a few of the residents who stayed there, including Uldis, sneered that he was now living at the “fancy place” (*smalkā vieta*). It was hard to blame them: while the Poplar Tree residents were moving into a new, purpose-built facility with individual studio apartments, many older adults remained in cramped rooms shared by two or three people, some with black mold visible on the walls, and where long-overdue renovations were needed but never undertaken. The contrast made the difference in investment palpable.

This sense of unequal attention and unequal value persisted. Importantly, no policy document in Latvia ever explicitly declared people with mental disorders more worthy of investment than older adults – in fact, in the general population stigmatization of people with mental disorders was still present. Yet on the ground, that was how it often felt. For the older adults, Asnāte’s growing focus on the Poplar Tree residents carried the message that their needs were secondary.⁶⁶

The Poplar Tree was predicated on the idea that its residents could change and that with proper support they could learn new skills, maybe even take up employment, and move toward fuller social and economic participation. Older adults at the Pansionāts, by contrast, were rarely positioned within such a narrative of transformation. Instead, in public and political discourses their lives were filtered through the discourse of “healthy aging,” a morally charged framework

⁶⁶ Formally, more of Asnāte’s time was allocated to the Poplar Tree than the Pansionāts, but to the older adults such contractual details mattered little.

pervasive in Euro-American contexts. Whereas Poplar Tree residents were imagined as transformable through institutional care and external support, older adults were either expected to transform themselves by embodying the ideals of activity, independence, and self-management or to stay as they were. This was particularly felt when addressing so-called “proletarian” older adults, who were not even expected to engage with healthy aging. The model of successful aging, a predecessor of the term “healthy aging,” had emerged as a way to resist decline but had increasingly shifted responsibility onto individuals to maintain their health, activity, and productivity throughout the life course (Corwin 2017, 98).⁶⁷ Governments have good reason to push ideals of erasing “old age,” especially as populations age: if older people stay healthy and active, they delay becoming dependent and remain economically active. Thus, the movement of healthy or successful aging, with its stress on self-care and responsibility, can be seen as a contemporary biopolitics of aging, remaking potentially frail and dependent elders into active, fit, and responsible subjects (Lamb 2019, 268).

At the same time, this framing risks rendering those who do not or cannot live up to such ideals as failed subjects. Calasanti and King (2017) similarly argue that successful aging reproduces ageism by privileging bodies that remain youthful, active, and self-managing, while marginalizing those who do not “invest” in themselves in sanctioned ways. Such ideals are not universal but reflect particular cultural and political-economic values, including the neoliberal emphasis on individual self-care and autonomy (Lamb 2019, 268; Lamb et al. 2017, 1–2)

Seen from this perspective, it is plausible to suggest that the notion of “healthy aging,” gradually introduced through policy documents in Latvia, contributed to shaping emerging ideas about whose lives might be considered investable. Unlike DI, whose funding was distributed through municipal institutions, support for healthy aging emerged more indirectly and less tangibly via research funding, applied projects, and collaborations between municipalities, research institutions, and NGOs (for example, Interreg.lv 2025; NordPlus, n.d.). These initiatives were often framed around teaching older adults new skills, training municipal representatives, or, at least in theory, adapting social and health services to better meet the needs of older adults.

⁶⁷ “Healthy aging” is a derivative of the term “successful aging” – a term coined by gerontologist Robert Havighurst (Havighurst 1961). In the 1980s and 1990s, the physician John Rowe and the psychologist Robert Kahn (1987; 1997) further developed the concept in response to questions about mental and physical vitality in the second half of life. Since then, “successful aging” – later replaced and advanced by terms such as “active aging,” “productive aging,” and “healthy aging” – has remained a dominant, and often uncritically adopted, component of gerontological research and policy in Europe and Northern America. It is referenced in both self-help literature and the guidelines of the World Health Organization and the European Union on healthy living and aging (Lamb et al. 2017, 1–3).

As the director of another care home for older adults explained to me in a private conversation, the ideas associated with healthy aging did not easily translate into the everyday realities of long-term care institutions for two main reasons. First, he noted that institutions like the Pansionāts were widely associated with frailty, dependency, and poverty, precisely the opposite of what “healthy aging” was meant to signify and as I have discussed earlier in this thesis. Staff at the Pansionāts voiced similar observations, recalling that ten or twenty years ago, healthier older adults were more likely to move into the facility than today. This shift may reflect longer overall life expectancy, as well as a widening gap between life expectancy and healthy life years, as Latvia has the lowest level of healthy life years in Europe (Oficiālās statistikas portāls 2024b).

The second challenge was financial. In principle, project-based funding could support improvements in care home services, but in practice any project requiring new staff for implementation and sustainability risked increasing the already high fees and placing additional burdens on relatives or municipalities. As a result, the most effective way to use external funding was usually through construction projects, which did not always expand or transform the services themselves. The Pansionāts had become adept at jumping on the bandwagon to access whatever resources were available and find ways to use them to improve life in the institution. For instance, during the pandemic, it secured state funding to build a covered porch as a measure to enable social distancing. The facility did indeed lack adequate gathering space and although the porch was initially underused, partly due to residents’ limited mobility and partly to the embodied politics of humility, it gradually became more popular.

The Pansionāts also invested its own limited savings in improvements. One notable example was the construction of a dedicated kitchen for a culinary workshop that the physiotherapist had started years earlier and that Asnāte later took over. This kitchen, located in a separate building and shared with the Poplar Tree, was framed as a way to engage residents in meaningful activities in a modern and inviting environment. Once in place, it became a long-term asset that could serve multiple purposes and resonated with discourses of healthy and active aging, even if those ideals did not fully align with the lived realities of many residents. At the same time, the new, modern spaces underscored how outdated the existing facilities were, especially the Lower Building. This unevenness did not reflect neglect but indicated how investment was aligned with broader ideas of “healthy aging” and with the practicalities of available funding. It was often more feasible to channel resources into visible infrastructure, such as the porch or new kitchen, than into ongoing social services that would require additional staff or deferred maintenance that would have gone largely unnoticed by external funders or local media. Thus, what counted as “investable” was shaped not only by pragmatic funding

concerns and the visibility of improvements, but also by moral visions of active and healthy aging that framed certain kinds of projects as more legitimate or worthwhile.

In this way, the moralization of aging foreclosed the possibility of investment without transformation. For older adults, it hinged on their ability to embody the ideals of healthy aging. For Poplar Tree residents – younger adults with mental disorders, investment was tied to the prospect of certain level of rehabilitation and future inclusion. In both cases, care and resources became conditional on the promise of change. At the Poplar Tree, people with mental disorders were imagined as transformable through institutional support: with training, rehabilitative care, and structured programs, they might learn new skills and move, at least in theory, toward inclusion. Investment here flowed because transformation was framed as possible and could be scaffolded by external resources. Older adults at the Pansionāts, by contrast, were rarely positioned within such a collective narrative. Their potential for investment was tied instead to the ideals of “healthy” or “active” aging, which cast transformation as an individual responsibility: older adults had to show themselves as active, engaged, and self-managing in order to be seen as a “worthy” investment. In practice, few could or wished to embody these ideals, which meant that institutional and infrastructural investments bypassed them almost entirely. The paradox, then, is that both groups were governed by the same logic: only transformation merited investment. For Poplar Tree residents, this transformation was collectively supported through institutional care, while for older adults it was demanded as an individual responsibility and rarely attainable in practice.

In this way, deinstitutionalization and “healthy aging” both articulated morally saturated visions of investable lives, but along different trajectories. DI was tied to EU funding and state prioritization, making people with mental disorders legible as subjects of European reform. Healthy aging, meanwhile, carried considerable moral weight but less financial backing in Latvia, and thus remained framed as an individual responsibility of persons reminiscent of the Foucauldian “technologies of the self” that were aligned with broader neoliberal currents in Eastern Europe (Skultans 2003; Rivkin-Fish 2005; Friedman 2009)

The decision to build the Poplar Tree illustrates how care initiatives in Latvia often followed the availability of funding rather than locally defined needs. This is not to suggest that DI was unnecessary or that the Poplar Tree did not improve the lives of its residents. Rather, it highlights the skepticism voiced by Pansionāts staff about whether this was the most suitable place, and what ultimately drove the Poplar Tree’s creation. Together, they reveal the layered yet conditional nature of investment in social care. The Pansionāts had long embodied a form of investment in older adults that sustained lives marked by decline, dependency, and modest means and in doing so keeping both the institution and the locality alive. The Poplar Tree, in

contrast, channeled resources toward a more future-oriented project, where residents could be imagined as transformable and thus aligned with broader policy ideals. In this sense, both the Pansionāts and the Poplar Tree illustrate how state care acted as a spatio-social fix: securing presence and continuity by investing differently in lives that might otherwise be deemed empty and unworthy of investment, albeit on certain conditions.⁶⁸

Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have shown how state care for older adults at the Pansionāts, “complicated” residents such as Uldis, and younger adults at the Poplar Tree sustained both individual lives and the institutions themselves. In this context, care was not just about meeting immediate needs but also anchoring different visions of presence, continuity and future.

Uldis’s long stay in the Pansionāts illustrated a form of present-oriented continuity or maintenance: his life was stabilized through everyday care that secured his life, without projecting any larger promises of improved conditions, adaptive care services, or his own moral growth. His presence, morally ambiguous to staff yet practically indispensable to the institution, revealed how the Pansionāts could “catch” those who did not fit elsewhere. His story also revealed how interdependencies, here between Uldis, the Pansionāts and the municipality, specific modes of belonging (Rutherford 2007).

At the same time, the creation of the Poplar Tree introduced a more future-oriented model tied to Latvia’s alignment with EU policy priorities and civilizational discourses of Europeanization. Even though many residents were unlikely to “move on,” their care was framed within ideals of inclusion, learned skills, and work – values that symbolically aligned the institution with broader European futures.

To conceptualize these dynamics, I have reworked David Harvey’s (2001a; 2001b) notion of the spatial fix. Where Harvey theorized capital investment as a way of resolving systemic crises through expansion and restructuring, I use the term spatio-social fix to describe how care sustained life and institutions under constrained conditions (Harvey 2001a, 24). These fixes did not resolve crisis but held contradictions together: stabilizing people, places, and infrastructures in ways that were modest, morally charged, and contingent. Uldis’s long-term residency at the Pansionāts and the creation of the Poplar Tree exemplified this dynamic. Each, in its own way,

⁶⁸ In 2025, ownership of the Pansionāts was transferred from the municipality to a new Pansionāts-Poplar Tree LLC. It has continued to provide social care to local residents as before, but with greater flexibility for investment and development.

anchored the institution, the municipality, and the surrounding community, even as they distributed futures differently between older and younger residents.

Both cases show how care fixed not only individual lives but also the institution and the local social fabric. The Pansionāts stabilized Uldis's life at a moment when few alternatives were available, while his continued presence, in turn, helped stabilize the institution itself by sustaining its routines, its role in local social reproduction, and its relevance in the surrounding landscape. For the Poplar Tree, care operated as a fix oriented toward imagined futures – both for its residents and for the municipality – channeling EU funds, expanding services, and securing the institution's role in the municipality. In both forms, care was durable and did not result in temporary solutions but ongoing arrangements that bounded residents, staff, and the place itself into a modest, yet stable equilibrium.

The Poplar Tree also demonstrated how deinstitutionalization in Latvia was domesticated to local logics. Its construction was both a humane initiative and a pragmatic strategy: it attracted EU funding, created employment, and stabilized the Pansionāts in a shifting welfare landscape. Residents benefited from individualized care and new opportunities, yet the facility also extended institutional care under another guise, catching those who had no other place to go.

By comparison, the older adults in the Pansionāts were more subtly connected to the discourse of “healthy” aging. While powerful in Euro-American debates, in Latvia this framework functioned less as a resource-backed policy and more as a moral aspiration, shifting responsibility for “healthy” later life onto individuals. For many residents, such ideals were unattainable or strange. Nevertheless, care was provided to everyone who entered the Pansionāts: meals, housing, medical oversight, cultural events, and social contact that secured life in the absence of family or other supports. This form of care was steady and necessary, but it lacked the forward-looking promise that surrounded the Poplar Tree. There younger residents with mental health conditions could be more readily aligned, if only implicitly, with broader policy goals of rehabilitation and inclusion. The contrast was less about who deserved care and more about what kinds of futures care was imagined to make possible.

What emerged was not a story of rupture but of contested and uneven and in current conditions indispensable continuity. The Pansionāts and the Poplar Tree revealed how marginality was lived and managed through forms of belonging that were partial, negotiated, and shifting. In the end, both institutions invited me to ask what kinds of futures are made possible, and for whom, within the moral and economic constraints of institutional life, and what it means when a kind of continuity based on maintenance rather than transformation becomes the most enduring promise of care.

8. Epilogue

I think of Eduards' quiet statement "all roads lead to the Pansionāts" every time I return there. Although my visits have become less frequent (more because of current work obligations than lack of desire) it still feels familiar from my years there. Eduards is gone, as are many of the other residents who shaped my days there. Their absence is palpable to me, yet every time I return, I see and feel that the Pansionāts's daily rhythm carries on. The staff remain, most of the routines persist, and new residents have taken the place of those who are gone. The place has never quite let me go. It has lingered in my memory, notes, conversations, lectures, and throughout the slow writing of this dissertation.

Crossing the threshold between past fieldwork and this written account, not only the passage of time comes into view but the broader conditions that the lives of residents and employees revealed. Over the years, the Pansionāts has revealed the core argument of this thesis: in a setting shaped by multilayered emptiness, care operates as a socio-spatial fix, stabilizing people, institutions, places, and modest futures through forms of stability that are fragile yet enduring. This fix emerges precisely through the entanglement of emptiness and care. Care anchors what is publicly framed or intimately felt as emptiness, while emptiness shapes the value, possibilities, and endurance of care. Together, they generate the forms of everyday continuity through which life in rural Latvia persists.

This insight did not arise from any single chapter or any one theoretical text. It grew gradually, through the accumulation of daily happenings that patterned life for residents, employees, and the Pansionāts itself: Anda's careful deliberations about reducing her herd, Ivars's single Latvian Brown, the residents' morning coffee breaks or alcohol routines, the Poplar Tree's promises and limits, and the care home's never-ending influx of older adults. Through these scenes, the theoretical strands that introduced this thesis became tightly intertwined. Thelen's (2015; 2021) understanding of care as social organization becomes inseparable here from Harvey's (2000; 2001a; 2001b) notion of the social fix: together they illuminate how care at the Pansionāts offered a form of steadiness, holding people and institutions in place often just long enough. This analytic pairing enables me to see not only how care circulates but how it organizes life in contexts shaped by national and personal decline.

Dzenovska's (2011a; 2012; 2018a; 2020) conception of emptiness as a historically produced condition shaped by out-migration, austerity, and political abandonment and as a mode of living amidst shrinking horizons appears in this ethnography alongside other layers of

emptiness that structure rural Latvia. Emptiness here is both a discourse of decline and a lived condition: a national-level re-generational anxiety about demographic shrinkage, a framing of aging as the “wrong” kind of presence, and an everyday practice of endurance in which people sustain relationships, institutions, and life itself through small, persistent acts of maintaining and caring for and about. I draw on Harvey and Thelen to show how emptiness in this setting becomes tethered to practices of care that steady people, institutions, places, and futures – a conceptual bridge that my ethnography brings into view. What follows in this epilogue gathers these threads into a single frame. Rather than revisiting each chapter, I trace how the ethnography as a whole unsettles dominant narratives of decline to reveal something quieter but more enduring: a socio-spatial fix shaped by the relation between care and emptiness that makes life possible even in places where the future is imagined to lie elsewhere.

Across the preceding chapters, this dissertation has traced how care and emptiness interweave to form a socio-spatial fix in contemporary Latvia. Each chapter approached this relationship from a different angle – demographic anxieties, rural infrastructures, informal socialities, moral worlds, social and spatial practices, and marginality – but taken together they reveal a coherent and cumulative argument: that state care for older adults functions as an infrastructural anchor in a landscape shaped by multi-layered emptiness. This section brings these strands together, showing how the analytic trajectory of the dissertation moves across scales and deepens through ethnographic detail and ultimately illuminating how rural life is held together through everyday work, institutional stability, and the endurance of those who remain.

The ethnography begins in Chapter 2 with re-generational anxiety – a longstanding narrative in Latvia that imagines demographic decline as a threat to the nation’s biological and cultural survival. This anxiety is not abstract. It permeates the everyday: emptying farms, closing shops, shrinking kin networks, dwindling cattle herds, and the bodily limits of aging farmers. These scenes show how emptiness is lived as a mode of inhabiting a place from which the future appears displaced. They demonstrate how demographic decline is felt through landscapes and routines, and how older adults – those most often framed as demographic burden – continue to hold things together.

This chapter makes two critical moves for the dissertation as a whole. First, it anchors emptiness not as absence but as presence: a condition produced by political-economic processes and experienced affectively, spatially, and morally. Second, it positions aging as one of emptiness’s key registers: older adults are central to sustaining rural life yet symbolically positioned outside the nation’s future. In this way, Chapter 2 sets the conceptual ground for understanding emptiness as both discourse and lived condition.

Where Chapter 2 traces the symbolic and material contours of emptiness, Chapter 3 turns to the Pansionāts and its employees to show how emptiness and care come together as a socio-spatial fix for them. What appears in policy and public discourse as a marginal institution – a care home for older adults – emerges ethnographically as a central anchor in local life. The Pansionāts provides employment, informal economic opportunities, municipal revenue, and a form of infrastructural stability in a region marked by shrinking livelihoods. It sustains forms of continuity that would otherwise falter.

Here, emptiness and care become interdependent. It is demographic decline that keeps the institution full; it is the presence of the Pansionāts that enables residents and employees to remain in place. This mutual dependence illustrates how the institution functions as a fix – a way of stabilizing people and place in the face of broader uncertainty and precarity. At the same time, following Thelen (2015), the Pansionāts is shown to be a form of social organization, a relational infrastructure through which care is distributed, negotiated, and made meaningful.

Seen through this lens, care at the Pansionāts does not simply stabilize life but does so through a dynamic of continual dependency that resonates with Harvey's (2001a) notion of the fix. The institution's endurance depends on a steady inflow of older adults and people with disabilities – the very populations publicly framed as contributing to Latvia's emptiness. In this sense, emptiness provides the material conditions that keep the care home full, while the care home in turn holds this emptiness in place, converting it into employment, municipal revenue, institutional continuity, and the routines of everyday life. This recursive dependence – where emptiness supplies the population and care transforms that population into a form of stability – gives the socio-spatial fix its full analytic weight. It is not a permanent resolution but a temporary, necessary, and continually renewed way of keeping life going.

Taken together, Chapters 2 and 3 move the argument from national anxieties about disappearance to the infrastructures through which rural life persists.

Chapter 4 deepens this movement by examining how residents, staff, and locals engage in practices of place-making amid emptiness. Here, emptiness appears not only as a structural condition but as a terrain of sociality, attachment, and everyday negotiation. Conversations along the road, shared concerns about infrastructure, and small mutualities reveal how people make places livable even when they are cast as declining or peripheral. Yet the chapter also shows something more subtle: that even as the Pansionāts anchors employment, economic activity, and social life, it remains largely invisible in how locals publicly articulate the value of the locality.

When residents of nearby villages, including some employees of the Pansionāts, mobilized to demand better road maintenance, the care home did not enter their arguments,

despite being one of the area's largest employers. In the short video supporting the road campaign, it was absent altogether. What counted as evidence of the locality's importance was framed through other landmarks and activities, not through the institution that quietly sustains livelihoods and daily rhythms.

A contrast emerges in the next section: whereas the local library appears as a valued symbol of cultural continuity and communal worth, the Pansionāts remains peripheral to such imaginaries. This juxtaposition – between an institution rendered emblematic of the locality and one rendered invisible – illustrates how emptiness is lived through selective visibility. Institutions associated with aging, disability, and decline do not count as evidence of vitality or future, even when they sustain economic and social life. The care home's infrastructural centrality does not translate into symbolic centrality; it remains outside the narratives through which belonging, value, and future possibility are publicly framed.

Chapter 4 thus shows that place-making is not the opposite of emptiness but one of its modes, shaped by what is seen and what is left out. Everyday socialities carve out pockets of continuity and meaning, yet the locality is still imagined as empty when institutions like the Pansionāts are symbolically discounted. This reinforces a core theme of the dissertation: care infrastructures stabilize life while remaining marginalized in imaginaries of the future.

Chapter 5 shifts from social practices to moral worlds. The phrase “nothing really happens here”, often repeated by residents, does not simply describe boredom or stasis. Instead, it reflects a moral disposition shaped by humility, modest expectations, and ambivalent temporalities by the residents. People do not imagine grand futures; they stretch the present, maintaining life through quiet routine.

This chapter highlights how humility functions as a moral and affective response to emptiness. Rather than producing despair, emptiness often engenders forms of acceptance, adaptation, and even pride in endurance. These dispositions align with the argument that care and emptiness are entangled in and beyond the Pansionāts: care becomes meaningful because it stabilizes life in a world where expectations of improvement are minimal. Here, modest futures emerge as an alternative temporality to the expansive imaginaries of national renewal. The dissertation thus foregrounds a temporal mode of continuity rather than transformation, one that resonates strongly with care work, maintenance, and infrastructural persistence.

Chapter 6 explores how space is continually reconfigured through everyday practices of coffee drinking, intimacy, alcohol use, and small transgressions. These practices exist within porous and constantly shifting institutional boundaries between public and private, formal and informal, rule and exception. Rather than treating alcohol as deviance, the chapter shows how drinking became a socio-spatial practice, shaping relationships, producing tensions, and

creating zones of intimacy and relaxation in a place lacking privacy. These dynamics illuminate how residents assert agency within constraints, and how staff maintain institutional order while accommodating the realities of institutional life.

This chapter contributes to the broader argument by showing that the socio-spatial fix is not static. It is continually created and reproduced through negotiation, relational work, and informal adaptations. Care here is not only relational but also spatial; it is structured through corridors, rooms, yards, and shared tables; through what is permitted and what is quietly tolerated; through who can linger where and with whom.

Chapter 7 brings the argument to a crux by examining how residents inhabit marginality and how the institution manages lives deemed complicated, undeserving, or hard to place. The story of Uldis reveals how care can stabilize lives that do not fit normative ideals yet do not fully belong elsewhere. His long-term residence at the Pansionāts reflects not only personal circumstances but gaps in the welfare system, municipal priorities, and the moral economy of care. Uldis embodies the tension between care as affective and relational practice and care as containment. His presence helps clarify how the state stabilizes certain populations not by enabling flourishing but by keeping lives “in place” in a way that oscillates between support and sequestration.

The chapter then introduces the Poplar Tree as a contrasting and yet complementary site to the Pansionāts: a deinstitutionalization project infused with EU values, funding, and expectations of transformation. Whereas older adults at the Pansionāts are rarely framed as worthy of investment, Poplar Tree residents are imagined as objects of potential change. Yet both groups illustrate the same underlying logic: investment flows toward those who can be aligned with visions of the future, whether the EU’s or the nation’s, while maintenance and containment mark those aligned with decline.

By juxtaposing these two forms of care, Chapter 7 demonstrates how care, emptiness, and fix operate differently across populations but always in relation to imagined futures. Thus Chapter 7, by tying together present and future, also partially serves as a summarizing and concluding chapter.

This dissertation thus makes several related contributions to the anthropology of shrinking and aging societies, to theories of care, to the anthropology of aging, and to studies of rurality, place-making, and emptiness. Building on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in a rural Latvian care home and its surrounding communities, the dissertation develops a conceptual framework – the socio-spatial fix – that captures how state care in a small rural care home for older adults stabilize life in contexts of demographic decline. The contributions outlined below extend across empirical, and theoretical domains, offering new ways to

understand care in places where expansive horizons of transformation, improvement, modernity have narrowed.

First, this dissertation contributes to the anthropology of shrinking and aging societies by theorizing how life is sustained amid shrinkage rather than growth. It shows how social life continues through forms of care that include endurance, relational labor, and infrastructural anchoring. The concept of the socio-spatial fix captures how care institutions like the Pansionāts stabilize lives, relationships, and continuity without promising regeneration. This analytic moves beyond frameworks centered on revitalization or demographic recovery to illuminate how people inhabit, negotiate, and maintain life in the shadow of emptiness. It advances an understanding of shrinking societies not as emptying out but as reorganizing around practices of staying, holding, and maintaining.

Second, the dissertation offers a theoretical contribution to studies of care and social reproduction. By bringing Thelen's (2015) conception of care as social organization into conversation with Harvey's (2000; 2001b; 2001a) idea of fixation and Dzenovska's (2011a; 2012; 2013; 2018b; 2020) analysis of emptiness, the dissertation develops an integrated framework for examining how care infrastructures operate in contexts of decline. Care emerges as both relational and infrastructural: it holds people and institutions in place yet is enacted as a spatial practice that organizes daily life in conditions of uncertainty and precarity. The socio-spatial fix provides a conceptual tool for understanding how care stabilizes life not by resolving crisis but by managing it, by creating temporary yet enduring forms of continuity. This integrative approach speaks to broader anthropological debates on infrastructure by shifting attention away from spectacular projects and innovation to the everyday practices of maintenance and repair that sustain social worlds.

Third, the dissertation contributes to the anthropology of aging by extending existing insights into how aging is embedded in broader moral, spatial, and political economies, especially in contexts marked by demographic decline. Older adults in the Latvian countryside inhabit a paradoxical position: they are symbolically associated with decline, demographic panic, and the "wrong kind" of presence, yet they are practically indispensable in sustaining local livelihoods, caring for land and animals, and maintaining social infrastructures. Aging becomes a vantage point from which to understand how futures are allocated, how moral worth is negotiated, and how continuity is produced in emptying places. In highlighting aging as both devalued and generative, this dissertation argues for an anthropology of aging attuned to everyday practices of older adults in conversation with broader structures.

Fourth, this study contributes to scholarship on rurality, place-making, and emptiness by demonstrating how emptiness is lived, sensed, and navigated in everyday life. Drawing on

Dzenovska's (2011a; 2012; 2013; 2018b; 2020) work, the dissertation conceptualizes emptiness as a historically produced, multi-layered condition shaped by out-migration, austerity, and political abandonment. Yet it also shows how emptiness is enacted through selective visibility – how institutions like the Pansionāts remain materially central but symbolically peripheral, unnoticed in public reasoning about what makes a place valuable. The ethnography illustrates how people create livable worlds through small acts of sociability and mutual help, even as they inhabit landscapes marked by shrinking infrastructures and modest expectations or are engaged in a smallholder farming threatened by large farms, neoliberal processes, changes in kinship ties and aging of the farmers themselves. These practices reveal that emptiness does not foreclose sociality; instead, it shapes distinctive modes of place-making rooted in maintenance, everyday creativity, and the stretching of the present.

Finally, the dissertation offers comparative and interdisciplinary insights for understanding care infrastructures and demographic change beyond Latvia. While grounded in a specific post-socialist setting, the concept of socio-spatial fix extends beyond Latvia to other contexts worldwide. By theorizing care infrastructures as anchors that sustain life, the dissertation invites comparisons across welfare regimes and demographic conditions. It also opens space for dialogue with demography, geography, gerontology, and policy studies, offering an ethnographically grounded counterpoint to models that privilege prediction, revitalization, or measurable outcomes. The findings suggest the importance of attending to maintenance, endurance, and relationality as central dimensions of social life in aging societies.

Taken together, these contributions recast how anthropology might understand life in shrinking and aging societies. Rather than approaching decline as the gradual disappearance of social worlds, the dissertation shows how stability is continually produced through modest, routine, and relational practices that anchor people and institutions in place. The socio-spatial fix developed here offers a vocabulary for analyzing these forms of endurance – ways of sustaining life that rely not on transformation or renewal but on holding, maintaining, and staying. In grounding this framework in the everyday dynamics of a rural Latvian care home, the dissertation also points outward, suggesting how similar constellations of care, emptiness, and infrastructural anchoring may shape social life across diverse settings marked by demographic contraction and uncertain futures.

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