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STORIES FROM LATVIA’S PAST

Folklore and historical stories play a very important role in helping people understand their history. The following stories tell of Latvia’s history and geography. One of them tells about a great ruler of Latvia named Namejs, and the other tells how a waterfall in the city Kuldiga came to be. These stories help build national pride and cultural understanding.

Starting Points

1. Display pictures of Namejs’ ring and the Kuldiga waterfall (see Folklore & Language Visuals 1–2), or have the students draw their own pictures of them.

2. Discuss stories about famous American heroes and their influence on modern American culture.

3. Play hangman with the following words. Then, write these two lists on the board separately and ask students how they think each list of words could be combined into a folktale:

   a. ring     a. bargain
   b. war      b. wizard
   c. king     c. waterfall

Information

Namejs

More than seven hundred years ago, in a part of the world then called Livonia, now called Latvia, there were a lot of tribes with different rulers. One of the greatest rulers was a man named Namejs. He was brave, smart, loyal, and good to his people. They were free and happy. They were also pagan and worshiped many gods.

About eight hundred miles away, other tribes lived in an area of the world we now know as Germany. Although the people there were also pagans at one time, they had been converted to Christianity by the Romans. The Germanic tribes considered non-Christians to be barbaric. They decided to conquer the so-called barbaric tribes in eastern Europe and Christianize them.

In the early part of the thirteenth century, the Germanic tribes began heading towards Livonia. Namejs found out that they were coming and prepared his people to fight. When the Germanic knights arrived, a war began. The Germanic knights had more people, but Namejs and his people had strong fortifications and defended themselves well for a long time. Eventually, the Germanic knights beat Namejs and
his army. The people loved Namejs so much that they did not want him to be captured. They thought of a plan to protect him from the Germans.

Namejs had a special ring that only he wore (see Folklore & Language Visual 1). The Germanic knights knew that in order to find Namejs, all they had to do was find the man wearing this ring, but all the men that lived in the kingdom decided to make and wear rings exactly like Namejs’. When the Germans came to take Namejs away, they could not figure out who he was. Namejs was thus able to escape to Lithuania.

Today, many people in Latvia wear a ring that looks like Namejs’. No matter where you go in the world, if you see someone with that ring you can be sure that that person has been to Latvia. You can also be sure that that person is a friend and is willing to help you.

Kuldiga’s Waterfall

About five hundred years ago, a wizard lived in a town named Kuldiga. The wizard lived in a castle next to the river Venta, which runs right by Kuldiga.

The wizard was a smart man, and one night he made a deal with the devil. No one knows what the exact details of the deal were, but we do know the conditions. If the wizard lost the deal, his soul would belong to the devil. If the devil lost the deal, he would make the wizard rich.

The devil lost the deal. Furious, he refused to keep his promise. He decided to kill the wizard.

Because the wizard was so smart, he knew the devil was up to no good. He also knew the devil always slept during the day and woke up at night because he couldn’t be seen in the sun. The wizard started staying up at night and sleeping during the day to make sure the devil could not trick him.

It wasn’t long before the devil decided to do his terrible deed. One night, he gathered a huge bag of boulders to drop on the wizard’s castle. However, the wizard was awake and saw the devil coming. He went up into his tower and started crowing like a rooster. The devil heard the wizard and thought that morning was coming. He dropped the rocks and ran away. The rocks landed in the river Venta and made an enormous waterfall. Today it is called Kuldiga’s waterfall; it is the highest waterfall in Latvia and one of the widest waterfalls in Europe (see Folklore & Language Visual 2).

The Latvian Language

Although Latvia used to be part of Russia, Latvia has its own language—Latvian. In fact, the Latvian language comes from the same roots as Indo-European and Baltic languages (including Lithuanian and Old Prussian). This is what the Latvian alphabet looks like:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aa</th>
<th>Āā</th>
<th>Bb</th>
<th>Cc</th>
<th>Čč</th>
<th>Dd</th>
<th>Ee</th>
<th>Ėē</th>
<th>Ff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gg</td>
<td>Ģģ</td>
<td>Hh</td>
<td>Īī</td>
<td>Iī</td>
<td>Jī</td>
<td>Ķķ</td>
<td>Kķ</td>
<td>Lī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lī</td>
<td>Mm</td>
<td>Nn</td>
<td>Ėņ</td>
<td>Oo</td>
<td>Pp</td>
<td>Rr</td>
<td>Ss</td>
<td>Šš</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tt</td>
<td>Uu</td>
<td>Ūū</td>
<td>Vv</td>
<td>Zz</td>
<td>Žž</td>
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</table>
Here are some basic phrases to practice in Latvian:

**English** | **Latvian**
--- | ---
Yes | Ja (Yah)
No | Ne (Nay)
Hi! Hello! (informal) | Sveiks! (Svayks)
Hello! (formal) | Labdien! (Lahbdee-ehn)
Good Morning! | Labrit! (Lahbreet)
Good Evening! | Labvakar! (Lahbvahkahr)
See you! (Goodbye!) | Uz redzenanos! (Ooz redzejanoohs)
Please. | Ludzu (Loodzoo)
Thank You. | Paldies (Pahldee-ehs)
How’s it going? | Ka tev iet? (Kah tehv ee-eht)
It’s going fine. | Paldies, man iet labi. (Pahldee-ehs, mahn ee-eht lahbee)
How are you? | Ka jums klausas? (Kah yooms klah-yahs)
Fine, thank you. | Paldies, labi. (Pahldee-ehs, lahbee)

**Activities**

1. Provide props and act out the stories of Namejs’ ring and Kuldiga’s waterfall as you’re telling them.
2. Write a folklore story.
3. Draw pictures of what took place in the stories.
4. Find American folktales and share them with the class.
5. Practice pronouncing Latvian phrases.
6. With a partner, practice greeting each other in Latvian.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Why would the people of Latvia hold Namejs in such high regard to this day?
2. Name some American heroes similar to Namejs.
3. How can folktales of historical events and landforms add to the culture and build patriotism in a country?
4. Folktales are generally based on some truth. Do you believe Latvia’s folktales or folktales from the United States? From what truth do you think they could have been derived?
Folklore & Language Visual 1: Namejs’ Ring
Folklore & Language Visual 2: Waterfall at Kuldiga
FLAG OF LATVIA

The two maroon bands on the flag represent the blood shed in the distant and recent past for the cause of freedom, and the readiness of the people to give the blood of their hearts for freedom. The white band represents right, truth, honor of free citizens, trustworthiness, and, above all, freedom.