

“Do you sometimes lack the strength and awareness on how to live your life? Do you get overcome by doubts about the future? Then read *Gathering of the Souls* (*Dvēseju pulcēšana*): Melānija Vanaga doesn't reveal any prophecies or clever research insights. In her place, the people of centuries past tell the story of her nation powerfully and convincingly, through the agile strokes of her writing pen.”

Zigmunds Skujiņš

“A unique project in Latvian publishing has materialized. The history of a people and the country that they founded, of that country's development, demise and rebirth has been told through the timeless story of one person, one family and one rural region over several generations.”

Vija Jugāne

“A language speaks as fully as the people who have used it. It seems as if a writer has stood by the linden tree at Sermuļi and listened carefully – oh, so very carefully!”

Genovefa Bērsone

“A monumental and enduring work that has enriched our literature and our collective memory. Its value will not decrease, but will grow with the passing of time.”

Māra Zālīte

“These books by Melānija Vanaga are just what was missing in Latvian literature. They are a look at history under the light of the “plain white truth.” They are not fiction. They are facts that come to light through the author's emotions.”

Laima Līvena

“I discovered a true PERSONALITY! What kind of personality? An individual who stands out in the crowd. Another workhorse is following in the footsteps of Latvian folk song collector Krišjānis Barons.”

Guntis Eņiņš

“The text in these books – particularly the dialogues – is so alive that just by listening to it, everything becomes visible. I'd even venture to say that Melānija Vanaga didn't merely write out these dialogues from the past, but broadcast them directly to us in some mystical manner.”

Egils Ermansons

“When we turn our eyes searchingly at critical moments in our history, let's look for the strong ones. We've got more than enough weakness to go around. Let's not share in our weakness. Let's look for the strong ones. Even if they are no longer in our midst, the strong ones embolden us to live up to our full potential.”

Anda Līce

Awards conferred to Melānija Vanaga

- 1992 Latvian Ministry of Culture award for outstanding literary achievements – *Suddenly, a Criminal. Sixteen Years in Siberia* (*Veļupes krastā*);
- 1993 Cardinal Julians Vaivods Foundation award for Melānija Vanaga's memoirs on her years of forced exile – *Suddenly, a Criminal. Sixteen Years in Siberia* (*Veļupes krastā*);
- 1994 Eduards Veidenbaums Literary Prize for *Father's Tribe* (*Tēva cilts*), the first book in Melānija Vanaga's *Gathering of the Souls* (*Dvēseju pulcēšana*) documentary series of novels;
- 1994 Three-Star Order of merit (Latvia's highest civilian award) for outstanding contributions to the good of the country.



Triju zvaigžņu ordeņa manās rokās.

“Holding the Latvian Three-Star Order in my hands!”



Melānija Vanaga and her son Alnis



*I love my native region;
its rocky soil and
racing clouds;
its wide roads
and its narrow paths of the past;
the restlessness of its hills
and the small homes that crown them;
its industrious people
and their endearing Cēsis dialect
manner of stretching word endings.
I love the Amata River and its generous tributaries –
the splendour and lifeblood of the region.*

Melānija Vanaga

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2017

LAWYER
JOURNALIST
WRITER
CULTURAL HISTORIAN
RESEARCHER OF HER NATIVE REGION OF AMATA
IN CENTRAL LATVIA

Melānija Vanaga

4.09.1905.–23.09.1997.



Melānija Vanaga obtained her initial education at the Amata Primary School, where a memorial room has been set up in tribute to her life and work.



The fact that I exist means that I had a beginning somewhere, and my thoughts sometimes turn toward my origins. My first name – Melānija – was close to my mother’s heart already from the time when she was a school-child in Āraiši, because my mother absolutely adored her schoolteacher, whose name was Melānija Peleks.

My last name – Vanaga – is a gift from my husband Aleksandrs, the son of a manorial taskmaster.

My maiden name – Šleija – refers to a North African Arab tribe. One of my ancestors was a slave from that tribe. He was sold to someone in Denmark and brought to Latvia during the reign of Swedish King Gustav II Adolf (1611–1632). My father – Jānis Šleijs – was a bookkeeper at a rural bank and the head of the Sermuļi homestead. He harboured a lifelong resentment at not having been able to study at the University of Tartu, due to a lack of foresight in his youth. My mother – Emīlija Šleija, née Ņamis – was the daughter of a pastor’s assistant at the Lutheran church in Āraiši.

And now about me.

Born during the blessed hour of the sunrise on Tuesday, September 4 in 1905 – a very turbulent year in Latvia’s history.

Baptized at the Lutheran church in Āraiši.

Regarding my education:

Primary school: Amid the chilly climate of uncertainty during the last days of the Russian Empire, I basked in the warmth of the sun in my homestead, where I loved to cut the dew-covered grass of the fields on early summer mornings. The grass was then dried to make hay. I also loved to take tree branches from a pile and chop them for firewood on a huge log that bore the axe marks of previous cuttings.

Secondary school: Twenty years in a free Latvia. I loved working as a radio announcer and as a journalist, and I loved singing in the Dziesmuvara (Power of Song) choir.

Higher education: Sixteen gruelling years in the collective death camp of Siberia.

I have found warmth at the end of my life in the care of my son in Riga.

I love storms, bridges, cats, sparrows, white flowers, white pieces of paper, white dresses.

I believe in the divine power of truth.

I believe that those who have passed away continue to take part in the lives of the living.

I believe in my people.

Sermuļi is my native homestead. It can be found on a slope that faces the west in the Vidzeme Highlands – the warmest place in the whole wide world.

My husband worked “the Hill” on our homestead with the same love and care that Solomon cared for his gardens.

Melānija Vanaga, 1997

“The Hill” at the Sermuļi homestead by the Nediene River.

Melānija Vanaga

1905. Born in Sermuļi, her family homestead in the parish of Drabeši in central Latvia.

1925. Graduates from high school in Cēsis. Enrols later that year in the Faculty of Economics and Juridical Science at the University of Latvia.

Works at the Riga Regional Court, Radio Latvia and the Free Land (Brīvā Zeme) newspaper.

1931. Marries journalist Aleksandrs Vanags, who later becomes the editor of Free Land.

1939–1940. Editor of the Homemakers (Mājsolim) supplement to the Daugava Herald (Daugavas Vēstnesis) newspaper, which is published in Daugavpils.

June 14, 1941. Deported with her family to Siberia. The 5,000-kilometre railway journey in a closed cattle car takes three weeks. Melānija (age 35) and her son Alnis (age 8) are sent to toil in harsh conditions in a village in the Krasnoyarsk Krai. Her husband Aleksandrs is separated from his family on the day of their deportation and executed in Sverdlovsk in 1942.

1957. Melānija and her son Alnis return to Latvia and settle into the town of Drabeši, not far from Cēsis.

1957–1962. Melānija works as a cowherd at a kolkhoz near Drabeši.

1962. Melānija moves to Riga, where she lives with her son and his family until her death in 1997.

1991. Her first book *Suddenly, a Criminal. Sixteen Years in Siberia (Veļupes krastā)* is published in Latvian. Another book, *Exile and Return (Ceļi un atceļi)*, which Melānija co-authored with writer Astrīde Ivaska, is published that same year.

1993–1999. Melānija publishes seven cultural-historical novels, collectively named *Gathering of the Souls (Dvēseļu pulcēšana)*.



The Vanags family in 1936.

“Some love stories can never be told in full.”



“I survived the darkest of times in Siberia (1941–1957) and returned home to tell the tale.”

“I realized that I had to write. I had to write out of respect to Sermuļi’s past inhabitants and their future descendants.”

While there is no need to boast about the accomplishments of one’s ancestors, one does need to know one’s family history. Doing so strengthens one’s self-confidence. It also helps one to live, to remember and to look at oneself from a distance.

Only when I stand by the lengthy scroll that contains my family tree – which, in turn, is part of a larger primeval forest of similar trees – can I really appreciate that the grand history of a nation consists of the smaller fates of its individuals.

To the people of Amata and Araiši, I leave a portrait of Amata and a chronicle of the region’s history in many written volumes.”

Melānija Šleija and her future husband Aleksandrs Vanags were members of the Power of Song (Dziesmuvara) choir, which was founded in 1925.

“We were initially drawn by the power of song in Alfrēds Kalniņš’s works, but Ādolfs Ābele’s compositions ensured that we would remain hooked on singing for good.”

Gathering of the Souls (Dvēseļu pulcēšana)

A cultural-historical novel written by Melānija Vanaga and published in seven volumes:

Father’s Tribe (Tēva cilts, 1993), *Mother’s Tribe (Mātes cilts, 1995)*, *In the Shadow of Fear (Baīļu birgā, 1995)*, *The Power of Song (Dziesmuvara, 1996)*, *I Lived in a Tale (Iedzīvoju pasakā, 1997)*, *Sun-filled years and Fading Light (Saules gadi un dzisums, 1998)*, *Suddenly, a Criminal. Sixteen Years in Siberia (Veļupes krastā, 1999)*

The seven volumes address the most important events in Latvia’s history, from the 17th century to the current era. The 20th century is extensively covered, including the First World War, the Latvian War of Liberation, the consolidation of Latvia’s independence, the country’s subsequent occupation by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the tragic fate and heroism of Latvia’s deportees, and the life of those who remained behind under Soviet rule. The narrative is supplemented with documents, excerpts of people’s memoirs, and tales, and is replete with historical, geographical and ethnographic information that Melānija Vanaga gathered and verified with the help of J. Freibergs, K. Rubis and others. Among the sources of inspiration for *Gathering of the Souls (Dvēseļu pulcēšana)*, Melānija Vanaga mentioned the Amata River and its beautiful surroundings, as well as her own relatives. Through the history of a single family, she recounts the fate of an entire nation. The revelation of Melānija’s personal experiences, the force of her personality and the richness of the language that she uses make this testimony a significant literary work.

“Those who have long since departed are revived in this testimony, each reliving the events of his or her particular era..., I have forged a link between life and the afterlife..., between one generation and the next.”

Melānija Vanaga’s autobiography *Suddenly, a Criminal. Sixteen Years in Siberia (Veļupes krastā)* has been published four times in Latvian (1991, 1999, 2013 and 2016). The book was also translated into Russian by Roalds Dobrovenskis and published in that language in 2014. An English-language translation by Maruta Voitkus-Lūkina was published in 2015 by Friesen Press. Theatre performances based on the book were presented at the Latvian National Theatre in 2010 (director Valters Silis). A full-length feature film named *The Chronicles of Melānija (Melānijas hronika)*, director Viesturs Kairiņš, Mistrus Media film studio) was released in 2016.



“One should know one’s corner of the Earth to the last tree stump, one should learn every historical account. By doing so, you set roots into your land; you become richer, wiser, better. The stories of the land and its people must all be gradually told, so that they continue to live on in our collective memory.”

In 2000, the Melānija Vanaga Memorial Room was set up in the Amata Primary School. The exhibition therein pays tribute to Melānija Vanaga’s life and work, and to the people of Amata who were deported to Siberia during the Soviet occupation.

Address: “Doles 2”, Amatas pagasts, Amatas novads, LV-4141 (in the original Amata Primary School building)

1994. Melānija Vanaga stands by the book volumes that she has devotedly written by hand.

