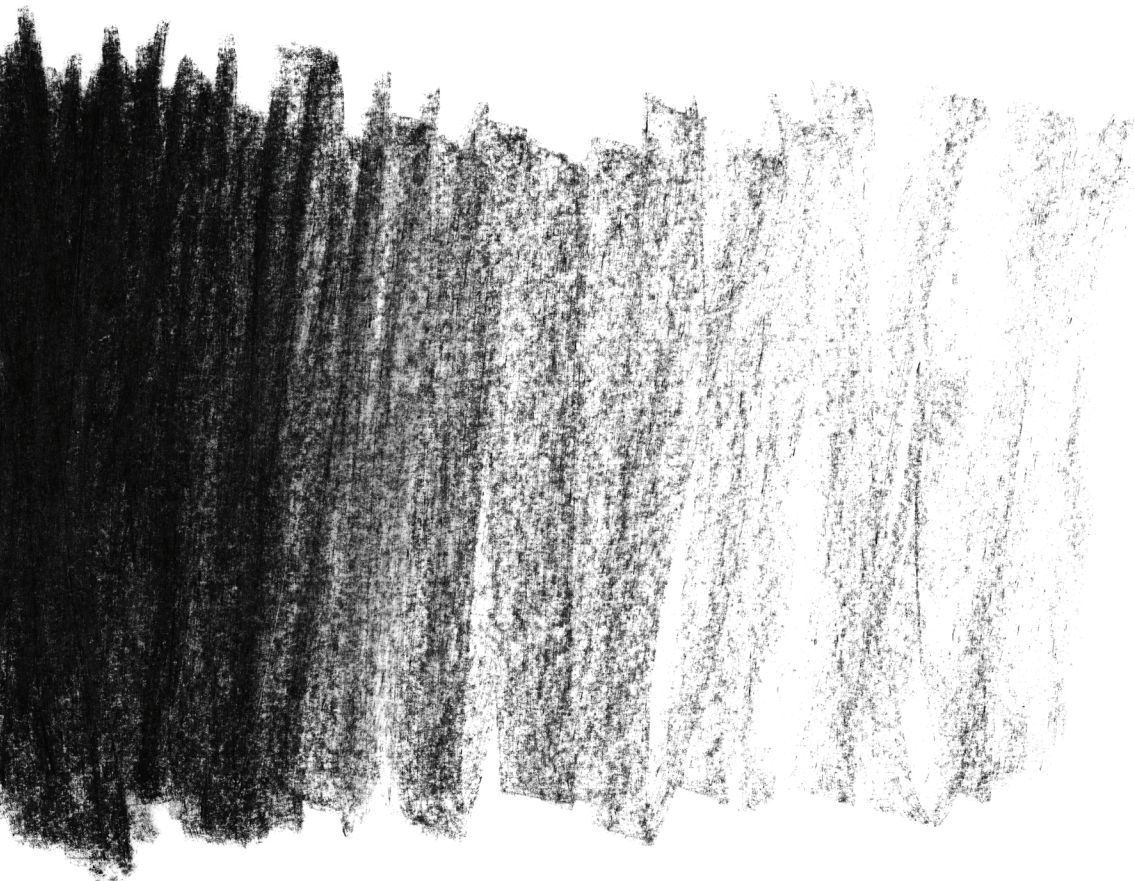


Exhibition

Gunārs Astra

Freedom Fighter



MUSEUM OF
THE OCCUPATION
OF LATVIA

Temporary Exhibition
**Commemoration of Gunārs Astra (1931–1988) –
Freedom Fighter**

“Think and judge independently, live according to one’s own beliefs. That distinguishes a free person from a captured one, a slave. I cannot live differently without the loss of my human dignity.

I am the way I am – everywhere and always without concessions under all circumstances. In the name of this, I can sacrifice everything – including my so-called freedom.

It’s just an exchange of the big zone [the Soviet Union] for a small one [a Gulag camp]. While there, I am not bothered by the insidious illusion that I am a free person. That’s where I belong. In a place where all nonconformists of our system should be.”

Gunārs Astra
Latvian patriot and freedom fighter
Convicted in 1961 and 1983 of insubordination
towards the Soviet occupying power and its
ideology.

In 1983, at the hearing, the statement of Gunārs Astra:

“My belief that this time will pass, like a terrible nightmare, which gives me the strength to stand here and breathe. Our people have suffered frequently and have therefore gained the fortitude to survive this dark age.” was a bold and explicit indictment of the Soviet Union’s occupation regime.



Gunārs Astra

(Riga, 22 October 1931 – Leningrad, 6 April 1988)

Gunārs Astra's father is Larions Astra (until November 1925 Astratjevs, 1902–1971), his mother is Elza Ernestīne (b. Anuševica, 1903–1971), his brothers are Harijs (1925–2019) and Leons (1941).

He completed the 48th Riga Primary School in 1947 and graduated from Riga Electromechanical Trade School as a radio technician in 1952. He worked at the VEF factory as an engineer-constructor, later as senior engineer. From 1951 to 1953, he briefly studied at the Latvian branch of the All-[Soviet] Union Institute of Law.

From October 1954 to February 1956, Gunārs Astra served in the Soviet Army in the Kaliningrad Region and in Latvia.

From 1956 to October 1958, he worked in the VEF factory in Riga.

In 1958, he joined the English language department of the Faculty of Languages and Literature of the Riga Pedagogical Institute. In September 1958, he was transferred to the Faculty of History and Philology of the State University of Latvia where he studied English remotely until his arrest in February 1961.

From March to September 1959, he worked as a 1st category senior engineer-constructor in the Tool Workshop of A. Popovs' Riga Radio Factory. From November 1959 to February 1961, he worked as a laboratory assistant of the Sound and Light Section of the History and Philology Department of the University of Latvia.

From April 1976 to January 1978, he worked at the factory as an electrician. From February 1978 to December 1979, he worked at the Technical Control Department of the Riga Electric Machine Building Plant as a controller for assembly of electrical appliances.

From February 1980 to September 1983, he worked for the Riga Road administration as a 1st category road worker. At that time, his main source of income was the cultivation and marketing of flowers.

On 1 March 1988, while travelling to Leningrad to sell flowers, G. Astra suddenly fell ill. He was admitted to a [general] hospital, but later transferred to a military hospital where he underwent heart surgery. He died on 6 April 1988. During his illness the diagnoses of the doctors in charge were altered several times and independent foreign specialists were not allowed to participate in the post-mortem examination. The enigmatic circumstances of G. Astra's death raise suspicions that the KGB poisoned him, but this version has not been officially proven.

Brothers Harijs and Leons remember their brother – Gunārs

“Gunār’s main stimulus was curiosity. He was extremely interested in everything. Especially all that came from the other side [the West]. His character – indestructible. Under all circumstances – no compromise.

After 15 years of imprisonment, he returned as a new person. A new temperament (disposition) and solid convictions.”

Harijs Astra

“At the time when my brother became independent-minded, it was the result of remarkable curiosity. A compelling desire to understand how things work.

In the Soviet regime, which was in power at that time, people were required to look at things and events in the way the ruling system demanded. For people who did not succumb to this obligation, it was quite natural that such an imposition was unacceptable. They tried to get information from forbidden sources.

My brother was one of them. He wanted to understand the true subject matter. This desire became a necessity.”

Leons Astra

1.

The Astra brothers: (from the left) Leons, Harijs, and Gunārs. Riga, 1 August 1947.

2.

Astra family: Harijs, the father Larions, Gunārs, and the mother Elza. Riga, 13 January 1960.

3.

Gunārs Astra (third from the left) during his service in the Soviet Army. Kaliningrad Region, December 1954.

4.

Letter to his brother Harijs from service in the Soviet Army.
Sovetsk, Kaliningrad Region, 9 December 1954.

“Hi Hari!

After a journey of less than 12 hours, I arrived yesterday morning in the East Prussian town Sovetsk (Tilsit) where I am supposed to serve my entire period. The conditions here seem to be good – living quarters are in a grand, solid, 5-storey house. The town must have been quite sympathetic – it even has had a tramline.”

5.

Letter to his brother Harijs from service in the Soviet Army.
Ādaži, Latvia, 22 June 1955.

6.

The Astra brothers: (from the left) Leons, Gunārs, and Harijs. Gunārs is on vacation from service in the Soviet Army.
Latvia, 1955.

7.

The cap of Gunārs Astra with a cockade (badge) and the letters DJK [Daugava Yacht Club].
In the early 1950s, while studying at a technical school, Gunārs Astra learned to sail, and he was very good at it.

8.

Gunārs Astra (standing 4th from the left) among family members when meeting Eduards Berklavs (standing next to Gunārs) and Gunārs Freimanis (standing 3rd from the right).
Riga, 9 February 1988.



Photo of Gunārs Astra in the file compiled by the KGB of the Latvian SSR. 1961.
(Latvijas Nacionālais arhīvs – Latvijas Valsts arhīvs)

Political activities and arrests of Gunārs Astra

In the 1950s, Gunārs Astra listened to foreign radio broadcasts. Among colleagues and acquaintances, he repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the Russification of Latvia and various problems in the Soviet Union.

In January 1958, and also later in Riga, Astra met some employees of the U.S. Moscow Embassy (or perhaps people impersonating U.S. diplomats), and at least one Latvian émigré – Gaida Priedīte – and corresponded with her.

1961

On 22 February 1961, employees of the State Security Committee [KGB] of the Latvian SSR searched Astra's apartment and arrested him on 23 February.

In October 1961, the Baltic Military District War Tribunal sentenced him to 15 years incarceration for treason against the motherland, anti-Soviet agitation, and propaganda.

After returning to Riga in 1976, Gunārs Astra continued to maintain contact with other former political prisoners. He translated the Baltic Charter [from Russian] into Latvian – a political memorandum signed in 1979 by Baltic resistance movement activists. He was active in the conspiratorial Latvian Independence Movement, read and reproduced (photographed) literature that did not match the ideology of the Soviet regime, like works of Latvian writers and historians published in Western exile, the work of A. Solzhenitsyn “Gulag Archipelago” [from Russian], and the novel “1984” by George Orwell.

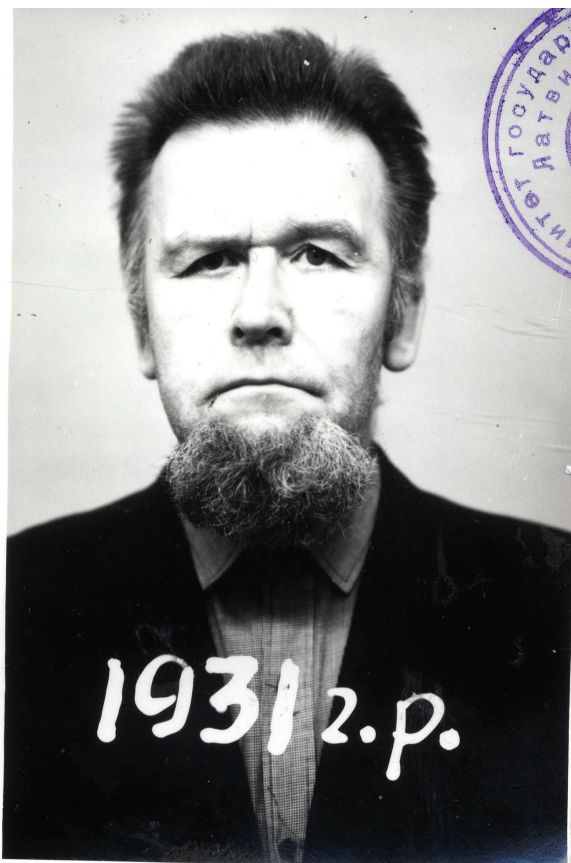
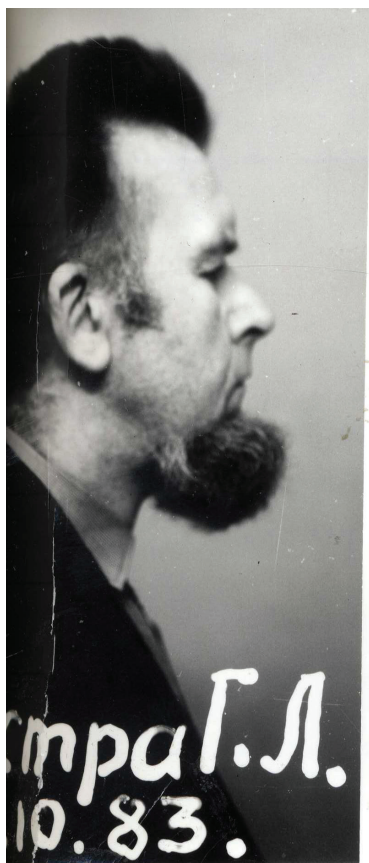


Photo of Gunārs Astra in the file compiled by the KGB of the Latvian SSR. 1983.
(Latvijas Nacionālais arhīvs – Latvijas Valsts arhīvs)

1983

On 15 September 1983, Gunārs Astra was arrested. During investigation, he essentially refused to cooperate with the employees of the State Security Committee [KGB], the prosecutor's office, or the court, refusing to testify about himself and other persons.

His responses were:

“I refuse to give explanations. I essentially refuse to testify.”

On 19 December 1983, the Supreme Court of the Latvian SSR found G. Astra guilty of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda and sentenced him to 7 years in incarceration, followed by 5 years of forced settlement in Russia. He was declared a “particularly dangerous repeat offender.”

Gunārs Astra was incarcerated in prisons and camps in the Soviet Union for 19 years, 4 months, and 16 days

First imprisonment

From 1962, in forced labour camps in the Mordovian ASSR.
From July 1972, imprisoned in a strict regime labour camp in Perm-36 in the Perm Region.
Released 23 February 1976.

Second imprisonment

In March 1984, he was transported from Riga and incarcerated in the strict regime labour camp Perm-36 and the central hospital of the camp Perm-35 from 7–18 May 1987 and 8 December 1987 to 9 January 1988.
He was transported to the State Security Committee [KGB] in Riga on 9 January 1988.
Released 1 February 1988.

9.

A letter to his brother Harijs asking him to send books.
Mordovian ASSR, 31 October 1962.

10.

Greeting card with a drawing of the Powder Tower of Riga.
Post cards.

Sent by Gunārs Astra to his brother Harijs from confinement in
the camp Perm-36, December 1972.

Sent by Gunārs Astra from the Perm-36 camp to his brother
Harijs. November 1985, 1987.

11.

Letter to his brother Harijs. Mordovian ASSR,
28 November 1971.

“Good evening, Harij.

*[...] Along with the lack of time (nevertheless!) I am limited by
the few opportunities to earn in this paddock – my whole salary
practically goes for books.*

*I don't miss any publication in Riga of books like The Burning
Island, Plūdonis' Poetry, Mont-Saint-Michel, Ivanhoe, A Man who
Laughs, and similar.”*

Letter to his father. Mordovian ASSR, 28 November 1971.

“Dear father,

*I am sending you many greetings and good day wishes from
Mordovia. [...] As I understand it, you are holding on rather poorly.
Do not forget that we are men and may not bow to the burden of
grief. The day is not far off when I will be able to hold your hand
again. [...].”*

12.

Gunārs Astra (in the middle) while incarcerated. Mordovian ASSR, 8 August 1965.

13.

Letter to his brother Harijs. Mordovian ASSR,
27 December 1971.

*“Good evening, Harij,
Do try to believe – as fanatical Muslims, Buddhists, and Catholics do – to believe a dogma – your letters bind me to life more than does bread. It is not the length nor style that is important – the main thing is its arrival. A letter from you is like a regular heartbeat – if the rhythm is disturbed, the person waits for the next one with increased anxiety.”*

14.

A letter to his brother Harijs asking him to send cocoa, coffee beans, raisins, garlic, lemon, ascorbic acid, as well as envelopes, stamps, and vegetable and flower seeds. Mordovian ASSR, 19 March 1972.

The camp inmates were allowed to receive one package every six months.

15.

First letter from camp Perm-36 to his brother Harijs. Perm Region, 16 July 1972.

*“Hi Harij,
[...] I’ve already nearly recovered from the road and am back on my feet. My health is holding up.”*

16.

Letter to his brother Harijs asking him to send flower seeds and bulbs. Perm Region, 8 March 1973.

17.

Letter to his brother Harijs including a tree leaf with the inscription “Already autumn in the Urals 1.8.73”. Perm Region, 1 August 1973.

18.

The last letter from Russia on the way to Latvia to his brother Harijs shows the return route: Kuchino–Chusovaya–Perm–Kirov–Kostroma–Yaroslavl–Bologoye–Leningrad(?)–Tallinn(?)–Riga. Yaroslavl–Leningrad, 23 January 1976.

19.

Plywood suitcase.

The addresses, painted in Russian, are those of the recipient – his brother Leons Astra in Latvia and the sender – Gunārs Astra – of his confinement camp. 1976.

Fellow prisoners remember Gunārs Astra

“The long years of imprisonment, stress, and constant nervous tension did not diminish the strength of Astra’s confidence, nor did it diminish the attractiveness of the sharpness of his mind and power of persuasion, nor his will to fight.”

Agris Šefers

“[Gunārs] Astra, being mentally and physically remarkably strong, looked as though the ‘mud’ side of camp did not affect him.”

Bruno Javoišs

On the night of 4–5 December 1963, Bruno Javoišs hoisted the Latvian national flag on the Riga radio tower. Arrested on 6 December 1963. Sentenced to 7 years in a strict regime correctional work colony. He met G. Astra in a Mordovian ASSR forced labour camp. Released on 4 December 1970.

“Gunārs was a thinker. He carried pain in him about Latvia, its culture, and fate. As a thinking man, he was dangerous [to the Soviets]. A particularly dangerous state criminal.”

Nikolay Braun

20.

Helēna Celmiņa. Painting “Courtyard of a Mordovian penal hospital.”

Canvas, oil. New York, USA, 1979.

Helēna Celmiņa (1929–2017)

From 1957, she met with sailors of foreign ships in Latvian harbours. She received from them books and magazines containing “anti-Soviet and anti-communist content” published abroad. In conversations with other people, she “denigrated” living conditions in the Soviet Union and expressed a wish to go abroad.

Arrested in June 1962. Sentenced to four-year incarceration in a strict regime correctional work colony and confiscation of property. Incarcerated in Mordovian ASSR.
Released in June 1966.

21.

The labour assignments for prisoners in the Barashev camp.
Mordovian ASSR, 1960s.

There were three camps for political prisoners in Mordovian APSR – No 7, 11, 17 (Sosnovka, Java, Barashev) and camp 3 was a hospital.

In the early 1960s, in camp 11 there were more than 2000 prisoners, similarly in camp 7. Every few years, prisoners were transferred from one camp to another. The work assignments were in sawmills and at construction.

22.

Document.

Issued by the head of the correctional work camp “ЖХ – 385/3” in 26 October 1963 stating that the inmate Uldis Ofkants took a refresher course from 12 July to 10 September 1963 and passed the sawmill master exam. Mordovian ASSR.

Uldis Ofkants (1941–2008)

Arrested in May 1962 for possession and distribution of “anti-Soviet” literature and participation in an “anti-Soviet” organisation aimed at the separation of the Baltic States from the Soviet Union. Sentenced to 10 years incarceration in a strict regime correctional work colony. Released in May 1972.

23.

A box.

Made by Agris Šefers while he was imprisoned. He gave it to Ēriks Raimonds Miķelsons on 2 September 1967, when Miķelsons was released from imprisonment.

Mordovian ASSR, 1967.

Agris Šefers (1940)

Attempted to flee to West Germany on 20 April 1961. To counter the border guards, he purchased weapons and stole a car, with which he was going to drive to the border.

Arrested on 24 April 1961. Sentenced to 10 years in incarceration. He met G. Astra in a Mordovian ASSR forced labour camp. Released on 21 April 1971.

Ēriks Raimonds Miķelsons (1929–2008)

Arrested in September 1962 for “anti-Soviet” letters about Communist Party members. Sentenced to five-year incarceration in an enhanced regime correctional work camp. Released in September 1967.

24.

Knuts Skujenieks and Viktors Kalniņš gave the card to Ēriks Raimonds Miķelsons in a camp in Mordovian ASSR, 11 August 1966.

Viktors Kalniņš (1938–2001)

Arrested in April 1962 for possession and distribution of “anti-Soviet” literature and participation in an “anti-Soviet” organisation aimed at the separation of the Baltic States from the Soviet Union. Sentenced to 10 years incarceration in a strict regime correctional work colony. Released in April 1972.

25.

“From the Hospital Area” – ten poems by Knuts Skujenieks. The poems created and written from December 1968 to January 1969 while he was incarcerated in Barashev, Mordovian ASSR.

Knuts Skujenieks (1936–2022)

Arrested in April 1962. He possessed and distributed “anti-Soviet” literature. In 1956 to 1960 he wrote “anti-Soviet” poems. Sentenced to seven-year incarceration in a strict regime correctional work colony. Released in April 1969.

26.

Notes on basketball games between incarcerated Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian inmates written by Jānis Dembovskis. Mordovian ASSR, 1962–1966.

Jānis Dembovskis (1940)

While serving in the Soviet Army, in conversations with other service members, he said that Latvia should be free from Russia and he tried to collect cartridges.

Arrested in July 1961. Sentenced to five-year imprisonment in enhanced regime correctional work colonies in Mordovian ASSR.

27.

Side-caps, made of dark fabric. In front, above the brim, the two black buttons fasten a fabric ribbon that alters the diameter of the cap. Mordovian ASSR, 1960–1970s.

28.

Black tea packet labels.

29.

Nikolay Braun received the tea kettle from his mother, the poet Marija Komissarova, when she brought it to the camp in the Kuchino village of the Perm Region where he was incarcerated in the summer of 1975.

The kettle was used to prepare extra strong tea that he drank often with his fellow inmate Gunārs Astra during conversations in the camp Perm-36.

Nikolay Braun (1938)

On 15 April 1969, the poet, writer, and translator Nikolay Braun was arrested in Leningrad. He was charged with anti-communist and religious propaganda, the preparation of a bombing the Lenin Mausoleum and assassination attempt against Leonid Brezhnev, and the distribution of his own poetry about the entry of Soviet troops into Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Sentenced to 7 years in incarceration in a strict regime camp

and 3 years in forced settlement. From the spring of 1970 he was in camps in the Mordovian ASSR, from 1972 to 1976 in the camp Perm-36 in the Perm Region, from April 1976 – 3 years in forced settlement in the Tomsk Region. Returned to Leningrad in 1979.

30.

An item made by the inmates of Perm-36. Perm Region, 1970s to 1980s.

In the Perm Region camps were located 250 km beyond Sverdlovsk, at a distance of 5–10 km from each other. The camps were heavily guarded and surrounded by numerous fences.

In the barracks of camp Perm-37 were 60 to 70 persons. Carpentry work from 08.00 to 17.00.

31.

11 March 1984 list of regulations from the camp Perm-37 administration to Gunta Rožkalne about packages, letters, and meetings that according to law are due to the incarcerated Jānis Rožkalns.

Jānis Rožkalns (1949)

He was active in the conspiratorial Latvian Independence Movement.

Arrested in April 1983. Sentenced to five-year incarceration in a strict regime correctional work colony and three years in forced resettlement. Incarcerated in the camp Perm-37. Released in February 1987.

32.

Apolinārijs Ulass. Drawing "385 / 11-9".

Paper, Indian ink. Potjma, Mordovian ASSR, 8 October 1961.

Drawing "Third camp hospital/ the patient is sleeping".

Paper, ordinary pencil. Potjma, Mordovian ASSR,

7 January 1964.

Apolinārijs Ulass (dz. Plotkāns, 1920)

Arrested in 1953, convicted for "treason of the motherland and participation in an illegal anti-Soviet organisation" (after the deportation of his parents on 25 March 1949, he joined the national partisans). Sentenced to 25 years incarceration and five years in forced settlement. He was imprisoned in a camp in Vorkuta, Komi APSR and Potjma, Mordovian ASSR. Released in 1966.

While in Potjma he started to draw using coloured pencils and oil colours sent from Latvia, later also Indian ink.

Political prisoners dangerous to the regime

During 1972–1992 especially dangerous state criminals were imprisoned, in the Perm Region camps Perm-35, Perm-36, and Perm-37 (officially named – correctional work colonies BC-389/35, BC-389/36 и BC-389/37). These were political prisoners considered dangerous to the regime, who had been convicted according to Article 58 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR (1926), Articles 1-10 of the USSR Law “On Criminal Liability for State Crimes” (1958), Articles 64-73 of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR (1960) or analogous Criminal Codes of the USSR republics. A total of 995 prisoners.

Members of the Baltic National Resistance Movement who were imprisoned in the camps Perm-35, Perm-36, and Perm-37:

Latvians: Kārlis Augusts Vētra (1920), Žanis Skudra (1924–1994), Gunārs Freimanis (1927–1993), Ints Cālītis (1931), Juris Ziemeļis (1941–1988), Jānis Rožkalns (1949), Jānis Vēveris (1954) and others

Estonians: Mart-Olav Niklus (1934), Heiki Ahonen (1956)

Lithuanians: Balys Gajauskas (1926–2017), Viktoras Petkus (1928–2012), Antanas Terleckas (1928), Jonas Pakuckas (1937), Sigitas Tamkevičius (1938)

Dissidents and human rights defenders:

Ukrainians: Levko Lukianenko (1928–2018), Stepan Hmara (1937), Vasyl Stus (1938–1985), Josip Terela (1943–2009), Semen Gluzman (1946)

Jews: Natan Sharansky (1948)

Russians: Yuri Orlov (1924–2020), Sergey Kovalev (1930–2021), Gleb Yakunin (1934–2014), Nikolay Braun (1938), Vladimir Bukovsky (1942–2019)

33.

The books photocopied by Gunārs Astra from late 1970s to early 1980s:

Jānis Grīns. *Dadzīvotāji rezonē (The Living Resonate)*. Sweden, 1951.

Arnolds Spekke. *Atmiņu brīži (Memory Moments)*. Sweden, 1967.

Jānis Jūrmalnieks (aka A. Balodis). *Latvijas iekļaušana Padomju Savienībā. Tās priekš- un pēcspēle (Incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union. Its Pre- and Post-Match)*. Stockholm, 1973.

Agnis Balodis. *Baltijas republikas Lielā Tēvijas kara priekšvakarā (Baltic Republics on the Eve of the Great Patriotic War)*. Sweden, 1980.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. *Gulag Archipelago*. Brooklyn, 1975.

34.

Writing pad with notes written by Harijs Astra during the trial of Gunārs Astra. Riga, 1983.

35.

A blue box used to store photographic films. It contains 15 films of copies made in the 1980s of forbidden literature – books, newspapers, and cartoons.

Self-published edition of forbidden literature – Atis Lejiņš. *Gorkija iela 11a or the Road Back Home*. Sweden: Memento, 1976.

Self-published edition of forbidden literature – Aleksandr Orlov. *The Secret History of Stalinist Crimes*.

Photocopy made in 1980s and duplicated as needed. Made by Jānis Vēveris.

Jānis Vēveris (1954)

He was active in the conspiratorial Latvian Independence Movement.

Arrested in January 1983. Sentenced to three-year

incarceration in a strict regime correctional work colony.

Incarcerated in the camp Perm-35. Released in January 1986.

36.

The photoenlarger used by Juris Saulgozis in 1981–1982 to prepare copies of Uldis Ģērmanis' book *The Latvian People During Struggle and Work in the 19th and 20th Centuries*.

The film and photos. Among them is an incomplete copy of Uldis Ģērmanis' book.

Distribution by Juris Saulgozis in 1981–1982. Book was brought from the USA to Latvia by Astrīda and Zigurds Rīders.

Archives of Diāna Vagale, foster daughter of Gunārs Astra:

37.

Astra family: the mother Elza and the father Larions with youngest son Leons, Harijs and Gunārs. Riga, around 1943.

38.

From the left: Gunārs Astra un Jānis Krūmiņš.
Riga, July 1955.

39.

From the left: Jānis Krūmiņš, Gunārs Astra, Valdis Muižnieks,
Zigfrīds Hibšs un Oļģerts Hehts. Riga, July 1955.

Jānis Krūmiņš (1930–1994) and Valdis Muižnieks (1935–2013) won 3 silver medals at the Summer Olympic Games (1956, 1960, 1964) as part of the USSR basketball team.

Jānis Krūmiņš, Valdis Muižnieks and Oļģerts Hehts (1931–2016) – three-time champions of the European basketball club tournament (Euroleague) as part of Riga ASK (1958, 1959, 1960).

40.

Gunārs Astra in imprisonment. Mordovian ASSR,
27 January 1963.

41.

Gunārs Astra in imprisonment. Sosnovka, Mordovian ASSR,
January 1965.

42.

Gunārs Astra in imprisonment. Mordovian ASSR,
8 August 1965.

43.

Gunārs Astra (in the back), Knuts Skujenieks (first from the right). Latvia, around 1977.

44.

Gunārs Astra (in the back with camera) together with Knuts Skujenieks (sitting second from the right) and Uldis Ofkants (first from the left). Latvia, around 1977.

45.

Gunārs Astra. Riga, 1981.

46.

Gunārs Astra. Riga, 1988.

47.

Document.

Decision on changes in administrative supervision - ban on leaving the house from 19:00 till 6.00; ban on leaving Riga without permission and ban on being in the territory of the correctional institution are lifted.

Riga, 18 November 1976.

48.

Letter from Gunārs Astra to family – to his wife Herta Līvija (1933–2011) (married 1976–1988) and son Kristaps (1977–2000). Perm Region, 18 November 1987.

Letter begins with a quote “Respect for all people is necessary for peace” and ends with a quote “So your trails would be straight and your thoughts and work bright. Be healthy and happy.”



Shortly after the release from prison Gunārs Astra listens to a reel-to reel audio tape recording of his mother Elza's last words to him before her death in 1971, while he was still serving his first prison sentence. Latvia, 1976.



Gunārs Astra with his wife Herta Līviņa and son Kristaps.
Riga, in the spring of 1988.

