President of Latvia: Gunārs Astra is one of those who gave free Latvia to us

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Egils Levits

On 20 January, President of Latvia Egils Levits took part in the unveiling of *Stay brave* statue dedicated to Latvian freedom fighter Gunārs Astra.

'Free Latvia was the dream and goal that Astra pursued for all his life. We became free more than 30 years ago, and the statue that we are about to unveil is our gratitude and acknowledgement of Gunārs Astra role in restoring independence. It has been long time in the making, long overdue, but it is finally here and ready to be unveiled in the very heart of Riga, by the historical building where Mr Astra was convicted more than 38 years ago. The building where soviet rulers punished Latvians for their freedom aspirations.

We are gradually coming to terms with what our freedom fighters did and how our people struggled over five decades of occupation. We still know very little about the enormous role played by Gunārs Astra and his followers who joined the non-violent resistance. Gunārs Astra is one of those who gave free Latvia to us.

Gunārs Astra was a man of high moral standing. He faced persecutions alone. He faced the occupation court alone, but what he did made him a national hero for the whole of Latvia. Gunārs Astra refused to abandon the dream of free Latvia, he continued to be the voice of Latvian nation, and thanks to him this dream became a reality we see today.

As I said, this statue is long overdue. We should have put this statue in the very heart of Riga by this building a long time ago, so that people who pass it on daily basis can be reminded and feel compelled to take time to contemplate what it took to make Latvia free, what it takes to have freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, freedom to come together for a cause. It took the whole life for Gunārs Astra, his high morals and his devotion to the Latvian State to achieve that.

We are about to reveal the statue of Gunārs Astra that embodies this dream of his. The dream of free Latvia. We will forever be grateful to him and honour his memory. Memory of a man who gave us an opportunity to build democratic Latvia, country that

universally respects all human rights and civil liberties that a democratic state of Latvia that Gunārs Astra fought and died for is expected to provide,' President of Latvia Egils Levits said in his message.

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