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## Visiting the Baltics – Latvia (E18A-2)

My second stop on a trip through the Baltics was Riga, the capital of Latvia, for a four-night stay. Latvia is on the Baltic Sea, sandwiched between Lithuania, Estonia and Russia. The area that includes Latvia was home to a handful of Baltic tribes who became targets of Teutonic Order Christian crusaders who took over the area. These Baltic Germans, as they came to be called, for centuries generally governed what became Latvia even as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sweden and finally the Russian Empire eventually ruled the land.

A Latvian identity formed during this time, and Latvia gained its independence at the end of WWI when the Russian Empire collapsed, although fighting continued here until 1920. But the Nazis and Soviet Union signed a treaty in 1939 that gave them spheres of influence in eastern Europe. The Soviets installed puppet governments in each of the Baltic States. These governments then joined the Soviet Union, beginning 50 years of Soviet and Nazi occupation. The Nazis occupied Latvia during WWII, but the Soviets reoccupied Latvia near the end of the war. Latvia declared its independence in May 1990, although the Soviets then unsuccessfully tried to overthrow the Latvian government in January 1991. Like its Baltic neighbors, Latvia has since built close ties with Western Europe, joining the European Union, NATO and the Schengen Agreement.

Latvia has just under two million residents, a third of whom live in Riga. Riga's city center features its medieval Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, an extensive collection of buildings in the Art Nouveau architecture style, a number of older wooden buildings, and the Maskavas neighborhood, once a center of Riga's Jewish community.



On the sightseeing drive that I took from Vilnius, Lithuania to Riga, Latvia, we stopped to tour the grounds of Latvia's Rundāle Palace. It was built in the Baroque style in the 1700s for the Dukes of Courland.

The palace was partially restored and a museum established here during the Soviet occupation.

We then stopped at the Salaspils Memorial Ensemble, built at the site of the Nazi's Salaspils Police Prison and Work Education Camp. The Nazis sent political prisoners and their families, Soviet prisoners of war, and Jews deported from Germany here.



One of several Soviet occupation era sculptures on the grounds of the memorial.



Concrete blocks mark the locations of the camp's barracks. According to our guide, when prisoners arrived, men, women and children were sent to separate barracks. The children were then generally ignored until their barracks quieted down. Only then did camp officials come by with wheelbarrows to collect the bodies of dead and dying children, who were then dumped into mass graves. Some visitors leave toys at the sites of the children's barracks, a tribute to the children who died here.

I spent four nights in Riga, Latvia's capital.



The Monument of Freedom (left) honored soldiers killed in Latvia's War of Independence from the Russian Empire following World War I. During the years of Soviet occupation, the Soviets considered demolishing it. The Laima Clock Tower (right) is named for a local candy company. It was a popular meeting place.

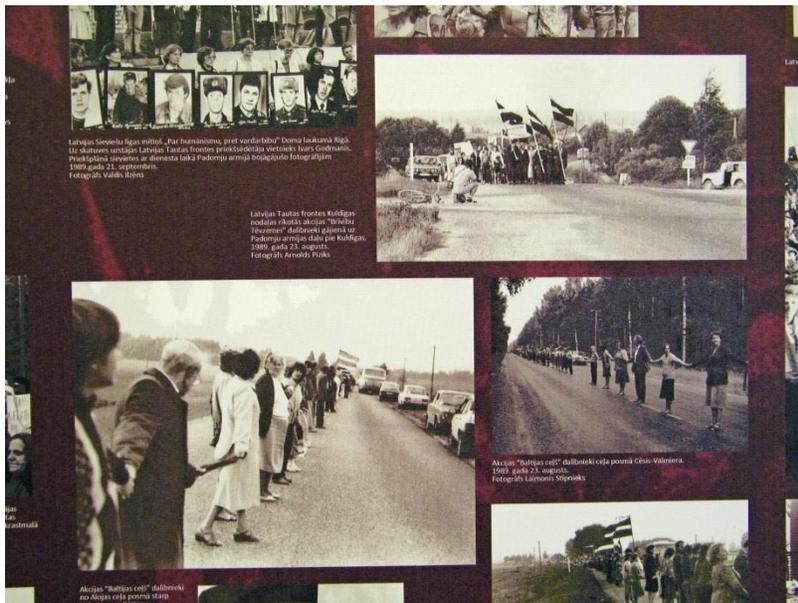


The historic canal around Riga's Old Town has been restored, and is now a feature of Bastejkalns Park.



I first saw a version of this in Vilnius, Lithuania and didn't think enough of it to take a picture of it. But when I saw it in Riga, I got curious. This commemorates the "Baltic Way". On August 23, 1989, two million Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians created a 420-mile long human hand-holding chain across the three countries to protest the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the pact that put the three countries in the Soviet sphere of influence, and then led to the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia a year later in 1940.

Seven months after the Baltic Way protest, Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to declare its independence from the Soviet Union. Latvia and Estonia soon followed.



Pictures in the Latvian National History Museum of the Baltic Way protest.



Livu Square



Feature of the so-called Cat House on Livu Square. Reportedly the businessman who owned this house was upset with the business guild, so he installed some sculptures of cats on his roof, their butts originally facing the Guild House.



This building housed the Latvian Resistance Prison, a Soviet prison where in the years following WWII members of the Latvian national resistance movement were imprisoned, tortured and murdered.



Now the Lutheran St. John's Church, this is reportedly the oldest surviving church in Riga.



St. Peter's Church dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and today is a Lutheran church. The viewing platform in the steeple features views of Riga's Old Town. Its tower is the tallest church tower in Riga.



The Peitav Synagogue is the only synagogue to have survived the Nazi occupation of Riga and the Holocaust in World War II. It was too close to other buildings to burn, so the Nazis converted it into a warehouse.

During the Soviet occupation it was allowed to serve as a synagogue. Since Latvia left the Soviet Union, it has been bombed twice.



Town Hall Square, including the Riga Town Hall and a small tribute to Riga's first Christmas tree.



Also on Town Hall Square, the House of the Blackheads. The Brotherhood of Blackheads was a guild for unmarried merchants and ship owners in Riga. But this is a 1990s reconstruction. The original building which dated to 1580 was bombed by Germans in WWII and what was left was demolished by the Soviets in 1948.



Riga Cathedral (the Evangelical Lutheran Cathedral of Riga), built in the 1200s, is the largest medieval church in the Baltics.



You've gotta have heart. Even if it's the heart of writer Carl Gustav Jochmann, which is on display here at the Riga Cathedral.



Riga Castle, founded in 1330, and substantially rebuilt a few times over the years. Once home to the Livonian Order, the branch of the Teutonic Knights that took over the area during the Baltic Crusades, it became the center of power under Polish-Lithuanian and then Swedish rule. The local governorate ruled from here after the area became part of the Russian Empire. After independence, the president of Latvia lived here. Soviet agencies were housed here during the occupation, but this is now once again the residence of the Latvian president – and it also houses several museums.



View across Daugava River towards Riga Castle.



Home to the Latvian Parliament.



As with the Lithuanian parliament building, after Latvia left the Soviet Union, the Soviet's tried to force a coup to pull Latvia back in. This memorial pays tribute to a barricade that Latvians erected to protect the parliament from the Soviets.



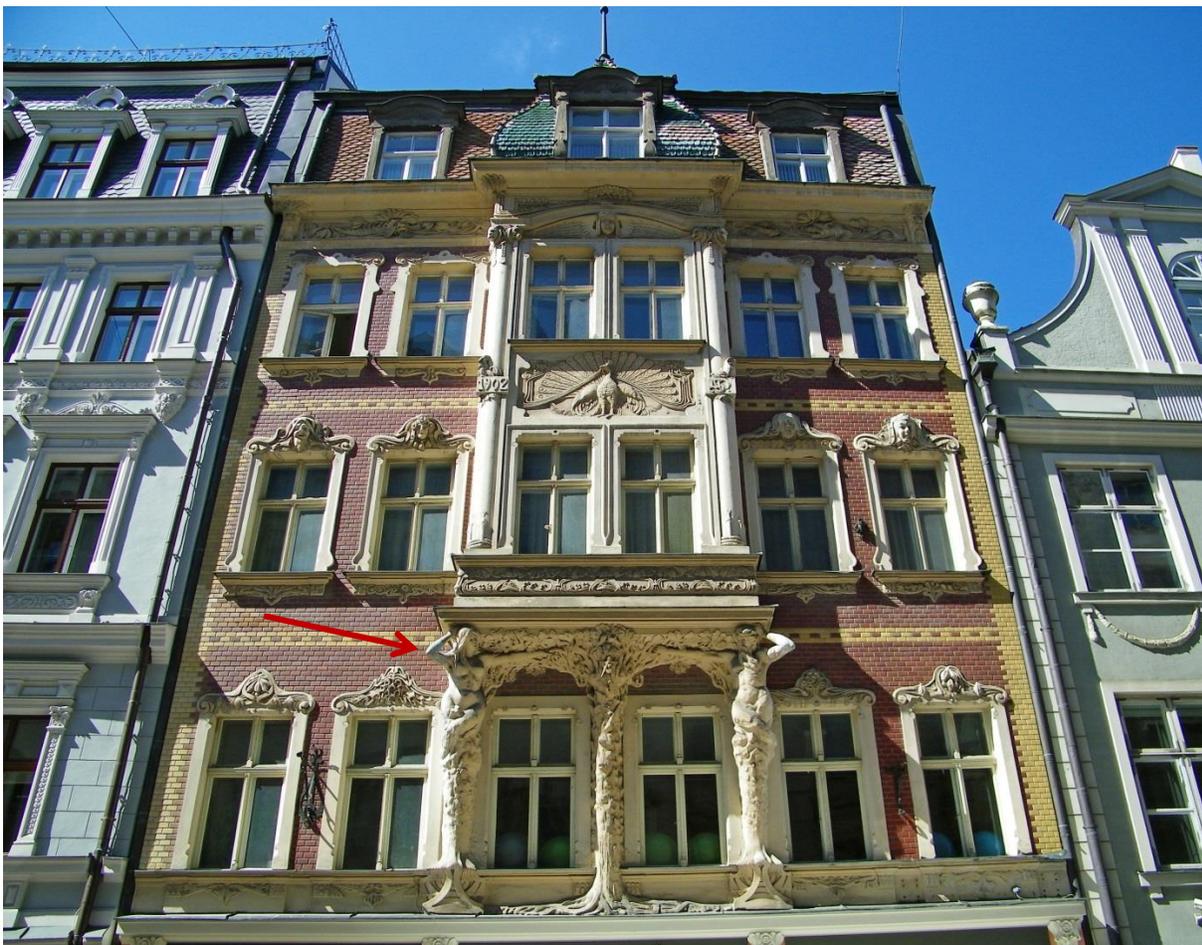
A surviving remnant of the old medieval city wall around what is now Riga's Old Town (left), and the Swedish Gate, a surviving city gate through that wall (right).



The Swedish powder tower, now a museum.



The Three Brothers, the oldest set of dwelling houses surviving in Riga. The house on the left dates back to the late 1400s.



Riga is famous for having one of the largest collection of Art Nouveau-style buildings in the world, both in the Old Town and in inner suburban neighborhoods. In a beauty contest of Art Nouveau “women”, the one on this building was crowned Miss Art Nouveau.

More Art Nouveau design





Not to be outdone, this is a representative example of Soviet occupation-era apartment block design. As my day tour to Riga approached Riga from the south, we passed miles of similarly drab buildings.



A fancier example of Soviet architecture, this tower in the Maskavas (Moscow) neighborhood south of Old Town is nicknamed “Stalin’s Birthday Cake”. The style is typical of Stalin-era skyscrapers.

It was built to house what is now the Latvian Academy of Sciences. It was built with the help of “voluntary donations” deducted from the salaries of rural Latvians.

Maskavas was a primary neighborhood for Riga's Jewish population before World War II. When the Soviet Union absorbed Latvia in 1940, the Soviets began arresting and deporting Jewish community leaders. When the Nazis occupied Latvia in 1941, they established a Jewish ghetto in Maskavas. All but one of Riga's synagogues were destroyed, and the Nazis had murdered almost half of Latvia's Jewish population by that fall.

On two days in late 1941, the Nazis rounded up 25,000 Jews in the Riga ghetto, and loaded them on trains that took them to the Rumbula Forest about seven miles to the south. Group by group, the Jews were stripped of their clothes and valuables, ordered to lie face down in the burial pits (often on top of previous groups), and each person was shot once. Those not killed would be buried alive.

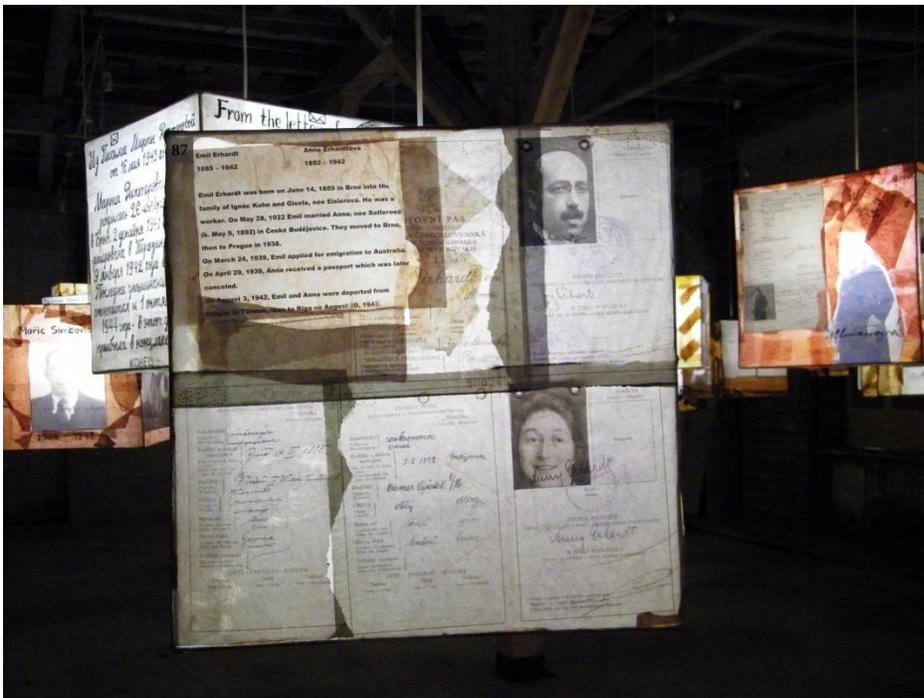
By the end of WWII, the Nazis had murdered 90% of Latvia's Jewish population.



The ruins of the Great Choral Synagogue in Maskavas, now Riga's Holocaust Memorial.



The Riga Ghetto and Latvia Holocaust Museum Names Wall lists the names of all Latvian Jews known to have been murdered in the Holocaust.



Display at the Riga Ghetto and Latvia Holocaust Museum features photos, letters, documents and news articles for a handful of the victims of the Holocaust in Latvia.



The Heart of Jesus Evangelical Lutheran Church in Maskavas. It is the largest wooden classical design building in Latvia.



The Riga Central Market is the largest market in Europe. It is housed in and around five old German Zeppelin hangars, and features more than 3,000 trade stands.



Inside part of the market that focuses on meat products



Ethnic Russians make up a quarter of Latvia's population. It was not unusual to see signs and product names in Russian, such as these healthcare products I saw at a stall in Riga's Central Market.



A model of old Riga in the National History Museum



Anti-Soviet Union poster in the National History Museum, during the push for independence



PSRS Komunistiskās partijas laikraksts „Pravda” ziņo par Latvijas uzņemšanu PSRS. 1940. gada 5. augusts  
*“Pravda”, newspaper of the USSR Communist Party, reports on the admission of Latvia into the USSR. 5 August 1940*

The cover of Soviet newspaper Pravda (“Truth”) reporting the “admission” of Latvia into the Soviet Union. On display in the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia.



The Latvian National Theatre. In addition to being a working theatre, Latvian independence from the Russian Empire was declared here in 1918.



I headed across the river to the Pardaugava neighborhood where I checked out the Latvian National Library (left) and a dead tree sculpture carved with a variety of Latvian folk symbols (right).



The Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders a.k.a. Victory Memorial to Soviet Army, in Victory Park, is a memorial to the Soviet Army's victory over Nazi Germany.

As in Vilnius, I was lucky to find a folk festival underway in Riga while I was in town.



Singing and music...



... and dancing. For as young as they were, these kids were pretty impressive folk dancers.

I took a different sightseeing tour to get from Riga to Tallinn, Estonia. We made five stops along the way, including three more stops in Latvia.



Our first stop was the Bobsleigh, Luge and Skeleton Track in Sigulda, where Olympic hopefuls can train year-round. The track is ice-covered in winter. During more mild weather there are wheels on the sleds. Note the athlete rounding the curve center-right in the picture.



Our next stop was the Old Town of Cēsis, Latvia. German Crusaders who would Christianize the area that would become Latvia originally built the Cēsis Castle, although they would destroy it in 1577 to prevent its loss in Ivan the Terrible's failed attempt to conquer the area. Parts were later rebuilt. The town itself dates back to the 1200s.



This Cēsis statue pays tribute to a monk who once walked the streets of town at night carrying a lantern.

Our guide said that she knew the sculptor, and had noted a close resemblance between the monk's face and that of the sculptor.



Our final stop in Latvia was Gauja National Park, which follows the valley of the Gauja River. Here we hiked a short trail out to Sietiniezis Rock, some sandstone cliffs along the river.

Along the way we stopped to pick some blueberries.



Sietiniezis Rock is a sandstone cliff that rises about 50 feet above the river. Big by the generally flat standards of Latvia, but of course I've spend a lot of time exploring the sandstone canyons, cliffs, arches and natural bridges of the Colorado Plateau region in the American Southwest.

Visitors have carved names and dates into the cliffs for years, but there were no prehistoric petroglyphs here.



Symbols commonly used to identify the men's (left) and women's (right) restrooms in the Baltics.



MOONShine Restaurant in Riga presents an American diner/Route 66 theme in its décor and the names of the items on its menu. But not necessarily the menu items themselves. E.g., the Elvis starter features hot bruschettas with tomatoes, onions and Mozzarella cheese. The Route 66 Steak is a beef steak with mini potatoes, cherry tomatoes and Café de Paris sauce.



Of course, you could instead go out for pizza, even if the restaurant is a bit uncertain about how good its pizza is.