

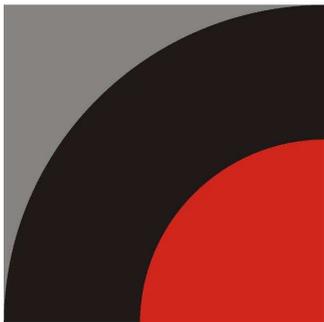
Visit to Latvia: Riga, Ulbroka & VEF

Article from British DX Club Communication November 2008 - by Alan Pennington

Last month I reported on the 2008 EDXC Conference in Vaasa, Finland and the first leg of the post conference trip to Estonia. This month we head south to the Latvian capital – Riga.

Our Eurolines coach from Tallinn took four and a half hours to drive south in the rain to the Latvian capital, Riga, mainly on an EU funded road. The three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania) are in the European Union and we drove across each border with no passport or customs formalities, though each country does have its own currency still. But Risto Vahakainu of the Finnish DX Association who organised the trip had thought of everything and had a supply of currency for each country plus snacks and drinks for the coach trip! By late afternoon we were settled in the grand Garden Palace Hotel in Riga, and despite the drizzle, set out to see some of the sights of the city. As well as some of the buildings in the old town and the “Freedom statue”, of course we had to see the Broadcasting House of the state broadcaster in Dome Laukums (Cathedral Square), but only from the outside. It looked quite an elegant building even in the early evening gloom and drizzle – the dome and statues above the entrance reminded me of Bush House in London. All Latvijas Radio’s four services are now broadcast only on FM: Radio 1 (the National programme), Radio 2 (Latvian pop music), Radio 3 – Klasika (classical music) and Radio 4 – Doma Laukums (Russian & other minority languages) – the latter described as their “integration programme service” on their website <http://www.radio.org.lv/> . Around one quarter of the population is Russian speaking.

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The following morning we were collected by minibus-taxi and first driven through the rush-hour traffic to the island of Zaķusala in the middle of the Daugava River which divides Riga. Here stands the striking 368-metre high TV Tower (the highest in the European Union and the third highest in Europe). Constructed fairly recently (it was finally finished in 1989) it first made transmissions in January 1986. In common with similar towers of the time it was not just built as



a technical tower to radiate TV and radio programmes, but also as a tourist attraction with restaurant and observation deck – which explains its impressive design and location close to the centre of Riga. The transmitters are housed in the building at its base, between the three legs. Today it transmits four TV channels and an experimental DVB-T channel to half the population of Latvia, plus twelve radio stations and a multitude of telecommunications services. (We didn’t make it to the top of this tower, though did make it up the equivalent tower in Vilnius later in the trip). The Zaķusala tower has its own detailed website (with English option) at <http://www.tvtornis.lv> . (see photo on front cover)

Our Russian taxi driver then drove our group some ten kilometres

to the east of Riga where, in a wooded area, down a lane aptly named 'Radiostacijas iela', was the Ulbroka shortwave and medium wave transmitter site based in the old Ulbroka Manor house (built around 1800) and its grounds. It had a rather overgrown and deserted air to it – our minibus drove right up to the buildings as there was no gate or barrier. Nobody approached us, so we started taking photos of the aerials and feeders etc, though this was difficult because of the tall bushes and trees. Only after 20 minutes did a man appear at the top of the steps to the grand columned entrance to the building and unsmiling, said something in Latvian. He was probably asking what we were doing there so as we had sufficient photos, we boarded the mini-bus and drove off. The Ulbroka site was only established after WWII – the first masts to be erected in 1945 and 1946 were a lattice



mast and the unusual Blaw-Knox radiator (see photo on cover of October's Communication), reportedly built by German prisoners-of-war and used originally on 575 (later 576) kHz. Programmes in Swedish were also carried on this frequency from 1960. These masts more recently were used on 945 kHz – the Blaw-Knox is pictured on a QSL card from Radio Nord which was relayed on this frequency. although not on the air during our visit, transmissions from Riga have recently been heard on 1485kHz - see this month's MW Report. Also at the Ulbroka site is the shortwave transmitter and masts. The 100 kW SW transmitter was

originally used on 5935 kHz and included an English half-hour (the first listing of 5935 I can see in the WRTH was in the 1973 edition). The last broadcast on shortwave from Latvian Radio was on 31st July 1999 when it became internet only. Since 2002 a great variety of stations have been heard on shortwave via Ulbroka, including "Latvia Today" an English language programme produced by domestic station Radio SWH. In 2003 the 5935 kHz frequency was switched to 9290 kHz which puts an excellent signal into the UK at weekends.

Our minibus headed back into the centre of Riga via our final destination, a bistro & night club we had chanced upon when flicking through our city guide booklet. But this was not just any club



as "16. Korpuss" was based in part of the former VEF (Vega) factory in Brīvības gatve. Valsts elektrotehniska fabrika (VEF) was a major manufacturer in Riga, employing 20,000 people at its peak. In the UK we probably know it best as the producer of (Vega) transistor radios in the Soviet era – the Riga factory produced one million Spidola transistor radios per year in the mid sixties (40% of its production). But before WWII it also produced in Riga the Minox miniature camera as well as telephones, aircraft and a small car. The industrial giant had its own VEF Bank, "culture palace" and sports club - VEF Riga was the most successful football team in Latvia for many years. Outside, the large brick building had an impressive clock tower, still with large VEF neon sign on top (see photo left).

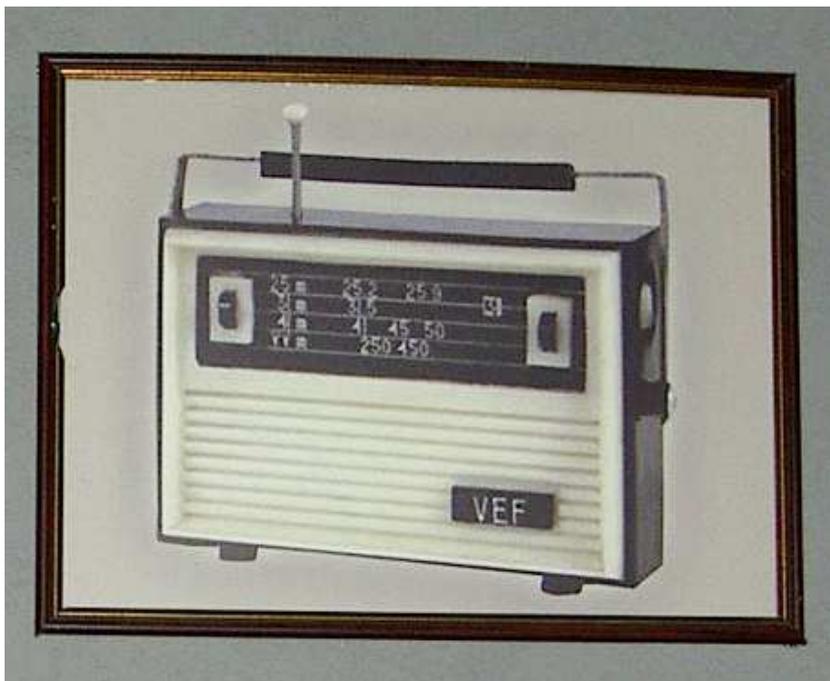
Inside the part that is now the club (at night) and cafe/bistro (in the day) there were many old radios and gramophones on display, as well as pictures and posters of the radios produced there and photos of production lines inside the factory. Even the table tops had pictures of transistor radios on them! With the taxi waiting outside we quickly snapped some photos of the



Above: Left & Right: – posters for VEF 12 portables at the 16.Korpuss club in the former VEF factory. Centre: Top – VEF logo; Bottom: 1969 Soviet stamp issued for the 50th Anniversary of the VEF factory.

interior (and feeling guilty bought a banana from the bemused staff!) before leaving. Our Russian taxi-driver by now was more talkative and was keen to show us another VEF building a short distance away with an impressive statue of Zeus with lightning sparks emitting from his upstretched clenched fist. VEF had certainly left its mark on this city we thought, as we crossed the VEF bridge heading back to our hotel.

Before leaving Riga we had a couple of hours to see some further sights so ascended St Peters church tower in a dodgy Soviet-era lift to view the city from a high before spending our final hour (not long enough) in the ugly modern building housing the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. At two in the afternoon the Kaunas bus left Riga for our third and final Baltic State on the tour – Lithuania. (Alan Pennington)



Above: Early VEF transistor radio. Right: Zeus on frontage of VEF factory in Riga.