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SOURCE Latvju Vards, No 13, 1950.

EYEWITNESS REPORTS ON CONDITIONS IN LATVIA

The following information regarding conditions in Latvia at the end of 1949 was given by a Latvian refugee to a Polish Nationalist who later forwarded the report to Sweden.

One of the noticeable changes in Riga during 1949 is the fact that there are far fewer Red Army soldiers in the streets than in former years. This is true in other parts of Latvia, except the coast of Kurzeme on the Baltic and especially the two sea ports of Liepaya and Ventspils. However, the number of MVD units has increased and, especially in Riga, it is estimated that one half of all men in uniform are MVD members. In general the Red Army is no longer the undisciplined crowd which appeared in Latvia between 1944 and 1946. Drunken soldiers and officers are seen less frequently, and cases of robbery and rape, a daily occurrence in the first years of occupation, have also decreased.

The Nakhimov Naval Cadets School is located in the former "Pulvertornis" (Gunpowder Tower) and surrounding buildings. This school has very strict discipline. Cadets are admitted to the school at the age of 10. They are often seen marching through the streets of Riga, wearing white gloves, and led by a military band.

It appears that considerable Soviet air forces are concentrated in Riga, as bombers and fighter airplanes are constantly seen flying over the city.

The Spilve Airport has been greatly expanded and transformed into a large military airfield. Next to it is the civilian airport which handles passenger transports on several air lines (Riga-Moscow, Riga-Liepaya, etc.) Tickets for air transportation are very expensive but can be purchased by anyone. In buying a ticket, one has to give personal information such as name, address, etc. The airplanes are serviced by Russians.

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Railroad transportation is also expensive; for instance, a third-class ticket from Riga to Ventspils costs 34 rubles. At the time of the "currency reform," railroad tariffs were not changed, but in September 1948 they were raised 15 percent. It is not necessary to have a special permit for railroad travel within the Soviet Union. It is, of course, easier and simpler to obtain tickets for people who have travel orders or sufficient funds to "make presents" to the train conductors. People sitting on the train steps may travel free of charge. This is not official, but it is an unwritten law and many have made use of it; one can often see railroad cars with ragged tramps and barefooted teen-age boys, mostly Russians, sitting on the steps. Train conductors are very strict about not letting any of these individuals without tickets get inside the cars. All cars are numbered, and passengers may board only the car indicated on their ticket.

There are few trains and the times of departure and arrival indicated in timetables are not strictly observed. This applies even more to bus transportation, which uses broken-down old busses. It is simpler, therefore, to travel along country roads by truck, which can be stopped by raising one's hand and agreeing with the driver as to the cost of transportation. The latter is around 50 kopeks per kilometer. Roads are in poor condition and most of the bridges are the same as in 1944/1945, when they were repaired with wooden materials after being demolished or damaged during the war. Bridges are carefully guarded; for example, the bridge across the Gauya River near Strenchi is guarded day and night by 50 soldiers. A new railroad bridge is being built across the Lielupe River on the Riga-Tukum line.

Even more attention is given to the coast of Kurzeme, where watch-towers have been built and which is patrolled by Soviet units. All boats on the shore are placed behind barbed-wire fences and carefully guarded. To go out to sea, one has to obtain each time a permit from the staff of the frontier troops, and only those fishermen may claim such permits who have previously received fishing permits. Those fishermen who are considered politically unreliable have no hope whatsoever of obtaining a permit. It has also been observed that among the fishermen who are allowed to go out to sea and remain there from 1 to 4 days, there are always MVD agents.

All Kurzeme districts located along the coast of the Baltic have been declared a restricted zone. This zone is crossed by the automobile road leading from Ventspils to Kuldiga and Ventspils to Liepaya, but bus passengers are forbidden under threat of heavy penalty to get off the bus before they reach their destination. All "politically unreliable" persons have been banished from the restricted zone.

It should be noted that anyone is allowed to go out into the Gulf of Riga without a special permit and many people make use of this opportunity. The Soviet government even makes propaganda for water sports, especially the "bourgeois" sport of sailing. Fishermen do not need a permit in the gulf, as long as they are artel members and have not aroused the suspicion of the Soviet powers.

The status of frontiers between individual USSR republics is very peculiar. Actually these frontiers do not even exist and they are not guarded, for example, the frontiers between Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and the USSR. Anyone may proceed to a neighbor republic and look for a job, if he can obtain a permit from the employer and the militia. However, the frontier between Lithuania and Poland, which was crossed by the author of this report, is very heavily guarded, as Poland, which is not yet formally considered part of the USSR, is apparently regarded as dangerous by the Russians.

The only contact with foreign countries which Latvians may have is by radio, as strangely enough it is possible to listen to foreign broadcasts, but it is not permitted to tell others about the "propaganda of lies" heard on the radio, as this is subject to penalty. However, Latvians know the Russians well enough not to listen to foreign broadcasts openly. Since 1940, there have been periodical rumors that Minister Zarinsh was to speak on the London radio "on such and such a day," but it is suspected that these rumors are spread by the MVD so as to disclose "unreliables."

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Latvians become almost frantic over reports concerning the unceasing efforts of America and England to reach an agreement and understanding with the Bolsheviks. In the cities of Latvia -- on squares, street intersections, and near railroad stations -- there are loudspeakers which blare out Riga and Moscow radio programs from early morning to late at night (0200)

The large Riga radio station is located in Ulbroka [about 12 kilometers from Riga] and is guarded by MVD units. The radio committee and broadcasting studio is located in downtown Riga, in the building of the former Latvian Credit Bank, opposite the Church of St Mary, or Dome Church.

It is possible to communicate within the country by mail or telegraph; however, it often happens that letters and telegrams arrive weeks late or do not arrive at all. Mail censorship was officially abolished in 1946, and there is no proof that letters within the Soviet Union have been censored since that time; however, Latvians have learned to be cautious and no one entrusts his opinions to the Soviet mail. Many signs indicate that all foreign mail is still being censored, and there is ground to believe that all letters sent from Latvia to foreign countries are first concentrated in Riga and then sent to Moscow, from where they are either forwarded or not forwarded, according to a "selection process."

Letters to foreign countries must be delivered at a special counter of the post office. The envelope may be sealed, and the post office clerk puts on the necessary stamp in the presence of the sender. No documents have to be presented and the clerk does not ask for the name of the sender or any other information. Nevertheless, several instances have been known where persons "guilty" of carrying on a correspondence with persons abroad have been ordered to appear before the MVD and have been forced to "tell their friends in broadcasts to Latvians abroad everything they have on their minds." In that case no excuses are accepted.

The Riga Main Post Office is now at the corner of Brivibas and Komunaru (former Merkel) streets, in a building which formerly housed the Army Commercial Store.

The Latvian Information Bulletin appearing in Denmark contained the following article:

A Danish sailor who was in Riga recently gives the following account of his impressions in Latvia.

Our ship was destined for Riga, but for some unknown reason we were first ordered to stop in Ventspils for unloading. Upon entering the harbor, the ship's transmitter was sealed and the antenna removed. In Ventspils the ship's crew was not allowed to go ashore and the ship was closely guarded. After unloading, the ship continued on its way to Riga for timber.

We remained in Riga during the last 3 weeks of December, first in the export harbor, then in some coal harbor. We had the impression that our ship was the first one to visit the Riga port since the capitulation. During the first weeks, the crew was unable to go ashore and the ship was guarded. Five soldiers were constantly patrolling the quay along side the ship and machine-gun posts were stationed nearby.

A great shortage of manpower was noticeable in the harbor, as loading was done by women and very old men. Every time one of the workers had to come abroad, he had to present his passport, and the same was repeated when leaving the ship. The foreman therefore had to show his documents several hundred times a day. The loading was done very slowly, and the workers were often driven to work in the morning by armed soldiers.

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The people in Riga look very depressed and no one enters into conversation with strangers. Only soldiers and women are seen in coffee shops and restaurants. Drinks in restaurants are very expensive; for 5 rubles you can buy only a few glasses of beer. If you ask one of the girls to dance, she will immediately leave the restaurant and will not even talk to you.

There are relatively few goods in the stores and people's clothes look shabby. Visitors who have been in this city before are amazed at the change, as Riga used to be known as one of the most hospitable and well-to-do cities.

One does not see any ruins in the center of the city, and it seems as though it had not suffered much from the war but it is very striking that the city nevertheless has a wartime look. The corner houses at street intersections have apertures for machine guns and heavier automatic weapons, usually on the first floor where the stores are located, so as to cover two streets at once.

Those who know the people in this city are of the opinion that their resistance to the new regime must be very strong. In a roundabout way we found out that shortly before Stalin's birthday people had been deported from Riga, and many had fled into the woods. In this connection there were disturbances in the city and some workers refused to go to work.

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