

Bible School in Latvia – impressions of a first-time visitor, May 2006

From accents heard on the streets of Old Riga, Latvia seems to be becoming a popular destination for weekend breaks for British people. Quite understandably – it's a beautiful place, many people, particularly young people, speak at least some English, and it's still very cheap compared to the UK. No problem with currency conversion for the British, either, as one lats is exactly equivalent to one pound.

But I wasn't there just to visit the Old Town over the Spring Holiday weekend, I was there for the Bible School at Lielupe, in Jurmala, not far from Riga. What a truly international fellowship we have – like the first Christians, who were one Brotherhood, whatever their origins. In Lielupe, there were brothers and sisters and friends not only from all over Latvia, but also Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, the UK and France.



Helena and Linda from Norway

The rather decaying Soviet-era conference-centre-type hotel was actually ideal. Plenty of space, very quiet, and so cheap that, thanks to the various kind sponsors, it was possible to pay for the accommodation for those who find the 40p train fare from Riga already quite a sizeable expense. Soviet-era pensions have not kept up with the rising cost of living.

I can assure all those who made it possible that the brothers and sisters really do appreciate and benefit from being able to meet up in this way, and spend time together around the Word of God.

The studies were led by Duncan, in Russian and English, and Nick, for whom Irma very ably interpreted. Duncan spoke about the message of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Hosea, concerning God's love and concern for us, and Nick about how God's plan is being worked out, from Pharaoh to Hitler, and so on.

Yes, language is a problem. The Soviet era has left Russian as the lingua franca in that part of the world. But for those of us who don't speak it, someone can always be found to speak English, and simple smiles and sign language can convey a lot, too. Two Latvian sisters, at least, speak German, much better than I do, but the little I could remember was useful.

The hotel is surrounded by woods, with pine trees and silver birches. Wild lilac bushes were blooming profusely by the sides of the roads, and lily-of-the-valley was growing under the trees. There were birds everywhere, even swans on the sea-shore, proving that the Baltic is less salty than other seas. Yet again, one is left wondering how people can see such wonders and still deny their Creator.

It was on Saturday afternoon that we had time to walk through the woods to the beautiful sandy beach. Saturday evening finished with an interesting film about Joseph.

Sunday morning, Nick exhorted us for the breaking of bread, then we had another study, and after lunch it was time to leave, as many people had a long way to travel, and Monday wasn't a holiday for them.



Nick giving the exhortation. Including day visitors, about 60 attended the weekend, making it the largest ever gathering of brethren in the Baltic states

I travelled back to Riga by train with a group of sisters, and then Irma very kindly spent the afternoon showing me around the city centre, in particular the beautiful Old Riga.

Sis. Sonia Hemingray (Lyon, France)



Sis Austra wanted to see the sea "as it will probably be the last time I see the sea in this life before the Kingdom of God comes". So we took her there.



New brethren from Estonia and Latvia in discussion. One of the vital things about these gatherings is that isolated believers come together and share the joy of finding there are others in similar situations to themselves, holding the same beliefs and sharing the same difficulties.

These gatherings provide a welcome break and spiritual oasis for many brothers and sisters who otherwise live very difficult lives. Now that health care has to be paid for and there was no health insurance system in the USSR period that has any validity today, many find themselves in serious difficulties when they need medication or major medical care. One brother needs about 300 GBP [about 740 Australian \$, or 440 Euros, or 560 US \$] for an operation. He wishes to not be a burden on any, and although he has a job and works hard at it, it's still hard for him to find those funds. So he wishes to sell his stamp collection, built up over many years during the Soviet years, in order to fund the operation- this is his only valuable possession. The collection has been scanned and we've put it up on the web at <http://www.carelinks.net/care/stamps.htm>. Items of interest include: 19th century New South Wales stamps [from before the postal service in Australia was unified] ; German 3rd Reich era postage stamps featuring Adolf Hitler; WW2 postage stamps from occupied Europe over stamped with Nazi statements in German; German postage stamps from the years of hyper inflation in the 1920s, '200' over stamped with '2 million'; early Israeli stamps; 19th century stamps from Argentina; early French and Australian Antarctic territories stamps; 19th century stamps from England, France, Serbia , Bosnia & Hercegovina; Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and several other European states; wide collection of early Russian and USSR stamps, etc etc.

We can vouch for our brother's sincerity and faithfulness in the Lord over many years, and so if you are interested, or know anyone who might be, do forward the link around. We commend our brother and others like him who seek to do all they can in order to meet the economic crises they find themselves in with integrity.

With love from your brothers and sisters of CCM