

# Riga is a Beautiful City

cont'd from preceding page

members if they knew his family. They told him that all the Jews of Riga were either killed or left during the war.

Fortunately, during the day our experience was better. We had a guided tour of the old city and found the only remaining synagogue of Riga. It was very rundown and in need of many repairs. This one was formerly on a big square but now other buildings have been put up around it and it is squeezed in between dilapidated apartments. We heard it was beautiful inside, but could find no one to unlock the door to let us in. The population of Riga, pre-war, was 30% Jewish and there were scores of synagogues. This is all that remains of a vital Jewish community.

Later that day, we met Todd's refusenik who told us most of the Jews are trying to leave. He said it is very difficult for the ones who remain because they don't have Hebrew teachers or books for the children. He is teaching his own children Hebrew at home but felt it would be better for them to go to the synagogue and meet other Jewish children. He told us they are in dire need of Hebrew teachers and that is the one thing they hope the Jews of the United States send them.

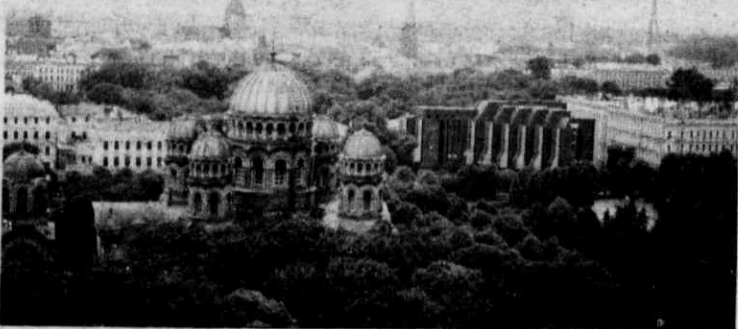
The city of Riga is beautiful with many parks and fountains. It is the second most important Baltic port, after Leningrad, and is on the Daugava River which has a most unusual bridge connecting the historic old city with the industrial areas. There is also a very efficient bus and trolley system which we used to take us to our second farmer's market of the trip to satisfy our craving for the fruit we were unable to find in any of the restaurants or food shops near our hotel.

Our hotel lobby was always full of people and the guard at the door watched carefully to prevent street traders from entering. Even so, a very enterprising young man, named Konstantine, managed to hang out at our hotel in hopes of earning some money as a translator and guide. He and Todd struck up a conversation and after our evening of no communication and no dinner, we thought Konstantine would be useful to have around and hired him for the day. This was definitely a good move. With his help in translating, lunch was great. In a small restaurant in the old town, we managed to find real broiled chicken, even though we had to wade through the compulsory cold hors d'oeuvres first.

Konstantine was the one who helped us find the synagogue. He asked me if I were a believer.



View of tree-lined avenue from our hotel window, Riga.



View of city of Riga from window of our Hotel Latvia.

photos/Todd Gorelick

I was not sure I understood what he meant. Finally, I realized he meant — did I believe in God. When I replied, "Yes," he said "I am not. I only believe in me and then not always." He is the result of a child brought up under the Soviet system with no religion. Konstantine was

dressed in typical American clothes: Bass Weegins, Hugo Boss knit shirt, designer jeans and a backpack.

The one characteristic that separated him from most Americans, other than his speech, were his teeth. They were already stained even though he was only



House built in 1649. Old City of Riga.

photo/Dana Gorelick

22-years-old; they looked like they had never been professionally cleaned. We noticed that many Soviet citizens had the same type dental problem and were acutely aware that the quality of their medical and dental services leaves much to be desired. In spite of this, he was

a charming young man. We told him we were leaving that evening on the overnite train for Leningrad and he asked if we would sign a form inviting him to the United States. He desperately wanted to leave the Soviet Union and was ready to go immediately with us on the train to Leningrad. Unfortunately, we could not do this for him because we were afraid of putting our own family's chances for a visit to the U.S. at risk. Konstantine was disappointed, but Todd has kept in touch with him by mail and he is still trying to leave. We think his chances have improved greatly in the last few months.

Our luggage was on the move again. This time our destination would be our last stop, Leningrad. We were all in the hotel lobby waiting for the van to take us to the train station when Rael, Jeff and Scott joined us after a good shopping excursion. Like locusts, we descended on them to sample their delicious treasure of fresh baked bread. I suppose if one stayed in Riga long enough, it would be possible to find good food, but our van was ready to leave and so were we. On to Leningrad and what would be the final meeting with our Moscow family.

— to be continued —

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