

# Preserving Hope in Latvia



## **ON A QUIET STREET IN CENTRAL RIGA SITS A HISTORIC WOODEN BUILDING, MARKED BY GRAFFITI AND OVERGROWN WITH VINES.**

Across the street is a school. Next door sits the Riga First United Methodist Church. A short walk away, the Freedom Monument reaches skyward. Museums, cathedrals, historic centers of government, cafés and outdoor markets engender the unmistakable character of Old Riga's Center District.

First appearing on city records in 1824, the Akas Iela (Wells Street in English) wooden building is a historic gem among many in Old Riga. Renovations to the building were recorded in 1852, at which time it was home to the Von Wolff family of German-Baltic aristocrats.

In 1921, the US-based Methodist Mission Board purchased the property for use as a home for children who had been orphaned by the ravages of World War I.

By 1940, the Soviet Union had occupied Latvia, closing the Methodist Churches. The property was nationalized and converted to communal apartments. Over the 50 years of occupation in Latvia, the old wooden orphanage fell into disrepair.

In 1991, Latvia regained its freedom. The building was returned to its pre-occupation owners, the General Board of Global Ministry of the United Methodist Church.

As the Methodist Church began its post-Soviet reconstruction, the orphanage was deeded to the Hope Center of the Latvian United Methodist Church. The intention was that it would again be a beacon of hope to families all over Latvia.

## THE HOPE CENTER

The Hope Center, located in the rural town of Liepa, provides a home for unwed mothers. One of the social issues that has concerned Latvians has been the low birth rate, and the high number of pregnancies in young girls who live in orphanages. These young women are given a choice: terminate the pregnancy or leave the orphanage.

The Hope Center provides a place for these young women to live, have their babies, and learn life skills.

Because of Liepa's rural location, the Hope Center encounters many limitations in helping mothers find access to transportation, housing, education and employment. The central location of the wooden building in Riga would greatly increase access to these vital services.

Gita Bināne, Director of the Hope Center, has created a plan for the use of the wooden building in Riga as a second Hope Center location. The plan would allow for expanded social services. In addition to the care of orphans and single mothers, the space could be utilized to provide counseling, assistance for children aging out of orphanages, professional consultations, medical support, and hospice care.

## A MONUMENTAL CHALLENGE

Unfortunately, the Akas Iela wooden building has been rendered unusable by time and neglect. Concerned city officials, church members, and neighbors have long worried that the building poses a safety threat. However, it is protected, both by its location in the Historic District of Central Riga, as well as by the area's UNESCO World Heritage designation.

Leaders of the church have considered whether the property should be sold to an organization that would be able to properly restore it, rather than attempt to use it for the Hope Center. However, the deed to the wooden building is tied to the property that is home to Riga First United Methodist Church, one of the country's largest Methodist congregations. The site also houses the Latvian District Offices of the United

# Insight: The Plight of the Latvian People

by Gita Medne

For centuries, Latvian men have been conscripted into foreign armies to fight foreign wars. Many husbands and sons have lost their lives and limbs for others' causes.

Living in an agrarian country under the rule of German Barons has left centuries of Latvians being told that they are subhuman. Historians write that the peasants of Latvia were more ill-treated than slaves.

In the 1850s a new dawning of independent thought and self-worth began to circulate, leading to a bold declaration of independence in the midst of occupiers.

The country prospered. Latvia became an exporter of lumber and dairy products. Many of its citizens began to flourish on small farmsteads. Latvians were the second-most-literate country

in the world. Women had the right to vote and many became doctors, dentists, lawyers, judges, and teachers.

This all ended with occupation by the Soviets and Germans. The Soviets deported many of the professionals to Siberia because they were seen as threats to a successful occupation. Thousands of educated people fled, knowing their fate under the Soviets. Homes, farms, businesses and apartments were confiscated.

The Latvians were considered to be second class citizens, not to be trusted with any type of leadership or important jobs. History books were re-written to indicate that all the world's

achievements were accomplished by Soviet men and women, regardless of the truth. The KGB was ever-present and people could no longer trust their friends, families or co-workers.

The people learned to blend in as much as possible and to show no initiative that others could envy. The occupation lasted almost 50 years, causing Latvians to lose trust and initiative, traits taken for granted by people living in freedom. •



German troops entering Riga - World War I | WikiCommons

Methodist Church. The heart and soul of Methodism in Latvia is indelibly linked to 13 Akas Iela. Sale of the property is simply not an option.

The Historical Preservation Board in Riga requires that certain elements of the historic structure be retained. After many years of discussion and debate, the Board has now agreed that the project can be completed in phases. In the first phase, the building itself will be dismantled to alleviate the immediate danger of the dilapidated structure. Within five years, the second phase - reconstruction - must begin. The reconstructed building must maintain the general appearance of the facade, as well as certain historical elements of the building.

The burden and cost of this project has presented a major problem for the Methodist Church in Latvia. The cost of the first phase is estimated at \$50,000 (USD). For an organization whose annual budget for all work across the nation of Latvia averages less than \$200,000, that figure is daunting.

Yet, the Methodist people of Latvia, and their friends around the world, still believe there is hope. Advocates of the Hope Center feel strongly that this central location is vital to expanding its reach to Latvians in need.

## NEXT STEPS

Architects have developed plans. Estimates have been obtained. Approval of the Riga Historical Society is in process. All that remains is for the Hope Center to raise adequate funds for the work of phase one to begin. A local historical foundation in Riga has pledged to provide some funding, once the permits are in place. For the remainder, the Hope Center will rely on donations.

There are 12 small Latvian Methodist congregations who are each committed to supporting the wooden building project. In addition, the international Friends of Latvia organization has been spreading the word to churches in the United States, England, Ireland and Denmark. To date, approximately \$16,000 has been raised toward the first phase of preservation.

You have the opportunity to be a part of the effort to preserve this historic building, and restore hope to countless lives in the process. Donations may be made online via the United Methodist Missions giving portal located at [www.umcmission.org](http://www.umcmission.org). Search for project #00235A and indicate "Hope Center Wooden Building" in the memo of your tax-deductible gift.

If you have questions or would like to have someone speak to your group about the Riga wooden building project, contact Friends of Latvia. •

**FRIENDS OF LATVIA** is a group of individuals who join together to support the United Methodist Church in the Baltic nation of Latvia. Members come from all over the United States, Latvia, and other parts of Europe.

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Artist's rendering of Akas Iela after renovation