

THE YEARS OF FEAR

THE KGB BUILDING IN RIGA

by Rosario Napolitano

As we know, Latvia, as well as Lithuania and Estonia, was not only invaded once, but three times. The first time was by the Soviet Union from 1940 until 1941, the second by Nazi Germany from 1941 until 1944, and the third and last time again by the Soviet Union from 1944 until 1991. In these 51 years, the “soul” of the *Stūra Māja* also changed several times and in different ways. The purpose of this paper is to focus attention on the *Stūra Māja* [Corner House] of Riga and how the building was used is in the focus of this article. I have also conducted interviews, with both the former Latvian KGB Chief Edmunds Johanson, as well as the former Latvian dissident Leo Hirššons.

The origin of the building

Located on Brīvības iela 61 (on the corner with Stabu iela, hence the name Corner House) the building was designed by architect Aleksanders Vanags (1873–1919) in 1912 after he had obtained his certification as an architect in Saint Petersburg. In the same year, Vanags traveled a lot with his wife, seeking to learn new architectural techniques.⁷ In Berlin, he was pleasantly surprised by the “Adlon” Hotel, built in 1907 by Lorenz Adlon and he wanted to create the same project in Riga with the aim of attracting more tourists. After Berlin, Vanags also visited Italy, choosing to pass through Rome, Venice, and Naples before he returned to Germany, this time to Munich.

In 1919, seven years after the completion of the Corner House, Vanags was arrested on March 18 in Jelgava along with 21 others and condemned as a member of the Counter Revolutionary Movement. Vanags was executed the next day, along with the 21 others, after having dug his own grave. He is buried in Riga Meža Kapi with his daughter Daina Rasmane.

The Corner House was finished in 1912 and consists of six floors. It had a variety of different uses from 1912, such as apartments and stores, while from 1919 the Lat-

vian Revolutionary War Committee was located there.

From 1920 until 1940, the Corner House was the location of the emigration office, the border guard, the Latvian anti-alcoholism organization, and the headquarters of the newspaper *Jaunā Balss* [The New Voice]. It was primarily a state property, a sort of social building.

The first Soviet occupation

From August 1940, after the first Soviet occupation, the “soul” of the Corner House radically changed, as did the social and cultural life of all three Baltic countries.

The first prominent Corner House victim was General Ludvigs Bolšteins of the Latvian Guards Organization. Bolšteins, who was in charge at that time with an office in the Corner House, decided to commit suicide on June 21, 1940, after receiving the news of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic country.

In fact, from November 1940 until June 1941, the Corner House was the building where the Cheka (Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage, founded by Vladimir Lenin in 1917) operated in Riga. But the Corner House was not the first Cheka office

in Riga: the first one was in Alberta iela 13.

Forty-four cells of various sizes were built in the Corner House from 1940 (ten of those cells are in the abandoned basement, which is no longer accessible for tourists). The three elevators in the building date back to the period before the first Soviet occupation.

During the first Soviet occupation, the building was the place of interrogation, torture, and incarceration of Latvian citizens, who the occupying regime considered to be opponents of the Soviet system.

The first people incarcerated were border guards, because they were standing in the way of Soviet troops during the occupation.

The years of terror started. The same happened in the current Genocide Center Building in Vilnius that was used in the early of 1940s as the office of the Soviet repression.

A post box was located in the first check point of the KGB building with a guard in the same room. The post box was accessible for everybody, enabling anyone to deliver letters or documentation of people whose activities made them suspect. This post box was used during both Soviet occupation periods. After delivering a letter, the person who deposited it was interrogated by the KGB. The rewards offered by the Soviet regime for these informants were very tempting: it could be a monetary payment, special access to shops to get more food or goods, or even an apartment. An apartment was very desirable and was considered one of the primary targets for informants. At a time when up to five families of different social classes were often perched together in the same *kommunalka*,⁸ each in different room, with one toilet and one kitchen, a new apartment was like winning the lottery.

Another stimulus for collaboration with the Soviet government could also be a new car or a promotion at work.

The German interregnum

From 1942 to 1944, the Corner House was the place where the *Nacionālā Sardze*⁴ documented Cheka operations during the previous year. The man responsible for the project was Jūlijs Bračs, a history teacher who worked with several students, thanks to whom the huge amount of documents and files meticulously compiled by Cheka were revealed. Bračs was arrested in 1943 by the Germans because his organization was looked upon with suspicion by the Nazi regime and considered “too” Latvian; one hypothesis is that Bračs and his helpers were producing anti-Nazi propaganda in the building. Bračs was released several months after his arrest and decided to leave the country for Germany in the summer of 1944, one year before the Soviet Union invaded Latvia and the other Baltic States for the second time.

“DURING THE FIRST SOVIET OCCUPATION THE BUILDING WAS THE PLACE OF INTERROGATION, TORTURE AND INCARCERATION OF LATVIAN CITIZENS.”



The second Soviet occupation

During the second Soviet occupation from 1944, the Corner House at Brīvības iela 61 was returned to its original former use as the KGB building, and Riga Central Prison was moved to Matisa iela 3.

The process of Sovietization started in the Baltic countries between 1944 and 1945, but it was only in 1955–1956, after Khrushchev took power as the new Secretary of the Communist Party, that the last group of partisans was destroyed by the KGB, who had adopted a different strategy.

The KGB officers had several targets: including religious movements, anti-Soviet and anti-Russian organization members, foreign intelligence agents, people who were taking part in illegal anti-Soviet agitation or trying to leave Latvia for other countries, and artists who were against the canons of socialist realism that glorified the values of communism and the emancipation of the proletariat. One of these cases was the Latvian poet Knuts Skujenieks who spent six months of his life in the KGB building and was then sentenced to six years in a labor camp in the Ural Mountains.⁵

Other prestigious victims were members of the armed resistance, and in particular Latvian national partisans.

In fact, the Latvian national partisans were one of the reasons for why that the process of *Sovietisation* in Latvia, but also in Estonia and in Lithuania (the last Lithuanian partisan killed in battle was commander Ananas Krūjelis on March 17, 1965),⁶ was so slow.

IN THOSE YEARS, the Soviet regime decided to destroy the partisan movements from within, so they used infiltrators to discover them and find out who they should arrest. There were several cases in which a partisan member killed or betrayed his own comrade. After the arrest, those presumed guilty were forced to undress and consign to the guards all the potentially dangerous objects that could endanger their lives and those of other prisoners.

Then the accused were taken to the interrogation room. The interrogations carried out by KGB agents always started with a normal conversation and simple questions, then they totally changed their behavior and became very rude and violent to

the prisoners, who were often punched and beaten until they signed a confession.

After Stalin's death in 1953, physical torture, which was very common at the KGB building, was replaced by psychological torture. Prisoners were crammed into small cells, often 20–25 people at a time (generally in the biggest cell) and in the majority of cases the room remained illuminated for 24 hours a day, serving to disorient the prisoners.



The prisoners were fed three times per day, and the meals were exclusively prepared in the kitchen located in one part of the basement. The “menu” was always the same: a piece of bread with coffee in the morning and fish soup or just soup with vegetables, at best, for lunch and dinner, but the quality and cleanness of the food were below normal standards.

One curious space in the KGB building is the metal room in one part of the basement, built in the late 1950s as a bomb shelter in case of a possible nuclear attack.

Between the end of World War Two and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, around 30,000 KGB agents and informers worked in Latvia – many of them Latvian. Most of the chairmen in the KGB building were Russian, but there were some exceptions.

One of these was Edmunds Johansons⁷ (1936–2017), the second to last KGB officer who operated in Stūra Māja from the mid-1960s until 1991. He was preceded by seven others: Semjons Šustins, Alfons Noviks, Nikolajs Kovaļčuks, Jānis Vēvers, Langins Avdjukevičs, Boriss Pugo (Secretary of the Latvian Communist Party from 1984 to 1988), and Bruno Šteinbriks; the last chairman of the KGB in Latvia was Jānis Trubiņš, who succeeded Johansons just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Trubiņš is currently working as Head of the Transport Division of the Central Market in Riga.

Johansons earned his degree in Moscow in 1960, then decided to move to Latvia and started to work for the KGB in the mid-1960s. Almost 5,000 agents throughout Latvia worked with him, and a remarkable number of secret informers collaborated providing detailed reports of suspicious people in exchange for small favors (such as money or a promotion at work).

In another part of the building Leo Hiršsons⁸ was held, and he

was the last prisoner in the KGB building and the last dissident in Latvia. Leo Hiršsons is the son of Hermans Hiršsons, considered to be one of the first Latvian partisan, but who did not join any official group. Hermans Hiršson started his working career in a circus in Kuldīga (a small city situated 150 km from Riga) before moving to Liepāja before the war started. In 1943 he was captured by Nazi German soldiers and sent to prison in Germany until 1945, when he escaped and came back to Latvia. His son Leo was born just 10 years later.

At the age of 27, Leo moved to Riga from Liepāja where he started to work in the cinema industry as an actor and stuntman. He was arrested in November 1989 and released after six months, on May 4, 1990. At that time he was working as a stuntman in the cinema industry, and he lived illegally to avoid arrest.

THE REASON FOR Hiršsons' arrest was that he did not register his work material at the specific offices. The KGB did not find any kind of connection with anti-Soviet organizations (he was also the member of Latvian Social-Democratic Party⁹), but Hiršsons had joined some dissident movements that had links with Sweden because it was totally impossible to create an anti-Soviet movement in the Baltic at that time. Hiršsons went to Sweden several times, and then met with leaders of Latvian communities who helped by printing a production of the underground magazine *Sociāldemokrāts* (Social Democrat). The other illegal magazines made in Sweden were *Brīvība* (Freedom), and *Auseklis* (Auseklis is the name of a Latvian god).

When Hiršsons came back from Sweden in 1989, he was accused by the KGB of espionage. The situation was made worse by the fact that Hiršsons was the bodyguard of the Latvian dissident Lidija Lasmane-Doroņina, who had been sent to Siberia for his dissident activities in Latvia.

On November 24, Hiršsons was arrested after his home in Gustava iela 610 was searched by KGB agents. He spent the first two weeks in isolation in Riga Central Prison, and was then brought to the KGB Building where he was held for almost six months. He was sentenced for being a member of a terrorist group. Hiršsons was released on March 16, 1990, exactly 12 days after Latvia proclaimed its independence.

According to the most recent data, almost 200 people were killed in the KGB building; the prisoners were sent to the execution room, a large quiet space next to the yard, where they were

shot in the head. They were loaded onto a big truck with other dead bodies and buried in a common grave outside Riga. The majority of the killings happened in 1941, after which prisoners were killed in Riga Central Prison (until 1953–1954).

Conclusion

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Latvian State Police worked at the Corner House from 1992 until 2008; they also utilized some offices, which are located both in the basement and from the second to the sixth floor, spaces that are currently not accessible for the public.

The building was only opened to the public in 2014, which was 24 years after Hiršson left his cell. It is now is a museum and exhibition space.

Thanks to this decision, at the same time the KGB Building was unlocked, opening up almost 70 years of history.

Since the building opened to the public, there have been different ideas of how to use it, such as a location for scary adventures or refurbishing it to create new apartments or even a hotel. ■

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