**An Israeli Finds PEP in Estonia and Latvia to Be Rich and Rewarding**

By **Judy Shlasky**, CIF Israel

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to spend three weeks in Estonia and Latvia in the spring of 2016 for the CIF Professional Exchange Program (PEP), which was divided evenly between the two countries. The program began on May 20 in Tallinn and ended on June 10 in Riga, and I was part of a group of four participants: Barbara, aged 60, from the US, Min-Chu, aged 35, from Taiwan, Izzettin, aged 31, from Izmir, Turkey, (all social workers) and myself, from the Tel Aviv area in Israel.

 At first we all stayed together in a comfortable apartment near the water in Tallinn. During this time we underwent orientation together while getting acquainted with each other, and started to meet the members of CIF Estonia. Margit, the CIF Estonia President, provided us with food and "goodies" for our stay. On the first day we were taken by Margit to the Parliament of Estonia where we had a tour, heard a lecture and had a meeting with a member of Parliament, a lady who deals with social welfare issues, and several other people from CIF and from the Parliament also took part. Later in the day we participated in a large meeting with the members of CIF Estonia, had time to speak with them personally and each of us (from abroad) delivered a presentation of our own work and respective countries. The atmosphere was warm and welcoming. Following the meeting we were taken to dinner in a lovely restaurant by the sea, and several CIF local members came also.

 The next day we were given a walking tour of the Old City of Tallinn, which is beautiful and fascinating, with a CIF member who is very knowledgeable and she served as our guide. Following this we had more walking tours in other interesting and unique neighborhoods in Tallinn, and we did quite a lot of walking that day! The pace was broken by a half hour stay in an ancient cathedral in the city where we listened (free) to an organ recital of Bach, and a lunch in a lovely Russian restaurant where we all ordered *parishkees,* a special filled Russian pancake, and in the evening we were again invited by CIF Estonia to a very nice restaurant in an interesting area of the city, where we dined with several CIF local members and Margit.

 On the third day each of us went to our own host families, Barbara and Izzettin left Tallinn for other towns for the remainder of their stay in Estonia and Min-Chu and I remained in Tallinn, each at a separate host family (fairly close to each other). My hostess took me to the local supermarket and made a point of choosing foods that I like and planning the meals with me. She also took me around the neighborhood and showed me where the bus stops are that I would use, and the local train station, and showed how to walk from her house. I was staying with a young couple with a cute dog. Annie is a social worker in a big hospital in Tallinn and Artur has a fish business. I had my own room in their private house, and was told to take anything I want from the refrigerator and kitchen, and was made very welcome. Their house has a large, attractive yard which we used also.

 On the fourth day I began the PEP and each day I visited between two to four social agencies where I heard lectures, had seminars and met the staff. There were discussions about the kind of social work done in each agency and I was also asked about how things are done in Israel, and we had discussions about the similarities and the differences in the social work practice at parallel agencies in Estonia and Israel. All of the people I met were cordial and cooperative and showed interest in me and in professional work in Israel. However, I found that most of the people knew very little about Israel the country, and did not seem to have opinions regarding events and policies here. Among the agencies I visited were the Tallinn Municipal Social Service Agency for Families (multi-service), an agency that helps victims of “human trafficking” and women trapped in the cycle of prostitution, the Tallinn Municipal Children's Protective Agency, a Center for Counseling for Foster and Adoptive Families, a live-in shelter for women and children, an agency that provides various services for needy children including a home for them, the social service of a large hospital, and a drug maintenance center for addicts.

 During the weekend there, my hostess took Min-Chu (from Taiwan) and myself to her home town, Hapsalu, where her parents live, and we also did a tour of the town and climbed to the top of an ancient fortress we visited!

The week went fast and in addition to the professional visits we experienced other things such as: a walk in the "bog" (forest) at the end of one day, a walk along the beach at day's end, a visit to the dog training center where my hostess takes her dog for training, an evening out at an entertainment club where special games are played, and also at a Russian pub. I visited the Estonian Occupational Museum by myself. At the end of the 10 days in Tallinn, my hosts held a farewell party and gathering for Min-Chu and me in their yard, and most of the local CIF members participated. We also did the CIF summary and questionnaire for the program. It was quite emotional and hard to say goodbye!

 The next morning we had one more agency visit and from there we went to the bus station and rode on the bus to Riga, about 4 hours and 40 minutes.

 We were greeted in Riga by Ieva, the President of CIF Latvia, and taken to a welcoming reception for us with the CIF Riga members. All four participants were present, as the other two (Izzettin and Barbara who spend time out of Tallinn), also arrived. We were introduced to all of the local members and there was generous snack food of all kinds. Following that meeting each participant was taken home by his/her host/hostess and I stayed with Zina, a lovely lady who lives alone. The same evening Zina showed me her neighborhood and the bus stops and informed me of all transport that I would need.

 The next day we each began our individual professional programs. We were also given a guided tour of the Old City of Riga, which is an architectural gem, and of the Occupational Museum. On another day we were given a tour of some art deco buildings in a section in the middle of Riga. I visited the following agencies: the Riga Municipal Social Service Family Agency, the office of the National Welfare Ministry in Riga, an agency that is parallel to the National Insurance Institute of Israel, a center for foster families, a multi-function day-care center for children, a center that specialized in treating women in stress including victims of domestic violence, the Riga "Family Court," a Mediation Center for families and a clinic for "sand therapy" and the Riga University School of Medicine and School of Law. I showed my presentation from Israel to students of Social Work at the School of Law, as did my colleagues.

During my stay in Riga I went to a performance at their Opera House, a special treat, to a restaurant-club with live singers (with Ieva and Barbara), and visited both the Latvian Art Museum and the Jewish Museum of Riga that tells the story of the Jewish Community. I also walked around the picturesque Old City by myself.

On one of the weekends In Riga, we were taken on an outing to an art fair next to a restored village which were fun to visit.

 While in Latvia each of the participants was sent to another city for two days and two nights to experience another setting and see another part of Latvia with more social agencies. I was sent to Liepaja on the Baltic Sea, a vacation town. I was greeted there (after a three and one half hour bus ride) by my hostess and family and given a whirl-wind tour of Liepaja that evening (still was light out) and then taken home to stay in a small separate flat adjacent to my hostess' flat. During my two days there I visited these agencies: a large rehabilitation center for various kinds of disabilities for all ages, the Liepaja Family Court, the Liepaja Municipal Social Service for Families, and an institution that provides permanent housing for homeless people. I also visited the School of Social Work at Liepaja University. I was asked to lecture and show my presentation twice while there, once at the University at my hostesses lesson (she teaches in the social work school) and once at the Municipal Social Service. Also, my hostess and family showed me some of the attractions in the town such as a lovely Russian Church, and took me to see the memorial by the beach for the thousands of Jews murdered there during the Holocaust.

 I returned to Riga for the end of my stay and my hostess made a special dinner for me at her apartment in my honor. On the last evening there was a farewell party/meeting for all four participants, who completed the PEP, and most of the local CIF members attended. There were speeches and blessings and much food. Each participant received the certificate of completing the Estonia/Latvia program and we all said our goodbyes, sadly. I was very satisfied by the treatment I received from all of my hostesses in Tallinn, Riga and Liepaja. All were attentive and kind and did their best to make me comfortable and satisfied in their homes, and I felt welcome and enjoyed meeting them and staying with them.

 At the end of that meeting I went to the Riga Airport for my flight back to Tel Aviv, full of emotions and gleaming from the rich and fascinating experience in Estonia and Latvia. Although there were some minor things that could be improved, on the whole it was a wonderful program that worked well and provided much learning and enjoyment. I gained a rich and rewarding experience while learning about the professional work there and about the other cultures we visited, and from meeting all the good and gracious people there. I truly appreciate the opportunity I had to visit those countries and highly esteem all of my hostesses who were so gracious and helpful and were a delight to know. I miss them and also my colleagues who came from abroad. I am grateful to Margit Radaru in Tallinn and Ieva Antonson in Riga, as well as Vinita Vitola in Liepaja. I hope to return to both countries.

Photo: participants and CIF Latvia below:

