



Europa Royale Riga

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◀ The grandeur of the building is felt already upon opening the front doors. The vestibule is adorned with artificial marble walls and columns and expressive woodcarvings. A broad oak staircase leads to the hotel restaurant and apartments. In the time of the first owners, a hall-porter would stand here armed with a revolver. The left side staircase led to the Pfab palace, later on to the Benjamiņi flat that occupied the entire ground floor. It then became the Writers' Union but now the restaurant "Benjamiņš". The right side staircase led to expensive rented premises but now to the hotel apartments.



▲ By the left side staircase we come into a spacious ante-room with wainscots and a wooden carved ceiling. Four windows face an enclosed sunlit yard and therefore, instead of ordinary glazing there is stained glass with landscape paintings. We can see the Koknese castle ruins, a view of Bauska, the bridge over the Venta in Kuldiga and Staburags. The Benjamiņi had transferred the majolica fireplace to the ante-room from the round hall.



tables, Sevres chinaware, crystal glasses and silverware. The stained glass artwork on the walls was replaced. These works were made in Paris by K. Brencēns, a Latvian artist who studied there. The stained glass artwork "Lāčplēsis" depicts the national hero, around him there was a red-white-red strip of a banner – a forbidden symbol in Soviet times. The white strip was painted out with red gouache, thus the stained glass survived till today. On the right side there is "Castle of Light" – Mrs. Benjamiņa herself with her sister in stylised folk costumes. Neither the architect nor the hostess had liked these artworks, and they wanted to replace the stained glass by the old ones. Then Antons Benjamiņš convened a commission, which favourably evaluated the outstanding art. In this room most of all one can sense 1930s



◀ The fireplace. In the Pfabs' day this was a divided room when visitors would first enter the waiting room to meet the secretary. E. Laube, the architect of the reconstruction of the Benjamiņi house, joined the two rooms leaving the beam supported by two decorative wooden columns with Corinthian chapiters. During reconstruction a fireplace with woodcarvings was installed. During the time of the Writers' Union this room was known as the Cabinet of A. Upiťis, named after the first chairman of the Union. Under the painting of K. Miesnieks, which now is located at the State Art Museum, serious meetings at the round table took place here...
▼ The Benjamiņi rebuilt the dining hall of the Pfab family so that all present at the table would be astonished and would not eat much. The main features were solid



Latvia – national romanticism. The saturated power of the colours of the stained glass artworks suits the hotel bar very well and pleases the visitors.
◀ Going through the Ballroom and the Venetian Hall, Emilija Benjamiņa would come to her boudoir – now the Royal Suite. This room is like the heart of the house, its pulse. Here the sun's rays flood in and one can see the whole yard, who is coming and who is going, the stables and the young handsome coachmen... Everything has been restored very precisely and it is hard to imagine that here was once the secretariat of the Writers' Union with clacking typewriters. The palace has experienced much. Sculpted bust of Antons Benjamiņš, sculpture of the poet Rainis, portrait of Lenin in the Ballroom. This house continues to write history...



EUROPA ROYALE
HOTEL RIGA



E. N. Pfab (1828-?), designer of the house and its first owner. This, the only surviving photo, was taken during a hunting trip.



A. V. Pfab (1848-?), wife of the first owner of the house, also did much in the creation of this house.

During the golden age of construction in Riga, in the mid-19th century, new built-up territories began to arise outside the walls of the medieval city fortifications, which today we call the historical centre of Riga – a monument of the world cultural heritage. The house of the Pfab family of wealthy merchants was built here in 1876. It was designed in the eclecticism style by the architects V. Beckman (1832–1902) and H. Ende (1829–1907) who were invited from Berlin and took their inspiration from the Italian Renaissance in Florence. The grandiose brick house with its beautiful terrace and extensive garden was a building unique for its time and clearly visible from the entire surroundings. For northern Latvia, each ray of sun is worth its weight in gold. And the German architects knew how to use the excellent location of the site to make the sunlight enter the interior of the house and to play with the sumptuous ceiling decorations, the ornamental friezes and to sparkle in the stained glass and chandeliers. The morning and evening rays of the sun mark out the beautiful architectural lines and the chiaroscuro enlivens the adornments, reliefs and sculptures. The young sculptor A. Volk (1851–1926) was also invited from Germany and it is his art that does not allow us to forget the first owners of the building. Two allegoric girls gracefully adorn the arch above the entrance, one holds an attribute of flame but by the other girl there is a flax spinning wheel – the base of the Pfab family's wealth. On the balcony two shield bearing lions demonstrate the proud self-assurance of the family. The Vestal virgin in the niche of the wall – a terracotta copy of the antique statue – is the protector of the home. In the 1920ies the Pfabs lost the profitable Russian market and their prosperity began to decline, the large house intended for presentations ruined the health of the owner. Having lived there for 52 years, the family was compelled to part with their magnificent mansion.



Postcard, beginning of 20th century

In Latvia there has never been a crowned royal couple, but the uncrowned one was certainly Emilija and Antons Benjamiņš. In 1928 they bought the Pfab palace and so began the most legendary page in the history of this house. Being ordinary newspaper reporters they understood the power of one kopek in tsarist Russia. In 1911 the couple founded the most popular daily newspaper “Jaunākās Ziņas” with a circulation of 90 000 copies at one kopek apiece. Their rapid advance towards millions continued with the publication of the family magazine “Atpūta” in 1924 with a circulation of over 60 000 copies. This magazine even nowadays can be considered as outstanding, interesting and unsurpassed as to the content. And so the new press magnates of Latvia in their splendid house established what was to be undoubtedly the most influential salon in Riga. Its sumptuous doors were opened only for the select – diplomats, ministers, deputies, celebrities.

The shrewd diplomats knew that accreditation at the palace of the President was not sufficient, it must also be obtained at the Benjamiņi Palace, in order to ensure the benevolence of the most popular newspaper. The editors of the newspaper were able to cause crises of the ministers’ cabinet, to choose new ministers and distribute influential directorial posts. The State President was unmarried and so there was no “first lady” in our country. This vacant place was occupied by Mrs. Benjamiņa self-assuredly and without any timidity. She revelled in recognition and honours, and she wanted to shine in the society. In Riga there was an unwritten rule, not a legend, that every new artist who wanted to rise in his career had to perform the first concert at the Benjamiņi salon. The hostess conferred this privilege to herself. If Emilija Benjamiņa on Thursday had not time to go to the première of an opera, she presumed to ask the Director of Opera to transfer the performance to the Friday night. If the request was not complied with, the Director ceased to work at the National Opera. Yes, the Benjamiņi were thinking about their high status, influence in society and the prosperity and stability of their family. They



deposited funds in Swiss, American and French banks, the profit from all their estates each day was 10 000 lats. But truth to say, the uncrowned royal couple undeniably also did much for the benefit of the entire Latvian society of the time. The widespread dissemination of the press promoted the overall level of education in Latvia, innumerable public organisations, charitable societies and sports clubs were founded. The Benjamiņi supported artists in an especially wise manner, they invited the most brilliant minds for very high paid work on their publications. They donated two airplanes to the Latvian army. Both Benjamiņi were included in the roll of honour of 100 most eminent Latvians.

The host and hostess of this building carried out alterations of the interior of the house built in the Neo-Renaissance style. They engaged the most outstanding Latvian architects, stained-glass artists and painters of the 20ies and 30ies who imparted to the building the characteristic features of their epoch. The fireplaces were replaced by central heating and they installed the most magnificent treasure of the house, the largest Venetian chandelier in the entire Baltic states. There was silk wallpaper, the finest grand piano in Riga, tapestries, crystal, silver, roses in winter... here everything had to be unsurpassable.



Emilija and Antons Benjamiņi

In 1940 the Benjamiņi house was nationalised and in 1945 it became the home of the Writers, Composers and Artists’ Union. Initially the creative unions were strongly subjected to Stalinist ideology but a silent opposition to the regime was forming in them. The Writers’ Congress of 1965 was splendid proof that with imagination and a good idea, even the walls of the Stalinist regime can be penetrated. The Central Committee of the Communist Party had already had planned for the election of a suitable chairman of the union and who was officially nominated by the members of the board. However, the majority of the board was opposed to these candidates and did not elect any of those recommended by the Committee. For the first time an executive post was not occupied by a member selected by the Central Committee causing a historic sensation. The age of the great force of the small droplet began when one free thought creates another eventually forming a sea. In 1965 the Writers’ Union established a new tradition, the Poetry Days. The dissemination of literature among the people started, the influence of art in the society reach its highest apex, creative persons were honoured and loved, books were printed and read in large numbers. Good poetry books reached circulations of 33 000 and prose – 130 000. There were literary parties, concerts and exhibitions – people desired to see and hear the truth. The activity of the Writers’ Union was very extensive – organising translators’ workshops, spreading Latvian literature in the world, publication of Latvian classic authors, the fight for recognition of artists unfavourable to the regime, conferring of awards of Republic. All of this balanced on a knife-edge; one had, so to speak, crawl through the eye of a needle. If the censorship in Soviet Latvia banned the publications of a writer, our representatives went to Moscow, to the USSR Latvian Literature Commission where they had much success. The creative activity in the Benjamiņi House in the dusty greyness of Soviet power continued to expand and develop into a bright gleam, there was no place for the routine there. In 1987 this was the place where the heads of the People’s Fronts of the Baltic states Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia came together, the singing revolution had started. The barricade days of 1991 became a special testimony to the love and faith of the people and creative unions. One farmer had brought a slaughtered pig, which was carved on the terrace, women writers cooked soup and fed the defenders of Latvia. The doors of the building were open day and night for the guards of Riga. These were unprecedented moments of happiness with tears in the eyes of both men and women. History.

But, of course, where there is work, there is also recreation. Legends and adventures cannot be fully recounted. It became fashionable to celebrate the round jubilees of artists on a grand scale. The hero of the anniversary was warmly congratulated with flowers in the ballroom; tables laden with food were set up in the fireplace hall and guests would dance till the morning light. In the basement there was a café where those writers who were stingy by character waited for the lavish ones, who then paid for the cup of joy to all present. Silence and peace was alien to this room.



Members of the Writer' Union in te summer o 1945 at te house

PRESENT DAYS



Restaurant “Benjamiņš”

The house at No. 12 Krišjāņa Barona iela opened its doors as the hotel “Europa Royale” in 2006. Considerable construction work and renovation and been carried out earlier order to transform this mansion with its special history and unique layout into a functional, comfortable hotel with 60 apartments. Not only the building itself but also seven of its rooms have been declared cultural monuments of national importance and therefore the external appearance of the building and the group of representational rooms of the Benjamiņi house where the restaurant “Benjamiņš” is located, were retained without changes. The majestic premises in the city centre are still a favourite meeting place of state presidents, ambassadors, ministers and deputies. Historical heredity in the magnificent mansion goes on. The building has an active and attractive public life with corporate parties, pre-Midsummer Day festivities for hotel guests, jazz concerts on the summer terrace, weddings and birthday celebrations, Christmas art fairs. The frequently heard sentence “I’m here for the first time” is true, because till now only specially invited guests visited this house but now the hotel “Europa Royale” welcomes everyone, giving visitors the chance to breathe in the air of history and to enjoy themselves.