

My visit to Latvia and the family village of Subate

Poland has traditionally been the home of the Subritzky's and I am not going to bore you all with the details (only a summary), but I now regard Latvia as more the home of the Subritzky's than Poland which is why I made a quick trip there and left Chris (my wife) in Poland for a few days.

The Subritzky's originated from a small village called Subate right on the Latvia/Lithuanian border (have the stamp in my passport now) and also right on the shores of a beautiful lake. Their descendants arrived sometime late in the 14th century to this area – ref to Mike Subritzky's work for this.

Note that over the centuries Subate has had various names including Subata and Subucoz.

Romuldus Zubrycki was born in this village and christened on the 6 Feb 1785 in the Roman Catholic church. I have viewed and photographed his christening record in the church.

Romuldus was one of the owners of the village but in the early 1800's, serfdom was banned in Latvia so Romuldus no longer had an interest in the village. He then joined up with Napoleon and attacked Russia. The Napoleonic army, from my research, also attacked a town called Daugavpils which is approx 50km from his own Subate. As Napoleon was defeated and Romuldus no longer had any interest in the village of Subate, he then went to Germany, changed his surname to Subritzky, married Sophie and had 4 children. He died in 1833, 10 years before Sophie and her children immigrated to NZ which is the story that all Subritzky's know and the family that they are descended from.

Subate is now a very run down village but has most of the basics. 2 food shops, a chemist, school, medical centre and several church's. The nearest petrol station is approx 40km away in Latvia or 15km in Lithuania (different currency and reluctant to take Visa as I found out). The housing is of a very poor standard and very neglected. Nothing like what we are used to back in NZ or Australia. In fact, all the time that I was in Latvia I did not see one house that would come close to the standard of what we own in Australia.

There were horse and carts on the village roads, plenty of firewood being cut by hand with bow saws, people tending their crops manually and very few cars. However the latest technology in the form of Satellite TV was in evidence.

What is interesting is that as mentioned, Romuldus had an interest in Subate and lost it. If I sold one or two of my properties, I could afford to buy it back - but would I want it, no, the climate is too bad and what would I do with a few hundred ramshackle houses - but the location on the lakeside is something special.

I believe that I was the first Subritzky to return to the village in nearly 200 years which I regard as quite an honour - not to mention the difficulties getting there dealing with LOT (Polish airlines taking 2 hours to get flights organized in Gdansk and Warsaw), Avis rental cars, finding a hotel, maps, road signs (or lack of), condition of the roads, the wet weather and food. No lunches for 2 days, language problems, etc.

Latvia was a communist country until 10 to 15 years ago and once again, the communists have done them no favours. Latvia is now part of the EU but is still a long way from being a 1st world country. The cars are not too bad, the trucks and buses are in the main ex-soviet, badly maintained and clapped out. Outside Riga (the capital), the Police cars are really clapped out old Ladas or other Soviet origin vehicles. The roads (goat tracks) are the worst that I have encountered anywhere in the world that are not dirt roads and that includes Fiji that has some lets say memorable roads. Talk about pot holes. Some are filled with sand, some with dirt and some with dirt mixed with bitumen, most not filled at all and they are everywhere.

The housing in Latvia is in the main either very old peasant type huts or ex-soviet monstrosities of concrete apartment blocks, all of which are not maintained at all and never have been since they were built. They are ugly as to look at and should all be demolished but I suspect will fall down sooner rather than later.

The farming seems to be subsistence farming with no real big farms. The milk tanker stops at most farms to receive the 5 to 50 litres of milk that each farmers cows have managed to produce for the day which is poured into the tanker from the old style cream cans that went out of fashion in the civilized world in the 1950's. There are very few farms with a lot of planting and it is rare to see animals which have to housed inside for 6 months of the year over winter.

It is not unusual to see people manually weeding, watering, digging, etc large plots of land with no machinery. Horse and carts still used on a regular basis as well as hand carts. Weed eaters (Whipper Snappers to the Aussies) seem to be the primary way to cut grass although I did see some old timers with their scythes cutting the grass.

A lot of farms have tractors which is their only means of transportation - no cars or trucks and it is not unusual to see mum and dad in their Sunday best on the tractor going somewhere or the tractor towing a trailer that is huge.

I have never been to a country and seen so little happiness - mind you , they do not have a lot to live for with snow 6 months of the year, very poor housing, next to no decent roading, outdated and very old public transport system, excess of crime, etc

For someone from the western world who is used to travelling to different and difficult countries, I found it frustrating to do even simple things like finding a hotel (few and far between), finding a restaurant (even scarcer then hotels unless you want a dried up sandwich from a Bistro. Forget about western type of fast food - it does not exist. I spent an hour one night trying to find a second restaurant (been to the same one for 2 nights running) gave up and ate there again. (The food and beer was excellent) This was in the 2nd largest city??? in Latvia. Fortunately the food was cheap as with a typical meal being beer, soup and main course for under \$A10. Also found plenty of Supermarkets with some foods very similar to what we are used to.

Car theft and the security of cars is a major problem with my rental car having to be secured in a locked secure area every night or no insurance for theft. Luckily my hotel had secure parking. There are secure compounds for cars scattered throughout the towns where people can leave their cars for the night for a price. When you see a sign for parking that indicates that you need to pay a meter and you can see no parking meters, there may be a ticket machine nearby but if there is not one, you stand by your car and in a couple of minutes a uniformed old lady comes and takes your money once you have told her how long you are staying, then hand writes a ticket for you to display on your dash.

Even less English is spoken in Latvia than other countries but you get by with no real problems by being innovative in how you communicate with people. A smile goes a long way, especially in Latvia as in any other country.

A brief trip was made to Lithuania to another village called Kupiskis which the Zubryckis also had an interest in. It is now a modern thriving town which seems to be what Lithuania is all about. It is a much more developed country than Latvia, better roads, housing, etc.

All in all, a very informative trip.

Steve Subritzky
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