

DE BINNENLANDSE LUCHTLIJN RIGA – LIEPĀJA – RIGA: NIEUWE INFORMATIE

Yehoshua Eliashiv

Ik was aangenaam verrast toen ik van Ruud van Wijnen hoorde dat er al direct na de publicatie van mijn artikel in de vorige “Het Baltische Gebied” (nr. 81) een reactie was. Die kwam van onze mede-verzamelaar Frits Gerdessen, die vooral geïnteresseerd is in de luchtvaartgeschiedenis van de Baltische staten.

Hij kwam niet alleen op de proppen met een aantal mooie zwartwit foto's genomen op de luchthaven van Liepāja, maar ook nog met twee pagina's getypte tekst. De gegevens daarin zijn gebaseerd op informatie van de heer Otto Atonovics, een lid van de commissie die onderzoek deed naar een geschikt vliegtuig voor de luchtlijn Riga – Liepāja – Riga (**zie bijlage**).

Bij de keuze voor een toestel ging het uiteindelijk om twee mogelijke Engelse vliegtuigbouwers: Avro Anson in Manchester en De Havilland in Hatfield. Hoewel het Avro-toestel moderner was dan de DH89 van Haviland, was het niet alleen zwaarder, maar had het ook een langere start- en landingsbaan nodig. Dat maakte het toestel minder geschikt voor de relatief zachte zandgrond van de luchthaven bij Liepāja.

Laten we eens verder kijken naar het interessante, door Paul E. Branke samengestelde, document. Ook hier wordt 15 juni 1937 genoemd als dag van de eerste vlucht. Al in mijn artikel toonde ik aan dat die datum niet klopt, maar ik vond ook aanvullend bewijs in de vorm van een aangetekende brief. Die werd op 10 juni gepost op de luchthaven Spilve bij Riga, met op de achterzijde een aankomststempel met dezelfde datum (**afb. 1**).

De tekst bevat een aantal interessante wetenswaardigheden. Het eerste vluchtseizoen van de nieuwe lijn eindigde op 15 oktober 1937.



Afb. 1



Afb. 2

We lezen: "luchtverkeer vond plaats tot in oktober, totdat herfstmist rond Liepāja dat onmogelijk maakte". Twee aspecten worden duidelijk benadrukt: het belang van de lijn voor zowel het postverkeer als voor de bevolking van Letland. "Het vervoer van post was van belang voor de hele onderneming..... De route was nogal populair omdat men nu voor zaken 's morgens uit Riga kon vertrekken naar

Liepāja en 's avonds weer terug kon vliegen. Daarvoor kostte dat met de trein twee dagen".

Tenslotte. Op een van de foto's zien we een groep heren bij een vliegtuig staan. Volgens een bijgevoegde beschrijving is een van de mannen links de Letse president Karlis Ulmanis (afb. 2). Deze foto werd in mei 1937 genomen na het overvliegen van het

vliegtuig van Engeland naar Letland. De aanwezigheid van de staatspresident toont eens te meer het belang van deze binnenlandse luchtlijn.

Ik dank Frits Gerdessen voor deze interessante aanvulling en de heer Paul E. Branke in Zweden voor de toestemming om zijn geschrift te mogen gebruiken.

Bijlage 1

AHLEN & AKERLUND'S FÖRLAGS AB Manusspapper med 12 resp 10 nedslag per tum

| Tidning | Nr | Sid | Blad nr |
|---|----|-----|---------|
| Otto Antonovičs' recollections about Latvian airline Riga-Liepāja | | | 1 |
| Sänd August 13th, 1975 | | | |

Beställningsnummer ifyllas av beställaren
Paul E Branke
Denna uppgift skall skrivas på arbetsrapporten

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Otto Antonovičs Kārlis Irbitis Oskars H Dzērvītis Frits Gerdessen Augusts Graudiņš
Jānis Aboliņš Paul Hayes Jan Frumerie Robert J Ruffle
Alfreds Gerbers Aleksandrs Ārgals Teet Koppel Harri Habel

In search for a suitable type of airline aircraft for the projected Riga-Liepāja line, a Latvian commission, of which Mr Otto Antonovičs was a member, visited first France while at the same time also looking for heavy trucks at the Renault works. As for aircraft Breguet company was visited, but owing to the difficulty of paying in French currency of which there were no large assets in Latvia, very much was against the choice falling on a French passenger carrying aircraft type. From France the commission continued to England. After visiting Airspeed in Portsmouth and Avro in Manchester, the commission paid a visit to De Havilland at Hatfield. The Latvian finance minister had already strongly argued for placing an order with a British aircraft manufacturer because of the foreign currency matter, Latvia having fair funds of Sterling as a result of many years' trade with Great Britain. While in Manchester, the commission had had the Avro Anson demonstrated. This was undoubtedly a more modern aircraft than De Havilland's DH 89 Dragon Rapide? However, there were two reasons why the Anson was unsuitable: it needed a longer take-off run than the Dragon Rapide and it was too heavy. The airfield at Liepāja was both too short and too soft with its predominantly sandy soil. Two other members of the purchase commission mentioned by Mr Antonovičs were Jānis Jēriņš, today at Ērgļos, and Aleksandrs Ārgals, today in Seattle, USA. Later the pilot Jānis Sproģis was sent to De Havilland at Hatfield to train ~~among~~ blind flying, but was this later when an additional route Riga-Daugavpils was considered in 1939? Both Dragon Rapides were equipped by De Havilland with machine gun rings in the fuselage top deck. This was stipulated by the Ministry of Defence, but since each machine gun ring weighed about 180 kg, thus lessening the efficient civil airline use with two passengers, the machine gun rings were jestingly referred to as "the Ministry of Defence's luggage" ("Kara ministrijas bagāža"). While in peacetime, the machine gun rings were covered with fabric, but not only did they steal payload, they also cost extra to be fitted. From the civilian point of view these rings were next to worthless as no one anyway considered them to be of any use in case of a war. Both aircraft (YL-ABC c/n 6351 and YL-ABD c/n 6352, Certificate of Airworthiness on April 30th, 1937, to Post & Telegraphs Department, Ministry of Commerce, according to Peter W Moss, author of Profile Publications Nr 144 The de Havilland Rapide) were flown to Latvia by Alexander de Havilland and a factory pilot. Along as a passenger was a British legation member from the British Embassy in Tallinn, Estonia. The route taken was Lympe-Amsterdam-Berlin/Tempelhof, where the aircraft were parked overnight. The following day, May 16th according to correspondence with Mr Paul Hayes, the delivery flight was continued to Königsberg, where lunch was eaten, and on to Riga which was reached at about 17.00 hours. At the arrival the press was not invited, but later the newly acquired aircraft were demonstrated to the press properly. According to Mr Antonovičs' correspondence with Mr E Zilinskis of the Latvian legation (6 Holland Park Road, London W.14, phone 01/602 2003) of December 28th, 1971 (nr 659), the Riga-Liepāja route was opened on June 15th, 1937. During the first four months 2 157 passengers were carried. Traffic was continued until October, when the autumn fogs at Liepāja made it difficult to continue with. The state-owned airline had to pay full price for the fuel; being a domestic airline it was not possible to take advantage of tax freed petrol as was the case with international traffic. However, the state subsidized part of the ticket price as the Valsts Gaisa Satiksme was not a profit-seeking company. The budget was worked out on an annual basis with also annually fixed pilot salaries and could not be altered until the following year. Thus the full-price petrol matter was no trouble, as the state made up for the difference, having full economic control of the operation. An important factor on which the whole operation was based was the carrying of mail and

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a break-even point, as Mr Antonovičs remembers today, was calculated at approximately 50 % load factor.

The mechanic Liepa was sent to Great Britain to be trained at De Havilland as a mechanic on the Dragon Rapides, while the second mechanic Karulis stayed in Latvia. The latter was normally based at Liepaja.

After the successes enjoyed on the Riga-Liepaja route, a second route was considered between Riga and Daugavpils. For this purpose a third Dragon Rapide was considered, but the site or location of the civil airfield was not yet dealt with. A high school graduate of ?? (Latvian: kulturtechniķis) made calculations as to how to drain the field in order to get it dry in spring. At Riga/Spilve there was already an automatic drain system with float-equipped pumps. As mentioned earlier, a third pilot besides Jānis Āboliņš and Karlis Alksnis, was to have been Jānis Sproģis who would have been sent to England for training. However, the outbreak of war put an end to any such expansion plans.

One week after the Soviet occupation of Latvia on Monday June 17th, 1940, the two Dragon Rapides were handed over to the Russians. Significant of the Russian way of life was the matter with the clocks or watches in the cockpits. There were separate clocks in rubber-cushioned mounting in the pilots' joysticks, intended as an aid for the pilots. Almost immediately after the handover ceremony these clocks were promptly stolen by Russian soldiers swarming all over the aircraft.

Besides Mr Paul Hayes of 191 Kingston Road, Teddington, Middx, Mr Antonovičs has been approached for information on the Vālstis Gaisa Satiksmes Dragon Rapides by a Mr Günter Endres of 16 Stanton Drive, Fleet, Hampshire, a member of the International Association of Aviation Historians, for a projected book on civil aviation.

Mr Paul Hayes adds in a letter of February 19th, 1975, that during conversations with Mr Antonovičs, he had taken down the following information: "Both aircraft were delivered together one week after the coronation of (King GY), which would indicate May 15th, 1937. The two aircraft were used on services between Riga and Liepaja, operating two flights daily, depart Riga at 08.00 hours and 14.00 hours and Liepaja at 11.00 and 18.00 hours. Mr Antonovičs was not very clear of the timings but maintained that two round trips were flown. These services operated only during the summer, i.e. April to October. The Rapides were trouble-free and carried some 2 000 passengers in the first year. The route was quite popular as it now meant that you could leave Riga in the morning, go to Liepaja on business and be back that evening, when before, going by train, would have meant being away for two days. Due to the success of this first route it was being considered to extend it down to Daugavpils, i.e. Liepaja-Riga-Daugavpils, and this would have required a third aircraft."

PEB: This last point needs clarifying; i.e. was it considered to extend the route as mentioned above or was a second route only between Riga and Daugavpils considered?

So far only four photos of the Latvian Dragon Rapides are known to exist, two in the possession of Jānis Āboliņš of YL-ABC with engineer Jēriņš, Jānis Āboliņš and Karlis Alksnis as the two airline pilots and the mechanics Karulis and Liepa in front of the aircraft one photo located by Mr Alfreds Gerbers, depicting YL-ABC, and one in the possession of Mr Antonovičs, depicting himself, his wife and father-in-law in front of the passenger entrance of the a/c. A fifth photo in the possession of Mr Harri Habel depicts the Estonian group of pilots from Sonderstaffel Buschmann in front of SB+AH which was used to ferry pilots to Riga on May 26th, 1942, to pick up VEF-built Stampe-Vertongen SV-5 a/c (3) and the LAR Miles Magister. The Estonians picked up the Dragon Rapide on May 5th, 1942, at Liepaja, testflew it on May 6th and ferried it to Tallinn on May 8th at 11.30 hours. This is supposed to have been an ex-Latvian a/c but might also originate from Lithuania?

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