

## Rīgas lidosta. Personiski

## Riga Airport. Personally

# Riga Airport celebrates its 50th anniversary through stories of their employees.

RIX Riga Airport is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. During these years, millions of people – of different nationalities and generations, history makers and witnesses – have come and gone through the Airport, bringing with them the joy of travel, changes, and legendary events. Airport employees have been their closest witnesses. Over the years, they have experienced both the Airport's

growth and unusual everyday stories. Now they are ready to share them, opening the door to the unknown side of the Airport. For the anniversary exhibition of Riga Airport, we have selected special items and personal memories kept by employees, which will take you on an exciting journey through the history of the Airport – from Joe Biden's pen to the "Gatves" dance on the runway.

Looking back at past events, we see how the Airport and its team have grown both in strength and size. The growth continues to bring to life the vision of becoming a Northern European travel hub of the future with a new passenger terminal, RIX Airport City, and four times the capacity.

Your RIX Riga Airport

### Exhibition guide to

Stories at the Gate B7

3 min

Stories in the Gallery between Gates B and C



### Runway for dancers

August 23, 1989 is a very special date for the Independence movement in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. While still being under Soviet occupation, approximately 2 million inhabitants of the Baltic States joined hands and created a 670 km long living chain – the Baltic Way, thus demonstrating unity and determination to regain independence.

"To honour the 30-year commemoration of the Baltic Way, the runway of Riga Airport was temporarily transformed into a place for the popular "Gatves" dance in Latvia," recalls Dzintra, Aerodrome Operational Manager.

"We had exactly 25 minutes to carry out this plan, so all actions were carefully planned, everyone knew their place and what to do.

Everyone involved was close to the runway, and as soon as the plane landed, we closed the runway and everyone did their job: the firefighters made marks for the dancers on the runway, the electricians ran the cables, the tuners and cameramen set up the equipment, the dancers took their places. The "Gatves" dance could begin!

Once the dance was performed and filmed, we still had seven minutes left to clear the runway. The dancers were taken to the terminal by buses, the firemen tore off the stickers, the technical people removed the cables and equipment. The cleaning machines were the last to go on the runway to make 100% sure that the runway was completely clean. It took three minutes to clean up, then we reopened the runway and it went back to normal – to welcome planes."

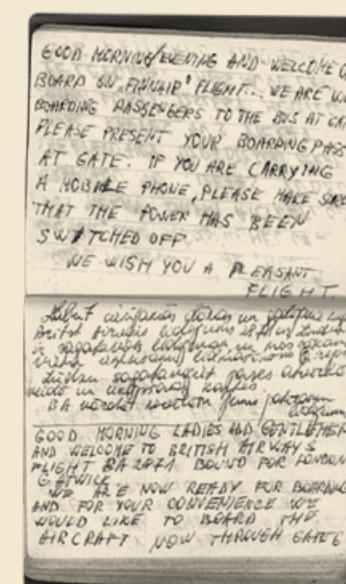
### Cheatsheet book

"Nowadays we carry out the registration of passengers and luggage, as well as the management of the boarding process, with a single automated system," explains Liene, Director of Aviation Services and Business Development Department, "but in the past, the check-in staff did it all in several systems and manually. I also started my career at the Airport as a check-in agent. Each airline has its own rules, and at that time, each also had its own check-in system. We had to be able to work with all of them. In order not to forget anything, just like during school years, I made a book of cheatsheets. It was especially useful when I came back from a vacation or longer breaks.

When we started implementing the quality management system at Riga Airport, I, as an experienced employee, had to to explain

about the registration process. When asked how I knew so well what exactly to do in each situation, I thought to myself: "What kind of question is this?!"

I just know it, I have a book of cheatsheets!"



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### Biden's pen

"I didn't work at the Airport at that time, but my first close contact with airport processes, other than in the capacity of a passenger, was when I worked in the press service of the President," recalls Ilze, Communication Project Manager. "We organised an incoming state visit, which had to meet the highest international standards – Latvia was visited by Joe Biden, the Vice President of the USA at that time. Around four in the morning, we arrived at the Airport together with journalists. Riga was still waking up, but we were already at the Airport, watching how the Airport employees were preparing to receive the impressive Boeing 747-200B.



The red carpet was rolled out, the boarding bridge prepared, the guard of honour practiced their position. After landing, Air Force One pulled into its stand and came to a stop on the carpet and ramp so precisely that they didn't have to be moved an inch. I thought such precision was probably the captain's skill, but now I know that it is the Airport employee who signals to the pilot the right moment when to stop.

**A spectacular sight! And the very term "aircraft marshalling" still sounds a bit fabulous and amazing to me.**

During Biden's visit, the press service coordinated the work of about 70 local and international journalists, it was a good professional test. Everything went well, and after the visit I received a thank-you gift from

the US Vice President – a pin and a pen. I still write everything down with it and it reminds me of the beautiful morning at the Airport. Being at the airfield – those are still special moments for me."

### We are driven by the desire to learn and keep up with the times

"After regaining Latvia's independence in 1990, we started working at Riga Airport in accordance with the security standards of the International Civil Aviation Organisation, or ICAO," recalls Iveta, General Training Manager. "ICAO's regional centre was located in Kyiv, and their specialists came to us to train Riga Airport employees. At that time, analogue slides were used as visual aids. Over time, these materials were modernised, but the old slides were still retained as evidence of history.



Based on the information of specialists in Kyiv, my colleague and I developed training tailored to our Airport. We worked at the security inspection lines daily, but on our days off, we trained our colleagues. The training lasted two days for existing employees and longer for new ones. Later, I moved to work at the Airport's Training Centre, where I improved training and introduced internship opportunities. Even now, after learning the theory, new employees first work together with their instructors and only then take the tests to start working independently."

### Knitting needles

"Knitting has been one of my favourite pastimes since I was seven," admits Ilze, Communication Project Manager, "so I have to be familiar with the aviation security regulations

for transporting them. For the most part, airlines and airport security control do not object to wooden, bamboo, plastic, and other non-metallic needles with short sharp points (no longer than 6 cm). But for the sake of security, you should always check the conditions of all airlines and airports on your journey."

### To lure away a bird

"Not everyone will have heard that every internationally certified airport must take bird and animal control measures to reduce the risk of collision with aircraft," recalls Senior Bird and Animal Control Specialist Mareks. "Such collisions can end quite badly, as they can damage aircraft engines or the airframe," Mareks explains. Birds used to be scared away from the runway by airfield engineers who scared them away with physical approach and car horns. A wooden rattle was also used, which made a loud noise when turned.



We now use the "ScareCrow" system, which allows you to play different bird voices through the speakers to both scare and attract certain species. Scary sounds are mostly used – cries of danger and screams, the sound of a gunshot. Sound rockets, gas cannons, and laser light are also used for scaring.

However, there are also situations where birds are lured away from the runway. We use night vision binoculars in the dark. All birds and animals noticed, as well as scaring actions, are recorded in the system. During a shift, over 24 hours, we usually make about 200 records.

**We have to be like bird psychologists, we need to understand their reactions in certain situations.**

Crows are known to be very smart birds. They already know both our equipment and our employees and no longer react to the noise of the loudspeakers. Then we have to use sonic rockets.

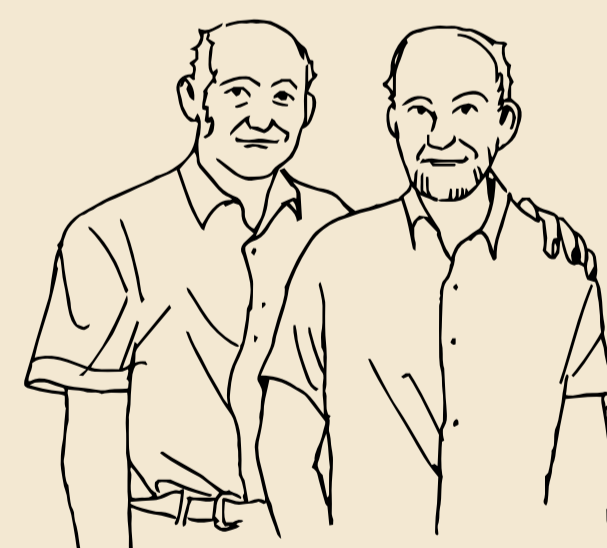
Among the birds, we most often see crows and starlings, but it is the most difficult to chase away seagulls. Most work is to be done in June when, in the first half of the day, as many as 800-900 seagulls can gather to feast on earthworms and beetles. Then we use sound cannons, we work with a colleague in pairs. Of the animals, foxes and hares, as well as pets – cats and dogs – wander into the Airport more often.

### Like father, like son

Working at the airport can become a family tradition. Arvids, Former Shift Manager in the Passenger Services Department, and his son Valdis – Former Shift Manager in the Aviation Security Department, entrusted us with their story. The father, Arvids, recalls: "I started working in aviation as an aircraft technician-mechanic, then worked as a flight engineer in the crew of IL-18 and TU-134 aircraft.

I have flown 7,000 hours in 13 years as a flight engineer. If at least 500 hours were flown per year, then the years required for retirement were counted twice; for two years, I flew in the army as a flight technician with the Mi-6 helicopter, that time was also counted double. I am currently 82 years old, and my total work experience is more than 60 years. I have retired three times because I was repeatedly invited to return – to Riga Airport, private aviation bodies and the Civil Aviation Agency. Now I will finally rest.

**As a child, Valdis came to work with me, he saw the Airport, I took him with me on flights a couple of times. However, professionally, I did not guide him to aviation, because I knew that this was a hard job. On the contrary, I put a hat with a big nail on his head so that he could not see the sky. However, things turned out differently in life."**



Son Valdis Priednieks: "The restoration of Latvia's independence in the 1990s was a difficult time. I also had to leave my previous occupations and look for a new job. On my father's advice, I went to study as a border guard and started working in that role at the Airport. In this position, we cooperated with the Airport security service, and after half a year, I moved to work for them – at first, I was an inspector, later a shift supervisor. In 2005, I was invited to work at the Civil Aviation Agency, where I still work. I think that I have not disappointed my father with my career."

# See the history of the Airport through the eyes of its employees!

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### Water salute

The water salute is a beautiful tradition in aviation used to mark a special occasion. At Riga Airport, we welcome the first flight of a new airline to Riga or the anniversary of the airline's operation at our airport with a water salute. We have also welcomed our athletes home with a water salute after their successes in international competitions – the Olympic Games or World Championships. Airlines often celebrate the retirement of their captains with a water salute or welcome the first aircraft of a new type to their home airport.

**Our large fire trucks line up opposite each other and when the plane pulls up to its stand after landing, it passes through a gate of honour made of water jets. It is especially impressive to observe this view while on the airfield.**

Many European airports do the same – important events in the airport's or airline's life are marked and celebrated with a water salute.

### Oldtown in the Airport

"Working in aviation means dynamism, passion, and creativity, wherever and whenever we work. As a vivid example, I remember the creation of a souvenir shop in front of the security check – we, together with the tenant, came up with the idea of building a miniature model of Old Riga there," recalls Artūrs, a Member of the Board. The carpenters did a



Water salute at Riga Airport

fantastic job: there was a bakery, butcher's, shops selling jewellery and other Latvian products. The Old Riga-style store at the Airport existed for about five years and, during this time, received several awards from the Traders Association as the best store in Latvia in its category.



### The red carpet

"One of the elements of welcoming special guests is the red carpet that is laid on the airfield in all weather conditions," explains Andra, Head of the VIP Passenger Service Unit.

**"This should be done very carefully in windy weather so that the carpet does not turn from red to flying."**

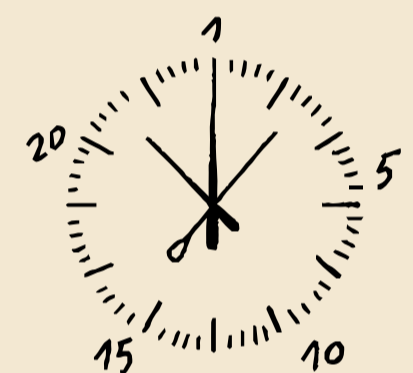
To keep the carpet on the ground, we usually put the delimiting posts on its edges and sometimes we also ask the guard of honour to hold the edges with the toes of their shoes. Once, when His Majesty Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko of Japan flew in, there was a very strong wind. To keep the carpet

on the ground, we placed all VIP Centre and platform employees – agents, drivers, cleaners and baggage handlers – on its edges. The carpet stayed in place and the dignitaries respectfully shook hands with all the people standing on the edge of the carpet as they got off the plane."

### Turnaround time – 25 min

"I can forever watch a flame burning, water running, and our aircraft maintenance team working on the airfield," says Ilze, Communication Project Manager. "In aviation, there is a term "turnaround time" – it is the time from when the aircraft comes to a standstill until it is ready to take off again. For some airlines, it is 25 minutes. During this time, passengers must disembark, baggage and mail must be unloaded, the cabin and amenities cleaned, fuel added, garbage removed, food delivered, and then the new passengers and their baggage handled."

**It is a pleasure to watch how precisely the airport employees work, how coordinated each movement and action is, and how well they understand each other."**



## Stories in the Gallery between Gates B and C

# The first 50 years of RIX Riga Airport – a prelude to ambitious future plans

### Exhibition guide to

Stories at the Gate B7

3 min

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### The British Airways uniform is a real adventure

"In the early 2000s, British Airways check-in agents had to wear special uniforms," remembers Aviva, Airport Process Training Manager. "We had to wear dark blue tights and shoes, white pearl earrings, and a dark blue straw hat. There was a special, royal feeling when wearing this uniform."

Once this uniform gave me an unusual experience. When checking in passengers, we had to collect vouchers which were then given to the airline. If one was missing, there was a fine, so we kept a close watch to make sure all the vouchers were in place. At one point, I noticed that one was missing, and I went to the plane to collect it. The passenger I was



looking for was sitting at the very back, and could not immediately find the voucher. I was leaning over the chairs and engaging in the conversation, so I didn't even notice that the boarding was finished, the plane doors were closed, and we were already heading to the runway. The rest of the crew did not notice me because I looked like one of them. When the misunderstanding came to light, the crew offered to fly me to London. I laughed, saying that I would have to go back to Riga after that, and I contacted my colleagues on the walkie-talkie, who sent a car to pick me up.

**To avoid bringing the boarding stairs, the captain offered me his ladder, and I climbed out. So I stayed in Riga and had to go back to work.**

### Morning on the bus

"In the past, employee buses took us to the early morning shifts from our homes in various parts of Riga," recalls Aviva, Airport Process Training Manager. "I remember one morning we were driving along Čaka Street, where one of our colleagues lived, but she was not at her usual spot. We were calling her, asking where she was, because we needed to start checking in the flight soon. It turned out that she had overslept. After a short while, she ran down the street to the bus in her nightgown, with clothes in hand. On these buses, we often got dressed, put on our make-up, and ate breakfast. I remember once a colleague came on board with a warm pot, she had just prepared her takeaway lunch."

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### Unauthorized colours

“Before the establishment of Riga Airport, Spilve Airport in Ilguciems was used for passenger flights. During the Soviet occupation, strategically important places, such as the airport, were especially carefully monitored by the State Security Committee (KGB),” recalls Ēvalds, former Electrician.

**“In the 1970s, the Spilve Airport café was renovated, and an SSC employee noticed that the buffet counter was in red and white colours. These are the colours of the independent Latvian flag, and such symbols were strictly prohibited during the occupation.**

A KGB employee asked me to explain this choice of colours. I brought him to the window, from which you could see the airfield well. Lighting poles, fences, airfield markings – all the details were red and white. This colour combination is internationally accepted and used in aviation worldwide. So, the chekist had to put up with the red and white bar counter...”

### The treacherous sound

“During the security check, passengers are sometimes also checked manually – security officers check with their hands to ensure there are no unauthorized objects attached to the body. They have to squat, and this happens 200 or more times a day,” explains Aleksandrs, Airport Process Training Manager.

**“It is a strain not only on the knees and muscles but also on the trousers. And then it happened – the treacherous sound when squatting; both my colleagues and I understood what had happened – the trousers had torn.**



We are trained not to show any emotion even in the most unusual situations, so I calmly completed the search I had started. A colleague came to replace me without saying anything, but I went to the dressing room to put on a new pair of trousers.”

### The wolf flies to his girlfriend

“I was the supervisor of the passenger check-in shift,” recalls Aviva, Airport Process Training Manager. “Once, a colleague called me and said that a wolf wanted to fly to Germany. I went to the non-standard baggage drop-off point to clarify the situation. It turned out that

the aviation security colleague had asked the person accompanying the animal to take the wolf out of the cage, then we would run the cage through the scanner, then the wolf would go back in, and everyone would be on their way. However, the accompanying person had refused to do so because he was afraid. The wolf could not fly that day, because we could not check the cage.

**During the next shift, the wolf was accompanied by another keeper who was not afraid of it. Everything went well, and the wolf flew to the German zoo to visit his girlfriend.”**

### The airport is no circus!

“I liked to draw as a child, but later I lacked the time and courage to do it daily,” admits Eva, Deputy Head of the Training Centre. “Being on maternity leave, I finally attended painting courses, after which I created wall drawings in our family’s kindergarten and home. It turned out that my drawing skills also came in handy at work – I have created a series of educational materials for children about Riga Airport, flights, and destinations. I have also introduced the theme of the Airport into the popular board game ‘Circus.’”



### Hašek autograph

“In the past, we registered passengers on charter flights manually by marking the passenger’s seat on the plane plan with a pen and writing the number on the boarding pass,” recalls Artūrs, Member of the Board. “Once, when I arrived for my night shift, I found out that I would have to register a team of NHL stars who had come for a game. I am an ice hockey fan, so I quickly rushed to the printer, printed a photo of the famous Czech goalkeeper Dominik Hašek, and went to register the athletes. Even though I follow the NHL games, I didn’t know all the hockey players by their faces, they are always wearing helmets on the ice, but of course, I knew their names.

**When the hockey players gave their passports, I saw all the owners of the famous surnames in real life!**

When Hašek came, I took out the printed photo and asked for his autograph. He was also very happy!”

### Carp as a passenger

“At the beginning of my career, I worked as a passenger check-in agent, and I really enjoyed it; it gave me some toughness and provided memories of unusual incidents,” recalls Artūrs, Member of the Board.



“Once, an elderly lady came to check in for her flight to Ireland. She put her bag on the scale, and suddenly the bag moved. I thought it was early morning, and I had not woken up yet.

**After a while, I looked again – and the bag moved once more. It turned out that the grandmother was visiting her grandchildren and had brought bread and fresh carp with her.**

My colleagues and I discussed whether carp should be considered an animal or just very fresh food. We decided that carp did not threaten aviation security and would freeze anyway during the flight.”

### Fireman’s story

“In the 1980s, firefighters worked together with security guards at the Airport, they had to protect the area, including the fuel depot,” recalls Aivars, fire brigade dispatcher. Wires were strung around this warehouse, to which dogs were attached on leashes, so that they could run around at night and help with security. When the Airport was modernised and the dogs were no longer used, one of them continued to live at the fire station together with the firefighters for many years.



At one time, several firefighters at the Airport had side jobs, such as growing flowers or repairing cars. After a 24-hour shift, we had three days off, which allowed us to manage a lot of other activities.”

### Morning rush and a secret key

Iveta, General Training Manager, recalls an unusual morning: “A passenger arrived for an early morning flight, and went through the security detector, which reacted. We invited the gentleman to take his jacket off and go through the detector again. The moment he takes off his jacket, the reason for the beeping becomes clear: he had been in such a hurry that he had put the jacket on with its metal hanger still inside and had not even noticed it.”

On another occasion, the metal detector was triggered as a gentleman passed through. We asked him to take off his outerwear and go through the detector again. After he took off his coat, the scanner revealed that there was a huge key in one of the pockets. We told the gentleman to take it out. He insisted there were no keys, appearing surprised. We checked the pockets – really empty. Then we noticed that one pocket had a sewn seam... Apparently, the key had fallen behind the lining before it was sewn and stayed there. The gentleman then remembered that the key to the barn had recently gone missing, they had searched for it for a long time, then made a new one. He had no idea he had been carrying it around all along.”

### Outfits and accessories

“I graduated from the Riga Vocational High School as a clothing designer,” says Andra, Head of the VIP Passenger Service Unit, “and when the Airport employees’ uniforms were changed in 2003, I had the opportunity to design them. I developed the design, drew sketches, searched for accessories for both passenger service agents and the security service, and looked for a manufacturer who could sew the uniforms. For summer, there were light blue ones made of a thinner fabric, while for winter, there were other uniforms – dark blue. The fabric for the vests was specially woven with the Airport logo.



Later, the Airport attracted a professional fashion artist, Ingrida Drāzniece, who designed the next uniforms – black suits with silk scarves and the RIX logo. The employees of the VIP Centre wore elegant coats for the spring/autumn season and bright red leather gloves. We received compliments from our customers, they said we looked like we were from a Chanel fashion show.”

### Gingerbread planes

“One Christmas, the Airport gave employees specially made gingerbread moulds in the shape of airplanes,” recalls Iveta, General Training Manager. “I still bake gingerbread airplanes at Christmas, and everyone I give them to is very happy. I know that other colleagues use them as well.”

### RIX Riga Airport 50th anniversary exhibition “Riga Airport. Personally” newspaper.

**Idea:** RIX Riga Airport Communications Unit. For the exhibition exhibits, inspiring stories, and willingness to share memories, we would like to say a special thank you to the current and former employees of RIX Riga Airport: Aivars, Aleksandrs, Andra, Artūrs, Arvids, Aviva, Baiba, Dzintra, Eva, Ēriks, Ēvalds, Gatis, Ilze, Iveta, Liene, Mareks, Mārtiņš, Vaiva and Valdis.

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RIX Riga Airport, 2024.

# RIX – closer than expected!

## Stories in the Gallery between Gates B and C