

“Roche” Scientific and Production Facilities in Riga

Celestine Katharina Seger, Juris Salaks

Rīga Stradiņš University, Institute of the History of Medicine, Latvia

Introduction. This research concerns the Swiss pharmaceutical company F. Hoffmann-La Roche & Co AG in Basel, Switzerland, founded in 1896 by Fritz Hoffmann. It is presented as analysis of historical data in the time period between 1918 and 1940.

The “Roche” company was a very successful business and soon started to expand and build up new sales and marketing branches all over the world. After the company was forced out of St. Petersburg by the nationalisation in 1918, it began to establish its pharmaceutical division in Riga in the early 1920ies, as a “bridge to Russia”. In 1925 the first small office of F. Hoffmann-La Roche in Riga was founded, with Josef Aronstamm, former “Roche” office leader in St. Petersburg, as manager and single employee.

While it was first mainly assigned with marketing tasks, it soon became an official sales point. One year into the thriving business in Riga, it became apparent that there was the need to expand the local facilities. Therefore, a new office was opened in 1926 on Monetu Street, as well as a scientific office on Valnu Street, which was appointed the first “Roche” branch in Riga in 1929. The business in Riga was so promising that the parent company in Basel decided to make Riga a “Roche” branch and in the end of 1930 a property of 1,183.5 m² at a total price of 45,000 Lats was purchased for the construction of a new laboratory and production site in Riga. At the time of purchase it was not inhabited, but a wooden house was still situated on it. The “Roche” building was planned by the Latvian architect Aleksandrs Klinklavs, who later became specialised in health care buildings. The import of special plates for the façade is just one example of the great care taken in the construction of the building. In 1932, “Roche” moved into their new property on Miera Street 25, containing office rooms and storage as well as a laboratory and production site. However, after almost 20 years of successful business in Riga, “Roche” was once again forced to leave by the Soviet nationalisation in 1940. The building was then used as a laboratory first by the Soviets, then by the German *Wehrmacht* in 1941–1945 and again by the Soviets.

After Latvia’s independence was restored in 1991, the “Roche” historical building in Riga was used by the Traffic Safety Department.

In spite of many attempts to take up the business in Riga, it was only re-established in 1993, and the property only went back into their possession in 2016. “Roche” is planning to return to the historical property in Riga in 2018.

Aim, Materials and Methods. This research is analysis of historical data concerning the company F. Hoffmann-La Roche & Co AG in Basel in the time period between 1918 and 1940, found in the Latvian State Historical Archive and others archives.

Results. The property on Miera Street 25 (former Karlīnes Street 23) was constructed with great care and efficiency. The time between the purchase of the property and the moving into the new building was only around one and a half years. During the nationalisation process, the total value of the property with its laboratory and pharmaceutical products was estimated at around 500,000 Lats.

Conclusions. “Roche” in Riga was able to work its way up from just a small office to a large laboratory and production site in only around ten years. The construction of the “Roche” building is a huge part of the success story. Despite the thriving business, the historical development in Europe was at the company’s disadvantage, leading to the nationalisation in 1940.