

ZIGFRĪDS ANNA MEIEROVICS

The first Minister for Foreign Affairs of Latvia



Ahrleetu ministrs S. Meierovičs savā darba kabinetā ahrleetu ministrijā.

Above everything else we must hold dear the destiny of Latvia, its needs and its requirements. We must pursue every avenue to bring about and to nurture Latvia's happiness. Under this motto, we have to apply all means [...], but it should be done for the good of Latvia and in the national interests.

Z.A.Meierovics, 1917

Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics

(Born 6 February, 1887, Durbe - died 22 August, 1925, Brizule)
Politician, statesman and diplomat.

In 1917, representatives of the Latvian civic community defined as a goal the foundation of a sovereign state, as the most favourable option for the future development of the Latvian people. To reach this goal, measures were taken for the popularization of Latvia abroad, and direct contacts were initiated with representatives of other countries in Russia and elsewhere.

In November 1917, the Latvian Provisional National Council (LPNC) was formed in Valka. The LPNC resolved to set up seven departments, including a Foreign Affairs Department. Based in Petrograd, this department carried out LPNC functions and secured its representation abroad. The official proclamation of the notion of statehood marked a new stage towards the establishment of the state of Latvia.

The principal foreign policy mission of the staff of the Foreign Affairs Department was to achieve, by diplomatic means, the international recognition of an independent Latvia. The Foreign Affairs Department of the LPNC was the first [Latvian] institution to deal with foreign affairs. It began establishing the first diplomatic contacts, however it was not yet a body with diplomatic status. The LPNC began the formation of a Latvian foreign service as a non-governmental entity even before the proclamation of the state of Latvia.

Zigfrīds A. Meierovics became one of the most distinguished officials of the LPNC. Meierovics was born into the family of a Jewish doctor and his Latvian wife, who died soon after childbirth. On the day of his mother's funeral, the newborn was named Zigfrīds, and was also given a second name, Anna, after his mother. Meierovics attended the local school in Kabile, afterwards a school in the town of Tukums from 1900 to 1905, and then the Mironov School of Commerce in Riga from 1906 to 1907. He graduated with a candidate's degree in commerce and a golden medal. From 1907 to 1911, Meierovics was a student in the department of commerce of the Riga Polytechnical Institute, from which he graduated with a degree of the Master of Business Administration (*cand. rer. merc.*), 1st class.

Meierovics organised and, from August 1915, was the head of the Culture Office of the Latvian Refugee Central Committee in Moscow. He was also involved in the organizing committee of the Latvian Riflemen units. From May 1916 to 1917, he worked in the Co-operative Department of the All-Russian Union of Cities in Rēzekne, managing the provision of supplies to refugees in Vidzeme and Latgale, and also the provisioning unit on the Northwestern Front. In Rezekne he was one among the group who devised a plan on the reunification of Latgale with the rest of Latvia. Meierovics was a member of the board of the Vidzeme Land Council and the head of its financial division; on a number of occasions he took part in meetings with the provisional government of Russia on the subject of Latvia's autonomy.

From December 1917 to July 1918, Zigfrīds Meierovics was a member of the Foreign Affairs Department of the LPNC in Petrograd. The advancement of the young economist and board member of the Vidzeme Land Council was facilitated by his enormous capacity for work and his public activities, as well as his skill in reconciling different opinions and a talent for public speaking. Zigfrīds Meierovics was chosen as the first and the most suitable delegate for representing Latvia abroad. In the authorisation

issued to him by the LPNC it was stated that "this representative will advocate the need for a sovereign and indivisible Latvia." At the initiative of Meierovics, in July 1918 the first LPNC information office was opened in Stockholm.

On August 12, 1918, Zigfrīds Meierovics came to London. As early as October 23, 1918, Meierovics was received by the British Foreign Minister Arthur James Balfour, who, in the name of the British government, informed that the United Kingdom had decided to recognize temporarily the Latvian National Council as an independent institution of Latvia until a decision on Latvia's future would be adopted by the Peace Conference. Following this announcement by the British government, and before the formal declaration of independence of Latvia on November 18, 1918, the first diplomatic mission of Latvia started to function in London.

The British Government recognized Latvia *de facto* on 11 November 1918, when Zigfrīds Meierovics received an official note signed by James Balfour stating that the British government "... are glad to reaffirm their readiness to grant provisional recognition to the Lettish National Council as a *de facto* independent body until such time as the Peace Conference lays the foundations of a new era of freedom and happiness for your people." Zigfrīds Meierovics became the first diplomatic representative of Latvia, and the LPNC - the first Latvian institution to be recognised by a foreign country.

On 18 November 1918, the official meeting of the Latvian People's Council proclaimed the Republic of Latvia. On 19 November 1918, Zigfrīds Meierovics was appointed first Foreign Minister of Latvia within the Provisional Government of Latvia. Under his guidance, the establishment of a network of Latvia's diplomatic and consular representations abroad was started. In July 1919, following the return of the Provisional Government from Liepāja to Riga, he set upon the formation of a Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riga. Meierovics held the position of Foreign Minister without interruption until 26 January 1924.

In January 1920, Zigfrīds Meierovics took part in the first conference of the Baltic states in Helsinki, and after that, led the negotiations and concluded the preliminary agreement as to the resumption of relations between Germany and Latvia (15 July 1920) and the peace treaty between Latvia and the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (11 August 1920). In August /September 1920, Meierovics chaired the conference of the Baltic states in Bulduri, with the aim of establishing a union of the five Baltic countries. In 1920, he concluded arbitration agreements with Estonia and Lithuania on the delimitation of the border. From November 1920 to January 1921, Meierovics conducted the negotiations regarding Latvia joining the League of Nations; he later visited Rome, Paris and London, where he strived to achieve the *de iure* recognition of Latvia.

The international *de iure* recognition of Latvia took place on 26 January 1921, and already on 22 September 1922 Latvia was accepted as a member of the League of Nations. Zigfrīds Meierovics deserves most of the credit for achieving the international *de iure* recognition of the Republic of Latvia and its accession to the League of Nations. He was also a member of the Constitutional Assembly and of the first Saeima, representing the faction of the Farmers Union. Concurrently with his duties as Foreign Minister, from June 1921 to January 1923, and again from June 1923 to January 1924, Zigfrīds Meierovics also served as Prime Minister of the Republic of Latvia.

In 1922, Zigfrīds Meierovics laid the foundation for Latvia's foreign trade policy by concluding the first two trade agreements with the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic, according to the most favoured nation principle. Considerable efforts were devoted to the establishment of a Baltic Entente. In August 1922 in Riga, Meierovics convened the first conference of Latvian envoys, during which the chief aims and directions of Latvia's foreign policy were mapped out.

From 19 December 1924, Zigfrīds Meierovics once again assumed the position of Foreign Minister. In the summer of 1925 he attracted considerable attention internationally by his extended mission to Western European capitals in order to achieve a decision favourable to Latvia at the Council of the League of Nations, where the Baltic German landlords had submitted a complaint and to encourage economic interest in the Baltic states on the part of foreign countries. The minister also led negotiations on Latvia's external debts and concluded trade agreements with Belgium and Italy.

The achievements by Zigfrīds Meierovics were highly significant for Latvia's foreign policy. Over a very short period of time he became a highly-respected statesman not only in Latvia, but also at European level. He set out the basic guidelines for Latvia's foreign policy and its diplomatic traditions; he conducted an enduring and very dynamic diplomatic campaign. Under his guidance, the foreign service of Latvia was formed - the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a network of diplomatic and consular representations abroad. The legacy of Zigfrīds Meierovics continued to retain its influence throughout the first period of Latvia's independent statehood (1918-1940). The basic principles Meierovics devised still underpin the foreign policy of contemporary Latvia.

Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics lost his life in a car accident on the Tukums - Birzule road, not far from the village of Brizule. In 1926, a grey memorial stone was erected at the place where he passed away. A bronze bas-relief of Meierovics' profile was attached to the memorial on 21 August 1926. On 26 January 1929 a monument to Zigfrīds Meierovics by the sculptor Žanis Smiltnieks was unveiled in the First Meža Kapi Cemetery in Rīga, featuring an image of Latvia in mourning, and an inscription "To Zigfrīds Meierovics - the people of Latvia". For many years his gravesite was a place where the Latvian nation came to express its gratitude, as well as the venue for patriotic rallies and for the demonstration of internal resistance to totalitarian regimes.

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