

LATVIA



www.mvm.lv • info@mvm.lv

Pauls Stradins Museum of the History of Medicine

The First Century of the “Kēmeri” Spa Resort in Latvia (Established in 1838)

Edīte Bērziņa • Inta Vegnere



Latvia has a wealth of healing mineral water streams, and for centuries these have been used in folk medicine. The first spas appeared alongside the ancient streams of healing in the 17th century.

Sulphurous streams in Kēmeri were first used for treatment in the late 18th century. The first chemical analysis of the water was conducted in 1801, and in 1818, the first natural scientist of Latvian origin, Tartu University Professor David Hieronymus Grindel (1776-1836), studied the sulphurous streams of Kēmeri and confirmed their medicinal properties. The first swimming pool alongside the sulphurous streams was built in 1825. Rapid development of the spas began after the governor general of the Baltic provinces spent three summers in Kēmeri for medical treatment and ordered that a project involving a bathtub institution be prepared, the swamp in the area be drained and roads around the region.

The official date when the spa was opened was July 6, 1838, when a bathtub institution with 20 tubs was opened. The first permanent physician at Kēmeri, Gottfried Magnus (1800-1861) joined the staff in 1840.

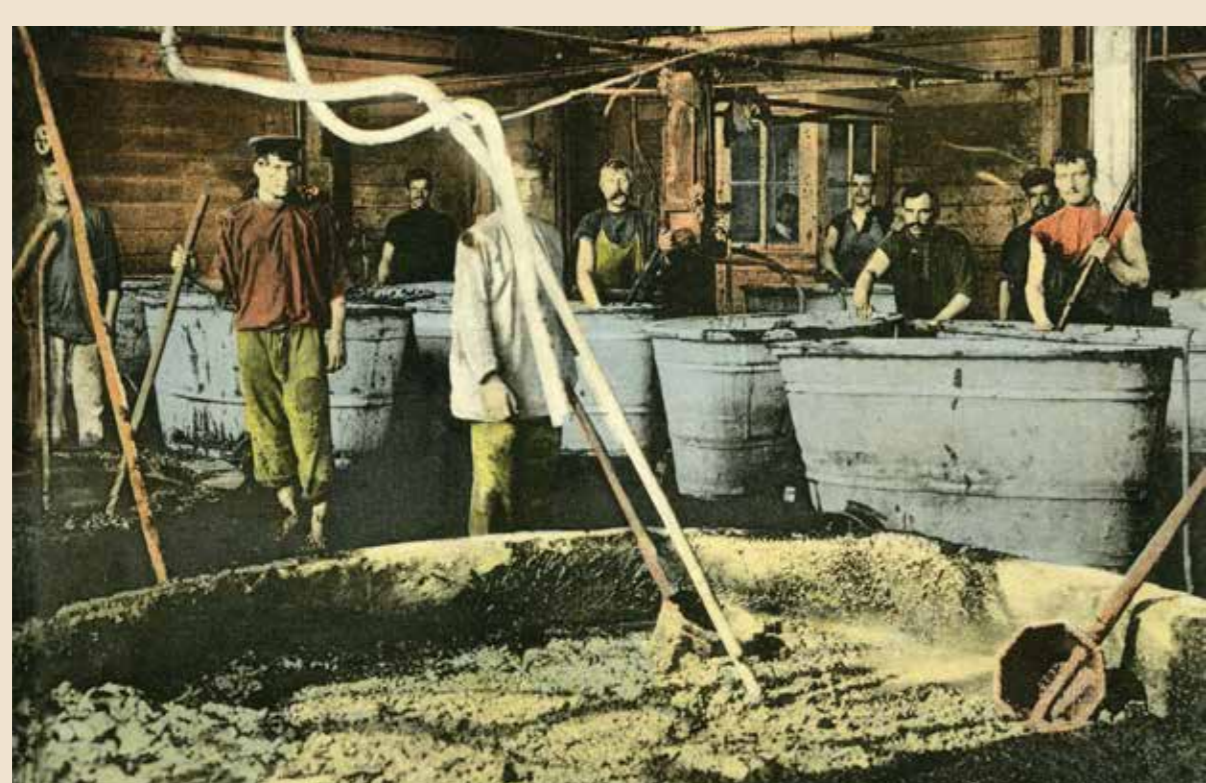


A commemorative plaque for the founders and directors of the spa, which was opened in 1961 (1920s or 1930s)



A sulphurous stream, 1930s

Medicinal mud baths were first used at Kēmeri in the mid-19th century. By the end of the century, the spa was treating chronic joint inflammations, diseases related to digestive systems, gynaecological disorders, skin problems, venereal diseases and nervous disorders. Doctors used mineral water baths with hydrogen sulphide, mud baths, mud and hy-



Processing of medicinal mud in the early 20th century



The Kēmeri spa in the early 20th century

drogen sulphide baths, mud applications, as well as mineral water for internal use.

Alexander Lozinsky (1868-1961) became the director of the Kēmeri spa in 1904. He was the founder of scientific balneology in Russia. Lozinsky ran the spa until World War I, when he was drafted. During his time in Kēmeri, the medicinal factors of the spa were examined in detail, experiments were conducted, and this led to scientifically based theories about the medical effects of the mud. A major investment in this work was made by the Russian biochemist, Professor Vladimir Sadikov (1874-1942).

In 1916, he published the book “Balneology for a Practising Doctor.” Under Lozinsky’s leadership, new bathtub institutions were built along with administrative and other buildings. The area around the spa was improved, a 6 km electric tram line was opened between Kēmeri and the seashore, and guides to the spa were published in Russian, German and Latvian, along with medicinal instructions. After World War I, Alexander Lozinsky worked at a balneology institute in Pyatigorsk.

Latvia’s spas were almost totally wrecked during World War I. After the establishment of Latvia’s independence in 1918, a new network of spas and sanatoriums was established throughout Latvia. Prior to the war, the services offered by the spas and sanatoriums were mostly used by wealthy residents of Moscow, St Petersburg and other large cities in Russia, but after the establishment of independence, the offer was mostly focused on treatment and leisure opportunities for the residents of Latvia itself. The spa at Kēmeri was reopened, and it was owned by the state. In 1920, Latvia approved a law on sickness insurance, allowing policyholders to use the services of spas and sanatoriums. The largest spa, at Kēmeri, was built almost from scratch, and it became one of the most modern healing facilities in all of Europe. There were new bathtub

buildings, a building to prepare medicinal mud and store it, as well as systems to heat water and mud. The chemical composition of mineral water and mud was examined further, particularly by pharmacologist Professor Jānis Kupčs (1871-1936) at the University of Latvia. This expanded the use of the water and mud on the basis of scientific discoveries. Visitors were offered sulphurous water and mud baths, mud compresses and applications, mineral water for internal use, sulphurous water and hydrogen sulphide baths, sulphurous water and oxygen baths, sulphurous water and pine needle baths, sulphurous water and salt baths, kidney rinsing procedures, inhalations, showers and massages. Each year the spa offered an average of 130,000 procedures.



Kēmeri spa director Alexander Lozinsky (1904–1915) A medallion commemorating Lozinsky (J. Strupulis, 1984)



The Kēmeri tram, which spa guests could use to ride to the beach



The Kēmeri spa in the early 20th century



The Kēmeri swimming institution, 1930s

buildings, a building to prepare medicinal mud and store it, as well as systems to heat water and mud. The chemical composition of mineral water and mud was examined further, particularly by pharmacologist Professor Jānis Kupčs (1871-1936) at the University of Latvia. This expanded the use of the water and mud on the basis of scientific discoveries. Visitors were offered sulphurous water and mud baths, mud compresses and applications, mineral water for internal use, sulphurous water and hydrogen sulphide baths, sulphurous water and oxygen baths, sulphurous water and pine needle baths, sulphurous water and salt baths, kidney rinsing procedures, inhalations, showers and massages. Each year the spa offered an average of 130,000 procedures.

The number of visitors to the spa increased from 5,625 in 1929 to 6,516 in 1935, but the spa earned most of its revenues by treating people from the state and local government-financed sickness insurance system. Prior to 1936, the number of foreign visitors was comparatively low – just 300 or 400 people a year, on average. There were extensive discussions about the spas and their desire to attract foreign guests so as to create more comfortable living conditions at the 3rd Congress of Latvian Physicians and Dentists in 1932. One of the sessions of the congress was held at Kēmeri.



The vestibule of the Kēmeri Hotel, 1930s

As the country’s economic situation stabilised, the energetic director of the spa, Dr Jānis Libietis (1885-1946) talked the government and Bank of Latvia into building a profitable and well-appointed hotel at the spa. It was opened in 1936. The hotel was designed by the distinguished architect Eižens Laube (1880-1867). The ornate hotel had 105 rooms, a dining hall, a library, a roof garden, a sun tanning terrace, and a viewing tower. Around the hotel was a vast and beautiful garden with 15 km of pathways in all.

The number of foreign visitors to the spa increased after the hotel was opened, with most guests coming from Sweden, Germany and Poland. The hotel offers various entertainments – concerts, theatrical performances and dances.

The spa was shut down during World War II, and its equipment was evacuated. The spa at Kēmeri reopened after the war was over.

In 1995, sadly, the Kēmeri spa went bankrupt, and three years later some of its buildings and mineral water deposits were unsuccessfully privatised. Attempts to restore the spa proceeded slowly and petered out in 2013. The future of the spa is currently uncertain.



The Kēmeri Hotel, also known as the “White Ship”, 1936



The library of the Kēmeri Hotel, 1930s



The Kēmeri Hotel, 2012