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THE EARLY HISTORY OF LATVIAN BOOKS

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In recent years, opinions have been divided concerning the year in which the first Latvian book was published. Until the 20th century (1911) it was believed that the oldest book printed in Latvian was a translation of Luther's "Mažais Katechisms" (The Little Catechism), together with some church hymns and some gospel texts, which was published in 1586. This opinion now ought to be changed, since an older book has been discovered in the library of the University of Uppsala, the "*Katolu katechisms*" (Catholic Catechism), dated 1585. Although some scholars, for example J. Straubergs, wrote that even some older books published in Latvian probably exist, there is scant evidence to support this. Thus, a decision was made to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Latvian printed book in 1985.

In 1960, Karlis Egle published a treatise "Par Latviešu gramatniecības šakumu" ("On the Beginning of the Latvian Book Issues") in *Literatūra un Māksla* (1960, No. 19). Professor Paul Johansen of the University of Hamburg had found some detailed information in the diary of the Dome Dean of Luebeck Brandt regarding a Latvian book printed as early as 1525. In this diary, written in Latin, it is mentioned that in 1525 a Lutheran Church Book "Missale" was published with three parallel texts — in ordinary Livonian, in Latvian, and in Estonian. The fate of this book is very interesting. Konstantins Karulis in his book *Latviešu gramata gadsimtu mainā* (Latvian Book in the Change of Centuries, Liesma, Riga, 1967), gives us some information. After the printing, copies of this book were sent in a barrel from Luebeck to Riga. (In the Middle Ages and the Early New Ages, books were usually transported in barrels.) The Council of the Catholic City of Luebeck ordered the barrel to be opened, protocol about the books was written, and all of them, but for two copies left for the archives, were burned. One of these remaining copies was found in the Provincial Library of Schleswig before World War II.

The text of this book had been translated from Latin by the pastor of St. Jacob's church in Riga, Nicholas Ramm, who had studied at the University of Rostock. In 1514, he was appointed as a Catholic priest at Limbaži, but was expelled when he turned to Luther's protestantism. From 1524, Ramm was in charge of the first Library of the City of Riga (now the Main Library of the Academy of Sciences), and in 1527 he was appointed pastor of a Latvian parish. While holding this position, he wrote or translated a number of hymns into Latvian, the first one dated 1530.¹

Some evidence can also be found in the literature that a Lutheran handbook was printed in 1530. It is possible that, after the mishap with the 1525 book, the same text may have been printed a second time in 1530. In the book *Cosmography* by Sebastian Muenster, Basel, the text of the Lord's Prayer was printed in Latvian. This is the oldest extant printed text in Latvian.

In 1582 the Pope's legate Possevino arrived in Riga. In a letter he asked the Pope to send him, for translation, a copy of the popular *Catholic Catechism* by Peter Canizius. A German Catholic priest, E. Tolgsdorf, who was familiar with the Latvian language, also arrived in Riga at that time, and it can be assumed that he then undertook the task of translating the Canizius Catechism into Latvian. It was printed in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 1585 in an edition of 1,000 copies — a very large number for that time.

Regardless of the fact that no pre—15th-century texts have been preserved, evidence indicates that Latvian books existed even before the beginning of the 15th century. At the beginning of the 15th century, Latvian peasants were formally examined on religious matters. Religious teaching could probably not be done by memory alone, without a special textbook. In all the later texts known to us, no differences of dialect were apparent. We find a traditional literary written language already developed at that time. This is extraordinary, for the differences of Latvian dialects in the 15th century were much greater than they are today.

It is known that in the year 1530 at St. Jacob's church in Riga, services were held in Latvian, and a number of handwritten texts were in circulation even in the provinces. In Uppsala, Sweden, there is preserved an example of the *Catholic Agenda*, printed in 1507 in Latin, which was in use at that time in Suntaži and in Riga.

The Main Library of Latvia, in the Section of Manuscripts and Rare Books, has in its possession a handwritten prayer book, the *Missale Rigensis*. It is written on parchment — a thick book indeed, bound in leather. An inscription indicates that it belonged to the Riga Dome church.

The book by Karulis, mentioned earlier, contains some detailed information on the first book printing shops in Latvia. The first printing shop in Riga was established in 1588. Besides religious items, it also printed, in the 17th century, the first secular literature, such as dictionaries (the first one in 1638), grammars (the first in 1644), primers (in the 1680) and laws (1696). The 17th century could be considered as the beginning of paper industry in Latvia — the first paper manufacturing plant was established about that time in Kurzeme.

Unquestionably, of substantial importance to the development of book printing was the fact that in Vidžeme, ruled at that time by the Swedes, the first Latvian peasant schools were established in 1687, with Latvian as the language of instruction. In the City of Riga, the first Latvian school, with Latvian as the language of instruction, had been founded as early as the 15th century.

In Germany, printing shops were established at the end of the 15th century, and in the first half of the 16th century, a network of printing shops had spread over all of Europe, reaching Riga in 1588. The Council of the City of Riga had invited the printer Nicholas Mollin from Germany. The King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, Sigismund III issued a special permit for the opening and operating of the printing shop. By this, Mollin was put in a highly privileged position, giving him the printing monopoly in Vidzeme. In the first year of his activities, Mollin printed two books: one in Latin and one in German. After two years, he was appointed the official book printer of the City of Ryga, with a salary of 100 thalers a year. Mollin also owned a bookstore. When Vidzeme was occupied by the Swedes (1629), Mollin secured a permit for his shop from the King of Sweren. In a period of 38 years he printed approximately 160 books, only three of these in Latvian.

A copper engraver, J. Turns, worked at Mollin's shop which was operated according to the strict guild (Zunft) regulations for craftsmen. These rules and regulations also applied for the opening of a new printing shop. When Mollin died, all the rights to the printing shop were transferred to his wife. To run the printing shop as a full-time operation, the Council of the City of Riga requested the printer S. Shreder to marry Mollin's widow and acquire the shop. Shreder accepted this proposal. In this time of operations (1626 -1657), the quality of the printed works rose to very high standards, for new type fonts were brought in from foreign countries, and a good quality of paper was used. Shreder printed many books in Latvian, for example, the *Dictionary of Phraseology* by Mancelis, a book of sermons, also by Mancelis, and a number of others.

The book printer's job at that time was a good source of income, as Shreder's holdings, at his death attest: there was a basket filled with articles of gold and silver, besides more pounds of other articles of gold, and a lot of money and belongings. During the period of Shreder's activities, bookbinders also became active in Riga.²

1 N. Viksninš, "Mūsū jaunatne un latviešu valoda". *Latviešu Akademiškas ziņas*, No. 12. Latviešu akadēmisko macībspeku izdevums.

2 A. Svabe, *Latvijas Vesture, 1800-1914*. "Daugava", 1958, p. 372.