

**This is a story of 20 generations
joining hands with the world
with the help of books in Latvian**



Mini Surf Trip Around the World with a Book

Come visit us in Latvia, Northern Europe, by the Baltic Sea. This is the place where the library is called the Castle of Light, where the hockey team wins world medals, where the world music stars are born. Where unicorn companies become a tradition and where song and dance are the stress relief, where people plant the Trees of Happiness simply because that brings joy.

We are happy to welcome guests in our celebrations! You're in luck – you are entering a printed mini surf trip dedicated to the 500th anniversary of books in Latvian where you'll learn many important events and figures in book publishing, you'll spot unexpected encounters with other cultures and locations around the world.

1525

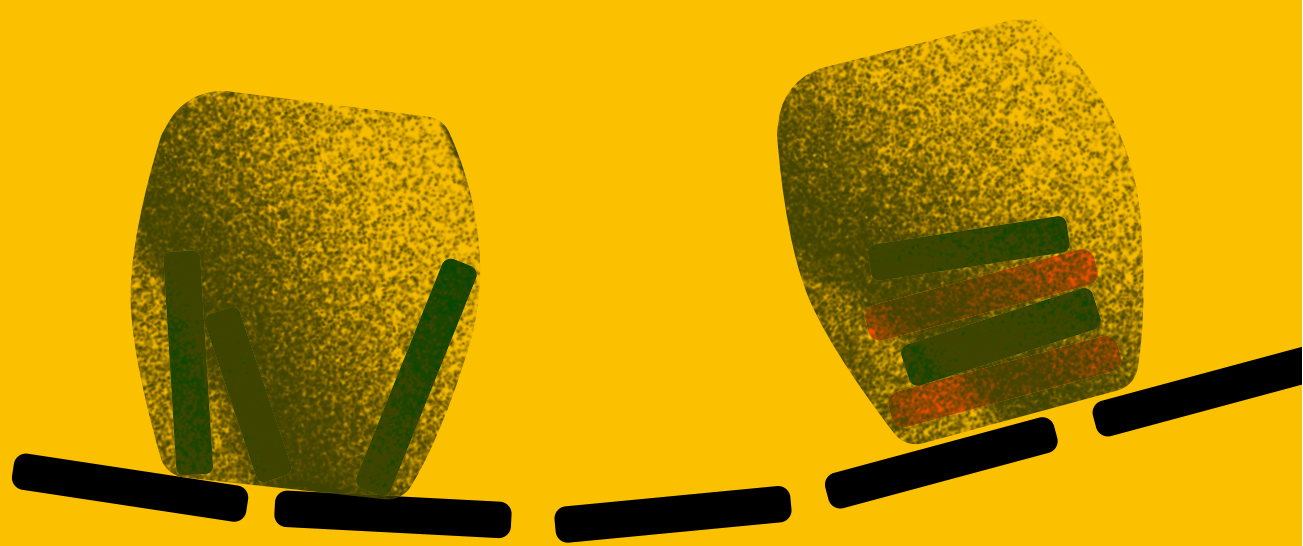
During such significant anniversaries, we take time to remember our legacy and dream bold about our future.

Latvia: EU, NATO, OECD, Eurozone member state. An elected member of the UN Security Council 2026–2027. The capital Rīga – a Hanseatic city since 1282. Home to the largest collection of Art Nouveau buildings in Europe, as well as wooden architecture gems.

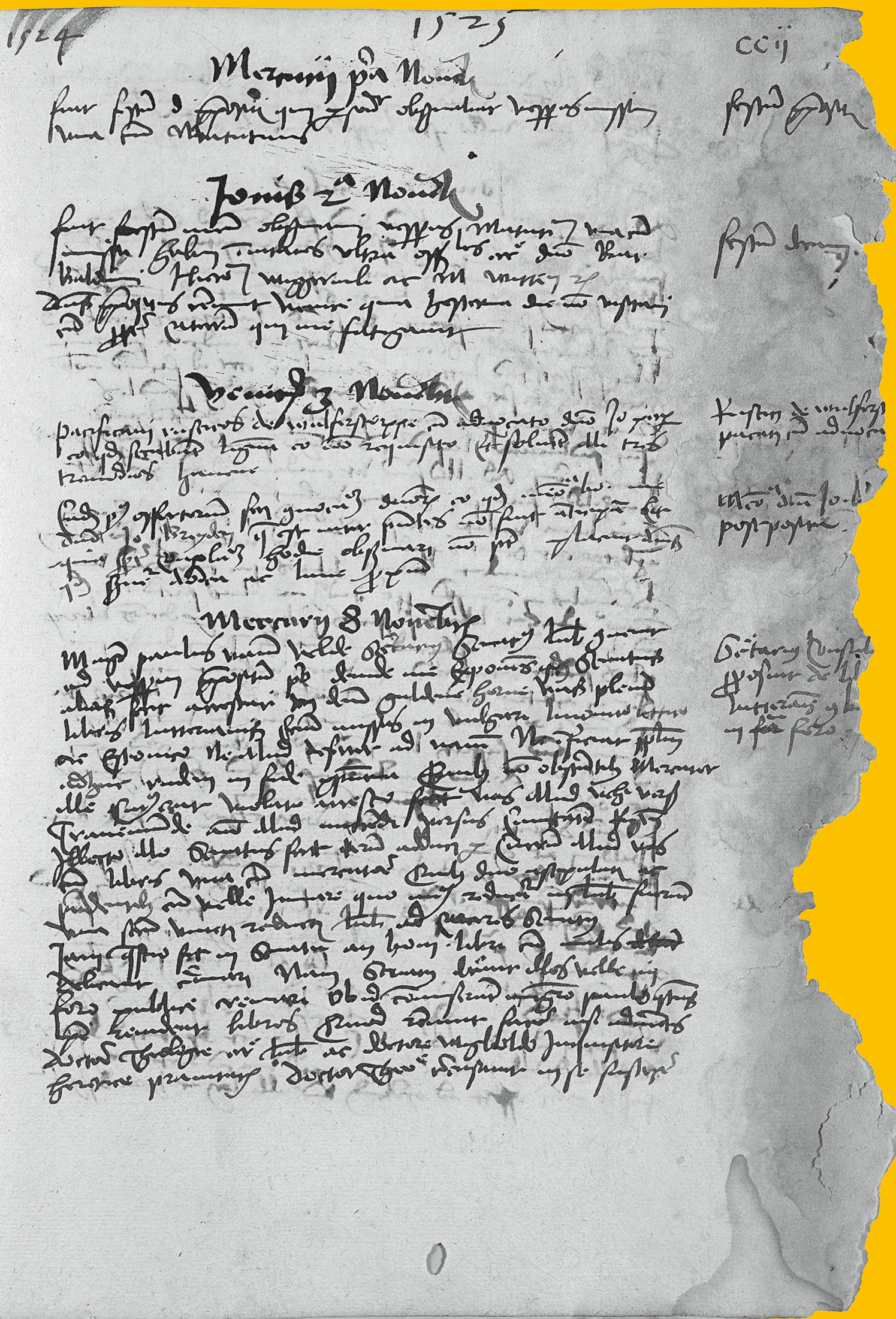
20 generations are linked by printed books in Latvian. What will the 21st generation bring? Which Latvian book will embark on the journey to another planet and who will carry it there?

The very first book in Latvian was supposed to arrive in Rīga from Lübeck in 1525. However, on a cold day on 8 November, it was banned and declared to be burned. All we know is that it was classified as Luther's "propaganda" to be erased from the earth.

The World's Shortest Detective Story Caused by a Book



20 generations later, this story is not over yet – a copy of this book might still exist somewhere in the world.

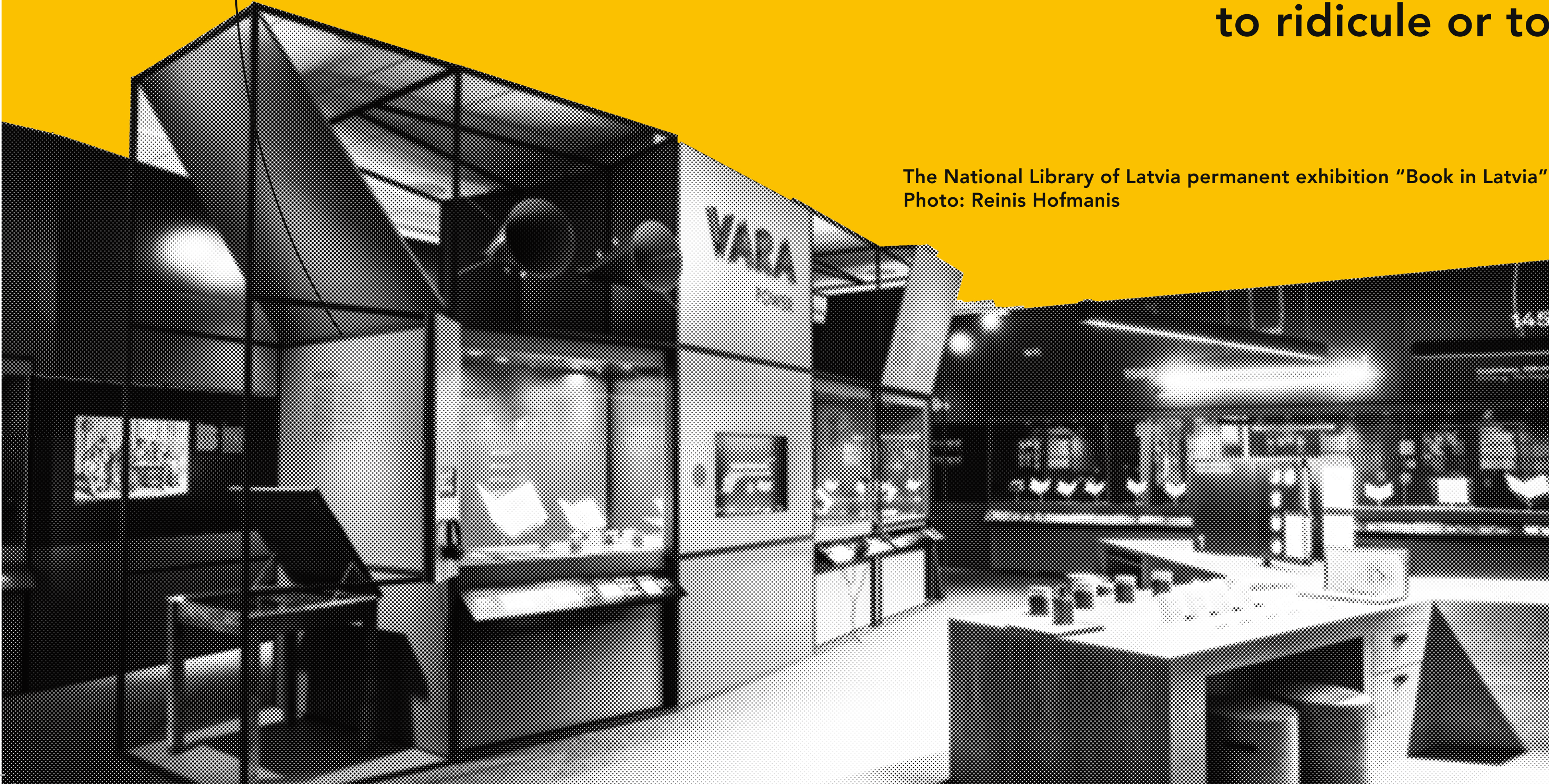


Note by Johannes Brandes in the protocol book, LSH

Book in Latvia, the permanent exhibition at the National Library of Latvia, is not just the only place in the world telling the story of Latvian book publishing, it might also be the only exhibition featuring an item that does not exist – a vanished book.

The very first book to never reach its readers could be described in diminutive – due to its very small size – and Latvians love diminutives. They are so difficult to translate and yet so dear to us. In English, what is left of the diminutive – e.g. horsey, froggy, kitty – is used to convey cuteness and kiddie-speak. For us, on the other hand, it is a diverse and refined tool used to change tonality, to express tenderness or irony, to ridicule or to belittle.

The National Library of Latvia permanent exhibition "Book in Latvia"
Photo: Reinis Hofmanis

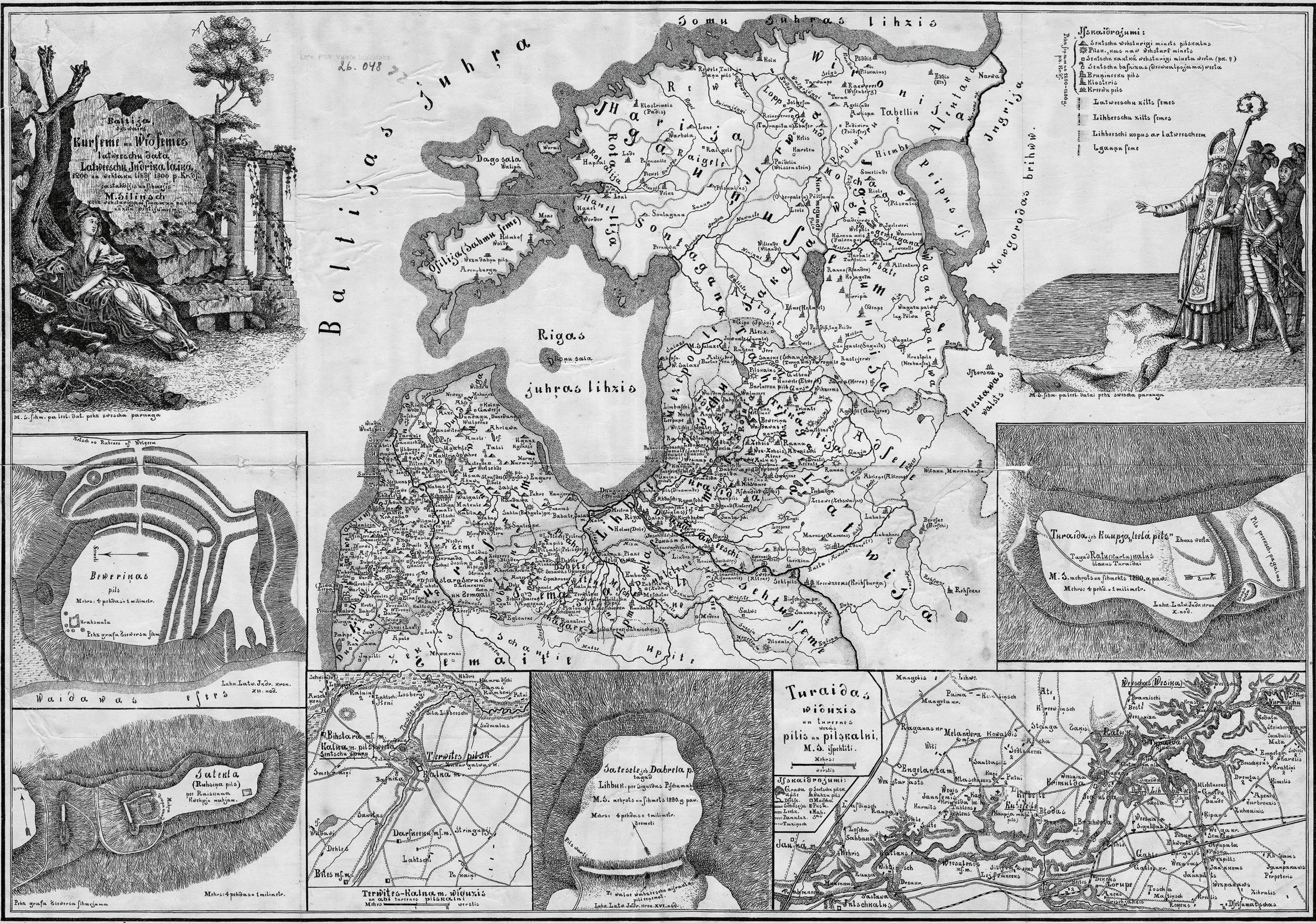


Did you know that the vessel carrying the first ever book printed in Latvian had to cross the Baltic Sea, often referred to as Mare Balticum those days? It is the youngest and freshest sea in the world, i.e., with least salinity. The low salinity also makes the combat against pollution more difficult.

The Freshest of All Seas



For Latvians, the Baltic Sea has always served as a symbol of the world horizons and freedom. The first book in Latvian brought the spirit of reformation to the church. Meanwhile, one of the first popular protests for liberation from the Soviet Occupation was the Prayer for Sea when 300,000 people joined hands along the seashore in 1988 praying for salvation of the sea and for freedom.



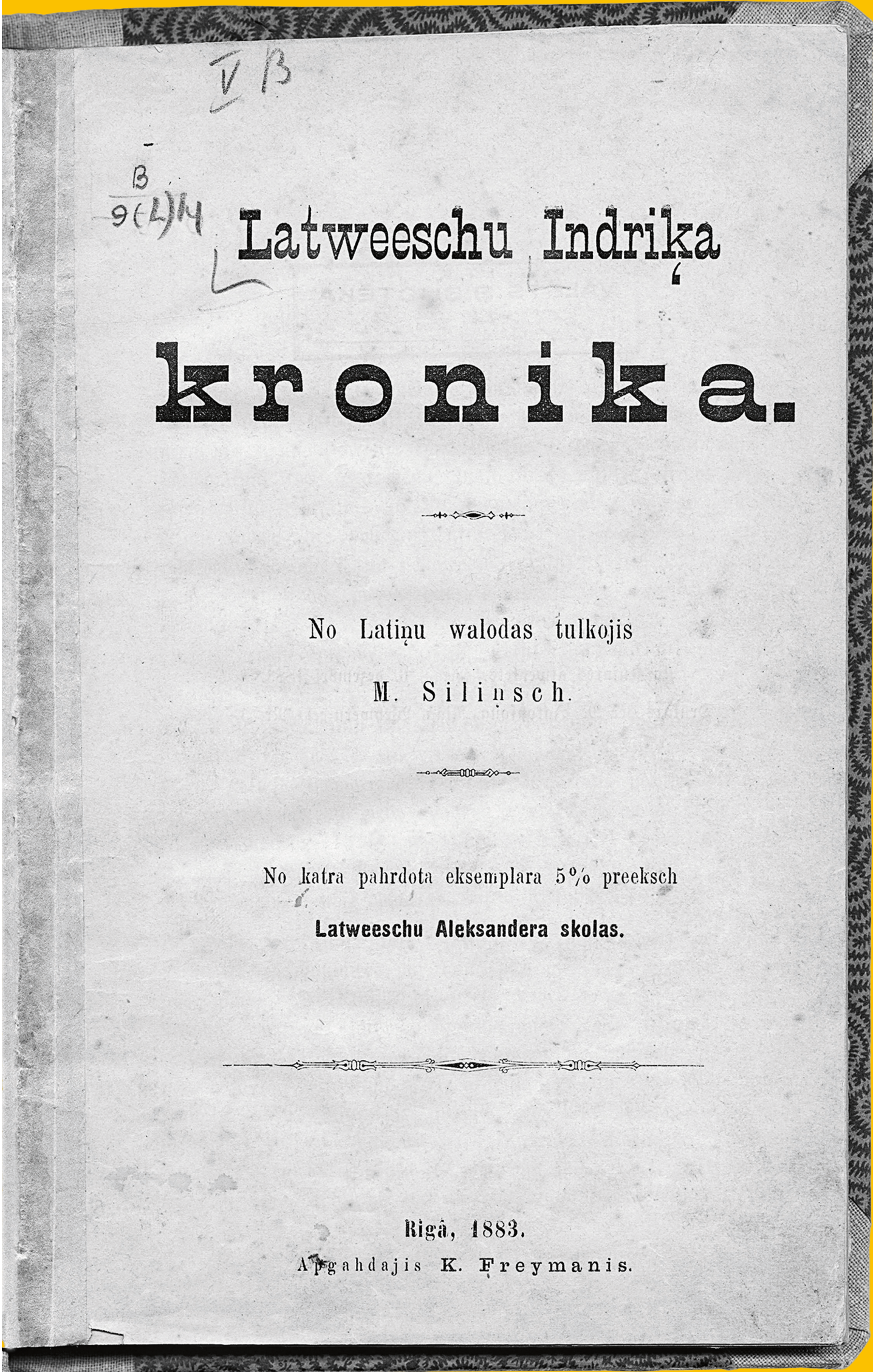
The map of Kurzeme and Vidzeme in the Baltics during the time of Livonian Henry in years 1200–1300, compiled and drawn by M. Siliņš based on historical information, his own and others’ research, NLL

The Dual Nature of Chronicles and Influencers

A question to the ancient chroniclers remains – were the accounts of historical events made to look a secular or religious leader good, or can they be trusted to depict the historical facts as they were? Only the authors themselves know what information made it to the paper and what’s hidden between the lines. Nevertheless, these chronicles give us a certain idea of the turn of events and allows us to see the bigger picture of history.



The damage inflicted by wars and in the name of the religion is not a unique feature of the current times. The 13th century Livonian Chronicle of Henry (Henricus de Lettis), marking the beginnings of written history in Latvia and Estonia, tells a similar story. It depicts the conquest and Christianisation of the East coast of the Baltic Sea. The first translation of this chronicle into Latvian was published in 1881, and was done by Matīss Siliņš, a teacher, ethnographer, writer, and cartographer – a true Renaissance man.



Livonian Chronicle of Henry title page, 1883, NLL

From 1 Book to
the Castle of Light

The first printed book in Latvian could have arrived by the sea route to the land of “oral books”, the Latvian folksongs, or Dainas. Dainas is one of the largest collections of versified folk heritage in the world. Our Vedas. They represent the collective wisdom and worldview of Latvians, encoded into 1.2 million four-to-six-line verses.

Dainas – the Northern European Twin Sister of the Vedas?

Cabinet of Folksongs, in which all Latvian folksongs (dainas) collected by Latvian folklorist Krišjānis Barons are stored
Photo: Didzis Grodzs

Until the beginning of the 21st century, the first major edition of folk songs (1894–1915) was the most comprehensive transfer of the oral tradition into print showcasing the ancient, unique, and robust Latvian culture.

*Lēni, lēni Dieviņš brauca
No kalniņa lejiņā;
Ne traucēja ievas ziedu,
Ne arāja kumeliņu.*

*Slowly, quietly drives God
Downwards to the valley;
Not a blossom is disturbed,
Not a foal is startled.*

Translated by Velta Snikere

A complex world of mythology, detailed accounts of the working life and social customs are described in the best of history books – yet written in poetry. The use of the diminutive form is a core element, making Dainas almost impossible to successfully translate into any other language. Due to their extreme compactness, around 100 characters, we like to think of ourselves as the forefathers of micro-blogging.

Get off the horse and listen to the Latvian language. Some say Latvian is rooted in Sanskrit and consider it one of Europe's oldest languages. Spoken by about 2 million people, it is one of the two remaining languages in the Baltic branch of the Indo-European languages, the other being Lithuanian. Although related, Latvians and Lithuanians cannot easily understand each other. Finno-Ugric languages Estonian and Liv, though not related to Latvian at all, have left their mark as well with the stress on all Latvian words being on the first syllable.

In the Jungle of Language Network

Phonetic spelling requires us to write as we hear, therefore, foreign names are modified to conform. For example, John Smith will be spelled as Džons Smits. We know it may be confusing therefore we try to add the original in brackets. Today we take care of Latvian as well as other European languages with the help of software solutions for proof-reading, translation, and speech technologies. *Tilde* is well-known in the region to be the developer of machine translation solutions of excellence.

|a



There are 6,500 living languages worldwide, however, approximately 2,000 of them have fewer than 1,000 speakers.



Indeed, Sanskrit has a great amount of vocabulary with obvious similarity to Latvian. Especially so in the vocabulary for body parts and natural phenomena. Such as, "naktam" and "nakts" (night), "pādah" and "pēda" (foot), "agnih" and "uguns" (fire). "Dievs" (God), the relevant Sanskrit word "Dēva" ("devah") is also one of the names of Indra, the deity of thunder.



Photo: Reinis Oliņš, Latvian National Centre for Culture Archive

When we travel around the world, we can see that we are all linked not just by water and sky, but different cultures share similar ornaments and geometrical patterns as well.



According to the estimate from IT specialists, a single belt may contain a million bytes of information. If only we knew how to “download” it! We know the individual meaning of the woven symbols – such as “strength”, “fertility”, “home blessing”, etc., but there are still unanswered questions among researchers and mystics – could this sequence of symbols have been used for individual protection or as an “encyclopaedia” of the wisdom of Universe? Will we ever be able to decipher them again, maybe with a help of quantum computing?

The samples of this belt were first published in *Latvian Ornaments* (Vol. 2), published in 3 volumes between 1924 and 1931, ed. by the graphic artists Rihards Zariņš.

NLL

World Geometry – the Source of Inspiration for the Printed Text?

The 3-meter long and 10-cm wide Lielvārde belt is a traditional element of the Latvian folk costumes where each ornament is unique – we believe this sequence contains a longer “message”. The ornaments in this belt are a part of an ancient global geometrical ornament code, as you’ll find many of them in other countries in Europe and elsewhere. These days, Lielvārde belt has become one of the symbols of what it means to be Latvian. Its motives have been included in our dance and numerous items – fabric and clothing prints, jewellery, pottery, even embedded into the Latvian passports and tattoos.



The ABC mountain trail is among the most well-known mountaineering routes in the Himalayas. Meanwhile, learning the ABC is the first summit to be climbed on your way to the Himalayas of books. Here, in Latvia, we have a 300m long trail that allows you to walk through the first illustrated alphabet book. Right next to it, there is a trail of the first "encyclopaedia" in Latvian – they were both created in Sunākste where Gothards Frīdrihs Stenders (Gotthard Friedrich Stender), a book compiler, German pastor, poet, writer with an inscription on his grave – "Latvian". One of the visitors of this trail reports that Stenders "... in addition to all of this, was also designing washing machines and advocating for their use. To me, the legacy of Stenders sounds a bit like our own da Vinci".



ABC – the First Summit on the Way to Himalayas of Books

He is still remembered
with great affection
and gratitude for the
mission he accomplished:
"The more a nation grows
in true and great wisdom,
the happier it will be".

In fact, G. F. Stenders' *Book of Great Wisdom from the World and Nature* (1774) was the first encyclopaedia for peasants in Europe.



The alphabet book of Gotthard Friedrich Stender, 1787
Illustrations, 2014

From 1 Book to the Castle of Light

In the freezing cold weather of 18 January 2014, the six-hour long world-famous campaign *Path of Light – Chain of Book Lovers* took place in Rīga. In this event, 30 000 people formed a two-kilometre-long human chain, handing over 2,000 books hand to hand – from the former building of the National Library of Latvia to their new home, the Castle of Light. This event marked the official opening of Rīga as the 2014 European Capital of Culture. The Chain of Book Lovers gained considerable international media attention, with over 15,000 participants from Latvia and abroad signing up to take part!

I Am Creating Legacy – Chain of Book Lovers

The Chain of Book Lovers was the deepest expression of respect and love for the legacy accumulated in the previous 20 generations.

This Latvian example has inspired others worldwide, such as the residents of Chelsea, Michigan, U.S.A., relocating a bookstore to new premises.



The People's Bookshelf, Photo: Reinis Hofmanis

The books that made their way to the Castle of Light in this unique manner were placed in the People's Bookshelf. You will notice this impressive structure as soon as you enter the library! The People's Bookshelf is the only bookshelf in the world having its own website: tautasgramatuplaukts.lv.



Emily. Queen of Press TV Series poster, courtesy of Mistrus Media

After Johannes Guttenberg's revolutionary invention of the printing press around 1450, it wasn't long before women also began engaging in the "business" of printing books with a great enthusiasm. We know of four female book publishers from 16th–18th century: *Plantin-Moretus printing house (Plantin Press): Martina Plantin, Anna Goos, Anna Maria de Neuf, and Maria Theresia Borrekens. Elizabeth Harris Glover* was the first female book publisher in America – arrived from Great Britain in 1638 and established a printing house after her husband's death.

The Great Book-Publishing Amazons



In the heart of Rīga, capital of Latvia, the Monument of Freedom stands tall – a figure of woman visible over the surrounding rooftops, holding three stars high above. The first book printer in Rīga, *Nicolaus Mollinus*, arrived here in 1588. He would definitely be surprised to learn that these days the publishing business in Latvia is "held high above" generally by women – a constellation of enthusiastic professionals operating with enormous engagement on home turf and with international acclaim and ambitions. Possibly their determination finds inspiration in the legendary Queen of Press of 1920–30s, publisher Emīlija Benjamiņa, recently featured in TV series.



Monument of Freedom, Photo: Agris Tabaks, Latvian National Centre for Culture Archive



For about 3 centuries from mid-16th century or 12 generations, the printed content in Latvia was not very diverse – generally of religious nature. The most popular books of those days were the songbooks – perhaps thanks to the beloved folksongs. The church songs gained much wider popularity than the religious texts. And songbooks had to be re-printed more often due to their wear and tear.

Song Therapy



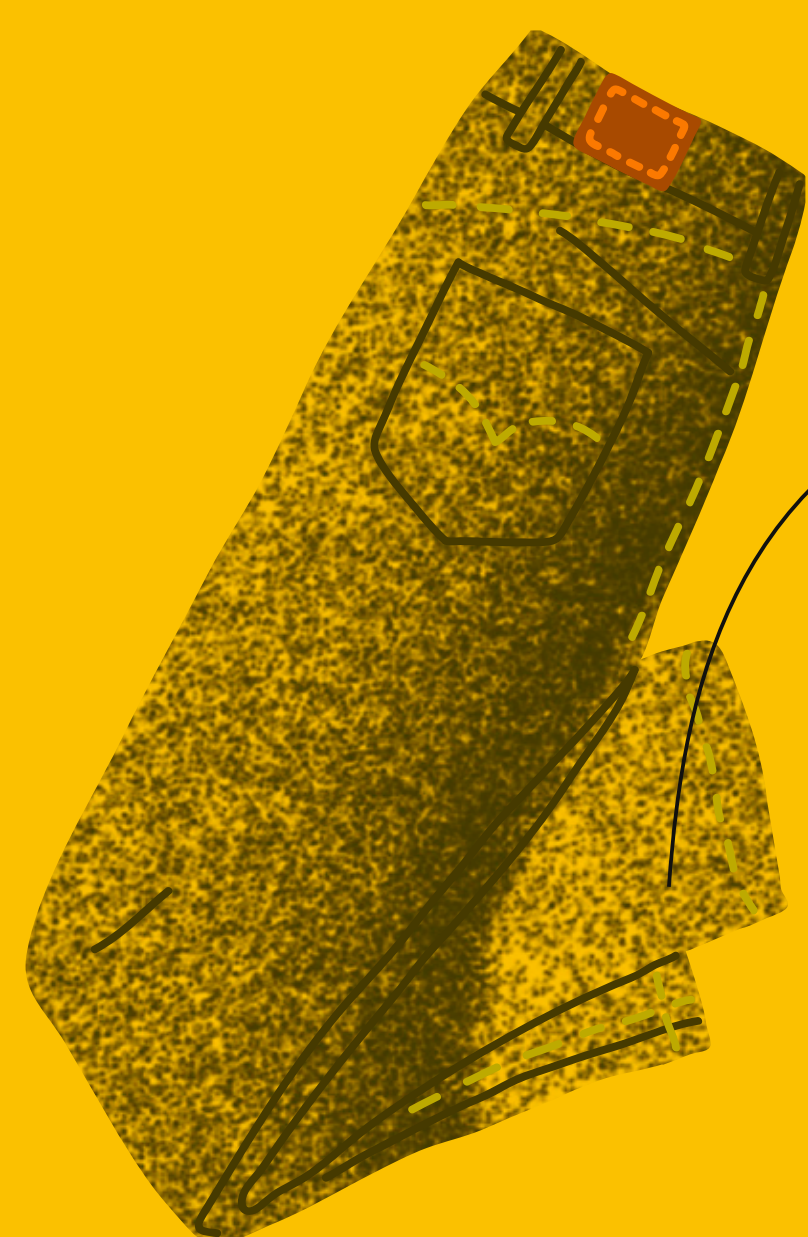
Today, the Latvian Song Celebration is the world's largest choir in a country of just 2 million – every 5 years at least 16,000 singers “join hands” in this polyphonic choir on a single stage in the capital Rīga. The thousands of spectators join many of these songs.



Song and Dance Celebration, Photo: Ilmārs Znotiņš, Latvian National Centre for Culture Archive

Music therapists are right – the physical act of singing has a healing/therapeutic effect on the singers. The Latvian resilience and ability to survive through the hardest of times in history is probably one of the best side-effects arising from our obsession with singing. Be it an old ritual folk song, an opera aria or a mighty ode for a choir of eight voices; performed solo in the field, on an opera stage, in a circle of close friends during the night of Midsummer celebration in June or at the Song and Dance Celebration, singing keeps us sane and allows us to overcome any pain, frustration or express the overwhelming joy. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say – we will exist as long as we keep singing.

Jeans have been worn by at least 6 generations worldwide – this iconic item was invented by Rīga-born Jacob Davis and patented in 1873 together with Levi Strauss. Initially, denim trousers were popular among cowboys thanks to their simple and durable cotton fabric.



Jeans and Awakening of the National Spirit

The time when the inventor of denim was born, second half of 19th century, was the formative time for Latvians as a nation. With the help of press, journalism, and public events, the educated intellectuals were trying to awaken the reader to the awareness of the treasures of the national legacy, the cultivation of the literary Latvian language, and the awareness of the collective national spirit. We often refer to this time as our First Awakening – the written word was of tremendous importance in newspapers and works of Latvian authors.



Interestingly enough, the inventor of denim made a symbolic return through his work – the trousers – to Latvia during Soviet era. Those days, jeans that had become popular in America in the 1950s and were later smuggled into Latvia from the West, were a scarce commodity here and became a symbol of the free-thinking spirit of youth, the dissatisfaction with Soviet rule, and the spirit of rebellion against oppression.



Still from *Soviet Jeans*, courtesy of Tasse Film

Life under different superpowers for generations contributed to development of the skill of “reading between the lines”, a special, difficult-to-describe feeling when the reader perceives the subtext even from a seemingly innocent character. For example, during the Soviet years of the 1960s and 1970s, people would queue, sometimes all night, outside a bookstore waiting for a new book of poetry, just to read between the lines and celebrate every freethinking idea that had escaped the scrutiny of the censors. The message hidden between the lines and the ability to read it created invisible bonds linking the part of society that had not lost hope for Latvia’s freedom and restoration of independence.



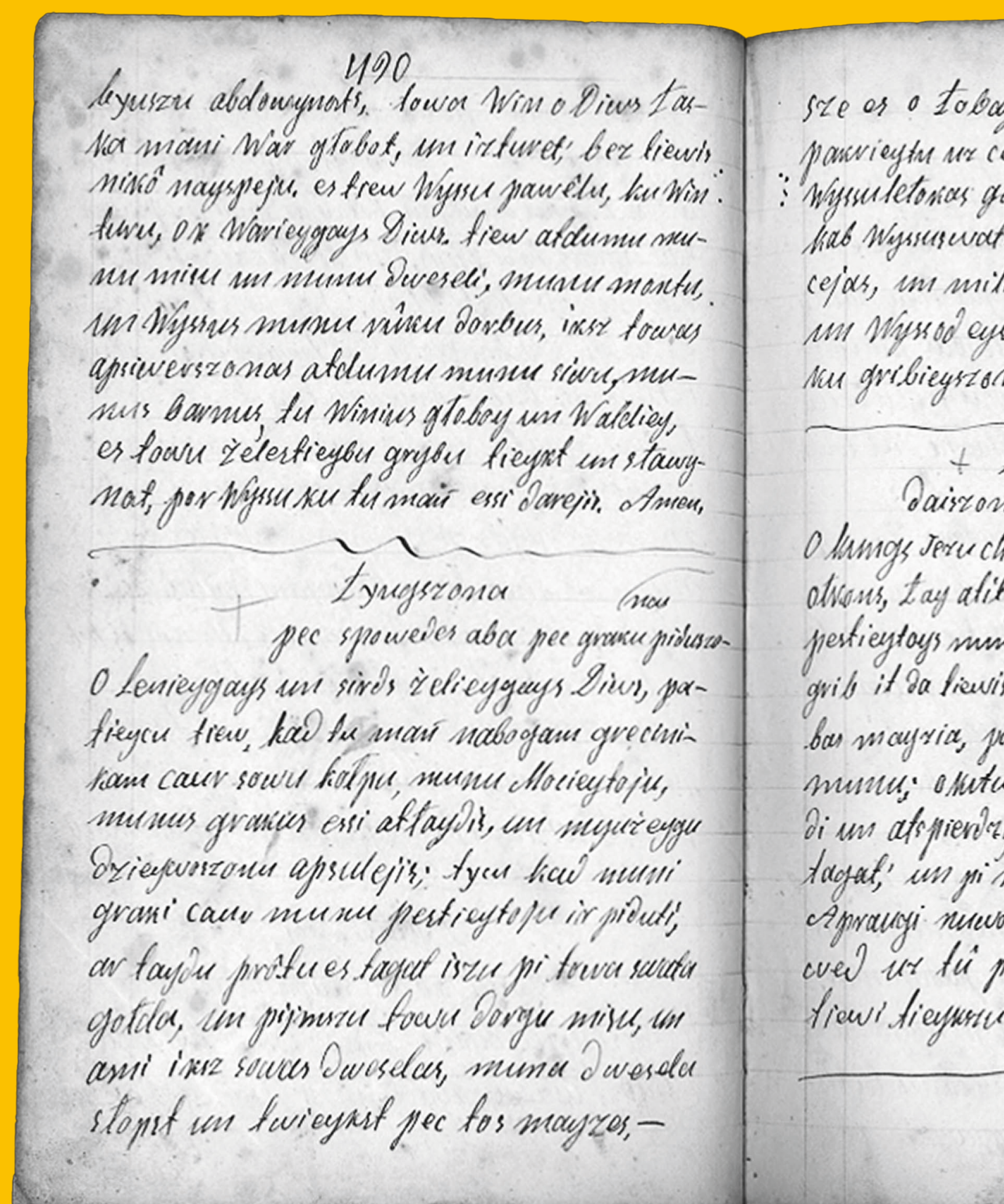
Censorship and Freedom

During the reign of the Russian Tsarist Empire at the end of the 19th century, it was forbidden to print books in Latin alphabet in the eastern Latvian region of Latgale. For 2 generations – until the ban was lifted – intellectuals secretly copied books by hand and distributed them to readers.



The Baltic Way, Photo: Harijs Burmeisters

The generation that lived through 1989 staged another determined and peaceful resistance to the occupation based on the nefarious Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 for partitioning of Europe. On the eve of the nation’s awakening in 1989, people joined hands linking the Baltic states – Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania – in a continuous human chain. This was the beginning of the so-called “Singing revolution” leading to the restoration of full independence in 1991. According to NASA officials, this 670 km long human chain was visible from space.



Book in handwriting of Andrius Jūrdžs “Lūgšanas, dziesmas, koronkas, lītānijas, psalmi”, written before 1894. NLL

THE LIFE OF I.*

QUALITY TIME



Illustration: Reinis Pētersons, Text: Anete Konste

From 1 Book to
the Castle of Light

The campaign #IAMINTROVERT is on its mission to present Latvian literature globally. #IAMINTROVERT is both about a national personality trait and representation of the immense richness and depth of the world of the imagination and the Latvian literature. Apart from that, it is also simply describing the act of, well, reading a book.

Introvert Is the New Sexy

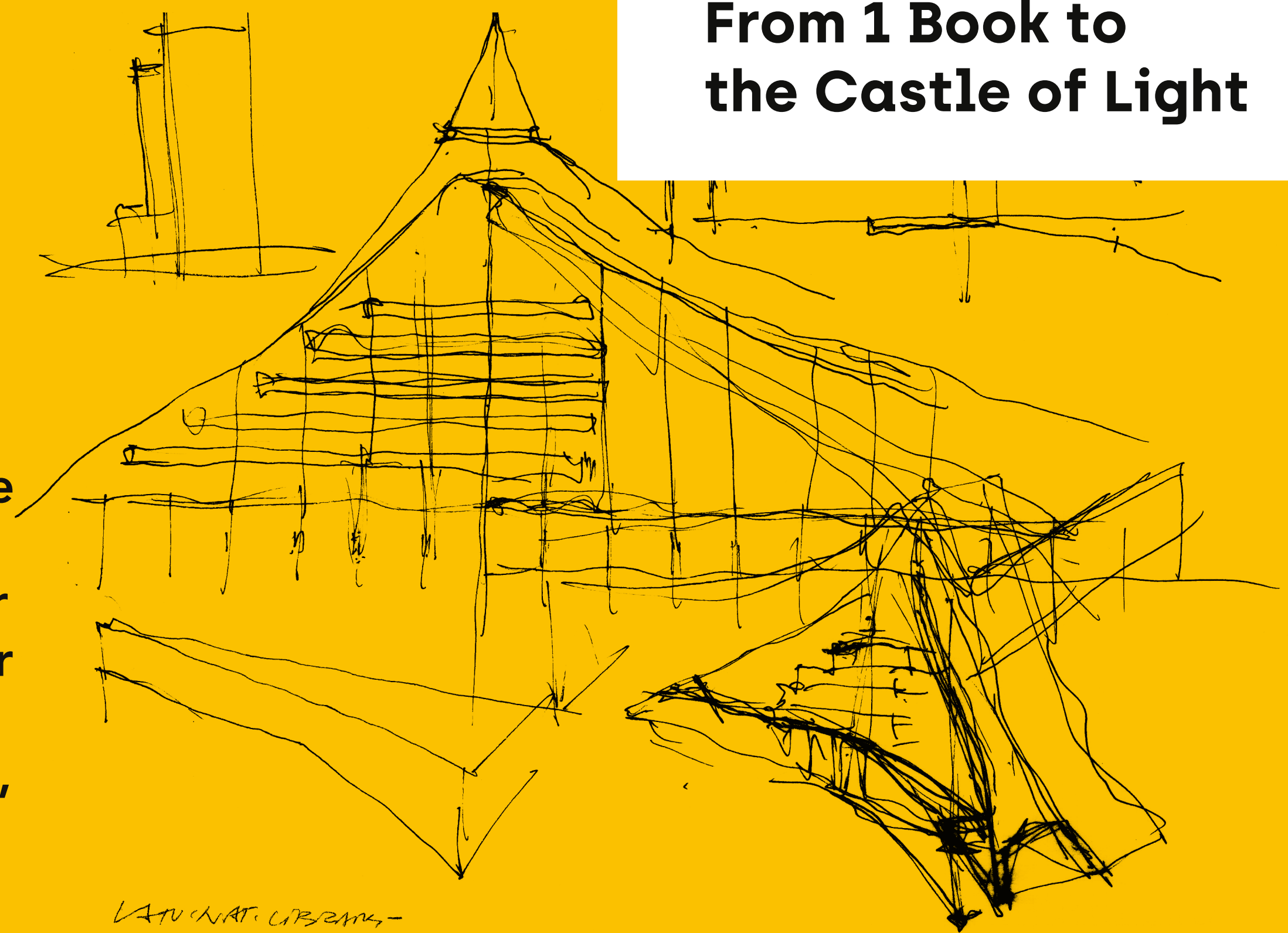
Among all the authors and books presented through the years, there are slightly edgy children's books suitable for both parents and children and reaching the levels of fine art. Jānis Jonevs' novel *Jelgava '94 (Doom '94)* received the European Literature Prize and focuses on a generation whose youth was in the nineties when Latvia had just regained independence.

In 2014, *Come to me*, a poem by Kārlis Vērdiņš was included in a list as one of the 50 best love poems worldwide, compiled by Literature and the Spoken Word at The Southbank Centre (London). Is it about .. cheese sandwich, or not..



From 1 Book to the Castle of Light

Opened to the public in 2014, the new building of the Latvian National Library (founded in 1919) is a masterpiece by the US-based Latvian architect, Gunnar Birkerts (1925–2017), often called "The Castle of Light". A place to study, to exchange ideas, to absorb and to celebrate, it is at the centre of the nation-wide network of knowledge, a hub for 800 libraries with books, periodicals, public computer workstations and free wi-fi. It is the home to the unique Cabinet of Folksongs (on display on Level 5), over 4,5 million books, and other valuables.



Sketches by architect Gunnar Birkerts of the National Library of Latvia

The Castle of Light – One of the TOP10 Libraries in the World

No wonder that our Castle of Light is ranked as one of the most beautiful libraries in various TOP 10's in the world, and the architect Gunnar Birkerts was nominated for the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal 2013.

The Castle of Light is also a fine choral work, composed in one day, on 21 June 1899, by Jāzeps Vītols (lyrics by Auseklis) and is always the culmination of the Song and Dance Celebration. A story of a mystical castle which holds our nation's collective wisdom, virtues and strength, is a tale of the triumph of light over darkness, a timeless ode to the nation's aspirations. It is of no surprise that the new National Library of Latvia building is called the Castle of Light as a reverence to the symbolism encoded into Vītols' original song.



The National Library of Latvia and sculpture "Divi Raiņi" by Aigars Bikše Photo: Reinis Hofmanis

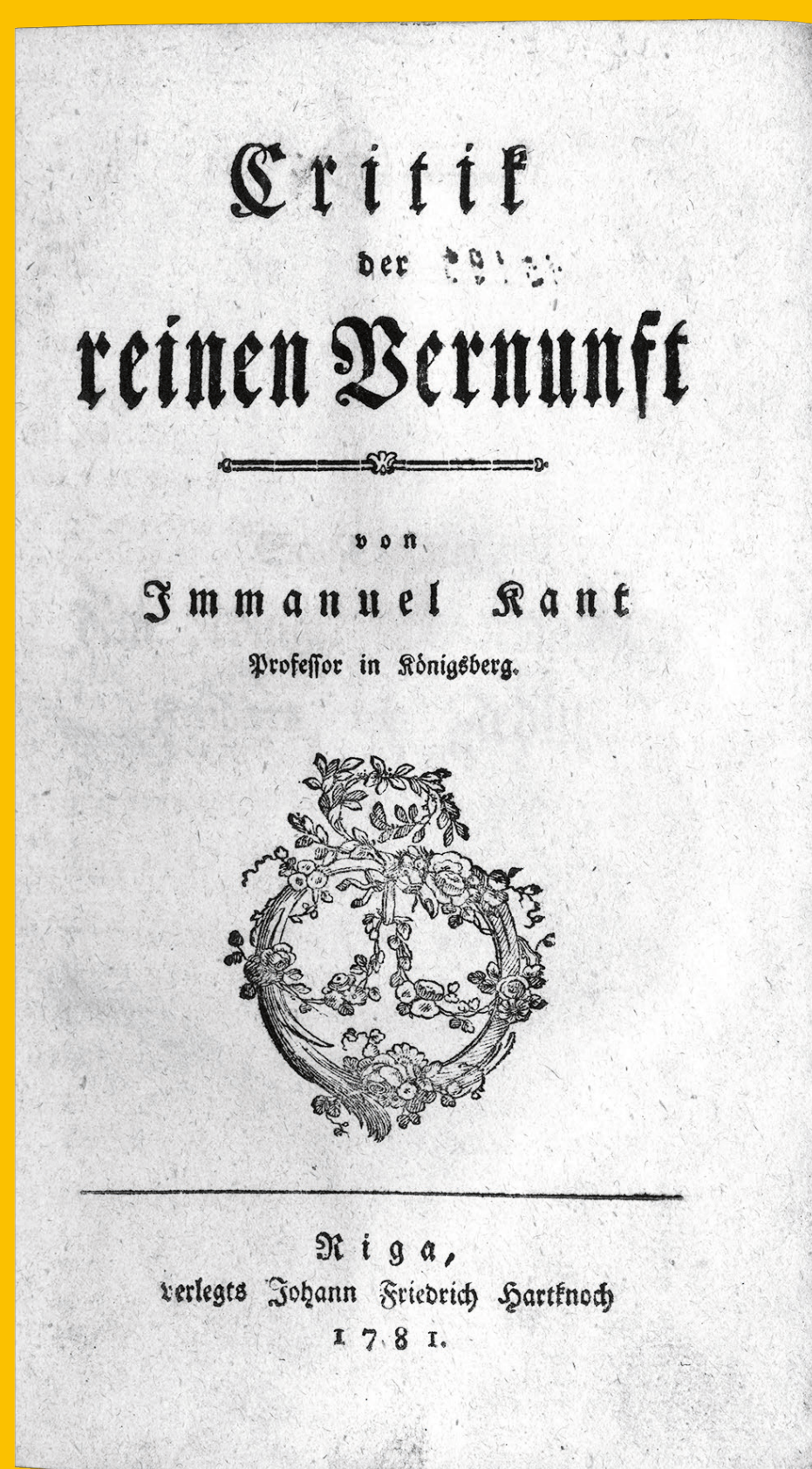


From 1 Book to
the Castle of Light

Some European Union organisations label everyone under 35 as youth. If only Immanuel Kant had been ready to leave Königsberg at 30, he would still qualify for Erasmus+ exchange programme.

Photo: Zane Priede

Be Like Immanuel Kant, Publish Your Works in Rīga

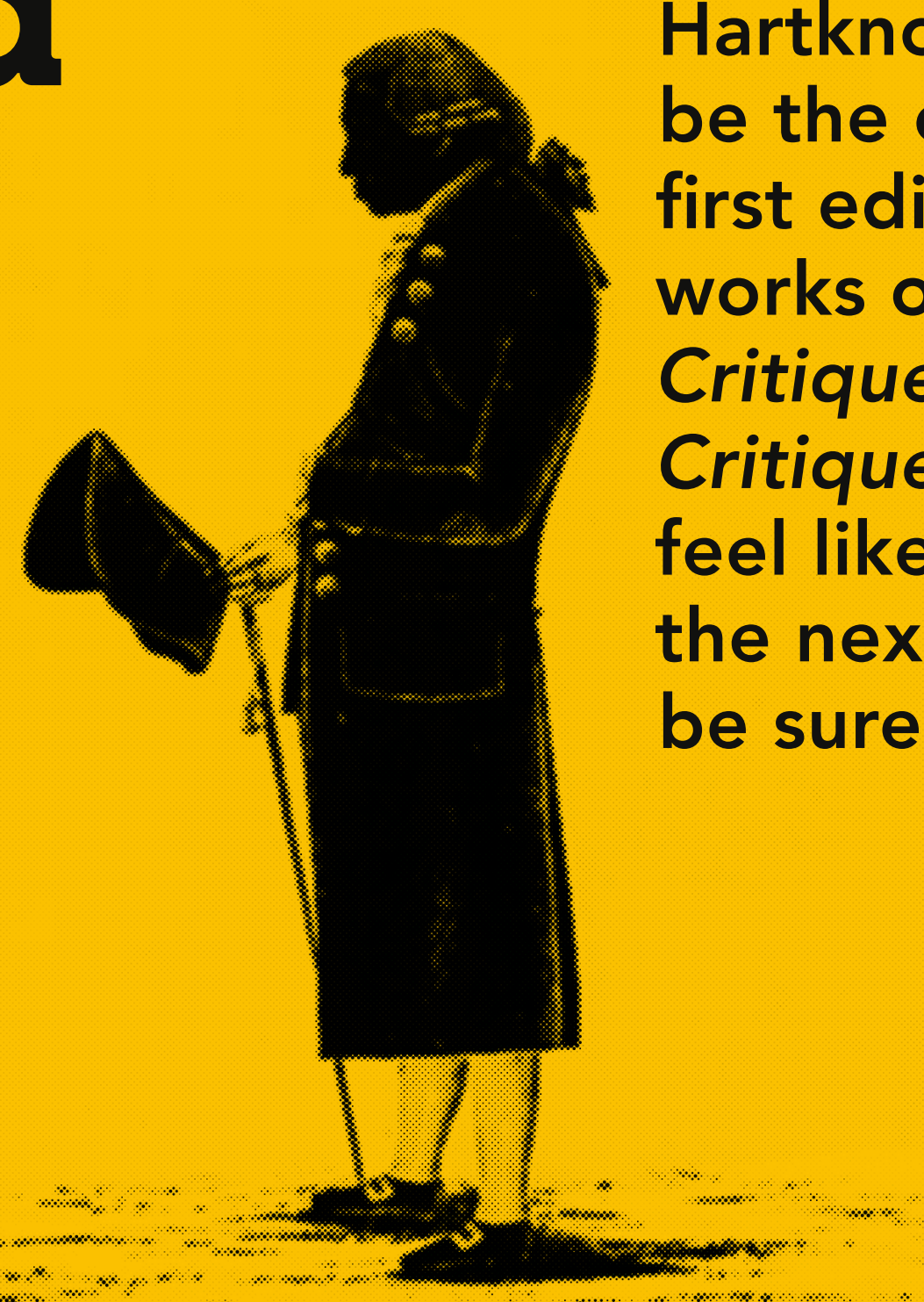


Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*
Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1781. NLL

Oxford, in turn, inherited the famous philosopher Isaiah Berlin who spent his childhood in Rīga at the beginning of the 20th century, in the Art Nouveau gem on Alberta iela. While the ideas of Kant laid the foundation for modern liberalism, emphasizing the importance of reason and duty, Berlin expanded the concept of liberalism by introducing the ideas of value pluralism and the diversity of freedom.

Ideas and innovation are on the minds of residents of Rīga in the 21st century as well. From excellence in the realms of space, quantum physics, drones, and wind tunnel construction to the rulers of the IT jungle, masters of the finest sound devices and microphones, and creative souls of pea or insect protein extraction.

In the 18th century, Rīga was an attractive hub for educated, smart twenty-year olds creating a network of ideas of the German-speaking Europe. German classical literature and philosophy would definitely take a different shape without Rīga as a part of this intellectual network. In 1765, the 25-year-old Johann Friedrich Hartknoch arrives in Rīga. He will be the one later publishing the first editions of most important works of Immanuel Kant in Rīga – *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. If you feel like you might have written the next *Critique of Pure Reason*, be sure to publish it in Rīga.



A masterfully crafted playlist can be your best friend in your daily calorie-burning activities, as well as in traffic jams or when studying – what's on your playlist? Jazz, ambient music? Perhaps, an opera by Richard Wagner? At the age of twenty-four, Richard Wagner arrived in Rīga and began working as the Chief Conductor with the City Theatre. He stayed here for two years and composed his opera *Rienzi* while in Rīga.



Wagner shattered Rīga's musical life to its core and brought a fresh breath of air with him. Today, the Wagner House is being renovated, and many of us here hope that Wagner's aura will inspire the cultural life in Rīga once again. The building of the Latvian National Opera and Ballet in the very heart of Rīga always takes one's breath away when leaving the Old Rīga – it is so majestic, bright, in the middle of a blooming park, and there is a reason it is nick-named the "White House".

Heine, Rīga, Wagner, and the "White House"



Richard Wagner. *Rienzi*. Berlin: C.F. Meser, 1890. NLL

Heinrich Heine's *Memoirs of Herr von Schnabelewopski*, purchased in Rīga and read by Wagner during his sea voyage, inspired the composer to compose *The Flying Dutchman*.

So many artists educated in Latvia have achieved global fame – Elīna Garanča, Andris Nelsons, Maija Kovaļevska, Mihails Barišņikovs, Gidons Krēmers, Marina Rebeka, Egils Siliņš, Baiba Skride, Iveta Apkalna, Aleksandrs Antoņenko, Inga Kalna, Miša Maiskis, Inese Galante among others.

Latvian National Opera and Ballet
Photo: Daiga Viksna

L N B
LATVIJAS
NACIONĀLA
BIBLIOTĒKA

Latviešu grāmatas
51.10
Latviešu grāmatas



The Brothers Grimm gaining world fame during the 19th century with the folk tales and fairy tales they had collected and edited, were also known among the Latvian intellectuals. Perhaps the fame of these brothers served as an inspiration for co-operation of other two brothers – Latvian teachers and writers Reinis and Matīss Kaudzīte. They were the authors of the very first Latvian novel, *The Time of the Land Surveyors* (*Mērnīeku laiki*) (1879). M.Kaudzīte compiled the first extensive anthology of Latvian poetry, *Laughter and Tears or a Poet's Greeting* (*Smaidi un asaras jeb Dzejnieka labdienas*) (1880), and translated the works of the outstanding German poet Heinrich Heine into Latvian as well.



Brothers Grimm and Brothers Kaudzīte

The historical background of *The Time of the Land Surveyors* is the process of land survey in Piebalga in 1860–70s. On the backdrop of the romantic relationship between the main protagonists Liena and Kaspars, many day-to-day scenes play out that have since then become a part of the local folklore – a movie has been made based on the novel, and it is also popular among amateur theatres. This historical-sentimental novel with traits of adventure has found its way to readers of Lithuanian, Estonian, German, and Russian as well.

Protagonists of *The Time of the Land Surveyors*, illustrated by Eduards Brencēns, 1913 Brāļi Kaudzītes, 1923

1877

Matīss Kaudzīte's book *The Unity of Brethren in Vidzeme* published.



1834

Various restrictions imposed on the Unity of Brethren.



1860

Signs of a crisis in the Herrnhutian movement and a gradual decline in membership. But the brethren's influence continues in the national awakening movement.



1845

The number of Herrnhutians in Vidzeme and Estonia exceeds 100 000; The Russian government identifies the Herrnhutians as an untrustworthy political organisation. When the conversion of the peasantry to Orthodoxy takes place, the Herrnhutian congregations in Vidzeme have the least number of converts.

The influence of the brotherhoods – the Herrnhutians – in this part of Latvia, who, for religious reasons, took care of the education of peasants and their children, certainly played a significant role both in the growth of the Brothers Kaudzīte and in their novel. In the other half of the 18th century, Latvian and Estonian peasants are among the highest educated in Europe.

2017

The NLL has established a new digital collection: Latvian (hand) writings of the Moravian Brethren.

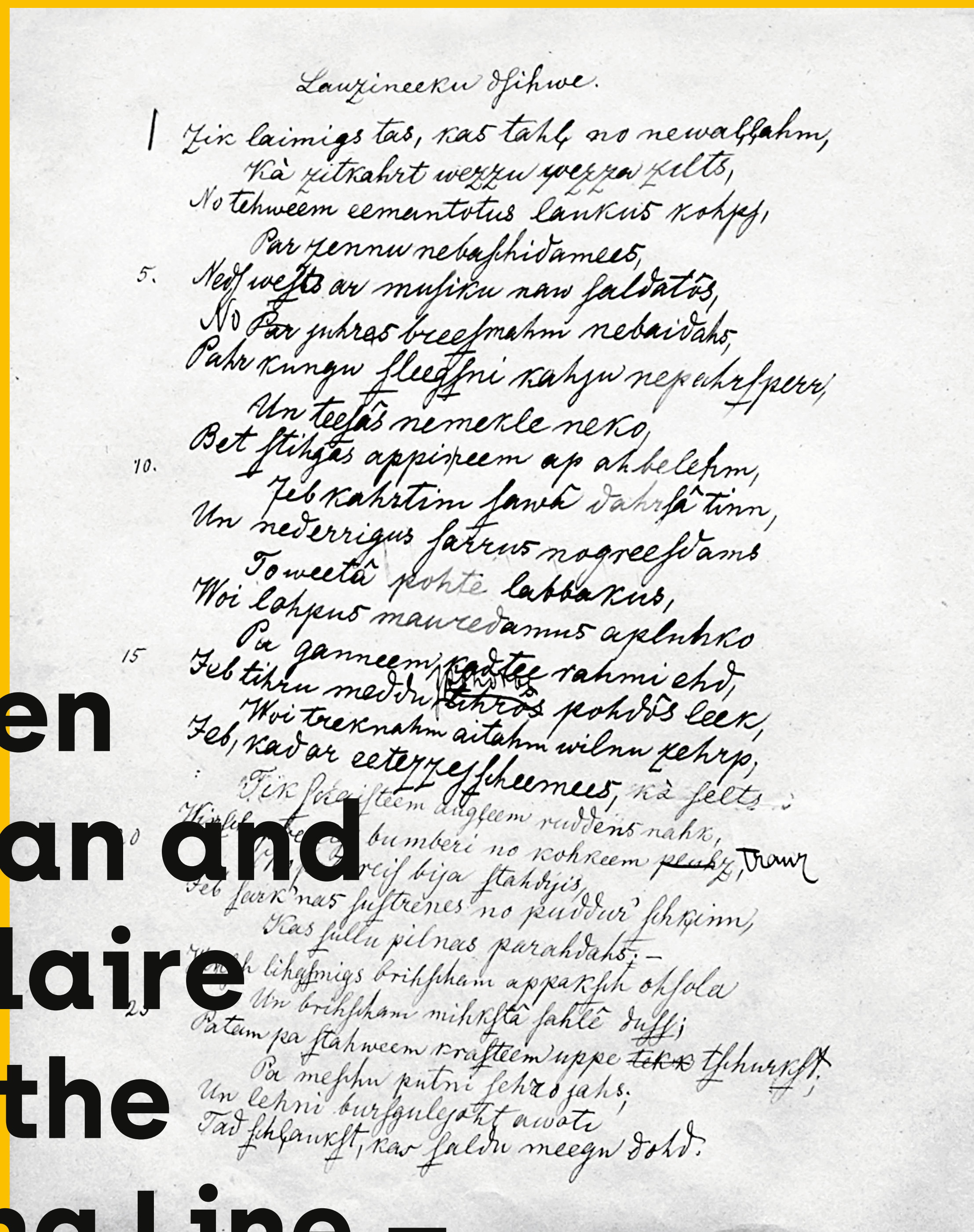


A year after the modernizer of the American poetry Walt Whitman's collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and a year before the French symbolism predecessor Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleures du Mal* (1857), the *Songs (Dziesmiņas)* by Juris Alunāns were published marking the beginnings of modern Latvian poetry. It contains poetry translations and one original piece, thus bringing a wind of change to the traditional Baltic society and decline of the German upper-class dominant position. The inclusion of Latvians in the greater scene of global culture and translation of world culture heritage into Latvian, and "demonstrating how powerful and nice the Latvian language is" were important to Alunāns.

Between Whitman and Baudelaire along the Starting Line – the Master of Language, Juris Alunāns

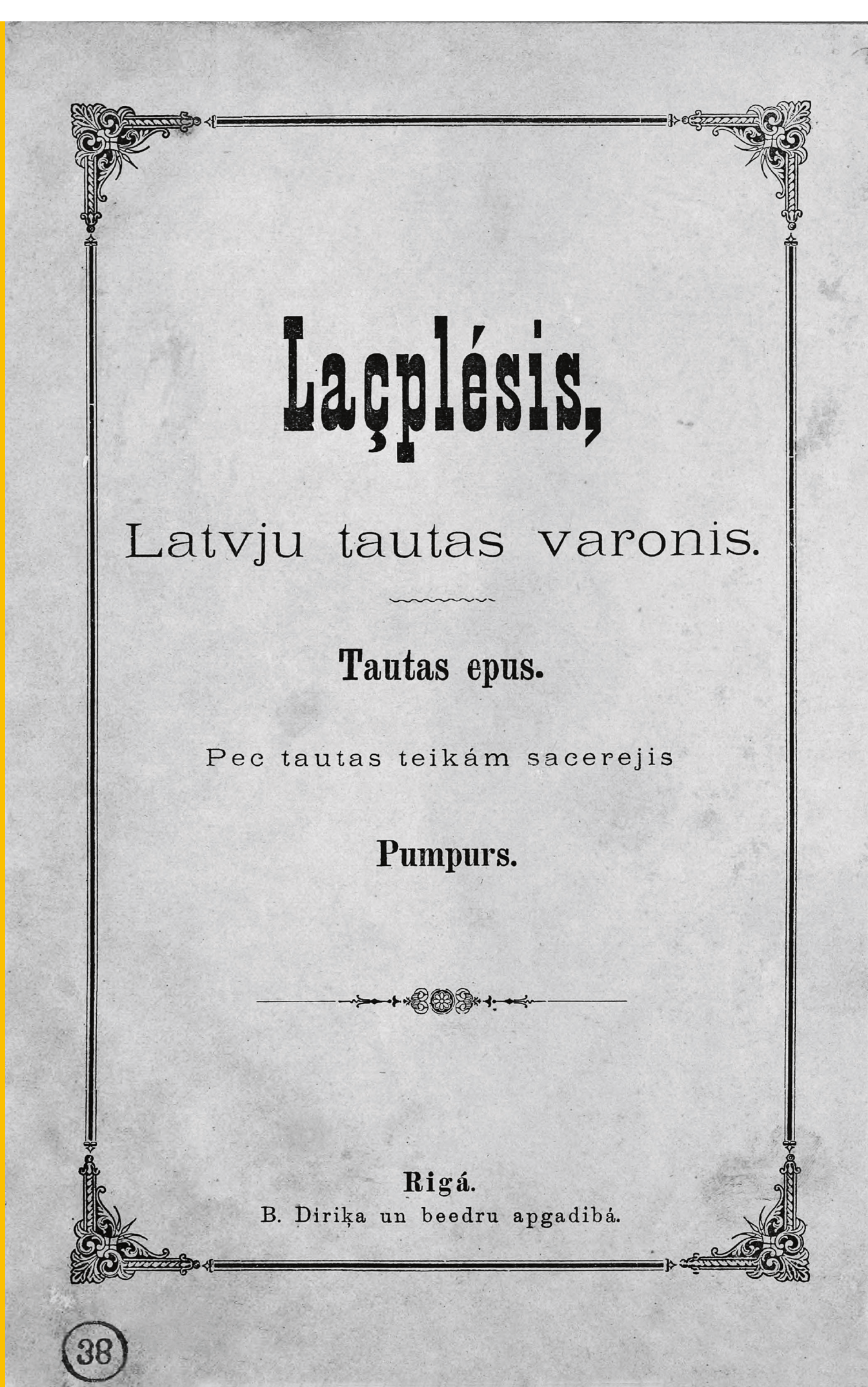


Juris Alunāns was the first Latvian author of socially meaningful and high-quality poetry. However, the times required him to be more than just a poet – today we'd say he was busy 24/7. As a part of the Awakening movement of the Latvian intellectuals, Alunāns worked a lot for the benefit of society, laid the foundations of national linguistics, and worked on the development of the language. Alunāns is "the father" of many words in Latvian.



Handwriting of Alunāns, NLL

The author himself could hardly have imagined that his *Songs*. Translated into Latvian, printed in Revel and Dorpat in 1856, would be placed in the National Library of Latvia's exhibition *Book in Latvia* along with other treasures of the history of book-printing.



First edition of Lāčplēsis, 1888, NLL



Superheroes Lāčplēsis and Crocodile Dundee

The poem describes the scenic Latvian landscape along the Daugava River and Burtnieki Lake, while some scenes take place in Rīga and Rome. The protagonist's trip around the world, like Odysseus to the edge of the world, as well as to the realm of gods and underworld, is of great significance.

In real life, a few generations after Lāčplēsis was written, an "actual" famous Hollywood character – the Crocodile Dundee, kind of a "crocodile slayer", lived. The story hit cinema screens in 1986 and quickly became a worldwide success. As people became interested in the characters depicted in the film, it turned out that the prototype for the main character was Australian – and most probably of Latvian origin, Arvīds Blūmentāls.

From 1 Book to
the Castle of Light

Lāčplēsis (The Bear-Slayer) is an epic poem by Andrejs Pumpurs, a Latvian poet, who wrote it during the Latvian National Awakening between 1872 and 1887 based on local legends. Those days the popular idea around Europe was that a nation should be defined by the fact that it has a national epic while the nations on the East of the Baltic Sea had none. It is considered to be one of the most influential works of Latvian culture. The text itself is not long, it consists of six cantos (4,912 lines).

It is set during the Livonian Crusades telling the story of the mythical hero Lāčplēsis or the Bear Slayer. Lāčplēsis' mother is a she-bear (a popular motive in folklore with ears of bear being the source of strength and weakness at the same time).



ESTDIENA, 30 OKTOBRIS, 1993

SestDiena

Pasaule

Nacionālais dēkainis

Rimants Ziedonis

Ar...

Latvian text columns

Nacionālais dēkainis Arvīds Blūmentāls. Autors foto

Latvian text columns

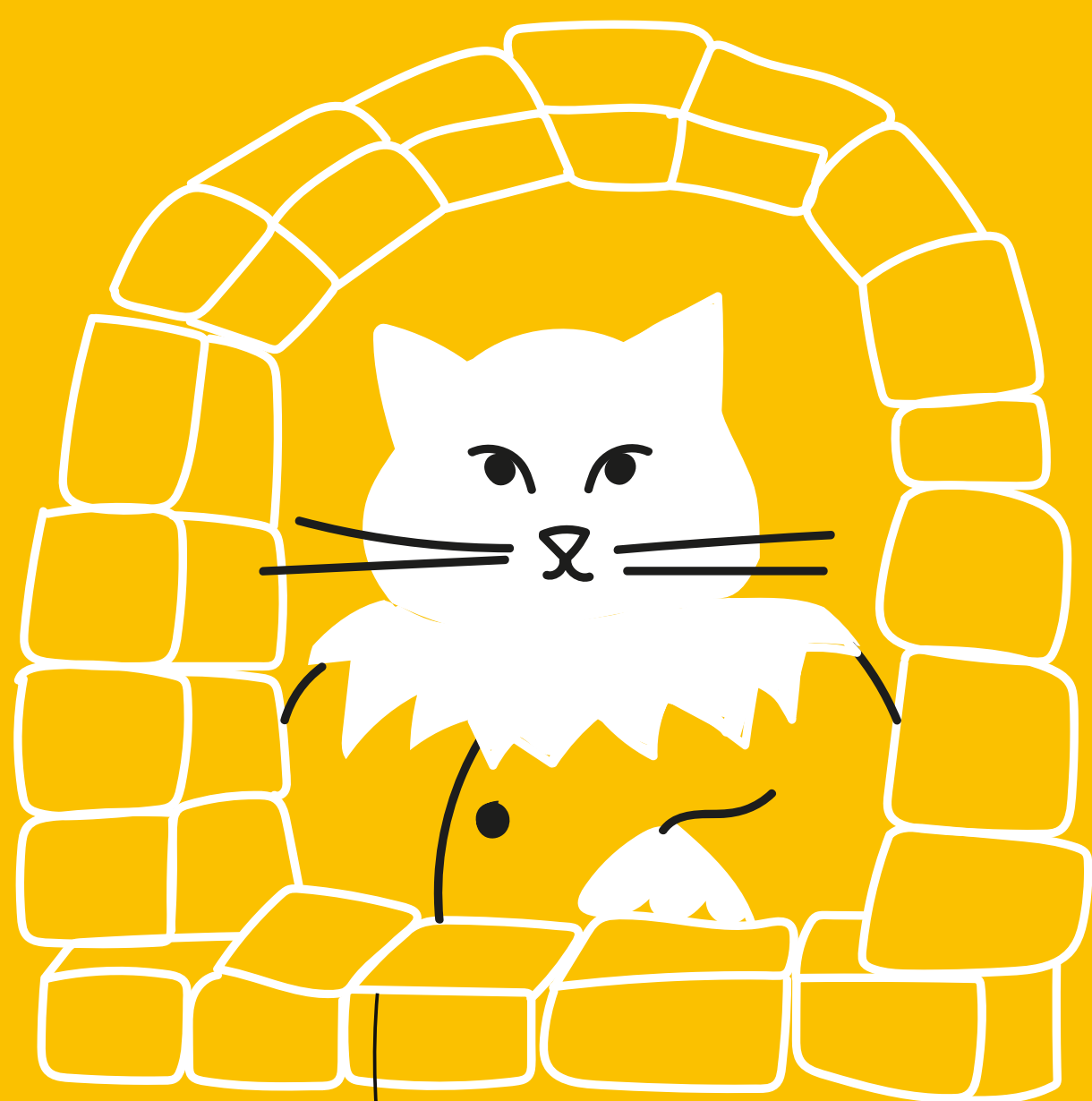
Latvian text columns

Latvian text columns

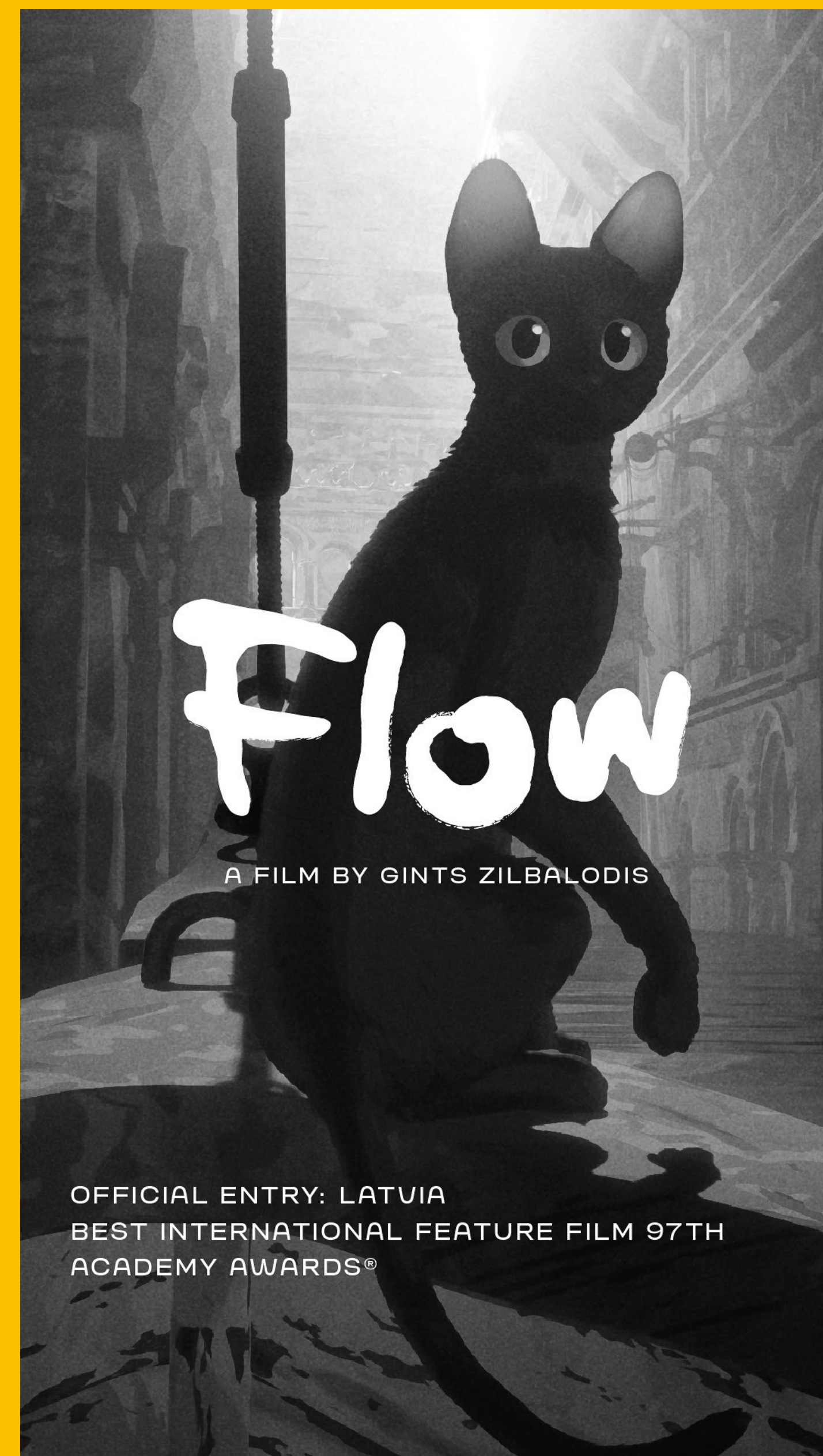
Story about Arvīds Blūmentāls by Rimants Ziedonis, newspaper "Diena", October 30, 1993. NLL

In early 2025, the brave Latvian cat from the animation movie Flow made it to the red carpet of the Academy Awards Oscars in the Mecca of the film industry and was screened in almost every cinema in the world. "We are all in the same boat, so we must overcome our differences," says animation director Gints Zilbalodis, expressing this philosophical idea of coexistence.

Oscar, Flow, and Sage Cats

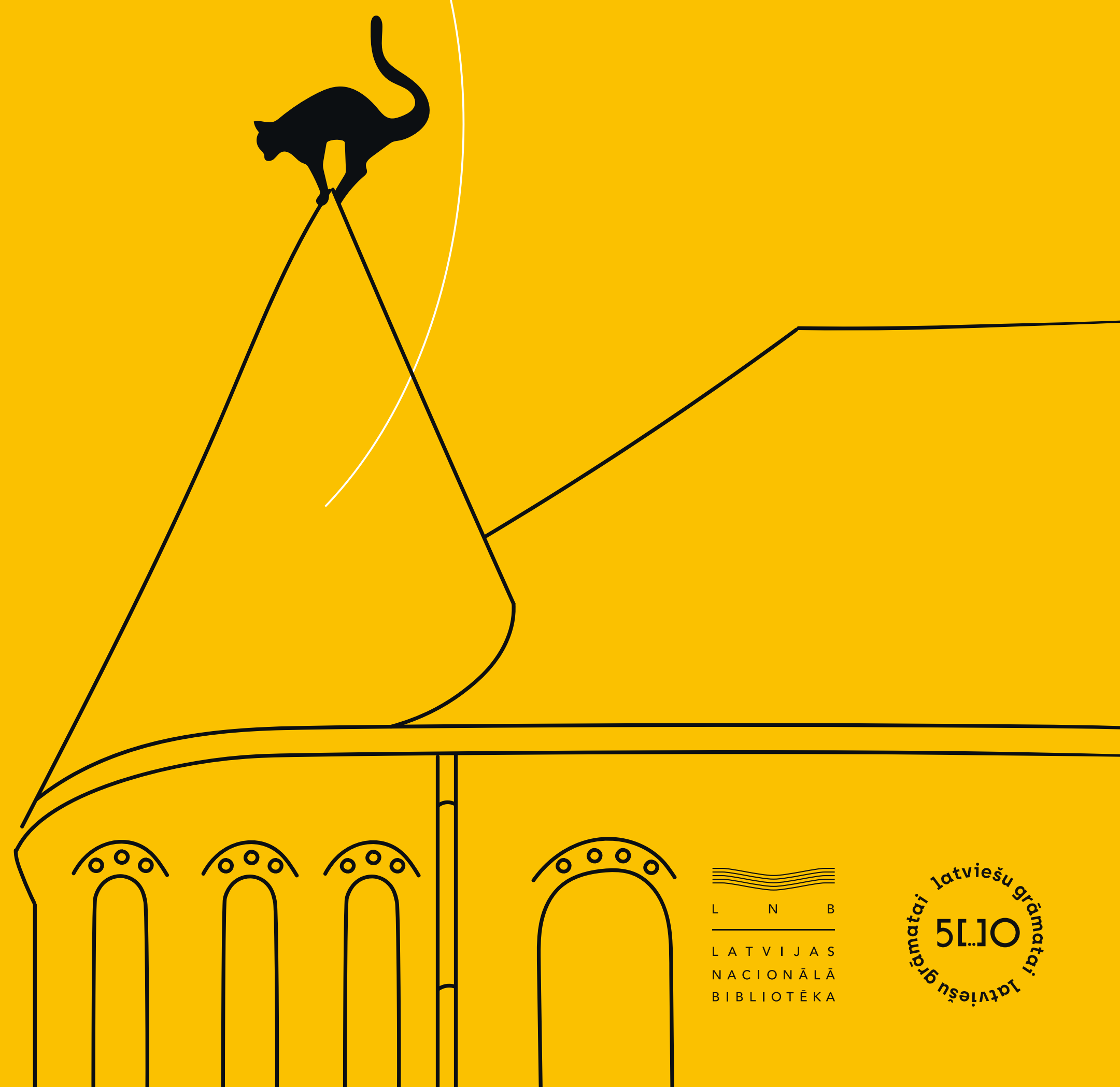


There is another sage cat to be found in the Latvian literature, the white cat from the tale by Kārlis Skalbe, Cat's Mill, calling for love and compassion. A phrase by this white cat has already become a part of local folklore: "Why create more pain? Let's create more joy!" This tale became an animated movie as well in 1993, created by the legendary film director Roze Stiebra.



Courtesy of Dream Well Studio

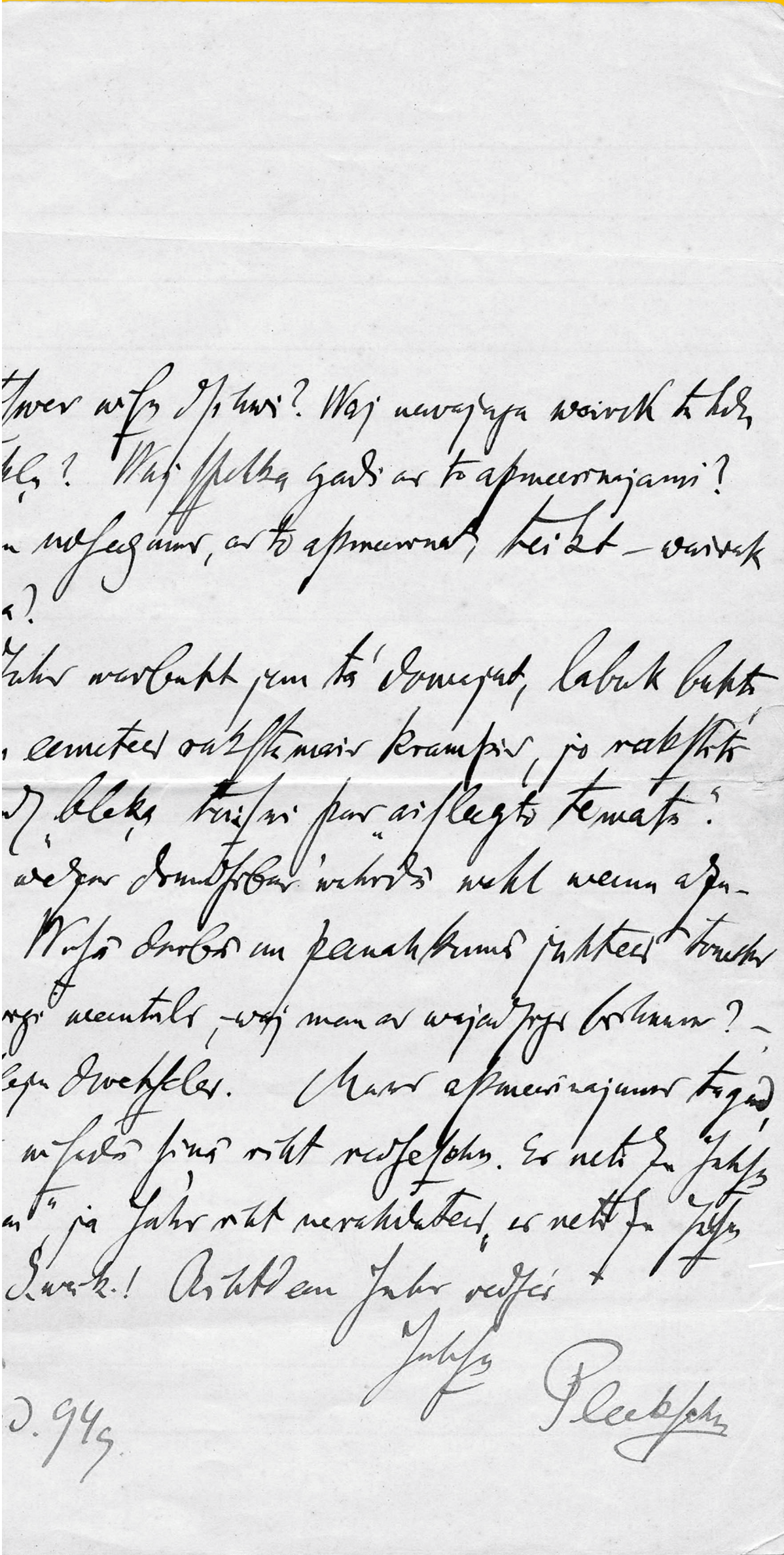
As we know, cats were sacred in Ancient Egypt and protected the ancient libraries from the unwanted intruders, the rats. Meanwhile, the famous Cat House in Rīga reminds us once again – not everything can be protected by sheer force.



So many couples have attracted the interest of historians, Antony and Cleopatra, Churchill and Clementine, etc., while the most famous couple in Latvia is still our most accomplished poets of the 1st part of the 20th century – Rainis and Aspazija. There is a recurring discussion as to which one of them was the greater poet, who left a more important imprint on society, how many monuments each of them has, and is there a balance there.

Both poets were vocal defenders of democratic ideas, Aspazija – standing up for women’s rights in her poetry, in society, and in parliament. There are museums to honour their legacy and streets named after them not only in Latvia, but also in Switzerland, Castagnola, where they lived during their exile escaping from Tzarist Russia repressions. The bounty promised on Rainis’ head was enormous for those days – 10,000 rubles. So, that “head” must have been very dangerous and its influence in society not to be underestimated.

The Most Famous Love Birds, Poetry, and Democracy



Letter from Rainis to Aspazija, May 13, 1894. NLL



The correspondence between Rainis and Aspazija is registered in the UNESCO World Memory list in the Latvian National Register. The collection consists of almost 2,500 letters.

Illustration: Tatjana Raičiņeca

What shape will the books
of future generations take,
what will be the content
and value of books?

**"The spirit
will see
a new light
as the times
go by"**

– we dedicate these universal,
timeless lines by the poet Rainis
to all 20 generations of readers,
both in Latvian and other
languages. Each generation
looks at the inherited printed
legacy and its value differently
supplementing it with
creations of this generation.

500-year timeline of books in Latvian

1525

The first printed book in Latvian

1585

The oldest surviving printed book in Latvian: Catechism of St. Peter Canisius

1588

The first printing house in Livonia opens for business in Rīga under leadership of Nicolaus Mollinus

1638

The first printed Latvian dictionary: Lettus by Georg Mancelius

1774

The first printed popular science book in Latvian: Augstas gudrības grāmata (Book of High Wisdom) by Gotthard Friedrich Stender

1822

The first Latvian newspaper – Latviešu Avīzes

1856

Dziesmiņas (Songs) by Juris Alunāns published – marking the birth of Latvian national literature

References

www.gramatai500.lv
www.lnb.lv

Tā pirmā grāmata. Nozīmīgākie izdevumi latviešu un igauņu valodā 1525–1918. Rīga, NLL, 2025.
“Latvia 100 snapshot stories”, Rīga, Latvian Institute, 2017.

© National Library of Latvia

Text: Aiva Rozenberga
Design: Dārta Hofmane
Illustrations: Ella Mežule, Laura Lukēviča
Rīga, Latvia, 2025

1879

The first Latvian novel: Mērnieku laiki (The Time of the Land Surveyors) by Reinis and Matīss Kaudzīte

1899

The first book in Latvian Braille: Pastarā diena. Stāsts iz tautas dzīves (Judgment Day. A Tale from the Life of a People) by Augusts Deglavs

1903

The first complete universal encyclopaedia in Latvian – Konversācijas vārdnīca

1919

The National Library is founded – today known as the National Library of Latvia

2010

The first e-book in Latvian

2025

500 Years of Latvian Books