

Latvijas Nacionālā Bibliotēka: the National Library of Latvia

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INTRODUCTION

In October 1999 the National Library of Latvia (NLL) celebrated its 80th anniversary, and August 2001 marked 800 years since the founding of Riga, the capital of Latvia. Both the Republic of Latvia and its premier library have gone into the new millennium with high hopes – the Republic with expectations of continued economic, social

and cultural development, the Library with anticipation of continued service to the economic and intellectual development of the country and its people.

History of Latvia

A country with an area 64,589 sq.km (24,937 sq.m.), located in northeastern Europe on the

eastern coast of the Baltic Sea, Latvia has four regions (Kurzeme, Zemgale, Vidzeme, Latgale) and borders with Estonia, Russia, Belarus and Lithuania. Because of its location between Russia and western Europe, Latvia has long been known as a 'crossroads country', and ancient records chronicle the famous 'amber route', which extended through Latvian territory via the River Daugava from Scandinavia to the Byzantine Empire and was also known as the 'route from the Vikings to the Greeks'.

The strategic geographical location of the country has determined the destiny of Latvia and its inhabitants since the ancient Baltic tribes populated the area in the early part of 2000 BC. Since the 12th century, invasions by larger countries such as Germany, Sweden and Russia have left their mark on all aspects of life. In the early 1800s Latvia had its period of national awakening, similar to national movements in other countries of Europe, but independence was not proclaimed until 18 November 1918 – after the end of World War I. Internationally, Latvia's independence was recognized on 26 January 1921, and in that year it was also admitted to the League of Nations. After little more than 20 years of independence, Latvia once more became occupied by foreign powers, first by the Soviet Union, then by Nazi Germany, and then again by the Soviet Union from late 1944 until August 1991. Since then it has become a member of the United Nations and is actively seeking admission to the European Union and NATO. Cooperation with Estonia and Lithuania is seen as a political and economic priority, as is joint action with the other countries in the Baltic Sea region.

HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

The names by which the NLL has been known are a good indication of its complicated history:

29 October 1919: founded as the State Library of Latvia in Riga

July 1940: reorganized as the State Library of the Latvian SSR after Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union

August 1941: became the Landesbibliothek after the German occupation

October 1944: once more became the State Library of the Latvian SSR after the second Soviet occupation

April 1966: given the name of Vilis Lācis State Library of the Latvian SSR

1989: original name of State Library of Latvia reinstated

March 1991: renamed by government decree as the National Library of Latvia.

The library has had ten directors, the first one being Jānis Misiņš, the eminent bibliophile, collector and bibliographer. The present director, Andris Vilks, has been in post since 1989.

The pre-World War II period

The State Library of Latvia was founded to serve as Latvia's central repository of books, periodicals and other sources of information in a wide variety of fields. It became the official agency of the national bibliography, created and maintained a union catalogue, and provided user services to support the new democratic institutions that developed after independence. At the beginning, its collections were assembled from books and other printed materials that had been left unclaimed by unknown owners after World War I and subsequent battles for the liberation of Latvia. Certain other valuable collections from the 17th to the 19th centuries were also legally ceded to the new library, thus providing it with precious incunabula, paleotypes (publications of the first half of the 16th century), old Russian books and Latvian, German, Russian and French publications and manuscripts of the 17th and 18th century. Gifts by individuals, societies and book publishers, as well as purchases, supplemented the collections. By July 1920, the library's holdings consisted of about 250,000 volumes. A Baltica Department was formed. Also in 1920, through the mediation of the Press Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the library began to receive two deposit copies of all newly published books; files of foreign newspapers were received from the Information Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In the law 'On the State Library', promulgated 24 May 1922, the library's tasks were defined as the following:

- to collect and preserve all that is available and is published in Latvia;
- to acquire foreign publications which represent the science, art and culture of Latvia;
- if possible, to collect publications which portray foreign cultures.

In the same year, the law 'On the Central Book Catalogue' prescribed the formation of a national union catalogue and defined the responsibilities of the State Library in this regard. From the beginning, it collected materials in both Latvian and foreign languages, and established contacts with libraries abroad, its holdings reaching one million by 1940.

The Soviet period

The Soviet occupation after World War II had a drastic impact on the national and all other libraries, continuing the changes that had already been implemented during the war. The emphasis of collections and services was on fostering Communist ideology. Therefore, for nearly 50 years access to history and western foreign-language collections was severely restricted. Many cultural archives and collections were destroyed, contacts with libraries abroad were strictly controlled, and information was censored. Censorship was manifested in a number of ways, all of them damaging to intellectual development and research. During the first ten months of Soviet occupation 800,000 items were added to the NLL collections, all in Russian, while 500,000 Latvian books were removed. Russian-language materials (mainly from Russia but from other Soviet republics as well) continued to flow into the national and other libraries in great quantities. So-called special (closed) collections of forbidden materials were formed according to secret instructions from the Central Literature Board of the USSR (known by its acronym Glavlit).

Most books and periodicals published in Latvia during the 1920s and 1930s were removed into the closed collections, but in no more than two copies. General collections were checked and 'cleaned' of these undesirable materials. Ironically, while the forbidden collections aided Communist censorship, it is now considered that they also played a part in the preservation of ma-

terials which might otherwise have been destroyed. Readers, having somehow identified the existence of items which appeared in none of the library's catalogues or bibliographical indexes, were allowed access to materials in the forbidden collections only by special written permission. Books and periodicals from the Latvian exile press were banned completely. The acquisition of foreign literature was practically stopped. The library received the minute sum of US\$300-500 per year for purchase of periodicals from the West. With the local rouble currency, it could buy materials from the then Socialist countries (DDR, Poland, Bulgaria, etc.). Under the careful supervision of the censor, exchange programmes with several libraries in the West continued. However, collections were inundated with the mass publishing production, especially Russian books, of the Soviet republics. Almost no funding was committed to the care of collections, information resources or the maintenance of buildings.

The NLL and renewed independence – the 1990s

Despite 45 years of Soviet domination, the NLL started creating, and responding to, opportunities for freedom of access and information when these became possible in the late 1980s as a result of Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Staff of the library played a lead role in suggesting and organizing the congress at which the Library Association of Latvia (Latvijas bibliotēkāju biedrība) was renewed in May 1989. During the two years preceding the restoration of independence in August 1991, the NLL had already begun to resume the proper basic functions of a national library as defined by UNESCO. One of the first steps in the 'de-ideologization' of the work of the library was to open the special closed collections and lift other restrictions on access to information that had been imposed in the Soviet period. The structure of the library was reorganized and contacts with Western colleagues and exiled Latvians were actively pursued. One result of this activity was that tens of thousands of Latvian publications were now sent to the NLL that had been issued in the West but were forbidden as imports during the Soviet period. Thus, after independence these

materials reclaimed their rightful place as part of the national bibliographic record of the country and its people.

After independence, collection development needed complete rethinking in the light of the changed circumstances. The huge quantity of multiple copies of Communist propaganda materials, including multiple sets of Lenin's and other leaders' works, was no longer needed, so they were weeded out of the collections. However, the weeding has not been carried out without giving thought to the research needs of future scholars. The NLL is conscious of the fact that in the foreseeable future it may enter the European Union with a representative collection of Soviet literature, which could be interesting to the rest of the EU and to all researchers in Soviet studies; for example, the NLL holds one of only two existing complete USSR *samizdat* collections.

The policy of weeding propaganda and out-of-date materials from collections has meant that in some years there has been negative collection growth, because limited funds have not allowed the purchase of as many new items as might have been desirable. Exchange partnerships have been continued with a number of libraries, but libraries in the West have undergone their own financial crises in the 1990s, thus decreasing the availability of exchange materials. Also, the development of a competitive publishing industry and an active book trade in Latvia has meant that many foreign libraries have preferred to purchase materials direct in the Baltic States rather than depend on what might be available on exchange; this has led to still further reduced availability of exchange materials.

Nevertheless, by the end of 2000 the NLL's holdings totalled 4.5 million items, with materials in over 50 languages. Without a doubt the proportion of locally produced materials has been enhanced by the passing in 1997 of legal deposit legislation, which ensured that the library would receive five copies of all printed and other materials published in Latvia (legal deposit covers all kinds of materials, excluding cinema films).

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY TODAY

Mission, vision, functions

Displayed prominently on its home page is the library's mission statement:

'The mission of the National Library of Latvia is to facilitate the stable and continuing development of the spiritual and intellectual elements of Latvian society. By working to develop the country's library system, establishing collections of information resources, and providing full public access to information, the NLL supports the growth of a new Latvia.'

The mission statement is built on the hope that in a new Latvia, people of all backgrounds can acquire unbiased, uncensored information and use it to enhance personal understanding, strengthen business enterprise and build new relationships.

Linked to this statement is the *vision* that the National Library will be crucial to the process of stimulating Latvia's renewal and redevelopment in the post-Soviet age. As Latvia seeks a significant role in the markets of Europe and the world, the NLL will become an integral part of the country's educational infrastructure, not only for school-based learning and academic research, but also for business development.

The *functions* of the NLL, as noted in the law 'On the National Library of Latvia' (passed 1992), are that the library, working in coordination with other libraries:

- forms a depository of national literature, and ensures the use and preservation of it for future generations;
- selectively accumulates (purchasing, obtaining by exchange, receiving donations) and stores those foreign publications and documents that are of significance to the development of the State of Latvia, science, economy, education and culture of Latvia, and provides access to same;
- performs the function of a central depository library of Latvia;
- is responsible for the development of a national bibliography in the country;
- organizes and establishes a system of cataloguing all libraries of Latvia in order to provide in-

formation to users regarding all resources of information in the state;

- performs the functions of an interlibrary loan centre in Latvia;
- organizes and ensures the operations of the parliamentary library and information service.

The cataloguing and bibliographic functions are reinforced by the law 'On Libraries' (passed 1998), in which para. 20 states that the National Library is responsible for a national union catalogue.

Collections

In 2000, to serve its 44,660 registered users, who made 464,661 visits and borrowed 3,294,530 items, the NLL had holdings of 4.5 million items in over 50 languages, and a budget of US\$1,954,764. The collections are housed in 16 specialized reading rooms, spread over five buildings. Any resident of Latvia from the age of 16 can become a registered user. The library is open 74 hours per week, with reduced hours during July and August. Increasingly, it provides a variety of electronic information services in parallel with its traditional print-based services. On its website (Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, 2001) there is a complete listing of all the reading rooms. Those reading rooms with active home pages (social sciences, humanities, Lettonica, and publishing, library science and bibliography) provide comprehensive information about address, contacts, opening hours, collections and catalogues, listings of significant holdings, new acquisitions, CD-ROM databases, periodicals, services, and information on the subject area in the Internet (with URLs). At the present time (September 2001) the home pages are all in Latvian, but English pages are under construction. Some of the more unusual collections are briefly described.

Letonica (Letonika) Collection. This is one of two collections in Latvia that has the most complete holdings of documents related to Latvia - in any language, from any time period or publisher. (The other collection is the J. Misins Library (Jāņa Misiņa bibliotēka) of the Latvian Academic Library, formerly the Main Library of the Latvian Academy of Sciences). Without a doubt, these

holdings of national literature are the cornerstone of the library's collection. Letonica has holdings of over 60,000 items (as at January 2001) and new materials are added at the rate of about 1,500 items per year. Almost 60% of materials are in Latvian. Even though they are within the remit of the Letonica subject area, the following types of materials are not housed there, but with items of similar physical formats: newspapers, journals, maps, sound recordings, prints, and rare books and manuscripts. The collection includes publications of the exile Latvian press and Baltic German literature relating to Latvia. Letonica has a number of general and specialized catalogues as well as providing bibliographic aids on diverse themes and persons on all aspects of Latvian research and literature. It also mounts exhibitions (22 in 2001). On its section of the NLL home pages, Letonica has also compiled a webliography called *Latvija tīklā* (Latvia on the WWW), which provides an extremely comprehensive set of links to a wide range of Internet sites that have information about Latvia.

Rare Books and Manuscripts. Every national library takes pride in its Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts. The NLL's collection has over 47,000 items of ancient publications, manuscripts and photographs. Almost all documents that were published in Latvian prior to 1850 are represented in the collection. It also has about 5,000 items from other countries, dating back to the 15th century, including 61 incunabula and 287 paleotypes. The manuscripts collection comprises about 18,000 items, bearing an unpublished witness to Latvian history and culture. Staff of the department compiled *Latviešu seniespiedumi 1525-1855: kopkatalogs* (Old works in Latvian 1525-1855: a union catalogue), which was awarded first prize for 1999 in the annual competition for the 'Most Beautiful Book' published in Latvia. Since 1964, the department has housed the permanent exhibition 'History of Latvian Publishing'.

Cartographic Materials. This department of is rather unusual in that it has existed as a separate department only since March 1994. Before that, maps were within the Department of Small Prints, Cartographic and Art Publications (see below). Other cartographic materials were scattered

throughout the NLL, so that, for example, bound atlases were in the book collections and rarer, signed editions with the rare books and manuscripts. The collection nowadays totals over 17,000 items and specialists in the department are active in identifying missing items and compiling lists of desiderata.

Small Prints and Graphic Materials. This department, with about 1.2 million items, is the only one in Latvia where such materials are freely accessible to the public. It has a unique collection of posters, engravings, postcards, prints, bookplates and art catalogues. The collection of posters (over 4,500) is the most complete in Latvia, including examples of Latvian poster art from the 19th century to the present. The postcard collection (over 100,000 postcards and about 5,000 sets) represents a complete history of postcard publishing in Latvia since the 1870s and thus also presents an excellent visual history of the country. Comparatively speaking, the collection of bookplates (ex libris) and prints is small, comprising only about 6000 items, but it is nevertheless unique.

Other separate special collections worth highlighting are the Council of Europe Information and Documentation Centre, the Children's Literature Centre and the Baltic Central Library.

Opened on 16 February 1996 as an autonomous unit at the NLL, the Council of Europe Information and Documentation Centre has a wide range of information on the structure, aims and work of the Council of Europe (CE). Its tasks are linked with the aims of the Council, and it disseminates information about the Council and explains its importance; stores, translates and widely disseminates materials that pertain to the activities of the Council; maintains contact and cooperates with bodies in other CE countries by organizing seminars, conferences and exhibitions; ensures that the CE has information about events in Latvia; cooperates with other CE information centres (in Tallinn, Vilnius, Budapest, Moscow, etc.); and collects and summarizes articles about the CE that appear in the mass media publications of Latvia. Housed in a separate reading room, the centre's collection comprises about 2,000 documents on open access, as well as periodicals, posters and pamphlets about the CE in its official languages (French and English). The most important docu-

ments are available also in Latvian and Russian, for example: the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; the European Cultural Convention; the European Social Charter; the European Charter on Local Self-Government; and the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages.

The *Children's Literature Centre* has since 1998 been located in spacious, attractively furnished, modern premises, which were obtained thanks to successful cooperation with the IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Netherlands Section and financing from the Prince Bernhard Fund. Its main areas of activity include:

- providing information on children's literature;
- a further education programme for staff of children's libraries and teachers;
- dissemination of new methods of facilitating reading.

In its activities, the centre works closely with the Council on Children's and Young People's Literature of Latvia, a non-government organization (est. 1993). The council is a member of IBBY and it is the coordinating centre in Latvia that brings together specialists involved with children's and young people's books and the promotion of reading. The collection contains a wide variety of materials, and all information formats (printed, audiovisual and electronic) are collected. Thanks to many gifts, it has the richest collection of secondary literature in the Baltic States, thus being able to offer a complete collection of children's and young people's literature (starting from 1993) as well as books in non-Baltic languages. At the centre, users can become familiar with a wide range of periodicals in Latvian and Russian. Research journals about children's literature and reading, and educational materials in Latvian, English and German are also available. The centre mounts exhibitions and participates in international projects and conferences.

The Baltic Central Library, like several other collections, is a 'library within a library'; it was donated to the NLL in 1995 by the Baltic German Otto Bong. Its holdings are the result of a dedicated collector's lifelong pursuit of materials on the history, languages, ethnography, folklore and culture of the Baltic area. It is an extensive re-

search library, and Bong continues to provide new materials for it. The collection has books, periodicals and small prints spanning the 17th to the 20th centuries, and there are 18,000 items of unpublished materials as well. An image archive of about 54,000 photographs and postcards of the Baltic region provides superb visual information to supplement traditional printed materials.

Services

As the name changes of the NLL show its difficult past, so do those of the Bibliographic Institute of Latvia, each hinting at a different master and a slightly different emphasis:

September 1940 - 1958: Book Chamber at the State Library of the Latvian SSR

January 1959 - September 1966: Book Chamber of the Latvian SSR

September 1966 - 1989: State Book Chamber of the Latvian SSR

December 1989 to present: Bibliographic Institute of Latvia (incorporated into the NLL Oct. 1993)

Today, as in the past, the main function of the Bibliographic Institute is to prepare the national bibliography (current and retrospective). In addition, it compiles statistics on the country's publishing production for the Central Statistical Bureau and UNESCO, among others; it is also the local ISBN, ISSN and ISMN agency and ensures the efficient functioning of the ISSN in Latvia. The institute is structured into five sections, two agencies and one national centre: bibliography of current periodicals; current bibliography of books; *Letika* – Latvia and Latvians in the world's press; retrospective bibliography; publishing statistics; ISBN agency; ISMN agency; and ISSN centre. It compiles and maintains eight databases relating to the aforementioned sections and issues five serial publications relating to the publishing industry in Latvia. The precursor of the present national bibliography, *Latvijas Preses Hronika* (Latvian Press Chronicle), was *Valsts Bibliotēkas Biļetens* (State Library Bulletin), which started in 1927. The *Latvian Press Chronicle* is not only a national bibliography of monographs, but also has an analytical component, documenting articles about Latvia and Latvians in

newspapers and journals. In 2000, the institute successfully completed Phase 1 of a pilot project 'The Retroconversion of the National Bibliography of Latvia (mid-18th century to 1995)', which was financed by the Library Network Programme of the Open Society Institute in Budapest. The long-term goal of the project is to create an integrated bibliographic database for the relevant years, converting all the manual records of the printed bibliographical indexes to machine-readable form. It is hoped to continue with Phase 2 of the project in 2002.

The NLL has a Library Advisory Service, which coordinates the work of public libraries in Latvia and provides consultation and advice services to them. It organizes seminars, conferences and other further education activities, while also compiling bibliographic and methodological materials, and publishing a current awareness bulletin about the work of public libraries in Latvia called *Bibliotēkas Pasaule* (Library World). Staff of the service represent public libraries on international projects (e.g. PubliCa, Libecon) and compile the database 'Public Libraries of Latvia'. They also gather statistics about libraries in Latvia, which are published in the annual *Latvijas bibliotēku darba rādītāji* (Performance indicators of libraries in Latvia). The NLL 'Z' Reading Room, which houses the collections on librarianship, bibliography, and publishing and the book trade, is under the direction of the service; it is the only such collection in the country.

Even though there is no national policy for the preservation of the national cultural heritage, there are a number of collaborative projects between libraries, archives and museums. The work of the Restoration Department is supported by funds from a variety of sponsors, because state financing for its activities has not been allocated in the budget. Sponsorship has been mainly for equipment and digitization projects. For example, with funding from the Soros Foundation Latvia and the Culture Capital Foundation of Latvia, work was started in 1999 on the long-term project 'Heritage: Preservation and accessibility of Latvian newspapers', which aims to preserve newspapers (1822-1940) in digital form; a CD-ROM version of *Kurzemes Vahrds* 1918-1920 has already been produced. Additionally, the depart-

ment is involved in a number of cooperative microfilming projects.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE NLL

Latvia has adopted a National Programme of Informatics, with the declared goal of facilitating the transition to an information society. The model for Latvia's information society requires that every citizen be given access to the nation's Universal Information Service, meaning that information should be available at any place, at any time required and at a socially acceptable price. This means that the NLL should have the capacity to deliver all information necessary to the user, either directly within the library, remotely or with the aid of supporting libraries. Information and communication technologies (ICT) play an undisputed role in the delivery of services in both the traditional and the digital library. The NLL's IT strategy is closely linked to the development of ICT in Latvia. The library is a member of the non-profit organization Library Information Network Consortium (LINC), and is responsible for LINC's union catalogue, which is available over the Integrated Library Information Network LATLIBNET. In 1999, the NLL initiated a digitization programme, in three stages: Stage 1, newspaper preservation, has already been mentioned; Stage 2 involves the preservation of records of folklore, one of the cornerstones of Latvian culture; and Stage 3 calls for the development of a national digital library in cooperation with other libraries, museums and archives in Latvia.

The electronic catalogue of the NLL, running Aleph-500, contains records of books since 1996; it is part of the union catalogue of LINC. The NLL Bibliography Institute of Latvia uses ALISE (Advanced Library Information System) for its electronic catalogue, with searching available in Latvian and English. The library has been continually improving its presence on the WWW, redesigning and upgrading the NLL website, providing links to its own and external databases, and ensuring electronic mail facilities for all staff. Since 1999 there has also been an ongoing staff training programme, although a number of NLL reports regret the lack of funding for very special-

ized training. An Internet reading room is provided for library users.

A NEW NATIONAL LIBRARY FOR A NEW LATVIA

While maintenance, development and preservation of collections, and improvement and expansion of services have formed the basis of NLL policy since 1991, an overriding priority has also been the project for a new library building. The library has never had a purpose-built building. A new state library has been awaited since the 1920s. However, in the post-World War I years, national symbols such as the Freedom Monument took precedence. From the State/National Library's founding in 1919 until the present, its collections have been housed in buildings adapted as far as possible for library use. These include premises that have been, for example, apartment houses and banks, and even a fish-canning factory.

The basic assumption has been that the new building project, including a national library information network, is a fundamental precondition to forming a 'knowledge society' in Latvia. In order to ensure universal access to information services for the general public, access to resources will be supported and based on the principles of the virtual library. Documents will be supplied both in hard copy and in electronic formats. The NLL will serve as the central portal for dissemination of information.

In 1988 the State Committee on Culture passed a resolution on the new building and a programme of implementation was defined. With the basic assumptions about the NLL in mind, the internationally recognized Latvian-American architect, Gunārs Birkerts (born in Riga in 1925), was commissioned in 1989 to submit a design for the new national library. His plan symbolizes the democratic and open society that Latvia developed after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and by 1991 he had finished the project's sketches, which were partly revised in 1995/96. During 1997/98, three business plans were drafted, there were public discussions about the NLL's new building, and an NLL Support Fund was created. In 1999, the project was included in the State Investment Pro-

gramme, and on 17 November the UNESCO General Assembly passed a resolution on support for constructing the new building:

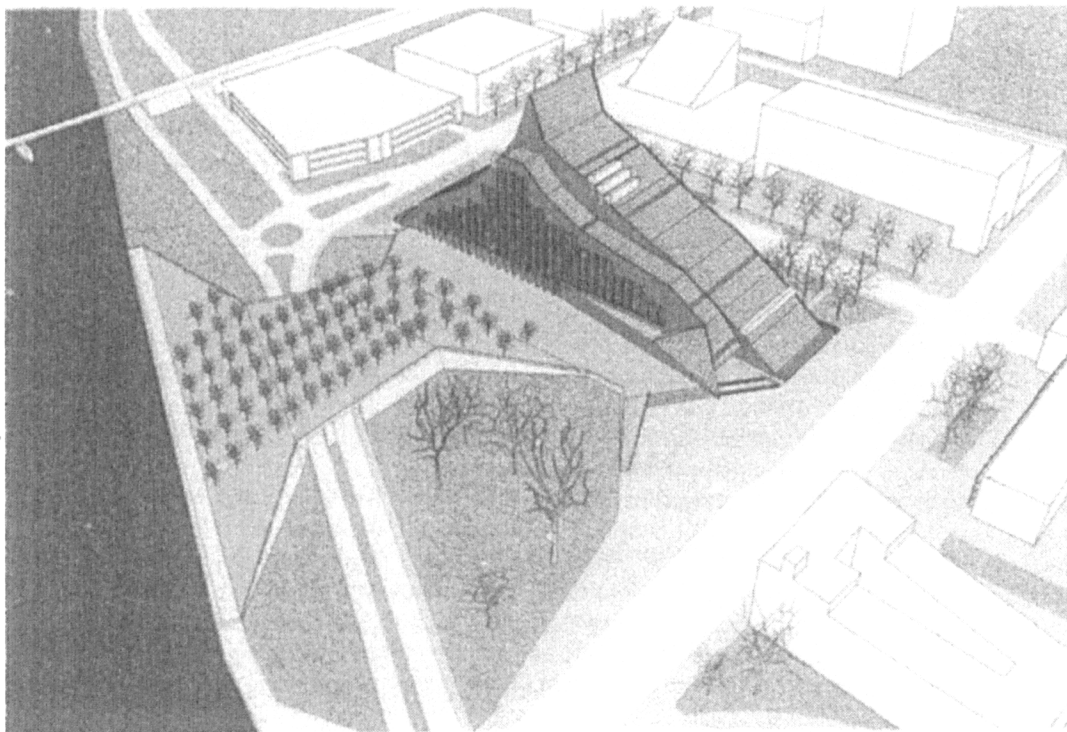
'... Considering the intention of the national authorities to make the National Library of Latvia a multifunctional centre contributing to the safeguarding and promotion of scientific and cultural information, and encouraging cultural diversity and inter-ethnic knowledge and understanding,

'Conscious of the ignorance of this project for cultural development and cooperation in Latvia and the Baltic region as a whole,

'Calls upon the Member States and international community to provide all possible support for the implementation of this project.' (Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, 2001)

In 1999 the building's sketches for the design project were finished, and the draft for a law 'On the Implementation of the Project for the National Library of Latvia' had been prepared. This law went to the *Saeima* (Parliament) for a third reading in October 2001.

In his summary document on the new National Library, Lejnicks (1999, p.10) comments on Birkerts' architectural vision: 'Metaphors and allegories are in the heart of every Latvian and are easily recognized and understood by them. Therefore Birkerts decided to work with the metaphors and references taken from the most significant fables and poetry found in Latvian literature. The folk tale of the Crystal Mountain, in which the hero struggles to ride up the mountain to awaken a sleeping princess at the top, is an allegory for the country's determined fight for freedom. The symbolic Castle of Light, as the fable says, sank during the bloody days of enslavement. The castle will rise from the depths and free the people when its name is invoked by courageous men.' Latvians have long referred to libraries as 'castles of light' (*gaismas pils*) or 'castles of knowledge' (*zinību pils*), with the light being the knowledge found within the library. How appropriate it seems to have a castle of knowledge for Latvia as a developing knowledge society.



Gunārs Birkert's design for the new National Library of Latvia

LATVIJAS NACIONĀLĀ BIBLIOTĒKA: THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF LATVIA

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ABSTRACT

The National Library of Latvia (NLL) was established as the State Library of Latvia in 1919, and its history mirrors that of the country in the 20th century. During the period of independence prior to World War II, it was the official agency of the national bibliography, and created and maintained a union catalogue, both of which functions it continues today through its Bibliographic Institute of Latvia and participation in the Library Information Network Consortium. The development of the NLL and its collections was defined from 1945 until 1991 by its status as a Communist ideological institution of the Soviet Union. Since Latvia regained independence in 1991, the NLL has once more taken on the functions of a modern national library, also developing its collections and rebuilding those that were destroyed or forbidden during the Soviet occupation. While maintaining a compilation of the national literature in its Letonica Collection and having interesting collections of rare books and manuscripts, maps, prints and graphic materials, the NLL has developed special collections and services (e.g. the Children's Literature Centre) that are unusual in a national library. Through its Library Advisory Service, it aids the development of the public library network in Latvia. Conscious of the importance of ICT developments, the NLL has Internet access for its staff and users, and is also a participant in a number of initiatives, particularly digitization projects, that help it play a part in Latvia's National Programme of Informatics. A priority for the future is the construction of a new library building. Plans for this in the context of a digital library are well advanced.

