

Recenzijos

## A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDIES OF BOOK PUBLISHING IN LATVIA

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The subject that was chosen, when Viesturs Zanders, the associated professor of the University of Latvia, started his research – the publishing activities of one of the most important societies in Latvia's history, has resulted in presented doctoral theses and a book<sup>1</sup>. During the course of many years separate V. Zanders' publications and presentations dealt with diverse aspects of the Society's activities, which now have been collected and expanded into a monograph and provide a comprehensive insight into the research subject. The attention of the scholar, renown of his erudition and meticulousness, is focused upon one of the most significant societies in Latvia's culture history and its publishing activities spanning two thirds of a century.

The Riga Latvian Society was established in 1868 during the national awakening of the Latvian nation, and for more than half a century it played an important role in awakening the feeling of the national unity and self-confidence, in promoting education and culture. During the first decades the issues linked to the research of literature and culture history, as well as book publishing were dealt with in the framework of the Knowledge Commission. A number of book publishers and printers were among its members, it cherished many good intentions about setting up a printing basis and a repertoire of good and cheap books for the nation. However, the only tangible result was the newspaper "Baltijas Vēstnesis" and collections of articles. In 1886 the Useful Books branch was established as a separate structural unit, which regularly implemented its programmatic aim to distribute useful knowledge among the population

<sup>1</sup> ZANDERS, Viesturs. *Rīgas Latviešu biedrība (1868–1940) kā nacionālās grāmatniecības centrs*. Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2006. 158 p., il. ISBN 9984-802-31-0.

with the help of books. During the first stage of activities, prior to the World War I the series “Vispārīgie raksti” (*General Articles*) and “Jaunības raksti” (*Youth Articles*) were published. Striving to popularise the literary achievements of other nations led to the dominance of translations – among 172 fiction editions 54 books by Latvian authors were published. However, there was no lack of first editions and important second publications among them. The publishing house of the Society significantly contributed to the publishing of works in humanities and social sciences – large collections of folklore and ethnography were published, research in the field of Latvian literature, history of language, education, also biographies of Latvian public figures. The members of Society were also trying to reinforce the positions of Latvian authors in the field of natural sciences, geography and useful literature, however, there was a lack of manuscripts dealing with these topics, therefore the books written by Western scholars were translated. The Society had an important role in the creation of reference literature – the first comprehensive encyclopaedia in Latvian *Konversācijas vārdnīca* (“Conversation Dictionary”) (1903–1921, 99 parts) was published under its auspices, a special Writing Commission was established to prepare it. The branch of Useful Books continued its activities until the destruction of the Society in 1940, however, during the period of independent Latvian state and implementation of a targeted national book publishing policy, the Society’s

contribution to the overall book sector diminished. It peaked around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/ 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In general the publishing house of the Society (not counting its other structural units), as counted by V. Zanders, published 355 book publications, as well as the monthly edition “Druva” and “Konversācijas vārdnīca”, which it took over from the Knowledge Commission.

During the Soviet period the Society, which in 1940 was liquidated by the occupation powers, was not totally ignored, however, its activities were exaggeratedly politicized and it was complicated to engage in a detailed research of it. The Soviet literature contained brief, general information about the Society’s publishing activities in encyclopedic editions and general overviews, some student research works took up this subject. More extensive research was lacking. This neglect on part of the scholars of the book sector towards this outstanding factor in the history of culture was unpardonable, one might even say – criminal, even more so, because a comprehensive range of sources about the Society had been preserved, both as books and articles published in the periodicals, as reports on its activities, as well as rich archive materials in the collections in Riga, and the shelves of the largest libraries stored hundreds of books, collections of articles, volumes of periodicals published by the Society. The scholars in exile did not take up this subject, perhaps, due to the lack of sources and the historians’ interest. Thus prior to V. Zanders’ research the Society as a book publisher in literature has

been reflected only generally, at times even superficially and erroneously. V. Zanders, turning to the research of the Riga Latvian Society's publishing activities, has carefully reread various publications dating back to the period when the Society was active, as well as unpublished sources – the Society's archive materials, correspondence with writers and figures in culture, diaries, memories. The extensive and exhaustive sources and the researcher's exact approach to the study and assessment of them has allowed V. Zanders to correct the mistakes and superficialities that have occurred in the reference literature and text-books published previously in characterizing the Society's activities in the field of publishing. The readers have received a comprehensive and exact study.

V. Zanders' research method is rooted in the functional approach, which dominates in Latvian book research of the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was initiated and cultivated by the older generation of book historians, it demands that the research subject is characterised not only as to its quantity and quality, but also the outlining of its role and place in the public life. Thus, the scholar, who does not belong to the younger generation, has described the organisation of the publishing house of Riga Latvian Society, its activities, principles and specific manifestations, persons involved in its work, printing basis, provided description and evaluation of the end product, has dealt with press reviews dedicated to this phenomena, has collected and presen-

ted data on book sales and other forms of functioning within society, thus revealing the resonance the activities of the publishing house caused in a wider society. Comprehensive and thorough characteristics of the publishing house are provided. A new contribution to the history of book sector are new facts about some phenomena, also about the contribution that many persons gave to the activities of the publishing house and the general history of Latvian culture, since V. Zanders has revealed the role of elementary school teachers and other public figures, who have not been presented in the previous publications, provided their biographical data, thus created the opportunity for the future researchers to include them in the scholarly and popular circulation. With the introduction of the new factual material into the scholarly circulation, the book significantly expands the factual basis of Latvian history of books. The previous studies of the issues in the history of book publishing in Latvia, the problems of publishing and distributing scientific and popular literature have been dealt with rather little. The overview of books of this sector and analysis of problems provided in V. Zanders' book to a large extent fills this gap.

V. Zanders research reveals his extensive erudition, ability to study and excerpt a significant range of literature and sources, so that, as it seems, not a smallest detail linked to the subject of research, has gone unnoticed. Looking at this from this vantage point, the book can serve as the model

of descriptive book research in the positive understanding of the word. The enormous volume of facts and phenomena is skillfully organised in a compact and uniform work, applying the approach of synthesis and analysis. V. Zanders' cautious attitude towards making generalisations, without the smallest striving to show off or to add a touch of sensationalism, makes his narrative smooth, saturated with facts, precise and brief in expression. His respect towards scientific facts is also revealed in his conclusions, in which he does not attempt to cross the border set by the collected factual material. Thus, what is said by V. Zanders, the result of his work can be trusted as a being correct and precise. The general conclusions and descriptions are included in the first chapters of the book. The subsequent chapters, which form the basic part of the book, contain the description of the printed products, broken down as to the sectors, and end with the description of the monthly "Druva". This structure is logical, clear, but the organisation of information lacks the principle of circularity. Thus, one closes the volume with a certain feeling of

incompletion; one feels the need for a summary or even a short afterword. The lack of it could be seen as the only drawback of the book. It also seems that the readers of other nationalities would appreciate a summary in a foreign language.

The book could serve as a model for the development of scholarly supplementary apparatus, since even a single fact or statement is not left without references and indications of sources. V. Zanders' study provides a panoramic overview of an important age in the history of Latvian nation, which starts with the awakening of the national self-confidence, moves through the establishment of the nation state and its 20 years of existence, and concludes with its destruction as the result of the occupation. The description of the phenomena in book publishing reveals the spiritual strivings of the Latvian nation, which, even though are not foregrounded by the author, will not go unnoticed for a careful reader. The book says nothing redundant, nothing ungrounded; each sentence carries certain content. The history shows that exactly research of this kind stands the test of time.

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