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GERMAN PARSONS IN LATVIA IN THE RIVER OF TIME: LITERARY HERITAGE

The aim of the article is to outline the contribution of one of the best known Baltic Germans families – the Stenders – to the Latvian literary heritage and describe its destiny throughout the centuries.

The familyname *Stender* always comes to mind when we think about the traces that the Baltic German culture has left in our history. An 18th century parson Gotthard Friedrich Stender (1714–1796) is the founder of Latvian secular literature and the author of our first popular scientific book *Augstas gudrības grāmata no pasaules un dabas* (A Book of High Wisdom dealing with the World and Nature). His son – Alexander Johann Stender (1744–1819), a local parson too, is the translator of the first play in Latvian and of the first German language learning manual, he is also a translator of various student songs, *Gaudeamus igitur* among them. But genealogically they are only two small branches somewhere in the middle of the vast Stenders family tree.

In 1985 in Bonn (Germany) Renata Prechtel (1921), the grand-grand-granddaughter of the above mentioned Gotthard Friedrich Stender together with her husband created the Stenders family tree. It contains 12 generations some of them going as far back as the 16th century. In 400 years the family tree has branched off enormously, and today its descendants can be found in Germany, USA, Canada, Russia, Ukraine and even Kazakhstan.¹ To my knowledge only two elderly ladies of the German Stenders family have preserved close ties with Latvia, perhaps due to memories of their childhood in Latvia. Younger generation, unfortunately, has lost the interest in Latvia.

According to an old family legend² the name *Stender* comes from the fort Stender in the Netherlands. When in 1572 the Dutchmen were

¹ Jānis Stradinš, *Stenders un viņa "Augstas gudrības grāmata..."*, in: *Etīdes par Latvijas zinātņu pagātņi*, Rīga: Zinātne, 1982, p. 139.

² Georg Friedrich August Czarnewski, *Kurlands Nekrolog oder Beiträge zu Biographien kurländ. Gelehrten, Stenders Leben, nebst Anmerkungen und Beilagen; eine Vorlesung den 21. Mai/ 4. Junius 1796 im P.zu Sonnaxt gehalten*, Mitau, 1805.

fighting with Spaniards the fort Stender of the Meheln fortress was guarded by an officer who later fled to Braunschweig to escape from the attacks of the Spanish Catholics. He might have been born in the middle of the 16th century. It is known that the Stenders started to work as parsons in the southern part of Latvia as early as the first half of the 17th century.

Stenders family branches in Courland in the 18th century due to the marriages of brothers Gotthard Friedrich and Georg (?–1789). Since in Georg's line only daughters were born in the next generations very soon they lost the Stenders family name. Therefore all descendants of the Stenders family who still have that family name today are directly related to the well-known writer and enlightener Gotthard Friedrich Stender.

Historian Wilhelm Räder acknowledges that in the Baltic German families the most respected and valued were three professions—those of parsons, physicians and lawyers³. Among all the Stenders that we are familiar with there were 15 parsons followed one by another without any interruption in 8 generations from the 17th century on and serving in Sonnaxt / Sunākste for 149 years. The parishes, in which members of Stenders family worked, are concentrated in the southern part of Latvia – Buschhof/Birīli, Dubena /Dignāja, Nitau / Nītaure, Kalkuhnen / Kalkūne, Egipten / Ēģipte, Kaltenbrunn / Kaldabrūna, Selburg/ Sēlpils, Sonnaxt / Sunākste and Lassen / Laši. The last parson Stender – Maximillian Stender (1876–1946), who had worked in Riga left Latvia during World War II.

Nothing specific can be said about the parsons Stenders in Latvia in the 17th century although another Stender who was born and never left the duchy of Braunschweig, left traces in German literature of that time. Friedrich David Stender (1628–1678) became a poet in the court of the duke of Braunschweig. He published a collection of anagrams *Anagrammata Latina* in 1666. Although in the history of German literature he is characterized as a poet from the *Milchstrasse von Dichtern zehnten Grades*⁴ [from the Milkstreet of the poets of the 10th grade], he proved that a poetic soul of the family was still alive.

³ Wilhelm Räder, „Eines kurländischen Pastors Ahnenreihe“, in: *Baltische Hefte*, 2. Jahrgang, Heft 3, April, 1956, S. 61–64.

⁴ Roethe, *Stender, Friedrich David*, in: *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, Bd. 36., Hrsg. Durch die historische Commission bei der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: Duncker&Humblot, 1971, S. 44–46.

The 18th century brought the ideas of Enlightenment. A great role in Courland at that time is played by Gotthard Friedrich Stender (1714–1796). Like many other German Baltic parsons he received good education in Jena and Halle and was back in Courland in 1744 where he started to work as a tutor in a local school and a few years later he was ordained. Gotthard Friedrich Stender was interested in linguistics. In his forties he collected materials for a grammar and a dictionary and translated an ode by Barthold Hinrich Brockes (1680–1747) from German into Latvian depicting a threefold sight in nature – before a thunderstorm, during it and afterwards, thus bringing a new type of poetry founded by the English poet James Thomson (1700–1748), – the poems of nature – into Latvian literature. And for the 18th century Latvian it is a good translation:

Tas pērkons sper un sperdams ilgi ruc,
Ar zibiņiem un krusu lietu jaukdams,
Viss debess plīst ar uguņiem un dūc,
Un ziemels starpā griež, pārlieku kaukdams⁵.

[The thunder strikes and striking rolls,
Whipping rain with hail and lightning.
All the heaven drones and bursts in fire;
And the northern wind dances roaring in the middle.]

At the age forty-five, in 1759, together with his family Stender suddenly left his parish and moved over to the duchy of Braunschweig, later on – to Copenhagen. Real causes of his decision are not known, it could have been dissatisfaction with himself for being no more than a rural parson somewhere in a remote countryside overgrown with woods, it might have been a need for a different way of life. Gotthard Friedrich Stender was a man of original fate and Braunschweig was the land of his predecessors.

There – in the duchy of Braunschweig and later in Denmark he devoted most of his attention to geography and the issues of education. These were the spheres where Gotthard Friedrich Stender found his real vocation. In the middle of the 18th century the periodicals became the arena of German enlighteners' discussions related to schooling and upbringing. Being abroad Gotthard Friedrich Stender published an article on the aim of life, the relationship between the leader of the state

⁵ *Gaisa jaukums pēc pērkoņa briesmas*, in: *Gorthards Fridrihs Stenders, Dzeja*, Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2001, p. 198.

and its citizens and eternity in the newspaper *Braunschweigische Anzeigen*⁶. It is believed that following this publication Stender was invited to take up rector's post in one of local schools of the duchy – in a small town of Königsutter. Unfortunately his work there lasted only a few months due to a discord with a local clergyman, a person of old-fashioned views. In Denmark Stender directed his attention to geography, which at that time was among the most popular passions of intellectuals. Stender wrote about the measurement of distance at sea⁷, took part in several scientific debates and made globes for the king of Denmark and the Royal library in Copenhagen. His dream was to earn money as a scientist by opening a workshop of geographical instruments. But it never came true. In 1766 he returned to Courland with his wife and five children. There, Gotthard Friedrich Stender focused all his attention – as many other philosophers, teachers and parsons of that time – on the development of the spiritual life of common folk, the Latvian peasants. Stender gave the peasants the first Latvian popular scientific book. He tried to transform the dull process of learning to read into an attractive game by means of a new illustrated ABC. Like many enlighteners he believed that songs, religious or secular, were one of the best means of education. For example, during the second half of the 18th century increasing numbers of collections of secular songs appeared in Germany – one in 1750, seven in 1770, 30 in 1790 and 57 in 1799⁸. Many poets took part in composing special texts for peasants. As singing was a natural part of peasants' every day life, a song was a nice way to achieve didactic aims as well. Stender became the founder of Latvian secular literature, including secular poetry. The first volume of poems *Jaunas Ziņģes pēc jaukām meldeijām, par gudru izlustēšanu* (New Songs with Nice Melodies for Clever Pleasure) was published in 1774. And that was only a small part of his creative work. Gotthard Friedrich Stender's literary heritage proved him to be a follower of German Enlightenment.

Gotthard Friedrich Stender's elder son Alexander Johann Stender (1744–1819) took his father's path and also became a parson. Alexander

⁶ „Von den Vorzügen und Stufen in der zukünftigen Seligkeit als dem kräftigsten Antriebe zu großmüthigen Handlungen“, *Braunschweigische Anzeigen*, 1759, Nr. 84, 85, 87.

⁷ *Der Schultzische Vorschlag die Meereslänge zu finden, verfasst von Gotthard Friederich Stender aus Curland. Mit Kupfern. I. und II Stück*, Kopenhagen, 1764, 79 S.

⁸ Günter Häntzschel, *Nachwort*, in: *Rudolph Zacharias Becker, Mildheimisches Liederbuch. Faksimiledruck nach der Ausgabe von 1815*, Stuttgart: J.B.Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1971, S. 9*.

Johann Stender studied in Helmstedt and Königsberg in the 60ties and 70ties of the 18th century. In Germany at that time the ideas of the popular or peasant Enlightenment broke into full blossom. A significant role in that movement was played by rural parsons. The main directions of the popular or peasant Enlightenment were the following: 1) education – the foundation of rural or peasant schools under the guidance of parsons which were financially supported by enlightened landlords; 2) natural sciences, agriculture and health – a lot of calendars and periodicals for peasants appeared to promote the heliocentric world view; to disseminate information about vaccination against smallpox and about latest cattle breeding methods, cattle health, growing clover, etc. 3) recreation – a wide range of didactical novels, stories, poems, odes and fables were published to serve the aim of amusing and at the same time developing of the intellectual forces of peasants; 4) law – a lot of books and articles appeared containing the interpretation of laws issued by state and local landlords; 5) national awakening – due to the Napoleonic wars a lot of texts reminding of the duty to protect the fatherland were issued.

It is believed that with the support of Alexander Johann Stender and his father several Latvian schools in Gritzgalln / Gricgale, Preekuln / Priekule, Wahrenbrock / Vārenbroka and Sonnaxt / Sunākste were opened⁹. Alexander Johann Stender wrote many articles on cattle breeding, clover growing and peasants' work in the fields and gardens throughout the year etc. for one of the first Latvian periodicals *Latviska Gada Grāmata* (Latvian Year Book, 1797, 1798). In addition, he supplemented essentially the above mentioned popular scientific book *Augstas gudrības grāmata* written by his father, translated and made local a lot of didactic religious and secular songs as well as tales for peasants. In 1790 he made local the first play in Latvian, „Jeppe of the Hill“, which was originally written by a Norwegian-Danish playwright Ludwig Holberg (1684–1754). It was later renamed into *Žūpu Bērtulis* (Bartel the Drunkard). He also compiled a calendar for women supplemented by songs and translated several Garlieb Merkel's (1769–1850) articles filled with romantic local patriotic ideas against Napoleon wars. Thus Alexander Johann Stender, being one of the diligent followers of the popular or peasant Enlightenment inspired and broadened the intellectual, religious and even theatrical life of Lat-

⁹ H.Schaudinn, *Deutsche Bildungsarbeit am lettischen Volkstum des 18.Jahrhunderts*, München, Verlag von Ernst Reinhardt, 1937, S. 83–88.

vians long after his death (e.g. *Žūpu Bērtulis* now and again is staged in different Latvian theatres).

Alexander Johann Stender's son Johann Christian Stender (1787–1862) was a representative of the 19th century intellectuals. His paths took a more quiet direction although he was engaged in the establishment of local schools, reconstruction and rebuilding of rural churches and writing didactic articles for Latvian newspapers. He died already in the period of Latvian national awakening – in 1862. And it is interesting to point out that there was an underlying tone to his activities – the quest for a new place for a German parson in a society standing at the crossroads. He was fond of his fatherland – the land where his predecessors lived for nearly 200 years. In the era of romanticism he expressed love and admiration for his native country in manuscripts, articles and brochures in German reminding the readers that Courland's nature and history were as colourful as *Rhein, der Donau und der Schweiz*¹⁰. Having collected Latvian folktales, he even tried to unite Latvian and German culture – Latvian folklore with the Baltic German poetry. He was the author of romantic commentaries on the historical background and beauty of his beloved Selburg / Sēlpils – the place where he worked, as well as Staburags – the best known and most beautiful rock on the bank of river Daugava. Two of his articles were published in one of the most splendid Baltic German editions of the 19th century *Album Kurländischer Ansichten* (1866) supplemented by engravings of a well known painter Wilhelm Siegfried Stavenhagen (1814–1881). The texts nicely match the illustrations, e.g.:

*Die Düna ist ein gewaltiger, herrlicher Strom. Im Frühlinge sieht man beim Schlosse Selburg auch gern dem aufspringen des Eises zu, wo alsdann der Strom in vollster Kraft ist. Die gewaltigen Schollen toben und kämpfen und die Herzen erbeben beim Anblick des entfesselten Elements.*¹¹ [The Daugava is a powerful and wonderful stream. In spring in the places where the stream is the strongest the break of ice can be observed by the castle of Selburg. The huge plots of ice rave and fight and the hearts tremble at the sight of liberated elements].

¹⁰ *Der Staburags. Monographie. Zum Besten der Selburgschen Orgel*, Mitau: J.F.Steffenhagen und Sohn, 1850, S. 1.

¹¹ Schloß Selburg, in: *Album Kurländischer Ansichten gezeichnet und herausgegeben von Wilhelm Siegfried Stavenhagen in Mitau, in Stahl gestochen und gedruckt von G.G.Lange in Darmstadt. Mit erläuterndem Text von verschiedenen Verfassern*, Mitau: im Selbstverlag des Herausgebers, 1866, S. 9

Johann Christian was the last of the Stenders who published any materials on Latvians and for Latvians. It has to be noted that he did not provide separate editions in Latvian, in contrast to what his father and grandfather had done in their works.

On the eve of the 20th century the parson Johann Stender (1864–1945), the grandson of Johann Christian Stender, collected the names of rivers and brooks, lakes and moors, hills and fields, meadows and woods of Sonnaxt / Sunākste region in order to supplement linguist's, ethnographer's and parson's August Bielenstein's (1826–1907) collection of Latvian toponyms. But one will never know if that was his own will and pleasure or just execution of an order.

The times changed and the period of Latvian national awakening had just begun. Johann Christian Stenders' successors did not show any interest in Latvian literature or culture, which was typical of the Baltic Germans of that time in general.

In 1933 a novel *Blumbergshof* by a Baltic German writer Siegfried von Vegesack (1888–1974) was published. There, Vegesack showed the relations between Latvians and Germans by means of a nice metaphor – a glass wall as an inviolable border always remaining between the two nations. The glass wall existed and characterized the relationship between a parson and his parish throughout centuries. The wall gradually became more lucid and clean but never disappeared.

Besides, in Latvian the word *mācītājs* has a double meaning 'a parson' and 'a teacher'. The Baltic German parsons were portrayed as being not only more clever than their Latvian common folk disciples but also strict and unapproachable. This can be observed through characterization of parsons in the obituaries written by their colleagues. For example, Gothard Friedrich Stender is described as follows: „He was well built and thickset, always kind in face with a pretty aquiline nose. High forehead and the brave and observant stare made an impression of a man whom one could trust and lay on but had to be afraid of as well“¹². And the phrase *had to be afraid of* or a similar expression dominates in almost every text of that kind.

On the other hand, among Stenders there is the sense of a profound understanding, compassion and even identification with the Latvians. For example, Gothard Friedrich Stender at the end of the 18th century wished to be remembered as a Latvian (in fact, his tomb plate bears

¹² quoted after: Zigrīda Frīde, *Latvis Gothards Frīdrihs Stenders*, Rīga: Zinātne, 2003, p. 122.

the name *Latvis* – ‘Latvian’). A few years later Alexander Johann Stender believed that the only way for Latvians to get a better position in life and more income was the German language, German culture and German society. Besides, in 1819 Alexander Johann Stender himself compiled the first teaching aid for Latvians to learn German. Rather symptomatic in my opinion is the fact that almost all his books earned severe criticism in local German periodicals, one of them was even concluded with a rhyme :

*Bewahrt das Feuer und das Licht, – Daß euch und den Nachbarn kein Schaden geschicht*¹³. [Look after the fire and light so that for You and the neighbours it causes no disaster]. The position of those Baltic Germans standing on the narrow path to the hearts and souls of Latvians was not stable at all – with one foot on the side of peasants, the other foot remaining somewhere in the air. By origin they still belonged to a largely arrogant Baltic German society. This society was afraid of the changes and the loss of cheap working force and it blamed everybody who demanded equal rights for Latvians.

But the spiritual work of the peasant enlighteners (educating peasants by means of books, teaching aids and schooling, the support to gifted Latvian young people) was sufficient to become one of the sources of enhancing Latvian national self-confidence. It brought the nation closer to the movement of the national awakening in the middle of the 19th century. The abolishment of serfdom in Livland / Vidzeme (1819) and Courland / Kurzeme (1817) contributed to gradual economical flourishing of Latvian peasantry.

The more pronounced was the movement of Latvian national awakening, the more opposed became the views of Latvians and Germans. Regarding the fate of the above mentioned parson Johann Stender some quotations from Latvian newspapers might be given:

1) November, 1906: *In comparison with other parsons who have left their parishes due to the revolution: the parson of Sunākste has not left his place and does the duties not only in his but also in the neighboring parishes as well*¹⁴.

2) A few years later, 1911, October 13:

The present-day parson has nothing common with Latvians. His beloved neighbors are the surrounding barons, where he spends several cheerful hours. It has to be pointed out that Stender is an antagonist of any kind of Latvian

¹³ *Wöchentliche Unterhaltungen*, 8. Januar 1806, S. 23.

¹⁴ *Latvija*, 1906, November 20.

societies. That's partly the real cause why the society life in Sunākste has fallen into decay...¹⁵

3) and finally a year later – 1912, August 16:

*Parson Johann Stender was going home to Sunākste after the service in Sēlpils. About 9 versts from Sēlpils church at 7.30 p.m. somebody shot at him. The dean was guarding himself from rain with an umbrella above his head (...) A single small shot brushed against the back of his head so gently that it fell out of the skin on the spot.*¹⁶

In 1917 the German army ruined the parsonage in Sonnaxt / Sunākste completely, and short afterwards Johann Stender left Latvia for Germany for good. His brother Maximillian Stender (1876–1946) who did not know the Latvian language at all served as a parson only for the Germans during the Second World War. In 1943 he also left Latvia, the land of his predecessors for the last 400 years.

Today the house in Sonnaxt / Sunākste where the Stenders had been serving more than 140 years stands in ruins overgrown with grass like a reminder of the fact that Baltic German literature and culture have no continuation in Latvia. But at the same time nothing better than the ruins of the prosperity in the past symbolize the beginning of something new in the future. It means – to renovate, revive and understand. Besides, the reconstruction in Sonnaxt / Sunākste has just begun. Last summer the road to the parsons' estate and the parsons' spring were cleaned. Symbolic points to start with.

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¹⁵ *Dzīve*, 1911, October 13.

¹⁶ *Rīgas Avīze*, 1912, August 16.