

# Grundtvig and Latvia

*By Ingrid Sokolova*

Latvian-Danish relations have old and rich traditions. Of all Scandinavian literatures, Danish literature was the first to appear in Latvia. Two centuries ago, in 1790-1799, Ludvig Holberg's comedy »Jeppe paa Bjerget eller Den forvandlede Bonde« was performed here, in a Latvian setting. As far as our contacts in general are concerned, they actually go back to the early Iron Age. Our contacts became more intensive in the 9th - 11th centuries when the Danish vikings travelled by sea and visited Latvian tribes to sell their goods.

The Danish-Latvian relations were not only material, but also extended to areas of culture and folk art. It is worth mentioning the prominent Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe, who wanted to erect an observatory on an island near Riga; then, later, the works of Henrik Pontoppidan, Holger Drachmann, Karl Larsen, Gustav Wied, Georg Brandes, Herman Bang, Martin Andersen-Nexø, and many others. We know of some ninety works by famous Danish writers having been translated into Latvian by prominent Latvian writers. Although each nation has its own Grundtvig, we must confess that these giants, who are like huge mountains rising proudly over the valleys, have not always been sufficiently comprehended and honoured. It is a cause for wonder that Grundtvig is still so little known in Germany, Scandinavia, and Latvia. When I had published an article about him in our »Teachers' Newspaper«, many people would come to me and say, »The man is a genius, so unique«. And he is!

Grundtvig is a giant of thought, an emblem of humanism. His pedagogical ideas may have come up against a barrier later, since they were so closely linked with theology. The present superrational society, some artificially created »Kommunikationsgesellschaft«, is very likely to find a patriarchal family based on such sacred ethical categories as diligence, love, tolerance and respect completely obsolete and useless. But what about national identity? I am more than sure that Grundtvig would have been the first to petition against joining the European Community because

it is a threat to national culture and ethnic character. No nation should be ordered to change its traditional mode of life and its mentality. People should not be turned into mechanical robots, as it happened in the infamous Soviet Union which gave birth to that strange and abnormal creature - the homo sovieticus. We Latvians, the same as the Danes, do not want to be integrated either in the East or in the West. This urgent problem is, naturally, reflected in the activities of the People's University, since a *højskole* has all the potential for fighting the destruction of one's personality and the eradication of our national roots.

After fifty years of oppression we have every right to demand now that the Latvian language should be given its proper place in a civilized society - it should become the official language of the Republic. We advise the many people, especially Russians, who have been living in Latvia for half a century, without having found it necessary to learn even a few words of communication, to attend the People's University and acquaint themselves at last with the rich history, language and economic life of Latvia. A man should know everything that could be of use in life and which makes life meaningful; one has to do everything that suits »Livets Tarv«, as it was said by Grundtvig.

Judging from the collection of speeches in the book »Um des Menschen Willen«, issued by Professor Röhrig, representatives of 35 countries were gathered in order to compare »højskoler« in different places. What unites them is humanism and the belief in an equal share of light for each member of the society. In Latvia our People's University is often referred to as a Palace of Light.

Now something about the People's University of Murmuizha.

Its founder was Paul Peterson, an agriculturalist and the owner of a model farm himself. He was also a skilful pianoplayer and had been taught by Emils Darzinsh, the classic of Latvian music. Peterson had two great passions: Rabindranath Tagore and Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig.

In 1922 the Minister of Education, Professor Dauge, confirmed the first regulations of the University, its purpose being to give people a possibility to acquire a general education. As in Denmark, where the Folk University was supervised by the University of Copenhagen, the beginnings of the People's University

are to be found in the University of Riga, which supported the Murmuizha University and ten other Folk Universities in the province.

As in Denmark in the twenties and thirties of this century, young people in Latvia tended to leave the villages to go to the towns. The founder of the University, Paul Peterson, characterized the situation as follows: »Too much to be harvested and too few to do it.« It was clear that only higher cultural standards could be a remedy. The slogan »Back to the soil!« was heard everywhere, and it became a catchword even for Karlis Ulmanis, the then President of Latvia, who had visited Denmark many times. As the University needed space, a shabby palace was bought with money gathered from people's donations, lottery tickets, etc. The palace was bought from Professor Knirim, Director of the Polytechnical Institute and grandfather of Olof Palme. Soon a library, large enough to contain a thousand books, and a hall with a stage were erected. At first there were only twenty listeners, then forty, then seventy, and finally 200 from far and near, arriving on foot, on bicycles, or on horseback. The call went: »Fathers and mothers, if you want to keep your children at home, send them to the People's University where they will learn what is good and what is not, what is beautiful, and what makes one healthy.« The end of the appeal was »What is it that makes a Latvian country man not do the same as a Dane has done? Only the man who organizes his life himself is free...« There is another analogy with Denmark. In Murmuizha University three notions - Motherland, Nation and Christianity - and the symbol of the Palace of Light, the Sun, were kept sacred. If the anthem of Danish folk high schools began with the words

»What the sunlight is for the soil so dark,  
Enlightenment is for the friend of the soil«,

every session in Murmuizha University began with

»Only he will understand the great Sun  
Who has a place for a Sun in his heart.«

Apart from Grundtvig with his magnificent ideas, Denmark also had such practical men as Kristen Kold and Rasmus Sørensen. Besides Director Peterson, we had Zenta Maurina, the first Latvian Doctor of Philology, a world-famous essay writer, the author of 67 books. After an attack of poliomyelitis at the age of five, she could only move about in a wheelchair. Peterson invited her, and she travelled 65 times on a night-train from Riga to Murmuizha, where the train stopped only for a minute. Then she was taken on horseback to the University. Over ten years she delivered 130 lectures on literature, ethics, and aesthetics. She brought with her the most prominent Latvian poets, musicians, artists, and scientists of that time. She was the one who told Peterson: »If we want to know how to work well, we have to go to Denmark.« Following her advice, Peterson spent three weeks in 1934 at Ollerup and other places, in order to study the structure of folk high schools in villages. It was at Ollerup that specialists of all kinds were being educated, including teachers for *efterskoler*, *Freischulen*, *Volkshochschulen*. He told the students about what he saw and what he thought could be taken over from Denmark.

The University was subsidized by the state. The lectures were not paid, however; everything was done on a voluntary basis. Subjects and teaching methods varied: there were lectures on the Latvian and world literature, gardening and housekeeping, technical sciences and music, art history and geography, education and philosophy, chemistry and linguistics; there were anniversary lectures; there were excursions to exhibitions, theatres, concerts, and to picturesque places in Latvia. The teaching included composition writing on various topics, diary writing, singing, recitation. Enthusiasm was high and united people for a lifetime. The same is true now. And after long years of prohibition, each academic year is again introduced and finished with a ceremony, given by a clergyman.

What is, briefly, the history of Murmuizha University? After its foundation in 1930, it prospered for ten years. Then, in the summer of 1940, with the change of power, the University was closed like so many other organizations. But the students refused to stop their studies. They gathered in flats, and also in the house of Director Peterson. In 1947 Peterson was deported to

Siberia. He did not return until 10 years later and worked as a music teacher in Valmiera. Every year many of his former students came to see him on his birthday. Zenta Maurina died in Germany, where she had been living in exile. The University was not given permission to reopen. If it had not been for the democratic reforms by Mr. Gorbachev, the University would never have been opened again.

At present the University has ended its fourth study year. Sessions take place on the first Saturday of every month from October to May, totalling seven sessions with five lessons in each. Giving lectures or concerts here is again regarded as an honour by the most prominent people of the Republic-statesmen, scientists, writers, artists. Scholars from abroad will also come here as welcome guests; one of these foreign visitors was Professor Schjørring from the University of Århus.

Special sessions have been devoted to Denmark and Germany, and the next one will have France as its topic.

We have received several Danish delegations and we have become a member of the Latvian-Danish Friendship Society. The students have written excellent compositions about »What do you know about Denmark?« One of these compositions, incidentally, ended with the words: »I wish I could visit a fairy-tale, that is to say Denmark«, and another student wrote: »We should go to Denmark and learn how to live and how to do things!«

In April 1991 I was a guest of the Nordic Association and visited some Danish folk high schools, and I would like to pay my tribute to the beautiful country of Denmark, its kind and happy people, its way of life, and its clever Queen, whose visit to Latvia we have appreciated highly.

I have learned that there are more than a hundred 'People's Universities' in Denmark with a history of 140 years. In comparison, our history is short. In the thirties students came to Murmuizha on foot and on horseback. For many of them it was really going »per aspera ad astra«. Now the students arrive in public buses and in private cars. Now and then a special transport will be sent to Riga to help lecturers and pop groups to come. Lecturers and professors who have cars of their own, have unselfishly covered their own expenses in connection with tra-

velling the double distance of 130 km. However, at present we are experiencing a crisis, and petrol prices are soaring. The budget of the University is made up of students' payments which are kept at a reasonable level to enable everybody from the age of 18 to 85, and even whole families, to attend the studies. Senior citizens make up a separate group, since they are actually veterans - the students belonging to the beginnings of the University. The hall of the University is crowded with members of the farming community and the local intelligentsia - agriculturalists, livestock experts, economists, physicians, teachers, and people otherwise engaged in agricultural cooperatives. People come from different places, especially from Valmiera, the nearest town.

Under the Soviet regime, cultural institutions were subject to complete supervision by the Communist Party; they were neither able nor willing to offer an overall insight into the surrounding world, and, naturally, they despised such simple interests as the love of crop-growing. One of the objectives of the People's Universities now is certainly to cover the gaps left behind after the decease of Communist dogmas.

We need to create a general educational system which will satisfy everyone's thirst for knowledge and provide answers to the numerous puzzles of life. Land is being nationalized now, and again we are facing the problem of how to make young people interested in rural life and in becoming self-sustained in the future.

It may be surprising information to many that millions of acres of field where wheat and rye used to be grown, are now lying fallow, overgrown with bushes, or rooted up by training troops of the Russian army, the evacuation of whom we are asking all countries to help us with.

At our University there is no such problem as what to do when the University is finished. People are unwilling to leave our University. We had intended to give away graduation certificates; yet, students would refuse to accept them and would ask to be enrolled at the University again and again.

Now we are looking forward to October 4th, 1992, when a memorial plaque of Dr. Zenta Maurina will be put up on the

University wall. High-ranking officials, among them the Minister of Culture and the Archbishop, have promised to be present. The ceremony will include a presentation of Z. Maurina's books. The event will certainly be telecast and publicized in the press. We possess no »Højskolebladet« of our own, since we are the only People's University based on the principles of Grundtvig; yet every spring the leading periodicals of the Republic carry our gratitude to everybody who has enriched Murmuizha with some ray of mental light.