Le Pays de Quebec. Produced and directed by Laura Boulton, National Film Board of Canada, 1942. ATLV 147.

New Scotland. Produced and directed by Laura Boulton, National Film Board of Canada, 1943. ATLV 105.

People of the Potlatch. Produced and directed by Laura Boulton, National Film Board of Canada, 1943. ATLV 146.

Polish Dance. Produced and directed by Laura Boulton, National Film Board of Canada, 1943. ATLV 108.

Totems : Indians of British Columbia. Produced and directed by Laura Boulton, National Film Board of Canada, 1943. ATLV 146.

Ukrainian Winter Holidays. Produced and directed by Laura Boulton, National Film Board of Canada, 1942. ATLV 107.

Ukrainian Dance. Produced and directed by Laura Boulton, National Film Board of Canada, 1943. ATLV 106.

The First Sound Recordings of Latvian Folklore

by Aldis Putelis

Latvia is a small country on the Baltic coast. Its history as an independent state is rather short. For many centuries it was a territory inhabited mostly by people of the peasant class who were ruled by others, either Polish, Swedish, or sometimes Russian kings and German lords. In the 19th century the first learned representatives of this "class of ploughmen" appeared and started looking for an established cultural heritage. What they discovered was a comparatively well-preserved and rich tradition of folklore.

The first foreigners to describe the Latvians recognized their singing traditions and aptly titled them a "nation of singers." This label was readily accepted by the first educated Latvians in the middle of the 19th century. Although eventually it proved impossible to compose an epic from Latvian folk song texts, following the example of the Finnish *Kalevala*, the active collecting of songs resulted in a significant number of texts, which became the basis of modern Latvian culture. Since medieval Latvians had no written traditions, and existing documents were written by foreign rulers, the texts served as material for understanding the history and linguistics of Latvians. They were also used a great deal by the first poets who sought to reintroduce ancient ideas into the modern world.

Ironically, the melodies received much less attention. The general public sought a literary heritage which would convey concepts and notions to provide material for immediate use in building and authenticating a new culture, not a comprehensive study of folklore. The first edition of folk melodies, *Latvju tautas muzikas materiali,* compiled and edited by Jurjanu Andrejs (1856-1922) is much less known and used than the popular text edition of *Latvju dainas.* This text edition became a national symbol along with the name of its editor, Krišjanis Barons (1835-1923). Both editions started the same year, 1894. Baron's work is regarded as seminal, and has lasting importance to Latvian culture.

This emphasis on the text is represented by the language itself: the word for *dziesma*, 'song,' is now understood as referring to the text. Perhaps this practice is also derived from the fact that the ancient ritual melodies allow performers to sing many different texts about the same occasion to the same melody. Or perhaps this focus resulted from the fact that nearly all Latvians were literate and capable of reading printed text, while reading a musical score required specialized knowledge.

Folklore continued to occupy a significant place in Latvian cultural life. In 1924, only six years after the founding of the Latvian nation-state, the Archives of Latvian Folklore (ALF) was established. It was to be a state-funded institution situated in Riga, the capital of Latvia, and its aim was to collect, publish and study Latvian folklore. One immediate task was to collect folklore from the so-called "silent territories"--those not represented by a single text in *Latvju dainas.*

In April 1926, the Archives purchased its first phonograph, an Edison, and also acquired two Excelsior machines later in the year. Two of those are preserved and on display at ALF today. The phonographs were in use for a period of about 20 years, from 1926 until 1947. Presently there are 171 cylinder boxes on the shelves of ALF. The exact date of the first recordings is unknown, but the last field recordings (10 cylinders) were made in Eastern Latvia by the Folklore Institute of Soviet Latvia in August and September of 1947. After this trip, the phonograph was no longer used for recording folklore in Latvia. In 1951, the era of magnetic recording also reached Latvian folklorists. From this period, there are about 200 tapes, all of which have been recently re-recorded on modern tape to ensure preservation and accessibility.

Unfortunately, documentation of and about the first recordings is scarce, and some information may even be speculative, such as the name and age of the singer. In some cases the location of a recording is not stated in any documentation. Fortunately, a reexamination of cylinders in the Archive's collection yields additional information about Latvia's history of recording. Although there is an index of cylinders compiled more or less simultaneously with making of the recordings, the exact number of cylinders recorded cannot be stated for sure, as the numbers on boxes do not coincide with those given later in the index (actually they were numbered anew for each session, e.g., Jelgava 1, 2, etc.). The last cylinder in this

index is No. 159, but there are still more confusing documents. In 1944, with WWII troops returning to Riga, the most valuable materials were either taken away from Riga or hidden in the cellar safe-rooms of two banks. The number of cylinders mentioned in the respective documents is 216; apparently 57 cylinders were missing.

The recordings were made with one main purpose: to allow musically trained people to transcribe them without spending time traveling to the location. Because of this objective, there are very few recordings of a complete song; only melody samples were necessary. The recordings were transcribed promptly and the scores were used for study purposes. The cylinders were therefore considered as a kind of intermediate material and simply kept on the shelves.

The first attempt to re-record the cylinders on a magnetic tape was made in the 1950s, but nothing is known about how it was done. Another attempt to re-record as much as possible was made in 1993. Technologically, it was a fairly straightforward process, using only the original phonographs, a microphone on a stand, and a Soviet-made top grade consumer taperecorder. To avoid the relatively high mechanical noise, the mike was placed inside a cone. This set-up, however, caused another difficulty. Since the cone moved during playback, the microphone also moved. As a result, occasional extraneous noise caused by the movement of the microphone stand was also recorded. After several months of work the following conclusions were made: 1) the cylinders are still playable and they contain valuable information not obvious from the transcriptions; 2) not all of the cylinders are equally well preserved.

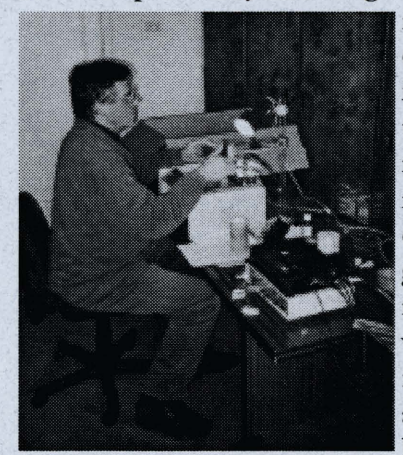
There are two types of cylinders in ALF - shorter cylinders made of light-brown wax and longer ones made of very dark, almost black wax. With the latter, there were no problems with sound quality as far as the regular recording quality of a phonograph recording is concerned. The former, however, were frequently covered by a white layer of mold, which rendered the sound quality poor, and sometimes practically inaudible. The mold was found to be related to the storage of the cylinders in tightly packed cardboard boxes, and unfortunately rendered them valueless.

By a lucky coincidence in autumn 1994, the Viennese Phonogrammarchiv started collecting information on the sound archives of Eastern and Central Europe. After the Iron Curtain fell, the Viennese experts were interested in sharing their expertise and helping archives in formerly inaccessible countries. Thus, ALF came into contact with this outstanding institution. The following year a seminar was held in Vienna and ALF was invited to participate, in order to obtain information about archiving standards and practices in different countries. The meetings in Vienna also resulted in an unexpected dividend, namely the information that the first recording of Latvian folklore actually had been made by the Phonogrammarchiv in Austria in 1915, when a Latvian prisoner of war had sung two songs and told a fairytale during a recording session at a POW camp. Still, the main benefit for ALF was a preliminary agreement on transferring the cylinder recordings to a modern format using the expertise and technology of Phonogrammarchiv.

Several years were spent seeking ways to arrange a re-recording of the ALF cylinders. In 1997, an agreement was signed by the Academy of Sciences in Latvia and in Austria. As Phonogrammarchiv and ALF are members of the respective academies, most of the administrative and organizational issues were addressed by this agreement, which made the whole project much easier to organize. The transfer session lasted from 15 to 26 February 1998.

The engineer of the Phonogrammarchiv, Mr. Franz Lechleitner, arrived in Riga with his equipment, a portable Sony DAT recorder, pre-amp and a cylinder player of his own design. Especially for this session twenty-four other cylinders were handed over to ALF from the National Library, those probably being a part of the collection made by the Language Archives, an institution separated from the original ALF late in the mid-war period. Unfortunately these cylinders--having traveled through the hands of several private collectors--had suffered much worse storage conditions and produced much worse sound. As a result of this session there are about eight hours of recording, both in DAT format and cassette as a listening copy. Currently the second stage of the project entails selecting the best pieces for publication on a CD.

In conclusion, some general information should be added about the audio-visual collection of ALF. In addition to material mentioned above, the holdings include: 54 VHS video cassettes (E-180), recorded since 1986 from different locations in Latvia and border regions, and about 350 cassettes recorded since the beginning of the1980s. The technical facilities in the AV department allow us to deal with practically all analog formats. However, there is no equipment for playing or creating digital recordings. Because of both technical and ideological reasons under the Soviet regime, there is a significant gap in the technologies used. The equipment needs cannot be filled with the current state funding. Therefore, we are thankful to all who have helped us, especially the University of Wash-



Franz Lechleitner at work.

ington School of Music. Thanks to them we have improved our services and now we are ready to offer our collection to anybody interested in Latvian singing styles. Please feel free to send all inquiries to: Audiovisual Department, Archives of Latvian Folklore, Akademijas laukums 1 Riga LV 1050, Latvia.

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From the editor

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