

# **Development of a National Program for Identifying, Investigating and Preservation of ‘Endangered Handicrafts’**

Vilnis Kazāks and Kārlis Kazāks

## **INTRODUCTION: WOODEN HOUSE BUILDING HISTORY IN LATVIA**

In ancient times all the buildings on a Latvian farmstead were made of wood, be it a dwelling or an outhouse as threshing barn, grange, cattle shed, or bathhouse. It may be said there was a wooden building for each Latvian. And this is something that matters.

As the tradition has it, the conifers for construction timber were felled in frosty winter at the time the moon was waxing, while the broadleaves, to avoid cracking and rotting of timber and make its useful life longer – at the waning moon. Normally, the woodcutters had some 5 or 6 axes with them, each for a separate operation: felling, topping and lopping, debarking, making grooves in the log and the corner joints, etc. The frame of the house was put together right in the forest to find the right logs that matched each other. Then the frame was dismantled and horses carried the logs to the site where the house would stay for good.

Even though Latvia is a small country, there are striking differences in the design and building techniques between the different regions of the country; Kurzeme in the west, Zemgale in the middle, and Vidzeme in the northeast. Geographically, Latvia lies at the crossroads between the East and the West. Yet, the Latvians have been ingenious enough to grasp the way of thinking of other nations and make the best of it. By keeping up their native tongue, traditions, values, and lifestyle the Latvians have developed their own understanding of a cosy house and agreeable environment.

The methods of radioactive carbon used in determining the age of artefacts found in archaeological digs prove the ancient Latvians to have processed timber already several millennia before the Christian era. The samples of wooden buildings of more recent epochs are on display at the site featuring a replica of ancient settlement on Lake Āraiši, on some private estates, and at the Latvian Ethnographic Open Air Museum. Only a few more countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world would boast of so impressive a collection of folk-tradition wooden buildings gathered on museum precincts (see the website address: [www.muzejs.lv](http://www.muzejs.lv)).

In modern times the Latvians see the world with a certain naivety and subtle irony typical of them, thus provoking certain mistrust. That is why strong arguments are needed.

With woodlands covering 45% of its land area Latvia is among the European countries rich in wood resources. About 50% of forests are in state ownership, 42% in private ownership, 8% are owned by communities, or other owners, or are under protection. All the state-owned forests are certified following the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) scheme. With the protected woodland areas accounting for 11.9%, Latvia has in place, as provided by the respective EU directives, a network of conservation areas: NATURA 2000.

The current annual increment of wood is 16.5 million m<sup>3</sup>. The volume of annual removals (10.75 million m<sup>3</sup> in 2004) is substantially below the annual increment. The forests are managed following the principles of sustainability, widely accepted by the EU states.

The output of wood and wood products is realized as follows: export sales 68%, home sales 32%. Already for a number of years the wood industries sector, contributing about 40% to the country's foreign trade balance, is among the key ones for the national economy of Latvia.

Over recent years the Latvian wood industries have demonstrated a steady growth and noticeable competitiveness on the international markets not only in Europe but also in such far-away regions as the USA and Japan. It has been achieved largely thanks to the ability of Latvian wood industries to pool foreign and local financial resources for production modernization and product development and promotion.

Building houses from wood is of no less importance for the Latvian economy. In 2004, the authorities supervising construction issued 4,077 building permits (as against 2,855 in 2003) for private homes; 235 permits were for dwelling houses of two or three flats.

The sector of building houses from wood may arbitrarily be divided as follows:

- Timber frame houses made of horizontally stacked logs, roughly hewn to suit the particular house; normally, it is a customized house built by highly skilled carpenters, relying on conventional methods and largely using manual work.
- Timber frame houses made of pre-prepared turned logs; customized or made to well-proven designs and technical solutions the building involves less manual work; similar construction technologies are also widely used nowadays, and appeared in the late 20th century.
- Houses are assembled on-site by using prefabricated wood constructions; for Latvia this method of construction dates back to the 1960s, when in the town of Līvāni an industrial complex was launched for making prefabricated single-family homes for

housing developments in rural areas; today the Līvāni facility continues the manufacturing on a competitive price level of prefabricated wood construction houses.

After Latvia regained sovereignty in the early 1990s the professional and social activities of artisans were resumed. The Latvian Carpenters' Society, founded in 1992, jointly with some other trade associations re-established the Latvian Chamber of Crafts in 1993. Under the Law on Crafts the artisan's community has a full mandate to develop arts and crafts, while vouching for the quality of services offered.

It goes without saying that practicing crafts is the most long-lived way of creating added value. Craftsmen were the first to make useful things from the objects found in nature. Actually, all the modern industries have grown out of the arts and crafts. Yet, the craftsmen live on, and it seems will never die out.

Craftsmen are people of special breed who can alter the lifestyle of individuals, families, large communities, and even whole nations. The people concerned with crafts have an inborn ability to keep up tradition, which is deeply rooted in the nation's identity. They have a strong affinity for nature, making environment-friendly things and products.

Last but not the least, the craftsmen are the right people to help realize one's most cherished dreams and wishes. To support the handicrafts, the Riga Technical University now offers specialized curricula in building wooden houses by hand. Scrupulous research is done on a variety of aspects related to making houses from wood (see the website address: [www.lak.lv](http://www.lak.lv)).

Today it is the all-mighty market that rules the world. The same as in any other walk of life the customer may have a small wooden cottage built by handiwork, a serially made wooden house of timber panels, or a high-style customized construction project executed fully in wood. Modern information and design technologies allow serving the customer anywhere in the world be it Europe, Japan, Australia, or Mexico. Wooden houses of Latvian origin are now found in a number of European countries.

The Latvian specialists have made an in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the wooden buildings produced in this country. By working jointly with the philosophers of environment, psychologists, architects, engineers, designers, and experts in other fields we feel we have succeeded in conveying to the international community our vision of the functional and aesthetic qualities and advantages of wooden buildings. And Latvia offers these values on the international market. Even though it may seem an advertising gimmick we claim that we have found the formula for making a dwelling cosy and agreeable. It is our know-how, of course. That is

why we feel confident in offering to the client a choice between a simple wooden cabin, a serially made house, or a palace built of wood after the customer's order.

## WOODEN HOUSE BUILDING DEVELOPMENT IN THE LAST 15 YEARS

### Builders' Carpentry and Joinery from Wood

While engaging 8.1% of the labour force of wood-based industries the builders' carpentry and joinery products run to 3.5% of the total added value generated by the country's wood and wood products sector.

Table 1. Share of builders' carpentry and joinery in the total added value generated by the wood product sector, %

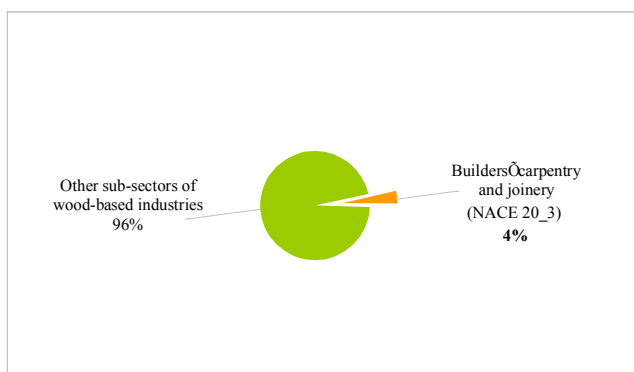


Table 2. Average number of employees\*



With the output doubled over the past three years the carpentry and joinery products (including building components) amount to 18% of the country's total output of wood and wood products.

Table 3. Builders' carpentry and joinery output\*

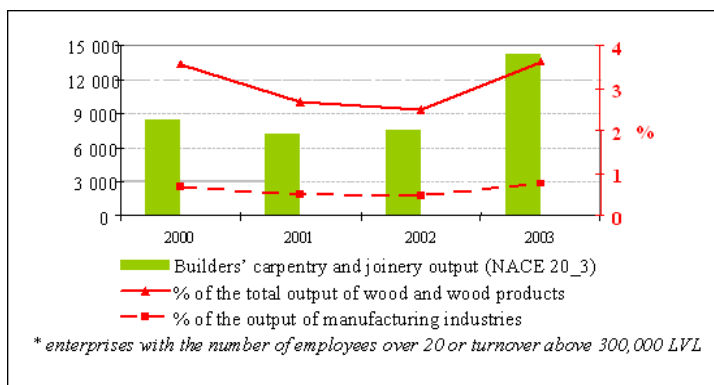
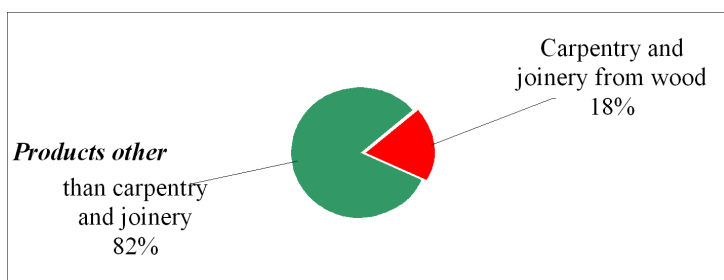
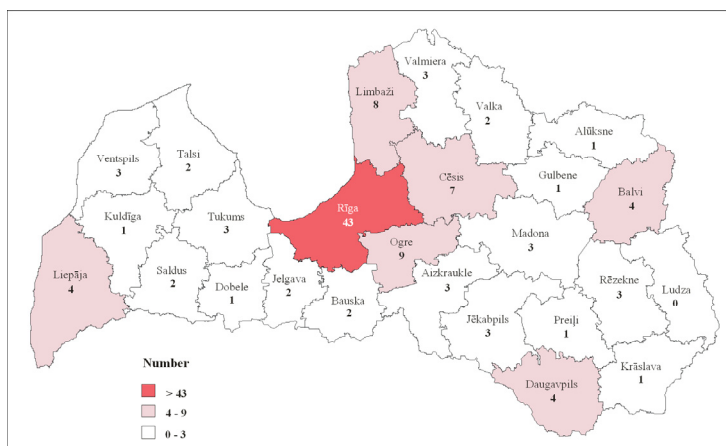


Table 4. Wood product manufacturers (NACE 20) by major commodity groups, 01.01.2004



The highest number of wood processing enterprises are in Riga and its environs.

Table 5. Location of enterprises making wood houses



3.3% of the total volume of round wood consumption and 43% of sawn wood go for making the carpentry and joinery products (including building components).

Table 6. Roundwood utilisation, including export, 2003

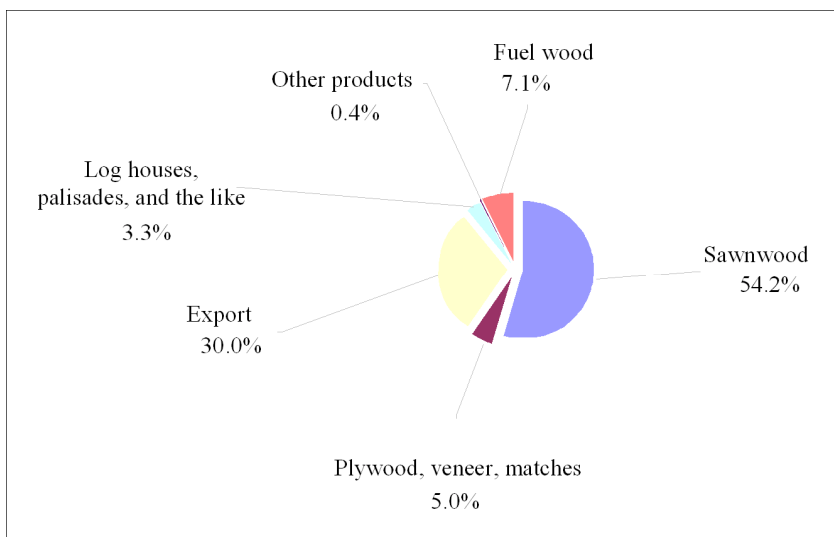
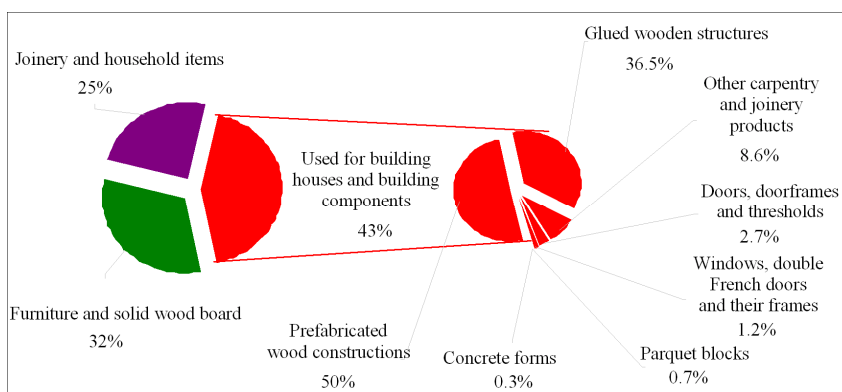
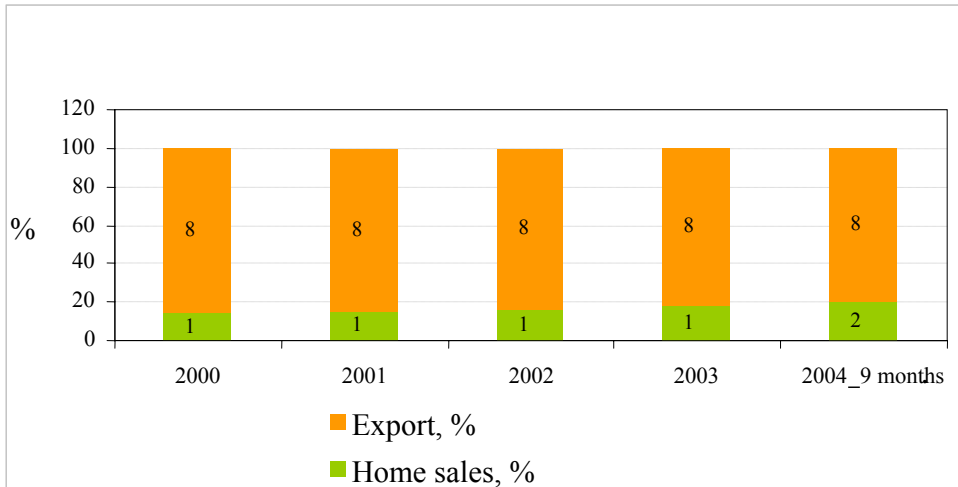


Table 7. Domestic consumption of sawnwood, 2003



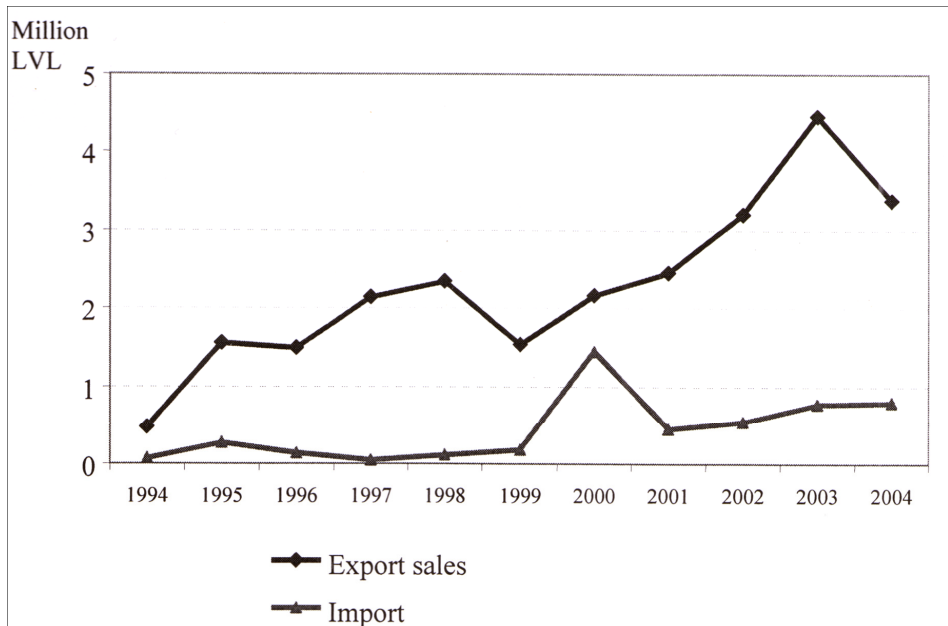
Regardless of increasing home sales the bulk of the output is sold on the export market.

Table 8. Home and export sales, %



In export pattern, the prefabricated wood constructions rank first, followed by stairs, wall panels, and items for making saunas, which according to the commodity classification belong the group of other products.

Table 9. Foreign trade with prefabricated wood constructions



### Tendencies in the domestic construction market

Over the past three years, the volume of work done by the building companies has in terms of actual prices increased 1.3 times. However, 91% of the building permits issued are for dwelling houses. With emphasis on private homes preference is given to two-storey houses.

Table 9. Building permits issued in 2004 by the function of building

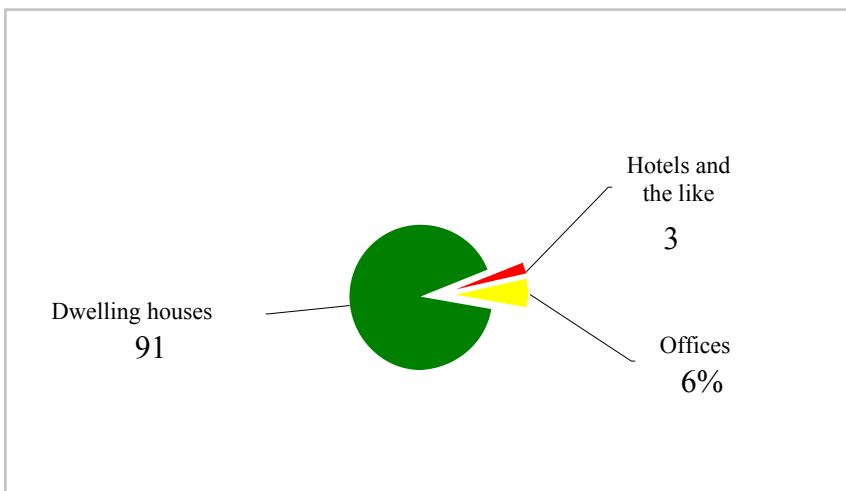
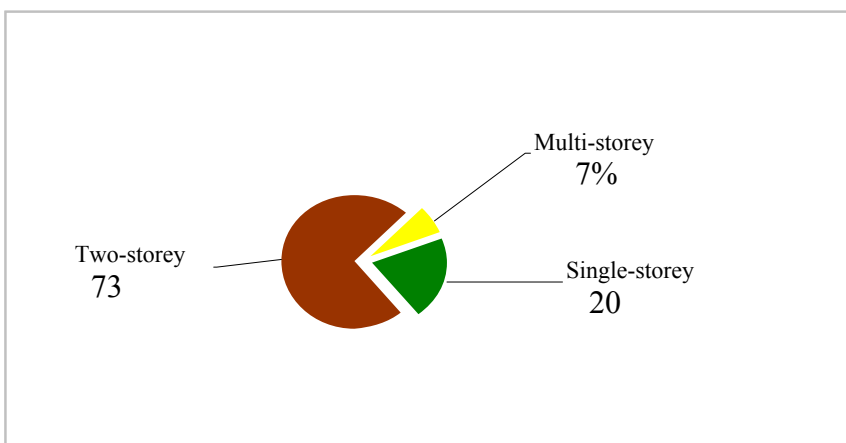


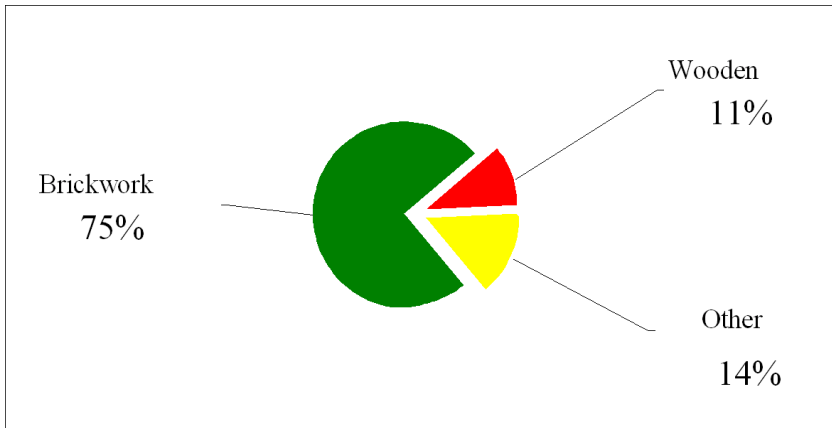
Table 10. Buildings commissioned in 2003, % of the floor area





Wooden houses make up 11% of the total amount of buildings commissioned.

Table 11. Buildings commissioned in 2003 by the type of construction material



With Germany, the UK, and Sweden leading the way, the foreign capital inflow is highest in the Latvian enterprises, manufacturing builders' carpentry and joinery from wood.

### Foreign investments

Table 12. Foreign investments in the Latvian forest sector enterprises by the major product line, 1992-2004

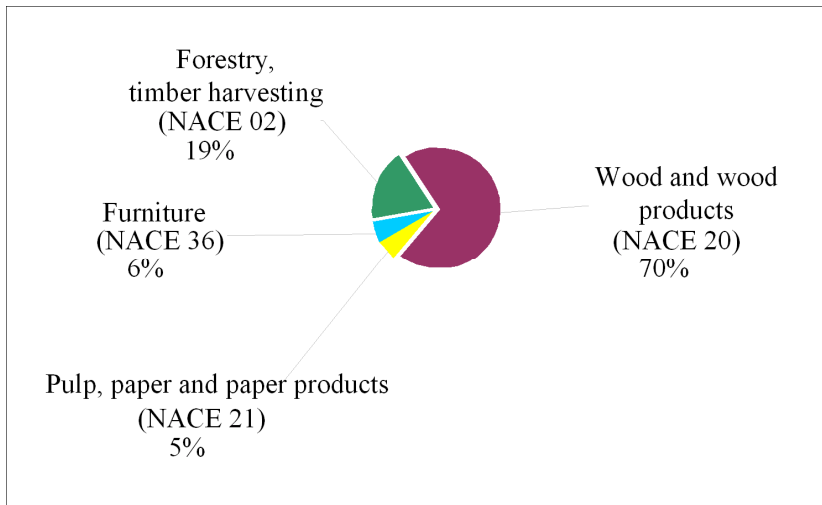
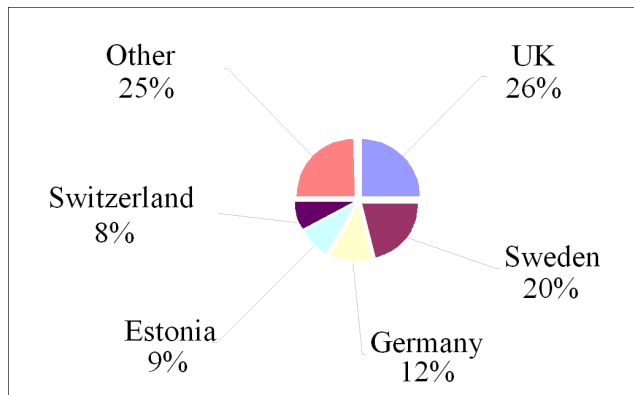


Table 13. Foreign countries investing in wood and wood products manufacturing (NACE 20) in the Latvian forest sector enterprises, 1992-2004



#### **METHODOLOGY FOR IDENTIFYING, INVESTIGATING AND PRESERVATION OF “ENDANGERED HANDICRAFTS”**

Latvia, situated in the northern reaches of Europe, much like its neighbors, who are not richly endowed with mineral resources, has throughout the ages relied chiefly on its flora and fauna in determining the materials that are to be used in popular crafts. Hence, historically emphasis has been placed on developing skills in the crafts connected with wood products, soft goods (wool, linen, leather), earthenware and objects in stone.

In later centuries with the use of metals coming on stream and more intricate economic relationships developing between trading nations, the culture of metalworking such as forging, black-smithery and jewelry crafting made its appearance and became quite commonplace in rural areas as well as in the cities in Latvia.

At the same time a rather worry-some phenomenon could be noted. Once highly developed skills in the basic handicrafts and trade secrets passed down from generation to generation by highly skilled masters in various trades began to wane through disuse. The researchers in folklore and students of national heritage have pointed out that the teachers in trade schools and trade associations must be made aware of the phenomenon of “endangered handicrafts”. Along with the development of new products, the preservation of time proven skills and traditions of the masters must be treated with due reverence.

RTU (Riga Technical University) and LAK (Latvian Chamber of Trades and Crafts) have resolved to take a serious heed of the phenomenon of “endangered handicrafts”. What is more, under the 50 years (from 1940 through 1990) of occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union, under the socialist

system orderly development of trades was completely disregarded and a great void occurred in the development and maintenance of the traditions of craftsmen's skills. Similarly, the revered category of "a master of a trade" was denigrated and the trove of knowledge of master's secrets and lifetime of work erudition was lost forever.

With the emergence of national independence again in 1990, the political and educational programs stipulated that the traditional teaching and development of trades be restored.

Presently we are restoring such crafts as log-home manufacturing, horse team and harness equipment handcrafting and sledge hob forming and many others. Over time by gaining experience we hope to develop a methodology for identifying and investigating endangered handicrafts, preservation of rare skills and devising ways for placing them in the treasure trove of the national heritage.

### **Considerations prior to launching the Preservation of "Endangered Handicrafts" Program**

At the outset, it is important to identify certain considerations that must be born in mind as the work-team proceeds with the tasks ahead:

1. The nation's local and national governing institutions must understand and be in full support of the program that is about to be launched.
2. A sound work program can be devised only after a thorough preliminary research phase is conducted and its results carefully compiled and analyzed.
3. The work team must be fully aware of the enormous amount of time, personal contact and human skill that will have to be devoted to the relationships with craftsmen, especially, masters in order to gain their full trust and confidence:
  - a) The apprentices must possess strong character traits and be given moral and material support in order to convince them that this skill cultivation and trade secrets nurturing concept is of great value and must be passed down to the next generation.
  - b) The handling of the masters is going to be more complicated because it is not only that they must be made aware that they have an enormous role to play in passing down the inherited skills and erudition but that they are about to make an invaluable contribution to the overall treasure trove of knowledge of their craft.

4. The work team must be ready to anticipate problems that it will encounter in accomplishing the work ahead. It must also exercise great discipline in compiling and preserving the obtained material: texts, drawings, photographs, audio and video inscriptions, and etc. These will become important future aides in teaching and carrying out additional research.

**Orientation Questionnaire Relating to Five Distinct Areas in the Preservation of Endangered Handicrafts Program.**

1. Information about the schools and training received:

- What motivated the master to select his particular trade?
- In what educational institution was he matriculated when he made the choice?
- What is the earliest age, that in his view, the learning of this trade can be commenced?
- Who was gave the master his first instruction?
- Who trained the master's master?
- How was the teaching of theory and practice carried out?
- What was easier to acquire, theory or practice?
- How much did the training cost?
- Has the master had the opportunity to train apprentices?
- How does the master visualize an up-to-date, well run educational institution?

2. Information about a selected trade and its product:

- What motivates the master to create?
- What ritual does the master undergo in starting his work?
- Was his particular work carried out differently before he undertook it? If so how?

- Is the master aware of another master in the vicinity performing this same trade?
- What is the remuneration for his kind of work?
- Can the master's product be sold? If so where?
- Who does the selling of the product, the master himself or others?
- What interesting incidents have occurred at the workplace?
- What rituals take place at the time of finishing a product (wooden building)?
- What folk tales and folk songs does the master know about his work?
- What other idiosyncrasies are there connected with his trade?

### **3. Information about materials:**

- How many different primary materials, and what are their specific designations, does the master use in his work?
- How many different secondary materials, and what are their designations, does the master use in his work?
- At what time of the year does a given master normally acquire his materials (wood, for example)?
- In what meteorological (weather) conditions does a given master acquire his materials (wood, for example)?
- What criteria is applied in the selection and acquisition of material?
- What criteria is born in mind when selecting a material supplier?
- Who performs the acquisition of the material?
- What means of transportation are being used ?
- What methods are employed in preparing the material for storage?

- Does the master entrust (lend, sell, give) his materials to others?
- What other vital considerations about the materials should one take that have not been mentioned here?

4. Information about the master's creative process:

- How does the master commence the manifestation of his ideas? From a clear idea in his head, from a sketch, a drawing, works from a model or copies a good idea noted elsewhere?
- Can the master describe the setup of his work place? His instruments, tools, tool systems, wall charts, graphic representations and/or displays mounted on the shop walls.
- How is the work place prepared at the start of the day?
- How does the master determine environmental and technical parameters (temperature, moisture, humidity, atmospheric pressure)?
- How, at the outset of the day, are the primary and secondary materials prepared for utilization?
- How does the master follow and control the work performance and the work quality in his workplace?
- How can the master describe the work process?
- How is the unfinished work preserved and scheduled for completion? How is it stored?
- How is the finishing process of a work accomplished?
- 10. What safety precautions are exercised in the workplace?
- What other comments can the master add?

5. Thoughts and ideas concerning the future:

- What causes can be identified as responsible for the demise (vanishing) of a specific handicraft or it's application?

- How can a master justify or defend the necessity or value of his craft?
- What negative consequences can be identified as resulting from the demise or vanishing of a craft (in the family, community, nation)?
- How could a craft be modified or altered in order to make it survive the changing culture?
- What related craft could be identified to function as a substitute?
- Where does the master hope to work after his craft has disappeared?
- What surviving testament does the master hope to preserve after the disappearance of his craft?
- What would be the fate of the tools, instruments, equipment systems after the demise of the masters workplace?
- What is the master's message to the generations following, after his workplace has undergone demise?
- Should the state (Government) step in and save the craft? How could that be accomplished?
- Can other issues, not mentioned here, be identified and used in justification of the craft's survival?

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