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The Origins of the Freemasonry Movement in Latvia

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At the time of the birth of the modern Freemasonry, the territory of Latvia was divided in three parts: 1) the province of Livonia (*Vidzeme*) together with the capital of Riga already incorporated in the Russian Empire after the Great Nordic War in 1721; 2) Polish Livonia or *Latgale* directly governed by the Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania until 1772; 3) Courland and Semigallia (*Kurzeme un Zemgale*) with the capital Jelgava a semi-independent dukedom until 1795. Under these circumstances Latvian lodges became the place for intensive competition between the English, German, Swedish and Russian Masonic systems. Riga and Jelgava rapidly became centres of international importance for the new movement.

The world-famous philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder was initiated in the Lodge of Sword in Riga, June 1766 and was acting as the secretary of the lodge. His dream at that time was to reform Livonia, „the province of barbarity and luxury, ignorance and exclusive taste, freedom and slavery”, and to propagate “culture and liberty”. He later published his influential collection of folksong *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1788–1789), where he gathered also folk lyrics of Latvian people. Ideas of Herder, the great architect of *Sturm und Drang* and German Romanticism, influenced the mighty wave of national awakening and liberation of Latvians from the serfdom at the beginning of the 19th century.

In 1777, Johann August Starck, regarded as ‘the father of the comparative history of religions’, accepted the proposal to teach philosophy at the recently founded Academical gymnasium at Mitau (known as *Academia Petrina*). Together with Carl Gotthelf von Hund, Carl Friedrich Eckleff, Estienne Morin and Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, Starck belongs to the founders of rites and rituals still practised in various degrees of contemporary Freemasonry.

During his stay in Jelgava in 1779 and 1780, the famous psychic and adventurer, Alexander Cagliostro, contended with Starck for the palm of superiority. Deeply immersed in the dreams of the Rosicrucians and mystics, Cagliostro determined to found an Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry upon the first three degrees of the fraternity, where magical practices were to be perpetuated.

After regaining of independence in 1991, the Craft has been gradually revived in Latvia. First Brethren were admitted to Freemasonry in 1993, and the pre-war lodge *Jāņuguns (Johannisfeuer)* was reactivated in 1996 as a regular lodge by the Grand Lodge AF&AM of Germany. The second lodge *Ziemeļzvaigzne (Zum Nordstern)* was reactivated by the same GL, but the third lodge *Pie Zobena (Zum Schwert)* was reactivated in 2002 by the Land Lodge of Freemasons in Germany. Despite some ritual

controversies among the German Grand Lodges, the United Grand Lodges of Germany decided to consecrate the multi-ritual Grand Lodge of Latvia in 2003.