

## **Architect Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli in Jelgava**

### **Ernst Johann Biron**

Political situation in Courland changed, thanks to the widow Duchess Anna Joannovna who became the Tsarina of Russia in 1730. Ernst Johann Biron, an indigent Kurzeme landlord's son who worked at Tsarina's office, had become her favourite about 1718. In 1730, Biron was bestowed the title of the Count and became the Tsarina's Chief Chamberlain. After the Duke Ferdinand's death on 12 June 1737, the congress of the landed gentry of Courland elected Ernst Johann Biron the Duke of Courland-Semigallia.

Already in 1736, construction works of the Rundāle Palace supervised by the Russian Court Architect Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli were started. It was intended as the Duke's summer residence; in November 1737 the old Jelgava castle of the Dukes was blown up. On 14 June 1738, the foundation stone of the new Jelgava Palace was laid under supervision of Rastrelli.

### **Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli and his new Jelgava Palace's projects**

He was born in Paris in 1700 where his Florence-based father Bartolomeo Carlo Rastrelli had been working at the time. In 1716, they moved to Russia, which became their second homeland. Still in his adolescence, Francesco Bartolomeo started to design buildings but in 1721 he took up his first independent building – Dmitrii Kantemir's Palace in Petersburg, followed by many other buildings.

Rastrelli's project sheets – layout planning (two versions), planning of both floors and of the eastern façade (two versions) – have survived in the National Library in Warsaw, the National Museum in Stockholm and in the collection of prints "Albertina" in Vienna.

According to Rastrelli's first layout planning, fortification ramparts had to be pulled down and the island – reconfigured symmetrically. A small park was envisaged on an artificial island on the northern side of the palace. Yet the other, simpler version was implemented – building of the new palace within the ramparts of the old fortress.

Planning of both floors and the eastern façade was also presented in two versions. According to the first version, spatial composition was much closed; the fourth western block was interrupted only by a gate. A very dynamic central or eastern façade corresponded to the first version – its ends whose length was measured by seven window openings stretch to the back of the façade but its middle part is divided by five risalites. Frequent divisions made the façade particularly active, bringing in the interplay of lights and shades.

In the second version of palace and central façade planning, the western side of the block opens on the town. The planning is changed considerably, bringing in a huge staircase premise in the centre of the main façade. A monumental state enfilade appears, and the Duke's apartments are moved to the south-east corner. The eastern façade of the main block is made much more composed in comparison with the first version; it is very prolonged and ended with risalites.

### **Building of the new Jelgava Palace**

The construction works in both Rundāle and Jelgava at the same time were a very complicated enterprise, made possible only thanks to the Tsarina Anna who ordered to send craftsmen and workers from the Imperial Building Office as well as large number of Russian soldiers to Kurzeme. Many Latvian peasants from the Duke's domain manors took part in transportation works.

Construction of the palace was technically very difficult because of the boggy ground containing quicksand, therefore the palace was to be built on a thick pile grid. About 4 metres long and 28 centimetres thick piles were driven side by side, leaving about 30 centimetres space between them. Large rubbles, on which foundations of the building were laid, were placed directly on the piles.

Until late October 1738, the foundations of the central block were completed. 211864 bricks and 374 cubic fathoms of rubble were immured in the foundations with 10308 piles driven beneath them.

In winter 1738-1739, it was decided to send to Jelgava the Rundāle Palace façade decorations of cast iron, plafonds painted on canvas by the Italian painter Bartolomeo Tarsia, splendid tiledstoves with gilding made in Vircava workshops and carved wooden doors made in Russia.

In early April 1739, bricklayers resumed works. The ground floor consisting of 1330800 bricks was completed in June but bricking of the main block was over on 31 October.

In October, 1739 the joiner master Johann Baptist Eger reported on the completion of inlaid oak, maple, box tree and mahogany floor with engraved flowers and acanthus leaves in two Jelgava Palace bedrooms, two state rooms and two corner rooms. Inlaid floors were made also for the Great Hall, antehall and 14 other premises, wall panels for 23 rooms were completed as well.

Making of tiles for stoves in more than 200 premises of the palace was a very demanding work. Austrian masters supervised by Philipp Thorner worked at the Vircava Pottery, Russian potters supervised by Ivan Ushakov made simpler tiled stoves painted in blue cobalt.

In December 1739, the artist Dietrich Peter Denffer-Jansen and his assistant Kurlstner were hired to paint ceiling plafonds. He was appointed the Duke's Court Painter, receiving the salary of 300 Albert Thalers.

Roofing of the central block went on during winter 1740. Both side blocks of the palace were completed in a surprisingly short period and roofing could be started already in November.

On 14 June 1740, the Duke decided to send to Jelgava the altar intended for Rundāle Palace. It was made after Rastrelli's sketch in St. Petersburg and was on board of a ship in the Daugavgrīva Port.

In November 1740, a part of bricklayers were given leave to St. Petersburg but the rest continued to plaster walls. One third of the cast iron decorations brought from Rundāle had already been applied to the facades.

## **Influence of Jelgava Palace to St. Petersburg architecture**

Tsarina Anna Joanovna died on 23 October 1740. According to her will, Biron became the regent of Russia until Ivan Antonovich, the successor to the throne born in the same year, would come of age, but the court revolution broke out on 20 November. Biron was arrested, tried and sentenced to death in March 1741; within few days it was changed to life sentence. The Duke's family was deported to Pelim in Tobolsk Province. In 1742, the new Tsarina Elisabeth Petrovna allowed Biron to move to St. Petersburg but he was detained in Jaroslavl by another order; Biron had to spend the next 20 years there.

Construction works in both Jelgava and Rundāle were suspended. Non-completed side blocks were covered with temporary roofs but part of the finish materials – doors, parquetry, stoves, and cast iron façade decorations – were sent to St. Petersburg. In 1746, provision storages for the Russian army were arranged in Jelgava Palace premises. In 1754, the Russian Ambassador to Courland E. J. von Buttlar reported to Tsarina on the poor condition of the palace and suggested renovation but nothing was done.

In 1758, Russia and Poland came to an agreement about a new candidate of the Duke of Courland. Karl, son of August III, the King of Poland, was the nominee. In 1759, he arrived to Jelgava and started his short period of reign. The Duke Karl stayed at the palace in the centre of Jelgava where widow Anna Joanovna had lived.

When the Tsarina Elisabeth Petrovna died in 1762, the new Tsar of Russia Peter III did not support the Duke Karl. He summoned Biron back from the exile, reassigned the Duke's title but was about to grant Courland to one of his relatives. When Catherine II ascended to the Throne, she decided in favour of the old Duke Biron because of political reasons. In August 1762, a festive restitution of Biron took place in St. Petersburg, on 11 September he arrived in Riga but on 22 January 1763 he returned to Jelgava.

The Duke Ernst Johann resumed construction works in Jelgava and Rundāle. Firstly they were supervised by the Duke's Court Architect Johann Gottfried Seydel, but in 1764 Rastrelli again came back to Kurzeme, and stayed there until the mid-1769. Rastrelli died in early 1771, the place of his death and burial is unknown.

In 1766, the Danish architect Severin Jensen was hired in the Duke's service in Seydel's position.

Jelgava Palace reconstruction started with bricklayers' works. The message sent by Seydel on 7 March 1764 indicates that pilasters should be dismantled and bricked anew, and 96892 bricks are needed for this purpose, and 154 120 bricks – for rebuilding of cornices and upper parts of walls.

In 1767, roofing of the palace continued and all windows of the palace were reported to be made anew. In the 2nd half of 1768, the Berlin sculptor Johann Michael Graff's team moved from Rundāle to Jelgava. Until the end of the year they managed to complete decorative finish of ceilings in six state premises.

On 1 September 1768, the Italian painter Antonio d'Angeli was hired. He worked until November 1771 and is likely to have painted Jelgava Palace plafonds and sopraportas.

In 1769, J. M. Graff's team completed sculptural finish of the grand staircase and 16 premises. In 1770, Graff had worked in the Great Hall in the centre of the southern block as well as in several other premises, receiving a salary of 1900 Albert Thalers. The following year Graff was mostly working on the palace chapel, using artificial marble fin-

ish as well as creating stucco decorations in the Duke's study and the Silver Hall. In 1772, Graff continued to shape the altar of the chapel, decorated the Duchess' bedroom, completed 15 mirror frames and several stoves and rounded out Grat Hall decorations. In June 1772, gilders Andreas Hoffstadt and Thomas Ducko were hired, but part of gilding and silvering works was done by the master Johann Endres, Court Gilder from 1767 to 1771. Woodcarvers Johann Georg Bader and Josef Slavitzek also worked at the palace.

On 8 December 1772, the Duke's family moved in the new palace with a festive ceremony. The old Duke Ernst Johann died in the palace on 28 December.

In 1773, finishing works continued, mainly in the Duke Peter's apartments. This year the painter E. H. Barisien also is known to have started his work in the palace.

After 1785 the sculptor J. G. Bader was replaced by Johann Eberhard but gilders Hoffstadt and Ducko – by father and son Kesebiers.

Concerts and theatrical performances were also frequent at Jelgava Palace. The Duke Peter had his Court Band conducted by Franz Adam Veichtner, a musician from Regensburg. He was hired as the Court First Violinist in 1765 and held this position for 30 years. Veichtner also composed music for festive occasions and three operas. In 1784, the Duke Peter granted the title of First Violinist to Adam Hiller, the famous German composer of musicals and founder of Leipzig Gewandhaus although he stayed in Courland for a very short period.

In early December 1782 the Duke and his court left Jelgava and settled in Vircava Palace. In late 1782, the Duke Peter made to reconstruct the Jelgava Palace chapel. It was divided by partition walls whose weight broke the lower floor vaults where the Duke's archives were kept.

### **From fire to fire**

On 22 December 1788 fire broke out in Jelgava Palace, destroying the northern block and half of the central block premises, including the grand staircase. The damaged part was not roofed until the end of the Duchy.

In 1785, the Duke Peter bought Friedrichfelde Palace near Berlin, but in 1786 – the Duchy of Sagan in Silesia, belonging to Prussia. He was disillusioned in the future prospects of the Duchy of Courland and tried to secure his future citadel. The Duke was in a permanent state of conflict with landed gentry but his political sympathies towards Prussia and Poland were incompatible with the support from Russia. After the third division of Poland in early 1795, the Duchy of Courland lost its official liege and subsequent political status. On 17 March 1795, the Duke Peter resigned from the throne in St. Petersburg. On 27 May 1795, the former Duchy became the Province of Courland.

In August 1795, the Duke Peter's family left Vircava Palace and moved to Silesia, taking furnishings from all six palaces of the Duchy – Jelgava, Rundāle, Vircava, Svēte, Zaļāmuiža and Luste.

On 24 June 1795, the Duke's Tower was dismantled in Jelgava Palace and the new Governor of Courland Peter von der Pahlen with various administration offices settled in the palace. The part of the building not damaged by fire still retained the look of a presentable residence. In May 1797, Pavil I arrived in Jelgava; the court reception and a ball were organized in the palace.

In the second half of 1797, reconstruction of the palace started by roofing the burnt-down blocks. For economical reasons the roof was changed into mansard in order to use much cheaper tiles instead of the expensive roofing iron.

On 20 March 1798, Jelgava became the residence of Louis, the Count of Provence and pretender to the French throne who stayed in Jelgava as Louis XVIII together with his Council of Ministers, court, guards and servants. The Orthodox church arranged for the émigré court on the ground floor of the palace in 1796 was changed into a Catholic chapel. In June 1799, the wedding between the Duke of Angoulême Louis Antoine, Louis's XVIII nephew, and Maria Therese, daughter of Louis XVI, was organized in the chapel.

Political contacts between the Tsar of Russia Pavil I and the First Consul of France Napoleon Bonaparte in 1801 caused banishment of French émigrés from Jelgava. The Governor of Courland with his offices returned to the palace.

On 3 January 1805 Louis XVIII again settled in Jelgava Palace. His second stay was much more unpretentious. The King arrived as the Count of Lille, his suite had been reduced to less than 100 people. The King occupied the former Duke's apartments once again.

The French court was lacking space because the palace north-east section was occupied by barracks and war hospital. The garden of the Duchess of Angoulême was located on one side of the courtyard while wounded soldiers were taking walks on the other. To get additional living rooms, reconstruction of the palace was started, significantly damaging interiors. The splendid ballroom in the southern block was divided in two floors and many small rooms.

In 1807 when the Tilsit Peace Treaty had been signed, French émigrés in Jelgava again became obstacles for rapprochement politics between Russia and France, and Louis XVIII left Jelgava.

In 1812, Kurzeme was occupied by the 10th Corps of the French army lead by the Marshal Macdonald. A puppet government of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia was created and based at the Jelgava Palace. Its central block was occupied by hospital. In December 1812, the Russian army liberated Kurzeme, and Province governmental institutions returned to Jelgava Palace.

The building was in poor condition; in addition, on 11 May 1816 the northern block burned down again. This stimulated to start serious repair works of the entire palace. The reconstruction of the building started in 1817 and was completed in 1823. It included repairs of the part damaged by fire, a new roof and repairs in the Governor's apartments.

In 1824, new stables designed by the Courland Province architect Friedrich Schultz were built. In 1825, fundamental repairs of all facades were commenced; during the works most of the palace balconies were pulled down, several outer staircases were built anew and facades painted. In 1829, the mansard roof of the burnt-down part in 1797 was finally replaced, and the palace silhouette resumed its initial proportions. In 1816, lawns were laid out on the southern and northern sides of the palace instead of the ramparts which were gradually pulled down. Trees were planted around the palace. In 1829, a dam was built to secure the way from the town to the palace because it was usually completely isolated from its surroundings during the spring flood.

In 1843, capital repair of the palace was started according to the order by Nikolai I, the Tsar of Russia. It lasted for two years and mostly involved adaptation of premises to the needs of 15 institutions and 40 apartments, changing the palace's spaces and arrangements: new doors were broken out, new partition wall created, new staircases built and the old ones pulled down.

Former Duke's apartments, the so-called imperial rooms, were renovated only in 1859 when a contract with Riga architect Heinrich Scheel was signed. He undertook to "restore according to the previous taste" 16 premises for 14600 roubles. Scheel's "restoration" completed in 1860 was superficial and led to alterations of the 18th century finish of walls and ceilings.

In 1864, the imperial rooms were refurnished with furniture and art objects brought from St. Petersburg.

In 1853-1858, the Governor of Courland Piotr Valuev made to continue planting of trees and shrubs around the palace between the dam and the building and linden alleys between the River Lielupe and the River Driksa. In the second half of the 19th century small repairs went on, depending on the needs of the huge building. In 1896, electricity and telephone were installed in the palace, an artesian well was drilled in the courtyard, running water and sewerage were fixed up. The last minor reconstruction works took place in the palace in 1913, preparing the imperial rooms for the Swedish Crown Prince.

When the first World War broke out, part of the palace furnishings were evacuated to Moscow. German troops entered Jelgava on 1 August 1915. The headquarters of the German army and other occupational institutions settled in the palace.

In early 1919, communists ruled in Jelgava, replaced by the German Landeswehr and the General von der Goltz's army in March and White Guard Colonel Bermond-Avalov's army in July. Shortly before retreat from the town, on 21 November 1919, Bermond forces ravaged and burnt down Jelgava Palace.

In 1923, the fate of Jelgava Palace ruins was first discussed at the Heritage Board meeting; in 1926 Jelgava Palace was included in the list of protected monuments. In 1924, the reconstruction of walls was started, lasting until 1932. In 1933, the restoration of some of the palace 18th century interiors was very superficial from the scientific aspect.

In 1937, Latvian Chamber of Agriculture moved to Jelgava, receiving 130 premises at its disposal. Offices of the Head and Secretary General of the chamber were furnished in Art Deco style after the artist Ansis Cīrulis' design.

In 1936, there was a decision to locate Latvian Academy of Agriculture in Jelgava Palace. The southern block was rebuilt according to its needs, but in 1937 foundations of a new western block designed by Eižens Laube were laid. After Laube's sketches several interior premises were built, including the large palace ballroom. On 3 July 1939, the Latvian Academy of Agriculture, consisting of two faculties – Agriculture and Forestry – was opened.

After Latvia's incorporation in the USSR construction of premises and arrangement of lecture rooms went on. In 1941 13 institutes of scientific research were formed at the academy, several faculties of the Latvian State University were planned to move to Jelgava. Beginning of World War II in the Latvian territory interrupted these plans. German occupational institutions settled in the former premises of the Chamber of Agriculture.

In July 1944, Jelgava Palace burnt down. Most part of the town was destroyed because of Soviet air raids, direct military actions and want of the German troops to leave empty land to approaching Soviet army.