



VENTSPILS MUZEJS

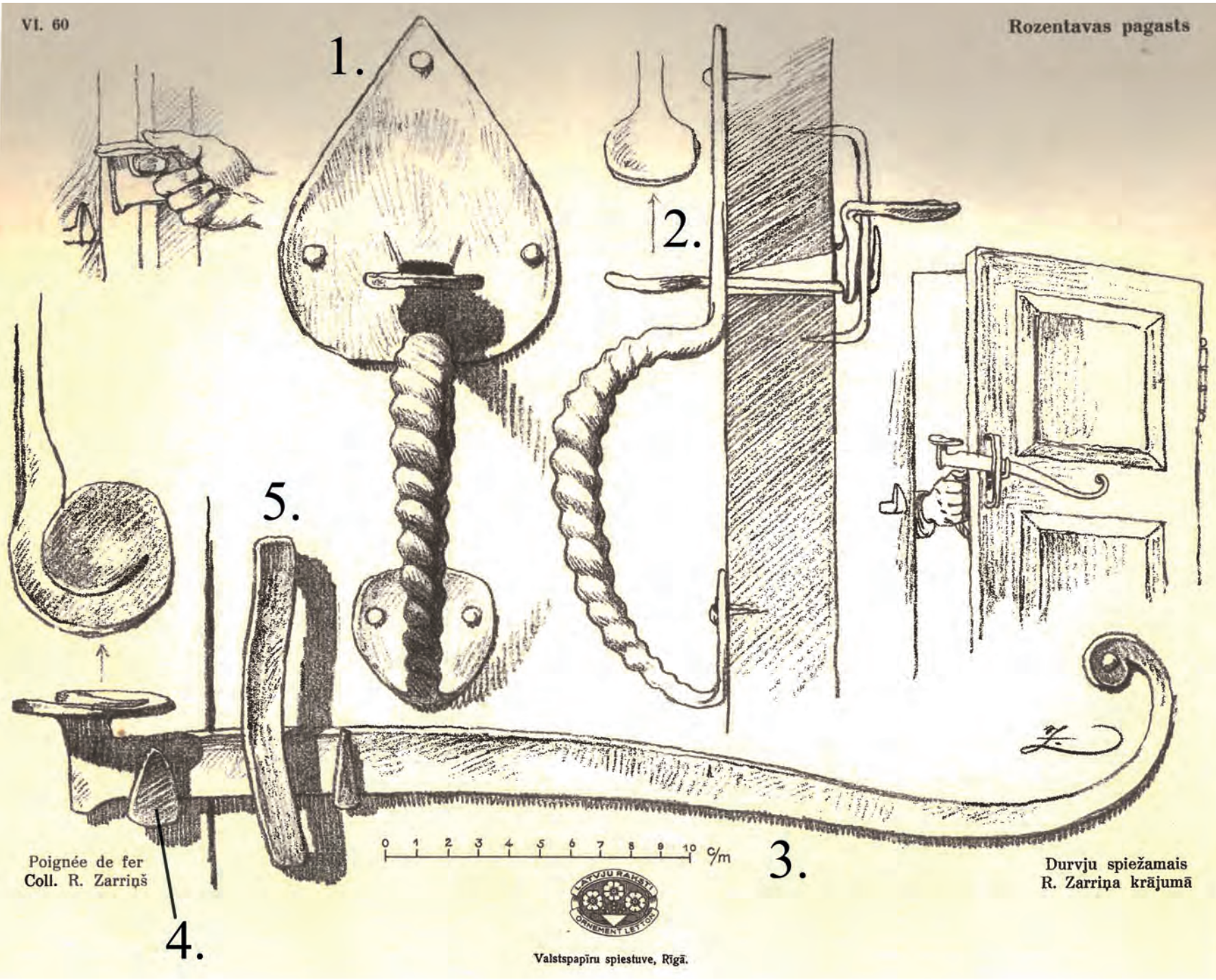


PIEJŪRAS BRĪVDABAS MUZEJS

THUMB DOOR LATCHES – USE, THEIR VARIETY AND RESTORATION

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This research was prompted by some of my earlier works while being employed in the Seaside Open-Air Museum of Ventspils. At first glance builders hardware seems insignificant, dare I say for most people: scrap. However, it is an important account of local history, mainly focusing on the local smiths.



1. Latch handle – used to operate the door and house the thumb lever, acts as the pivoting point of the lever.
2. Thumb lever – used to lift the latch bar on the other side of the door.
3. Latch bar – a pivoting bar that serves as the locking element.
4. Latch keeper – used to secure the latch bar to the door frame.
5. Staple – guides the latch bar and restricts its movement.

Several kinds of door latches have been used for millenia to keep doors and gates closed when they don't need to be locked. What started out as basic bolt or lever latches evolved into a simple yet elegant mechanism that required only one hand to operate. Dating back to medieval times this type of latch became commonly used due to the increasing availability of local smiths and use of wrought iron. With the advent of the industrial revolution and mass production, these latches evolved slightly in design and material technology, cast iron became the go-to material before being replaced by steel. With the introduction of steel stampings and spring loaded latch designs this type of lever actuation fell out of favor in wealthier areas, while still being widely used in places where the common people could only afford the services of the local smith. Iron forgings have been used as buiders hardware since the dawn of the Iron age. They range from crudely made functional forgings: simple hinges, door latches, etc., to intricately designed pieces reflecting both the design ability and craftsmanship of the smith, and the wealth and taste of the person who ordered their production. Door latches shown in Fig. 2 were documented in Vidzeme Cultural region of Latvia, near Vecpiebalga. The latches found in Kurzeme Cultural region of Latvia differ very little from these, though they haven't been documented as well as those from Vidzeme. To gain more insight on the variety of the local remaining door latches, I went on several research trips around the Kurzeme Cultural region of Latvia: cities of Tukums, Liepāja, Kuldīga, Ventspils, village of Sārnate and Tāši Manor. These are examples of thumb door latches I've documented.

As can be seen in these pictures, in each documented location there is a considerable variety in latch handle designs. Different bend locations, directions and radiuses, the shape of base plates (rounded, spade type, leaf shape, teardrop shape, etc.) Also there are differences in the shape and length of the thumb lever.

RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION

In 2024 while being employed by Ventspils Seaside Open-Air Museum I restored 12 peaces of door furniture, 9 of them being thumb door latches. This is a small sample on the work done on one of them:

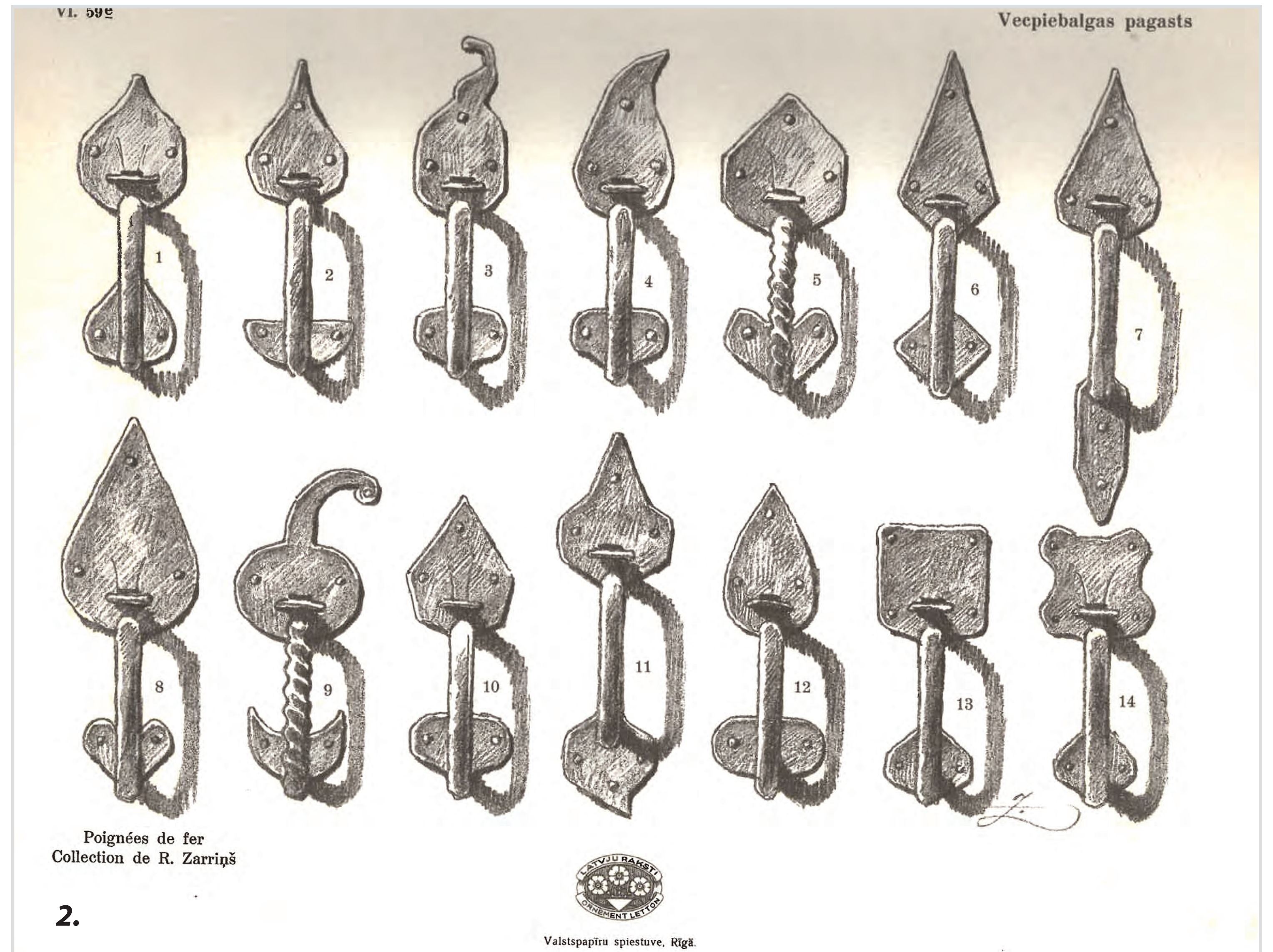
VZBM 2824 Thumb door latch. Owner: Ventspils Seaside Open-Air Museum, Ventspils Museum. Craftsman: unknown. Early 20th century. Iron, forged. Size: total length 21.6 cm, length of lever 11.8 cm, width of thumb piece 5 cm. Restored in 2024. Photos by: Līva Ķemere

Condition of the item before restoration - Item appears to have been previously conserved (possibly coated with boiled linseed oil). Uniformly corroded. Bottom part of latch handle cracked.

Process of restoration – Latch handle and thumb lever degreased, chemically cleaned and rinsed, neutralised and dried. Surface of items mechanically cleaned. Covered with protective coating. Lacquered and waxed.

Objective: to draw attention to historic thumb door latches and their conservation to present day.

Recomdations: research and catalogue locations where these types of door latches are still present, but, at the moment, they are not in the holdings of National museums. This way we could construct a database of builders hardware and other large and small building elements, that are still privately owned. But one day, could become available either as period and location correct replacements or reference material for reproductions in building restoration projects.



Before restoration



After restoration

REFERENCES

- Fig.1. and Fig.2. – “Latvju raksti 3. sējums” (Ornament Letton III), Valstspapīru spiestuve, Rīga, 1931.
- Fig.3. – Tower of Tukums Castle, museum.
- Fig.4. – Liepājas 17th - 19th. century interior museum “Madame Hoyer’s Guest House”.
- Fig.5 - Fig.6. – Tāšu (Telses) Manor.
- Fig.7. – Exhibition of Open collection of Kuldīga Municipality Museum “Journey in museum holdings”, KNM 18431 From Padure village house “Mazaucenieki”, in museum holding since 1983.
- Fig. 8. – Exhibition of Open collection of Kuldīga Municipality Museum “Journey in museum holdings”, KNM 11102 In museum holdings since 1978.
- Fig. 9. – Fig.11. – Sārnate Manor house of moder.
- Fig. 12. – Ventspils Seaside Open – Air museum, “Smiltņieki” dwelling house.
- Fig.13. – Fig. 14 - Ventspils Seaside Open – Air museum, “Kaugeri” dwelling house.