

# VERSATILE PEDAGOGICAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF A GRADUATE OF RIGA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE JĀNIS STIPRAIS (1870–1946)

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**Summary.** The research discusses continuous effort of a pedagogue, economist and journalist *Jānis Stiprais* (1870–1946) in his pursuit to obtain education and his versatile pedagogical activities in Tomsk (Russia), *Tukums*, *Valka* and Riga, as well as the contribution he made in such areas as journalism, folklore and social work. *J. Stiprais* shared his knowledge of economics gained at Riga Polytechnic Institute (RPI) with the students at the University of Latvia (UL), Latvia People's University and *Vilis Olavs* Commercial School; in the first half of the 20th century he was the principal of educational institutions in *Tukums*, *Valka* and Riga, he also was one of the signatories of the Memorandum of the Central Council of Latvia on 17 March 1944. In the recognition of *J. Stiprais* merit for Latvia, he was honoured with the highest award of the Republic of Latvia – the Order of the Three Stars.

**Keywords:** *Jānis Stiprais*, Riga Polytechnic Institute, signatories of the Memorandum of the Central Council of Latvia, school principals.

## Introduction

Many representatives of the Latvian intelligentsia, including a number of prominent pedagogues, came from *Piebalga*. It is also a home town of a pedagogue, economist and journalist *Jānis Stiprais*, who despite his modest financial situation obtained university education and served his people for many years, educating youth.

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Numerous press articles dedicated to *J. Stiprais* started to appear already during his lifetime. Nowadays, memories about the pedagogue are carefully retained at his *Alma Mater*. The interest in his highly appreciated contribution may be evidenced by both this research developed in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of *J. Stiprais* and an article in the RTU newspaper «*Jaunais Inženieris*» (Young Engineer), published to celebrate his 130th birthday in 2000 [1]. The works translated by *J. Stiprais*, his books and newspaper articles, as well as the articles dedicated to his personality and heritage published in the periodicals have been preserved in the Latvian libraries, whereas his personal file of a pedagogue, a personal file of a lecturer of the UL, a passport of a citizen of the Republic of Latvia and other documents are stored in the State Historical Archive of Latvia of the Latvian National Archives.

Being a true Latvian patriot, *J. Stiprais* signed the Memorandum of the Central Council of Latvia in 1944. One of the latest publications about *J. Stiprais* is his biography, which is included in the biographical dictionary dedicated to the signatories of the Memorandum published in 2014 [2]. It should be noted that some inaccuracies have been made while compiling the mentioned biography of *J. Stiprais*, since neither the original documents nor his *Curriculum Vitae* were used – the name of his father was spelled incorrectly, the years of his pedagogical activity were also not recorded accurately. The aim of the present research is to study pedagogical and social activities of *J. Stiprais* and to clarify his biographical data. The main research method used in this paper is analysis of literature sources.

## Childhood, School and Study Years of *Jānis Stiprais*

*Jānis Stiprais* was born in *Vecpiebalga* Parish on 31 August 1870. His birth was registered with the Congregation of *Piebalga*, his father *Andžs* was a farmer [3]. This is also confirmed by *J. Stiprais* autobiography written in the early 20th century [4]. Later, in some documents, including the passport of the Republic of Latvia, the name of *J. Stiprais* father was recorded as *Antons* [5], this name later also appeared in several published pieces of research [2].

For two years, *Jānis* studied at *Kaibēni* School, educators and writers brothers *Matīss* (1839–1920) and *Reinis* (1848–1926) *Kaudzītes* were his first teachers. Then for four years he studied at *Skujene* Parish School, then – at Tsar Peter I Vocational School in Riga, which he graduated in 1892. *Jānis*' father passed away when he was in the 4th grade of the vocational school and thus *Jānis* had to provide for himself. *Jānis* was

exempt from paying tuition fees at the vocational school, however, he had to pay apartment rent. He could not timely cover it and thus accumulated debts. To settle his obligations, he started to give private classes to the host's children and later to other children. Studying in the 5th grade of the vocational school, teaching private pupils *J. Stiprais* earned a considerable amount of money for that time – 10 roubles per month. He soon also earned a job as a transcriber for a district court translator. It was not easy, because he often delivered four private lessons a day and returned to the rented apartment only after nine o'clock in the evening. In the absence of private lessons, he wrote for newspapers and translated for money [4].

In September 1892, *J. Stiprais* entered the Department of Agriculture of Riga Polytechnicum, but in 1893, he had to interrupt his studies due to material considerations – he had to pay for his studies at a private university. For the next six years, he worked and saved money for education. In the autumn of 1899, *J. Stiprais* resumed his studies at Riga Polytechnic Institute (RPI), which had been reorganized in 1896, this time choosing to study at the Department of Commerce [6]. In his spare time, he continued working as a tutor, as well as earned money by selling firewood. After gaining some knowledge of trade, *J. Stiprais* began to teach it to others, and later established private trade courses [4]. As a student, in 1892 *J. Stiprais* joined the oldest Latvia-based corporation of the Latvian students «*Selonija*», he later worked in its Society of Philistines. *J. Stiprais* graduated from RPI in 1904, in the same year as the Latvian public figure and publicist *Vilis Olavs* (1867–1917). It is interesting to note that later *J. Stiprais* worked in the school named after *Vilis Olavs*.

## Translations, Journalism, Compilation of Folklore

Already during his university years at the end of the 19th century, *J. Stiprais* earned his living by translating. For example, he translated a book «*Edisons*» by the Russian writer and translator Andrei Kamensky (Андрей Васильевич Каменский; 1843–1913) from Russian. It was published in 1892 by the Department of Useful Books of the Riga Latvian Society [7]. It is quite possible that *J. Stiprais* translated the autobiography of an American inventor and entrepreneur Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931) not only for financial reasons, but also out of personal interest, since he was studying engineering.

The translations from the German language by *J. Stiprais* should be also named – the tragedy «*Marija Stjuarte*» (Maria Stewart) by the German poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) and the

drama «*Fricītis*» by the writer Hermann Sudermann (1857–1928). Both plays were staged – in 1896, the theatre of Riga Latvian Society performed «*Marija Stjuarte*» and in 1904, Riga New Theatre staged «*Fricītis*».

Already during his study years, *J. Stiprais* collaborated with almost all newspapers that were published in Latvian at that time. In his autobiography, *J. Stiprais* wrote that during the summer holidays of 1902, he headed the Foreign Section of the newspaper «*Baltijas Vēstnesis*» [4]. Later he worked as a collaborator in the newspapers «*Dzimtenes Vēstnesis*», «*Līdums*», «*Tautas Balss*» and from 1919 to 1940, in the newspaper «*Brīvā Zeme*».

In 1908, *J. Stiprais'* article «*Mūsu tirdzniecības mācību iestādes*» (Our Trade Educational Institutions) was published in the newspapers «*Dzimtenes Vēstnesis*» [8] and «*Zemkopis*» [9]. It discussed the history of these schools in the Russian Empire, which at that time included the territory of the present-day Latvia, legislation for their establishment and operation, and popularity, as trade was considered by *J. Stiprais* to be the cornerstone of the well-being of the Latvian people. He also mentioned his *Alma Mater* – RPI, whose future graduates of the Department of Commerce started working already during their studies, working in shops as accountants, holding responsible positions at the banks and in trade, receiving good salaries. Prospective entrepreneurs also used to teach languages, but at that time it was a highly competitive field, so remuneration was rather low. However, *J. Stiprais* was a selfless pedagogue who primarily worked for the sake of a noble idea rather than due to monetary considerations.

In the 1920s and 1930s, *J. Stiprais* also published various articles in periodicals, including reflections on schooling and childrearing. For example, with regard to the choice of schools, *J. Stiprais* wrote to parents that a good education can be obtained not only in big cities. He noted that if farmers opt to send their children to study in the city, as a result, children may not only lose connection with their parents as well as the love of the countryside, the parents may also lose control over their children's use of leisure time and the process of education. Based on observations of *J. Stiprais*, in large schools, where the number of pupils is about a thousand, «a rare teacher knows his pupils by name» [10].

*J. Stiprais* considered education one of the basic values in life. Having acquired education himself, he wanted to make sure as many people as possible obtain it as well. His pursuit of education and spiritual values came from the family and society where he spent his childhood – *Piebalga, Vidzeme*, where the ideas of fraternal congregations were widespread. Brothers *Kaudzīte*, who maintained close connections with the fraternal congregations and their pupils at *Kaibēni* School, also

played a major role in this regard. As *J. Stiprais* wrote in his memoirs, they «not only gave knowledge but also the laid down foundations of morality», made pupils accustomed to work and order, instilled a desire to pursue noble goals [11]. *J. Stiprais* stuck to these values throughout his life and had always spoken well about both brothers-teachers, who were excellent pedagogues and educators able to engage pupils also in their free time, for example, doing sports. There was a self-built skating rink near the school, the skates were mostly homemade – with a blade driven and secured in a wooden block, which was either a self-wrought scythe or some other suitable piece of iron. There were no enough homemade skates for everyone, many skated with one skate or borrowed the other skate from others. Pupils also skied and rode on the sleds. The teachers – brothers *Kaudzīte* – also went into sports. For example, *Matīss Kaudzīte* had «light metal skates that could be attached with a screw to the heel of the boot» [12]. The children rode from the hill with a single ski made of aspen wood by local craftsmen. Pupils called skis *luģes*. They were shorter and wider than those we use today. The pupils neither knew nor used ski poles. On the other hand, the pupils held ropes tied to the front of each ski, which made it possible to change the direction of the ride or, when descending the mountain, they helped to maintain balance [12].

*J. Stiprais* loved to get involved in the discussions about science, art, literature, ethics, noble goals, tasks and success. This is evidenced by his article «*Vienkāršība dzīvē un audzināšanā*» (Simplicity in Life and Upbringing) published in 1923 [13]. He also pointed at the negative social phenomena, such as extravagance, revelry, and pursuit of wealth. From a young age, he believed that people should not be divided into rich and poor, and that regardless of their descent and material status, people can sit at the same table side by side. Even as a young man, *J. Stiprais* called for abstinence from alcohol abuse and exaggeration in clothing. He reported on these issues at an event organised by the Society of Philistine (Senior Members) of «*Selonija*» on 14 January 1929 [14]. His report was titled «*Vienkāršība dzīvē un audzināšanā*» (Simplicity in Life and Upbringing), it was copied and sent to all active members of Latvian corporations. *J. Stiprais* discussed the above-mentioned issues pointing out that the money earned should be spent prudently and evenly, the family and the school should increase the level of morality of young people. The pedagogue, economist and journalist said in his report, «Academically educated citizens should not follow in the footsteps of unbalanced bacchanals and follow their lead, take them as a paragon for themselves and waste their hard and honestly deserved possessions. The peoples belonging to the culture of Western Europe do not practice wasteful revelry and excessive eating and drinking that continue

until the next morning, undermining their health and impairing their ability to work. We have inherited these entertainment habits from the east. Such lifestyle is not suitable for our circumstances, because a person may spend more than one's monthly income during a single evening» [15]. At the end of the report, *J. Stiprais* summoned, «Let's teach simplicity and thriftiness not only with words, but with all our lives, then the new generation, nation and society will follow the set standard and live up to an excellent example» [15].

*J. Stiprais* also made a considerable efforts, compiling Latvian folk tales, legends and stories. A book publisher, social figure and patron *Jānis Rauska* (1873–1967) published «*Latviešu tautas pasakas*» (Latvian Folk Tales; 1918) at a publishing house in *Valka*. This carefully collected and compiled edition was then re-published in seven volumes (1921). «*Latviešu tautas teikas un nostāsti*» (Latvian Folk Tales and Stories; 1921), which came from the collections of the Latvian writer, folklorist, researcher, social figure and teacher *Ansis Lerhis-Puškaitis* (1859–1903) was also published there. This volume comprised the stories about the origin of the *Daugava* River, the king of snakes, *Piebalga* Pub, the origin of *Ranka* and *Pakuļi* Lakes, *Vecpiebalga* Castle, and many other. *J. Rauska* also published «*Tautas teikas un pasakas 1. daļa. Dievs, Pērkons, Velns*» (Folk Tales and Fairy Tales Part 1. God, Thunder, Devil; 1925).

## Pedagogue's Work

*J. Stiprais* became acquainted with the profession of a pedagogue in 1893. After he had to discontinue his studies, he worked for one year both as a private teacher and as a teacher at a private girls' school in *Kandava*, then for two years – as a private teacher in *Valmiera* at the home of a writer and Pastor of the *Valmiera* St. Simon Congregation, *Jānis Neilands* (1840–1915), then for three years – as a teacher in *Jaungulbene* [16]. Later, he worked as a teacher near *Ikšķile*, teaching the sons of two manufacturers, preparing them for enrolment in a vocational school [4]. While he studied at the university, he was involved in the pedagogical activity teaching to the private pupils. In 1904, immediately after his graduation, he went to Russia and began working as a teacher at a stock exchange commercial school and trading evening courses in the Siberian city *Tomsk*. In 1906, the young engineer returned to Latvia and in August began working as an inspector at *Tukums* School of Commerce. From 1909 to 1918, he was the Principal of that school. *Arnolds Zariņš* (1876–1940), a graduate (1907) of the Department of Chemistry of RPI, who had previously worked as the Secretary of the *Tukums* City, taught merchandising, chemistry and natural sciences at the School

of Commerce. *Jēkabs Vītols* (1877–1961), a graduate (1907) of the Department of Engineering of RPI [17], taught mathematics and physics. Principal *J. Stiprais* knew *A. Zariņš* and *J. Vītols* since his study years, because they together worked at the student corporation «*Selonija*». During World War I, the School of Commerce continued working in *Valka* and in 1918, it was closed. Then for two years – from 1918 to 1920 – *J. Stiprais* worked as the Principal of *Valka* Latvian Secondary School. Then in 1920 he returned to *Kurzeme* and for two years he was the Principal of *Tukums* City Secondary School [18].



Figure 1. *Jānis Stiprais* (c. 1920).

In 1922, *J. Stiprais* started to run the Riga City Secondary School No. 1, and from 1929 – the Gymnasium (now – Riga State Gymnasium No. 1). When he started working as a principal in Riga, he already knew some teachers. For example, *Juris (Georgs) Lerhs* (1881–1967), who had taught mathematics at *Tukums* School of Commerce. While performing the duties of the Principal, *J. Stiprais*, being a good psychologist, was able to resolve conflicts and reconcile the parties to the conflict. He managed to maintain unshakable inner peace and prudent composure. One of the graduates of 1927, later a poet *Leonīds Breikšs* (1908–1942), believed that Principal *J. Stiprais* knew all his pupils as if they were his own children [19]. Although he was strict, the pupils respected and appreciated him. When the students were caught doing something naughty or misbehaving, he asked, «Boys, is it really the way you should behave?» [19]. He expressed serious and though over wishes and kind words of encouragement to the graduates of the school. In 1934, *J. Stiprais* left the Gymnasium. His position of the Principal of Riga City Gymnasium No. 1 was taken over by a public official, diplomat, pedagogue, theologian, and journalist *Pauls Oto Gailītis* (1869–1943) [20],

a brother of *Markus Gailītis* (1882–1942), a graduate (1911) of the Department of Engineering of RPI.

The family of Riga City Gymnasium No. 1 was not too happy about the departure of Principal *J. Stiprais*. The poem «*Dir[ektoram] J. Stiprais kungam aizejot*» (To Dir[ector] *J. Stiprais* on His Departure) written by a pupil, later a veterinarian *Andrejs Šmitmanis* (1915–2004) may be seen as a proof of respect and recognition *J. Stiprais* deserved among his pupils:

You loved new pupil generations,  
Which every year came in troops.  
And now we want to warmly praise you,  
In our First Gymnasium rooms.

You are school's father and the guardian,  
For whom every pupil is dear and good,  
And yet you're leaving for another job,  
Your name here will stay grand and great!

We see you with a youthful vigour  
Walking only where your duty calls;  
But your work and thoughts will be devoted  
Forever to the new generations of Latvian schools.  
And now, parting from our school,  
You will leave, but your work will stay alive.  
Recalling this, new generations will repeat:  
«You – First Gymnasium's First Kriwe!» [21].

In 1934, *J. Stiprais* was entrusted with the organization and management of the new Riga City *V. Olavs* School of Commerce. Exactly for this reason, *J. Stiprais* had to resign from the position of the Principal of Riga City Gymnasium No. 1. *J. Stiprais* worked as the Principal of *V. Olavs* Commercial School only for a couple of years and already in 1935/1936 retired during the academic year [22].

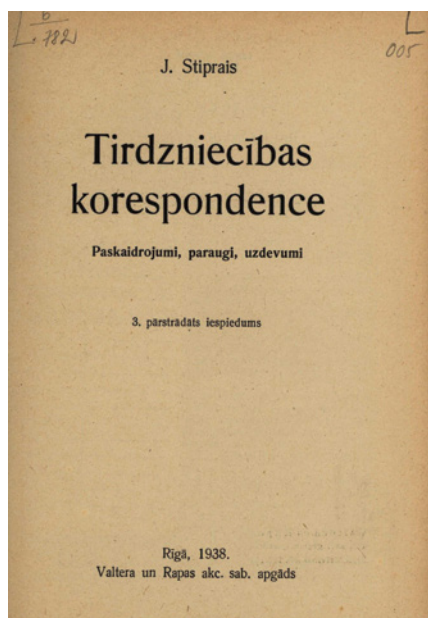
In addition to pedagogical work at school, *J. Stiprais* had been working as a lecturer at the University of Latvia since 1922, teaching Business Correspondence in Latvian and German and Introduction to Cooperative Business [23]. He continued this work at the University also after retirement. He also taught Business Correspondence in Latvian at the Latvian People's University [24]. *J. Stiprais* also delivered lectures at *Krišjānis Barons* Folk University [25].

*J. Stiprais* made a considerable contribution to development of textbooks. He compiled a self-study German language handbook, providing learner the opportunity to learn grammar and some useful

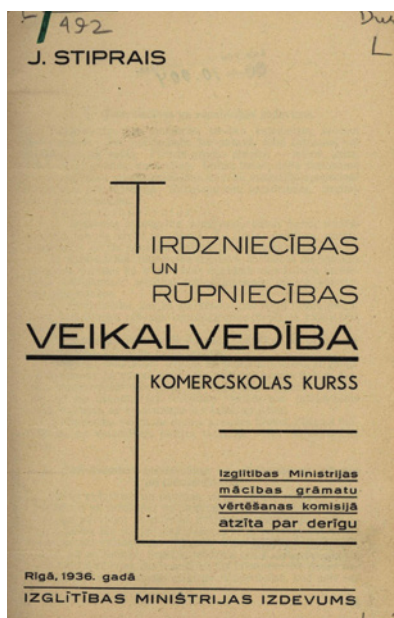


words, which was published by *J. Rauska* Publishing House in *Valka* in 1918. The handbook contained sample conversations, trade letters and petitions, and texts for reading. In 1919, two ABC books for primary schools were published – «*Strauts: mazā ābece*» (*Strauts: Little ABC*) and «*Strauts: ābece*» (*Strauts: the ABC*). His book «*Strauts: lasāma grāmata pamatskolām*» (*Strauts: A Book For Primary Schools*) in four parts (1923–1926) was also published in *Valka*. The first part of this book was printed for the second time – in 1929 in Riga. The book about ancient times by *J. Stiprais* about Rome and Carthage was aimed at providing additional knowledge in history, it was published by *J. Rauska* Publishing House in 1927.

The learning aid for the secondary school course in social sciences «*Pamatjēdzieni par valsti un tiesībām*» (*Basic Concepts of the State and Law*) was first published by *J. Rauska* Publishing House in 1924, the second edition was published in 1927. The third, fourth and fifth revised editions of this book were published in Riga in the 1930s. The textbook «*Tirdzniecības korespondence*» (*Business Correspondence*; 1921, 1930, 1938), as well as «*Tirdzniecības un rūpniecības veikalvedība*» (*Trade and Industrial Store Management*; 1936), «*Tirdzniecības vēstuļu metodika*» (*Methodology of Business Letters*; 1937), which were intended for future entrepreneurs, were published several times in Riga.



**Figure 2.** The Cover of the book by *J. Stiprais* «*Tirdzniecības korespondence*» (1938).



**Figure 3.** The Cover of the book by *J. Stiprais* «*Tirdzniecības un rūpniecības veikalvedība*» (1936).

## Social Activities

*J. Stiprais*, a pedagogue, economist and journalist, is often referred to as a social and cultural worker [22]. He worked at the Society for the Promotion of the League of Nations (LN) founded in Latvia in 1923. The aim of the Society was to promote the development and further establishment of the LN, to support Latvia in this organization, and to popularize the ideas and tasks of the LN in Latvia. The LN was the most important international organization after World War I, the predecessor of the United Nations. *Jānis Čakste* (1859–1927) was one of the founders of the promotion society [26].

Significant and versatile contribution of *J. Stiprais* to social and educational spheres in Latvia was highly appreciated – in 1926, he was awarded the Order of the Three Stars of the 4th class. He received the Cross of Honour of this organization for his work in the main board of the Latvian Red Cross. *J. Stiprais* worked in this organization together with an engineer, RPI graduate (1901), selonian<sup>1</sup> *Spricis Paegle* (1876–1962), and his colleagues from the University of Latvia – doctors, professors *Kārlis Barons* (1865–1944) and *Ernest Putniņš* (1867–1962), as well as many other prominent Latvians [27].

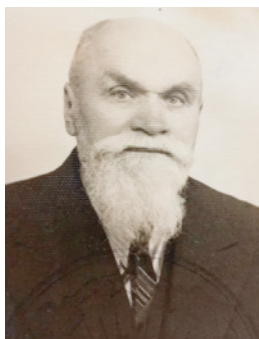


Figure 4. *Jānis Stiprais* (1940s).

*J. Stiprais* spent the end of his life and the years of World War II in Latvia. He advocated the restoration of the independence of the Republic of Latvia and was one of the signatories of the Memorandum of the Central Council of Latvia drawn up on 17 March 1944 [2].

## Conclusions

*Jānis Stiprais*, a pedagogue, economist, journalist and social figure, was «the most prominent personality, an extraordinary figure at the school he managed for twelve and a half years during the existence of

<sup>1</sup> Member of the student corporation «*Selonija*»

Riga City Gymnasium No. 1» in the first half of the 20th century [28], a God-given talent [29]. He is one of the RPI graduates who disseminated the knowledge he gained at the university to his students in commercial schools, gymnasiums and universities both as a pedagogue and as the author of textbooks for future entrepreneurs, reading books for primary schools and social science textbooks for secondary and gymnasium students. Thanks to our knowledge and love for the work of pedagogues, we still remember *J. Stiprais* now, more than seven decades after he passed away. His legends, fairy tales and stories of Latvian folk retain their cultural and historical value.

In the course of the research it was clarified that although two different names of *J. Stiprais* father appear in different documents – *Andžs* [30; p. 64] and *Antons* [2, 5], mistakes were not made, because already during studies at RPI it was found that the father is called both – *Andžs* and *Antons* [18; p. 2]. *J. Stiprais* ran the Riga City Gymnasium No. 1 until 1934 instead of 1935 [2]. *J. Stiprais*, a teacher, economist and journalist, had passed away not on 26 April 1946 [30; p. 88], but on 30 April, which has so far been mentioned as the date of death, apparently buried in the Forest Cemetery in Riga.

*J. Stiprais* had two sons. His elder son died at the early age, while learning at school, his younger son – *Pēteris Stiprais* (1913–1947) – was a medic, he died and was buried in Germany. *J. Stiprais'* wife *Marija Stiprā* (1884–1963) was also a teacher.

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## SOURCES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

**Figure 1.** Jāņa Stiprā Latvijas Republikas pase. LNA LVVA 2996. f., 17. apr., 47347. l., 1. lp.

**Figure 2.** Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka.

**Figure 3.** LNB.

**Figure 4.** Latvijas Universitātes mācībspēka Jāņa Stiprā personālieta.  
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### **Rīgas Politehniskā institūta absolventa Jāņa Stiprā (1870–1946) daudzpusīgā pedagoģiskā un sabiedriskā darbība**

Pētījumā atklāta pedagoga, tautsaimnieka un žurnālista Jāņa Stiprā (1870–1946) mērķtiecība, lai iegūtu izglītību un viņa daudzpusīgā pedagoģiskā darbība Tomskā (Krievijā), Tukumā, Valkā un Rīgā, ieguldījums žurnālistikā, folklorā, sabiedriskajā darbā. J. Stiprais ar Rīgas Politehniskajā institūtā (RPI) iegūtajām zināšanām ekonomikā dalījās ar studentiem Latvijas Universitātē, Latvijas Tautas universitātē un Viļa Olava komerckolā, 20. gadsimta pirmajā pusē bija mācību iestāžu direktors Tukumā, Valkā un Rīgā, darbojās latviešu studentu korporācijā «Selonija», bija viens no 1944. gada 17. marta Latvijas Centrālās Padomes Memoranda parakstītājiem. J. Stiprā nopelni Latvijas labā novērtēti ar Latvijas Republikas augstāko apbalvojumu – Triju Zvaigžņu ordeni.

**Atslēgas vārdi:** Jānis Stiprais, Rīgas Politehniskais institūts, Latvijas Centrālās Padomes Memoranda parakstītāji, skolu direktori.