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Traditions of the Classical Languages Instruction in Latvia as a Mirror of History

Europe's classical heritage reached Latvia (and the whole Baltics) relatively late and under quite dramatic circumstances – it was introduced together with the Christian faith by German conquerors who came to Latvia with sword and fire in the 12th century. Despite these circumstances, the presence of classical heritage plays an essential role in Latvia's cultural environment, as it became one of the foundation stones the nation was built upon in later centuries. The teaching of classical languages did not develop steadily, though, as it had its rises and falls, and all these fluctuations reflected the key events of Latvia's history. Maybe this would have been paradoxical in another territory, but in Latvia, where ruling powers have been changing frequently and fierce



Pic. 1, Riga Dome School

battles have been fought for this geopolitically vital region in North-Eastern Europe, classical heritage has been part of ideological struggles, and therefore the traditions of teaching classical languages reflect history quite directly. Already the first educational institution in Riga where Latin was taught was an ideological and not an educational project – it was the Riga

Dome School, founded in 1211 with a purpose to prepare clerics. After the Reformation it was transformed into a secular

school with its potential reaching nearly the level of a university and boasting a regional center of Neo-Latinity. There were many attempts to transform the Riga Dome School into a university, but they did not gain support from the fathers of the city, as in the 16th century Riga was narrowly pragmatically-oriented city of merchants. Besides, concerns were voiced that the presence of libertine students could undermine the city's moral. The school was an ideological project also in that it strengthened social discrimination, ensuring privileges for ethnic German



Pic. 2, one of the books, published in Riga in Latin

citizens and restricting the rights of non-Germans, i.e., Latvians to education. In its whole history, the Riga Dome School had only a couple of Latvian students, and they were admitted almost only thanks to a misunderstanding. Notwithstanding dominant atmosphere in Riga a small cycle formed in Riga, which maintained classical traditions.

In the 18th century, two new projects were carried out in Latvia's territory, with classical heritage playing an important role in them, and again, education was closely linked to ideology. The first project was the Catholic Theological Seminary in Kraslava, eastern Latvia. With the help of this seminary, the Roman Catholic Church strengthened its positions in eastern Latvia, a territory, which was then under Poland's control and which due to this reason never surrendered to the Reformation. The other project was carried out in Western Latvia, then the Duchy of Kurland. In 1775, a new educational institution, Academia Petrina, was established in the duchy with an aim to gradually develop it into a university. This school was

the Duke's effort to find a new, assertive manifestation for the duchy, which was politically weakened and torn by inner contradictions. Although the academy organized activities unprecedented for Latvia at that time (for example, the first observatory), its resources, both in terms of the academic staff and students, was too weak (9 professors, 50 students). Moreover, in 1795 the duchy ceased to exist and after Poland was divided, because it was under protection of Poland and the territory was bought by Russia. By early 19th century, all Latvia's territory was



Pic. 3, ACADEMIA PETRINA

incorporated in Russia. At that time Russia was reforming its education system, and both the Riga Dome School and Academia Petrina became gymnasiums. Such gymnasiums were set up also in several other Latvian towns, and gradually they were made more accessible to ethnic Latvians.

Classical languages made 41 percent of the curriculums in these schools, thus the first generation of Latvian intellectuals, who studied in the 19th century, in large extent were educated in classical traditions.

The absorption and reception of classical heritage became essential elements in developing national culture. “Dziesminas” (“Songs”), a collection of poems by Latvian poet Juris Alunans (1862 – 1864), consisted mainly of translations, including from Greek and Latin. By translating these texts, the poet asserted the potential of the Latvian language. During the second half of the 19th century first Latvian poets appeared whose poetry showed highly artistic combinations of the individual, national and classical. For example, in the poetry of Eduards Veidenbaums(1867 – 1892) the dramatic way of a young Latvian intellectual, described in romantic contrasts, has intertwined with the reception of Horatio’s motifs. This was also the time that the first generation of Latvian philologists was studying at universities. They became translators and professors working already in the education system of the independent Latvian state and at the first Latvian university, which was established 1919.



Pic. 4, University of Latvia (f. 1919)

The education policy of new-created state (1918) was based upon European traditions, and it was a state ideology to organize the education system in line with the highest European standards, and classical philology flourished during this period. Logical sequence and continuity of the instruction was determined through a two-level system:

- I. High school level – Classical gymnasiums and humanities orientated gymnasiums;
- II. University level: Department of Classical Philology, various other departments.

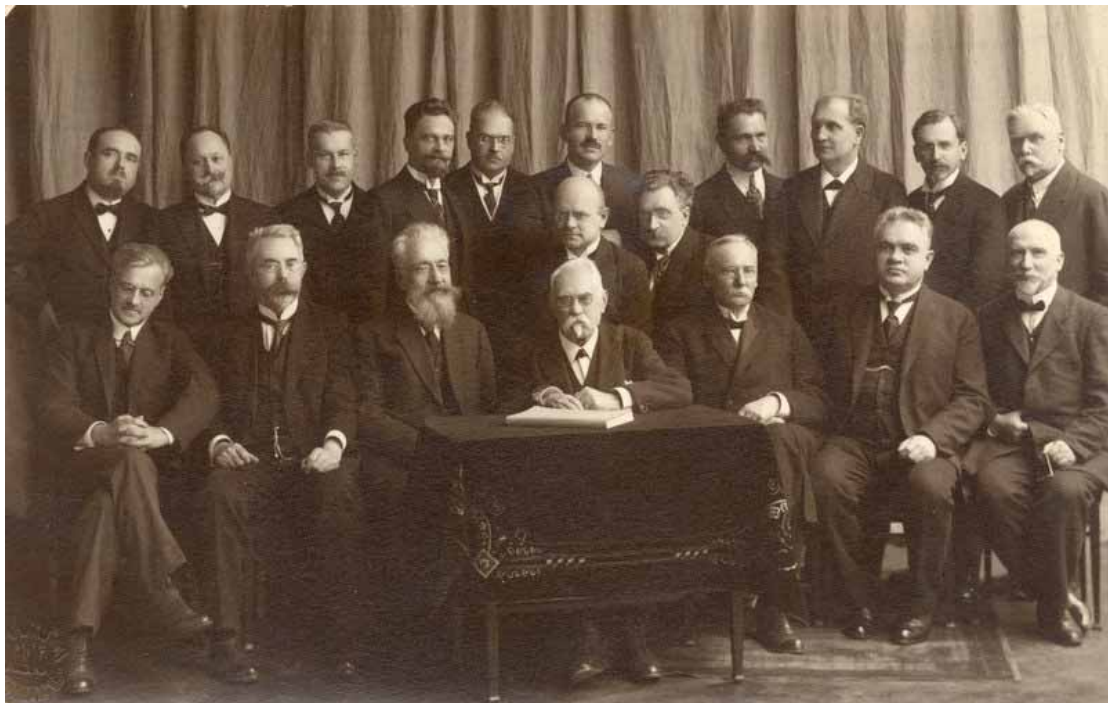
Altogether functioned 4 classical gymnasiums in the curricula of which Latin and ancient Greek were baseline courses, in humanities orientated schools Latin had the status of mandatory course. An evidence of the considerably proficient students' knowledge of Latin is the fact that taking entrance exam in Latin was a requirement for entering several programs (medicine, veterinary medicine, theology, philology).

In the pre-war University of Latvia the significance of classical heritage was not questioned. Besides the department of Classical Philology which prepared highly qualified specialist of the classical languages and civilization, Latin and/or ancient Greek as well as some other courses of Classical Philology had the status of mandatory general educational courses for the students of Humanities and Social Sciences.



**Pic. 5, Professor of Classical Philology
E.Felsbergs, first rector of UL**

The highest level of the classical studies in the whole history of this tradition is connected with the Department of Classical Philology, which started work within the University of Latvia in the academic year 1920/1921. Numbers testify to the growing popularity and high prestige of this department. In the first year there were only two persons applying for studies to the department, but in 1938/39 there were 155 students. Professors were mostly Latvians, studied at the different universities of Europe, prominent scholars of their time, authors of books – Eriks Dils, Peteris Kikauka, Karlis Straubergs.



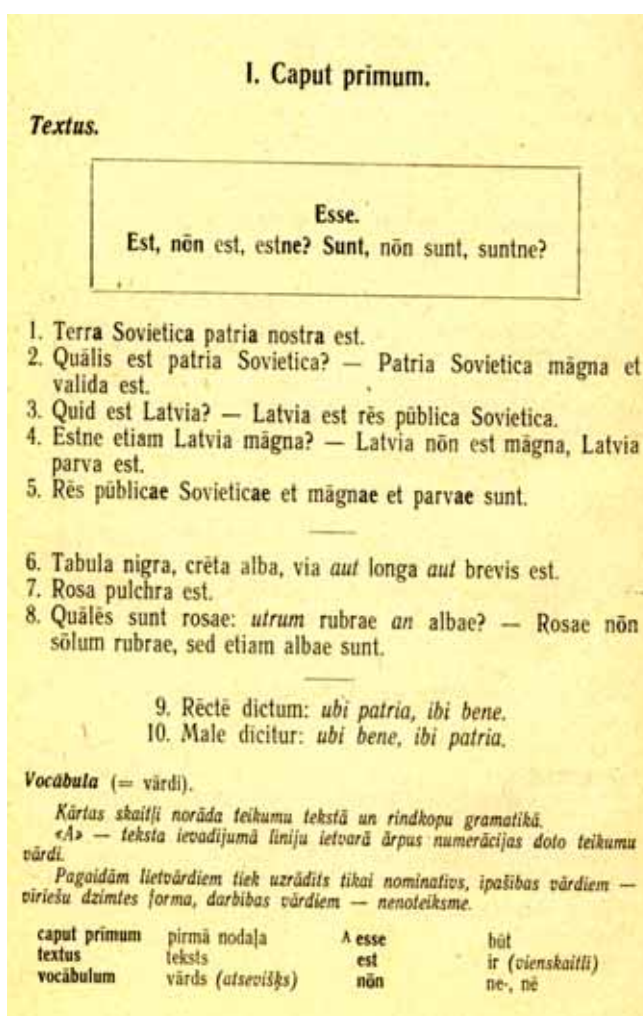
Pic. 6, Teaching Staff of Philology, UL, 1920ties

The curriculum of the courses in the Department of Classical Philology ensured sound practical and theoretical knowledge of the ancient languages as it was based on serious studies of philological disciplines as well profound insight into history and culture of the ancient world. Evident result of the work of the department is number of new translations, manuals, research papers published at that time. Classical heritage was important part of Latvia's cultural life at that time, what we

can see in the theatre, literature, art and architecture. It strengthened European dimension of new created republic.

The attitude towards classical traditions rapidly changed after Soviet occupation. The existent two-level system of Classical languages instruction, which was based on the principle. Soviet regime came with a totally different approach to education, with ideas of forming of builders of communism in educational institutions. For them classical heritage could be only an unnecessary bourgeois junk. highly qualified specialists were considered as potential enemies of regime. Some of them at the end of the war went into exile, some were deported to Siberia.

The Classical Philology Program was closed in 1948. As new specialists were not being prepared this policy actually meant liquidation of Classical Philology as a branch of studies and research. Besides several of the professors were subjected to administrative pressure and even political persecution. At University of Latvia Latin Language instruction for students of Humanities and Social Sciences on a limited scale continued, but in comparison with pre-war period the scope and



Pic.7, page from Soviet-time manual

consequently the contents of the course were insignificant. Students who

had no basic preliminary high school Latin Language course knowledge during the University course managed to cover only some fundamental Latin grammar issues.

For the survival of the classical tradition we are grateful to the enthusiastic and highly motivated specialists of this area as well as to all intellectuals who understood and appreciated the significance of the classical heritage.

90-ties mark the Renaissance of the classical tradition and once again we can see interaction of the power and this field. The regained independence brings about the liberalization of educational system and new understanding and appreciation at the history of nation, country and humanity in general.

Although the restored independence in Latvia has allowed to renew Classical Studies programs at the University of Latvia, by an large the present system of teaching classical languages is a far cry from the pre-war period. There are no more classical gymnasiums in Latvia and there are no plans to reintroduce them. Basic level Latin Language is only an optional course in some of gymnasiums. Amount of hours in most cases is insufficient. This, of course, does not help the university which has to start the instruction of classical languages from a scratch. Nevertheless Classical Philology programs are re-established both for bachelor, master and doctor degrees and positive point is that Classical Philology in the eyes of high school graduates is regaining popularity. The competition for studies at the bachelor level program is about 3- 4 person per slot. Basically this means that gradually young people come into Classical Philology. They study, they graduate and they teach others. But they must to work very hard for results, because their starting level is very low. The role of the Bologna process also has not been positive in this respect, as

the time of studies has been reduced. Education policy of the EU will obviously determine trends in Latvia in the future. Few years ago, while holding the EU presidency, Greece tried to come up with incentives for promoting classical education, but it seems that these efforts have not been very successful. However, our sad experience under the former Soviet regime has shown that classical heritage is immortal and indestructible. It shows flourishing research activity at the re-established activities. Graduates of it have constituted a new generation of teachers and translators. Like plants growing towards the sun can break the pavement, humans striving towards intellectual lights also overcome all obstacles.