

ERIK VÁSZOLYI'S 70 YEARS  
OR WHAT CAN A FINNO-UGRIST DO FOR THE AUSTRALIANS?

Erik Vászolyi was born in March 24, 1933 in Budapest, Hungary. His seventy years is but a demonstration of the truth of the Latin proverb *Historia est magistra vitae*. In the first half of his life E. Vászolyi lived through three major crises of world history. As a child he saw the devastations of World War II, then later, in his youth, as a university student he became an active participant of the promising, but short-lived Hungarian revolution against totalitarian dictatorship in October 1956; and as an adult, he saw the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the joint forces of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968. It was then when he saw his education and training completed, and felt he had learned everything history could teach him in Hungary, so he decided to leave for the West. His decision was understandable and fully justified. As someone who participated in the street-fights against the occupying Soviet troops in Budapest in 1956 E. Vászolyi could foresee that not much good was to be expected in his native Hungary after the re-establishment of Soviet rule over Eastern Europe of which the occupation of Czechoslovakia was but an admonition. E. Vászolyi did not want to spend the rest of his life in that "long arctic winter" Soviet totalitarianism brought upon East-Europe. Anyway, he was then still a young man with his 35 years.

But E. Vászolyi had other teachers than history. Among them the eminent Fenno-Ugrists of his country, professors Ödön Beke and Dávid Fokos-Fuchs. Thanks to his university professors and to his own efforts by the time of his



emigration in 1968 he became a trained Finno-Ugrist and, what was more, an expert in linguistic field work — a rare bird in Hungary that time. In that relatively short period of some twelve years between his graduation and emigration he had time to make two field trips to the Soviet Union, to the Komis (Zyrians) in 1959–1960 and 1966 and collect large amount of invaluable linguistic and folklore material. Preceding these expeditions in a couple of years he also worked as teacher in a secondary school where he happened to be — incidentally? — the teacher and mentor to a boy called Péter Hajnóczy who became later a legendary figure and an eminent author of XXth century Hungarian prose. In the profession of Fenno-Ugric studies E. Vászolyi earned fame with his discovery of the Kolvatas and their language and lore. The Kolvatas are a peculiar population of the Kanin-peninsula in the shore of

the Arctic Ocean in European Russia whose language is Komi (Zyrian), but whose lore is a deposit of Nenets (Yurak-Samoyed) folklore. The Kolvatas is a unique blend of people with mixed Komi and Nenets provenience.

After leaving Hungary and staying for two years in England E. Vászolyi got an invitation from the University of Western Australia in Perth where he soon became an expert of aboriginal languages. It was there where his expertise in Fenno-Ugric linguistics and his training in field work were of real use. No wonder, soon he became a leading expert in aboriginal languages of Australia. After having worked with various language planning programs and having written several books on aboriginal languages and for aboriginees he retired as a professor of University of Western Australia in Perth in 1995. His achievement in the field of languages of Australia is due, indirectly, to his rigorous training in Fenno-Ugristics. And not only to his linguistic studies, but also to history in Hungarian, or rather, East-European context: as a "native" Hungarian he would never forget what does it mean to be subjected, oppressed, misused by the mightier, and evidently, his sympathy went to the "underdogs" of Australian society, to the aboriginees and with his empathic approach he could win their heart and with the help of his linguistic expertise he could understand their mind and language too.

The first steps in E. Vászolyi's career as a linguist and folklorist were connected to a people and a culture of the extreme North. Later, he has studied languages of the southernmost inhabit

able continent of the Earth. He began his professional life as a linguist and folklorist with collecting and saving the rare blend of culture of a Fenno-Ugric tribe in the north-eastern corner of Europe, the Kolvatas who were on the verge of extinction, and later he continued his career in the same spirit in the South, where he tried to save what was left from the aboriginal languages of Australia. As an eminent pupil of both his masters and history E. Vászolyi understood well these languages and cultures are a common heritage and treasure of mankind.

The year 2003 was a vintage year for E. Vászolyi: first, a large collection of his youth was completed by the publication of the 3rd volume of "Zyriaenica" (Specimina Sibirica, Tomus XIX, Savariae; the 1st and 2nd volume were published as Tomus XV and XVII in 1999 and 2001 of the same series, respectively — with texts in Zyrian original and in English translation together with notes and comments also in English) and secondly, another book of him titled "Ausztrália bennszülött nyelvei" (The Aboriginal Languages of Australia) appeared in Hungary. It is a didactically well prepared introduction to the study of aboriginal languages of Australia — the first of its kind in Hungarian. E. Vászolyi's odyssey as a scholar seems to come to a happy end with the publication of these opera which are, in their turn, the beginnings to a new discipline called global linguistics. The teaching of E. Vászolyi's adventurous life and oeuvre is that language is the greatest adventure of life wherever fate happens to thrust us on Earth.

*Isten éltessen, Erik!*

PÉTER SIMONCSICS (Kolozsvar)