
NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

ALEXANDER VASIL'EVICH ISSATSCHENKO, 1910–1978

Alexander Vasil'evich Issatschenko was born in 1910 to an artistically and politically talented St. Petersburg family. Emigrating soon after the 1917 Revolution, he was educated at the classical gymnasium in Klagenfurt, Austria, and at the University of Vienna, where he completed his doctoral work in Slavic and Indo-European philology under the tutelage of Prince N. S. Trubetzkoy. Professor Issatschenko's teaching career mirrored the vicissitudes of Central European history: assistant at the University of Vienna (1935–38), privatdocent (a title without salary) at the University of Ljubljana (1939–41), docent at the Commercial Institute in Bratislava (1941–45), and, after the liberation, professor and chairman of the Russian Department at the University of Bratislava (1945–55), professor and chairman of the Russian Department at the University of Olomouc in Moravia, known during its heyday as the "little Oxford" of Czechoslovakia (1955–65), and simultaneously section chief in the DDR Academy of Sciences (1961–65), and, finally, associate director and heir apparent in the prestigious Institute of Languages and Literatures of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague from 1965 to 1968. When the vision of a decent and civilized socialism—a dream he shared—disappeared beneath the Soviet tank treads in August of 1968, Alexander Vasil'evich left Czechoslovakia for good. For a few congenial years he taught at the University of California in Los Angeles, until, plagued by the stupidities of the U.S. Immigration Service, he resigned in 1971 and returned to the country of his youth, this time as professor and chairman, and later as vice-rector, at the newly founded University of Klagenfurt. He had acquired many honors, including membership in the Academies of Science of Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, and Austria, but his peripatetic career had left him little peace. At the time of his death on a spring morning in 1978—the day after his retirement party, at which he had been presented the Festschrift offered by his friends and students—he had been planning to devote himself to his journal *Russian Linguistics* and to the garden and fruit trees of his small country home not far from Klagenfurt.

The scholarly opus left by Professor Issatschenko is as many-sided as was the man himself. A nearly full bibliography can be found in his Festschrift (*Studia linguistica Alexandro Vasilii filio Issatschenko collegis et amicis oblata*, edited by H. Birnbaum, L. Đurovič, G. Jacobsson, N.-Å. Nilsson, A. Sjöberg, and D. S. Worth [Lisse, 1978]). Suffice it to say here that his two-hundred-odd publications include some twenty books and monographs and deal with Slovene dialectology, Russian and German phonetics, Old Church Slavonic, comparative Slavic lexicology and versification, and a host of other topics—wherever his unfailing curiosity carried him. Above all, though, he was concerned with the structure and the history of the Russian language. His *Die russische Sprache der Gegenwart* is one of the century's great books in the field and—especially in its treatment of the Russian verb—is unlikely to be surpassed for a long time. During his last years, Alexander Vasil'evich worked on problems of Russian morphophonemics, founding and leading what he liked to call the "Los Angeles school," and engaging in spirited polemics with his Soviet colleagues. His major interest, however, lay in the origins and history of the Russian literary language, his views of which, as of other subjects, were based on close knowledge of the texts and the secondary literature. His views were original, at times provocative, and invariably stimulating (see, for example, his *Mythen und*

Tatsachen über die Entstehung der russischen Literatursprache [Vienna, 1975]). His final statement in this field will appear in the form of his two-volume *Geschichte der russischen Literatursprache* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, forthcoming).

More than most scholars, Alexander Vasil'evich will be remembered for his person as well as for his books. Most of his students in Czechoslovakia—a country he loved—have been cowed into silence, and his books have been removed from the library shelves, to the detriment of that country's scholarship and the shame of its leaders. But even those who cannot now mention his name will remember a teacher and colleague who gave unreservedly of himself to students and friends. One of the busiest of scholars, he was never too busy to hear out a student's awkward struggle with a new idea or to take a visiting colleague for a drive along the California coast or into the Carinthian hills for a glass of homemade *most*. Alexander Vasil'evich lived as intensely as he worked. Master of a dozen languages, he mastered the ukulele and the yo-yo as well. He was a musician of almost professional caliber, a passionate fisherman, a gourmet cook, and far and away the best raconteur ever to earn an advanced degree. His keen and capacious mind was only one part of his keen and capacious appetite for all the quality things that life could offer. Alexander Vasil'evich Issatschenko was a great and productive scholar, and he was a complex and fascinating person. It was a privilege to have known him. It was also great fun.

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