

A TRIBUTE
to
FRANCIS H. INSLEY

When I joined in 1961, this club was under the leadership of Francis H. Insley. He was a soft-spoken scholarly writer and a poet, having served as secretary from 1943 to 1977, 34 years, a record unattained before or since.

On admission to membership, I asked Francis for suggestions for topics for essays. He said, "Bill, pick any topic, but remember this is a literary club, so your papers should be related to literary matters, no matter if only remotely related to literary, but literary."

Although sometimes failing his advice, I nevertheless dedicate this essay to Francis. H. Insley

January 19, 2016

William J. Wood

CY'S THIRTY THREE

In 863 A.D., a devout chieftain of Moravia in what is now Serbia came to a momentous decision. He would invite someone to send a missionary to preach the Gospels to his Slavic people.

He may not have realized it at the time, but his decision would have momentous religious and political ramifications to this very day.

Various missionaries had already come to the religiously inclined Slavs, some from as far west as Ireland, but nothing seemed to stick with the Slavic tribes in this heavily forested area. Few roads existed, other than remnants of old Roman highways.

They did have the Olga and Vistula Rivers in the north and the beautiful Danube (Drava) in the south and also access to the Adriatic and Black Seas, but nothing like, say, Indiana, with the large Buffalo traces tramped down over thousands of years of meandering Bison migrations. The Slavs needed an energetic missionary and more importantly a visionary missionary.

The second momentous decision by this remote chieftain was where he sent his request for a missionary to educate his people in the rudiments of their Christian faith. Did he send his messenger west toward Rome? Rome was the residence of the Pope, the successor of Peter himself. Rome also had a strong reliance on Latin accompanied by its Greco-Roman language.

No! He chose to send his request east to the emperor in Constantinople.

Wait, you say. The only emperor in the civilized world was the Holy Roman Emperor in Europe, crowned by the Pope himself.

Wrong!

Ever since the seat of the old Roman Empire was moved to Constantinople in the 300s, the Emperor of Constantinople retained his title despite the fact that his “empire” at times consisted of little more than the ^{neighborhood} ~~environs~~ of Constantinople itself. In the year 800, when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne (Charles I of the Franks) as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople could only “fulminate,” as put by Professor Jean W. Sedlar in her book East Central Europe in the Middle Ages 1000-1500.

Despite the hegemony of Rome in religious and political matters, the Slavic request for a missionary eventually reached the ears of the emperor in Constantinople. The Emperor promptly met with the head of the Church, the Patriarch of Constantinople, to discuss the request. There were doubtless the usual naysayers, pointing out that the Patriarch could hardly spare a missionary to spend valuable resources on the Slavs with little historically likely in return. But the emperor astutely perceived an opportunity not only to educate the Slavs in their faith, but also to poke a stick in the eye of Rome, which had always considered Eastern Europe to be its province.

There was enmity in religious matters between east and west since the Roman Emperor Constantine moved to Constantinople in the fourth century. There also developed competition in political matters between Rome and Constantinople. Trouble boiled until finally in 1054 the Great Schism occurred when the Pope excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople, who promptly excommunicated the Pope!

The Great Schism ultimately devolved into the two separate large churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Catholic Church. Under the Orthodox Church, the bishops and clergy of each nation are under the jurisdiction of its national patriarch. Thus we have the

patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the patriarch of, say, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, etc.

The Patriarch of Constantinople is highly respected as the “first among equals,” you might say.

Despite what I consider some minor Christological issues, the two are devotedly Eucharistic Churches.

So, after consultation, the Patriarch and the emperor decided to send a missionary to the Slavs in the year 862.

There remained only 38 years til the millennium, when many people believed that Jesus would return. If so, there was no time to lose to prepare everyone for the second coming.

Keep in mind that in Constantinople, the affairs of the church and the affairs of the government were completely intermixed. The idea of separation of church and state had never entered people’s minds. So the Patriarch and the Emperor worked hand in hand. The Emperor *even* participated in the election of the Patriarch.

Having decided to send someone to the Slavs, they then considered whom to send. Their interest promptly focused on a learned professor of linguistics and philosophy at the palace school in Constantinople, by the name of Constantin. But it was considered important that the one selected should be at least an ordained priest to preach the gospels authoritatively. It is unclear to me whether Constantin was then ordained or had already been ordained a priest. He was somewhat familiar with the Slavic language in his native Salonika in northern Greece, an area with many Slavs.

Constantin agreed to go and adopted a clerical name, Cyril. He invited his older brother, Methodius, to join in the venture to Slavia. Methodius was also a well regarded resident of Constantinople, an administrator and diplomat of the imperial government.

Despite their high hopes, on arriving in Slavia in 863, the two brothers immediately encountered a major obstacle that would have turned lesser hearts back to Constantinople: The Slavic people were illiterate. They could not read Greek. They had no Slavic alphabet!

Undeterred, the two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, undertook the gigantic task of creating an alphabet for the language of the Slavs! They accomplished this daunting task by 867.

The two brothers became known as the “Apostles to the Slavs.” Their work was a turning point in the cultural development of Slavia. They even composed a civil code for the Slavic people.

Some historians say that Cyril and Methodius did not actually create a new alphabet, but merely used an old pre-existing Glagolitic alphabet, simply adding a few Greek and Hebrew letters here and there, but the majority of linguists agree with me that Cyril and Methodius did indeed create a new Slavic alphabet. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it. The Pope agreed with me, because the two brothers were later canonized as saints.

Professor Sedlar said it well, “They were the first to invent a Slavic alphabet and undertake translations into Slavic on a major scale.”

Indeed, there was an existing proto-alphabet known as “Glagolit,” but it was incomplete. Cyril and Methodius completed an alphabet so that all Slavs could understand in their own language the words as written, with written symbols for all sounds. Cyril and Methodius appear to have formed the Cyrillic alphabet from ancient Greek letters, supplemented by Hebrew letters

and also by letters from the older pre-Cyril proto-alphabet known as “Glagolitic.” The Glagolitic letters were used for sounds not found in Greek.

Rome did not want Constantinople to preempt the Slavs. To forestall this move, the two brothers were invited to Rome in 867. Cyril died in 869 and Methodius died sometime between 882 and 885.

At that time, the Mass – that is the celebration of the Eucharist – was read and sung in Greek in Constantinople and Eastern Europe. So the brothers first translated the Mass book from Greek into the new Slavic alphabet. The Gospels and then the psalms were translated. Ultimately the entire old and new testaments were translated into Slavic so that all the scriptures could be understood by all Slavs. By 890 the Mass Book in the new alphabet was widely used.

Professor Alexander M. Schenker, in his book, The Dawn of Slavic, said that the new Cyrillic alphabet demonstrated “a sophisticated phonetic analysis of Slavic.” The new alphabet was a mélange of Greek, Hebrew, Old Latin and rogue characters. The Slavic alphabet came to be known as the “Cyrillic” alphabet and its use spread throughout the Byzantine areas. At one time perhaps as many wrote in the Cyrillic-Slavic language in Eastern Europe as the Latin-Romantic languages in Western Europe. The Cyrillic alphabet must have been handy because its use spread so rapidly so far.

Here are some maps of east Central Europe then and now, and a graphic comparison of the Roman and Cyrillic Alphabets.

But, as Professor Lehmann has said, “Languages change constantly.” Despite the fact that Cyrillic was well received by peoples in mid and east Europe, over the centuries various forces ^{now} have put pressure on the use of Cyrillic.

During the middle ages the Latin alphabet displaced Cyrillic in the western Slavic languages of the Poles, Czechs, Croats, Slovenes, and Slovaks as these peoples adopted the Roman form of Christianity. Eastern Christianity remained with Cyrillic, adopting Orthodoxy.

In the late 1700s Romanians gave up Cyrillic and adopted the Latin alphabet.

The Turkish invasion of Europe put further pressure on Cyrillic. In 1928 Turkey adopted the Latin alphabet (replacing the Arabic alphabet). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a number of Turkish-speaking ^{peoples} have replaced Cyrillic with the Latin alphabet.

To be sure Cyrillic has its stout defenders. Peter the Great set Cyrillic in its modern form in 1708.

Of course, the Soviet Union did much to preserve Cyrillic, requiring all Soviet controlled countries to use Russian and Cyrillic writing. Russian was taught in all schools.

Russia remains the principal nation still steadfastly using Cyrillic writing and the Cyrillic alphabet. Today most Slavic languages are still written in Cyrillic, including Bulgarian, Serbian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, and Macedonian, as well as Russian.

But even today Serbia actually uses both Cyrillic and Roman alphabets.

Nevertheless, since the breakup of the Soviet Union, several satellite countries beside Turkish countries have begun to shift away from Cyrillic toward “Romanizing” or “Westernizing” their writing.

Cyrillic is now faced with the overwhelming, engulfing irresistibility of the English language and the Anglo-American-Roman alphabet. English is the most widely written language currently in the world, an “astonishing linguistic revelation.” It is the most widely spoken second language. Over 700 million speak English. Only Chinese is more widely spread. English now has the richest vocabulary of all the 2700 spoken languages today.

Across the world, the relentless march of English and its alphabet have even moved into Oriental languages. In 1970 the People's Republic of China developed a transliteration of Mandarin into the Latin alphabet called "Pinyin" for educational purposes (although traditional characters remain in writing and reading).

And, although Vietnam used Oriental characters, under the French the Viets adopted the Latin alphabet.

The remote, small nation of Moldova is an example. Moldova is an agricultural country on the Black Sea. The people speak Moldavian, a language close to Romanian. When the Soviets moved in, Russian was made the official language; Cyrillic script was required on all official documents and governmental mail. Russian speaking and writing were taught in schools. Russian workers were brought in for the industrial jobs. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Moldova has begun to shift "westward." Part of Moldova now uses the Roman alphabet in writing, but other parts still adhere to Cyrillic. I do not know if Moldovans have "Romanized" the spelling of its words. As one Moldovan emigree said, "It's all crazy!"

The English alphabet now has the richest vocabulary but it is not ideal. The Russian Cyrillic alphabet today has 33 letters, compared to our 26 letters. Thus with thirty-three, you might say Cyrillic is more "complete." As of 2011, approximately 252 million people still use the Cyrillic alphabet. About half of them are in Russia.

Linguists tell us it is not hard to learn the Cyrillic alphabet if you put your mind to it, because Cyrillic letters are close to signs for sounds of letters in our Roman alphabet.

Besides Roman and Cyrillic alphabets, a number of other alphabets exist today in the world. The Arabic alphabet is used in the Arab countries and in North Africa. In much of India,

the Brahmic alphabet is used. While in most of China, non-alphabetic systems of writing are used. Both Koreas use the Hangul alphabet.

The experience in Mongolia is much like that of Moldova, switching between the Roman to the Cyrillic alphabet and back.

Ten million people in the Czech Republic use a Slavic language. The Czech alphabet uses a Latin script.

Similarly, forty million people in Poland speak the Polish Slavic language that uses a Latin script for writing.

May 24 is a public holiday honoring Saints Cyril and Methodius in Russia, Bulgaria and Macedonia. The holiday is celebrated on July 5 in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Will English become the world's "lingua franca"? Is it already? Will Russia hold out indefinitely in the use of its beloved Cyrillic while their grandchildren learn the ABCs? As Professors McCrum, Cran and MacNeil said, Russian is becoming "mildly colonized by new words known as Russlish..." As the Moldavian said, "It's all crazy."

William J. Wood

Delivered at the

Indianapolis Literary Club

January 19 2016

Bibliography

Schenker, Alexander M. 1995, "Early Writing" The Dawn of Slavic. Yale Univ Press

Jean W. Sedlar. 1994. East Central Europe in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500, University of Washington Press

Cyrillic Alphabet, 2011. Books LLC, Memphis

Wikipedia, various pieces

Winfred P. Lehmann, 1962, Historical Linguistics, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil, 1986, 1992, 2002, The Story of English, Third Revised Edition, Penguin Books