

20 Years of Scandinavian Studies at Vilnius University – Feast, Play and Puzzles

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Games are distinct from work, which is usually carried out for remuneration, and from art, which is more often an expression of aesthetic or ideological elements. However, the distinction is not clear cut... *Wikipedia*

I study the Icelandic language not because I wish to train in politics or gain knowledge in the art of warfare, but rather to master the mindset of a true man and to rid myself of the deep-rooted spirit of misery and slavery which were fostered in me by my up-bringing. I want to train my mind and my spirit so that I would be able to face danger without fear, so that my spirit would choose to part with my body rather than to betray what it absolutely believes to be true and just. *Rasmus Rask*

Those of us who are lucky to have careers in university teaching, can remember the tickling feeling somewhere inside us – a mixture of joy and fear which we experienced before the first ever lecture in our lives. A belief that you know something that is worth sharing with people who will come to your lecture, mixed with excitement and fear – ‘how will it go?’ Those were my feelings, when 27 years old, at the end of 1986, I came to Vilnius and put small Swedish flags on the desks in various departments, thus announcing a course in the Swedish language. On arrival my ‘baggage’ was far too heavy – just one Russian textbook on Swedish, coupled with a doctorate from St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) and topped by a desire to change the world. My plans were to share the knowledge and the academic spirit derived from some wonderful professors and friends in St. Petersburg and to open a window to another world. One should remember that all this was happening with

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the *iron curtain* still in the background. Sweden, Scandinavia, Europe were much further from Vilnius than Vladivostok or Samarkand. So, that *other* world was primarily of academic nature, in the best meaning of that word. The modern Nordic countries were so far away that they could be approached and taught mainly 'theoretically'. But things went on smoothly; the world changed too, and in 1991 the Department of Scandinavian Studies was established.

It would be unfair to say that Scandinavian languages were *terra incognita* at Vilnius University – there had been a tradition of Swedish lectureship before the World War II.¹ In the 70s and 80s, separate courses on Danish, Swedish and Icelandic were taught by Svetlana Steponavičienė. But never before has there been established a systematic and comprehensive study programme for these disciplines. Though things have changed since the beginning of 90s (in 1991, the first lecturers of Danish and Norwegian arrived in Vilnius; the Swedish lectureship started in 1990). These pioneers of Scandinavian lectureship were Karin Nordquist from Sweden, Trond Thue and Gunnar Johannessen from Norway and Ebbe Flatau from Denmark. We appreciate greatly the contribution made by these and other dedicated lecturers to the academic and social life of our Department.

Launching proper studies was, needless to say, a big undertaking. Two options were considered: to offer academic language courses as secondary to some other main subject, or to organize independent academic studies. We chose the ambitious second option. Lack of local academic staff meant that a very large amount of organizational work had to be shouldered by those involved. We had to persuade lecturers and professors from other departments to prepare new – or to adapt existing – courses, so that they could fit into the curriculum of the Scandinavian Department. It was also necessary to establish links with other universities, invite colleagues from different countries to conduct courses and deliver lectures; in other words, to 'crank up' the study process. Looking back, it seems that all this called for somewhat infernal endeavors, but at the same time it was an incredibly joyful process, especially, when you encountered sympathy and co-operation from colleagues around the world. And of course, one should not forget that those were special

1 Cf. Erika Sausverde. *Lennart Kjellberg och Litauen*. In: Grenzgänger. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Jurij Kusmenko, hrsg. von Antje Hornscheidt, Kristina Kotcheva, Tomas Milosch & Michael Riefler. (=Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik 9). Berlin: Nordeuropa-Institut der Humboldt-Universität, 2006. 275-279.

times in Lithuania, often filled with new ideas requiring courage and faith that everything was possible.²

In the beginning, the Department was working in close collaboration with colleagues from St. Petersburg and Moscow, but very soon, links with universities of Uppsala, Lund, Stockholm, Oslo, Copenhagen, Reykjavik and others were established as well. As a result, the Department hosted a galaxy of wonderful lecturers. Actually, the lack of local academic staff turned out to be an academic luxury for the first students of the Scandinavian Department. They attended lectures on Old Icelandic Literature delivered by the unforgettable Olga Smirnicksaja. Runology and a whole number of other courses were taught by Jurij Kusmenko; Swedish grammar was elucidated by Ulf Teleman; Norwegian literature was introduced by Otto Hageberg; history of Norwegian language – by Arne Torp; whereas Henrik Galberg Jakobsen taught Danish lexicology. The list goes on. One can claim that the seeds sowed by these and other extraordinary specialists have yielded a remarkable harvest. The first international conference of teachers and students *Scandinavistica Vilnensis*, which was held in 1994 and brought together students and professors from Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Norway, Russia, Poland and Sweden became an important milestone in the life of the young department. It was here that a number of Lithuanian students (some of them now teaching at Vilnius University) presented their research papers to an international audience for the first time.

At that time we decided to build a Scandinavian studies programme, based on the template which has been developed for the well-established studies in Lithuanian philology. As a result, our first graduates received a joint degree, but after a while, we were able to secure independent Scandinavian studies. We decided to start every year with one Scandinavian language as the main subject, and repeat this cycle every four years. In such a way, from the early 90s up to now, the Department (from 2006, 'Centre of Scandinavian Studies') has produced fifteen generations of graduates with a Bachelor's degree, and twelve – with a Master's. Altogether, the Department has trained over 200 specialists in Danish,

2 It is worth noting that the first post-independence Minister of Education and Culture Darius Kuolys (famous already in Soviet times as a publisher of an underground literary magazine) who in 1992 welcomed new facilities of the Scandinavian Department, took up his post at the age of 28.

Norwegian and Swedish. The language courses of Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, – after a while, also Icelandic – were also offered for four to five terms to students specializing in a range of different subjects. These studies attracted about 100 students on different levels each year. In 2006, the Finnish lectureship was moved to the Department, and we started to offer courses in Finnish studies. Gradually, Scandinavian Studies have become one of the most popular subjects at Vilnius University. We keep in touch with many of our alumni who work in different companies and organizations both in Lithuania and abroad. Many of them work for different EU institutions, some have chosen academic careers and gained professorships in universities in Sweden and Canada.

We offered Bachelor and Master's degrees and, after few years, the first PhD students completed their course. The PhD course was organized in collaboration with other departments and universities.

Organizing studies on all these levels was challenging and an incredibly time- and energy-consuming task, but at the same time, it was a truly thrilling process. In our endeavors we could rely on the experience and commitment of friends. One such friend has been professor of Humboldt and St. Petersburg universities, dr. Jurij Kusmenko, who has participated in this educational process from its very beginning. In 2011, in grateful recognition of his contributions, professor Jurij Kusmenko was awarded the *Doctor Honoris Causa* of Vilnius University.

From 1999, the Department has been collaborating with professor Tomas Riad from Stockholm University, who for 3 years has also been a guest professor of the department³ and contributed significantly to the establishment of PhD courses by consulting both students and staff in their research work.

As our Department grew in strength and stature, we continuously evaluated our chosen direction consulting with our closest neighbours – Scandinavian philologists in Riga and Tartu.⁴ Our collaboration received a new impetus after Daniel Sävborg took over the professorship in Tartu, and we have found common interests in the Old Scandinavian literature.

³ Thanks to *NorFa* (nowadays *NordForsk*) guest professorship programme.

⁴ Tartu University hosts the only professorship of Scandinavian (Swedish) languages in Baltic states, which for many years has been sponsored by the Swedish government (university of Tartu was founded by Swedish King Gustav Adolph). Since *Scandinavistica Vilnensis* conference in 1994 we worked with the late professor Stig Örjan Ohlsson.

Openness and active collaboration with colleagues have remained the principle feature of departmental strategy throughout its existence.⁵ The Department has hosted many wonderful teachers and researchers, to whom all the staff and students are deeply indebted. *Ingen nämnd, ingen glömd*,⁶ as they say in Swedish. Nevertheless, I will risk to name but a few names of people to whom we owe our deepest gratitude – Kjell Ivar Vannebo, Eskil Hansen, Jan Terje Faarlund, Svein Lie, Else Ryen, Ruth Vatfedt Fjeld, Per Thomas Andersen, Jan Hognestad, Else Mundal, Elsie Wijk-Anderson, Claes Åneman, Kerstin Thelander, Sven-Göran Malmgren, Lars-Gunnar Andersson, Kerstin Norén, Sven Lange, Rune Palm, Cecilie Falk, Hans Strand, Jan Svanlund, Maria Koptjevskaja Tamm, Anna Vogel, Ulf Olsson, Karin Aronsson, Thomas Lundén, Lars Heltoft, Matthew James Driscoll, Thomas Bredsdorff, Hanne Ruus, Frans Gregersen, Jens Normann Jørgensen, Ole Togeby, Tore Kristiansen, Bent Preisler, Anatoly Liberman, Sven H. Rossel, Valerij Berkov, Elena Tjerkalina, Anton Zimmerling, Marina Rusakova, Vésteinn Ólason, Tom Lundskær-Nielsen – and many other colleagues and friends including younger generations from Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Stockholm, Uppsala, Lund, Gothenburg, Copenhagen, Aarhus, Roskilde, Odense, Helsinki, Minnesota, Wien, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Iceland, London, Riga, Tartu. They have been and continue to be a source of inspiration to us all!

Our first course structure – a combination of Lithuanian and Scandinavian studies – proved to have a lasting legacy. High quality comparative studies carried out in the Department are a testimony to this. We take special pride in the fact that the Lithuanian sociolinguist, dr. Loreta Vaicekauskienė, “matured” while being part of Scandinavian Studies, and is now an inexhaustible source of research ideas and inspiration for the students. We are happy, too, that professor of Lithuanian Language, dr. Axel Holvoet, is now supervising Scandinavian students in linguistics, in his capacity as a part-time professor of our Centre.

At present, the Centre has 20 full- and part-time staff. Ten of them hold doctoral degrees, and are specialists in different Scandinavian languages and other fields of research – most of them are our former students. The last *viva* of the doctoral thesis in November 2012 – Rasa Baranauskienė’s *Celtic and Scandinavian Language and Cultural Contacts during the Viking*

5 We calculated that between 2008-2010 the department hosted 42 foreign visitors – lecturers and writers.

6 ‘Nobody mentioned, nobody forgotten.’

Age (supervisor Jurij Kusmenko) and Ugnius Mikučionis' *Modality and the Norwegian Modal Verbs* (supervisors Tomas Riad and Axel Holvoet) with Anatoly Liberman (Minnesota), Daniel Sävborg (Tartu), Johan van der Auwera (Antwerp) and Vladimir Plungian (Moscow) as the examiners – turned out to be a feast even for the sophisticated academic audience.

During its 20 years of existence, the Department has hosted numerous international conferences and seminars, which will continue to be a source of inspiration for students and staff for years to come. Here I will mention some of them. The *Academic Writing* workshop with Lotte Rienecker and Peter Stray Jørgensen (1999), which provided a solid background for this course at Vilnius University. Small, but significant *Writing Grammars: The Scandinavian Experience* (2006), which gathered authors of Nordic and Lithuanian academic grammars – Staffan Hellberg, Svein Lie, Lars Heltoft and Axel Holvoet. *Dialogues with the Viking Age* (2007) on Old Norse literature, mythology, culture, social life and language, which resulted in the book *Approaching the Viking Age*. Being always conscious of the fact that we are teaching “small” languages in a “small” country we have always been curious as to how similar studies are organized around the world. This curiosity has resulted in several international conferences. The biggest of them *Nordistik utanför Norden* (Scandinavian Studies outside Scandinavia), held in 2005, brought together specialists in Scandinavian Studies from over 30 universities in Europe, USA and Canada. This conference provided a forum for discussion of our purposes and our methods. The conference *Modules and Models. University Study Programmes* (2008) was an attempt to respond to the changes in the studies of humanities in the modern times.

These discussions resulted in the introduction of new programmes in 2011. Enhancement of interdisciplinary approach and extension of joint studies were widely implemented as a result of these discussions. In addition to more traditional subjects, such as linguistics, literature, Old Norse studies, our students are now also introduced to the Scandinavian theater, films and the intellectual history.⁷ During this process, the Centre has gained new friends, such as David Östlund, a unique specialist in the Scandinavian intellectual history, and Claire

⁷ The admission quotas have also changed. At present we accept students to study Danish, Norwegian and Swedish every year, which has led to the increase in the number of students.

Thomson, a specialist in the Scandinavian film. The *Scandinavian and European Studies* MA programme is conducted in collaboration with The Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University. Our students have the opportunity to select additional programmes across other departments in the university. In turn, we offer Scandinavian Studies as an additional discipline for students from other departments. We view this approach as particularly befitting in the country where hundreds of academic and non-academic structures are co-operating with the Nordic countries. Building the image of neighboring Scandinavia as a success story, is useful and fruitful for specialists in different fields.

Throughout its existence, the Centre, often together with the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Vilnius, has initiated different discussions which were open to the wider audiences.⁸ We have invited Scandinavian authors, publishers, scholars, journalists et al., and, together with Lithuanian colleagues organized a series of seminars focused on particular themes, e.g. *The Rhetorics of Opposition, Language and Identity* (2005), *Globalization and Roots* (2007), *Voices from the Province* (2008), *Migration and Literature in Nordic Countries* (2009), *The Revived Family Saga in the 21st Century* (2010), *Fictional Autobiographies* (2011), *Children's literature* (2012)⁹ etc. The Centre has had the pleasure to host such authors as Torgny Lindgren, Tomas Tranströmer, Per Olov Enquist, Carl-Göran Ekerwald, Märta Tikkanen, Theodor Kallifatides, Odd Abrahamsen, Ragnar Hovland, Sofi Oksanen, Kim Blæsbjerg, Helena Henschen, Ragnhild Nilstun, Erling Kittelsen, Ari Behn, Kjell Askildsen, Juha Itkonen, Bent Vinn Nielsen, Suzanne Brøgger, Klaus Rifbjerg, Leif Davidsen, Carsten Jensen, Jonny Halberg, Claus Beck-Nielsen, Taija Tuominen, Selma Lønning Aarø, Håkan Nesser, Herbjørg Wassmo, Kjell Westö, Kristian Lundberg, Dag Solstad, Per Petterson, Erlend Loe, Svein Nyhus, Lone Aburas, Timo Parvela, Jonas Karlsson, Ulf Peter Hallberg and many others.

- 8 We have always been encouraged by the incredible support from The Nordic Council of Ministers, The Swedish Institute, Danish and Norwegian Ministries of Education, CIMO in Finland, Sigurður Nordal Institute, the embassies of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden in Lithuania. Without this invaluable support, many of our initiatives and projects would not have been fulfilled.
- 9 These seminars became possible thanks to The Nordic Council of Ministers Coordinating Committee for Nordic Studies Abroad (SNU). It is sad that this activity of NCM has ceased.

Apart from teaching and research, the Department has been actively involved in the translation of Scandinavian literature, and introducing it to the broader Lithuanian audience. It is satisfying to see the increasing numbers of Scandinavian books being translated into Lithuanian. Scores of books by Scandinavian authors have been translated by members of the Department and by former students. We are proud of our colleague Eglė Išganaitytė-Paulauskienė, who in 2009 was awarded the Lithuanian PEN Center prize for her translation of *Our Stealing Horses* by Per Petterson. Our former student and colleague Raimonda Jonkutė who twice (in 2008 and 2012) won the IBBY (Lithuanian section) prize for the best translation of children's books (Ulf Stark and Sven Nordqvist), and was nominated for the IBBY Honour List in 2014.

Our own series of publications *Scandinavistica Vilnensis* was many years in making. So, it is particularly satisfying that our first publication was a complete translation of the *Poetic Edda* from Old Icelandic, which can be viewed as a significant contribution into Lithuania's cultural life. This work was carried out by Aurelijus Vijūnas, who dedicated 13 years to its completion.¹⁰ Our publications include both academic and teaching titles – grammars, dictionaries of Scandinavian languages, collections of articles and monographs, such as *Texts and Play. The Ludic Aspect of Karen Blixen's Writings* (2011) by Ieva Steponavičiūtė. The most recent title in this series is *The Grammar of Icelandic Language* (2013) by our dear former colleague Rasa Ruseckienė.

The 20th anniversary of the Department of Scandinavian Studies in Vilnius University coincided with the completion of the new facilities in the Centre, which were inaugurated in September 2011, with the presence of the University management, the ambassadors of the Nordic countries and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. It was symbolic that the conference dedicated to the anniversary of the Department was held in a physically and spiritually reinvigorated environment. All this became possible thanks to the dedication and commitment demonstrated by every member of the Department. It delights us to see that this once unknown field of studies, after 20 years, has become part of the academic and cultural life of Lithuania. One can only hope that it will have a bright future.

¹⁰ Dr. Aurelijus Vijūnas, who is working at the National Kaohsiung Normal University in Taiwan, started his academic career at Vilnius University, and continues to work closely with the Department.