

A Mind That Understands Words...

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I once had the honour of becoming acquainted not with Tatiana Vladykina, but with Tatiana Perevozchikova¹. It was so long ago... It was in 1985, in Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi Republic. It was an exciting Finno-Ugric scholarly congress: for the first time, Western Finno-Ugrists were allowed to visit a Finno-Ugric region in Russia, and to meet many more Russian colleagues than the Congresses abroad could host. It was also a treat to many Eastern European scholars, who accessed for the first time Russia's Finno-Ugric regions, which they had been working on for decades. It was the beginning of the opening up, the first swallow: some five years later, it became possible to access many other regions. The Tatiana Perevozchikova whom I met had just published one, or perhaps even more books, in the Golden krez² series, collections of Udmurt folklore with Russian translations, my first contact with Udmurt folk culture. I am sure that there remained much I could not access, as I did not know anything at the time about folk culture in general and Udmurt folk culture in particular. But I remember the day Tatiana offered me that book.

Although our acquaintance goes far back in time, the same cannot be said of our friendship. We did not meet for decades. I started visiting Udmurtia in 1994. I decided, in the first decades of my discovery, not to seek out the Udmurt scholars and I am not sure I regret my choice. First of all, I was not interesting for them as I had no academic (or other) position. I was only an interested amateur. But I think I very much wanted to avoid the kind of experience my good friends and teachers had: Péter Domokos³ and Jean Luc Moreau⁴ were famous when they were able to visit Udmurtia for the first time, and they had whole rich programmes set up for them. I wanted time and leisure. I did not want anything official. Just to get acquainted with people, with ordinary people and get to know them by coming back and coming back again. I also suppose that I was not ready... Thus, my first contact with Udmurt colleagues was, as far as I remember, in 2001, the last year before the defence of my dissertation. Then, I already had a status. I was a teacher at Tartu University (although not in Finno-Ugristics) and I prepared a dissertation about Udmurt identity and literature. But the habits remained: I did not inform anyone of my visits, I was not expected with a red carpet, I could live at my friends' places and travel alone from village to village to meet different acquaintances I made throughout the years.

My closer relations with the Udmurt scholarly world are the fruit of the last years. Some of the Udmurt scholars I met through friends, but then the habit came of visiting them at the research Institute, which is now certainly one of the structuring places of my Udmurt world. But even then, our paths, Tatiana's and mine, did not cross. However, I heard about her as a brilliant and strict teacher, of whom, I am sorry to say, many were afraid. I understand now that those who were afraid of her direct speech were probably those who were not yet very close to her, and had not had the opportunity of benefiting from her harshness and to feel the benevolence behind it. And after all, hierarchy is very deeply

rooted in Russia, and younger scholars could not avoid being in awe of such a coryphée. It requires maturity to start feeling comfortable and easy. All the more, because Tatiana Vladykina is one to say things as they are, without circumlocutions. Especially in the Udmurt world, where one is accustomed to extreme caution, such a direct approach can be frightening.

But our paths did cross at last, I suppose, when I was ready. It was at Russia folklorists' congress in Tula, in 2018. I was there with my good colleague Nikolai Anisimov, who is indirectly part of Tatiana Vladykina's school. She did not supervise his work, because of a technicality. Nikolai defended his doctoral dissertation at the University of Tartu, where he had a supervisor, and when he looked for additional support in Udmurtia, he turned to a teacher he knew pretty well, who had been his supervisor for his graduation. I suppose it would have been awkward to address such an authority. So, Galina Glukhova was his direct mentor, although she is undoubtedly a direct disciple of Vladykina. Therefore, if not a scientific mother, she is in the distant – and close – place of a grandmother.

We decided to attend her presentation, for she is always interesting, and indeed she was! She talked about a poem I was well acquainted with, and this gave me the opportunity of asking her a question. So started an interaction, which continues, if anything more and more deeply. We decided to find a place to continue our conversation, the three of us. I remember fragments: I commented about a presentation, in which a young scholar talked about Béla Bartók's folk songs and sang one of them, but with an operatic voice, which for me did not fit at all with the simplicity and purity of the song, and she agreed with me. We talked about the collection of articles we had thought of editing, about Udmurt contemporary culture and I asked her to write something about the power of words for the Udmurt. What do the Udmurt intend to say when they say something? I had understood that between the 'formal'

meaning of the words and the reality in communication, there is a whole metaphorical world and I thought she was the best person to unravel this mystery. We talked about the importance of collecting dreams and of working on these texts.

The conversation was long. I discovered how fascinating exchanging ideas was with her, and I suppose she was intrigued and interested to face an external reflection on her culture. We decided that, as we were leaving Tula for Moscow the next day, we could travel together, and so we did. True enough, we had tickets in first class, and there were no more first class tickets left. Never mind, we were happy to give our places to Tatiana's neighbours and the three of us enjoyed our continued conversation. In Moscow, it was not over! We had some hours before our plane, and we spent them in a café, having lunch with Tatiana.

The foundations were set. Next time I was in Izhevsk, I was invited at the Vladykins' place in Yakshur. Others have mentioned this small Udmurt heart, with its inner sanctum, the *kuala*, and Tatiana's memorable porridge cooked on its open fire. The Vladykins are Christians, and they introduced in the otherwise very traditional *kuala* a high window in the form of a cross that allows light in. Otherwise, it respects the traditional rules, as does the rest of the household. Unfortunately, I had not the luck to meet her goat. She had told us many stories about her goat in Tula, and I remember how shocked a good friend was, who had admired all the beautiful flowers offered to Vladimir Emel'yanovich for his 80th birthday, when she learned that they had been the delight of the goat's dinner. In this visit, I talked more to her husband, who was now more rarely to be met, and we talked both about the future of the study of traditional culture in Udmurtia and about the Nenets writer Yuri Vella, with whom I had long made fieldwork and whom Vladimir Vladykin also admired. Meanwhile, she had proposed that I go over to "thee" (informal 'you'), which is a huge step in Russia. But Vladykina has studied, as a post-graduate, in Tartu, and she

knows that I am more comfortable with the absence of formality; this is the way we communicate to this day.

She has a deep and subtle feeling for linguistic accuracy and nuances. She accepted our invitation to edit our films about Udmurt ceremonies, which had been criticised for the Russian subtitles of the prayers, which did not transmit the poetic beauty of the original. She finally changed little, for subtitles do not allow for much flexibility, but by changing a word, or even just the place of a word, she was able to change the whole atmosphere transmitted, for which we are very grateful. For not only is she an Udmurt culture bearer, she is also very skilled and sensitive to Russian, a language she beautifully masters the scientific and literary register of.

For me, Tatiana has become the main person I consult about Udmurt words and meanings. Knowing several languages means also knowing that, however useful a bilingual dictionary is, it unavoidably simplifies and does not transmit the worldview richness expressed in words. Who better than she? If I want to understand the real meaning of what the Udmurt ask God for in their prayers, I cannot be content that *shud*, in Udmurt, is the word for happiness. What does happiness, for an Udmurt, mean? Moreover, I now understand Udmurt enough to identify, in the Udmurt texts of prayers, that the sacrificial priest asks God for *his* health, *his* happiness. As if God mastered all that is health and all that is happiness, and we ask him to share it. This detail is never translated, but I feel that it contains a whole worldview, and who better than Tatiana to open it to me? I wanted once to talk about a person I had met, to say that she was simple, simple as a major compliment like easy, unadorned, modest, pleasant. But the Udmurt word that exists for “simple” is also an equivalent of “ordinary”, and this is very far from what I wanted to express. Tatiana opened for me the world of possibilities that the use of two adjectives allows, the one influencing the way the other is received.

I like her straightforwardness, I feel comfortable with it. I like that she is always happy to help and to support. One of our younger colleagues, a very skilled and sensitive doctoral student, is not comfortable with writing. Tatiana is always happy to write with him and to help him to overcome this obstacle. I am so very grateful to her that we have become such good friends and colleagues in the last years and that she helps me to delve deeply into the Udmurt world and the Udmurt intellectual layers in order to be able to better understand a culture I am passionately interested in.

Notes

- ¹ Tatiana Vladykina's maiden name.
- ² Udm. *Zarni krez'*.
- ³ Péter Domokos (1936–2014), Hungarian Finno-Ugrist and specialist in Udmurt literature and of Finno-Ugric literatures in general. In 1975 he published a substantial 550-page study of Udmurt literature, the first outside Udmurtia. Even then, until 1990 he could not discover Udmurtia directly.
- ⁴ Jean Luc Moreau (born 1937), French Finno-Ugrist, former professor of Finno-Ugric languages at INALCO, Paris. He learned Udmurt and in 1966 wrote an article in French about Udmurt literature, wherefore his name was well-known in Udmurtia.



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Photo 1. Tatiana Vladykina chairing a session. Congress of Russia's anthropologists in Izhevsk. 03.07.2019. Photograph Eva Toulouze.



Photo 2. Tatiana Vladykina and Nikolai Anisimov, Ludorvay, Udmurtia, Field symposium, September 2018. Photograph Eva Toulouze.



Photo 3. Tatiana Perevozchikova dedicates her book, on the picture Vasili Vanyshv and the Khanty writer Eremey Aypin. Syktyvkar, CIFU, August 1985. Photograph Eva Toulouze.



Photo 4. Tatiana Vladykina with the Udmurt folk singer Dzhakapay and Nikolai Anisimov at the Congress of Russia's anthropologists in Izhevsk. 02.07.2017. Photograph Eva Toulouze.



Photo 5. EvaToulouze's lecture at the Udmurt Institute: from left to right Elena Popova, the institute's librarian, Galina Glukhova, Tatiana Vladyina and Tatiana Russkikh. Photograph Eva Toulouze.



Photo 6. Tula Congress of Russia's folklorists: Tatiana Vladykina with a young Mari scholar, Eva Toulouze and Nikolai Anisimov, March 2018. Photograph Eva Toulouze.



Photo 7. Tatiana Vladykina and Anna Mutina. Congress of Russia's anthropologists in Izhevsk, 29.07.2019. Photograph Eva Toulouze.



Photo 8. Tatiana Vladykina in a Field conference in Udmurtia, September 2016. Photograph Eva Toulouze.