

SIGITAS NARBUTAS

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Francysk Skaryna, *The Little Traveller's Book*, and Us¹

It was the 27th year of the war with the Moscow. Taking advantage of a favorable political situation, Ivan III, Duke of Moscow, attacked the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1492. His son and father of Ivan the Terrible, Vasily III, later continued the aggression. The war came to an end only after his death – a truce was concluded in 1537, so this war lasted as long as for 45 years.

At that time, Francysk Skaryna, bent over his lectern in Prague, was writing his famous preface to *The Ruthenian Bible*, beseeching his Ruthenian compatriots to strengthen their faith and to educate themselves. For this purpose, it would be best to use the Holy Scripture, since, in his words, “This book teaches about the beginning and the end of all possible wisdom – the God Almighty. In this book, all the laws and all the rights are written down – people must follow them on earth. In this book, you will find all the remedies for the mind and body. Here we also find the moral teaching of philosophy, and how to love God for own sake, and our neighbor, for God’s sake. Here, the case of every human community and every town is also laid out, and here it is shown how public good is increased through faith, ties of love and harmony of opinion. All seven liberal arts are sufficiently laid out here. If you want to know grammar, or, speaking in Ruthenian, the lore of letters, which teaches to read and write well, you will find it in the entire Bible, in the Psalms – read them. If you want to understand logics that teaches you how suitably to distinguish right from wrong, read the book of Saint Job or the epistles of the Holy Apostle Paul. If you are resolved to have knowledge of rhetoric, that is, the art of eloquence, read the books of Solomon. These are the three arts of the word. If you desire to learn music, that is singing, you will find plenty of verses or holy hymns throughout the book. If you wish to learn arithmetic and how it, concisely, but correctly, teaches you to count, read the fourth book of Moses more often. If you want to have geometry, or in Ruthenian, land measurement, before your eyes, read the book of Joshua. If it is astronomy, or the science of the stars, then in the beginning of this book, you will find out about the creation of the sun, moon, and stars; in the book of Joshua, about how the sun stayed in one place all day; in the books of Kings, how the sun went back a few feet; in the Holy Gospel, you will also find out about a new star that rose at the hour of the birth of our savior Jesus Christ.”² Skaryna was the first in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and one of the first in this part of Europe, which on the west is bounded by the Elbe, on the east by the Dnieper, on the north by the Baltic Sea, and on the south, by the Black Sea, to

¹ This is the text of remarks given on May 10, 2022 at the Vilnius City Hall.

² Translated from: Францыск Скарына, *Прадмовы і пасляслоўі* (Мінск: Выдавецтва «Навука і тэхніка», 1969), 62–63.

appreciate the significance of the Bible in this way, exalting the boundless powers of the religious and secular education of man and nation concealed in it.

What do we know about Francysk Skaryna today? Has our earlier knowledge of him grown? It certainly has somewhat increased. Within the last five years, Skaryna's date of birth has been determined. It was accomplished by the acclaimed Balticist and Slavist Ilya Lemeshkin. He carefully examined the portrait of the translator and publisher of *The Ruthenian Bible* and discovered that the portrait, in accordance with the traditions of European portrait art, carried indication of the age Skaryna had been at when he had started publishing the Holy Scripture in 1517. As Skaryna was 47 years old at that time, he must have been born in 1470. Other biographical data for him remain unchanged. I will briefly review his biography, so that we may properly evaluate Skaryna's merits in the perspective of the almighty time.

The future pioneer of printing in Lithuania was born in Polotsk in 1470. His father, Luka Skaryna, was a rich Orthodox merchant trading in hides and furs. Francysk has an elder brother, Ivan, who took over the business after the death of their father. It is unclear where Francysk received his primary education. He must presumably have gained his interest in Catholic culture from the Bernardines and completed his primary studies in Vilnius. In 1504–1506, Skaryna studied at the University of Cracow, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree. It is unknown where he obtained his master's degree and where he acquired his knowledge of medicine. In any case, in September of 1512, he passed his examinations externally at the University of Padua and obtained a Doctor of Medicine degree. Afterwards, we see him in Prague: in 1517–1519 or 1520, he published a translation of the Old Testament into Church Slavonic (of which, 23 books are known) in the printing house belonging to a merchant called Severyn. After moving to Vilnius in 1520, he continued his publishing work. About 1522, he printed *The Little Traveller's Book*, and in 1525, *The Acts and Epistles of the Apostles*. These books mark the emergence of printing in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. After 1525, Skaryna married the widow of a Vilnius city councilor and mayor, Jurgis Odvernikas, Margarita (she died soon after 1530). He had two sons with her, Francysk (František) and Simeon. In 1523–1535, Skaryna served as personal physician and secretary to the Bishop of Vilnius, John of the Lithuanian Dukes. In early 1530, Skaryna visited Königsberg on the invitation of Albert of Brandenburg, but soon he went back to Vilnius. After his departure, the Duke of Prussia sent a letter to the Vilnius Voivode and Grand Chancellor Albertas Goštautas, requesting to send back two of his subordinates, a Jewish physician and a printer, whom Skaryna had brought away to Lithuania.

This return to Vilnius marks the trail of misfortunes, which would plague Skaryna incessantly for several years. His printing house burned down in the fire that ravaged Vilnius in 1530. His wife died soon after. In 1532, creditors of Skaryna's brother Ivan sued Skaryna to the court demanding compensation for his brother's debts, so he had to spend some time in a Poznan prison. Owing to the efforts to his nephew Roman, Skaryna was finally acquitted by King Sigismund the Old. However, the king's favorable judgment was not enough to allow Skaryna resume book publishing in Vilnius. At that time, the city magistrate and the entire community of townsmen roiled with disagreements concerning businesses and properties. The losses incurred by the fire and the quarrels of Vilnius people crushed his last support, the backing by wealthy Vilnius citizens, which until then had been breathing life into Skaryna's efforts. So Skaryna, with his children, left for Prague, where he served as gardener to King Ferdinand I Habsburg. We may deduce the time of Francysk's death from a royal letter of January 29, 1552 issued to his son Simeon concerning the return of Skaryna's property to the heir. Skaryna's other son, also named Francysk, perished during the fire that devastated Prague in 1541. Simeon was still alive in 1593.

Looking at the publications of Francysk Skaryna from the five-century perspective, one of their qualities comes to mind first. Together with other phenomena, works, and events of those times, they mark an increase in the creative powers of the state and society in the period from approximately 1510 to 1530. At that time, Sigismund the Old steadfastly modernized the state economy. Ensuring a constant flow of revenues into the Duchy's treasury, he put in order the revenues of the ducal estates (1514 and 1529 regulations for the Aukštaitija estates), replaced the feudal rent in kind with monetary rent (1527 and 1529 economic regulations for Žemaitija), ordered to enumerate the nobles and private estates, and distributed taxes and military duties equally among them. He left an even more lasting imprint on legislation when he, by his 1506, 1522, and 1529 privileges, he pledged himself to enacting laws with the consent of the Council of Lords, and when he approved the First Statute of Lithuania in 1529. Far advanced for those times, this document confirmed the statehood of Lithuania and united the population into an ethnopolitical community. According to Darius Kuolys, "The Statute – *the Christian law* – raised the idea of legal equality of people and made all residents of the Grand Duchy subject to one code of laws, uniting them into one Christian nation. It was not the legal code of the closed feudal class, but of the entire society, even if this society was socially stratified and unequal. Many provisions of the Statute had a universal character, encompassing all social strata. Equality of citizens – nobility and wealthy townsmen – was asserted in courts, and the peasants were granted the right to participate in court proceedings."³

The first steps towards the canonization of Prince Casimir, already famous for his miracles, contributed towards the confessional growth of the state and society. As early as in 1516, the Vilnius Bishop Albertas Radvila approached the Pope in this matter first in a letter, and later in person, when he visited Rome with the King's embassy. Eventually, a special papal legate, the Guardialfiera Bishop Zaccaria Ferreri, was sent to Poland and Lithuania to collect and prepare the materials necessary for the process. In his instruction of November 1, 1519, the Pope ordered a study of Blessed Casimir's life and the miracles that transpired after his death through his intercession. In early 1520, Ferreri came to Poland, and in the second half of that year, he visited Vilnius, where he "successfully completed (on November 15, 1520) an informational process necessary for the canonization of Prince Casimir"⁴. Based on the materials collected in Vilnius, Ferreri then wrote, and published the next year in Cracow, *Vita beati Casimiri confessoris* (*The Life of Blessed Confessor Casimir*)⁵.

Published in Vilnius in such circumstances, *The Little Traveller's Book* is a significant landmark in the field of religious and cultural changes. It should be said that this publication should be viewed as an indivisible whole with Skaryna's other publications: *The Ruthenian Bible* and *The Epistles and Acts of the Apostles*. Indeed, all Skaryna's books are part of his endeavour to publish the Holy Scripture in its entirety – the Old and the New Testament – in the Church Slavonic language.

The first of his publications, *The Ruthenian Bible*, is special in many ways, even unique. In the bright sunlight of the Holy Scripture, not all of the features of Skaryna's Bible are noticeable at once. One of such features is the immediate and personal relationship of a printed biblical text with the reader. In the same way as in the earlier times of the manuscript codex, the books of *The Ruthenian Bible* were kept on the altar and read from it, together with manuscript Holy Scriptures. However, the considerable print run of the printed books allowed the Holy Scrip-

3 Translated from: Darius Kuolys, *Res Lituana: Kunigaikštystės bendrija*, kn. 1, *Respublikos steigimas* (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2009), 142.

4 Mintautas Čiurinkas, "Introduction", in *Ankstyvieji šv. Kazimiero „gyvenimai“* (Vilnius: Aidai, 2004), 11.

5 Zacharias Ferreri, *Vita beati Casimiri Confessoris ...* (Cracoviae: typis Joannis Haller, post 7 IV 15210).

ture to enter not only churches, but also homes of laity. Therefore, Skaryna made it possible for the Holy Scripture to exist not only in the sacral, but also in the secular environment.

This feature of printed books is particularly obvious when looking at the above-mentioned *The Little Traveller's Book*, the publication marking the emergence of printing in Vilnius and Lithuania. It consists of Psalms with the Book of Hours (*Часослов*) and several pieces of chanted liturgical poetry: eight akathists (liturgical hymns chanted and listened to while standing), eight canons, Hexaemeron (*Шестоднев*), the Canon of Repentance (*Канон покаяльный*), and the Daily Cycle of Services (*Последование церковного собрания*). Some specialists view 22 parts of this book as separate publications, even though Skaryna himself considered them to be parts of a single publication, which he entitled *The Little Traveller's Book*. The year of its publication is determined based on the Computus Paschalis, a supplement to the Traveller's Book that lists all the Easter dates for 1523–1543 (which means that the book had to be published before 1523, so about 1522). The place of publication – the most glorious city of Vilnius (*у великославном мѣсте Виленском*) – is indicated at the end of the Horologion.

Skaryna's another publications, *The Acts and Epistles of the Apostles*, presents the traditional liturgical text in Church Slavonic. It includes prefaces written by Skaryna, in which he explains this part of the Holy Scripture. Both the date and place of publication are stated in the book: March 1525 in the glorious city of Vilnius (*мѣта по нароженіи нашего спасителя Исуа Христа, сына божия, тысящнаго пятьсотога и двадесеть пятого, мѣсеца марта, при держаніи налакавшего господаря Жыкгымонта Казімировича... во славном мѣсте Виленском*). It is also important that one extant copy of one version of this book contains Skaryna's mention that he had translated all the books of the Bible (not all of them have survived to this day).

According to the prominent Slavist Sergejus Temčinas, both Vilnius publications were intended for the education of the society and instruction of the common people in the truths of the faith. Significantly, these publications include the Psalms, the Hours, Acts and Epistles of the Apostles – the books traditionally used by the Orthodox Christians for development of basic writing skills; the formation of literacy began from reading them. No less important is that these books were used for spiritual – religious and ethical – education.

The significance of Skaryna's books is immense. Above all, they reinforced the existence of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania based on the strong cultural identity of its citizens. Skaryna's books served this purpose alongside other significant changes in the state such as economic or legal innovations. Besides, the books published by the famous Polotskian in Prague and Vilnius make it possible to clarify the assertion of a number of cultural historians regarding the exceptional contribution of Poles, primarily graduates of Cracow University, to the modernization of Lithuania on the turn of the 15th–16th centuries and later on. Indisputably, this contribution is very important. However, Skaryna's life and work shed light on other important trends in the interaction of cultures. At that time, cultural innovations flowed to Lithuania from such diverse locations as Cracow, Padua, Siena, Königsberg, Wittenberg, Vienna, and Prague. This deserves more careful evaluation and further research. Since the times of Vytautas' brother Butautas (died 1380-05-07), Prague had been the wellspring of Baltic medieval written culture. It is in Prague that Skaryna continued the tradition of writing in Church Slavonic and Ruthenian and implemented a new opportunity – printing in Cyrillic characters. In 1522 and 1525 he accomplished this again in Vilnius. So, it is no surprise that the initiative of writing in Lithuanian also was accomplished here, in the old capital of Lithuania. Eventually, the year 1547 arrived, when Lithuania, which already had experience in printing in Latin and in Slavic languages, enriched the repertoire of the printed word by texts in the Lithuanian language. In six more years (1553), there began the history of Polish printing in the Grand Duchy. And that was not the end...

History repeats itself. We are celebrating Skaryna's 550th birth anniversary and the 500th anniversary of the publication of the *The Little Traveller's Book*, even as the Kremlin's army devastates the holy land of Ukraine. The homeland of our Belarusian brothers and sisters is now suffering from the same aggressor. What can we, the Lithuanians, the Belarusians, and the Ukrainians, the descendants of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, do in such circumstances? The first suggestion that comes to mind would be to follow Skaryna's example and to accomplish such works that would incessantly testify and loudly proclaim to future generations that the living cultural tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuanian remained important to the world. So while the occupiers are suffocating Mariupol and Kherson in their grip, while their heavy boots are trampling Gomel and Pinsk, let us call out here in Vilnius, "Жыве, Беларусь! Слава Україні!"