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ВАЛЕРИЙ НИКОЛАЕВИЧ ЧЕКМОНАС
IN MEMORIAM

Valerij Nikolaevič Čekmonas died March 17, 2004 in Vilnius. With the passing away of this remarkable personality and scholar the Slavic research community in Vilnius and in the world at large has suffered a great loss. Valerij Nikolaevič was an extraordinary man, a scholar with inexhaustible energy, immense enthusiasm and a boundless fertility of ideas. Nobody who got to know him will ever forget his personal charm and humor.

Valerij Nikolaevič was born in 1937 in the Cherkassk region of the Ukraine and lived through the war there. His father fell in the war in 1942, and Valerij grew up in the household of his grandfather. The harsh living conditions in post-war Ukraine were not made easier for Valerij and his family by the temporary arrest of his grandfather. His mother appears to have felt compelled by the circumstances to have Valerij enrolled in the Kiev Suvorov Military School from where he graduated in 1955. After three years in the army, Valerij left it in 1958 to start philological studies at the University of Czernowitz. After falling out with his teachers of the history of the CPSU and scientific atheism, he was expelled from the university and only after considerable trouble and efforts did he succeed in graduating by means of a correspondence course from the University of Rostov-na-Donu. Here he had the good fortune to have among his teachers the famous Indo-Europeanist A. N. Savčenko with whose help Valerij in 1965 managed to get accepted for the *aspirantura* at the Belorussian Academy of Science in Minsk. In 1968 Valerij was awarded the degree of *kandidat nauk* with a dissertation on the correlation of hard and soft consonants in the Belorussian language. In the following years Valerij worked as a research fellow in Minsk and here he finished his *Habilitationsschrift*, *Исследования по исторической фонетике праславянского языка*, just before he moved to Vilnius in 1979. Valerij now made Lithuania his adopted homeland and turned himself into an ardent Lithuanian patriot transforming effectively Čekman into Čekmonas.

In Vilnius Valerij initially worked at the Russian department as a docent, being appointed full professor in 1985. During his 24 years at the University of Vilnius Valerij unfolded an extraordinary activity. Besides his scholarly activity he took an active part in the Lithuanian struggle for independence. In 1989 he managed to set up a Department of Slavic Philology at the University of Vilnius. Despite of often meager resources Valerij succeeded in turning it into a thriving research center, offering since the first half of the nineties courses in all the Slavic languages as

well as in Turkish and Hungarian. The scholarly journal *Slavica Vilnensis* was founded and edited by him until 2002. Valerij was also instrumental in creating a chair of Polish philology at the University of Vilnius, because, as odd as it might sound, in the partly Polish-speaking city of Vilnius surrounded by many Polish-speaking villages, Polish language and literature could not be studied at the University of Vilnius in Soviet times.

As a man of many parts, Valerij made significant contributions to a number of scholarly fields, ranging from monographic treatments of Proto-Slavic, to the phonetics of Belorussian, the sociolinguistic and ethnic situation in Lithuania and the Polish dialects in Lithuania and in the *kresy*, the former Polish eastern territories. Two fields, however, were dominant in his carrier, phonetics and dialectology. He has conducted fieldwork in as different places and languages as among Albanians in the southern Ukraine and among the Iranian Ossetians in the Caucasus. The major part of his dialectological fieldwork, however, was carried out in Belorussia, Lithuania and Russia, where Valerij worked above all in the province of Rjazan and in the province of Pskov. Central in his investigation of Russian dialects was *akan'e*, its origin and varieties to which he dedicated several works. In a number of comprehensive articles Valerij discussed a number of issues pertaining to Russian dialectology. These represent part of his major contributions to Russian linguistics. Another major contribution is his investigation of the language of the Old Believers, in Russia, in the province of Pskov, but, above all, the language of the Old Believers in Lithuania. In the nineties Valerij set up a solid research group in Vilnius which undertook extensive investigations among the Old Believers in Lithuania and now, due to comprehensive publications, new light is shed on the century-old Russian population in Lithuania, on their language and their origin.

The life and career of Valerij cannot but remind us about the circumstance that in Soviet times, due to travel restrictions and various other impediments, the scholarly activity that unfolded beyond Moscow and Leningrad was to a large degree unknown to foreign scholars. The feeling of being beyond reach, was often felt by scholars in the Soviet province, and many suffered from it. The life and career of Valerij illustrate how much valuable work was done indeed outside the Soviet major institutions despite of obstacles for us hard to imagine today, and that Valerij managed to achieve an outstanding scholarly career and to create in Vilnius an excellent center for research and teaching of Slavic languages.

While mourning the premature death of Valerij, we are left to celebrate his life and to pay due homage to his legacy.

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