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Image of Georgia in Latvian Literature. The Second Half of the 20th century and the Beginning of the 21st

Ausma Cimdiņa started her academic career in the 80s of the 20th century as a lecturer at the University of Latvia (at the time – the State University of Latvia). One of the first courses in which she was lecturing was “Literature of the USSR nations”. The course was established on the basis of centralized guidelines, it was not desired among lecturers, as it was created artificially and saturated with ideological dogmatics in order to indoctrinate students on the issue of how under the Soviet rule a new order of literature was emerging – the socialist realism – and how that helps build the communism. In reality this course under the supervision of Ausma Cimdiņa turned into a peculiar interpretation of world literature, where in the texts from various nations the utter disfigurement and lies of the Soviet occupation and its ideology became apparent as if in a mirror. At the end of the 80s when during the Gorbachev era some new opportunities appeared, thanks to the enthusiasm of Georgian expert in Latvian language and literature Ushang Sahtlucishvili and the interest of Ausma Cimdiņa, an exchange programme between the University of Latvia and the State University of Tbilisi was created (in a way a prototype for ERASMUS programme), thus letting the students of Latvian studies participate in a several week museum internship in Georgia (in turn, the Georgian students were going to Riga to learn Latvian). The exchange programme lasted several years only, as the collapse of the USSR created a new geopolitical reality, and partnerships had to be reestablished, and for this to happen several years had to pass. As a consequence, Ushang Sahtlucishvili came to Latvia with new translations only in 1998. However, the author of this short memoir sketch, who participated in the museum internship programme under the supervision of Ausma Cimdiņa and Vilnis Eihvalds in 1988, returned to Tbilisi in 2015 to deliver a paper in the Akaki Tsereteli’ 175th anniversary conference. On the basis of this paper the following article has been composed with support of research project “National Identity: Gastropoetic Aspect. Historical, International and Interdisciplinary Context”, founded by Latvian Science Council. The ties between Latvian and Georgian literatures are mainly viewed through the works by Nora Ikstena in the article – a perfect occasion that on the great anniversary of Ausma Cimdiņa ties her early academic activities with her mature research interests in feminism.

Georgia historically had stayed apart from Latvian migration routes. Up to a certain point in the history we cannot observe widespread and significant interaction between Latvia and Georgia – only in separate cases elements of cultural interweaving appear. Reflections of Georgian and Caucasian impressions can be found in the works of writers who came there during World War I (Pāvils Rozītis, Jānis Ezeriņš, Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš, etc.). However, ties waned during the interwar period as Georgia was under Soviet occupation. There is of course room for a typological research as the affiliation to the same cultural space takes place simultaneously both in common and different ways.

The situation changed during the Soviet era. On the one hand, there was an official simulated idea of friendship among peoples, on the other hand, this implementation took an unexpected turn as solidarity against the occupying power, as a conscious expression of national specificity, as intellectual co-operation and as a peculiar form of protest.

For the image of Georgia and its further development in Latvian literature the year 1965 is of essential importance, when the first comprehensive celebration of Akaki Tsereteli took place in Latvian periodicals (Silagadze 1965). Approximately at that time the situation in Latvian Writer's Union changed as a young and progressive generation took over it. They started cooperation and reciprocal visits between Latvian and Georgian writers and intellectuals. History and nature of Georgia, self-esteem of the people made an alternative for Soviet unification. So Georgia became an important place in Latvian cultural scene. Exchange processes and the impressions gained in Georgia found reflection in the works of art on a wide spectrum of genres and styles – in travel notes and descriptions, in poems based on travel impressions, and in drama and prose.

The image of Georgia appears in the creative work of Soviet era Latvian writers and poets in a broad paradigm of the genre, content and imagery. Most prominent examples are:

- Georgian motives are present in lyric poetry, associating Georgia with love of freedom and the value of self-esteem. First poems of this kind appear already in 1945 in the first postwar autumn when poets Valdis Lukss (1905–1985) visits Georgia and writes a poem “Gruzijas piezīmes” (“Notes from Georgia”) (Lukss 1946, 260) which is strongly subjected to the recently established Soviet empire's style of socialist realism. It is possible that during Soviet times there was a specific and centralized directive for cooperation as visits of Latvian poets to Georgia was a regular occurrence, quite often providing impetus for new works of poetry. Though only a few examples step out of the frames of traditional narrative poetry. Artistically more significant works that have been created after the visits to Georgia and other republics of the Caucasus are the poems by Jānis Peters (1939). Among them one can observe formal

experiments, interaction between motives, for example, the imagery of ethnographical Latvian and Georgian cuisines – in the poem “In the train Moscow–Tbilisi–Erevan” from the collection “My bee tree” (“Mans bišu koks”, 1973) the motive of fermentation that is expressed with wine and curds soup – a characteristic Latvian country drink from clabbered milk (Peters 2004, 147). This fermentation metaphor is used to express both national color and feeling of aspiration and motion.

- The reflection upon Georgian scenery can be observed in the playwright's Gunārs Priede (1928–2000) play “Blue” (“Zilā”) (Priede 1973) (for many years Priede was the head of Writers's Union as a key figure of literary processes). In the play the action takes place in a sanatorium in Georgia, where the main character is recovering after a car accident. The name of the play is based on a rare and nearly extinct species of a beautiful Latvian cow ‘zilā govš’ (The Blue Cow). It becomes a metaphor, of which the spectrum of use and connotations are widened by the blueness of Georgian mountains, thus providing an axis for self-analysis, that is put between associative images – the blue cow and the blue mountains.
- A peculiar use of the Georgian motive can be observed in the story “Tbilisi, Tbilisi, Tbilisi” (1974) by Andris Jakubāns (1941–2008), in which the image of Georgia is present as a motive from a song, expressing longing and dreams. The action takes place in Siberia where one Latvian has come to make his life profitable, but a Georgian song heard in a restaurant causes longing and memories. The song in the story is not characterized in detail, but one who knows peculiarities of Georgian music and its perception in the Soviet Union can suggest that it can be a very popular song “სიმღერა თბილისზე” (Song about Tbilisi, 1959) by Revaz Lagidze (1921–1981). The story is included in a collection of the best Latvian short stories called “Latviešu Zelta stāsti” (“Latviešu Zelta stāsti”) (Jakubāns, 2007).

It is worthy to mark that the first half of the seventies is a particularly rich time for Georgian motives in Latvian literature and at this time we observe this strong influence in all main genres.

At the end of the Soviet Union Georgia became an important cooperative partner in the Latvian cultural and intellectual dimension. At that time a regular student exchange was established between the University of Latvia and Tbilisi State University largely due to the effort Ushang Sahtlucishvili, an expert of Latvian language and literature, and he has done a lot for strengthening and developing Georgian–Latvian cultural ties. Times of change interrupted cooperation, and further historical and political development was different. However, the fascination with Georgia did not disappear.

Georgian impressions resurfaced in literature vividly in the 21st century with Nora Ikstena's (1969) book “Our Lady's friend” (“Dievmātes draudzene”, 2013)

where the personal (author's 3rd husband was a Georgian writer Levan Beridze) intertwines with the historical. The book shows some alienation in which the efforts to get closer intertwine with the insurmountable distance, showing that the times have changed. The work of Ikstena deserves further and closer examination as it is the core piece of this paper. Furthermore, one can say without a doubt that nowadays Ikstena's work will be the first one a Latvian reader interested in Georgia will come across.

Nora Ikstena is one of the most significant contemporary Latvian writers, and she has gained both national and international recognition – on a regular basis she participates in literary festivals, book fairs, and her works have been translated in prolific proportions. She writes mainly prose, but she has works in various genres – novels, stories; she has written many biographies in the endeavour to break the traditional borders of the genre by writing biographies about important Latvian writers – Imants Ziedonis, Rēgīna Ezera, Dzintars Sodums and many others. She is among the Latvian authors that have been translated into Georgian as well.

Ikstena has written an autobiographical work that is based on her travel experience and is called "Our Lady's Friend". It is a work of its own kind and takes a particular place in her creative CV. In a way it conforms to the genre tradition of travel notes, but at the same time notably stepping out of the genre borders. From one perspective, the work gives information and tells a story about a foreign land, focusing on artefacts, customs, culture and history. From another *point de vue*, it is a strongly personal story about inner changes of the soul, though the wish to explore and get familiar with a different country is present and essential for the story. This wish is subordinated to desire, to the love towards husband and that by default defines that the foreign is accepted as bound to become familiar. The intimate character of the book is accented by illustrations – photos with her spouse, his relatives and friends. Old black and white family photos mix with views of nature, city and life, at times commentaries about photos are given, but sometimes interlaces of color, composition and mood are let to speak for themselves.

The book is created as a combination of travel notes and a diary in the manner of impressionists and without an explicit chronological backbone or plot, although several dates are mentioned, especially when the author reflects upon current affairs of Georgian society. As the starting point of the events depicted in the book is mentioned March, 2012 – the author's departure from Georgia after a tremendously severe winter, and the narrative of the book ends in October, 2012, when the author takes part in grape harvest for the first time in her life, and these dates serve as the basis of reflection about contemporary Georgia. Despite the fact that the direct time of the narrative covers a half of a year, the author herself said that the book is based on five-year experience and communication.



Latvijas Valsts universitātes Latviešu valodas un literatūras specialitātes studenti muzeju praksē Gruzijā. Vidū Vilnis Eihvalds, Ausma Cimdiņa un Ušangs Sahtlhucišvili. Metekhi pakalns Tbilisi, 1988. gada jūlijs. No Raimonda Brieža personīgā arhīva.

Latvian language and literature students from Latvian State University during the museum internship in Georgia. In the centre of the photo there are: Vilnis Eihvalds, Ausma Cimdiņa, Ushang Sahtlhucishvili, Metekhi Hill. Tbilisi, July, 1988.

Still, many of the 27 chapters of the book have no link to a particular time, or they make time loops to nearer and farther periods in the past, mainly focusing on recent events, though going as far to the times of Nino and Tamara, and illuminating the essential events of the 20th century. These historical strokes are one of the aspects that make clear that the seemingly accidental and kaleidoscopic impressions are carefully constructed, giving a definite narrative purpose, as in fact the history of Georgia is being told. The observation that the impressionistic fragmentality is consciously and carefully created is strengthened by the presence of the facts mentioned from the cultural history of Georgia, mainly as individual figures. These facts are dispersed throughout the text and give evidence that the narrative is not only the exalted personal impressions but that the author has devoted a considerable amount of time to the research.

In her understanding of culture Ikstena mainly uses literature and especially poetry, paying much attention to painting, theatre, cinema and music as well. Thus the book is a concise outline of the cultural history of Georgia and a mini-anthology of Georgian poetry as well due to the many poetry quotations. In footnotes one can find factual information about the mentioned persons as they are commonly known from the perspective of a Georgian, though the focus in

the main text is on bright poetical images. Although the author is very discreet and does not overly exaggerate, for an attentive observant of cultural processes in Latvia many of the names will be familiar. Still the footnotes serve as a cane on which to rely on.

The religious motives serve as a narrative frame – monasteries as the essence of a special spirituality of Georgia. The introduction of the book is filled with particularly strong imagery – an extraordinary cold winter and the monastery as the last stop before departure, footsteps that are covered in snow but stay on the ground. The emotional climax of the whole narrative is the conversion to orthodoxy by the author herself, and the church under which all the people of Georgia are gathered will become an important sign for the characterisation of Georgiana people. The contemporary Georgia is hard to comprehend for the author – the political events, taking into account the most recent ones, are terrifying, so the past that has become still in the walls of churches and monasteries is described as the true spirit of Georgia.

The modern and complex today seems so pompous and silly in contrast to the shabby, but wise and clear yesterday. The yesterday is the true spirit of Georgia. The author disapproves of the renovation of ancient buildings – “If it’s not a joke, one must weep heavily.” (Ikstena 2013, 43) And the buildings of contemporary ones – “My heart aches about the enormous glass buildings of police and justice department .. about the monstrous glass bridge that lays over Mtkvari River in the very heart of Tbilisi” (Ikstena 2013, 49).

The author very frequently names the Georgian cultural artefacts by their original names, not trying to give equivalent Latvian terms, but creating descriptions for them, thus providing an ethnographical and linguistic color and the narrative becomes a blink into the Georgian language. The author considers local food as essential factor for understanding Georgia and that is the reason for abundant descriptions of Georgian food. The preparation of Georgian food is narrated from personal perspective as well. From the perspective of the author the churches and monasteries make the spiritual pole of the Georgian world, but the food – the material pole.

“The essential value of Georgian food are the ingredients that are always fresh and that the food is prepared almost in front of the eyes of the eaters, From food like that appears both the joy of life and the strength to endure sharper turns” (Ikstena 2013, 65).

The narrative is full of warm and friendly intonations, though in everyday life the author comes upon social events that she does not understand and that repel her. The author uses the phrase “contemporary contrasts of Tbilisi” that somewhat reminds of Soviet rhetoric. The contrasts are a part of life. Although the author has found Georgia to be her friend for life, she acknowledges that her feet are thoroughly standing firm in the honey of her homeland.

Literature

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