

Struggle for the National Language

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Translated by: Allen E. Konrad

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P.O. Box 157, Rowley, IA 52329

onamission1939@gmail.com

Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

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Struggle for the National Language

by Rudolf Weiss

Yes, we often wrote and read it differently, namely: The Struggle for the Mother Tongue. That was also correct. Our German language was indeed under serious threat, and even twice in a row—during the Russian and then Romanian periods. It was primarily about the position of the German language in education. The fight was initially led by the German Central Committee in Odessa and the Duma Political Representative; then by the German People's Council in Tarutino and the church. We have honorably endured this struggle for the mother tongue—we have returned as good Germans to the motherland.

The struggle for the mother tongue was simultaneously a struggle **against** the national language, at least against its predominance in education. Especially in the 1890s, when a new period of Russification was initiated, the reluctance of the German population was quite large. In particular, one could not understand why girls should also learn Russian. I can still remember how a father raged against the fact that his two daughters had to constantly sit behind Russian books. “They probably want to marry Russians,” he said, “but I would rather beat them...”. And he uttered a terrible threat.

So how could one also speak of a struggle **for** the national language?

The situation was as follows. On the German side, the far-reaching benefits of the national language were recognized as well. For example, knowledge of Russian or Romanian was of immense advantage for the young people who were drafted into military service. They were able to adapt quickly to the new environment, made friends with their regiment mates, gained the favor of their superiors, and rapidly rose through the ranks. Woe to those, however, who

understood hardly a word of Russian or Romanian, who therefore did not understand the commands and kept to themselves during their free time, away from their comrades. They were not only constantly teased but also often subjected to humiliating punishments. The same was true in trade and professions. Our teachers could also tell a story about it, as they were assessed by their superiors based on how well they mastered the national language.

The struggle for the national language differed significantly from the struggle for the mother tongue in that it was not organized, not conducted in the name of the entire ethnic group, but rather individually, so to speak, privately. Each individual was expected to recognize the benefits of the national language, and it was left to each individual to find the means and ways to learn the national language.

And yet the individual was not standing alone in this struggle. He had a powerful ally in the government. And thus it was remarkable that the opponent in one struggle became a fellow fighter in the other.

What were the **difficulties** in the fight to learn the national language? The main obstacle lay within the learners themselves. It is less about the laziness, which incidentally is a side effect of all subjects. The hindrance ran much deeper. It refers to the particular aversion to using a foreign language, which is probably inherent to every person, perhaps with the exception of those who are particularly linguistically gifted. Only those who have learned a foreign language themselves can truly understand this. One knows that one is often seized by an almost insurmountable reluctance when one has to open the mouth to pronounce foreign sounds. Psychologically, this can perhaps be explained by the fact that a person has the instinctive awareness that a language—and that is the mother tongue, which is why he cherishes it above all—is completely sufficient for life and everyday needs. Why then should one burden the memory with foreign sounds, which may even complicate the learning of the mother tongue? It is just like when someone is full and they should still eat more. Especially young people in a developmental stage are often overwhelmed by this paralysis and struggle in vain against it. I knew a student at Werner School who felt such a great aversion to Russian that one day he threw all his Russian textbooks into the corner and stopped doing his Russian homework. He continued this for several weeks, during which he received a two (equivalent to a German four) from the old “Märte” (teacher of the Russian language) one after another and had to endure a torrent of insults every time he “answered”. Until he finally realized that he could not prevail with his thick skull, and he did not want to be expelled from school. Like someone returning to prison, he then submitted to the pressure and took care to get better grades.

The second obstacle was the fear of making mistakes or, better said, the fear of criticism from others. The sharpest and most dangerous critics were, of course, the teachers, who took note of every language error and then gave them their grade. There was often an immediate reprimand, which was all the more humiliating because it was given in front of the whole class. The criticism of the teachers reached its peak during the exams, which were therefore feared like fire.

But the educators were not the only critics. The same role was gladly taken on by individuals from our circle who spoke the foreign language fluently. Those haughty expressions are still remembered by all of us who saw them when they listened to our stammering. However, they

had not the slightest reason to throw stones, as they themselves sat in a glass house, since they experienced their mother tongue in the same way as we did with the foreign national language. But that was just how it was, and it served once again to convey the primacy of the national language over the mother tongue.

The worst part of the criticism was that it undermined confidence and created feelings of inferiority. For some, it went so far that just the thought of having to use a foreign language in the next moments would make them tremble. It was particularly distressing to have to participate in a gathering where the conversation was conducted in Russian or Romanian. The repeatedly intimidated person eventually told himself: you make the fewest language mistakes if you do not speak at all, and he became a notorious mute in social situations. However, that was the greatest mistake he could make, as it is a well-known fact that one only learns to speak by speaking. Furthermore, the lack of civil courage, which was expressed in the silence, did not make a good impression on the others present.

A significant part of the difficulties was rooted in the foreign languages themselves. These challenges were of various kinds. The first mountain that had to be overcome was the foreign vocabulary. The goal was to acquire a word in the foreign language for every German word. However, very few managed to do so. Most only learned a few thousand so-called vocabulary words. However, there was still a difference between knowing a word and being able to use it. The so-called “easy” (*geläufige*) vocabulary is often just a small fraction of the “known” (*bekannten*) vocabulary. Ultimately, acquiring a vocabulary was a matter of practice and a good memory.

Another hurdle that had to be overcome was pronunciation, but notably, good pronunciation. Good or correct pronunciation was understood as the purity of the sounds used in the foreign language. It is known that both Russian and Romanian have certain sounds that do not exist in the German language. Their unaltered reproduction therefore caused considerable difficulties for the Germans.

However, the true fortress that had to be conquered was represented by the grammatical forms of foreign languages, which deviate significantly from German grammar.

To mention are mainly the six declension cases of the nouns and the aspects of the verbs in Russian as well as the gerund [a derived noun form of verbs] in Romanian. Only a few succeeded in storming these last bastions. In general, one could count the individuals in the German communities who spoke the national language correctly both phonetically and grammatically on the fingers of one hand. These were only those individuals who had lived among the foreigners for at least a few years, whether as students of a higher school, as officials, or as soldiers in the army. Only they could be confused with a genuine Russian or Romanian, as not even the “German accent” could betray them.

The aversion to the foreign language, mentioned earlier, was further heightened among the students by the fact that it made learning extremely difficult. This is explained by the requirement that all subjects, except German and religion, had to be taught in the national language. For students with weak knowledge of the foreign language, this meant nothing other

than memorizing the assigned texts word for word. One can imagine how much time and patience that required. However, the next day everything went smoothly. What did it matter if classmates mocked afterward and buzzed like a machine, imitating the presentation? The main thing was to secure the goodwill of the teacher. After all, the fellow-students did the same thing, with the exception of perhaps the notorious lazybones (*Faulpelze*) and a few who were naturally (*von Hause aus*) proficient in the national language.

And yet, how often we envied the students in Germany, who were allowed to learn and present their assignments in their familiar mother tongue. Learning must be child's play under these circumstances! Such happiness seemed almost incredible to us! And how we secretly grumbled at our forefathers, who deprived their descendants of this happiness by moving to a country with a foreign national language! Not knowing much about the history of settlement, we of course did not know that the ancestors were guaranteed the free use of their mother tongue in school and official communication, a freedom that was later taken away along with many others.

The following words of Max von Schenkendorf, which we slightly altered according to our situation, would now appear as if spoken from the heart:

*Ach, wie traurig ist mein Sinn,
Daß (wenn) ich in der Fremde bin,
Daß ich fremde Sprachen üben,
Fremde Worte brauchen muß,
Die ich nimmermehr kann lieben,
Die nicht klingen als ein Gruß.*

Ah, how sad is my mind,
That (when) I am in a foreign land,
That I have to practice foreign languages,
Have to use foreign words,
Which I can never love,
That do not sound like a greeting.

The Register of Resentments and Sufferings that came with learning the national language could still be continued for a long time. However, it must be admitted that this is a purely dry topic for the readership of today. It would be much more interesting if this material were made the basis of a novel and illustrated through the experiences of one or more individuals what embarrassing situations were associated with it. Who among the younger colleagues will take on this task?

When we take stock today of our departure from Bessarabia, the flight from Warthegau, and the return to our ancestral homeland, the loss side does indeed account for very high figures, but on the gain side there are also significant values that we previously could not have imagined. Foremost among these is the free and unrestricted use of our mother tongue, the liberation from the necessity and coercion to learn a foreign national language, the relief from the harassment associated with not mastering this foreign language, and the elimination of the barriers to our intellectual and economic development that arose from our status as second-class citizens.

The youth hardly knows how to appreciate these advantages, because they have not experienced the plight of a minority people. However, they only need to read in the faces of the elderly, in which some deep furrows have also been etched by the struggle for the national language—and then they will understand much better.

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