In memoriam: Professor Andrei Zalizniak

The Department of Modern Languages mourns the loss of Andrei Anatolievich Zalizniak, who passed away on Christmas Eve of 2017. The Uppsala Slavists had been looking forward to planned guest lectures in the Spring Term 2018 by Professor Zalizniak and his wife Elena Viktorovna Paducheva when the sad news reached us in the December darkness. Andrei Zalizniak is missed terribly by all who knew him, as well as by the many who did not know him personally but are familiar with his many research achievements.

It is still difficult, almost one year later, to use the past tense with reference to Andrei Zalizniak, who was the warmest and most ingenious scholar I have ever met. He always looked at you with a kind smile and genuine interest in his eyes, listening patiently to questions. At his annual open lectures, he was keen to discuss possible solutions to puzzling linguistic issues related to birch-bark scrolls. These lectures, which became the most awaited linguistic event of the year, were always overcrowded, no matter how large the hall. They attracted people from all disciplines and countries. Andrei himself preferred to call them reports (отчёты), considering them an account of the latest summer excavation season and of progress in reading the fragments of scrolls recently unearthed. Each of these reports was meticulously and masterly designed by him, with a steady crescendo of excitement, inviting the eager and enthusiastic audience, which included students as well as prominent scholars from a variety of disciplines, to an open discussion of possible linguistic interpretation and reconstruction of messages written on often damaged birch-bark scrolls. The atmosphere was joyful, creative and elevated, and every attendee felt encouraged by Professor Zalizniak, who visibly enjoyed this session with the audience. These lectures were representative of his teaching style: affable, humoristic, humble and elegant, always sensitive and respectful towards all.

1 The source of this photo of Professor Zalizniak is: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrey_Zaliznyak#/media/File:Zalizn_5.jpg, 2018-12-14
Andrei was young at heart and had a genuine connection with young people, who were drawn to him. He was always surrounded by students with whom he generously shared his vast knowledge. It was of great importance for him to meet new generations of students, whom he never ceased to inspire. Eager to learn more, they attended Saturday seminars led by Andrei. (“What will we do on Saturdays now! – exclaimed one of his many grateful and grieving students at the funeral). A couple of years ago, my daughter Ellen and I attended one of these Saturday seminars on Sanskrit at Moscow University and witnessed students doing syntactic analysis of Sanskrit texts after only their third lesson. After the seminar, Andrei stayed on, surrounded by students who wanted to talk with him and pose questions. In the lobby on our way out from the university building, he was approached by several students who had lined up for his autograph. It made a profound impression on my daughter. For her, as a Swedish student who had never experienced such worship of a teacher, this scene was pretty surreal. Andrei was indeed a celebrity, beloved by all his students.

Andrei Zalizniak’s name is forever inscribed in the history of Russian linguistics. Where others saw a mess and chaos, Andrei saw systems and relations. And he did so with an intellectual brilliance and a unique capacity to discern hidden patterns and even scripts, whether it was the Old Novgorod dialect he reconstructed, the Old Russian accentuation models, the hierarchy of enclitics, a Novgorod palimpsest (a wax codex) or the flectional system of modern Russian language, on which all computational software dealing with Russian language are based. He took the most complex issues within different fields of Russian linguistics and made them comprehensible, logical, and beautiful. His achievements are of such significance that he could be called the Carl von Linnaeus of Russian linguistics.

Andrei Zalizniak was recognized internationally and in his homeland, his outstanding efforts rewarded with several prestigious prizes and distinctions in Russia. For many years, Andrei gave invited lectures in France, where he studied linguistics as a student (in Paris), Italy, Switzerland, Germany, as well as at Uppsala University. Although Andrei was welcome at universities all over the world, his preference for rail travel limited him to Europe. In Uppsala, we have been honored several times to host Andrei and his spouse, the distinguished linguist in modern Russian, Elena Paducheva.

In 2013, the Doctor Honoris Causa Award of the Faculty of Languages at Uppsala University was conferred on Andrei Zalizniak for his scientific achievements and his longstanding contribution to Uppsala Slavistics. The honorary doctorate is a token of our deep appreciation of Andrei’s commitment to Uppsala University ever since he began visiting it in the 1990s, giving lectures, seminars, and individual consultations with PhD students alongside collaboration with Uppsala researchers. Thus, when the wax palimpsest known as the Novgorod codex was unearthed in 2000, a carbon analysis to determine the age of this wooden codex was carried out by scientists at Uppsala University with the cooperation of Slavists. The results of carbon dating (in addition to
other methods, such as dendrochronology and stratigraphy) helped to date it to the end of the tenth century, thereby recognizing it as the oldest book from Rus’.

Besides strong professional ties with Slavists in Uppsala, other circumstances make Andrei’s relation to Uppsala quite special. He considered Uppsala his second birthplace and 26 November 1992 his second birthday. On this day, the Swedish surgeon Hans-Erik Hansson (1940–2006) carried out successful cardiac surgery, made possible by fundraising among Swedish Slavists led by Uppsala professor Sven Gustavsson (1938–2013) and by a donation from the Uppsala University Hospital. The prognosis after such an operation is eight years, Dr. Hansson had informed Andrei, who gratefully received every new day as a gift. He lived for twenty-five years after the surgery, which was a real blessing for scholarship and for all who knew him!

An ocean of flowers from the four corners of the earth followed the last journey of a man who loved flowers. His wisdom and joy will be remembered with deep gratitude.

Karine Åkerman Sarkisian