

KÖZLEMÉNYEK

Francysk Skaryna and his legacy in literature and publishing: to the 500th anniversary of Belarusian book-printing. The year of 2017 in the Republic of Belarus marks the 500th anniversary of Belarusian and East Slavic book-printing. This event is of national and international significance, which is proved by the decision of UNESCO to include it into the organization's calendar of memorable dates.

We owe the first printed book in Belarusian to the activity of the outstanding Belarusian enlightener – Francysk Skaryna. Being the publisher, editor and translator of the first biblical books, author of original forewords and commentaries to the Holy Scripture and other books, he contributed greatly to many spheres of creative work – from the reformation of language-literary traditions of the written language and typography to the history of civilization and society of Antiquity and Christianity, as well as the philosophy, aesthetics and law of his time.

Francysk Skaryna was one of the first East Slavic scientists who earned the highest academic titles – Doctor of Medical Sciences and Doctor of Liberal Arts (philosophy). He was one of the first among his compatriots to enter the international scene, adding Belarus to the most developed countries of Europe.

Contemporary researchers [8] draw comparison between the first Belarusian printer and such outstanding 16th century humanists as François Rabelais, Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus of Rotterdam and others. Francysk Skaryna, similarly to the majority of European enlighteners of that time, stood out with a developed sense of dignity and high appreciation of his own activity. He positioned himself as a “chosen man” or a “learned scholar”, “doctor of medical sciences”, “professor of sciences and medicine” [9, p.23, 25, 72–73]. He was of the view that a person who has written a book could be immortal [4]. The foreword to the Book of Job contains the following lines, “So, I, Francysk son of Skaryna from Polotsk, (...) knowing that thinking of death, self-development and recollection of what should happen composes the highest wisdom, ordered to publish this book (...)” [9, p.20]. In his edition of the Bible he printed his own portrait three times, which the official Christian Church considered the sacrilege [8].

Self-esteem, so typical for a Belarusian enlightener, emphasizes his individuality in the traditional society he represented. Regardless of the fact that the cultural-historic process of the mid-16th century was characterized by significant changes in the lives of the people in public, political and spiritual sense, the typical features of medieval culture remained dominant.

There are few reliable sources related to the life and activity of Francysk Skaryna. It is known that he was born in one of the most ancient Belarusian cities with rich cultural traditions – Polotsk. In his books he always indicates the place of his birth, “Francysk son of Skaryna from Polotsk” [9, p.20, 23, 37]. The date of the birth is still under discussion among researchers. Usually 1490 or a period close to this date is indicated as his birth year [2; 3]. The father of the future typographer was merchant Luka Skaryna [1].

Supposedly, Francysk Skaryna received primary education at the Polotsk Bernardine Monas-

tery and then continued his studies in Vilno – the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1504 he was enrolled in the Kraków University on the Faculty of Liberal Arts from which he graduated in December 1506 as Bachelor of Philosophy. There isn't any information about the activity or location of Francysk Skaryna between 1507 and 1512. According to one theory, at that time he served as secretary of the King of Denmark but only few researchers agree with that. Although it is reliably ascertained that in this period Skaryna received the Doctor of Philosophy¹ degree, researchers still argue about which university conferred it to him.

On 5 November 1512, Francysk Skaryna received the Doctor of Medicine degree from the Padua University (Italy). Up to the present moment, the question where he had studied medicine hasn't been answered. What we know is that from 1509 to 1516 the university was closed due to military actions. Consequently, Francysk Skaryna received medical education in other educational institution and went to Padua to take an examination, which judging by the preserved records he passed brilliantly [3]. One of the documents in the Padua University book of acts contains the following record, "There is a learned but poor young man who has a degree of Doctor of Arts and who arrived from a very far-away country situated, probably, four thousand Roman miles away (...)" [quot. 1, p. 44].

Researchers don't have any information of the next four years of Francysk Skaryna's life. Around 1516, Skaryna arrived at Prague, where he opened his typography. On 6 August 1517, the first book – the *Psalter* – was released. That is the starting date of the history of Belarusian and East Slavic book-printing. Between 1517 and 1519, Francysk Skaryna published 22 more books of the Old Testament under the common title "The Ruthenian Bible published by Doctor Francysk Skaryna from the glorious city of Polotsk for honour of God and for learning of common people".

The typography functioned only for three years [6]. According to the researchers, the general volume of the prints published in that period adds up to 2400 pages [7], proving the herculean working capacity of the first Belarusian printer who was translator, editor and the manager of the typography in one. The reason why the typography stopped functioning remains unknown, but the difficult financial situation of Francysk Skaryna is one of the existing hypotheses [6].

The Belarusian enlightener retook the publishing activity several years later but this time in the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was supposedly between 1519 and 1520 when he went to Vilno, and around 1522 when with the support of local mayor Yakub Babich published the *Little Travel Book*. The *Little Travel Book* includes the *Psalter*, the *Horologion*, 17 akathist hymns and canons, the *Hexameron*, a Short Church Calendar and the *Computus*. These parts were printed separately, with their own foliation and each of the books had its own title sheet. Researchers at present agree that the *Little Travel Book* consists of 21 separate editions [6], though the complete structure and sequence of the edition parts is still not determined.

The Vilno period in Francysk Skaryna's publishing career was very short; it ended in 1525 with the release of the "Apostle" book, that consists of four separate parts.

Supposedly, the volume of the two Vilno editions exceeds 1600 pages [7] but their format was less than that of the Prague editions: while *Apostle* was published in the octavo format, the *Little Travel Book* was in twelvemo [6].

Researchers still have not reached a common view regarding the reasons of Francysk Skaryna's abandoning the publishing business and leaving Vilno. One of the most widespread versions is financial difficulties in connection to property lawsuits [1; 2]. It is known that Skaryna made attempts to resume his publishing activity in Moscow and Königsberg but they were unsuccessful [3;7].

In the mid-1530s Francysk Skaryna returns to Prague. In that time Ferdinand I, the King of Bo-

¹ The fact that Francysk Skaryna had the Doctor of Liberal Arts degree is mentioned in the documents of the Padua University [1]

hemia and Hungary, decided to employ him in the Royal Garden as a learned gardener. In 1539 he left this job and engaged himself in medical practice. The exact date of his death is unknown. According to a theory, Skaryna died in 1540 or 1541, but other sources say it was in 1551 [1].

Although the activity of the first Belarusian printer covers only a brief chronological period, the significance of his heritage could hardly be overvalued. It attracted the attention of historians and writers since the 16th–17th centuries. Presently there are over two thousand scientific and popular-scientific works dedicated to Francysk Skaryna [3].

According to the researchers, the Prague Bible of the first Belarusian printer doesn't suit to any well-known confessional schemes of the Holy Scripture [3; 8]. Moreover, it remains unknown to which confession Francysk Skaryna belonged. Some researchers consider him Orthodox, others Catholic or Protestant. However, none of these viewpoints has been confirmed by documents. In religious issues Francysk Skaryna was rather tolerant; his forewords don't include the glorification or the detraction of any religion [8].

Francysk Skaryna's Bible is not in line with the Church canons in terms of composition and content, or general orientation, secular live spirit, humanistic and educational tendencies [3].

First of all, it was the first Bible printed, according to Francysk Skaryna, in the "Ruthenian" language². Consequently, his books could be understood "not only by doctors and learned scholars (...) but also common people" [quot. 8, p.168]. Under "common people" he meant wide societal strata of citizens and the poor noble class as the urban underclasses and the peasantry generally were illiterate. To make his books understandable for broad layers of society, he added explanations in "Ruthenian words" to the margins next to the Church Slavonic ones, which he considered "incomprehensible for common people"³ [2].

At that time, publications in the vernacular language were not supported by the Catholic or the Orthodox Church, the first insisting in the use of the dead Latin, and the second in the Church Slavonic language. To overcome the existing traditions, the publisher had to have courage and insistence [8].

Francysk Skaryna translated and narrated the biblical texts rather freely. For example, he could change the order of chapters or delete them, rephrase commandments with his own words and even give his judgments of certain facts from the Bible. For instance, in the Book of Leviticus he suggests that it is impermissible to give absolution for reward, "it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" [quot. 8, p.170]. This phrase contradicted the existing church practice of giving absolution for reward.

Each edition of the biblical books was accompanied by the author's commentary and afterword. These texts, on the one hand, emphasize the supernatural and divine character of the Holy Scripture ("Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out"⁴) [9, p.46]) and on the other hand, regard the Bible as the universal source of all the secular sciences. Francysk Skaryna considered the "seven liberal arts" (grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) to be the most important knowledge for a person [8]. In the foreword to the complete Bible he explains the benefit of reading it and learning these arts. "If you want to acquire knowledge of grammar, which learns to read and talk, in the complete Bible you will find the Book of Psalms – read it (...) If you want to learn music

² Modern linguists define the language of Prague and Vilno editions of Francysk Skaryna as Church Slavonic with the insertion of Belarusian words.

³ Francysk Skaryna published three of his books that were most famous among readers of that time – the Psalter, the Apostle and the Little Travel Book – without translation, in Church Slavonic language.

⁴ Romans 11: 33 (NIV)

or to be more precise – singing, in this book you will find a lot of verses and holy songs. If you agree with arithmetic, which learns to count quickly and accurately, read the fourth book of Moses more often. If you lean to the study of geometry, in Ruthenian meaning “ground measurement”, read the book of Joshua” [9, p.46].

In his forewords, Francysk Skaryna also touched upon some aspects of cultural and social-political life, expressed his own opinion regarding issues of ethics, law, theory and practice of public life [6; 8].

The character of the afterwords Francysk Skaryna added to each book, were rather stereotyped: they included the name of the translator-publisher and the place and time data of publishing [7].

The separate Old Testament editions by Francysk Skaryna had title sheets with thematic pictorial engravings, vignettes and headpieces above the text and each new section or paragraph started with initials [7]. Francysk Skaryna’s Prague editions differed from other contemporaneous West European books in terms of artistic-graphic layout and the more convenient quarto format [6].

The Vilno editions stand out with their even higher graphic level, the richness of vignettes and the wider usage of red paint compared to the Prague editions. At the same time, except for the *Psalter* (1522) and *Apostle*, Francysk Skaryna didn’t write forewords to other editions, but added so-called tales that were actually short annotations to a certain work [7].

The promotion of new scientific knowledge is typical of both the Prague and Vilno editions. They provide numerous calendar data; a more progressive – Christian – chronology is used. Many books contain astronomy data. Francysk Skaryna introduced new, more precise and detailed information on the duration of day and night at the beginning and the end of the month, equilibrium and solstice days, and he forecast eclipses, firstly in Cyrillic book-printing. As a matter of fact, the information he added to the religious publications shook the faith in the unpredictability of natural phenomena and the religious dogma of the unapprehensiveness of the world [3].

The editions of Francysk Skaryna contributed greatly to the further development of book-printing in European countries. As a matter of fact, his books served as a model for artistic decoration of prints. Many publishers imitated the typestyle of Skaryna’s editions. The idea of the ‘passportization’ of the use of quotations in a book belongs to the first Belarusian printer. The genre of forewords introduced by Francysk Skaryna is used in publishing still today. Small format, which made the books convenient for usage, also got widespread in the publishing business [1; 2; 6].

The vicissitudes of history, wars, uprisings and invasions led to the situation that Belarus – the native country of the first Belarusian printer – now has only some copies of his editions. Until recently only 10 copies published by Skaryna in Prague between 1517 and 1519 have been kept in the country (in the collection of the National Library of Belarus). In general, there are about 520 copies of the editions published by the Belarusian enlightener, stocked in museums and archives of the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Russia, the USA and Ukraine.

For many years, the National Library of Belarus (NLB) has been engaged in activities of the scientific study and the return of Francysk Skaryna’s literary heritage to his native country. The development of information technologies allowed the NLB to take the solution of this problem to a new level. Thus, in 2011–2015, within the framework of the State Program “The Culture of Belarus” the project of the creation of the digital library “Francysk Skaryna – Belarusian and East Slavic First Printer” was implemented. The digital library is intended to integrate the digital versions of all the existing copies and handwritten texts of Francysk Skaryna’s editions referring to the 16th–19th centuries.

Presently, the electronic collection of the NLB counts over 100 digital copies of Francysk Skaryna’s books, received by the means of acquisition, change or granting from Germany, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine.

The presentation of Francysk Skaryna’s heritage in electronic form allows showing to the wide

audience all the variety of his creative activity, and facilitates taking a look at the digital copies of Skaryna's original works regardless of their actual location.

Between 2013 and 2017, and funded by a Belarusian bank, the National Library of Belarus implemented a grand-scale project of the first Belarusian printer's legacy in literature and publishing. In the course of the 22-volume facsimile edition release, the NLB has been presenting and lending it to the libraries, scientific and educational institutions of all Belarusian regions, as well as the largest library-information institutions of foreign countries.

With regard to the exceptional significance of Francysk Skaryna's heritage for the national, Slavic and European culture, a complex program of events for the 500th anniversary of Belarusian book-printing was elaborated in the Republic of Belarus. It includes a number of academic, artistic and educational events to be held both in Belarus and abroad. After the anniversary year, the NLB will continue with its scientific research to explore facts and narrative sources dating back to the 16th-17th centuries in the archives and libraries of different countries, and to list the unknown documents of the activity of the first Belarusian printer.

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