



"... I KNEW FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND I HAD MUCH MORE INTERESTING CURRICULUM VITAE THAN PEOPLE WHO DIDN'T HAVE THOSE EXPERIENCES..."

Learning foreign languages became more topical after adoption of the President's Resolution № 1875. Higher school leavers in the European countries know several foreign languages. How is this problem solved there? We decided to speak about it with Stefan Priestner, the UN Resident Coordinator in Uzbekistan.

1) How many languages have you learnt?

My school took place in one country, and my university time took place in four countries. In school I had a pleasure, apart from my mother tongue of German, to learn English at a very early time. Namely from 3rd class onwards, so when I was 8 we began with very simple English. Then from class 6 onwards we learned Latin which I still think was one of the most useful things that I've ever learned. Because it leads you to a full family of languages especially in Europe and it also gives you the entry into basic half of the scientific terms in all languages. And then from class 8 onwards we learnt French. So, until my finalization of high school I had two living and an important dead language in addition to my mother tongue German that we learnt. In university I studied Greek which was basically the choice of my own. Because at that time I was really interested in Greece and its language that is from totally different family of languages. And I also studied Italian. When I studied a year in Italy (It was an American University) because Italy has, of course, a fascinating culture. It was a very easy language to learn for me having known Latin. In six weeks I was able to speak Italian and read Italian newspapers because of the basis of Latin. Finally long after my school, after my posting to Uzbekistan I also decided to learn Russian a little bit.

2) Foreign languages teaching in European schools is very advanced. What's the basis of this achievement? Is it a tradition, curricula or the geopolitical peculiarity of the continent?

When I went to school, it was the late 70s and the beginning of the 80s. I think the situation is a bit different now. I think now a foreign language teaching is much more integrated. At that time every country had its own foreign language education and I think there was a big difference, how different countries took on the importance of learning foreign languages. Austria, my country followed very much the German model and Germany always had a focus on languages and had a focus also on humanism that is why the Latin was so important. This was one issue, so it depended on a tradition. If you really compare that time different European countries the number of foreign languages was always very big in such countries as Belgium and the Netherlands. And then came perhaps the German set of countries – Germany, Switzerland and Austria, while some other countries did not have that many foreign languages. Secondly, it depends very much on which type of school you were attending. In Austria we had several different schooling types. Especially, there were schools that were geared towards languages. I went to such kind of school. Not everybody learned the same number of languages. And normal secondary school usually only taught German and English. For people that stopped education with 16 to go to a vocational school it was only German and English. In the high schools which I went to there was a big emphasis and you had to have usually definite by two living languages and sometimes also Latin and if you were going to a humanistic school you were even taught ancient Greek. So, there were different type of schools and different types of traditions in Europe. I am not sure whether you can talk about Western European tradition. France and England less focus on foreign languages, because their own languages were so prevalent that it wasn't even so necessary. Now since the European Union a lot has changed and there is very much of harmonization of curricula of different schools regarding foreign languages.

3) Do you consider that this kind of practice should be spread in many countries?

Well, I think the study of foreign languages is an extremely important part of learning. I think it opens a completely different perspective of other countries to you; it opens you the understanding of the world to a certain extent. Because you understand different systems that exist and you understand them vastly better by studying the language. I think it is a good practice to youth, the very functioning brains of children and young people that can absorb a lot of new

information. I think it is important for youth learn foreign languages. What we from the United Nations have found important however, is that you start education with your mother tongue. Because if you learn your mother tongue first, you are able to understand other languages much better. There are some countries in the world where they don't teach the native language as a primary language, but other languages as first. It has been proven that you should learn your own language and you go for other languages.

4) What is the role of humanitarian education vis-à-vis scientific education in contemporary world?

I think both sides are very important. It is totally different thinking that is developed through these two sides of education. I wouldn't say that one is more important than the other. But I do think that human communication, understanding of culture, understanding of history and the understanding of languages are very important constituent of our human nature and intellect. Therefore, I think they are absolutely essential to be studied and there should be focus on the education on these subject areas. If you only focus on sciences, a lot of richness in terms of human nature and probably also human well-being is lost. The issue of the arts can be only accessed if you understand some of the preconditions and one of them is to know languages and the humanistic side of things. I do think that too early specialization is not always beneficial. I think one has to expose pupils as long as possible to variety of learning. Even in the time when information is available on the internet at the fingertips, it is important to provide the frameworks of thinking. One framework is science; the other framework is philosophy, human thinking and the knowledge of history which all are closely connected to languages.

5) How did the knowledge of foreign languages help and impact on your career?

First of all, my study of foreign languages definitely contributed to my interest in the world which led to travels to foreign countries and a bigger understanding of what happened around me. This helped me to have the career that I'm having now. It helped me to apply for my second study, which was in America. I needed to know a certain level of English to qualify. But in addition to that I also looked at students that had an extraordinary life experience until then. Because I knew foreign languages and I had much more interesting curriculum vitae than people who didn't have those experiences. So these were my studies and one thing followed the next and I ended up in the United Nations, also because I understood the interrelations and different parts of the

world. There were also requirements to know two official UN languages which in any case were English and French.

6) How are languages related to mentality and the way of thinking of people?

I think there can be no question that language is an important input into somebody's thinking, because it is the tool to communicate. How big that influence is, is much more difficult to say. I think languages are the constituent of culture and culture is the big determinant for how we act, how we think. But obviously there are many other determinants also. Many people say that there are national characteristics of certain people. Germans are very correct and structured and Italians are very outgoing and easy to make friends with and so on. Obviously, some of these national characteristics may exist but I think as people look into other cultures by learning other languages, they have bigger options to understand the cultures. I think this is the importance of the foreign languages. They help you break out of one frame – of mind. I think now because of globalization, due to possibilities to take on different ideas, thinking, national characteristics are diminishing because of language only. But this is something that would have to be looked at in a scientific manner. It again I think displays the importance to basically looking into foreign languages as a source of information.

7) For the past time such topics as linguoculturology and intercultural relations have actively been discussed in Uzbek linguistics. Coming out from this and as a Resident Coordinator of UN in Uzbekistan, what could you tell from your experience about mental peculiarities of our people you are working with? Is it interesting or difficult to work here in Uzbekistan?

I had the privilege to live in different cultures and I am very interested in learning and getting to know new cultures. I have seen here a very rich culture which I find very fascinating. I always wanted to come to this part of the world to understand one of the Central Asian cultures that played an important role also for Europe, because of the age old interaction of the Europe and this country. Of course there is a very strong focus on big family units here which I like very much, because I myself come from a big family. There is a big focus on community here. There is a big focus on traditional arts which I think is very interesting both in terms of visual arts as well as the music. I like the type of music and dances you have. And then what is interesting is that because of your specific history there is quiet a bit of European influence which we can see from literature and opera here. We can enjoy the classical music which I grown up with: Central European music and the Russian music, both Chaykovski and Mozart. I see them as a part of your culture here which makes

me feel like at home. In terms of communication through languages, unfortunately my Uzbek is not good enough to have a conversation with local people. But I am lucky to work with people around me who are from this part of the world. They know well enough English to interact with me in my language and give me feeling of the local culture. I usually have somebody with me who in detail explains me what's going on in the event that I am participating.

8) Have you travelled a lot around Uzbekistan? Do you like the country?

I really like the country. I had the privilege of visiting most parts of Uzbekistan. So far I've been to Ferghana valley, extensively to different corners of Tashkent region. I also visited the beautiful cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva for many times. I've been in Termez, Surkhandaryo which I think is very charming town. I went to the very west of the country. I've been to Urgench and Nukus, the Republic of Karakalpakistan where I have been to extreme north western corner of the country – the Aral Sea. I both like the nature of the country, the landscapes which are very arid, dry and the moment you enter the irrigated and cultivated places you see lush green and other colors. I also like to contrast the places - where you have water: paradise; and where you have vast expanse of desert and semi desert which makes me think back of history when so many people travelled through this way over the months and months time.

9) In fact we have talked about the things we have planned and I would like to ask if we missed something that you would like to talk about?

I can only reiterate that my career in international diplomacy was very closely related to my ability to learn languages at early stage. I can only encourage the students of today to focus also on learning languages. Because for me it was the opening of understanding different cultures but also the entry point to my professional career that has been extremely interesting. So, I would like to wish to all the readers of your journal all the best in their study of languages, because it's essential part of education.

Mr Prisner, thank you for your interview. We congratulate you on the coming holidays. Let your experience in international diplomacy and good knowledge of languages promote the world progress and democracy.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you and your family!

Prepared by Saidaziz A'zamov, Venera Kayumova.