

Neris. Expedition of 2007

Volume 1

By Vykintas Vaitkevičius

In the summer of 1857, the owner of Lahojsk Estate and a member of a well-known noble family of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania Count Konstantinas Tiškevičius (*Konstanty Tyszkiewicz*) (1806–1868) organized a scientific expedition along the River Neris.¹ Ten participants of the expedition covered the whole of 47 km on foot, sailed the remaining 463 km by boats and drew the first map of the Upper Reaches of the Neris (the stretch of 66 km) as well as the atlas of the 12 largest shoals of the river and accomplished a number of observation and measuring works within 38 days of the expedition. Besides, they explored the history, archaeology, ethnography and folklore on the riversides. The book *Wilija i jej brzegi* (1871) based on the fieldwork, which was published after the death of K. Tiškevičius, belongs to the golden treasury of the history of European science.

In the summer of 2007, i.e. 150 years after the above-mentioned events, the travellers from Lithuania and Belarus repeated the expedition route of K. Tiškevičius. A number of researchers, who took part in this 28 day-long tour – geographers, historians of culture, archaeologists, ethnologists and folklorists, such as Mindaugas Černiauskas, Dr. Gražina Golubovska, Inga Kovalenkaitė, Doc. Filomena Kavoliūtė, Lina Sokolovaitė, Jurasis Unukovičius, Dr. Vykintas Vaitkevičius and Laura Valauskaitė, assisted by Dr. Liudmila Dučyc, Dr. Julia Gurskaja, Dr. Daiva Vaitkevičienė, Dr. Tacjana Valodzina and Andrej Vaiciachovič – devoted their attention to the nature, culture and history of the River Neris. The Upper Reaches of the Neris, which make up the stretch of 47 km, were explored on foot, whereas the remaining 463 km were covered by inflatable raft intended for 8–9 persons. The crew of this slowly sailing means of transport could only reach the speed of 3.5–4.5 km/h under favourable climatic conditions. Due to long distances of 18–28 km between camps, the working day of the expedition used to extend from 9 to 21 hours and more.

At the outset of the expedition, the water level in the river was close to average summertime norm; however, after reaching the water measuring station of Buivydziai near the Lithuanian-Belarus border (226 km)² the river used to get shallower every day. Thus, there was a great opportunity to explore its rocky shoals and boulders in the riverbed.

The weather was always changing; temperatures used to reach 25–30degC during the first ten days. After the exhaustive heat during the daytime, the night used to bring coolness. While coming

¹ The Neris, the right affluent of the River Nemunas, which extends for 510 km, is called *Вяльня* in Belorussian and *Wilija* in Polish. Neris flows along the territory of two countries – Belarus (282 km) and Lithuania (228 km).

² As generally accepted, the remaining distance to the mouth of the river is provided.

to Lithuania, the heat was for the time being replaced by storms and rain. The boats were confronted with the western wind around Čiobiškis (75 km) and the showers in the Lower Reaches.

The work accomplished is a collection of data accumulated by researches led by Vykintas Vaitkevičius. The concept of data does not only refer to the oral tradition and the photos but also to what we could call the description of the fieldwork accomplished by the group of scientists and the report of the most significant results of their empirical research (the determination of geographical location of objects, the data of observations, measurements, explorations, archaeological excavations and other). The scientific commentaries supplementing the data enable a better understanding of the Lithuanian-specific importance of the data collected and their context extending far beyond the river.

The Neris and the entire set of data related to it is roughly divided into seven sections based on the geography, culture and historical development of the river: 1) headwaters; 2) the Upper Reaches from its headwaters to the confluence with Narochia (366 km, on the right); 3) the transitional stretch between the Upper Reaches and the Middle Reaches from the confluence with Narochia to Daniushava site (330 km, on the right); 4) the first section of the Middle Reaches from Daniushava site to the confluence with Žeimena (213 km, on the right); 5) the second section of the Middle Reaches from the confluence with Žeimena to Gegužinė site (60 km, on the left); 6) the transitional stretch between the Middle Reaches and the Lower Reaches from Gegužinė site to the confluence with Šventoji (44 km, on the right); 7) the Lower Reaches from the confluence with Šventoji to the mouth of the river. The first volume of the book covers the first three stretches of the river.

The book on the expedition of 2007 is similar to one of K. Tiškevičius since the river is described consistently moving towards its Lower Reaches; shorter or longer paragraphs provide comprehensive descriptions of the objects of scientific interest as prompted by the process of narration. Nevertheless, the text of the book is not always monotonous: the narration is accompanied by the data about remarkable objects (the description of their geographical location, measurements, description of their peculiar features and other); original texts based on the transcription of oral narratives of the information providers in the Byelorussian language, the content of which is an inherent part of the most significant results of the expedition, are published at the end of the book.

Dr. T. Valodzina and J. Unukovičius prepared transcription of oral narratives. Dr. V. Vaitkevičius selected and grouped the texts for the book. Dr. Nijolė Tuomienė conducted their final edition and has written summaries in Lithuanian. Ričardas Adamonis helped to translate the terms related to the fish and fishery into Lithuanian.

The preparation of folklore texts for publishing was based on the assumption that it is by all means authentic source of information about the language and culture of this epoch. At some points, certain details in the narratives of the information providers and the questions asked by the researchers may seem irrelevant from the first sight but they help to follow the course of the dialogue and, what is most important, the chain of thoughts of the information providers.

Since the book was written two years after the expedition, it is based on the field notes, transcription of oral narratives, photographs, video recordings and personal experiences. The names of locations and personal names in Byelorussian and Polish languages are transcribed in

Lithuanian characters in the book trying to follow the standard form of the names to the best degree possible. The lists of bilingual equivalents provided (Pages 154–164) reflect their original spelling.

The mileage of the river is based on the book by Prof. Česlovas Kudaba *Nerimi* (1985). The geographical coordinates of objects are provided in WGS84 format. They were measured on the spot using the navigator Garmin Legend (greatest possible error of 5 m).

THE LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Title page of the book by Konstantinas Tiškevičius
2. Precise burial place of K. Tiškevičius in the churchyard of Lahojsk Church is not known. Nevertheless, a fragment of the tombstone demolished during the Soviet Times was found in recent years (24-07-2006)
3. The discovery of the map of the Upper Reaches of the River Neris in the library of Vilnius University (10-02-2005)
4. The tour of J. Čechavičius along the Neris. Departure from Vileyka (around 1874–1880)
5. S. Kolupaila (on the left), H. Jonaitis (in the centre) and A. Sabaliauskas (on the right) near the Gaidys Stone in the River Neris near Valiukiškės Village, Širvintos District (1939)
6. Č. Kudaba (on the right) at the time of one of the expeditions
7. Near the headwaters of the Neris (1968)
8. The archaeological map of the Neris-Narach Lake vicinity drawn during the expedition of F. Pokrovskis in 1895. (Table of conventional signs: 1) group of barrows; 2) hill fort; 3) workshop of flint items; 4) finding place of an stone axe.)
9. Participants of Dūkštos Expedition in Sudervė Village (1970)
10. I. Stankevičiūtė and her colleagues explore the stones of the Neris between Vilnius and Kernavė (24-09-2004)
11. The environmental protest campaign (1988)
12. The tour to Belarus (21-05-2006)
13. Boats coming to the Lithuanian-Belarus border (in the front – the raft of researchers) (16-06-2007)
14. On the shoal near Gegužinė, Kaišiadorys District (from the left): Laura, Lina, Filomena, Gražina, Vykintas, Inga and Jurasis (30-06-2007)
15. The flagship of the Lithuanian delegation (from the left): Birutė, Vytis, Andrius and Vytautas (14-06-2007)
16. The raft of researchers during a spare minute of the expedition (30-06-2007)
17. The division of the Neris into seven stretches, which is followed in the book
18. The guide Viktor Radkevich (03-06-2007)
19. The Stepan Stone from the south side (29-08-2004)
20. The Kulina Pine from the west side (29-08-2004)
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22. The cut in the trunk of the Kulina Pine and the food donated by a stranger in the cavity of the cut (26-07-2006)
23. Ridge of the Stepan Stone (29-08-2004)
24. Alena Kapył (on the right) speaks to Tacjana Valodzina (24-07-2006)
25. A fragment of the enamel horseshoe-shaped brooch found in the hill fort of Staroje Zaponne (Vitunichy)
26. Barrows of Niabyshyna (02-06-2007)