

Neris. Expedition of 2007

Volume 2

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Count Konstantinas Tiškevičius (*Konstanty Tyszkiewicz*, 1806–1868) organised a scientific expedition along the River Neris in summer of 1857.<sup>1</sup> This research resulted in his book *Wilija i jej brzegi pod względem hydrograficznym, historycznym, archeologicznym i etnograficznym* (published in Dresden in 1871) which recounts exploits of the expedition in gripping detail and vividly depicts the River Neris placed in a historical context of the multinational Great Duchy of Lithuania. Enriched by illustrations by Marcelinas Januševičius (*Marcelin Januszewicz*), K. Tiškevičius's story is full of admiration for his country and people.

At the invitation the Council of NGOs, a group of Lithuanian and Belarusian travellers embarked on an expedition following in the footsteps of K. Tiškevičius in summer of 2007, i.e. after 150 years. On this 28-day magnificent journey, a dozen of researchers focused on natural, cultural, and historical aspects of the River Neris. Having explored primarily the upper reaches of the Neris while travelling on foot, they set out for the remaining 463-kilometre-long itinerary on an inflatable raft accommodated for eight or nine people. The crew paddled downstream at an average speed of 3.5–4.5 km/h.

In his first book *Neris. 2007 metų ekspedicija /1* (published in Vilnius in 2010), the author provides a comprehensive overview of the history of explorations of the River Neris, includes information on participants and findings of the latter expedition, describes the events as they unfolded starting at the upper reaches of the Neris: from the Dokshytsy District, Vitebsk Region, to the village of Daniushava in Smarhon' District, Grodno Region. When crossing this territory, the traveller encounters a kaleidoscope of different landscapes and people, while witnessing the emergence of the Neris as streamy and stony river. The second book deals with the River Neris expedition 2007 from Daniushava to Vilnius, highlighting the exploits of a team of scientists from two countries headed by Dr. Vykintas Vaitkevičius. It offers a selection of records done and photographs taken during the expedition, describes expedition's scientific work and key findings of empirical research (geographic location of objects, and survey, measurement, and reconnaissance results etc.). This book engagingly recounts past and present issues of the river, depicts riverside villages and small towns, fishermen and rafters, storytellers and charmers. The author reflects a distinctive character of the environment of the Neris and discloses subtle connections, close although often unperceived, between the river and the man inhabits its riversides.

<sup>1</sup> The River Neris (Вяля in Belorussian, Wilia in Polish), a right tributary of the Nemunas, flows through territories of two countries: Belarus (282 km) and Lithuania (228 km).

Similarly to the first book on the River Neris expedition 2007, the second book follows mostly the same structure as the monograph of K. Tiškevičius. It describes the Neris along its run downwards. Depending on a narrative sequence, it provides general information or detailed observations about items of scientific interest. Here and there, the story is supplemented with data on geographic localities or objects (location, dimensions etc.). The last part of the book includes original texts as recorded from the lips of presenters in Belarusian, Polish, and Lithuanian, which are an integral part of the findings of the expedition.

Upon leaving Daniushava (330 km to the river mouth), the members of the River Neris expedition 2007 crossed the Welcome (*Прывітальная*), the first of the twelve large shoals on the Neris and stopped at the village of Zhadzishki (317 km) to investigate a number of valuable natural, cultural and historic objects. At the eastern side of the District of Astraviec, the expedition scientists have been particularly interested in Gierviaty (*Gervėčiai*) – an island of Lithuanian villages and the village of Markuny situated at the mouth of the River Ashmianka (279 km). Markuny was a locality where the members of K. Tiškevičius-led expedition heard Lithuanian language for the first time on this itinerary. Nowadays, traces of this language survived only in names of places, proper names of persons and some aspects of the spoken language of local population.

Polish culture and self-awareness dominates in localities of Bystryca (245 km), Buivydžiai (226 km) and Nemenčinė (196 km). Local population mostly speaks a Vilnius dialect of Polish language, associates itself with Poland and Polish nation. Below the confluent with the River Žeimena (213 km), the Neris takes another direction, whereas the local population and old farmsteads are evidently on the decrease, more and more giving their place to great numbers of country houses of town-dwellers, let alone gardener communities erected during the Soviet period. Differences in attitudes and values mount the tension between country-people and town-dwellers, the more noticeable, the closer to Vilnius, as in the case of localities of Bratoniškės (189 km), Ožkiniai (179 km) and Turniškės (174 km). Similarly, such divide aroused in those days between a handful of expedition scientists and a pack of noisy travellers interested in nothing but night parties.

Folklore texts published in this book were transcribed by Habil. Dr. Tacjana Valodzina (*Тацяна Валодзіна*), Dr. Jurasis Unukovičius (*Юрась Унуковіч*) (both – in Belorussian), Dr. Krystyna Rutkowska (in Polish), and Inga Butrimaitė (in Lithuanian). V. Vaitkevičius selected and classified texts for the book. Linguistic proofreading of the transcribed texts (collation with the original audios) was done by T. Valodzina and K. Rutkowska. Danutė Šaduikienė and V. Vaitkevičius prepared summaries in Lithuanian of all the texts. Ričardas Adamonis assisted in translation of fisheries terms into Lithuanian.

Extracts from folklore texts have been prepared for publishing based on a conception that each of them is an authentic source for knowledge of the contemporary language and culture. Sometimes seemingly insignificant elements of stories delivered by presenters and questions put to them by researchers are critical for close following of the dialogue and, above all, the flow of thoughts of the presenter.

Four years after the expedition, the author composed the book based on field records, texts of stories, photographs, videos, and personal experience. Names of places and proper names of persons are phonetically transcribed considering recommendations of linguists as far as possible. Original spelling names of places and proper names of persons in Belarusian are provided in bilingual lists at the end of the book.

Data about the length of the river were taken from the book *Nerimi* by Prof. Česlovas Kuda-ba (published in Vilnius in 1985). Geographical coordinates of localities and objects are given in WGS84 format. Measurements have been taken in field using a handheld GPS device Garmin Legend (mean error: 3–5 m).

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