

Neris. Expedition of 2007

Volume 3

By Vykintas Vaitkevičius

In the summer of 1857 count Konstantinas Tiškevičius (*Konstanty Tyszkiewicz*, 1806–1868) organized a scientific expedition along the Neris River. The book *Wilija i jej brzegi pod względem hydrograficznym, historycznym, archeologicznym i etnograficznym* (published in Dresden in 1871) records the work of the expedition and paints the picture of Neris River and the multinational Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Enriched by illustrations by Marcelinas Januševičius (*Marcelin Januszewicz*), K. Tiškevičius's story is full of admiration for his country and people.

In the summer of 2007, after 150 years, Lithuanian and Belarusian travellers, invited by the Council of non-governmental organizations, repeated Tiškevičius' expedition, while a dozen of Lithuanian and Belarusian researchers who took part in this colourful journey focused on the nature, culture and history of Neris River. The expedition lasted 28 days, the upper Neris was investigated by walking and the remainder of the total 463 km was travelled on inflatable raft, fitting 8-9 people. The rowing crew carried the raft at an average speed of 3.5–4.5 km/h.

In the first book (published in 2010) the author presented a detailed history of explorations of the Neris and acquainted readers with the expedition of 2007 – its participants, progress and key results, starting from the upper reaches of the Neris: from the Dokshytsy district, Vitebsk region to the village of Danyushava in Smarhon' district, Grodno region. The second book (published in 2012) tells about the exploration of the river and its coast from Danyushava to Vilnius. In Danyushava, the Neris, from slow and quiet, turns into a fast-flowing, rocky, upland river. Coming closer to Vilnius region, members of expedition witnessed not only these natural changes, but also cultural ones: on the eastern outskirts of Astravyets district their attention was attracted by Gervėčiai, an island of Lithuanian villages, while from Bistryčia village (located 245 km from the river mouth) Polish language starts to dominate, the local people associate themselves with Poland and the Polish nation. From the confluence with Žeimena (213 km) the number of old homesteads and local inhabitants significantly decreased and more country houses and collective gardens appeared. When approaching Vilnius (about 187–174 km) an increased tension between the rural and urban population can be felt, the difference in their worldviews and values becomes evident.

This is the third book, presenting a report by dr. Vykintas Vaitkevičius-led research team that have conducted an expedition from Vilnius to Kernavė (93 km). It consists of a selected records and photographs taken during the expedition, description of scientific work and key em-

pirical results (geographic location of objects, and survey, measurement, explorations and many other data). Complemented with many previously collected archaeological, historical, linguistic, folkloric and ethnographic facts, this book engages readers with the river's past and present, natural and cultural heritage, coastal villages. The local inhabitants assist the author – they contribute to describing the characteristic picture of the world of the Neris, revealing strong, visible and invisible connections between the river and the man living on its shore.

Like the first two, the third book is also close to Tiškevičius' monograph style: the Neris is described sequentially, by travelling down the river, with things interesting to science discussed throughout the narrative in more detail or in general terms. The main story is in some places complemented with data on geographic locations or objects (their localization, measurements, etc.) and at the end of the book there are original texts by locals in Belarusian, Polish and Lithuanian languages. The content of these texts is an integral part of the results of the expedition.

In Vilnius, the author views Neris from a historical perspective. He talks about a fish factory, established in 1664 close to the Sts. Peter and Paul's Church, and the Five Wounds Brotherhood which was later built on the foundations of the factory (members of the brotherhood engaged in fishing). Similar brotherhood, named after St. Hyacinth, established nearby the Sts. Philip and James' Church in 1690, united boatmen of Vilnius. Fishing and river boat industry is an integral part of Vilnius' commerce history and the historic fleet of the Lukiškės pier. In addition, the author draws attention to the changes made to the banks of Neris in the twentieth century, river's cleaning methods and extent.

When leaving Vilnius in 2007, the scientists of the Neris expedition first came across the city outskirts' environment, unpleasant in the way the local real estate owners are abusing their property rights. Locals (*tutejszy*) speak here *plainly*. In the second half of the 19th century in most of the Vilnius region, Lithuanian was replaced by the *plain* language (*no-npocmy*). In most cases the Polish language spread afterwards; in some locations it replaced not the Belarusian but Lithuanian language. The Catholic identity and Polish language (or, more accurately, its Vilnius dialect) is characteristic to the self-consciousness of most surveyed local residents. The first locals speaking broken Lithuanian were met in Paneriai (109 km), where the Polish-Lithuanian language mix replaced the Polish-Belarusian mix and continued up to Kernavė (93 km).

Dozens of the Stone Age campsites, Iron Age settlements, hill forts, burial mounds, trees, springs on the coast of Neris between Vilnius and Kernavė are eloquent witnesses of history of Lithuanian culture, economy, religion and statehood. The book includes records of legends and stories on the ancient Lithuanian religion, the baptism of Lithuania, wars with the Swedes, Napoleon's army march, the 1831 uprising, serfdom, soul rafting, fishing and many other. All the time from Vilnius to Kernavė scientists were accompanied by the motif of demarcation line that separated Lithuania and Poland during the occupation of Vilnius in 1920-1939. For many kilometres this line stretched along the middle of the Neris River and left a mark in the region's history and culture.

River's depths, shoals and single stones, all bearing proper names, is another interesting aspect of the world of Neris. All this is wrapped in enthralling legends and one can feel the special harmony of nature and culture. Many of the place names and legends heard here for the first time, enriches the knowledge of the so far little-known Baltic religion and mythology.

Folklore texts published in this book were transcribed by dr. Jurašas Unukovičius (in Belarusian language), dr. Krystyna Rutkowska (in Polish), Ugnė Kabelkaitė, Laura Valauskaitė and V. Vaitkevičius (in Lithuanian). The texts were selected and grouped by V. Vaitkevičius. Language editing was made by T. Valodzina K. Rutkowska and V. Vaitkevičius. Summaries in the Lithuanian language were prepared by Danute Šaduikienė and V. Vaitkevičius.

When preparing the extracts of folklore texts for media publication, it was regarded that these texts constitute, in all aspects, an authentic source of language and culture of our epoch. Sometimes at first glance insignificant fragments of stories told by the surveyed and questions given to them by researchers help to fully and accurately keep track of the interview's and, most importantly, the surveyed person's chain of thought.

The book, written six years after the end of the expedition, is based on fieldnotes, texts of narratives, photographs, videos and personal experiences. Data collected by Lithuanian ethnic culture researcher and promoter Ida Stankevičiūtė (1952–2006) is widely used as well. Place names, proper names are transcribed in Lithuanian. Linguists' recommendations were taken into account and implemented as much as possible.

The indicated river mileage is based on Prof. Česlovas Kudaba's book *Along the Neris* (published in Vilnius in 1985). Geographical coordinates of areas and objects are indicated in WGS84 format. They were measured on the sites using a receiver Garmin *Legend* (average margin of error 3–5 m).