

History of Sciences

Niko Marr – The Scholar of a World-Wide Significance

(150th Anniversary)

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ABSTRACT. The outstanding scholar Niko Marr was born in the family of Scot James Marr and Georgian woman Agraphina Magularia in 1864. He studied rich Georgian culture and was a public man of the world scale. Georgian language took special place in the treasury of Georgian culture and N.Marr devoted to this issue the whole life. The object of the scholar's research was the questions of Georgian and Armenian languages. He studied about 50 languages widening the sphere of linguistic knowledge. On his initiative Japhetic Institute was founded. N.Marr came to the conclusion that all the world languages are the result of human creation. He tried to explain the process of origin of the language and perfection of its separate types in order to make easier the process of finding a single sophisticated communication tool by means of creative technique. He wanted to find out the way how to finish collective-conscious activity that appeared collectively-instinctively and assimilated into new forms through many thousands of years. © 2016 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci

Key words: Japhetic theory, linguistics, caucasian languages

This was the title of the autobiography of the academician Niko Marr published in the “Ogonyok” magazine in 1927 (No27/233), it was written specially for the magazine. After the title the following was printed: “the Soviet Country should know its scholars.”

The great scholar described his life, parents, relatives and friends with amazing frankness. Niko Marr says humorously that if one believed his mother his birth and childhood seem to have been legendary. “My father was an old Scotsman and my mother – a young woman from Guria (Ozurgeti District, Kutaisi Province).” Niko was born on the right bank of the river Rioni in Kutaisi, at the so-

called “farm,” where his father Jacob worked - he was the headmaster of the agricultural school.

The scholar’s mother had a modest home education, but his father was a University graduate, history as his major. He was interested in botany. During the hard period of his life (as N. Marr notes) he took up gardening. The first attempt to grow tea in Guria, as the scholar says, is associated with the name of Jacob Marr.

N. Marr spent his childhood among Georgians. His relations were French, Russian and Spanish (the relatives of his father’s first wife), but Niko rarely communicated with them. The Marrs moved from Kutaisi to Ozurgeti. Here, the

future scholar, as he says himself, led a very happy life. Jacob Marr had very conservative views on life. The only instruction he got from his father was the blessing of his future way: “You will never do anything sensible.” His father said this after he had watched him playing and examined the toys Niko had made. As for his mother her views about her son were exaggerated and everything she saw in him was good and ideal.

In his “Autobiography” he specially notes that his mother and father had no common language to communicate, mother knew only Georgian, and father spoke only English and French. They communicated by means of “distorted” Russian and Georgian words. This fact also influenced the scholar’s vocabulary: “... in general I can consider Georgian my native language, Georgian dialect to be more exact. The first language I read and wrote was Georgian.”

His father died when he was eight years old and his single hope was his mother. Little Niko was considered to be uneducated, ignorant and hence was held in contempt. Their relations drove Niko and his mother away from their home. Thanks to his father’s great services he was admitted to the classical gymnasium school. In spite of the fact that Niko considered himself unprepared (especially in theology), he got down to work. Another fact that helped the future scholar was that the headmaster told the students that he was English. He made numerous mistakes in his written test work, though Blagodarov, his teacher of Russian, paid attention to the young man and saw a talented pupil in this seemingly ignorant boy. He was praised in another field too – he made a great success in mastering Latin. In the group where most of the students were Georgian it was very difficult to study Latin. This dead foreign language was taught through Russian which most of the students did not understand. Niko Marr was acknowledged as the best Latin learner.

The student of the gymnasium school Niko Marr recollects that the first book he read in Georgian was a collection of fairy-tales. In the second form of the gymnasium he read “Robinson Crusoe” in Russian. At that time Niko’s mother got married but she continued to take care of her son. So great was the future scholar’s love for books that his whole life belonged to the world of literature. Herewith due to his naughty character and activities he often put the teachers, who regarded him with favour, in an embarrassing situation. Niko himself notes, “for any prank of mine they could have kicked me out of school blacklisted.” Fortunately, they forgave him everything because he had a very good singing voice and apart from that he played the clarinet in the gymnasium orchestra. His mischiefs had their result, it was reflected in his marks for behaviour.

When at gymnasium school he also went in for sports, he ran but neither the running did him any good.

He hurt his leg and the complications were so serious that the doctors were going to amputate it. But his mother’s persistent and categorical “no” did the job. The local doctor cured his leg. At this time the Marrs were hard up. Niko decided to quit school and start working as a telegraphist. But his mother was against it, so Niko continued his studies. He was especially good at languages. The teachers were greatly impressed by his talent. The future scholar mastered both the dead (old Greek, Latin) and west European (Italian, English, French, German) languages. Niko was greatly interested in Georgian literature. He wrote poems and published the gymnasium newspaper in Georgian. This strengthened his technique in mastering the Georgian language. Niko thought it a great achievement that in that period he was actively engaged in studying the problems of ancient toponymy, which became his speciality in future. “Simultaneously with the newspaper articles,” wrote N. Marr, in

answer to the famous Georgian poet Akaki Tsereteli, who wrote about the events of March 1, 1881 (assassination of Alexander II) “The bird that flew to us from the North with the good news” I published the poem “The Appeal” which called for actions and not for chirping.”

Niko ran away from the gymnasium school twice. At first to Tbilisi as it was his great wish to work in the Botanical Gardens (it is known that his dream was to become a botanist). As he was in need of money he began to work in the library, after that he returned to the gymnasium school. Next time he expressed a protest—never took his final exams to get the school-leaving certificate (though there was every post possibility for him to finish school with a gold medal) he wanted to stay at school for another year to polish his knowledge of old Greek. They ascribed this decision of his to his psychical instability and expelled him from school. In future Niko first planned to enter the medical faculty, but subsequently he changed his mind and got interested in philology, Caucasian studies in particular. As he thinks it was under the influence of Stoyanov, his teacher of history. On his part his teacher of French Zaburg also encouraged him.

After being reinstated at the gymnasium he finished it with honours and began reading to get ready to enter the Faculty of Oriental Studies. Many people advised him against taking this step and as he writes in his Autobiography, they told him not to bury his talent, not to ruin himself, “what will you be? At the best you will be a teacher of Georgian, accordingly a village teacher and that will be all.”

“Everyone, who could, gave me advice and I always took an opposite decision.” Young Niko Marr’s aspiration is very interesting, “As early as that it was my aim to explain the origin of the Georgian language, as early as that I compared it with the only language I know (through the communication with people) of our neighbouring

eastern country—Turkey. This idea, forgotten for a while afterwards, in fact is one of the urgent scientific—social problems, now brought forward by the Japhetic Theory.”

After being enrolled at Petersburg University Niko Marr was reading in three spheres: Caucasian, which then included only Georgian and Armenian, Aramaic—Persian—Turkish and Semitic (Hebrew, Arabic, Syrian). In the second year of his studies (1886), Niko Marr paid attention to the Georgian and Semitic languages being cognate. This observation of the future scholar stirred up doubts at the University. He notes with great regret that one of the renowned Russian orientalists (arabist) predicted a complete fiasco. The scholar also added that if it were correct, they would not have waited for the arrival of some Caucasian—it would have been known a long time before. But such an “evaluation” did not frustrate N. Marr. The more so that many from among his Caucasian friends supported his suggestion about the problem. The scholar was especially grateful to Georgians. His Georgian friends and he were also united by their common social mentality. In his “Autobiography” Marr writes that his dream (together with other Georgians) was to liberate Georgia, he even swore an oath with one of his gymnasium friends, “never to put down the arms until Georgia has been liberated.” Niko Marr adds with humour that subsequently his friend became a banker and he—an academician.

After he had begun excavating the site of the ruined city of Anis in Armenia, he also found supporters there.

In 1888 the student Niko Marr’s first scholarly work “The Nature and Traits of the Georgian Language” was published; it was published in the “Iveria” newspaper in Georgian. It is noteworthy that the publication of this article evoked hostility. The professor of Georgian saw his rival in Niko Marr. But the future scholar’s goal was quite different. He had to continue his work in the

“underground.” In 1903 Niko Marr was awarded his doctor’s degree and only after that, in 1908 he presented the basic problems of his Japhetic theory (“Preliminary Information about the Relation between the Georgian and Semitic Languages”). Factually it was an introduction to his work “The Basic Tables of the Grammar of the Georgian Language.” Niko Marr dedicated this work to his teacher Rosen, a Semitologist.

In 1989 the Caucasian Educational Region offered to Marr a journey about Svaneti, which was very important for the scholar. During his travel (and generally in Georgian circles) the scholar noticed some contempt. And indeed as he thought his theory about the association between Georgian and Persian literature and about the plot of “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” being Persian was unacceptable. Niko Marr’s attitude to the provenance of the Georgian translation of “The Bible” caused a fiercer opposition.

Niko Marr returned to Petersburg (probably a little disappointed) and accepted the suggestion of the Armenian professor I. Patkanov that he should get ready to become the professor of Armenian philology, language and literature. It should be noted that the Department of the Armenian Language disapproved of this suggestion. The chairperson of the department would not attend the examination board meeting. Apart from that the Armenian deputation demanded that no non-Armenian be admitted at the Department. As it seems an active interference of the renowned professor Khvolson, a Hebraist, helped to solve the problem and N. Marr got down to thoroughly mastering the Armenian language and conducting research.

At this point the “Autobiography” stops giving the biographical details and deals with the general scholarly issues. He is constantly engaged in researching into the Georgian and Armenian problems. Herewith the scholar underlines that his historical – literary interests were replaced by archaeological issues. The Ani archaeological exca-

vations were very interesting and significant. The material was important to the whole Caucasus.

Niko Marr expands the sphere of his knowledge of languages – he is learning about 50 languages. The conclusion he comes to is very interesting, “all the cultures of the East and the West as well as all the languages are the result of one of the same creative process.”

Niko Marr travelled to the Basque country and came back with a lot of material and significant ideas. The studying of the Japhetic languages needed certain conditions.

The Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union honoured Niko Marr’s request and founded the Japhetic Institute. All the languages of the world were considered to be the result of man’s creative work. Therefore the Institute was to work on the problems, to study and research into the questions presented by N. Marr.

Niko Marr finishes his “Autobiography” by emphasizing his new theory, considers it very significant herewith posing a new problem, “The basic urgent problem in my speciality: to specify the identification of the process of the speech origin and the perfection of its separate aspects in order to facilitate the process of finding a single, the most perfect means of communication among peoples and to finish collectively and consciously something that emerged collectively and instinctively and was being transformed into the new forms over the millennia.”

Niko Marr’s “Autobiography” is the first class, very significant source to study the life details of the scholar and his creative work.

The scholar of the world-wide significance, who came from “the Georgian home” contributed a lot of comprehensive, important research works to the common treasury of science. It should be emphasized, that in the creative work of the scholar his motherland – Georgia and the study of her eventful history and rich culture occupied a special place.

*მეცნიერების ისტორია***ნიკო მარი — მსოფლიო მნიშვნელობის მეცნიერი**

(დაბადებიდან 150 წლისთავი)

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გამოჩენილი მეცნიერი ნიკო მარი მსოფლიო მასშტაბის მოღვაწე იყო. შეისწავლა ქართველი ხალხის უმდიდრესი სულიერი და მატერიალური კულტურის საკითხები. ქართული ენა, ნ. მარის შეფასებით, მსოფლიო დონის უმნიშვნელოვანეს ფენომენად იქნა აღიარებული. ნიკო მარის კვლევის არეალში იყო მოქცეული ქართული და სომხური პრობლემები. იგი 50-მდე ენას ფლობდა. მისი თაოსნობით დაარსდა იაფეტური ინსტიტუტი. მეცნიერმა საფუძველი ჩაუყარა ტექსტოლოგიურ კვლევებს - ქართულ ტექსტოლოგიას. ნიკო მარს მიაჩნდა, რომ ქართული ენის შესასწავლად და მის საშუალებათა გაუთვალისწინებლად კაცობრიობის კულტურულ სიძველეთა საკითხი ვერ გადაიჭრებოდა. მოითხოვდა, რომ ევროპის ყველა უმაღლეს სასწავლებელში დაენერგათ ქართული ენის სწავლება. ნიკო მარმა დიდი ყურადღება დაუთმო „ვეფხისტყაოსნის კვლევას“, რომელიც მას მსოფლიო მნიშვნელობის პოემად მიაჩნდა. ნიკო მარი ებრძოდა სიყალბეს მეცნიერებაში და იგი ობიექტურ სინამდვილეს ემსახურებოდა. ამდენად, ნიკო მარი იყო დიდი მეცნიერი და მაღალ-მოქალაქეობრივი მრწამსით აღჭურვილი, სიმაღლისათვის მამაცი მებრძოლი, ნამდვილი პატრიოტი.

Received March, 2016