

Harry Halén—A Biographical Sketch

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Harry Thorvald Halén (in Russian Г. Т. Гален) was born on the 24th of May, 1943, in Helsinki. His father Tor Holger Halén was a shop-assistant and musician, who sometimes played in the «Dallapé» orchestra, Finland's most famous entertainment band of the '30s and '40s. Both he and Harry's mother Agnes Lovisa Halén (née Östman) had Swedish as their mother tongue. The parents separated fairly soon, however, and the upbringing of Harry and his elder sister Amy (Ann-Britt) fell on the mother, with a meagre income of a telephone operator.

Finnish became Harry's first language when he went to the Finnish Normal Lyceum alias «Norssi» in Helsinki in 1955-1963. His was the classical course with long Latin, but he also studied Russian. Due to the difficult financial situation of his family he was freed of tuition charges, and he took his studies very seriously, getting the prize called «The Horn of Wisdom» in 1961. We have a good record of how Harry experienced the school and what were his manifold hobbies and interests during that time, for in 1998 Harry published his school reminiscences. With his habitual humour, irony and anecdotes (he still likes to tell anecdotes about all his acquaintances), he describes school customs and incidences and draws a lively portrait of the different teachers, both verbally and visually. (Having gone to the same school as Harry, we can testify to the accuracy and aptness of his description.)

Harry used the school library a lot, feeling it to be «an oasis of safety and silent comfort», where «the learned musk of old books attracted the wounded traveller from the dangers of the school desert». Among the many books he borrowed, Harry specifically mentions Sven Hedin's thick volumes on Tibet (*Transhimalaya*). He also tells how once when the roof of the school was being repaired, he slipped to the loft through a usually locked door that had been left open. There, in this forbidden secret place, under a thick cover of dust he found remainders of library archives that had been rescued from the ruins during the war, when the school had been bombed. He collected thirty numbers of hand-written early issues of the school journal *Weikko* and some original photographs of the old register of the school. The journal issues he later presented to the surprised teacher in charge of the school library, after having first asked him about the lacking early numbers. He was happy that the teacher did not ask how he had got hold of these treasures, and that he made a promise (never

fulfilled) to institute a search for the still missing issues. Harry's archivist leanings manifested themselves most clearly in his being the chronicler of his form for the school journal (*Veikko*).

Harry was an active member in several of the school's hobby associations, including stenography, a skill he later needed when interpreting the stenographed diaries of G. J. Ramstedt. Harry was also the President of the school's Astronomy Club and spent many nights at the observatory of the local association of astronomers «Ursa» in 1962-63. Even more important for him was «Turnarit», the association for gymnastics (in this subject, Harry had the maximum marks in his school certificate). Later on, Harry has often regretted that in his ignorance he spoiled his backbone, a source of much suffering, by training weight-lifting with too heavy loads too young. This may be one of the reasons why Harry always has emphasized the importance of healthy habits of life. Harry is known as a strict adherent of temperance with regard to almost anything stronger than water.

In his reminiscences Harry tells about his many expeditions to the antiquarian bookshops in Helsinki, while the form chronicle quotes him boasting of having books in «77 languages». Oriental languages soon became a special interest. After hankering for many years for the overpriced copy of I. J. Schmidt's Mongolian lexicon at Isak Gordin's bookshop, Harry was happy to get from Härkönen's bookshop «the many times better» Kalmuck dictionary by G. J. Ramstedt. Härkönen expressed some surprise when this junior bought from him A. F. Stenzler's *Sanskrit primer*, «which now, more than 40 years later, is still in safe keeping with a good service record». Harry used the *devanagari* script in his school notebooks and even wrote some Sanskrit in an essay, which he got back duly corrected by his teacher Tuomo Pekkanen, well versed in this language. The history teacher, however, wanted to run everything according to her own notes, and did not appreciate the Egyptian hieroglyphic texts that Harry had copied into his notebook from Carl Grimberg's well-known work.

In this connection it is appropriate to note that Harry from the very beginning cultivated calligraphy when writing Oriental scripts, and habitually made all his paper work including his own handwriting, with maximum neatness and clarity. Moreover, he has always kept all his papers and books in perfect order. These thoroughly ingrained virtues have been of the greatest value in his later work, and a matter of much admiration for his colleagues. Graphic skills have been particularly useful in the many editorial appointments Harry has had.

Eastern religions, in particular Buddhism in its Tibetan variety, fascinated Harry Halén in his school time. «Tibet is my homeland», he is reported to have said. Buddhism has remained the faith closest to his heart ever since. But when he tried to institute serious discussion of Buddhist

philosophy and the thoughts of Jiddu Krishnamurti in the classes on religion, he met with little understanding and sympathy. This eventually resulted in his relinquishing the Christian church with the consent of his mother, and being thus relieved of the duty to attend the classes on (confessional Protestant) religion.

«The favourite slogan of discontented teachers: ‘You should leave the school for work in the harbour!’ was realized in my case better than they could imagine. During four summers, I worked aboard more than 60 ships, measuring wood cargo exported along the coast [of Finland] from Ii to Virolahti. In the company of Turkish, Greek, Yugoslavian, Spanish and German sailors, the narrow and often stuffy school world shrank into a mouldy ship biscuit. One needed the provisions of Arska [Aarre Pipinen, the teacher of German], Donna [Eila Lindblom, the teacher of English] and Bögeli [Cyril Gyllenbögél, the teacher of Russian] and the *Modern Greek Reader* by Kykkotis. The world opens up only through language skills. That was the most precious yield of the school. Everything else has remained fairly thin strip wood.» «Speaks Turkish and Greek», reports the form chronicle.

After the school, Harry Halén completed his military service in the Finnish army, serving mainly as a clerk in the Swedish-speaking brigade of Nyland located at Dragsvik, and reaching the rank of second sergeant. From his own period of service Harry likes to quote samples from the almost unintelligible Swedish dialects spoken by some of his fellow conscripts. By that time, Harry had already become well familiar with the Asian exploratory achievement of Marshal C. G. E. Mannerheim, but he may not yet have known that he would later become intimately involved in studying the history of the Russian military in Finland, especially from the point of view of its ethnic composition.

At Helsinki University, Harry focussed on three subjects: Altaic philology, Sanskrit and comparative Indo-European linguistics, and Russian. In the first two subjects his principal teacher was Pentti Aalto, while in Russian studies he enjoyed the more distant guidance of Igor Vahros and Valentin Kiparsky. Somewhat later, he also became a disciple of Aulis J. Joki. Harry took his B.A. degree in 1967, M.A. in 1970, and Lic. Phil. in 1974. His thesis for the highest marks in Altaic studies was a thorough biographical treatment (in Finnish) of the Tatar intellectual and politician Sadri Maksudi Arsal. His corresponding thesis in Indo-European (Indian) studies was an equally careful examination of the pantheon of the Buddhist Jātaka texts written in Pāli, backed up with nearly exhaustive quotations. Finally, Harry’s Licentiate thesis (corresponding to an Anglo-Saxon PhD dissertation) dealt with the *mangghus* monsters of Central Asian folklore and mythology. Unfortunately, all of these valuable theses remain unpublished, while Harry has directed his activities to ever new areas and topics.

Harry started his career as a trainee at Helsinki University Library in 1965-67. From 1966 to 1970, he was employed by the library to catalogue the Turkic, Arabic, Persian, and Caucasian collections formed during the times when the Grand Duchy of Finland was a part of the Russian Empire (1809-1917) and the Library received (or was supposed to receive) a free copy of every single publication that came out in the empire. These collections had never been catalogued before because they demanded specialist knowledge of several Oriental scripts and languages, which was exactly what Harry possessed.

Harry's first wife Sirpa (née Jääskeläinen) also worked at Helsinki University Library. Harry and Sirpa had two daughters, Katja born in 1966 and Tesla born in 1969. They divorced in 1973, however, and Sirpa and the daughters moved to Sweden. In 1976, Harry married a second time. His new wife, with whom he has lived happily ever after, is Nina Soldarew-Bogorodski. Nina's parents were emigrants from Russia, and with Nina the Russian element in Harry's life became even stronger than before. Harry met Nina at the Finnish Bookstore, where she is still employed—at that time Nina was taking care of the orders of books published in Russia. Harry and Nina have one daughter, Nadja, born in 1977. Nadja is following his father's footsteps, having taken her M.A. in 2003 in Russian language and literature as well as Turkish language and literature (with an M.A. thesis on Chingis Aitmatov).

After his work on the Oriental book collections of Helsinki University Library, Harry turned his eyes on Oriental manuscripts as well as unpublished field materials, on which he has worked ever since. The two scholars whose heritage has become closest to Harry are, without a doubt, G. J. Ramstedt and C. G. E. Mannerheim. For the work on Ramstedt's Mongol and Caucasian Turkic materials Harry was granted a scholarship by the Finno-Ugrian Society in 1968-73 and again in 1976-77. The work on Oriental manuscripts was supported by the Scandinavian (now Nordic) Institute of Asian Studies in 1975-76. Over the years, Harry has demonstrated that even the relatively limited Oriental collections of Finland can offer work for decades. Even so, Harry's scholarly work on the sources of Finnish Oriental studies has been accompanied by a long and important administrative career.

Harry's administrative skills were needed when Aulis J. Joki's consistent efforts resulted in the founding of the Unit for East Asian and Altaic Studies of the University of Helsinki in 1974. Joki, whose actual chair was in Finno-Ugrian linguistics, was one of the most visionary developers of Oriental studies in Finland. A disciple of Ramstedt, Joki had also studied Chinese under Bernhard Karlgren in Sweden, and he was much concerned with the fact that Far Eastern languages were not represented at the University of Helsinki, nor in any other academic institution in Finland. At Joki's instance, full-time lectureships in Chinese

and Japanese were founded, and the teaching of Korean was also resumed, though on a more modest scale, after a long pause following Ramstedt's Korean courses in the '30s.

After first serving as a temporary half-day assistant of the new unit led by Joki, Harry was, in 1976, appointed a full-time *amanuensis*, a position whose multiple dimensions are perhaps best rendered by the Russian term *ученый секретарь* 'learned secretary'. Since 1978 Harry has held this position on a permanent (though extraordinary) basis. In the course of these years, the Unit for East Asian and Altaic Studies has grown into what is today the Institute for Asian and African Studies of the University of Helsinki, an institute of higher education and advanced research, where all major fields of Oriental and African Studies are represented. This development could hardly have taken place without Harry. Sadly, Harry has had to accept the fact that the otherwise so fruitful expansion has marginalized Altaic studies—Harry's own principal field and the original focus of the whole institute.

There are many anecdotes of the early years of the institute. In the beginning, the Unit for East Asian and Altaic Studies was housed in a one-room office on the Boulevard in Helsinki. Once it happened that the unit had to receive Ernst Palmén, Rector of the University, who came to discuss the possibilities of increasing the facilities of the unit. When Palmén, a chain-smoker, was looking for an ashtray, Harry gave a typical reply: «We expect that people can curb their desires for the moment they are visiting us!» Palmén (who was a good friend of Joki) did not take offence. In 1976 the office moved to new premises at Vuorikatu 3 A, close to the main buildings of the University. This was the location where the present-day composition of the Institute for Asian and African Studies took shape. In 1981, the Institute got larger premises at Fabianinkatu 24, from where it moved to Meritullinkatu 2 A in 1992. Into its present (and hopefully permanent) premises at Unioninkatu 38 (an old Russian military hospital) the Institute moved in 1998.

Through all these thirty years of service, Harry has managed the administration of the Institute with «motherly» care. This has involved making and managing the budget, keeping the accounts, taking care of the teaching plan and its realization, acting as the secretary of the governing board of the Institute, collecting materials for the yearly teaching programmes, study requirements and reports, seeing them through the press, registering the examinations of the students, managing the premises and its facilities (many people will remember Harry even taking the role of a cleaner, when people have soiled the floor with their dirty boots in a bad weather), receiving and replying to all the countless telephone calls to the institute every day, giving and mediating expert advice (over the years, he has built an extensive database for this purpose), distributing to and collecting from the personnel administrative inquiries, taking care of

the foreign personnel and visitors (their work permits, housing and taxation problems), and so on and so on. Harry has done everything very conscientiously and effectively, but he has managed this only by sacrificing his Saturdays to Institute work without pay. He has laboured single-handedly almost all these decades, and it is evident that the Institute is facing a dire crisis at his retirement. It can be said without any exaggeration, that Harry Halén has been the real backbone of Oriental studies in Finland all these years, a collective force and a very important factor of background influence and support.

As if this was not enough, Harry has accepted even further administrative burdens. For more than a decade, starting in 1980, he was the publication secretary of the Finnish Oriental Society. In this capacity, he functioned as the midwife of many manuscripts, transforming them into neatly-set volumes of *Studia Orientalia* and issues of the Popular Series with painstaking accuracy and great efficiency. Also, seeing the decline of the status and resources of Altaic studies in Finland, Harry has systematically taken care of the remaining students in the field both as an advisor and as an examiner. After the retirement of Pentti Aalto in 1981, Harry was long the only person at the institute with competence in Altaic studies. In addition to his other roles he has also taught courses and held seminars at various levels and on a variety of Altaic subjects, including Ancient Turkic, Written Mongol, Modern Mongol (Khalkha), as well as Buddhist texts and inscriptions.

Besides his exhausting daily labour, which he has always started punctually at 8 a.m. and concluded at 4.15 p.m. every working day, Harry has with iron self-discipline managed to have another career as a scholar and writer in his free time. He has an astonishingly voluminous and many-sided production to his credit, as is immediately evident from the list of his publications. His works cover the whole world, but Asia, especially Central (or Inner) Asia, is unquestionably his special area. Most importantly, perhaps, Harry has documented the interaction between Finland and Asia, interaction which most often has taken place via the Russian link. The history of Finnish researchers in Asia, and, conversely, the history of Asian visitors to Finland, has been the leading theme that traverses most of Harry's production.

Here we shall mention only a few highlights. In addition to publishing Ramstedt's Northern Mongol and Caucasian Turkic language and folklore materials, Harry has made available a rare set of Tibetan-style *thangkas* depicting Siddha masters, bought by Ramstedt in Urga and kept in mint condition at the National Museum of Finland. After numerous shorter papers and public lectures, Harry's work on Ramstedt's life and expeditions finally culminated in his comprehensive biography of Ramstedt, published in English for an international readership. Before this, Harry had already published the archaeological notes from Mongolia

by Ramstedt's travel companion (in 1909), Sakari Pälsi, also known as a popular author. To complete this publication, Harry also compiled a full bibliography of Pälsi's works (including his belletristic *œuvres*). As a small side step from Mongolia, Harry published the Western Lamut materials collected by Arvo Sotavalta from a Lamut informant who stayed in Helsinki in 1928. The book-size publications of field materials made available by Harry thus cover all the three main groups of the «Altaic» languages: Mongolic, Turkic, and Tungusic.

Harry's work on his other great idol, Marshal C. G. E. Mannerheim, is still in progress. Harry has written extensively on Mannerheim's ride (1906-1908) through Turkestan, Northern Tibet and China, and one of his future plans concerns the reediting of Mannerheim's large travelogue (*Across Asia*), which was originally published without proper attention to the ethnographic and toponymic details. In collaboration with foreign colleagues Harry has also worked on the so-called Mannerheim fragments from Eastern Turkestan, which form one of several similar collections of early documents in a variety of languages once used in the region. An important treasure saved by Harry from oblivion is Mannerheim's collection of drawings of Chinese folk deities (published in collaboration with Bent Laerbek Pedersen).

In many other publications Harry has dealt with the lives and travels of a broad spectre of other learned men, especially Finns and Russians, and quite particularly Finns in Russian service. For the purpose of making available obscure early publications and archival materials, Harry established a publication series of his own, bearing the telling name *Unholan Aitta*, «Storehouse of Oblivion», which by the present day has reached its 16th volume. Related activities also led Harry to write an extensive biography of the eccentric artist and self-made etymologist Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa (in collaboration with Tauno Tukkinen), as well as a book of «encounters» between Finland and the Orient, published under the title *Kulkumiehiä*, «Wanderers».

The local history of Helsinki and the coastal regions of Finland has also been of special interest to Harry. Among other things, he has written (under the pseudonym «Sailor H.») on Pihlajasaari (Rönnskär), an island in front of Helsinki, his favourite place of swimming tours in the summers besides the Åland Islands, which have been the goal of yearly bicycling tours in the company of Nina during summer holidays. From the tombstones of cemeteries in Åland as well as on the fortress island of Sveaborg (also known as Suomenlinna) guarding Helsinki, Harry has collected information on distant visitors who met their fate long ago in the service of the Russian Army in Finland. Especially when writing in Finnish, and on such juicy topics as the slightly daring erotic escapades of Tibetan rogues, Harry's prose is inimitably expressive and strong. He has also tried his poetic skills in rendering long episodes from the immense

Kirghiz national epic *Manas* into Finnish using the traditional Kalevala metre of Finnish folk poetry. He has musical hobbies, too, including Mongolian-type overtone singing (*khöömii*).

There is one aspect of Harry that perhaps explains something of his amazing productivity: Harry does not waste his time on foreign travels. He seldom participates even in conferences, though he keeps a large network of international contacts through correspondence by mail and email. In his youth Harry, like most Orientalists, dreamed of travels to exotic countries like Tibet, Mongolia and Yakutia in the wake of the classic travellers of former generations like Ramstedt and Mannerheim. Eventually, Harry's own relationship with the countries of the East has mostly remained platonic, though he has visited Istanbul, the Black Sea coast and Lithuania. He has commented his lack of interest in fieldwork by saying, «I do not want to lose my illusions». Instead, he has retraced the steps of former travellers and published important original material collected by them, material that without Harry would have remained forgotten in obscure museums and archives.

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Source: Harry Halén, *Janua Orientis*, p. 90.