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Beware the Illusion or Latvian Literature's Road to the Nobel Prize

The Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded annually by the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, is the world's most prestigious and popular recognition in the field, and the media all over the world, even those whose priorities are not cultural news, do not forget to report on it. Authors have been nominated for this prize since 1901, and many of its recipients are deservedly among the world's literary classics.

The Nobel Committee has been reproached for the marked dominance of European, and especially Scandinavian, authors among the prize winners. The prize committee has also been reproached for the conspicuous rarity with which Asian and African writers have received the prize. The apparent underrepresentation of women among the prize winners has also been rightfully criticised. Public opinion has been influential in these areas, with positive developments in recent decades.

The problem of the penetration of small nations into the world cultural circle remains a topical issue. This is also the case in Latvia, where the Nobel Prize has been debated since the 1920s. For a long time, the media discussed the nomination of the poet and playwright Rainis and the imminent probability of receiving this prestigious prize.

The focus of my research is to study the press' overview of this nominee process in Latvia and the attitude of press people to Rainis. The press overview exploration doing this research is a kind of self-reflection, it is also about the way a nation sees and accepts its own high-ranking intellectuals.

Key words: Rainis, Nobela Prize in litterature, Jēkabs Janševskis, Edvarts Virza, nomination, press.

In the past, the rumours that the Latvian poet Rainis (1864-1929) had once been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature were briskly circulating among public and for quite a considerable time it remained the best topic for ardent discussions, yet in the course of time this issue has faded into oblivion. As far back as I can remember, from my early age in the Soviet times, the topic of Rainis and the Nobel Prize would pop up in adult conversations occasionally. There was a strong credence that Rainis was nominated for it, but for some unknown reasons did not receive it. There was not even the slightest doubt that Rainis was worthy of the prize. In public opinion, he was an even more worthy candidate than many of those who already had received the prize. Why the prize was not awarded, however, was a matter of divided opinion. People were sure that the big nations, through their lobbies, had unfairly sidelined Rainis and then swept the issue under the carpet. Consequently, social chats discussing this topic usually finished with the conclusion that the small nations had never been allowed to get their rightful place in world culture. They noted that these were the bygone times, and the injustice of this issue has ceased to be topical, stressing the fact that the Soviet Union was not interested in promoting the cultures of the Baltic peoples – its' only interest was the "greatness and mightiness" of Russia.

This occasionally was a topic of friendly conversations mostly at home parties where the gathered could leisurely address different intriguing themes. With the advent of the 21st century, this discussion was gradually ousted by other, more urgent, and more astonishing news. The discussion of Rainis' nomination for the Nobel prize was recently resumed as today we have access to the Nobel Prize database. It lists the international nominees in all fields, ranked by year, country, and the names of the persons who had submitted the applications.

(Yet, we can find information only up to 1971, but in the case of Rainis there is quite sufficient material for examination). The object of my research are the articles in printed press focused on the Nobel Prize in literature, events and negotiations around the awarding process, and the attitude of press persons towards Rainis.

If we look through the nomination archive, it is distressful to discover that, contrary to the popular public belief, Rainis was NOT nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature at all. And this is downright astonishing, considering the cultural stratum and legends that have surrounded this issue over time. However, looking through the contestant list we can find that another remarkable Latvian writer, Edvarts Virza, was nominated for this prize in 1935 and 1936. Unlike the case of Rainis, Virza's nomination was not passionate, lacked any legends and ambiguous stories, and we must admit that the issue has not left any noticeable impression or memories on the public consciousness. This is probably due to Virza's much lower popularity among the readers.

The evolution and chronology of this event were also widely reported in the press of the day. In many ways, this was possible since researchers could study the diaries and notes of those involved in the process. The inter-war periodicals, to which access during the Soviet regime was denied, at present have been digitalized and made widely available.

The subject matter of my research is the press' publication overview of this nominee process and the attitude of press representatives towards Rainis. The press publication discussion and this research is also about self-reflection, about the way a nation sees and understands its own high ranking intellectuals. It is a catalyst for the growth of a nation. Self-reflection helps to develop self-awareness, which enables a better understanding of interaction with the world around us. Through self-reflection, it is possible to discover and change patterns of behaviour that contribute to personal and professional success.

Rainis' apparent nomination and the events around it is worth exploring, as they show the Latvian people's vision of the place our literature occupies among the literatures of other nations. It is about a vision of our culture and its place among other culture nations. It's about trying to compare ourselves with others.

The Latvian public was relatively well informed about the Nobel Prize in Literature through the articles in press. Information was available on the winners in the natural sciences, medicine, literature, and peace prize winners and candidates. In newspapers, this information appeared as early as 1901, the year when the first prizes were awarded. The nominees and recipients of the Literature and Peace Prizes are, naturally, the most popular figures in public press.

The positive as well as negative features of each nominee are under discussion. The readers are also informed about the various intrigues and lobby activities, but most frequently the Swedish Academy is being criticized for its choices and the so-called incompetence.

This was the time when Latvian society was slowly regaining senses after the trauma of the bloody revolution of 1905. A second awakening was slowly dawning in the consciousness of the nation. Literature had awakened national self-consciousness and, at the same time, itself. Literature had crawled out of the mire of provincialism, saturated with inferiority complexes, and had created a solid basis for further progress (Berelis, 1999, p. 39).

The awareness that Latvian literature had reached a certain maturity and had taken its place alongside other European nations, at least the literatures of Northern Europe, gave rise to the desire to compare it with the cultural achievements of other nations (Berelis, 1999, p. 28).

The Latvians were eager to take their place among other "Culture Nations". Hence, as early as 1910, in the newspaper "Dzimtenes Vēstnesis", we find an article with an anonymous writer assertion: "Now and then we hear that the Swedish Academy has awarded the much frequently mentioned Nobel Prize to one or another writer and poet, or scientist. The question is about choice: why just to this writer and not another one: why, for example, to a French writer and not a Persian, Finnish or Latvian one?" (Dzimtenes Vēstnesis, 1910).

The author of the article further recounts a discussion on this topic from abroad, covered in the newspaper "Das Literarisches Echo". It was admitted that the Swedish Academy should seriously consider the principles of awarding prizes since the Academy was behaving unfairly by giving a prize to a writer of a major nation: French, German, Italian, Russian, English, Spanish, etc. The prize is not awarded based on talent, but on other considerations, as a favour to show some courtesy to a country. Is this fair? Should this serve as a political and diplomatic compliment? At the end of the article, the author expresses hope that this policy is beginning to change since the prize has allegedly been awarded to Selma Lagerlöf – a celebrity from a smaller nation.

The Latvian public also noticed that the prize was also awarded to the Polish writer Henrik Sienkiewicz. He is also being positioned as a representative of a small nation, not of a nation-state but an ethnic minority within the Russian Empire. There has certainly been a change in the process of awarding prizes, as in 1913 the prize is awarded to Rabindranath Tagore. He is the first Nobel Prize winner of non-European origin. Europe, and particularly the British Empire, is not psychologically prepared for this. This is the shock and confusion among critics. There are no doubts, reporter says, that Tagore's poetry is beautiful, but how many people in the world know the Bengali dialect? But in Europe, we find Anatole France, Émile Verhaeren, Brandes, Wells, Hamsun. Why have they paid such great attention this year to Tagore and have discarded the great European writers? (Jaunais Ceļš, 1913).

Creative achievement is less important and remains in the background. This is in accord with the general trend in the press, where we can find a surging proliferation of articles on the cultural significance of small nations. The surnames have not yet been mentioned, but there is a feeling in the air that Latvian writers might also enter the competition.

Writers are also preparing for the competition. In 1908, Rainis' we find a brief remark in his diary: "Proj[ect] to win the Nobel Prize" (Rainis, 1908).

It is obvious that Rainis, as is typical of individuals with high intellectual power, had an escalated attitude towards the world around him, not always based in real life. One could even say narcissism and a reassessment of his own importance. This manifested itself in excessive self-esteem, a lack of empathy, a glorification of his own achievements and talents, a constant desire to be in the centre of attention and difficulty in accepting other people's opinions and ideas. His ambitious state of mind was absolutely corresponding to the role he dreamed to play on the political stage of the independent Latvia, and to the intended high-ranking positions he wanted to take. In July 1919, during his emigration in Zurich he wrote in his diary the following:

"Right now, this year, I must start building up my dear Latvia to become a free, politically and economically independent country, I must build it up to be the first free country of the future world, I must make it happy. I must become the first President [of Latvia] right now: I must be the President of Latvians, Russians, and it should be European. I must be Rainis the Great; I must achieve admirable happiness. I must be strong and victorious, I must become the first poet of the world and of the proletariat, I must become the first ruler of Europe, I must become the first New Man" (Jundze, 2015, p. 55).

The public euphoria after the establishment of independent Latvia cultivated this mood in many ways. Rainis and his wife, poetess Aspazija, returned after their emigration in Switzerland to their homeland on 10 April 1920 after having spent 14 years abroad. Official delegations and a huge number of well-comers were waiting for their arrival at the train terminal. Both poets were showered with flowers. Afterwards, they were driving in a car along Rainis Boulevard (recently named after him) (Laukstrādnieks, 1920). On 1 May 1920, the Constitutional Assembly – the first elected Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, met for its first session at the House of the Livonian Noble Corporation. Two candidates were nominated for the post of President of the Constitutional Assembly. They were Jānis Čakste from the civic parties and Jānis Rainis as a representative of the Social Democrats.

The Constitutional Assembly, by 83 votes, elected Čakste as its President. Rainis took it painfully whereas he considered that he had rightfully deserved this post. After the re-election vote, Rainis in offence left the Constitutional Assembly building. His dreams of becoming the President of the Constitutional Assembly and the President of the Republic vanished.

In the field of literature, Rainis' hopes were linked to the Nobel Prize for Literature. Rainis wrote: "I must live more than three hundred years in full mind and sound body, in purity of conscience, win the Nobel Prize and the infinite wealth" (Rainis, 1908, p. 683). These hopes and dreams (intentions) for the Nobel Prize appear in the diary with enviable regularity over the years.

It is quite remarkable that Latvia, as a newly established state, only a few years after the war, had a great interest in the world's cultural events. Not only leading writers were aware of the Nobel Prize in Literature, but also ordinary newspaper readers knew about it. The local press wrote about the nominated writers and prize winners, and their works were discussed. The plays of the prize winners were quickly staged at theatres. And this is only less than three years after the end of the First World War, after the revolutions and the danger of the Bolsheviks that followed, after typhus, famine, and other disasters.

The first press reports linked to Rainis and the Nobel Prize appeared in March 1923. The article is dedicated to Jacinto Benavente the Spanish playwright who won the Nobel Prize in 1922. The article gives the reader the assessment of the previous years' laureates and concludes that "The choice of the Stockholm Academy has often been very strange. ... They stubbornly disregard many notable names, but bestow their crowns and world fame on second, even third-rate talents. " The author of the article, the Latvian poet J. Sudrabkalns, aged 28 at the time, concludes: " Without fear of being accused of local patriotism, we can say that we have an artist who goes far beyond many Nobel Prize winners.... Who knew anything of Rabindranath Tagore before? The Stockholm Academy made him famous and even now we read Tagore's works endlessly translated from English, and the quality of translations is quite questionable. Rainis' works will probably be extremely difficult to translate, as well as Pushkin's, who has lost all his appeal through German and French translations. However, the considerable and old Europe will some day notice the small and new nations, too"(Sudrabkalns, 1923).

No doubt, the readers in Latvia at the time were well informed about the prize. For example, in May 1923 the comedy "The Game of Interests" by the 1922 Nobel Prize laureate Jacinto Benavente (1866-1954) had already been staged at the Dailes Theatre (Latvis, 1923).

Other newspapers have also published similar viewpoints and discussions on Rainis' potential of winning this prestigious prize. The author of one of the articles, besides listing all the prize winners of the previous year, concludes: "Our Rainis has several books which place him high above the crowd – yet how can the eyes of Stockholm academicians spot a writer of a small, young nation? Probably now, with the change of international situation and appearance of German, French and English translations, the Finns, Latvians and Estonians can also hope to be noticed" (Ritums, 1924). We see that the author of the article accentuates the capacity of the new-born nations' to compete as equals for a place on the Olympus.

Articles discussing Rainis' chances of winning the Nobel Prize began to appear regularly and frequently. It is characteristic that we see also publications that react negatively to the nomination of the poet. It was for several reasons. They reprimand for wasting a lot of money on translations of Rainis' literary works. There are references to Rainis' relationship with the Social Democrats. They assert that "Rainis being a socialist, a preacher of class struggle, a subverter of the capitalist order is chasing after the Nobel [Capitalist] Prize" (Latvijas Sargs, 1925).

This was probably the dominating view of most of the Latvian people on this issue. It was no surprise that Rainis himself was aware of these publications. We find a brief note in his diary: "I am reading "Jaunākās Ziņas", my nomination for the Nobel Prize is being discussed. The Writers' Society joins Gulbis proposal. The University has not spoken yet. A Swede writes. It is often talked about (Rainis, 1926, p. 309). "The Nobel Prize is no longer just a distant dream of a poet. The idea of nominating Rainis for the prize is now being discussed in public, including renowned politicians, diplomats, culture celebrities, and journalists. We get the impression that Latvian society is seriously committed to make this final step for nomination. Unfortunately, both – the diaries and press accounts show a rather insensitive picture, which is also partially reflected in the press.

Rainis' nomination was considerably discussed and debated. Rainis, in the press view, as a writer is unquestionably worthy of the nomination. (There is a lesser-known episode with another respected writer, Jēkabs Janševskis, but this cannot be seriously considered outside political intrigue.)

Rainis' is outstanding, it is not questioned, but the press focuses on other matters, namely, the procedure of the nomination and the persons who are eligible to voice the nominees, the academicians who will take responsibility for the choices made. The elementary envy of the brethren within the guild.

The strongest objections were directed towards Rainis due to his political convictions and his affiliation with the Social Democratic Party. An important role was played by a certain part of society who disliked the Social Democrats. (The episode with the threat to nominate Janševskis for the Prize is also just an attempt to force Rainis to leave the party.)

In the newspapers, journalist activity regarding the competition for the Prize continued to a greater or lesser extent till the death of Rainis in 1929.

This was the end. The public had to accept that there would be no prize, not because Rainis was not worthy of receiving it, but because Nobel prizes often depended on considerations that had nothing to do with literature.

If the Latvian community had supported him and had been assertive enough, this dream might have come true. Of course, the poet must also be blamed, yet it is a pity that at a decisive moment the right- and left-wing circles could not reach a compromise. If Rainis had received the Prize, the Latvian nation would have benefited – our literature would have received better recognition in the world. There was a lack of will to take some action. That is how we can put an end to the discussion of this issue as being irrelevant now and, in the times, to come.

At present the Nobel Prize award is no longer a topical question in Latvia as it was 100 years ago when the country had just gained independence.

Today, looking through the nominations, we can admit that in the years 1935 and 1936 Latvian poet Edvarts Virza failed in the competition. Literary scholar Valija Ruņģe concludes: "Our literature, is still in its infancy of spirit, breaking out of the darkness of anonymity" (Ruņģe, 1997).

Attitude towards the Nobel Prize has changed, other accents are on the agenda now, yet serious changes cannot be traced. We see that calculations are still being made drawing statistical tables and charts (Sneis, Carlos, 2022). They calculate how many prizes have been awarded to each country, which countries or even which continents have been nominated less.

At the beginning of the 20th century there was a struggle for emancipation, for women's rights in the arts and sciences (Habinek, 2023). Men's exclusive rights in the field of literature were shattered by the prize awarded to Selma Lagerlöf. Colonised Asian literature was marked by the prize awarded to Rabindranath Tagore and confirmed the role of literature written in lesser-known languages on the world literary stage (Lindfors, 1988). The chances of small European nations winning the Nobel Prize have neither increased nor diminished.

The long-standing question of the Swedish Academy's principles for awarding prizes has come up for debate again. The Prize in Literature is not awarded based on writing talent, but rather on other interests.

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