

Returning home after four centuries

Presentation of the facsimile edition of the first Slavic Primer takes place in Minsk

By Lyudmila Kovaleva

The word 'bookvar' (primer) is now used in dozens of languages: Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Bosnian, Dagestan, Khakass, Khanty, Chukchi, Evenk and others. However, few know that it is Belarusians who invented it and, 400 years ago, published the first book with this title. This is no surprise, as modern Belarusians only learned about this relatively recently. The topic is much discussed as the Primer of 1618 has become publicly available since, on the initiative of the National Library of Belarus, its facsimile has been published.

Accidental acquaintance

A facsimile edition is a small book, half the size of modern analogues — with smooth pages, a neat cover and the fresh smell of ink. This is not the original, but it has taken much effort to ensure it is released. When the book is in your hands, it's hard to believe that this rare Primer could have been hidden from public eyes for another century. An unusual coincidence helped to change the situation.

For a long time, the year 1631 was viewed as the first date of the Belarusian Primer by Spiridon Sobol, who published the book in Orsha. Belarusian researchers however, recently learnt that another book — printed 13 years earlier by the printing house of the Vilno Holy Spirit Orthodox Brotherhood in Eyve — existed. The discovery was made when they came across descriptions of it by foreign bibliographers. In Belarus, not a single copy of that ancient Primer has been preserved: all educational publications were simply obsolete. However, two books were lucky.

One of them, incomplete, is kept at the Royal Library of Denmark in Copenhagen. Another book — fully preserved — is owned by the Library of the Middle Temple in London. It was the London copy that formed the basis for the facsimile. It is known that, as early as the beginning of the 17th century, it was acquired by the collector Robert Ashley. He collected interesting and unusual publications in different languages, trying to study and popularise the wisdom of different peoples among his fellow Englishmen. After his death, his collection was bequeathed to the Middle Temple Library. The Primer was preserved but for many years, no one has seen it because the library is not public and is a private institution. Only in 2015, after years of correspondence and negotiations, was it visited by a Belarusian cultural expert, the Deputy Director of the National Library — Alexander Susha.

"I managed to get to the Library of the Middle Temple in large part thanks to the assistance of the British Belarusians and, first, Professor Jim Dingley. I

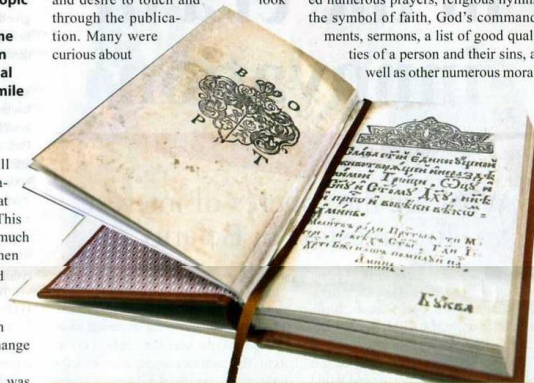
eventually got an opportunity to hold the edition in my hands, look at it and make a digital copy. I was enraptured by the very fact that this book exists, and it is not a myth! I received a proof of the existence of the ancient Primer — the very first book with this title. It was a real cultural shock," the researcher recalls.

Learning from prayers

Other Belarusians now experience the same cultural shock. The presentation of the facsimile copy at the National Library was full of guests. The visitors could not hide their admiration and desire to touch and look through the publication. Many were curious about

to add whole words and then sentences," explains Mr. Susha. "It resembles the modern style of teaching. However, modern editions don't have the alphabet both in usual and in the reverse order: this was done for better memorisation of the letters."

Interestingly, the ancient Primer taught not only literacy but also spirituality. Important texts for reading included numerous prayers, religious hymns, the symbol of faith, God's commandments, sermons, a list of good qualities of a person and their sins, as well as other numerous moral-



Alexander Susha

sion. The title page features some decorative elements that create a solemn feeling. Two beautiful large engravings decorate the book: on the back of the title page (the coat of arms of Belarusian magnate Bogdan Oginsky, the owner of the town of Eyve and the trustee of the printing house in which the Primer was published) and at the end of the book (a cross with a spear and staff). The text of the Primer also includes artistically engraved pictures, endings and initials," notes Mr. Susha.

Invaluable gift

Naturally, all elements of the artistic design are preserved in the facsimile edition of the Primer. The three-volume edition includes a facsimile, its translation into modern Belarusian and scientific researches in Russian, Belarusian and English. To date, a thousand of the books have been published and a large circulation is being negotiated. The project participants — the National Library, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministries of Culture and Education, the Embassy of Belarus in the UK and Latvia, the International Association of Belarusians, the Middle Temple Library, the Belarusian State University and sponsors in Belarus and the UK — aim to make the ancient Primer accessible. Within a year, the edition will be sent free of charge to libraries, museums, educational and scientific institutions both in Belarus and abroad. So far, some books have already been presented as part of Minsk's presentation. Several copies of the Primer were donated to children who will go to school this year.

"The National Library has implemented a number of projects on facsimile restoration of iconic books: religious works (Turov Gospel, Polotsk Gospel), chronicles (Barkulabovo Chronicle), editions by the first printer Francysk Skaryna, and many others. Such projects demonstrate, primarily, to Belarusians that they have a rich culture and exceptional world achievements: the first Primer was invented by our ancestors! We really have something to be proud of. If you are proud of yourself, then respect comes to you from outside," Mr. Susha believes. "I see how much delight our book projects bring to foreigners. In fact, through such books we present ourselves to the world, show that our culture and people have existed for more than a century. This works much better than abstract words. Therefore, among the planned activities to popularise the Primer are many initiatives that we are going to organise abroad: in Vilnius, London, Moscow, Paris..."

OPINION
IRINA DRIGA,
First Deputy Culture Minister of Belarus:

The Primer is a book with the largest circulation and the happiest reader's outcome. No pupil, even if they have learned how to read before going to school, cannot but study it. This is an eternal book which will exist as long as there are schools, enlightenment and science.



how the Primer of 400 years ago differs from modern analogues and how our ancestors studied.

"Initially, pupils were taught the letters of the Slavic alphabet ('az', 'buki', 'vedi', etc.) and then learned to compose simple syllables from letters and tried

educational texts that occupied almost two thirds of the book.

The content and artistic design of the edition amazes viewers. "Different variants of Cyrillic fonts are used in the Primer; these facilitate the perception of texts and create a good visual impres-