



A person of wide-ranging interests

Vatslav Lastovsky's complete history of country's literary legacy

Vatslav Lastovsky (November 8, 1883 – January 23, 1938) is a Belarusian writer, public and political figure, academician, historian, philologist, director of the Belarusian State Museum. Lastovsky proved with his works: the best university for a person is a "deeply read and written in good faith book". In spite of his four-year primary education, Vatslav Lastovsky became a corresponding member of the Ukrainian Academy of Social Science in Prague (the Check Republic) in 1926 and an academician of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences in 1928.

Belarus' first saint, Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya, began her service to God 'writing books by her own hand'. Belarusian lands were also responsible for the first Eastern Slavonic Bible — released by Frantsisk Skorina of Polotsk. Meanwhile, in the second half of the 16th century, around a third of all editions published in Cyrillic originated here. Every monastery and church had its own library, as did magnate estates. Some (such as that owned by the Radziwills at Nesvizh) rivalled the world's largest collections. However, centuries have passed and much of this wealth has been dispersed.

Vatslav Lastovsky was the first to try and collate a list of these literary treasures, in his History of Belarusian (Krivichian) Book, published in 1926 in Kaunas. It remains a unique reference

book, being 776 pages long — recently republished in Minsk, jointly by the Mastatskaya Litaratura Publishing House and the National Library. Supervised by Ales Susha, the Deputy Director of the National Library, he here tells us little known facts about Vatslav Lastovsky.

Last year, a monument was unveiled to Vatslav Lastovsky in his native town of Glubokoe, during its hosting of the Day of Belarusian Written Language. How did he begin his research?

From 1909-1915, he worked in Vilnya, for 'Nasha Niva' newspaper, alongside Yanka Kupala. He prepared over 300 articles, on themes as varied as agriculture and poetry. In 1913, he wrote an address to literary men, calling for them to write works worthy of standing alongside European and world literary masterpieces — of which everyone could be proud. He disapproved of pieces bemoaning the fate of peasants.



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He seemed misunderstood, yet found a soul mate in Maxim Bogdanovich: considered to be our best poet. Was Lastovsky a good judge of character?

Lastovsky's support led to 'Nasha Niva' publishing the first verses by the young Belarusian poet. Lastovsky defended Bogdanovich's poetry from accusations of 'barrenness'. It may sound strange today but, a hundred years ago, Bogdanovich was perceived as being too far removed from real life, flying to romantic heights. Lastovsky compiled Bogdanovich's only lifetime collection of verses: 'Vyanok' (Wreath). Later, he remembered: 'Bogdanovich sent his manuscript to the editorial office of 'Nasha Niva', which contained all his verses. Some had been previously published while others were newly written. He asked that they be released as a separate book and, in 1913, money was received. I gave a drawing for the cover which slightly resembles

a wreath and decided to make an inscription on the book — 'vyanok' — as is my right as the publisher.'

During his work for Nasha Niva, Lastovsky prepared a series of publications dedicated to domestic history: A Short History of Belarus. It was released in Vilnya in 1910 as a separate book.

Lastovsky wrote in the foreword: 'History is the foundation on which the nation's life relies. In order to build our life, we need to start from the foundations, enabling the building to be strong. Our foundations are solid, since we boast a rich history.' When WWI broke, Lastovsky became involved in enlightening issues even more actively, as Belarusian schools were opened on territory occupied by German troops. Immediately, textbooks for these educational institutions were required, so Lastovsky helped by creating his series within a few years.

Didn't this distract Lastovsky from his research?

Yes, he was 'divided' across several fronts. In November 1918, he became a member of the Lithuanian Government, where he headed the Belarusian department and, for some time, worked as Belarusian attaché at the Lithuanian Embassy to Berlin. His greatest political achievement was his election in December 1919 to the position of Prime Minister of the Belarusian People's Republic. In 1923, Lastovsky retired from this post, moving to Kaunas, where he turned to his research. Between 1923 and 1927, he released 'Kryvich' magazine, which became a true phenomenon of Belarusian cultural thought in its day. His real masterpiece during the Kaunas period was, of course, his 'History of Belarusian (Krivichian) Book'.

How authoritative was Lastovsky?

Several times, he was invited to work for famous scientific and educational establishments around the world. Through American diplomats, Lastovsky received the offer of moving to the USA to head the Slavonic Department at the Chicago Library. However, in early spring 1927, he chose Minsk as his place of permanent residence, working as the Director of the Belarusian State Museum and, then, as an academic at the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. Being encyclopaedic in his interests, loving to study a wide range of Belarusian cultural aspects, he was a member of the Commission to Protect Ancient Monuments. He organised and took part in ethnographic expeditions and, in 1928, discovered the Cross of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya, which he brought back to Minsk.

What inspired his interest in book heritage?

It was aroused in childhood, after arriving in St. Petersburg in 1899. He took a job as a librarian; remarkably, working in a library was also his final job, on being exiled to Saratov from Minsk during Stalin's repressions.

What brought about his legendary work on the history of domestic literature?



History of Belarusian (Krivichian) Book, published in 1926 in Kaunas, hitherto remains a unique reference book. 776 pages of research is a considerable volume! Moreover it is a bibliographic rarity

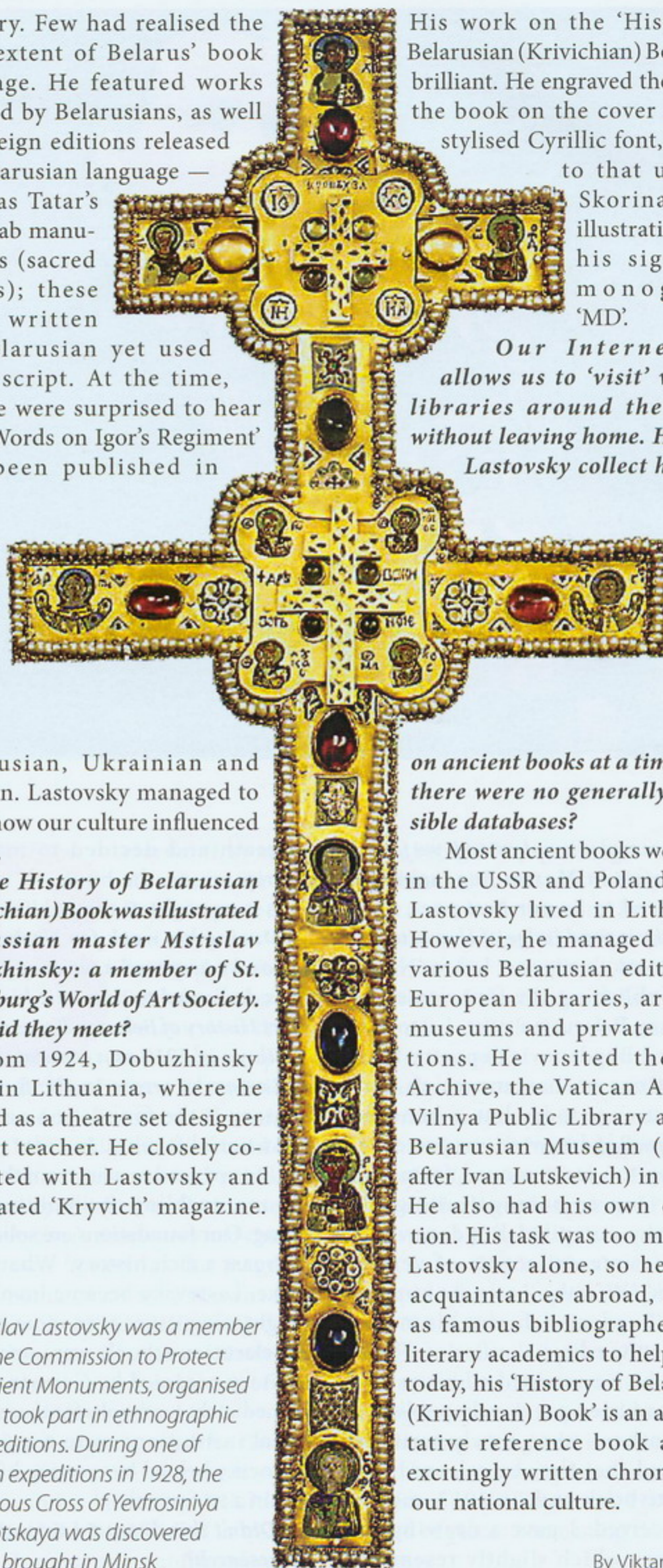
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By the early 1920s, it had been 400 years since Frantsisk Skorina had launched Belarusian publishing in Vilnya; Lastovsky had been collecting material for many years, since the 1910s. In 1925, he acquired good quality, expensive paper for publishing his work, intending to show the wealth of our culture through Belarus' literary heritage. Besides looking at the history of books, he explored the history of Belarusian culture through book printing, literature, pictorial art, science, education, philosophy, language and religion. He viewed them as inter-dependant elements.

How many ancient editions did Lastovsky manage to discover and describe?

His book contained 874 descriptions of key editions and manuscripts, dating up until the late 18th

century. Few had realised the true extent of Belarus' book heritage. He featured works created by Belarusians, as well as foreign editions released in Belarusian language — such as Tatar's Al Kitab manuscripts (sacred books); these were written in Belarusian yet used Arab script. At the time, people were surprised to hear that 'Words on Igor's Regiment' had been published in



Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian. Lastovsky managed to show how our culture influenced others.

The History of Belarusian (Krivichian) Book was illustrated by Russian master Mstislav Dobuzhinsky: a member of St. Petersburg's World of Art Society. How did they meet?

From 1924, Dobuzhinsky lived in Lithuania, where he worked as a theatre set designer and art teacher. He closely cooperated with Lastovsky and illustrated 'Kryvich' magazine.

Vatslav Lastovsky was a member of the Commission to Protect Ancient Monuments, organised and took part in ethnographic expeditions. During one of such expeditions in 1928, the famous Cross of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya was discovered and brought in Minsk

His work on the 'History of Belarusian (Krivichian) Book' was brilliant. He engraved the title of the book on the cover using a stylised Cyrillic font, similar to that used by Skorina. Each illustration bore his signature monogram: 'MD'.

Our Internet age allows us to 'visit' various libraries around the world without leaving home. How did Lastovsky collect his data

on ancient books at a time when there were no generally accessible databases?

Most ancient books were kept in the USSR and Poland, while Lastovsky lived in Lithuania. However, he managed to find various Belarusian editions in European libraries, archives, museums and private collections. He visited the Riga Archive, the Vatican Archive, Vilnya Public Library and the Belarusian Museum (named after Ivan Lutskevich) in Vilnya. He also had his own collection. His task was too much for Lastovsky alone, so he asked acquaintances abroad, as well as famous bibliographers and literary academics to help. Even today, his 'History of Belarusian (Krivichian) Book' is an authoritative reference book and an excitingly written chronicle of our national culture.

By Viktor Korbut