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**RESEARCHER OF INTERETHNIC CONTACTS:
COMMEMORATING THE 100th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE BIRTH OF YAKIV ISAKOVYCH SHTERNBERH (1924–1992)**

Yakiv Isakovych Shternberh (János Váradi-Sternberg – both forms of the surname and name were in the paper) was a former professor at Uzhhorod State (now National) University, an outstanding scholar of the history of Transcarpathia and Hungarian-Ukrainian relations. The achievements of the scholar, who was born 100 years ago, are researched, analysed and properly evaluated. Due to his Jewish origin, he was forced to leave his hometown of Oradea (now Romania) and his family at a young age as fascism rose to power. The paper described how he miraculously escaped to Moldova and later to the Soviet Union, where he pursued a career first as a laborer and later as a scholar. After graduating from St. Petersburg University, he moved to Uzhhorod University in 1949, where his knowledge of Hungarian facilitated his research into Hungarian history.

János Váradi-Sternberg primarily studied the history of the liberation struggle of 1703–1711 under the leadership of Ferenc Rákóczi II, but the main topic of his scientific interests was the study of interethnic relations, in particular centuries-old Hungarian-Ukrainian cultural and scientific contacts. It has been found that the research of the scientist provided significant data on the topic of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, in particular, studies on the relations between Rus and Hungary in the 11th century, on the Hungarian Queen Anastasia Yaroslavna, on the Ukrainian portrait painter of Ferenc Rákóczi II, on Hryhorii Skovoroda's stay in Hungary, on Ivan Franko's contacts with Hungary, on students of the Kyiv Academy of the 18th century, on the relationship between the artist Mihály Zichy and Taras Shevchenko, etc.

Váradi-Sternberg's approach to scholarship was thorough and respectful, demonstrating a understanding of his chosen topics and a recognition of the cultures of neighboring peoples. He was a sceptical historian. He believed that only factual material confirmed by sources in accordance with scientific standards should be used. During his

short life, he did not fully achieve his goal, but he managed to lay the foundations for further research.

It is concluded that the scientific and popular science works of János Varadi-Sternberg played a significant role in promoting the history of the periods he studied and in fostering closer ties between the Hungarian and Slavic peoples.

Key words: Yakiv Isakovych Shternberh (in Hungarian: Váradi-Sternberg János), Ukrainian-Hungarian cultural relations, Rákóczi's War of Independence, local history, Transcarpathia, seals and emblems.



János Váradi-Sternberg was born on January 10, 1924 in Oradea, on the territory of present-day Romania, in a family of antique dealers. Among the old objects, he could be touched by the spirit of the research of the past. Although he admitted that he was never ready to become a historian, his life turned out that way. His mother was a literature-loving woman, raised in a religious patriarchal family in Oradea. Here he attended elementary school and then high school. He immortalized his connection to his native land with the first part of his name (Váradi – from the Hungarian name of his hometown, Nagyvárád/Oradea). The later fate of the family changed completely due to the Jewish laws of the Second World War. His parents and one of his brothers were deported to Auschwitz, where they became victims of the inhuman Hitlerist

machine. He began his secondary education at the Oradea Grammar School, continued in Cluj-Napoca and finished in Moldova, in Romanian, because the advance of fascism in his hometown forced him to flee to Moldova at the age of 16 with his two elder brothers and sister. Leaving his homeland has left an everlasting mark on him, the now orphaned János Váradi-Sternberg (Soós, 1995). He lived in the port city of Dniester, where he was already disappointed in the «educative» influence of the Soviet school. The war broke out immediately after his graduation, after he was sent to Slavyanskaya (Krasnodar Territory) for military service, where he completed a machine operator's school and worked as an assistant tractor driver (Mandryk, Olashyn, 1999), so he was able to earn money, since he also had to take care of his brother's children. He learned the Ukrainian language, history and culture. The Hitlerist advance was already threatening them here, and they fled eastwards with great difficulty. Eventually, he found work as a tractor driver in a collective farm beyond Frunze (now Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), where he starved, receiving only 220 grams of flour a day. In the hope of a better living, he joined railway builders who promised him more bread. On his brother's advice, he enrolled in the history department of the Moldovan State Teacher Training College, which had been relocated to Buguruslan¹. It was at this college that he fell in love with history. From there, as a third-year student, he enrolled in Kishinev, and after missing a year, the now excellent student managed to transfer to the University of Leningrad/Saint Petersburg, having passed the entrance exams (Soós, 1995;

¹ Buguruslan, a settlement in Russia, in the Republic of Tatarstan.

Mandryk, Olashyn, 1994). History research was slowly becoming his passion. His teachers took notice of his versatile language skills. They entrusted him with translations, which he conscientiously completed. They encouraged him to become a historian, researching the history of Hungary. In Leningrad in the 1940^s and 1950^s, the remnants of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia were still present. Váradi-Sternberg was deeply affected by the arrests of several scientists and artists by the party apparatus of the time. It was perhaps at this time that he realised the destructive nature of communist ideas, which is why he was able to remain outside the party for the rest of his life. The university was one of the most prestigious in the country, and was a centre of real high-level research. He worked much in the Saltikov-Shchedrin Library, where he found a wealth of Hungarian material, which he processed with great enthusiasm (Kész, 2024).

During his university studies, it was of decisive importance for him to listen to lectures by leading figures of Soviet historiography – S. B. Okuny, V. V. Mavrodin, J. V. Tarle². As a scholar, he inherited from them a colourful and fluent scientific style of presentation, based on strictly accurate sources. He came to Transcarpathia after completing his studies in Leningrad, inspired by the ideas of these three outstanding thinkers, but also carrying with him the Transylvanian tradition. In September 1949, he became an assistant professor at the Faculty of History of Uzhhorod State University, where he later became a professor of universal history. Those whom he taught not only acquired knowledge and competence from him, but also humanity, honesty, and a cheerful, lively interest in the world (Zakryvydoroha, Mandryk, Melnyk, Troian, Shovsh, 1994).

His diligent work, which brought many results, was envied by some, but he always had supportive colleagues who helped him, such as Miklós Lelekács, Fedir Potusniak or Miklós Rotman (Balla, 1992).

He published regularly from the early 1950^s. As a disciple of this generation of historians, he defined his individual teaching style. His academic interests were very broad. In 1955, he wrote his candidate's thesis, entitled «The War of Liberation in Hungary and Russian-Hungarian relations in the early 18th century», which examined the international relations of the War of Independence and the diplomatic activities of Ferenc Rákóczi II and Tsar Peter I. He was the first to study the international relations of the War of Independence and the diplomatic activities of the Hungarian, Ukrainian and Russian peoples. His doctoral dissertation, defended in St. Petersburg in 1970, dealt with the whole system of social and cultural links between Hungary and Russia in the second half of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th century (Soós, 1993).

He was a person who was committed to history, who was almost passionate about researching the values of the past, and who, as an educator, was able to pass this passion on to new generations of his students. His life was unaffected by the political winds of the moment, and he was able to remain authentic even when it was hard to live, let alone create. His cool diplomacy, his well-developed political sense and his wisdom, free from pettiness, enabled him to judge the challenges at hand. His skill as a negotiator enabled him to find the right voice to argue and persuade in critical situations, and to express his scientific convictions. As a historian of doubts, he was a diver of the heritage of centuries, never content with suppositions, and he presented a wealth of irrefutable data to prove his truth. His intellectual impact is consistent and uncompromising.

² Okuny Semion Bentsianovych (1908–1972), Mavrodin Volodymyr Vasyliovych (1908–1987), Tarle Jevhen Viktorovych (1874–1955), leading scholars of Soviet historiography.

He took part in one of the most significant undertakings of Soviet historiography, writing the first three-volume synthesis of the history of Hungary in Russian. He was also credited with the creation of a landmark textbook for teaching Hungarian history in Transcarpathian education. After forty years of academic work, he left his academic post in February 1989 to become a staff member of the newly established Hungarology Centre in Uzhhorod. He did not feel comfortable in the new institution, which was also supported by Hungary, due to professional and personal disagreement (Balla, 1992).

At that time, he played a decisive role in initiating the compilation of the highly significant bibliography «Hungarology at Uzhhorod State University», in selecting and guiding its working group, and in developing its modern concept. He continued to work tirelessly for the exploration and care of cultural treasures even after his forced retirement in September 1990, which left him with a painful scar for the rest of his life. He considered his dismissal unjust. His work is summarised in some three hundred articles and studies, of which some 200 were on the subject of hungarology. Thanks to his prestige, he contributed to the functioning of the institute's internal life and to the development of its contacts abroad (Soós, 1995b).

His activities as a science planner and science organiser were also multifaceted. As a prominent expert of Uzhhorod State University, a member of the Hungarological Council of the former Soviet Union, chairman of the traditions preservation committee of the Transcarpathian Hungarian Cultural Association, a founder and board member of the World Association of Hungarian Historians, head of the methodological committee of the history faculty and the library council of the university, lecturer at the Transcarpathian Institute of Postgraduate Pedagogical Education, he participated in the definition of the main directions of historical research in locally and abroad, in the development of thematic plans, and expressed his opinion on issues related to the education of our past at various levels. He was the supervisor of several theses and dissertations on the history of Hungary (Soós, 1995b).

During the study of the 17th and 18th centuries, he also paid special attention to the relationship between the Ukrainian and Hungarian peoples, which he made interesting for us not only with the facts provided by the sources, but also by evaluating the lives of historical characters. Of course, within the current framework, we cannot undertake a full presentation of his work. Thus, in the future, the assessment and significance of this will be a task for researchers.

Perhaps János Váradi-Sternberg's most favourite research topic was the 16th–18th century Kuruc period, as he published nearly 50 papers on the Rákóczi. These studies reflect a multifaceted examination of military politics, economics, culture and international relations. In his writings, one can trace his non-compromise, his impartiality towards general political and compliance trends. His outlook on the Soviet era could not change his worldview. His first work on the subject already mentioned was his candidate thesis itself. In his treatise, he reviewed the whole system of previous relations, while at the same time introducing unknown or little-known data into the scientific circulation. At the same time, he also sought to provide us with a rich history of the subject, including local events. In his articles, he emphasised the events in Transcarpathia, the action of the Hungarian and Ukrainian rebels in 1703, as the beginning of the Rákóczi liberation struggle (Sternberg, Balla, 1958; Shternberh, 1965; Shternberh, 1971). He published new documents on the siege of the fortress of Uzhhorod in 1703–1704. His research, which is also noteworthy in the international cultural history of the period, was also carried out in the manuscript archives of the library of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kyiv. There he found the

Latin manuscripts of Simon Forgách, the most prominent Kuruc general of the Rákóczi War of Independence, covering both the years during and after the War of Independence. He published this rare and unique work of his in the long-established history journal *Századok*, accompanied by an introductory essay. In addition to examining the sources of the manuscript, it also explored how the manuscript came to be in the Ukrainian capital and why the ashes of the general were not repatriated in the early 20th century. He attached great importance to the manuscript, placing it on the level of Rákóczi's work of the same kind among the narrative sources of the Hungarian War of Independence and establishing new concepts about its author on the basis of the source (Váradi-Sternberg, 1968, 1981).

In 1964, Professor Sternberg was asked by a Soviet historical encyclopaedia to introduce the Zrínyi (Shternberh, 1964a, 1964b) and to present their life work. Later he enriched the encyclopaedia with the biographies of the Rákóczi princes. In 1974, his second volume of studies was published, in which a complete series of Rákóczi studies and correspondence and studies on the Hungarian contacts of Ukrainian writers, among others, were published. In the 1970s, he prepared for an international conference dedicated to the anniversary of the birth of Ferenc Rákóczi II, the scientific results of which were published in the so-called «Rákóczi studies» (Váradi-Sternberg, 1980b) and «Europe and the Rákóczi War of Independence» (Váradi-Sternberg, 1980c). The collection of the most influential, but at the same time, last publications of Professor Sternberg's research is the «Heritage of the Centuries». The publication was made possible with the support of publishers in Uzhhorod and Budapest. In this collection, in addition to Hungarian-Ukrainian-Russian relations, extensive space is devoted to his research of Rákóczi. Under the title *Studies on Rákóczi*, it explores the complex background of diplomatic relations. The professor attached particular importance to popular historiography, and his articles published in professional journals were usually published in the local press, also in a popular form, keeping alive the cult of the Rákóczi freedom struggle in the region. He published a sourcebook entitled *The Kurucs of Ugocha* (Váradi-Sternberg, 1988), in which he published the names of the villages preserved in the State Archives of the Transcarpathian Region (SATR). With this he enriched his list of known Kuruc names, which included not only Hungarians, but also Ukrainian and Romanian inhabitants (SATR). His research in this field proved that there must have been about 8,000 freedom fighters in the territory of present-day Transcarpathia at the beginning of the War of Independence in 1703–1704 (Soós, 1993).

Professor Shternberh's research convincingly proves that the cradle of the Kuruc movement was in our region, Transcarpathia. The Tysa crossing (Váradi-Sternberg, 1989d) and the Shalanky national assembly (Váradi-Sternberg, 1991) took place here. His study entitled *The myrtle bush of Polydoros* examines the circumstances of the chronicler and preacher István H. Tasnádi's joining the freedom struggle as an «expelled preacher», pointing out the local characteristics of the poetry of the time. He writes his work on the figure of Ilona Zrínyi in Petőfi's works, in which he examines the authenticity of Petőfi's lines and establishes their plausibility (Váradi-Sternberg, 1989c). He published six letters of Princess Ilona Zrínyi that she wrote to the leaders of the surrounding counties about the protection of the Kurucs in hiding, and about her wedding in Mukachevo (Váradi-Sternberg, 1989b). He also followed the fate of Kelemen Mikes (Váradi-Sternberg, 1990), Rákóczi's page, and wrote an article about the role of Shalanky in the freedom struggle (Váradi-Sternberg, 1990). His last work was the story of the relations between Ferenc Rákóczi II and Kelemen Mikes in Shalanky (Váradi-Sternberg, 1990), and the story of their stay here – a

preliminary draft of a five-part TV film script entitled *From Shalanky to Tekirdağ*. He could not complete this major work, but only the outline was printed (Soós, 1993).

He also made a lasting contribution as a scholar of Ukrainian-Hungarian relations. An important research result for us is the study of the life story of the Hungarian queen Anastasia Yaroslavna, daughter of Yaroslav the Wise, who came to Hungary as the wife of King Andrew I of Hungary (Shternberh, 1984, 1988). In this work, the author has pointed out the dynastic relationship between the two ruling houses, and at the same time the interstate and cultural relations between Hungary and the Kyiv Rus.

He studied the travels and activities of 18th century students of the Kyiv Academy in Hungary. He singled out V. H. Barskiy, who summarised his experiences in Hungary in a memoir in which he noted, among other things, that «people of different religions live here, but they are all hospitable». His memoirs also led other Ukrainian historical figures to visit this country, such as Hryhoriy Skovoroda, Ivan Falkovsky and Andriy Samborsky (Shternberh, 1965).

In several studies he dealt with the work of Ivan Franko. He presented Franko's works translated into Hungarian (Shternberh, 1957a). He published the Ukrainian writer's manuscript *The Hungarian National Ancient Legend*, which he provided with a valuable introductory study. Here we can trace Franko's serious interest in Hungarian history, in the real history of prehistory and legends. He wrote about the literary and cultural circumstances that represent the common past and the points of contact between the Hungarian and Ukrainian peoples in this period (Shternberh, 1957b; Váradi-Sternberg, 1959b). He presented the results of his research on the relations between the two peoples at numerous conferences (Shternberh, 1962; Shternberh, 1983).

He drew a parallel between the great figures of world literature, Sándor Petőfi (Váradi-Sternberg, 1989a, 1989e), and Ukraine's bard, Taras Shevchenko (Váradi-Sternberg, 1981); he collected their ties to the Decembrists; and for the first time among Hungarian historians, he drew attention to the international importance of Yuriy Venelin-Hutsa (Shternberh, 1989); he portrayed the relationship between Hungary and the Kyiv Rus (Shternberh, 1983, 1984) in attractive colours, described Hryhoriy Skovoroda's activities in Hungary (Váradi-Sternberg, 1981), through him we know about Mykhailo Luchkay's manuscript (Shternberh, Tiutriumova, 1965) on Ethiopian languages, Vasylii Dovhovich (Váradi-Sternberg, 1980a) as a member of the Hungarian Society of Scientists and much more. His scientific activity as a whole represents an outstanding level in the research of the past of Transcarpathia.

In the last years of his research, Y. I. Shternberh deepened his study of the use of symbols of the Transcarpathian settlements. He collected the coats of arms, seals and related symbolic images that pointed to the characteristics of a particular town or village. It is known that until the 20th century, the so-called «talkative» coats of arms were used. The seals of less well-known villages were described separately by him. The professor explored the symbols of the counties of Ung, Bereg, Ugocsa and Maramures based on the sources of the SATR and the National Archives in Budapest. In this paper, we will outline the extent of the work carried out and attempt to characterise and evaluate the results of his work on heraldry, based on the data he published and the manuscripts he left behind. For the first time in Transcarpathian academic literature, he described and professionally characterized the coats of arms of the Ung, Bereg, Ugocsa and Maramures counties of our region. He formulated the characteristics that were depicted on the seals and coats of arms of our region. Many local settlements also had medieval seals and coats of arms, such as Berehove, Mukachevo, etc. From the written legacy of János Váradi-Sternberg it is clear that the scholar would have liked to have edited a larger-scale publication on the

use of symbols of the settlements of Transcarpathia, but unfortunately he could not do so, but nowadays we have researchers in Transcarpathia who are continuing the research on the coats of arms begun by the professor. Here we can mention the name of Ivan Miskov³, who processed and analysed the professor's works on coats of arms (Miskov, 2024), or the teachers of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education, who organised a permanent exhibition on the symbols in question.

His research activities included the constant search for sources, which meant that he was a constant visitor not only to the archives of the region, but also to those of the nearby capitals. He was the first to point out the rich repository of the SATR. Back in 1958, he wrote an informative article on the historical documents of the SATR (Váradi-Sternberg, 1959a), which became the first Hungarian-language information on the written heritage of the archives. In the last years of his life, he edited a publicity leaflet for the archives, which he did not live to see published. Eventually, with the help of the archives staff, the manuscript was published (Delehan, 1995). As his work shows, archival sources played an essential role in the writing of his studies.

Because of his wide-ranging work, he can rightly be called a polymath, as he was equally active in historical, literary and cultural matters. That is why it is important to cherish the results of his work and his memory. The Váradi-Sternberg memorial room, which his eldest son set up in his study at home immediately after his death, has made a significant contribution to the preservation of his memory. In 1999, the UngBereg Literary and Cultural Foundation established the János Váradi-Sternberg Award. According to the founders of the prize: «The prize can be awarded to those practitioners of the social sciences (from Transcarpathia or dealing with Transcarpathia), researchers, educators, publicists, representatives of public life or even the arts, who, through their activities, promote the cause of the coexistence of nations and nationalities, tolerance, respect for otherness, who stand up against all forms of discrimination and whose work testifies to the need for a history and social philosophy free of distortions and falsifications» (Díjak és díjazottak, 2001). The prize could be awarded once a year by the Foundation's Board of Trustees on the anniversary of the eponym's birth. Although the Uzhhorod City Council decided to unveil his memorial plaque, the intention did not materialise. Much later, on 10 November 2023, a memorial plaque in his honour was finally unveiled at the Hungarology Centre in Uzhhorod, his last workplace. The ceremony was attended by descendants of the Sternberg family, former colleagues from the university, the Hungarological Centre, friends, students and acquaintances. Last but not least, a street in Uzhhorod was named in honour of the professor.

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³ Ivan Miskov, associate professor, candidate of historical sciences, Transcarpathian College of Arts.

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**ДОСЛІДНИК МІЖЕТНІЧНИХ КОНТАКТІВ:
ДО 100-РІЧЧЯ ВІД ДНЯ НАРОДЖЕННЯ
ЯКОВА ІСАКОВИЧА ШТЕРНБЕРГА (1924–1992)**

Зазначено, що Яків Ісакович Штернберг (Янош Вараді-Штернберг – у статті вжито обидві форми прізвища й імені) – колишній професор Ужгородського державного (тепер – національного) університету, видатний науковець із питань вивчення історії Закарпаття та угорсько-українських відносин. Досліджено, проаналізовано та належно оцінено досягнення вченого, який народився 100 років тому. Виявлено, що через єврейське походження він був змушений покинути сім'ю в рідному місті Орадя (тепер – Румунія) в молодому віці через наступ фашизму. Описано, як він дивом утік до Молдови, а відтак до Радянського Союзу, де зміг реалізувати себе як робітник, а згодом як науковець. Після закінчення Санкт-Петербурзького університету 1949 р. перевівся до Ужгородського університету, де, використовуючи свої знання угорської мови, почав вивчати історію Угорщини.

Наголошено, що Янош Вараді-Штернберг досліджував передовсім історію визвольної боротьби 1703–1711 рр. під керівництвом Ференца Ракоці II, але основною темою його наукових зацікавлень було вивчення міжетнічних зв'язків, зокрема багатовікові угорсько-українські культурні й наукові контакти. З'ясовано, що дослідження науковця дали вагомі результати, зокрема про зв'язки Київської Русі та Угорщини в XI ст., угорську королеву Анастасію Ярославну, українського портретиста Ференца Ракоці II, перебування Григорія Сковороди в Угорщині, контакти Івана Франка з Угорщиною, студентів Київської академії XVIII ст., стосунки художника Міхая Зічі з Тарасом Шевченком тощо.

Виявлено, що Я. Вараді-Штернберг глибоко і всебічно вивчав теми, якими цікавився, поважав представників сусідніх народів, шанував їхню культуру. Встановлено, що він був скептично налаштованим істориком, вважаючи, що потрібно використовувати лише фактичний матеріал, підтверджений джерелами, відповідно до наукових стандартів. Констатовано, що дослідник за період свого недовгого життя повністю не досягнув своєї мети, але йому вдалося закласти основи для подальших досліджень.

Констатовано, що наукові та науково-популярні праці Я. Вараді-Штернберга відіграли важливу роль у популяризації історії досліджуваного періоду, зближенні угорського та слов'янських народів.

Ключові слова: Яків Ісакович Штернберг (János Váradi-Sternberg), українсько-угорські культурні зв'язки, національно-визвольна війна під проводом Ференца Ракоці, краєзнавство, Закарпаття, печатки та герби.