

Roman Jakobson in Sweden 1940–41

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It is well known that during the wanderings provoked by the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938, Roman Jakobson spent two years in Scandinavia, first in Denmark, then in Norway and Sweden. He lectured, wrote articles, and took active part in the academic life of these countries; it was a very intense period in the scholar's life, the intensity no doubt being enhanced by a political development that could at any moment take a turn which, for a Jewish intellectual especially, could prove fatal.

When, in 1977, I was working with Jakobson on his memoirs of the Russian Avant-garde movement (published in Jangfeldt 1992), he told me some amusing details about his flight from Norway to Sweden in 1940 : e.g., how he and his wife spent a week in prison in a little Swedish border town and how, in order to secure some fresh air, he took long walks with the prison guard, entertaining him in German with episodes from Russian history.

This caught my interest, and at the beginning of the 1990's, when Jakobson's file in the so called Foreign Commission (kept in the archive of the Swedish Immigration Office [*Invandrarverket*]) was made available, I decided to investigate it. Containing police reports, correspondence with official authorities, letters from Swedish slavists and philologists, applications to the Foreign Commission, and one so called Alien's passport, the file corroborates and supplements much of the information that Jakobson conveyed to me orally. The facts presented below are, unless stated otherwise, based on this documentation.

On the 23rd of April, 1940, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the Czech citizens Roman Jakobson and his wife Svatava Jakobson turned up at the customs post at the Swedish border to Norway, without a passport or any other documents to prove their identity. They declared themselves to be «political refugees» and were taken to the police station in the little border town of Särna, where a police report was drawn up. The report sheds

new light on Jakobson's personal biography in the thirties as well as on his stay in the Scandinavian countries (for his scholarly contacts with Scandinavian colleagues in 1939–41 see Astrid Baecklund-Ehler's article (Baecklund-Ehler 1977, 21–27). The report is reprinted, in English translation, as an appendix to this paper.

According to the information given in this report, after the German *Machtübernahme* the professors at Brno University were persecuted, and after some time the university was closed. Jakobson then went to Prague, where he spent about a month, during which time his apartment in Brno was searched by the police. In Prague the Danish consul managed to get an exit visa for Jakobson, and at the end of April, 1939, he arrived through Berlin in Copenhagen, where he had been invited to give lectures.

The political situation obviously did not give Jakobson much of a choice, but one of the reasons why he decided to go to Denmark was no doubt his close contacts with the Danish linguists Viggo Brøndal and Louis Hjelmslev, founders of the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle. Both scholars had lectured in Prague in the thirties, they were both members of the Prague Circle, and it was they who invited Jakobson to lecture in the Danish capital (Baecklund-Ehler, 23).

At the University of Copenhagen, Jakobson lectured about the structure of the phoneme and in the Linguistic Circle on the zero sign (Jakobson 1974). Four months later, at the end of August, he went on to Oslo, where he arrived on September 1st, the day of the outbreak of the World War. The role played in Denmark by Brøndal and Hjelmslev was played here by his friend and colleague Alf Sommerfelt, who had participated, as the only scholar from Scandinavia, in the phonological conference convoked by the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1930; Sommerfelt was also the first to acknowledge (in 1939) «the fundamental importance» of Jakobson's ideas on distinctive features for the study of phonology (Baecklund-Ehler, 22).

In Oslo, Jakobson gave lectures at the university, worked at the Institute for Comparative Cultural Studies and was elected member of the Norwegian Academy of Science. During his seven-month stay in Norway, «a close scholarly cooperation linked him with Broch, Sommerfelt, and an impressive team of linguists, who in their studies covered an amazing variety of linguistic groups» (Baecklund-Ehler, 25). One of these scholars was the semitologist Harris Birkeland, whose book *Akzent und Vokalismus* (Oslo 1940) according to the author himself was written under Jakobson's «inspiring influence» (Baecklund-Ehler, 25). With Birkeland Jakobson initiated an attempt at a phonological approach to the metrics of Biblical laments, but this joint study was disrupted when the Nazi army invaded Norway.

When on April 9, 1940, the German army gave the authorities of the Norwegian capital an ultimatum — to give up the city or it would be bom-

barded — Jakobson didn't even have time to go home from the university to fetch his documents but immediately took a northbound train together with his wife. He feared that he might get into the hands of the Germans and, «at best», be sent to a concentration camp. The Jakobsons spent a few days at Sørnesset, where Oslo University had a sanatorium, but the Germans were after him. He and his wife were advised to flee to Sweden, which they did.

In the police report Jakobson states that he would like to stay in Sweden since in Czechoslovakia and Norway he might be sent to a concentration camp. For recommendations he refers to his Swedish colleagues, slavists and linguists : Professor Hjalmar Lindroth at the University of Gothenburg, Professor Anton Carlgren, the University of Stockholm, Professor Rikard Ekblom, the University of Lund, Professor Gunnar Gunnarsson at the University of Uppsala, and Astrid Baecklund (who was to defend a doctoral thesis under Jakobson's supervision later the same year). The following day the police authorities in Särna sent the report to the authority in Stockholm in charge of matters concerning foreign citizens, the so called Foreign Commission. A week later the Commission took the decision «not to extradite the aliens». Pending the decision about a residence permit, «the aliens» were moved to the small town of Bollnäs in the northwest of Sweden. The positive decision may very well have been the result of a letter submitted to the Foreign Commission by Rikard Ekblom, in which Jakobson is described as «an outstanding scholar».

On May 6, Jakobson sent a letter to the Foreign Commission asking permission to go to Stockholm for 2–3 days. His request was motivated by his decision to leave Sweden and go to France or England, and since all documents were still in Oslo, plans for the trip could only be made in Stockholm. In a post scriptum to the letter Jakobson reports that the very same day he had received from Czech diplomatic representatives in Paris a letter informing him about the possibility of going to France, and also that he had been invited to France by his parents, who lived in Paris, as well as by the Dean of the Sorbonne.

Jakobson acted with astounding speed and efficiency. The following day, May 7, he sent an application (in Swedish) to the Foreign Commission in which he asked for an Alien's passport and permission to stay in the country until he received a French visa. In this application, he declared himself to be a Czech citizen. As to Jakobson's citizenship, there is some confusion in the documents. Sometimes he is a Czech, sometimes a Norwegian, sometimes he declares himself to be stateless. In one police report he says that he and his wife were given Norwegian citizenship but didn't get the official confirmation before fleeing to Sweden. In the paragraph «Religion», Jakobson always states «Orthodox».

Jakobson and his wife received permission to go to Stockholm in order to arrange their personal matters. In Stockholm, they once again turned to the Foreign Commission, this time to ask permission to settle in Uppsala. «As a scholar», writes Jakobson, «I would very much like to study the manuscript archives in the University library in my special field, the slavic languages». Already the following morning he received an answer from the Commission informing him that, pending the residence permit, Jakobson and his wife could, or, as the letter says, «should» stay at Uppsala. The same day Jakobson received his foreign passport as well as Norwegian passports from the Norwegian embassy in Stockholm.

The permission to stay in Sweden was only granted for six months at a time, so Jakobson had to renew his application twice, in November, 1940, and in May, 1941. In the first of these applications, he states in the paragraph «Purpose of stay» that he is waiting for permission to go to America — through Germany and Lisbon ! He had been invited to New York, where a chair in general linguistics was waiting for him, and the American visa had already been issued.

The passport in Jakobson's file is in fact stamped with three visas : Norwegian and British transit visas and a regular French entry visa, all three issued as early as May, 1940. This means that initially Jakobson had no intention to stay in Sweden but wanted to move on as soon as possible. However, instead of leaving the country in May, 1940, he stayed on a whole year.

In fact, Jakobson and his wife did not leave Sweden until late May, 1941, when they embarked upon a passenger ship in Gothenburg destined for New York. With him on the ship was another European emigré, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who since 1936 had been a professor at the University of Gothenburg and who, like Jakobson, thought it best to leave a country that might at any time be invaded by the Germans. As a matter of fact, Jakobson was directly advised by Östen Undén, the Chancellor of the Swedish Universities, to leave the country before it was occupied : «Si vous pouvez partir, partez, nous ne savons pas quand les Allemands viendront nous prendre.»¹

In her memoirs of her husband, Toni Cassirer remembered the vivid discussions between the two scholars during the crossing of the Atlantic : «The conversation lasted [...] nearly the whole fortnight of the passage and was extremely exciting and rewarding for both scholars. Whether it was stormy or not, whether the mines were dancing before us or not, whether the war news were positive or not — the two scholars were discussing their linguistic problems with the greatest enthusiasm» (Cassirer 1981, 282).

¹ Interview on French television : «Archives du XXème siècle», February 1972.

Mrs Cassirer also recalls that on the second day the ship was stopped by the Germans who wanted to check the identity of the passengers. Cassirer and his wife were Swedish citizens and passed the control without difficulties, but the Jakobsons were stateless. When the German officers realized that Jakobson was a Russian refugee, however, he and his wife were allowed to continue.

Roman Jakobson's impression of the academic milieu in Sweden was rather ambivalent. On the negative side, one may cite the Swedish linguists' ignorance of the new phonological theories; in this respect they were far behind their Danish and Norwegian colleagues (although there were exceptions, like Hjalmar Lindroth and Bertil Malmberg). On the other hand, this ignorance forced Jakobson to try to present the new ideas in a more pedagogical form and to avoid all terminological innovations (Jakobson/Pomorska 1982, 31).

A positive element of Jakobson's stay was his cooperation with other foreign scholars working in Sweden, Janosz Lotz and Wolfgang Steinitz. During his work with them he reached a deeper understanding of the need for a phonological approach to the problems of versification : the result of this cooperation was the publication of an article on the axioms of a versification system (Jakobson/Lotz 1941), written by Jakobson and Lotz and based on a lecture given at the Hungarian Institute of Stockholm University just one month before Jakobson left the country (Jakobson / Pomorska 1982, 32).

Another positive aspect of Jakobson's Swedish experience was that it, as he wrote later, substantially enriched his «interdisciplinary experience» : «Without the spirited assistance of the University Clinic at Uppsala and the rich medical library at the *Karolinska Institutet* in Stockholm, I wouldn't have been able to tackle the questions of comparative interpretation of linguistic and neurological syndroms, i.e., the questions on which the classification and therapeutics of aphasia are to a greater and greater extent based today» (Jakobson 1974). The most important result of these studies was the book on child language and aphasia, published in Uppsala in 1941 (Jakobson 1941).

There was, however, yet another connection between Roman Jakobson and Sweden, however oblique. Two years before his escape from Czechoslovakia, he had published an article about Eveline Hańska, Balzac's wife, and her sister Caroline Sobańska, who was the mistress of both the Polish and Russian national poets, Adam Mickiewicz and Alexander Puškin, as well as a police spy working for the tsarist secret police (Jakobson 1937).

During our conversations Roman Jakobson told me that during his stay in Sweden he met with a relative of Eveline's and Caroline's : Marika Stiernstedt, a famous Swedish writer, whose great grandmother Pauline

was the sister of the two Polish beauties. As far as I remember, Jakobson mentioned Mrs Stiernstedt as one of those who «patronized» him in Sweden, but there are no traces of any interventions on her part in the documents I have seen. However and whenever they met, they had a lot to talk about, Caroline's biographer and her sister's great grandchild. In 1935, Marika Stiernstedt had published a book based on her impressions from a trip to the Soviet Union (Stiernstedt 1935). Although her attitude towards communist Russia was more favourable than negative, her conclusions were quite critical and close to those drawn by André Gide a year later in his book *Retour de l'URSS*. And like Gide, she was criticized for the book in the Soviet Union and by communists in her own country.

Roman Jakobson and Marika Stiernstedt were thus connected by mutual interests : for his homeland and her relatives. The information Mrs Stiernstedt gave Jakobson about her relatives was probably more or less identical with the story she provides in her family chronicle, published in two parts in Stockholm in 1928 and 1930 (Stiernstedt 1928–30). From this chronicle it is clear that in the family mythology it was «tante Balzac», i.e. Eveline, and not «tante Caroline», who was the most brightly shining star among the sisters. Jakobson, who knew the family record at least as well as Mrs Stiernstedt, was able to provide her with information that would no doubt make her change her mind on that point.

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APPENDIX :

[Police] Report. Wednesday, 24th April 1940

On Tuesday, 23rd April 1940, at 3 p.m., *the Czech citizens Professor Roman Jakobson and his spouse Svatava Jakobson* were brought to the police station in Särna by Constable Knut Bernhard Green. The latter reported that he that same day had taken them into custody at the customs post at Fløtningen, since they had arrived from Norway and were without passports or other means of identification and furthermore declared themselves to be political refugees.

Under questioning, performed by CID Constable David Helmer Svedberg, Professor Jakobson [...] gave the following account :

[...] He was born in Moscow, Russia, on 11th October 1896, legitimate son of the then Austrian citizen Josef Jakobson, engineer, and the latter's wife in marriage Anna, née Volpert, is married, domiciled in Brünn / Brno, Czechoslovakia, most recent address 16, Doktor Holms Vei, Aker, Oslo, and is employed at the Institute for Comparative Cultural Research in Oslo.

He lived and was raised in his parental home in Moscow until 1918, during which time he attended the Lazarevsky Institute in Moscow, which educational institution he left at the age of 16 1/2 years. He belongs to the graeco-catholic faith but is not confirmed. After completing his studies at the above-named educational institution he commenced studies in general and slavic philology at the University of Moscow until 1918, when he left Moscow together with his parents and proceeded to Prague, at the university of which he continued his studies. In 1930 he received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Prague. Alongside his studies he also wrote on philological matters. In 1931 he became a senior lecturer at the Masaryk University of Brünn, where he then, in 1933, went on to become Professor of Slavie Philology and in 1936 Professor of Mediaeval Literature, posts which he held until he left Czechoslovakia. During this

time he gave a number of lectures in other countries; among other places, he visited Rome, Amsterdam, Ghent, Sofia and Aarhus, at the universities of which he lectured. He did not participate in political life but engaged in a debate with German scholars on the subject of Czech history and literature, and in so doing incurred their displeasure. After Hitler came to power in Czechoslovakia the professors in Brünn were subjected to persecution and the university was closed. For this reason Jakobson departed for Prague, where he stayed for around a month. Apparently, he was searched for immediately after his departure from Brünn, since a search was carried out in his home there. During his stay in Prague, the Danish minister there helped him to obtain an exit permit to allow him to travel to Copenhagen, where he had earlier been invited to lecture. He arrived in Copenhagen on 23rd April 1939 and remained there until the end of August 1939, during which time he gave a number of lectures on linguistic theory at the university. At the end of August he departed for Oslo. After his arrival in Oslo he lectured at the university there. In addition, he started to work at the Institute for Comparative Cultural Research and was elected a permanent member of the Norwegian Academy of Science.

At around 11 am on Tuesday, 9th April 1940, he travelled into Oslo, accompanied by his wife, who had been with him throughout. They then made their way to the university. There he learned that the authorities had received an ultimatum from the German military authorities to the effect that the town was to surrender within a few hours, failing which it would be bombarded. Since he feared that he would fall into the hands of the Germans and be returned to Czechoslovakia, where he would at the very least be taken to a concentration camp [phrase incomplete — B.J.]. His fear of this was all the greater since he knew that those university professors who had not managed to leave Czechoslovakia in time had been interned in concentration camps soon after his departure for Denmark. He intended to travel further north in Norway, for which ends he had been supplied by Professor Selang in Oslo with a letter of recommendation to the university convalescent home in Sørneset. He had not been able to procure a vehicle to convey him to his home nor had he had time to make his way on foot, which is why he had not been able to collect his passport, papers or other personal effects. He had some 1, 800 Norwegian kroner which he had received as remuneration for a piece of work. Together with his wife he made his way to the railway station in Oslo, where he managed to get onto a train to Rena, where they spent the night. On the following day they continued to Sørneset, where they arrived on 11th April. There they stayed until 19th April, when they received a message from friends in Koppang to the effect that there was a danger that the Germans would come to Sørneset. They therefore left for Koppang the same day. The following day they left Koppang, since Rena had been bombed and Koppang was to be evacuated.

They obtained a permit from the police authorities there in order to be able to make their way to the Swedish border. They were told by the military commander in Koppang that it would be wise for them to make their way over to Sweden. They then travelled from Koppang to Ossheim-Misterdal and through Trysildalen to Myrsta. From there they were allowed to travel in a military bus to Ängedal, from where they made their way to the Swedish border, where they reported to the customs office at Fløtningen.

Jakobson explained that he could not return to Czechoslovakia, since he would immediately be sent to a concentration camp; neither could he return to Norway, since he feared that, if he fell into German hands there, he would meet the same fate.

He went on to explain that he was confident that he would be able to obtain some proof of identity via the Norwegian legation in Stockholm.

He wished to obtain residence permits for himself and his wife and refers to Professor Hjalmar Lindroth, Göteborg, Professor [Anton] Carlgren, Stockholm, Professor [Rikard] Ekblom, Lund, Professor Gunnar Gunnarsson, Uppsala and [Astrid] Bäcklund, schoolmistress, Oskarshamn, who would be able to supply the necessary information about them. [...]

On his arrival at Särna Jakobson had 1, 562 kronor in Norwegian money on his person.

Professor and Mrs. Jakobson each had a means of identity, in the form of tickets for the Holmenkollen Railway. These had photographs affixed to them. Mrs. Jakobson has, in addition, a certificate of baptism. [...]