

VANISHED CONSUL

OSCAR WIESEL, RUSSIAN DIPLOMAT AND ETHNOGRAPHER

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The Russian XX century history often makes one recall "the dark pages" of Western Europe. It is sometimes impossible to find data about the fate of genuine cultural heroes who in other countries would have monographs written about them, as well as monuments and eternal honors. It is the case of Wiesel.

Oscar Wiesel was a loyal servant of Russia, a diplomat and scholar, as well as researcher of Scandinavia, collector and founder of the Lappish collection in the Russian Ethnography Museum in St. Petersburg. There are practically no data about him after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Neither experts in Scandinavia, nor ethnographers and experts in emigration and even relatives know anything about him. When did he emigrate, what did he do in emigration, when and where he died?

Oscar Wiesel was born on August 20, 1864 in Petersburg into a family of Russian Germans, those Germans who were often made fun of, envied, beaten in 1914 and exiled in 1941, but who

did a lot for their strict motherland. His father Oscar Borisovich (Wiesel Oscar Sigismund) served as a financier. He was a laborious and selfless servant who enjoyed trust of the Royal Court. He numerously went on foreign business trips to resolve sensitive financial matters. The mother - Marie Christine Pointin (Maria Frantsevna in Russian) was a French lady from a family of Russophiles cooperating with Russia. Her father distinguished himself while casting the iconostasis for Kazan Cathedral. It was made of silver which Cossacks seized from the French during Napoleonic wars.

Young Oscar graduated from the prestigious Second St. Petersburg College with merits. He received higher education in law and entered diplomatic service where he careered from vice-consul to general consul and from titular counselor to actual state counselor.

He began his diplomatic service in Germany where he worked for five years and then in Norway in 1901 where he represented the empire for twelve years. His potential of a scholar,

political expert and ethnographer developed there. Wiesel arrived in Norway before it gained independence from Sweden. From 1905 the young Norwegian state was actively involved in drafting and adopting legislation and he attentively followed the process. In 1909 the Second department of the Russian foreign ministry published Wiesel's Collection of Norwegian Laws related to trade and businesses of Russian nationals in Northern Norway. It contained information about the latest Norwegian laws, resolutions on communal and city charges, Norwegian metric weights and sizes. The supplements contained most important local laws related to Russian nationals. Wiesel was awarded the Orders of St. Stanislav II degree, St Anna and other decorations for his diplomatic and scientific work.

He mostly stayed in northern Hammerfest but often traveled to border territories. He spend much time on Spitsbergen before the archipelago went over to Norway. The border with Russia going along the Pas River was transparent at the time and during his foreign mission the diplomat often crossed into his native country - to Kola Peninsula.

Wiesel was fond of Kola Sami culture and bought unique items from the people. He made a big collection of close to a hundred items and transferred it in two batches in 1904 and 1914 to the reestablished Ethnography Museum in Petersburg (modern collection numbers 444 and 445). The Wiesel's collection includes items mostly from Pas River, Songel, and Pechenga districts which are head and footgear, decorations, household items, harnesses, fishing rods and even boats. It contains exhibits presented by priest Konstantin Schekoldin from the church of St. Boris and Gleb on the border between two countries. The churchyard which emerged yet in the times of Reverend Tryphon of Pechenga developed into a center of Christian enlightenment for Sami people. Father Konstantin built there one of the first church schools for local children in 1888.

The formation of Oscar's ethnographic interests and his collection was considerably influenced by his only brother Emil Wiesel. In contrast to the travelling brother he permanently resided in Petersburg where he was known as a classical artist, connoisseur and patron of arts.

The service in Norway completed in 1913 when Wiesel was moved to Switzerland, first to Vevey and then Geneva. In 1917 right after the

February revolution he was transferred to Naples in Italy. The files of Italian secret services who spied on foreign diplomats revealed the reason for the appointment. Then Russian Consul General in Naples Schleifer was a Germanophile and made careless pro-German statements. Correspondent information was lodged and Italians demanded to replace the Russian representative. However subsequent revolution changed everything and Schleifer retained his post for the time being.

The catastrophe in Russia forced Oscar Wiesel to remain in Italy. He did not occupy the position of the consul in Naples and likely moved to Rome. But there were no vacancies and no money in the Russian embassy in Rome. However older diplomats and Wiesel hoped for a change. In 1919 he was a member of the Rome-based Union for reviving Russia together with allies. Its aims were to restore Russian relations with Entente allies and mobilization of Russian emigrants to fight "German and Bolshevik dominance".

However Italy soon recognized Soviet Russia and tsarist-era diplomats were stripped of positions and residence. Where did Oscar Wiesel go after Bolsheviks arrived in Rome? Did he reduce himself to private life like some of his colleagues did in Italy? Or did he move to Germany as he had a German family name and represented German culture? Maybe he left the Old World and went overseas? There are no answers. Further research of Russian emigration history and new archives may shed light on the fate of the Russian diplomat and scholar. Oscar Wiesel does not deserve oblivion.

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From Amber Bridge files

Emil Wiesel (March 1, 1866, St. Petersburg – May 2, 1943, Leningrad) was the keeper of the museum of the Academy of Arts, member of the councils of the Hermitage and Russian Museums, portraitist, participant in Paris shows and exhibition organizer. In 1935 he was repressed and exiled to Kazakhstan but pardoned three years later due to support of family friend and pianist Vladimir Sofronitsky. There was no correspondence between Wiesel brothers after 1917.

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