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On (mis)communication in medieval language contact: the case of the Riga-Polotsk correspondence of 1470¹

by Sergey Ivanov

Über (Miss-)Kommunikation bei mittelalterlichen Sprachkontakten: Der Fall einer Korrespondenz zwischen Riga und Polozk aus dem Jahre 1470

Zusammenfassung: Der vorliegende Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit den Herausforderungen in der Kommunikation im Handel des östlichen Ostseeraums. Die hier in den Blick genommenen Beziehungen zwischen Riga und Polozk waren intensiv und umfangreich; dennoch bleibt weitestgehend offen, wie genau die Kommunikation verlief, welche Sprachen benutzt wurden und in wessen Verantwortung die Übersetzung lag. Dieser Beitrag untersucht den einzigen lateinischen Brief, der von Polozk an Riga im 15. Jh. geschickt wurde. Weiterhin wird behandelt, welche Rolle das Latein in der Kommunikation zwischen den Städten spielte und ob die Situationen in Polozk und Novgorod in Bezug auf Übersetzungen sich unterschieden. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit gilt dabei der möglichen Beteiligung von ‚Schlesiern‘ als Dolmetscher am Polozker Hofe, wie sie in der letzten überarbeiteten Ausgabe der Polozker Urkunden vorgeschlagen wird. Die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Text und seinem zeitlichen Kontext spricht dabei für schlesische Übersetzertätigkeit und erlaubt die Hypothese, dass ihre Erwähnung zudem auf handelspolitische Verschiebungen anspielt.

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Introduction

Language contact is a vast field of research which brings together psychological, sociological, linguistic and historical aspects, and should, in the end, account for the entire range of very different situations in which contact takes place. However, studies of current situations have the advantage of immediately observing the contact phenomena which are, as a consequence, abundantly documented, while the deeper one plunges into the past, the more scanty and fragmentary the attestation becomes, and the more heavily researchers need to rely on written sources. As often is the case, the information gathered from such sources is a matter of interpretation. In this article, I will address one such case based on the correspondence between Riga and Polotsk in the late 15th century, which demonstrates how strongly the whole picture and reconstruction of language contact depends on understanding the words written and the linguistic and extralinguistic context in which they were used.

International trade exercised by the Hansa necessarily gave rise to manifold language contact situations which have been intensely studied over the last decades. The main questions, as summarized by Sture Ureland² are: Which language was used for trading? Were bilingual or multilingual interpreters involved? Were pidgins in use? Were merchants bilingual? Kurt Braunmüller³ in his studies of Middle Low German-Scandinavian contact pointed out four possible situations:

- 1) One language gets the upper hand;
- 2) a third language is available for communication;
- 3) both parts are bilingual;
- 4) in case of closely related and mutually comprehensible languages, both parts may stick to their own language.

The same problems and situations can be transferred to official communication. The East Baltic region was especially challenging in this respect because of obvious difficulties in tackling different non-Germanic languages. Phenomena and issues produced by this contact are well researched in relation to Novgorod.⁴ However, the 15th century Polotsk was a part of another state with its own cultural, linguistic, legal and administrative peculiarities. We will see which situations described above can be applied to Polotsk, which role Latin played and whether the situation in Polotsk was different from that in Novgorod.

² Ureland 1987, p. viii.

³ Braunmüller 1997, pp. 365 f.

⁴ See Reitemeier 2002; Squires 2009; Selart 2014; Gąssowska 2019.

1. The letter and its interpretation

The Principality of Polotsk, one of the oldest principalities of Kievan Rus', like those of Chernigov, Novgorod and Pereyaslavl, was ruled by a separate branch of the Rurik dynasty and enjoyed considerable autonomy from the centre. Untouched by the Mongol invasion, which radically reshaped the political map of Eastern Europe, it was nonetheless drawn into the orbit of Lithuania in the mid-thirteenth century and gradually integrated into the Grand Duchy until it finally lost its status in the 1390s and came to be ruled by a governor.

One of many peculiarities which distinguished the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was that Lithuanian played no role at all in the official records, for the first written documents in this language appeared no earlier than 16th century.⁵ The functions of an official language were carried out by the West Old Russian⁶ until it was replaced by Polish. However, the complex mixture of cultures, religions and languages as it was, the Grand Duchy required yet another intermediary linguistic tool for internal and external communication with non-Slavic subjects and neighbours. For this purpose the administration had available to it the universal medieval mediator: Latin.

Polotsk, a significant administrative and commercial centre, had constant language contact, underpinned, as usual, by intensive trade and diplomacy, with its neighbours. But how exactly was this contact maintained, and how successful was their communication in foreign relations? It can be presumed that a multicultural and multilingual town, along with its chancery, should not have had any complications with communication, for example, with its closest partner, Riga.

⁵ This does not mean, of course, that Lithuanian was not used in the administration, especially in Lithuania proper, or in contacts between Lithuanian nobles, but it was restricted to oral communication, see Dziarnovič 2012. In this paper I consider only written documentation. On the status of Slavic lands in Lithuania see Frost 2015, pp. 159–160.

⁶ The terminology regarding the East Slavic language spoken and written in Polotsk is fraught, and a matter of considerable debate. Although this chancery language already shows some dialectal features, it was nevertheless without undue effort reciprocally comprehensible with the Old Russian of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, and the difference between them was nowhere near as great as that between Low and High German, which we will discuss below. The term 'Ruthenian' is confusing for many reasons, but especially since in contemporary sources *lingua Ruthenica* was indiscriminately applied to Old Russian both in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and in the Grand Duchy of Moscow, see for example its use in the "Description of Sarmatian Europe" by Alexander Guagnini (d. 1614). For a historiographical survey of the relevant terminology, see Danylenko 2006; Verkholtantsev 2008, pp. 1–10. For our purposes the designation 'West Russian' would be useful, as it appears, for instance, in Waring 1980; Zoltán 2018; and Ušinskienė 2016. However, I prefer to use a slightly modified term 'West Old Russian' to avoid, on the one hand, subordinating it to the Old Russian of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, while stressing, on the other hand, their linguistic affinity and mutual comprehensibility.

Indeed, it has recently been argued that unlike Novgorod, whose authorities and merchants stuck to Russian in all areas of negotiations and correspondence with the Hansards, the Polotsk administration managed to communicate effortlessly with the Hansa in German.⁷ But we will see that that was not the case.

Medieval documents very rarely bothered to convey information on the linguistic situation and language contacts, let alone the activity of interpreters and its mechanics.⁸ Therefore, every source which contains statements on the language and translation issues deserves our closest attention. In what follows I will focus on a specific document, which is extraordinary revealing as to the linguistic means of communication between Polotsk and Riga in the 15th century.

In a letter in Latin dated 24 December 1470, the governor of Polotsk Olechno Sudymontovich apologizes to the Riga council for not having answered their previous letter and explains the reasons:⁹

Latin original	English translation ⁹
Circumspecti domini, amici nostri dilecti. Dignemini nobis pro malo non habere, quia ad litteras ab amicitia vestra ad nos missas nondum responsum dedimus, et hoc factum est, quia tunc temporis notarium in lingua Theutonica circa nos non habuimus, quia licet aliqui sunt Slasythe, illi tamen plenarie lingwam vestram non interpretant. Que littere usque nunc non sunt lecte, sed quamcito perlegentur, extunc ad amicitiam vestram responsum mittemus aliquem per nostrum. Eciam amicitia vestra scit, quod ante litteras per n(ost)ras ad amicitiam vestram, ut sepius mittebamus, ut quando amicitia vestra deberet ad nos litteras mittere, quod in lingua Ruthenica sive in Latino scriberentur, quia non semper circa nos habemus Theutonos.	Prudent sirs, our beloved friends, Please do not to take it from us as an offence that we have not so far given an answer to the letter sent to us by Your Grace. This has happened because at this time we had have no clerk [versed] in the German language with us, for although some are Silesians, they nevertheless do not understand your language completely. This letter has not been read so far, but as soon as it has been read, we will send a reply to Your Grace through one of ours. Your Grace also knows that as we have previously often sent letters to Your Grace, whenever Your Grace sends a letter to us, it should be written in the Russian or Latin language since we do not always have Germans with us.

⁷ See Squires 2020, p. 123: “This bilingual (often multilingual) competence of the legal bodies in Polotsk enabled them to translate both ways: from German into Ruthenic and vice versa. Treaties could be (and sometimes were) composed and formulated in parallel versions in two (or more) languages. Translators both in Riga and Polotsk were able to produce accurate renderings in both traditions (the local Ruthenic and the western), avoiding one-way transfer in the language and text structure.” On differences between Novgorod and Polotsk business letters see Lazar 2010.

⁸ In fact, the issues regarding the role, status and activity of interpreters as well as the technical aspects of oral and written translation were passed over in silence until the 19th century, cf. Schmidt-Rösler 2012, pp. 228–229.

⁹ All translations are author’s unless otherwise stated.

This letter has not yet attracted sufficient scholarly interest, although it is telling in many respects.¹⁰ One learns from it that the Riga chancery sent a letter to the governor of Polotsk written in German, which could not be read because the governor did not have a translator able to understand that language. He reminds his Riga correspondents that he has often asked for letters addressed to him to be written in Russian or Latin. But the most intriguing passage concerns some *slasythe*, who, as the letter implies, could understand German, but not completely. In order to interpret this correctly, one needs to answer the questions of what ‘German’ means, who the *slasythe* are, and how this letter fits into the historical context.

The letter was first published in 1910 in the *Liv-, esth- und curländisches Urkundenbuch*¹¹ as a plain untranslated Latin text. In 1978 it was again reproduced in *The Charters of Polotsk*, this time with a Russian translation. Here the passage “quia licet aliqui sunt Slasythe, illi tamen plenarie lingwam vestram non interpretant” was rendered as “since there were scribes of Slavonic, but they do not translate your language completely”.¹² The recently published new edition of *The Charters of Polotsk* offers another interpretation: “since although there are some Silesians, but they do not understand your language completely”.¹³ Apart from these two Russian translations, a proposal was also put forward by Valentin Kiparsky, who took *slasythe* to be a form of *szlachcic* (Pol. ‘nobleman’).¹⁴ Thus far, three interpretations of *slasythe* have been advanced: (1) *szlachcic*, (2) Slavs, (3) Silesians.

In order to evaluate these versions, one must take into account both semantic and formal considerations. First, the sentence must make sense and correspond to the extralinguistic reality, and secondly, the word forms must be recognizable and comprehensible to the addressee if we assume that the letter was supposed to be read and understood correctly. The first two interpretations do not meet both requirements. Semantically, the concessive meaning of *licet* presupposes that the *slasythe* were automatically expected to have at least some knowledge of German, which is obviously not the case either with the Slavs or with the *szlachta* ‘Polish nobility’. Formally, the recipient had no chance of recognizing *slavice* or any orthographical variant of *szlachcic* in the form *slasythe*. Therefore, these two interpretations should be dismissed.

¹⁰ There are only some mentions in passing, cf. Mahling 2015, p. 55; Gąssowska 2019.

¹¹ LECUB, Bd. 12, S. 424, No. 765.

¹² PG1, II, S. 33–34, No. 143: “так как были писцы славянского, однако те полностью ваш язык не переводят”.

¹³ PG2, I, S. 318–319, No. 197: “ибо хотя и есть некоторые силезцы, однако они не вполне понимают ваш язык”.

¹⁴ Kiparsky 1939, p. 87.

On the other hand, Silesians are a perfect match, for the same reasons. In the historical works of the 15th century, numerous graphical variants of the name can be found. For example, a critical edition of the *History of Bohemia* by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius IX) in 1458 shows a great range of variant readings which include also *Slesitarum*, *Slesite*, and, most notably, *slasite*.¹⁵ The chronicle of Peter Eschenloer *The History of Breslau* completed in 1479 has the single spelling *Slesite*.¹⁶ It is to be noted that the text was edited after its autograph (lost in the Second World War), so that in this case we have an opportunity to see how the word was spelled by the author personally. Thus in the 15th century, several spelling variants were present. The form that occurs most often in the work of a highly educated foreigner Aeneas Silvius, is *Sclesite*, but it was often changed by scribes to such variants as *Slesite*, *Slezite*, *Selesite*, *Schlesite*, *Slasite*. In the chronicle composed in Silesia, the original spelling was *Slesite*. These various forms of the demonym correspond to the toponym which, from the first mentions down to the 15th century, was *Slesia*; however, it also appears in the form *Slaszia*.¹⁷ Such forms as *Slasite*, *Slaszia* show that *slasythe* fits well into the range of possible spellings, and should have been recognized without difficulty by recipients as referring to Silesians.

2. Lingua Theutonica

Now we should consider how the assumption that *slasythe* means ‘Silesians’ corresponds to the semantics of the passage. As we have already observed, it requires them to understand German, but not fully. Therefore we should start with the question what does *lingua Theutonica* mean in this letter?

The language of the Riga chancery was Low German of a type very close to the Lübeck standard, which served as the official language of the eastern branch of the German Hansa.¹⁸ The official papers and letters were mostly composed in this language, apart from the occasional use of Latin in correspondence. Incoming letters and documents in other languages were also translated into Low German. The difference between the German spoken

¹⁵ HB, 18 *Sclesitarum: Slesitarum, Sclesiarum, scelstiarum, scelestiarum, Schlesitarum; Sclesite: Slesite, slasite, Slesie, Slezite*; HB, 92 *Sclesite: Slesite, Slezite, Slasite, selesite, Sclesiste*; HB, 176 *Sclesite: Slesite*; HB, 452 *Sclesitarum: Slesitarum, slesiarum, Schlesitarum*.

¹⁶ HW 6, 32, 36, 41, 46, 192. On the author see Honemann/Roth 2005. On *Slesitae* see also Jurek 1998, esp. p. 38.

¹⁷ Rajman 1998.

¹⁸ Lele-Rozentāle 2012. On the Middle Low German as language of the German Hansa see Sanders 1983.

in the Upper and Lower regions of Germany did not go unnoticed by their neighbours. Of considerable interest in this context is the observation made by a Russian traveller. An anonymous author of the *Journey to the Council of Florence*, who accompanied Isidore, the Metropolitan of Kiev, on his way from Moscow to Florence in 1437–1438, travelling by way of Riga, Lübeck, Brunswick and Leipzig, wrote:

Итъи Нурбех град стоит среди Аламанские земли. Аламанская земля, то есть не иная вера, ни ины язык, но есть едина вера латиньская, а язык немецкий же, но разнo, яко и Русь Сербы, тако и оне с немьци.¹⁹

“And the town of Nuremberg lies in the Alemannic land. The Alemannic land has neither another faith nor another language, but the same Latin faith and the same German language, but different, for they [the people of Nuremberg] stand to Germans just as Russians do to Serbs.”

This passage raises the interesting question of what language was ‘German’ for the Russians. The juxtaposition of ‘German’ and ‘Alemannic’ as it occurs here, implies that ‘German’ (‘немецкий’) was meant to be Low German *par excellence*. In any case, the fact is that the difference between Low German and High German was perceived by a (presumably, non-German-speaking) Russian traveller as clearly as their affinity.

Naturally, in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which had regular contacts with Middle and Upper Germany,²⁰ the situation should have been different from the Russian states which, especially in the north-eastern part, seem to have had contacts predominantly with the Low German speaking Hansards, who were keen to sustain their monopoly and by all means to prevent merchants from other regions from directly trading with Russians, including such measures as prohibition to teach Russian.²¹ However, it also clear that *lingua Theutonica* of the letter in question refers specifically to Low German.

¹⁹ Kazakova 1970, p. 65; see also Kazakova 1999, p. 472. Wimmer 2005, p. 113, n. 320, mentions this passage while referring to another document which attests to differentiating between High and Low German by the Russians. In 1492 in Lübeck, the envoys of Ivan III received a charter written in High German (грамота, высоким языком писана ‘a charter written in a high language’) which was translated for them by the printer Bartholomäus Gothan.

²⁰ It would not be out of place to recall here that the Teutonic Order in Prussia was mainly High German speaking, see, e.g., Peters 2000, p. 1416.

²¹ See, e.g., Reitemeier 2002, pp. 174–176; Squires 2009, p. 38; Selart 2014, pp. 50–51.

3. Low German – High German

Now, if we assume that *slasythe* mean ‘Silesians’, we must consider the question of whether they really could not completely understand *lingua Theutonica* (= Low German). Both words *understand* and *completely* need to be stressed. First of all, it should be recalled that Silesia was not linguistically homogeneous. In the 15th century, Upper Silesia remained predominantly Polish-speaking, while Lower Silesia was strongly Germanized.²² The population of Breslau (Wrocław), the biggest Silesian trade centre, was mainly German.²³

The editors of *The Charters of Polotsk* suggest that Silesians could be involved “since they commanded Latin (and sometimes German), and still could speak with their Lithuanian patrons in Polish.”²⁴ However, the Silesians in the service of Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania in 1392–1430, who are mentioned by the editors, do not confirm that claim since at least two of three persons with Silesian background – Konrad Frankenberg and Jan Lichtenwald – were undoubtedly Germans.²⁵ Thus, there are in fact no grounds for downplaying their German origins, for everything we know about the contacts between Silesia and north-eastern regions in this period makes it very plausible that Silesians who happened to be in Polotsk at the time when the letter to Riga was being written were German-speaking. Although neither the social status nor the occupation of these Silesians can be ascertained, most probably they came from Breslau – the biggest market centre with extensive trade connections throughout Europe.

The Silesians spoke the Eastern Middle German dialect of High German.²⁶ But if they were Germans, why did they not understand *lingua Theutonica* completely? The answer lies in the mutual incomprehension between the Low German and High German speakers which is well known and documented since the early Middle Ages. Thus, Peter of Zittau (d. 1339), an abbot of Königsaal in Bohemia and a chronicler, wrote that “the speech of a Saxon is perceived by a Bavarian like

²² See e.g. Scales 2012, p. 403, n. 82.

²³ On population numbers see Belzyt 1995, pp. 62–63. I have not found indications of the exact German share in the population of Breslau, but by way of comparison, one might consider the tentative evaluation of the Cracow population in the fourteenth century, of which Poles composed approximately one-half, while Germans account for one-third, see Janeczek 2003, p. 411. If such was the population structure in Cracow, one can imagine how the figures stood in Breslau which was much more Germanized.

²⁴ PG2, II, 153: “Служба силезцев в качестве писцов в ВКЛ восходит ко временам Витовта, в канцелярии которого они работали (Kosman 1969, pp. 105–112; Čapaite 2012). По-видимому, их привлечение связано с тем, что они владели латынью (а иногда и немецким) и вместе с тем могли без труда изъясняться со своими литовскими патронами на польском языке.”

²⁵ See Čapaite 2012.

²⁶ See, e.g., Hartweg/Wegera 1989, p. 25; Wiesinger 1983, pp. 869–871.

water drops by a stone because he [a Bavarian] does not understand the Saxonian language [= Low German] as an owl does not understand a magpie".²⁷ In 1359 a statement of the league calling to the blockade of Flanders was translated in Thorn into Eastern Middle High German to make it comprehensible to the Nuremberg addressees.²⁸ In 1495 the officials of Rostock who were leading negotiations with the Duke of Mecklenburg declared that they could not understand the Chancellor of Mecklenburg, a native of Nuremberg, and asked to send to them one of their countrymen in his place.²⁹ In 1535, the Low German parishes complained that they did not comprehend the sermons of preachers from Upper Germany,³⁰ and, *vice versa*, the Upper German chanceries in Speyer and Frankfurt were unable to decipher letters in Low German.³¹

It would be perhaps inappropriate to lay excessive stress on the linguistic barriers between Low German and High German speakers because language contact involves many different situations, and it must be assumed that, for example, the direct perception of fluent speech should be regarded differently from reading a written text. Still, it cannot be denied that intercomprehension between Low German and High German was not unproblematic, to say the least. The illustrations adduced above show that the identification *slasythe* = Silesians perfectly explains the meaning of the passage. The Silesians who spoke Eastern Middle High German could not completely (*plenarie*) understand a Low German text, although the extent to which that was true is admittedly unclear.

4. Trade, diplomacy and language

Thus, linguistically, the mention of Silesians is justified, but it looks very suspicious in the text of the letter. One gets the impression that it could be omitted without any damage to the overall message. Indeed, why did the governor not confine himself to declaring that he has nobody to translate

²⁷ Loserth 1875, p. 52: *Hinc tua vox Saxo / redolet Bavaro, quasi saxo / Undarum stillae, / quia non intelligit ille / Linguam Saxoniam, / sicut nec noctua picam.*

²⁸ These two examples are from Scales 2012, pp. 500–502, where an interesting discussion of the mutual comprehensibility of various German dialects can be found. However, see a different opinion on the Thorn letter in Hoen 1994, p. 146, n. 778.

²⁹ See Bischoff 1983, p. 115; Gabrielsson 1983, p. 131.

³⁰ Polenz 2000, p. 269.

³¹ See Wülcker 1883, p. 196; Gabrielsson 1983, p. 124. The lack of understanding involved not only barrier between Low German and High German, but also between other dialects. For example, the Archbishop of Salzburg in 1439 states that he does not completely understand a letter written in Rhine Franconian, see Sanders 1974, p. 21. For a further discussion of the barriers between Low German and High German see Hoen 1994, pp. 32–33, 146–149.

the epistle written in *lingua Theutonica* as he has repeatedly admonished his Riga correspondents? What do the Silesians add to his statement? We might suggest yet another dimension to this, but in order to unveil the hidden sense it supposedly bore to the reader we need to consider the contemporary relations between Polotsk and Riga, on the one hand, and between Breslau and the Hansa, on the other.

Polotsk maintained intensive contacts with Riga, its important trade partner, but there were highs and lows as things did not always run smoothly. Relations between the towns reached their peak in the early 15th century after the trade treaty of 1407 secured the rights and privileges of Riga and Polotsk merchants. However, the letter under consideration here was written precisely during one of the gravest crises. The conflict lasted for a period of 12 years: it began in 1466 with an episode of violence against merchants from Polotsk in Riga, and was settled only in 1478. Over this period, the office of the Hansa in Polotsk was closed, and trade between both towns was paralysed since the wares of the Hansa merchants could be confiscated as security against the alleged losses of their Polotsk colleagues.³² In the same year, 1470, when Olechno Sudymontovich sent the letter analysed here, the wares of a merchant from Lübeck were seized in Polotsk.³³ At the same time, numerous diplomatic efforts at reconciliation were repeatedly made; this resulted in increased correspondence between all interested parties, including the Grand Duke of Lithuania and the Archbishop of Riga. Ultimately, these negotiations led to the confirmation of existing trade agreements and the reopening of commerce. However, the time of the Hansa offices in the east was already coming to an end. The Novgorod office was shut down in 1494, and the final blow to Hansa trade in Polotsk came with the cancellation of privileges by the Grand Duke Sigismund in 1510.

The Hansa played an even more important role in the history of Breslau, because the town had been a member of the Hansa since ca. 1387.³⁴ Its advantageous position far inland on the popular trade routes linking north and south as well as east and west made it a desirable gain for the Hansa. However, its links to Upper German towns finally outweighed the benefits of being a *Hansestadt*. Breslau enjoyed the privileges bestowed by this membership, but over time the obligations became an increasingly heavy burden which led to constant violations of the Hansa prescriptions, especially in the Low Countries, where Breslau merchants, defying the rules, paid visits to and traded on markets

³² On the conflict see Hildebrand 1873, pp. 378–380; Daenell 1905, II, pp. 260–262.

³³ HUB 9, No. 758.

³⁴ On the relations of Breslau within the Hansa see Myśliwski 2012.

other than Bruges. In 1474, the town authorities decided to leave the Hansa.³⁵ Thus, the membership of Breslau lasted less than a century and was given up very soon after “some Silesians” were mentioned in the letter from Polotsk.

The tensions were directly related to the commercial successes of the Upper German towns. The Upper German towns were kept away from trading along the Baltic coasts by the Hansards, but they could not control other routes outside Livonia, which went through Poland and Lithuania and which were more and more extensively used. Already in 1437 a German merchant wrote from Polotsk to Riga that local merchants refused to follow new requirements aimed at strengthening quality control, and mocked them, maintaining that they could always find other ways to transport their wares to Danzig (Gdansk), Warsaw and Breslau.³⁶ The interest of Breslau merchants in trading with north-eastern regions reached as far as Novgorod: in the same year 1437, the aldermen of Breslau wrote to the Novgorod office of the Hansa requesting assistance for a servant of a Breslau merchant who had travelled there on his master’s business.³⁷ In 1492, envoys from Moscow to the emperor Maximilian received an instruction from Ivan III stating that some people from Breslau had visited Russia and brought news about the political situation in Europe.³⁸ In the opposite direction, eastwards, Upper German merchants in the 1470s delivered English cloth via Holland, Frankfurt, Nuremberg and Breslau, having recuperated this trade from the Hansa, which was then at war with England. Since the mid-fifteenth century, Upper German towns also dominated trade with regions of the modern Ukraine that had been abandoned by the Italians after the successes of the Turks. This route led through Leipzig, Breslau and Cracow.³⁹ At the same time, the influence of Upper German merchants grew in Breslau.⁴⁰

Thus, in the 15th century Breslau established itself as a thriving centre at the crossroads of trade routes from Southern Germany both to north and south-eastern Europe. “The more troubles in Novgorod and Livland caused a standstill in the Russian trade of the Hanse over sea, the more intensively

³⁵ Daenell 1905, II, pp. 94, 144, 295, 300; Myśliwski 2012, pp. 61–3.

³⁶ LECUB I, 9, No. 153. See also Hildebrand, 1873, pp. 355–356.

³⁷ LECUB I, 9, No. 147. See also Myśliwski 2012, pp. 64–6; Goetz 1922, pp. 400–401.

³⁸ PDSDR, I, 90: “приехали, господине, люди из Слезские земли из Рославля, да то сказывали” – ‘Sir, there came some people from the Silesian land from Roslavl’ and they spoke about that’. Here Рославль is definitely Breslau. See also above, n. 19.

³⁹ See Daenell 1905, II, pp. 278–9. On Breslau’s connections to the Upper Germany see Myśliwski 2010.

⁴⁰ Fuhrmann 1913; see also most recently Patała 2018.

progressed the development of long-distance trade routes from Nuremberg through Middle German market places as Leipzig and Breslau.⁴¹

The above political and economic context suggests that the unnecessary mention of Silesians in the letter from the Governor of Polotsk may have been made deliberately, with the aim of stressing that Riga was far from the only possible trade partner, and that the disruption of trade would inflict more damage on Riga than on Polotsk.

5. Conclusion

The letter under consideration here turns out to be unusually informative. It contains many important details regarding not only language, trade and social contacts between Polotsk and Riga, but, which is perhaps even more instructive, also the far-reaching connections with Silesia.

(1) This is the first ever certain attestation of the Silesians' presence in Polotsk.

The next time Silesians appear in a written document in direct connection to Polotsk is 30 years later, but that mention is debatable. It is contained in a charter that was issued in December 1501, and concerns Christoph Rindfleisch, a citizen of Breslau who needed to clear his name, because his father had stained his hands with a hangman's job in a town called Plocz.⁴² It has been argued that this stands for Polotsk;⁴³ but this identification was not accepted, for example, by the editors of *The Charters of Polotsk*.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing who those Silesians were. The mention is extremely vague – perhaps, it was appropriate for a hidden message, but does not help to determine whether they were merchants, occasional travellers, envoys on a diplomatic mission, persons in the service of the Governor of Polotsk or even clerics. We know, however, that the governor could have counted on their assistance in translation from German. The plural *aliqui Slasythe* and the preceding clause may be telling. The explanation that “at this time we have no clerk [versed] in the German language with us” appears to make the Silesians of the next

⁴¹ Gabriellsson 1983, p. 121. See also Daenell 1905, II, 271–2. On the central role of Breslau see Weczerka 1995.

⁴² For this very intriguing story and the transcription of the town's authorities' confirmation, see Stenzel 1847, pp. 59–64.

⁴³ Szacherska 1991. I wish to thank Grzegorz Myśliwski for drawing my attention to this hypothesis.

⁴⁴ PG2, I, S. 27, n. 1.

clause belong to this group of employees. In this case they should have played a role similar to that of their countrymen at the court of Vytautas (see above), which involved many various functions, and was hardly limited to exercising the duties of a mere scribe and translator. However, if there had been Silesian clerks in the service of the Governor of Polotsk, they could be expected to have left some traces of their activity. They could not possibly serve as scribes and translators into Russian; the only position one can think of is that of Latin or German scribes. But the letter under consideration here is the only one written in Latin in the Polotsk chancery, and the circumstances of its composition are very special.

As for the Low German and High German documents written in the period 1400–1498 and edited in *The Charters of Polotsk*, these are treaties and drafts produced for the Lithuanian side not by Polotsk, but by the Grand Duke's chancery so that they cannot be used as evidence for language contact or the linguistic situation in Polotsk.⁴⁵

It therefore seems more reasonable to suggest that there is no semantic connection between *Slasythe* and *notarius*, and that they must be treated as separate entities. I am inclined to think that they could be merchants, which would also lend more weight to the covert warning and at the same time explain the plural. It was naturally unusual to call in a third party to translate a diplomatic document, but given the exceptional circumstances, that would have been a conceivable option. The final sentence of the letter seems to point in that same direction, as it states that the governor did not always have Germans with him (“non semper circa nos habemus Theutonos”). He seems to be referring here not to professional, but occasional interpreters – persons who could be asked to translate something written in German.

- (2) With regard to language contacts and attitudes to translation, the letter clearly shows that the task of translating into and from Russian lay solely with the Riga chancery, just as in the case of relations with Novgorod. The chancery of the Governor of Polotsk had no interpreter able to cope with German, and this was not a one-off shortage since it is emphasized that Riga was often notified of that situation. The Novgorod situation can thus be projected onto the Polotsk chancery and society, which means that all the Polotsk documents – letters, treaties, agreements etc. – were translated

⁴⁵ Cf. PG2: High German Nos. 41 (1400), 42 (1401), 43 (1402), 45 (1403–4), 47 (1405), 50 (1405–6), 53 (1406), 54 (1406), 59 (1409), 60 (1409), 120 (1447), 222 (1477); Low German Nos. 50 (1405–6), 51 (1405–6), 54 (1406), 73 (1439); Latin Nos. 46 (1403), 54 (1406).

from and into Russian by the Riga chancery.⁴⁶ German translators do appear in Polotsk at the very end of the 15th century, and their emergence interestingly coincides with the bestowal of the Saxon-Magdeburg Law by Grand Duke Alexander in 1498.⁴⁷ Latin, which is mentioned in the letter of 1470 as one of the languages of communication alongside Russian, was in fact used only on exceptional occasions – and namely, in this very letter. The next letter in Latin was sent from Polotsk to Riga in 1509.⁴⁸

The availability of translators was determined by the status of each individual chancery and by the needs of the person in charge. Thus, as shown above, the chancery of the Grand Duke had Latin as well as German translators at its disposal. The Riga chancery obviously could not do without a Russian translator. On the other hand, the chancery of the Archbishop of Riga, who apparently only rarely had to deal with his East Slavic neighbours, lacked persons who were able to translate Russian. Archbishop Silvester in 1466, when asked by a Polotsk envoy to act as intermediary in the conflict, was obliged to ask the Council of Riga to translate the letter handed to him by this envoy since, in his own words, “we have nobody who can read it to us”.⁴⁹ The Polotsk chancery, which stood a step lower than that of the Grand Duke, did not employ any German translators, and for a long time had no need for them for the reasons explained above.

Clearly, it was owing to some emergency that Riga sent a letter in Low German to Polotsk. Perhaps something had happened to the Russian translator, or he was not able to exercise his duties.⁵⁰ It cannot be ascertained why Riga did not exercise the second option offered by the Polotsk chancery and write the letter in Latin, but probably the circumstances were so extraordinary that this possibility was not even considered. Some unpredictable circumstances which caused a malfunctioning of the Russian translation service were thus sufficient to lead to the miscommunication demonstrated by this letter.

⁴⁶ Cf. Squires 2009, p. 50, on the Novgorod correspondence: “Für die Zeitspanne zwischen 1269 [...] und der Mitte des 15. Jhs. ist – auch dann, wenn die Texte keine Aussagen enthalten – mit einer Übersetzung ins Russische und aus dem Russischen (also ins Niederdeutsche) von Seiten der Hanseaten zu rechnen”.

⁴⁷ Cf. Low German letters in PG2 Nos. 357 (1499), 386 (ca. 1505), 393 (1505). On the legal and linguistic aspects see Lazar 2017.

⁴⁸ PG2, No. 443.

⁴⁹ HUB 9, Nr. 277: *Densulvigen breeffsenden wy juw hirinne vorsloten; wy hebben nymant, de en uns lesen kan; doet wol und latet en uns vordutschen und sendet uns den wedderumme mit der vordutschinge yn juwem breve vorsloten*. See also Selart 2014, p. 52.

⁵⁰ On occasional absence of interpreters (*tolks*) see also Reitemeier 2002, pp. 161–162.

- (3) The hypothesis of a hidden message aimed at alarming the Riga authorities by mentioning other possible trade partners from Breslau fits very well into the overall situation of the 1470s. This was a period when several processes that began in the first half of the 15th century were moving towards their logical conclusion. These were: the increasing influence of the Upper German element in Breslau, the cooling of relations between Breslau and the Hansa, which ended with the withdrawal of Breslau in 1474, the conflict between Polotsk and Riga, which lasted from 1466 to 1478, and the weakening of the Hansa's positions in Eastern Europe, as shown by the closing of its offices in Novgorod and Polotsk in the late 15th/early 16th century.
- (4) The picture that emerges from this letter and its context is not one of easy communication and multilingualism, but rather of communication breakdown prompted by an inability to translate (Low) German on the part of Polotsk. Latin could naturally help, but the absence of Latin from both earlier and subsequent correspondence (until 1509) shows that it really was only an emergency tool.

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