

MR JANIS SAPIETS*

BBC broadcasting to the Soviet Union

A colleague writes:

The death of Janis Sapiets removes a man of remarkable gentleness and moral excellence, who exercised an unobtrusive yet considerable influence in the BBC's broadcasting to Eastern Europe — in particular to the Soviet Union — as he did upon many of his colleagues.

He was a familiar voice to an audience whose dimensions in Russia can only be guessed at but which was probably many millions. Sapiets occupied a rather special position in the Eastern European service at Bush House in that he was both head of its small central research unit and also had charge of religious broadcasting for the Russian service. They were tasks for which his own eclectic background equipped him particularly.

The Second World War had put an end to his hopes of a diplomatic career in an independent Latvia where he was born in 1921 and which was annexed by Stalin in 1940, following the agreements with Hitler to partition Eastern Europe. Sapiets, who spoke Russian, German, French, English and, of course, Latvian fluently, spent some time in displaced persons camps, with a period studying theology at Bonn University, before he arrived in England in 1947. Here he picked up the threads of the older political and religious alignments which once drew Northern Europe together.

He went to Belfast to study at the Presbyterian College and was ordained as pastor of the Latvian Lutheran church in Scotland in 1950, and, also, joining the Church of Scotland in 1953, became a minister at South Leith, Edinburgh, and subsequently at Bank Hill Presbyterian Church, Berwick-on-Tweed.

He was a central focus of the cultural and religious life of the Latvian community in Britain. After more time at London University, he joined the BBC's Russian Service in 1962. Throughout the 1970s he was head of the BBC's research and information at Bush House and editor of religious programming to the Soviet Union.

Sapiets was a deeply religious man and the fact that he had been a minister had a strong bearing on his whole approach. He was impressively devoid of bitterness or rancour. Although the Baltic states had been crushed by Stalin's empire, he saw in the Russians the greatness of the Dostoyevskys and the Chekhovs while deploring the boorishness of the present secular culture.

Coming as he did from one of the marginal states of Europe, he was a constant reminder of that older constituency — the small nations of Europe — which historically had been Britain's prime concern. In the English environment where people might not

naturally ask, or take an interest, Sapiets and his research institute became a point of reference for other departments throughout the BBC.

When Solzhenitsyn arrived dramatically in the west and was besieged by regiments of pressmen and photographers, the first and only journalist the Russian writer agreed to see was Sapiets, who was known to him by voice only. "I recognized you at once when you spoke," Solzhenitsyn said.

The two men were to form a close association. Sapiets played a characteristically unassuming but central role in the introduction and explanation of Solzhenitsyn's significance to the Western press, television and broadcasting — where once exposed to the force of the Russian's personality and ideals it made such a considerable impact.

Eastern Europe, whether it came in exile, as with the procession of dissidents, or in the forum of orthodox exchanges, beat a path to Janis Sapiets's door.

Solzhenitsyn, for example, convinced the BBC that there was a far greater attachment to the Christian faith in the Soviet Union than had been supposed. A direct consequence was that the BBC at once decided to increase the number of its religious programmes to the Soviet Union. It was Sapiets who carried this into effect.

Janis Sapiets had a natural *gravitas* and an unaffected humility. In the ferocity of often hotly disputed ideas within the BBC, and particularly in the matrix of Eastern Europe at Bush House, he was effective in constantly enabling people to talk to one another. He was known if not widely, then affectionately, as "Homo Sapiets".

He was unfailingly courteous and solicitous of others and in more than one category his persuasive gentleness enlisted sympathy for his many insights, nowhere more so than those into the predicament of the amputated cultures and peoples of the other half of Europe.

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* Janis Sapiets was a member of the Council of Management of Keston College for many years — *Ed.*

Contributors

JOHN R. ARNOLD is Dean of Rochester and Chairman of the East-West Relations Advisory Committee of the British Council of Churches.

TIMOTHY GARTON ASH is the author of *Und willst Du nicht mein Bruder sein. . . Die DDR Heute* (Rowohlt, 1981), which he is revising for publication in English next year. His *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity 1980-82* will be published by Jonathan Cape this November.

JANICE BROUN is a freelance writer on religious affairs in communist countries.

LEONARD FRIESEN is a doctoral candidate in Russian history at the University of Toronto.

IVAN HVAT is a writer on Soviet and East European affairs with a particular interest in religion in the Soviet bloc. He is based in München.

TADEUSZ KADENACY is a member of the Polish research staff of Keston College.

PAUL KEIM has recently spent two years in Poland under the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pennsylvania. After a period of secondment at Keston College, he is studying at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana.

FATHER L. LADANY was until recently editor of *China News Analysis* for thirty years. Before that, he spent nine years in China studying theology, the Chinese language and Chinese legal history.

SIR JOHN LAWRENCE is Chairman of Keston College. He was editor of *Frontier* for many years and is author of a number of books, including *Russians Observed* and *A History of Russia*.

STEVEN R. LAWSON is Director of Communications of Christian Response International, based in Rockford, Maryland, the US affiliate of Christian Solidarity International in Zürich.

JØRGEN S. NIELSEN is Lecturer in Islam at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, where he is responsible for a research programme on Muslims in Europe.

MACIEJ POMIAN-SRZEDNICKI holds the degrees of B. Soc. Sc. in Russian Studies from Birmingham University and PhD from the London School of Economics. He is author of *Religious Change in Contemporary Poland* (Routledge Kegan Paul, 1982).

MICHAEL ROWE is Head of Research at Keston College.

MARITE SAPIETS is a member of the Soviet research staff of Keston College.

VADIM SHCHEGLOV is the former secretary, and now the representative abroad, of the Moscow-based Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR. He is a mathematician, and until recently was employed in the Ministry of Health of the USSR.

PAUL D. STEEVES is Professor of History at Stetson University, DeLand, Florida.

FRANK E. SYSYN is associate professor of history at Harvard University and research associate of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

DR ROGER WILLIAMSON is the Human Rights Officer of the British Council of Churches.