

LEARN GERMAN, LEARN THE WORLD

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Editor's note: Robert spoke with Vaun Waddell on 27 January 2009.

Vaun: On a poster showing the faculty and languages in your department, I see an unusual assortment of languages. Chinese and Russian are prominent. French and Spanish are especially prominent. There's no Portuguese. And there's one German teacher. You are teaching only classes above the 201-level, and you are expecting German to be phased out.

Robert: I am the oldest member in the department. I remember when we used to get in the car and go somewhere to a convention and talk about how to teach, for example about when Russian started here.

I was the department chair. John Galbraith was the division dean. There was great discussion, and not only great discussion but lots of prayer about what languages we should include. At that time, Steve Bennion was the President of Ricks College. He was in favor of languages. President Bennion said Japanese was a language we should offer here. Yet he left the decision to John and me. John and I discussed it a lot, prayed about it, talked about it with the department, and when we finally came to a decision we felt like Russian was the language we should bring on board.

They take these things to the Academic Council and prioritize them. Garth Olsen said we needed another Spanish teacher rather than bringing in Russian. So when it went to Academic Council, the proposition was that we do Russian and also add to the Spanish faculty. Academic Council prioritized the listing and put Russian somewhere around 22 on the list of priorities and the Spanish teacher at 17, which effectively killed the idea of a Russian program. They start with the first priority, and if it takes all the money, there is no more money that year for anything else. In a typical year they may get down to 14 or 15, or maybe even 17. This meant that even the Spanish program's additional hire was questionable.

After Academic Council finished prioritizing, President Bennion still had the final say, and he changed Russian from the 20s to eight and left Spanish at 17, which gave

Russian a reasonable chance of coming on board. Well, it was interesting because that summer—1990—John Galbraith, Larry Saunders, and I wanted to take a trip to Russia and Eastern Europe, and I wanted to see where the Berlin Wall had come down in November 1989. On our way to Russia, we came to Prague, Czechoslovakia. It happened that we came through Czechoslovakia on Sunday. I had been in Prague in 1980 for a semester abroad and a couple of other occasions, so I knew the branch president there and we found out where the meetings were being held and went to church. President Richard Winder, with his wife, Barbara, had been called to be the mission president in Prague, in the Czechoslovakian mission, and that meeting was their first Sunday.

We came into the room that morning and introduced ourselves, and Sister Winder, who had been the General Relief Society President, found out I was the department head and John was the division head. She said, “I have something very interesting to tell you. I was in the meeting with the Board of Trustees at the time when President Bennion’s priority list came under discussion.” She explained that they were discussing new hires and expenditures for Ricks College, and they came to the Russian hire and almost decided against it. Then the discussion came to Elder Packer. He said he felt it was what we needed to do, that it was visionary, which changed the discussion, and the Russian hire was approved. Sister Winder’s story, in my mind, vindicated our prayer and our desire to offer Russian.

After that we had a difficult time finding a Russian teacher. It took us two years, I think. We had different people come, and Roy Huff was one. Others came and tried, including several who had been with military intelligence. One guy came from New Mexico, and his understanding of Russian was excellent because he had been listening in on Russians in East Germany, but he did not know how to write or speak. When finally Ed Kumferman came, we realized he was the man we needed.

Vaun: You and I both know the impact that decision had on you and on me. Do you see your call as a mission president in Russia in some way connected with it?

Robert: Absolutely. You know the book *The Morning Breaks* about Lowell Biddulph’s service in the Ukraine? You ought to read

it because there were so many things that happened that were absolutely...

Vaun: ...miraculous, unaccountable...

Robert: ...yes. Here is what happened because of the Russian language. I have to go back a few years to when I was doing graduate work at Michigan State University, 1964-65 and the spring of 1966. I was in the doctoral program and at that point had decided to no longer pursue the doctorate but complete a master's degree. I came home and said to Barbara, "Do you care if I continue my pursuit of the doctorate?" and she said she didn't. After that, I had an impression that I needed to learn Russian. So I came home one day and said to her, "You know, I need to learn the Russian language." She said, "What for?" and I had no answer for her. Any time we went to conferences or whenever I saw Russian teachers, I introduced myself and asked them to teach me some Russian.

When the decision was made to hire a Russian teacher, I think the first one was Paul Brizzee, to teach a night class. That's where I learned how to say *dosvidanija* and *menya zovut*.

Vaun: You had already been here how many years?

Robert: Well, that would be in 1989, somewhere right in there, so about 25 years. Paul taught everything in English. We didn't use the Russian alphabet. All the words were anglicized. Even though I could say *dosvidanija* and *kak vas zovut*, I had no idea how to write or read in Russian. But it was a start. So then when the Berlin Wall came down, I was interested. In fact I had been in Berlin. I was released from my mission the day the wall went up and had been back to Berlin many times. I saw the wall, how it was first about five feet high with barbed wire and then evolved into nine feet and so forth.

Vaun: This was during your mission in Germany?

Robert: No, after the mission. In North Germany, Berlin was the headquarters. The day I was released from my mission, I was in Kiel, on 11 August 1961. The history books say that the wall did not go up until 12 August 1961, but on the morning before I left Kiel they had blocked off access to the West from East Berlin. That was not the wall. It took several months to build the wall.

Vaun: How do we get from there to 1990?

Robert: In 1989 the wall came down. And there we were, in 1990, in Prague. Then we went on into Russia and down to Donetsk, Ukraine, and met with the Ukrainians whom my wife, John and Carol Galbraith, and Larry and Ruth Saunders had met in Rexburg at the international dance festival. My wife had written to them and was still writing the following year, 1991, when Howard Biddulph, the son of Ruth and Lowell Biddulph, who had been up in Victoria, B.C., teaching at a university and learning Russian for whatever reason, was called to Vienna as mission president of what they called the Vienna East Mission.

Vaun: Brother Neuenschwander had been there, at the Vienna East Mission. It included points east of Vienna.

Robert: Because I had been in Vienna in 1980 and had come in contact with the Vienna East concept, I knew the Vienna East Mission didn't have anything to do with Vienna. Howard Biddulph was called as the new mission president. He had come to a priesthood meeting or stake conference in Rexburg on his way to his mission training in Salt Lake City because his parents were here. At a Saturday night meeting, Tiny Grant introduced us to Howard, who had been called as president of the Vienna East Mission. My wife and I nudged each other because we knew what that meant. I didn't know Howard; I knew Ruth and Lowell of course. After the meeting Barbara went up to President Biddulph and said to him that she had the names and addresses of 35 people in Donetsk.

Vaun: The new president, Howard?

Robert: Yes. She gave him the names. When he got to Donetsk, those people treated him like a king and took him around, showed him where things were, led him all over. Then he got the mission going. The next thing is that John Galbraith started taking tours to Russia because he had been over there once. When they got to Donetsk, Howard Biddulph met John and said, "There's a university here that's not a government university, but an open university. They don't receive governmental support, and they want to have some religion taught. What do you think Ricks College could do?" John came back and talked to President Bennion. At first President Bennion was not that excited about it. But President Biddulph had a vision in which Ricks College and people in this area played a role in spreading the gospel

into those countries. He sent a letter to President Bennion. When President Bennion got the letter, he and Dean Sorensen decided to send someone over to the open university. We chose a religion teacher and an English teacher, but the English teacher's family was not able to go. Just before Christmas break in 1992, I was going into my office and John Galbraith, whose office was across from mine, said, "Schwartz, come in here a minute. Would you be willing to go?" I said I needed to check with my wife, so I called Barbara at school. When I told her what the deal was, she said, "Yes, I will go." So in August 1993, we went to Donetsk. I taught English and German, English mostly. We went to Kiev many times and came in contact with President Biddulph.

Vaun: And you were there for how long?

Robert: For ten months.

Vaun: It sounds like you were there for the purpose of teaching but engaged in organizing the Church, although not in an official calling. And you were also training to become a mission president in that part of the world and didn't know it. That was which school year?

Robert: 1993 to '94.

Vaun: And when did your mission presidency begin?

Robert: July 1997.

Vaun: And you served in Rostov-na-Donau...

Robert: ...which is about 300 kilometers from Donetsk. It's the same kind of town, a coal mining town. Getting used to the culture was not a problem. When we were in Donetsk we didn't have any mission home to live in. We lived on the economy.

Vaun: What an inspiring story about how study of foreign languages, lands, and cultures connects with building up the kingdom. Nothing could be more obvious than that, because the kingdom of God is for all people in all lands, it has to be presented to them in their languages and in their homes.

You have talked about the necessity of getting into foreign language in a deep way. How has the repackaging of credits in foreign language affected what you can do to help students get deeper?

- Robert: If we want to do it right, here is my humble opinion: There is a difference between studying and learning. Study is a step in learning, maybe the first step. “Study” means to think and contemplate; “learn” is actually to internalize and apply.
- Vaun: And to be proficient.
- Robert: Absolutely. How many times do you hear people say, “Well I know it, but I can’t explain it”?
- Vaun: That means they don’t know it.
- Robert: Exactly.
- Vaun: What you’re saying is that knowledge and the language facility, whether in a native language or another language, are welded together in some way.
- Robert: Yes.
- Vaun: I think language teachers would agree with you, but people in other disciplines may not necessarily share that theory.
- Robert: To me it’s like music. A music appreciation course doesn’t teach you anything about music. You listen to music, but it doesn’t teach you intrinsically. If I learn to play the piano, albeit at an elementary level, then I understand what a note is, and I understand in a way I cannot understand if I only listen to piano music.
- The same thing is true with a foreign language. You don’t learn it by becoming acquainted with a few phrases. You have to delve into it to the point where you can appreciate what you must do to be able to speak it. Speaking is the last thing we learn. That’s the last skill that comes. People think babies learn foreign languages and just speak, but they don’t. Why don’t children speak until they are two or three? My three-year-old daughter gave me an insight into language when she said one day, pointing to her brother, “Daddy, he hurted me.”
- Vaun: She knew how to conjugate regular verbs in the past tense.
- Robert: Exactly. Now where did she learn that? It’s not by talking first. They have a computer in their mind that will accept whatever language they are thrown as a baby, and even mentally handicapped babies can learn to speak difficult languages at an elementary level.

- Vaun: We struggle to teach even university students the direct object and indirect object. That knowledge is built into the Russian language so that every three-year-old knows it intuitively.
- Robert: The same thing with German.
- Vaun: Another feature of language is that it's connected with other higher-order mental functions, and different languages are connected with different functions, so your ability to acquire knowledge is in some way predisposed by the language you have learned.
- Robert: You cannot express yourself using vocabulary that you don't have...
- Vaun: ...or grammar that you don't have.
- Robert: That's right.
- Vaun: Russians don't have articles in their language—no “a,” “an,” or “the.” In English we don't have verb aspect, so we are not as keenly aware of the difference between completed and continuing actions. We don't have many noun declensions, so we don't understand when to say “whom.”
- Bob, as you look back on the years and decades of being associated with bringing language, culture, and learning together, on the institution that used to be Ricks College and your work in teaching foreign language, what does this mean to you?
- Robert: I see everything that has happened to me. I am an Idaho farm boy. I grew up thinning sugar beets, hauling manure, and milking cows. When I was called on a mission to Germany, Bruce R. McConkie set me apart, and one of the things he told me was, “This mission will be as a stepping stone to fulfill your mission in life.”
- Vaun: Is that a quotation or a paraphrase?
- Robert: That's a quotation.
- Vaun: You are talking about your mission in life now.
- Robert: Yes. One of my favorite scriptures is “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). Spencer W. Kimball interviewed me in Lansing, Michigan, to come to Ricks College. Our bishop

had asked us to go on a mission because we had been unable to have children. The ward was going to support us.

Vaun: And you were university students?

Robert: We were university students completing our stay there, and we were willing to go on the mission. After we had already told him we would go, the bishop said he wanted us to talk to Elder Kimball. Elder Kimball asked about the mission, and then he said, “Brother Schwartz, I don’t want you going on that mission. You have a mission to fulfill at Ricks College. That’s where you need to go.” So I came here, and you know what the pay was like then. I worked summers at the sugar factory, I worked at U.S. Steel, and I mowed lawns. Once in a while we would get a summer class where there would be three or four students, and they would pay me thirty or forty percent of the low summer wage. Never was I able to do anything in the summer but work because I needed the extra income.

Vaun: You did have children.

Robert: We didn’t have children when we came here, but our six children were born here. An interesting thing was that before I was called to Russia as a mission president, Christine, our youngest daughter, wrote in her journal, “My dad is going to be called on a mission to Russia someday.” Anyway, I was in the hands of the Lord. You look back on all the things that have happened and they are not just coincidence. The hand of the Lord was in my life...

Vaun: ...in the generation of your children, your grandchildren, and the generations to come, and in the generations of missionaries you sent to German-speaking places—miraculous features of being associated with this institution in this little, out-of-the-way place.

Robert: Yes, that’s it. And that to me is the Spirit of Ricks. ☺