THEY LEARNED 150 LANGUAGES, INCLUDING ARMENIAN

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Tassilo Schultheiss, Emil Krebs

People with exceptional linguistic abilities, such as learning numerous languages with ease, are justly celebrated for their phenomenal talent. While some of these unique personalities have conquered as many as 100 languages, at the top of the heap are two Germans who learned more than 150 languages, including Armenian.

Tassilo Schultheiss (1891 - 1936) was a linguist and doctor of philosophy. Information about him is hard to find because he was active in Nazi Germany. I am grateful to the Germany-based philologist Armenuhi Drost-Abgarjan for providing me with information about Schultheiss she had found in Clemens Knobloch's *Public Linguistics* (Tübingen, 2005). Schultheiss was born into a family headed by a professor and a librarian. He studied/worked in Poland, Czechia and Germany. He also worked as a gymnasium teacher. During the First World War, he was translator in the Bulgarian division. He published few studies: *Macedonian Dialects* (1938), posthumously, *The Eight Virtues of German* (1941), and *Armenian and Hittite* (1961 volume of the "Journal of Comparative Philological Studies").

Schultheis learned 150 languages, including Armenian, due to his profession. He liked to read German authors in foreign languages: Thomas Mann in Russian, Goethe in Chinese, and Schiller in Armenian. On one occasion he said: "Armenians love Schiller very much and have translated many of his works. It is also cheap to buy. I pay the bookseller 20 pfennigs for the Armenian translation of Schiller because the bookseller cannot easily sell Armenian books in Berlin."

The other German polyglot is **Emil Krebs** (1867 - 1930). He wrote in 68 languages and learned 120 more. He studied languages from the age of seven until the end of his life. By the time he finished school, he had learned 12 languages, including Russian and Turkish. While studying at the law department of the University of Berlin (he graduated in just six years), he learned Chinese. While working (1893) as translator at the German Embassy in Beijing, he continued to study languages. In 1912, Krebs claimed to have a very good command of 32 languages, including Manchurian, Mongolian, and Tibetan. Returning to Germany in 1917, he worked in the language service center of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs until the end of his life. While employees of the ministry were given a bonus for each language they knew, Krebs was denied the bonus because his many languages could have made him a millionaire. The head of the service once said Krebs had replaced thirty employees. Krebs's library, located at the US Library of Congress, has books in 120 languages.

Krebs also mastered dead languages (Ancient Egyptian, Sumerian, Aramaic, Babylonian, Coptic, and Sanskrit) and languages such as Basque in addition to Ainu, Buryat, Nivkh, Swahili, Javanese, and Malay. His notes and the textbooks show Krebs learned some of the languages based on German and others on the basis of the languages he had already learned. For example, he learned Afghani, Burmese, Gujarati, Irish, Sinhalese, Urdu, and Hindi based on English; Ukrainian, Buryat, Tatar and Finnish based on Russian (although only the first is related to Russian); Basque based on Spanish,

etc. He was also helped by the translation of the New Testament into 61 languages.

Neuroscientist Oskar Vogt studied the brain of Krebs (it is kept at the Vogt Institute of Brain Research at Heinrich Heine University of Düsseldorf). Researchers have noticed a significant difference between the brains of Krebs and ordinary people. In Krebs's brain, the white matter is present in large quantities, especially in the left hemisphere.

And under what conditions did Krebs learn Armenian? Werner Otto von Hentig, a diplomat and detective who worked with Krebs at the German Embassy in Beijing, dedicated in his autobiography (*My Life. A Mission*) a chapter to the famous polyglot. This is what he wrote about Krebs's learning Armenian:

"Krebs was an extraordinary person. By 1912 he already knew 32 languages, not as many polyglots claim to know, but perfectly and decently. He knew Arabic, Russian, and Italian.

"Once I had the opportunity to witness how he was engaged in the task of learning a new language. Dobrikov, Krebs and I were the guests of an American archaeologist in a train restaurant. After some time, Krebs, who had been silent and motionless until then, began to make twitching movements. Then he could not stand it anymore, got up and approached a table behind us. Pulling up, he approached two dark-haired people with a Mediterranean appearance and soon left them satisfied. He heard the sounds of a language that was unfamiliar even to him. That language could not be established either in the East or in the West of Asia. It was Armenian. On the same day, he requested by telegram from the librarian of the University of Leipzig a grammar of the Armenian language, church books in classical Armenian and modern Armenian novels. He learned the grammar in two weeks, classical Armenian in three weeks, and modern Armenian in four weeks. After this short time, he mastered that new language perfectly."

- **On photo: Emil Krebs.**

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