**Biography of Alexander Vovin**

**John Kupchik**

Alexander (Sasha) Vladimirovich Vovin was born on January 27, 1961 and raised in Saint Petersburg in a multi-ethnic and multilingual family. His maternal grandfather Ya’akov (1901–1990) was trilingual in German, Yiddish and Russian,and his maternal grandmother Alexandra (1908–1975) was bilingual in Frencha nd Russian, but the common language was Russian, and due to the harsh realities of the Stalinist era – his maternal grandfather was sent to the GULAG as a “German and Japanese spy” and spent almost seven years there – they raised their two children (Alexander’s mother Svetlana (Sophia) Vovin (1937–2018),an underground poet, was the youngest) as Russian monolinguals. Alexander grew up as a monolingual, too, but from a young age he was influenced by his maternal grandfather’s love for foreign languages, and he was taught English and French by private tutors from an early age as well. It is not quite clear who his father was, but the prevalent legend assigns the parenthood to Vladimir Sandler, the inventor of the printing machine for SAMIZDAT publications (illegal publications in the former USSR), while another theory (much less credible, in Alexander’s opinion) attributes it to Iosif Brodskii, the famous Soviet poet who was forced to emigrate.

Alexander, who had been studying Ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew (the latter two by himself and Ancient Greek under the guidance of Aleksandr K. Gavrilov), upon graduating from high school in 1978, tried to enter first the Department of Persian and Arabic, and then the Classical Department in Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad) State University, but was intentionally failed on the entrance exams as a person of partial Jewish decent. Only due to the intervention of his maternal uncle, Prof. Dr. Ruslan Y. Vovin, then the chief psychiatrist of Saint Petersburg, was he admitted to the Department of Structural and Applied Linguistics and not drafted into the Soviet Army. But as Alexander often said, it was a blessing in disguise, for two reasons: first, besides English, both Japanese and French were taught in the Department. English was obligatory, but Alexander found it to be uninteresting. Therefore, he chose Japanese, and as he later said, that was the most important decision he made before his twentieth birthday. The second one, no less important, was meeting Leonard G. Herzenberg, an Iranist and an Indo-Europeanist, and studying Indo-European linguistics and various ancient Indo-European languages under his guidance. The influence of Herzenberg was the most profound on Alexander during his University years. It was also Herzenberg who directed him to the study of East Asian linguistics.

Upon graduating from the University in 1983 with an MA degree in General Linguistics and Japanese Historical Linguistics (there was no BA/MA split inthe USSR at that time) with a thesis on Japanese transcriptions of Sanskrit, Alexander went to work at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (then the Institute of Oriental Studies, Leningrad Branch) and started his doctoral program a year later. His academic advisor was Irina T. Zograf, a Sinologist specializing in the history of Middle and Early Mandarin Chinese, who taught him a great deal about Chinese language history and about the art of academic writing. This art was also taught to him by E. Temkin, the Indologist. His other teachers during his years at the Institute of Oriental manuscripts were Sergei Ye Yakhontov for Old Chinese, Lev N. Men’shikov for Tang period Chinese (both vernacular and Classical), Vladislav N. Goregliad for Classical Japanese and pre-modern Japanese cursive writing, and Margarita E. Vorobieva-Desiatovskaia for Indic paleography. Alexander also self-taught himself Korean, Ainu, Manchu, Turkish, Finnish, and Chuvash during this period. He defended his PhD in October of 1987 at the age of twenty-six, being probably one of the youngest PhDs at the Institute of Oriental Studies in more than half a century.He always regretted that he did not steal the announcement from the Instituteinformation bulletin board that had the following text: “Alexander Vovin, a PhD graduate student of the second year, is to be dismissed from the Graduate School due to the defense of his dissertation”. His doctoral dissertation was on the language of the Hamamatsu chūnagon monogatari, a Classical Japanese novel from the eleventh century, which was years later considerably rewritten, expanded and published as *A Reference Grammar of Classical Japanese Prose* in 2003 by Routledge.

In 1986 he went to participate in his first international conference, the Permanent International Altaistic Conference held in Tashkent. It was his first trip to Central Asia, which led to two significant events. First, he came back stunned by the marvels of Samarkand, and this deepened his interest in Turkic linguistics. And second, he met Ross King there, then a graduate student at Harvard, and now a Professor of Korean at the University of British Columbia, who organized his escape from the USSR to the USA in 1990.