

## Greetings to Lars Johanson on his eightieth birthday

Dear Lars,

when I began to write these lines I almost wrote it in Hungarian. Not that I forgot that your mother tongue is Swedish, not that I forgot that we always spoke either English or German, and even not because we use to speak with Éva in Hungarian. The reason was that you are so near to me that it was natural to address you in my mother language.

Looking back to our long-time friendship we always found the appropriate words, whatever language we spoke. Be that in an auditorium, in a class-room or in a restaurant, on an excursion or during a slow walk in a small European town, we always had so many things to tell each other.

I always admired the wide range of problems which you could grasp in a clear and reasonable way. But even more was I fascinated by your mastery, building up a new structure of Turkology. You created a new school of Turkic Studies, and there are almost no aspects of our science where your considerations and methods did not bring new aspects and consequently new results.

You remembered me that we first met in London, at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the early sixties of the last century. I gave a lecture on the problems of the relationship of the Altaic languages. That was my first reading at a foreign university and I have to admit that I had a tremendous stage-fever. People *there* and *then*, amongst them you, gave me the encouragement to forward my ideas to a greater audience. More than fifty years passed away and

I regret that I cannot join today those who are congratulating you with their presence, but I will never forget the help which you generously gave me and my pupils on their scholarly trip.

The occasion, namely that you passed your seventies and you are now beginning your eighties reminds me to a curious Hungarian verb. What the English call blustering, bragging, swaggering, swashbuckling and the like, the Hungarians call *hetvenkedik* word-by-word 'to seventy'. According to the Hungarian etymological dictionary there is no connection between the numeral *hetven* 'seventy' and the verb *hetvenkedik* 'to bluster etc.' May be this is so. But there was a famous *seventieth* regiment of the Janissars in the Ottoman history, who called themselves *yetmişli*. In any case from the regiment of the *yetmişli* s of the Turkologs, you have now to pass to the *seksenlis*. You may ask what does this mean? In Turkic *sekiz* is not only a word for 'eight'. As Marcel Erdal (1991,480) pointed out, in the Uighur Maitrisimit the word *sekiz* has the meaning 'quick-witted', and the binom *sekiz biliglig* means 'sharp-witted and wise'. Hence *seksen* has the meaning, beyond any doubt: 'ten times quick witted'. Thus, dear Lars, you entered the group of the *seksenlis*, the TEN TIMES QUICK-WITTED AND WISE TEACHERS. A good reason for a birth-day celebration.

Dear Lars, I wish you a long life in health and with further witty successes in your scholarship and preserving your wisdom in your personal life.

Qutlug bol!

your as ever

András Róna-Tas

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