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AURÉLIEN SAUVAGEOT
AND THE FOUNDATION OF FINNO-UGRIC STUDIES IN FRANCE

For more than fifty years, the field of Finno-Ugric studies in France was dominated by the strong personality of Aurélien Sauvageot (1897—1988), the first holder of the chair of Finno-Ugric languages at the National School of Oriental Languages in Paris. His appointment to that post in 1931 was decided many years before by Antoine Meillet, who at the time ruled supreme in the field of linguistics in France.

Everything began in 1917. Aurélien Sauvageot was only twenty years old and preparing for the entrance competition to the *École Normale Supérieure* when he was "ordered" by Antoine Meillet to devote himself to Finno-Ugric languages, because French linguistics lacked a specialist in that field. Aurélien Sauvageot himself was more attracted by Germanic philology, but Antoine Meillet's orders were not of kind to be disregarded. And the prospect of a brilliant career held out by Antoine Meillet probably succeeded in convincing him. Everything was arranged for him. After entering the *École Normale Supérieure*, he would go to Sweden to study Finnish and Lapp. He would then continue his studies in Finland under the supervision of Emil Nestor Setälä. After that he would go to Hungary for a few years to complete his doctoral thesis, while teaching French at the *Eötvös Kollegium*. Then he would return to France to hold the chair of Finno-Ugric languages that would be specially created for him.

Everything happened as Antoine Meillet had decided. After his studies in Finland, Aurélien Sauvageot spent eight creative years in Hungary, from 1923 to 1931, during which he wrote his thesis on the problem of Uralo-Altaic linguistic relationships (*Recherches sur le vocabulaire des langues ouralo-altaïques*). In this work, published in 1929, he tried to establish sound correspondences between the occlusives of Uralic and Altaic languages. His research was facilitated by his good knowledge of Turkish, having lived in Istanbul for many years as a child. This was the first French thesis to deal with Uralic languages. During his stay in Hungary, Aurélien Sauvageot also compiled a monumental bilingual dictionary. The French-Hungarian volume, published in 1932, amounts to 1178 pages, and the Hungarian-French one, completed in 1937, is even longer, containing 1359 pages.

In Hungary, besides his linguistic work, Aurélien Sauvageot was actively involved in political and diplomatic intrigues. He moved also in literary and intellectual circles, where he met many major writers such Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi, Zsigmond Móricz, Attila József.

In 1931, when Aurélien Sauvageot became the first French professor of Finno-Ugric languages, everything remained to be done in France in that field and Aurélien Sauvageot, throughout his long career, proceeded to do it. The order in which his main works were published after the Second World War displayed an amazingly methodical approach.

The first important task was to write a description of the two main languages of the family. Aurélien Sauvageot did so brilliantly, in a very personal and original way. His "Esquisse de la langue finnoise" (1949) and "Esquisse de la langue hongroise" (1951) are intended

not only for linguists but also for anyone interested in those languages, since they are written very clearly and can be read from beginning to end without any difficulty, almost like novels. On the other hand, they are somewhat too broad and general to be, strictly speaking, grammars.

The second task was to remedy the lack of textbooks in French to teach Finnish history and civilisation. Aurélien Sauvageot first devoted himself to Finnish prehistory. His book "Les anciens Finnois" (1961) deals with the origin of Finns and their way of life before the Swedish conquest. Although now somewhat out of date on certain points, it was the first book on the subject ever published in a Latin country. It contains some beautifully written pages on the "spiritual life" of ancient Finns. This particular chapter is of great interest also for Finnish readers, because although it does not contain anything new, it sums up in a few pages all existing Finnish books on the matter. Aurélien Sauvageot also wrote a History of Finland, published in 1968.

Meanwhile, in 1964, he was a co-founder of the first journal of Finno-Ugric studies in a Latin country — "Études finno-ougriennes", which still exists today and is published in Paris once a year by the Association for the Development of Finno-Ugric Studies.

In 1965, Aurélien Sauvageot published a textbook of Hungarian, which was used for some time in the National School of Oriental Studies.

After his retirement in 1967, he turned towards historical linguistics and published a history of written Hungarian (L'édification de la langue hongroise, 1971), soon followed by a similar work on Finnish (L'élaboration de la langue finnoise, 1973). In these two books he shows his interest for what he calls "human action on language". He gives a lyrical description of the work of Finnish and Hungarian intellectuals who reshaped their own language to create a language of civilisation. The Finnish language reform (together with the Hungarian *nyelvújítás* and Estonian *keeleuuendus*) furnished Aurélien Sauvageot with ideas and methods that he suggested applying to the modernization of French.

Apart from Finnish, Hungarian and French, Aurélien Sauvageot was also interested in many other languages: he published articles on Tahitian, Yukaghir, Eskimo, Samoyed, Lapp, Cheremiss, Vogul, Ostyak, etc. Of the main Uralic languages, only Estonian, oddly enough, seems to be excluded from his research, apart from a short article on Estonian phonology (Nature et rendement de la quantité en Estonien. — Études finno-ougriennes VI—VII, pp. 22—23). In fact, towards the end of his life, he was working on a comprehensive description of Estonian, along the lines of his landmark works on Finnish and Hungarian. Although the section on syntax is missing, the remainder of the manuscript, which was found after his death, is almost the final version and its publication would be possible with minor corrections.

Aurélien Sauvageot died in 1988 at the age of 91, having brilliantly accomplished the mission entrusted to him, which was to establish Finno-Ugric studies in France almost from scratch.

Books by Aurélien Sauvageot in the Field of Finno-Ugric Studies

- Recherches sur le vocabulaire des langues ouralo-altaïques, Paris 1929. 144 pp.
 Dictionnaire général français-hongrois et hongrois-français, vol 1, Budapest 1932. 1178 pp;
 vol. 2, Budapest 1937. 1360 pp.
 Découverte de la Hongrie, Paris 1937. 240 pp.
 Esquisse de la langue finnoise, Paris 1949. 250 pp.
 Esquisse de la langue hongroise, Paris 1951. 338 pp.
 Les anciens Finnois, Paris 1961. 222 pp.
 Premier livre de hongrois, Paris 1965. 324 pp.
 Histoire de la Finlande, Paris 1968. 495 pp.
 L'édification de la langue hongroise, Paris 1971. 428 pp.
 L'élaboration de la langue finnoise, Paris 1973. 477 pp.