

# MR JANIS SAPIETS\*

## BBC broadcasting to the Soviet Union

A colleague writes:

The death of Janis Sapiets removes a man of remarkable gentleness and moral excellence, who exercised an unobtrusive yet considerable influence in the BBC's broadcasting to Eastern Europe — in particular to the Soviet Union — as he did upon many of his colleagues.

He was a familiar voice to an audience whose dimensions in Russia can only be guessed at but which was probably many millions. Sapiets occupied a rather special position in the Eastern European service at Bush House in that he was both head of its small central research unit and also had charge of religious broadcasting for the Russian service. They were tasks for which his own eclectic background equipped him particularly.

The Second World War had put an end to his hopes of a diplomatic career in an independent Latvia where he was born in 1921 and which was annexed by Stalin in 1940, following the agreements with Hitler to partition Eastern Europe. Sapiets, who spoke Russian, German, French, English and, of course, Latvian fluently, spent some time in displaced persons camps, with a period studying theology at Bonn University, before he arrived in England in 1947. Here he picked up the threads of the older political and religious alignments which once drew Northern Europe together.

He went to Belfast to study at the Presbyterian College and was ordained as pastor of the Latvian Lutheran church in Scotland in 1950, and, also, joining the Church of Scotland in 1953, became a minister at South Leith, Edinburgh, and subsequently at Bank Hill Presbyterian Church, Berwick-on-Tweed.

He was a central focus of the cultural and religious life of the Latvian community in Britain. After more time at London University, he joined the BBC's Russian Service in 1962. Throughout the 1970s he was head of the BBC's research and information at Bush House and editor of religious programming to the Soviet Union.

Sapiets was a deeply religious man and the fact that he had been a minister had a strong bearing on his whole approach. He was impressively devoid of bitterness or rancour. Although the Baltic states had been crushed by Stalin's empire, he saw in the Russians the greatness of the Dostoyevskys and the Chekhovs while deploring the boorishness of the present secular culture.

Coming as he did from one of the marginal states of Europe, he was a constant reminder of that older constituency — the small nations of Europe — which historically had been Britain's prime concern. In the English environment where people might not

naturally ask, or take an interest, Sapiets and his research institute became a point of reference for other departments throughout the BBC.

When Solzhenitsyn arrived dramatically in the west and was besieged by regiments of pressmen and photographers, the first and only journalist the Russian writer agreed to see was Sapiets, who was known to him by voice only. "I recognized you at once when you spoke," Solzhenitsyn said.

The two men were to form a close association. Sapiets played a characteristically unassuming but central role in the introduction and explanation of Solzhenitsyn's significance to the Western press, television and broadcasting — where once exposed to the force of the Russian's personality and ideals it made such a considerable impact.

Eastern Europe, whether it came in exile, as with the procession of dissidents, or in the forum of orthodox exchanges, beat a path to Janis Sapiets's door.

Solzhenitsyn, for example, convinced the BBC that there was a far greater attachment to the Christian faith in the Soviet Union than had been supposed. A direct consequence was that the BBC at once decided to increase the number of its religious programmes to the Soviet Union. It was Sapiets who carried this into effect.

Janis Sapiets had a natural *gravitas* and an unaffected humility. In the ferocity of often hotly disputed ideas within the BBC, and particularly in the matrix of Eastern Europe at Bush House, he was effective in constantly enabling people to talk to one another. He was known if not widely, then affectionately, as "Homo Sapiets".

He was unfailingly courteous and solicitous of others and in more than one category his persuasive gentleness enlisted sympathy for his many insights, nowhere more so than those into the predicament of the amputated cultures and peoples of the other half of Europe.

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\* Janis Sapiets was a member of the Council of Management of Keston College for many years — *Ed.*

# Contributors

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