

# A diplomat between two countries

## ARNOLDS SPEKKE AS A CULTURAL LINK BETWEEN ITALY AND LATVIA

by **Rosario Napolitano**



Photo of the passport of Arnolds Spekke. LNA-LVVA, 2996 f., 17 ap., 35968 l.

In June 2023, while I was perusing some archive materials at the Latvian State Historical Archive (Lat. *Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs*, hereafter LVVA) in order to complete a monograph, I discovered an interesting folder titled *Storia della Lettonia* [which translates into History of Latvia: An Outline], the contents of which were authored by Arnolds Spekke.<sup>1</sup> On first impression, I was not very surprised because I knew that Spekke – historian, diplomat and translator – was fluent in Italian. It then came to my mind that the Italian version of this book had never been published. Indeed, until now, the only versions that had existed are in English and Latvian. To alleviate any doubt, I contacted my friend and colleague from University of Pisa, Prof. Pietro Umberto Dini, to confirm that no other Italian version of this book existed. At length, I decided to publish Spekke’s monograph (forthcoming 2024/2025, published with *Vociferiscena*) as a history of Latvia written by a single author in the Italian language. This article highlights some of Spekke’s activities during his proxy as head of the Latvian legation in Italy during the Soviet period, and immediately after re-independence when he was dividing his time between Italy and the United States.

### The first steps: The years in Moscow and work at the University of Latvia

Arnolds Spekke was born in Bauska in 1887 into a family of schoolteachers, which most probably influenced his early career in education before entering academia. After finishing school, he spent two years at the Faculty of Mechanics at the Riga Polyethnic Institute (1906–1907). From 1909 till 1915, he lived in Moscow, where he studied Romance languages at Moscow University’s Faculty of History and Philology. He subsequently stayed in Russia for three more years while he pursued a professorship, in the

meantime working in several middle schools within the Russian Empire.<sup>2</sup>

When he came back to Latvia, he became the director of the middle school in Liepāja.<sup>3</sup> In December 1919, he was appointed as a professor at the University of Latvia, where he worked till 1932. During those years, Spekke was active not only in Latvia, but around Europe, informing people about the history of Latvia and popularising the University of Latvia. He presented public lectures about the history of Latvia – in addition to the humanism movement in Livonia – in Poland, France, Finland, and of course Italy.

### The Volta Conference and the Roman experience

Before being appointed as Head of the Latvian Legation in Rome, Spekke obtained a Rockefeller Scholarship, part of which he used to undertake research at the Vatican from October to December 1932.<sup>4</sup> During this period, the Latvian Government asked Spekke to take part in the Volta Conference in Rome (14–20 November 1932). The event was organized by a commission formed by Vittorio Sciajola, President of *Accademia d’Italia*, and, among others, the academics Francesco Oristano, Francesco Coppola, and Alberto de’Stefani.<sup>5</sup> The goal of the seven-day conference, which gathered more than a hundred personalities from Germany, France, Hungary, Great Britain, etc., was to analyze the critical period that Europe was going through. On this occasion, fascism led to a wider revolutionary moment on a continental scale. After the Volta Conference, Rome was seen by the Italian press as the “guiding light” that could take the rest of Europe out of its dark decline.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of the Baltic states, besides Spekke representing Latvia, Estonia also took part in the conference, represented



Eduards Keišs' caricature. A. Spekke, Ambassador in Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania. From the album *Latvian Ambassadors in Friendly Caricatures* (Latvju sūtņi draudzības saržos). Gift to K. Ulmanis. 1935. Archive of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



Cover of the book *Lettonia*, published in 1939.



From the personal archive of Baiba Ozola. The journalist of the *Voice of America Latvian Section*, Irène Karule, gives an interview to the Latvian envoy to the US, Dr. Arnolds Spekke, in Toronto, Canada in May 1957, during the basketball tournament of American and Canadian Latvians.

by Nikolai Maim, professor of law at the University of Tartu and League of Nations participant.<sup>7</sup> Spekke's participation at the Volta Conference was without any doubt an important "business card" for his career. He actively participated at the conference, giving a brief speech in which he reminded participants of relations with Russia and the balancing role of Latvia and the other countries that overlook the Baltic Sea.<sup>8</sup> After a brief period back in Latvia, Spekke returned to Rome for three months, conducting research at the *Archivio Apostolico Vaticano* (Vatican Apostolic archive) on Latvian history in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup>

In October 1933, he was appointed as Head of the Latvian Legation in Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania, based in Rome.

### The Riga Prize and Lettonia

At the beginning of the 1930s, Italy tried to strengthen its role as a "friend" nation and reliable partner in the Baltic region, which was caught between the expansionist policies of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The choice of Spekke as the new Head of the Latvian Legation in Rome was a logical appointment as he had already established good relations between Latvia and Italy.<sup>10</sup>

A key episode crowning the cultural friendship between Latvia and Italy was the establishment of the "Riga" and "Rome" prizes. These were created to be awarded to the author of the

best literary work about Italy by a Latvian and the best literary work about Latvia by an Italian, respectively. The awarding of the *Premio Roma* [Rome Prize] ceased for two reasons. The first was economic: the Accademia d'Italia, the responsible institution, did not have enough funds for the prize. The second reason was a misunderstanding by the Deputy President of the Accademia d'Italia, Carlo Formichi, who believed that the two prizes were the same but by two different names.<sup>11</sup> To remedy this, the Art Academy of Riga transformed the Premio Roma into a scholarship for a Latvian artist to study in Italy. In 1935, the first Premio Roma was assigned to the Latvian painter Eduards Kalniņš, while the first Premio Riga went to Francesco Tosti.<sup>12</sup> The following year, the competition was suspended due to the sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations, a consequence of the invasion of Abyssinia. The sanctions indeed influenced the economic and diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Italy and Latvia, but the cultural relations paid the greatest price. In 1937, the Premio Riga prize was re-established and awarded to the winner of the competition that was suspended in 1936. Spekke was chosen to be part of the prize jury. Besides Spekke, the commission included the Italian academic Massimo Bontempelli, and a member of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda, Amedeo Tosti. The prize assigned for the best Italian work was



Teaching staff of the Faculty of Philology and Philosophy of the University of Latvia around 1924. First row from the left: Aleksandrs Dauge, Kārlis Balodis, Jēkabs Velme, Jēkabs Lautenbahs, Ernests Felsbergs, Pēteris Šmits, Ludis Bērziņš; vidū: Kārlis Straubergs, Augusts Tentelis; Second row from the left: Arnolds Spekke, Juris Plāķis, Ernests Blese, Pauls Jurevičs, Maksis Nusbergers, Pauls Dāle, Rūdolfs Jirgens, Pēteris Zālīte, Francis Balodis, Jānis Kauliņš.



From left Prof. Dr. Arnolds Spekke, Latvian Envoy in Washington, D.C., A. Blodnieks, Mrs. A. Spekke.

2,000 lire. The Commission awarded the prize to Elio Migliorini for *Note geografiche sulla Lettonia* [Several geographical facts about Latvia] and Vincenzo Colarocco for *La Nuova Lettonia, fatti e tendenze* [The new Latvia, facts and tendencies],<sup>13</sup> assigning 1,000 lire to each participant. According to the guidelines, the prize was indivisible; nevertheless, the quality of the works presented exceeded expected standards, hence the prize was awarded to both writers. The prize later lost its “soul” and was used as a political tool by Galeazzo Ciano, Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1936 to 1943, and not for its intellectual value.<sup>14</sup> After that, control of the Premio Riga was taken over by the Latvian intelligentsia. They decided to revise it, beginning with the name, re-naming it the *Premio Latvija* [Latvia Prize]; its administration was assumed by the Italian-Latvian Association.<sup>15</sup>

THE ITALIAN-LATVIAN cultural tandem continued in 1939 with the volume *Lettonia*, a clear attempt to present Latvia to Italian readers in different fields. The preparation of the volume, which was encouraged by Luigi Salvini, started one year before it was published. Franco Ciarlantini, editor of the book series *Il Mondo d'oggi* [The World Today], with the support of the publishing house Edizioni Roma, sent Spekke a note with the intention to publish a volume about Latvia.<sup>16</sup> According to Spekke, the aim of the book was “to know better the historical, political, economic, and cultural aspects of a country [Latvia] that is linked with Italy through a true friendship.”<sup>17</sup> Salvini gave Spekke full discretion for the choice of authors and materials that would be employed for the book. The book is divided into nine chapters. Spekke wrote the first chapter, titled “Storia sintetica del popolo lettone” [A Concise History of the Latvian Peo-

ple], in which he provides an overview of the history of Latvians, from their origins till the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Among the other authors, notable contributors were Elza Stērste “La letteratura lettone moderna” [Modern Latvian literature], Marta Rasupe “I rapporti italo-lettoni” [Italian-Latvian relations], and Giacomo Devoto “Le origini e la lingua dei lettone” [The origin and language of Latvians].

The volume was a success, its publication being reported by both the Latvian and Italian press. After the book was released, between 1938 and 1940, Spekke was still involved with the Italian intelligentsia, this time in the *Istituto di Studi Romani*. He was invited here to take part in two conferences, most probably two of the last events before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In the first, Spekke presented a paper titled “I popoli baltici nel primo millennio dell’era cristiana” [The Baltic peoples in the first millennium of the Christian Era].<sup>18</sup> In the second, he prepared the paper: “Le relazioni della corte di Ravenna ai tempi di re Teodorico con le genti baltiche” [The relations of Ravenna court with the Baltic people during the time of King Theodoric].<sup>19</sup>

### The Soviet occupation and the volume “Storia della Lettonia”

On August 23, 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany was a prelude to the temporary end to the independence of Latvia, as well as Lithuania, and Estonia, which started in summer 1940. Latvia fell immediately under the Soviet sphere of influence, paving the way for the tragic events that followed, namely the deportations in 1941 and 1949 that involved more than 50,000 Latvian inhabit-

**“THE VOLUME WAS A SUCCESS, ITS PUBLICATION BEING REPORTED BY BOTH THE LATVIAN AND ITALIAN PRESS.”**



ants. In August 1940, Moscow sent the German Government a notification in which it was reported that the Soviet Union assumed the “legal succession” of the Baltic states, and the Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian legations in Italy came under Soviet control and propriety.<sup>20</sup> Spekke was discharged as the Head of the Latvian Legation in Rome, but he decided not to go back to Latvia and stayed in Italy. Indeed, most of the Baltic diplomats stationed abroad ignored the instructions and demands of the new regimes to return home. Some governments subsequently extended de facto recognition; others, such as the United States, did not and continued to accept the official functioning of the Baltic legations in their capitals.<sup>21</sup>

**AS REPORTED** in the preface of the English version (but not in the Latvian one), Spekke started to work on *Storia della Lettonia* in the early 1940s in Rome, when the destiny of Latvia was already sealed: “The work was begun in the autumn of 1940 when the author lost his fatherland, and became an emigrant, and was interrupted in the autumn 1943 when Rome went through bad times.”<sup>22</sup> In the same preface, the author also explains the reason why the Italian version was not yet published:

“The first manuscript was written in Italian with the aim of publication in Italy. No less than three times an attempt was made to achieve this objective, but each time some force majeure, either political change (or collapse), or economic difficulties, prevented its fulfilment. And so, the manuscript remained unpublished until 1946 when the Latvian publisher M. Goppers, Stockholm, took the matter in hand.”<sup>23</sup>

The volume, which according to the author was intended to be a sequence of essays that gives general information to the international reader, comprises 18 chapters (the same as the English and the Latvian versions). Each chapter is generally divided into two parts, the first being a report of the most important events that happened in Eastern Europe, with the second devoted to facts related to the Latvian people. The first chapter gives an overview of the setting, where Spekke focuses on the geographical formations in the Baltic Sea region, the developments of the rivers and mountains, and the people that were living in the region. Proceeding through chapters related to the Livonian Confederation, the Catholic counter-reformation, and the independence of 1918, the book ends with the chapter “Un fiore fra due abissi – 20 anni di libertà fra due conflitti mondiali” [A flower among two abysses – 20 years of freedom between two world conflicts] where Spekke mentions the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the beginning of World War Two.<sup>24</sup>

The Italian version found at the LVVA does not differ substantially from the Latvian and English versions. Indeed, in all three versions, Spekke debates with the problem of Latvian historiography, which he begins at the time of the national awakening of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while examining the long road to Latvian independence, which arrived only in 1918. Spekke also mentions that

this volume is the second attempt to publish a history of Latvia in the Italian language, the first being “Storia della Livonia sino alla morte di Gualtiero di Plettenberg” [History of Livonia until the death of Gualtiero from Plettenberg] in the second volume of *Russia, Polonia e Livonia*.<sup>25</sup>

In December 1942, in the middle of writing the volume, Velta Spekke, the wife of Arnolds Spekke visited the Italian Embassy in Berlin. Spekke’s wife informed the embassy that the University of Latvia required the former Head of the Latvian Legation in Italy to return to Latvia. According to Italian archive material, one year before Velta Spekke’s visit in Berlin, her husband submitted a request to become an Italian citizen; in this way he could apply for a position as professor of the history of Eastern Europe at Italian universities, specifically at the University of Padova and University of Rome.<sup>26</sup> However, his request was not granted. Spekke spent his last years in Italy in both Rome and Milano, where he worked as teacher, translator, and librarian.<sup>27</sup>

## The experience in Washington and last active years

After his experience in Italy, in 1954, Spekke moved to the US where he became *chargé d'affaire* and Head of the Latvian Legation in Washington DC. In the aftermath of WWII, Spekke helped Latvians who arrived in Italy (or were already there during the Soviet invasion) to move to the US or Australia. Support was also given by the Latvian Red Cross Society in Italy. Its plenipotentiary representative was Jāzeps Čamanis, a member of Kārlis Ulmanis’ government from 1934 till 1940. The number of Latvians registered in Italy in 1946 was 115 people (58 men, 48 women, and nine children), the majority of them in a desperate situation.<sup>28</sup>

Besides the huge geographical distance, Spekke never cut ties with Italy. In the 1960s, he exchanged correspondence with Marta Rasupe, who was lecturer of Latvian language and literature at the University of Rome from 1939 until 1966. The LVVA reveals a huge amount of correspondence in which Rasupe informed

Spekke about developments in the Italian political situation. An interesting document is a journal article, titled “Il governo poteva cadere per colpa della Lituania” [The government could collapse because of Lithuania] reported by the newspaper *l'Espresso* in September 1961.<sup>29</sup> The article describes the attempt by Nikita Krushchev to influence the Italian Prime Minister, Amintore Fanfani (on the occasion of their meeting in Moscow during August of the same year) to abolish all programs broadcasted by Italian radio made in the Lithuanian language. These claims were rejected by both politicians.

**SPEKKE WANTED TO** fill the gap between the Latvians and Americans, who were mostly unfamiliar with the Baltic states. In 1958, he published a small, illustrated book (56 pages) titled *Latvija 1918–1958*, in order to inform the American public not only about the years of independence, but also the tragic events that fol-

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lowed WWII, as well as the consequences of the Soviet occupation.<sup>30</sup> In the book, there are also quotes and declarations made by American statesmen about the Baltic question.

During his stay in the US, Spekke was very active, participating at conferences in several American institutions. He also extensively published essays in Italian and French about the history of Livonia and the development of humanism in the Baltic region, which until now were considered milestones of Latvian history.

Arnolds Spekke died in Washington in 1972. ✖

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