

Vējš, Jānis Nameisis, (in Latvian with an English summary reproduced below) Četras esejas par Berlinu [Four Essays on Berlin] (Riga, 2017: Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia); includes a Latvian translation of ‘European Unity and Its Vicissitudes’

Author’s summary

The title of the book echoes Isaiah Berlin’s well-known work *Four Essays on Liberty*, which is familiar to readers in Latvia from the Latvian translation of 2000. Recently there has also been a sustained series of events to popularise the intellectual achievement of Berlin, in view of the fact that his birthplace is Riga – now the capital of the Republic of Latvia and a cultural centre of regional significance in the Baltic area.

The present volume is intended to offer to the academically minded Latvian readership a compact version of Berlin’s life and work by characterising him as an outstanding philosopher, historian of ideas, and social and political theorist. Accordingly, the first essay, entitled ‘Life’, offers the necessary information about Isaiah Berlin’s journey from Riga, where he was born in 1909, to Oxford in the United Kingdom, where he achieved academic fame and died in 1997.

Isaiah Berlin’s father – a successful timber merchant in Riga – was a highly esteemed member of the local Jewish community. During World War I the family went to St Petersburg (Petrograd), and after the Bolshevik coup left Russia to repatriate to Latvia – a newly independent sovereign state. In 1921 the Berlin family moved to England, where Isaiah obtained a high-quality education at St Paul’s School and Oxford University. He made a successful career there as an academic, public figure, founder of Wolfson College, and President of the British Academy (1974–8). He won several distinguished prizes of international significance.

Isaiah Berlin’s birthplace in Riga is well marked by a suitable memorial inscription attached to a beautiful art nouveau apartment building in a prestigious location. It is included in tourist routes as a significant site of architectural monuments, designed by, among others, Mikhail Eisenstein, father of the world-renowned filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein – another celebrity with Riga roots. Isaiah Berlin’s bust is at present located in the Central Reading Room of the National Library of Latvia – a recently completed, impressive structure that serves as a real monument to the vigorous cultural and intellectual life of the Latvian people today.

The second essay, ‘Philosophy’, deals with the philosophical background to Berlin’s intellectual development, starting in the 1930s. Attention is concentrated on the origin and development of British analytical philosophy, which is viewed as part of the general anti-Hegelian trend of philosophical enquiry in the leading British universities of the time. In particular, the views of G. E. Moore, A. J. Ayer and J. L. Austin are discussed at some length, so as to accentuate Berlin’s role in the general discussion of phenomenism.

The third essay, ‘Ideas’, attempts to characterise briefly the originality of the ‘history of ideas’ approach practiced and theoretically formulated by Berlin. The essay discusses such themes as the relations between the humanities and scientific methodology, the monist/pluralist dichotomy, the role of historical enquiry, history as enlightened self-understanding, relativism, scepticism, enlightenment and counter-enlightenment. Discussion of these issues is related to Berlin’s highly original and incisive portrayal of such personalities as Alexander Herzen, Ivan Turgenev, Lev Tolstoy, Joseph de Maistre and other well-known figures of European thought. For a Latvian readership particular interest might be aroused by Berlin’s treatment of J. G. Herder and J. G. Hamann – German thinkers closely connected with spiritual developments in

the Baltic German community in Riga. The essay pays attention to the nexus existing between the personal freedom of an individual and that of the nation as a social group.

The fourth essay, 'Liberty', is devoted to a discussion of the most celebrated theme of Berlin's teaching (the term 'teaching' being used here in a specific sense, implying the overall character of his argumentation, rather than a strictly structured set of categorical statements). The essay deals with the problems of social and individual ethics by discussing such notions as value pluralism, the incommensurability of values, the human predicament and toleration.

The book draws on a selection of the existing biographical and scholarly studies of Berlin's corpus, and undertakes to identify some of the main themes of his teaching. Berlin's unique contribution to liberal social and political thought is discussed within the context of the British analytic tradition, in particular so-called Oxford philosophy of the mid-twentieth century, of which he ranks as one of the originators and an outstanding expositor.

This aspect – the comparatively extensive discussion of the philosophical items in the present volume – deserves mention, because, as a result of the specific circumstances of the development of political and spiritual life in Latvia during the recent (post-totalitarian) period, one feels the necessity to underscore the role of analytical methodology in strengthening liberal and democratic values both in academia and in public discussion in general.

The present volume also includes a translation into Latvian of Berlin's essay 'European Unity and Its Vicissitudes', originally a lecture delivered by Berlin at an international conference on European culture in Amsterdam in 1959. It seems highly appropriate in present circumstances.