



“The Zamenhof Story”

★ Do you enjoy birthday parties?

Many Esperanto-speakers celebrate December 15th, often by giving each other books in Esperanto as presents, because that is the date on which Lazarus Zamenhof was born, in 1859. Lazarus, who later also adopted the name Ludovic, was the person who eventually created Esperanto.

★ How big is your family?

Lazarus was the first child of Marcus and Rosalie Zamenhof, a Jewish couple who lived in a small wooden house in Bialystok, a town at that time under Russian control, but now in Poland. Marcus was a teacher of languages and very strict; Rosalie was a kind and loving mother to Lazarus and his eight brothers and sisters.

★ What is it like where you live?

Lazarus was a child who helped a lot at home and worked hard at school. He had a strong sense of

right and wrong, and he felt that there was a lot wrong on the streets of Bialystok: there he saw arguments and violence between the different groups of people who lived there - the Russians, Germans and Poles, and often against the Jews themselves. He was deeply upset by all this, and thought that the cause of the problem was language: because people spoke different languages, it was difficult for them to understand each other. Lazarus was learning several languages at home and at school, and started to think about how good it might be if everyone could speak the same language ...

★ Do you have a special project?

When Lazarus was fourteen, the Zamenhof family moved to Warsaw, and he went to secondary school there. He was learning more languages by now, but still had his idea about one language for all mankind. He decided that this language would have to be a new language, that did not belong to any nation or country, so that it would be fair for everyone - everyone would have to learn just this one language, as well as their own, and would then be able to talk to each other.

By the time he was nineteen, he had already worked out a version of his international language, which he used with some of his schoolfriends and his brother Felix. The language worked, and he was able to translate texts from the Bible into it, and he even wrote some poems in it.

★ Would you like to go to university?

Lazarus had continued to work hard at school and in 1879 was able to go to university in Moscow to study medicine. His father wanted this, and persuaded Lazarus to leave all his papers to do with the new language at home, until he had finished studying. Lazarus came back to continue his studies at Warsaw university in 1881, and hoped to do some work on his language during the holidays - but he discovered that his father had burned all the papers ...

★ What would you do?

Marcus hoped that this would stop his son's "silly dreaming", but Lazarus had not forgotten his project. The burning seemed to make Lazarus even keener to work on his special language: it gave him the chance to re-think the whole language from

scratch, and he made several important changes to the original.

★ Could you work as a doctor?

When Lazarus was twenty-five, he began work as a doctor in a small town in Lithuania. He was very upset by the poverty which he saw, and by the number of incurable patients that he tried to treat. He decided that this work was too difficult for him, and he began to specialise as an oculist, treating people's eyes. After further study in Warsaw and Vienna he set up a surgery in Warsaw in 1886.

★ Are you keen to see projects through to the end?

All the time Lazarus was studying and trying to make a success of his career, he kept up his work on his language project, often working until late into the night. He was determined to create a language that would be easier to learn and use than the national languages, and he produced many versions before he came up with his best solution.

★ How would you test a new language?

Before thinking about publishing his new language - which would be too expensive for Lazarus at the time anyway - he spent many more hours trying it out by translating stories and poems, prayers and extracts from the Bible

★ Have you ever been in love?

In 1886, Lazarus met a young lady, Clara Zilbernik, who was keen to help him in his language project. They fell in love and were married in 1887.

★ Have you ever needed help?

Thanks to help from Clara's father, Lazarus obtained enough money to have the first book in Esperanto printed and published. It was really a small booklet teaching the reader the basics of the language and giving some examples of how to use it. It also invited students to add their names to a register which Lazarus kept, so that Esperanto-users could be introduced to each other.

