

UNIVERSITY OF VYTAUTAS THE GREAT

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PROF. STEPONAS KOLUPAILA, formerly of the University of Vytautas the Great in Kaunas, and a well-known authority in hydrography, is doing consulting work and at the same time teaching at the University of Notre Dame.

Lithuania, some time ago a large and important European country, has had an old university in Vilnius since 1579. In 1795 Lithuania lost her independence having been overrun by Russia. The people's desire for freedom emerged in resistance and open revolts and in reprisal the Russian government closed the university in 1832 and plundered its institutions.

Thus free Lithuania had no academic school. Worse yet, her capital Vilnius was taken over by Poland. Hence, the Lithuanian government founded a new university in Kaunas, the temporary capital, in 1922.

The new Lithuanian university was granted a liberal autonomy: professors were elected by councils and formally nominated by government, inasmuch as the university was supported by the state. The members of the administration — the rector (president), the prorectors (vice-presidents), and the deans — were elected by the council also. The president of the republic nominated the nucleus of the academic staff.

The university had seven separate schools in Lithuania, called faculties: Theology-philosophy (Catholic), Evangelic theology, Law and economics, Liberal Arts, Natural science, Medicine and Engineering. There were some changes in the number during the course of time, since some departments were later divided into special schools, such as the Academy of Agriculture and the Veterinarian Academy. The Engineering School, too, was divided into Civil Engineering and Technology.

The pioneer personnel of the university were selected from the many Lithuanian scientists, who were dispersed around the world, throughout Russia, Poland, Germany, Switzerland, U. S. A., and even the Philippines. A score of foreign professors was invited to aid the young institution, many of whom learned the Lithuanian language and became successful lecturers. Prospective new faculty members were sent to study in the best schools in Western Europe. The few lucky enough to obtain a Rockefeller scholarship went to the United States. In this manner, in less than a decade the university had developed a well-qualified staff of about 400 members.

In a short time the young university had accomplished a challenging task: a scientific Lithuanian terminology was created, Lithuanian textbooks were composed and edited, contact with international organizations was established, university transactions were exchanged with foreign schools and local investigations were organized in various fields, such as geology, geography and folklore.

In 1930 the government named the university after Vytautas the Great, in commemoration of the fifth centenary of the death of the national hero.

The student body, as many as 4500 young men and women, was composed of graduates from high-schools with 7 to 8 years of preparation. Study at the university required 4 to 5 years, sometimes longer. Besides study, the students enjoyed a vivid and colorful social life. More than one hundred different student organizations were active, many of ideological, regional, professional or economic distinction in the country at large.

The university played a very important role in the Lithuanian life, helping the young state to enjoy its freedom during the short interwar period, which was characterized by a rise in general culture, a blossoming of the liberal arts, and great

economic progress.

An outside force quickly ended this prosperity. A new, perfidious Russian occupation was the first hard stroke. Freedom and autonomy ceased. Religion and human Philosophy were banned and subsequently subplanted by the Russian version of Marxism.

Then came occupation by the Germans who in 1943 closed the university, when the students refused a call for military duties. Teaching, however, continued underground, despite the risk of persecution. Many professors who were caught teaching were sent to concentration camps.

About 50 per cent of all academic personnel left Lithuania in 1944, as the current Soviet occupation approached, and tried to find freedom in the West. The Baltic University in Hamburg-Pinneberg, UNRRA — University in Munich, the academic-technical courses given in Kempten, Bavaria, welcomed these eminent professors to their ranks.

With the closing of its formal classes and the scattering of its professorial staff, the University of Vytautas the Great has become a rallying point, a symbol of the freedom, to the people of Lithuania who remember it as the burgeoning flower of a national culture that a ruthless aggressor has crushed underfoot.