

Literary Look

Review of "Crosses"

By Richard Stockham

In 1954 an English translation of the book "Kryžiai" ("The Crosses") by the Lithuanian author, V. Ramonas, was published in the United States. The book was very favorably received by the critics in this country. Here we present the review by Mr. Richard Stockham, which appeared in the Nov. 4, 1954 edition of the Brentwood Pacer, a Los Angeles, Calif, newspaper.

Editor

CROSSES, by V. Ramonas (Lithuanian Days Publishers, \$4.00).

We feel that it is necessary, because the advent of Crosses in English literature is an important event, to break a recently set precedent in this column, of reviewing several books, and to devote our entire space to this one work.

Here is a first English edition, translated from Lithuanian by Milton Stark of Santa Monica, Calif. Mr. Ramonas, a master of Lithuanian letters, has written Crosses with high seriousness. Reading it, we felt that he must have spewed it out. There is nothing studied or ponderous or slow moving about the work, in spite of its long passages of religious, political, and philosophical discourses, all in dialogue. Throughout we find continual movement.

Characters clash and tangle, like pebbles shaken in a box. They bruise each other, they caress, they flee, they kill. There is love and hatred, fear and courage, honesty and deceit. Pride and lust bring death. A search for power and independence pulls down into terrible rubble, a structure of society that has stood for centuries. Revenge ends in sorrow and hopelessness. Darkness rolls over the land.

This is the picture of the human existence we find in Crosses. It is a picture of doom.

For so many people to be in such a turmoil in our western culture, there must be some ideal in question. In this particular case that ideal is authoritarianism — Communism on one hand and Nazism on the other.

It is the beginning of 1940 in Lithuania. The Russians are driving into Germany and the Nazis are smashing them back. Lithuania is in the middle. Her people are forced to make a choice. Some try to merge with the invaders, in this instance the Russians; others try to pull away from them. There is not any middle ground. It is a black or white choice.

Mr. Ramonas unfolds his story by following deeply the inner workings of a man Kreivenas, who would merge with the aggressors. The conflict that is stirred up within him, like a terrible whirlwind, destroys him. All that he is essentially, as a human being, rises up boiling and seething. We are witnesses to a man being torn to pieces by overpowering emotions that are set off by the turmoil in his environment. And we feel that if this catastrophe had not rushed in upon his land, the poisons within him might never have been let loose and so risen to the surface of his life.

The writing in Crosses will strike the American reader as quite unusual. This, we feel, is due to the excellent translation of Mr. Stark. Although the essence of the work has a distinct European flavor, which Mr. Stark has beautifully preserved, its language yet holds, in idiom and structure, the essential naturalness of English written by a skilled and talented American author. To accomplish such an effect is a difficult feat. It takes an acute perception and a deep understanding of both languages.

The characters, as a group, with the exception of Kreivenas, are more types or symbols, than real people, even though at times they do give their impression of being full and deep human portrayals. Kreivenas, however, it seems to us, is perhaps as intricately and powerfully done as Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment. It does seem though, that, from an artistic, a poetic sense, the final, tragic event in his life comes too swiftly. On the other hand, realistically, it is as though a person were struck down by an automobile, after deliberately risking his life, dodging them, in a busy intersection, during a rush hour. The tragic incident arrives, is suddenly finished, and there is everlasting death. Justice?

We feel that *Crosses* holds something of the power and depth of Dostoevski, some of the fine detail of Flaubert, it is definitely the work of a master of letters. The reading of it will give an insight into a phase of the terrible corrosion and finally the violent tearing apart that authoritarianism commits upon humanity. It stands as one of the most moving and penetrating studies of the effects upon the human mind of this type of government that we have ever read.