

THE UNIVERSITY OF VILNIUS

Commemorating of the 375th Anniversary of the University of Vilnius

Dr. Sruogienė-Sruoga

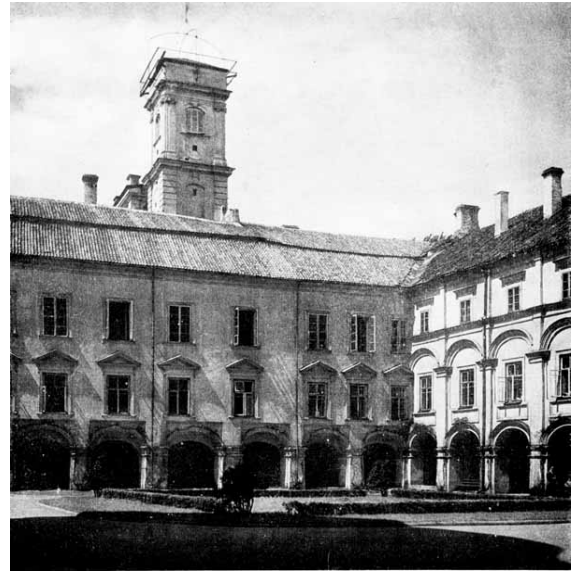
Dr. Vanda Sruogienė - Sruoga was born in Caucasus — her parents had been deported to that area because of possession of Lithuanian books during the period between 1864-1904. She studied in Moscow, Berlin, graduated from Vytautas the Great University at Kaunas, and received the Ph. D. in Bonn. Known as historian, educator, author of history textbooks and numerous publications.

Was married to a professor and famous writer Balys Sruoga. During the first Soviet occupation the whole family was to be deported to Siberia and only the German-Russian war prevented this deportation. In 1943 the Germans arrested prof. Sruoga as a hostage and kept him imprisoned in a concentration camp. After the end of the World War II the Russians arrested him shortly after the liberation. As a consequence of all those sufferings he died in Lithuania.

The year 1954 marks the 375th anniversary of the founding of the Academy of Vilnius, the first Lithuanian University.

Life in the 16th century in the Great Dukedom of Lithuania, the largest state of Europe in those days with its borders reaching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, had reached a remarkable level of cultural development. The first Lithuanians to attend universities date back to the end of the 14th century. They studied at the oldest European universities, such as that of Prague (founded in 1347). In 1401 the Lithuanian Grand Duke Ladislas Jogaila (Jagiello), who became the King of Poland in 1386, founded the University of Krakow. The third Rector of that institution was the Lithuanian John Vaidotas, the Duke of Drohicin — a relative of the Gediminas dynasty which had reigned over Lithuania. After the most famous Lithuanian ruler, Vytautas the Great, established closer relationships with Western Europe, throughout the entire 15 and 16 centuries, many Lithuanians left their native land to study; not only at Krakow or Prague, but also at numerous universities in Germany and Italy. The universities of Padua, Bologna and Siena, produced the men who, widely versed in law, drew up one of the most modern constitutions of its time, the Statute of Lithuania (1529).

Finally, in 1539—40 the first institution of higher learning in Lithuania was founded in the capital city of Vilnius. Its founder, Abraomas Kulvietis, had been educated in Germany and Italy, was well read in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, and was a specialist in law as well. His school, therefore, differed only a little from the recognized universities, the main discrepancy being a lack of the department of theology. The school did not last long, however, and Kulvietis, who had gone to Prussia, became one of the first professors of the University of Königsberg (established in 1543), the first Rector of which was also a Lithuanian named Stanislovas Rapagelionis (Rapagelanus).



*University of Vilnius, founded as a
Jesuit Academy in 1579*

The active intellectuals and the Diete of Lithuania continued their demands for the founding of a College in Vilnius and in 1570 they succeeded. Zygmantas Augustas, the Lithuanian Grand Duke and King of Poland (since 1385 Lithuania and Poland had been negotiating for unification) gave this college a generous grant and left it his valuable library. The staff

functions were assigned to the Jesuit Fathers, who a year before had arrived in Lithuania. In 1579 the ruler Stephanus Batory had signed the founding act, and thus the Jesuit Academy officially became the recognized Academy in Vilnius.

The Academy had its schools of theology and philosophy; the Jesuit Fathers showed little concern for law as an academic subject; and medicine, in those days the trade of barbers, was considered as improper. The first Rector of this Academy was the famous preacher Peter Skarga, and most of the professors were foreigners. Among them were three Englishmen, one famous Portuguese theologian and a Spaniard. The language was Latin.

It was a time of religious persecution in Western Europe and because of that many foreigners found their way to Lithuania, known to be a tolerant country. For many years people of various national and religious origins had lived there side by side, amicably: the Ukrainians and the Poles, the Tartars, the Karaites, the Germans, the Jews, the Catholics, the Orthodoxes, the Mohammedans and, later, the Protestants. While it is true that religious problems arose in Lithuania, too, at the time, 1620, that the "Mayflower" was reaching the shores of America, carrying Englishmen who were fleeing religious persecution, Lithuania had its share of those seeking the freedom to worship as they pleased. It is not surprising, then, to find students in the Academy of such diverse origins as Scotland and Ireland and Poland and Lithuania. Attendance rose from 600 students to 2,000. The intellectual ferment was intense; many theological disputes were conducted; plays concerned with religious themes were produced. Among the more famous graduates of the Academy were the author of the first dictionary of the Lithuanian language, Konstantinas Sirvydas, and the historian Vijukas Kajelavicius, whose history of the Lithuanian Grand Dukedom, written in Latin and published in 1650, was, for many years, the only source for the Western world to learn about the past of Lithuania. Until the middle of the 17th century, the Academy of Vilnius was the important and widely recognized educational center for all of Eastern Europe.

In 1655 Lithuania experienced the first of the many hardships it had to endure in subsequent years; hardships which affected the life of the Academy as well. Lithuania, which had bravely withstood any aggression from its growing neighbor in the East, finally became the victim of an invasion by the Moscowites. The entire southern and eastern portions of the country, including its capital Vilnius, were occupied by the barbaric armies from Moscow. Kaunas, Gardinas, Vilnius — wealthy cities which had not seen an enemy in centuries — were destroyed, robbed, and burned down. Everything was taken to Moscow: jewelry, goods from the warehouses, all removable parts of the churches, and all objects of art. Lithuania was left stripped of its valuable cultural heritage. Many of its people were deported to the interior of Russia and experienced atrocities.

The simultaneous occupation of the western and northern sections of Lithuania by Swedish invaders contributed to the misfortunes which characterized those years of Lithuanian history. The Swedes also tried to ship away as much as possible. The entire contents of the Academy library were prepared for transportation, but, miraculously, the shipment to Sweden was stopped. After 13 years of war and occupation the country freed itself, but it could not recover quickly from the wounds it has suffered. Starvation followed the wars, various epidemics reduced the population and subsequent wars and other misfortunes brought about the collapse of the country's economic, cultural and educational activities. Because of these circumstances the Academy lost its importance and influence.

Only in the last years of the 18th century, with the country once again on the upgrade, economically and culturally as well, did the leaders show great concern for the re-establishment of educational institutions. This led to the rebirth of the Academy of Vilnius. When, in 1773, the Pope had abolished the Jesuit Order, the government had founded a "National Educational Commission", which took over the Jesuits' former leadership in the educational field, and received from the state the possessions of the Jesuit Order. The Academy was reformed. It became known as the Supreme School of the Lithuanian Great Dukedom. The academic level was raised as the Academy attempted to prepare good citizens for the welfare of the state.

Misfortune struck Lithuania again at this time. In 1795 the Russians and the Prussians divided Lithuania between themselves and once again independence was lost. However the intellectuals, more than ever before, were concerned with the education of the youth of the country. Russia's Alexander I, during his first part of reign — characterized by a liberal approach — permitted the founding of the University of Vilnius in 1803, the functions and aims of which were to educate the young people, supervise the school system of the country and engage in research activities. The university had four schools: (1) mathematics-physics; (2) political and moral sciences (theology, philosophy, history and law); (3) literature and the liberal arts and (4) medicine.

The University of Vilnius now had all the opportunities for a natural, unfettered development. Soon its scholastic standards reached the level of the great universities of Western Europe with which close contacts were maintained. A number of the professors of the University of Vilnius became well known: among them the philologist Grodeck; the medical authority Franck; the specialist in natural sciences Sniadecki; the historian Leleveland and others. Before long its first students became known and famous; the great poet Adomas Mickevičius (Mickiewicz), who wrote in Polish, but whose poetry is concerned with Lithuania's past, its fight for freedom and its beautiful countryside; the bishop of the province of Žemaičiai, the Very Rev. M. Valančius, one of the educators of the people, writer and historian.

After their unsuccessful attempt to free themselves of the Russian occupation, in 1831, the Lithuanians again had to experience a hardship. The university was closed down by the Czar. Lithuania now was left without its own institution of higher learning and the Lithuanian youth had to go to Russia to become educated. After the second uprising against the

occupation, in 1863, the Russians prohibited the use of the Latin alphabet for Lithuanian writings. Only after forty years did the Lithuanians regain the right to publish their writings in the Latin alphabet. During these years of repression the thought of having a Lithuanian university never disappeared from the minds of those who were concerned with Lithuania's problems. The intellectuals continued to remind the authorities about the need for a university and in 1905 the historic Lithuanian Diete (Seimas) demanded the re-establishment of the University of Lithuania in the capital city. The same demand was strongly supported by Lithuanian emigrants in the U. S. A.

When on the 16th of February in 1918, Lithuania was declared an independent country, the executive branch of the government was prepared to re-open the university in the fall of the same years. The charter had been approved when, in 1919, the Polish Army led by J. Pilsudskis occupied Vilnius and founded the Stephanus Batory University instead. During the 20 years while Vilnius was kept under foreign rule the University of Vytautas the Great at Kaunas and other institutions of higher learning took over the education of the youth.

In 1939, during the Polish-German war, Russia returned Vilnius to Lithuania. On the 1st of January in 1940 the University of Vilnius began its work once again: the Rector was prof. Mykolas Biržiška.

When the first semester was over, on the 15th of June, the Soviet Army occupied Lithuania again and declared the country a Communist republic. The people had to experience the russification process which was reinforced by the attempt to make the country a communistic one. Forced by the Communist Party, the Board of Education (Commissariat) had to order certain changes at the university. The faculty of theology was abolished and all student organizations and fraternities were prohibited. In their place the Communist Youth Organization "Komsomol" began its activities. The teaching of Russian was intensified; everybody was required to take courses in the teachings of Marx and Lenin: and certain administrative changes took place in order to insure more uniformity with Russian schools. A number of professors suffered from these changes, and from the occupation in general.

The most severe blow came on June 15th, 1941, when the mass deportations of Lithuanians to Russia began. In about ten days more than 40,000 Lithuanians, men, women and children, were put into livestock cars and shipped to Siberia, Kazakh and other places in the depths of Russia. Among them were a number of professors, their families, members of the staff and quite a few students. A second deportation was planned and, as later discovered lists revealed, the majority of the professors would have been included. The war between Russia and Germany that had broken out in the meantime stopped this barbarism.

The new ruler, however, quickly proved to be no better than the former one. The Nazi regime began to suppress the country and these regulations affected the institutions of higher learning. Many of the professors and students became victims of Nazis; some of them were held as hostages; quite a few suffered and died in the Nazi concentration camps.

In 1944 the Russians returned to Lithuania. The universities were again "readjusted" to the Russian pattern.

Celebrating the 375th anniversary of the founding of the University of Vilnius every Lithuanian intellectual — those who remained behind the Iron Curtain and those who have found shelter in the behind the Iron Curtain and those who have found shelter in the friendly and democratic countries, especially in the U. S. A. — are filled with hope that some day Lithuania will be free again and will be able to permit its citizens to participate in the free, unrestricted creative work which serves for the betterment of the country and humanity in general.