

LITHUANIA IN 1958 AN OUTSIDE GLANCE AT SOME ASPECTS OF HER LIFE

VINCAS RASTENIS

VINCAS RASTENIS, a jurist and journalist is President of the Association of Lithuanian Journalists; Chairman of the Lithuanian National Movement; Chairman of the Lithuanian Independence Alliance. He is also head of the Lithuanian Section of the Free Europe Press Division. In 1910 he was arrested by the Soviet authorities and spent a year in various Soviet prisons.

1. Under the Shadow of Coexistence

While progress toward peaceful coexistence between the East and the West remains questionable, person-to-person contacts between Lithuanians at home and those abroad have increased amazingly, much more so than could have been foreseen a few years ago. Although these contacts probably do not involve more than some five per cent of the population of Lithuania, their impact is apparently felt much more widely.

Personal correspondence is often accompanied by an exchange of publications. Publications coming from Lithuania are issued without exception by institutions of the Communist regime; however, there are no obstacles in the West to their prompt delivery. It must be noted that the publications that private individuals choose to send to their friends abroad are not pure political propaganda. Many of them have considerable cultural, and even Lithuanian patriotic value, however touched up with commentaries aligned to Marxist-Leninist teaching. Since these publications are published by institutions of the regime, they constitute evidence that the regime finds it necessary to permit and even to encourage the fostering and cultivation of Lithuanian national (ethnic) cultural values and, furthermore, that there are many educated people in Lithuania who are eager to devote themselves to such work, despite the unavoidable necessity of adding some political retouching.

A few years ago the leaders of the regime and its press ignored completely the fact that many Lithuanians — old emigrants and new political refugees — were in the West. After personal contacts were widely established, and this became known to the entire population of Lithuania, it became impossible to remain silent about the existence of many countrymen abroad. The leaders of the regime and propaganda workers found it necessary to enter into indirect and even direct polemics in their press with the Lithuanian press in exile. At the same time they intensified their attempts to convince the people in Lithuania that their countrymen abroad were leading an unbearably miserable life, that their only dream was to find a way to return home, and that only the misleading propaganda of a few servants of the American capitalists kept them in fear of the Soviet system and prevented them from coming back.

But there is a very tangible answer to such assertions. Correspondence is often supplemented by gift packages from the West. During the past two or three years, these packages (mostly from the U.S. and Canada) have become famous in Lithuania, and even among Lithuanians forcibly settled in distant parts of Siberia. (The same is true in regard to Estonia, Latvia and the Ukraine.) The quantity and quality of these gift packages demonstrate, without the need for words, the true situation as to the economic conditions of the "unfortunate countrymen who are forced to live under capitalist serfdom."

The people who maintain such contacts with their homelands under Soviet rule provide the most convincing and effective evidence in the dispute between the East and West, and especially between the Soviet Union and the United States, evidence that is more eloquent than any other means of communicating the superiority of the system of democracy and free economy. It must be emphasized that the transmission of this evidence directly to the target is financed neither by capitalists nor by the "imperialist" governments. Expenses (including enormous customs duties and other fees paid to the Soviet treasury) are being paid by little men from their modest earnings; these people cannot even deduct such expenses from their taxable incomes, as they could if they gave the same amounts to local churches or charitable institutions.

Interest in contacts with the West has grown to such an extent in Lithuania that the regime evidently does not consider it wise at present to restrain the flow to the East of letters, packages or even publications from Lithuanians abroad. Although the exchange of books and newspapers is far from being a free two-way street (some publications cannot be mailed from Lithuania, and there is no way of knowing whether a publication from the West will be delivered to its addressee in Lithuania), there is nevertheless much evidence that at least some books by Lithuanian authors in exile are already circulating from hand to hand in Lithuania, even including certain books that two years ago would not have passed the Soviet censorship. As late as 1955 and even 1956, no Lithuanian newspaper from the West, even pro-Communist, was allowed to reach Lithuania. Now, in 1958, at least some privileged (i.e., reliable to the regime) pressworkers apparently receive a number of Lithuanian newspapers and magazines from the United States and other countries. There are some hints that even unauthorized people occasionally have an opportunity to see such publications.

All this creates a mood very different from the one that prevailed in Lithuania during the first decade of Soviet rule after World War n. This mood may be an unexpected by-product of the propaganda for peaceful coexistence. At any rate, since this new state of mind is still in a state of development it must be a matter of conjecture what may result from it in the future. Nevertheless, the new mood has already found expression among Lithuanian students as well as among cultural workers, most of the latter being members of the younger generation. This trend has caused the Party leaders headaches and has alarmed them as to the danger of what they call "revisionism" and "nationalistic superstitions."

2. The "Superstitions"

The following story may indicate the kind of "nationalistic superstitions" that make the Communist leaders unhappy.

The finest Lithuanian novelist of the older generation wrote a novel called *The Rebels*. The author portrayed a revolt that took place in Lithuania (and Poland) in 1863. (This was one of the series of Lithuanian and Polish revolts against Russia after the latter country took over most of the former countries' territories at the end of the 18th century.)

The Party authorities approved the novel and the author's approach to his subject, since the author carefully presented the revolt as a social-economic uprising of peasants against the rule of the upper classes, rather than as an uprising against Russia.

Then a young librettist and a young composer created an opera based on this novel. A panel of experts approved the opera, and it was accepted into the repertoire of the State Opera in Vilnius. The opera's first performance was scheduled for November 7, 1957, the 40th anniversary of the Soviet Revolution.

However, at one of the final rehearsals a visitor from the Soviet Union's Ministry of Culture in Moscow appeared. He was shocked. What he saw was a glorification of the Lithuanian national uprising against the Russians!

The opera was promptly dropped from the repertoire. And at the Party Congress in February, 1958, the instance was presented as a prime example of how calamity may result from giving way to the moods emerging out of "nationalistic superstitions." The librettist and composer were repeatedly reprimanded for their "ideological weakness." And many others felt uneasy, since they had failed to notice the error until it was pointed out by the inspector from Moscow.

Other "ideological shortcomings" revealed and condemned by the First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party in his report to the Party Congress (February 15, 1958) included the following:

- a) A tendency among "ideological weaklings, especially among some groups of young people, to turn from the road of proletarian internationalism toward the misleading way of national Communism;"
- b) Anti-Russian feeling, and confusion of the Tsarist (and the Communist?) regime with the Russian nation;
- c) A tendency to seek priorities for republic rights to the detriment of all-Union interests;
- d) The "whitewashing of bourgeois nationalist anti-peoples activities during the Nazi occupation" and "a complacent attitude toward such tendencies on the part of some functionaries in the ideological field, and even of some Party members;"
- e) The deliberate selection of negative aspects of contemporary life in works by young poets, novelists and playwrights;
- f) trend on the part of young literary critics toward "aestheticism" and "abstractionism" and a loss of touch with real life (in Communist semantics, 'real life' means an idealized picture of the "building of socialism");
- g) Carelessness on the part of the State Publishing House and its editors in the publication of Lithuanian classics, i.e., a failure to screen them according to the requirements of Leninist ideology. (A collection of works by Maironis, a poet of the Lithuanian national renaissance, was published in an edition of 25,000 copies last year and was sold out within a month, while Lenins works can be sold only under high pressure);

h) Revisionist tendencies on the part of professors at the University of Vilnius in evaluating some Lithuanian authors of pre-Communist days.

An article by leaders of the university's Komsomol organization, published in "Tiesa" on April 27, 1958, criticized the literature professors even more sharply for praising authors who are considered ideologically wrong. The Komsomol leaders deplored the influence the professors' attitude has had on a large number of students. It should be noted that these University of Vilnius professors were not old-timers; they were all comparatively young, and had graduated under the Communist regime. Most of them were replaced this spring, in the middle of the semester.

3. Achievements in the Socialized and Private Branches of the Economy

On December 2, 1957, Radio Vilnius made a surprising statement: "Lithuania has already left the United States far behind in the production of butter!" Figures were quoted indicating that Lithuania's per capita butter production in 1957 was 6 kilograms, as against a figure of 3.8 kilograms for the United States in 1956.

Putting aside an evaluation of these figures, it must be noted that officials in Lithuania, in speaking of agricultural production, have recently begun to use the term "whole agricultural economy." The quoted figure is the alleged butter production of "the whole agricultural economy of Lithuania," which includes not only the kolkhozes and sovkhoses but private plots as well. These private plots (which average one and a half acres per peasant family) are used so intensively that when their production is added to that of the "socialized agricultural economy" the entire picture is very considerably improved. This is why the officials choose to speak about the production of the "whole agricultural economy" rather than about the production of kolkhozes and sovkhoses.

The figures for milk production in 1957 given to the Congress of the Lithuanian Communist Party in February, 1958, constitute eloquent evidence of the superiority of private economy over kolkhoz or even sovkhos economy.

It was disclosed that the average milk yield per 100 hectares of arable land, meadowland and pasture was 9.14 tons for the kolkhozes, 21 tons for the sovkhoses and 31.9 tons for the "whole agricultural economy," that is, kolkhozes, sovkhoses and private plots combined.

According to official statistics published in Narod-noye Khcyaistvo SSSR, 1956, the "whole agricultural economy" of Lithuania comprised 3,900,000 hectares of arable land, meadowland and pastures, distributed as follows: kolkhozes, 3,400,000 hectares, or 87%; sovkhoses, 300,000 hectares, or 8%; private plots, 200,000 hectares, or 5%. (All kinds of state farms are included under sovkhoses in these statistics; the figures are for 1956, but they could not have changed appreciably by 1957.)

Thus total milk production in 1957 was evidently 1,244,10 tons (31.9 tons times 39,000 — the total number of hectares divided by 100). Of this, the kolkhoz production accounted for 310,760 tons (9.14 tons times 34,000) and the sovkhos production accounted for 63,000 tons (21 tons times 3,000). Subtracting the kolkhoz and sovkhos production from the total, we arrive at the following figure for the milk production achieved by the peasants on their small privately used plots:

1,244,100 — (310,760 63,000) 870,340 tons

That is to say, the kolkhozes, with 87% of the land, produced only 25% of the total milk yield; the sovkhoses, with 8% of the land, produced 5% of the milk; while the private plots, with only 5% of the land, produced 70% of the milk.

The same source gave the following figures for the average milk yield per cow: kolkhozes, 1,741 kilograms per year; sovkhoses, 2,669 kilograms per year. This makes it possible to calculate the approximate number of cows in each of the three branches of agriculture, as follows: total number of cows, 541,700; in the kolkhozes, 178,700, or 33%, in the sovkhoses, 23,000, or 4.3% in private ownership, 340,000, or 62.7%.

The average yearly milk yield per privately owned cow may be deducted from these figures; it comes to 2,560 kilograms, as against the kolkhozes' 1,741 and the sovkhoses' 2,669 (most of the sovkhoses are intended to be exemplary cattle-breeding farms).

These figures though approximate, may be considered close enough to reality. It is known that most peasants keep at least one cow, and some even two, on their plots. There are about 335,000 privately used plots (200,000 hectares, at .6 hectares per plot or less). The latest figure for peasant families still living in the old dwelling of former private farms was given as 280,000. Some peasant families are already living in the kolkhoz villages. Thus the present figure for peasant families may be considered to be 300,000 or more. Besides the peasant families, many officials and workers in the countryside (teachers among them) are also permitted the use of private plots of land and the ownership of a cow or two. All this corroborates the above estimate of the number of privately owned cows. On the other hand, the number of cows owned by the kolkhozes in 1956 was given in official sources as about 164,000, so the figure 178,700 for 1957 may also be considered to approximate the truth.

In the cities, too, private economy shows much more vitality than the socialized economy wherever private economy is tolerated by the government. For instance, construction of privately owned individual dwellings, when it is permitted, always proceeds at a faster rate and more efficiently than the state housing program. But the state agencies feel that they must restrain this private competition. For instance, the construction of individual dwellings was recently prohibited within the city limits of Kaunas, and from now on people who wish to build homes of their own will have to participate in the construction of two — three — or four — story cooperative apartment houses.

The local administrative agencies in some towns have found themselves compelled to abandon the organization of artisan cooperatives and to permit private artisans' shops (as during the NEP period of the 1920s in Russia), since the artisan cooperatives (artels) turned out to be inefficient and financially unsound.

There are thousands of cases — deplored publicly in Lithuania's Communist press — where retail shops owned by the state or by centralized cooperative organizations (which practically amounts to being owned by the state) fail to satisfy public demands because of their inefficiency, while the "black marketeers" (unlicensed private merchants) are almost always able to provide the desired merchandise.

The most recent step in the struggle against private trade is the regulation of the buying and selling of automobiles. From now on a single dealer (a "specialized shop" in Vilnius) is to be the sole authorized dealer for the whole of Lithuania. The buyer of a car is also required to get a permit from the local administration and the local trade union committee. The number of permits is limited. No permit may be given to a person who has owned a car at any time during the last five to eight years (depending on the model of the car). Used cars may be sold only through the Vilnius shop, and only to persons having permits to buy. A car acquired through other channels will not be registered for license plates. Thus, at least as regards cars, private trade is completely eliminated.