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CULTURAL DISCRIMINATION IN LITHUANIA The Problem of Cultural Press

R. TAUTRIMAS

R. TAUTRIMAS is a pen-name of a soviet affairs specialist, affiliated at present with one of the outstanding American universities.

Qualitative Literary Changes After the Thaw

It is commonly said that the creative process requires not only talent but also certain minimum of favourable environmental conditions, without which ideas can not germinate, grow, and bare fruit. It was, therefore, perfectly natural, when the writers, poets, dramatists and critics gathered to the Fourth Congress of the Lithuanian SSR Writers' Union on December 13, 1965, in Vilnius, that much time should have been devoted in one way or another on the conditions of creativity and their relation to literary productivity. Happily, their discourse was not a pretense that intelligent people in the not too distant past were so often forced by the circumstances to go through; for a change it had some substance. The congress was taking place almost a decade after the formal de-stalinization process was initiated, bringing in its wake some real and meaningful changes.

The effects of the thaw in literature in Lithuania were not so pronounced as in the Russian Federation. Nor were the freezes when ideological winds began to blow cold again. While liberalization in the field of literature and other arts in Lithuania was smoother and less dramatic, yet its actual results did not reach the same degree of depth as was attained in Russian arts. This is understandable. The masters are always more liberal and will tolerate more mischief from their own children than on the part of ungrateful children of the Baltics, who right from the beginning scorned the unsolicited charity of mother Russia. And yet, in spite of this, liberalizing tendencies that accumulated in the post-Stalin period formed the most reasonable creative conditions that Lithuanian writers and artists ever had since their country was forcefully incorporated into the Soviet Union. Especially in the last two years, after the climax of freeze in early 1963, in Moscow, the climate for creative arts in Lithuania, in comparison to Stalinist period, became in a certain sense almost stimulating. It became practicable, in many respects, to portray life under socialism without the customary varnish, but as it is, with its conflicts, shortcomings and injustice. Though socialist realism in theory remained, as before, the only proper and permissible style of artistic expression and orientation, in practice significant departures have been made. The rigid concept of socialist realism has widened and became much more flexible. "Diversity of literature, the healthy clash of opinions and aims, numerous experimentations that already gave positive results, are vitally necessary for further development of our literature." ¹ It is understandable how the change from a physically insecure and intellectually humiliating and oppressive situation to a relatively secure and comparatively free post-Stalin period restored self-confidence and self-respect among the literary community. In addition, tensions that must have pent up during Stalin's reign and projects that were too risky or unthinkable to undertake, now could be vented, though some risk and apprehension was still present.²

The result was a sharp increase in literary productivity, as well as qualitative improvement. A participant in the congress tersely summed up the change of literary activity, saying that "empty rattling gave way to concrete work"³ There is little need, if any, to disbelieve the validity of the following statement, made at the congress by the President of Lithuanian Writers' Union, Ed. Miežlaitis:

The seven years that have past since our last congress have been very fruitful years. They were determined and intense years of work, I would say enthusiastic years. Never did our writers work and write in such high spirits as in these years, and as in fact they do now. While we remember those days when the agendas of congresses, plenary and other massive meetings, often used to have a single item — weak creative activity of writers and low production ____" (ellipsis in the original).⁴

However, one should not be left with an impression that by the end of 1965 the Lithuanian writers were free to choose any subject or manner of writing. Unfortunately, this is not the case. What has happened by the fourth congress of Lithuanian writers, was that freedom of literary activity has improved significantly in relation to situation existing prior to 1956. The Communist Party remains the supreme judge of literature, but its interference in literature per se has lessened, its commands became mere "humane". "The literary community rejoices in the cessation of the harsh commanding and crushing methods of criticism that existed during the period of the cult of personality, that the tone of criticism has become much friendlier."⁵ Literature regained its professionalism and stature partly as the Communist Party became aware that it was not enough for literary work to possess the correct ideological slant or content to be effective as mass instrument; it must also have aesthetic form. And that, as Stalinist period amply proved, could not be attained by brute force. The Communist Party was forced to make certain concessions to writers and other artists in order to further its own aims. The increased freedoms in creative field, improved material well-being, combined with decline of terror and the realization that writers individually, and especially as a group, possessed certain valuable knowledge and skills highly sought by the regime, contributed favourably to more congenial environmental situation, influencing the creative process and its results.

Inadequacies of the Cultural Press

In contrast to generally improved climate for creative work in literature and other arts, which has been sketched, we must examine a problem aired well in advance of the Fourth Writers' Congress concerning publication of a literary journal for the younger generation in Lithuania. Natural growth and the improved conditions for artistic activity led not only to increased quantitative and qualitative production of arts, but also attracted increasingly more people to its ranks. In literature this phenomenon at first stimulated a healthy rivalry, greater diversity, and interchange of ideas, but after a while the problem of "over-crowding" emerged. It has become increasingly difficult for younger and unestablished authors to publish their works. There are two literary publications in Lithuania: **Pergalė** (The Victory) — the official organ of the Union of Writers of the Lithuanian SSR, a monthly journal of literature, arts and criticism; and an eight page weekly newspaper **Literatūra ir Menas** (Literature and Art). Technically both periodicals belongs to the writers' union — to literature. But since there are no other periodical publications devoted to other arts (except for an illustrated monthly magazine **Kultūros Barai**, devoting much of its space to a presentation of fine and applied arts) they have to cover the whole area of fine arts in Lithuania. For lack of space and personnel, both publications can not adequately cover cultural life of the country and have difficulties introducing new original works of the members of the writers' union, not to mention the unestablished authors. Though both publications appear to be sympathetic and occasionally introduce talented young writers, asked whether the press and, in particular, the writers' press gives sufficient notice to young writers, poet Juozas Macevičius answered: "For a representative of Pergalė editor's office and a party secretary, the second part of the question is very unpleasant. I will try to be honest. Neither *Literatūra ir Menas*, nor *Pergalė* with the best intentions are capable of giving sufficient attention to works of the young writers."⁶ A correspondent from a provincial town, in a letter to *Literatūra ir Menas*, complains that "the editor's office did not keep it promise to publish more works of younger prosaists and poets."⁷

The situation does not appear to be any better in an illustrated monthly magazine **Jaunimo Gretos** (The Ranks of Youth), published expressly for youth. Since the major function of Soviet press is to mobilize its public to tasks of "erecting Communism" and moulding it to a very definite pattern of socio-political behavior, all publications, and especially those of youth, appear to have definite instructions how much space can be devoted to original literature. Especially now, when its content tends to be more concerned with aesthetics than with ideology. Asked to comment on the situation of youth press in Lithuania and its task of aesthetical upbringing, Albinas Bernotas, a young poet on the editorial staff of **Jaunimo Gretos**, was rather apprehensive:

The question is perplexing. It is rather difficult to answer it, when one works in youth press himself. Things can always be better seen from the side ... I will narrate of a recent incident at our *Jaunimo Gretos* editorial office. An incident, which, I haveno doubt, has occured not once, and unfortunately will occur... in other editorial offices of periodicals assigned to youth and probably other non-youth magazines as well. We had plans to publish a sizable "cluster" of poems of a certain young poet. But as we began to leaf through all the manuscripts that were sent an brought to our office, after heated debate, though unwillingly, we had to abandon the project. It turned out that there accumulated at the editor's desk, not a single but more than ten such clusters (of poetry). One could devote several entire issues to the works of younger poets! And even then, there would remain some, that would have been left out. What did we do? Well, we took one poem from each poet's cluster and sent it to print. We had no other recourse. The harm to a begining, little known poet is evident. From a single poem one cannot envision the quality of his work. Perhaps we should have on that occasion published a selection of one or two poets and let the others await their turn? In the meanwhile, however, each morning the mail brought new contributions to our desks. Here I am talking only about poetry. What about the other genres of literature whose volume requires even greater space?

And what of those works that were not written, knowing that there will be no chance of publishing them? Is this an internal and petty problem of an editorial office? To my mind it is a great problem." ⁸

He went on to say that the problem will continue unless a new publication, similar to *Yunost* (a literary monthly journal published in Russian, in Moscow) for the younger generation, with many young writers contributing, will appear in Lithuania. Actually A. Bernotas was merely supporting and illustrating the need for a new literary publication, that his older colleague A. Jonynas had made some months earlier. Jonynas stressed that "the ranks of young writers have grown exceedingly" that the existing publications cannot manage the literature produced. As a result, young writers and especially the emerging young critics of literature suffer from this situation, while young people who are interested in literature and wish to debate or raise some important problem have even greater difficulty of having a hearing in the press. Jonynas argued that in addition to literary development of young authors and critics, the proposed publication was badly needed for the large student body engaged in the studies of technical sciences. Often university and other institutes fail to give them sufficient literary training to be able to appreciate literature.⁹ The concern for literary forum for the younger generation went beyond the narrow circle of writers, as the following quotation indicates: "The best solution would be if during the writers' congress the problem of the literary youth journal, about which everyone is busily talking, be finally and positively resolved. One wishes that after the congress, these discussions would not become just an empty silence." ¹⁰

When the congress finally took place on December 13, 1965, the President of the Lithuanian Writers' Union and Lenin prize winner Eduardas Mieželaitis (later on re-elected for another term in the office) endorsed the need for literary youth publication as did the union's secretary Algirdas Pocius. A. Jonynas reiterated his former statements and Alf. Bieliauskas, Eug. Matuzevičius, M. Martinaitis and others once more repeated the familiar arguments, in support for the project.¹¹

No one can doubt the sincerity of Lithuanian writers and the very real need of having an additional literary publication, the lack of which is causing harm not only to numerous young authors, but also to the Lithuanian literature. This problem in a very real sense was reminiscent of the Stalinist period. In fact, it showed once more that Soviet Russian policy in respect to the nationalities and their cultures has not changed, that very artificial restrictions are hindering and harming the natural development of national cultures, which had the historical misfortune to fall under Moscow's rule. The degree of cultural autonomy existing in Lithuania at present time, even after Stalinist excesses have been condemned and return made to "Leninist norms", can be judged from this case. In order to publish a literary youth journal, a constituent republic has to wait and manoeuvre for years until a suitable opportunity arises, and then its intellectuals have to prove or establish a need that has been obvious for some years. It should be noted that the Lithuanian literary community was not seeking some privilege; it was trying to get similar type of publication existing in the Russian Federation, Belorussia, and Ukraine. Half a year has elapsed since the congress and since then there has been a total silence, as some had feared this would be the case.

The Assimilative Aspects of Cultural Policy

The impasse in which the project of Lithuanian youth publication has landed (though there may still be changes in this respect) appears to be a part of a greater plan to restrict to a minimum the means necessary for production and diffusion of national culture. Such policy attains a number of interrelated effects: 1) it limits the spread and effect of a particular culture; 2) it lessens the resistance to accept newly offered variants; and 3) it discourages the producers of a culture (writers, artists, philosophers,) directly and indirectly (by effects of falling consumption or demand for their products) from persisting in their activity. This appears to prepare a national culture for absorption, which is further helped by the fact that the Lithuanian nation, for example, politically, economically, and administratively is incorporated into the larger Russian dominated state.

In a sense it would be inconsistent for the Soviet regime with its assimilative goals to allow the publication of literary journal for the Lithuanian youth. Such a publication would reinforce patterns of national culture and delay the emergence of common communist culture. The idea is that the Lithuanian youth should get used to satisfying their cultural needs by turning to the "all-union" *Yunost*.¹² If they will be provided with a similar stimulating publication in their own language, they will have no need to read *Yunost*. This, in fact, is periodically recommended to Lithuanian youth in standard announcements in Lithuanian press. They read: Subscribe to all-union publications — *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, **Molodoi Kommunist**, *Yunost*, etc.

During the Fourth Lithuanian Writers' Congress it became apparent that it was not only the younger, un-established writers and generally youth who lacked adequate periodical space and chance to be heard. In the secretary's report to the congress on the organizational aspects of the writers' union it was revealed that a very similar unsatisfactory condition was shared by the whole literary and artistic community.

Writers' periodical press — the weekly *Literatūra ir Menas* and the journal *Pergalė* play a great role in the cultural life of our republic. It is concerned not only with literature. In pages of this publication we must find room for all branches of Lithuanian arts: literature, fine arts, music, theatre. When one looks at the volume of our weekly publication, immediately it is clear that this is not an easy task. The growth has taken place not only in Lithuanian literature, wide development has been accomplished on the creative field by our graphic arts, sculpture, painting ... masters of applied arts. New heights have been attained by Lithuanian composers and we are delighted at the

success of our cinematography. And what changes took place in our weekly *Literatūra ir Menas* devoted to representation of our culture and arts? After 1959 there has been a change from a large to a small format, the personnel was reduced and the honorariums were cut almost by half. On the one hand, steeply rising curve, on the other — sloping down.

The Committee of Writers' Union on a number of occasions has raised the issue of improving the material base of our publication. Beginning with this year the situation of *Literatūra ir Menas* has improved slightly, but in spite of it, the situation remains to be unsatisfactory. It is very difficult to accommodate into the four small pages the numerous materials concerning the problems and affairs of all the branches of arts. There are even fewer possibilities of presenting to our reader the latest works of our writers.¹³

Shortly afterwards, on the occasion of the printing of the one thousandth issue of **Literatūra ir Menas**, the editor-in-chief Vacys Remeris confirmed this unsatisfactory condition — we need more space for publishing and better material resources.¹⁴

Why is such situation permitted to persist? Is culture not important in the life of society? No one seriously tries to tell the Ministry of Education that with the facilities, teachers, and budget of 1956 it can, without any ill effects to the country and its youth, educate greatly increased school population of 1966. Yet this is precisely the situation that Lithuanian literary publications are expected to do in the area of arts and literature. Soviet propaganda apparatus likes to point out that for every 1,000 inhabitants in Lithuania there are 1189 newspapers or magazines.¹⁵ But it fails to mention that out of those 1189 periodicals only 7, or less than one percent, are literary publications, devoted to Lithuanian arts and literature. While for every 1000 Russians in the Soviet Union there are approximately 25 literary monthlies in the Russian language, correspondingly for 1000 Lithuanians there are about 2.5 copies of literary monthlies in the Lithuanian language. There are 10 Russian literary monthlies, they make up a volume of 2,476 pages per single issue and are printed over 3 million copies per issue. There is single Lithuanian literary journal, it has 200 pages and circulates 6,500 copies per issue. As it has been pointed out, the eight-page weekly **Literatūra ir Menas** has to cover, besides literature, all the other remaining areas of art in Lithuania and also give nule to cultural developments in the Soviet Union and beyond. To cover a corresponding area of arts in the Russian Federation there are three newspapers in the Russian language: the weekly **Literaturnaya Rossia**, the three-weekly **Literaturnaya Gazeta**, and **Sovetskaya Kultura**, whose combined weekly volume corresponds to 54 pages of **Literatūra ir Menas**. In addition, there are three Russian monthly journals: **Sovetskaya Muzyka**, **Sovetskaya Pechat** and **Tear**.

Not only Lithuanian writers, artists, intellectuals, but also the Lithuanian Communist Party must have been aware of the inadequate conditions of Lithuanian periodicals devoted to representation and diffusion of arts and culture in Lithuania. Particularly noticeable was the existing inequality in respect of literary publication for the younger generation in Lithuania. The Russian Federation, Belorussia, Ukraine, and some of the other republics have had such publication for a long time, while in Lithuania it is conspicuously absent. By the time of the Fourth Lithuanian Writers' Congress the internal situation of the Soviet Union was relatively back to normal after the ouster of Khrushchev and the Lithuanian literary community, probably with a tacit backing of the Lithuanian Communist Party, must have decided that this was an appropriate time to right some of the more outstanding inequalities. Obtaining a literary publication for the younger generation would relieve at least to some extent the unhealthy congestion of literary works that **Literatūra ir Menas** and **Pergale** have been facing for a number of years. More than that, a forum for the younger generation undoubtedly would be very valuable for selection, growth, and stimulation of talented young people, i. e., for a further development of the nation's literature and art. So far the attempts of Lithuanian writers were not fruitful.

The party ideologues in Moscow are distrustful of youth, always more idealistic and sensitive to injustice, and especially of youth of a nation which less than two decades ago was subdued with considerable force and brutality, characteristic of Stalin's reign. Nationalism, and especially nationalism of a smaller nations within an empire, has always been a source of anxiety to the metropolis. Concerned with nationalism of others as an obstacle to building of Communism, Russian communists have "overlooked the teachings of Lenin, who, quite rightly, pointed out that nationalism of a large nation is far more harmful force than that of a small nation. Lenin was concerned with the problem of nationalities, though in his days it was not a burning question. He foresaw the difficulties of the autonomy of the non-Russians vis-a-vis Russians in the Soviet Union.

It is quite natural that in such circumstances the "freedom to withdraw from the union" by which we justify ourselves will be a mere scrap of paper, unable to defend the non-Russians from the onslaught of that really Russian man, the Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and lover of violence, such as typical Russian bureaucrat is. There is no doubt that the infinitesimal percentage of Soviet and sovietized workers will drown in that sea of chauvinistic Great-Russian riff-raff like a fly in milk.¹⁶

Lenin warned that "nothing holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity so much as national injustice: 'offended' nationals are not sensitive to anything so much as to feeling and to violation of this sentiment.."¹⁷ The voices at the Fourth Lithuanian Writers' Congress, and those expressed some months prior to it, are those of "offended nationals". It remains to be seen if the Party in Moscow is sensitive or even aware of Lenin's warning.

Whatever the final solution will be, the case of Lithuanian youth journal has once more exposed the fiction of the sovereignty of Soviet Lithuania, if it cannot even publish a literary journal without Moscow's authorization.

Notes

1 Alf. Bieliauskas in *Pergalė*, 1966, No. 1, p. 125.

2 The most notable and revealing Lithuanian novel, a product of the "thaw" and its aftermath, undoubtedly is J. Avyžius' *Kaimas Kryžkelėje* (Village at the Crossroads) (Vilnius, 1964). It started in 1953 and has had several drafts as the "liberalization" period progressed. As the President of the Lithuanian Writers' Union Ed. Mieželaitis expressed. "We can imagine the torments, sleepless nights, and doubts that the author had to go through in writing this novel" (*Pergalė*, 1966, No. 1, p. 81). The anxieties of the author no doubt concerned the frank treatment of several communist personages in the novel.

3 A. Jonynas in *Pergalė*, 1966, No. 1, p. 123.

4 *Pergalė*, 1966, No. 1, p. 74. * Ed. Mieželaitis in *Pergalė*, 1966, No. 1, p. 96.

6 *Literatūra ir Menas*, Aug. 14, 1965.

7 *Literatūra ir Menas*, Nov. 27, 1965.

8 *Literatūra ir Menas*, Aug. 7, 1965.

9 Cf. *Literatūra ir Menas*, Dec. 26, 1963, and *Pergalė*, 1966, No. 2, pp. 142-52.

10 *Literatūra ir Menas*, Dec. 11, 1965.

11 *Pergalė*, 1966, No. 1, p. 72 *passim*.

12 Although *Yunost* is classified as an "all-union" publication, its contributors are mainly Russians, there is not even a symbolic, not to mention proportional, representation of each union republic on its editorial staff, nor among its contributors. Cf. *Pergalė*, 1966, No. 4, pp. 186-7.

13 *Pergalė*, 1966, No. 1, p. 117.

14 *Tiesa*, Jan. 8, 1966.

15 *Komjaunimo Tiesa*, May 4, 1966.

16 V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow; Foreign Languages Publishing House, n. d.), p. 803.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 805.