

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 17, No.2 - Summer 1971

Editors of this issue: Antanas Klimas, Ignas K.Skrupskelis

Copyright © 1971 LITUANUS Foundation, Inc.



THE LITHUANIAN HEROES OF THE JUNGLE

ANTANAS MUSTEIKIS
D'Youville College

I

Collectivism as a social and literary movement in America has been a rather distinct and important trend, the beginnings of which can be traced to the European continent. It is the Marxian theory of dialectic materialism, or some of its modifications, that colors the movement. The proclamation of "the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the accession of the proletariat," or industrial working class, to power through revolution affected intellectual and imaginative left wing writers in America. Upton Sinclair was one of these. *The Jungle* may be considered one of his best novels which, to a certain extent, convinces the reader that "social facts" "make" people. However, in this paper we are not concerned with the author's merits in the successful documentation of American capitalistic forces in certain industries, politics, and the like. We limit our investigation to the psychological aspects of the Lithuanian heroes in *The Jungle*. (All main characters in this novel are Lithuanian by birth). We shall seek the answer to the following questions: To what degree are the heroes recognizable as Lithuanians? Do "social facts" influence any classes, occupations, nationalities, religions and, generally, cultures in the same way? What is the "psychological entity" of the heroes of *The Jungle*?

Before we go into a proper investigation of our problem we shall question the possibility of the solution of the problem from two points of view. First, are we justified in demanding certain things from the author who probably had limited his fiction to the "social facts" only and did not intend to grasp psychological realities of some, say, forgotten and remote Lithuanian creatures? Secondly, are we able to determine which features are truly Lithuanian and which represent human nature in general, while there are no definite studies on Lithuanian culture?

We shall answer both questions affirmatively. In literature we are primarily concerned with those authors' powers which affect the reader enduringly. Since ancient times literary tradition has carried the only everlasting actuality: the human being itself in all of its emotional, mental, or other experiences which are artistic and are conceived of as real by readers. Thus we are justified in questioning the reality of Sinclair's heroes. Their nationality is to be considered as a necessary attribute of human beings since Sinclair often tries to convince the reader that they are of certain nationality, and draws some details which are supposed to be specifically Lithuanian. On the other hand, we do not necessarily need to make an exhaustive study of the Lithuanian culture in order to draw some conclusions about the nationality of Sinclair's heroes. A few articles on the subject which are at hand at this time may be supplemented by corresponding parallels in Lithuanian literature. In addition, certain historical facts pertaining to Lithuanian people are illuminating the point without any special anthropological studies, which helps us to correct Sinclair's, say, superficial observations in this respect.

By the way, the coincidence of the nationality of the author of this paper and of the heroes of *The Jungle* may have double consequences. First of all, it is useful to treat nationality with first hand knowledge about it; that knowledge is supposedly latent in persons of the nationality concerned. Thus, the author is much more sensitive to deviations from the truth about that nationality as he knows it more or less intuitively. In addition, he has done studies comparing two cultures.* Secondly, that case also involves a possibility of distortion because every person may have certain biases in connection with his own ethnocentric preconceptions, assumptions, and values. However, these preliminary remarks may help us to avoid, at least, conscious biases and to strive toward objectivity.

We shall divide our paper into the following parts: (1) introduction, (2) previous environment and culture of the Lithuanian heroes, (3) new environment and change in human behavior, and (4) conclusion.

From the beginning of *The Jungle* the reader is thrown into the life of a national minority. This minority consists mainly of one family who just came over to America and tried to settle, the same as many other families of various nationalities at that time. The author calls this family by a pure Lithuanian name, the Rudkus. Throughout the whole novel we find many Lithuanian names, some expressions, songs, recollections of places on the other side, etc. The author also seems to have taken pains to reconstruct the previous life of his heroes as documentary as possible, for here and there you will easily notice inferences from the past. Unfortunately, those inferences are often lacking not only in exactness of what is specifically stated, but also in some elementary knowledge. If the former may sometimes be justified by the writer's intentional exaggeration, the latter is by no means a merit to the novelist.

Concerning the former, we could easily include such overstatements as the following. Jurgis Rudkus, the main hero, "had met Ona at a horse-fair a hundred miles from home." A little further the same hero "tramped a full fortnight's journey which lay between him and Ona" (*The Jungle*, 1947, p. 22). As the ethnographic country of Lithuania at that time amounted to about 25,000 square miles, i. e. a little less than Maine amounts to, it is improbable that Jurgis, a very healthy and strong man, had to spend two weeks in journey before he reached his girl. During that period he could have crossed the whole Lithuanian country. It is unusual that a rather densely populated Lithuanian country would have suggested a courting of a girl a distance of a hundred miles, even if our hero lived in the Imperial Forest of *Bielowiez* (not *Brelowicz* as it is misspelled in the book), which marks the border of the ethnographic Lithuania. A remote and unknown country seems to Sinclair to be necessarily exotic, strange or primitive. Probably the reminiscences of popular American western stories with its tramp heroes scoring long distances was an example to the author of *The Jungle*. On the other hand, the Imperial Tsarist Russia which had occupied Lithuania, along with many other countries since the end of the 18th century presumably was identified with Lithuania. This is so in spite of the fact that Lithuania herself was once a great empire whose territory extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea and that the Lithuanian language and population are quite different from Russian or Slavic ones. The author committed that mistake since it is clear from the fact that he writes about the broad Slavic face with prominent red cheeks of Marija Beržinskas (Berczynskas, p. 9). In another place Jurgis sought shelter in a little house... "It was a working-man's home, and the owner was a Slav like himself a new emigrant from white Russia..." (p. 219).

Included in the category of real distortions of the Lithuanian way of life is Jurgis' courtship. "He found himself, purple in the face with embarrassment and terror, asking her (Ona's parents) to *sell her to him* for his *wife* — and offering his father's two horses he had been sent to the fair to sell" (p. 22). Lithuanian folklorists have collected a lot of folklore indicating various kinds of ancient Lithuanian wedding procedures, but none has ever shown proof of these procedures in historical times (since 13th C. in Lithuanian history). Thus this suggestion of buying the bride is quite false. Looking anthropologically, that way of marriage, if it had been at all, had to have great consequences in Lithuanian family life. Lithuanians would have followed these customs even in a new environment such as America. However, the author does not even hint at this.

Moreover, the reader who knows European culture and history is soon affronted by the author's ignorance or negligence of the real past of his heroes. Sometimes Sinclair notices some detail from the past which may be true, but he leaves it unexplored with no consequences. For instance, he mentions that Jurgis' father, while a boy, was beaten by his father because he tried to read some books (p. 59). It may be true. It suggests that his father was an ignorant peasant. In reality, however, some knowledge of Lithuanian history would show that there may have been a good reason for the "primitive" behavior of the old father. Publications of any kind in Lithuanian were forbidden by the Russian occupational forces at that time and people were deported to Siberia if they had been caught reading Lithuanian books.

When the author speaks about the other side he suggests that "there had not been any politics — in Russia one thought of the government as an affliction like the lightning and the hail" (p. 91). This truth is partial only. For just at the same time a vivid national revival took place in Lithuania, and a great battle by underground periodicals and other publications played a decisive role in the way toward Lithuanian self-consciousness and independence. The main conditions inhibiting the occupational plans of the Russification of Lithuania were "racial," religious, and cultural differences between Russia and Lithuania. Here religion played a very important role for the Lithuanians, with some exceptions (consisting of educated classes which were influenced by Russian socialism or liberalism), were very religious people. Religion had been most important as a refuge to the Lithuanian peasantry who had lived in bondage for many centuries. As a representative of common Lithuanians, Jurgis could not do away with religion so quickly as the author indicates: "Jurgis had always been a member of the church, because it was the right thing to be, but the church had never touched him, he left all for the women" (p. 89). On the contrary, Lithuanian folklorists point out that Lithuanian Christian beliefs are often tinged by old pre-Christian beliefs, usages, or what we nowadays call superstitions, and the Lithuanians are religious so that we shall not overstate by saying that nature (or natural and supernatural forces) rule the Lithuanians rather than vice versa.

As men's relations to God or nature are rather imposed by the latter, man's relations to fellow-men are distinctly balanced in the Lithuanian culture. These relations are based on the *Gemeinschaft* rather than the *Gesellschaft* principle, to use Toennies' terminology. The Lithuanians feel closely related to their neighbors because of the same origin, blood, social strata, etc. A society based on private interests, which dominates all modern Western societies, has not yet replaced the

old one. Thus Sinclair noticed indeed that a future "extended" family, named the Rudkus, emigrated from Lithuania as an entity, destined to a common fate. This rightly corresponds to the Lithuanian family pattern which obviously has perpetuated itself since the Middle Ages.

The few Lithuanian cultural features which we just have raised, and which were partially discovered by the author, suggest the real personalities of *The Jungle* in the exposition. Now we shall follow their change in a new environment.

III

The opening pages of *The Jungle* clearly show how skillfully the author plots his novel. The power of gaiety, delight, hospitality, sociality, and other features of the Lithuanian *veselija* (wedding feast) gradually decreases at the end of the feast, and the hard conditions of the new environment crush the whole extended family of 12, one after the other, until the end of the novel. What is remarkable in the exposition picture is Sinclair's ability to catch 'the ideas and reasoning of foreign people while observing their wedding customs in such a short period as a single evening and night (cf. *Independent*, May 17, 1906, p. 1132). The laws of the *veselija* depicted by the author include hospitality ("no one goes hungry;... even dogs went out happier"), informality, singing, music, dancing, the *acziavimas* (thanksgiving), and the like. They do truly belong to the Lithuanian culture, and the author discovers their deep meaning: to give up that custom would not only mean defeat "but to acknowledge defeat — and the difference between these two things is what keeps the world going" (p. 14). It is true that the costly manner of cultural (say, wedding) laws is the essence of life, but not because "having known himself for the master of things" (ibid.). It is rather the Gemeinschaft principle that forces the Lithuanian people to toil a long time in order to be socially fit on any special occasion. It is obviously a social heritage from ancient times when people lived in small groups (like an extended family) with common rather than private property, with social rather than individual security, desires, and works...

Since the author revealed some genuine Lithuanian cultural features, we expect their continuation at least to some degree in the new American environment. We agree that corrupted industrial and political patterns had to affect our "new Americans" (the Lithuanian emigrants), more or less disintegrating their previous cultural ways. But we could not contend that the Rudkus family instantly became a kind of tabula rasa in which only the experiences of the new environment reminded. We shall not go into details as to which features of Lithuanians were inherent and which were acquired in their life span in their native country (which was under the Russian Tsarist rule). But by no means did they begin their life as new-born babies in America. Those laws of *veselija* appreciated by the author had to be extended for a longer time and on other occasions. And even if we admit that the disintegrating forces of the new environment had to crush the Rudkus at the same rate as the author shows it, we cannot believe in the way the author schemed for them. Thus we do not exclude the possibility that Ona Rudkus may have been seduced by a boss, but hardly could she do that on the basis of purely economic interests, even if they were related to the existence of the whole family. The same is to be said about the other young girl, Marija Beržinskas, in the same family. You could argue that they tried to follow the Gemeinschaft principle: they were saving their social group from death by starvation. But what seems to be legitimate and not far from "permissible" to a liberal is by no means "permissible" to a conservative Lithuanian girl. The Lithuanian village was rather "decent," by which is meant that there was no acknowledgement of a possibility of divorce and no sexual relations before marriage. The last point is strongly emphasized in folksongs; they often refer to the wreath of rues which symbolizes chastity; and woe to a girl who lost that wreath. In Lithuanian literature, Vienuolis Žukauskas, in his short story, *The Drowned Girl*, is more characteristic of the Lithuanian culture than is Lazdynų Pelėda in *Pasha*. The former lets his girl be drowned because of the loss of the wreath of rues, while the latter finds her surviving and helping her family. Thus "bad" means to good ends are not justified by the Lithuanian village, and we could not believe in two members of one Lithuanian family becoming prostitutes, because of urban industrial conditions solely.

Similarly, the behavior of Jurgis Rudkus is not justified at times when great disaster strikes him. Though we can believe that he got drunk when his wife or his son died, he hardly could escape the cultural pattern of burying nearest relatives. Whether he was an ardent Christian or rather indifferent to religious matters, as the author claims him to be, he could not do away with at least token attendance of burial ceremonies in both cases.

Sinclair lets him look for a new job while his late Ona is being buried or leaves his residence for tramping in the country while his dead son, little Antanas, was being prepared for burial. That last service to the deceased could not be denied either in the Lithuanian, or in many other cultures. This behavior involves the Gemeinschaft principle too, which in many cases was also violated. Similar to Jonas, who deserted his family earlier, Jurgis turned his back to his relatives and went hoboing through America. And the author tries to base that deviance from the ordinary customs by the following reasoning: "The old *Wandertlust* had got into his (Jurgis') blood, the joy of the unbound life, the joy of seeking, of hoping without limit. There were mishaps and discomforts — but at least there was always something new; and only think what it meant to a man who for years had been penned up in one place, seeing nothing but one dreary prospect of shanties and factories, to be suddenly set loose beneath the open sky, to behold new landscapes, new places, and new people every hour! To a man whose whole life consisted of doing one certain thing all day, until he was so exhausted that he could only lie down and sleep until the next day — and to be now his own master, working as he pleased, and facing a new adventure every

hour" (pp. 215-216). This long quotation clearly shows Sinclair's aberrations in his conception of rural cultural patterns. It is true that Jurgis was tired and bored by the "dreary prospect of shanties and factories" and was glad "to behold new landscapes," but he surely was not a nomad with "the old *Wanderlust*," — he could not have "the joy of unbound life" while at the same time he had left his relatives in emergency. Nor could he be "his own master, working as he pleased, and facing a new adventure every hour." In reality it was nature that had been his master for centuries and Jurgis was too conservative a performer of duty for the perception of a sophisticated joy of "a new adventure every hour."

The most incredulous turn in our main hero, Jurgis, is found in his swift switch to socialism. Even if he was indifferent in religious matters, he could not listen with hatred when an evangelist preached. He could not favor "lecturing men who were struggling for their lives, men at the death grapple with the demon powers of hunger and cold" rather than Christian priests. For in the Lithuanian culture, the profession of clergyman was considered as most honorable, though not necessarily profitable. Anyway, the priest was the only adviser and consolator while the rest of the professions or administrative positions were represented by lords or Russian occupiers mostly. It is unbelievable that Jurgis, on having heard an inspired agitation of a socialist leader, at once became enlightened and rallied to the cause of socialism and world revolution. We assume that had he not been deeply rooted in his native culture, he should have morally perished after all of his experiences, injustices, and tortured nirvana in the new environment. But author saves him by the old trick of the "Deus ex machina," which in Sinclair's terminology and conception was turned into socialism. At the end of the novel, while the whole extended family was broken or died, Jurgis emerges in the socialist movement and seems to have discovered truth in socialistic propaganda like this: "No matter whether the person's trouble was failure in business, or dyspepsia, or a quarrelsome mother-in-law, a twinkle would come into his eyes and he would say, 'You know what to do about it — vote the Socialist ticket!'" To this point we do not need to grasp the shocking consequences of, say, the Russian revolution which had been anticipated by the author in blissful terms. We only question the amplitude of a conservative villager, Jurgis Rudkus. Lindė-Dobilas, Lithuanian philosopher and novelist, solved a somewhat similar problem in his *Blūdas* (The Muddling). There he depicts his hero, Bajoriūnas, a smallholder's son, involved in a controversy between socialism and the traditional cultural ways of the Lithuanian peasantry in the 1904-05 Russian revolution (about the same time as Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*). Bajoriūnas was a little shaken by the new socialistic ideas; he muddled though it within few days; he accepted some of them and incorporated them into his old cultural lore. Nevertheless, he remained rather conservative, in a rather static equilibrium. Sinclair's Jurgis, on the contrary, became a socialist missionary, a fighter for the world revolution, though we do not know any prominent socialist or communist leader believing in any ally of the rural class. Could a couple of years spent in the so-called capitalistic country produce an ardent socialist fighter, like Jurgis Rudkus, out of a conservative farmer? We think not. As an exception Jurgis, however, may be classified as such a missionary. But then we had rather classify the whole extended family as an exceptional case, not typical of the Lithuanian culture. If so, it is not a great exaggeration in conclusion that the Lithuanian attributes of the heroes of *The Jungle* found their place in the novel accidentally.

IV

Having raised some doubts as to the Lithuanian character of Sinclair's heroes we come to a deeper question: are they real human beings? Are they psychologically true? Partially this question was answered in the preceding chapter. The characters do not hold true in the background of Lithuanian culture. The fact that the author did not intend to write about the Lithuanian heroes at the beginning of scheming the novel (cf. "Is the Jungle True," *Independent*, May 17, 1906) may somewhat account for the discrepancies between the expositional characteristics and those in the final pages of the novel. But this clearly hints at another point. Upton Sinclair is much more interested in the "muck-raking" of the greed, exploitation, Pharisaism, and the like of his capitalistic Society than in human nature itself. He overwhelmingly discovers new details in the dressing of hogs in Chicago stockyards and is so satisfied by his own creation that he lets his hero forget whether he had ever dressed any hogs on his father's farm. Or is the deserting of burying of one's dearest considered to be the highest expression of grief? Is it possible for a man to remain decent because of some propagated Utopia of a socialistic future while he experienced the injustices, outrage, and brutality of the unscrupulous forces and himself followed that pattern without "much ado" about it? We think not. Sinclair's noble intentions to help the working men are clearly felt in the novel, but we suspect that his leading hero has indicated too much of the author's, and not of the palpable hero's, desires. In spite of Jurgis' conservative peasant tradition he seems to have taken for granted basic socialistic and radical views, the continuation of which we could easily follow in other Sinclair novels. There his typical story is that of a rich young man who gets mixed up in the radical movement and fights against the ruling-class dogmas. At the same time we could extend Sinclair's story to the reality of the Helicon Home Colony. The last experiment as a trial to realize a Utopia characterizes the true mode of Sinclair's creation. No matter how important the experiments like the Helicon Home Colony are to society, the "pure" literature deals with them only as mediators or as a material to something else, which we usually call human nature. Because of conscious or unconscious overemphasis on the "social facts," Sinclair's novels are casting a shadow on "the psychological entity" of a human being and sometimes they reduce human nature to a kind of bunch of conditioned responses. At the expense of the fullness of human nature, Sinclair remains the main expositor of the industrial America.

* See my article "Cultural Encounter Between Americans and Lithuanians", *Aidai (Echoes)*, Dec. 1960, pp. 404-7.