

VINCAS KUDIRKA

DR. VINCAS MACIŪNAS

DR. VINCAS MACIŪNAS has taught Lithuanian literature at the Universities of Kaunas and Vilnius and was in charge of the university library in Vilnius. Later associate professor at the Baltic University in Hamburg-Pinneberg, Germany, he is now working in the library of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pa.

On December 31, Lithuanians will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Vincas Kudirka, their great patriot and famous writer and author of their national anthem. Commemorative meetings will be held in many Lithuanian colonies in the free world, and the Lithuanian press is already carrying articles about Vincas Kudirka. His name has been honored by all Lithuanians for many decades. When Lithuania gained her independence, Kudirka's works were read and studied by thousands of Lithuanian students; statues of him decorated many squares and parks and portraits of him were displayed in many official buildings. Numerous streets were named for him, and Naumiestis, the town where Kudirka died, was renamed Kudirkos Naumiestis.

In order to gain a better understanding of Vincas Kudirka's significance to the Lithuanian nation, we must first briefly survey the times in which he lived. The Lithuanians had been suffering from Russian domination since the end of the 18th century. That domination became increasingly severe with each unsuccessful uprising, and after the revolt of 1863 the Russian government inflicted such terrible repressions on Lithuania that the governor-general, Muriaviev, became known to history as "the hangman." The Russian government did not stop at hangings and deportations, however; it attempted to root out completely any possibility of future unrest. Lithuania was to be completely Russified, and a thoroughgoing Russification program was instituted. Russian colonists were settled on lands confiscated from the revolutionaries; only Russians were appointed to government posts; all private schools were closed and children had to attend Russian schools. Lithuanian cultural life was greatly hampered and the Russian Orthodox Church received open support, while the Catholic Church, which exerted a great influence on the people and could thus have interfered effectively in the Russification program, was subjected to constant supervision. This policy toward Lithuania was in line with the general policy toward non-Slavonic people, which was inspired by Slavophiles and pan-Slavists. Even more drastic measures were adopted in Lithuania, however: Lithuanians were forbidden to use the familiar Latin alphabet and were told to use the Cyrillic one. It was hoped that once the Lithuanians became used to the Cyrillic letters, they would become used to Russian books and the Russian language and would eventually become completely Russian. On this score, the Russian senator Miliutin once cynically remarked that the Russian letters would finish what the Russian sword had begun.



But the Russian government, to its own surprise, had miscalculated. In spite of the fact that during the forty years 1865-1904, not even primers and missals could be printed in the Latin alphabet in Lithuania, books in the Cyrillic alphabet that were supplied by the Russian government were not accepted. Only about sixty of these books were published during this period, and even these were destined to mildew in government warehouses. Meanwhile, since acceptable literature could not be published at home, they were published in East Prussia, where a part of the Lithuanian nation was living under German rule. This material was smuggled across the border and distributed throughout the country. At first, books of a general nature were primarily published, but eventually nationalistic periodicals made their appearance. The year 1883 marked an epoch in the Lithuanian national revival, since in that year the first issue of 'Aušra' (The Dawn) appeared. This newspaper of nationalistic inspiration was soon joined by a number of others. It is true that, because they were constantly

persecuted by the government and were forced to circulate underground, these newspapers were small in size, but their significance to the Lithuanian nation was great. In articles beyond the reach of the official censors they explained to the people their rights and privileges, threw light upon the designs of the Russian government and encouraged the people to resist. They urged the idea of nationhood and were successful in arousing the passive and conservatively inclined peasant class into a nation. And if Aušra had only a handful of patriotic contributors, several decades later the 1905 Congress of Vilnius welcomed some two thousand people who courageously demanded autonomy for Lithuania.

The struggle for a national literature was not easy, for the Russian government did not hesitate to use against a defenseless Lithuania a large police force, the courts and the administration. The last mentioned became the chief punitive agency and dealt out severe punishments: long prison terms or even exile to Siberia. The courts were less frequently resorted to by the government, for their sentences were lighter. In this way what began as a ban on the press ended as a total persecution of the Lithuanian nationalist movement. Eventually the Russian government was forced to concede defeat and to admit that the press ban not only failed to achieve its aim but actually worked contrary to Russian interests, in as much as it revolutionized the Lithuanian nation. In 1904 the ban was lifted.

The forty-year period is a heroic time in Lithuanian history, one that Lithuanians recall with pride. Two heroic types arose during this period that became national symbols to future generations. The first was the man who smuggled literature across the heavily guarded border. In doing this, and in spreading the writings throughout the land, he was risking his life. He was pursued and persecuted and not infrequently punished by exile from Lithuania. But he never lost courage, and ultimately he was the victor over the huge Russian administration. The second type was the writer himself, also persecuted, hiding under a pen name, always subject to searches, often arrested and imprisoned or deported or, because of the difficult conditions of his life, an early prey to tuberculosis. In this second group we find Vincas Kudirka.

Vincas Kudirka was born on Dec. 31, 1858, in the county of Vilkaviškis, in southwestern Lithuania. From his father, an able and respected farmer, he inherited a strong character and a clear mind, while from his mother, who excelled in singing and story-telling, he received his artistic tendencies. While Kudirka was still in high school he was known for his interesting drawings and as a singer and a talented musician (he later arranged a number of Lithuanian folk songs and dances), as well as a gifted story teller who was even known to write verses. It would have been difficult to foresee that this lively and witty youth, who knew how to enjoy himself and was a good dancer and popular with the fair sex, would grow up to be a determined fighter for national freedom, a man with a strong sense of duty, an influential leader of the Lithuanian nation — all the more difficult since at this time Kudirka (like the greater number of Lithuanian intellectuals, who because of historical circumstances were still strongly under Polish cultural influence) held himself aloof from the nationalist movement. When Kudirka graduated, he did not go to Moscow to study, although a large group of Lithuanian students had gathered there, but rather to Warsaw. He enrolled in the faculty of history and philology, but a year later he switched to medicine.

While Kudirka was studying in Warsaw, and especially during his holidays at home, he heard more and more about the growing nationalist movement. Among his former high school classmates was an active patriot, Jonas Jablonskis, who later became a noted linguist. Jablonskis was then a student in Moscow, and he wrote Kudirka a fiery patriotic letter. It was "Aušra", however, that made a very special impression on Kudirka. He himself has described the moment: "Quickly I leafed through "Aušra" and I do not remember all that was happening within me... I only remember that I stood up, bowed my head, afraid even to look upon the walls of my room... It seemed that I heard the voice of Lithuania speaking, accusing and forgiving at the same time: And you, prodigal, where have you been up-to now? Then I became so sad that I laid my head on the table and wept. I grieved for the hours that had been irretrievably erased from my life as a Lithuanian, and was ashamed that for so long I had been a degenerate... After that my breast was filled with a quiet warmth, as if I was gaining new strength... It seemed that I had grown up all at once, and that this world had become too narrow for me... I felt myself mighty and powerful: I felt that I was a Lithuanian." And Kudirka continues: "Soon I became engaged to Lithuanian literature, and to this day I have not deserted my betrothed."

In 1889, Kudirka and some friends founded "Varpas" ("The Bell"), a monthly of liberal tendencies which ceased publication in 1905. This paper was widely read in Lithuania, and it exerted a great influence in forming Lithuanian national and political opinion. It attracted many influential contributors — noted Lithuanian writers such as Žemaitė, Lazdynų Pelėda, Gabriele Petkevičaitė and Jonas Biliūnas; Antanas Kriščiūnaitis, future president of the Lithuanian Supreme Tribunal; Kazys Grinius, a future president of Lithuania; Petras Leonas, a well-known jurist and later dean of the law faculty of the Lithuanian University; Jonas Jablonskis, the so-called "Father of the Lithuanian Standard Language," and many others. But the principal contributor to "Varpas" and unquestionably its very soul was Vincas Kudirka. Upon "Varpas" he left the imprint of his exceptional personality; to it he consecrated all of his talent and all of his strength, which even then was beginning to fail him; he had an incurable disease that brought an end to his industrious life on Sept. 6, 1899.

It may be that he inherited his weakness for tuberculosis from his mother, who died of it when he was only ten. Unquestionably the financial difficulties of his Warsaw days contributed to the weakening of his health. Another possible factor was the Russian prison in Warsaw, where he spent some time in 1885. His first hemorrhage came in 1889, the year he graduated from the university. It was not easy for him to earn a living as a doctor, as his own health was steadily deteriorating. In 1894 he went to the Crimea in search of a cure, but he soon returned because of insufficient funds. In 1895 he was arrested by the Russian police for his patriotic work and was imprisoned for a short time in Kalvarija. In the fall of the same year he went back to the Crimea, from which he returned in 1896 already a sick man who spent most of

his time confined to bed. He relinquished his medical practice but did not sever his connections with "Varpas." He settled in the border town of Naumištis, so that he might more easily supervise "Varpas," which, like most Lithuanian publications of the time, was being published in East Prussia. Kudirka had to be extremely cautious in his work, since he was suspected by the police. He wrote on very thin paper, which could easily be burned in the flame of a candle should the police knock on his locked door. Thus Kudirka in a room of his small house, rarely visited by anyone (other Lithuanian patriots avoided frequent visits so as not to arouse the suspicions of the police), confined to bed by his illness — wrote his many articles, read proofs and supervised the publication of his newspaper. His words in printed form spread throughout the entire country, arousing a national consciousness and courageously condemning the cruel actions of the Russian administration. As a doctor himself, Kudirka well knew that death was approaching, but this did not lead him to despair; rather, it encouraged him to work with greater speed. In fact, it is amazing how Kudirka calmly mentions his approaching death in his letters, as if in passing. To quote from a letter written to Mykolainis, the publisher of some of his works, on July 15, 1898; "This fall, winter and spring I was confined to bed. Now I can walk, but only in my room. I may survive until winter." He was not concerned with his ebbing life, only with his work. In his last letter to Mykolainis, written immediately before his death, he still said, "The only thing that worries me is that I may not finish *The Black Earth*; perhaps I will finish it, even though death is watching me very closely." The novel referred to in the letter, which was written on Oct. 10, 1899, was a work of the Polish writer M. Rodziewiczówna that Kudirka was translating. He did not complete the translation; he died within the month.

Kudirka's friends were deeply moved by his iron will and his diligence. Jonas Staugaitis, future president of the Lithuanian parliament, writes in his memoirs: "Whenever I happened to visit Vincas Kudirka, I was always impressed by his appearance: in a small room, on a bed, lay a lean man, almost like a shadow, with a strong gigantic will and burning eyes, and always writing and writing." No less moving was his pure idealism, his complete disregard for the poverty to which he, a sick man, had come. He did not write for personal profit, only to help his country. He once wrote to Mykolaitis: "Since you are aware of my financial status, you will not be surprised at what follows. I would appreciate it if you would forward some money for the second volume of *Kanklės*. I will not specify the amount but leave it up to you to decide, with my work in hand and according to your means, how much you can pay me. Know beforehand that no quarrel will arise between us on this account and that there will be no dissatisfaction on my part — what you can spare will suffice me. And if, after figuring things up, you can send nothing, that too will be fine." The work referred to in this letter is a collection of folk songs that Kudirka had harmonized.

Kudirka's collected writings were published in six large volumes in 1909. He was perhaps most influential through the many polemical articles he wrote for "Varpas"; they appeared in each issue and constituted the section known as *Tėvynės Varpai* ("The Bells of the Fatherland"). Kudirka reacted to the various positive and negative aspects of life in Lithuania with the sharp insight of a talented journalist and the zeal of a patriot. But Kudirka did not arouse his readers as a contributor to the commercial press does, through sensational news stories; rather he aimed at educating the public. He wrote, "Lithuanians must know Lithuania. Each one of us must know where a Lithuanian weeps, where he is happy, where poor and where rich, where he is abandoned and oppressed, where free and happy, in order that we may know who among our brothers needs help, and who can help us; we must know the feelings, thoughts and works of all Lithuanians, so that it will be clear on whom we may rely to defend the fatherland and to bring it happiness."

Kudirka's journalistic works clearly show his talent as a writer and his deeply patriotic spirit, which now rejoices in the event it describes, now laments it, now ironically mocks or is filled with anger against observed evils. In particular, he wrote many angry words describing the wrongs inflicted upon the Lithuanian nation by the Russian government. The notorious Slaughter of *Kražiai* occurred in 1893 when government Cossacks savagely dispersed a crowd of farmers who had gathered to defend a Catholic church against a government order that it be closed. Kudirka, disregarding the danger that the author of such an article faced should he be exposed, wrote in great indignation: "The hair stands up on one's head, the blood freezes in the veins when one thinks of *Kražiai*. To think that such things could happen in a time of humanitarianism and toleration of all kinds, in a time when societies are being founded to discourage the breaking off of twigs from trees, for preventing cruelty to animals and for outlawing the slave trade in savage lands. Do-gooders! Do not hurry to provide protection for the trees and animals of Europe, for in this very Europe there are still human beings who are not free from torture! Do not look to Africa, as if you believed there are no slaves in Europe! Do not forget that in Europe there is Muscovy — behold the land called Lithuania, suffering under the Muscovites; you will find slaves here, crying in a more pitiful voice than those among the savages. And truly, first show your good will in Europe; leave Africa for the future, as a lesser evil. In vain might we search the whole world, we should never find deeds more savage than those in *Kražiai*. Such atrocities are only possible under the protection of the throne upon which Ivan Grozny) sat. You Neros of ancient times, tremble before the White Tsar — he has surpassed you!"

Kudirka displays the same attitude toward the Russian government in his popular satirical stories *Viršininkai* (the Chiefs), *Lietuvos tilto atsiminimai* (Reminiscences of a Lithuanian Bridge), *Vilkai* (The Wolves) and *Cenzūros klausimu* (On the Question of Censorship). In these stories he sharply derided Russian officials in Lithuania as being ignorant, corrupt and drunkards, oppressors of the people and persecutors of the book smugglers.

Kudirka was concerned with enriching Lithuanian literature, and he left to the Lithuanian reading public translations of several world literary masterpieces: Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* and *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, Byron's *Cain* and others.

Kudirka also wrote a number of poems. His poetry is social in content and mirrors his humanitarian spirit. One of his poems was destined to become especially popular, and it eventually became the Lithuanian national anthem: This is his eight-line poem "Lietuva, Tėvynė mūsų" ("Lithuania, Our Fatherland"), which was published in "Varpas" in 1898 along with the music, which he also wrote. Therefore this year also marks the 60th anniversary of the Lithuanian national anthem.

In the poem Kudirka recalls Lithuania's past, from which the present should draw its strength; he exhorts his countrymen to follow in the path of virtue and work for the good of Lithuania; he hopes that the sun will disperse the present darkness and that light and truth will guide Lithuanian footsteps, that love for Lithuania will burn in her people's hearts and that unity will flourish. As we see, we find expressed here the same social and patriotic ideals that inspired all his work. It might be noted that this poem lacks the somewhat imperialistic note of aggressive designs on foreign territory that characterizes some national anthems.

Kudirka's song quickly became popular in Lithuania, and it was sung so frequently on various patriotic occasions that it soon gained the respect usually shown a national anthem. At the same time it aroused the hostility of the Russian government. The first act of persecution occurred under singular circumstances that reveal the brutishness of the Russian administration. On the night of March 2, 1903, a worker in the pay of the city police mutilated the words of the anthem, which appear on Kudirka's monument in the Naumiestis cemetery. Later, some years before World War I, the government prohibited the singing of the anthem during public concerts. Such acts could not eradicate the song from the people's memory, of course, and after World War I it was made the official Lithuanian national anthem. One can easily understand why it was again banned by the Soviet government following the forcible incorporation of Lithuania into the U.S.S.R. in 1940. Again, government orders did not suffice to make the people forget their anthem, and even today it is a source of patriotic inspiration. Following is an interesting account by a woman who had been deported to Siberia, returned to Kaunas, and in 1957 was able to reach Austria. She describes a young people's demonstration that took place in Kaunas on Lithuanian Independence Day (February 16) in 1957: "At ten o'clock...we went home. I live, as I have mentioned, next to the executive committee. Above my apartment is a student dormitory. The students were indescribably noisy today, and I could not get to sleep. Old Lithuanian songs were being sung again and again. Suddenly a very loud commotion woke me. It was midnight. The national anthem was being sung on the Avenue of Freedom. Putting on my coat and forgetting all danger, I rushed out to the street. In the darkness I saw a mass of people. O God, they were all youths. They could not confine them under house arrest. Singing the national anthem, they advanced on the executive committee. I was moved by the clearly sung words: 'Lithuania, our fatherland...' Only on strange occasions is the anthem sung." (! Laisvė' (Toward Freedom), No. 15, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1958.)

And so we see that even today the words that Kudirka wrote 60 years ago are not only being sung in the free world but are also heard in occupied Lithuania, like a clear symbol of a free and independent Lithuania.

LITHUANIAN NATIONAL ANTHEM

Words and Music by Vincas Kudirka

Lie-tu-va, Tė-vy-ne mū-sų, Tu did-vy-rių žė-me,
 Iš pra-ei-ties Ta-vo sū-nūs Te sti-pry-bę se-mia.
 Tė-gul Ta-vo vai-kai ei-na vien-ta-kais dō-ry-bės,
 Tė-gul dir-ba Ta-vo nau-dai Ir žmo-nių ge-ry-bei.
 Tė-gul sau-lė Lie-tu-vos Tam-su-mus pra-ša-li-na
 Ir švie-sa ir tie-sa Mūs žingsniuste-ly-di-
 Tė-gul mei-lė Lie-tu-vos De-ga mū-sų šir-dy-se.
 Var-dantos Lie-tu-vos Vien-y-bė te-žy-ai.

ORIGINAL WORDS

Lietuva, Tėvyne mūsų
 Tu didvyrių žeme,
 Iš praeities tavo sūnūs
 Te stiprybę semia.

Tegul tavo vaikai eina
 Vien takais dorybes,
 Tegul dirba tavo naudai
 Ir žmonių gerybei!

Tegul saulė Lietuvos
 Tamsumus prašalina
 Ir šviesa Ir tiesa
 Mūs žingsnius telydi!

Tegul meilė Lietuvos
 Dega mūsų širdyse,
 Vardan tos Lietuvos
 Vienybė težydi.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Lithuania, land of heroes
 Thou beloved fatherland
 From the glorious deeds of ages
 Shall thy sons take heart.

Let thy children, day by day,
 Stride upon the virtuous way
 Let them labour for thy glory
 And the good of man.

May the sun of Lithuania
 Clear the darkness of the night,
 And may light and may truth
 Guide our steps aright.

May the love of Lithuania
 Flame forever in our hearts
 In the name of Lithuania
 Let unity reign.