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SIMONAS DAUKANTAS, HISTORIAN AND PIONEER OF LITHUANIAN NATIONAL REBIRTH

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I

Perhaps there is some truth in the statement that while a nation concentrates on creating history, it has little time to worry about recording it. Only when its downfall is imminent or when great misfortunes befall does the nation become better aware of and more interested in its past. Among other things, attempts are then made to determine the past causes for those errors which led to the present distress. Great historians usually arise from such adverse national circumstances.

The Lithuanian nation illustrates such a development. Although its population was not numerous and the country was not endowed with large natural resources, in a few centuries (13th to 15th century) Lithuania created an empire. Later allied with Poland, Lithuania held out a few more centuries (up to the end of the 18th century) as a more or less comfortable refuge of Western civilization, feudal political freedom, and religious tolerance.

While in its prime, Lithuania did not take time to record the various feats and victories, leaving this activity to foreign historians and annalists. Russian, Norman, German, Polish, even Arab, French, English and other annalists copiously described Lithuania of the Middle Ages. These historians, however, often depicted Lithuania's worst characteristics, often cursing the nation with all possible names. This was due in part to religious antagonism — up to the end of the 14th century Lithuania remained mostly pagan while all of Europe was Christian — and partly to conflicting political interest. Professor Henry Paszkiewicz, one of the best specialists on medieval Eastern Europe, noting the hostile attitude of the neighboring annalists and historians regarding the Lithuanians, perhaps came to the right conclusion that "this picture of the Lithuanians was drawn largely in anger, with the feeling that Lithuania was hard to conquer, and this evident prejudice must cause us to treat the sources with great caution".¹

In the 16th century, when Lithuania's greatness began to decline, the first Lithuanian annalists appeared. Some of them attempted to create a more or less fantastic image of Lithuanian history, even trying to relate it to the ancient Roman history. The first Lithuanian historian who wrote about Lithuania appeared in the 17th century, when a foreign invasion threatened the nation. He was the Jesuit Albertas Vijūkas Kojalavičius (1609- 1677), who, nevertheless, wrote his two volume history of Lithuania in Latin. The first Lithuanian historian to write in Lithuanian was Simonas Daukantas (1793 -1864). His historical works and their significance will be discussed in this article.

II

To understand better Simonas Daukantas' part in Lithuanian national rebirth, one has to become acquainted with the Lithuania of his time. By a strange coincidence, the years of S. Daukantas' birth and death coincided with two significant dates of Lithuanian history. In 1793, Moscovite and Prussian armies, aided by the conservative opposition within the country, occupied all of the Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth. They annexed large portions of its territory and abolished all the attempted reforms of that time, especially the Constitution of May 3rd, 1791. Whatever remained of the old

Commonwealth was under their complete domination. In the gallant rebellion of 1794, led by Gen. T. Kosciuszko in Poland and Gen. J. Jasinskis in Lithuania, Poland and Lithuania desperately tried to save that what was no longer possible to save. By so doing they hastened the final partition of the Commonwealth in 1795. [2](#)

One wonders whether T. Kosciuszko, after the defeat at Maciejowice, where he was wounded and taken into captivity, pronounced the words "Finis Poloniae" or not. Many, however, could have uttered these words since they were on almost everyone's lips. Tadeusz Czacki, who was a contemporary of that period and a student of Lithuanian and Polish laws, began his work *O litewskich i polskich prawach* (published in Vilnius in 1801), which later was used by S. Daukantas, with the following sentence: "Now Poland is erased from the family of nations." Poland to him obviously meant the Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth. Almost everyone agreed with this statement and not many were particularly worried about it. S. Daukantas himself, later writing about these events, pointed out quite stoically that everyone waited hoping that perhaps "the new masters will be kinder to the people than the old ones". [3](#) There was almost a general consensus that the old Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth was obsolete and that it had either to reform or to perish.

Nevertheless, fate plays its game with nations just as it does with individuals. Soon Europe, stirred-up by Napoleon, raised hopes of liberation. Not only did the numerous Polish and Lithuanian emigrées, but also the occupied country itself awaited liberation. And in many minds liberation meant the restoration of the old Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth. In Lithuania, prayers were even composed to Napoleon which, according to reports by French consuls in Königsberg (Kaliningrad) and Klaipėda (Memel), were recited by many who hoped for a French - Russian war and subsequent restoration of the Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth. Unfortunately, that war came in 1812 and left Lithuania with nothing but economic misery, disease, and general desolation.

But the idea of liberation and restoration did not die even after that. It was alive among the students of the Imperial Vilnius University, it appeared spontaneously in the revolt of 1831, in the conspiracy of S. Konarski, and at last in the rebellion of 1863 - 1864. Although this constant struggle took place on Lithuanian territory and involved Lithuanian nobility and often even the peasantry, it was directed from Warsaw. It was not really a struggle for Lithuania's freedom and independence. During the entire 70 years' struggle (1794 - 1864) there was almost no one who would imagine the future Lithuania separated from Poland. As we shall see later, S. Daukantas was almost the only exception. That is why he did not participate in that struggle. One should keep this fact in mind if one wishes to understand the significance of S. Daukantas to the Lithuanian national renaissance.

Undoubtedly language is the foundation of any national rebirth. During the last two or three centuries Lithuanian language was on continuous decline. It was almost completely abandoned by the nobility and the Catholic Church. In the second half of the 18th century the Lithuanian Dominican friar Kantas Baginskis in his *Chorography or the Description of Holy Samogitia* (in Polish, of course) wrote: "The Samogitian language — is neither this or that. It is spoken differently in every district, almost in every parish ... Here lies the greatest reason for the commonness and lack of culture of young Samogitians. They do not want to drop their absurd language and enter the world." [4](#) That is how it was in Samogitia. in the extreme western part of Lithuania, which was least touched by Polish influence.

There is not the slightest doubt that the Lithuanian ruling classes had withdrawn from the nation. Their struggle against the occupation of Czarist Russia in the first half of the 19th century was more or less foreign to the interests of the Lithuanian nation. As far as Lithuania is concerned that struggle was very unsuccessful; one defeating blow fell after another on the heroic but often senseless efforts of the Lithuanian ruling classes. After the revolt of 1831, the Polish University of Vilnius, which for three decades spread Polish language and culture throughout Lithuania, was closed. After Konarski's conspiracy the Lithuanian code of laws of the 16th century, which until now was tolerated by Russian government and upon which the local self-government was based, was abolished. After the rebellion of 1863 - 1864. not only was all vestiges of self-rule abolished, but also writing in Latin or Polish letters was forbidden. In Lithuania for a while even the public use of Polish language was forbidden. Clearly all these blows weakened the already almost parasitical dominant minority. The weaker it became the greater chances appeared for the genesis and growth of a new revolutionary creative minority, which, using A. T. Toynbee's terminology, arises from that "inner proletariat" of which most of the Lithuanian nation was composed. At the end of the 19th century this new creative minority began to revolutionize the whole nation and lead it to the Declaration of Independence in 1918.

If the 1863 - 1864 rebellion and its merciless defeat by N. M. Muravyev was the last and fatal blow to the old Lithuanian dominant minority, the abolition of serfdom, which coincided with the rebellion, was beginning of the new Lithuania. [5](#) Simonas Daukantas, who died in 1864. may be called John the Baptist of the new Lithuania, because he foretold and explained the birth of the new Lithuania many years before it came into being. His death at the crossing point of the abolition of serfdom and the suppression of the rebellion was truly symbolical.

III

Here are a few facts about Simonas Daukantas' life and works. He was born at the northwest border of Lithuania, in the Skuodas District, to a peasant family. Some of the recently discovered documents about the alleged nobility of Daukantas' parents are inconclusive.

Daukantas' father was a farmer and a forest ranger at the same time. This may explain why forests played such a great role in his historical works. More than once he tried to show a parallel between the extinction of forests and the decline of Lithuanian nation. His birthplace was not too far from the Baltic Sea. This may explain his interest in such problems as the importance of the discovery of America to the Lithuanian agriculture, the part played by Lithuania and Courland in colonizing some central American islands (Tobago), the Šventoji Harbor problem, etc. The idea of unity of the Lithuanians, Latvians, and old Prussians was also very dear to S. Daukantas.

Daukantas received his first lesson in reading and writing from his mother, who was an educated woman and who had even taken part in the revolt of 1794. At that time mother's "school" was a unique institution of learning in Lithuania. There were very few regular schools, especially for peasant boys and girls. In his writing Daukantas spoke with great respect about the Lithuanian mother-teacher, and dedicated one of his historical works to her.

Later Daukantas entered parish schools in Lenkimai and Kretinga and a district school in Žemaičių Kalvarija, which was in the care of Dominican friars. The level of learning in these schools was not high, but they differed from other Lithuanian schools of that time in that a large percentage of peasant boys and girls attended them.

At the head of the whole educational system of Lithuania was the University of Vilnius. The University sent out special inspectors to visit provincial schools and to investigate their educational, moral, financial, and other problems. These inspectors complained that in Samogitian schools not enough Latin, very little Polish, and almost no Russian at all were taught. On the other hand, they praised the great eagerness of Samogitian parents to send their children to schools and even greater eagerness of these children to study. In one of such reports by Ksaveras Bogušas, author of an essay on the origin of the Lithuanian nation and language, we read: "Sympathy, surprise and at the same time a kind of respect overwhelms one seeing the poor Samogitian struggling with so many moral and physical obstacles in order to get education. Thinking fearfully that all knowledge comes from heaven, he studies his lessons while kneeling on his knees a few hours at a time. I also heard about one, who seeing lazy fellows punished by rod and thinking that it imparts brains, would beg his teacher tearfully not to feel sorry for him and not to spare the strokes. In what country would not such obstacles keep one from education? It does not scare a Samogitian! What couldn't be achieved with such determined and work loving people!" [6](#)

One of such students was S. Daukantas. After a few years in the Dominican School of Žemaičių Kalvarija, he set out for Vilnius with only a few ruble in his pocket. Because of the university, Vilnius was called the Northern Athens. After finishing his middle school education Daukantas entered the university. He found there quite a few students from his native Samogitia. During his study of philosophy, ethics, and law he had a chance to listen to lectures of such celebrities as G. E. Groddeck (1762- 1825), professor of classical philology; J. Lelewel (1786- 1861), professor of history; I. Danilowicz (1787- 1843), professor of history of law; and especially I. Onacewicz (1780 - 1825), whose lectures on Lithuanian history probably influenced S. Daukantas the most. Subsequently Daukantas devoted all his life to the studies of Lithuanian past.

Student life in Vilnius at that time was extremely active. Adam Mickiewicz, only a few years younger than Daukantas, wrote his masonic "Ode to the Youth" and other works, secret student organizations flourished, atheistic and revolutionary ideas of Voltaire and Rousseau spread. Even the newest invention of Western Europe — liberalism — found place among students and intelligentsia of Vilnius.

It seems that S. Daukantas did not show too much interest in this seething life of Vilnius and its university. Its Polish spirit was alien to him. According to the testimony of Motiejus Valančius, the famous Bishop of Samogitia and Daukantas' friend, Daukantas' spoken Polish was never very good. While still a student at the University S. Daukantas had begun to write his first historical work *Darbai senųjų lietuvių ir žemaičių* (The Deeds of Ancient Lithuanians and Samogitians), in which he set forth his somewhat primitive philosophy that "Lithuanians and Samogitians, being pagan, living in forests, brave in war, free at home, had more virtue than their neighbor Christians." S. Daukantas left the University with a master's degree in philosophy. Probably spurred by Professor I. Onacewicz, he spent some time collecting historical material in the Koenigsberg archives. Later he worked many years in Governor General's office in Riga. From 1835 he lived in St. Petersburg where, working in the Senate's chancellery, he had an opportunity to examine state documents and other historical sources of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In St. Petersburg he wrote his two main historical works *Istorija žemaitiška* (Samogitian History) and *Būdas senovės lietuvių kalnėnų ir žemaičių* (The Character of Ancient Lithuanians and Samogitians). The latter was the only work published during his lifetime. It was published under the pseudonym of Jokūbas Laukis in 1845. In St. Petersburg he wrote or translated from other languages many practical booklets on such topics as hop and tobacco raising, bees and orchards, tree seeds, and fire prevention. He published them always under a different pseudonym, perhaps wanting to show by this that a great number of people wrote in Lithuanian.

Daukantas described the hardships of his life in St. Petersburg in one of the letters to his fellow historian Teodor Narbutt (1784- 1864), author of the famous nine-volume history of Lithuania (in Polish) whom he assisted in research. In the letter of June 24, 1846, he wrote: "My fate has been and is very sad; that is why I did not answer sooner. Sitting for ten years in the clamp and cold archives, working through eight or nine hours without leaving my chair, I would become so terribly stiff that later walking I could not feel my legs at all. By living so I caught an illness that doctors cannot diagnose. On the eve of the Feast of the Three Kings my blood gushed to my head so quickly that it seemed I would go out of my mind or would not live for another day. Aided by doctors, in four months I slowly became better so that I could walk again. My nerves have become so weak from that illness that a pea falling scares me, and the ache of my feet, especially one, is so terrible

that I can walk only a few hundred steps at a time. Thus I torture myself until this day. The doctors say that it is gout, but I haven't drunk even a half gallon of wine in my life, and I haven't committed any other improprieties. After each dinner I could eat another if someone would offer one. Neither my father nor grandfather, living in forests, ever heard of gout." [7](#)

In 1850, due to weak health, he was forced to give up his office work at St. Petersburg and go back to his native Samogitia. Here for some time he lived in the home of Bishop M. Valančius, and later with various acquaintances. He died poor and forsaken almost by all in Papilė, where he spent his last years with the good Rev. I. Vaišvila. He was accompanied to the resting place only by a few peasant women. Twenty years after his death the same Rev. I. Vaišvila placed a monument on his grave with this inscription: "Passer-by, remember, here lies buried Simonas Daukantas, first of learned men, writer of historical works on Lithuania and Samogitia and other useful books. In his life, like that of a poor mouse, he wished only to write relentlessly in Samogitian for the benefit of his countrymen." [8](#)

IV

How did S. Daukantas visualize the new Lithuania? As we mentioned, he stood apart from all the great problems of his period. He did not form a program for the new Lithuania, but undoubtedly he had a vision of the new Lithuania to be. We had to wait many decades after his death, until J. Basanavičius, V. Kudirka, Maironis, J. Šliupas, Vaižgantas, P. Višinskis, A. Smetona, and S. Kairys came to form the program of the new Lithuania and turned it into fact on February 16, 1918, by the act of the Declaration of Independence.

Yet from all S. Daukantas' works, from his voluminous but often fantastic Lithuanian histories, from his folk song and folklore collections, from his dictionaries and grammars, from his prayer book and practical booklets on hop and tobacco raising, one sees that he addressed the new Lithuania. In this respect he was a typical son of his times since the 19th century was not only the age of great empires but also the age of national renaissances. In this respect S. Daukantas was one of the first who perhaps did not understand but at least felt the great significance that the new national renaissance movement was to have on European and world history.

Every new cultural or ideological, political or social, national or international revolution first appears as criticism of the old regime. Without such criticism it would be difficult to understand why a new revolution is necessary. The criticism is often severe, it is not always soundly or truthfully-based; nevertheless, it is necessary. For that reason every new revolution is first against something, only later for something.

S. Daukantas knew well against what he stood and what he fought. Influenced by the ideas of Romanticism of his time, he revered the life of Lithuania's ancient, especially pagan, past. Often he was very uncritical regarding that ancient past, idealizing and even idolizing it. However, he was very critical of his present period and the more recent past. He knew and understood that Lithuania stood on the edge of an abyss, and knew or said that he knew, who was responsible for this. In addressing the guilty parties he did not spare his severest criticism. In his most interesting work, *Būdas senovės lietuvių*, he devoted a few last passages to the exposition and condemnation of the parties which caused Lithuania's downfall. The guilty party, in Daukantas' opinion, was the ruling class of Lithuania, which was transformed from being the creative minority into a parasitical minority. Most importantly, S. Daukantas condemns it for having refused to follow its own path and having started blindly to flatter foreigners, especially the Polish, by taking on their customs and even their outward appearance.

Since the control of Lithuania had fallen into such hands, not much good could be expected. That is why S. Daukantas was skeptical of the knights and heroes of this time. Neither the courage shown by Lithuanians in Napoleon's army who with their horses' bodies made a living bridge for Napoleon to cross over Nemunas, nor the University of Vilnius students' noisy declamations, nor the heroism of the revolt of 1831 impressed S. Daukantas, since these were not struggles for the Lithuania for which he worked and wrote. When the previously mentioned Teodor Narbutt found the 17th century Lithuanian historian Albertas Vijiūkas Kojalavičius' heraldry manuscript and complained to Daukantas that he couldn't find a publisher for it, Daukantas wrote him, "If you can't do it yourself, then couldn't you find somewhere some soldier of Vytautas who could help you to finish that hard work? Could the blood have stopped flowing in all the ancient Getic hearts? Won't God take pity, and won't we wake up remembering the well known proverb: 'He who respects himself will be respected by others.'" [9](#) By asking such questions Daukantas showed that he had little faith in the "Vytautas' soldiers" of his time. Actually, neither Daukantas nor Narbutt succeeded in finding publishers for their works.

The other problem which Simonas Daukantas criticized severely was the Polish influence in Lithuania. In all his works he was categorically and strictly anti-Polish. In this respect, one could say that he stood alone in the Lithuania of his times, because everyone else, even while encouraging studies of Lithuania's past and the Lithuanian language, did not dare to oppose the union with Poland. Because of this, he was admonished by the Poles. The historian of Polish language and culture, and student of Lithuania's mythology, prof. Aleksander Brückner (1856- 1939), wrote that by his works Daukantas shamed the old Vilnius University. What seemed a shame to the historian of Polish culture seems a very daring, almost revolutionary, step to the student of Lithuanian national rebirth. Union with Poland in those times was some sort of dogma which no one dared to criticize, or even question. On the eve of the rebellion of 1863 everywhere in Lithuania there were processions commemorating the anniversary of the Union of Liublin. The unofficial Polish anthem "God save Poland" was being translated into Lithuanian, and Antanas Baranauskas, the author of the well known poem "Anykščių šilelis", directly condemned all those who wished to put in jeopardy good Lithuanian - Polish relations. There was no shortage of partisans

for Lithuania's and Poland's union even in the beginning of the 20th century when new independent Lithuania was arising. S. Daukantas, earlier by more than a hundred years, not only dared to declare himself against but also openly fought the Polish influence in Lithuania.

S. Daukantas did not merely criticize the politics of the ruling minority and its surrender to Polish influence; he also helped the growth of the new revolutionary and creative ruling class. The new class, having grown from the proletariat majority (bondaged peasantry) later led Lithuania to a new road. Daukantas, considering his period's tragic and almost hopeless situation, was not a pessimist. He believed in the Lithuanian nation and its future. He based his faith not only on the greatness of Lithuania's past, but also on the present, in which he considered two things as being especially important: the Lithuanian language spoken by the common people, especially in his native Samogitia, and the Lithuanian folklore, songs, tales, proverbs, maxims, etc. As long as those two things exist, Lithuania shall also live.

He described this well in the preface of his *Būdas senovės lietuvių*, which was published in St. Petersburg in 1845, and which was read later by the future Lithuanian leaders of *Aušra* (Dawn) and *Varpas* (Bell), earliest magazines of national awakening. Having declared that from the ancient past the Lithuanian had a language different from others, "clearer and purer than all the ones spoken today", and "rulers, bishops, and dukes spoke this language in the past", S. Daukantas wrote further: "All that now is non-existent. The (Lithuanian nation) is now flooded over by foreign nations, her lords, kings, dukes and even the priests already speak in a foreign tongue, are bedecked in foreign apparell, and spread foreign truths. In short, Lithuania has already lost its spring-green leaves and merely recalls her deeds from ancient writing, just as a forest displays its twigs in winter. Among these, language alone remains like a green lingonberry, armed from frost until this day is green as a sign of all that was." (Lingonberry is a popular berry in Lithuania; it is unusual in that during winter it does not freeze under the snow).

As long as that language, that green lingonberry remains alive, the nation still lives.¹⁰ Quite probably no one worried more about the life and cultivation of that language than did S. Daukantas. He refused to write anything in another language and rejected the invitation of various Polish journals in Vilnius to contribute articles. He was forced to write private letters in Polish to the historian T. Narbutt and even to the Samogitian Bishop J. Giedraitis and his successor, Bishop Valančius. That shows how weak was the life of the Lithuanian language, that green lingonberry.

That language depended for its life not so much on Lithuania Proper itself as on Prussian Lithuania, where the Lithuanian language was considered more important and was used by the great 18th century poet, Kristijonas Donelaitis.¹¹ S. Daukantas' contemporary, Simonas Stanevičius, compared the Prussian Lithuanian language to cultivated orchard and that of Lithuania to a wild forest about which no one cares.¹²

It is said in the Bible that at first there was the Word. From the Word started all creation. If the Lithuanian word exists, Lithuanian creations will exist. Relishing the Lithuanian folk songs, tales, and proverbs, with which he greatly sprinkled his works, S. Daukantas understood that the creativity of the nation depends on the life of the Lithuanian word. Recalling the famous German author, G. E. Lessing (1729- 1781), who, having heard a few Lithuanian folk songs, said that the Lithuanian nation will someday produce great poets, S. Daukantas declared that Lessing was late in his comments, since Lithuania already has such a poet in the person of Kristijonas Donelaitis.

This is where the 18th century poet met with the early 19th century historian, a pioneer of the new Lithuania: a small, but a very important step was taken towards the renaissance of the Lithuanian nation.

NOTES

- 1 Henryk Paszkiewicz, *The Origin of Russia*, London, 1954, p. 187.
- 2 V. Trumpa, "[The Disintegration of the Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth](#)", *Lituanus*, 1964, No. 2, pp. 24-32.
- 3 This and subsequent quotations of Daukantas are from his *Rinkiniai Raštai* (Selected Works), Vilnius, 1955.
- 4 Cited by L. Gineitis, *Kristijonas Donelaitis ir jo epocha* (K. D. and His Epoch), Vilnius, 1964, pp. 25-26.
- 5 V. Trumpa, "[The 1863 Revolt in Lithuania](#)", *Lituanus*, Dec. 1963, pp. 115-122.
- 6 M. Lukšienė, "Aplinka, kurioje mokėsi S. Daukantas" (The Environment of Daukantas' Education), *Pergalė* (Vilnius), 1964, No. 12, p. 138.
- 7 *Mūsų Senovė* (Our Antiquity) (Kaunas), 1922, pp. 760-761.
- 8 Lietuvos TSR Mokslų Akademija, Lietuvių Kalbos ir Literatūros Institutas, *Lietuvių Literatūros Istorija* (History of Lithuanian Literature), K. Korsakas, ed., Vilnius, 1957, vol. I, pp. 465-466.
- 9 *Mūsų Senovė*, 1922, p. 719.
- 10 It is interesting to note that S. Daukantas' works were very popular among America's Lithuanians. His *Istorija Žemaitiška* was serialized in *Vienybė Lietuvininkų*, the American Lithuanian newspaper, during 1891-1896 and published separately. In 1892 his *Būdas senovės lietuvių* was published separately in Plymouth, Pa.
- 11 See the special issue of *Lituanus* (1964, No. 1) devoted to life and work of K. Donelaitis.
- 12 J. Lebedys, *S. Stanevičius*, Vilnius, 1955, p. 171.