

Excerpt from "THE REBELS"

V. MYKOLAITIS PUTINAS



EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION. V. Mykolaitis-Putinas is the outstanding living Lithuanian writer, one of the principal leaders and innovators of modern Lithuanian literature. To this day, even under the stifling precepts of socialist realism, Putinas continues to produce artistic works, as evidenced by the quality and scope of his latest novel SUKILĖLIAI (The Rebels).

The novel SUKILĖLIAI, projected in two volumes, deals with the 1968 revolt in Lithuania. Evidently, it is a result of an extensive research by the author, providing an artistic insight into the era.

The first volume of the novel was published in 1957. It covers the events leading up to the 1863 revolt against Russian rule, describing in vivid detail the conditions of the serfs and the feudal lords, the punitive actions carried out by the Russian government against the Lithuanian peasants. V. Mykolaitis-Putinas is quite careful to distinguish the "reactionary" Czarist policy from the "progressive" influence of the Russian people. The notable attempts by the author to interpret the revolt as a socio-economic uprising

of the peasants against the upper classes and not against the Russian domination was acceptable to the cultural commissars in the years of the "thaw." However, an opera, based on the novel but emphasizing more the national struggle against the Russian domination, was taken out of the repertoire after a dress rehearsal was witnessed by a representative of the Moscow Ministry of Culture.

The second volume of SUKILĖLIAI has not been published so far, even though its publication has been predicted by the soviet press almost annually. Most likely Putinas failed to revise the work sufficiently to please the post-thaw literary overseers. The publication history of the novel suggests that the Lithuanian writer must be not only a proponent of socialist realism, but also a pro-Russian in the portrayal of characters and events.

The excerpt that follows is from the still unpublished second volume of SUKILĖLIAI. It was published in the weekly literary newspaper LITERATŪRA IR MENAS on March 23, 1963. The excerpt deals with the organization of an insurgent band by the novel's central character — the priest and revolutionary leader Mackevičius.

* * *

A crowd of about two hundred men was standing in the street. Most of them had scythes on their shoulders, a few had guns, some had pitchforks, and others — only long wooden scythe handles. Both sides of the street were crowded with older men, youngsters, and women. Many had gathered here today; the little village was full of the excited talk and suppressed laughter.

When Mackevičius appeared, the voices grew silent and all eyes turned on him. Not everybody recognized him at once. Only after a good look did they realize it was he.

"Lord, there's our priest!" shouted a surprised woman.

"Can't be!" doubted another.

"Certainly it's he."

"Oh, but he's handsome ..." whispered the girls.

"If only I were a man..." complained the more impetuous ones among them.

Meanwhile, Mackevicius was greeting everybody. He waved, nodded his head in all directions, and pushed himself forward.

"All right, men. Line up!" he shouted. "Four to a row. Like soldiers. From this day on, we shall be the soldiers of Lithuania. The army of Lithuania!"

Both of the Balsys brothers, Jankauskutis, and Noreika started lining up the men. When the rows had been formed, Mackevicius stepped in front, raised his arm, and the insurgents started forward. The people lining the streets followed them waving their caps. The women were wiping tears from their eyes.

When the marchers disappeared around a bend in the road, the whole village became strangely quiet and bleak. The people were dispersing reluctantly. It seemed as if they were waiting for something, though all knew that there was nothing to wait for. What had happened was final. They tried to quench the rising uneasiness by recalling what Mackevicius had said and by dwelling on their hopes for the future. Mackevicius' words about the farmland had especially excited them and now, returning home, they discussed them carefully. "You'll see, we will own all the land which we are farming now. The buildings also."

"Without any taxes or duties."

The farm laborers and smallholders were also discussing land.

"Three margas they promised ..."

"That's not much."

"Well now, just how much is a margas?"

Nobody seemed to know for sure just how much land that would be. — Still others were jubilant.

"That's the end of the lords!"

"There won't be any lords, any boyars or serfs any more. We will all be equal."

"Well... Could something like that really happen to the lords?.."

Naste, the chambermaid of lady Skrodskis, was returning to the manor with the coachman Pranciškus.

"You didn't go with the insurgents after all," she accused.

Pranciškus was morose and did not want to talk. "So, I didn't. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. It's just that in your place I would have gone."

"Don't chatter. I have my own plans."

"What sort?"

"We'll see yet, we'll see. This much I will tell you now: the manor workers have their own accounts to settle with Skrodskis." He turned to her and there was a threat in his voice. "But keep your mouth shut!"

"Don't worry. But wouldn't it have been better to talk it over with Mackevicius?"

"I have my own head."

Pranciškus refused to talk any further.

Mackevicius and his detail of insurgents reached the forests of Krekenava before dark. Scouts had already found a clearing suitable for making camp. The place was ringed by tall trees, overgrown with shrubbery, and was excellently suited for this purpose. The two hundred men dispersed quickly and set to work. The wagons had to be parked, supplies had to be unpacked, and sleeping places had to be readied. A host of questions and opinions arose right away. Who was to do what, how should things be ordered, where should one start?.. Quickly, some volunteered advice; just as quickly others refused to listen to it. Mackevicius quietly regarded this confusion. He had foreseen this, and he knew that his first

duty as a leader was to organize this informal group into a military unit and subject it to military discipline. The time to begin was right now. Kazys Jankauskas had a herder's horn slung over his shoulder. Mackevicius noticed him.

"Kazys, stand here beside me and blow your horn," he ordered and climbed up on a tree stump.

The first call of the revolution reverberated through the forest. Everybody started and understood that Mackevicius wanted to speak to them.

This time he talked to them not as a preacher but as a military leader. He told them what lay ahead and what was expected of them. A hard life was ahead — poverty, danger, and battle. Many times before he had spoken to them about the purpose of this fight and all knew why they had believed in him and why they had followed him. Many sacrifices will be required, he told them. First, they will have to sacrifice themselves, their own will, their own opinions. Everyone will now have to obey him and obey those who would be chosen as his aides.

"First, I ask complete obedience of you," said Mackevicius in a firm, loud voice. "I ask that there be no disagreements among you, no quarrels, no anger, no lies. We are all equal, we are all brothers, we are all determined to fight for our land and for our country. I am just one of you, as are those who will be chosen as my aides. Don't envy us. Our job will be harder. We will walk in the first rows and maybe the enemy's bullets will find us first. Your duty is to be obedient and to follow our orders. That's the way it is everywhere. An army has to follow its commanders. We are the Lithuanian army now, you are Lithuanian soldiers. If anybody doesn't agree, he can leave us today and return home."

The men approved of Mackevicius' speech. Their hearts filled with pride that they were now the army of Lithuania, that they were now its soldiers. The future dangers, the battles, the enemy bullets did not frighten them now; now these things were distant and hard to imagine. Not a single man wanted to return home. All of them were ready to follow where Mackevicius would lead. They felt confident that he knew what he was saying, that he knew what he was doing.

Mackevicius chose Petras Balsys and Noreika for his aides. On the morrow he intended to choose others. Each group of twenty men was to have its own commander.

When it grew dark, they lighted several big campfires, ate, and prepared for the night. Sentries were posted and Mackevicius told them how important it was to keep their eyes open and to stay alert. There was no actual danger, however, since no government troops and no police were to be found in the surrounding villages and towns.

Gradually, silence enveloped the first campsite of the insurgents. Slowly all talk died down. Only now and then a horse would neigh or the axle of a wagon would creak. Not many of the men, however, had untroubled sleep that night, the first such night in their lives. The hard, uncomfortable ground, the cold night wind, and especially the bothersome thoughts prevented peaceful rest.

Nor did Mackevicius sleep. This new situation excited and moved him. There were no doubts in his heart now. Quite on the contrary, he now felt serene and was pleased with his people and with himself. The first and fateful step had been taken, and there was no turning back. The past was finished! He was not the priest of Paberže any more; the priest who had been chastised by the bishop for setting the people against the lords. He was a free soldier now, a leader of revolutionaries. True, the future was indefinite and uncertain, but however it turned out, it could not be worse than life up to the present had been.

Mackevicius was lying on his back in the straw piled in a farm cart. Through black fir branches he gazed with wide-open eyes at a sky shimmering with stars and allowed his thoughts to wander. He felt satisfied with this change in his personal affairs but, more than that, he felt he was fulfilling an essential and basic duty. He had stirred the people out of a frozen slave like existence, he had kindled human pride and the determination to fight in the frightened serfs; — a will to fight for their rights as human beings. He had given them courage; courage to face the lord's punishment, the policeman's whip, the soldier's bullets. It was wonderful that men could be lifted from the squalor of an animal-like existence to the ranks of fighters and heralds of a new and bright tomorrow.

He thought about the working people of Lithuania, about their age long efforts to free themselves from slavery and poverty. He knew much about this long and bitter fight and had explained it many times to serfs and lords alike. It was a fight spanning hundreds of years. Much blood had been shed in it. Much courage and desperate do-or-die endurance had been shown. However, this new fight would be different. It would exceed all the previous efforts in its size, its determination and in its purpose. Now the people were rising not only against the lords of their manors, not only against the whips of the overseers, but against the most powerful master of this world, against the ruler, the emperor, against the Czar himself! They were rising not because they were goaded into it by the boyars and the priests, not in order to fight for the privileges of the boyars as it had been thirty years ago. No, now they were rising of themselves because they themselves understood the significance of the battle. And he, Mackevicius, was part of this understanding. And not he alone, but also Kalinauskas and many others understood the monstrous wrongs and were determined to fight, determined to arouse the downtrodden humbled masses. There had not been such a revolution in Lithuania. Mackevicius was glad that he had gone into the forests and had not waited for any orders from some revolutionary committee, that he had gone because he had understood his duty to fight in front of his people and do lead them.

Enveloped by such thoughts, at times becoming excited, at times feeling serene, Mackevicius fell asleep. He awoke to a loud blast from a herder's horn. Kazys Jankauskas was blowing his horn to wake the insurgents at daybreak. Everybody jumped from whatever place they had found for the night. A busy day lay ahead. Weapons were inspected, exercises in their use were begun. They repeated again what Kolyska had taught them in the barn of lord Silings.

However, the weapon shortage was clearly evident. More had to be procured immediately. Mackevicius sent out a detachment of trusted men into the surrounding countryside to search for scythes and guns. The insurgents' campsite in the Krekenava forests was not to be kept secret. After all, they had no reason to hide. Any good and true man was to be made welcome here. With enemies, on the other hand, they would know how to deal. But care was required; — guards surrounded the forest and were posted along the countryside roads.

After two or three days the men who were sent out began returning with weapons and other supplies. Now at least a sufficient number of scythes was available. Dundulis from the village of Šilėnai and his fellow blacksmiths had seen to that. The supplies of clothing and food were also increased.

One afternoon a large wagon drawn by two horses arrived at the forest clearing. It was loaded with huge bundles and four men were sitting on them. Petras Balsys went up to it and was surprised to find that one of the men was his uncle Steponas.

"Greetings, uncle!" he shouted to the man climbing down from the wagon. "Didn't expect you so soon. What did you bring us?"

Steponas returned the greeting. He seemed to be in a good mood but quite serious and careful.

"Lead me to Mackevicius. I will tell him."

Mackevicius was just as surprised and as happy as Petras. He had often thought about Steponas, but because of the latter's advanced age he was reluctant to ask him to join the insurgents. Yet now he had come of his own free will and not empty handed at that. Thus Mackevicius greeted him very sincerely.

"So we have a veteran now! Wonderful! We will make a general of you, Steponas. We need your experience."

Steponas smiled.

"Well, if I'm going to be a general, then this army will have to look like an army."

They went over to the wagon and Steponas showed what he had brought. There was a number of scythes, four double-barelled and three single-barelled guns, and some food. The bulk of the load, however, was made up of gray overcoats, leather belts and black caps.

"These are the gifts of Jadvyga Skrodskis, Malvina Butautas and Mr. Survillas," explained Steponas. "When you left, Malvina and Jadvyga started gathering cloth from the surrounding countryside and took it all to Kėdainiai and Panevėžys. All the tailors were drowned in work. Wherever they got the idea, I don't know. They insisted that the insurgents of Mackevicius should look like real soldiers."

And truly, when the men put on their gray overcoats, wide leather belts, and identical black caps, they looked like an army. The subsequent days were spent in group exercises with scythes and with guns. The forest clearing echoed with gunfire and orders. The men took well to the new routine. They rapidly lost their peasant stiffness and timidity and became more alert and more sure of themselves.

During the noon rest periods the men would sing. They knew many songs, but now they needed some new ones—songs that would fit their new mood. Petras Balsys and Adomėlis Venckus remembered some. Others learned them and they quickly became the favorites of the camp:

Oh flying, flying are the white swans,
To the land's defense they are calling her sons.

Or:

Arise, rise, oh brother dear —
The time to saddle your steed is here.

In the evening, when the sun was setting they would gather around Mackevicius and with strong harmonious voices would sing the song he had taught them:

We shall go, brothers, where the Nemunas flows,
The Poles will look and ask what army here goes —

These are Lithuanians, these are our brothers,
Together we'll reclaim the land of our fathers.
Their scythes, their lances glitter in the sun,
They stand there waiting like a wall of stone.
Lithuania, sacred country of our birth —
We, your sons, will fight for you till death.

New thoughts and feelings stirred in the hearts of the former serfs as they listened to the songs. They went to sleep full of determination and spirit so that when the sun arose they would be ready for the trials that lay ahead.

Shortly, rumors about the campsite of the insurgents had spread across the countryside. New volunteers arrived. They were mostly young men who had run away from their manors. These were taken to Mackevicius. He looked at them searchingly, questioned them as to who they were and why they wanted to join the insurgents, and then asked harshly:

"Do you know what awaits you here?"

He answered this question himself.

"Every day you will be hungry. You will sleep on the hard ground, often you will walk barefoot. In a battle you might be killed, or wounded, or taken by the enemy. And if you should become afraid and run, your own commander would kill you as a traitor. Think it over! Do you really want to join us?"

If the new arrival would say yes without any hesitation, Mackevicius would turn to his men:

"How about it men? Shall we accept him?"

And if nobody objected, the volunteer was accepted.

Thus the group of insurgents slowly grew and reached three hundred. They became accustomed with each other and gradually the group came to resemble a huge family. They grew to love Mackevicius and learned to obey his every word. They liked his open-mindedness, his directness and even his severity. For his sake they were determined to go through fire.

They did not know when, but everyone felt that shortly the big test was coming, that shortly they would have to prove with blood their faithfulness to Mackevicius, to their country, to their people.