



## THE LITHUANIAN SCHOLAR AT A CROSSROADS

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In addition to all the crossroads at which the Lithuanian scholar finds his mind and heart — beginning with the meaningfulness of his vocation and ending with his choice of analytical method — during the last year and a half it so happened that, always in a state of doubt, I had to stand at one more crossroads and decide: is it necessary or is it not necessary to unite world scholars of Lithuanian into some kind of unified organization? It wasn't easy to make my way through these doubts, especially having the knowledge that I myself had provoked them like some hanged man who had made himself his own rope. But the rope came about purely by chance. It was needed as a lifesaver for the honorable emigre organization, the Institute of Lithuanian Studies, which had a long string of accomplishments to its credit but now was feeling rather lost after five decades of existence in the United States. In the fall of 1992 during the Institute's conference held in Washington, attended by only a few of its members, in almost everyone's eyes one could see the same question: to be or not to be. The Institute's forces were diminishing (because of the "graying" of its members), its enthusiasm was in decline, so wasn't it better to disperse and to work without any formal union? There was another solution offered — to join some scholarly institution in Lithuania. The first way appeared to be too pathetic and insulting to personal pride. The second seemed foggy and unreal: it wasn't clear what institution such a professionally various organization as the Institute of Lithuanian Studies could successfully join and if it did, what to do once they were joined because, after all, their traditions and status were very different. In Lithuania the academic institutions were financed by the government, they have their own long-term plans which they execute for pay, while the Institute of Lithuanian Studies was a group of devotees working to promote an idea, in their spare time and doing the research they pleased. How to unite two such disparate structures? So then "the rope" that spontaneously presented itself was reached for — the idea to create an organization, somewhat similar to the Institute of Lithuanian Studies but one having a broader base, including scholars from both Lithuania, the emigre community and scholars from other countries as well. The Institute of Lithuanian Studies would naturally flow into such an organization, safeguarding the independence necessary to it, but at the same time it would be part of a larger structure, executing its goals and undertakings. This seemed like the best solution. The efficacy of the idea was tested once more last fall during the Eighth Symposium on the Arts and Sciences in Chicago. Since I had attended both forums, I was delegated to initiate something.

At first a small group of enthusiasts came together and later it grew. Its composition changed somewhat, as did its moods. While things were only in the discussion stage, they looked brighter and more romantic; when it was necessary to start working concretely, it turned out that not everyone could find the time. But the idea and a sincere desire didn't fade. At that point it was decided to test everything in front of a larger audience, to call a founding conference. It was supported by Vilnius Pedagogical University, the Open Lithuania Fund and prof. Jurgis Gimbutas from the United States. The initial group consciously avoided seeking large funds, they wanted to test the idea without much fanfare, to start from the content rather than the form, as it were. In these times one can create the illusion of a grandiose project and make an impressive start by advertising oneself and spending a lot of money, but if there is no inner catalyst — original ideas and a belief in one's activity — everything will quickly fade or become a formality at best. There are a huge number of such extinguished or formal organizations now, both in Lithuania and in the emigration. By the way, the presence of such failed organizations also dampened the enthusiasm of the initiators: perhaps someone would say — look at the scholars in Lithuanian, they're giving in to fashion, too, they're also founding something which is fated a priori to die or just vegetate. But what is to be done, if certain problems confront scholars in Lithuanian daily, problems which they could solve better together, if they aren't satisfied with just letting others know about the results of their individual research projects or simply showing off their own wisdom.

The new political, economic, cultural and spiritual situation in theory opens up wider horizons and possibilities, but in practice it puts the scholar at a new crossroads, forcing him to set up new formations and search for new forms of

cooperation, to discuss and to come to some agreement. This necessity is not felt as acutely by foreigners interested in scholarship in Lithuania who happen to reside somewhere in Germany, Italy or Norway. They keep on working as they always have, being only the happier that they can now freely come to Lithuania or invite some colleague from here. The situation has changed more radically for the scholars in Lithuania and the emigration. Both sets are experiencing a being at the crossroads, the former perhaps feel several cross-roads.

First a word about the emigre scholars. Earlier on the direction of their work and its meaning was dictated by circumstance: they had to do that which it was impossible to do in Lithuania or that which was being done in a conformist and deformed way. It's enough to mention emigre works like the 37 volumes of *The Lithuanian Encyclopedia*, the six volume *Encyclopedia Lituanica*, Pranas Čepėnas' *Naujujų laikų istorija*, Petras Jonikas' *Lietuvių tauta amžių būvyje*, Bronius Kviklys' *Mūsų Lietuva*, the edited works of Vincas Krėvė, the proceedings of the Institute of Lithuanian Studies and the Catholic Academy of Science, the stimulating studies of Juozas Girnius, Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Vytautas Kavolis and Vincas Trumpa. This is only the short list; one could continue it. Some particular work might lack academic solidity; nevertheless, it was meaningful because of its author's attempts to seek the truth and to express his hypotheses and conceptions freely, which here in Lithuania would have been mercilessly censored. But now the situation has changed: all this can now be done in Lithuania and I wouldn't say that we lack qualified people for this work. Perhaps these scholars' thinking is slightly standardized, perhaps their boldness in suggesting hypotheses is somewhat paralyzed, but this will pass, especially with the younger generation which upon entering the arena is already expressing itself in an original way. So it seems as if the emigration is losing the privilege fate had granted it and quite naturally it is raising the question as to how to act, especially with its forces diminishing. To cooperate with the scholars in Lithuania? To share topics and projects? To invite each other to help? To create analogical groups on one side and the other? Some things are already being done, though human weaknesses still stand in the way: personal ambition, the desire to lead, suspicion, jealousy, the desire to give advice and to teach, the childish caprice to prevent being taught, etc. The emigration stands at one more crossroads: where to put its rich personal libraries and archives of Lithuaniana which it would prefer to see kept together, but which it would like to see available to scholars. What is their fate, if even in Lithuania there is not much respect shown for libraries? It seems to me that only a unified power like the International Association for Scholars in Lithuanian could find the best solution, and having found it attack society's consciousness and the government's conscience. Only it could brighten the horizon, which is sometimes clouded over by ambitions and misunderstandings arising over some question or other, when academic principles are mixed with political passions. The most recent and most obvious example of such a mixing is the argument over the collection of documents, *Lietuvos kovų ir kančių istorija*.

For a long time emigre scholars were separated from archives, manuscripts, libraries and trends in the development of the living language. For this reason the theoretical — interpretative aspect in their works is stronger, while the empirical — factual one is weaker. In the works of the scholars in Lithuania the opposite tendency holds. The former aspect predominates, making them boring conglomerations of material decorated by ideological clichés yet. In no way do I want to suggest that all works are like this, I only want to show the general direction — also a crossroads, at which both sides stand today, and having met head on, they should without any pride acknowledge their gaps and as soon as possible they should go the rest of the way, amending that which is missing. The goal of the International Association of Scholars in Lithuanian would be to hasten the flow of empirical material to the emigre side and to send the flow of theoretical thought toward Lithuania. The actual means and forms will depend on our own activity and ingenuity.

And now about several crossroads which scholars here in Lithuania are experiencing. The first, the most banal but also the most painful one is the dilemma of financial survival and vocation. Unable to make a living on one salary, the scholar tries to make ends meet by working more than one job, thus dissipating his energy in all directions. This can't help having a negative effect on his productivity and professionalism. Appeals to his dedication and idealism won't be of any use in this case. Appeals to the patriotism and the understanding of the government so far have not produced any result and they should not be relied on for the future either. Is there some solution? Up till now each academic institution has looked for solutions on its own in order to justify its existence and to retain its employees; it plans its work and by means of these plans it tries to show how necessary it is. This is perfectly understandable. But it is also clear that there is no coordination and no thought given as to how to use people most wisely and no one is even thinking of any planning. Everyone is fighting for his place under the sun, silently looking for ways to get financing, passing on his way other projects, perhaps worthier of doing. Initiative is a good thing. God always punishes sluggards, but is this good for the general good? This is precisely what the Association should be thinking of — this general good — how to use scholars to the best advantage, without losing sight of the most important things, judging their possibilities realistically, without becoming mired in only currently relevant needs, keeping one eye on the future. It is self-evident that the most significant works of the century should be finished. No matter how bad things get, we can't slow the pace of the great Lithuanian language dictionary or the language atlases. Even more intensively we should work on historical, etymological and toponymic dictionaries. And what about the terminological wastelands that lie before us; they are painfully evident as modern practices, technology and modern lifestyles step into our daily lives. And what about the state of oral and written language which needs no explanation? This barely covers linguistic concerns. There's also history, literature, folklore, art... Is the writing of a history of Lithuania based not only on faithfulness to fact but also on modern thinking and a twentieth-century system of values not a priority? And a general work about Lithuanian literature which would serve both teachers and students who would know that there would be no conscious gaps, no deformed proportions and no evaluations based only on ideology. And scholarly editions of writers that the researcher could trust. And the publication of archives, not only historical ones but ethnographic and literary ones as well, so we wouldn't have to run around from place to place and waste time on bureaucratic

formalities. When you think of all the work that lies ahead, especially keeping in mind the diminishing numbers of scholars working on Lithuanian and their daily problems, the horizon looks very bleak without any sky in sight.

But the horizon gets somewhat brighter as soon as you look at the problem from a higher vantage point. Everything that has been mentioned so far is in one way or another classical Lithuanian scholarship which starts with Sirvydas' dictionary (1620). And it will never end. It doesn't matter how many dictionaries we publish, we'll always be able to think of new ones, no matter how many histories we write, we can always present more interesting ones, no matter how many archives we publish, we won't reach the bottom, because they're always expanding. Scholars in Lithuania are caught up in a whirlwind of activity and they're even afraid of losing their momentum because they think they'll fall on their faces or that all of scholarship will fall apart.

It is cause for rejoicing that many an emigre historian, literary scholar or cultural sociologist has escaped this; young linguists, literary theorists, ethnologists and historians in Lithuania are escaping, too. It's not because they no longer value the traditional methods of the older generation but because those other tasks will never end and if no one initiates new ones, they won't start up by themselves. In reaching out, of course, it's easy to go to extremes, to believe that some method or other is a panacea and to even border on caricature and the absurd. We can already find examples of this. Usually there is no ill will involved, however, rather it is the result of there being no competition, no alternatives, no counterbalance.

Not so long ago I happened to attend a history conference at Vilnius University, or more accurately its final discussion. Besides other interesting questions, one especially stuck in my mind: what criterion should be used in the periodization of history? If you look through the prism of economic and social life (natural farming, feudal farming, industrial farming), history will appear one way; if you look from the perspective of social cataclysms (wars and rebellions) it will look another way; if from the aspect of cultural values (the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque, Positivism) it will appear a third way; if you look at the roles of separate personalities or statehoods, it will appear differently yet. The historians put the question dramatically — what should they do? But why shouldn't the historians write "histories" in all of these ways without looking for a model that would satisfy everyone? If you keep looking for one model, you may never write anything. After all, it's possible to write a history of Lithuania as a chain of paradoxes and absurdities. This kind of history also has the right to exist. We could think this way of literary scholarship, too. The psychological and cultural method of treating works has the longest tradition. Recently we have some semiotic research, some experience with structuralism, the German school of interpretation, Anglo-Saxon New Criticism. However, contemporary hermeneutics hasn't been tried at all; we have no attempts at research based on psychoanalysis, neither Freudian, nor Jungian. Where is the wise man who could take responsibility for recommending just one or another model? Every serious researcher forms his own approach, finds his own key, as long as all paths are open to him and all sources are available.

It is here that the scholars in Lithuania are confronted by another crossroads, a purely mechanical one, I would say, that is the obstacle of foreign languages. Knowing only one foreign language, that is Russian, well, they can handle other languages only as much as is needed for some concrete task. Today they are forced to reorient themselves, if they want to make use of the wealth that the humanities have attained in the rest of the world. For some this may perhaps not pose a problem, but for most of us it's a problem, nevertheless, which the emigres could best understand if they imagined the following situation. Suddenly someone tells them to forget English and read in other languages, mainly Russian. The most important thing is that you cannot hurry through this crossroads; it's not a path to be traversed in half a year but a case of a five year commitment. Therefore, the question arises as to how most rationally to use the scholar's time and energy. For example, what's more important today — to write our own dictionary of literary terms, engaging a large group of literary scholars in the enterprise, or to commit them to learning English well in the meantime and then translate the dictionary. I would be for the second possibility. What's more logical: to prepare a scholarly edition of the works of Simonas Daukantas, or to depend on what has already been published and instead write three original studies about the refreshing and standardizing effect of Daukantas on the Lithuanian consciousness and on the formation of our model of literature and our conception of history during the last century? Again, I would be for the latter project. But, of course, this is only my opinion which I'm not forcing on anyone in any way. I just want to emphasize that it is necessary to preserve our scholarly forces for the tasks which no one else is going to do for us and always leave time for scholars to refresh their erudition and search for original ideas. The greatest problem that our scholars face is that they are forced to live off of the intellectual interest that they saved up in writing their dissertations. Later they usually only reproduce and illustrate their earlier ideas, while they have no energy or time to generate new ones. Here, too, the Association could make its position known, not in a decisive way perhaps but in a friendly, advisory capacity.

For the Association to be a vital one, it has to have its own academic axis around which other more concrete functions would align themselves: organizing conferences and meetings, collecting funds, publication, communication among members, exchanges, etc. Concern for research on Lithuanian topics is much too abstract and too broad a commitment. Besides, this goal is included in the programs of all institutions of similar profile. Our Association should find its own place, without repeating other structures or especially competing with anyone. Metaphorically speaking, it ought to have its own slogan and its own banner. It is the task of everyone to search for this banner today. I will limit myself to a few suggestions.

It seems to me that the most important goal that the Association could have to make its existence meaningful would be the promotion of the newest scholarly methods and their application in research. The Association should always remind its members that Lithuanian studies stands on the threshold of the 21st century and it can't step into the new century with the

tools it inherited from the 20th, even if they seem trustworthy and necessary. A seminar could function at the Association's headquarters, it could be called "Lithuanian Studies at the Juncture of the Centuries", where people could come and discuss their newest ideas and hypotheses, even the most unexpected ones or the most ridiculous ones. This should not be the presentation of finished and polished papers which frightens and gives an overly responsible sense of mission to the one who is doing the reading and somewhat paralyzes those who are listening, but it should consist of free and spontaneous improvisations and positive discussions. It would be enough if there were a small group of devotees and eventually it would grow like a snowball rolling downhill.

Another slogan around which we could rally would be our efforts to think through what Lithuanian studies mean today to us and the world. By saying "to us" I have in mind a concrete us and not the model of a Lithuanian that we have imagined for ourselves from the works and actions of the late 19th century or the early 20th — the patriot, the idealist, the dedicated one, the social activist, and so on. I have in mind the individual of the 20th century who is ironic, skeptical, one who treasures his freedom of spirit, one open to the world but one who doesn't want to lose his identity. It would be quite meaningful, for example, to collect all our scholarly forces and analyze from all angles the similarities and differences of the ideals which arose in the emigration and in Lithuania over the last fifty years. Literary scholars, ethnologists, art historians could take part, while the historians and philosophers could draw their generalizations. This is one aspect of the problem. There is another aspect, however, one that is even more important: what can our historical, cultural and spiritual experience mean to the Western world (of course. Eastern as well, but perhaps the Western first), which likes to look down on us but who at the same time feels opening up before it an abyss of moral values created by a relativistic turn of mind, a materialistic lifestyle, a pragmatic stance and the cult of rationality when man seems to have fragmented into a clever head which is capable of classifying and analyzing perfectly yet has hands that in a critical situation don't know what to do. Does our history, our literature and our art have only an exotic experiential value for such a person, or can it say something essential to him, something which he hasn't experienced himself, something he has forgotten or something that can still happen to him? Only by relating our research of specific questions to the general problematic of man at the end of the 20th century can we make our works on Lithuanian subjects interesting to others and we ourselves can then better discern the horizons for our actions.

The third slogan could sound something like this: maximum confidence in the younger generation, the greatest attention to its idealism and bold hypotheses. When the Association has been founded, the way should first of all be open to young people if it only recommends itself with serious works in Lithuanian and wants to take part. Not titles, not positions, not old contributions should be the most important criteria for membership, but scholarly initiative and original ideas. Why? Because the most realistic way out of a crossroads is always first felt by young people, perhaps they do not so much feel as they know that they will have to go somewhere. And they do go.

*Translated by Violeta Kelertas*

\*This article was originally read at the founding conference of the International Association for Scholars in Lithuanian, held in Vilnius on June 21, 1994. Albertas Zalatorius was then elected President of this organization. Now a year later the organization is holding its first conference, in Vilnius, June 27-29, 1995, uniting its local and foreign members. The conference is titled "Lithuanian Society during the Years of Dependence (1940-1990): Resistance or Adaptation". This issue of *Lituanus* is the first issue to be edited and written only by scholars from Lithuania and is part of the activity of the new Association. (Translator's note).