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TOMAS VENCLOVA

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Tomas Venclova was born in the Lithuanian coastal town of Klaipėda, a major port on the Baltic Sea, on September 11, 1937. His father was Antanas Venclova, a prominent member of the left-wing Third Front literary movement of the 1930's and a figure in the Soviet-led Communist takeover of Lithuania in June 1940, and hence Tomas was born into a family of power and privilege. He was educated at the University of Vilnius and later taught literature, semiotics, and comparative linguistics at that University as an adjunct member of the Faculty of Humanities. During those years, Venclova wrote several scholarly articles on the literature of West Europe and authored two scholarly and popular books, **Raketos, planetos ir mes (Rockets, The Planets, and Us, 1962)** and **Golemas arba dirbtinis žmogus (Golem, or The Artificial Man, 1965)**. He is known also as a translator; his translation of T. S. Eliot's **The Waste Land**, in fact, stands as one of the masterworks of translation in the history of modern Lithuanian letters. An interesting and important discussion of Venclova's translation of that poem by Eliot, in fact, appears in the **Journal of Baltic Studies** VII:2 (1976).

Venclova, however, first and foremost, is a poet. The only collection of poetry he was allowed to publish in Soviet Lithuania, **Kalbos ženklas (The Sign of Speech, 1972)**, is extremely complex and intellectual, and in Lithuanian critical circles is considered an attempt to renew the Lithuanian poetic language by recasting it in a frame melded from classical and experimental impulses. It is one of the most important books published by a Lithuanian poet in the twentieth century, but it brought Venclova only controversy and difficulty in his native land. Despite his parentage, Venclova fell into official disfavor and was not accepted into the Soviet Lithuanian Writers' Union, an act of exclusion tantamount to artistic death in the Soviet Union because it automatically and officially prevented him from publishing his work in the Party-controlled press and journals. In response, Venclova asked for permission to leave Lithuania. A copy of his letter to the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, in translation, appears in **Lituanus** 22:3 (1976).

His request for an exit visa for himself and his family was denied, and Venclova became increasingly active in the dissident movement. His involvement culminated on December 1, 1976, when he and four other Lithuanians—including the recently condemned Lithuanian Catholic activist Viktoras Petkus—held a press conference for foreign correspondents in a Moscow apartment at which they denounced Soviet violations of human rights and announced the formation of a Committee to monitor Soviet observance in Lithuania of the provisions of the Helsinki Declaration. The text of that announcement and associated materials are reproduced in **Lituanus** 23:1 (1977), pp. 64-67.

Because of his prominent and vocal involvement with that group, Venclova was threatened with a number of sanctions, including forced confinement in a psychiatric hospital. His cause was made public in the West through reports from other dissidents which filtered out of the Soviet Union via Stockholm and through reprintings in the Lithuanian emigre press of the underground **Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika (Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania)**, one of several such underground publications in Soviet Lithuania which revealed and protested against the treatment of dissidents and activists.

In early 1977, Venclova was finally allowed to emigrate to the West, without his family, on a five-year Soviet passport. He was granted an exit visa primarily because of pressure brought by various organizations—including Amnesty International, the Lithuanian Writers' Association in Exile, and P.E.N.—and by a number of prominent individuals, including Venclova's friend, poet Joseph Brodsky, Prof. Czeslaw Milosz of the University of California at Berkeley, and playwright Arthur Miller. Mr. Miller's letter to the First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party is reproduced elsewhere in this journal.

After a brief stay in Paris, Venclova arrived in the United States in February 1977, and shortly thereafter, on February 24, 1977, testified in Washington, D.C., about Soviet violations of the Helsinki Agreement before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Venclova's statement to that Committee is reproduced in **Lituanus** 23:1 (1977), pp. 68-71.

Through the efforts of Prof. Milosz, Venclova became affiliated with the University of California. He spent several months at Berkeley and currently teaches a Lithuanian language course and semiotics at UCLA.

Venclova, however, is not free of harassment even in California. On August 23, 1977, he received a telegram from A. Jermakov, Soviet Consul General in San Francisco, which informed him that the Soviet Supreme Presidium, by a unanimous vote on June 14, 1977, had stripped him of his Soviet citizenship for "actions which blacken the name of the citizens of the Soviet Union." Venclova replied to that pronouncement by issuing the following statement:

"On August 23, 1977, Soviet Consul Jermakov in San Francisco sent me a letter, informing me that the Supreme Presidium of the USSR revoked my Soviet citizenship on June 14, 1977, for 'activities which blacken the name of the citizens of the Soviet Union.'

"As is well known, such actions of the Soviet government are in conflict with the Declaration of Human Rights, the Helsinki Agreement, and elementary justice, and have of late become a constant practice. Soviet citizenship has been taken away from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Maksimov, and others, whose names have since become synonymous with civic courage and honor. I am proud that my modest attempts to defend human rights have earned such appreciation. This indicates that I have not done my civic duty badly, and gives me the strength to continue to do that duty.

"I am somewhat surprised by the fact that my citizenship was not taken away while I was still in the Soviet Union. When I was in that country, during these last years I spoke and wrote as freely as I do and plan to continue doing here abroad.

"In addition, I am not a man without a country. I have a Lithuanian visa. For a Lithuanian, it is a more natural thing than a pass issued by the USSR."

* * *

The poems I have included in this selection have been taken from 98 eilėraščiai, Venclova's collected poems (1956-1976), which was published in Chicago in 1978 by the emigre Lithuanian publishing fund, Algimanto Mackaus Knygų Leidimo Fondas. Those readers interested in seeing other poems by Tomas Venclova in English translation can find the following in these publications: "Tell Fortinbras," translated by Algirdas Landsbergis, in **Lituanus** 23:4 (1977); "The Eleventh Song," "A Poem About Memory," and "In Memory of the Poet. Variant," translated by Jonas Zdanys, in the September 1978 issue of **Poetry**. That issue of **Poetry** also includes a note on Tomas Venclova and a discussion of the difficulties of translation. Finally, "A Poem About Death" and two parts of "Dialogue in Winter" appear in **Selected Postwar Lithuanian Poetry**, edited and translated by Jonas Zdanys (New York: Manyland Books, Inc., 1978). A book length translation of Venclova's poetry is currently being prepared for publication.