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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

JURGIS BALTRUŠAITIS

I, Jurgis Kazimirovič Baltrušaitis, was born into a Roman Catholic peasant family in Paantvardys, near Jurbarkas, county of Raseiniai, province of Kaunas on May 2, 1873. Except for the fragmentary information about the steel-like character of my grandmother, nothing else is known about my ancestors. In a more immediate way, the mysterious poetic flame I must have inherited from my sensitive mother, whose gentle overshadowing image cannot be severed from my life...

Into the magic art of reading and writing I initiated myself at a rather early age through personal efforts at home, but until I was ten my young mind had to be satisfied with only the meager content of a few old calendars and books, which happened to be on the solitary farmstead. But as if to make up for this, my imagination had for its development a far better playground. There were the unforgettable wintry fairy-tales of my mother—often her own inventions—and the sinister Lithuanian legends about monsters, ancient giants and whole tribes of people with dogs' hearts and dogs' heads. How ingenious were the tales of the old itinerant village tailor and the fables of the beggars, who often passed the night in our home! Above all, within a few versts was the river Nemunas, from spring to fall dotted with white sailed barges and flanked by burial mounds and ruins of castles, which according to folklore, dated from the times of the Sword bearers. I was particularly attracted to these burial hills and to the neighboring woods; in their deep thickets, under the roots of ancient trees, one could still see the traces of field ditches, ponds and wells. How I loved to roam along Lithuania's cart-tracks, studded with weather-beaten and leaning wayside crosses, and picture to myself all of mankind plodding its ancient and sorrowful procession to Golgotha...

Strictly speaking, my formal education began when I was ten years old, at which time I went to live at the home of a parish pastor, K. Žekevičius for the duration of the winter. Under his guidance I began to learn arithmetic, geography and Latin, and it is to his noble personality that I am grateful for making possible several important subsequent events which affected my life. Having passed the examination of the elementary school in the fall of 1885, I enrolled at the gymnasium in Kaunas. The meager means provided me by my parents lasted only until the fifth grade, and from that time on, namely, from the time I was 16 years old, I was forced to earn my own living. The new circumstances in which I found myself were especially complicated through the fact that the gymnasium pupils who had no accommodation with close relatives in the town were being forced to move into so-called student quarters, where the monthly rent was forbiddingly high compared to my income from private lessons. For one of these, to cite an example, I received only one rouble a month. It was two years later that I was at last permitted to move as a private tutor into the house of a local grocer, where, by the way, I had but a completely dark pantry to huddle in. There I learned by heart the verses from the **Odyssey** and the **Aeneid** to the accompaniment of a creaking pump, which supplied water to the neighboring steam-bath, and the frequent hellish rattle of a machine that seemed to saw endless numbers of sugarloaf's. At times it was even worse, but I was full of the joy of living and found it easy to press ahead. Only seldom did I feel so depressed that my work as a shepherd lad, with which I started out in life and to which I returned in the summer until my graduation from the gymnasium, seemed like a lost paradise. The spiritual environment, which characterized my gymnasium years, was equally not the best. One could visit the theater only by special permission and this was always granted unwillingly. The reading of books, even from the school library, was not encouraged, and the **Russian Gazette**, as well as the **Political Economy** of Ivaniukov were inexorably banned.

In August 1893 I succeeded in moving to Moscow to continue my studies at the university, where I graduated from the science course in the faculty of mathematics and physics. As soon as I moved to Moscow my personal life and will received new impetus. In addition to science lectures, I attended also lectures in the department of history and philology and very soon devoted myself almost exclusively to the study of literature. The former knowledge of many languages I had gradually acquired gave me immediate access to the best works of human genius — from Sophocles to Ibsen, from Dante to Wilde, from Spaniards to Slowacki. Somewhat later my education was essentially supplemented by frequent and

prolonged sojourns in the West, with which I acquainted myself to various degrees — from Hammerfest to Sicily and from Berlin to Chicago. This was the mold in which my innermost experiences were being shaped.

With reference to my social - political views, my very origin from among the least of this world could cultivate in me only one feeling and one conviction, that man's chief duty is a lifelong fight for social existence which would be equally just and equally abundant for all...

I began to write poetry while still at the gymnasium. During my university years I completed several cycles of poetry and two plays. However, I made my debut in the press only as late as the fall of 1899, in V. S. Miroljubov's magazine "Žurnal dlia vsekh". At the same time with S. A. Poliakov we were able to establish a publishing firm "Skorpion", as the result of our mutual translation of H. Ibsen's play **When We Dead Awaken**. During the following years I was a constant contributor to the almanac "Severnyje cvety" and review "Vesy"; V. Briusov was the chief editor of the latter. Later I made literary contributions to the newspaper "Rus", to various reviews: "Pravda", "Zolotoje runo", "Russkaja mys'" and more recently to "Russkije vedomosti", "Severnyje zapiski", "Zavety" and to the English periodical "The Mask". In addition, I managed to take a very active part in the "Free Theatre", headed by K. A. Mardžanov.

It is very hard for me to speak on remarkable events of my life. Naturally, every human existence knows crises when in one knot or in one solution all our will is being gathered up, all our strength is being proved, when our very fate is being silently revealed to us. Yet with the development and the deepening of life, with a cunning and slow grasp of its meaning and purpose, I for myself am less and less ready to distinguish the great from the small, I am less and less capable of dividing the living threads into the important and the unimportant. For what appeared but small yesterday, becomes again and again the beginning and basis of today, and what seemed by all its outward signs great disappeared without a trace as something casual and fleeting. And could I single out the long row of exceptional hours, like the unforgettable thrill from the first reading of **Eugene Onegin**, the **Demon** of the pages from Edgar A. Poe. Strictly speaking, I know of only one remarkable event in my life: that human life of mine from the cradle to the grave, that mysterious fabric of thoughts and passions, of knowledge, faith and hope, where there has been, is and will be to much suffering, where there has been, is and will be too much joy...

Excluding the collection **The Lily and the Sickle** (Lilija i serp') which is ready for publication, the "Skorpion" published two collections of my poetry: **The Terrestrial Stairway** (Zemnyje stupeni), 1911, and **Mountain Path** (Gornaja tropa), 1912. Among my translations of poetry are **The Vision of Judgment and The Age of Bronze** by G. Byron (edited by A. S. Vengerov and published by Brocktauz - Efron); **Peer Gynt** by H. Ibsen (Universal'naja biblioteka, "Pol'za") and **The Poor Heinrich** by G. Hauptmann ("Pol'za"). My prose translations: tragedies of G. d'Annunzio: **The Dead City, Glory and Gioconda**; dramas of H. Ibsen: **Lady Inger of Ostraat, The Master Builder and Hedda Gabler**; works of K. Hamsun: **Hunger, Viktoria, Game of Life, Evening Afterglow and Queen Tamara**; plays of G. Hauptmann: **The Reconciliation and Schluck and Jau**. In addition to these works, I translated several works of O. Wilde, A. Strindberg, G. Heiberg and others.

My poetry has been translated into Bulgarian, and also a collection of poetry has appeared in Italian entitled **La Scala terrestre** (1912, Baldoni, Florence).

Among articles about my work, I might mention the following: a booklet of S. S. Rozanov **J. Baltrušaitis** (1913, Moscow); an article by G. Polonsky in the periodical "Zaprosy žizni" (Nr. 41, 1912) and the article by J. Aikhenval'd in the newspaper "Reč" (1912.VI.4). In the West articles about me have appeared in the review "La Vie" (Nr. 2, March, 1912, Paris); in "Le Cronache letterarie" (Nr. 102, March, 1912, Rome), "La Patria" (Nr. 237, 26 August, 1913, Bologna) and "Rassegna Contemporanea" (February, 1914, Rome).