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LITHUANIANS IN UPTON SINCLAIR'S *THE JUNGLE*

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In commemoration of America's bicentennial and the first wave of Lithuanian immigrants nearly 100 yrs. ago one calls to mind Upton Sinclair's (1878 - 1968) *The Jungle*, a novel describing the Lithuanian immigrants' plight in the stockyards of Chicago. This year marks the 70 year anniversary of *The jungle* which upon first publication aroused vehement sentiments amidst the American and European public. That same year the novel was translated into many of the European languages, although Upton Sinclair found it difficult to find a publisher in the United States due to the novel's radical character and stark portrayal of the injustices suffered in the stockyards. The Germans responded to *The Jungle* in a practical manner by placing high import duties on meat products entering Germany from the United States. In response to Sinclair's outcry the U. S. government under the leadership of T. Roosevelt passed a series of meat inspection laws. Sinclair's primary concern in writing the novel, however, was to initiate improvement of the working conditions. The U. S. government responded, but with greater emphasis on increasing the rate and quality of production rather than the betterment of the worker's condition. It is for this reason that Sinclair often remarked: "I aimed at the public's heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach." The gruesome stockyard conditions were echoed even in the lines of poets:

It is not so much that it kills us -
We are used to being killed -
But we like to know what fills us
When we pay for being filled.

(Charlotte Perkins Gilman).

In this novel Sinclair portrayed the horrible and degrading working conditions and meat industry of the Chicago stockyards with such accuracy so as to arouse not only the reading public, but also to cause the political hierarchy to be greatly affected. If Dante or Zola were alive today, Sinclair remarks, the conditions rampant in the stockyards would prove appropriate subject matter for the conceptualization of hell. Except for the last three chapters of the novel *The Jungle* was written with such tension and variety of scene changes so as to enable comparison with Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* and his description of Paris underground. *The jungle* becomes a symbol of the corruption, insidiousness, and deception prevalent in society.

In writing the novel with respect to thematic and literary effect Sinclair was greatly influenced by naturalism and such writers as Jack London, although literary critics do not consider Sinclair a naturalist. Sinclair belongs to the realist romantics concerned with portraying good amidst evil forces (J. C. Duram, *Upton Sinclair's Realistic Romanticism*, 1970).

The major character of *The jungle* is Jurgis Rudkus, Lithuanian immigrant coming to the United States in the early 1900's "to seek fortune" with his father, brother, fiancée, stepmother, a relative, and six children (altogether a family of twelve members). Fate and the horrible conditions with which the family is confronted leads to death and degeneration. Jurgis remains steadfast and firm amidst the injustices surrounding him.

Why does Sinclair chose the Lithuanians in place of another ethnic group to play a major role in his novel? The reason is economically-oriented. As one reads further along one finds the answer in the sixth chapter. The German immigrants having experienced the wage injustices within the stockyards moved on to find a better way of life. After the Germans the Irish established themselves for a period of six to seven years within the stockyards in Packingtown ("the Irish City"). After a workers' strike the Irish moved out and their place was taken by the Czechs and Poles, and then by Lithuanians and incoming Slavs.

In his *Memoirs* (1932) and *Autobiography* (1962) Sinclair delineates his reasons for writing *The Jungle* and for his choice of a Lithuanian as the major character. Upon his graduation from Columbia University in New York City as a journalist the editor of *Appeal to Reason* invited him to conduct a study of the working conditions in the stockyards of Chicago. Sinclair was able to identify with the workers' plight. The author came to Chicago in October 1904 and lived amidst the stockyard workers, visiting their homes and listening to their experiences. Sinclair was able to directly observe the stockyard conditions by actually joining the ranks of the workers and in this way obtained an inside view of the reality of the stockyards. By directly communicating with the workers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, and policemen the author was able to complement his originally scanty notes. Within a month Sinclair accumulated the necessary factual information and decided to place the facts into a literary context. What was still necessary to fulfill his idea was a set of characters for his novel. While walking through the stockyard neighborhoods Sinclair

fortuitously came upon a wedding procession. Having stopped to observe the procession Sinclair was persuaded to join it. Therefore one finds *The Jungle* commencing with a wedding ceremony. Thus within the novel one finds characters such as the young wedding couple, the mother and father, cousins, and a musician. After a period of about two months Sinclair began to put together the facts for his novel. The novel was written in Princeton, New Jersey, where Sinclair owned a farm (M. C. Sinclair, *Southern Belle*, 1962). Sinclair's novels were mostly written through accumulation of facts by observation. Among these novels are *The Metropolis* (descriptive of life in New York City), *Oil!* and *Boston*.

In the beginning of *The Jungle* Sinclair presents his major characters at the Lithuanian wedding: the groom and his bride (Jurgis Rudkus and Ona Lukošaitis), a cousin, and the "spiritus movens" of the wedding, Marija Berczynskas (Berčinskaitė or Beržinskaitė). In charge of the wedding table we find "aunt" Elzbieta, Kotryna, and the old Majauskienė. In charge of the ceremonial speech we find Jurgis' father "uncle" Antanas and Jokūbas Šedvilas, a delicatessen owner on Halsted street (the names of the major characters are given in their Lithuanian form). Other couples that we find are Alena Jasaitytė and Joseph Račius, Jadvyga Marcinkus and her fiancée Michael. Tamošius Kušleika is the musician. As evidenced by the author's descriptions one could speculate that the newly emigrated Lithuanians came from around Dzūkija and the Vilnius region, and other forested regions of Lithuania. Many of the above mentioned characters play minor roles within the novel because most of the author's attention is concentrated in the character of Jurgis Rudkus.

In observing the wedding, Sinclair was fascinated with Lithuanian folk songs and thus in his novel includes a stanza in original Lithuanian verse of one of the songs, "Sudiev, kvietkeli, tu brangiausias." If the author of the song, Antanas Vienažindys, had been mentioned in the novel, the poet would have become world renowned, since *The Jungle* was translated into thirty-six languages.

It is necessary to consider just how strongly the Lithuanian character is delineated and preserved in *The Jungle*. Within a period of seven weeks of visiting homes and observing the Lithuanian lifestyle Sinclair no doubt became acquainted with a large percentage of Lithuanians in Chicago. However, it was impossible for the author to come to full understanding of the Lithuanian soul and to more deeply understand Lithuanian customs, culture, and attitudes. Sinclair had accumulated factual material before even becoming acquainted with the major characters of his novel.

Jurgis, although an uneducated individual, is portrayed as the embodiment of physical strength, endurance, diligence, and temperance. However upon misfortunes his wife's death in childbirth and subsequent death of his child -- Jurgis is thrown off balance and thus becomes the conventional rambler. This is highly contrary to the Lithuanian character which is usually portrayed as abiding by the "Golden Mean" and avoiding extremities in action. Among other inaccurate descriptions is the comparison of Jurgis to the Slavs. This is highly unlikely and nonsensical and should not be emphasized in works such as *Encyclopedia Americana*, V. Bennet's *Reader Encyclopedia* or H. R. Keller's *Reader's Guide*.

Another inaccurate description is the portrayal of Jurgis' wife as she is sexually misused by her "boss". Nothing is said of her inner strength and endurance. It is the influence of naturalism and materialism that led Sinclair to such descriptions. One must remember, however, that Sinclair is not a naturalist by literary standards (J. C. Duram, *Upton Sinclair's Realistic Romanticism*, 1970).

Among other erroneous descriptions inconsistent with Lithuanian character is "aunt" Elzbieta's surrender to Jurgis' new ideas, which he himself does not yet firmly uphold. Even more erroneous is the delineation of Marija Berčinskaitė as incapable to resist misfortune. These descriptions are not representative! What is even less acceptable is that the characters are portrayed without a sense of patriotism and affiliation to the mother country, Lithuania. It is a known fact that many of the Lithuanian immigrants possessed a longing for their mother country even though returning was an impossibility. However, Sinclair's motive was to portray Jurgis Rudkus as America's social reformer and "apostle." It can be concluded that the characters that feature in *The Jungle* are stereotyped and without an individual identity.

In writing *The Jungle* Sinclair includes various elements of his own life as evidenced in his memoirs. He wrote with true compassion and insight into the stockyard workers' plight, juxtaposing his own family experiences with the workers' difficulties. He writes in his memoir, "Have I not experienced what it means to suffer the winters of Chicago?" Ona (Jurgis' wife) was Corydon (Sinclair's first wife's surname), who spoke Lithuanian fluently. Sinclair further writes, "it was our youngest son who fell under the blow of sickness (p. 158)."

Jurgis Rudkus no doubt is the author's idealistic exponent. Marija's leaving home to "work" urges Jurgis to seek social justice, yet he becomes passive in the last three chapters of *The Jungle* when he listens to Ostrinki's and Schliemann's (Swedish) exposition on socialism. Schliemann, an advocate of Nietzsche, believes in the propagation of Nietzsche's "gospel." One of the views that Schliemann so adamantly supports is that elimination of competition leads to elimination of corruption and vice. Although an intellectual, Schliemann often remarks about the wasteful practices of the manufacturing industry. For example he speaks of the waste of time in manufacturing a variety of sample products when one type of sample should suffice.

Generally Sinclair's conception of socialism is of an individualistic, Utopian, and religious nature as evidenced by the remarks of the writer Winston Churchill (U. Sinclair. *My Life time in Letters*, 1962). In the 29th chapter of *The Jungle* one finds the following statement: "It was the new religion of humanity — or you might say it was the fulfillment of the old religion, since it implied but the literal application of all the teachings of Christ." With such an individualistic tendency it was impossible for Sinclair to participate within the framework of the Socialist Party and thus he withdrew in 1933. The author also greatly rejected extreme socialism (communism). Sinclair was preoccupied with religious themes, but as evidenced by later writings his conception of Christianity was individualistic as well.

Sinclair's primary objective in writing was to seek social justice and as his instrument of thought he chose the Lithuanian immigrant. Through him Sinclair chose to bring injustices to the foreground. Upon the publication of *The Jungle* Winston Churchill, England's renowned Prime Minister, wrote an enthusiastic review. Sinclair later noted: "Would Churchill have remarked in an enthusiastic way if the gruesome working conditions in England were revealed?"

In 1931 Sinclair was a candidate for the Nobel Prize. The committee to elect the laureate consisted of renowned members such as J. Dewey, A. Einstein, B. Russell, and others. *The Jungle* was given much credit both literally and thematically for its excellent portrayal of social injustice. However, Professor Quin of the University of Pennsylvania depreciated the literary value of *The Jungle* and thus the Nobel Prize was withheld from Sinclair.

For this reason C. A. Andrews, Professor of literature at the University of Iowa states (introduction to *The Jungle*, 1965 edition): "As a novel the book fails in the end because the hero almost disappears from view and the solutions offered are presented in a chapter which is little more than a socialist tract — with Jurgis only a passive observer of the ideas of others. The ending must be regarded as a *deus ex machina* which is altogether weak and unconvincing."

In general *The Jungle* is considered to be Sinclair's best work, written with the enthusiasm of a youth. One cannot even compare *The Jungle* to the series of Sinclair's later works. The Lithuanians are credited with their role in bringing the gruesome workers' conditions to the foreground. After the second World War the waves of immigrants were no longer subjected to such conditions. Thus, Sinclair and his hero had accomplished their goals of social justice. The Chicago stockyards had already begun to disintegrate.