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MEMOIRS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Two noted graduates of the University of Vilnius in two distinct eras present here enlightening glimpses of its life in recent history. Czeslaw Milosz, the noted Polish poet and scholar, Nobel laureate in literature (1980), graduated from the University of Vilnius, then called the Stephen Bathory University, during the years when Vilnius was under Polish rule, years of intense nationalism and conflict between Lithuania and Poland. **Tomas Venclova** studied at the University of Vilnius when the Lithuanian academic community began to revive after years of Stalinist repressions. Their thoughts, presented in the following articles, were expressed at a public commemoration of the University of Vilnius quadracentennial, held at the University of California, Los Angeles, in May of 1979.

Courtyard of Adam Mickiewicz

Legend of the University

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I entered the University of Wilno in 1929 when we celebrated its 350th anniversary. It was precisely 50 years ago. And a whole life has gone by since. Today I would like to tell you, not necessarily about the period between the wars, but rather, about some legendary aspects of reality as seen from a perspective of today. For undoubtedly there is a legend of our University which has been growing with time. And it is a strange feeling to observe the growth of a legend around persons whom one once knew as his colleagues, insignificant youngsters, without any, as it seemed, chance to become historical figures. One meditates then on how the legends are made, what contributes to them.

In present day Poland, the legend of the University of Wilno is due to the very strong impact its alumni have had in the past decades in various domains of life, including politics. This applies both to the Catholic and the Communist sides. When I assumed my profession of writer in the new, "People's" Poland in 1945, I profited to some extent from the fact that there was a "Wilno mafia" among the new rulers.

Let me take a look at the components of the legend. First, it is a memory of the period when the University functioned under the Czar Alexander I and was the best institution of learning in the whole Russian Empire. It produced the eminent Polish romantic poets: Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Slowacki (who was a son of a professor of literature and a brilliant student in law). There were several prose writers whose careers developed there, to mention only Józef Ignacy Kraszewski who wrote much on Lithuania, as well as a whole group of writers whom I should consider as both Lithuanian and Polish, for they wrote in Polish on Lithuanian subjects — in the first place historian Teodor Narbutt. The whole movement of Romanticism, so central for the history of modern Polish literature, is connected in the minds of every Pole, with our University where it originated.

Before I speak of the second period, after the University was reopened in 1918, I would like to make a digression. When traveling to Los Angeles from Berkeley by plane, I tried to remember the names of my colleagues from a high school in Wilno. Here are some of them: Alchimowicz, Blinstrub, Bobkis, Bolbot, Czebi-Ogly, Dabkus, Meyer, Meysztowicz, Mikutowicz, Mirza-Murzicz, Swolkień, Siemaszko, Wolejko, Zawadzki. You may guess or play detectives as to the origin of these names: Tartar, Lithuanian, Polish, and Danish. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, multi-national and multi-lingual, survived in our city and in our University, though it was a Polish language university and the city belonged to Poland. But it was a very different university from other universities within the Polish state. I do not know how to explain its specific character. Perhaps by tradition — a tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Or by other factors: geography perhaps, or something difficult to define — an aura of the city itself. In any case, my student years were marked by a permanent conflict between students' organizations of a standard, "Buerschenschaft" type and a quite curious group to which I belonged, without any analogy at any other university of Poland, the Club of Vagabonds. The "Buerschenschaft" type "corporations" were modeled upon similar "corporations" in Dorpat and Riga where many young Poles studied in the XIXth century. In my time the "corporations" were the mainstay of the Polish patriotic and conservative mentality, while we were a sort of hippies differing from our pro-establishment colleagues, even by our attire — we were wearing, as a sign of protest, large black berets with a red or golden tassel. There was also the Club of Vagabonds — Seniors, an alumni organization very influential in the University and the city. In a curious way, all that seemed to repeat the pattern of the 1820's when Mickiewicz and his colleagues founded the Society of Philomaths, which was connected with the local free-masonic lodges bearing picturesque names — "The Zealous Lithuanian" for instance. The most active among the professors attended then the humorous ceremonies of the Society of Scoundrels (Towarzystwo Szubrawców). As to our century, the Club of Vagabonds gave birth to a politically oriented Club of Intellectuals — the pretentiousness of that name reflects its leftist sympathies. But the students also had a Catholic organization, "The Renaissance" (Odrodzenie) which did not fit the pattern of Polish Catholicism of that period either and searched for new formulas.

Doctoral dissertations are today written in Poland on our literary group *Žagary*, of which I was one of the founders in 1931 together with the poets Teodor Bujnicki and Jerzy Zagórski. Whether we chose the name because of its symbolic connotations or because we liked the sound of the Lithuanian word, I am not sure. In any case, *Žagary* is today considered as one of the landmarks in Polish literature of the period between the two wars and is largely identified with the so-called Second Vanguard.

Žagary was a periodical for which the group was named. At first it appeared as a supplement to a local newspaper, "Slowo". "Slowo", one of three newspapers of Polish language in our city (there were also those published in other languages) represented what may be called a Tory orientation, a rather exotic thing in Poland. Its editor, Stanislaw Mackiewicz, made proof of his great tolerance by giving a tribune to young men — sarcastic, turbulent, violent in their writing and radically inclined, either in literature or politics or both. Such an alliance could not last long: protests of indignant readers and the noise in the press forced the editor to stop publication of our supplement, but at that moment our group had already acquired a kind of fame, more, it is true, by its programmatic pronouncements than by literary works. Soon its members each went their own way. Some became Communists and created their own periodicals — "Po Prostu", "Karta". If poets in our group, like myself, were protected from a doctrinary way of thinking, it was by our sense of humor. It is not superfluous to mention in this place one of the contributors to our review: a poet by the name of Aron Pirmas. He never existed. We invented him, in other words, we wrote his poems and signed with his name, which hinted at the mixture of nationalities in our city. Aron Pirmas wrote in Polish, but in his poems he called himself an amalgam of a Jew and Lithuanian. And our joke tells something of the atmosphere in our circle of friends.

I return to the past few decades in Poland since the last war. When I started to publish in Krakow in the Spring of 1945, practically everything in the press and new publishing houses depended upon the word of Zofia Dembińska, widow of my colleague from *Žagary*, who had been executed by the Nazis. Her maiden name was Westfalewicz: this family's two sisters — one became a Catholic nun, another, Zofia, became a Communist. My colleagues from Wilno were in the government or received diplomatic posts abroad. On the other hand, the Catholic press and the intellectual milieu of the Catholic University of Lublin would be unthinkable without the writers and professors who had to leave Wilno. One interesting detail about the Catholic University itself. Marija Gimbutas mentioned the closing down of the University by the Czarist authorities after the uprising of 1831. As a result of those measures, the department of theology was moved to St. Petersburg and

reorganized there as a theological academy. After World War I a new Catholic center of learning in Lublin inherited the library of that academy, originally taken from Wilno to Russia and then returned by the Soviet Union to Poland. Today scholars of the Lublin University like to stress that link with the famous Alma Mater.

I am proud to say that I published my first poems in a yearly publication of our University, which appeared under the title, "Alma Mater Vilnensis". And I remain a patriot of a country which does not exist anymore and which cannot be restored: The Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Perhaps some historical entities survive in a much more subtle manner than one would guess looking at the maps. In any case, not only the legend but the people from Wilno played a considerable role in Poland in the last decades. In the worst Stalinist years the departments of humanities in Toruń and Lublin, both composed of scholars "repatriated" from the Soviet Lithuania, maintained a high standard of independent learning in spite of great odds. This applies particularly to the study of Polish literature and of classical philology. Also, Poland possesses a center for Lithuanian studies at the University of Poznań, thanks to an eminent historian, an immigrant from Lithuania, Henryk Lowmiański, and his disciples. In literature, the impact of the poets of *Žagary* upon post-war Polish poetry is a universally recognized fact. But some "immigrant" prose writers count among the most prominent, too: Tadeusz Konwicki, Pawel Jasienica (whose true name was Beynar — of a Tartar origin), Antoni Golubiew. And a writer whose work fascinates today's young generations after his death in exile, Witold Gombrowicz, who always stressed the Samogitian origin of his family. One can say, without exaggeration, that to come from Lithuania is a mark of distinction for a Polish writer, as it is for an English writer to come from Ireland.

The election of a Polish Pope would not have been possible, in my opinion, without a serious change in the intellectual climate of Polish Catholicism. Various factors contributed to it, but for me personally, the part played by the alumni of our University is obvious. Two centers in post-war Poland have been the focusing energies of the Catholic intelligentsia: the Catholic University of Lublin, where the present Pope once joined the faculty as a young professor; and a publishing enterprise in Krakow — a weekly "Tygodnik Powszechny" and a monthly "Znak". Few countries in the world possess Catholic press of such a high level as these periodicals. The present John Paul II was at first a reader and later a contributor to that press which was created out of nothing in 1945 by Jerzy Turowicz, a man who largely deserves cordial friendship of the present Pope. Turowicz continued and brought to fruition the work of intellectual renewal, initiated before the war by a small Catholic magazine, "Verbum", published in Warsaw. If, however, we look through the list of his close collaborators in the first postwar years and during the intensified persecution of Catholics in the years 1949-1956, we discover that the most active supporters and contributors came from our University. They, too, as instructors at the University of Lublin, carried on close relations between that university and the Krakow periodicals. Quite symbolically, the lettering of the title "Tygodnik Powszechny" was designed by an artist trained at the Department of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University.

The greatest Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, has never been in Krakow or in Warsaw, and his name is forever tied to the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. His legend sustains other legends, more recent but persistent. In my conversations with young people from Poland, I have discovered that Wilno is for them a kind of sanctuary which intrigues them and transforms every voyage there (a rare event) into a pilgrimage. I have not noticed in them any tendency to revindicate the city as a part of a hypothetical independent Poland. What is vivid in them, is an awareness of a common Polish and Lithuanian heritage — and the Lithuanians appear to them as guardians of the sanctuary. Such an attitude seems to me promising, favorable to friendship between our two nations.