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THE DOUBLE FATE OF THE LITHUANIAN GENTRY

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Lovers of metaphors may wonder what is meant by *double fate*. Most historians would write vividly of one *destiny* or state that there are *many destinies*. It is a question of *one* or *many*. I would agree with those who think that there are no identical people, and their destinies are not the same. People who are used to the textbook version of the Polonization of the Lithuanian gentry may get the impression from the title of this paper that *the double fate* is connected especially with the question of the national identity of the upper class of society. It would not be a big mistake to think that the destiny of the Lithuanian elite was similar to that of the Poles. In that case, the idea of a different destiny for the Lithuanian gentry would appear well founded: part of the Lithuanian gentry took part in the Lithuanian national movement and the life of the restored Lithuanian state. The national identity of the Lithuanian gentry is and will remain one of the most challenging questions in Lithuanian historical scholarship.

Here, however, we are dealing with a different kind of double fate. It is the *historiographic destiny* of the Lithuanian gentry, described in works of historians in the last century, and their destiny, connected with some unexpected tendencies in the Lithuanian gentry's life, recently raised from the past. What is unexpected about the historical problems of the Lithuanian gentry? What is the difference between historiographic destiny and real destiny? How can the difference be traced? The answer is this: It is well known that, since the time of *Aušra (Dawn)*, the Lithuanian gentry have been considered to be foreign to the Lithuanian nation. The roots of modern Lithuanians have mostly been connected with the countryside. The ideological grounds of young Lithuanian nationalism ("We are the nation of peasants") were also acceptable to theorists of *class struggle* in the Soviet period. With the help of textbooks, this opinion has become the universal view. The historic consciousness of several generations of Lithuanians has been based on this historiographic view. Only after our singing revolution and the restoration of in-dependence were societies of the Lithuanian gentry, as well as the Society of the gentry of Žemaitija, established, and a new interest in family trees arose. How can this be explained? Can this tendency be seen as a desperate attempt to compensate for the poverty of our society or an imitation of the descendants of the Russian gentry? Or, perhaps, this can be interpreted as a rightful, authentic, spontaneous reaction to something hidden by history that has become free, together with some other general characteristics of Lithuanian society. Such unexpected circumstances allow us to trace the double fate of the Lithuanian gentry (historiographic and real).

Historiographic Fate

Nowadays, nobody would be surprised by the statement that historians do not always tell the truth. Like their readers, historians are children of their epoch. A historian who tackles problems that are not interesting to his contemporaries would not be understood by members of his society. Of course, there are exceptions - some works were better understood by later generations than by contemporaries. Those who do their best to satisfy their readers' curiosity usually do not serve the muses; they serve the readers. In this way, a *history* that has more in common with the present than with the *past* may be created - one may choose among the more primitive examples of Soviet historiography. However, some deviations in historiographic destiny are connected with more complex reasons. It is not always possible to explain them. Over several centuries of historical science there were all kinds of deviations: falsification of historical sources, as well as unjust accusations of falsification. For instance, for several decades, Teodoras Narbutas - the author of the nine volume *History* - was considered to be a falsifier of Lithuanian annals until later investigators proved that the Lithuanian chronicle of Bychow

really existed. On the other hand, even a historian who does not falsify facts deliberately may misinterpret past events for some other reason. The historiographic destiny of the Lithuanian gentry seems to be determined by such circumstances.

Reading the works of prewar Lithuanian historians, one can see that the focus of researchers was not the upper stratum of society, the Lithuanian gentry. Konstantinas Avižonis's *Lietuvos bajorai Vazų laikais (Lithuanian Gentry in the Vasa Period)* and Augustinas Janulaitis's *Lietuvos bajorai ir jų seimeliai XIX amžiuje (Lithuanian Gentry and Their Sejm in the XIX Century)*¹ published before World War II, are notable exceptions. However, there is no denying the absence of the investigation of the gentry in Lithuanian historiography. There are a number of books on the history of the peasants, but none on the history of the gentry.

For six decades after the publication of Janulaitis's book, no one wrote about the fate of the Lithuanian gentry in modern times. One of the reasons was that this stratum of old citizens was considered to be foreign, totally Polonized and even socially dangerous. The concept of complete Polonization determined the Lithuanian gentry's role of the dead. Lithuanian historians were inclined to search for something close (not foreign) in Lithuania's past. *Searching for Lithuanians in the history of Lithuania* was the aim of the young historians of the 1930s, who gathered a round *Lithuanian History*, edited by A. Šapoka². Therefore, everything that was considered *not Lithuanian* (or not only Lithuanian) was not found interesting by local investigators. This especially concerned the processes and events of the nineteenth century that determined the character of the modern Lithuanian nation. To cut a long story short, historians did not write about the Lithuanian gentry because they were considered to be foreign.

However, this was not the only reason not to create a picture of the gentry in Lithuanian historiography. The relations between the landlords and the country people were very important too. In the period of the national movement and later - between the World Wars - there was a strong feeling of the gentry's injustices toward the people...

Baisioji baudžiavos skriauda per amžius slėgė valstiečius ir kruvinu skausmu rusena širdyse kiekvieno lietuvių, kilusio iš šiaudinės pastogės. Skriaudos nepamiršta ir gyvieji palikuonys. Lietuvos dvaras - sinonimas išnaudojimo, neteisybės, priverstinio nutautėjimo.

(The dreadful offense of serfdom oppressed the peasants and iš štili burning painfully in the hearts of Lithuanians who came from the countryside. Their living descendants do not forget the offense. The Lithuanian estate is a synonym for exploitation, injustice and compulsory denationalization.)³

These words were not written by some Soviet author but by Vanda Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė, who published her article "Lietuvos bajorų palikuonys" (The Descendants of the Lithuanian Gentry) in *Sėja*, a magazine out of Chicago.

However, in making this statement, the Lithuanian diaspora historian was trying to draw conclusions that were quite unlike those made by Soviet writers. In Soviet Marxist historiography, the peasants' hatred for the lord's manor had to fit into the methodological categories of absolute class conflict (as this was necessary for the ends of Marxist - or, more accurately, pseudo-Marxist demagoguery, which could be summarized, if we simplify grossly, in the following words: feudal lords abused the peasants, exploited the workers and used the fruits of their labor, and so are not worthy of being remembered). Since historical scholarship is to some extent a tool to serve memory, this Marxist position helped remove the gentry from the list of topics for research. Vanda Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė herself has called attention to another side of the same problem. She noted that, when discussing the social conflicts between the lord and the peasant,

...it is often forgotten that a system of social injustice ruled not only in Lithuania but also in most of Europe for many centuries... Many people should remember that there were not nearly as many harsh injunctions in Lithuania in this terrible system of serfdom as in Germany, where the "ius primae noctis" was supported by law.⁴

Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė has tried to show that social distancing in the past is not an obstacle to present-day Germans to feel respect for traditions of their feudal knights and "exploiters," while the German people today include the descendants of both plebeians and nobles. To be convinced of this, we simply have to consider how much research German historians and those of other Western European countries devote to research on the culture of the nobility and to the writing of works on the everyday life of their historic elites.

Most Lithuanian historians, especially in Soviet times, chose a different path. The past was, so to speak, "degentrified." When they wrote about Lithuanian intellectuals, they had to find "representatives of the people." If they did have to deal with the noble origins of one or another activist, often they passed over this fact in silence or referred to it as unimportant. Thus, for example, in writing the biography of Dionizas Poška, his noble origins (he was the owner of a medium-sized estate with its peasants) are completely overshadowed by the descriptions he created in his works of the rising peasant (Samogitian and Lithuanian serfs). Dionizas Poška's heroes, as a literary critic might say, almost totally upstage the respected and influential personality of the nobleman of Samogitia. All of this was already evident in nineteenth-century Russian cultural politics for the so-called Northwestern territories. For it was important for Russian imperial policy to show that the "Lithuanian people" had been, and were, a placid peasant community, for whom the rebelliousness and ambitions of "Polonized gentry nobles" to reestablish the old Lithuanian state were quite foreign. To put it another way, attempts were made to convince the Russian (and European) society of those times that Lithuanians were a people without a nobility of their own, without their own political elite, and so without their own traditions of political life. Thus the nineteenth-century Russian strategy of a "degentrified" Lithuania was reflected in the pages of Lithuanian historiography. All members of the upper class of Lithuania became "Poles" in this literature.

Another trend of Lithuanian historiography was less noticeable; it appeared before the Second World War, but gained strength only in the postwar diaspora. Its first representatives can be considered to have been the brothers Vaclovas and Mykolas Biržiška, along with Vanda Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė, who has already been mentioned. The latter had already begun research on nineteenth-century nobles' estates in Samogitia for her Master's thesis at Vytautas Magnus University. However, this short work, published in the 1930s, was written in a very cautious manner and did not touch upon the wider circumstances of the fate of the gentry.

In his memoirs, Mykolas Biržiška, who was a leftist - although of gentry origin - offered a very realistic assessment of the mission of the Lithuanian gentry in the period of national revival. For him, the gentry as a class was a relic of the past. Making a show of oneself as a noble seemed to him a hollow pastime. Attempts to maintain older traditions of a ruling class for the new Lithuanian nation seemed unreal and might even complicate Lithuanian identity. Professor Biržiška contemptuously recalled the story of the founder of the Lithuanian nobles' association, which operated between the two world wars. Jonas Gediminas Beržanskis, who called himself a prince and who came from a small village in Pluogas in the parish of Vieکشniai:

Now if he had devoted those twelve years that he gave to finding documents to prove his princely status to collecting historical material about his own region in those very same archives, how much he could have contributed to Lithuanian historical research!⁵

wrote Biržiška in his book *Lietuvių tautos kelias į naują gyvenimą* (*The Lithuanian People's Road to a New Life*). Jonas Beržanskis, who was a well-known contributor to the Lithuanian national renaissance periodicals *Aušra* and *Varpas* was not considered to be psychologically abnormal, but from a social point of view his attitude seemed bizarre.

However, Mykolas Biržiška's sceptical attitude referred only to attempts by the gentry to maintain itself as a conscious (self-conscious) class in recent times. He treated the role of the gentry in Lithuania's past with respect, disagreeing with those who defended the theory of total Polonization of the gentry. He wrote,

For a long time now, it has been correctly repeated that Lithuanianism... survived only under a thatched roof. But it is incorrect to draw from this statement the conclusion - as is often done - that only rural Lithuanianism was maintained. It is true that this formed the older, strongest and oldest foundation for a new Lithuanian culture, but it must be added that the survival of Lithuanianism was also supported by the gentry, which also lived under thatched roofs, and whose influence was felt both in the countryside and in Lithuanian culture.⁶

The ideas of this professor, who found himself in exile, went along with the argument offered by Mykolas Riomeris in 1915: that it is wrong to think that the Lithuanian gentry was Polonized in its entirety. Class boundaries and ethnic boundaries were not the same in Lithuania. According to Riomeris, this simplified interpretation of Lithuanian ethno social structures was the product of political demagoguery that could provoke a Lithuanian modernizing pathology. Riomeris demonstrated that Polonization affected not only the upper ranks of the Lithuanian society but also the peasant class, especially in the southeast part of the country.

In the last decade, the beginning of which practically coincided with the new surge of Lithuanian national renaissance, this historiographical tendency was revived by a group of Lithuanian historians of the younger generation grouped around the publication, *Historical Research in the Lithuanian Renaissance*. So far, nine volumes of this series have appeared.

The basic thesis of this school refers to the fate of the gentry as upholders of the old political traditions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It denies the statement, which up to then dominated Lithuanian historiography, that the Lithuanian people began modernization with an incomplete social structure: that is, without a noble class. In opposition to this established opinion, efforts were made to demonstrate *that only the Lithuanian noble class itself reached modern times in an incomplete state*.⁷ A large part of this social class was Polonized, and this class's social activism was almost totally absorbed into that of the Polish people. In general, interest in the history of the gentry has grown sharply so that it is likely that historical attitudes to the fate of the gentry may be considerably modified.

* * *

It is possible to reconsider the situation of the Lithuanian gentry at the close of the 19th century because of the existence of a broad range of historical sources. Even the use of old and well-known statistical facts can give impetus to the development of new interpretations, allowing us to explain the real relations among class, native language and national identity in Lithuanian society.

In order to evaluate the gentry statistically, we can once more use the first general census of inhabitants of the Russian empire of 1897 (earlier statistics did not include such information). However, it must be kept in mind that, in the 1897 census, nationality was established according to only one criterion - native language.

Thus, in 1897 about 2.7 million people lived in the territory of present-day Lithuania that belonged to Russia (in contemporary Lithuanian historiography it is customary to equate the Lithuanian territory of the 19th century with those districts whose centers now belong to the Republic of Lithuania). Of these, 87.3 percent lived in the rural areas and villages, while 12.7 percent lived in towns. Class structure was as follows: peasants formed 73.4 percent, townsmen, 20 percent, and nobles, 5.2 percent, with the percentages for other classes not being indicated. The native language of 58.3 percent of people living in present Lithuanian territory (except the Klaipėda region) was Lithuanian. In the census for

Samogitia, Lithuanian and Samogitian were indicated separately, 13.3 percent were Jewish and 10.3 percent, Poles, 14.6 percent spoke one of the Eastern Slavic languages.

The class structure of towns and bigger cities was as follows: 56.9 percent were townsmen, 29.2 percent were peasants, 8.2 percent nobles, 2.4 percent were administrators, 1.1 percent were merchants and 2.2 percent representatives of other classes. From the point of view of native language, the demographic structure of towns was as follows: 42.1 percent of Lithuanian townsmen said that their native language was Yiddish, 24 percent, Polish, 21.5 percent, one of the eastern Slavic languages and 7.8 percent said it was Lithuanian. It is not possible from these statistical facts to determine what languages dominated public town life, but it is known that it was Polish and Russian. Lithuanian, like Yiddish, was most often a means of communication among those people for whom this was their native language.⁸

Now let us analyze relations between language and class. The inhabitants whose native language was Lithuanian (or Samogitian) - and only these are considered Lithuanians in historical works - belonged to the following classes: 93.3 percent were peasants, 3.9 percent were townsmen and 2.5 percent were nobles. However, in the Kaunas administrative district this breakdown was a little different among those whose native language was the Samogitian dialect: 86.6 percent peasants, 6.3 percent townsmen and up to 6.7 percent nobles (and this after all uprisings and their repression!)

These figures seem to confirm the claim for the peasant basis of the Lithuanian nation. But, on the other hand, we should look more closely at those figures which we have not paid much attention to up to now. The native language of almost one-third - 27.7 percent - of the nobles by birth, living on what is present-day Lithuanian territory, was Lithuanian. There were even more such nobles in the Kaunas administrative district - 36.6 percent. Of course, the native language of the majority of Lithuanian nobles (59.4 percent) was Polish.⁹

Even in the Vilnius administrative district, the number of nobles who considered Polish their native language was less than in the whole Lithuanian territory - on the average, just 51.6 percent. The native language of 32.5 percent of the nobles in the Vilnius administrative district was Bielorussian, while 10 percent was Russian and 4 percent (!) Lithuanian. In all, nobles in the Vilnius district comprised 4.4 percent of all inhabitants (In the Kaunas district they comprised 6.4 percent and in the Suwalki district, only 0.6 percent).

On the other hand, among the people who lived in the territory of present-day Lithuania and whose native language was Polish, it was not the nobles, but the peasants, who dominated: the latter comprised 40.9 percent, while nobles formed 30.2 percent and townsmen, 26.4 percent.¹⁰

During the period of national renaissance, as well as later, the integration of the gentry into modern Lithuanian national social structures took place very painfully. Land reform acts of the 1920s carried out by the governments of Independent Lithuania were the most important and radical means used to alter the economic basis of the noble class. During the interwar period, between ethnic nationalism and the Bolshevik threat, the heirs of the gentry felt very uneasy in Lithuania. The conflict with Poland over Vilnius heightened Lithuanian suspicions. In regard to "Polish-speaking Lithuanian gentry," Vanda Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė has noted that:

During the period of independence, most former nobles who took part in the work of establishing our state hid their noble origins. Some of them were afraid that the persecution of those of noble origin might begin among us as it had in Bolshevik Russia, while others simply were trying to avoid the derision of their fellow citizens.¹¹

The most amazing example of this was the wife of the famous poet Henrikas Radauskas. It was only before her death that she admitted to V. Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė that her mother had been a real princess, Czartoriska, and showed her their family coat of arms, the Vytytis (an armed knight on horseback, the state emblem of Lithuania).

At the present time, observing how the descendants of Lithuanian nobles are creating organizations, it has to be admitted that the historiographical fate of the nobility deviated too much from its real fate. Thus there is a need to expand interdisciplinary research in these fields, and these might be of help in current life. For there is a real danger that the interest felt by the descendants of the nobility in family histories will turn into comical examples of pomposity and amateurism.

¹ Avižonis, K. *Lietuvos bajorai Vazų laikais* (Lithuanian Gentry in the Vasa period).

² Šapoka, A. *Lietuvos istorija* (Lithuanian History).

³ Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė V. *Lietuvos bajorų palikuonys* (The Descendants of the Lithuanian Gentry). *Sėja*, 1974, Nr. 3, p. 25-45.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Biržiška, M. *Lietuvių tautos kelias į naują gyvenimą* (*The Lithuanian People's Road to a New Life*). Los Angeles, 1952, 1957.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Lietuvių nacionalinis išsivadavimo judėjimas (ligi 1904 m.) Lithuanian National Liberation Movement [until 1904]*. Vilnius: Mokslas, 1987, p. 52-54.

⁸ Aleksandravičius, E., Kulakauskas, A. *Carų valdžioje: Lietuva XIX amžiuje* (*Under the Tsars: Lithuania in the 19th Century*). Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1996.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Daugirdaitė-Sruogienė, V. *Lietuvių bajorų palikuonys (The Descendants of the Lithuanian Gentry)*. *Sėja*, 1974, Nr. 3.