

## JONAS ŠLIŪPAS (1861-1944)— PHYSICIAN-ACTIVIST, WRITER—A NOTE

"Physician, publicist, and nationalist liberal activist," begins an encyclopedia entry on Jonas Šliūpas, to which "erudite maverick" and "freethinker" could be added. Šliūpas carved out fascinating careers on both sides of the Atlantic as one of the best known Lithuanian personages. His brother Rokas (1865-1959) became a famous activist-physician in the homeland, while his daughter Aldona (1886-1980) practiced medicine in the United States. Brothers Rokas and Silvestras (1859-1911) engaged in book smuggling during the tsarist ban of 1864-1904.

Jonas was born in Rakandžiai, County of Šiauliai, on February 23, 1861. His uncle, Fr. Aloyzas Šliūpas, helped finance his early schooling. He studied history, philology and law at the University of Moscow from 1880 to 1881 and natural sciences at St. Petersburg in 1882. His student radicalism earned him three months imprisonment and a ban on further studies at any Russian university. Briefly, he edited the Prussian-based monthly *Auszra* [Dawn], the voice of the infant nationalist movement and was expelled by Prussian authorities.

He came to the United States in 1884, where, subsidized by clergy, he entered the University of Maryland Medical School and became a physician in 1891, setting up private practice in the anthracite district of Pennsylvania. He was to remain there for thirty-five years, constantly on the lecture circuit, clearly establishing himself as the "father" of socialism and freethinking among his ethnic brothers and sisters.

As one of the few émigré intellectuals, the idealist elicited little support for his periodicals. Of his five publications, *Laisvoji mintis* [Free Thought] survived the longest, 1910-1915. His writings were simply too sophisticated for the masses.

In his essays, he professed socialist and freethinking ideas, combined with a vigorous ethnic spirit. At the same time, he belittled religion and capitalism as the twin enemies of the people. Curious to note, he enjoyed a fleeting friendship with Fr. Aleksandras Burba through a mutual passion for Lithuanianism and momentarily consorted with Polish radicals, such as the religious separatist Fr. Franciszek Hodur, to further mutual goals. Briefly, he headed the Lithuanian Freethinkers Alliance and held posts in other agnostic associations. The strong-headed maverick easily lost patience with those with whom he disagreed. For example, he parted company with Juozas O. Sirvydas, considered a major organizer of Lithuanian socialists. Šliūpas constantly engaged in polemics with clergy and in the homes of churchgoers, the physician's name became a household word.

Yet Šliūpas generated awe among his opponents. One finds him in the thick of nationalist stirrings, with membership on a variety of committees during World War One. In 1919, he assisted in setting up a Lithuanian mission in London and was a delegate to the Paris Conference.

Except for a fund-raising visit to the United States in 1920, Šliūpas was back in his homeland from 1919. One finds the restless scholar teaching high school at Biržai and Šiauliai (1921-1923), directing the Society for Ethical Culture (1923-1924) and teaching medicine at the University of Kaunas (1925-1930) where he was granted honorary doctorates in medicine, humanities and law. From 1933 to 1940, he served as mayor of the famed oceanside resort city of Palanga. He returned to this office briefly during the Nazi occupation of 1941, until ousted because of his protest against the destruction of Lithuanian and Jewish lives.

Šliūpas revived his *Laisvoji mintis* from 1933 to 1941 as a pulpit for his secularism, advocating a separation of church and state that would entail, for example, a civil registry of vital statistics, non-denominational cemeteries and the exclusion of religion from public schools.

The doctor was a prolific writer, publishing in Polish, German and English, as well as Lithuanian. He also borrowed, improvised and translated. The majority of his works trumpeted materialist and atheistic concepts, reflecting the nineteenth-century rationalism with which he was imbued. Another segment of his writings centered on Lithuanian history, culture and literature. His *Lietuviškieji raštai ir raštininkai* (Lithuanian Literature and Its Authors) of 1890, was the first attempt at survey. He delved into history with his substantial two-volume work, *Lietuvių tauta senovėje ir šiandien* (The

Lithuanian Nation in the Past and Present) 1904-1905. One of his few English titles dates from 1918, called *Essays on the Past, Present, and Future of Lithuania*. Reflecting his own profession, he published *Higiiena* [Hygiene] in 1928, and *Senovės ir viduramžių medicinos istorija* [History of Ancient and Medieval Medicine] in 1934.

An intimidating task awaits a biographer of this complex, bearded, bespectacled, tall and imposing figure, who won a small circle of allies and numerous enemies during his provocative career. Recognized by the Lithuanian government with the Order of Gediminas in 1936, Šliūpas died in Berlin, Germany, on November 6, 1944.

#### Bibliographical Sources

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The newspaper *Vienybė Lietuvninkų* [Unity of Lithuanians], printed numerous essays of Šliūpas and accounts of his ceaseless activities; his son, Vytautas, has established the Archive of Aušrininkas Dr. Jonas Šliūpas at 2907 Frontera Way, Burlingame, CA, 94010 (tel. 415/692-6856).

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