

Recenzijos

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On Duty Guarding the Nation

Juozas Gabrys-Paršaitis. Tautos sargyboj.
 Linas Saldukas, compiler.
 Vilnius: Versus aureus leidykla, 2007.

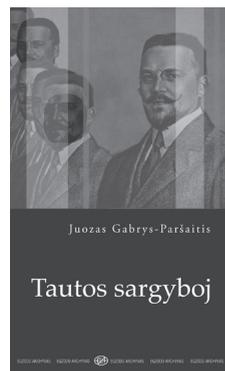
This is a remarkable document. In his lifetime, Juozas Gabrys was a controversial figure, and this publication of his memoirs, which he wrote in the late 1930s, may revive some of that controversy. The document's free intermixing of fact and fantasy may even confuse the reader. Can one really believe Gabrys's assertions that in 1917 both the Imperial German government (p. 324) and Vladimir Ilich Ulianov-Lenin (p. 317) considered him the best person to head the new political order that they each envisioned for Lithuania? Is this book to be read as historical fiction? Gabrys obviously wanted his readers to believe all. The reader can probably accept Gabrys's claims of having met a remarkable pleiad of prominent European political figures in Switzerland during the First World War and of informing them about his image of Lithuania, but his verbatim renditions of his conversations with these figures demand utmost caution from that reader.

In the period covered by these memoirs, 1911-1918, the principle of national self-determination was strongly influencing the re-drawing of European borders. My father told

me of his joy when as a youth, he read about the establishment of the state of Albania; and during his years at the University of Fribourg, 1918-1921, in addition to participating in some of the activities of Gabrys's Lithuanian Information Bureau, he supported the Irish national movement. In 1919 the peace conference in Paris was bombarded by pleas for recognition by national groups from around the world.

During the First World War, Switzerland provided particularly rich soil for nationalist and revolutionary nationalist ferment in opposition to the old order that had brought on this devastating conflict. Activists of all persuasions gathered there. In 1915 Gabrys

came to Lausanne from Paris and worked to organize national movements under his leadership while putting forth Lithuania's name; at about the same time, Pierre Coubertin brought the International Olympic Committee to



Lausanne. A Swiss, Robert Grimm, organized the Zimmerwald Movement of socialists protesting the war; and from this start grew the Communist Third International. Switzerland offered a unique arena for activists, providing them with access to agents – secret, official and unofficial – of all the warring powers.[1]

In this arena, Gabrys was a star; he thrived in this conspiratorial milieu. It was a world of fact, fiction, and even fantasy. Educated at the Sorbonne, he called Charles Seignobos his “maitre” for understanding models for political action. As he recorded his activity, he called certain meetings and consultations, no matter how small, “conferences,” and he gave them sequential numbers so as to create the image of growth and development. To be sure, he did not include important meetings that he did not want to publicize, such as his talks in Stuttgart with Wilhelm Steputat-Steputaitis, January 9-11, 1916, which resulted in a signed agreement laying out the terms of his cooperation with the Germans. He wrote memoranda to governments, and as a journalist he sent out reports to publications and through radio broadcasts. Reading his account of his activities, one cannot but think of what he could have done in the age of the internet.

As his title indicates, the theme of these memories was the “defense of the nation,” his defense of Lithuania’s interests. The “nation” and the name “Lithuania” were in his mind interchangeable. He objected that Western European commentators considered “Lithuanians” to be just “ethnographic material,” but he treated other peoples in his imagined Lithuania as “ethnographic material.” He wanted a Lithuania that had 15 million inhabitants – ethnic, conscious Lithuanians would obviously constitute only a minority, but he apparently considered Latvians, Jews, and Belarusians to be “ethnographic material” that could be quickly Lithuanianized. (To be sure, he notes that only in this way could Lithua-

nia legitimately claim Vilnius, pp. 305-306.) He spoke of “democracy,” but he was ready to deny the vote to his colleagues whom he considered incapable of understanding the imperatives of the day as he saw them. He admitted to having spies reporting to him on the behavior of his colleagues, and for the “good of the cause” he sanctioned breaking into the residence of a rival. He pictured himself as frequently standing alone in his “defense of the nation” (viz. p. 156), and with good reason.

At times in this memoir, he compared himself to Roman Dmowski and Tomas Masaryk (p. 153), but his troubles at the end of the war rather undermine that image. When the Germans surrendered in November 1918, the new Polish government in Warsaw was antagonistic to Dmowski, an émigré, but at the opening of the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, Dmowski represented Poland and delivered a major speech on the first day. Subsequently Dmowski was a major player in Polish politics. Gabrys played no role at the conference and had no political base in Lithuania. This comparison has to be considered unsuccessful.

The aspect of Gabrys’s wartime activity that can be best traced in independent documents would seem to have been his dealings with Baron von Romberg, the German minister in Bern. Gabrys’s Ukrainian friend Vladislav Stepankivski introduced him to Romberg and helped to set up his trip to Stockholm to meet Martynas Ycas, “the First Lithuanian Conference in Stockholm” (p. 131). In the conspiratorial culture of wartime Switzerland, the Germans considered Gabrys interesting because of his French connections, while the French were intrigued by his German connections. Romberg considered Gabrys’s trip to Stockholm to be a test, and Gabrys does not mention the fact that Alexander Keskula, an Estonian who was already working with Romberg, accompanied him. Upon returning

to Switzerland, Gabrys, using the code name "Garlawa," entered into an agreement with the Germans whereby they gave him monthly payments to support his anti-Russian publications.[2]

In discussing his publication of the papers of the Nationalities conference in June 1916, Gabrys declares that the American-Lithuanians covered the cost (p. 354); he does not mention Romberg's payment of some 35,000 marks to cover just these costs. While he mentions his use of the penname "Marie Camille Rivas," he does not mention that he was also "Inorodetz," the compiler of a collection of anti-Russian essays provided him by the Germans. Especially interesting in this regard is his assertion that Baron von der Ropp, while a German agent, worked as his agent in Berlin. Of all the intriguers then active in Switzerland, he apparently considered himself the only one that could in fact act independently of the agents funding his activities.[3]

Gabrys's world finally came apart in 1918, at the so-called V. Lausanne Conference, when an irreparable split divided him from the leaders of the Lithuanian State Council (Vastybes Taryba) in Vilnius. Although he claimed to have persuaded the Germans to allow the Taryba to come into existence, now its leaders refused to recognize him as the leader of the Lithuanian national movement and insisted that they were the sovereigns of Lithuania. Gabrys attributed this to the intrigues of Antanas Smetona; in 1954 Kazys Pakštas, a participant in that meeting, informed me that he considered the basic factor to have been the difference of opinion as to who would win the Great War: The representatives of the Taryba still thought the Germans would win, Gabrys, who was still working with the Germans under the codename Käufer, argued that the Entente would win.

Although Germany in fact surrendered barely a month later, Gabrys soon discovered

that he had no significant political future in Lithuania. His solo performances on the Swiss stage were unsuited for party politics in the new Lithuania. He was an outsider in these new politics, and support from the French did not help him. In reaction, Gabrys launched an intensive campaign over the next several years, denouncing the Taryba as a tool of the Germans, even as he reasserted his claims that the Germans had created the Taryba on his advice. In the fall of 1919, about the time that the Lithuanian government broke up the POW plot against it, he even declared his readiness to cooperate with the Poles against the established Lithuanian government. He became bitter, eventually retiring to Switzerland, and these memoirs embody his lingering self-image as the unappreciated, demeaned protector of Lithuania's identity in a day when the world hardly knew of the nation's existence.[4]

It should be added that Gabrys always had strong supporters, particularly among American Lithuanian Catholics. As Julius Bielskis, who is mentioned favorably in these memoirs, told me in 1956, "Gabrys may have been against certain personalities, but he was always for Lithuania. He has always been for independence of Lithuania and not for autonomy. He was a real patriot. His accusers are narrow partisans. He must be admired for his role in the fight for independence.... He was not one of those seeking to use the situation for personal gain." Gabrys and Bielskis both believed that the Lithuanian émigrés who had graduated from western universities were much better educated than the Lithuanians at home who had graduated from Russian universities. This, they went on to argue, made the Lithuanians at home suspicious and all the more determined to defend their positions against the returning émigrés.[5]

The text itself has an interesting history. Consisting of four volumes, partly handwritten and partly typed, it lay unpub-

lished in Gabrys's archive, which passed to his widow after his death in 1951. When my father and I visited Madame Gabrys in 1957, she showed me a few documents, mostly telegrams dating from August and September 1919, but although she gave me a number of his publications, including a complex of *La Lituanie Independante*, she made no mention of the memoirs. In 1967 or 1968 Albertas Gerutis related to me how, after Mme. Gabrys's death, he went to her home and discovered that in accordance with Swiss law, the archive was consigned to trash. He rescued what he could, including the memoirs, and I had a chance to acquaint myself with the original, although I

had only time enough to pick out spots to read. I had no idea of the scope of the complete four volumes.

The next I heard of the memoirs, after Gerutis's death, they had apparently disappeared. In the 1990s I understood that they were not a part of Gerutis's papers in the manuscript section of the University of Vilnius. Prof. Eberhard Demm's discovery of a copy of the memoirs in Hüttenfeld then made possible this publication by the Emigration Institute in Kaunas. For all the controversy the publication might raise, Lithuanian historiography is richer for it. One can only hope that the mass of documents that Gabrys cited as existing in his archive, especially his diary, has survived and that someday these too will become available to the public.

Notes

1. I have discussed these developments in *The Russian Revolution in Switzerland, 1914-1917* (Madison WI, 1971)

2. Keskula personally disliked Gabrys, calling him "a miserable person with no backbone" and a "Dummkopf." See Alfred Erich Senn, "Garlawa: A Study in Émigré Intrigue, 1915-1917," *The Slavonic and East European Review* (London), 45 (1967): 411-25. For another view of Gabrys's activities see the works by Borje Colliander, *Lausannemötet 1916. Ett ideologiskt varsel under första världskriget.*, Acta Academiae Aboensis (Åbo 1964), Ser. A, 29:2, and *En Konspirators Minnen, 1911-1916*, Acta Academiae Aboensis (Åbo, 1965), 31:1.

3. See von der Ropp's memoir, Friedrich von der Ropp, *Zwischen gestern und morgen* (Stuttgart, 1961).

4. He originally formulated his story that he himself had inspired the Germans to create the Taryba in articles for *Draugas* in 1919, reprinted as a pamphlet in 1920. See my article, "The Activity of Juozas Gabrys, 1914-1920," *Lituanus*, 23/1: 15-22.

5. Alfred Erich Senn, "A Conversation with Julius Bielskis," *Lituanus*, 21/3: 37-44.