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GENTE LITHUANA, NATIONE LITHUANA

Dariusz Szpoper (2009). Gente Lithuana, natione Lithuana. Myśl polityczna i działalność Konstancji Skirmuntt (1851–1934). Arche. Gdansk, 487 S.

TWO DECADES AGO, A HISTORIAN OF LITERATURE, professor of Jagellonian University Tadeusz Bujnicki, whose family has its roots in the Lithuanian – Latvian borderland, in the publication “Znad Wilii” called the territory of the historical Grand Duchy of Lithuania a “forgotten continent” (*zasypany kontynent*). In this way he stressed a need for complex, often interdisciplinary joint studies of its unique heritage by Lithuanian, Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian researchers. The collapse of the Soviet empire has made archival documents more accessible and state borders have become easier to cross. It has also brought some other advantages that could not be enjoyed in the past.

In the early 1990s, the Polish academic circles came up with a lot of initiatives aimed at studying the Polish, Polish-Lithuanian or Polish-Belarusian heritage outside modern Poland. Unfortunately, only a few of those projects have been carried out ever since. It looks like the Poznań circle, developed in the 1980s by Jerzy Ochmański and then Jan Jurkiewicz, Grzegorz Błaszczyk, Krzysztof Pietkiewicz et al., has gone into decline, though I would prefer to be mistaken here. On the other hand, new initiatives are arising. Being just as valuable, they are making a more and more tangible contribution to the development of historiography.

At Gdańsk University, law historian Dariusz Szpoper has been actively studying for years the development of political thought in Lithuania and Belarus in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

For the last decade, apart from the monograph that is mentioned here, he has published three works on Polish political thought in Lithuania and Belarus (Szpoper, 1999; Szpoper, 2003; Szpoper and Bielecki, 2001). While the personality of Alexander Miejsztowicz has been more or less familiar to both scholars and the general public, Konstancja Skirmuntt is much less known in Poland, Lithuania and Belarus. Her cousins Roman and Konstancy Skirmuntts have been much more “popular” with researchers.

So it should be pointed out that Dariusz Szpoper has addressed a little-known personality, discovering a lot of new archival documents and thus reminding us about some pages of the social and political life of the Polish – Lithuanian – Belarusian borderland of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which were covered with a thick layer of dust. Considering that the person the book is dedicated to spoke Polish, its mere title is thought-provoking.

It hints that the author is going to represent an unusual figure, who cannot be easily inscribed in the context of today's history course books and even some monographs.

From the very first pages, Dariusz Szpoper encourages his readers, even if they are well-aware of the turns of political history in the western provinces of the Russian Empire and the history of Lithuanian and Belarusian national revivals, to think what author of the monograph on Konstancja Skirmuntt in his unique way shows through the actions of one social writer and public figure the period when the modern national states were coming into being, how "crowded" these states were and how a group of intellectuals, who called themselves "the last citizens" of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, actively sought for super-national formulas about a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago.

Unlike Alexander Miejsztowicz, Konstancja Skirmuntt rarely attended political salons. She was not a frequent visitor at influential figures' houses in Minsk (Miensk), Warsaw, Vilnius (Viłnia) or Kaunas (Koūna). In a wheelchair for more than a decade, Konstancja Skirmuntt spent most of her life in Pinsk, a town dominated by Jews and surrounded by unique landscapes of Paliessie with its picturesque estates, whose owners did not stay away from anti-imperial activities even at the hardest times that began in 1864. The author of "Gente Lithuana, natione Lithuana" very precisely, sometimes even in too many details restores the atmosphere of that world of landowners.

It should be remembered, however, that towns played a much less significant role in the political and cultural life of Russian provinces in the 2nd half of the 19th century than in Galicia or Transylvania, to say nothing of Western Europe. Pinsk had suffered mainly from the vacuum that was left when the Jesuit College, naturally associated with Adam Naruszewicz, had been closed down and the Order of Jesuits had stopped its work. It has to be regretted that the author did not show a wider picture of social and cultural life in this distinctive region. It has not been completely eradicated from general history or world culture course books, in spite of the historical turmoil of the 2nd half of the 20th century, which is, unfortunately, still going on. Suffice it to say that Pinsk and its suburbs figure in the biographies of well-known Jewish public figures, including the founder of the Zionist organisation "Mizrachi" Rabbi Yitzchak Yaacov Reines and the first President of Israel Chaim Weizmann and Prime Minister Golda Meir. Ryszard Kapuściński was also born in 1932 in Pinsk, where he lived until he was eight.

Konstancja Skirmuntt, who Dariusz Szpoper has dedicated his research to, did not stay away from crucial political processes. Unlike her mother, a well-known in the 19th century and undeservedly forgotten in Poland and Lithuania artist and sculptor Helena Skirmuntt, Konstancja did not have an opportunity to visit a lot of European capitals, Dresden, Florence or Milan. Nevertheless, her social writings and views openly aired in the press made

Konstancja Skirmuntt a personality whose ideas were widely debated and had a certain influence on different social groups. Her long-lasting correspondence with Eliza Orzeszkowa and the leaders of the Lithuanian national revival Jonas Basanavičius and prelate Adomas Dambrauskas-Jakštas proves that she was very active as a social writer.

At the time of the Russian Empire, Konstancja Skirmuntt boldly aired her views in “Kraj”, which was published in St. Petersburg, as well as the Vilnius-based “Kurier Litewski”, “Gazeta Codzienna” and a pro-Lithuanian paper “Litwa”. She also debated with the Warsaw-based “Kurier Polski”. In the interwar period, her publications, polemics and notes could be found in the conservative Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz’s “Słowo”, which seldom favoured her, and ideologically close to her “Przegląd Wileński”.

Konstancja Skirmuntt was not completely forgotten by contemporary researchers. The highly popular Lithuanian Encyclopaedia that came out in Boston after the Second World War published a biographical note on her (Konstancja..., 1963:55). Historiographers assessed the role of books on history by Konstancja Skirmuntt in shaping Lithuanian identity. They were written in a highly romantic style, which modern readers may even find funny, but it made them no less popular a hundred years ago or so.

In her research “Renowned Women in Lithuania: from the 16th to the First Part of the 20th Centuries”, Aniele Butkuvienė discusses Konstancja Skirmuntt and her mother Helena Skirmuntt in a detailed article (Butkuvienė, 2007). Lithuanian historian Rimantas Miknys, a well-known researcher of the political thought of the early 20th century, in his articles has more than once drawn attention to Konstancja Skirmuntt’s role in the development of the local patriots’ circles. The author of the monograph should have taken into consideration the works by the Lithuanian authors, as well as a number of other works by Lithuanian historians on the national revival. At the same time, highly valuable correspondence of Stanisława Paškevičienė, editor of the *Aušra*, the main periodical of the Lithuanian revival movement of the late 19th century, in Polish, which Dariusz Szpoper found at Vilnius University library, would have added to the intriguing air of the monograph. Similarly, the reader could expect a wider background picture concerning landowners’ stance at the Polish – Lithuanian or Polish – Belarusian borderland in the late 19th – early 20th centuries.

Although the author has already provided answers to a lot of questions concerning the actions of the conservative circles, in his “Successors to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania” (*Sukcesorzy Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*), it still seems a must to offer a consistent comparison of Konstancja Skirmuntt’s position with that of other pro-Lithuanian landowners, such as Bolesław Jałowiecki, Stefanija Jabłońska or Otton Zawisza. This is even truer of Stanisław Narutowicz and Michał Romer, who, regretfully, figure minimally in the monograph. Although in her letter to Jonas Basanavičius Kon-

stancja Skirmuntt called herself “the last of the Mohicans”, in her feelings of divided Lithuanian-Polish loyalties, she was by no means the only one to find a place for herself in neither Polish nor Lithuanian political structures. In this context, the author should have mentioned landowners’ letter to Antanas Smetona, published in the early 1920, where the authors declared their willingness to help the young Lithuanian Republic.

The “old Lithuanian” Józef Piłsudski with his dilemmas concerning the domestic and international policies of the revived Poland, who is more often referred to in the monograph, or the undeniable leader of Vilnius Lithuanians Mykolas Biržiška, considering that he came from the family of the gentry, would have helped a great deal in explaining such an unusual phenomenon as *gente Lithuanus, natione Lithuanus*. In this way the author could have spared the reader plenty of “dense” quotations two or three pages long without paragraphs, even though they are taken from highly valuable documents and unknown archival sources.

In spite of all the shortcomings, I strongly recommend reading Dariusz Szpoper’s book, which will be of particular interest to researchers of the Lithuanian, Polish and Belarusian political thought of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It probably reveals a lot of new facts from the history of landowners of the old Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a social group whose merits were consistently underrated during the Soviet period in all Eastern Europe. The book is another disproof of a statement, which grew into a myth as early as during the interwar period and is still quite often found among researchers, that landowners on the territories of modern Lithuania, Belarus or Ukraine were deeply pro-Polish and strongly opposed the national revival of the peoples that they lived side by side with.

Konstancja Skirmuntt’s position is another reminder that at the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the deeply rooted tradition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had a long-lasting potential. Her outlook was only partially grounded in the romanticism of the glorious history, but first and foremost it was shaped by a deeply thought-out understanding of nation-building processes at the Belarusian-Lithuanian-Polish borderland due to a firm belief in a civilising mission attributed to the 1385 and 1569 Unions, as well as super-religious and political role played by the Catholic Church in Eastern Europe.

Konstancja Skirmuntt boldly aired her views not only in Vilnius, but also in Warsaw, though her circles found them too pro-Lithuanian. She pointed out in the conservative “Kurier Polski” that “*national differences combined with political unity, the development of our own individualities combined with inseparable brotherly links, a fight against both Polish and Lithuanian chauvinism basing on healthy national patriotism and deep Christian feelings are the principles that I adhere to. I hope they will be shared by all my Lithuanian*

brothers, when they get rid of the chauvinist fever, to leave only sincere and pure patriotism, which is from God. However, for this long-awaited moment to come, our older Polish brethren in the Polish Kingdom and Lithuania should not defer it with their actions.”

Although Konstancja Skirmuntt did not know the Lithuanian language, she considered herself a Lithuanian, on the grounds that the language criterion should never be decisive or one of the main rules in determining national identity. As she explained to Warsaw-based readers, “*I belong to the Lithuanian element which is alive and active all the time, not only among common people, but also among the gentry, on the land of Vitaūts and Gedymins. Gente Lithuana, natione Lithuana.*”

Dariusz Szpoper succeeds in revealing the atmosphere of Polish-Lithuanian language disputes in the public life of Lithuania and the writer’s involvement in those complicated arguments. (It has to be regretted that the author was unable to use the Lithuanian press).

The book also contains the forgotten correspondence between Konstancja Skirmuntt and Mieczysław Dowojna-Sylwestrowicz, which showed big differences of opinion. The latter published Polish-language periodicals in Vilnius, including the abovementioned “Litwa”, but at the same time his goal was to spread the idea of studying and beginning to speak Lithuanian among the gentry, sometimes even by forceful methods. A careful reader will notice, among other things, an unusual exchange with Marjan Zdziechowski and Ludwik Abramowicz, whose role in settling the Polish – Lithuanian or Polish – Belarusian conflicts just before the First World War and in the interwar period can hardly be overestimated.

Konstancja Skirmuntt thought that without landowners’ involvement, the Lithuanian nation-building process was doomed. Her correspondents Jonas Basanavičius and Adomas Jakštas did not agree with such an opinion, arguing that this social group had distanced themselves too much from Lithuanian society and betrayed the Lithuanians. In their opinion, only deep remorse for Polonisation that followed the Union of Lublin and a sincere desire to learn Lithuanian, combined with full commitment to the cause of national revival could bring back “the young generation of magnates” to the Lithuanian people.

Dariusz Szpoper reminds that for Konstancja Skirmuntt, the Unions of Křeva and Lublin were a historical necessity, which the Grand Duchy of Lithuania benefited from considerably, getting engaged in the western Christian civilisation. She had a high opinion of Gedymin, Alhierd, Kiejstut, Vitaūt¹ and, of course, Jahajla (Jagiełło), who had not only maintained his father’s and grandfather’s achievements, but also given them a broader new

¹ Lithuanised names of GDL dukes – Gediminas, Algirdas, Kęstutis, Vytautas, – are more spread in the English language literature.

dimension. In 1910, Konstancja Skirmuntt called upon political figures and intellectuals in Warsaw and Krakow to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the battle of Gr̄unwald in close cooperation with Lithuanians. She supposed that Polish-Lithuanian cooperation, based on Catholic faith, had always been a historical necessity, which Russian political thought would forever oppose.

Guided by these principles, at the beginning of 1920 Konstancja Skirmuntt sent a letter of protest to Józef Piłsudski in connection with the occupation of Vilnius (Viłnia) and Vilnius region by the Polish army and the establishment of the Civil Government over the eastern territories. This matter is little known to historians, so I believe the letter should have been published in its full form in the Appendix.

“There is no Lithuania without Vilnia, which like a dear ‘sister’, with its lands and peoples once gave Poland a status of a superpower in merging with it. Today, it has nothing left of its glorious past except Vilnia, its symbol of legacy. [...] For the sake of healthy politics, Poland should not claim Vilnia. Then the main issue for dispute between the two nations will disappear, and the old union will flourish in its new forms,” said Konstancja Skirmuntt to the head of the Polish state in her letter, published in the Polish-language “Echo Litwy”, a paper of Vilnius/Viłnia Lithuanians.

In spite of her poor health, Konstancja Skirmuntt worked hard when the Middle Lithuania was incorporated in Poland, commenting on topical political issues, even though the events took a different turn from what she had hoped for. In his monograph, Dariusz Szpoper often quotes Konstancja Skirmuntt’s previously unknown work called “In Connection with the Text of Lithuanian Demands, Presented to the Polish Government by the Delegation of the Lithuanian Government in the Second Half of December 1920 in Warsaw.”²

After her disappointment with the actions of Polish politicians in Warsaw and Vilnius, Konstancja Skirmuntt was just as disappointed with the decisions taken in Kaunas, which was at the time the capital of the Lithuanian Republic. Her deepest regret was the Lithuanian–Soviet Treaty of July 12, 1920. No less critical was she of the guidelines of an agrarian reform passed by the Lithuanian Parliament. Konstancja Skirmuntt called on the Lithuanian Government “*not to hurt the Lithuanian gentry by confiscating more land from them than the country really needs and by confiscating it without any payment.*” She labelled the reform an “*erroneous twist of social theory.*” When the Province of Vilnius was set up, Konstancja Skirmuntt became an outspoken critic of the Polish government’s policies towards the Lithuanian and Belarusian national minorities in Viłnia (Vilnius) region and their rights and freedoms.

² The original title is, “Uwagi z powodu tekstu żądań Litwy, przedłużonych rządowi polskiemu przez delegację rządu litewskiego w drugiej połowie grudnia 1920 roku w Warszawie”.

The author of the monograph presents Konstancja Skirmuntt's highly versatile public and literary activities in five chapters, called "The Paths of Life. A Biographical Sketch against the Background of the Epoch", "The Tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Birth of Ethnic Lithuania", "Attempts to Find a Compromise and Modernise the Public Life of the North-western Provinces", "The Reality of the Polish Revival and Together with the Catholic Church". For some reason, a chapter on the Belarusian question is not included in the monograph. Fortunately, the author does not completely ignore the issue, and the Pinsk landowner's attitude to the Belarusian revival can be traced on some pages.

Despite a number of critical remarks, it has to be unequivocally admitted that Dariusz Szpoper's book has brought back from oblivion a unique personality, whose intellectual legacy we are going to address more and more.

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