

Lithuania

part 2

by C. P. Hallihan

Part 1 of this article, in QR 572, gave a brief sketch of the history of Lithuania, its religion and the events of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. For part 2 a look at Lithuania's language, literature and Bible was promised. The usual sequence would be in the order just mentioned, but the story of the language and literature of Lithuania is so dependent upon the Bible that this must be our starting point.



The Bible

Early Translation Work

The work of the Reformation always gave special emphasis to the native tongue for the reading of Scripture and for church services. Wherever it began,¹ the need for the Bible in the common

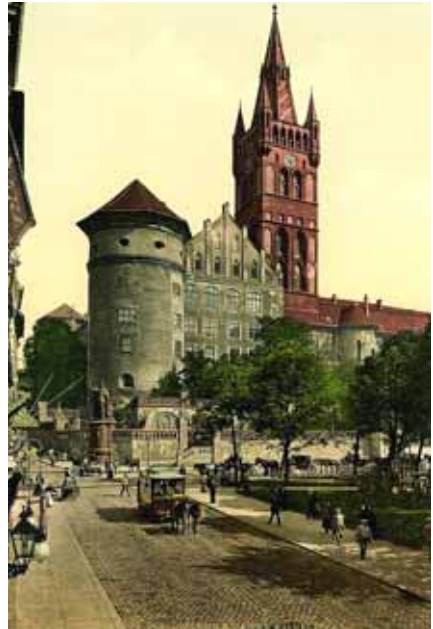


language was a first fruit, and God raised up His servants to grapple with the burden of translation. This mighty work which, like the rain, fell upon the just and the unjust,² always furthered literacy in the countries where it was

begun, a kind of cultural leavening. First for this work in Lithuanian were Stanislovas Rapalionis and Abraomas Kulva-Kulvietis in Königsberg,³ who dedicated their lives to translation of religious literature into Lithuanian. Rapalionis is believed to have completed a translation of the Old Testament, but the manuscript disappeared. Both men died in the same year, 1545, leaving much work unfinished, but for the next fifty years Königsberg was a centre of Lithuanian publishing and translating activities. Some of this early work came to be included in various later collections, notably the Mažvydas Catechism.

 **Martynas Mažvydas and Jonas Bretkūnas**

The Catechism, the first printed book in Lithuanian, was published in 1547 by Martynas Mažvydas, another Königsberg exile. It was primarily a translation of Luther's Catechism, the Ten Commandments, two Psalms, eleven hymns (with music notation), and extracts from the Gospels and Epistles, with items by several contributors. It included an alphabet and a primer, thus providing tools for literacy, an exceptional demonstration of the leavening aspect mentioned above.⁴ There were two prefaces: one was in Latin, as might be expected of that time, but the other was cast in rhyming Lithuanian! Mažvydas became pastor at Ragaine, totally committed to translation work throughout his life. His cousin, Baltramiejus Vilentas



The Königsberg Castle before World War I

(Willents) translated the Gospels and Epistles, publishing this work in 1579. It has been estimated that as many as thirty Lithuanian scholars were collaborating at Königsberg about that time on various Lithuanian translations of hymns and 'postilla'.⁵ The Mažvydas Catechism, then, was not only effectual in spreading the message of the Gospel among the Königsberg Lithuanians, but also began a tradition of 'outside the country' Lithuanian publishing which preserved the language. From that time Lithuanian was used in churches and schools and even in the publishing of royal and official papers.

The first whole Bible translation into Lithuanian was completed about 1590 in



Jonas Bretkūnas

Königsberg by Jonas Bretkūnas, pastor in Königsberg. Bretkūnas based his Bible translations on Latin texts as well as on the Luther version. This work, although having scholarly and royal

approval, ran into difficulties and remained unpublished. Bretkūnas, a giant among these early translators, also published a collection of hymns and a prayer book. In 1591 Bretkūnas published a famous *Postilla*, a two-volume commentary on the Gospels. This used a rich, flowing and lively language (adjectives often applied to the work of Luther and Tyndale) and introduced a level of Lithuanian writing that had not been achieved before.⁶ Although only a fraction of his works were ever published, they were available, along with his Bible, in manuscript form to later authors. Bretkūnas died in Königsberg in 1602.

These men from Mažvydas to Bretkūnas were pioneers, creating from scratch the first classical forms in literary Lithuanian, working from an oral tradition in a language that had no prior written forms or conventions to deal with abstract concepts and intellectual argument. Biblical-theological language, already established in much of Europe, had to be created.⁷ They laboured without dictionaries or grammars: the first Lithuanian grammar, *Grammatica*

Litvanica by Daniel Klein, was not published until 1653.⁸

Samuel Chylinski to Ludwig Rhesa

Enthusiasm for Lithuanian Bible translation seemed to fade with Bretkūnas. There was, however, a valiant effort by Samuel Boguslav Chylinski. His work is of peculiar fascination, because although the translation was done on the sadly familiar expatriate basis of other Lithuanian Protestant endeavours, it was actually accomplished in London. Samuel lived there while his home country was ravaged by the post-Reformation conflicts. He, with at least two others, had some official ‘scholarship’ arrangement as the basis of this work in London from the National Synod of the Protestant Churches at Dantzig. Another intriguing aspect of Chylinski’s work is that recent research

The window of a traditional home in Rumsiskes, Lithuania



suggests that as well as Polish, Greek and Latin Bibles, the Dutch Statenvertaling was a major resource for his Biblical labours.⁹ In 1663 Chylinski was sidelined after doubts were raised about the quality of his work, and only Genesis to Psalms were printed, in London. An unusual historical footnote can be added—in 1933 a handwritten manuscript of the New Testament was auctioned in England, and proved to be Chylinski's Lithuanian translation. It seems likely then that Chylinski had completed the whole Bible, and that its non-appearance may well have been a political rather than a quality matter.¹⁰ He died in 1668.

Through the next fifty years several part-Bible works were published, including a new version of the New Testament prepared by Samuel Bythner. This was a partly bilingual edition, with Polish words bracketed in the Lithuanian text. A complete Bible finally appeared in 1727, published at Königsberg. This was a collaborative effort by numerous authors, based largely on the work of Bretkūnas and Chylinski; it used the Gothic alphabet, a feature of Prussian-Lithuanian publications. Within ten years it had sold out and was reprinted. By the turn of the century there was a real scarcity of Scriptures in Lithuania, and such copies as could be found were very expensive. A new edition was prepared by a Königsberg committee and appeared in 1816, under the editorship of Ludwig Rhesa.¹¹ In his German

preface Rhesa outlines Lithuanian Bible history and describes his own translation procedures, making use of Hebrew and Greek resources as well as the usual historic versions.

Rhesa's Bible, which went through numerous subsequent editions, remained the standard text for many generations to come, and is still referred to after the time of Lithuanian independence.



The Language

Language Overview

The Baltic languages do belong to the Indo-European group of languages, Lithuanian and Latvian having common form as recently as the 5th–7th centuries AD. Lithuanian, though, only existed in oral form—that is, only as a spoken language—until the 16th century. Indeed, the language had no settled or agreed consistent written forms until the end of the 19th century. Numbers of Lithuanian words are used by Belorussians and Poles, reflecting former Lithuanian influence, and Lithuanian names for rivers and lakes occur from the Vistula to the Kama and Moscow Rivers. Words of Lithuanian origin account for more than one percent of Finnish vocabulary. In Medieval times all written communication



The New University of Königsberg in 1862.



Postilla by Jonas Bretkūnas

To counteract this growing influence, the Roman Catholic Church was forced to use Lithuanian and to print religious books in Lithuanian. The first Vilnius-printed books in Lithuanian¹² were the 1595 Romanist Catechism and a Postilla of 1599, both

translated into Lithuanian by canon Mikalojus Dauksa. Somewhat late in the national-literary day, Dauksa used his 'Prefatory Word to the Gentle Reader' to explain the importance of the native tongue and to voice his grief over the fact that the mother tongue was despised in Lithuania. It is, for all that delay, a noble declamation, beginning—'Where could you find in the world a nation so dark and vile which does not possess three innate things of its own, viz., its own land, customs and language?... A nation lives not by the fertility of the soil, not by the diversity of garments, not by the pleasantness of the country, not by the strength of its towns and castles, but most of all by the preservation and usage of its own language which is the mainstay of a nation and enhances its qualities, its concord and brotherly love....'

Towards Modern Language

In 1629 there appeared a Lithuanian-Polish-Latin dictionary by Konstantinas Sirvydas. The first Lithuanian grammar

(mentioned above) was written in Latin by Daniel Klein, and printed in Königsberg in 1653. Many of the 17th-century books stressed the importance of the native tongue, showing concern for the spread of written Lithuanian. Unfortunately written Lithuanian became more and more burdened with Polish input, and the 18th century was a time of impoverishment and decline of literary Lithuanian. A growing awareness of Lithuanian national character did begin to bring about a gradual revival of the popular traditions of the Lithuanian language as the 19th century drew near, but by 1795 Czarist Russia was the ruling power in what was left under the name Lithuania. The whole of the 19th century for Lithuanians is the struggle against 'russification'. There were risings in 1831 and in 1863, followed by reprisals: hangings, whole villages burned, exile to Siberia, and men conscripted into the Russian army for twenty-five years.

As part of these repressive efforts, Russia forbade printing of Lithuanian texts in the Latin alphabet, 1864–1904, and publishers or distributors of Lithuanian books joined the number of those punished, imprisoned, or exiled to Siberia. From all this some escaped by fleeing, many to the US. Lithuanians continued to print books and newspapers outside Lithuania, now with financial help from the American expatriates. Book-runners smuggled books into the country, with whole families participating in local distribution.



Vilnius, view from the Gediminas Tower

Children were taught to read in secret from Bibles and prayer books.¹³

Up to the very end of the 19th century Lithuania still had no standard written language; some wrote in one dialect, others in different ones. Only at the very turn of that century was there a common form of the language in general literary use. Kazimieras Jaunius (1849–1908) wrote a Lithuanian grammar which helped standardize written Lithuanian. His pupil, Kazimieras Buga (1879–1924) was the originator of the dictionary of present-day Lithuanian, and Jonas Jablonskis (1860–1930) a prolific protagonist of written Lithuanian, is now styled the ‘Father of Lithuanian’. The official language of Lithuania has been Lithuanian only since 1918, and even then, during the Soviet times, was used alongside Russian in official affairs. Post-Soviet efforts to recover the language from the inevitable Slav influence over seventy years are

compounded by the appearance of loan words from the West, especially English, at every level, from popular reading to materials for science and technology.



The Churches

As outlined at the end of the previous article, the modern church situation is as mixed as in any other modern country! There certainly are Bible-believing, Christ-preaching churches, few in number but spreading, small in membership, but growing.¹⁴ The ‘old’ churches, Roman Catholic and reformed, scarred survivors of so much opposition, are becoming very conservative—in a nationalistic and cultural sense, not theologically! The Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania even refused to acknowledge Vatican Two! Lithuania remains very dominated by Rome to this day.

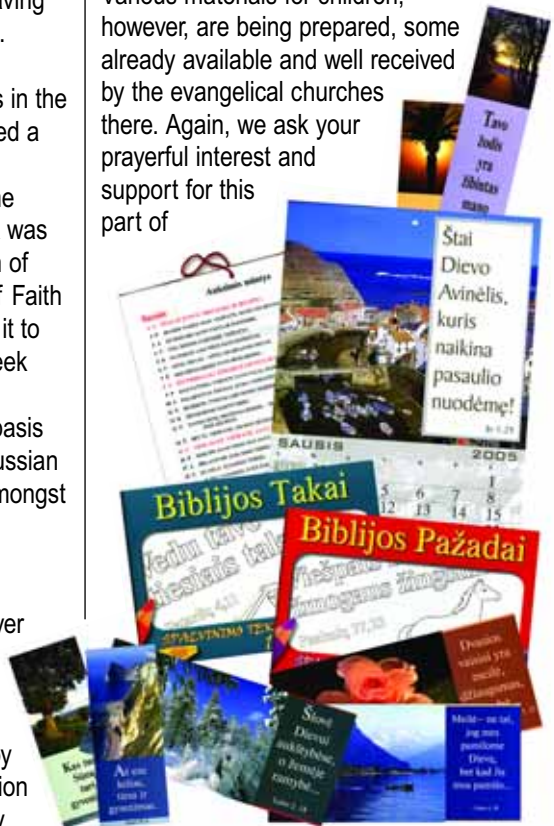
There is a cameo glimpse of ‘free’ church struggles through the 20th century in the life of Konstantinas ‘Kostas’ Burbulyš. Born in March 1902, he attended seminary in Germany and Latvia and became a Methodist minister in Latvia in 1932. He spent six months as a pastor in Taurage, Lithuania, then at Siauliai and Birzai, in the north of the country. Burbulyš just escaped deportation to a Siberian gulag when the Soviets came in 1939; then, because of his teaching abilities, he was spared by

the Nazis in 1941. With the return of Soviet troops in 1944 he was forced into slave labour for the front-line troops, but ended the war in a refugee camp in Germany where he worked as a pastor. Burbulys, with his family, eventually settled in the Chicago area of the US. He continued to preach and teach, without pay, being employed full-time in a bakery before retiring in 1968. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Burbulys reclaimed the house that he owned in Siauliai and donated it to the church there. He died in January 2002, having nearly reached one hundred years.

There is a further interest for us in the life of Kostas Burbulys; he produced a Lithuanian New Testament and published a Lithuanian multi-volume Bible commentary. This Bible work was taken up as the basis of an edition of the New Testament by the Word of Faith Bible Centre in 1996, who declare it to be 'co-ordinated with the older Greek copies of the Textus Receptus Manuscript Group which was the basis for the King James Version and Russian Synodic Translation'. It is in use amongst evangelicals in Lithuania.

The Society has had direct and indirect involvement in Lithuania over a number of years, producing the Words of Life Calendar and, more recently, the Golden Thoughts Calendar in Lithuanian. There is, by our principles, no single Bible version in Lithuanian which can confidently, fully and consistently be used for our

work: a source of difficulty. In 2002 TBS took a step towards meeting this need with the publication of Mark's Gospel in Lithuanian. However, it is not envisaged at present that further extensive translation work in Lithuanian will be undertaken by the Society, as we are reliably advised that the Burbulys New Testament (1996 edition of the Bible) mentioned above is sufficiently accurate to obviate our spending years of labour upon a revision when there are more pressing needs in other languages. Various materials for children, however, are being prepared, some already available and well received by the evangelical churches there. Again, we ask your prayerful interest and support for this part of



A selection of TBS publications in Lithuanian

the work, and for the Word of God, the Gospel and the churches in Lithuania, and Lithuanian communities elsewhere.



Epilogue

Gathering, digesting and presenting this information has brought mingled feelings of haunting sadness, and yet great gladness that still Christ is preached and the Scripture of Truth is known and used in that country. The question arises, humbly, 'Why did the Reformation not 'take' in Lithuania?' Look at the gifted men of God, their proximity to and familiarity with the European Reformation. Look at the unmistakable contribution of the Protestants to the language and literature of the country. Look at that woeful chain of Bibles completed, but never printed. I attempt no answers, but rather say, 'Why did the Reformation 'take' in Britain?' More deserving, more expectant, more faithful? Resoundingly, fearfully, the answer is 'No, never'. What have we that we have not received? And how well have we matched that which is expected of those to whom much was given? Taking the overall moral condition of the United Kingdom and of Lithuania, where (in both) the old Epicurean secularism is rampant, who could tell which nation had had four hundred years of Reformation, Puritanism, awakening, revival, giants in the pulpits and lecture halls, and the bright thread binding them all, the sure and certain Word of God, the Bible, freely available?

Endnotes

¹ Even going back to Wycliffe in England and Huss in Bohemia.

² Matthew 5.45

³ See Part 1 in QR572, p. 13.

⁴ There is in the TBS Library a vaguely similar work published in Dublin, 1881, using Scripture Selections as a primary Gaelic reader. Doubtless there are many others.

⁵ Latin *postil*, *postilla* (*post illa*, after this?): a marginal note on a text or passage of Scripture, or a series, a collection, of such comments. It is not now used in English except in an historical sense, but is always used of these Lithuanian books of homilies and extracts. Some very beautiful examples are in museums and galleries. Try *postilla* in a search engine.

⁶ Tyndale in English, Luther in German, Károli in Hungarian, these and others in translating the Scriptures, in some way defined or revived the language. The debt of entire cultures to the vernacular Scriptures should never be forgotten.

⁷ Much after the task of men like Carey and Judson: but at least those men were working from a known basis of well-trieved spiritual vocabulary into another tongue.

⁸ There are suggestions of an earlier work in Latin, *Clavis linguæ lituanicæ*, but no copy is known.

⁹ A number of Dutch expressions appear in the Lithuanian Bible's footnotes. It is a good reminder for English speakers that this inestimable Dutch Version also had extended influence beyond the country and language of origin, not least in England if we recall Haak's translation of the 1618 *Dutch Annotations*, which are still available from our friends the Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting in The Netherlands.

¹⁰ In 1984 the Chylinski New Testament was at last published by Polish scholars.

¹¹ It would have appeared sooner, but the editor marched off to the Front for the climactic Napoleonic confrontations of 1812.

¹² As distinct from Königsberg and other expatriate publications.

¹³ It is very salutary to recall that at just this same time a similar, if perhaps not quite so brutally extreme, repression of the Welsh language was being attempted by the English.

¹⁴ A recent Lithuanian visitor, at that time not in Christ, told me that there were no Baptist churches in Lithuania! He was quite taken aback when we next met and I was able to give him, from the Internet, details of over twenty, four of them in his hometown!