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Alfred Erich Senn

ANTANAS VISKANTAS: A LITHUANIAN WITH POLISH FRIENDS

Antanas Viskantas (1875–1940) is a mysterious figure in Lithuanian history, connected with affairs during the First World War and after. A Catholic priest, he worked in Vilnius for Bishop J. Matulaitis, and even after the Poles succeeded in removing Matulaitis from his bishopric, Viskantas continued to work in Lithuanian religious institutions in Vilnius. Calling him „lietuvių veikėjas Vilniuje“ (a Lithuanian activist in Vilnius), biographers have noted that „asmeninių ryšių su įtakingais valdžios žmonėmis dėka“ (owing to his connections with influential people on power) he was able to do things in the city under Polish occupation that other Lithuanians could not, and they have credited him with a considerable list of accomplishments on behalf of Lithuanian culture in the city up to the eve of World War II¹. The question arises, what was the nature of those „asmeninių ryšių“ (personal connections)?

Viskantas's background and his education were routine for a Catholic priest. A native of Žemaitija, he became a priest in 1900. He then entered a long study trip abroad. As his biographers record, „1907–1911 studijavo Liuvono univ. (Belgijoje), kur gavo filosofijos dr. bei politikos ir visuomeninių mokslų licenciatą. 1911–1915 studijavo Gregorianumo univ. (Romoje), tęsė teologijos ir bažnytinės teisės studijas, kurias baigė dr. laipsniais. I pas. karo metu gyveno Fribourge, Šveicarijoje ir rūpinosi lietuvių šalpos reikalais, bendradarbiavo vietos spaudoje, kėlė Lietuvos reikalus. Gavęs iš Amerikos lietuvių kunigų paramos, leido apie Lietuvą knygas...“² (he studied in 1907–1911 at the Univ. of Leuven, Belgium where he received his Ph. D. and a degree in Political and Social Sciences. In 1911–1915 he attended the Gregorian Univ. of Rome studying theology and canonic law and received his doctor's degree). During the First World War he

was engaged in relief-war supporting Lithuanians in Fribourg, Switzerland, contributed to the local press and raised the issue of Lithuanian independence. Having received support from Lithuanian priests in America, he published books about Lithuania).

Of particular interest here is the period that Viskantas spent in Switzerland, from 1915–1918. He went there to study at the University of Fribourg. Of the seven universities in Switzerland at the time, this was the only private one, and it was frequently referred to as „the Catholic University“. Founded in 1889, it quickly attracted East European Catholics, and it became a favorite for Lithuanians. Among those who studied there in this period were Juozas Purickis, Leonas Bistras, Kazys Pakštas, and Stasys Šalkauskis³.

The university, which sat exactly on the linguistic border between German- and French-speaking Switzerland, also attracted a great number of Poles; in 1915 there were three at the faculty. (This had so worried the German government that it refused to recognize academic degrees awarded there.)⁴ Among the more prominent was Bronislaw Piłsudski, the younger brother of Józef, and during the First World War, this group did considerable work on behalf of Polish war relief. Viskantas began his work for Lithuanian relief in cooperation with these Poles, and his „asmeniniai ryšiai“ (personal connections) may well have begun here.

Another institution that Viskantas came into contact with in Switzerland was Juozas Gabrys's Lithuanian Information Bureau, which had moved to Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1915. Like Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who moved the International Olympic Committee's headquarters from Paris to Lausanne in 1915, Gabrys had also moved there from Paris to avoid the pressures and dangers of the wartime French capital. Lausanne, as a stop on the Orient Express, was an important railroad hub with direct connections to almost all of the major cities of Europe.

From the start, Viskantas and Gabrys became rivals. Both men showed interest in profiting from the espionage business in wartime Switzerland, and they both approached the German embassy

¹ *Lietuvių Enciklopedija* (So. Boston), 34: 324–25.

² *Ibid.*

³ Juozas Eretas received his doctorate in Fribourg in 1918, and my father, Alfred Senn, received his doctorate there in 1921.

⁴ See Alfred Erich Senn, *The Russian Revolution in Switzerland, 1914–1917* (Madison, WI, 1971), pp. 47–48.

in Bern. Aleksander Keskülla, an Estonian who worked with Aleksander Parvus-Helfand during the war, introduced Viskantas to the German ambassador, Freiherr Gisbert von Romberg, as a rival to Gabrys, who had been introduced to the embassy by a Ukrainian, Wolodimir Stepankivskij. Keskülla disliked Gabrys intensely, calling him a „Dummkopf“, and insisted that Viskantas was much more trustworthy. Viskantas visited the German embassy several times, but Romberg in the end chose Gabrys as his Lithuanian agent⁵.

Viskantas had another taste of international intrigue in 1918 when he joined the Commission of the East, organized by the French-Swiss publicist Edmond Privat. Privat had developed a strong interest in Poland as a result of his enthusiasm for Esperanto as an international language; he even wrote his memoirs in Esperanto⁶. In 1918 Privat wanted to bring the peoples of East Central Europe together under Polish leadership, and Viskantas stood ready to help him.

On May 12, 1918, in Lausanne the Commission of the East held its first meeting under the joint leadership of Privat and Viskantas. Their goal was to organize a new federation on the territory that had once made up the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Privat hoped to bring Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Lithuanians together under Polish leadership. „You know that I have given myself entirely today to this difficult and delicate question of mutual comprehension between Poland and its neighbors⁷.”

From the start Privat recognized that Lithuanians might distrust his initiative as a „Polish maneuver“, and he considered Viskantas a key figure who enjoyed good relations not only with the Poles but also with Stepankivskij as a representative of the Ukrainians⁸. Therefore he asked Viskantas to make the first public announcement of the formation of the committee. Viskantas thereupon published an article in the Fribourg newspaper *Liberté*, suggesting that representatives of the peoples of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth meet to discuss matters of common interest. Privat then published an article calling Viskantas „a Lithuanian patriot“ and praising his initiative: „It seems to us urgent to respond to the eloquent appeal of the abbe Viscont and to promise him warm support“⁹.

There is no list of the „fifteen or so“ participants at the first meeting of the so-called commission on May 12 at Privat's home in Lausanne, but Privat had issued invitations to some twenty persons, including, at Viskantas's urge, the Latvian poet Janis Rainis. Although Privat insisted that Rainis had sent his good wishes, it seems unli-

kely that the Latvian would have agreed to work with this group, and while Rainis might have sympathized with Privat's leftist political leanings, he would surely have disapproved of the Latvian nationalists that Viskantas and Privat invited¹⁰. Stasys Šalkauskis and other Lithuanians simply rejected the invitation to participate.

Viskantas and Privat did not agree on all their respective nominations. Viskantas recommended inviting Keskülla, but Privat chose to ignore the Estonian. When Privat suggested inviting a Jewish representative, Viskantas was unreceptive¹¹. All in all, Viskantas's contributions to the list of participants did not speak highly of his political acumen. The Lithuanians criticized him sharply for his willingness to work with the Poles, and Gabrys was especially sarcastic in his attacks on the „triple doctor“ as he called Viskantas¹².

At the commission's first meeting, although Privat acted chairman, Viskantas directed the discussion. The work of the group, he declared, should consist in three stages: first, a study of the facts concerning the rights of these peoples and an investigation of their disputes; second an effort to persuade representative organs of the peoples to accept the conclusions of the study, and third, the acceptance of these decisions by a future peace congress. The commission should structure itself as a society in conformance with the Swiss Civil Code, and he urged that the group establish a publication, possibly entitled *Annales de la société internationale d'étude des peuples situés entre la mer Baltique et la mer Noire*¹³.

When the commission announced its existence, some critics suggested that it drew its inspiration from same German sources that

⁵ See Alfred Erich Senn, „Garlawa: A Study in Emigre Intrigue“, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 45 (1967): 413.

⁶ Edmond Privat, *Aventuroj de pioniro* (Tenerife, 1962). See also Alfred Erich Senn, „The Entente and the Polish Question, 1914–1916“, *Jahrbucher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 25 (1977): 26–27.

⁷ Letter to Zygmunt Witkowski, May 7, 1918, Bibliotheque de la Ville de la Chaux-de-Fonds, Fond Edmond Privat, carton 11.

⁸ Letter to Witkowski, April 10, 1918, *ibid.*

⁹ *Journal de Genève*, May 1, 1918.

¹⁰ On Rainis's views that time, see Alfred Erich Senn, „Sieben unveröffentlichte Briefe von Janis Rainis“, *Celi* (Lund), 15 (1972): 3–10.

¹¹ Viskantas to Privat, May 2, 1918, Fond Privat.

¹² Gabrys's comments in his manuscript memoirs, *Tautos sargyboje*, which were once in the possession of Albertas Gerutis in Bern, Switzerland.

¹³ „Rapport“, Fond Privat.

Gabrys's Conference of Nationalities had in 1916. Privat responded by proclaiming Viskantas's patriotism, declaring that, „to the contrary, a Lithuanian patriot, known for his differences with the organizers of the famous Congress of Nationalities and by his opposition to the centralist parties of his own country“, has played a leading role in this enterprise¹⁴. The group, Privat insisted, was aimed at establishing a neutrality modeled after the Swiss example.

Gabrys immediately attacked Viskantas, insisting that he was „acting on his own initiative and on his own responsibility, without the mandate of those whom he claims to represent.... He is alone among Lithuanians in defending a point of view, the success of which would only serve to sacrifice once more the independence of Lithuania to the profit of Poland“. Gabrys later insisted that he himself had rebuffed overtures from Polish leaders and that therefore the Poles had recruited „a Lithuanian of second rank“. Viskantas, he insisted, was „a personality with neither mandate nor power, excluded from all Lithuanian national organizations and in no way authorized to speak in the name of Lithuania“¹⁵.

Privat, who somehow or other still maintained good personal relations with Gabrys, urged him and his current Ukrainian ally, Prince Michael Tyszkiewicz, to join the commission, but on June 8 Gabrys formally declared that „none of the Lithuanian institutions in Switzerland“ could take part in the work of the group. Privat attributed Gabrys's position to his personal rivalry with Viskantas¹⁶.

Privat soon ran into his own problems with Viskantas. On June 8 the commission formally accepted Viskantas's proposal for a three-stage plan of action, and the group chose Viskantas as its Secretary-General, relegating Privat to the position of an advisor and figurehead. When Privat issued a summary of the meeting to the press, Viskantas objected, complaining of inaccuracies in the press release: „It is possible that I will consider myself obliged to make some corrections.“ Privat protested that there was nothing wrong with his text, but he expressed confidence that he and Viskantas could quickly resolve their differences¹⁷.

Viskantas intensified his demands. He asked Privat to give him all the correspondence concerning „our commission“, since, as Secretary-General, he must know exactly what was being done. He further declared that since he would have to edit the statutes adopted at the commission's June 8 meeting so as to eliminate „inaccuracies“, the statutes „cannot be published by anyone either in part or in their

entirety without my authorization". When Privat made bold with suggesting a meeting of the commission's executive bureau, Viskantas angrily declared that he had no right to take such an initiative. Privat humbly replied, „I regret the incident with all my heart, and I hope that it will remain closed“¹⁸.

Under Viskantas's leadership the commission atrophied. Vacations, illnesses, and other duties complicated Viskantas's own inability to act, and Privat abandoned all thought of working with any Lithuanians. Instead he concentrated on trying to bring about an agreement between Polish and Ukrainian representatives. Eventually Privat gave up all, and in summarizing the reasons for his failure, he laid considerable blame directly on Viskantas. Viskantas, he declared, had spent too much time editing the statutes, and then in the fall of 1918 he had left for Italy without telling anyone¹⁹.

Viskantas soon returned to Vilnius, where in 1919 he played a part in Józef Piłsudski's plans to draw Lithuania under the Polish umbrella. Visiting Vilnius in the fall of 1919, Piłsudski's specialist on Lithuanian questions, Leon Wasilewski, turned to Viskantas as a lever in trying to influence Lithuanian clergy in Vilnius. Viskantas willingly cooperated, telling Wasilewski of his own desire to see Poles and Lithuanians cooperate on the territory of the historical Grand Duchy. Viskantas also passed to Wasilewski his communications with the Papal Nuncio in Warsaw, Achilles Ratti, later Pope Pius XI²⁰.

In all, Viskantas's political activity, 1915–1919, produced little result. He failed in his bid to be an intelligence agent, he failed in his work as Secretary-General of the Commission of the East, and he accomplished little in his intrigues with Wasilewski. His biographers in *Lietuvių Enciklopedija* were probably well advised to concentrate their attention on his cultural work on behalf of the Lithuanians living in Vilnius between the two World Wars.

¹⁴ *Gazette de Lausanne*, May 13, 1918.

¹⁵ „Dr. A. Viscont desavoué par le Conseil national lituanien“, *Pro Lithuania*, No. 6 (1918), p. 198; also, Lithuanian Information Bureau, „Rapports de la Lithuanie avec les peuples voisins“, Fond Privat.

¹⁶ Correspondence in Fond Privat.

¹⁷ Correspondence in Fond Privat.

¹⁸ Correspondence in Fond Privat.

¹⁹ „Rapport de la Commission“, Fond Privat.

²⁰ See Alfred Erich Senn, „Lithuania Through Polish Eyes, 1919–1924“, *Lituanus*, 26/1: 15.