CHAPTER 2

With Father Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas at Viltis

Antanas Smetona understood the sad, almost hopeless situation of the Lithuanians at the beginning of the twentieth century only too well. Russified by the administration, Polonized by the churches and the estates, Lithuania was unknown as such in the world. Foreign scholars who valued the Lithuanian language as a key to Indo-European linguistics generally thought the nationality was dying. According to the figures of the 1897 census, Kaunas governorate and 5 Lithuanian districts of Suvalki governorate and 3 of Vilnius governorate had 2.7 million inhabitants, of which 58.3 percent were Lithuanians, 14.6 percent Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians 10.3 percent Poles, 13.3 percent Jews, and the rest Latvians, Germans, and Tatars. Of the Lithuanians, 93.3 percent were peasants, only 4 percent city dwellers, and 2.3 percent nobles. Only 14 Lithuanians listed themselves as merchants.

There was little hope of forcefully changing the Russian empire and its Russification policy. Only the radical ideologues of the Lithuanian national movement came out for open struggle in this situation, but most Lithuanian activists were cultural figures and did not think of raising a hand against tsarism or the Prussian administration. They were mostly concerned about freedom of religion and believed that the twentieth century would bring more social and political freedom. At this time the credo of this wing of enthusiasts were the cautious words of the writer Father Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas in Tėvynės sargas of 1900: “We consider political independence for Lithuania an empty dream, and we openly protest against what is expressed in the booklets of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party.” Tumas later greatly regretted this statement, explaining that at that time he had not yet developed a national consciousness, only a national instinct.79

The intellectual life of the Lithuanians blossomed after the annulment, in 1904, of the government’s press ban on the language.80 All the more because the economic situation improved significantly. By 1913 the conditions for the Lithuanian rebirth were much better, but Lithuanians constituted only 4 percent of the hired help in industries and trade, while Jews constituted the majority of the hired work force. In 1897 Lithuanians numbered just 2.1 percent of the population in Vilnius, 8–9 percent in the cities of Kaunas governorate – 27.8 percent in Šiauliai, 12 percent in Panevėžys, and 30 percent in Telšiai. In the cities of Suvalki governorate Lithuanians constituted 17 percent of all inhabitants. The situation of course changed through the years as more
Lithuanians came to the cities, received education, established small businesses, cooperatives, and small enterprises and entered trade. The most numerous layer of the professional Lithuanian intelligentsia were priests, of whom there were 1000 in the three Lithuanian governorates, and yet about 150 Lithuanian priests lived elsewhere, mostly in the United States. The second largest group of Lithuanian intellectuals was doctors – 200, and perhaps as many more lived overseas. The third largest professional group was lawyers.

Smetona was now becoming more and more distinguished as a writer, a collaborator in the Lithuanian press, and as a patient and linguistically demanding editor. He was one of the founding members of the Lithuanian Scientific Society (LMD) and participated in its first meeting on April 7, 1907. The soul for the society’s formation was Dr. Jonas Basanavičius, who came to be called “the patriarch of the Lithuanian national renaissance,” but Smetona became the society’s librarian. To be sure, the library was at first very small and easily fit into one small room in Smetona’s residence. The first general meeting of the Society, on August 18–19, 1907, accepted 47 members; Smetona became a member of the editorial commission of the society’s journal Lietuvių tauta (“The Lithuanian Nation”). Privately he spoke of the society’s members sarcastically. In a letter to Augustinas Voldemaras, he wrote that a coming meeting would “not be interesting. Vydūnas will lecture on ‘blessedness’; Mrs. Čiurlionis on Pietaris and will talk most probably a little more; the cicilikai [socialists] will whoop, and that will be it.” Nevertheless he performed his duties conscientiously, and he also participated in other organizations: Aušra (“Dawn,” a book publishing society), Vilnius Lithuanians’ mutual aid, Lithuanian art associations, and others. He taught the Lithuanian language in some Vilnius gimnaziums, and was one of the backers of the first Lithuanian two-class school. But it was his work as a journalist that brought him and Tumas together.

Six years older than Smetona, Juozas Tumas was noted for his articles that he had begun writing in 1890 for Žemajčių ir Lietuvos Apžvalga. He later published Dirva-Žinyčia, a publication of Catholic religious orientation. One day in 1894, more or less exiled to Mitau and ignored by the older priests, he received a visit from three Lithuanian intellectuals whom he did not know, one of whom was Jonas Jablonskis. These men invited him to attend literary gatherings and to write for the Lithuanian press published in Tilsit, on the German side of the Russian-German border. Tumas agreed and began to write under the pseudonym “Vaižgantas.” Having soon then obtained a post in Lithuania, Tumas continued writing, and he also smuggled illegal Lithuanian publications from East Prussia. Dissatisfied with the policies of Apžvalga in 1896 Tumas organized a new newspaper, Tėvynės sargas (Guardian of the Fatherland), and edited several issues himself. He was concerned with the Lithuanian character, religious