 CHAPTER 6

Baron Stasys Šilingas and the President

Born in 1885 and raised in a noble family in Vilnius, Stasys Šilingas inherited the title of Baron from his uncle Adomas. He studied law at Moscow University and, with his friend Ramūnas Bytautas, who was also from the nobility, acquired his Lithuanian consciousness from priests and peasants. In their political views the two friends were socialist nationalists. In his childhood, Šilingas had spoken only Polish, but he learned Lithuanian in two years, 1905–1907, and he enthusiastically joined the activity of Lithuanian students. Like Smetona Šilingas took to worldly matters, seeking to arouse national consciousness and understanding, emphasizing not political but cultural activity. In 1910 Šilingas, with others, began to publish a liberal newspaper for young people, Aušrinė (Morning Star), and edited it himself. In 1911 he turned the editorship over to Petras Klimas.

Having finished his law studies in 1912, Šilingas moved to Vilnius and won note as a journalist, a member of the Lithuanian Scientific Society, and a literature and art critic. With the help of his wife Emilija Bytautaitė (his friend Bytautas’s sister), he converted his home into a history, literature and art salon, where 30–40 people would gather for lectures and reports. (Šilingas was perhaps the first Lithuanian to give his many daughters pagan, not Christian, names – Galinda, Vingra, Audronė, Rusnė, Raminta, Saulenė, Danguolė, Daiva, Laima.) Šilingas worked in the only Lithuanian bank – the Third Mutual Credit Society – and also in the Vilnius Land Bank; he helped Lithuanian painters; and he helped to collect and preserve the artistic work of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. Through this activity he became acquainted with Smetona and worked with him in the Lithuanian Society to Help Those Suffering From War. In December 1914 when Yčas became chairman of the society and Smetona the deputy chairman, Šilingas became secretary and took over all the basic work of the organization.

During the German occupation of Lithuania, Šilingas was actively participating in the activity of Lithuanian organizations and party groups in St. Petersburg. He participated in the Second Lithuanian Conference in Stockholm, October 18–20, 1917, and at the end of June 1918 he returned to Vilnius with his family. On July 13, together with Yčas, Voldemaras, Draugelis, Purickis, and Alekna he was co-opted into the Lithuanian Taryba; he subsequently directed its legal commission, later its financial matters.

The process of planning a state administration and of introducing the beginnings of a Lithuanian capital in Vilnius was difficult; barely was something
done when there would be a strong Polish reaction, as was the case in naming a new bishop of Vilnius. The Lithuanian State *Taryba* wanted a Lithuanian bishop in Vilnius – this was essential because Vilnius was to be the capital of independent Lithuania. Smetona and Šilingas watched the story of the designation of the new bishop closely.

Thanks to far-sighted people there was a good candidate – the leader of the new Marian order Jurgis Matulevičius-Matulaitis, a prominent figure, noble, attractive, sensible, attractive when one just looked at him. And Pranciškus Karevičius, the bishop of Žemaitija (Samogitia), trusted him and was urging him to become bishop. In 1918 members of the *Taryba* twice visited the Papal nuncio in Munich, Eugenio Pacelli (later Pope Pius XII), gaining his approval. But Matulaitis himself did not want the post, which he knew would be difficult. In addition, Matulaitis surely already knew that in the *Taryba* there was strong sympathy for Konstantinas Olšauskas, since Matulaitis had lived among Poles for rather a long time.

Matulaitis openly declared that for him the faith was the most important. He explained to *Taryba* members that he would not discriminate against the Poles; he was just a spiritual shepherd; all were the same to him. Matulaitis told Smetona that he would rather remain an ordinary monk, that monks were necessary for Lithuania. The deputy chairman of the *Taryba*, Justinas Staugaitis, responded, “But we do not have a better candidate.” Matulaitis finally agreed, fearing that he would sacrifice himself and accomplish nothing.

In October 1918, the future Pope Pius XI, Achilles Ratti, then the Vatican’s Apostolic Visitor for Poland and the Baltic regions, sent Matulaitis a letter naming him Bishop of Vilnius and adding that the Pope would not accept a refusal. The Polish-dominated Vilnius Bishopric chapter warned Ratti that “the designation of a Lithuanian Bishop aroused anguish and even attitudes hostile to the Holy See.” Ratti considered this disobedience to the Vatican and reacted sternly; clenching their teeth, the Polish-dominated chapter accepted the new bishop.

Matulaitis had to deal with demands from both Poles and Lithuanians, and also from Belarusians. His formal installation, on December 8, 1917, included both Polish and Lithuanian sections. Then he had to decide in what order to accept greetings. He considered the Lithuanians the basic authorities in Vilnius and prepared to meet them first, but because of confusion, the Lithuanians did