CHAPTER 12

The Smetona-Voldemaras Tandem

From the spring of 1901 onward, the Smetonas’ closest friend was Augustinas Voldemaras. At the time Smetona was in his next to last year in Petersburg, and the nine-years younger Augustinas was preparing for his examinations in the V. class of gimnazium. Voldemaras, from the same region as Smetona, was born in Dysna, in the district of Ignalina, on April 15, 1883. In 1909 he finished the Historical-Philosophical faculty of St. Petersburg University, where he taught until 1914. In 1917–1918 he was a professor at Perm University. Voldemaras was interested in everything and was very talented. His friendship with Smetona lasted almost thirty years. When Mrs. Smetona brought her children to St. Petersburg for medical treatment, he put her up in his apartment, giving her his own room.

He was unceasingly active, ambitious, strong-willed, and he loved to be the center of attention. Asked by students and colleagues whether there was anything in the world about which he would decline to speak, Voldemaras declared, “Put a nail in the ceiling, and I will talk about it for two hours without a break.” At times he abused his talents. Arguing with Marxist students, Voldemaras overcame them using very long citations from Karl Marx’s Kapital, but he soon admitted to Vincas Krėvė that he had not even read that work. He used such tricks also in government service: In August 1920 in talks in Vilnius he clashed with the Soviet Russian delegates Julian Marchlevsky and Ivan Mezhlauks, he based each of his arguments with the latest citations from Lenin’s writing. Mezhlauks, who had wanted Voldemaras to be in the Lithuanian delegation, later complained that the devil had tricked him into requesting Voldemaras, who later admitted that he had not read Lenin, that he had simply improvised. Petras Klimas wrote that in Geneva Voldemaras did many untactful things and liked to tell unseemly jokes in serious company: “The professor lacked the necessary culture. He just prided himself on his memory and knowledge.” Having become famous in Geneva and, according to Klimas, “having made himself a world persona,” Voldemaras on one occasion answered questions for a group of French journalists “entirely rationally,” but he cited some unknown French author, perhaps one he had himself made up. He liked to put smoke in people’s eyes by citing a generally unread writer.

The university in Kaunas also rang with stories about Voldemaras. In the summer of 1926, Father Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas, who taught Lithuanian literature, wrote,
Professor Augustinas Voldemaras played a new trick on the faculty...[He] arbitrarily put a forward at the beginning of a faculty publication, where he gave all faculty members names, to be sure in Latin, which in translation mean ‘Taschendieb (pickpocket).’ Dean Krėvė complained about Voldemaras to the Rector and is preparing disciplinary action. Voldemaras is becoming so brutal that it is difficult just to meet with him. He is nevertheless abnormal with his talents. For me he is intolerable, and once I hit him, rather hard. I am awaiting some sort of vengeance.436

Several days later Tumas went on:

All the professors cannot tolerate Voldemaras’s arrogance. Even his friends say that he will swallow the Tautininkai as he swallowed the liberals. V[oldemaras] hangs on to Smetona with both arms – calls him uncle Moses and himself his Aaron...In the past Smetona together with the whole [Lietuvis] editorial board – with me, Žalys, Noreika and two others plus Tūbelis – protested against Voldemaras’s rudeness in the press and against his mistreatment of persons.437