



### ***Notes of the Museologists***

#### **"REVOLUTIONARY OF SAD IMAGE." POET VYTAUTAS MONTVILA (1902-1941)**

*Historian Dr. Modestas Kuodys*

On June 15, 1984, when the new exposition building of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum with intricate forms was solemnly opened, it looked like some Soviet ideology temple. In the totalitarian empire, which Lithuania was forced to join in 1944 and it lasted for a long time, the knowledge of the past and the interpretations of history had to fit in the strict framework of censorship and propaganda. Efforts were made to emphasise and publicise the necessary facts and to disregard or distort the inconvenient ones. For example, this happened with the official memory of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Telling these horrific events, it was aimed to consolidate a significantly distorted image of the past. The crimes of the Nazi collaborators in the forts of Kaunas Fortress and elsewhere during the Soviet period were simply called the "massacre of civilian Soviet citizens," avoiding the explanations who those citizens really were and why they were so recklessly killed. From the total number of many thousands of "nameless" victims killed in 1941-1944, only a dozen of specially selected personalities was highlighted, who had to become an unquestionable illustration of the heroism of the members and supporters of the Communist Party. Ideologists and propagandists made those figures a compulsory object of

worship. It should be noted that almost only the representatives of Lithuanian nationality were deliberately included in this group of "holy martyrs." The aim was to artificially emphasise the role of Lithuania occupied by the Soviet Union "in winning the victory over the Hitlerites in the Great Patriotic War" and, at the same time, to convince the younger generations that the majority of the country's population did not seek to restore an independent state but were oriented towards Moscow. Because of this reason, a number of sculptural busts depicting "the representatives of the Lithuanian revolutionary movement" killed during the bourgeois government and during the Nazi occupation lined up in the corridor of the new Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum building opened on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Lithuania's "liberation." One of those busts was dedicated to the proletarian poet and the herald of the "class struggle" Vytautas Montvila. This year, his 120 birthday is commemorated. This is a good opportunity to remember this sufficiently interesting personality, whose biography was significantly "edited" during the Soviet period.

Vytautas Montvila was shot without trial by Nazi helpers in the middle of July, 1941 in the Seventh Fort of Kaunas Fortress. At that time, thousands of Jews were also brutally killed here in a few weeks. Very little is known about these victims as little information has survived. However, Montvila's name was often mentioned in Kaunas during the Soviet period; in addition, streets, all kinds of companies and institutions were named in his honour as well as monuments and memorial plaques were erected: the propaganda apparatus was creating a heroic legend in every way. However, the real story of this man's life is not worth such a pathos. During the Soviet period, it was avoided to recall and analyse the most contradictory shades of psychological portraits of the universally exalted characters; yet, now "excursions" in the labyrinths of consciousness of famous historical characters have become quite fashionable. Therefore, in this article, attempts have been made to highlight some lesser-known and ambiguous features of Montvila's personality and biography.

The future revolutionary poet was born on February 2, 1902 in Chicago, in a family of Lithuanian emigrants who came here from Marijampolė Region. Also, priest Juozas Montvila came from the same region. He is remembered mainly because of the fact that in the spring of 1912, on the way to America, he sank in the Atlantic Ocean along with the famous ship "Titanic." It was impossible to find out whether these two men having the same surname were related.

At an early age, Montvila experienced his first considerable shock: his father left his family. Barbora Montvilienė returned to her homeland almost without savings, with four young children - a daughter and three sons. Possibly, she would have sunk into poverty here, but she received support from her father-in-law, who came to Lithuania from America a few years later. He built a small house in Marijampolė and lived with his son's family. However, Montvila's childhood was not easy: from an early age he had to work as a shepherd in farms and experienced much hardship. In 1919, at the age of seventeen, he, together with his older brother, volunteered for the army of the Republic of Lithuania that had just been established and participated in the struggles for independence. Having obtained only primary education, he had the opportunity to learn more in the army and started to enjoy reading books. At that time, Montvila's left-wing stance and his uneasy and "angular" character began to emerge.

In 1921, after returning from the army home, Montvila decided to pursue education. He entered the teachers' seminary in Marijampolė. At that time, Lithuanian society was torn apart by a sufficiently sharp confrontation between the Catholic and left-wing supporters. The youth pursuing education were particularly active in this debate. Montvila soon joined the left-wing supporters. It should be noted that the "anti-clerical front" was not homogeneous: it consisted of at least four political organisations, which were competing rather than cooperating. The Lithuanian Communist Party, secretly funded by the Soviet Union, was only one of them and not the most influential one. Montvila's relations with Moscow's agents were complicated from the beginning, and he did not

become a member of the Communist Party. Moreover, during the interwar period, i. e. in the 1920s and 1930s, the poet was associated with the communist rivals (the so-called "aušrininkai"), the Lithuanian socialist revolutionaries. Soviet literature tried to obscure this very inconvenient fact by emphasising the virtues of Montvila as an independent "proletarian poet." The task for the propagandists was to represent him as conforming to all the canons of the "Bolshevik saint" rather than as a person that he really was. As we know, the dead cannot object to biography writers.

As a "revolutionary," Montvila was first noticed by the police in 1924: he was briefly arrested for taking part in a demonstration by the left. This complicated his studies at the teachers' seminary significantly, but he still received his diploma in 1928 after an unpleasant break. However, this did not end the problems with law enforcement. Gradually, they only intensified, primarily due to the formation of the authoritarian regime of President Antanas Smetona in Lithuania at the end of the same year after the military coup. The left-wing supporters tried to resist the new government: they organised coups and attacks on officials. Montvila and some other members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party from Marijampolė were arrested in 1929. He was suspected of belonging to a group that unsuccessfully tried to shoot the Prime Minister of the Republic of Lithuania Augustinas Voldemaras, who was going to the theater. Although the evidence against Montvila, who had already studied at Kaunas University at that time, was insufficient, a military court still sentenced him to ten years in prison. He had to sit not only in the central prison of Kaunas, but also in the mysterious Ninth Fort. However, his case was reviewed fairly quickly. In 1931, after the President of the Republic granted the appeal for pardon, Montvila was released. The underground Communist Party, as well as other left-wing radicals, strongly condemned such repentances of political prisoners and distanced from them. As a result, Montvila became even more lonely than before. He had a very difficult time because, as a former prisoner and a politically unreliable person, he could not hold a slightly more promising position as a teacher or civil servant. His relations with his

relatives did not develop well either. His very religious mother and his sister, who followed her example, were outraged by Vytautas's freedom, rebellion and constant provocation of law enforcement. The poet's brothers did not support him much either. They looked at the world differently, pragmatically: they did not believe in socialism and simply wanted to make a living; therefore, after some time they emigrated from Lithuania. The elder went to the United States and the younger one - to Argentina, where he quickly disappeared.

The poet's personal life did not develop smoothly either: not according to the societal norms accepted at that time. From his youth, Montvila did not feel comfortable with girls. He despised flirtation, fashion and marriage customs based on material calculations in general as well as marriage in church. He always dressed in the same way and behaved ascetically; he valued only the women having a similar, "proletarian," worldview. During the last five years of Montvila's life, his real cousin was his partner. The poor girl without a dowry lived in the Montvilai house in Marijampolė after her mother's death until she became an adult. She did the work of a servant, and Vytautas's sister taught her dressmaker's craft. In 1936, the poet brought his beloved woman to Kaunas, where the couple soon had a daughter. The young family was in great poverty, and soon the war broke out and caused more problems. However, the wife and daughter of the poet, who was shot, survived until the end of the Nazi occupation.

Condemned for the appeal of pardon in 1931, Montvila became acceptable to the Communists again only in 1940, when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union. The politicians of the predatory Moscow politics needed a bright symbol in Lithuania: an authentic, proletarian in origin and way of life poet, who was constantly persecuted by the police. During the twenty most promising years of his life, Montvila, who had not found a place in society and was deprived, agreed to cooperate without hesitation. He made every effort to justify the trust in him: in his poems, he enthusiastically glorified Communism and its leaders; he also

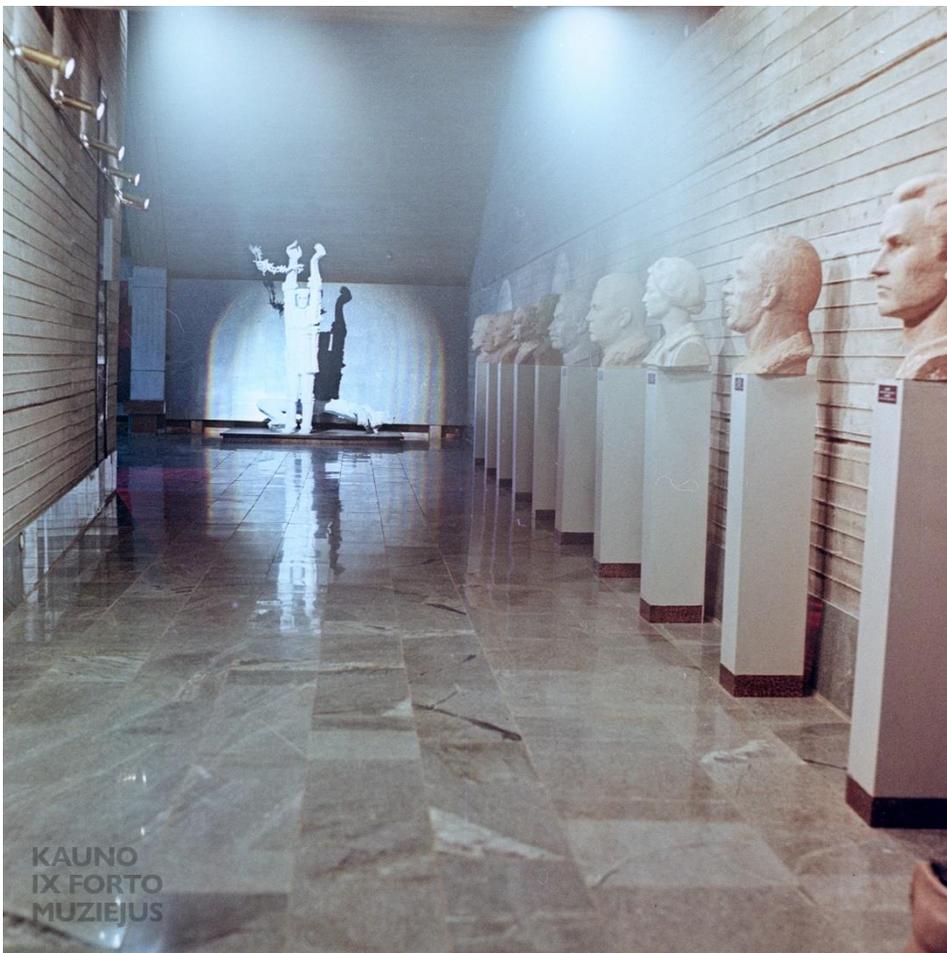
appeared as an agitator in the sham elections organized by the Soviet occupiers. Mainly because of this, he "earned a shot" as soon as the Soviet occupiers in Lithuania were replaced by the Nazis.

Vytautas Montvila's peculiar and at the same time very tragic biography was mainly determined by the features of his own personality (the consequences of childhood and youth psychological traumas) rather than by the social environment of the time. The poet's personality was rebellious; he was a categorical individualist, fanatically adhering to his principles. From this perspective, he reminds us of Don Quixote. As we know, this "knight of sad image" lived his life stubbornly, but utterly hopelessly fighting the enemies created by his sick imagination, having read many adventure novels. Likewise, Montvila was led into battle by Russian revolutionary literature. In his life, he seemed to imitate its heroes. He loved Maxim Gorky very much and even translated the author's famous novel "Mother" into Lithuanian. The greatest authority in poetry was Vladimir Mayakovsky. In Montvila's poems, it is not difficult to trace the influence of the latter, but their talents are incomparable. The works of the Lithuanian poet lack originality, sound of words and deeper meanings. It is a rather outright protest against "bourgeois society" and abstract slogans of "class struggle." On the other hand, there are some different and more intriguing parallels between the lives of the two poets. The cause of both Mayakovsky's and Montvila's death was a bullet. The first one shot himself, while the second one was shot. Both died at the age of approximately thirty-seven; it is the same age as Alexander Pushkin, the most famous Russian poet, died in the mid-19th century in the pistol duel. There is an even more impressive coincidence: Montvila's execution took place on July 19, 1941, i.e. during Mayakovsky's birthday. The latter would have turned 48 years old.

Also, there are some more analogies. Some Lithuanian researchers often call Montvila the equivalent of the famous Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca in the context of Lithuanian cultural history. This could be viewed as an overly

pretentious statement. Assessing the spectrum and depth of his work, Montvila is even further to Federico Garcia Lorca than to Vladimir Mayakovsky. What unites the Lithuanian and Spanish poets is only the equally tragic end of their life: they both died because of their leftist views and hostility to fascism.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the legend of Vytautas Montvila created during the Soviet period only confirms the regularity that in the countries with a state monopoly on ideology, history is simply a political servant as priority is given to propaganda images rather than real facts.



The new exhibition building of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum, circa 1984-1985. The line-up of busts of the most prominent figures of the Soviet Lithuania who died during the Nazi occupation. The bust of the poet V. Montvila is the first in the row



The final stage of the interior installation of the new exhibition building of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum (circa 1983). The line-up of busts of the heroes of Soviet Lithuania is being composed. The first one in front is the bust of the poet Vytautas Montvila



Monument to the poet Vytautas Montvila in Kaunas Vytautas Park (next to the current Perkūnas avenue), 1970s.