



Notes of the Museologists

EUROPEAN BOOK AESTHETE TADAS LOMSARGIS (1905–1942)

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At the beginning of 1942, on the western slope of Kaunas Ninth Fort, an earth layer already "hid" several tens of thousands of Holocaust victims buried in long ditches. A few months ago, Nazi collaborators mass-shooted local and foreign Jews brought here by train. The majority of the latter were the residents of Germany and Austria, but there were also "guests" from Czechoslovakia, which was very friendly to Lithuania. Soon, "routine" executions of small prisoner groups began at the concrete wall of the fort. The condemned were various enemies of the Nazi occupation regime, arrested and interrogated for a long time by the Gestapo. There were all kinds of people and representatives of various nations among them. Some of them were quite famous and educated, reaching broad European horizons with their cultural interests and connections. On September 26, 1942, at the Ninth Fort, a volley of gunfire ended the life of Tadas Lomsargis. He is considered to be the pioneer of artistic bookbinding and the first internationally recognised professional in this field in Lithuania. Commemorating the tragic anniversary, it makes sense to remember this personality at least briefly.

Considering T. Lomsargis's childhood, it is easy to understand where his special love for books came from. The future artist was born on August 14, 1905 in the village of Varnišķiai, which belonged to Tauragė County of Kaunas Governorate during the period of the Russian Empire. At that time, it was the very border of Great and Minor Lithuania: the border between two empires – Russia and Germany. During the entire second half of the 19th century, smuggling flourished here, which was not only the traditional one (goods and people fleeing anti-Semitic pogroms, poverty or military service to America), but also a very specific one – of Lithuanian books. After the defeat of the uprising in 1863–1864, the Russian authorities banned the printing of Lithuanian texts in Latin letters, aiming for faster assimilation of the local population. In fact, this meant the destruction of the language. However, the repressive policy of the empire faced a unique and peaceful response, a book-smugglers' movement. A whole network of people, indifferent to the fate of their nation, was formed, who organized the publishing and secret transportation of Lithuanian newspapers, books, calendars to Lithuania on the other side of the border, in German East Prussia. The Lomsargiai family was also involved in this activity. Booksmugglers used various tricks to deceive the Russian gendarmes who were chasing them. However, a number of Lithuanian patriots suffered greatly due to this "smuggling." The Lomsargiai were also in trouble with the tsarist authorities. Partly because of this, Tadas had to spend part of his childhood in a kind of exile – in East Gudia, Mogilev Governorate. He also started attending school there. After the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, the large Lomsargiai family returned to their homeland. The experience of national revival, like a printing press, vividly imprinted in the child's subconscious the awareness that a Lithuanian book being persecuted was a rare and very expensive thing, which must also look solid.

After WWI (1914–1918), the independent Republic of Lithuania was established, and new and promising living conditions were created. For some time, T. Lomsargis studied in Rietavas and then entered Švėkšna Pro-gymnasium. The foundations of his political views began to form here. Charismatic math and

science teacher Justinas Bartkus, who belonged to the underground communist party, had a great influence on this.

After receiving a certificate of finishing the pro-gymnasium, under the influence and example of J. Bartkus, T. Lomsargis taught for some time in elementary schools in various areas of Western Lithuania. Then he decided to pursue a broader education and to realize his old dream of becoming an artist. In 1927, he entered Kaunas School of Art, which was the only institution of such a profile in Lithuania at the time. Its teachers and students were characterized by left-wing and atheist views, and quite often got involved in some scandalous stories. In 1940–1941, a number of them became Soviet collaborators.

T. Lomsargis graduated from Kaunas School of Art in 1930. His talent, exceptional thoroughness and creative interests did not remain unnoticed, particularly, his a deep interest in artistic bookbinding. At that time, this field was poorly developed in Lithuania although its prestige and demand were growing noticeably. There was a need for highly qualified specialists who could become teachers of this subject. As a result, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Lithuania granted T. Lomsargis a scholarship to continue his studies abroad: to study at the State School of Graphics in Prague.

During the interwar period, Lithuania's relations with the Czechoslovak Republic were warm and friendly. Connections could be traced in various fields: from linguistics (the influence of the Czech alphabet on the Lithuanian one) and history dating back to the era of the Grunwald Battle to technological cooperation. The Škoda brand was famous for its reliability and quality all over the world. The representatives of this company were installing the first sugar factory in Lithuania, in Marijampolė in 1930–1931.

It should also be noted that Kaunas and Prague were also connected by similar interests in foreign policy. The security situation of Czechoslovakia as well as

Lithuania was complicated by the long-lasting conflict with Poland over the border territories. In 1933, after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, an even more threatening situation arose: the National Socialists began to incite German revanchism in the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia and in Klaipėda (Memel), the only port city of Lithuania. Common enemies not only naturally bring people together, but often also encourage military cooperation. Lithuania bought Czechoslovak weaponry, which was famous for its high quality, and sent its officers to study there. Lithuanians also studied in other academic institutions of this country.

The academic and socio-cultural atmosphere of the great city on the banks of the Vltava left a lasting impression on T. Lomsargis. Many things corresponded to his worldview and beliefs. There was no shortage of freedom, cosmopolitanism, innovation and modernity. It should be noted that the Czechoslovak Republic was the only Central Eastern European country that maintained a democratic system throughout the interwar period. The Lithuanian press constantly spoke favourably of its first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk: he was admired as an influential intellectual and an authority that mobilized citizens, protecting his country from the expansion of German National Socialism.

On the other hand, the Czechoslovak society, boldly condemning the totalitarianism identified with the swastika sign, viewed the communist Soviet Union quite favourably as it was considered as a partner in defence against the claims of Poland and Germany; various Marxist and Russophile ideas had quite a large number of supporters in Czechoslovakia. T. Lomsargis was impressed by the anti-fascism of those social groups, irony towards the established social norms and their enjoyment of freedom. It somehow correlated with the anarchist "spirit" of Kaunas School of Art, as well as reminded of the one promoted by the character soldier Švejk created by the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek.

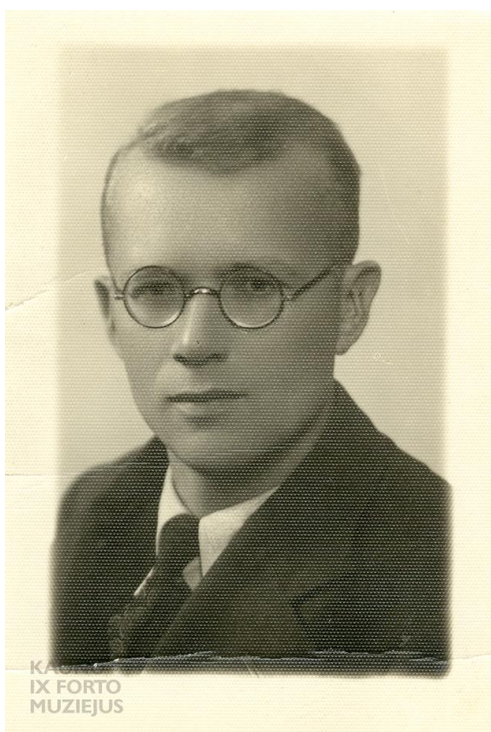
T. Lomsargis was studying in Prague for four years. He saw a lot, made various acquaintances and delved into the most subtle issues of technology and aesthetics of the chosen specialty. He was "incurably infected" by art deco stylistics and mastered sufficiently well the French way of binding books, which was the most difficult. He wanted to learn it in France as well, but he had to return to Kaunas as a teacher as soon as possible.

The last four years of T. Lomsargis's life in Lithuania (1938–1942) were very intense and rich. The artist taught students in Kaunas, created a lot and participated in international exhibitions in Paris and New York.

The talented artist might have been able to do a lot more and might have been able to become famous, but Europe was soon engulfed in the flames of the war. The international situation became complicated very rapidly. In the same year 1938, when T. Lomsargis left Prague, which had become close and dear to him, the Sudetenland was joined to the Third Reich. Also, in the spring of 1939, A. Hitler already occupied the whole Czechoslovakia and also took Klaipėda from Lithuania. The Führer personally participated in the latter action. On March 23, he arrived at the port of Klaipėda with a formidable squadron of military ships. This demonstration of aggressive power seemed like a prelude to further Reich aggression against Lithuania. However, history turned out to be different. After the secret agreement on the spheres of influence signed in September of the same year, Berlin "ceded" Lithuania to Moscow. The Red Army occupied the country in mid-June 1940.

T. Lomsargis was one of that rather large group of left-wing Lithuanian artists who welcomed the Soviet occupation. Now it is difficult to determine how much he was influenced by the naive illusions on the one hand and by the instinct of self-preservation and adaptation on the other hand. It might be that the artist, excessively fetishising the propagandistic Soviet "anti-fascism" in his mind, did not fully realize what scale of terror Lithuania would soon experience and, in

general, what a worthless concept not only human rights, but also human life was for the Stalinists. The first Soviet occupation, which lasted only a year, left deep scars in Lithuanian society. In 1941, at the end of June, Stalin's forces were pushed out of Lithuania by Hitler's powerful war machine. The Nazis initiated the extermination of Jews and "pro-Soviet elements" in the very first days of the occupation. In 1942, T. Lomsargis also fell into the vortex of repressions. He was accused of collaboration with the Soviets and connections with Czechoslovakian anti-fascists. One should remember that at the beginning of June, 1942, Czech patriots ambushed and mortally wounded high-ranking SS officer Reinhard Heydrich in Prague. At that time, he administered the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, following the order of A. Hitler. He was a fanatical and brutal Nazi, one of the main architects of the Holocaust. The attempt on such a high official caused great fury of the Führer and the SS leadership. A wide wave of brutal repressions soon swept through Prague and other parts of the Czech Republic. At that time, the trend of strengthening terror was also felt in Lithuania. Thus, in the circumstances of the death of T. Lomsargis, the tragic historical threads of two geographically distant countries were intertwined.



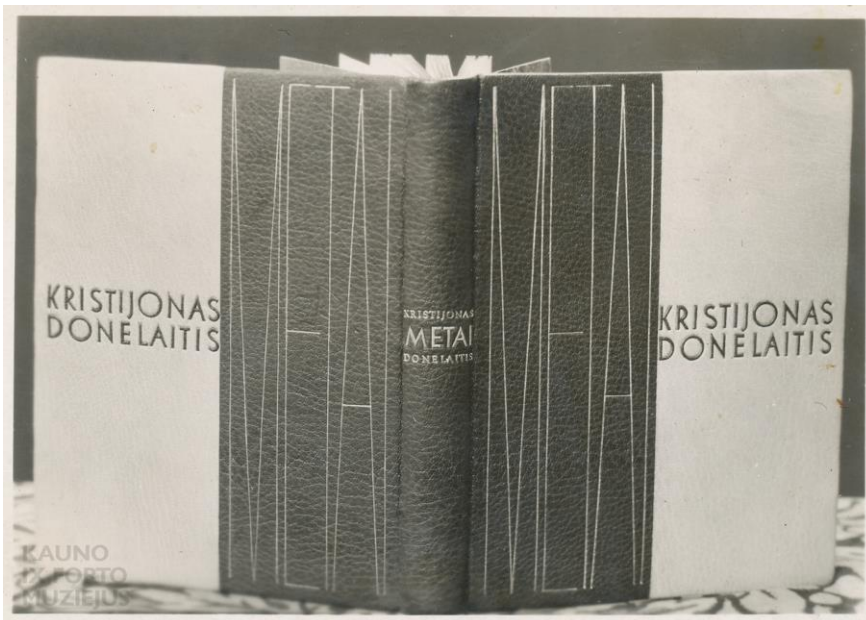
Portrait photo of Tadas Lomsargis. Unknown author, 1934

Lomsargis in Prague. Unknown author, 1935





Lomsargis near the Palace of Commerce and Crafts (today - Kaunas County Public Library's Old and Rare Prints Department) building.
Unknown author, 1939



A book bound by Lomsargis (a poem by Kristijonas Donelaitis "The Seasons")