



THE FIRST WORLD WAR AGENT JUOZAS GABRYS, NEWLY SPEAKING TO AN INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE AFTER A HUNDRED YEARS

Auf Wache für die Nation. Erinnerungen. Der Weltkriegsagent Juozas Gabrys berichtet (1911-1918). Hrsg. von Eberhard DEMM, Christina NIKOLAJEW, unter Mitwirkung von Nathalie CHAMBA. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2013. – 399 S. ISBN 978-3-631-64451-5

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298

Juozas Gabrys (1880–1951), despite the interest his personality presented and continues to present to more than one historian of diplomacy in different countries, is still considered a controversial figure. Being excluded from representing Lithuania as early as the first stage of the modern state, this Lithuanian ‘agent’ remained isolated all through the interwar period, even though during the First World War he played an important role by advocating the interests of modern Lithuania as far as it was possible at the time. The historian Alfred Erich Senn once called Gabrys ‘undoubtedly the best known Lithuanian political figure on the European scene before 1916’.¹ We can agree with this opinion even today, especially after looking at the literature intended for international audiences about Lithuania in the second decade of the 20th century, where Gabrys’ surname predominates. In London, Paris, Geneva and Lausanne, under his own name or different pseudonyms (Charles Rivas, etc), Gabrys published several dozen books, which explained Lithuania’s situation and outlined its prospects; most appeared in French, the language of diplomacy at the time. Thanks to his connections in Berlin, Paris and German-occupied Lithuania (the Ober Ost), he played a still hardly evaluated (regrettably, primarily in Lithuania) role during the First World War, by actualising the issue of Lithuania.

One of the principal sources which allows us to establish the scale of Gabrys’ activities before and after the First World War has for a long time been, and still remains, his own memoirs.² Having first appeared in French in 1920,³ the memoirs were meant to legitimise some of Gabrys’ activities and his understanding of events for an international audience. Simultaneously, he used his memoirs to distance himself

¹ SENN, A. E. The Activity of Juozas Gabrys for Lithuania’s Independence, 1914–1920. *Lituanus*, 1977, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 16.

² Cf. the study devoted to Gabrys’ activities: EIDINTAS, Alfonsas. *Slaptasis lietuvių diplomatas* [A Secret Lithuanian Diplomat]. Vilnius, 1992.

³ GABRYS, J. *Vers L’Indépendance Lituanienne: Faits, impressions, souvenirs 1907–1920*. Lausanne [1920].

from the accusations made against him by some political strata in Lithuania at that time, especially due to the position he took with regard to the Council of Lithuania (Lietuvos Taryba) which started functioning in 1917. The second version of the memoirs was written by Gabrys in Lithuanian in 1938; however, he kept supplementing and revising it up to 1940. In that version, Gabrys was more open about a number of aspects of his activities during the First World War, and, because of his old grievances, he expressed his open dissatisfaction with Antanas Smetona's authoritarian regime. Possibly because of this, the memoirs have never been fully published, either in interwar Lithuania or in the diaspora. Parts of the memoirs were preserved by the emigre diplomats Albertas Gerutis and Stasys Lozoraitis Sr. The copy of the first part of the manuscript at the latter's disposal turned up in the hands of the German historian Eberhard Demm, who published more than one work on the issue of Lithuania during the First World War as early as 1983. The typewritten copies of parts two to four in Gerutis' possession were transferred for storage to the Institute of Lithuanian Culture in Lampertheim in 1999. When all the original text had been collected, the idea occurred more than a decade ago to finally publish the memoirs of Gabrys. In 2003, together with the Lithuanian Emigration Institute at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Eberhard Demm agreed to publish the work in English and Lithuanian. However, for unknown reasons, only the Lithuanian version appeared in 2007, prepared for publication by Linas Saldukas (1970–2014), a historian at the Lithuanian Emigration Institute.⁴

Now, thanks to the translation by Christina Nikolajew and the comments of Eberhard Demm, as well as significant contributions from Nathalie Chamba and Arthur Hermann, an international audience will be able to enjoy the opportunity to read Gabrys' memoirs. They have been published in German by Peter Lang publishers, on the basis of the above-mentioned manuscript and typewritten copies. The last version, argue the compilers, differs from the Lithuanian one published several years ago, in several respects. They claim that in the Lithuanian version of the text, some of the expressions, names and bibliographical references in French were transcribed wrongly, and occasionally beyond recognition. Except for some brief bibliographical data, the Lithuanian version appeared without any critical comments or references to secondary sources in literature about Gabrys. Finally, even the title of the book *Atsiminimai* (Memoirs) did not receive any comment. The newly published German version of the book is supplemented by a critical introduction, a number of editorial comments, a biographical index of personalities referred to in the text, and a chronological table.

⁴ GABRYS-PARŠAITIS, J. *Tautos sargyboj* [On Guard for the Nation]. Vilnius, 2007. Cf. Eberhard Demm and Arthur Hermann's review of the book: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung*, 2007, 56 Jhg., Hf. 4, S. 625-626.

Gabrys' text, which he called *Tautos sargyboje* (On Guard for the Nation), provides a huge amount of intriguing material about Lithuania in the period 1911 to 1918. As is reasonably noted in the introduction by the compilers of the publication, it is important to read the book bearing in mind the genre: it is an autobiographical story, where the author sets out his own version of events, and also presents his role as he would like it to be seen by others. We shall add that, besides all this, when judging Gabrys' memoirs, it is important to remember the marginal position into which he felt he was undeservedly forced after 1918. The political isolation in which Gabrys remained until his death caused his response to the activities of other politicians; therefore, the text is characterised by the sometimes, it seems, exaggerated role of Gabrys himself, and a diminished contribution by others. In any case, Juozas Gabrys' memoirs pose a series of new questions for researchers into Lithuania during the First World War, and for historians of Eastern Europe, and that is their greatest value.