VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

Vilnius University, which celebrates its 425th anniversary this year, is the oldest establishment of higher education in Lithuania. Established in 1579 and for a long time became the eastern-most European university spreading the light of learning not only to ethnic Lithuania, the multinational Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but also to Central and Eastern Europe. Some works of the University graduates (Mathias Caesin Sarbievius, Kaziemiera Semenavičienė et al.) exerted influence over the civilization and culture of the whole Europe.

The genesis of Vilnius University was both a consequence of the development of European civilization and a fruit of the state’s policy. It was a Christian establishment of education, founded 200 years following Lithuania’s Christianization. Lithuania managed to follow this route – from Christianization to university – considerably faster than a number of other European countries. Shortly after Christianization, parish schools spread across Lithuania and in the mid-16th century high schools – colleges – began to appear.

The founding of Vilnius University was spurred directly by Reformation and competition among the advocates of Catholic renewal in the field of education development. As the Protestants hurried to establish a college of their own, the Jesuits did not wait and, on the initiative of the Bishop of Vilnius Valerijonas Protasevičius, in 1570 founded Vilnius Jesuit College which was soon to be transformed into a university. On 1 April 1579, Stephen Bathory, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, issued a note of privileges for the opening of Vilnius Academy. On 29 October of the same year, Pope Gregory XIII issued a bull that confirmed the transformation of Vilnius Jesuit College into a university, officially named Universitas Vilnensis.

The words on the edge of the coin: Universitas Vilnensis.

The edge of the coin is reeded at intervals.

The level of education at Vilnius University equalled the universities of Prague, Krakow, Vienna or Rome. The subject of modern scholastics was receptive to the ideas of the Enlightenment. Science was linked to practical activities and public needs. Jean Emanuel Gibert founded the Botanical Gardens of Vilnius University and wrote the work Lithuanian Fauna, which consisted of 5 volumes. He is said to be the father of Lithuanian botany. In 1753, the professor of mathematics Tomas Zebrauskas founded the astronomical observatory, one of the first in Europe and the fourth in the world, which, according to the experts, equaled the famous Royal Greenwich Observatory. Later, astronomical research was headed by Marcis Pocius, rector of the University for many years, a corresponding member of the Sorbonne Academy in Paris, and a member of the Royal London Scientific Society.

The tradition of humanitarian thought did not cease at that time either. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries it was supplemented by new achievements in historical studies. Joachim Lelewel was the first to embark on the research in the historical theory and methodology at Vilnius University. The research was subsequently headed by Jonas Gruzdaitis. Among the students of the University was Simonas Daukantas, who wrote the first history of Lithuania in the Lithuanian language. The famous painter Pranciškus Smuglevičius headed the Department of Drawing and Painting, established in 1793, and was the first representative of the classical style in Lithuania. The artist of the same style Laurynas Gucevičius established the Department of Architecture and designed the Town Hall and the Cathedral in Vilnius.

When the Jesuit order was dissolved in 1773, the management of Vilnius University was taken over by the Education Commission, which focussed a lot of attention on the education of the citizens of the state. The University resolutely supported the Constitution of 3 May 1791, which provided for the abolishment of the political system destroying the liberty, and for the introduction of a constitutional monarchy. After the division of the State of Poland and Lithuania among Russia, Prussia and Austria, Vilnius University was the sole guardian and cherisher of the idea of regaining statehood. Illegal Pallasfer and Philomath Societies were set up at the University. After they were tracked down, one of the biggest student proceedings in Europe started. A large number of University students fought heroically among the rebels of 1831. On 1 May 1832, the Russian imperial authorities closed the University down. The insipia of autocratic power – the rector’s sceptre, a gift from the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania Stephen Bathory, was taken away to Saint Petersburg Hermitage Museum and has been kept there until now. Any attempts of the Lithuanian nobility or intellectuals in general to renew Vilnius University failed against the tsarist self-will. The hope of restitution languished only at the end of World War I.

The Council of Lithuania, having declared the restoration of the state of Lithuania on 16 February 1918, on 5 December adopted the statute of Vilnius University.
Its first paragraph announced that the University was "revived from 1 January 1919". Yet following the Red Army's invasion into Lithuania, on 13 March 1919 the Bolsheviks declared about the opening of a Labour University in Vilnius.

The Poles, having reinforced themselves in the capital of Lithuania, on 11 October 1919 officially opened Vilnius University and named it Stephan Bathory University. Lithuania was forced to re-establish the University in its provisional capital Kaunas. This was done on 16 February 1922, in accordance with the statute of Vilnius University. In 1930, the Lithuanian University in Kaunas was given the name of Vytautas Magnus University.

When Lithuania regained Vilnius in 1939, the University was soon restored. In less than one year the Soviets invaded and began sovietising Vilnius University, whereas the Germans occupiers closed it down completely on 17 March 1943. After the return of the Soviets in the summer of 1944, Vilnius University renewed its activities, although academic freedom was restrained. Learning and studies were separated from the Western world. Yet even under conditions of occupation Vilnius University managed to endure ideological supervision.

Today, when a large number of universities have opened up in Lithuania, Vilnius University still remains the most solid establishment of education. It has 12 faculties, 8 institutes, 10 study and research centres, an old library (established in 1570), an astronomical observatory, botanical gardens, an international business school, etc.

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