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Lithuanian dreams of a free homeland

'If we don't have hope, then we won't want to live. Our hope is to preserve national heritage in this century.'

—Tomas Venclova

By DIANE FEEN

Tomas Venclova has a message for the people of the United States. That the reason he gives for spending years struggling to obtain a visa to leave his native country of Lithuania, in the Soviet Union.

Venclova spoke March 20 at the Divine Providence Church in Southfield as part of a nationwide lecture tour on intellectual and political repression in the USSR. He is on a five-year Soviet exit-visa and following his tour will teach at the University of California at Berkeley. He plans to return to Lithuania.

Venclova said he is one of small group of dissidents in Lithuania. Born and educated in Lithuania, Venclova is a translator, author and poet.

He was expelled from the Lithuanian Writers' Union and was not allowed to receive his PhD, he said, due to his dissident activities.

Venclova said that despite the Helsinki Agreement's provision for the free flow of ideas in all countries which signed the document, there is still no freedom of speech, opinion or movement in Lithuania.

He has lectured in Chicago, Boston, New York and spoke at a Congressional hearing in Washington two weeks ago.

Venclova said the dissident group he belongs to was founded in November 1976. Since they organized, they have been harassed constantly and told to remain silent by Soviet officials, he said.

"I am pleading that the international public pay attention to the fates of the other four members of the group while I am in the U.S.," he said. "If western culture gives more recognition in defense of human rights, Venclova and his followers will be a success."

One poet, who tried turning to the Communist Party to demand greater artist freedom, was committed to treatment in a psychiatric hospital, Venclova charged.

MONTHS LATER, upon leaving the hospital, the man was mysteriously killed under the wheels of a train, he said.

Other people have been exiled, expelled from schools, and separated from their families for merely complaining about local abuse by Lithuanian authorities. The most popular punishment is confinement to a mental institution, according to Venclova.

He attacked limitations on religious freedom.

"It is forbidden to commemorate those who died in the Arab-Israeli wars," he said. If these rules are not observed, he said, religious sects are subject to persecution.

Appeals by Lithuanian citizens to visit nearby relatives are refused without reason and are accompanied by government ridicule and thousands are still being punished for resistance against the Soviets during the Second World War, he said.

Many of them are forced to live in exile, although they have already served sentences in work camps.

Venclova hopes that in the future he will be able to openly speak of violations of the Helsinki Agreement in Lithuania but as of now, anyone speaking out is subject to great discomfort.

He said his family is doing well, but he fears for their future.

ASKED TO COMMENT on Soviet complaints that public criticism of Soviet practices by the U.S. government is an infringement into internal affairs, Venclova said:

"Human rights is an international concern and cannot be avoided. It should be defended in every country."

His ultimate goal is an independent Lithuania. He is hopeful that U.S. moral support toward that end can help, but he admits the prospects of independence are dim.

Venclova's poetry is a philosophical reflection of his nationalist sentiments. His work has been translated into English and Polish.

The poet sees recent Soviet disdain for President Carter's efforts on behalf of Soviet dissidents as temporary. He believes the Russians are more concerned about economic problems than dissidence, but they will test Carter to see if his stance on human rights is firm and consistent.

Soviet pressure on dissidents has increased since President Carter has spoken out on human rights. Many friends of Venclova's have been arrested, he said, but he feels the situation is temporary.

Venclova's great hope is for eventual Lithuanian independence.

"If we don't have hope," he said, "then we won't want to live. Our hope is to preserve our national heritage in this century."

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