

Summary

The book *Maironis. Letters. Memories* is a collection of letters written by Jonas Mačiulis-Maironis (1862-1932), a Lithuanian national poet, playwright, historian, educator and an important actor in the Catholic Church. The book also features recollections of the poet's contemporaries.

Maironis is one of the fundamental authors of the national revival that took place at the end of the 19th century; he created the poetic language still in use at the present day and remains the most important canonical poet. However, his literary heritage has still not been systemized, as this process was slow from the very beginning. For four years after Maironis' death the questions of establishing his former home as a museum was still being considered. At the fifth anniversary of the poet's death, in 1937, the idea to collect Maironis' letters and other things connected to his biography was proposed. Even though a few letters had been published in periodicals of the time, there was a lack of consistent effort for this idea to be realized. The occupation in 1940, along with World War II and the post-war battles disrupted this kind of scholarly work altogether. In the depressed atmosphere of the first Soviet decade, the scholars who remained in Lithuania worked to protect their national values and the literary core, even though it was obvious that full collections of the works of many authors would never be published.

In 1962, the Lithuanian émigré community in the USA – where Lithuanian literature and literary studies could be examined without any ideological boundaries – commemorated Maironis' 100th birthday. There were many publications on the topic of the poet, the most valuable of which were published as a book entitled *Maironis: Celebrating One Hundred Years of the Poet*. Activity in the émigré community encouraged a reaction in occupied Lithuania, which led to a more favourable atmosphere in which to conduct research into

the work of Maironis. This field of study was taken up by scholar Vanda Zaborskaitė, who, within a few years, wrote and published a substantial monograph *Maironis* (1968). The re-emergence of such research stimulated a new interest in the life of the poet. The Vilnius University chapter in Kaunas, The Maironis Museum (at the time called the Museum of Lithuanian Literature), The Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (at the time called the Institute of Lithuanian Language and Literature), the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, the Raseiniai Library and individual admirers of the life and work of Maironis began collecting memoirs, searching for letters, making copies of documents found in Saint Petersburg (Leningrad at the time) and in Catholic organizations of Lithuania etc. There were intense preparations for the 125th anniversary of Maironis in 1987. Zaborskaitė's monograph was republished and the anniversary was commemorated at the highest state level: there was a festive event at the Vilnius Opera House, an international conference, whereas the Academy of the Sciences prepared a lengthy new tome that focused solely on Maironis. This was the 21st volume of the series *Literature and Language*, and it was published in 1990 – the same year that Romas Adomavičius released a long-cultivated *Bibliography of the Writing of Maironis (1883-1989)*.

The 21st volume of *Literature and Language* had up until now been the most extensive publication of Maironis' documents, letters and memoirs. *Maironis. Letters. Memories* significantly complements and perfects its materials. The book contains letters written by and to Maironis, as well as the memories his contemporaries had of him. The letters include not only the letters by Maironis which had been discovered more recently, but also letters and postcards addressed to him. The letters are ordered chronologically, but letters addressed to or by the same person are grouped together. The second part of the book contains many new memoirs which had either originally been published abroad or after 1990, as well as some which had been recently found in the form of manuscripts. Both the letters and the memoirs are, where possible, published from primary sources, therefore they are more reliable than in previous publications: the volume released

in Soviet times has traces of the fears common at the time (such as missing stories about life at the seminary, the lack of capital letters in the names of religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter, and other irregularities). This book presents the unedited versions of the letters with all the grammatical, punctuation, syntax, vocabulary and other errors. The texts are written in the appropriate dialects, which is valuable when tracing the approximate periods of writing and as a mark of authenticity which is important to preserve. The memoirs were also edited as little as possible, with only the obvious proof-reading errors removed.

Considering how intensive the poet's literary and cultural life was, his epistolary heritage is comparatively scarce. Having lived in many different places, travelled widely and holidayed in various resorts both in Lithuania and abroad, Maironis was constantly writing letters concerning his creative works, cultural and religious life and even personal matters. He also received many greetings himself. It is estimated that he wrote a few hundred letters and probably received even more, however, due to various circumstances – especially the fact that during the war a German hospital was set up in his home and used Maironis' letters, manuscripts and books as fuel, and the overall fearful atmosphere of the Stalinist regime – the number of surviving letters is modest.

Not a single letter remains from the 1916-1920 period, during which World War I ended and Lithuanian Independence was claimed. This epistolary silence can be considered to be a division between the two periods of Maironis' letters – the ones written before Independence and the ones written after. This distinction is also warranted by the social issues discussed in the letters and more or less dominating the epistolary heritage of Maironis. There are 37 letters remaining from the period from 1898 to 1915, and 26 letters from the period from 1920 to 1932. In the second period, the letters are both fewer and shorter – this change is connected to an essential shift in the political and cultural situation, to the calmer life Maironis was leading in Kaunas, the temporary Capitol, and to the greater opportunities to speak face-to-face or on the telephone. In the first period we find a few letters

addressed to the priests Adomas Jakštas, Liudas Gira and Juozas Tumas. In the second period, these names have disappeared, as they, much like other cultural and literary individuals who had ties with Maironis, lived in Kaunas. The dominant language is Lithuanian: out of 63 letters only four are written in Polish and one in Russian. All five non-Lithuanian letters belong to the early period of correspondence, as do the ten letters written to Maironis in Polish.

A general overview of the letters shows their fragmented and incidental nature. There are only a few instances, where letters create an epistolary dialogue, where we see both a letter and a relevant reply. The rest are separated by longer or shorter periods of time. Only a few names of addressors and addressees in the lists of sent and received letters match. However, even though the remains of Maironis' correspondence are scarce, due to this individual's multifaceted activities and unique importance to Lithuanian culture, we can still reconstruct some interesting empirical narratives which enhance our understanding about the writer's social and creative worries, his various of interests, his values and the images of his working and resting moments.

A large part of the book is dedicated to other individuals' memoirs of Maironis. The story of the gathering of these memories is a difficult one. Though Maironis knew a wide variety of people, as would be expected for a man of his profession, activity, popularity and social character, there are few written reminiscences of him. Sadly, there was little effort put into collecting memoirs about Maironis immediately after his death. The eight years leading up to World War II could and should have been the most intense and fruitful for collecting these memories, as the people who had known Maironis were living Kaunas and Lithuania. Jonas Mačiulis was friendly with entire families: Jančiauskas, Stanelis, Matulaitis, Kaupas, Smetona, Nasvytis, Budrikas, and others. None of them recorded their memories of Maironis. Only two decades after the poet's death, occupation, war, emigration and death had already thinned out the number of potentially important storytellers. It was only when the émigré community started organizing itself in the US that memoirs

started being published. In Lithuania, a systemic effort to keep such records only surfaced in the 1960s (1962-1972).

To create a comprehensive portrait of Maironis and his surroundings, the most accurate strategy is to follow the key dates of his life. The poet's biography can be split into three clearly-cut sections: the first 26 years, which Maironis spent in his parents' home and in Kaunas (with the exception of one trip to Kiev in 1883-1884), the following 19 years spent at the Saint Petersburg Roman Catholic Theological Academy, and, finally, the last 23 years back in Lithuania, mostly in Kaunas. During the last period, Maironis was rector of the Kaunas seminary, taught at the university and had many guests and relatives at his home, therefore this period is the richest in memoirs about him. It is also split into three parts, leaving the "Memories of Contemporaries" of the book section presented in five chapters: "Maironis as remembered by family", "Maironis – a professor in Kaunas and Saint Petersburg", "Maironis – the rector of the Kaunas seminary", "On Maironis' life in Kaunas", "Maironis in the memory of cultural actors".

The book ends with an index of names and locations. The index of names includes not only the names and surnames of the individuals mentioned in the book, but also the important dates and short biographical notes.