

Elena V. Tumas

1920 - 1994

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, EMERITUS

B.A., M.A., Immaculate Heart College; Ph.D., Philosophy, Comparative
Literature, University of Southern California, June 11, 1964
California State University, Fullerton From September 1, 1965 To August 31,
1986

Birth: March 16, 1920; Death: October 22, 1994

Several years ago I attended a series of concerts given by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and I frequently conversed with a couple who usually sat next to me. On one occasion, I mentioned that I taught at Cal State Fullerton, and the man immediately asked whether I knew Dr. Elena Tumas, from whom he had taken two courses when he was a CSUF student in the 1970s. When I told him that she and I had been colleagues in the Department of English and Comparative Literature for over twenty years, he proceeded to tell me with great enthusiasm and gratitude how influential she had been in introducing him not only to literature and language but also to profound issues of ethics and morality. What he most remembered were her imposing knowledge of and respect for the works of writers such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Goethe and her compelling lectures that often incorporated aspects of her own experience of growing up in Lithuania, surviving World War II, and subsequently moving to the United States. I listened to this man's praise of Professor Tumas and felt a strong pride of association with my late colleague, but there were no surprises in what he told me. As a former chair of my department and a frequent member of its personnel committee, I had perused hundreds of student evaluations, read many letters, and heard countless personal tributes that extolled Elena's superb gifts as a teacher. Her intelligence, wisdom, warmth, generosity, and candor were widely documented.

Elena had sustained her aspirations for an academic career despite some formidable challenges and setbacks. In the 1930s she completed secondary school and some university work in Lithuania and was invited to pursue her studies at universities in Germany and the Soviet Union, but this phase of her education was aborted by the war. She resumed her studies in the United States in the early 1950s, eventually earning a B.A. (1954) and an M.A. (1958) from Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles and a Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Southern California in 1964. After teaching part-time at Immaculate Heart College, the Otis Art Institute, and U.S.C., Elena began her full-time teaching career at CSUF in September 1965. She retired in August 1986, but continued to teach on a part-time basis through the spring 1991 semester.

Elena's contributions to the Department of English and Comparative Literature were enormous. She was a significant participant in the definition and development of both our undergraduate and graduate programs in comparative literature, and she served for many years as a principal adviser to comparative literature majors. Elena prepared and frequently taught some of the most important and popular courses in the program. For many semesters her class in the Renaissance was a key offering, and it was one of the classes my acquaintance at the Philharmonic praised. Elena's classes in Russian literature and Soviet literature, especially in recent years, have had considerable cultural and political relevance. On the graduate level, she developed seminars in two of her specializations: Goethe and the epic novel. Elena's preparation for her many accomplishments were not merely academic. In addition to being the first member of our faculty to possess a doctorate in comparative literature, she had traveled widely, especially in Europe, and she spoke English, Lithuanian, German, French, and Russian and commanded a reading knowledge of practically all Germanic and Slavic languages.

Elena often expressed her faith in the value of higher education, especially in the humanities, to foster human understanding and harmony. She was no stranger to the anguish and suffering that political and cultural conflict can cause, and she stressed in her literature courses that despite human differences, most men and women share similar challenges, obstacles, and goals in life. During the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s, when Americans often perceived the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as threatening and adversarial, Elena represented, at least at CSUF, a cordial, compassionate, and nurturing Slavic presence. She fulfilled this role not only in the classroom but also occasionally in the kitchen.

I was fortunate to have been in attendance at "An Evening in Memory of Dostoevsky," that she helped to organize in 1972. During the early hours of the evening Elena was in the kitchen of the former faculty club (Mahr House) preparing borscht, piroshky, and savory desserts. She then moved effortlessly from her culinary to her professorial role and participated in a panel discussion of Dostoevsky and his legacy. She concluded her observations by stating that "words are the miracle of Dostoevsky. When translated, they can be understood and felt by anyone who reads them, no matter what language they speak." This comment embodied Elena's strong belief in the universal relevance of great works of literature and explained the enthusiasm and stamina that characterized her teaching of world literature.

Elena's students and colleagues expressed their respect for her fine work in a number of ways. In 1970 she was nominated for the Distinguished Teacher Award, and in 1980 the School of Humanities and Social Science honored her by naming her faculty marshall for its commencement exercises, at which she also delivered the keynote address.

Esteem for Elena was not limited to the campus. She was also immensely admired and loved by the Lithuanian community, especially those members in exile in Chicago and Los Angeles, whom she first served in

the 1950s as the English editor of THE LITHUANIAN DAYS MAGAZINE. Her keen understanding of the historical and political complexities of the Baltic world was acknowledged by the many invitations she received to speak to academic and public organizations. Elena was a particularly vigorous champion of the literature of her homeland and its region, and the record of her lectures and articles on Lithuanian, German, and Russian writers is prolific. Perhaps her most lasting scholarly achievement was her editing of and introduction to the first English translation of THE SEASONS by Kristijonas Donelaitis, the eighteenth century writer often called the "father of Lithuanian literature." Elena's scholarship was complemented by her own creative work, principally two volumes of her own poetry in Lithuanian: KARALIAI IN SVENTIEJI (KINGS AND SAINTS) and ZEMAS RITMAS (THE RHYTHM OF THE EARTH).

Retirement did not bring any pause to Elena's scholarly or creative interests, but the end of her teaching career did bring about changes in her life. Since her husband, Herman, had died in the mid 1980s, Elena had lived alone. Her only child, Vydun, and his wife and three children were living in Idaho, where he practiced medicine, and in 1991, Elena went to live near them. Thus began another itinerant phase of Elena's life: within three years she moved with her son and his family to small towns in Wyoming and Colorado. Briefly, and ultimately sadly, she went to Lithuania in 1993 to visit her sister and other family members and also to serve as a visiting professor at a Lithuanian university. While there, she developed gangrene and had to return to the United States and undergo the amputation of her lower right leg.

This misfortune did not seem to mute Elena's ambitions, interests, or joys in life. I spoke frequently on the telephone with her during the last year of her life. She always described her progress in learning to walk with the aid of a prosthesis, and she even looked forward to driving her car again. No conversation was without a report on the loving and amusing companionship she enjoyed with her three grandchildren. Just two days before she died, Elena went through a roster of questions for me about her former colleagues and ended our conversation with her unfailing reminder that I relay her best wishes to her many friends at CSUF. Peacefully and unexpectedly, Elena Tumas died in her sleep on Saturday morning, October 22, 1994, in Alamosa, Colorado.

Submitted by
Howard J. Seller
Professor of English
January 26, 1995