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AUSTRALIAN/LITHUANIAN COMMEMORATIVE MEDAL

By Ray Jewell



Actual size 51mm diameter.

Modern Lithuania is best known to most Australians as a small Baltic State struggling for independence from the huge expansionist Russia.

The Lithuania of today was created as a separate State after the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918. A country of 65,201 square kilometres and a population of 3.4 million, it is a far cry from the 15th century major power whose territory stretched south to the Black Sea.

The emergence of an independent Lithuania, after centuries of Russian rule, generated a population of ardent patriots. Recent events have shown this spirit has not been dampened by another period of Russian occupation.

One such patriot was Augustinas Voldemaras. Born in 1883 near Vilnius, he studied and took his degree at Petrograd University. Later Professor of history at Kaunas University, he became the first President of independent Lithuania in 1918.

Voldemaras was the most controversial political figure to emerge in Lithuania during the 1918-1940 period. His fascist policies were not always popular with much of the population. He served in several positions including a second term as Prime Minister. After the occupation by Russia in 1940 he was deported to Siberia and his fate is usually described as "unknown".

Migration from the Baltic States to Australia was strong in the twenty years after the Second World War and national groups grew in most large Australian communities.

One such group of Lithuanians in South Australia, certainly admirers of Voldemaras, decided to sponsor a medal to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the foundation of independent Lithuania, the First Prime Minister and his subsequent deportation.

The artist chosen to design the medal was Stasys Neliubsys, a migrant who had made his home in South Australia.

Neliubsys continued his artistic career in this country and his work has been displayed in the Royal Society of Arts Gallery, North Terrace, Adelaide. He has been described as "traditional in approach with vigorous control of his medium".

The 51 mm. diameter medal was produced by K.G. Luke of Melbourne in bronze. There was also a small silver striking and an even smaller uniface striking in bronze. The medal was originally sold in a white bakelite case with the Luke imprint on the silk lining inside the lid.

Mintages were: 115 in bronze
3 uniface in bronze
5 in silver

The uniface medals were inscribed with the details of Voldemaras' career. These and the silver medals were not available for sale.

The artists initials "SN" appear on the truncation of the neck on the obverse, while the initials "K.G.L. MELB." appear on the reverse.

Given the political leanings of Voldemaras it is not surprising that the medal did not sell well in Australia, even among the Lithuanian community. They were also offered for sale in the United States of America (at \$10 each post paid) and approximately forty were exported.

This medal poses an interesting challenge to cataloguers and collectors. It is a commemorative medal designed and struck in Australia but is it an Australian commemorative issue?