

## THE EXILE AND THE PROBLEM OF HIS ADJUSTMENT

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On occasion the exiled Lithuanian student meets a well-meaning American colleague who, after listening to the story of the Lithuanian, makes an observation somewhat like the following: "My friend, your misfortune is really a fortune in disguise; had it not been for the war, you probably would never have had the opportunity to live in this country; as it is now, you are one of us, you are part of a nation that is great, and beautiful, and strong."

I am sure everyone of us will agree that the opportunity to experience once again the glorious sense of freedom and of independent existence is the greatest fortune of the exile. The hospitality of the United States, as well as of other nations, is the most lucid single aspect of the whole dark odyssey of exiled people. No one will ever deny that it was indeed a blessing for the homeless to find such a hospitable, friendly refuge, and no one will ever question the greatness and the beauty and the strength of this country.

However, to say that exiled people would actually be happier now than they were in their own parent country is not to understand what exile means. This frequent lack of understanding is, of course, no fault of the people who say this sort of thing. For indeed, it is difficult to appreciate the value and the meaning of one's native country unless one has experienced the loss of it. Let me briefly point out some of the factors which our well-meaning American friend overlooks when he regards exile as "fortune in disguise".

We all know that the role of environment in the formation and molding of one's personality cannot be overemphasized. By "environment" here I mean everything that is not the person himself, parents, home, the natural environs into which he is born, the culture in which he grows, etc. From the very first day of his life, and even earlier, every individual is searching for and learning ways to adjust to the world about him so that he may cope with it in the most efficient manner.

Now life would be a gruesome process if everyone had to be constantly at grips with environment. Luckily, this is not quite so. As an individual grows and develops he begins to introject, to incorporate many aspects of the environment, so that the environment becomes a part of himself, something of his own rather than something entirely outside. This is the process of identification, and it enables the person to live with his environment rather than live against it. It involves practically every stage of an individual's life — from the situation at the mother's breast to elaborate aspects of culture. The individual comes to one, as it were, with his parents, one with his home, one with the people and things around him. This makes him secure, makes him feel adequate and competent.

Exiled people, like all others, identified themselves in this manner with the surroundings in which they were brought up. They grew, they learned, they sought and found ways of dealing with people and things, feeling more and more independent as they grew, more and more competent as they learned.

Suddenly these people were withdrawn from the environment that had actually become a part of themselves. All learning that was specific to that environment, everything that specifically equipped them for leading adequate, adjusted lives now became useless. Many habits, customs and other cultural treasures now became entirely nonfunctional. Instead, there

arose the need for new learning, for new ways, new patterns of reactions such as would enable the exile to function efficiently in the new environment. To acquire this new repertoire of reactions is by no means an easy task, mainly because this need for new learning usually comes at an age when learning can no longer be spontaneous and natural. The personality of the exile is already largely formed, and little that is new can be incorporated into it as an integral part.

Now someone may object, saying that the differences in the natural and cultural environments of Lithuania and of the United States are really not so drastic as to deprive an individual of a sense of completeness and adequacy when he is transplanted from one country to the other. Consequently, whatever relearning is necessary it should not be too difficult.

The fact is, however, that for exiles there are some special blocks and obstacles to the relearning process. What are these blocks?

There is, for instance, the natural resistance to the relearning that is a consequence of the coercion which the exiles have experienced. By this I mean that a person who immigrated to this country by his own free choice is much more likely to achieve a satisfactory adjustment than the exile. For in every man there is a basic need to be free, to be self-assertive, to be independent, to "decide one's own fate".

In the case of the exile his "transplantation", the change in countries was not his own making. It came as an unavoidable necessity. It was against his choice that the exile had to leave his country and his plans and hopes for the future as well. Consequently there is a sense of incompleteness in him, a sense of injury, of frustration, of injustice suffered. Leaving one's home and all aspirations for one's future is a truly traumatic experience which simply cannot be forgotten or repressed so that a new life may be started with as much vigor, determination and enthusiasm as had been dedicated to one's endeavors before. A ready melting into the new environs for the exile has a flavor of submission to fate, of surrender to coercion, and as such cannot be readily accepted.

In addition to this resistance, there is also some feeling of insecurity, futility and apprehension of the future. This is a natural result of having once experienced the collapse of all plans and the tumbling of a world in which the exile had been preparing for many years to live.

Another factor that has to be considered in weighing the exile's resistance to the environment is a certain sense of guilt arising from having left the country. Certainly not all Lithuanians, nor Latvians, Estonians, Czechoslovakians escaped the tyranny of communist occupation. Many had to stay and are now enduring a very trying, very cruel oppression. Thousands of these are known to be conducting an active crusade against the invader in terms of underground movement and other types of resistance. Many are being deported, many being tortured, many executed. Most of the exiles have once experienced all these things and they know precisely what their countrymen behind the iron curtain are enduring.

The exile is very strongly identified with his countrymen whom he left behind. If not by ties of blood relation then certainly by bonds of national unity he is intimately joined with the ones who remained. Consequently the exile feels much like the soldier who for some lucky reason happened to be away from his platoon when it was annihilated in combat. With every thought of rejoicing over being spared there is an accompanying feeling of guilt for having "deserted" the others. The realization of the fact that staying in the country would not have helped the others anyway is just not sufficient to absolve the exile from this sense of guilt. In his own eyes he is still a "deserter" no matter how reasonable is the justification for his departure from the country.

All these factors contribute to the difficulty that the exile meets when he is confronted with the need to relearn ways of life. He will never be able to regard the present country as his own in the same way in which it is regarded by those who were born here. And it is painful for the exile to hear someone say that he is really fortunate in having been forcefully "transplanted" from the one country to the other.

This does not mean that the exile is ungrateful to this country and its people for providing him with such a blessed sojourn. And it does not mean that he is disloyal to it because he feels an unquenchable yearning to return some day to the environment in which he was meant and molded to live. For it seems to me that the measure of loyalty is the extent to which one knows and respects the value of the thing to which he vows allegiance. This country is truly the home of the free. And there is no one who cherishes and treasures freedom more than the one who had the misfortune to experience its loss.