

A Glimpse Into Polish - Lithuanian Relations

The article below has appeared recently in the well-known Polish magazine "Kultura", in Paris. It evoked a considerable echo in the Polish circles. Whatever the opinions, it was welcomed as a thoughtful and sober contribution to the Lithuanian-Polish dialogue in exile which is of great importance for the future East-Central Europe. One of the latest manifestations of that dialogue was this summer's Lithuanian-Polish culture festival behind the Iron Curtain during which the dreariness of the official Communist slogans was transcended by the genuine interest of both nations in each other's creative genius.

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1. — International relations are usually considered to be a purely political matter, and at first glance the relation between Poland and Lithuania would not appear to lie within the competence of someone who is a philosopher rather than a political scientist. If I attempt to express myself upon the question, it is because I myself am convinced that men of politics are not the only ones who have a right to deal with it. The intercourse between our two nations has always comprehended much more than the merely political, and I believe that the treatment of Polish-Lithuanian relations on the level of pure politics will inevitably persist in being sterile. If a happier turn is to be effected in those relations, the ground for it will be prepared not by politicians, ruled as they are by nationalistic passions, but by those men of both nations who attempt to understand each other, to rise above the misunderstandings and conflicts of the recent past. In this conviction I accept, with sincere gratitude, the opportunity to review in a Polish cultural magazine the Lithuanian viewpoint on our relations.

I am not forgetting, of course, that Polish-Lithuanian relations require more than just a theoretical solution; this still does not mean, however, that they lie in the realm of pure politics. Between nations, as between individuals, relations are not above morality. And "pure politics" in particular tends to remain on the other side of morality and to be motivated by naked nationalistic egoism, selfishly considering only its own interests and disregarding the rights of others. And it is exactly this rejection of moral considerations that has caused pure politics to become synonymous with force and perfidy, rather than with peace and justice. It seems to me that the Poles and Lithuanians have experienced equally this meaning of pure politics translated into actuality: In the name of political realism our nations have been sacrificed to the Bolshevik leviathan. Pure politics is equally shocking whether it reveals itself in undisguised cynicism or is hidden under noble principles and charters, for it is really always the same. The Second World War began with an act of dreadful cynicism—the Bolshevik-Nazi pact; it ended with equal cynicism, at the Yalta Conference. If the unofficial dealings at Yalta that have now been made public appeared to many as an impolite tactlessness, they only showed us, the victims of the conference, what a frightful beast lurks behind the mask of political realism. The tragic experience of the Second World War forces us, victims of this war, to remain forever horrified at pure politics, which in the name of political realism sacrifices moral principles for expedient compromises. Pure politics is essentially indifferent to morality, and it is therefore constantly open to cynical temptations. Although officially politics regards international peace as its goal, it actually corrupts international relations by disregarding justice. A merely political solution of a question usually leaves the question unsolved, since all such solutions are essentially dictated by the stronger to the weaker. Pure politics is always saturated with nationalistic egoism, and egoism separates nations just as much as it separates individuals in daily life. Instead of serving as a bridge between nations, pure politics rather keeps nations in perennial opposition. If there are any hopes for peace that go beyond the mere silencing of smaller nations by means of genocide, these hopes must lie beyond pure politics, beyond

political realism, beyond nationalistic egoism. All humanistic movements in individual countries will remain ineffective if they do not move from national to international humanism. Speeches on man and humanity will remain hollow as long as entire nations are being destroyed at the same time as artificial conventions are being promulgated. There is no hope unless politics itself is humanized, unless "pure politics" (pure not in any purity of conscience, but in its prevention of any disturbance by the conscience of brutal egoism) is rejected.

This is true in principle, and this is true in our specific situation. There are questions that divide the Poles and the Lithuanians. These questions have their political side, and consequently their solution will demand political means — conferences, talks, treaties. But if true solutions are to be found, and not simply solutions dictated by force, a basic reciprocal understanding is necessary — and this is not just a political problem. A true reciprocal understanding is something more than a mere appraisal of the political "enemy." When a politician tries to "understand" his "enemy," all he has in mind is a knowledge of the enemy's weaknesses, a knowledge whose practical use is limited to war with that enemy. Reciprocal understanding is an entirely different thing; it means an effort to conciliate opposing interests through respect for the rights of both nations. Understood in this way, an "enemy" ceases to be an enemy and is transformed into a neighbor. Such an understanding of each other is needed by our two nations; it is the only way of establishing neighborly relations. It is necessary to institute in international relations the same liberality that has created in private relations a code of tolerance permitting men of differing convictions not to be mortal enemies. This personal tolerance once seemed Utopian, as today the turning of international relations into the path of morality seems Utopian. But even though the demand that the principles of humanity and liberality be made a part of international relations seems to be Utopian, a belief in the possibility of realizing this Utopia is the only hope.

Guided by this conviction, I wish to share several thoughts that may assist an understanding of the Lithuanian viewpoint on relations with Poland.

2. — The differences between the Polish and Lithuanian viewpoints rise not only out of recent conflicts but out of the whole fabric of the historical relations between the two nations. From the time of Jagiello to the fateful year 1795, Poland's and Lithuania's fortunes were so closely joined that it would seem this common historical past should have welded between the two nations an eternal bond of brotherly respect. If this did not happen, there were reasons for this. It is a fact that the bond of a common past was significant, for it joined the nations with many ties, and gave both nations a common claim to many people. But this historical bond was not as beneficial from the Lithuanian point of view as it might appear to the Poles. History has so disposed Polish-Lithuanian relations that two statements, seemingly diametrically opposed, are equally valid in characterizing them. On the one hand, it is possible to claim that throughout the period of common history the Lithuanians gave much to Poland and received nothing in return. On the other hand, it can be said that Poland had such an influence on Lithuania that it became a mortal threat to Lithuania's national existence. Both theses are justified, though they seem antiethical. I will now try to explain in brief my paradoxical characterization of Polish-Lithuanian relations in the past.

On the one hand, Lithuania gave Poland many men and received none from Poland. First, Poland was given the Jagiello dynasty, which closely allied the countries of Poland and Lithuania. If I am not mistaken, the Poles to this day refer to this dynasty with respect. But to the Lithuanians there is a certain ambivalence about the person of Jagiello himself. Jagiello's acceptance of the Polish crown was followed by internal strife with Vytautas, Grand Duke of Lithuania. To the Lithuanians it is Vytautas, not Jagiello, who is the symbol of the heroic epoch. And later men of Lithuanian blood went in a constant stream to the Poles and became assimilated into their culture — Radziwills, Tiskiewiczzes and others merged themselves into the Polish nation. And again, the Lithuanians consider that such names as Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Adam Mickiewicz belong to men of their blood. Finally, even in independent Poland, several Polish leaders were of Lithuanian descent. Lithuanians consider Narutowicz, first President of Poland, to have been of Lithuanian descent; his brother, S. Narutavičius, was one of the signatories of the Lithuanian declaration of independence. J. Pilsudski himself was closely associated with Lithuania and the Lithuanian people. I do not know whether my readers will be offended, and consider my claims "impertinent" and improper, when I say that Lithuanians consider these men to be of Lithuanian stock. It is not my intention, nor do I consider it useful, to engage in debate over how much of which nation's blood flows in their veins. Every one of these men, though of Lithuanian descent or at least in part of Lithuanian blood, merged into Polish culture and the Polish nation. And cultural identification with a nation bears more weight than ethnic origin. Therefore, as I have said, I would not consider a debate over "ownership" to have any practical meaning. If I have mentioned the point, it is only to show that the same names that are a matter of pride to the Poles represent lost sons to the Lithuanians. Furthermore, this relationship has been unilaterally favorable; if during the course of the two countries' common past there have been Lithuanians identified with Poland, there have been no Poles so identified with Lithuania's culture and nationhood. This is true in all spheres, from politics to poetry. There are no men in Lithuania's history to whom Poland could pose such pretensions of ownership as the Lithuanians claim for T. Kosciuszko or A. Mickiewicz. It is in this sense that I affirmed earlier that the Lithuanians, having given much to Poland, received nothing in return.

But this affirmation is no more than half the truth. If I were satisfied to stop with it, I might immediately be asked, "But did not Polish culture influence Lithuanian culture through all the years when the states of the two peoples were bound with close ties? It is not more to give a culture than to give individual men," This is the other side of Polish-Lithuanian relations. In fact, Polish culture deeply influenced Lithuanian culture. It would, of course, be naive to claim that the spread of Christianity to Lithuania through Poland was Lithuania's first contact with culture in general. When the Lithuanians

accepted Christianity they already had a powerful state and a native culture. But it is undeniable that later, after the acceptance of Christianity and after contacts with the Polish state, the Lithuanians — and specifically their ruling circles — were fatefully influenced by Polish culture. Here, again, though, the Lithuanian view of the fact differs from the Polish view, Polish culture, instead of serving as a catalyst for the growth of a native culture, enslaved the Lithuanians. If it was said earlier that the Lithuanians received nothing from Poland, it would have to be said in this connection that the Lithuanians received too much from Poland. The Lithuanian ruling aristocracy, in absorbing Polish culture, began to merge into the Polish nation, to become completely Polandized. In spite of all the ethnic differences between the Poles and the Lithuanians, a strange type began to evolve in the Lithuanian ruling circles, a type described by the formula "Gente lituanus, natione polonus" — "Lithuanian in origin, Polish in nationality." The cultural ties with Poland became a tie with the Polish nation itself. The Polish are entitled to consider this process as a part of their cultural expansion and to vaunt it as their achievement. But to the Lithuanians this process — through Polish culture to Polish nationality — was a mortal threat to their national existence. And if the process had affected the whole nation, rather than just the ruling aristocracy and the clergy, the Lithuanian nation would already have died a quiet death. But though the perennial influence of Polish culture deprived Lithuania of her intelligentsia, the Lithuanian folk remained little touched. It was natural in these conditions that the reawakening of the national consciousness among the Lithuanian folk took the form of a separation from Polish culture and the growth of a new intelligentsia uninfluenced by that culture. The Polish culture concentrated in manor and rectory was also socially in opposition to the Lithuanian peasantry, since it symbolized social oppression. Thus the national rebirth of Lithuanian intelligentsia, steeped in Polish culture, was in many cases not only indifferent to Lithuania's national rebirth but was actually opposed to it. By the same token, the new Lithuanian intelligentsia, having emerged from the peasantry, was opposed to Polandism, since Polandism was opposed to Lithuanianism.

3. — This one-sided — in its cultural aspect — development of Polish-Lithuanian relations was the cause of the paradoxical relations between the two nations even when, during the First World War, both nations began to re-establish themselves as independent states. The Poles had primarily in mind the common history, from Jagiello up to the revolts of 1831 and 1863. In the light of this historical perspective, it seemed to them natural that from now the two nations should join in creating a common state. To the Lithuanians, on the contrary, the memories of the epoch of common history stood as a warning that a national state is needed to preserve a national existence. If the idea of union appeared to the Poles as a brotherly gesture, it appeared to the Lithuanians rather as a treacherous threat to smother anew the reborn Lithuanian national consciousness. But, most important, this Lithuania was not the Lithuania the Poles preserved in their memories of history. Feudal Lithuania was a thing of the past; the manor, fallen under foreign influence, had become foreign to the Lithuanian nation. In place of a feudal Lithuania there had arisen a nation with a democratic consciousness, a nation resolved to follow its own destiny. In this situation, the dreaming about the common roads of the past that seemed to the Poles the extension of a brotherly welcome meant to the Lithuanians a threat to their very existence. In place of friendly relations, the two nations stood opposed in armed conflict. In the wars for independence Poland appeared to the Lithuanians as a mortal enemy. The Poles were the enemy who shed most of the blood of the Lithuanians who were defending their land and freedom. Of especially fateful consequence to the relations between the countries was General Zeligowski's march on Vilnius several days after the signing of the Treaty of Suwalki, breaking that treaty before its ink could dry. The means by which what had been achieved by force was later legalized appeared to Lithuanians as nothing more than the legalization of force itself. I don't know how the Poles look on General Zeligowski's march, but to Lithuanians it was nothing but a perfidious breaking of the Treaty of Suwalki, and it destroyed all respect for the Polish nation itself. I apologize if the reopening of this old wound is uncivil. But if the matter were passed over in silence, it could not be understood why, once the guns were silent, the Lithuanians refused to maintain the usual diplomatic relations with Poland. Objectively, it is possible to wonder if such a refusal was politically correct. But to the Lithuanian nation it was the only possible way of registering a protest against a treacherously committed wrong. Because of this, Poland was separated from Lithuania until 1938 by a "little iron curtain."

Although the nations were so separated, news from the Vilnius territory filtered through to Lithuania. And it was not such news as to permit a change in emotions toward the southern neighbor. Especially when, after the establishment of a totalitarian regime in Poland, a malicious persecution of Lithuanians took place in the Vilnius territory. One after another, Lithuanian schools were closed; Lithuanian newspapers were maliciously censored and shackled through numerous measures; members of Lithuanian organizations became the objects of various forms of administrative harassment. Each item of such news that reached Lithuania filled Lithuanian hearts with new hatred toward the Poles, the occupiers of the Vilnius territory. What nation could remain indifferent to the persecution of its nationals? It is possible that Warsaw and Krakow were completely ignorant that this persecution existed; it may have gone unnoticed in Vilnius itself. It is common to all persecutions that they are carried out in silence. In any case, the persecutors have other, more "objective," names for their work and never call it persecution. Only the victims feel the persecutors' hands. To Lithuanians, Poland, having occupied the Vilnius territory, became the persecutor of their brothers in Vilnius.

4. — The Vilnius territory is the problem on whose solution depends the future of Polish-Lithuanian relations. As long as this question remains unsolved, there can be no hope for neighborly relations between Poland and Lithuania.

The problem of the Vilnius territory, like many other territorial problems, is not an uncomplicated one. Each nation has its own historical, juridical, statistical and other arguments. Unless there is good will, a solution will be hard to find.

Historically, there is no question that the territory of Vilnius has from antiquity belonged to Lithuania; furthermore, it was the very heart of the old Lithuanian state. The inhabitants of the Vilnius territory are not Polish; the original residents of the territory — except for the immigrants from Poland itself — were of Lithuanian and not Polish stock. Nevertheless, quite a few inhabitants of the Vilnius territory, though Lithuanian is their native tongue, have accepted the Polish language and thus have merged more or less consciously into the Polish nation. It is this that makes the question of Vilnius so complicated. Still, it is necessary at all times to remember the fundamental difference between Poland's and Lithuania's claims to Vilnius. When the Lithuanians proffer their claim to Vilnius, they base it on their rights to territory that is historically theirs and whose people are of their stock. When Poles lay claim to the same territory and people, they base it on their rights to people whom they have won through their cultural expansion, and the territory these people occupy.

It is not the purpose of this article to suggest political solutions. May I be permitted, however, to express my lay opinion: The way to a just solution does not lie in absolute pretensions, but rather in a concrete determination of which nation has the better rights to parts of the territory. Perhaps a Lithuanian should agree, however painful it may be to him, that some areas of the territory have been permanently lost to Lithuania through the hopeless Polandization of their inhabitants. On the other hand, the Poles should realize that the Lithuanians cannot surrender those areas where Lithuanianism still lives even after years of an intensive Polandization campaign. When during the Second World War the Vilnius territory was returned to Lithuania, the falsity of the official statistics upon which, doubtless, Polish public opinion had been nourished became apparent. If those having Polish convictions were numerous in the towns, in the outlying villages, in many cases, the Lithuanian language and consciousness dominated. What reason could Poland have to desire those areas that have nothing to do with Polandism?

The city of Vilnius itself, as is usual with cities, was more multilingual and multinational. There were more immigrants from Poland there than anywhere else. But Vilnius — the capital city of Lithuania from antiquity! Can the Poles claim a city as dear to the Lithuanians as the heart? To the Lithuanian, every building in the city speaks of ancient deeds. Vilnius was Lithuania's cultural center not only in the historical past but up until the last years. The first Lithuanian daily was published there in 1905. In the same year the great Lithuanian Congress met there and promulgated the demands for autonomy and rallied Lithuanians for the wars of independence. The declaration of independence was made in Vilnius in 1918. The first Lithuanian Cabinet of Ministers began its work in Vilnius. Can the Poles desire this city for themselves? I do not consider this question an appeal to sentiment, I consider it an appeal to justice.

5. — Today the historical friendship of Poland and Lithuania is, sadly, filled with bitterness that often passes over into hatred. If both sides refuse to consider anything but the slogans of national egoism, there is no hope for normal neighborly relations. But there is no problem that cannot be solved, there are no wounds that cannot be healed by good will. Today both countries are again equally enslaved. (I do not consider significant the difference that Lithuania is directly enslaved and Poland indirectly enslaved by Bolshevism.) As after the revolts of 1831 and 1863, the substantial part of the intelligentsia of both nations is again together in exile. Being thus detached, we have an opportunity to consider our relations more calmly, less under the influence of passion. We are suffering equally from pure politics, which betrayed our nations. The longing for freedom among people of both nations might be caught up into the general longing for a new spirit in international relations. Burning with the longing for freedom for ourselves, we cannot plan slavery for others; desiring justice for ourselves, we cannot ignore the rights of others. Suffering as we are as a result of the egoism of the great powers, we cannot become like those who wish to preserve for themselves the privilege of fanaticism while demanding tolerance from others.

No matter how deeply Polish-Lithuanian relations are bogged down in mutual mistrust, one must have hope that with good will it will be possible to break through. The permission granted by the editors of this magazine for the presentation of Lithuanian opinions in these pages is a gesture of good will. The editors may, because of this gesture, receive many complaints from the one side, as the Lithuanian author will from the other. In fact, the public opinion of both nations is so oriented toward the "enemy" that there is no desire even to talk. There is no hope that politicians will dispel this mood. It is possible that the Poles would consider it treasonable not to cry "Poland with Vilnius and Lvov." But if one side raises such a cry, it can say little to the other side. Thus we remain without a common ground or any of the intercourse that is normal between neighboring nations. The task of the intelligentsia of both nations is to seek a common language, even if a certain amount of bitterness is unavoidable. Then, when the people of the two nations come to a deeper understanding, there will be hope that even the political differences will be justly settled. The road to true independence for our nations is a hard one; the road to a settlement of our differences is equally hard. But this road will never be found if it is not searched for with good will.