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## RETURN TO THE CAPITAL Memoirs

ANTANAS VENCLOVA

### EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

In the January, 1966, issue of *Pergale*, the main journal of literature and the arts published by the Association of Soviet Lithuanian Writers in Vilnius, Lithuania, a leading Communist writer Antanas Venclova published a lengthy memoir about Lithuania before the Soviet occupation that we think will interest our readers for at least three reasons. First, despite the usual denunciations of Lithuania's independence that Venclova includes into the text as it is properly required, the memoir gives information that especially the younger generation of Lithuanians so far has been denied. Much of this information contradicts the usual propaganda line on independent Lithuania. Second, there is to be found in the memoir a certain nationalistic quality: pride the nation-state, even though "bourgeois"; identification with certain traditional Lithuanian attitudes and aspirations. Third, the publication of Venclova's memoir by *Pergale* is indicative of a certain mellowing of the "Old Guard" Lithuanian Communists and of greater tolerance of publication (we hesitate to say "freedom" because the Soviet press is still very far from being free) that seems to be characteristic to Lithuania in 1966.

The fact and the nature of the memoir gains additional importance when it is considered that its author, Antanas Venclova (1896- ), is an old Communist and a functionary, at one time or another, of the Government, the Writers Association, and at present, of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR. He is also one of the most productive of Communist Lithuanian writers of today.

The following story constitutes only a part of Venclova's memoir, but is reproduced here without any changes. According to the author, it was written (minus introduction) in 1940, and in the Communist press first published only in 1966. The story describes the march of the Lithuanian troops into the city of Vilnius that the Soviet Union had returned to Lithuania to make it easier for the Lithuanians to accept Soviet military bases in the country. Vilnius (Pol. Wilno, Germ. Wilna, Engl. Vilna), is the ancient capital city of the medieval Lithuanian state that had become an object of competition between Lithuania and Poland after World War I when the two nations reestablished their independence. With the help of "irregular" military force, as it was the fashion in those days, and aided by their French ally, the Poles won and held the city until the collapse of Poland itself. Lithuania never recognized Polish administration and refused to maintain diplomatic relations with Warsaw. The Soviet Union played an ambiguous role in the conflict, most of the time, however, supporting the Lithuanian claim. In September of 1939, Poland was partitioned between Russia and Germany, and the Soviet Union, after Lithuania refused to join the Germans and to take the city by force, took over the city and area. She returned the city to Lithuania, but with only a portion of surrounding territory that the Soviets had recognized as Lithuanian by the treaty of peace of 1920. Venclova fails to mention this fact.

The city of Vilnius itself, though claimed to be Lithuanian or Polish, actually was very international. Approximately one third of its population was Jewish. The villages were mostly Lithuanian.

The commentary in the footnotes is supplied by the editor.

The German war with Poland was not unexpected. But Poland collapsed in a matter of days, and this stunned us. All kinds of rumors filled the air. There was talk that there were people in the government of Lithuania who wanted to draw Lithuania into the war on Germany's side. This would have been an awful and senseless move, similar to the recent simultaneous

rape of Czechoslovakia - Teschen by Poland and Germany. Vilnius was our historic capital, and its problem was of concern to all the people, but it would have been a real crime and idiocy to try to win its return at the price of an alliance with the Nazis. Fortunately, such an insane thing did not occur. The people of Kaunas — and they were not alone — sat glued to their radio receivers for days on end, listening to the German boasts and announcements replete with an evil rejoicing. We also heard the Polish radio reporting the heroic defense of the **Westerplatte**. Later the Polish radio broadcast the hopeless announcements about the unending aerial attacks against Warsaw: "Nadchodza ... Nadchodza ... Nadchodza ..." It was horrible just thinking of the possibility that tomorrow, or the day after, Hitler's bombs could be dropping on our cities, and German tanks could roll over our fields wrecking and destroying everything in their path.

Those were jittery and frightful days. Work began at **Aušra**—I wrote to Žilionis <sup>1</sup>—we saw one another in peacetime, and here we are writing to one another after war has broken out. What horror! What foolishness! ... I doubt very much—I continued in the letter—whether it is worthwhile for me to publish my stories ("The Night," a collection)—this is not what people are concerned about now.

Poland lived through a terrible tragedy. The Germans drove her armies into slavery. Her cities were burning. The survivors were burying their dead. The government, which had for so long been "friendly" with Hitler and rigidly set against the Soviet Union, fled and left the country to its fate. Military and civilian refugees poured across the border into Lithuania. Citizens of the country which had only recently presented an angry ultimatum to Lithuania,<sup>2</sup> now begged for and were given asylum. The rank and file of our people had pity on the refugees and tried to help them in every way and with whatever they could.

On September 17 we heard of new and significant events. Defending the Belorussians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians from a hitlerite invasion, the Red Army marched into Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia<sup>3</sup> and reached Vilnius shortly afterward. A feeling of waiting pervaded the air. We were not wrong—on October tenth, exactly nineteen years after the infamous seizure by Zeligovski's army, the Soviet Union ceremoniously conveyed the ancient capital city and Vilnius territory to Lithuania.

This was the only bright ray of sunshine and joy in that brooding and dark autumn. It is difficult to imagine what every decent Lithuanian—regardless of personal convictions—felt at that time. The dream of long years had come true—Lithuania had recovered its heart!

Though gritting its teeth and hiding a clenched fist in its pocket, the government of Lithuania on October 10 signed a "Transfer of Vilnius and Vilnius territory to the Republic of Lithuania and Mutual Aid Agreement" in Moscow. According to the terms of this pact, the Soviet Union placed comparatively small army contingents in Lithuania.<sup>4</sup> We saw that this was altering Lithuania's international position for the better. It was becoming evident that Lithuania would be defended against the aggressor (and even without mentioning him by name everyone sensed who the aggressor was) by one of the biggest and most powerful states of the world, which even before had always supported her in the international arena.

When the Kaunas residents gathered in meeting by the Soviet Union's legation, sincere feelings of gratitude filtered from many hearts. Having altogether different plans, the government could not be in favor of such a demonstration and used force to break it up. Perhaps never before had the mutual hatred between wide sections of the general public and the government been so open. Not only the workers, but even the more decent sections of the bourgeoisie and a majority of the intelligentsia now saw clearly who were our friends and who were our enemies.

I too participated in this demonstration. It was sickening to see people, gathered together with good feelings, being clubbed with rubber truncheons, cursed, shoved, dragged, and placed in vans and driven away. At times it seemed as though the Gestapo and its methods had come to Kaunas.<sup>5</sup>

I wrote to Žilionis in those days: "What is best politically, it seems to me, is that we are no longer threatened by either the Polish lackeys or by Germans. We can only be happy with the new neighborliness, since by itself it protects Lithuania from that neighborliness which had never wished any good for our poor man."

The residents of Kaunas, the highlanders, the low-landers, those who had seen Vilnius and those who had not, all rushed to visit their capital city. It wasn't long before the journalists and people of other professions (among whom, I recall, were artists Didžiokas and Pundzius) hired a bus and headed down the Vievis highway. It was just at this time that the Soviet Union handed Vilnius over to the Lithuanian Army marching from Kaunas. I then had the task of reporting those unforgettable days. I am using here these pages, written some time ago, because I believe that they have a certain documentary value. Beginning beyond Vievis, beyond the green gate on the other side of the former line of demarcation—I wrote at that time—Vilnius land was sunk in autumn mire, damp and mist. The low-hung heavy clouds scudding by threatened to release a torrential rain at any moment. The green pine forests, spotted with patches of reddened, copper-hued birch and maples, were autumnal, silent, beautiful and melancholy. As we drove along, on both sides of the highway spread a broad and brooding panorama of forests, fields and deep ravines, with unkempt farmsteads which, under the autumn sky, looked sad and forlorn. Our bus passed hundreds of military trucks, groups and lines of infantrymen, their faces under the heavy helmets tired but smiling, all marching to Vilnius... Here and there at the side of the road were burned-out and gutted hulks of Polish war machines.

There are tens, hundreds of people lining up the roads. They are weary, ragged, bleak. They wave to the passing troops, shout greetings to us, throw flowers. The nearer we came to the city, the larger the crowds. In some places there are so many people that the groups flow together into enormous crowds. These are Vilnius people who had come from several kilometers away to meet the arriving troops. And the unending lines of soldiers are already marching into the Vilnius suburbs. Our bus is also speeding along the crowded streets toward the heart of Vilnius, to the cathedral looming imposingly with its giant colonnades.<sup>6</sup>

The bus barely stops, and it is already surrounded by hundreds of people. We are greeted by Lithuanians, while others speak in Polish, Russian, Yiddish, Belorussian. Most of these people look tired. In the grey, gaunt faces you see visible signs of the war suffering and worries they had experienced. Former Polish army soldiers shiver from the cold in their bedraggled uniforms, the city's poor roam the streets without work, beggars ask for a few coins... Uniforms, uniforms—even grammar school children are uniformed.

Lithuanian cigarettes and Lithuanian matches are a great novelty—receiving them, some of the people gaze at them a long time, as though at some rare, long-time-unseen objects.

A huge Soviet tank clanks down the street, a line of Soviet troops marches by. Only we new arrivals pay any attention to them. The Vilnius residents are long used to them. In formation, Lithuanian troops mounted on beautiful horses pass by. Flags are flying — Lithuania's and the Soviet Union's... Many banners stretched across the streets greet Lithuania and its army in the Lithuanian and Polish languages. On the walls of buildings here and there hang the remnants of very recent history: mobilization and requisition orders by the Polish government, warnings to beware of spies lurking in every doorway. Alongside, orders and announcements by the Soviet government and—still not thoroughly dry — the new orders of the Lithuanian military government. The Vilnius people crowd around reading them, serious, thoughtful — they realize that an unknown future is near.

The crowds keep growing by the minute. They fill the streets and walks. The Vilnius militia regulate the flow of traffic to create space for the troops to pass.

I join the crowd. How do these people feel, what are they thinking, seeing the Lithuanian army in Vilnius after nineteen years?

It is difficult to read their faces. Some cannot contain themselves — they call out, "Valio!" (Hail!) together with the Lithuanians. These are, doubtlessly, minorities: White Russians, Russians, Jews, Kharims, Tartars. They understand that the boyar whip, which the former rulers of Poland held over their heads, would not return. One way or another, they expect greater freedom and welfare. Just so they are not deceived! No doubt among them there are also Poles who greet the new hosts of Vilnius. These are the people who have lived through the collapse of the cleric-boyar Poland and realize that this Poland would not rise again. However, there are also quite a few of those who watch Lithuania's entry with tightly compressed lips, long faces, lack-luster eyes. These are the Polish army officers, manor owners, the bureaucracy — all those who forgot nothing and learned nothing, but only kept dreaming about the restoration of "mocarstva" (Polish supremacy) on an even broader basis than before. This was what one pleasant Vilnius man said about these people in Štral's coffeehouse, as we sipped artificial tea and he nibbled on the one available cube of sugar. "You see," he told me, "these long and angry physiognomies? All those with fox and caracul fur coats, all those with their pretensions and scared hatred, were nowhere to be seen just a few days ago — they were holed-up like skunks hiding in burrows. Now they have all come out to sniff the new atmosphere. This is the most unsympathetic portion of the Vilnius people. It is still thinking only of its careers and its parasitic way of life. It still cannot imagine that its days are ended and is determined to defend its privileges tooth and nail."

The newsboys are already hawking Lithuanian newspapers on the streets. Many people buy them, even some who do not even read or understand Lithuanian. The people have an extraordinary longing for newspapers and news. Notices, advertising courses in the Lithuanian language, are displayed in many places, and many people are registering for the classes. In the crowd you often hear such expressions:

"My father spoke only Lithuanian ..."

"I wonder whether the Lithuanian grammar is difficult?"

"Have you registered for the classes? I have already begun learning Lithuanian," etc.

Some storekeepers, without waiting for any orders, are changing Polish signs for Lithuanian ones. The same with restaurants and movie houses.

What sort of nonsense about Vilnius was spreading through Kaunas? I thought it would be interesting to verify them with the people of Vilnius themselves.

"Typhus? Diphtheria? No, no one had ever heard about such an epidemic in Vilnius.

"Starvation? Of course some things are in short supply in the city, but, it seems, no one has died of starvation. After the entry of the Soviet army, many storekeepers hid many of their wares, so there had to be increasing shortage of many items. In addition, all kinds of speculators began buying up and caching things. In the villages, meanwhile, there is no less food than there always has been. The Poles had managed to requisition very little, while the Bolsheviks took nothing from the villagers — they appropriated only from the manors. They also partitioned the manor lands and animals among the villagers ..."

There circulate in the city the most diverse stories about the brief Soviet rule, but these tales are so contradictory that they lose all authenticity and there is no need to repeat them.<sup>7</sup> Each and every narrator speaks according to his wealth, situation and ideology. One thing was plain from all this talk — the way to all kinds of hooliganism was cut off at once, so law and order were properly in effect, while the courtesy of the Soviet troops with the people, in the general public opinion, was faultless.

The Lithuanian troops are still marching along Mickevičius street. Tanks, artillery and trucks roll along, cavalry troops canter by, infantrymen are marching. Ožeškienė street is impassable — thousands of people listen to speeches in the Lithuanian, Polish, Belorussian and Yiddish languages. These are the words of General Vincas Vitkauskas,<sup>8</sup> commander of the Lithuanian Vilnius task force, and the greetings of the Vilnius people. The rapidly falling darkness, the mist and the pelting rain fail to discourage and to disperse the shouting and flower-tossing crowds. No sooner does the crowd see a Lithuanian that he is immediately surrounded by Vilniusites who shoot questions at him in various languages:

"When will we be able to go to Kaunas?"

"What is the zloty (Polish currency) going to be worth?"

"Are the manors going to be parceled?"

A mother is holding the hand of her little daughter of about six. The little girl shouts "Valio!" at every opportunity. "So you too are now a little Lithuanian?" her mother asks in Polish. "Yes, mama," the little girl replies seriously.

## Notes

1 *Aušra* was the name of one of the best high schools in Kaunas, at which Venclova worked as a teacher. Vincas Žilionis also was a Leftist writer and teacher. He died in his early sixties, shortly after his teenage son received a prison sentence for attempting to flee the Soviet Union by crossing the border into Turkey. It has been reported that Žilionis committed suicide.

2 This happened in March of 1938. Poland demanded resumption of diplomatic relations or else threatened to invade Lithuania. The Lithuanian Government complied.

3 This is the standard Soviet explanation of reasons for aggression against Poland in 1939. It was of course a mere pretext. The Soviet move was agreed upon by Hitler and Stalin just three weeks before.

4 Soviet historians usually omit this information or camouflage it so it can not be recognized for what it is. The "small" Red Army contingents possessed armor and the air force and were much larger than the standing Lithuanian Army. In June of 1940, two of Lithuania's largest cities, Vilnius and Kaunas, were first occupied by the armored units from Soviet military bases. Establishment of these bases spelled out the beginning of the end of Lithuania's independence. The Soviets followed the same pattern for the occupation of Latvia and Estonia. Their non-aggression pact with the Nazis allowed them to hoist on the Baltic States treaties of "mutual aid" that provided for Soviet military bases. Venclova and other Soviet writers fail even to allude to the Nazi-Soviet pact. In recent years, however, they have begun to insinuate that the Government of President Smetona was seeking a secret alliance with Hitler the conclusion of which was prevented by the Soviet Union which pressured Smetona's Government into the "mutual aid" agreement with the Soviet Union. This version, however, is not true. German-Lithuanian discussions Venclova talks about in the footnote really occurred, but on German initiative, immediately following the Nazi aggression against Poland. Through Ribbentrop, the *Richsminister* for foreign affairs, Hitler had wanted Lithuania to join the war against Poland and to take Vilnius by force. After the Lithuanian Government declared neutrality and showed no interest, the Germans consigned Lithuania to the Soviet sphere of influence as they had previously done with Latvia and Estonia. This "transaction," as documents later showed, involved a German sale of a certain piece of Lithuanian territory for 3,000,000 dollars in gold.

5 At that time, Lithuania was under the authoritarian rule of President Smetona, but already had a coalition Cabinet in which all main political parties had representatives. The demonstration by the Communist Party, then in the underground, was dispersed by the police. Neither the Government, however, nor the police were pro-Nazi or Gestapo-like, as Venclova suggests. This is clear even from leading the story translated here and especially about the bookstores and literary activities in Kaunas. For information about Lithuania's domestic political development and about Smetona's dictatorship the reader is referred to V. Stanley Vardys (ed.), *Lithuania under the Soviets* (New York, 1965) pp. 30-38.

6 The cathedral had been converted into a concert hall and art museum.

7 Some of the stories were exaggerated, but other were true. The Soviets confiscated what they wanted (Venclova admits "they appropriated only from the manors"), dismantled some factories and shipped the machinery to Russia, and failed to provide food and other supplies for the population. The result was empty stores (not because of "speculation", as Vaclova suggests) and empty stomachs, lack of medical supplies, etc. One of the main reasons why the multi-national population of the city greeted the Lithuanian Army as enthusiastically as Venclova describes was the joy of getting rid of the Russians and an expectation of an orderly, normal, and prosperous life they thought would come under a non-Russian rule. It is interesting to note, however, that the very mention by Venclova of doubts about Soviet behavior and the profuse exaltation of "the coming of the Lithuanians" by whose side the Red Army is made to pale into disappearance, is rather unorthodox, startling and novel for Soviet Lithuanian writers. For someone else but Venclova such writing might even be utterly dangerous.

8 General Vincas Vitkauskas was to become Benedict Arnold of Lithuania in 1940. Popular with President Smetona who sought to use Vitkauskas to reduce the influence of other highly popular military figures—possible competitors to the President—Vitkauskas was appointed chief of the Army. While in this position, during the crucial days of May-June of 1940, the General turned against his Government and his nation and actively collaborated with the Soviet Union, facilitating Lithuania's military occupation. He was kept in the Red Army though he did not win further distinction. He died in 1965.