



HISTORY REVISITED: REFLECTIONS ON A STAY IN POLAND

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The theme of our conference is the Baltic peoples and their neighbors.* In view of this, one can assume that through various panels, symposia, and/or discussions, you have already become more aware of how neighbors influence each other — politically, socially, and culturally. I expect that such exposition of knowledge will continue through this conference at an unabated pace. This talk is meant to be one more contribution to the general theme. I should like to share with you some impressions about a six month stay in a country which could be classified — depending on your predilection of definition — as both a Baltic country as well as a neighbor — Poland. It is unfortunate, to my thinking, that Poland has largely been forgotten in terms of Baltic studies. In my rather modest way, I should like in the space of the twenty or so minutes allotted me, to present a small contribution in stemming the tide.

I will leave aside any questions pertaining to specific research at Polish archives. Those who are interested in such arcane matters will hopefully in time see some results in print. I should rather like to focus on several more general aspects of Poland and the Baltic and in particular on matters stemming from its relationship with Lithuania.

Before the war, with the exception of size and location, Lithuania in many ways, particularly cultural, had more in common with Central Europe than it did with its two northern Baltic neighbors. The residue of centuries was strong and had yet to be overcome sufficiently.

The historical connection between Lithuania and Poland is quite well known. It can perhaps best be likened to that of Scotland and England. A more primitive society, existing on the fringes of European civilization, though in proximity to a highly Europeanized society, provided a dynasty for the European state and entered into a long-standing period of political and cultural intercourse with the more developed society. In the course of this relationship, the cultural impact of the union was such that the educated elite of the more primitive partner abandoned its native language and became culturally subsumed into the donor society, in some way enriching the donor's culture as well. Some peculiarities had great staying power, but with time, these too became formalities — more than anything expressions of quaint localism. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries few educated Lithuanians saw any contradiction in being Polish and Lithuanian simultaneously. The poet Mickiewicz, just to take the most famous and most often cited example, could elegantly initiate his epic masterpiece *Pan Tadeusz*, the literary epitome of the spirit of old Poland, by exclaiming in elegant Polish, "Lithuania, my country, thou art like health."

Just as particular circumstances in British society are stirring Scottish nationalism today, so different but specific nineteenth century conjunctures led to the development of a Lithuanian nationalism based on language, which led to a separation of the two societies. The divorce proceedings were — as such proceedings are at times apt to be — replete with feelings of betrayal and grievance, with hatred and distrust. They affected Lithuanian society to a far greater degree than they did Polish society. It is perhaps only the post-war Lithuanian generation which grew up less influenced by the split. But in spite of the history of rancor, a special relationship seems to have been retained.

My personal interest in Poland and things Polish was first aroused in Vilnius — the inter-war bone of contention between the two societies. I was surprised to find that unlike the pre-war generation of Lithuanians who had been culturally nurtured on an anti-Polish diet, the post-war generation was particularly interested in developments to the south-west. Some made a special effort to learn the language so as to be able to subscribe to the Polish press which is generally available. Although it certainly would not merit for being among the most exciting in the world, it does provide a refreshing alternative and antidote to the drab and boring printouts that are the hallmarks of Soviet journalism. Like the Estonians who are blessed with the ability to tune into Finnish TV, large portions of Southern and Central Lithuania have similar possibilities of

catching the Polish network — *Vive la difference!* It was evident to me in Vilnius that the erstwhile period of hate and distrust had changed into one of curiosity, admiration, and even imitation. I realized that both historically as well as from a contemporary point of view it would be difficult to fathom Lithuania fully without an understanding, no matter how superficial, of Poland. And so Poland came to be integrated into the horizons of my scholarly consciousness.

My personal feelings of being in Poland can perhaps be likened to those of a grandchild of a divorced couple visiting the home of the grandparent who had not retained the custody of his own parent. It was a foreign country, yet it was not totally foreign either. From a purely romantic point of view, cultural echoes of the old commonwealth were resounding loud and strong. It was frequently possible to stumble over reminders of my Lithuanian heritage. The white knight — the Vytis — the coat of arms of both the Old Grand Duchy as well as of the inter-war republic seemed ubiquitous, much more so than for obvious reasons in Lithuania itself. Whether of stone, plaster, wood or stained glass, he peered down on me from various Krakow decorative cornices and doorways. He was boldly emblazoned in the tapestry collection in the Wavel Castle. He stared out from lofty niche in the monument dominating the battlefield at Grunwald, a commemoration of perhaps the finest moment historically of Lithuanian - Polish cooperation. He even surprised me from some unlikely places such as a beer bottle label. Unfortunately, the quality of Grunwald Beer in no way measures up to the nobility of its label.

Another wide-spread indication of the Lithuanian connection came in the form of the Palladium of old Lithuania, the Vilnius Madonna. The extent of her presence served as a mute testimony to the geographic origins of a sizeable portion of the population of northern Poland where she is most in evidence. While the cathedrals to the south; Krakow, Czestochowa, or Lublin tend to relegate her to small plaques located somewhere in back corners, in such cities as Gdansk (Danzig), Olsztyn (Allenstein), or Torun (Thorn), her cult has merited for her prominent places — usually one of the side altars.

On a personal plane, my Lithuanian heritage singled me out in dealings with Polish colleagues and acquaintances. My surname frequently made it impossible to remain simply American. As one colleague wrote in a farewell note: ". . . please be always sure of my sincere friendship for you, for many reasons — personal, scholarly, and national, since I see in your person a representative of the two countries that are deeply liked by every honest Pole: Lithuania and the USA." Conversations had a way invariably of being tracked into discussions of *the* historical relationship. This is not so surprising among historian colleagues where that topic continues to occupy a position of relevance. It was brought into the forefront during the previous decade in the writings of the late Pawel Jasienica, a popularizing historian, who argued that historically for Poland, Lithuania and the East was the albatross which eventually caused Poland's downfall. The question was again more recently broached by the publicist J. Mierosiewicz in the émigré Paris-based *Kultura*, which seems to have a surprisingly wide circulation among the Warsaw intelligentsia. Mierosiewicz argued that real Polish independence from Russia can be predicated only on a recognition that really independent Lithuania, Byelorussia, and the Ukraine are needed to serve as buffers.

The fascination over my Lithuanian heritage was more surprising when it originated with persons not immediately connected with questions of historical interpretation of political theorizing. I can well recall several extremely crowded, smelly, and otherwise rather unpleasant train rides which were enlivened by conversations with strangers sharing the cubicles which on local trains frequently pass for first class. More than once, having ascertained my identity, the topic of discussion became Lithuania. Some had been there, others talk of it as a lost extension of their own country.

Perhaps in keeping with a truism that matters pleasant tend to be remembered longer and with greater immediacy than matters unpleasant, the scars of the cultural divorce of Lithuania from Poland were no longer so readily present. In part this can be explained by the fact that in Poland proper anti-Lithuanian feeling had never really been strong. In this respect the Lithuanian national renaissance shows some analogies to the Irish situation. And just as, at least until recently when bombs began bursting in London's fashionable West End, there was very little anti-Irish sentiment in metropolitan England as opposed to Northern Ireland, so anti-Lithuanian sensitivities among Poles seem to have been confined largely to the inhabitants of the contested borderlands. Even before the war, such was definitely the case. Clear evidence can be found in the events of the spring of 1938, during the nadir of Polish - Lithuanian relations. As a consequence of the shooting, accidental, intentional, or provoked according to which version one is ready to lend credence, of a Polish border guard, a crisis erupted in Lithuanian - Polish relations, chronically strained since 1920. The Polish government chose this occasion to present Lithuania with one of the strongest ultimatums in the annals of diplomatic history — establish diplomatic relations with us or face consequences. The anti-Lithuanian demonstrations in Vilnius were to all appearances genuine, those in Warsaw had to be staged in the manner by which the workers in today's East bloc "spontaneously" indicated their opinions on any current topic. More prevalent then, perhaps, was a romantic approach to Lithuania, a hope that somehow the good old days of the commonwealth could be resurrected. The Poles failed to realize that the alienation had been too deep, that the pursuit of the painful divorce proceedings to their ultimate conclusion had left too many scars to heal in one generation.

It was a tragedy — a Baltic tragedy of massive proportions. Lithuanian nationalism, still young and insecure, could not envisage being able to afford any compromises. The Poles of Lithuania, culturally Polish though overwhelmingly indigenously Lithuanian in origin, could not accommodate themselves to the changing condition? — especially to the social changes attendant the rise of Lithuanian nationalism. They chose not to be Lithuanians, though they were. Unlike their fellows in another Baltic country, the Swedes of Finland, in particular the upper classes, they were unwilling or unable to make any cultural compromises. They could have continued for a long time to come, to be the Polish-speaking elite in a Lithuanian Lithuania, similarly to the Swedish elite in a Finnish Finland. But circumstances led them to sacrifice the idea of

a separate Lithuanian political identity in order to preserve their Polish cultural identity. As a disproportionate number of them occupied leading positions in inter-war Polish society, their feelings tended to be extended into generalizations of Polish feelings as a whole.

The result was twenty years of political hostility and minimum contact on both sides of what was a sort of mild pre-war version of an iron curtain. The situation fanned bitterness, mutual distrust, and rancor and did little to foster mutual understanding and respect which are the *sine qua non* to overcoming any alienation. Many of the problems seem to have found a solution through partial post-war repatriations. The love - hate relationship which was dominant during the period of strained relations has yielded to increased contact, though on a radically different plane of interaction and under different, well known unnatural circumstances.

Although it is often muted and hidden, some of the social relationship thinking seems to have lingered among today's officials as well. The Lithuanian First Party Secretary was an honored guest at last December's Seventh Party Congress in Warsaw. The Poles have taken an active part in the restoration of historic cultural monuments in Vilnius, and as far as I am aware, continue to do so. This was mentioned to me with pride on more than one occasion.

But one of the most compelling reasons for a relationship beyond the purely formal is the existence of minorities on both sides of the border — the living reminder of past historical community.

An accident of history — more accurately of an historical border delineation in 1920, a small Lithuanian minority hugs the Soviet border in the extreme Northwest of Poland. These are farmers attached to their land and as such refused post-war repatriation. Their number can be estimated variously at between 10,000 to 20,000 persons. Their cultural life is flourishing. A newspaper is published in the region. The unofficial Lithuanian capital of the area, the town of Punska, is the locale of the smallest gymnasium in Poland in which instruction is entirely in Lithuanian. Because of their compact existence under circumstances differing from those prevalent in Lithuania itself — mainly in the lack of collectivization — they have preserved some aspects of old Lithuania better than the majority across the border. As travel outside of the capitals of the Baltic regions of the USSR is severely hampered, this community in Poland presents what is perhaps the only readily accessible rural Lithuanian setting in the world, and this has made it the focus of interest for ethnographers, folklorists, sociologists, and linguists.

In addition to the compact group in the Suwalki area who are not émigrés, there are also smaller Lithuanian communities dispersed throughout some of the major Polish cities — Warsaw, Gdansk, Wrocław. Some of their members are from the Punska region originally — currently studying or graduate professionals with skills which cannot be utilized on farms. Others were brought to their new homes through the vicissitudes of wartime deportation, relocation, or flight. Like the confreres in the West, they strive, through cultural activity, to preserve an identity distinct from that of the milieu's majority.

Apart from its deep-rooted Lithuanian connection, Poland is also a Baltic country in its own right. Gdansk and German territories annexed after the war are inexorably connected with things Baltic. For a long time, Gdansk or Danzig, as it was then known, was the primary port on the Baltic and as such served as the entrepot of commerce and culture for the entire region. The area of old East Prussia also enjoyed a long period of relationship with an influence on the littoral regions to the northeast. In many ways even a fleeting visual encounter with this area can serve as an enhancement to an appreciation of the wider region. It was only after seeing the former Franciscan monastery in Gdansk as well as the numerous red-brick Gothic churches in the surrounding countryside, that I became more aware into which chain of architectural events the famous flaming Gothic of St. Anne's Church in Vilnius fit. A view of the massive, towering structure of St. Mary's cathedral in Gdansk unquestionably provides a better perspective, from the point of view of appreciation, of the Riga Cathedral or St. Olav's in Tallinn.

In view of the Lithuanian connection, as well as the current Polish position as a state bordering on the Baltic, the existence and development of Baltic studies at Polish universities and institutes is not surprising. Much is particularly done in the field of history with a view toward demonstrating historical Polish ties to the Baltic littoral and justifying contemporary borders. While some of this literature is very polemic, much also represents serious scholarship which is a definite contribution to the Baltic past. Of particular value is the extensive and varied historical study devoted to Gdansk.

Baltic studies in the more narrow sense, that are specifically devoted to the three Baltic States have also seen development in Poland. It is understandably overwhelmingly Lithuanian-oriented. It has, no doubt, been shaped somewhat by the various sensitivities inherent in current Polish - Soviet relations. But much of great value has been published. In no other country outside of Lithuania itself have so many contributions to Lithuanian studies appeared. In no other language other than Lithuanian has so much about Lithuania been written.

The best general history of Lithuania, in my opinion, in any language, is a work published in Poland nearly a decade ago. It promptly became a cause celebre in Lithuania itself. Not only did this publication of a socialist country carry photographs of the bourgeois declaration of independence and of the pre-war president-dictator, its bibliography listed all the émigré studies which had never been listed in Soviet sources. It is not surprising that the volume was banned in the Lithuanian Republic, and copies had to filter into Vilnius by way of such diverse places as Moscow, Erevan, and Alma-Ata.

The primary concentration of Lithuanian studies in Poland is Poznan. Its university and other institutions are the scholarly homes of a series of professors such as Oshmanski, Kosman, or Alexandrowicz or graduate students studying Lithuania and the Baltic States.

One of the finest surveys, I think, in any language of the inter-war internal history of these states is *The Baltic States — from Parliamentarism to Totalitarianism* by Professor Piotr Lossowski of the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences. As a young draftee, Lossowski was interned in Lithuania after the fall of Poland in September, 1939. He spent the war-years in the Lithuanian countryside and acquired a fluency in the language. He has since taught himself to read Latvian and has become probably the leading Polish historian of the Baltic States in general.

Krow's Jagiellonian University — the second oldest in Eastern Europe, is the scholarly home of two Indo-European linguists — Professors Bednarczuk and Smoczynski who specialize in Lithuanian. Zygmunt Stobierski of Warsaw is the author of a survey history of Lithuanian literature; he is also engaged in popularizing Lithuanian literature through translation. So far an anthology of short stories and another of poetry has appeared. Warsaw is also the home of one of the better known Lithuanian poets, Juozas Kėkštas, who, as a native of Vilnius, never lived in the pre-war Lithuanian state. As a veteran of both the worker's movement as well as of General Anders' army, he now lives in a veteran's home.

On the intellectual plane, then, there is a wide interest in Lithuania in present-day Poland.

The title of this talk has been listed in the program as history rediscovered. One interpretation of history sees it as a never-ending continuum in time — history is not only the past, it is also the present and the future. I should like to end with an application of that interpretation to my talk. I have tried impressionistically to demonstrate the facets of Poland as a Baltic country with a long-standing Baltic tradition — a tradition which has never been broken. It is my hope that someday it might become fully integrated into the Commonwealth of Baltic Studies.

* Luncheon talk delivered to the Fifth Conference on Baltic Studies, Columbia University, New York, 21 May, 1976.