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IMAGES OF AMERICA IN LITHUANIAN EMIGRÉ PROSE

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The one single image which may be taken to symbolize all of Lithuania, both the country and the myth, is the medieval castle tower on Gediminas' Hill in the ancient city of Vilnius. A castle is a defensive structure; it presupposes an enemy outside the gates, it offers protection and calls for endurance and courage to defend and preserve the lives and values of the community inside its walls.

The figure which the generous American imagination presumes to be engraved in the minds of its immigrants is, of course, the Statue of Liberty. It offers refuge and compassion, and it invites all the tribes and tongues of the world to come and build a new nation together.

In many ways, the images of America in emigré Lithuanian prose can be seen more clearly when we consider them as embodiments of the complex relationships which arise between these two symbols. What matters in particular are the visions or reality surrounding them as these might appear to someone still mourning the loss of his home and still apprehensive about the new and alien land.

In such a vision, when a Lithuanian descends the Gediminas Hill, he sees a mellow city opening before him, with a harmonious baroque skyline and with two rivers sparkling amidst the greenery which meet in Vilnius and continue westward across a rolling countryside dotted with small towns and peasant cottages. This land is easy to love: it has an aura of poetry and myth about it, arising from the ancient feeling of a meaningful unity between the native soil and whatever grows upon it, be it flower, animal or man.

Now, if we follow this Lithuanian across the ocean to America, the first thing that meets his eye underneath the Statue of Liberty is what used to be the immigration compound on Ellis Island — a crowded place of anxiety and confusion, filled with huddled masses from many distant places facing an unknown and possibly ominous future. Beyond this island he can see strange clusters of tall grey towers — castles of the new world — and hear the screaming sirens of a city in a great hurry to get somewhere, somehow, through the deep canyons of its dusty streets.

Thus, while in his mind the realities of the past have already turned into dreams, and the dreams of the future are not yet recognizable in the mirror of reality, our Lithuanian immigrant may well ask himself how easy it will be to love this new land, if indeed it can be loved at all. Some images of America in Lithuanian prose do provide a variety of direct answers to such a question, while others transcend their particular existential context to confront the universal issues of human alienation and belonging in a world made strange by the perceived presence of death.

To begin with, some background. The literary life of the Lithuanian community is fairly active, considering its limited size. In the last few decades perhaps an average of three or four novels came out every year, not counting plays, collections of short stories, poetry and various other publications which include scholarly and cultural journals, newspapers and books on historical and political topics. Here we are speaking only of the new immigrants after the Second World War, whose numbers in the United States may range anywhere from thirty to fifty thousand.[1] People who might recognize some Lithuanian strain in their heritage from previous waves of immigration are said to amount to perhaps a million, but the great majority of these are no longer active in Lithuanian literary, cultural or even ethnic life, although in the past there have also been many activities and publications generated by immigrants who came to the United States around the turn of the twentieth century and later, in its first few decades. These early arrivals were mostly simple working people eager to make a new life for themselves on this continent. The postwar influx, on the other hand, included many intellectuals and writers who have regarded themselves for many years, some, in fact, to this very day, as a distinct community of exiles suffering

from the trauma of war and dispossession. Their self-image includes the notion of living in this country essentially as guests, even generations of guests, as their children grow up and have children of their own. The cultural orientation was, and still is, toward the preservation of the Lithuanian ethos, instead of blending into the mainstream of American life.

Not surprisingly, therefore, almost all the literature produced by this community is in the Lithuanian language, thus forming a substratum of American culture quite unknown to the English-speaking majority. Nor is it, again, surprising that the images of America found in this literature mostly show a foreign country, only partially accepted or understood through the prism of exile.

On one end of the spectrum we find an almost total rejection of America and what it stands for, not in its ideals, but in its industrial life style, its materialistic and supposedly ,,soulless" daily experience of living. A rather extreme example would be the novel *Sąmokslas* (The Plot, 1968) by Vytautas Volertas, depicting the fortunes of a small industrial enterprise run by two immigrants — a German and a Lithuanian — and one native American. Each protagonist represents a collection of stereotypes ascribed to his particular nationality. The German is dilligent, skillful and naive, the Lithuanian is talented, withdrawn and lacking in ambition, and the American is a rapacious animal, indeed, an entire zoo of rats chasing rats, dogs eating dogs and big fish swallowing small. Other writers, such as Jurgis Gliauda in his novel *Šikšnosparnių sostas* (The Throne of Bats, 1960), do not so much reject the American reality in itself but rather deny its relevance to the values held dear by the suffering exile. Fidelity to the homeland takes the form of refusal to adjust, or, as they say, "to make out" in the new country. In a typical gesture, the protagonist, a former jurist in Lithuania, rejects the idea of learning to drive a car, because that would mean the acquisition of skills and attitudes leading to possible integration in a society which should be regarded as alien by any true patriot. Those Lithuanians who do drive cars, buy houses and enter the professions, lose their souls according to the measure of their success.

The novelist and playwright Antanas Tulys who came to the United States in 1913, has acquired a somewhat different perspective. His images of life in America are not drawn from underlying assumptions that the Lithuanian ethos is somehow more spiritual, nobler in itself than the surrounding reality. The characters in his collection of short stories *Tūzų klubas* (The Club of Aces, 1960) share the full measure of human vices and weaknesses with any stereotype Irishmen, Italians or whomever. If anything distinguishes the Lithuanians as a type in his work, it seems to be their desire to remain on the margins of the larger American context, to think and speak small and to retreat from dangerous passions.

That, too, is not presented as some inherent national trait, but rather it appears as a consequence of his heroes' social condition. Tulys often depicts the life of the earlier Lithuanian immigrants, people who came to America without much education and spent their lives in the coal mines or in similar hard labor. An example of his work could be the story "The Last Days of Juozas Karutis," describing the death of a retired coal miner living out his old age in a decaying Pennsylvania town, in a ramshackle house on an empty street which is being slowly reclaimed by solitude and weeds.

This is reminiscent of similar settings in the works of native American authors, particularly those in the twenties and thirties who wrote with a "social conscience," such as John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, or even William Faulkner. There is, however, one difference. The lives of the dying man Karutis and of his equally decrepit friend Rašinskas have had a cultural, one might almost say, an intellectual dimension not shared by Steinbeck's Oakies or by the rural troglodites in Faulkner. Karutis used to be a reader of books, and a fighter for social progress, a follower of those late nineteenth-century positivist Lithuanian intellectuals in the old country who helped prepare the awakening national consciousness for participation in the affairs of the civilized world. Outstanding public figures in the Lithuanian emigre community used to come to his house, and an extended ideological dialogue used to go on between Karutis and Rašinskas, a pillar of the local Lithuanian Catholic church. This world of ideas, however, was hermetically sealed off from the surrounding English-speaking community, and the two old men left no other gift to America than their physical labor, measured only in lumps of coal.

In spite of their differences, the images of America in the work of Volertas, Gliauda and Tulys do have one thing in common, namely, a lack of promise, an absence of dream. Instead of being an exciting challenge for a newcomer to exercise his best abilities, America appears as a grey place of small and sometimes nasty ambitions, inhabited by strangers and having little or no relation to an individual's inner core of values.

Written from a different standpoint, the novel *Rugsėjo šeštadienis* (A Saturday in September, 1970) by Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė transcends this isolationism by means of two inwardly connected dimensions of irony. One of them relates simply to a sense of humor, in the light of which the novel's main protagonist — an old man for whom America is not his first place of exile — can appear in his solitude to be both comical and lovable. He is the chief narrator, and the American reality filtered through his cantankerous old man's mind loses the claim to represent the author's own objective conviction. Thus when we read at the beginning:

The Chicago crickets keep at it with their monotonous, bothersome chirping, outside. In America, I would say, their song is coarse, it lacks "finesse". A Lithuanian cricket had the soul of an artist: he did not screech like that at full blast, he truly played a violin . . .[2]

we know that this image of America functions mainly as an artistic device to set an ironic mood which serves its own structural purpose in the novel, rather than being an attempt at "truthful representation."

The second ironic dimension consists of the presence of death. The protagonist knows he will soon die of a heart attack, and in this knowledge both his past and his present, Lithuania and America, and the half-forgotten Russia, appear equally distant and basically irrelevant to the serious business of preparing for the ultimate exile from them all. From this distance, a cool mocking light shines upon the conflicts and aspirations of all the other characters in the novel, so that their "American experience" does not seem as important and as tragic as the rhetoric of exile would have them believe. Indeed, they seem only marginally aware of what America is and what it has to offer in its vastness and variety. The great city of Chicago surrounding their little ethnic enclave seems to them hardly more than a vague outline and a distant hum. The protagonists, living in their comfortable ghetto, do not even realize that they have produced a miniature model of the smaller, more mundane concerns of their host country as a whole. Only the old man from his distance can see how much their Little Lithuania resembles the large United States, and how similar that is to the whole wide world.

In a number of works, the integration of Lithuanians into the overall patterns of American society is portrayed on several different levels of material affluence and cultural adjustment, ranging from professional people, such as doctors, who have successfully blended in with the suburban grass, to the life of the lower middle classes, the realm of Archie Bunker, or even below that, to the bleak existence of the forgotten poor. And, as often happens, it is the meek, downtrodden people who seem to possess the warmest, most touching quality of humanity. One such person is Paulius Shakalys (Paul Sack) in a short story "The Telephone" by Liudas Dovydėnas, from his collection *Vasaros vidudienis* (Midday in Summer, 1979). Shakalys is a decrepit old man who spends his days talking to the ghosts of his past through a make-believe telephone his doctor gave him when he realized that the man has lost his mind. The man's favorite place is a dusty city square where he keeps the company of similar leftovers from life, made up of various ethnic origins. He himself is an immigrant of the earlier wave and has spent great many years living in the States, but he still can hardly speak any English. Yet, he truly belongs with this group of retired coal miners and former saloonkeepers, and in that sense is fully an American. His qualifications for being a rightful inhabitant in this land of opportunity include fighting for America in the first World War, later saving up his coal miner's pay to buy a house, and finally also the experience of being swindled out of all his money by his own son, a dope pusher, who dies in a car crash trying to outrun the police.

In his way, however, Paul Shakalys is still a rich man, because he never lost the gift of communicating his humanity across all barriers of language and madness. Thus he can enrich his friend, an Irishman named Charlie Brown, who listens to Shakalys' talk without understanding a word of it:

But perhaps Paul Shakalys has something which these others, sleeping apathetically, do not have? No way to tell. What did his own mule, Dublin, have who knew no English, Lithuanian or Polish? This strange thought came to Charlie Brown. You see, even without knowing the language, there probably is and must be some bond, some telephone connecting man with man, and even with a mule?[3]

The new postwar immigrants appear to do better in both learning the language and achieving material comfort, while at the same time the precious grains of human communication at times seem to slip through their fingers like sand. There is solitude in clean well-lighted rooms, bleak empty spaces in the eyes of husbands and wives, and conflicts with children as they acquire strange new habits of thought and dress and move away into the incomprehensible American world.[4] These are not necessarily the symptoms of some special malaise of the exile, or the immigrant, but rather an image of America shared by ethnics, blacks and wasps alike in this time of transition from established value systems to some unknown, dubiously promising future. Some of the young people, just like their native American counterparts, confuse this distant future with immediate material gain and run off to buy things they cannot possibly afford. In a short story called "The Yellow Buick" by Kazys Almenas[5] there is such a young Ukrainian student who discovers the magic of time payments and invests himself with a pale-blond wife, a large expensive car and a remote control TV set. Then the payments come due, the beautiful wife drops him like an empty promise, the TV set is repossessed, and the young hero rams himself and his big car at full speed into a bridge abutment on a gray, unpromising morning.

For a native, this may seem a fairly common story, but for the new arrival it can acquire the frightening aspect of an absurd morality play on the theme of the American dream. It can be particularly distressing to those who had tempered their sense of dispossession with the conviction that they have kept their castle — some superior moral order — and who must now discover that they can be both fools and mortals, like everybody else, and that this is perhaps the true measure of their belonging in the new land.

What we have been speaking of is not really despair, but rather something a social scientist could call "problems of acculturation." True despair has an altogether different quality and it requires a special artistic talent to bring out its cosmic and its poetic aspect. Such an artist in Lithuanian emigré prose is Antanas Škėma, and here is his image of America from a collection of short sketches entitled *Celeste* (1960):

Golgotha is the falling of a burning airplane into the abyss, the cry of a four-year-old over the mother's corpse, the steps of a pregnant girl, the agony of a man under interrogation in a jail cell, the silence of the paralyzed in bed. A little song about love lost is quivering on Broadway, there are many beggars on Broadway, the sailors are squeezing the girls' hands, my cross is higher than the highest skyscraper; it is an advertisement for a fragrant soap.[6]

And here is another, from the cycle *Saint Inga* (1952), describing a traffic accident in Chicago:

A great fire stabs through the walls of the trolley. It is too late to jump out. Pure gold splashes on the hair of the boy, and the hair bursts into emerald. The mother grasps her son's head, sapphire and chalcedony, and crysolite and sardonyx tear her stomach to pieces. Fists beat against the windows, the glass shatters in sardius and beryl. Jasper, topaz and chrysoprasus shoot forth from between the twisted fingers. Then comes the darkness, because fire licks out the eyes and the people can no longer see jiacinth and amethyst.[7]

This is Škėma's response to the prophet's description of the Kingdom of Heaven, our home of the ultimate promise. Of course, Škėma is concerned here with agonies of his own, arising from his personal and artistic dimensions, and America as such serves only as a particular locale and medium of expression. Nevertheless, one can perceive in his portrayals something rather uniquely, jaggedly American: the speed, the energy, the sharp, almost cubist juxtapositions of fleeting images, and the multitude of bright colors which so quickly strike a newcomer's eye. The harsh and bitter irony, however, belongs to Škėma himself. The outstanding Lithuanian poet Henrikas Radauskas noted rather aptly that Škėma was among the first Lithuanian writers to describe how in his encounter with the life of a large American city "the Lithuanian provincial gets his bones broken on the wheel."[8]

Škėma's main work, the novel *Balta drobulė* (The White Shroud, 1958) extends the structural principle of a jigsaw puzzle put together in irony and pain to broad spacial and temporal dimensions encompassing both the past and the present of a Lithuanian immigrant to America. What we really see is a series of memories intermingled with immediate experiences in the troubled mind of the main hero, named Antanas Garšva, who is rapidly tilting toward a blissful state of insanity. He lives in Brooklyn and works in a Manhattan hotel as an elevator operator. Garšva perceives himself as a modern-day Sisyphus. The Greek myth is relatively plain: it tells of a large stone and a steep hill, and there is nothing but muscle strain and heavy breathing, mindlessly directed toward a single impossible aim. Garšva's elevator has no weight, and it moves across many floors, picking up and discharging elegant and grotesque, tragic and boring specimens of humanity which, taken all together, constitute an image of America, distilled and distorted to be Manhattan. Through it Garšva falls and rises in great and meaningless precision, gesturing elegantly with his white-gloved hands. He goes home in another, horizontal Sisyphus box which lets in and out anxiety and despair, stupid bliss and silent screams of pain, all masquerading as office workers, and factory hands, bums and chatty Puerto-Ricans, and fat ladies with Macy's shopping bags. These two coordinates describe and imprison Garšva's inner life which is that of a poet seeking his perfect word and his one great love across the shambles of his past and present, full of loneliness and humiliation, sentimental dreams and the demon of madness slithering like a snake from his unfortunate mother's mind into his own. The American present and the Lithuanian past work together to destroy the protagonist, but the book itself gains a great deal from its American setting. The point is that Lithuania alone is simply not large enough to contain the possibilities inherent in Garšva as a model of the modern existentialist hero. He needs the American vastness, its dynamic chaos and its multitudes of people, like infinite variations of the complex theme of the human condition which the figure of Garšva could then combine and shape into a significant artistic statement.

At this point, one could well ask what has Lithuanian fiction done to the American dream? It has not destoryed it, assuming, of course, that the dream is still there. Some writers, like Aloyzas Baronas in his novel *Laivai ir uostai* (Ships and Harbors, 1979) have approached it in a pensive mood, weighing and comparing it with the dreams left behind at home. Others, like Algirdas Landsbergis in his collection of short stories entitled *Muzika įžengiant į neregėtus miestus* (Music Upon Entering Cities Unseen, 1979) seize it and let it go again, turn it this way and that, as if a shining crystal ball, a plaything of their poetic fancy.

In Baronas' novel, the immigrants arrive looking like broken pieces of their former lives: a husband without his wife, a wife and daughter without the husband, and an aristocratic old lady without her estate and servants. The new country could make them whole again, but only at its usual price of renunciation tempered with acceptance of its own values. The frame in which Baronas sets the encounter is not very favorable, because it is also a judgment of sorts against the American promise: the travellers are compared to Ulysses on his way home to Ithaca, and America appears as the island of Circe, a place of enchantment where new love and happiness is possible if one can brave the risk of turning into a pig.

For some, things turn out unexpectedly well. The old lady, so set in her ways, is among the first to work out a psychological adjustment which does not require her to change her standards of value, but only to turn them around, facing herself. She takes a job washing dishes in a restaurant, and does it well like an aristocrat should:

The old woman breathed in the smell of various burned foods and soups and had no more time for thinking. Her habitual sense of duty took control of her actions. She had hired herself out for the first time in her life, and now she expected of herself the same thing she used to demand from others. She hurriedly washed and dried the plates with her bony fingers, and water from the faucet was warm and made a soothing noise.[9]

The young agronomist, Laimis Manikas, has more difficulty. His wife remained in Lithuania with a month-old baby, and now he works on a farm belonging to a Lithuanian of the old immigration who immediately calls our hero Louie and introduces him to his daughter Cathleen, a woman of straighforward mind and simple looks who nevertheless exudes some compelling power, known in the legends as sorcery and in America as sex appeal. After many struggles for his Lithuanian ideals and against his human nature, Laimis does in the end really become Louie and marries Cathleen and, after her father's death, sells the farm and moves to Florida to start a condominium. When he looks back regretfully at this second loss of roots in the soil, Cathleen settles the issue for him once and for all:

All of you from Europe are very strange. You look at every object as if it was alive. Americans do not mope about old houses or machines. They do what is necessary. They tear down a forty-story building and put up one of seventy floors. That's what America is all about.**10**

Later on she adds: "Oh, Laimis, things have no soul. Even flowers and trees. This is only a silly invention of the poets."

The third exile, a woman named Liusė, struggles bravely to fend off the oozing attentions of an Italian named Petucci, the husband of her Lithuanian relative, and to keep her daughter Jolanta on the right idealistic and patriotic Lithuanian track. She wins against Petucci, but it is a victory that leaves a hollow feeling in the soul. Her daughter, however, revolts fiercely against the unreality of a Lithuanian life in America that prevents her from acquiring an identity meaningful to herself.

America appears in the novel as a country of clear-thinking, businesslike people who, because of that, also seem to possess the power of a silent bog which drowns all the empty rhetoric and all the true ideals of homeland lost, offering security and even prosperity in return. One begins to think in terms of contrasting images or of contrasting languages which transcend the differences between Lithuanian and English. In Lithuania, the poets say, a young maiden spoke shyly to a rose. Here people do landscaping. In Lithuania youth was exhorted in noble speeches to build a great future for the fatherland. Here we have human resources management. There men died for the native hearth. Here they marry Cathleen. And that is the American dream. The question which Baronas' novel invites is: "do pigs have souls when flowers do not?" His own answer seems to be that, after all is said and done, things do have soul in America as well, and there is much goodness in the land, but it takes some moral courage and some generosity on the part of the immigrants themselves to perceive this through the screen of their old mythology of values.

Finally, Algirdas Landsbergis shows us the American dream balanced on the point of his wit. He likes to create amusing counterpoints in which immigrants from radically different backgrounds strive to possess the same American myth. Thus, in a story called "Tyrone Power and Martin Fierro on the Wide Screen" a Puerto Rican boy named Confessor Rodriguez who looks rather like a young, chubby Tyrone Power, dreams of being a movie star, Martin Fierro, a proud and great lover and avenger of injustice. Skaistė a young girl just arrived from Lithuania, is in love with Tyrone Power whom she saw once on the screen, back in the small town of Jonava. She herself is beautiful in a dark and sultry Spanish way, and she is desperate to go to Hollywood and be a star. The eyes of Skaistė and Rodriguez meet for a fleeting moment, and then each of them pursues his and her dream separately, through a series of brief vignettes arranged like a film scenario. Rodriguez is insulted by basketball-playing Yankee boys on the street. He forces his parents to buy him a Gaucho costume. He brandishes a knife, he grows fat, his parents shrivel up and die. Totally carried away by his fancies, he sets a house on fire. Skaistė goes to Hollywood. She marries a fat manufacturer of wigs. She becomes rich. She never gets to be an actress. The house that Rodriguez-Fierro burned down was supposed to be an evil landowner's plantation, but actually it is only a celluloid film strip which goes up in flames, together with Skaistė, Fierro, America, Argentina, and Lithuania. Heavy thinking about images of America is out of place here; the story is but a wisp of smoke, an unsubstantial dream. What is real in it has to do with the sweet pain of yearning, the desperate need for a dream. In other works by Landsbergis, particularly in the comic play *Meilės mokykla* (The School of Love, 1965) this yearning grows and develops the rich foliage of a fantastic success story where a man named Bangžuvėnas — Leviathan, from Balbieriškis — "Podunk," establishes a school of love and reforms the entire world by wheeling and dealing, backslapping and preaching in the proverbial American way. Compared to him, Horatio Alger thought small indeed. Then the bubble bursts, in the proverbial American way, and all we have left are the golden leaves of a Pennsylvanian autumn deep in the sould of young Gabriel, Leviathan's poetic friend. These autumn leaves, glowing and shimmering in the heart, are the true and immortal American, Lithuanian, universal dream.

How can one summarize and assess all these images of America? The main difficulty is that we are dealing with the medium of art, and literature has always told more about literature than about life. Perhaps we could say this: it appears that the Lithuanian writers on the whole are less interested in new dreams and visions and more concerned with the immediate experiences of ordinary small-scale life as it affects ordinary people. This individual close-up perspective can tell a great deal of truth about America, but it can also miss the grand sweep of its historic promise. Many of the writers do not confront the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of the American ideal, because they are anxious to keep the candle burning in the sanctuary of their traditional Lithuanian values. In the end, however, it may be precisely here, in that sanctuary, that the Lithuanian candle and the great American torch will be recognized as but two different sources of the same pure flame of liberty which finds itself at home wherever free and honest people come together to live in peace, under God.

1 For a still-valid assessment of the literary life of the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian communities in the West, see Ivar Ivask, "Baltic Literatures in Exile: Balance of a Quarter Century" in J*ournal of Baltic Studies,* Vol. III, No. 1, Spring, 1972, pp. 1-17.

2 Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė, *Rugsėjo šeštadienis*. Chicago: Lietuviškos knygos klubas, 1970, p. 7. This, as well as all other translations into English in this article are my own — R. Š.

3 Liudas Dovydėnas, "Telefonas" in: *Vasaros vidudienis*. Chicago: Algimanto Mackaus knygų leidimo fondas, 1979, p. 177.

4 Especially illustrative in this respect is the novel *Vieniši pasauliai* (Lonely Worlds) by Alė Rūta, Chicago: Lietuviškos knygos klubas, 1968.

5 Kazys Almenas, "Geltonas Buikas" in *Gyvenimas tai kekė vyšnių*. Chicago: Algimanto Mackaus knygų leidimo fondas, pp. 123-155.

6 Antanas Škėma, *Čelesta.* London: Nida Press, 1960, p. 60.
7 Antanas Škėma, Š*ventoji Inga.* Chicago: Terra Publishers, 1952, p. 125. Both the above passages from Škėma have previously been quoted in *Lituanus,* No. 4, 1966 and in Šilbajoris, *Pefection of Exile,* 1970.
8 Henrikas Radauskas, answer to a questionnaire about the work of Antanas Škėma. Metmenys, No. 6, 1963, p. 137.
9 Aloyzas Baronas, *Laivai ir uostai*. Chicago: Lietuviškos knygos klubas, 1979, p. 76.
10 Ibid., p. 275.