

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 45, No. 2 - Summer 1999

Editor of this issue: Violeta Kelertas

ISSN 0024-5089

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PASKENDEŠ KAIMAS

A year with the Lithuanians

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For one year, from August 1996 to August 1997, it was the great privilege of this writer to serve as the Fulbright Scholar in Lithuania, offering Academic courses and Professional seminars in Law, in Management and in Public Administration. My duties took me through the length and breadth of Lietuva, allowing me to live in three different cities and to teach at three different universities. The following is a personal reflection on my time among the Lithuanians.

Preparing to Go... And Why Lithuania?

Most readers are familiar with the phrase "defining moment," i.e., a life experience which is so imprinted on one's psyche that it shapes forever the choices, the sentiments and the dreams of the individual experiencing this moment. For some it may be an uplifting experience; perhaps winning an Olympic medal. For others it may be brutal such as imprisonment or war. For many it is mundane or trivial like earning a certificate of achievement in grade school. For a few it might be dramatic as with those who survive a physically harrowing episode.

In my case, the "defining moment" held each of these elements: inspiration, fear, banality and adventure... all wrapped up in one. This "moment" occurred over a one year period from 1960-1961 when I left the United States at the age of 20 to "travel around the world:" alone; without a fixed itinerary; with very few resources; and with no contacts¹. I was truly adrift. Just where I wanted to be at that stage in life.

The purpose of this paper - a personal reflection of my year in Lithuania - is not to impose on the reader a time-dried memory of a youthful adventure. But there is a connection between that defining experience and my year, several decades later, living in Lithuania. Simply put, for all its highs and lows, I *wanted* to do it again. More importantly, given the habits (long since nurtured) of enjoying solitude, foregoing material comforts and coping with foreign and sometimes hostile environments, I was *prepared* to do it again. In short I was ready once again to be alone; to struggle with a strange language; to live without familiar amenities; and to enjoy a life in an alien culture.

Many people have asked: why Lithuania? "What drew you there, you're not Lithuanian." The answer is that the choice had to do with three personal inclinations - also developed several decades ago. These "proclivities" have to do with language, graveyards and bread. In Israel I learned that there is something deeply admirable about a people who refuse to relinquish their ancient language. In Ireland I was reminded that there is something terribly human in a culture which attaches the highest priority to honoring and remembering its dead. In the former Yugoslavia I was touched by the generosity of very poor locals who placed the highest value on sharing their food with visitors.

These were the components I was looking for. In hoping several decades later to find a place to put all this together, the questions became: where do they cling to their language most ferociously? Where is respect for and remembrance of the dead the foremost of rituals? Where is generosity the highest communal value? Based on readings and conversations, all the arrows pointed to Lithuania, heretofore a place with which I had no connection (familial or professional); an image on the map which seemed to suggest a mystical past, an earthy flavor and a coherent culture.

The opportunity to play out this dream presented itself in an offhand comment by a foreign program director noting a teaching opportunity in Lithuania. This led to formal application for a Fulbright Award, which eventuated in the summer of 1996 [2](#) to a flight to Prague, where I secured a car to drive through Poland to Lithuania. I wanted to arrive overland; I wanted to get there alone; and I did not want to be met by anyone. As was my purpose several decades ago, I wanted to throw myself on the good graces of the people, and in this way come to know them.

Crossing the Border - The Road to Druskininkai

The border between Poland and Lithuania is one of those lines on the world map which delineate truly different worlds. After a harrowing, solo, two-day drive in a Czech tagged Skoda through Poland I arrived early evening at the Lazdijai border crossing. Very often frontiers and geopolitical boundaries are just artificial lines drawn by officials in remote conference rooms. At Lazdijai the line is real; things' change dramatically when you cross it.

On the Polish side, one sensed the border long before actually arriving at the customs station. From Augustow north, one noticed that the single-lane, rutted blacktop became ever more crowded with broken down lorries and sleek fast German cars. Fifteen kilometers south of the border the line of trucks thickened, with many on the side of the road, stalled or broken down. Ten kilometers further north and the single lane became several haphazard formations; snarled, twisting, snakelike lines of lorries and small trucks with surly looking drivers. These vehicles were interspersed with late model Lithuanian and Russian tagged cars driven by burly, skin-head shaven, young men dressed in muscular black leather jackets and bulging black jeans - the uniform, as I would learn, of the post-Soviet mafia.[3](#) Many of the trucks were disabled or burned out. As I slowly snaked closer to the customs station, marked by the usual dirty, oversized flags, I noticed many of the "drivers" drinking or urinating or sleeping on the roadway. Polish boarder guards armed with machine guns patrolled along the barbed wire perimeter. Small fights and arguments erupted. Hustlers accosted the few dazed tourists. Everywhere, incongruously, these men were using mobile phones. This side of the border, with the chaotic lines of vehicles looked like old aerial films of the Sinai desert after the Israeli air force finished with Egyptian convoys. It was a good place to get away from.

With a small dime store U.S. flag now adorning my simple Skoda, I wended my way through the tangle to the customs station, identified myself as a Fulbright Professor, flashed official looking papers and in two minutes was along side the Lithuanian post. On this side the hut was manned by a couple of smiling relaxed 20 year olds who acknowledged my grade school level of Lithuanian with a warm "laimingai" and with a single stamp waved me through to Lithuania... on this side of the border a different world. Here there actually was a vista, a view unscarred by litter, disabled vehicles and the debris of international roadways. The highway was double lane and smooth. On a late Friday evening mine was the only car on this stretch of road between the border and the nearest town, Lazdijai, which struck me as a placid, wood-structure, village soft and inviting despite the presence of several green garbed border police. A farm girl carrying two fraying plastic bags filled with fresh vegetables finally grasped my unintelligible Lithuanian and pointed me to the main road with a full, warm smile. I knew I was in a world very different from the one I had just left.

My goal that evening was Druskininkai a city identified in my guide book as a "spa" center with several swimming pools. As I remember, Druskininkai was 60 km. east. The sun was starting to go down but the roads were clear and after gassing up and changing money I set off. Half way to Druskininkai I began to notice a "familiar sight" - villages, small clusters of wooden buildings, settled in groves of thick trees, almost invisible from the curving highway. This was a familiar sight (though I had never been in Lithuania) because I had tried to memorize a poem "Peizažas" by Jonas Aistis and the third stanza begins with the line: "O toliau... Paskendęs kaimas."

I had struggled so long, so often and so hard with this poem that the line was fixed forever in my memory. And now, here it was... "Paskendęs kaimas"... just like the poem. Or rather here "they" were, for these green and red and yellow wood clusters were everywhere, every four or five kilometers, resting in the fields.

With the sun going down, and the summer mist settling around the frames of these now silhouetted structures and with no sign of human life apparent, the deeper meaning behind Aistis' phrase troubled me. Did "sunken village" refer to a life now lost; a world, once idyllic, calm and civilized, but now degraded and "sunk" in the negative sense. Did Aistis refer to a world gone by, abandoned and deserted by the cruel winds of communism? Or was this idealized culture still vibrant, still strong, still alive... just temporarily or seemingly "settled" deep in the cluster of protective trees?

Who were these people in the farm houses and villages? What were they like? Were they kind? Did they laugh and sing and dance? Were they sincere? Did they tenaciously preserve their language as I hoped? Did they care for their grave sites and honor their dead? Did they share their few precious loaves of bread with total strangers?

I was tired. I was drifting. I was, along with fragments of a poem, stretching for clarity. Sure signs of road fatigue. The drab but quiet Soviet-style hotel in Druskininkai, and the sunny pool in the hotel spa the next morning, was the perfect antidote

to several days driving. Next stop Panevėžys, where I would meet my American colleague at KTU. But first I wanted to drift, to learn the language, to visit graveyards, to taste the bread.

Making Plans - And First Impressions

Just as it takes a long time to get to know someone it takes a long, long time to get to know a culture - to penetrate, to appreciate, to absorb. And based on my experiences living abroad, this reality is multiplied, many times over, in the case of Lithuania.

To a casual observer from America, Lithuania at first appears familiar. It is a Christian, European, industrialized society with familiar transport systems, foods and restaurants, hospitals, shops, schools... all of the artifacts of a modern society. At another level, however, Lithuania is an extraordinarily - uncommonly - closed culture. There is a *reason*, after all, why Lithuanians have held tenaciously to their ancient mother-language, while the Irish and countless other proud peoples have lost theirs. The reason, I suspected, had to do with "insularity," the life-long, encrusted habits of a people who are resistant to change, doubtful of diversity, reliant on rituals which emphasize conformity, and above all careful about letting outsiders in.

In trying to understand how the language lasted, these factors emerged as powerful reasons. It had to be this way. Obviously, as I was hoping somehow to penetrate this "closed culture" I needed a plan. Driving across Poland a rough set of principles emerged and included these thoughts:

- go slow: spend a few days absolutely alone, observing, smelling, sensing, looking. No contacts; professional or personal. Watch the people, hear the language, visit the graveyards.
- live with Lithuanians: that is, whatever housing arrangements are available, make sure it is with non-English speaking Lithuanians. Do not compromise this rule.
- avoid Americans (and other ex-pats)⁴ no matter how rough the going, especially in the first few weeks.

And so, as I made my way at night to a hotel in Druskininkai, the calendar clarified. I would spend three days, alone, in hotels, in different cities just "watching." I would attempt to find housing⁵ with non-English speaking Lithuanians. And finally, although it would puzzle my American "contacts" at the U.S. Embassy in Vilnius, for a while I would avoid all contact with "officialdom."

There was one other guiding thought in these emerging plans. The force of the shock that "this looks familiar but it's really different" told me to take it in stages; to peel off one level, then go on to the next. All the signs, especially in the first few days confirmed the suspicion that this society was more complex - much more complex - than it appeared on the surface. But, this is the part I wanted to learn about. And as I formulated plans - alone, in a drab but clean soviet style room in Druskininkai - a three day, a thirty day, a three month and then a nine month plan began to take shape.

A photograph by a grandfather clock tells me I arrived in Druskininkai after 10:00 that evening. I remember, in the fog of fatigue, vague sights and sounds such as the snarling guard dogs where I parked my car; finding a late night bistro where I first enjoyed *šaltibarščiai*; noticing the trees, especially the trees, everywhere... tall, full, rich trees. And finally through my window the moon.

The moon, too, looked different. Here it seemed closer (was it the curvature of the globe, or was it the lack of sleep). It would be difficult fully to express my thoughts and emotions that first evening, especially to Lithuanians or to Lithuanian Americans who have a pre-conception of the country. But for me it was all new, all magic, all mystery. Close, like the moon, but far, far away from anything I expected, from what I had gleaned in the six weeks of Lithuanian class, and from what the brochures and guidebooks told me. This was old! This was complex! This, like the moon, was wrapped in the gauze-like folds of something different... and maybe special.

Getting Settled - And First Contacts

The First Three Days: Lessons Learned

The drive from Druskininkai through Birštonas and Kaunas to Panevėžys (where I would meet my American academic contact) amounted to a self-imposed three day car trip - a short distance which revealed several contradictions. In fact a pattern of apparent contradictions emerged. For example:

- a shop girl's attentive politeness or a waiter's easy warmth masked a deeper reserve (almost indifference) which in turn masked an even deeper sincerity and sensitivity. Obviously these people cared very deeply about things. They could easily be hurt. Better be careful.
- despite the appearance of economically depressed urban centers, with no bright lights or slick performance centers, this was at core a "café society." One could not help but notice the high level of art, sculpture and architecture. This, like their language would be a matter of great pride. Get to know it.
- although helpful in response to fumbled questions in halting Lithuanian, initial contacts with total strangers (police on the highway, hitchhikers, patrons at cafés, swimming pool attendants) revealed an undercurrent of tension. Often, in the background (as in Varėna where I stopped to "picnic" in the square), there was a buzz of roughness and loudness; coarse, harsh, semi-violent sounds breaking the spell of the soft summer. I was warned: these people could be rough; their lives were hard.

The First Thirty Days: Learning More

As I arrived in Lithuania in late July and as University classes would not begin until early September, I had a good month to get settled and acclimated.⁶ Two matters were foremost in my mind: living arrangements and teaching duties.

As mentioned, temporary housing had been arranged by last minute correspondence. Generously I had been offered a room in a Lithuanian academic's apartment. For a number of reasons, personal and professional, this arrangement was unsatisfactory and indeed conflicted with my larger purposes for being in Lithuania. For example, it was clear from the outset that Lithuanian would not be spoken to me in the apartment. (I suspect I was a welcome opportunity to provide free English lessons). Within a day the pattern and purposes were clear and I decided to find my own housing. My "hosts" first tried to talk me out of leaving, and then tried to scare me into "staying." "You don't know anyone in Lithuania," I was reminded. "You can't just pick up a paper and rent an apartment like in the U.S." "Fine," I countered. "In that case show me the way to a nearby village and I'll find a house to live in."

My hosts thought I was deranged. Just another goofy, naïve American who thinks he can do whatever he wants. But the strategy worked. On an early Saturday morning my host and I drove first to Berčiūnai where there were several opportunities to live in the village. Hot water in the winter was the only major qualifier. But conversations with deeply sincere (and very curious) villagers led to an address or two in nearby Naujamiestis which in turn led to conversations and other ideas and finally to the home of "J," an elderly, widowed, retired Lithuanian teacher who lived on the outskirts of Panevėžys.

When I first met "J" in her garden I remember trying to explain that during my year in Lithuania I hoped, above everything else, to try to learn the language. She gave me a noncommittal look, wiped her hands decisively, and invited me and my "host/translator" inside. My colleague explained the situation. Basically I needed housing; would she take me in? (Her home was large; she had a garage; she lived alone). During all of this she was very calm, almost distant. But when I interrupted, again in baby level Lithuanian, she listened with full force. I would pay, "of course," I suggested; she brushed that aside. I didn't smoke, or drink, my host noted; she was unmoved.

Knowing she was on the spot I suggested that she think about it. I was planning a visit to Palanga as my language class had not materialized and I would return in one week. Although nothing had been agreed aloud, it was clear we both had reached decisions.

A week later I returned to make logistical arrangements. Leaving a few personal belongings in J's care, I left briefly to attend to other matters in Kaunas and returned in late summer to spend the rest of the year with a woman who is now as dear to me as family.

Lessons learned years ago proved invaluable: trust the people - they won't let you down. If they appear to be blunt and direct, it's because they're sincere. If they appear to be prickly and overly sensitive, it's because they care. If they are slow to let in strangers, it means they are discerning.

My American contact⁷ failed to show interest in meeting me that summer, even to brief me on preliminary teaching and seminar assignments. So I let it go and left, as noted, for Palanga and for other sites to try out my language on hitchhikers and to re-group.

In Palanga, where there is a restful reading room in a shaded park, I studied, wrote letters, and read. Despite the horrific, boom-box music in the center of town, the dunes were a sanctuary of solitude.

In Palanga I made two important discoveries. First, I was treated to the finest vegetarian dishes I had ever enjoyed. If food was this good, what else? Second, the academics staying at the same University sponsored Poilsio Namai struck me as

uncharacteristically (for professors) boisterous. Was the academic environment this aggressive? Again the lesson was clear: make no assumptions and be careful.

Going to Work - Three Universities and Several Seminars Later *The First Three Months: Making Adjustments*

Formal teaching duties as a Fullbright Professor included offering Law and Management classes at KTU -Panevėžys⁸ and, on a volunteer basis, opening an American Constitutional Law class at Vytauto Didžiojo in Kaunas. The initial frustrations in opening these classes override, in my memory, any lasting sense of accomplishment in helping students to learn about American law or American management practices.

In Panevėžys, at KTU's emerging regional center, the University consists of about 20 dedicated faculty offering courses to students from the Panevėžys region in a couple of dilapidated buildings shared with the local technical college.

Most classrooms are located in the city center. I was shuttled off to a removed facility with old wooden desks, creaky floors, poor lighting, intermittent heat and pitted chalk boards. It was clear that my classes would not be a top University priority. I was informed only the night before class that I would be teaching Organizational Behavior to a group of 75 Fourth Form (senior) students. I was not advised that only two-thirds of the class knew English. As I was not provided an interpreter, things rapidly deteriorated.⁹ Minor frustrations like not having an office, not knowing the key "check-out" routine, not having secretarial help, only exacerbated the matter. Following some interruption of the class meetings and after a good deal of "Sturm und Drang" which included splitting the class into two sections (English and non-English); securing a translator (begrudgingly), and reformulating lesson plans, classes resumed, this time in a more central and appropriate setting. But the harm was done. The students (or at least one-third of them) were turned off. The staff at KTU quickly tired of my many demands for assistance. I was exhausted by the double duty resulting from the split classes.

In Kaunas, the smaller 25 member Constitutional Law class seemed to begin in a more propitious way. Two-thirds of the students showed up the first day (indicating the class had been posted); most but not all used some English, and the classroom itself was actually in the main building. In the end, however, or rather half-way through the semester, the students announced that they refused to take more exams or to follow the dictates of a senior level, case-study, American law seminar. By mid-term the line was drawn. After meetings with senior University administrators I was advised to "keep doing what you're doing; our students need to learn how to study." This, I thought, meant giving exams, controlling cheating and monitoring attendance, as was my practice. I showed up for the next class, bolstered by assumptions that the University appreciated my efforts. The students, however, did not show up. That was it. The class was canceled. I heard not a word from the University administrators; not even a response to a long and painful letter looking for guidance. I went home (or rather I went back to the room the administrators had provided me) packed my bags and left.

During this initial three-month period, I also offered professional level 2-3 day seminars to government officials, selected academics and business officers. The Seminar or Workshop topics focused on Managing Organizations (specifically on Managing People in Organizations). The audience, 30-50 adult participants in Vilnius and in Panevėžys, was extremely appreciative and dedicated to learning new/alternative approaches to Management. The Seminars arranged by the Ministry of Economics and by the Center for Business at KTU were fee-based and held in well appointed, translator-assisted settings. A rather rigorous pedagogical approach using case studies, outside materials, in-class exams, and required participation was met with enthusiasm and involvement by the students.

What I remember most from these not very satisfying early days was driving from Panevėžys to Kaunas to Vilnius and then back to Panevėžys. It was fall, families were working in the fields, the haze of "bobų vasara" enveloped the haystacks, and at night the hundreds of fires in the fields created a glow that was haunting and homey at the same time.

Unlike the haze of *bobų vasara*, however, the broad lessons of my early attempts at teaching were clear. These lessons included the facts that:

- universities were not a high priority; business and government programs came first. Students, with Soviet-era habits, reacted accordingly.
- students were provided very little by way of support services (decent facilities, text materials, counseling programs)
- host institutions were ill-prepared to welcome or to integrate visiting Western professors into the system.

Clearly, this would be tough duty. But the welcoming fires flickered in the field, the silhouetted haystacks seemed fuller with each passing week, the potatoes were coming out the ground and soon the infamous Baltic winter would arrive. Time to settle in.

One Year Later: Final Thoughts

In the end, despite the difficulties, the students and this professor adjusted. And overall, with the exception of the Con-Law class, accomplishments were noted. An additional course on International Law was organized at KTU-Kaunas and, in the more supportive environment of that developed institution more serious academic offerings were encouraged. Additionally, over the course of the year, six professional level seminars on law and on business were offered in four different cities (Panevėžys, Vilnius, Kaunas and Druskininkai).

Opportunities to attend performances at the Operos ir Baletu Teatras and at several musical theaters throughout Lithuania provided a weekly diet of sustaining activity. Invitations by many Lithuanian friends to observe religious and national festivities and ceremonies filled the calendar. Side trips to Nida, to Palanga, to the Lake region, and to Trakai and other points of interest were pleasant diversions.

With the daily language lessons with J, my Lithuanian improved; the not very bitter winter turned to spring; my students in Panevėžys and in Kaunas were adjusting beautifully and so was I. Time now to think about those words "Paskendęs kaimas." Was the village "sunk" in the negative, debased, lower sense. Or was it resting, nestled in a bank of trees, sheltered from the forces of change by mounds of earth, waiting for the moment to re-emerge. That is: would Lithuania return to the ancient, coherent cultured values the people once embodied. Or was the "village" so degraded by the Soviet experience as to be lost forever?

Conclusion: A Sunken Village?

Just as it takes a long time to get to know an individual it takes a lifetime to get to know a culture. Therefore, it would be wildly inappropriate for an outsider to offer even the most general conclusions about an entire people - especially the Lithuanians who are, by this seasoned traveler's estimate, among the world's most inaccessible, aloof and secluded peoples.

This is not to say that Lithuanians are, by nature, cold and rough and hard-edged; although the first impressions of "skin-heads" with their hard stares, soiled training suits and flashy mobile phones distort the deeper, softer rhythms of what is a highly cultured and civil society. It is only to say that first impressions are misleading.

For a number of reasons, however, I was able to approach this deeper more meaningful core. And as an academic, a lawyer and a businessman it is difficult to resist a few observations:

1. Academia: It is apparent that universities and colleges have their priorities inverted. In my experience the administrators, with their plush offices and extravagant perks, come first; students a distant second. Students it seemed have no "rights" and few support services such as useful libraries, technical resources, employment programs, counseling systems, etc. Massive, systemic immediate changes are in order if the next generation is to be given hope that a better life is reachable.

2. Business Life: Lithuanians are quite capable of operating free-market enterprises, at any level. It is insulting, in a way, to flood the country with outside "experts" on marketing, finance, accounting and other techniques. What seems to be crying for attention is a solution to the dead hand of the mafia and its poisonous effect on the emergence of a business class. In my favorite restaurant in Kaunas late one night I watched helpless and paralyzed as two mangy, vicious mafia thugs strong-armed the owner, a young family man, into "paying up." It breaks your heart. This reality must be addressed before a free-market business constituency can emerge as a counterweight to thick, heavy government bodies.

3. The Courts: The business problem is symptomatic of a related but larger issue involving the rule of law. Before any meaningful changes can be made in a bankrupt economy or in any other aspect of life (the police, the universities, the hospitals) an unbending Rule of Law ethos must be promoted and enforced. This means clean courts, uncorrupted procedures and civilian, not mafia, control of the police.

This is a tall order. But, I have little doubt that the Lithuanians, with their inherited fortitude and toughness, are capable of achieving it. If this people can hang on to its language and its heritage as tenaciously as it did over the past 70 years, it can deal with a few punk bullies. But it must be done soon. Else the casual visitor in observing "paskendęs kaimas" in the distance, will see only the decayed, drowned, despoiled remains of a society once vibrant and wholesome.

* * *

I remember my questions as I drove through the countryside that long-ago first evening when I noticed "paskendęs kaimas" off in the distance. Were the people kind? Did they sing and dance? Were they as deep as the landscape suggested?

As the reader now knows, I threw myself on the mercy of these people; and as I recall my year living in J's home, I remember that they are as kind and more caring than any people I have met anywhere. Do they sing and dance? In retrospect what an absurd question! University and other official ceremonies with a cast of thousands of singers and dancers remind me how little I knew then. Are they sincere in the sense that they are thoughtful and careful and serious? In my judgment they are as sincere and as "deep" as their language is old - and Lithuanian is one of the oldest of the living languages.

Is the village "sunken?" I've been there; I don't think so. I prefer to see it as resting: nestled in the grove, waiting for a cleansing westerly wind to sweep out the film of dirt and dust and reveal through the filigree of blue-leafed trees the outlines of a community blessed with ancient and profoundly rich qualities.

¹ In the end I traveled half way east to west; and half way north to south, covering parts of four continents. Self imposed rules included: no camera; no paying for transport, and no American companions.

² Although I had enrolled in a summer Baltic Studies Lithuanian Language class and had met several Lithuanian academics, my familiarity in the summer of 1996 with the language and the culture was minimal.

³ Thanks to Timothy Garton Ash for his insightful reminder of those realities in "The Puzzle in Central Europe," *The New York Review of Books*, Volume XLVI, Number 5, March 18, 1999, p. 22.

⁴ Ex-pats is an abbreviation for expatriates, a collective term widely used to refer to American, British, Canadians and other "displaced" English speaking people.

⁵ Through an American AID program I was offered "temporary" housing in Panevėžys. Upon arrival I learned that for various reasons I was expected to stay at least six months. This proved unsuitable, partly because my hosts refused to speak Lithuanian with me.

⁶ Initially this period was to be given to formal, tutored language study, but like many other logistical and living arrangements, this fell through. Another signal that I was on my own.

⁷ More on the "mixed" role of Americans working and living in Lithuania below.

⁸ KTU is Kaunas Technological University. I am grateful for the assistance DePaul University extended throughout the year in Lithuania especially in providing resources for my academic activities.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the problems encountered in managing classes in the post-Soviet system, see my article "Cracking the Code: Penetrating the Soviet Mentality in Post-Soviet Classrooms," *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January 1999.