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## SAYING GOODBYE TO ALGIRDAS LANDSBERGIS

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He called on March 1st, asking for material for the journal *Lituanus*; he was editing his own special issue. He told me that a few days previous he'd fallen down in the street and had lost consciousness. But the doctors couldn't find anything wrong - to the contrary, after a short stay in the hospital he wrote a new play in the course of a few days, something he hadn't done in a long while. Therefore, he recommended that anyone suffering from writer's block should knock his forehead against the sidewalk - that would get rid of it for certain. I made a bad joke. I said, "In our time we banged our heads against the Iron Curtain and that's perhaps why we were able to accomplish a thing or two." Two weeks later, I received a letter from him - again about *Lituanus*. The letter is still lying on my desk. I can't bring myself to file it away - it was Algirdas's last letter. At the end of March, Algirdas Landsbergis fell down a second time, but he did not regain consciousness and died on April 4th, 2004.

It is pointless and even perhaps insulting to call a certain kind of death good... But still, I think that for a writer a death like Algirdas's is best: midstream, in the heat of creative endeavor, having just finished a new work, awaiting copywriting and publication. For the umpteenth time I've reread his final letter:

There's a problem with translators - those who don't know the nuances of Lithuanian, write well in English, and the ones that know Lithuanian well are not capable of writing fluently in English... I've realized that this issue definitely needs a Polish writer, to complete the Czech-Hungarian-Polish 'mittel-europaeische Dreiheit...' (The Central European threesome). Collegially yours, Algirdas.

I was fortunate to be one of his colleagues. From my own everyday experience, I understood his anxiety over the émigré linguistic snare; his desire to loosen the boundaries of the Lithuanian ghetto and move on into a wider, at least a Central European, space. Algirdas himself lived far from the borders of the Lithuanian ghetto, in a nowhere land between cultures, but still, like few others, he guarded loyalty to his own culture and was concerned about its fate. This kind of nowhere land is perhaps the real place where art and meaningful existence intersect.

We met twenty-seven years ago, when I ended up in America and was visiting centers of Lithuanian émigré culture, trying to give some idea about the Lithuania of that time. It seems to me that, while still living in Vilnius, I had received one or two letters from him - later I accumulated several dozen of those letters. In the context of the émigré community, Algirdas was quite different; he was more involved than most in émigré activities, but at the same time he found it was too confining. He was unusually tall, thin, angular, wore thick glasses, acted somewhat distracted, he was friendly, and just the tiniest bit shy - he fit the picture one hundred percent of an European intellectual from our region. The Lithuanian village hadn't left its mark on him. Therefore, he was very different from others whose fate had been very similar to his, people like Mekas, for instance, or Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas. He looked younger than his age; Algirdas Landsbergis was an eternal student from Kaunas, knowledgeable about all its streets, its squares, and its movie theaters. Or, even more, like a young man from the displaced persons' camps, where at a young age he had learned the laws of this world and learned to view it according to its merits - that is, with rather bitter irony.

He was very interested in the recent arrivals from Lithuania - they probably seemed closer to him than the émigrés who'd been in America for decades. This attentive-ness can be seen in his works. In the play *Children in the Amber Palace* the hero is a director who has recently emigrated from Lithuania; it is easy to guess his prototype (Jonas Jurašas).

At the beginning of my life as an émigré, and even later, I received the most moral support from Algirdas. It was he who introduced me around the Lithuanian community; it was he who translated a few of my poems into English and had them published; it was he who brought me into contact with the PEN Club and other organizations; who advised me how to look for employment, and was happy for me when I found it. I'd receive clippings from Lithuanian newspapers from him with his biting, but insightful, comments scribbled in the margins. Together we worked on survey of Lithuanian literature, which back then was distributed at PEN Club conferences. Until Lithuanian independence, I was not in a rush to write about the controversial pages of Lithuanian history; but after March 11th I decided that it was time to explain what traditions were worth holding onto and which were unseemly. If not now, then when? I published an article on the revolt of June 1941, and with enviable solidarity I was condemned by both the émigré and the Lithuanian press. Algirdas was one of the very few people who supported me, and at the time it was very difficult to take that position (now it would be somewhat easier).

What is a young man to do, one who's been raised in a "purely Lithuanian" environment, who's experienced events that his environment could not adequately respond to - the Second World War, occupation, and flight from his homeland? Probably the best solution was to write.

During the war, and later in the emigration, several dozen such young men came of age, and for several decades they were trusted with the honor of representing Lithuanian literature. Their contemporaries, who'd remained behind in Lithuania, were unable to preserve this honor - even if it was for understandable reasons. Algirdas Landsbergis, a young man from Kybartai belonged to this generation. He was a dozen or so years younger than Antanas Škėma, five years younger than Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, approximately two years younger than Jonas Mekas, a little older than Algimantas Mackus. He was the product of the Kaunas Jesuit Gymnasium (I have a postcard from him from Kaunas City Hall with the message: "This is the heart of my other world.") For a few years, he studied Lithuanian literature at Vytautas Magnus University. After that, that "other world" fell apart. All that was left was the barracks of the displaced persons' camps in Germany. With a fair share of hardship, and with the aid of stress and willpower, he attended Mainz University. Algirdas was twenty-five when he ended up in the United States.

To survive, to settle down, and even to get rich, is relatively easy for an immigrant in America. But it is very hard to make a place for yourself professionally, especially if you choose writing as your profession (and, in particular, writing in a language no one around you understands). For all practical purposes, there was no one like Algirdas, who not only wrote in Lithuanian, but literally lived for literature alone. He completed his studies at Columbia University and, for a time, worked in politics and journalism. He broadcast on Radio Free Europe, but for twenty-six years remained in his element - teaching and discussing the art of writing with students. Even when he had retired he did not recede from his chosen profession, delivering lectures in American libraries (he called his lecture series "The Flying University"). His participation in the PEN Club landed him in the milieu of international writers and intellectuals. He made friends with the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, the critic Michael Scammell, the politologist Peter Reddaway. He participated in the American press. He'd learned English well enough to write plays; he spoke German and French; and also Russian, which allowed him to participate in the Russian émigré community - in the older as well as in the later one. Like no one else, Algirdas Landsbergis involved himself in projects with the goal of presenting Lithuania to the outside world. Even though he viewed "pure Lithuanianism" with sarcasm, he knew how to value that which was authentic in Lithuanian culture and to popularize it. His anthologies in English of Lithuanian literature, *The Green Oak* and *The Green Linden*, published in the early 1960s, when Lithuania was still nowhere to the outside world, I would call historical.

He began his writing, like many, with poetry, but found his true calling in prose, maybe even more so in drama. During those times, when the best Lithuanian émigré novel was considered to be the ultrapatriotic and ultra-Catholic novel *Crosses* by Vincas Ramonas (meanwhile, at that time in Lithuania, *The Truth of the Blacksmith Ignotas* and *Big Events in Naujamiestis* ruled), Algirdas Landsbergis's novel *Journey* (1954) appeared. It was the first rather lengthy prose text in Lithuanian, which reflected the avant-garde climate of the time. It appeared four years earlier than Antanas Škėma's famous *White Shroud* but I think it has held its own ground. The material for *Journey* was well known from the eyewitness accounts of many émigrés: fleeing the homeland; forced labor in Nazi Germany; the diverse and yet monotonously bleak life in a war zone; the bombs of the liberators; finally life in the postwar refugee camps where, if you weren't careful - you might be returned into the arms of the Russian liberators. In the novel there are some not totally convincing psychological conflicts and some melodramatic nightmares, which are marked not just by the nihilistic postwar atmosphere, but also by the prewar German spirit of Expressionism: the writer was still learning his craft and unavoidably veered into mannerism. Still, the characters of *Journey*, especially the non-Lithuanian ones, are quite interesting, including a stereotypical Nazi and a more peculiar Bolshevik, not a Russian, incidentally, but an Italian. They are a cross-section of delusional, displaced Europe. Today it is difficult to imagine the old continent that Algirdas saw and wrote about: hungry, turning into one huge Kaliningrad district, trying to understand, without much success, what had happened to it. Having gotten rid of Hitler with a lot of trouble, and having ended up within an inch of Stalin, on the threshold of a new type of killing, this is the same continent that we've always longed to be a part of, and - exaggerating quite a bit - one that we always considered ourselves a part of. Its strange spectacle is the most important thing the novel captures.

We've grown accustomed to calling emigration a catastrophe, but the émigrés, in a sense, were lucky - they were pushed out of their musty surroundings, they were given the opportunity to overcome their provincial views, although they didn't always seize the opportunity. Algirdas Landsbergis was one of the people who took everything he could from his new environment. He felt that he was a part of the postwar cultural cauldron - a fragmented, grotesque, and not entirely

understandable world, which contained not only Brazdžionis's patriotic poetry, but also existentialism and nihilism, the novels of Camus, the dramas of Ghelderode, Durrenmatt, and Tennessee Williams, stream-of-consciousness literature, psychoanalysis, surrealism, which was on its way out but which was still alive then, and a little later Beckett and Ionesco. We in Lithuania discovered all that much later, probably two decades later - besides, my generation received only fragments, just faraway echoes. For Algirdas it was all an entirely living context. It defined his only novel, his rather few, but memorable, short stories, and the most important component of his work - drama.

The other context of his life was the everyday conditions of life as an émigré. His innovative short stories, unusual in the context of Lithuanian literature (they remind me only of Jurgis Savickis), depict not the ideal and nostalgic Lithuania, whose memory was groomed and nurtured by most Lithuanian writers, but namely the world which surrounds everyone. There probably is not a single other writer who has described the modern, vulgar, consumerist, one-dimensional society with such elegance and accuracy. One wants to call Landsbergis's distance Nabokovian. His attitude is the attitude of a man of letters in a world where consciousness is no longer forged by signs darkening paper, but by the celluloid of cheap film and electronic noise. Landsbergis's best stories "Words, Beautiful Words" and "The Sky Empties, the Sky Fills" are, I'd say, subtle transformations of Vincas Krėvė's "Antanukas's Morning," where the environment of emigration is shown through the eyes of a child; and in that child's heaven, God no longer reigns supreme, but is replaced by a new primitive - though lively - mythology, that of cartoon characters. There are short stories that are not directed towards the émigré community, but towards Lithuania; and the most powerful among them is "The Birth of Song," written in a similar modernist (even postmodern) technique and showing fundamentally the same thing - a vapid person who has surrendered to the manipulations of the modern so-cio-technical universe. In our literature, no one has presented homo sovieticus so accurately. After I'd read "The Birth of Song" (and that was before my emigration), I thought that someone who'd recently arrived in the United States, maybe Aleksandras Stromas, had helped Landsbergis write the story. How else could he have captured so purely "our" mentality and slang? Only later I found out from Algirdas that he'd based the story on three sources - sporadic conversations with tourists from the Soviet Union, by reading the magazine *Kulturos barai*, and on a type of intuition, that I would call genius.

Exactly the same kind of attention went into showing the disturbing environment of the new times and the experience of avant-garde literature in Landsbergis's plays. Within his work we'll find different genres. There is a strange ha-geographical or maybe even anti-hagiographical work about Saint Casimir, *The Wind in the Willows - the Willows in the Wind*; a transformed Dostoevsky novel, namely *The Idiot's Tale*; and probably his most popular work, a play about the postwar partisans, *Five Posts in the Market Place*. But most of his works for the theater examine the same themes as his short stories - the conformity of the émigrés as characteristic of parents as of their children (it makes no difference if the one-dimensional mythology is totalitarian or American, or for that matter, purely Lithuanian). Incidentally, Landsbergis's dramaturgy possesses an innate element giving it the flavor of absurdity, as well as weight. In the emigration it was not possible to organize a Lithuanian language theater. And a dramatist without a theater cannot learn stage technique; he becomes a *contradicto in adiecto*. Yet Landsbergis managed to overcome this contradiction. In his plays, one finds elements of the circus and buffoonery, *commedia dell'arte*, amateur burlesque, a play within a play, elements of puppetry and television soap operas. These theatrical effects are especially interesting because they exist primarily on paper. On the other hand, Landsbergis knew how to exit the nonexistent Lithuanian émigré stage and enter the larger multilingual theater world. And that does not often happen with Lithuanian playwrights - not even with those who actually do have Lithuanian theaters to work with. *Five Posts in the Market Place* was performed in several languages and countries. I'd say that the play became a modern and not just a Lithuanian classic, which resonated with the existentialist drama of Camus and Sartre. It probably isn't Landsbergis's best work, but one thing in it is really worthy of our attention - the playwright shows the exhaustion on both sides of the battle and introduces the tone of the absurd and alienation. All this predicts the demythologization of the partisan era taking place at present, including the work of Marius Ivaškevičius and others.

Today, when Algirdas Landsbergis is no longer with us, his work has at last become a part of history. To be more precise, of literary history. In the hour of death, you understand that a person is the sum of his choices. Each choice moves a person in a certain direction, and taking all those choices together, they trace the unique line of a life: that line may rise, descend, break off, finally it ends forever, but it remains different from all other lines. For a writer, all these choices take the form of books. That is why the writer's line rises above the flat surface of everyday existence and inhabits the space of symbols and memory. Algirdas Landsbergis is a legitimate citizen of this space.

**Translated by Laima Simutis**