

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 40, No.3 - Fall 1994

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ISSN 0024-5089

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A JOURNEY HOME

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Lithuanians are drawn to the *tėvynė* or homeland even if they are born abroad. I am no exception. After a gap of forty years, I followed the reemergence of Lietuva — Lithuania as a nation state with fascination. I was profoundly moved by the courage of the people who faced Soviet tanks with candles and songs.

Within the Baltic community of Northern California, I went back to studying the ancient language of my forebears. No doubt I imbibed Lithuanian with my mother's milk. My parents, my grandmother and the powerful Lithuanian community which existed around St. Francis parish in Minersville, Pennsylvania surrounded me with warmth and love. I grew up there in the '30s and '40s amid three hundred families of the parish. The sisters of St. Casimir staffed the parish school, which boasted Lithuanian studies as part of the curriculum. For me this reinforced the language spoken at home. Church services were in both languages, prayers were in Lithuanian. Mine was perhaps the last generation to grow up speaking Lithuanian. All I can say is *Ačiū Dievui*, Thank God!

I could buy *silkės*: or herring for Christmas eve or *Kūčios* from the small Lithuanian-Jewish grocer up the street. He came from the area around Vilnius as did my father. Several large grocery stores were also run by Lithuanians. Our family doctor was Lithuanian, as was the pharmacist, the optometrist, the dentist, the tailor, the undertaker. Our Lithuanian community spoke with pride of its sons educated within one generation to become priests, doctors, lawyers. Even an admiral of the U.S. Navy grew up in our midst.

This was not to say that our little town of 5000 was entirely Lithuanian. By no means, following my father's example, we greeted our Polish neighbors in Polish as he did. He spoke Russian with the Russians because his only schooling had been three years in a Russian school in Tsarist times. He never mastered the English language, and had to communicate with the Welsh and Irish "fire bosses" at Pine hill colliery in broken English. Somehow or other, we managed to communicate with our Italian next door neighbors so that we occasionally shared a bowl of homemade pasta. Each ethnic group held to its own traditions, but the mix of cultures seemed a natural thing to me.

My own journey first took me away from my roots. I enjoyed languages and dabbled in French, Russian and German at the University. However, my focus of study was international relations and history. I hoped to save the world through some combination of the United Nations and World Federalism.

Marriage and raising a family cut short my Utopian dreams with practical demands. My contact with the Lithuanian was minimal. As long as my parents lived, there were visits to the hometown and brief excursions into the language which ended with the inevitable funerals, and a move to California. Happily I discovered that the west of our country, as well as the east, is rich in multicultural diversity. California is especially blessed in this respect. Europe and the Orient meet on blue Pacific shores. Even more surprisingly, I discovered there were many immigrants here from the Baltic states. Most of them had come here as displaced persons at the end of World War II.

That is how I discovered Lithuanian again and have been resurrected in many ways. Informal study of the language brought shock and pleasure at the recognition of its beauty and complexity. Shock and pleasure were doubled when I discovered that the textbook I was using was written by a linguist and an editor, a distinguished Lithuanian scholar, who had been a friend of my youth. One connection led to another. My life has been enriched.

Through my son, who worked at American President companies in Oakland, I was introduced to a colleague of his, a well known Soviet detector, Jonas Pleškys. I particularly needed Jonas' help so I could write to my new found cousins in Lithuania. Through Jonas I met his sister, Eugenija Pleškytė, one of Lithuania's finest actresses. She is now visiting me. All

of these people helped and encouraged me. Beauty has been added to my life. I have developed a passion for amber, perhaps the fate of all Lithuanian women.

But I have other passions too. When I refresh my memory of the great days of Lithuanian history — when the Grand Duchy of Lithuania stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea — my heart skips a beat. When I am confronted with the *Dainos*, the ancient folk songs which retell the creation myths from that part of the world, I am swimming in *deja vu* - incomprehensible. I discover the poetry of Donelaitis and Maironis. I look at Čiurlionis and Gailius and lesser known artists. It doesn't matter. I keep being seduced.

All the time I keep chastising myself. "Beware the dangers of ethnocentricity." I experienced World War II on the home front. My brothers fought on opposite ends of the globe. The holocaust horrors speak to me from films and books. With the lessons of age, I know I can no longer personally change the world, but I still want to embrace it. Within the context of raising a family and teaching languages, I managed frequent trips to Europe to expose my sons to the world's differences. I welcomed international exchange students into my home. That and more seemed to take thirty years of my life.

I am still concerned about being drawn into the morass of ethnocentricity. I am enough of a student of history to know something about lessons from the past. Blood is still flowing in Yugoslavia. Is it Wilno, Wilna or Vilnius this decade? I am fortunate because I like the sound of both the Polish Wilno and the Lithuanian Vilnius. This is a lucky accident of my past because Lithuanian and Polish and Russian all flowed from my father's tongue in equal measure into my receptive ears.

But I also know something about pain and longing for the homeland, *Tėvynė*. Immigrants like my father who left families forever in the early twentieth century transferred their pain to me. After forty years, I have found cousins I did not know existed. They had been sent to Siberia. Because of the opening of the Soviet empire, I can now write to them and maintain a precious link with the past that my father had to sacrifice. I can even understand the overwhelming enthusiasm of the Baltic peoples for their recreated states. I am caught up in this tide of overflowing freedom myself. Who am I to preach sermons on hatred? I was never a prisoner in a Soviet jail in Kaunas. My newly found cousins were sent to Siberia, not me. My father was not killed in any battle over Vilnius.

It is certainly safe to partake of the pleasures of Lithuanian folk dance and song. Can there be any harm in learning how to make *margučiai*, Lithuanian colored Easter eggs? After all, multicultural diversity offers rich pleasures untasted in the "melting pot." Besides, I have studied Mandarin to be closer to my Chinese daughter-in-law and her family. I have sat *shiva* with my Jewish daughter-in-law as we mourned my sons' Polish father. I am guilt free and comforted when I participate in a re-creation of *Kūčios*, traditional Christmas eve, with my Lithuanian teacher Danutė and classmates at Berkeley. Besides I like the food; the herring, the redbeets, the poppy seeds in dishes honoring the twelve apostles. I even take along my Irish husband Frank or Pranas, as he is called by our Lithuanian friends.

My journey continues. I am writing little vignettes of growing up Lithuanian in this country, caught between two worlds. Ethnic is in. I am happy to come out of the closet. People are appreciative and interested. Since 1991, everyone has at least heard of Lithuania, if only on the evening news. *Vėl, ačiū Dievui*. Once again, thank God. I don't feel so alone.

Several years ago, someone mentioned a Nobel Laureate at Berkeley, a sort of Polish-Lithuanian, a bit unclear to me. My mind stirred with vague memories of Mickiewicz-Mickevičius, a Polish-Lithuanian writer of the 19th century, also one of those mixed beings. The man at Berkeley was the renowned poet, Czeslaw Milosz. I hurried out to buy his volume. *The Collected Poems 1931-1987*.¹ I devoured it. Unfortunately, I had to read the poems in translation because Milosz writes in Polish. Fortunately, his poems have been translated by a great American poet, Robert Hass. Over and over, I read Milosz' poem called *Lauda - Liauda* (pp. 266-288) and the accompanying commentary and historical background. Milosz is a scholar as well as a poet and provides me with a balanced view. I am entranced by the poetry, intrigued by the history. *Mea culpa*, I confess I am enthralled by his occasional use of Lithuanian place names and terms.

On January 31, 1991,¹ I read an article he wrote for the "San Francisco Examiner", decrying the slaughter of Lithuanian citizens by Soviet tanks on the streets of Vilnius. The world is stirred. How can I help being stirred? I shed tears of commemoration with my friend Gražina and the entire Baltic community in the Cathedral of St. Mary in San Francisco. We sang the national anthems of the three Baltic countries, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. National costumes and amber embellished the Cathedral Plaza. It might well have been the Cathedral of Vilnius. There is so much power and emotion in this communal catharsis. I feel the ether has carried it from the Baltic to the Pacific.

Were I young and still a graduate student, I would probably read all of Milosz' monumental works, and write a doctoral dissertation on some aspect of his life and work. but I am not, so I must sing my own song. When I watched a documentary and interview produced by Public Television produced about him a few years ago, I was intimidated. He seemed so serious and deep. I was frightened by his scholarly brow, scowling bushy eyebrows, the image of a terrifying father figure, reducing me to childhood.

As chance would have it, Milosz, now a venerable yet very youthful 82, opened the Creative Writing Reading Series at St. Mary's college in Moraga, California on September 21, 1993. I told everybody about it, my Lithuanian friends, my Estonian friends, even a bit reluctantly my Anglo friends. They didn't know much about him and I was hurt.

Just before the reading was about to take place, I tried to find his latest volume *Provinces* in the bookstores. I managed to dig up a couple of his older works in the library. I had just finished his classic study of totalitarianism. *Captive Mind*. I was in the middle of his 1968 autobiography, *Native Realm*, when the doorbell rang.

"Dzien dobry." I greeted a charming young Pole named Dariusz, who had come to give me an estimate on some painting I needed done in my house. His eyes lit up when he noticed the odd volumes of Milosz lying in disarray about my living room. Being the eternal teacher, I told him about the coming reading. He didn't need my encouragement. When I told him that the name of my first husband was Wojciehowicz, he said simply. "That's a beautiful name." What music to my ears. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. Again, I felt I was not so alone.

There were about a hundred of us in the Chapel of St. Mary's College for Milosz' reading. Dariusz was there and brought some Polish friends. I came with Maimo, my Estonian friend and my Irish husband. My Lithuanian friend Daina sat in the row behind us. I even forgave the Anglos, when another friend named Rosalie waved at me from across the aisle. It was a privilege to hear Robert Hass introduce the poet and summarize his life.

In close proximity, he was not half so intimidating to me as his image on the cold TV screen. I thought how lucky his students must have been. There was an unexpected sense of humor. He twitched his massive eyebrows for subtle effect and not in a scowl, my mistake. He read from some of his older works like *Lauda*, as well as some new poems. Being four score and an Emeritus Professor hasn't affected his work life.

In about forty minutes, Milosz could only give us a sampling of his gigantic talent. I am tempted to give you a summary of the reading. But that would not do him justice. Suffice it to say, he chose well, and demonstrated the wonderful balance of a man who has come to terms with his life and art. I was reminded of Goethe and universal men. His poems often have an ironic twist and are provocative. He masters self delusion with disarming honesty. He has written powerfully about the Warsaw Ghetto and the horrors of World War II, which he witnessed in the years 1940-1945. He read us only one of these poems and then consciously balanced it with something lighter, most likely to spare *our* sensitivities.

I consider the man a phenomenon, although he might not like that characterization. There are others, in other fields, who are similar phenomena: notably one Vytautas (Vyts) Beliajus — well known in the field of international dance. Vyts also now in his eighties publishes "Viltis", magazine of international dance, almost singlehandedly. These men are sociological phenomena and so am I.

I haven't read all of Milosz' work yet. I have only vague glimmerings of some of his ideas on the period of the Grand Duchy of Poland-Lithuania and how he might think this is a possible model for coexistence of peoples of different nationalities. No doubt that is oversimplification. He compares Lithuania to Scotland, which has preserved its rich heritage and language within the framework of the multicultural British Isles. His ideas intrigue me. Is he just a magnificent poet unskilled in the world of *Realpolitik*? I'm not sure. But I know that we must keep searching for new ways, new models, and new ideas if the world is to become a better place. Ideas must precede action, so we desperately need our best thinkers, philosophers and poets to set the course.

Milosz is such a thinker despite the fact that relatively few people come to poetry readings or read his books. Recently, Milosz went home, returned to Lithuania, after 52 years. Vytauto Didžiojo Universitetas in Kaunas conferred on him an honorary doctor's degree. Reports are that he spoke very eloquently. In a sense, Milosz also went home — to Vilnius, the city of his youth and education; to the village where he was born at the manor house in Szetejnie or Šetainiai, according to your language preference. It is possible that his grandfather, the "lord of the manor" employed my grandfather to work in his fields. Perhaps I will find out some day.

Could it be that I recognize his description of the church where he was christened as my father's church, his grandfather's fields, as my grandfather's fields? I may never know. I am delighted that he mentions the region of *Swietorosc* or *Šventybrastis* or Holy Ford in his writings. It is a bridge between us. He describes with sadness the many changes he witnessed, and how most of what he remembered had vanished. He read us one of his new poems, about his mother, how she taught him his letters, how he felt at the time that he would *never* learn to write.

So even though things change, they always stay the same. Like all of us in our later years, the great poet needs to go home again to his beginnings. The nostalgia for the forests and rivers of his youth is evident. Lithuanian primeval forests are legendary in literature and have helped shape this man. He gives them credit. In many ways, Lithuania is a land of poets, her ancient songs, passed from generation to generation, must be imbedded in the bone like the flies in amber.

When we were leaving the reading, my husband Frank said I should go up to Milosz and speak to him in Lithuanian. When I demurred, and tried to shrink into the woodwork, Frank spoke to him as he passed us and said, "My wife would like to shake your hand." So I did. Fortunately, my Lithuanian did not desert me completely. I said, "*Ačiū labai už. viską.*" "Thank you for everything." Milosz replied, "*Labai malonu.*" "That's very kind of you."

I was touched in more than one way by this great man. Even though he made clear in one of his latest poems, the complexity and sadness of returning to the paths of our youth, as did Thomas Wolfe in *You Can't Go Home Again*, he

didn't flinch and neither can I. Although he doesn't know it, he has helped me along my own path. Going back to the language and culture of my ancestors is a compelling odyssey. I have no choice.