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KAIP LAIŠKAI

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tartum du užlipinti laiškai
tu sapnuoji dabar,
tu toli.
Tu man laiškus rašai.
Your slumbering eyes
are two letters sealed up by the night
Though you wander in dreams
far away,
you continue to write.
Justinas Marcinkevičius
Translated by Lionginas Pažūsis*

The connection was awful. Even though they were 8,000 miles away, I could hear my father's and stepmother's voices clear as day, but they could barely hear me. My voice kept cutting in and out – dragging, they said. We tried to dialogue, but it was stilted, one-way. Frustrated, I reluctantly said 'this isn't working', then goodbye, and dejectedly hung up.

My first experience placing a telephone call inside Lithuania in September 1992, as a Peace Corps volunteer trying to reach home in the United States, was similar to this. But this episode actually occurred just a few weeks ago, in September 2006, trying to call my parents in Saigon from my home in Portland, Oregon. Only this time I wasn't trying to place a prescheduled call in the early 1990s from the local Šilutė post office over an antiquated post-Soviet phone system. I was trying to connect over the internet using supposedly state-of-the art Voice Over Internet protocol through a software application called Skype. The results were the same, however: incompatible, antiquated equipment (my iMac, probably), bad connections, frustration.

As I struggled to find 'the fix:' checking and replacing batteries on the headset, adjusting the volume on my computer's speakers, downloading the latest Skype upgrade and installing it on my computer, it occurred to me that despite some of the revolutionary advances in communications over the last two decades, technology will always have limitations. I realized in the hour I spent trying to fix and place a call through Skype, I could have composed an e-mail, or even written a letter to my folks and posted it. The more I thought of it, the more I recalled that 15 years ago, letter-writing would have been my best, and only option to reach anyone.

Let me explain: during my two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Lithuania, I wrote scores of letters, notes, and postcards, perhaps between one to two hundred. I never counted the total, but thanks to Stacy, whom I met in Lithuania, courted through letters, and later married, and my parents – whom I like to think got the inspiration to live overseas from the correspondence I sent – dozens of pieces I sent to them still exist. I wrote dozens more to Stateside friends, relatives, and Peace Corps companions in the Baltics, but those are lost to the ages.

Up until Peace Corps, I'd rarely written letters in the United States. Greeting cards or postcards perhaps, but few letters. Talking on the telephone was my preferred manner of communication with people I cared about. It was easy, and

convenient. And in the United States, where frequent telephone use and long telephone conversations are normal, people have long had good connections, long distance telecommunications companies aggressively marketing toward and competing for customers, and numerous options for purchasing calling plans to accommodate low per-minute costs for long distance conversations and 'unlimited' local calling. When I went into the Peace Corps in the early 1990s Americans didn't think twice about paying a lot of money to use the phone, or using the phone liberally. Not much has changed since then; in fact, the trend has only accelerated since the widespread commercial availability of cell phones. Most still use the phone daily, far more regularly than they write.

But in Lithuania, the telephone wasn't much of an option for me. I didn't have a telephone in my apartment. Payphones on the street didn't exist in Šilutė. Neither did cell phones. Using a friend or neighbor's telephone meant an expense and inconvenience for them. In addition, I learned from my friends and colleagues, long telephone conversations were unusual, even discouraged. Part of that was due to cost. Poor connections didn't help either, but I also suspected that decades of Soviet occupation and fear of being spied upon limited extended telephone use in the Baltic States. Calls to Western Europe and the United States were extremely rare when the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers entered the Baltics, just a year after Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia declared independence from the former Soviet Union.

If I wanted to place a phone call, it meant pre-ordering a phone call at the Šilutė Post Office. And I could never dial the number myself; I had to give it to a postal employee, who'd place the call only after I furnished the telephone number, the city, and name of my party I wished to connect to. Then I had to wait until the number and city was broadcast over a distorted loudspeaker announcing which kabinetas I had to race into to pick up the receiver. If I took longer than ten seconds to get to the phone, I often lost the call and had to start all over again. It was one of my first direct experiences with the aggravation of Soviet-induced bureaucracy and central control, and I didn't take to it well. Like most Lithuanians, eventually I got used to it, and it made me empathize even more with the day-to-day challenges the Balts – known as 'host country nationals' in official Peace Corps parlance – had been living with for decades under communism.

Cost was another problem. Even in 1992 and 1993, telephone calls to the United States were prohibitively expensive; nearly \$1.50 a minute, and the connection was often bad. Peace Corps salaries were \$150 – about 600 Litai – a month, in 1992 and 1993, exorbitant in comparison to the earnings of my Lithuanian colleagues (and an uncomfortable discussion topic during those economic hard times). But even that income could not sustain luxuries like long distance overseas phone calls. That \$1.50 could pay for a nearly 30-minute call to Druskinkai, where my girlfriend Stacy, also a Peace Corps volunteer, lived. She had a phone in her dormitory, but it was under heavy guard by the *bendrabutis* receptionist, and she couldn't use it at will. So we had to pre-schedule calls, often via letters. While we talked on the phone about once a month by our second year, up to an hour sometimes if we were able to, I don't have any record of those conversations, though I do remember being disconnected a couple of times by either Stacy's dormitory receptionist or a Šilutė postal worker if they'd decided we'd been talking too long. It was an uncomfortable reminder that even after Lithuanian independence, phone calls were still monitored.

In the meantime, I still have all the letters written to my parents and girlfriend, for they saved them. It is a treasure trove I cherish from my Peace Corps experience. I, in turn, saved every single piece of correspondence my wife sent me: dozens of letters, cards, postcards, even telegrams. In August 2006, she and I gave a presentation to a group of about 60 people about our Peace Corps experience; we titled it 'Letters from Lithuania.' We pored over dozens of letters we'd written to one another and our parents over two years and read excerpts from about ten letters each. We covered the weather, the economy, food, politics, Lithuanian occupation and independence, and anecdotes of life overseas, both humorous and not so humorous.

Our letters recounted events we considered cultural touchstones: an early and sobering group visit to the Television Tower in Vilnius, the deadly heat wave during the summer of 1992, Lithuania's first bronze medal in men's basketball at the Barcelona olympics, chronic heating oil shortages nationwide our first winter, Lithuania's presidential election between Brazauskas and Lozoraitis in February 1993, the withdrawal of the last Russian troops later that summer, Pope John Paul's visit in September 1993, the long-awaited reintroduction of Lithuania's national currency, the Litas, the national teachers' strike in protest for low wages. We also recounted day-to-day living: how we learned to arrive at the markets early for the best selection, how amazingly good fresh Lithuanian dairy products and bread tasted, the necessity of dressing in onion-like layers during winter, traveling cross-country by bus, train, even taxi, our admiration of and frustrations with Lithuanians, the impact of the Soviet Union even after the fall of communism, our new home culture, living without American conveniences, television, driving, regular hot water, missing the United States, and how our long-distance relationship grew through writing to one another.

Each vignette was a story within a story, and that 30-minute presentation covered only a fraction of what we wrote, an inkling of what we'd said and wanted to say during that twoyear period. But still they were our voices and thoughts, albeit 15 years removed, and our words, which to us have always been worth saving in letter form. Revisiting those letters and the flood of memories they bring again was like finding buried treasure, opening a time capsule, reconnecting with a long lost friend or relative. As in Kaip Laiškai, they are my slumbering eyes; they symbolize the dreams and visions of my time in Lithuania that are always with me.

In my life I have never communicated more prolifically, more experientially, or more richly than I did through letters during the two year period from 1992-1994 – not as an English major at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth before I

entered Peace Corps, not in graduate school after Peace Corps, and certainly not while working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the past ten years. While I've written hundreds, maybe thousands of e-mail messages, contributed to reports, composed informational briefing papers, and talked for more hours on a teleconference, telephone or cell phone than I'd care to admit, those communiqués don't hold the same richness and meaning as my letters from Peace Corps days.

Why is this so? To borrow Henry David Thoreau's phrase from *Walden*, "I lived deliberately" through letters and my letter writing. I felt alive when I wrote letters, and connected to my reader much more clearly than through any phone line. Writing a letter in Lithuania never felt like a chore or a task, instead it was a fulfilling, cathartic exercise. In fact, I often used letter writing to procrastinate much harder jobs, such as washing clothes by hand, going shopping in the dark and snow, or grading papers and devising lesson plans. Over time, letter writing became ceremonial, an event to anticipate, an act of meditation and creation. I began to regard a well-crafted letter as a piece of art. In Šilutė, and in Lithuania generally, it was hard not to be aware of and appreciate the beauty of Lithuanian calligraphy and handwriting. Some of my students' journals and even 30 the 10th and 11th Form classroom "*Žurnalai*" bore some of the most amazing examples of penmanship I'd ever seen.

I had favorite places to write letters in Lithuania. During our first summer in Vilnius, on balmy evenings after eight hours of practicum and language lessons, I would write on the balcony of my room at the Dobrovolskis' apartment in Karoliniškis. The Television Tower loomed less than 1,000 meters away, a sobering reminder of what Lithuanians had endured for independence. Later, in Šilutė, my kitchen table and the curved bench in my *bendrabutis* became my favorite writing spot; that first winter I learned to time my writing after breakfast, with coffee in hand and the oven door open for warmth.

En route to or from Druskininkai, I would often write at either of two cafes near the Kaunas bus station, depending on whether I wanted food or *konjakas*, and the length of my wait for the next bus. When the weather was warm enough in my town, I would write in the park nearby my apartment on a bench under birch trees overlooking the Sysa river. Since I was alone much of the time, letters were my companions during entire stretches of Saturdays or Sundays. They kept me company and my mind off the cold or boredom awaiting a bus connection between Šilutė and Druskininkai, Vilnius, or anywhere else. Waits were often long – two or three hours wasn't uncommon – and there wasn't much to do at the stations.

Writing filled that void. I never had to pre-order a letter, or ask permission to write one. My letters never complained if I took a break, stared at me if I put them away or scratched out a mistake, scolded me for running out of ink, admonished me for grammatical errors in my Lithuanian, or cost more than a few cents. To finish a letter and post it was always extremely satisfying; to actually receive a letter or postcard from someone else, well, that was a prize. After two years of living in Šilutė I'd visited the post office often enough to be referred to on a first name basis as '*Šonai*,' which I later discovered translated into ...'flanks.' Eventually I got used to that, particularly since I was treated well and never had my mail opened or stolen, which unfortunately happened to other volunteers on occasion. The women working at the post office – they were always women – were kind to me; they were amused at my insistence on using 31 Lithuanian to transact and my fascination with the use of sealing wax and box string to secure packages.

Letters were my lifeline home and to friends in other parts of the Baltics. They were constant companions. My letters recall the Lithuanians I knew, current events at the time, the strengths and weakness of Peace Corps as I saw them, American culture missed (or not), the school I taught at, my students, my English teacher colleagues, teaching 'American' English, being alone, leaving my country, being in love. I wrote about the weather, about how I relished seeing dill in the marketplace – a sure sign of spring – the never-ending joy of seeing storks, the travails of getting food poisoning, or chicken pox both of which I contracted. I wrote about toilet paper, or the lack of it, and how I carried some around in my pocket – always. I wrote about how basketball was a national obsession, and how picking mushrooms, visiting *kaimas* and tending kitchen gardens embodied a connection to the natural world, Lithuania's agrarian roots, and the earth that many Americans were struggling to maintain or had already lost.

I wrote about my amazingly generous and caring host family in Vilnius – Elena and Bronius Dobrovolski and their two sons Felixas and Algirdas, my adopted family in Šilutė, the Paldauskai, about the joy of finding rotisserie chickens or new shopping finds in my town marketplace, holidays and customs, food, and how Lithuanians revered their dead, appreciated art and literature, and could literally sing all night, even if so many of their songs were bittersweet. I wrote about my travels across Lithuania: to Klaipėda, Nida, Palanga, Šiauliai Biržai, Vilnius, Kaunas, Kazlų Rūda, and Druskininkai, and with Stacy and other volunteers to Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Sweden. I wrote until I ran out of paper or ink sometimes. The longest letter I have – to my parents – was 27 pages, longer than most of my college term papers. By year two, I began even sending cassette letters home along with letters, mainly because my left hand got tired and ink-stained before I ran out of ideas, thoughts, and observations to share. The ones my parents and wife saved have become what Ivar Ivask 32 referred to in 'The Letter: A Dying Art?' as my personal diary¹ of that period in my life.

And my letters from Lithuania are as permanent as records can be. Certainly they have more permanence than a phone conversation, an e-mail, or today's text messages. I've come to realize that my letters, like most other handwritten letters, were also crafted with less – or even no – expectation that the recipients would respond. In fact, there's no guarantee with letters that the sender will receive a reply quickly – and by quickly I mean within two to three weeks later – or even at all.

But there's also a paradox to this supposed permanency: handwritten letters, once sent, are gone once you send them; they leave your possession and only return if your reader wants you to have them back. And you just have to trust that the person you wrote to will actually get it. Not to mention trust the postal system – U.S. or otherwise. On a fundamental level, letter-writers have to be optimists.

E-mail, meanwhile, a close cousin and the heir-apparent to the convention of hand-written letters, is designed to minimize risk. E-mail messaging is filled with options and safeguards. Fonts make reading the author's words and letters easier for the reader; spell and grammar checkers fix mistakes by the writer. At the touch of your fingertips on a keyboard, you the writer can save an e-mail even after you send it, just in case you or someone else might lose it, or you don't want to have to rely on someone to keep your messages. With a few keystrokes, you can save an e-mail to a separate file. You can even back up the file onto a memory storage device. If you want to ensure your reader has received the e-mail and actually opened it, you can enable a 'return receipt,' which is sent the moment your reader opens the message. You can let other people know you've sent an e-mail to someone by copying ('cc-ing') them. You can even secretly let people know you've sent a letter to someone by blind copying ('bcc-ing') them.

E-mail comes with its own built-in censors, too: if you send someone an e-mail that is sensitive, personal, or nasty, you can simply apply a 'prevent copying' control to that message. It can't be printed, so it has to be read and then deleted. Furthermore, you can send an e-mail to one person, a dozen people, or a hundred. Or a thousand. Handwritten letters, meanwhile, force their writers to write to one person at a time, and normally only allow only one reader at a time. That person has to use his/her hands to touch the letter, to open the envelope, to feel it. Letters can even be scented. I never used a computer keyboard or even a typewriter in Lithuania to compose a letter. Not once. It sounds archaic now, but it created an entirely different writing experience.

Another paradox of today's information age, an era virtually non-existent 15 years ago in either the mainstream U.S. or Lithuania, is that the dramatic expansion, acceleration and improvements in technology have brought with them greater expectations – demands even – for instant gratification in both generating a message and receiving a corresponding response. 'Instant messaging' is a good example. The ability to connect lightning-quick with another party, or even the simple act of leaving an e-mail or voice mail, implies that the recipient is now on the hook to provide a response back, and a quick one at that. Written letters usually don't come with such demands, unless the writer pleads, 'please write back!' Text messages, emails, phone calls don't even need that assertion; it's already assumed the reader will respond promptly. Not doing so is a serious breach of etiquette.

Communication, particularly that by cell phone or e-mail, also comes with increased pressure to 'manage' (i.e. discard As Soon As Possible) received messages using conventions that seem gauche for written correspondence. The sheer volume of bits and bytes that potentially needs archiving in support of the ever-growing use of these modern tools prompts users to recycle, delete, or erase messages that aren't needed or current. I routinely receive messages at work warning that I've exceeded my e-mail storage capacity; if I don't manage my e-mail accounts I can't send any more messages. The 'oldest' messages are usually the first to go. If I don't continuously re-archive and re-save telephone messages that are significant to me – like early phone messages from my children – they're automatically deleted from my mailbox. I've never been pressured by 34 my mailman to stop writing or receiving letters by mail, and with letters I and any other recipient chooses when we get rid of the letter, if we do that at all. In Lithuania, I saved all my future wife's letters and she mine; they were prizes that could be saved and re-read at our discretion.

When I revisit those letters, I think of how much communication in my culture – and in my own life – has changed in such a short period. I am now one of the 60 million Americans who owns a cell phone², and among the three of four U.S. citizens that has internet access³. In spite of the conveniences – and there are of course many – communication today too often becomes a distraction, something that competes for my time. But while I was a volunteer, communicating through letters was an outlet, a joy, an act of self-awareness, and of giving. I made time for letters, nearly every day, even if I was merely composing topics in my head. Actual letter writing always out-competed doing laundry or shopping, unless I didn't have clean clothes or food. Since I usually couldn't send gifts to others, I sent letters. I think of how I have changed from the days of writing and receiving those letters, how quickly I have reverted back to an American who spends most of his time communicating either on the phone or via e-mail. It's become a matter of convenience again, but something essential's been lost with that convenience. I've realized that the desire to write letters to one person at a time has blurred, then disappeared.

In 1993, the copies of *Newsweek* that Peace Corps mailed all its volunteers in the Baltics began talking of new phenomena: the Word Wide Web, the internet, and something called e-mail. I realize now how advanced, how exotic, and frankly how foreign and far-removed the internet, the web, and e-mail seem compared to my simple lifestyle back then. I walked everywhere in Šilutė; I didn't own or drive a car for two years. I communicated in basic to moderate Lithuanian most of the time outside my classes, lived without fast food and truly learned to shop and cook for myself, developed an English curriculum out of Soviet-era and late 1970s New York University English as a Second Language textbooks. The most high-tech gadgetry in my apartment was a Sony cassette player with an am/fm radio and a Russian-made 13" color television. While the reports out of *Newsweek* about these revolutionary changes in how people were talking to one another were fascinating to read about, I couldn't visualize my life with such devices.

Now I can hardly imagine life without them, although what used to seem exotic is now routine. You can find or get virtually anything on the internet, including viruses. E-mail is ubiquitous, and comes with conditions: its small monotypic print, propensity to make writers type staccato paragraphs make readers by nature demand shorter, more direct messages. Entire words or phrases are abbreviated into acronyms; I myself am routinely guilty of writing 'BTW' in substitution for 'by the way.' Writers can now insert 'emoticons,' small animated cartoon characters that depict emotions into messages instead of using words to describe how they feel. Painting a picture in an e-mail doesn't even require words anymore; it's easier and faster to attach or embed a picture into a message.

And for some reason, maybe because we users are using less descriptors in our language and e-mail more as a 'tool' for information exchange than interpersonal communication, email text does not convey nuance well at all, and is easily and at times disastrously misread or misinterpreted. Its capability to reach myriad inboxes simultaneously, while extremely useful sometimes, has also spawned spam, or junk e-mail, and subsequently any number of programs to allegedly control spam or protect computers and their users from identity theft. E-mailers are constantly exposed to annoyances such as chain letters and solicitations, and warned of any number of hazards such as phishing scams, hoaxes, Trojan horses, worms, and viruses. And irony of ironies, at least to someone who lived for a time in the former Soviet Union: political events in the United States have now made it conceivable that cell phone conversations and e-mail correspondence between U.S. citizens and foreigners could leave that person potentially subject to ... surveillance and monitoring.

Ultimately, hand-written letters, as antiquated as they sometimes seem, are much more forgiving and much less fraught with peril or headache, even if they do take longer to write, certainly to post, and end up taking up physical space in someone's life. But the more I look at a computer screen or buttons on a phone throughout the day, the more I long for the feel of a letter in my hands. Looking at words on a paper actually hurts my eyes less than staring at small print on a screen, or holding a phone receiver to my head. I realize I miss letters, something that's reinforced whenever I go to the mailbox and find bills, magazines, flyers, business offers, the rare card, but hardly ever letters anymore.

Nearly fifteen years removed from my Peace Corps days and that period of prolific, autobiographical letter-writing in Lithuania, I wonder if it would have been the same were I there now, or at least in the last days of Peace Corps' presence in the Baltics in the early 2000s. Would I have a similar written record of my time spent there? Handwriting letters to people was born out of necessity: over time it became a vital, cathartic, and stimulating release. Did later volunteers in Lithuania have access to better phone lines, to cell phones, to e-mail? Did they begin blogging, writing online journals?

Certainly they must have access to some of those tools; in 1993 and 1994 I could see Lithuania returning to Europe's embrace as rapidly as possible – too rapidly for some – and Lithuanians' energy and vitality after liberation from Soviet oppression manifesting in numerous ways. That meant free and open elections, more goods available in stores, more choices, and of course more commercialism and consumerism too. Even though cell phones, internet service, and e-mail were virtually unknown and not commercially available then, I suspect it didn't take long for those 'cyber markets' to spring up and thrive.

Recent research – internet based, of course – confirms this. According to an online source, IndexMundi, the Lithuanian phone system is still "inadequate but is being modernized to provide an improved international capability and better residential access."⁴ Yet Wikipedia also points out that, as of 2001, 32 Internet Service Providers provided internet service to Lithuania, with an estimated 700,000 internet users in 2004.⁵ Lithuania is in the middle of a digital revolution now that didn't exist while I lived there, but truthfully, that same age was also in its infancy when I returned home to the United States in 1994. Coincidentally or not, my return home in 1994 marked the end of my letter-writing era.

Two years ago, after being out of contact for nearly a decade, I was overjoyed to receive a letter one day from my former Šilutė First Secondary School colleague, Danute Paldauskienė. She was responding to several Christmas letters I had written that had gone unanswered; as I later found out because she and her husband, Bronius, had moved to a new flat. The new owner had received my letters but did not know where to forward them. But she did not throw them away. She kept them, which speaks volumes about her character and the staying power of letters. Danutė visited her old apartment one day and received them: correspondence over a period of three years. She wrote me immediately, updating me on her family matters, my former school, life in Lithuania, reminiscing about the day we said goodbye to each other at the Šilutė bus station in June 1994, thirteen years ago. I still remember that day, and was moved that she did also. It is now my turn to write back, not because I am obligated to, but because I want to. I could ask if she has access to an e-mail address, but I don't want to. Because I miss the feel of a pen in my hand, and I want the challenge of seeking a creative space that isn't in front of my computer screen. Because writing a letter will remind me of that special period in my life 15 years ago, when living seemed much less complicated, and when the simple act of sending or receiving a letter was so meaningful. Because I may wander in dreams far away, but I miss Lithuania, and a letter to Danutė is part of my connection to it all.

<p>KAIP LAIŠKAI</p> <p>Dvi miegančios akys tartum du užlipinti laiškai tu sapnuoji dabar</p>	<p>Your slumbering eyes are two letters sealed up by the night Though you wander in dreams far away,</p>
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tu toli.
Tu man laiškus rašai.
Aš bijau pajudėti
Aš bijau tavo mintį nutraukti
Man reikia budėti
Man reikia budėti ir laukti.

Laukti tavo laiškų –
Laukti tavo laiškų.

Viskas bus kaip kiekvieną rytą:
atsimerkus įteiksi tu
man du laiškus.
Juose parašyta:
“Nebijok!”
Ir tenai, iš kur aš grįžtu
Mes buvom kartu.

Dvi miegančios akys
tartum du užlipinti laišškai
tu sapnuoji dabar,
tu toli.
Tu man laiškus rašai.

1963

*From: Justinas Marcinkevičius,
Tokia yra meilė [Love is Like This,
Selected Poems], Vilnius: Vaga, 1983.*

you continue to write.

I had better not stir
lest I give you a fright
Lest your letters I blur
I must wait all the night.

For the letters I prize –
For the gleam of your eyes.

You will wake with a smile in the morning
and open once more
your two letters to me.
I shall read them with yearning:
Fear not!
In the dreams that I see
"You are always with me."

Your slumbering eyes
are two letters sealed up by the night
Though you wander in dreams
far away,
you continue to write.

*Translated by Lionginas Pažūsis
Edited by Peter Tempest*

1. Ivar Ivask, "The Letter: A Dying Art?" *World Literature Today* 64 (Spring 1990): 213, 214; excerpted from "Letter Writing – A Dying Art?" Originally prepared for the Web April 3, 1996: www.beloit.edu/~amerdem.
2. Federal Communications Commission: Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau; http://www.fcc.gov/kidszone/history_cellphone.html; last reviewed/updated September 20, 2004; accessed September 29, 2006.
3. IndexMundi: Lithuania Telephone System, with references from the CIA World Fact Book; http://indexmundi.com/lithuania/telephone_system.html; last reviewed/updated January 1, 2006; accessed October 5, 2006.
4. IndexMundi: Lithuania Telephone System, with references from the CIA World Fact Book; http://indexmundi.com/lithuania/telephone_system.html; last reviewed/updated January 1, 2006; accessed October 5, 2006.
5. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopaedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communications_in_Lithuania; last review/update May 20, 2006; accessed October 5, 2006.