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FAMILY SYSTEMS IN LITHUANIA

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"I know I once had three uncles. My father has told me about them: Uncle Vytautas, Uncle Jonas, and Uncle Antanas. When the Soviets took our country from the Germans in 1944, Uncle Vytautas ran to the forest because he didn't want to be conscripted into the Red Army. He became a partisan, a Forest Brother, and was shot by the Soviets, although no one knows where or when. Uncle Jonas was put on a train for Siberia because his brother was a partisan. He died of the cold somewhere on the trip to Siberia. Uncle Antanas fled west following the German retreat in 1944. I think he is living in Canada, but we have never heard from him. And my father somehow managed to stay here in Vilnius. He got a job in the Ministry of Transport, he married my mother. My brother and I were born in the 1950s. That is the story of my family and of so many Lithuanian families."

The young woman's voice trailed off into silence as she looked around the small crowded classroom where I sat with a group of Lithuanian mental health professionals. Heads nodded in agreement and others began tentatively speaking:

"My aunt was deported (to Siberia) with her mother when the Soviets first took over our country in 1940. My Aunt Daina was only thirteen at the time. Even today she can't speak of it, she can't reconstruct the horror. Her father was in prison. She and her mother and other friends from their neighborhood were packed into the same freight car. For two months they traveled east. There was so little food. Some of them froze, their skin sticking to the metal sides of the box car. They had to tear them off... "

Others spoke of their grandparents, their parents, their uncles, aunts and cousins taken from home in the night, with no warning, carried away in trucks. These psychologists and psychiatrists had begun to hear the stories of Siberia in recent months, the cold, the darkness, the skimpy, patched and re-patched rag clothing, the lack of food, the guards, the work quotas, and above all the cold. When they arrived in Siberia, there was no shelter. They built huts from sticks and mud. In the winter the snow was so deep that they roped the huts together so that they wouldn't get lost in the darkness and snow, as they felt their way from hut to hut. And they buried thousands of their dead, digging into the iron-hard frozen earth. Sometimes it took a whole day to dig thirty centimeters. They marked the graves with rough wooden crosses when they could find wood in the bleak tundra.

I had arrived in Vilnius early that morning. May 20, 1989, as part of a small group of American family therapists invited to teach a weekend of family therapy workshops at the University of Vilnius in the medieval capital city of Lithuania. This small nation, just north of Poland and west of Belorussia on the Baltic Sea, had been a powerful empire in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, stretching south at that time as far as the Black Sea. But since then it had been under the dominance of either Poland, Germany or Russia, except for a brief period of independence between the First and Second World Wars.

In 1940, through a secret 1939 agreement between Hitler and Stalin, all three Baltic republics were forcibly taken over by the Soviets, only to be invaded by the Germans when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in 1941. For the next three years the Baltic countries were occupied by the Germans, and Vilnius had an SS-run concentration camp just outside town at Paneriai where 70,000 Jews and 30,000 Lithuanians were exterminated. Then in 1944 the Germans, on the verge of defeat, retreated to the west, the Soviets returned and re-occupied the Baltic states. From 1944 until after Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviets systematically deported large numbers of Baltic peoples to Siberia and began to repopulate these countries with Russian workers.

We had arrived in Vilnius by overnight train from Moscow, our train taking us west past flat fertile fields, old stone farm houses, and tall stands of birch. The Lithuanians on the train seemed smaller and blonder than the Russians we had grown used to in Moscow, and they spoke Russian with a kind of sing-song lilt. As our train rattled along through the dusk, we heard an announcement on a public radio news broadcast that the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet had just passed a resolution asserting Lithuania's sovereignty.

That Saturday morning was therefore the beginning of a memorable day for Lithuanians. And we soon discovered that Sajudis, the Lithuanian reform movement, had organized a rally to be held in a local park that very afternoon. In a recent election, Sajudis — in existence less than a year — had won 36 out of 42 Lithuanian seats for the Congress of People's Deputies meeting to be held in Moscow the following week. The purpose of Saturday's rally was to give a big send off to all of Lithuania's delegates to the Congress. On our first morning in Vilnius we were face to face with the "Nationalities question" which ranks along with economic perestroika as one of the most serious problems facing the Soviet Union today.

In this heady atmosphere, we were warmly greeted at the railroad station by Dr. Gintaras Chomentauskas, from the Psychology Department of Vilnius University. He took us by bus through the old town to the Lietuva Hotel overlooking the Neris river. An hour later we were bused to the Vilnius Polyclinic where we were to present workshops and seminars to a group of about 75 Lithuanian psychologists and other mental health professionals, over the next two days. The first order of business in meeting this group in the large auditorium of the Polyclinic was to establish a mid-day "lunch break," so that all the participants could attend the Sajudis rally in the park.

After "break time" had been established, we introduced ourselves and found out what they were interested in. They wanted to learn about family therapy with alcoholics, drug addicts, adolescent delinquents, and pregnant teenagers, as well as learning about family violence and treatment of orphans. Each request apparently spoke to a major Lithuanian societal problem. They also described themselves as falling into two groups in terms of experience: quite a few Lithuanian psychologists had developed their own practice skills in recent years and wished to discuss specific treatment issues; others were completely new to clinical practice.

I elected to spend the next two days with the inexperienced group. Presenting ideas about a shift from individual to systems thinking seemed to me more interesting than technique-oriented discussions about particular patient populations.

My "beginners" group consisted of about twenty participants: four medical doctors, four psychology students, and eleven or twelve graduate psychologists who were working in diagnostic but non-clinical roles. One worked with the blind, one with orphans, one was a career advisor, and several worked in schools. As would have been the case with a similar American group, at least two thirds of the participants were women.

As part of a shift to systems thinking, I began by encouraging participants to focus on themselves and their roles in their families of origin, so that they would start to develop some ideas about emotional relationship systems from their most immediate personal experiences. We spent time working on family diagrams, looking at relationship patterns and family events over several generations. Many of them described growing up in families in which the father was a distant outsider and the mother "ruled the roost." They described parental conflict expressed through coldness and emotional distance. One woman had grown up with her widowed grandmother and widowed mother. She said she would have difficulty working empathically with men in a family.

After we had spent some time looking at family patterns as relationship systems, I asked the group if there were significant societal events which had had an influence on family relationship patterns. They were silent for a moment, looking around at each other. Then an older man, Edvardas, spoke up: "Surely the deportations to Siberia have influenced every Lithuanian family." He began to describe his own family's experience slowly and then in increasingly vivid and painful detail, while the others in the group gradually joined in.

First in 1941 and then between 1944 and 1953, the Soviet had sent more than 300,000 Lithuanians (one-tenth of the total population of the country) to Siberia. The first people deported were those who had resisted the forced accession of Lithuania into the U.S.S.R. in 1940 or were believed, because of their roles in independent inter-war Lithuanian, to be opposed to it. After 1944, those who had fought in or were suspected of participating in an underground armed resistance against the Soviets for eight years (1944-1952) were the prime targets. But then any family which had hidden or protected the resistance fighters (or was suspected of doing so) had also been deported, as well as any who apparently did not sympathize with the Soviet take-over. Men, women, and children were sent on long trips in unheated boxcars, into conditions of incredible hardship and misery, where no food or shelter awaited them. Tens of thousands had perished on the way.

Before the beginnings of glasnost, Lithuanians had rarely spoken of their deportation experiences even in the privacy of their homes. In the past year, people had begun to speak of the deportations, but many of those in my workshop had never discussed them openly before. With glasnost had the opportunity to address the suffering of the past. The recounting had the quality of a tragic lamentation, full of bitterness and sadness and of stories just recently passed to the younger generation, never to be forgotten.

I could hardly bear to hear their stories because the pain was so palpable. Where could a family therapy training session go from here? During the break for the Sajudis demonstration I encouraged them to think about the impact of the deportations on their own generation.

Throughout the remaining two days of the workshop the deportations dominated the discussion. The impact of the deportations on the younger generation has been unmitigated, as they live out the hopes, dreams and expectations of the blighted older generation. These young psychologists and psychiatrists experienced great pressure to achieve not only their own goals, but also the goals of their parents and grandparents. How these pressures may play themselves out in the younger generation's families remains to be seen, but these themes will certainly underlie many of the presenting problems of their future clients.

One can speculate that in the face of such severe family and societal trauma, some will do better than others. But over the long run, all individuals and families must be profoundly affected by the disruption of nurturance, attachment, and the stable values which would otherwise have been communicated across the generations. When fear, self-protection, and physical survival become the overriding concerns of human social groups, chronic anxiety will be so pervasive that physical, emotional, and anti-social symptoms must inevitably occur at high frequencies. Beginning to understand the connections between their own anxiety and the deportations was a first step for the young mental health professionals I met with. But a two-day workshop was hardly sufficient time to deal with the complexities of these connections and their implications for clinical practice.

After I returned to Washington I could not put aside my interest and concern for the present-day generation of young Lithuanians. I continued to talk with Lithuanians living in or visiting the United States about the deportations, exploring how such a powerfully traumatic and universal experience might have disrupted the functioning of a whole sequence of generations.

Darius Suziedelis, a young Lithuanian American who spent a college semester at the University of Vilnius in 1988, described three dramatically different Lithuanian generations, now coming together in Sajudis, the present day Lithuanian reform movement, but defining themselves in terms of the deportations. The grandparents (those over 60) who remember the brief 1918-1940 period of national independence before the Hitler-Stalin Pact, survived many years of suffering in Siberia, but have come home determined to re-establish the old values and processes of the independence period. The parents (ages 40 to 60) are often called the "lost generation," according to Darius. These people, if they avoided deportation, "sought a normal life" of survival and cooperation with the Soviets. They kept their heads low and were quiet. "Now many of them feel they must repent for being so quiet," Darius told me. They bring stability but also an energy fuelled by survivors' guilt to the reform movement. The younger generation, whom Darius got to know as his classmates at the University and as activists in the many radical political groups which have proliferated in Vilnius over the past year, have "no memories and nothing to lose." They know the names of the old dissidents as "great leaders," they are beginning to hear the stories of the deportations, they have no investment in careers or in the stagnant Soviet economy, and they feel pressure from the older generations to "make today count."

I also talked with Viktoras Nakas at the Lithuanian Information Center in downtown Washington. Viktoras was kinder in describing those of the middle or "parent" generation who had escaped deportation: "They are like people who lived through a plane crash," he said. "Maybe half the people will die and half will live. They don't feel guilty for having survived. They feel lucky. Perhaps they just weren't at home the day the trucks came to their neighborhood." According to Viktoras, the people of the younger generation demand to know their own history, the secrets of the recent past, and they blame their ignorance on their parents. They may also perceive their parents as having compromised their values in order to survive. There is clearly a powerful need to explain why some lived and some didn't.

I met with Saulius Galadauskas in a small kitchen in Adelphi, Maryland, where we talked through an interpreter. Saulius is a thirty-year-old artist who devotes most of his times these days to the Lithuanian Catholic Youth Organization ("My painting has suffered from my political work!"). He was in the United States for three months this year (1989) as a guest of the Lithuanian American community. Bearded, informally dressed, and youthful in appearance, Saulius responded to my questions deliberately and thoughtfully. His father, now 55 years old, has been a life-long Communist Party activist who avoided deportation and worked with the Soviet - system throughout his career. Saulius' mother, an artist, was unable to come to terms with her husband's ideological beliefs and they were divorced ten years ago.

Saulius said he wasn't sure how the exprerience of deportation would affect succeeding generations in Lithuania. Many parents had to sign documents when they returned from Siberia swearing that they would never speak of their experiences there. Their children never knew what the parents had lived through, although sadness and toughness were enduring family traits. Resignation, acceptance of those aspects of life which could not be changed had enabled them to survive terrible deprivation in Siberia and now colored their approach to life back home. Life was certainly better in Lithuania than it had been in Siberia.

The people of Saulius' generation who had been born in Siberia in the late '50s and had come back to Lithuania with their parents were different from the other children in school. They had qualities which set them apart, according to Saulius. He described them as having a special kind of moral strength which came from being survivors. Or perhaps they and their parents survived because they had that moral strength. "They were our very best people," Saulius said.

But Saulius resisted what he perceived as a simplistic notion that all Lithuanian suffering is linked to the deportations. The deportations were only a part of a whole complex of societal disruptions over a fifty year period. Everyone was affected in some way whether or not they were sent to Siberia. All Lithuanians lived through the suffering, the poverty, the hunger of the armed resistance (1944-1952), knew of the struggles of the Forest Brothers (partisans), witnessed the murders of these guerrilla fighters as they were rounded up, shot, and their bodies piled up in the central squares of small towns.

In Saulius' stern perception, Lithuania has become a demoralized society since those times, a country of people "whose will was broken." Crime is rampant in the younger generation, as men and women steal and lie in order to live better. According to Saulius, under socialism the prevailing attitude is, "no matter how hard you work, you still can't support a family so why work?" (A joke going the rounds defines socialism as a system in which "I pretend to work and you pretend to pay me.") A corollary of this attitude is that "stealing from the government is okay because the government is the enemy." According to Saulius, it is hard to know who is a friend, who is a foe, and whom you can trust. Selective dishonesty has become a norm which he believes is morally undermining to the whole society.

Many Lithuanians see the strength of the Sajudis reform movement as "a miracle from God and a triumph of the human spirit," Saulius told me. After all the suffering they have lived through over the past fifty years, Sajudis gives them "a channel, a direction" both for their anger and for their creative energy in building a new society. They are less bitter and less helpless today because of Sajudis.

Another Lithuanian, Antanas Dundzila, showed me a collection of stark, black and white photographs sent to him from a group of Lithuanians who had recently traveled to Tit Ary, a tiny village on the Lena river in northeastern Siberia. The photographs show Lithuanians digging up the graves of their countrymen who had perished there as deportees and preparing the remains to return to Lithuania where they would be re-buried with their families.

Even in the face of tremendous adversity the force of family is powerful. Like the children of Holocaust survivors, living Lithuanians carry with them varying degrees of their parents' unremitting bitterness, depression, and guilt. They also carry varying degrees of toughness, creative energy, and determination to survive. Many of those who were physically or emotionally weak were weeded out by hardship. Those who survived have given their children a driving sense of obligation both to the past and to the future.

As I found in my family therapy workshop in Vilnius in May 1989, family systems theory may be helpful in teaching concepts of multigenerational process to Lithuanian clinicians. Family therapy as it evolves in Lithuania will have to address the functioning of families in historical context. No individually based theory can possibly encompass human experience as Lithuanians have lived it in the past three generations nor can it account for a deteriorating societal process which has come to the brink of chaos at the very instant in which it has given birth to hope. Without responsible leadership, Sajudis could become a channel for national hysteria as its members join together in their common hatred of the Soviet system. With good leadership, the reform movement has the potential for binding both the anxiety and the creative energy in present day Lithuanian society into a system which will provide a newly healing environment for its citizens.