

FROM MY NOTEBOOK: TEN YEARS AFTER *The Lithuanian Pen Club: March 24, 1999*

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The first international organization to formally recognize and accept Lithuania, (on May 11, 1989, in Maastricht, Holland) was, to the surprise of everybody, the London-based International Pen Club, - an international organization of Poets, Essayists and Novelists PEN. The recognition happened in a very dramatic and sudden way, under the guidance of Algirdas Landsbergis in New York, myself from Boston, and a daring group of Vilnius writers, who started to organize themselves outside of the Society of Writers Association. And so, a new organization, free at last, was launched by Romualdas Lankauskas, undoubtedly the leader and the first president of the Lithuanian center, and maybe Petras Dirgėla (according to him, many taboos have been broken)*.

When I arrived in Maastricht, with my daughter Maya, my friends - this is the best part of this Club - from Austria, from Venezuela, from Puerto Rico, from Colombia, etc. asked me if the newcomer from Lithuania was to be trusted. I had to assure them that indeed he was our man, we could trust him, even though, as far as they were concerned, he was acting strangely. Of course, as I told them, he was from another planet. But the best anecdote from the Congress was the Soviet attempt to become a member, with 15 republics, before Lithuania. The Soviets forgot the basic rule, i.e., to read the rules. PEN membership is based on national, linguistic grounds. No one could say what the Soviet language was, and on the first ballot they lost. That is how Lithuania came first!

Maastricht proved that there were political, national and personal interests involved. First, Lithuania had to stop the Soviet Union from becoming a member of the International Pen with five sections (one of them probably would have been Lithuanian.) That was unacceptable. Second, this was the first opportunity to have Lithuania recognized by an international body as an independent entity from the Soviets. That was symbolically very important. As proof the 1991 Congress held in Vienna invited as a special guest Vytautas Landsbergis, chairman of the Council. And third, Lithuanian writers, that for so many years, (fifty to be exact) had been in a very vast prison had the first opportunity to travel abroad, as actually they did (actually, that same year, they traveled to the Pen Congress in Canada and read their works in the United States). And that was a precious gift of freedom, even though it proved to be an expensive one.

None of those things are relevant today. They are history. Lithuania is free, the writers are free to write and to publish and travel - if they have the means. Arthur Miller -I will quote, relying on my memory - as president of the International PEN, some 25 years ago, was visiting Moscow and, at the airport was asked by the Soviet press, what the difference was between being a writer in the United States and the Soviet Union?" Arthur Miller answered with his usual sense of humor: "None, in reality, you don't have the ideological freedom to publish, and we, in the USA, do not have the economic freedom." Lithuania today is living the second part of that statement. We can publish practically anything, if there is a sponsor and the reader can afford it. But we have to remind them, that the rising costs of books and newspapers is as dangerous for the freedom of the press as a totalitarian system.

The PEN Club is hardly national news today, but what happened with PEN reflects the general malaise of the newly independent countries, going through all kinds of convulsions trying to convince themselves and everybody else that things are different and yet the same. The forty years of Moses wandering through the Sinai Desert are still valid. What a metaphor for the emerging countries! None of the *homo sovieticus* will be allowed to join the Paradise of the new Free World. They will have to pay the penalty for being -willingly or not - part of a totalitarian system, and there is nothing anybody can do to save them from the dust of the desert.

Ten years ago, not really that long ago, but what a different world it was! The impossible became possible and again impossible, like a game 'of life. The adjustment to the new life, the new man, or the illusion of the new man - because you cannot build a new man until the old is dead -was painful. And so, both old and new try to survive, to live together, to misunderstand each other, to mistrust each other and there is no translator to translate the same language, but with different meanings! What theatre! Maybe that is why Lithuanian people adore the theatre, the tragic sense of life in the theatre. It is not for the entertainment; no, it is for the dramatic life, the suffering on the stage and in the orchestra, and everybody is afraid to be afraid, and it is so beautiful and so strange, and so unreal!

A little bit of history.** It took seventy-five years to get there. The Lithuanian PEN club is celebrating its tenth anniversary. It was established on February 23, 1989 and accepted into International PEN on May 11 the same year. Those are dates worth remembering, but the history is a bit more complicated than that. It was tentatively established in 1925, but it did not take off for reasons that would take long to explain. The fact is that no member (known members were Vydūnas - honorary, Matas Šalčius and Vincas Mykolaitis Putinas) traveled abroad or attended International Congresses; and, in 1931, the center was closed. No reasons given. Two international facts have to be taken into account. First, in 1933, PEN condemned growing Nazism in Germany, Hitler closed the club in his territory. Second, the Soviet Union always looked suspiciously at the freedom fight of PEN, but also condemned it because of its reactionary nature. If only for that reason, the PEN, which was condemned by two totalitarian regimes, deserves our attention as a worthy organization. In 1939, when Estonia and Latvia joined International PEN, Stepas Zobarskas made an attempt to join also. And finally, in 1951, Ignas Šeinius and Jurgis Savickis made the last attempt, but it was too late, Lithuanian had no country. Later, in spite of all the efforts by my friend Algirdas Landsbergis (no relation with Vytautas) to include the Lithuanian question in the Congress agenda, the time was not ripe, and we had to wait - it looked hopeless. However, one door was left open to join the PEN in exile, a new center in Europe and the United States for those who has lost their country and/or freedom. Lithuanian writers joined the Center for Writers-in-Exile - American Branch under the presidency of Aleksis Rannit. The first Lithuanian member was Algirdas Landsbergis (1960); he was followed by Leonardas Andriekus, OFM, Stepas Zobarskas and, in 1968, Stasys Goštautas; later Tomas Venclova (1976) and Jonas Zdanys. In 1989, in order to help the Lithuanian center and for reasons of solidarity, many writers in the United States and Canada joined the newly created Lithuanian PEN-American Branch.***

During those long years of exile, the Centre for Writers-in-Exile was the key to PEN's most important task, participation in the "Writers in Prison Committee", which angered the Soviets, so they tried to stop its work. From that Committee came the now famous faxes and cables to world leaders asking for humanity toward prisoners of conscience, in the Lithuanian case, Gajauskas, Iešmantas, Terleckas, Petkus, Tamkevičius, Bogušis, etc. I distinctly remember when, in July of 1979, we met in Rio de Janeiro under the presidency of my friend Mario Vargas Llosa, and sent to Moscow and Perm dozens of telegrams signed by the most prominent writers of the world, Joseph Brodsky, Arthur Miller, Tom Wolf, Rene Tabernier, Francis King, etc. Or in Caracas, October, 1983, Tomas Venclova and I met the president of Venezuela and many writers from that friendly nation and again sent dozens of telegrams. All the press gave us generous coverage. Now we know that they never saw our faxes or telegrams. However, they knew that something strange was happening because the guards were more gentle than usual. It's true that PEN became politicized - too much involved with that committee - and got reprimands from some of its members, and East Germany and Bulgaria filibustered all its proceedings, but what other organization would have taken this responsibility? Of course, writers should get together and discuss literature, not politics, but at that point in history, the political destiny of its members - and all writers are members- was more important than literature itself.

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The most beautiful thing for an exile, for an émigré is the old Greek example given by Odysseus homecoming, *id est*, the end of Exile. I couldn't help but to remember Borges' poem about him: ("Odyssey, Book Twenty-Three")

*Who in his exile wandered night and day
Over the world like a wild dog, and would say
His name was No One, No One, anyhow?*

(Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Poems*, tr. Robert Fitzgerald, 1979) "No One," that is the name of the exiled. After the small and big tragedies of modern times, such as the First and Second World Wars, collectivization of Russia and Eastern Europe and the Gulags, the Holocaust of Jews and Poles, Russians and Ukrainians, Latvians and Lithuanians, and so many No Ones, the Vietnam War, Afghanistan, the cleansing still going on in the Balkans and Central Africa - I probably forgot a few - there is sadness that the homecoming of the exiles, dead or alive, can cause. The last ten years was not only the beginning of the painful reconstruction of Lithuania and all the countries of Eastern Europe, but the welcoming of its writers home. And the best way to accomplish that, is what all the publishers have been doing, publishing the works of its exiled writers: Baltos Lankos, Vaga, Lithuanian Association of Writers, Tito Alba, Mintis, etc.; exhibiting its best artists and housing their collections in the museums; similar honor was paid to their music, theater, film documents, and so on. Suddenly, the ocean that divided us, was gone, and the best of the nation came back after fifty years of exile. Now, ten years later, there is no such thing as two Lithuanian literatures, but one, written in Lithuanian. All this was done in the spirit of PEN's charter of freedom.

In the same spirit of freedom, many writers and artists who felt exiled in their own country, suddenly realized that banishment, sentencing for antistate activities, revolutionary activity and mock trials and prisons and executions was over. They also came back from exile in their own land. That probably was the best price of the new spirit of freedom. Suddenly, they did not have to speak Aesopian language, no more riddles and metaphors for the happy few, no more words spoken in silence. "Open Society" is not only a foundation that helped so much the first ten years of Lithuanian *rinascimento*, is a real thing. We have been witnessing the birth of a nation for the second time. And those ugly years, decades of the greatest suffering, of delusions, of the realization that we have been cut off from society by exile internal and external, by the walls, iron curtains, and the worst of all feelings: that we no longer were useful to our human friends, that we were condemned, like Ovid, to eternal exile for our dreams, for our ideas. The nightmare is over, the exiles abroad can come back and feel useful rebuilding a nation and the exiles within, the aliens in their own country, the dissidents, the silent majority from the Gulags and from the villages of Lithuania are smiling again, because freedom is creative. Four hundred years ago, Cervantes, in his *Don Quijote*, II, 58, said: "Liberty, Sancho, is one of the most precious gifts Heaven has bestowed upon man. No treasures the earth contains or the sea conceals can be compared to it. For liberty, as for honor, one can rightfully risk one's life; and, on the other hand, captivity is the worst evil that can befall men. "

However, the ocean might be gone, but the mistrust of fifty years of separation, the envy of those who left and those who could not help but stay, and the evils that oppression can bring are still too fresh to be forgotten and too painful to be forgiven. "It is very difficult to prepare yourself for despair," said somewhere my friend from Lithuanian Pen Kazys Almenas. The right to criticize has to be followed by the right to be criticized, said Vytautas Kavolis, a friend of PEN. We need a translator to translate us in our own land and in our own language. That may take another forty years, like Moses in Exodus. Others, with contempt, are saying that it is all right that the waters divided us. I don't know, I only dare to expect that time, the omnipotent, will sort things out and everyone will find his own place within his own talents in this everyday smaller Internet planet.



President of the International PEN Club Mario Vargas-Llosa and Stasys Goštautas at the 1979 Congress in Rio de Janeiro.

* The other original members were Vydas Astas, Galina Baužytė (the present President of Pen), 'Alfonsas Bukontas, Vladas Dautartas, Ričardas Gavelis, Sigitas Geda, Juozas Glinskis, Eugenijus Ignatavičius, Jonas Juškaitis, Aleksandras Krasnovas, Marcelijus Martinaitis, Jonas Mikelinskas, Ema Mikulėnaitė, Leonas Petravičius, Kornelijus Platelis (second president of Lithuanian Pen, and, now minister of Education), Vytautas Rubavičius (the only member that the new PEN tried to expel, and did not succeed), Regina Rudaitytė (for several years the Secretary of the center), Saulius Šaltenis (former minister of culture), Judita Vaičiūnaitė, Albertas Zalatorius and the late Leonidas Jacinevičius. Some members, because of financial difficulties in the present Lithuanian economic situation, resigned or retired.

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*** Kazys Bradūnas, Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Violeta Kelertienė, Ilona Maziliauskienė, Aurelija Balašaitienė, Anatolijus Kairys, Alina Staknienė, Kazys Almenas, Aušra Jurašienė, and two honorary members, Grigorijus Kanovičius and Icchokas Meras, and the late Henrikas Nagys.