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OBSERVATIONS IN LITHUANIA IN 1992

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We are a retired professional couple who were invited to teach English as a foreign language at a Pedagogical Institute in Šiauliai, Lithuania. Funding for travel was provided by the Soros foundation in New York City. Subsistence was provided by the Institute. Professor's salaries received were equivalent to U.S. \$25.00 per month, which was adequate for food and some of our needs.

Although we both speak Lithuanian which helped us as we met people at the grass roots level, it took about six months to win their confidence, respect, trust and support. As a result we learned a great deal about their culture, way of life, economic life and education system which we wish to share with you.

Upon our arrival in Lithuania in February 1992 we found the monetary system was still tied to the Russian ruble and was already experiencing inflation. Teachers' salaries were less than 3,000 rubles per month and the rate of exchange already climbed to 120 rubles per dollar. Every month prices increased and by September the government increased teachers' salaries to 3,500 rubles. By this time the rate of exchange was 325 rubles per dollar. The government found it necessary to separate from the Russian ruble and issued temporary coupons called talonas.

It was during the fall of 1992 that Russia escalated the price of oil and gas up to world levels and payment was now demanded in hard currency. This created a terrible hardship in Lithuania because many people were unable to pay for the increased energy costs. The government which controls heating and hot water in the cities and towns reduced heating in buildings, schools and apartments to about 45 to 50 degrees F or less and provided no hot water. This caused serious health problems among the people, especially the children.

We may understand this better if we could view the impact of high energy costs on our society. If the price of oil and gasoline went to \$15.00 or \$20.00 per gallon and if our monthly bills for electricity and for gas went up to \$500 per month for the average family, we would be devastated.

The Lithuanian people are well educated and enjoy a high rate of literacy. They have electricity in every home. Most have television sets and telephones and many have automobiles. Weekend traffic jams were once common during the summer around the Baltic sea resort areas. They were well traveled throughout the former Soviet empire and the Soviet-dominated countries. They were and still are self-sufficient in food and clothing. Lithuania is not a third-world country and yet it is not a first-world country as the United States. It is probably a first-world country struggling with a depressed economy that is in transition from a centrally planned to a market economy.

We were surprised and puzzled by the deep hostility felt by many Lithuanians toward the American government. In contrast, we found them to be friendly, hospitable and respectful of American people. By visiting and probing their libraries and schools we discovered the reason for their hostility. English grammar books for the middle and secondary schools were filled with anti-American propaganda. Under Soviet domination the media continued this campaign of propaganda. History books were written with so many untruths that many people were unaware of the decisive role played by America during the Second World War.

There are basically three social groups in Lithuania, namely the prewar, post-war, and the youth just emerging from the perestroika period in 1985 and the more free period in 1988.

The prewar group, many of whom had been exiled but had once tasted freedom are now old, retired and mostly out of power. They were the ones who fought hard to preserve their language, religion and culture.

The second and more numerous is the post-war group, some of whom also spent some time in exile. They were born and educated during the Soviet occupation and for almost 50 years had accommodated themselves to the Soviet style of living. Among them are the present government leaders, professionals, academicians, businessmen, farmers, and workers. They were selected and appointed to positions in government, industry, business and educational institutions by communists in Russia and in Lithuania. They received their jobs because they were willing to either collaborate or give lip service to the communist part. There were no alternatives for educated and talented persons, so very few are untainted by communism. Nevertheless, they are the only persons experienced in governing a country and functioning in business and education.

They are now free but many do not know how to take advantage of freedom. This is the group that earlier had voted for independence but late last year, voted for a communist majority in their legislature. It seems that there are many yearning for the good old days under Mother Russia's wings when fuel and energy was cheap and plentiful. Now many in positions of power and influence are threatened by economic reform and are anxious to protect their privileges and jobs.

It will be difficult to change the mindset of this group unless they have an opportunity to learn about democracy and the market economy in the west. This can be helped by visitor programs to the United States for political leaders, business men, educators and farmers.

Finally there are the youth with whom we made close contact. They are being exposed to new ideas from the west especially from the media, modern music and visitors to their country. Their minds are still open to change and they want to know the truth about America. They are eager to know about America, to visit and study in America and to learn the English language, American history and culture. Unfortunately obsolete methods for teaching English have been in use for 50 years. They can read and write somewhat in English but they are deficient in speaking and listening with understanding. This can be remedied with new text books of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and instruction in modern methods of teaching language.

Before Gorbachev came into power in the Soviet Union, alcoholism was rampant throughout the empire. People were encouraged to drink. Factories and workplaces had wine breaks instead of coffee breaks for workers. Instead of coffee at breakfast, many people would have wine or vodka. It was not unusual to see drunkards sprawled on the sidewalks of the main street during the day.

With the coming of Gorbachev to power, a reform movement was initiated that led to much of his unpopularity among the people. He had many vineyards in Moldavia cut down, limiting the production of alcoholic beverages and also placed restrictions on the consumption of alcohol in the workplace. Alcoholism has lessened but it is still noticeably prevalent in Lithuania.

What might be done about these problems? A high cost Marshall Plan is probably not needed for most of the countries of the former Soviet Empire, because their cities, towns, factories and transportation systems are not in ruins as they were after World War II. As a shift is made from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, much of their equipment and facilities still need to be updated. Economic aid is essential and democracy and market economy should be encouraged.

The greatest problem now in Lithuania is the energy crisis. It is affecting the prewar group severely. They are old and retired living on small fixed incomes, but it is important that we don't write them off. They know the meaning of freedom and they are influencing and guiding their grandchildren to turn to America and to seek the truth.

Economic aid and energy assistance will help the post-war group to lead more normal lives. However, before we can expect them to change their attitudes they will need to taste freedom by some well-organized visits to the United States. They need to visit our federal and state governments, universities and schools, businesses and factories and most important, to meet with American families. They need to be introduced to a free society.

Energy assistance will also help the youth struggling for an education to lead more normal lives, but they have great needs too. The elementary, middle and secondary schools are still using English grammars published in Moscow. No replacements are yet available. They use 50-year-old obsolete methods of teaching English and they contain many lies and half-truths demeaning America.

We were able to provide a few one-week seminars in modern English language teaching methods to small groups of teachers of English with excellent results. The USIS in Lithuania was most helpful in providing booklets of American history and culture which tell the truth about our country both good and bad. We felt an amazing reversal of attitude among the teachers after the seminar.

A few teams of teacher trainers traveling to cities and towns giving one-week seminars supported by the USIS with books and booklets could cover all of Lithuania in one year. Let's do it. Many of the conditions which we observed in Lithuania probably exist in other Baltic and East European countries.