

Portrayal of Kaunas, Lithuania's Provisional Capital, in the Danish Press in 1921 to 1925

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Introduction

When covering and discussing the potential for developing relations between Denmark and Lithuania during 1921–1925, the Danish press inevitably turned their focus to Kaunas, which had become the provisional capital of the Lithuanian state. This article aims to reveal the impressions of Lithuania and its provisional capital conveyed to the Danes in the early 1920s, based on a systematic analysis of the Danish periodical press in the period 1919–1925.

The First Authentic Impressions of Kaunas in 1921–1922

In the summer of 1921, a newspaper in Aalborg, North Jutland, published an article introducing the three new Baltic capitals. It begins with a description of Kaunas. Located about an hour's train ride from the German border, Kaunas, the new capital of Lithuania, is described as having “no Western European or capital features, being nothing but a medium-sized Russian provin-

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cial city." The city has no public meeting places, so soldiers and officials wander one by one in the garden of the city theatre, while foreigners gather in a small patisserie.¹

In June 1921, Erik Biering was appointed Denmark's first consul in Lithuania, and from the very beginning he showed great energy for Danish business interests in Lithuania. His opinion of Kaunas was similar to the common press opinion at the time: it "gives the impression of a small, poor, and dilapidated Russian provincial city."² Consul Biering was able to justify his opinion because he had spent a great deal of time in Tsarist Russia.

The same newspaper correspondence from June 1922 described a Dane's trip to Kaunas from Germany. During his two-hour train ride from Virbalis to Kaunas, he saw only one relatively large herd of cows in the fields. Thus, while Lithuanian agriculture is said to be short of machinery, it also seems to be short of cattle.³ Kaunas was said to be "full of all sorts and ranks of the army, marching to and fro on foot, on horseback, or driving cars." A cavalry unit is marching by the Sobor, accompanied by a band. The soldiers howl at the top of their lungs to the music, which becomes automatic and monotonous. The abundance of soldiers can allegedly be explained by Lithuania's strained relations with Poland. The stores are small, and their signboards are in Russian, Lithuanian, or Hebrew languages incomprehensible to Western Europeans. Only a few words, such as "restaurant" or "buffet," can be understood from public signboards. The meaning of "transatlantic steamship company" is also clear, as Kaunas is the center of expatriate headhunting. Hotels have almost no staff who can communicate in any Western European language.⁴

According to another Dane who visited Kaunas in August 1922, "When you arrive from windswept Denmark, you are

¹ Tre nye hovedstaeder, *Aalborg Amtstidende*, 1921-08-14.

² Mažeika, *Danijos santykiai*, 67.

³ Jensen J. Kowno, *Aalborg Amtstidende*, 1922-06-25.

⁴ Ibid.

amazed at how little the winds blows here.”⁵ He also wrote that the city has a specific unpleasant smell, like wet clothes or the like, which you can not smell only when you climb the hills around the city, especially in Žaliakalnis. In Denmark, a similar smell is said to be present in so-called “Polish” housing, which is unpleasant to Western Europeans.⁶ Almost all stores in the city have heavy shutters on their windows and doors secured with large iron latches and bolts, suggesting that robberies and disturbances are commonplace. While sitting in a restaurant, a 20-man military band fills the air with thumping music, which evokes nostalgic thoughts of Denmark, where military bands are much smaller. In general, the large number of soldiers visible in the city is hard to ignore, although maintaining them must be expensive for the poor country. At the same time, however, it is a sign that there is still no quiet in Russia’s neighborhood.⁷

From 1921 to 1922, the Danish press highlighted Lithuania’s growing interest in developing economic relations, such as importing dairy and beef cattle, especially the Danish Red breed, which allegedly was highly valued by all those versed in it. In early 1921, Vladas Putvinskis, the leader of the Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union and landlord, told *Berlingske Tidende* journalist Stefan Holbek that he and other local landowners planned to start importing cattle of this breed from Denmark as soon as the conflict with Poland was over and the land reform set a clear maximum size for landholdings.⁸

In 1922, the Danish press was also clearly full of news of Danish businesses establishing themselves in Lithuania. There were reports of a Danish furniture factory in Kaunas founded by Arnor Nielsen and two companions, whose products were for the time being destined for the local market and partly for

⁵ Paa Studierejse i Lithauen, *Naestved Tidende*, 1922-09-11.

⁶ I Lithauen, *Naestved Tidende*, 1922-08-25.

⁷ Paa Studierejse i Lithauen, *Naestved Tidende*, 1922-09-11.

⁸ Holbek S. Danmark og de baltiske Fremtidsmuligheder, *Berlingske Tidende*, 1921-02-16.

France, but which hoped to expand in the future to the Russian market when the situation there was back to normal.⁹ In 1923, the Danish press regularly published information about the possibilities of expanding relations with Lithuania. In the spring, the Danish press reported that a Lithuanian delegation was negotiating with the Danish company DFDS to open a regular shipping line between Klaipėda and Copenhagen. It was reported that the Lithuanians would use this line to export eggs to England via Copenhagen.¹⁰ In the fall, the Danish press reported that Danish dairy producer organizations had received a request from Lithuania to recommend about twenty dairy specialists who could come to Lithuania to help establish Danish-style dairies.¹¹

Development of Lithuanian-Danish Relations and Impressions of Kaunas from 1923 to 1925

The Lithuanian state, which was re-established in the early twentieth century, similarly to the other Baltic states,¹² linked its economic future primarily to the prospect of developing its agriculture in the Danish style. Talks about the Danish farming model were common during the early years of independence. There was even a plan for the “Denmarkization” of Lithuania as an option for economic modernization drawn up by Minister of Agriculture Jonas Aleksa.¹³

In the early 1920s, the development of economic relations between Lithuania and Denmark was supported and encouraged by the introduction of a model Danish farming model in Lithuania, by renting out state-owned estates to young Danish farmers with an agronomic education. In 1923, agreements were

⁹ Dansk Initiativ i Lithauen, *Berlingske Tidende*, 1922-12-16.

¹⁰ En ny Damper-Rute mellem København og Memel, *Jylandsposten*, 1923-04-19.

¹¹ Danske Mejerister til Lithauen, *Aarhus Amtstidende*, 1923-10-28.

¹² Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 104.

¹³ Norkus et al., “Denmarkisation.”

signed to lease four state-owned estates in Marijampolė, Vilka-
viškis, and Alytus counties to Danish farmers.¹⁴

Denmark's participation in the Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition in Kaunas in the fall of 1923, where cows of the Danish Red breed were brought to it, was considered a success. Several dozen cattle of the Danish Red breed were brought from Naestved to Kaunas for the exhibition, after the Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture had undertaken in advance to buy them for a guaranteed price. The demand for this breed of dairy cattle was expected to grow in Lithuania. In addition, more horses were expected to be sold to the Lithuanian army. The ten horses already bought for the army before the exhibition had already been well appreciated in Lithuania. True, while Latvia had expressed a wish to buy about 500 horses, Lithuania had only about 50, but Denmark still considered this a worthwhile order.¹⁵

According to a Danish official, it was important to take advantage of the fact that the Lithuanians considered Denmark a model for developing bilateral economic relations.¹⁶ Laurits Hansen, hired by the Lithuanian government in the summer of 1923 to organize the export of agricultural products (eggs, butter, pork), spoke similarly about Lithuania's attitude towards Denmark. Press reports on his planned settlement in Lithuania noted that the final decision on whether he would work in Klaipėda or Kaunas had not yet been made. The conditions in Klaipėda would allegedly be relatively good because it is an old German city, whereas "in Kaunas, as far as we can judge from the information available to us, they are nearly appalling."¹⁷

¹⁴ Mažeika, *Danijos santykiai*, 133–136.

¹⁵ S. H. Danmarks Kvaegeksport til Baltikum og Sovjetrusland, *Berlingske Tidende*, 1923-08-30.

¹⁶ S. H. Det lithauiske Markeds Betydning for Danmark, *Berlingske Tidende*, 1923-10-17.

¹⁷ En Frederikssunder som Organisator af Litauens Eksport, *Isefjordsposten*, 1923-08-07.

According to the Danish Consul General in Kaunas, in addition to the four state-owned estates mentioned above, Danish farmers also rented four private estates in 1925, and a few dozen more were farm managers or the like.¹⁸ However, just one year after Danish tenant farmers began operating the estates, their joyful expectations began to fade, and the rental results became disappointing. Between 1926 and 1927, the Danish tenants on three of the four public estates had to give up their leases due to various setbacks. The only successful example of Danish farming culture was the Aniškis estate in Alytus County, which was taken over by a stubborn, persistent, and resourceful Danish farmer C. H. Dons in 1925.¹⁹

A seven-part series of essays, "Letters about Lithuania," chronicles the establishment of Danish land tenants in Lithuania, recounting the experiences and impressions from eight months spent in Lithuania. It was published in 1924 in a newspaper on the island of Zealand, in the city of Naestved (south-west of Copenhagen). The first article in the series notes that when you get off the train at Kaunas railway station, it does not look any bigger than that of a provincial town in Denmark, and at the station there is a cluster of calashes ("droški") with harnessed-up horses, whose harnesses are quite shabby, with characteristic Russian bows. Small wooden houses in the city alternate with brick houses that are two or three stories high, rarely four. The street pavement in Kaunas is far from first-class, although there are a few tolerable streets. Laisvės Avenue, Kaunas's main street, has a concentration of the city's best stores, but they do not surpass those in Danish provincial towns. Kaunas has almost no monumental buildings; perhaps only the "Russian-style cathedral" (meaning the Sobor) catches the eye. The churches in Kaunas are generally always open. People spend Mass kneeling on the stone floors because there are very few seats. If one drops by just for a while, it is customary to leave one's belongings

¹⁸ Chancerne i Litauen, *Holbæk Amts Venstreblad*, 1925-07-27.

¹⁹ Flatau, "Lietuva I," 19.

outside the church. There is a large sanctuary on Vytautas Avenue, which serves as the eternal resting place for many of the victims of the war.²⁰

Jews are said to make up a substantial part of Kaunas's population, with business and trade concentrated in their hands. This is why the stores in Kaunas are closed from Friday afternoon to Saturday afternoon. Huge locks hang on the store doors, which are locked with iron latches. On Saturday afternoons, Jews can be met walking the streets, the richer ones dressed in the latest fashions, and the ladies smelling strongly with perfume, their lips painted with lipstick, and their faces powdered.

The life of ordinary Kaunas city dwellers in general is said to be best known by visiting the market. The market's square is surrounded by small merchant houses, four or six on each of the four sides, with permanent or temporary stalls, and a public toilet in the middle of the square, the inside of which discourages any description of it. Carts with agricultural produce also stand in the market, and all sorts of things are sold in the merchant booths or at the stalls, including dried snakes. Snake meat is considered an indispensable remedy for some livestock diseases and is fed to animals after being well-crushed. Several streets adjacent to the market are free for parking, and it is the only place where you can park without worry. If you stop anywhere else on the street for an extended period, even to go shopping, a policeman may ask you to move on.²¹

Every Thursday, Kaunas holds a livestock market, selling horses, cattle and pigs. The horses are smaller to those in Denmark and are treated roughly; sometimes, they are even beaten over the head if they do not obey. Many of the horses at the market are one-eyed. It is said that one eye has been poked out to prevent the horse from being taken for military use.

²⁰ Nielsen P. Breve om Litauen. I, *Naestved Tidende*, 1924-08-27.

²¹ Nielsen P. Breve om Litauen. II, *Naestved Tidende*, 1924-08-28.

Some of the cattle for sale are Dutch breeds, but most are local. Beef cattle dominate the market, with only a few dairy cattle for sale. The cows are not milked on the day of the sale because the goal is to display their udders as large as possible to demonstrate their potential milk yield. Pigs weighing between 200 and 300 kilograms are sold at the market, but mostly lean young piglets of up to 20 kilograms, which many Kaunas citizens buy and raise. The Danes are completely unaware of how pigs or piglets are transported to the market. They are unaware that pigs are transported to the market in a cart with their feet tied together on a poor straw mat. If the unfortunate ones are not bought immediately, they may be tied up for most of the day. Such treatment of pigs would be considered abnormal in Denmark.²² Women selling milk in the Kaunas market are on their feet all day long, but they don't necessarily sell the milk they bring in, which is often only about 5–8 liters. This is partly because some Kaunas locals who have the space keep cows themselves. According to the author, agriculture in Lithuania is generally low-level, and the farming tools are often primitive. Though some farmers have modern plowing or harrowing tools, the soil is mostly acidic due to unimplemented land reclamation, so better tools are not very helpful. Livestock are not fed good enough fodder and are kept in dirty conditions. Milk yields are low, and butter production is carried out under primitive, home-based conditions. The butter's appearance is unattractive and unsuitable for the Danish palate. It will be a long time before there is a demand in Lithuania for the kind of butter known as "premium butter" in Denmark, which has a distinct aroma.²³

Lithuanian is the official language of the country, but it is mostly spoken in villages, while in the cities, several languages are spoken. Russian is understood by many, and is the most

²² Nielsen P. Breve om Litauen. III, *Naestved Tidende*, 1924-09-11.

²³ Nielsen P. Breve om Litauen. V, *Naestved Tidende*, 1924-09-17.

commonly heard language on the streets of Kaunas compared to other languages. You can sometimes hear Polish or German spoken, and you can get by with these languages in Kaunas.²⁴

Discussion on Engineer Frandsen's Initiatives to Modernize Kaunas in the Danish Press in 1923

In March 1923, M. Frandsen was hired to draw up a development plan for the city of Kaunas through the mediation of the Danish consulate (by telegraphing Copenhagen). The Danish press widely reported on the significant commission received by the Danish engineer, which showed confidence in Danish engineering achievements and competence.²⁵

After preparing the Kaunas city development plan, Frandsen told the Danish press that Kaunas was severely underdeveloped in several respects. He noted that the city had no sewerage system and that even the most beautiful streets had gullies one meter deep. The only means of transportation were horse-drawn tram and horse-drawn wagons. Since the city is now the capital of the country, its population has almost doubled, so the housing conditions are terrible and are getting worse and worse as more people arrive. Kaunas is doing much to expand the city, but rather haphazardly, without a plan. The engineer said he had drawn up a master plan in six weeks. According to it, "the center of the new part of the city is a large space with formal buildings, and from there, avenues stretch towards the old part of the city, the planned block of private villas, and a beautiful park."²⁶ Kaunas needs parks and other green spaces to provide residents with a reprieve from the ever-faster pace of city life and growing anxiety. Due to the lack of a piped water supply, the sanitation conditions in the Old Town of Kaunas are deplor-

²⁴ Nielsen P. Breve om Litauen. VI, *Naestved Tidende*, 1924-09-18.

²⁵ Et dansk Fremstød i Randstaterne, *Nationaltidende*, 1923-03-14.

²⁶ Dansk Byplan for Litauens Hovedstad, *Nationaltidende*, 1923-05-08.

able, especially in the butcher shops. Some streets in the Old Town should be repaired and widened to address transportation needs, but this cannot be done immediately. However, the city's development plan should impose certain requirements for all current redevelopments, such as setting back facades from the street. The historical circumstances of the city must also be taken into account, especially since the Lithuanians are great patriots who are proud of their history and the once-great state that stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. The historical memory of Kaunas should also be commemorated in the city. One way to achieve this would be to build a circular square, approximately 200 meters in diameter, at the confluence of the Nemunas and Neris rivers. A staircase would be built from the elevated square to the western side of the sandy plateau and to the eastern side of the descending terrain leading down towards the seminary for priests. The square would be reinforced with a stone wall and twenty supports. Sculptural monuments would be erected on the pillars. In the eastern part, they shall honor the people from the past who created the Lithuanian state and built the Old Town of Kaunas. In the western part, they shall honor those who, despite the persecution during the past few decades, have promoted the development of the Lithuanian nation and language. In the middle of the square, there would be a sculpture of Vytis, the symbol of Lithuania, facing Klaipėda. It should face Klaipėda because Lithuania's two largest rivers, the Nemunas and the Neris, flow towards the sea in that direction. They converge at the confluence of the rivers near Kaunas, and through Klaipėda, Lithuania is naturally connected to the whole world.²⁷

Frandsen's initiatives were publicly supported in the press by another Dane, the entrepreneur Carl Høyer from Odense. When presenting the city of Kaunas plan to the city authorities in May 1923, Høyer stated that Frandsen's plan was intended for a city with around 300,000 inhabitants – twice the current pop-

²⁷ Frandsen, *Betragtninger*, 1, 6–7.

ulation. According to Høyer, the most interesting part of the plan was the most picturesque part of the city: Žaliakalnis, where other government buildings were to be concentrated around the planned presidential and parliamentary palaces. He said that the implementation of the city's development plan had already begun by sending a large number of soldiers to build one of the larger avenues, 700 meters long and 40 meters wide. The opening of the new avenue, and thus of the new part of the city, had been scheduled for Tuesday, but heavy rain prevented the opening and it was postponed until Sunday. On that day, the president was to cut a silk ribbon across the avenue to inaugurate the work of engineer Frandsen.²⁸ The Danish press soon reported that the Danish engineer had not only drawn up a development plan for Kaunas, but, "one could say, was rebuilding the city."²⁹

Carl Høyer, the aforementioned entrepreneur from Odense on the island of Funen, once again wrote extensively about his personal impressions of Kaunas in the summer of 1923. According to him, Kaunas could not be called a beautiful city; the general impression of the city could be described in terms of greyness and disorder. Dirt and stench are typical features of the city. The city has no water supply, and not all homeowners have their own wells. The cityscape evokes thoughts of what Copenhagen looked like over a hundred years ago – the most modern to be found in the city are the police and the fire station. The police uniforms resemble those of the London police, and the fire station's equipment is similar to that in major European cities. Overall, however, the city has suddenly become the capital of the country, and there is a severe lack of local government institutions, which are now scattered throughout the city. The Lithuanians cannot be blamed for that; they are doing what they can to make their capital a better place. Right now the wooden sidewalks are being replaced with tiled ones to the best example of big cities. The most pressing task for the immediate future is

²⁸ Høyer C. Dansk Ingeniør i Litauen, *Nationaltidende*, 1923-05-08.

²⁹ Ny Sejr for dansk Teknik og Initiativ, *Dagbladet*, 1923-05-17.

water supply and sewerage. Most importantly, there is a desire and determination to significantly renew the city, with the city plan prepared by engineer M. Frandsen dedicated to its development in place.³⁰

The implementation of Frandsen's plan required considerable resources. Frandsen said to the Danish press that he had drawn up plans not only for the development of the city of Kaunas but also for its sewerage and water supply systems and a financing plan for all of the city's redevelopment works. He reproached Danish banks for their lack of interest in lending to Danish businesses abroad.³¹ The banks' public response was quite simple. They pointed out that Danish banks support businesses at home because none of them are strong enough yet to provide credit for ambitious business projects abroad. As for Lithuania specifically, the big risk is that the country is not politically secure, given its disagreements with Poland and possible claims by Russia.³² Lithuania's relations with Poland were clearly not looking calm. In an interview for a Danish newspaper, a clerk who had served two years in the Danish consulate claimed that Lithuania's foreign policy was determined by its relations with Poland and that, after the occupation of the Vilnius Region, "the word 'Pole' was used in Kaunas in no other way than as a swear word."³³

The Danish Foreign Ministry officials generally accepted Frandsen's view that there were many opportunities for Danish businesses in Kaunas in relation to the city's future development. After returning from an agricultural exhibition in Kaunas in the fall of 1923, the head of the Danish MFA's information bureau for business said in a press interview that Kaunas "is working in all fields to make the city modern."³⁴ However, solving the

³⁰ Høyer C. Baltiske Breve. De Danske i Kovno, *Nationaltidende*, 1923-07-02.

³¹ Hvor der er Plads for dansk Initiativ og Kapital, *København*, 1923-08-27.

³² Mulighederne i Lithauen. Spørsmaalet om Bankernes Stilling og Kreditgivningen, *København*, 1923-09-08.

³³ En ung Ringsteder som Konsulatembedsmand i Litauen, *Ringsted Folketidende*, 1923-08-23.

³⁴ Forholdene og Mulighederne i Lithauen, *København*, 1923-09-17.

issue of credit was failing. At the end of 1923, the Danish press still reported that engineer Frandsen had a good chance of being commissioned to build a sewerage system in Kaunas.³⁵ In the absence of credit, this probability did not materialize, and the Danes did not take advantage of the business development opportunities in Kaunas discussed in the press in 1923. Only a little later was one somewhat larger Danish contribution to Kaunas realized: the construction of the Vilijampolė and Aleksotas bridges in 1927–1930. In this case, the Danish government had already guaranteed the credit.³⁶ However, the credit for the bridges was obviously not of a size that would have enabled the realization of at least a major part of Frandsen's vision for the modernization of Kaunas.

During the interwar period, only a small part of Frandsen's Kaunas development plan came to fruition. In the trapezoidal area between Vydūnas Avenue, Radvilėnų Road, and Kipras Petrauskas Street, which was divided into blocks, fairly large, regular plots of land were planned and soon developed with houses.³⁷

Instead of Conclusions

The Danish press of the 1920s featured the most impressions of the provisional capital Kaunas in publications from 1923–1924. Danish visitors to Kaunas in the early 1920s did not have very positive impressions. Their assessment was that Kaunas gave the impression of being reminiscent of Copenhagen from over a century ago. However, they highly appreciated the efforts of the national and city authorities and their optimistic enthusiasm for the city's comprehensive change, transformation, and modernization. The Danish engineer M. Frandsen's plan for the devel-

³⁵ Danske Chancer i Lithauen, *Korsør Avis*, 1923-11-26.

³⁶ Mažeika, *Danijos santykiai*, 174–176.

³⁷ Balkus, *Kauno istorijos metraštis*, 209.

opment of Kaunas, drawn up in the spring of 1923, contributed to the efforts to modernize the city. The discussion in the Danish press reveals that Frandsen's initiatives were not supported by Danish banks and the government, primarily due to the political risks associated with Lithuanian-Polish relations and the potential for Russian revanchism.

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