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"Rummages in the National Soul"

Dear Peter,

A couple of years ago, while on a fellowship in West Germany, I became well known for a certain -- well, some people kindly termed it "predictability". The fellowship program, designed to acquaint young Americans with the political and professional realities of German life, had built into it several seminars. Whether our 15 member group was meeting with a left-wing writer or with a dry EEC bureaucrat, I could always be counted on asking the same question -- "And what do you think of the tortured German soul?"

After hearing this some three dozen or so times, the eyes of my fellow Americans tended to glaze over at such moments. But those to whom I addressed the question never refused to answer -- dry EEC bureaucrats included. Answers of course varied; a few respondents were annoyed, suspecting that here was yet another foreigner who wanted to go on about German guilt. Most were earnestly sincere; none were flippant. Questions about identity are high on the agenda in Germany; I saw many a nighttime talk show with intellectuals devoted to the topic. (Can you imagine Johnny Carson, or worse, David Letterman, talking about the tortured American self-image?) There are scores of books and articles about what it means to be a German, and why, sometime in the first half of this century, did it all go wrong...

The question is, of course, just a dressed up way of saying "Who are you ?" I have always been interested to hear how people describe themselves. We all know about the delusions that we nurture about ourselves. But it is also true that sometimes noone else but the subject him/herself can put into words, much less recognize, some very deep truths.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Well, now it is two years later. Instead of Germany, I am in Lithuania. I am still asking the same basic question, with the wording changed a bit to adapt to local conditions. But now there is a certain edge to it for me, for in asking a Lithuanian, "Do you think there is a Lithuanian national character and if so, what is it?" I am not just asking "Who are you?" but indirectly, and sometimes not all that well disguised, "Who am I?" I tend to have more than just a dispassionate interest in the answers I get.

The one I remember most clearly came from a young woman I met soon after I arrived here in February, 1990. She was a psychologist; we met at a new radio station where she was the local Agony Aunt, dispensing two-minute therapy in a half-hour show to distressed callers. Did she think that there are such things as national psychological characters?, I asked her. Oh yes, she answered. Then what is the Lithuanian one? I asked. She was reticent to answer, but finally, out it came. It went something like this. "Lithuanians," she said, "have the belief that they were once a great and powerful people. Then, through no fault of their own, they were subject to traumas from which they have not yet recovered. They experienced one disaster after another -- always imposed by an outside force -- which brought them to the very edge of extinction. Today, they are no longer great and powerful, and they feel robbed of what should have been their birthright."

I have found that answer very useful in the year and a half since I first heard it. It helps explain why Lithuanians so treasure those distant days in the Middle Ages, when under the pagan Grand Duke Vytautas, lands under Lithuanian control stretched as far south as the Black Sea and as far east as the outskirts of Moscow. (It also helps explain why every other male in Lithuania, including the current president of Parliament, is named Vytautas.)

But those were the good old days. The historical development of the past two centuries, this time of dictators with grandiose dreams and very little humanity, shows that the Lithuanians got the short end of the stick. They were, in other words, victims. That too, is a deeply ingrained part of the national identity today. (Although it is I, and not the Agony Aunt, who makes this particular claim).

Time and again, I have heard "chip-on-the-shoulder" notes in the voices of aggrieved, angry people here. It hasn't always been pleasant to hear. Coming from another society -- one that is more likely to suspect rather than make a cult of victimization -- I am sometimes painfully aware of the limitations that a victim psychology, no matter how justified, carries with it. Still, this way of seeing oneself in relation to one's surroundings does have a few things going for it.

All along it was easier, for example, for Lithuanians -- and Latvians, and Estonians -- than for Russians to name the totalitarian disease that all were infected with, and when the time came, to begin taking measures to eradicate it. After all, it hadn't been a home-grown virus, but an imported one. Unburdened by a tacit assumption of shared guilt for creating and imposing such a repressive society -- though not for keeping it going once set in place -- the Balts could more easily reject it. For a brief time, they became the ice-breakers leading the way for other anti-empire (though not always pro-democracy) forces in the Soviet Union do the same. And I don't think that it is all that surprizing that it was the Lithuanians who turned out to be the most radical and most categorical of the three Baltic nations in this endeavor. That sense of once having been a great nation, of having an injured honor to defend, was a powerful call from the distant past to reverse the tragedies and humiliations of more recent times.

Psychologically freer to begin furthering not only their own interests but spurring those in Russia proper to do the same thing, the Balts are unencumbered by things that weigh the Russian psyche down (or ought to). There was no need to go rummaging around in one's soul and say, "Where did we all go wrong?" or "What does my oppression say about me?" In a geopolitical sense, the Balts are not forced, as the Russians are (or ought to be) to acknowledge at least some public responsibility for the suffering experienced by this part of the world for most of this century.

But the things that give us our strength are also very often the very things that show up our weaknesses as well. Part of the definition of being a victim is that one is not required -- as the Germans were, for example -- to reexamine one's national identity in order to see it for what it is, not for what you think that it is. One is not forced to accept responsibility for anything. There is no reason to be perplexed about "What went wrong here?" What went wrong is clear -- some other guy came along and beat you up.

Today Russians are facing a similar dilemma to the Germans, with their national pride under severe attack from groups like the Balts, never mind all those other supposedly grateful peoples that they liberated at the end of World War II. They are kicking and screaming all the way to the altar of responsibility, resisting the notion that they could be anything but victims themselves. It is, when you think about it, a daunting thing to ask of them, demanding this about-face in self-identity. Consider that daily for the past 50 years, Russian society was spoon-fed the myth about how all their heartbreaking heavy sufferings -- and with over 20 million dead, they were heavy -- during World War II were all that nasty Adolf Hitler's fault. There is (or at least was) little mention of how Hitler was the one person Stalin trusted. (The latter allowed himself to be taken by surprise when the surprise Nazi attack on Russia did come). There is even less mention of how Stalin chopped off the heads of his most able generals in the late 1930's, thereby greatly weakening the fighting strength of Soviet Army.

Even Russian dissidents, when meeting with their Eastern European counterparts, are still not entirely free from this mind-set. They often express the opinion that no matter how bad Communist dictatorship was for Eastern Europe, it was always worse for the Soviet Union. Well, granted. But that is neither here nor there. This isn't a contest in measuring who suffered more from the same ogre. (Although many a lofty discussion often degenerates into just this.) It is a question of figuring out why things happened the way they did, and then, with a maximum of conscientiousness and hopefully a minimum of demagoguery, assigning responsibility. The fact that your father beat you even more than he beat me doesn't make it less of a crime that he even dared to touch me at all. That point is often lost -- or misunderstood -- in the contest of who is the greater victim (everybody has their list of crimes committed against them) and who is the unlucky one who should be forced to say "I'm sorry."

But I digress. I started to say that the things that make us strong are often the very things that make us weak. That victim thing is what I am talking about. I firmly believe that if a person -- or a group or a nation -- has been victimized, their road to recovery begins with naming their trauma. Attention must be paid to the damage that has been done. People need the catharsis that comes from reliving their grief and sorrows, even if this borders on wallowing. If you deny very real sufferings -- or if you are forced to deny them -- you are still being victimized. But this particular path is also fraught with dangers. Once you are convinced that you belong to a tribe of bona fide, no-doubt-about-it victims, you can become pretty damn smug. Your problems are all someone else's doing. Your shortcomings are a result of their misdeeds. You are apt to confuse justice with revenge. You are never being able to recognize that there but for the grace of God, you might have been the victimizer. (And sometimes, though they avoid thinking about as much as they can, some Balts were victimizers too. But that is another story.)

Why am I talking about all of this right now? Well, it is that time of year again, the season in Lithuania for the lauding of nationhood. This past February 16th marked the 73rd anniversary of Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1918, and this past March 11 the first anniversary of the act reinstating it. It has been a time when the symbols of Lithuanian statehood have been on center stage, and a time for me to muse about how their presence, and their meaning, in this society has changed in just a few short years.

Consider, the flag, the hymn, the national insignia. Three short years ago they were illegal. Public display could earn the displayee a mighty uncomfortable audience with the local security forces at the very least or an even more uncomfortable jail term. (One of my more distant acquaintances, a concierge in charge of a large apartment house, described to me the extra vigilance that she was ordered to maintain when February 16th rolled around in years gone by. Officially, of course, it was a normal working day. Her job was to be on the lookout for any sign of secret celebration, any sight of the national flag in somebody's window, or even any discreet display flag's yellow, green and red colors. She then had to report transgressions to the authorities.)

I was here in 1989 when February 16th was commemorated openly for the first time in half a century. It was a grand celebration, full of poignant moments and unrestrained joy. People poured into the streets and filled Gediminas Square in downtown Vilnius that night; there was a party atmosphere. I remember going to a cemetery in Kaunas, where wreaths were placed on the graves of Lithuanian volunteers who had died during that first fight for independence in 1918. The previous year, secret police stood in the shadows at the same cemetery and wrote down the license plate numbers of the cars of those few brave souls who dared to do the same thing. Now that is a sure sign of refined victimization. If even honoring the remains of those from another era is forbidden, what does that say about the hopes that the dead symbolized, or the events within living memory that the entire society later witnessed which dashed them -- such as the mass deportations to Siberia in the 1940's and the guerilla war against the Soviet Army for eight years following World War II? How deep did victimization go if you dared not acknowledge these things to either yourself or your children? I have a friend, a young man in his early 30's, the editor of an intellectual magazine who once told me, "My generation is lost. Our parents either kept silent because they thought they would protect us that way, or they told us outright lies. We had nothing that we could believe in while we were growing up." But he said these things in a philosophical tone; he did not blame his parents. "They had been (deported) to Siberia," he said. "They were broken people." The only hint he had of his father's sufferings was that sometimes, while asleep, the man would "howl in the night."

How quickly some things -- or at least their external trappings -- seem to change. One year ago, February, 16, 1990, saw the curious phenomenon of the independent Lithuanian Communist Party sponsoring an official program to commemorate the 72nd anniversary of independence. (Friends told me it was very similar in style to the celebrations in previous years commemorating The Great October Revolution and other Soviet holy days).

This year, February 16th was already a national state holiday. Everyone had the day off. Celebrations were no longer held in the streets, but had moved into the fanciest digs Vilnius has to offer -- the modern Opera and Ballet Theater. Both President Landsbergis and Prime Minister Vagnorius gave short speeches, guests from the European Parliament's Rainbow Coalition -- the Basques, the Scots -- put in plugs for their own political causes. Verdi's Requiem for Liberty was sung. At intermissions, Lithuania's current political elite -- newcomers culled from the intelligentsia and the few reform Communists who had survived politically -- prominaded in the foyer to see and be seen.

This reminded me of the countless February 16ths of my childhood. In concert halls in Boston, rented out specially for the occasion, year after year our emigre parents would plan, sponsor and attend such concerts. Of course, they dragged their kids along, too. Their job, as they saw it, was to make sure we would never forget the most important goal that, as Lithuanians, we had to strive for: was regaining that independence lost, the freedom torn away. (Independence and freedom were words used interchangeably; without the former, there could be no talk of the latter. Those who did not necessarily agree that one automatically led to the other were in a very very small minority.)

I grew up on these annual events -- they remain in my memory rituals commemorating a goal that was unquestionable. But I remember more the things that stick in a child's mind -- the uncomfortable Sunday clothes that had to be worn, the long long hours where one had to sit still, the impatience for intermission when I could go play with my friends.

When I began to periodically re-examine and test my feelings and thoughts about this Lithuanian heritage I had inherited, a lot changed over the years. I could not accept the external symbols of independence with as much reverence as did the older generation, for I happened to grow up during a time when the society I lived in placed all patriotic symbols into question. It didn't take a great leap of the imagination to include, in my scheme of things, Lithuanian symbols, even though it was the American flag that we saw burnt every night on television news reports in the late 1960's. And as far as the great mythical Lithuanian figures from the Middle Ages, the supposedly illustrious history that I studied every Saturday in Lithuanian school -- well, how relevant can a 700-year old pagan grand duke really be to a kid who would rather spend Saturday morning with Yogi Bear and the Flintstones?

I was not alone. An interesting moment in more recent times occurred a few years ago. A talented young Lithuanian-American playwright, who has been part of New York's downtown Lower East Side theater scene for several years, put on a series of plays about all these Lithuanian grand dukes. They were half historical, half satirical. Some of his characters from Lithuania's golden age were portrayed as normal joes, others as buffoons. I saw one play from the series staged at the experimental theater La Mama. I'd like to think that it was of a high enough standard that the majority of the audience, who had no connection to things Lithuanian, could enjoy it.

The reactions of those who did have connections were quite telling. In particular, I remember that of a middle-aged writer from Lithuania, today a member of Parliament. He was someone who had a great need to hold on to the myths of these medieval lords; they were a defense against the Soviet icons being rammed down his throat every day. Not surprizingly, he squirmed in his seat. He wasn't used to his heroes being made fun of. "We don't talk about Vytautas the Great in Lithuania this way," was the only comment he ventured. I think the only ones in the audience who truly revelled in it all were people who, although being first generation Americans, had also been fed this history from infancy. We laughed so hard we had tears streaming down our cheeks. If ever there was an in-joke....

Still, something from the legacy did rub off. No matter how quizically I view many of Lithuania's sacred cows, there was one thing that I never questioned -- her right to independence. Whether that independence is followed by freedom, whether democracy takes root, whether the kind of society Lithuanians build for themselves will be fair and tolerant -- all these things I am willing to question, along with the greatest skeptic. But not independence. It is, in my mind, an inalienable right. I hold it on a par with other rights I don't question but simply accept, such as one doesn't imprison people for their opinions because it is unjust, and one doesn't lie and cheat, simply because it is wrong.

Yet I know that even many Americans I have met over the years do not necessarily look at political independence for Lithuania (or for other far-off unfamiliar countries, for that matter) in this way. They see it more as the expression of the self-interest of a particular group, much on the same level, say, as animal activists wishing to close down labs that do experiments on live animals, or enivronmental activists trying to stop a chemical plant from polluting the local river. And in journalism -- which sometimes takes the laudatory goal of objectivity to the point of absurdity (I remember seeing a billboard in Manhattan advertising a local 6 o'clock newscaster as being "so objective, he has no opinion about anything") advocating a certain goal, especially if it touches you personally, is sometimes looked at very askance indeed. But I like to think that I would still be as unequivocal about Lithuanian independence even if I did not have a lifetime of hearing about its loss echoing in my consciousness.

I am still for it, more than ever before, and despite being shorn of illusions that many people who stand under its banner are cynical, corrupt or worse. Witnessing up close what happens to a society when it is deprived of independence is witnessing its degradation. The lack of civic spirit or plain civility are all symptoms of that same disease. If you treat someone like a brute long enough, don't be surprized that he begins to act like one. The sad fact is that long after you let the prisoner out of his cell, the cell still imprisons his mind. And I suspect that the 20 short years of independence earlier this century was not enough time to have freed the Lithuanian psyche of the czarist ghosts who haunted it.

Perhaps the most poignant moment during all the official celebrations I mentioned earlier occurred on March 11. The families of the people killed in the attempted coup last January 13th sat in the front row of Parliament, there to be awarded special post-humous medals in honor of their dead. The voices of those handing out the medals were already shaking as the ceremonies began. But when one woman -- whose son, after weeks of torment in a hospital, had been the last to die -- lost her way back to her seat because she was blinded by her own tears, the entire hall broke down. As Virgis said, "You saw her there, this old lady whose hair was pulled back into a plain grey bun in the back of her head, wearing what was probably a sweater she knitted herself, clutching that book (of honors). Even the most stalwart of us had our eyes fill up after that."

Perhaps one can call it progress that the symbols of independence are on their way to being institutionalized here, and those who die in its name can at least be honored publicly. A few short years ago, they had to be buried in the dead of night, their graves often unmarked, their families hounded. For so long, to be a Lithuanian patriot was synonymous with sacrificing yourself for a lost cause -- whether you were a secret book-carrier in the 19th century, defying czarist bans on publishing books in Lithuanian, whether you were a guerilla fighter in the forests after World War II, futilely resisting crack NKVD troops who outnumbered you, whether you were a dissident, guilty of "bourgeois nationalism" shut up in psychiatric hospitals during Brezhnev's era of stagnation. There is more than enough history to back up the claim for victim status for Lithuania.

Still, once it has been achieved, freedom has different demands. The identity that a nation carves out for itself under conditions of liberty requires the acceptance of responsiblity for one's actions, if it is to survive. It means grappling with the notion that martyr or not, one is not flawless. It means admitting mistakes, apologizing for wrongs committed in the past. Some peoples -- like the Germans for their Nazism, the Americans for their racism -- were forced to go through such soul-searching. It was not, I think, an exercise in futility. It would behoove "victim" nations -- I suspect this identity will be entrenched here for a long time still -- to engage in a little of it themselves, before they get too convinced of their own saintliness.

Best wishes,
Ina Navazelskis

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