

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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THE PAIN OF NATION-BUILDING

Dear Peter,

An image -- not a very pretty one -- crosses my mind much too often these days. It is of starving rats, trapped in a cage. The cage is almost bursting. The rats have been there for a long, long time. When a quack scientist first captured them, it was ostensibly because they were to be used for a series of experiments to prove a highly questionable, controversial theory. In reality, the experiments were just a cover-up for the scientist's own insecurities and need to feel powerful. He felt safer, he said, when the rats were under lock and key.

The scientist was sadistic. When he beat the sides of the cage with a stick, inside, scores of weakened rats fell dead. He put the surviving ones through several inexplicable, scientifically groundless tests. These measured the rats' reflexes when subjected to absurd conditions that they would never have experienced in their natural state. Once in a while, the scientist threw in some scraps of food -- but just barely enough to keep the rats alive.

At first, the rats gnawed at the bars of their cage, struggling to get out. They failed. The bars were strong; most rats succeeded merely in tearing their gums. The scientist was enraged; he destroyed the most active rats as a warning to the rest. Those remaining got the message -- only a few continued trying to break free. The majority turned their energies elsewhere. They began running in circles, biting one another's tails. This became an all-consuming activity.

One day, a new scientist appeared. He no longer beat the cage. He tried reasoning with the rats, hoping to convince them that the experiment was not entirely pointless; that all that was needed was to fix the methodology. The rats tried to bite him. He got angry and stopped throwing in food altogether. Still, he was less powerful than the first scientist; he was unable to destroy the rats physically and he was unable to get them to return to their former complacency.

Ina Navazelskis, a journalist, has written extensively about East European and Soviet affairs. She is the author of biographies about Leonid Brezhnev and Alexander Dubcek.

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The cage itself started to rust. A few more rats renewed the gnawing activity at the bars. One day, an opening appeared -- not enough to free the rats, but enough to raise the hope that, through their combined efforts, they could eventually break down the door. Emboldened by these developments, a few rats declared that they no longer recognized the existence of the cage, and even left it through that small opening for short forays into the world outside. During all this time, the scientist had not disappeared. He still controlled the gates.

Back in the cage, however, most rats were in a trance. They still wanted to get out, but had forgotten how. They stared at the opening without seeing it. The only thing that they knew how to do was to run in circles and bite one another's tails.

It is a rare Lithuanian who could swallow being compared to a rat. The analogy is more than just distasteful -- it is gross. I know this. I by no means want to imply that the grand experiment in socialism was justified because those human beings on whom the experiment was practiced were really little better than vermin, and that the world's conscience should therefore rest easy. I remember once seeing a Nazi propaganda film about the "Jewish Problem" where full-faced frontal shots of young Polish Jews were intersliced with images of a rat scurrying towards a camera. The connection was sickening.

I use this harsh analogy for another reason. Rats are disease carriers. I believe that many Eastern Europeans, among them Lithuanians, have not only been affected but also infected by the disease of totalitarianism. The symptoms are crude and subtle at the same time. They include aggressiveness, intolerance, destructiveness, a need to control, a need to reduce the complexities of the world into simple slogans and a need to produce bogus enemies where none exist. These, of course, are weaknesses that all human beings harbor within themselves. Totalitarianism neither gave birth to them, nor is their sole propagator. But totalitarianism honed these traits so well that for too many, they have become second nature. To root them out becomes almost as difficult as to root out sin itself. Those infected know this; but like any drug addict, they are hooked. They feel helpless, and they are none too eager to go through the inevitable period of withdrawal symptoms.

In despair or resignation, I have heard many Lithuanians remark "We are damaged people. It will take two to three generations before we will once more have a healthy society." I used to politely murmur things like, "Oh, I don't think so at all. If there is some anger here, well, it is justified. Look at how you have suffered." But now I am more inclined to believe them. Yes, they are damaged; it is almost a moot argument whether

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the totalitarianism that still infects them was first introduced as a foreign virus or was a home-grown one. The important fact is that it exists. It has seeped into people's souls, distorted their worldviews, warped their relationships to one another, and influenced the language they use to define themselves. If you repeat a message long enough and often enough -- no matter how inane or absurd it is -- it is bound to sink into an individual's consciousness. Every advertising executive knows this. So do the masters of the totalitarian mind.

Half a year has passed since the declaration of independence last March 11. Sadly, for me, this image of rats biting one another's tails becomes more and more apropos. It has been a tough half year in Lithuania -- tough economically, tough politically, and tough emotionally. People are depressed. The euphoria that the opposition movement, Sajudis, awakened with its birth more than two years ago has largely evaporated. For most people, Sajudis itself is now only the shell of its former existence, bereft of the spirit and the unifying power it once had. Disenchantment has set in. It cannot be written off solely to Moscow or to any other external forces. The people of Lithuania, able to hear their own voices freely for the first time in fifty years, have begun to realize that sometimes they say some pretty stupid things. Countless efforts are expended to defend, justify, even deny this fact, but they are not powerful enough to make it go away.

I believe Lithuania is in a worse situation now than she was a year ago. True, at that time, the Communist Party was still in power -- remnants of the old order still had to be reckoned with. But morale was high. It had only been a short while before that Lithuanians had re-discovered one another, re-discovered that they all wanted the same thing -- independence. They were unified.

Today, they are not. Morale in Lithuania is eroding at a time when she is facing ever deepening economic hardship. Such a combination can potentially be the recipe for disaster. Today, there is an atmosphere of suspicion. People rarely have something good to say about anyone else. This dynamic reminds one friend of an old peasant story: Two women are talking. One says to the other, "You know, there are no pretty girls in the village anymore. Just me and maybe even you a little." Were one to take them literally, many Lithuanians would convince you that there were no decent people anymore, except of course, the speakers themselves.

Many intellectuals have retreated from public life back into their professional spheres, disturbed by the turn that the tone of public debate has taken, and uncertain what to do about it. Lithuania's tendency towards provincialism has re-emerged. In early August, the first parliamentary act of censorship was to

close down a four-page weekly smut (or what passes for smut; the photos were so grainy, and the fig leaves so abundant that one could hardly call it pornography) newspaper called *Twenty Kopecks*. There is a witchhunt for enemies, mostly (but not exclusively) of a Communist persuasion. What is the most perplexing is that the Communists attacked as untrustworthy are usually those who are the most liberal and reform-minded. Meanwhile, the rump Lithuanian Communist Party still loyal to Moscow is rarely the focus of vitriolic indignation. The ominous question, which in reality is an attempt to neutralize political opponents "Are you now or have you ever been...?" is not only absurd, but dangerous in Lithuania's current situation. Her intellectual resources are stretched to the limit and the neutralization of any of them is a blow to her bargaining position vis a vis the Kremlin and a setback for the restructuring her catastrophic economy. The KGB could not do any better if it itself tried to destabilize the society. (And it is probably not too paranoid to suspect the KGB is doing its best to do just that. Lithuania, while refusing to acknowledge that rusty cage, nevertheless sits in one.)

At the center of public debate is Parliament. It is the first real Parliament that Lithuania has had in fifty years. In as much as there are now eight political parties and five fractions represented in it,* it is pluralistic. But it is widely perceived as ineffective, unprofessional and overly ambitious. Although parliamentary sessions are frequently transmitted over the radio, no one sits by the radio anymore, hanging on every word. People got tired of the in-fighting and bored by the nit-picking.

A few days ago, I went to a meeting held in the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, the same institute where Sajudis was born over two years ago. Some dozen intellectuals, mostly liberal, had gathered to discuss the disheartening mood in the country and what, if anything, could be done about it. At one point, a gray-haired middle aged man, unknown to most of those present, stood up. "I am a former political prisoner," he said in a quavering voice that betrayed his discomfort in speaking publicly. "Please don't be afraid -- I am not here to attack you. I want only to say that there are those of us, former political prisoners, who are also heartsick by what we see going on today. This is not the kind of democracy that we sat in in the labor camps for. This is not the kind of Lithuania that we want."

For a moment, the image of angry, tail-less rats receded in my mind, replaced by one of people -- dignified, humble, just, and all too often, broken-hearted. Such people first drew me to Lithuania. It was through them that I came to love and respect her. For half a year, I have been wondering where they had all gone. One shy man reminded me they were still there. It was all I needed to know.

*All the best,
Ina Navazelski's*

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*Political parties : the independent Lithuanian Communist party, the Communist Party still loyal to Moscow, the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats, the Greens, the Independence Party (a conservative party), the Democratic Party (also conservative party), and the Nationalists. Fractions are: the Free Democrats (liberal), Left (mainly LCP), Center (mainly Sajudis liberals), consistent radicals (conservative) and Polish.)