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"Who is Husak?"

Dear Peter,

On the second day of Easter, a film opened in Vilnius that just a few short years ago -- when it would have been able to circulate only underground -- would have caused a sensation. But today "The Unbearable Lightness of Being", a film set in Czechoslovakia in 1968, slipped into town almost unnoticed, garnering only one short review in a weekly cultural affairs newspaper.

That says something about what is going on in Lithuania these days. It has less to do with the well-known phenomenon that as soon as what was prohibited becomes permissible, it is no longer interesting -- although that, too, is part of the picture. Sadly, Lithuania is too wrapped up in her own troubles to notice when some long-forbidden foreign voices can now finally be heard -- even when those voices are particularly relevant to what is going on here.

There is a certain irony to all this. As in all Eastern European countries, the sentiment of "returning to Europe" (ie. Western Europe) is frequently trumpeted here -- be it in public discourse on television, in the newspapers or in Parliament. After half a century of being almost extinct in the world's consciousness, Lithuania has a strong need to reclaim her place in the world as, the way Lithuanians put it, "an equal member of the European family of nations."

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But for a society so hermetically sealed off for so long, that "return to Europe" is not simply a matter of opening up the borders. And since those borders are still controlled by a third party -- the latest reports are that it takes 110 hours (that's four and a half days and nights) to pass by car through the three control points (Lithuanian, Soviet, Polish) from Lithuania to Poland -- "return" is still safely tucked away in the realm of the theoretical. When thinking about the world outside, the question most people in Lithuania ask is "What are they saying about us?" rather than "What can they tell us about themselves? There is, in other words, a yearning for mirrors, rather than windows.

A real "return", with all that this entails -- being forced to readjust one's thinking, reassess one's predispositions; being forced, in the final analysis, to fundamentally change -- is a reality with which Lithuania, and I suspect a great many of her neighbors, has not yet come to terms. (And with little wonder. For the past 50 years not only has time been suspended here, but Lithuania has been on the psychological defensive. Change is perceived less as the inevitable need to grow than as the total obliteration of identity.)

Ironically, it is not only Western Europe that still remains terra incognita. Albeit to a lesser degree, ignorance also extends to other Eastern European countries. While the basic contours of their histories are known -- there is, of course, recognition of common sufferings under the same Soviet totalitarian boot, and common views that Westerners simply cannot comprehend what this was all like -- a lively interest about these countries in and of themselves, an in-depth knowledge of them, is not particularly pronounced. (The Latvian representative to Lithuania, for example, has occasionally complained to me that not only are Lithuanians poorly informed about what goes on with their Baltic neighbor to the north -- but they also don't seem particularly interested to find out more.)

One can sense this in all sorts of ways. In the past few years, for example, there has been a natural tendency to publish books, of varying academic standards, dealing with the suppressed history of the past half century. Of the half dozen such works that I recently saw in a bookstore, only one -- a biography of Imre Nagy, the leader of the crushed Hungarian Uprising in 1956 -- was about a foreigner.)

So even though "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" probably speaks more to Lithuania's experience today than at any other time, the non-reaction to its appearance here is totally in keeping with the prevailing mood. Only a few odd birds such as myself -- and the lone film critic -- saw an event in its premiere.

Based on Czech writer Milan Kundera's novel of the same name, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" is many things rolled into one. It is a love story, a film about the philosophies by which people live their lives, a film thoroughly permeated by the politics of a distinct time and place. American director Philip Kauffman* rejected the notion that it was essentially a political film, however, describing it instead as "a love story into which tanks rolled."

For those who have never seen it, here is a brief synopsis. A young Prague surgeon, Tomas, leads the life of a happy hedonistic bachelor, with many many lovers. While on a short trip to a sanitorium outside Prague, he meets Teresa, his spiritual opposite. One day, she unexpectedly shows up in Tomas' Prague apartment, and to his own surprise, enters his life permanently. They even marry. Tomas, however, continues to see other women. For him, this is as natural to him as the air he breathes. For Teresa, it is hell.

Political events soon barge into Tomas and Teresa's lives. It is 1968, the heady days of Prague Spring. Alexander Dubcek is in power. Due to his reforms, people begin to say what they think and feel, showing their distaste of the Communist system under which they live, often extending this distaste to all things Soviet. Tomas even writes a daring article that his fellow doctors praise and urge him to publish. He does.

This exhilirating breath of fresh air does not last. During a spat about the latest of Tomas' infidelities, Teresa runs out into the street. At that moment, the walls of their apartment begin to shake. Tanks are entering Prague. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops has begun.

Because Tomas has a long-standing invitation from a hospital in Geneva, he and Teresa join all the others who, as a part of Prague Spring, already foresee that they will have no future in the winter that is sure to some. They leave Czechoslovakia. But Teresa cannot adjust to the safety and sterility of Western Europe; she returns to Prague. Tomas must now choose whether to live an existence of "lightness" in the West, or whether to follow Teresa back to certain "heaviness." He opts for Teresa. Because he refuses to retract his article, back in Prague Tomas goes from top surgeon to window washer. Unhappy that she is unable to take affairs as lightly as Tomas, Teresa eventually tries infidelity herself, only later realizing that she was possibly being black-mailed by the secret police. Tomas and Teresa escape to the countryside, where their lives truly blend together. They discover that they are happy. The film ends.

* I am not sure of the spelling and have no way of checking.

I admit it straight off -- I am a Kundera fan. My synopsis holds nothing of the pointed insights -- never mind character development -- that Kundera sprinkles throughout his many novels about life, totalitarian-style. Somehow, without any artificiality, the film manages to capture some of these observations.

The first time I saw "The Unbearable Lightness of Being", I was with about six other Americans. We were in Paris; it was the spring of 1988. I still remember the evening. After seeing the three hour production, we stepped back out in busy, colorful and bustling Paris streets, a total contrast to the mood with which the film ended. There followed a discussion about Kundera, about Czechoslovkia, about the different worlds between East and West. I remember saying that in pursuit of Realpolitik, the West had done little more than express outrage about the 1968 invasion, and that this was one of the many bitter disappointments that Czechoslovakia has had to experience during this century. Others said that it was neither realistic, nor really fair, to have expected active defense from the West; it had other, more important and equally legitimate interests to defend.

I remember that discussion in a Paris cafe on a late spring night as earnest, sincere -- we had all been caught by the mood of the film. But in essence, it was much the same as scores of other conversations I have had in the West about these two different worlds. Such discussions usually had two common threads running through them -- they were, for the most part, academic (no one had been personally affected by the events discussed), and they were all held on safe territory. That makes a difference.

Just how much of a difference was brought home to me when I thought back to the first time I discussed events in Czechoslovakia here in Lithuania. There was nothing academic about that conversation. It was 1978, my first trip here. In the five days I was in Vilnius, my newly-found relatives tried to tell me something of their lives. A cousin spoke of her brother, who had been drafted into the Soviet Army in the late 60's, and had been sent to Czechoslovakia as one of those invading troops. What could he do? she said, shrugging her shoulders helplessly. For the Czechs he was an invader, and they spat on him. And he was unable to tell them that he knew all too well what they were going through, that the same thing had happened in Lithuania in 1940, that the tanks that had rolled into the country then brought tragedy and death, that his own family had been deported to Siberia...

The second time I saw the "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" was a week and a half ago, a few days after the Lithuanian premiere. The film was shown in an old cinema, built like a mini Grecian temple, in a run-down part of Vilnius. The evening was

chilly; the wide streets were dimly lit and deserted. Closeby is the site where ten years ago an elderly priest named Bronius Laurinavičius was killed when he was pushed underneath the wheels of a passing truck. (Laurinavičius had been one of the five members of the Lithuanian Helsinki Watch Committee and one of the few open dissidents in Lithuania at the time. His "accident" was largely attributed to the KGB.)

A few blocks away is a residential neighborhood housing Soviet Army officers and their families. Adjacent to it is "The Northern City", one of the largest Soviet military compounds in Vilnius. It was from here that tanks emerged on their way to the television tower and central television studio on the night of January 12th-13th. The setting couldn't have been more apropos.

The cinema's interior was renovated for small screen viewings -- to accomodate the video format. (About half of the foreign films make their way to Lithuania these days in usually very badly copied video cassettes. Consequently, "video salons", very often former movie houses, have sprung up around the city.) The evening I was there, the hall was only three-quarters full, perhaps about fifty people in all. The film was dubbed into Russian, but like so many Russian-dubbed films, the original English language underneath could still be heard in snatches.

The audience was as intriguing as the film itself. At one point, a Russian-speaking middle-aged man and woman got up and left. Did they leave because they were offended? Who can say -- but the scene they walked out on happened to poke fun at a sentimental Soviet army song.

That scene was, of course, dear to the hearts of Lithuanians in the audience. But the scenes that had them gasping, that the Lithuanian reviewer called "unexpected and riveting" were of the invasion itself. The boom of tanks, the crowds surrounding them, the screaming, the pleading with soldiers to put down their guns and go home, the frightened and angry soldiers turning those guns on the crowds, the demonstrations and the noise -- it all was a carbon copy of what happened in Lithuania last January 13th. I heard muffled coughs and sniffles, and in the dark, sensed dozens of hands discreetly brushing tears away. As the reviewer noted, "Today having ourselves... experienced the invasion of those tanks, we are, if only somewhat, already different."

But how different, really, is Lithuania's situation from before? True, unlike Czechoslovakia in 1968, last January Soviet tanks failed to put an end to perestroika, Lithuanian-style. One can therefore constitute that they didn't win. But they didn't lose either. They didn't go anywhere. They still surround the television tower.

According to Lithuanian sources, there are 15 various Soviet military compounds, with two major bases -- one subordinate to the Soviet Ministry of the Interior, the other to the Soviet Ministry of Defense -- in Vilnius alone. In Lithuania in total, there are about 150 Soviet military bases and approximately 120,000 (up from about 90,000 in 1985-1986)soldiers.(To get a sense of the density, compare this to the 370,000 Soviet troops in former East Germany. East Germany's population is 17 million; or, one soldier to every 47 citizens. In Lithuania, with a population of 3.6 million, it is one soldier to every 30 citizens.) The troops are in constant flux, and dislocations of units from outside the republic -- there were reports, for example, of troop movements from Kaliningrad to Kaunas over the past weekend -- are not uncommon. Sometimes these movements are simply regular maneuvers, but there is never a guarantee that they won't turn into something else.

In addition, Lithuania has also become transit territory for Soviet military personnel evacuating the former East Germany. Why? Because, according to those same Lithuanian sources, as of a few weeks ago, Poland and the USSR still had not signed a contract for the transport of troops by rail over Polish territory. The jittery Poles want hard currency. So since late last year, Soviet soldiers have been evacuated by ferry from Mukran, Germany* on to Klaipéda, Lithuania and then transported overland by rail to the Ukraine or the Urals. Only a few units have remained in Lithuania itself, usually in bases wheremissiles (I believe they were medium range nuclear missiles) have been removed. The benefits to the Soviet Union for this state of affairs are obvious. Not only is it cheaper -- the Lithuanians could demand all the hard currency they want; just try and collect -- but it has the added political benefit of a large extra contingency of troops in the area just in case any kind of local disturbances erupt. And what is the total estimated time for this transport? Four years. Take that and put it in your pipe and smoke it at the negotiating table in Moscow...

This then, is what made this the Lithuanian premiere of "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" a unique event for me. It was shown in a place where it all happened only yesterday, where memory is still raw, where it could still happen again tomorrow. (It has been estimated that to take over Parliament, still a barricaded fortress, all that would be needed is 14 minutes.)

* I am not sure of the spelling of this port. I looked for it on a fairly detailed map of Germany, but could not find it. I was told that it is a very small place on the German island of Ruegen on the Baltic Sea.

But Lithuania's story, like Czechoslovakia's (and Hungary's, and Poland's) before it, is not only about tanks and troops, not only about confrontation between a satellite and the center of an empire. It is also about solidarity and betrayal. And that is at the heart of Lithuania's troubles today.

As all attacks from an outside enemy are bound to do, Soviet Army activities in Lithuania last January served as a powerful catalyst for unifying the nation. As I walked behind the funeral cortege of the eight unarmed civilians who would be buried in Vilnius, all slain the night of January 13th (13 people had been killed in all, plus one Soviet soldier), I saw more people in that bitter cold mid-January weather than I ever had before. There was literally a sea of weeping, silent people in the streets, on the sidewalks, at the windows, on the balconies and on top of the roofs of Vilnius. The Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior reported that even the criminal underworld seemed to have expressed tacit solidarity by temporarily suspending many activities: for the week following January 13th, crime was way down.

Vytautas Landsbergis' popularity and prestige grew enormously after the January events. People saw him as steadfast and unwavering when Parliament was in imminent danger of attack, a leader who did not forsake his post.

But that grief, which for a brief moment unified unlikely forces -- some die-hard communists bitterly opposed to the new Lithuanian Parliament, for example, turned in the Party cards in protest of the violence -- could not keep the the taut fabric of society from further fraying. Landsbergis'political opponents were quick to gripe; many said that the only winner of the whole tragedy was President of Lithuania's Parliament himself. Landsbergis reacts to these remarks with a bitter joke -- it seems the tragedy was so beneficial for his rating, that the only conclusion to draw is that Gorbachev is Landsbergis' agent in the Kremlin.

Since January, the atmosphere of suspicion has only grown. When dissension is voiced these days, one can be assured that accusing question -- "For whom is all this useful?" -- will echo after it.

Take the latest political development, the forming of the first formal political opposition movement this month. On the weekend of April 13, the Lithuanian Forum for the Future (Lietuvos Ateities Forumas) held its first conference. The organizers were a motley group of people -- disillusioned intellectuals, disgruntled ex-Communist party nomenklatura, and many early founding members of Sajudis, the grass-roots opposition movement that started the move for Lithuanian independence three years ago.

In the manifesto that came out of this first conference, few words were minced in critiquing the current policies of the Lithuanian government. "The time has come to ask if all the difficulties that Lithuania now experiences are really unavoidable. Are not there too many actions which do not ease, but add to the burden and complicate our road to independence?... Until now, our policy for re-establishing independence has been more show, more declarative than actively working...what is needed now, is not finely sounding words about independence, but work. We cannot only tear down; we must also patiently, consistently build on what we already have."

The seeds of this opposition have been forming ever since the declaration of independence last March 11, 1990. But public expression of discontent was generally sporadic and subdued. The first major event was an open letter published in two major daily newspapers last summer, signed by over 30 prominent civic leaders and members of Parliament. In part, that letter said,"It seems that (the new leaders of Lithuania) strive for personal well-being, (seek) laurel leaves and honor much too soon. The cradle of power, bags of money, mafia networks, hunts for witches and enemies, confusion in economic and political spheres never could and never can be the symbols of freedom...From the very beginning of its work, Parliament, as the body which passes laws, has sought, in stages, to expand its powers." This letter was signed, among others, by 95 year old Juozas Urbšys, Lithuania's foreign minister 50 years ago when she was parcelled up between Germany and the USSR.

The outcry that followed forced a few of those 30 signatories, including Urbšys, to retract their signatures. (Urbšys, for example, said that he had been tricked into signing it under false pretenses. But I doubt this. I think that the frail old man was simply hounded. I met with him last December, several months after the event.

He admitted then that he was deeply troubled by the lack of "tact and diplomacy" in Lithuania's Parliament, and hoped to write an essay on that theme. "You cannot call Gorbachev names and then expect to sit down at the negotiating table with him. We need the good will of the Soviet Union," is what this man, who himself had been forced to deal with both Stalin and Hitler, and who had ended up spending 11 years in isolation in Stalin's prisons, said.)

Last summer, many attacked the letter for being poorly worded, particularly for its last sentence, which called for an election of a resurrected Seym (the term used for Lithuania's Parliament during the inter-war years). Its publication was a gift, the critics said, to Lithuania's enemies.

At the time, I remember thinking; what is all the fuss about? It is, for heaven's sake, only a letter! But the reaction highlighted the situation that those at odds with how Lithuania's interests were being defined and defended found themselves. Being critical of the parliamentary majority, of Vytautas Landsbergis' strategies and style, was quickly equated with being an opponent to Lithuanian independence itself, and ergo, a tool -- willing or unwilling -- of Moscow. That argument, simplistic as it is, is still so powerful (the Kremlin has of course done its bit to make it so) that up until this month, those who are in a natural opposition were very queasy about saying so. For example, when Richard Nixon visited Lithuania in late March, he specifically asked to meet with leaders of the "opposition." Those on the Lithuanian side who planned his agenda -- some of Landsbergis' aides -- later told me that when they scheduled the meeting with Algirdas Brazauskas (leader of the Democratic Labor Party, the renamed Lithuanian Communist Party), liberal leader Edvardas Vilkas and others, some of these people openly bristled at being referred to as "opposition". They were not "opposed" to Lithuanian independence and didn't want to be tarred with that brush.

But there are others, of course, who do not wince at such distinctions, for whom independence is a secondary consideration. Under the banner of opposition there are many many revanchists with whom liberals now find themselves in a curious and rather uncomfortable alliance. The type of people that I have in mind are the old party nomenklatura who are displeased that the revolutionary changes in Lithuania took their long-assured, much coveted and very comfortable privileges away. I recall a recent conversation with one such person, a man in his fifties who had spent several years in the United States as a Soviet diplomat. He pointed to all the current evils in the country -- Parliament's intransigent posturings, the deepening economic crisis, the infighting and rhetorically, he asked me, "Is this what democracy is all about?" Just as rhetorically, I answered, "It's still an open question where what we have here is democracy." "Exactly what I think!" he said gleefully. "There is no democracy yet in Lithuania!" I had been caught in a verbal trap.

Yet, people such as this gentleman did not set the tone of the Lithuanian Forum for the Future's conference. It was chaired, for example, by Arvydas Juozaitis, once the darling golden boy of Sajudis, one of the original five members of Sajudis' inner political strategy circle. Juozaitis, who had never been a member of either the Komsomol or the Communist Party, was among the first to fall out with Landsbergis, a falling out that was personal as much as it was political. He has since become a irritating mosquito for Landsbergis, buzzing around the outskirts of official politics, writing stinging

articles here and there.

At the Forum conference, Juozaitis was not alone -- he was in like company. Many of Sajudis's initial executive committee members -- economist and member of Parliament Kazimieras Antanavičius, ex-Prime Minister Prunskiene -- also participated. Even a priest, an unexpected participant because the clergy has generally supported the more conservative, nationalist forces who maintain "independence first, democracy later" addressed the conference. The good father's pedigree was impeccable. He had spent several years in Siberian labor camps, and during the "years of stagnation" had been a source of great consternation for the KGB and great comfort for everybody else. At the Forum, he spoke of the plight of neglected, impoverished collective farm workers.

There are other dissenting voices that are being raised more and more frequently who cannot be silenced with the epithet that they were Communist Party hacks. 70 year old Liudas Dambrauskas, for years hounded by the KGB because he had written memoirs of life in Lithuania during the post-war years, is one such person. He had been in and out of prison for years -- in the mid-1980's, Dambrauskas was amongst a handful of prisoners of conscience adopted by Amnesty International. In an interview with Radio Free Europe on April 19, Dambrauskas said, "Until now, we do not have a clear concept of (how) to reestablish independence...It seems that we are beginning to comprehend that we will not be able to re-establish statehood only with patriotic slogans and anti-Communist hysteria...Although we try to calm ourselves that we no longer have official censorship, the intolerance exhibited by the state press for those who think differently, especially towards criticism, creates a different kind of censorship, the censorship (that is born by being) blackmailed by one's surroundings."

Like the letter published last summer, the outcry against the Forum, and voices like Dambrauskas' has been loud. Lithuanian television news took a position of trying to ignore the conference -- allocating the minimal coverage of it. More coverage was allocated by Soviet Lithuanian TV (those occupiers of the TV tower) whose commentators naturally were very pleased to report the criticisms voiced. Sajudis condemned it, and threw out those old Sajudis leaders who signed up as Forum members. The official state press, that is, the newspaper Lietuvos Aidas, (which translated means "Echo of Lithuania", but which detractors often derisively call "Lithuanian AIDS") published a handful of articles, all of which were negative evaluations.

All this reminds me, once again, of Czechoslovakia. In the first weeks and months after the August 1968 invasion, Czechoslovakia's people were united. The media, broadcasting from secret locations, performed heroically, offering the people of

Czechoslovakia the chance to still hear uncensored news even as the groundwork for dismantling reforms was being laid.

But this didn't last. It couldn't last. And the split in society in Czechoslovakia, the eventual differentiation between those who caved in to Prague Winter and those who refused to do so, inevitably happened. Czechoslovak society was once more deprived of the chance to evolve into a mosaic, pluralistic entity. It was forced back into two classes of people -- those who conformed and renounced the reforms, and those who became window washers. Even Dubcek, before he became persona non-grata altogether, was forced to sign laws undoing what he had built during those brief eight months of Prague Spring.

But the chief Judas of the whole sorry story, who turned Czechoslovakia's clock backwards and presided over her deep freeze for the next 20 years was once one of the central reformers himself. How did that happen?

For Gustav Husak, the architect of Prague's winter -- and Moscow's hand in Czechoslovakia -- was an unlikely candidate for collaboration. His entire biography spoke otherwise. Although he had been a member of the Slovak Communist Party during World War II, he incurred Stalin's displeasure when he refused to blindly follow directives from Moscow. In resisting Nazi occupation, for example, Husak had joined forces with the democratic underground, gaining prestige for himself and the Slovak Communist Party along the way. But this had been forbidden by Stalin.

The Soviet dictator was not one to forget. When the Moscow-inspired purge trials in Czechoslovakia were set in place in the late 1940's, and enemies were fabricated out of the thin air, Husak paid for his disobedience. Accused of bourgeois nationalism, he was stripped of his Party membership and thrown into prison, where he sat for the better part of the 1950's. Released towards the end of the decade, he began his climb back into the political life of his country in the 1960's, becoming at one point more closely identified with the reform wing of the party than did Dubcek himself.

So why did he do it? Why did he betray Prague Spring and help Moscow? The common belief is simple jealousy. Husak chafed that Dubcek got all the glory.

In the end, the reasons why people turn their backs on their own ideals, on former comrades, often boils down to such very basic reasons -- hurt ambitions, envy, real or imagined insults. It is sentiments such as these that those who wish to divide and conquer try to encourage. Lithuania is a society for whom this cycle of betrayal began back in 1940, when lists of those to be liquidated and those to be deported to Siberia were first drawn up.

Some of the work, of course, was done in Moscow. But many, far too many names were added to those lists by people who lived in Lithuania, who were one's neighbors, sometimes even one's friends. For fifty years such people were officially hailed as heroes. It is only yesterday that their victims have been able to call them something else. And tragically, that first round of betrayal 50 years ago was followed by scores of others betrayal on a grand scale, betrayal on a petty one. No wonder everybody is still suspicious of everybody else. I am often reminded these days of that old saying -- just because you are paranoid doesn't mean they are not out to get you.

It can certainly be applied to Lithuania today. I do not think that the expression of political opposition, such as the Lithuanian Forum for the Future, is necessarily the place to look for Lithuania's enemies, although who can say? There are many here who would disagree with me, and they have convincing arguments. But this does not mean that I am not troubled. Something very destructive is going on. Perhaps this period of suspicion and witch-hunting -- the mentality which one very disappointed Sajudis leader calls "bolshevism in national dress" -- is inevitable, an inescapable part of the wrenching, painful process of growing out of totalitarian thinking into something better, freer. I wish it were not so.

For the disappointment is deep. After people in Lithuania realized that they still harbored some noble sentiments within themselves, and allowed themselves hope that maybe they were still capable of brotherhood and friendship with one another -- a hope expressed during those twenty months from Sajudis' birth in June 1988 until the declaration of independence in March, 1990 -- there has been a grand letdown. Maybe, the unspoken fear is, we really are too damaged to build a new society?

For today, noble sentiments have been superceded by other ones. There are more than enough bad feelings -- such as those that Mr. Husak must have felt -- floating around. Insults, hurt feelings, jealousy, thwarted ambitions abound. The questions that I ask myself these days, knowing full well that the answers, if they exist at all, will not become evident anytime soon, are these: How much of all this is Moscow's doing? How much is the responsibility of the Lithuanians themselves? And where, in all this mess, should we be looking for Lithuania's Husak?

Best wishes,

Ina

Received in Hanover 5/10/91