

Do Flowers Bloom in the Shade of the Wall?

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A wall always remains as an object and a memory for longer than its builders, this has been or will be discussed here numerous times. The Great Wall of China, the Long Walls of Athens, the frontier of Christianity – our lands in the 15th-17th century, the wall from Mexico that Trump either is or isn't building. Of course, the Berlin Wall, which I believe inspired this meeting of ours. It is all mingling – the symbolic and the physical sense. The physical actuality, the bricks, logs, blocks, and something intangible, the defense, the separation, the protection, the imprisonment. Eventually, the walls are no longer there, but their meanings remain. Even their builders are forgotten – who can name the architects of the Wall of China, who remembers exactly the initiators of the Berlin Wall, and it doesn't even matter if it was erected in Stalin's time, it is not contained within them, and in Khrushchev's time, the time of de-Stalinization, it is still equally efficient. Even when they crumble or are destroyed, the walls still stand in history.

On the other hand, there is another way to look at walls. One contemporary European Buddhist told a story to illustrate that everything is only a phenomenon of our consciousness – I don't remember the details, but they are unimportant. In one war or another, the enemies captured a scout who had crossed the border between the fighting sides. Before he was executed, he asked for a last look at his homeland for whose freedom he had fought. His wish was granted, he was taken on some hill, and the soldier took a long

time to look at the land opening in front of him. Everyone kept respectfully silent. Eventually he turned around and said: now I am ready to die. The only thing he didn't know was that the enemy soldiers were too lazy to walk another kilometer, and he was looking not at his homeland, but at the enemy land, which looked exactly the same. The wall was an illusion, and he failed to recognize it.

Such a perspective is possible, and sometimes even right, however, it's not that simple – may I be forgiven for this banality. There are things that are only made up by our imagination, there are conventions that shall depend on the will of those who agree about them, like, for instance, the Lithuanian-Latvian border. But there are some walls that, as I have just mentioned, retain their symbolic meaning with no less force than their physical shape. Thus, I'll share a personal experience.

I have never seen the Berlin Wall, but I have seen the iron curtain. Not the metaphorical one, mentioned by Churchill or someone like him. To me it sounded as metaphorical as the Cold War, before I saw it with my own eyes. One wakes up at the bus after the heavy sleep of travel, or rather, slumber. It is early, and one sees that the bus has stopped on a bridge covered in steel net. Underneath it was a ravine, with mists floating above it, and through the mist, one could see something like a tiny narrow creek, barriers, rolls of barbed wire, watchtowers, surveillance and killing machines at the bottom. Things that are even difficult to describe if one isn't a pro. Something not entirely accessible to human language. The proximity of the curtain, or rather, being inside it, flooded like horror – back then, I had not seen a single horror movie, but the experience was exactly like that: something both unreal and breathtaking at the same time. The morning quiet was suddenly interrupted by the German border patrols who after that experience seemed to be very much human, very angry, but not at all scary. It was only a month or two before the fall of Honecker, and their barks actually seemed quite comically cozy in the background of perestroika and the crumbling communism. I don't know how long it took for the bus to break free of the iron net, maybe 15 minutes, maybe a half hour, but those minutes changed my perception of life. It was one thing to live only on this side of the wall, depressed, even under threat of going to what Solzhenitsyn called "inner zone", i. e., a real Soviet concentration camp, but quite another thing was to cross the actual wall from the free

world to this “great zone” (I had come there by plane, so did not get this strong impression).

This line that separated the continent of Europe into two parts – of slavery and of freedom, could acquire a very fragile, almost ethereal shape, but that did not make it any less real. I spent my childhood in Klaipėda, I finished five years of school there. And I still remember how upon nightfall, the sand by the sea was harrowed so that the mysterious enemy could not emerge from the sea at night and enter the Soviet space without a trace. It was a magical solution rather than a practical one. One need only remember the watchtower lights, the regular patrols of the border guards and their K9. I must admit – it might be my trauma speaking, but whenever I look upon, I think, Japanese gardens with rocks and sand lined by rakes, I remember this harrowing of the beach that must separate two worlds each night.

However, no wall is so blind, no wall, not even the best one, may separate people from their history and the surrounding world so much that they would not even suspect that there is a different time and space, not just the one on this side of the wall. The very presence of the wall raises the irrepressible question about what is behind it. Besides, through it, over it, no one knows how from underground, seeds arrive, plants thrive, blossoms open, and clearly they don't belong to that misty reality. Those who live on this side of the wall one day realize they're in some strange flower garden that seems to have arrived from another spacetime, but at the same time is part of their life, and gradually, the center of their life. I must admit I don't believe that my metaphor of flowers in the shade of the wall to be very smart, creative. But it is important to me in one sense. Flowers seem to be very fragile, sensitive, almost incorporeal. But their presence makes life more celebratory and cozy. In a sense, they are promises of a more perfect world. So let's take a walk in this unusual garden. At first I wanted to arrange my narrative in the order of importance of those blooms, or at least their statistical significance, later I realized it's pointless, and I only left one thing deliberately at the very end.

The first thing that comes to mind is Polish television – the first channel of Poland. Yes, the choice is a bit unexpected, but in my subjective opinion, it was exactly what shaped my generations – of course, mostly people in Kaunas and in the part of Lithuania between Kaunas and Marijampolė. I don't think it was seen in Vilnius, but at that time, the sense that Lithuania

is not only Vilnius, or maybe even the other way round, that Russian-speaking Vilnius is less Lithuania, was very strong. I never figured out what technical problems gave us this chance, I've heard that the Soviets put pressure on the Poles to do something about it, but eventually the problems were only solved in the early years of independence – this time thanks to commercial pressures, competition for advertising, licensed territory of Western films. It was a significant loss at the time when the Lithuanian privately-owned and free state-sponsored television were only emerging. And during the Soviet time, it was a miracle. There were many reasons (the size of the country, the hard patriotism, the importance of the Catholic Church) why Poland always enjoyed greater intellectual and even economic freedoms – the films that we had only read or heard about, sometimes accessible in the shape of illegal, formally pirated tapes. From erotics that was unprecedentedly straightforward for the time to perfect classics. News that included more and more reports on Solidarity, shows that contained more and more true discussions, differences of opinions, concerts of contemporary music. We all spoke at least a little Russian, so the language barrier was not that great, more and more of us could understand Polish, more and more were listening to the official and Western radio in Polish. It probably goes without saying that it was also a pretext, and sometimes even a reason to include a greater diversity into the Soviet Lithuanian television. To sum up, the Polish television provided the cultural background for the whole life, a true alternative for leisure and information during the bleak Soviet era of boredom and gray.

The second thing were the foreign radio stations in Lithuanian – not only the famous ones like Voice of America, Vatican Radio or Radio Free Europe, but also exotic ones – broadcasts from Madrid, prepared by the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania, as far as I can tell, I used to listen to it with my morning tea before school; broadcasts of Italian radio; and if memory serves, I also heard some Lithuanian – not Russian – radio shows from Turkey, most of them about Atatürk. Not to mention the Russian ones – the spectrum was incredible, from Tel Aviv to Deutsche Welle, from Radio France International to religious Baptists or Pentecostals – I no longer remember the name. Some of them were interfered to the point where only separate words could be heard – like Radio Free Europe; others, like Voice of America, came through quite well. No one could explain it,

but even the buzzing sound itself was a challenge – an array of tiny tricks allowed one to hear a sentence here and there.

The third thing is the underground press, especially in synergy of the radio stations – of course, the first place here belongs to the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, but other publications were important too. The present-day researchers of the younger generation sometimes fail to grasp how great a force it was – not just as symbolic resistance, but also as a real impact. The tiny print run of the publications didn't matter. Distribution was also unessential. For instance, the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* describes how an atheist teacher ripped off a cross from someone's neck, or a local kolkhoz chairman refuses to loan the a car for a funeral with a priest, the report is read on Radio Vaticana, the whole village is discussing it the next morning. The Committee of the Party and the local KGB representative are worried, something needs to be done, maybe they should at least be more careful in the future... On the other hand, a lot of the press was devoted to discussing political, cultural, religious problems, disseminating independent information. Those texts would reach, let me put it this way – the elites of the resistance. But the periodicals also contributed to the shaping of the elites, the consolidation, the establishment of the various identities. Once the time of the Sąjūdis came around, a large part of the elites was involved or started actively participating in the public discussions and the activities of other organizations.

The fourth is the various literature that arrived from abroad in the shape of books and magazines. I would include here both the legally sold books in Polish or German published in the West and the so-called world of people's democracy, the Western publications obtained from abroad and the artistic and cultural works of expatriate Lithuanians. Again, what mattered was diversity, astonishing diversity – instead of the single truth of the Party, which could be easily identified as a lie, one could read the authors who thought differently and sometimes engaged in direct or indirect polemics. Poets and prose writers of different aesthetics. Maceina, Girnius, Kavolis and Greimas, Brazdžionis and Mackus, Bradūnas and Landsbergis. I remember the influence of Maceina's *Filosofijos kilmė ir prasmė* (The Origin and Meaning of Philosophy) – dozens, possibly hundreds of intellectual people learned that philosophy is not the antics of the Soviet textbooks, but rather, a dynamic and free way of thinking. One should also mention

the contacts with the expatriates and the people of culture and arts in the West – limited, sometimes dangerous, but even those infrequent meetings, lectures encouraged, inspired, brought new ideas. Those books actually were not only read and loaned, but also copied – transcribed by typewriters, and also by photocopiers, which became more and more prevalent. At first with the horrible, stinky paint, and later with a little better one. True, the typewriter, depending on the paper and whether it was mechanical or electric, could type up to 8 copies. The last one, of course, was almost illegible, but also the cheapest. The first three were good enough, the second sometimes even a little better than the first, because the letters on the first one could be not bright enough because the tape was dry or otherwise poor quality. But back to business.

The fifth blossom in this strange garden is the pre-war Lithuania. I could pedantically identify several layers. The first is quite immaterial – the memories of parents and grandparents. Sometimes idealized, sometimes simply personal, sometimes simply an objective story of “how things were by Smetona”. Sometimes a special bit of luck happened – an acquaintanceship or even friendship with a much older person, and sometimes someone prominent back then. I will only mention Alfonsas Keliuotis, Juozas Grušas, Vaclovas Šiugždinis, the Brazauskas family. Bet there were much more of such people in Kaunas. There were such people in other towns too.

The second layer is the periodicals of the time that sometimes acquired a special and even prestigious status, like Šapoka’s *History*, which has received plentiful and not always deserved criticisms today, or the six volumes of Skvireckas’ translation of the Bible. The sets of periodicals – *Židinys*, *Naujoji Romuva*, *Vairas*, even the reddish, leftist *Kultūra* could contain interesting morsels, the very fact of its existence meant that there are societies that tolerate different worldviews. Besides, sometimes they seemed incredibly contemporary, relevant, one could find deliberations on topics that were unheard of in the Soviet discourse. As I was reading *Židinys* all in one sitting, I got the idea to publish a magazine that would continue this tradition once Lithuania is free – it is called *Naujasis Židinys*.

And finally, the third layer – the material artifacts of symbolic or emotional significance. Often they were signs of statehood – silver 10 litas coin with Vytautas or Smetona, five litas coin with Basanavičius, notes and

stamps, images of Vytautas, portraits of the dukes or their copies – especially the jubilee bas relief of Vytautas Didysis by Petras Rimša, which spread in thousands of copies. But also old photographs with grandfathers in uniforms, or land property papers, a button or a belt buckle with the Gediminas Columns that once belonged to a cadet... Too much to list, but it was a very real testimony to another, different Lithuania, and a hope of its return.

And finally, the cultural, or possibly even more counter-cultural influence of the Western world that is so hard to define. Music, “rags”, as the Western and in general better-quality clothing was referred to by the communist propaganda, denim and even chewing gum – all were symbols of another world that sometimes acquired shades of protest, even the counter-cultural youth movements, the hippies and the punks, which used to automatically colored politically. The Kalanta uprising was first and foremost an effect of the hippie youth, even though plenty of Kaunas people joined in immediately. Before then, there were the “stileivos” – “stilyagi” in Russian, whose trousers seemed too tight to the orthodox CP members, the lovers of jazz, simply people who grew their hair long, and who later wore bellbottoms, men who dyed their hair blond. Women were probably allowed more, but they were also flooded with the whitewater criticism for their aspirations to dress nicely and live nicely – to pander to the consumer bourgeois lifestyle.

What I left for the very end is the Catholic and other churches and religious communities. They were not even flowers, rather, trees whose roots were reaching deep into the soil of not even pre-war, but of many centuries. The very church buildings, Gothic, Baroque, Classicist, sometimes modern, like in Šančiai neighborhood of Kaunas, or as the Resurrection Church that was turned into a factory, or the temple of the Continental Reformed Church in Kaunas that I think was made into the canteen for the Soviet militia school – they made their impact even while they were closed, they were foreign to the sovietized landscape, it splintered and crumbled around churches. The sacred buildings seeped into the works of art, and the censors required to remove the crosses from the images of the temples. Just like in 1940, or 1861, or 1794, the congregations gathered in them, the inscrutable rites took place that had nothing to do with the five-year plans of the Party, the words of gospel resounded unauthorized by Glavlit, even the simple

and in a way conformist homily led to a world of different values and aesthetics. This topic of religion is too broad to discuss in this presentation in more detail, so let's leave it at that.

I was going to finish my speech on a different note, a more optimistic one, but recently something happened that made me return to the wall, not the one that's destroyed, but the one that's being constructed. On the 23rd of August in the Cathedral Square, some people gathered in support of Hong Kong citizens who lined up in their own Baltic Way. Suddenly, a number of aggressive Chinese appeared in front of them and flew the red flag of the communist China. They were the ones who tried their best to build a wall in the capital city of a free country, to separate the free people in support of other people who desire freedom. For now, the wall was made up of their backs, the flamboyant red flags, the aggressive chants. What hurt me the most was not the fact that the Chinese broke the law, the most hurtful was the fact that the police tried to avoid interfering and defending the freedom of choice of the citizens. I am really scared that it may become the first tiny fragment of the new wall that is being built not only in the hatred of the enemy of freedom, but in our own fear and calculation. A wall in the shade of which one would again look for flowers who witness that there is another and different life on the other side – how would I know where.

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