

Touring the Lands of the old Rzeczpospolita: a historic travelogue

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Starting out

On a warm day in July 1997, I was sitting in a tourist bus going from Warsaw, Poland, to Vilnius, Lithuania, with two dozen young graduate students recruited from the western republics of the former Soviet Union. The bus was chartered by the University of Warsaw Eastern Summer School for a mobile session to be held in Warsaw, Vilnius, Minsk, and Lviv, after which we would travel back to Warsaw. Our twenty or so students (or rather, auditors, since they were all at the advanced graduate level) comprised an assortment of nationalities, abilities, characters, and appearances. Among them were a very energetic young lady radio producer from Minsk, an assertive student of nationalism from Kiev, a couple of tall literature-minded Russian girls from Moscow, an inquisitive Bulgarian pair, and a friendly, picture-pretty Ukrainian teacher, to name just a few. The accompanying staff consisted of several Polish professors (each joining us for a portion of the trip) and myself (I was taking the risk of remaining for the entire length of the expedition). Our academic organizer, Jan Malicki, was doggedly determined to make us consume the totality of the cultural menu without neglecting to visit a single site; Inga Kotanska, the financial organizer adept at juggling with all the soft currencies of the region, was to assume our solvency; and Wojciech Stanislawski, the administrative assistant, was in charge of the physical well-being of the travelers. A Polish Radio reporter was also aboard. The chartered bus had seen better days, but it was air-conditioned and shook only moderately. It was driven by a business-minded Polish driver, adept at fixing the old vehicle (which was required from time to time) and at selling us beverages between meals.

We were to stay at least five days in each city outside of Warsaw. Lectures were to be delivered either in Polish or in the local language by Polish, Western, and local professors. Among those who ventured to lecture outside of Warsaw were a few familiar names: the Lithuanian-American writer Thomas Venclova (in Vilnius) and a vast array of historians, among them the Welshman Norman Davies, the Pole Aleksander Gieysztor (in Vilnius), and the Ukrainian-German Bohdan Osadczyk (in Lviv). Each session outside Poland was to deal with a

specific field: history in Vilnius, political science and NATO in Minsk, and art history in Lviv. In addition to the academic part, participants were supposed to visit historic and cultural sights, mostly those related to the Polish past of the region.

The key to our journey was that all the lands we were to visit were, at some point in history, part of old Rzeczpospolita. Polish culture impregnates these cities' pasts; castles and palaces carry the armories of Polish nobility; history is interwoven with that of the old Polish-Lithuanian state. Vilnius (or Wilno in Polish) and Lviv (or Lwow in Polish and Lemberg in German) were in Polish hands as recently as the interim between the two world wars, and they were also part of the Polish world between the 14th and the 18th centuries. They remained the hotbeds of Polish nationalism during the Romanov rule in Vilnius and that of the Hapsburgs in Lemberg. The Polishness of Minsk was more remote, with Polish rule having lasted for "only" five centuries (between the 14th and the end of the 18th), but every ruin of a castle around Minsk nonetheless bears the name of its Polish founder.

Our journey had a threefold goal: to immerse our students (who mostly came from the lands of the pre-18th century Rzeczpospolita) in Polish culture, to impress them with the new Poland (the westernized country, candidate for NATO membership), and finally, to familiarize them with the western methods of dealing with their own history, politics, and culture. Poland was to appear as the carrier of western ideology on the borders between Central and Eastern Europe (and the Poles are insistent upon placing themselves in the eastern part of Central Europe and not in the western part of Eastern Europe!).

The Polish-Lithuanian border crossing, like all the car crossings between Poland and its eastern neighbors, is an endless affair, with drivers sleeping in their cars awaiting their turn. We crossed much faster as a result of the priority given to buses, especially since ours was supplied with official Lithuanian consular letters requesting all possible assistance (a pattern to be repeated at all our border crossings). Still, it took some time, but we were supplied with Polish coffee, sandwiches, and mineral water (our bus carried cases of Polish mineral water during the entire trip for use in unforeseen circumstances, a visible indicator that Poland had joined the ranks of advanced nations).

Lithuania

We arrived in Vilnius by night, and were soon provided with accommodations; the professorial staff stayed in a university guest-house in the center city while the students were housed in student dorms farther away. My "residence," located on a charming tree-lined street, faced a neglected park. It was a pre-war apartment house, with marble stairs and an elegant facade, partly dilapidated and dirty, but partly restored as business offices, a trendy cafe, and a venereal disease clinic. The next morning our bus picked us all up for a short trip to the Vilnius University, now a Lithuanian institution, located in the old town and founded in the 16th century by Stefan Batory, king of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. Receptions and cultural visits supplemented the schedule of daily sessions.

The session in old Vilnius, known as "the triangle of three cultures" dealt with history. History is the sore point of Vilnius mentality, as the city has been subjected not just to the influences of three cultures, as its epithet may indicate, but to many more, including Lithuanian, Polish, Belarussian, Russian, Jewish, and even Tatar invasions or waves of settlement. Thus we inevitably encountered reminders of the precariousness of ethnic relations. In comparison with what I saw in Vilnius two years ago, more historical plates with Polish inscriptions have been

removed from the walls of Vilnius University, and more traces of the city's Polish historical past have been eradicated all around town. The inscriptions at the Trokai castle remained solely in Lithuanian; the Russian and Polish texts had been removed, but funds were not yet available for the supposedly forthcoming English inscriptions. But at the entrance to the castle, as a sign of new times, a nine year old Lithuanian girl readily sold me fresh berries for an American dollar, obviously not disturbed by currency exchange problems (a state-run pharmacy in Vilnius was). Despite efforts at eradicating the cosmopolitan past of the city, Polish and Russian are still widely spoken, and the new Polish ambassador, an educated and elegant lady, seems to have acquired some influence in Vilnius, especially since Poland was invited to apply for NATO membership.

During the past two years the Jewish presence had diminished both in terms of population and, it seemed, from the peoples' memory: the only kosher restaurant that existed two years ago, "Jerusalem of Lithuania," had closed for lack of customers, and the pre-1917 Russian-language inscription on a Jewish-owned store, previously nicely restored, had vanished altogether. What was the purpose: to get rid of the Jewish or the Russian past, or both? I had no answer.

We observed several touching scenes. Entering an old church by chance, we witnessed a commemoration of the attempt by the Polish Home Army to liberate Wilno from the Nazis prior to the entry of Soviet troops in 1944. A group of elderly men in worn uniforms, covered with decorations, were at the ceremony, addressed by the Polish ambassador. The fate of the Vilnius branch of the Polish Home Army was tragic. Decimated by the Germans, then arrested and deported by the Soviets, they finally returned from exile but were treated with suspicion, and this after Lithuania regained its independence. They were a living testimony to a lost heroic cause. At "Ostra Brama"(Sharp Gate), Wilno's Lourdes, scores of pilgrims were, as always, seeking the protection of the Virgin Mary, whose dark image glorifies the site. At the Rossa cemetery, we saw the grave where the heart of Josef Pilsudski, the founder of post-World War I independent Poland, is buried. The cemetery is full of old graves similarly attesting to the city's past, almost all of them inscribed with Polish names, many known from literary and cultural history. (I did not go to my grandfather's cemetery; that one was leveled during the Khrushchev years and its marble plates removed for "better use"). We did go to the gothic Church of St. Anne, admired by Napoleon in 1812 on his route to Moscow.

An excursion to Kaunas, the interwar national capital and a city less marked by multi-ethnicity, was a voyage through time. Only one street, where the city's *jeunesse dorée* congregates in the few, already privatized, cafes, seemed alive. Surrounded by the typical impersonal and desolate Soviet-built suburbs, the city center seemed to have stood still in time, with its empty streets and squares a contrast to the busy center of Vilnius, a capital already bustling with the life of a consumer society. Two episodes from Kaunas remain in my memory: our bus losing a Warsaw University dean at a recently built highway rest-stop, and a Polish Catholic priest happy to converse with me in French.

Belarus

Our next session was scheduled in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, the most Soviet of all the post-Soviet republics of the old Soviet Union. The subject of the session was a more contemporary one, focusing on present-day politics such as NATO enlargement, the European Union, etc. The border crossing went once more without incident, except for the unsuccessful attempts of some minor custom clerks to extort a crossing bribe from us. This time, our host was

not a university but the independent foundation Euroforum, and our sessions were to be held in the only Belarussian- language high school in Minsk, which President Lukashenko wants to move to remote suburbs. While conversations in Vilnius dealt mostly with history and ethnic symbolism, discussions in Minsk concerned mostly the current political situation. Our hosts were both nationalist and pro-Western, and their government (that of president Lukashenko) was both anti-Western and anti-nationalist, dreaming above all of the restoration of the old Soviet Union. We fell into the midst of a political struggle: Wolha Karatkiewicz, our already-mentioned Belarussian participant, invited us to a party given by optimistic young people of the sole non-governmental radio station, "temporarily" closed. Contrary to what happened in Vilnius, our sessions were boycotted by local officials but attended by personalities of the opposition (including the previous president of Belarussia) and numerous western diplomats. A major preoccupation during all discussions was the possibility of Poland joining the Schengen group, thus ending the visa-free access to Poland by its eastern neighbors and creating a new "iron curtain" along the river Bug.

Our arrival in Minsk was in itself an illustration of the local situation. Since the hotel where we were supposed to lodge had no hot water, we were directed to another hotel, a nondescript square concrete building. Inside were penitentiary-style corridors, smelly toilets, and rooms furnished with poorhouse furniture, including worn-out mattresses. A disheveled man in a torn red undershirt was sitting at the entrance to check our guest cards. Middle-aged women with rags in their hands were moving around, supposedly cleaning the place. As a gesture of welcome I was handed a roll of toilet paper, and soon our bus took us to a restaurant called "Rest" located on October Street, for a prepaid dinner (our hotel, appropriately named "Soviet," was no longer equipped to supply food). Here our hungry students and professors got their next surprise: after a cup of watery soup, a small piece of over-fried meat was served with a few greasy potatoes and a glass of mineral water. The waitresses were surprised at our disbelief that nothing else was coming.

Fortunately, the next day, our organizers upgraded us to a better restaurant. For my part I decided to plead my age and western addiction to body comfort and offer to pay a supplement from my own pocket in order to be moved to a more comfortable hotel. This decision did not come lightly; my colleagues (including a university dean and a former ambassador) heroically remained in the old dump. The new place with the proud name "Planet" was a typical Soviet-style "deluxe" hotel tower, somehow decayed and neglected, but still much better than the downtrodden "Soviet." At a question about the odd shower installation (no base, but a draining hole in the floor), I got a political lesson: "Our Soviet shower hits hard, not like those Western showers of yours." The hotel itself was located in an area destroyed by the war, where the city fathers created a modern "Soviet city" made of massive impersonal structures built at considerable distance from each other. Urban atmosphere was lacking and all traces of human conviviality were absent. Other parts of the town presented very different styles: standard Soviet-era blocks, a few pre-revolutionary structures, and whole neighborhoods of small village-style wooden houses in various states of decrepitude. All around stood boxy concrete constructions and shopping areas of third world standards.

An excursion to the countryside, which made us cross the old border of Western Belarus (an area taken from Poland, following the September 1939 Soviet-Nazi partition of the Polish state), was an eye opener. In the town of Mir, the old castle, founded by Polish aristocracy (practically all castles are of Polish-Lithuanian origin, going back to the old Rzeczpospolita), was bought after World War I by a Russian emigrant, Prince Sviatopolk Mirskii, who liked the

fact that by sheer coincidence the castle and the town bore his name. After the arrival of Soviet troops, the old Russian Prince Mirskii was deported to Siberia along with many Poles, and the castle was pillaged and left in ruin. Today, the castle is being slowly restored, and pictures of Prince Mirskii and his family are shown on the walls. The town has changed little since 1939; except for the disappearance of all traces of Jewish presence and the increased misery of its inhabitants, Mir seemed untouched by decades of Soviet rule.

A larger center nearby, the town of Novogrudok, had harbored a large Jewish population before the war, in addition to Polish, Belarussian, and Tatar inhabitants; Jewish synagogues, Orthodox and Catholic Churches, and Muslim mosques stood side by side. The Jews, like elsewhere in Belarussia, had vanished in the death camps during the German occupation, and after the return of the Soviets, the churches were closed and the synagogues transformed into offices or warehouses. Now the synagogues were still abandoned, but churches, including Catholic ones, were open again. A statue of Lenin (they are still preserved all over Belarussia) with his finger typically pointed in admonition toward the abandoned hotel, still dominated the main square. The town had three main attractions: the Mickiewicz museum, a well-preserved modest manor house where the poet spent several years of his life, a clean, privatized restaurant where decent food was served, and a new mosque being built by the still surviving local Muslim community. Not far is the legendary lake Svitez, which disappointed our high expectations. It looked more like a pond, and its shores were "embellished" by carved wooden sculptures of souvenir shop quality, which were supposed to illustrate its legends. The forest site of Kuropaty, where the KGB carried out its mass executions, left us silent. There were three cement stairs and stalls over some graves, people were picnicking around, and children were playing. Another visit was to the massive Baroque church at Nieswiez, since 1939 successfully protected by the American branch of the Radziwill family and now faced with the possibility of being turned into a state museum-- President Lukashenko seems more oblivious to Western pressure than Chairman Brezhnev had been.

From the point of view of national image, the case of Belarus is unique. The Belarussian language is rarely spoken, for Russian prevails. The government itself, although more nostalgic about the old Soviet Union than actually pro-Russian, favors the Russian language over Belarussian. A feeling of Soviet patriotism seems to abound. The country has made few strides since 1991, and the population, the usual mafia and "new Belarussians" (who are just like the "new Russians") aside, is mostly concerned with survival. Despite official suspicion of the West (Poland and even Lithuania included), Belarussian border crossings are crowded with truck convoys proceeding to Russia, Western cars (bought or stolen), and a variety of voyagers (from proverbial "chelnoki" and Mafioso to simple citizens trying to make a living) in their own automobiles, all of them waiting to cross.

Ukraine

Our next stop, and the last academic session before returning to Warsaw, was Lviv. We were brought to the turn-of-the-century hotel George, formerly "Inturist" and before that a luxury establishment, turned into a slum during the years of Soviet rule and waiting to be restored. This mixture of palatial and dump setting was typical of the city as a whole. In this particular hotel, large rooms with high ceilings and elaborate moldings were furnished with junkyard items. Beautiful parquet floors were in disrepair, and in the tremendous bathrooms massive copper faucets were partially replaced with shifting aluminum tubes serving both the sink and the tub.

At night, cockroaches crawled from the cracks in the walls. One of its formerly chic restaurants still served a modest breakfast, while another was turned into a popular and rather dirty eatery. But my balcony, graced by a cheerful stone cherub, opened on a picturesque square, spoiled only by the neon sign of the money changer.

Walking around town, one is struck by both the beauty and the neglected state of this city, the majesty of its boulevards contrasting with the poor attire of the crowd. Lviv reminded us not only of Krakow, but of Vienna as well. Churches of various styles and periods (including Armenian Boim chapel in black marble), 18th-century houses with deep courtyards, 19th century prosperous apartment houses, townhouses with sculptured facades, parks, and monuments; the town could be a tourist mecca. Its Polish, Austro-Hungarian, and Jewish past is still manifest, but as in Vilnius, the Jews were exterminated during the Nazi occupation, and the Polish intelligentsia left for Poland while Ukrainian peasants from neighboring areas (Lithuanian peasants in the case of Vilnius) populated the town. The heritage of the old Hapsburg Empire is visible in the architecture of the town, but the last remnants of the German speaking population have vanished. The half-century of Soviet misrule left an imprint of neglect and disrepair; enormous efforts would be needed to restore the city to its previous glory. However, money is hardly available; an average Ukrainian worker makes little more than a franc per hour while his Polish neighbor makes ten times that much. Poverty sends scores of Ukrainian (and Belarussian) "Gastarbeiter" into neighboring Polish provinces and scores of half-starved homeless dogs into the streets of Lviv, an especially disturbing picture to animal lovers. At the border between the old and the new parts of the town stands an impressive monument to Lviv's Jewish population who were exterminated by the Nazis. It was built after independence with funds provided by World Jewry. Otherwise, almost nothing recalls of the contribution of "galicians" (Jews of Galicja) to this city. Only an outside wall with a commemorative plaque remains of the famous Golden Rose synagogue, the most important among the destroyed temples; children play in the weeds around it, unaware of its past.

Post-communist impoverishment of the intelligentsia is visible. Professor Roman Lipka, a prominent art specialist with great charm and a small salary, guided us around local monuments. With equanimity, he showed us the Ukrainian, Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Armenian, and Jewish heritage of the city, and we all learned to appreciate his impartiality. A little local Polish boy, no more than eleven years old, followed us around, playing on his Polishness to "rich"-- all is relative-- Polish visitors. A bystander hearing our Polish speech volunteered that life was better under pre-war Polish rule.

In the streets, Russian seemed to be spoken by most and Polish understood by many, but Ukrainian clearly prevailed in this hotbed of Ukrainian nationalism. Lviv and the entire western Ukraine not only consistently vote nationalist, but are ardent advocates of Western political orientation for the newborn Ukrainian state and opponents of very close relations with Russia. The 1939 Soviet annexation of Western Ukraine and its incorporation into the Ukrainian Soviet Republic was a major blunder on Moscow's part: it brought new life to Ukrainian national feelings, counterbalancing the integrationist tendencies in the russified eastern provinces (with the center in Kharkiv) and influencing the capital Kiev itself.

A visit to old castles and churches around Lviv gave us more material for thought. Again, as in Belarus, both the castles and the churches are connected with the Polish aristocracy, and towns with their former Jewish inhabitants. Again, the glory of the past contrasts with the neglect of the Soviet era and the slow pace of reconstruction, hampered by the lack of funds. Another splendid palace, with rooms still decorated with beautiful moldings, panels, the remaining

furniture and paintings, was in a total state of disrepair, and its formerly elegant park was covered with weeds. A Soviet-style sanatorium was housed there. At another castle in the process of restoration, only the photos at the gate were out of place; they commemorated the war-time memory of the SS brigade Galicia, not exactly the darling of all visitors, and certainly not ours. Our return to Lviv was delayed by a singing and costumed procession carrying the image of Virgin Mary from village to village; we did not complain about the lost half hour.

Stopping on the public square of a larger town, we were barely able to buy anything to eat; the absence of service establishments and eating places seemed to be widespread. A question came to our minds: how do the inhabitants carry out their daily routines under such conditions? Obviously they do, and no doubt the lack of a basis for comparison with Western amenities helps.

Back in Poland

In our final trek from the former Soviet Union and back to the West (i.e. Poland) we crossed the border near the Polish city of Przemysl. On the Ukrainian side was a decrepit border station staffed with grouchy-looking Soviet-style officials, while on the Polish side was a modern structure manned by smiling young men in English-style sweaters with leather elbow patches, who, unlike their Ukrainian colleagues, were obviously instructed to project a "welcome to NATO" image on the voyagers.

The first kilometers into Polish territory were covered by billboards, all in Cyrillic lettering, advertising innumerable goods and materials for sale to visitors from the Ukraine. The old Polish mistrust of the Russian (and Ukrainian) language has vanished together with the Warsaw Pact: visitors from the east are no longer perceived as occupants, but as either customers or "Gastarbeiter" - welcome as far as entrepreneurial Poles are concerned.

Our next night was spent in a newly-built motel (still a rarity in Poland) near the town of Lancut, where a palace (now a museum) stands, which was built by the Lubomirski family and successively inhabited by all the Polish Gotha. It remained miraculously untouched; furniture, art, and china remain as spared by both German and Soviet troops. It is said that the last owner, Count Potocki, due to his social connections, was able to dissuade the Germans from pillaging the site, except for the interior of the Lancut synagogue. His majordomo performed the same miracle after the prince's flight, by affixing inscriptions reading "Polish National Museum" in Russian all over the palace and the park gates, and securing the protection of the commander of the entering Soviet troops, who happened to be an educated man. I suspect that our organizers choose the palace of Lancut on purpose for our last visit of this journey; the splendor of the castle and its gardens, including the collection of over fifty horse carriages, were meant to show the superiority of Poland over its less fortunate eastern neighbors.

Our trip across the lands of old Rzeczpospolita ended in Warsaw the next evening. It had been an excursion into the past glories and present resurrection of Poland, an insight into the hardships still suffered by its eastern neighbors, a confirmation of the depth and dimension of Soviet mismanagement, and a revelation of the still-persisting nationality problems. It has also been a chance to rekindle the memory of local Jewry, forgotten by all except the very old and odd visitors like myself.

