

LITHUANIA AS VIEWED BY THE JAPANESE

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Introduction:

For this conference I have chosen the topic “Lithuania as viewed by the Japanese”. It is easy in one sense but not so in other senses. Honestly speaking, the average Japanese did not know Lithuania until the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Even though Lithuania was officially recognized as an independent state on the 3rd of September 1991, her situation and circumstances were not reported in detail by the Japanese Newspapers. For the Japanese, Lithuanian independence was nothing more than having been one of the Soviet Republics. Accordingly we had no way to know the fate of a small state which suffered at the hands of a big power.

I will present my own views on Lithuania rather than those of all “the Japanese”. In 1991, I had undertaken field research about the ethnicity of Lithuanian immigrants, that is displaced persons in Australia. I was interested in comparing their views with those who live in their mother country. Therefore, I visited Lithuania the following year.

I did not have much knowledge about the reality of socialist countries in Europe, although I had some research experiences in China. We Japanese had known the Soviet Union behind the iron-curtain only through official information received Moscow. I imagined Lithuanian revival as a democratic state. And I pictured in my mind that the people

were excited by gained freedom again and the young people were actively joining the reconstruction of the democratic state.

When I came to Lithuania in March 1992, I saw the large concrete blocks as barricades around the Seimas, the shops without goods, the dismal looks of the pedestrians on the street, and discontented youths. This was far from my image of independent Lithuania. It took little time until I understood that Lithuanian mentality had changed during the Soviet regime over a half-century. I confirmed this fact when I met many Lithuanian displaced persons in Australia and the United States. Lithuanian displaced persons seemed to me to be different Lithuanians.

Since the year of 1992 I have visited every year. To my surprise, the society has developed with increasing speed with the advancement of the privatization of the State property. Last summer, I saw the capital, Vilnius, had changed dramatically in appearance. The citizens were gloomy faces no more and were full of life. When individual rights were guaranteed through privatization, the people realized the value of democracy. Based upon my experiences I will speak about Lithuania in stages. During my field research in rural areas, Dr. Aukse Čepaitienė always accompanied me.

1.

Even though the Peoples Front called Sajudis as a movement of ethnic revival in Lithuania started in accordance with Perestroika and Glasnost' in Russia, I believed a spouting of ethnic revival showed the fact that the underground organization of the nationalists had not been isolated. Many magazines, pamphlets, newspapers and even a journal of the Catholic church had been published in the underground. During the

era of Sajudis, the Baltic States displayed unprecedented demonstration of protest to Moscow regarding the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Baltic people organized to make a “human chain” of protest by 1.5 million citizens, reaching across 600 Km through the three Baltic states. And “revolution through singing” was born, that is, a way of protest by singing folk songs. These protests were likely due to the wisdom of a nation which had survived under incredible suppression.

Lithuania became independent soon after the breakdown of the Soviet Union by coup d'état. The first Republic of Lithuania was independent under similar circumstances in 1918. It was due to the Russian Revolution. Lithuanian independence was not won by bloodshed.

After independence in 1991, the Sajudis movement was cracked by internal disunion. It seems to me that the lack of solidarity in this country is caused by three things: ethnic composition, national character and the historical background. The majority of the nation is composed of ethnic Lithuanians. Historically the Lithuanian themselves had never established their sovereignty since Vytautas the Great of the Middle ages. Lithuania had been controlled by big powers such Poland and Russia. Because of this, Lithuania had hardly any experiences in facing serious situations with unity as a nation. Lithuania depended too much on international organization or big powers during the period from the first Republic to the Cold War, irrespective of bitter experiences. Nevertheless, Lithuania since the most recent independence was too dependent on aid from Europe and America.

The Baltic states had large unsettled problems in their countries such as the Soviet army's stationing and the drift of the conservative groups even after their independence. On the other hand, they had to reorganize

their diplomacy and create a free economy by themselves. Lithuania changed gears from being part of a big power to the cooperative organization with the other Baltic Sea states. Lithuania wanted to work with the EU based on a cooperation with Estonia and Latvia. In fact Lithuania approached the Council of Baltic Sea States actively and was more interested in regional cooperation.

2.

In 1992, Sajudis groups were gradually losing their power. In waiting for the first free election, Sajudis and its leader Vytautas Landsbergis were not always popular in the rural areas. Under the Sajudis government the privatization of land was being discussed by the farmers. For instance, the Sajudis members in Plunge area began a campaign for privatization. On the other hand, the ex-Communist Party members prevented the Sajudis campaigning. As a result, the farmers were confused and fell into an uneasy situation. In those days, Kolkhoz bosses and ex-communists still had power in the rural areas. The Soviet army camps and KGB still remained in many places and controlled the people. The Sajudis campaign was not enough to explain the process of privatization to the farmers who were afraid of radical changes.

The State authority finds it very easy to confiscate private land and property, but the contrary is not as easy as the post-communist states showed. The Supreme Council in the Sajudis government issued the cheque at the same time as the privatization law was enacted. This policy proved very successful for making a new nation. The declaration of independence was justified by a guarantee of individual right. I realized that a transition from socialism to capitalism in the state required enormous

energy.

In the first election, Sajudis group was completely defeated by the ex-Communist Party called the Lithuanian Labor Democratic Party. The social consciousness of the rural areas lags behind the urban areas in almost any countries. In Lithuania the people were not excited about the election as a whole. The farmers were still controlled by the Kolkhoz bosses and did not have many ideas for making a democratic society.

On the other hand, the people of cities had criticized the Sajudis government for the cessation of the hot-water system, due to the shortage of energy under the Soviet sanctions and a decline in the standard of living caused a shortage of consumer goods. All of those problems most likely appeared as the result of the election.

I thought the people under the Soviet regime found it difficult to know the value of freedom. The last Minister of Foreign Affairs, Juozas Urbsys left a message to the nation a few months before his death. He emphasized that the nation must be patient with many difficulties, which were greater in number than that of the independence of the last Republic. His words did not echo in people's mind. When the people were complaining about the lack of hot-water in the homes, I remembered that the average Japanese family could get a hot-water system only about 20-25 years after the war. Perhaps the Lithuanian people find it difficult to imagine how we Japanese were patiently waiting for a life of freedom. The Lithuanians can not forget that their compatriots paid through the immeasurable number of victims who died gaining freedom.

Lithuanian society began to change remarkably in 1993. A variety of Western goods appeared in shop windows, although they were beyond the reach of middle class people. On the other hand, the technocrats who

worked in the government received a favorable salary and gained buying power. Under the new government, the disparity in the distribution of wealth became conspicuous. All people knew exactly who, and what kind of person was rich in the new society. In fact, the new luxurious homes attracted attention in both urban and rural areas.

In contrast to the former Nomenklatura, the former political prisoners including partisans, and the former deportees were still living at the bottom of the social scale. Those people were out of touch with social topics and did not receive people's attention. In those days, a requiem mass for a victim of the Soviets could not be organized on a nation-wide scale. Rather, a small function in the district was held only by a surviving partisan and the families of the victims. As the government was replaced by the former Communist Party, the people had to recall a previous terror under the Soviet system. The general public did not join this function due to a faint shadow of uneasiness.

In 1993 I was deeply moved by the withdrawal of the Soviet army on the 31st of August. I joined the celebration held by the government in the front of the Seimas building. I felt I was very lucky to be together with the Lithuanians at that historical moment. I was so deeply touched by the liberation of the nation that I could not talk for a while. Then, the elderly gentleman and his wife in view of the public servants stood behind me. They said in hushed tones, "If the Soviet army evacuates Lithuania, Lithuania has no more hope! It is certain that a coup d'état will take place!" . They looked very somber and full of tragic feeling. They were likely thinking in all seriousness.

On the other hand, a group of inebriated young people caused a great uproar and disturbed the solemn atmosphere during the flag raising with

the national anthem of the military band. As soon as the fireworks display was finished, the crowd of people immediately dispersed. It was strange for me that the ceremony did not leave any aftereffect and ended all too soon.

The next day the former Sajudis groups held the celebration at the same place. Its climax was the arrival of Landsbergis, the former Sajudis leader and the leader of the Opposition. The people could not move due to the surging crowd. In that crowd there were : a 94-year-old lady, the wife of a Cabinet member in the last Republic, a tattered Lithuanian flag defended to the last by the partisans, and an uprising volunteer army. I cannot forget the old lady with tears streaming down her cheeks. All others meeting my gaze truly moved me. During the ceremony, we thought of innumerable victims who had died for the sake of their motherland and freedom.

It was unnatural that the nation could not celebrate in unity despite such a historical celebration. The disintegrating celebration was not only due to the government of the former Communist Party but also historical background, because the Lithuanians had few experiences of unity under national solidarity. I was interested in ethnic revival and, how the Lithuanians recovered their humanity after liberation from the Soviet society. It was undeniable that the people educated under the Soviet system had changed their mentality.

One day, I asked a Lithuanian about the idea of "state". A majority of Lithuanians were proud of the Dukedom of Lithuania and Vytautas the Great, who conquered a wide area in the Middle ages. Vytautas the Great was a hero only for Lithuanians. The Lithuanian average historian depended considerably on the Soviet documents for the

contemporary history of Lithuania. However, the documents were not always accurate. The living memory of the deportees, that is, the former social élite and partisan survivors are valuable for filling in the blanks of Lithuanian contemporary history. The historian must seek the cooperation of former political prisoners and displaced persons. Those people pass away not only in Lithuania and but also overseas year after year.

In 1992, I started to have conduct interview with deportees and partisans all over the country to record their living memories. I found it very difficult to find even their places of residence so it took time. Now, I have lost my seven informants. I was happy to meet such persons who are so hard to replace. In 1996, I saw the first book of resistance by a Lithuanian historian. The partisan survivors had been waiting for it since Sajudis movement began.

After the first election, the former leaders of the KGB or the NKVD began to join social and political activities openly. As a matter of course, their unity was strong. As the former Nomenklatura had the know-how of administration, they became a power group in the Seimas.

On the other hand, some of the former élites did not accept the new state and became self-seekers. The average Lithuanian found it difficult to be patient for the sake of a new Lithuania and to dream of the future. The society was not yet stable due to a 180° turnabout of the state system.

3.

It came in the year 1994. The change of the society accelerated and all people could recognized its development, although the government

was in a fix economically. The privatization programme which had ceased because of the replacement of the government began to work once again. The stabilization of the society was due to a great extent to the successful privatization of the state property. In Lithuania, the cheque issued on behalf of privatization was organized at the same time as the declaration of independence in 1990. The quick issue of the cheque made it easy to be successful in privatization. The cheque issue was carried out prior to Russia and its success was noted by the other Baltic states.

The economy developed rapidly owing to joint-ventures and the introduction of foreign capital in 1995. The privatization of the state property which required a great undertaking was completed by the end of year. As a result, many buildings were repaired and the walls were repainted. The appearance of the old town of Vilnius changed at a stroke. On the other hand, farmers in the rural areas harvested doubly for the first time on their own land in the autumn of 1996. Other farmers expected their turn for land privatization. The state became stable and economic rehabilitation reached its present stage by economic activation. It was only five years after independence.

Individual rights were most guaranteed by privatization in the post-Soviet countries. One of the reasons for quick success in Lithuania was due to the majority ethnic Lithuanians (81.4 percent) and the small geographical area of the country (65,000 square kilometers).

Corruption and bribery exist in Lithuania as well as in Japan. But the people awakened for social justice. This was apparent from the result of the second election after independence in the autumn of 1996.

Lithuania was the first (1993) to make the Soviet army withdraw, and restitution of private property from the state was completed for the

first time (1995) among the Baltic states. This was due to a great extent to the Sajudis group which was led by Vytautas Landsbergis and other eminent members.

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