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BETWEEN VILNIUS AND VALENCIA – Where Poets Meet in Session

A colleague, who had already taken part in this congress advised me, if I go to the „Poetry-Spring” in Vilnius, to pack some warm clothes, it can be quite cool in Lithuania at the end of May. The Lithuanian „Poetry-Spring” exists since thirty five years and in the last decade with international participation. Ten poets and a translator were invited to Vilnius this year. They came from Great Britain (Danie Abse), Latvia (Amanda Aizpuriete), U.S.A. (Craig Czury and Kerry Shawn Keys), Slovenia (Ales Debeljak), Iceland (Ingibjörg Haraldsdottir) Sweden (Li Li und Anna Harrison), Spain (Jaume Pont), Russia (Sergej Zavjalov) as well as one Austrian.

I should have taken more T-shirts with me rather than sweatshirts. The cold winter had changed into a summery spring, so much so that I was able to enjoy the evening of my arrival, drinking beer in a pub garden on the other side of the old city. After one and a half hours flying time, one is suddenly a guest in a country, from whose language one doesn't have a clue. So – back to sign language.

At the reception the participants received an imposing anthology, with translations of their poems into Lithuanian, as well as the poems of the Lithuanian authors. „I translated your poems, some of which will be presented, you read the original version and I the transcription,” said Jurgis Kuncinas. The Uzupio Caffe is full to bursting. Poets and customers eat and drink in a spacious, comfortable, glazed-in terrace,

under old trees, with a view over a small stream. Although merely a few minutes walk from the city centre, a suburban atmosphere prevails here.

„I live in this area,” says Antanas Jonynas, a poet and translator from German, who was also the moderator for the evening.” This will be our quarter, the quarter of the artists, as Schwabing once was in Munich. The apartments and houses are still inexpensive here, but that will soon change, as much has to be renovated.”

„Are you ready? Now its our turn,” whispered Jurgis. „Please let me know which of my poems you have translated, to know what I should read.” Good two hours long, guest and local poets recited from their works, and still the public remained attentive, even the waiters served without making disturbing background noises.

Next day the foreign guests are invited for an excursion to Trakai, the former capital city of the country. School children jostle in the rooms of the renovated castle, that is set up as a museum, which awakes cavalier attitudes in some of the boys and causes the girls to mutate into catalains.

In the bus to the „Gallery of the Ditch” at Zabarija nobody has a notion of what lies ahead. In the middle of the landscape, fairly well on its own – a house. I think to myself – who would stray into such a remote area for a multilingual reading, particularly since it would require considerable local knowledge to find the way to this secluded place. Nevertheless there are many young people on the move, working and constructing. „My brother is a sculptor, that is his studio and these are his students,” explains Eugenijus Alisanka, the organiser of the festival. The assignment was to

produce objects out of natural materials: there are sand torsos, constructions out of twigs, straw and wood, which are burnt at night to symbolize the transience of all things, sculpture for a restricted period . An improvised sauna was in the process of being constructed under a plastic awning. The artist is simultaneously the subject and the object, his body is both plastic and organic – the boundaries become indistinct.

Many vehicles are parked on the lawn, the interested public has arrived, poets introduce themselves in many languages. Afterwards, all who wish to, are invited to avail themselves of the sauna. Others help themselves from the buffet – „Cepelin” is served, a potato dough covered Lithuanian speciality. I decide to give preference to conversation, rather than perspiration.

Next day the participants are divided into groups and driven all over the countryside. The poets visit schools, libraries and cultural centres, to deliver lectures. Suddenly our bus stops at the side of the road, where two small buses are already parked. Nothing but forest as far as the eye can see. A breakdown, we think, drivers help each other. „They are a little bit late,” said Jurgis. At the edge of the forest, a drummer has set up his kit, accompanied by four other musicians, brassblowing and accordioneering. They welcomed us to the borders of their region. Then I discovered the direction signs on the side of the road. Girls in regional traditional dress offered us bread, cheese and a drink which Jurgis translated as „Milk Champagne”. Prepared from whey, with very little alcohol, the liquid adds spice to the mild cheese, served with raisins. Each Poet is presented with a flower. While the musicians play, the traditionally dressed girls ensure that everybody has sufficient cheese and bread, right up until we make our departure.

The children and teachers are already waiting in the school for the local and foreign poets. Cultural events are not frequently on the programme for this off the beaten track village. They respect people who write stories or poems, are curious what they have to say. The children have no inhibitions, to put questions to the writers. Well expressed answers are rewarded with applause. Again, flowers for the poets. There is still an atmosphere of past Soviet times hanging in the air. Nevertheless we must leave the prepared snack, after a cigarette, as a reading has been arranged for this evening in the municipal library of the small town Varéna.

More than one hundred listeners found their way to the ceremonial hall. The authors of certain poems earned considerable applause. Apparently, the people enjoy poetry, otherwise they would have stayed at home, there is no obligation for them to attend a poetry reading.

And yet again, flowers after the show, each of the readers received a sash with the Town's coat of arms, laid over their shoulders. In the entrance area to the library tables are arranged together for a meal. We would normally invite guests to a restaurant, but the Lithuanians served us with homemade dishes. Various starters led over to a warm main course. During the desert I feel I should say a few word as guest, which Jurgis translated, especially since the Lithuanian authors gave short speeches and proposed toasts. My regrets, not being able to speak Lithuanian, induced the director of the library to present me with a Lithuanian-German dictionary, on the spot, which he promptly look from his stocks, that this argument would have no validity on my next visit.

Jonas Liniauskas, the leader of our group urged us to depart, as we still had to return to Vilnius. „It won't be that easy to get away” prophesied Jurgis. Thereafter we drank one or two farewell drinks, as well as a parting glass and one for the road.

The next day we are on the road again, this time to Birstonas, a traditional health-resort. We are greeted by a dance group of young traditionally dressed girls, in front of the town hall, where the notables were all lined up. After a round of welcoming words, we proceed to the school for a reading, where this time the pupils would also read their own poems which they had learnt by heart. Again flowers, and quickly to the town park and the next appearance, which takes place in the open air beside the monument to the Lithuanian writer Balys Sruoga (1896 – 1947). Not a seat is free, and many have to listen standing up. Through the public address system, even those sitting on the adjacent benches can follow every word. Some people understood German and let it be known. The flowers give pleasure to a lady of my choice. The centre point of the buffet is a cake in the form of a book. The bus driver wants to return to Vilnius. Although there is a full moon the nights are extremely short.

Tomorrow we will all meet in the Writers Association to go to the nearby university where the main event, the Closing Ceremony of the „Poetry Spring” would take place in an inner court. „Many people will come.” Eugenijus Alisanka was proved right.

But I'm still with Jurgis and Antanas on our way to the graveyard. „That you also see something other than libraries, schools, forests and parks.”

Orderly rows of German soldier's graves, concrete crosses, one like the other, up hill and down dale, uniformly lined up even in death, perhaps even more so than during their lives. Unused crosses for the nameless dead, no doubt mass produced, lie ready for action. A war memorial for the Soviet soldiers. Pompous the monuments for the dead Russians: functionaries and politicians, „now they have lost their power.” Antanas and Jurgis nod to each other, while young boys with bicycles use the gradients and inclines as a track for their competitions.

Poets and members of the audience stream into the court of the university. The reading will last two hours. Photographers and television are present. The evening will be moderated by Eugenijus Alisanka. I am able to count the people from my position on the podium: I give it up at about four hundred. More and more are still arriving, some in traditional dress, as if it were a popular fair. Jurgis had translated two more of my poems, specially for this occasion, which we would present in our well practiced dialogue style.

In the meantime I'm thinking about the detour we made to the woodland house of the deceased holder of the Andersen Prize, Anzelmas Matutis. Downstairs a cramped little room for living and eating, upstairs a bedroom, all fabricated by the author of numerous children's' books, from tree trunks, roots, branches and twigs, a house out of a fairytale, but with electricity, refrigerator and cooker, hidden behind tree bark, yet without either bath or toilet. This need was fulfilled by a small stream. All who visited Matutis must first balance their way over a tree trunk which bridged the stream. Those who succeeded were offered a schnapps. There wasn't enough space for more than three people in Anzelmas Matutis living-room.

The closing ceremony at the university proved to be an important literary event, the focus of which was poetry alone, pure poetry. The audience is patient and attentive. Physical and communicative needs are attended to after the poetry marathon by means of a party in the „Writers Association” building. The night is still before us.

But every farewell is at the same time a new beginning. The flight to Valencia for the „First World Congress on Literature” is waiting. About seventy writers from four continents have come. During the next five days we will evaluate each other on the basis of our poetry.

The inaugural evening was organised by Germain Droogenbroodt, a Belgian who lives in Spain and is co-organizer of the festival. His address is supported by two musicians, the Indian artist Satish Gupta produced a drawing to each poem, the creation of which was transformed to a screen through a video camera. An attempt to put poetry into a multi-media setting. Paying attention to the drawing process quite often distracted me from the poetry, whether because pictures evoke a stronger attraction than words or because we are used to the fascination of the visual image. I will study the poems later in peace and quiet.

We were collected from our four star hotel and driven to the newly constructed Congress Centre of Valencia, the third largest city in Spain. The programme for the next three days assigned six lectures to each morning and afternoon with a theme of the day: „War and Peace”, „Literature and Environment” and „Spheres of Influence of Literature”

The lectures are simultaneously translated into English and French as well as Spanish. There was not sufficient time for subsequent discussion of the presentations. Although open to the public we are nevertheless among like minded.

On three evenings, readings take place in the „Capilla de la Beneficencia”, a former church which was converted into a Culture Centre. The authors sit in front of the Iconostases. Pedro de la Pena, one of the organizers, introduces the writers, while Germain Droogenbroodt translates into Spanish. Five or six poems from each of the poets have been freely translated and copies are available to the public. Some poets fascinate because of their dress, others through the phonetics of language.

At the communal meals we come into conversation with each other, become acquainted with standpoints and positions, have the opportunity to discuss various contributions and can expose the cultural backgrounds of the individual participants, more than is possible from a lecture. Here we have a Chinese who lives in Holland, with an Aztec writer from Mexico, a Spanish and English speaking gipsy from America; there is a Russian from St. Petersburg, a Nepalese, an Albanian who lives in Spain, at the same table with a Serb and a Turk, who has chosen Paris as his domicile. An Indian distributes circulars with his biography, whereby we know that he aspires towards the Nobel Prize for Literature. In the meantime a Russian translates from English into French for the Tunisians, Algerians and Senegalese. I speak German with a poet from San Francisco, who knows Vienna in surprising detail. Those from Luxembourg and Holland have a good command of German, as does a Lebanese who translates Austrian Literature into Arabic, and will enjoy a scholarship in Vienna next Autumn.

As the bus travels southwards in the direction of Altea, where a lyric anthology in three Levantine languages, Spanish, Arabic and Hebrew will be presented, each of the occupants has to sing a song from his homeland over the bus microphone. Vocal indisposition as a pretext is not acceptable.

A police car is waiting immediately after the toll-gate. They are not here to process a traffic offence, but to lead the bus to the Museum of International Music and Music Instruments, a villa by the sea with a view over the Bay of Altea. That's where the presentation of the book will take place. One of the two policemen takes over the role of a museum porter and regulates the sale of the book, and at the same time smokes his pipe.

While some stay in Altea, the others board the bus with a full stomach and return to Valencia.

One fragmented day remains to at least see a little part of the old city, as there was no opportunity during the congress. The Thai colleague can't believe that the shops are closed on Sunday.

And me, I'm flying home again, to catch up with my sleep.