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Memory and Amnesia in a Postcommunist Society

The transition period has led in Lithuania to a decay of communal identity and civic solidarity: As everywhere else, the euphoria over the fall of the Soviet regime has died down and given in to disillusionment with the new political elites. Almantas Samalavicius asks how this change is tangible in the way Lithuania is writing and re-writing history in post-communist Lithuania.

When diagnosing the most essential problems of the current social period, a strange decay of communal identity and collective memory should be taken into consideration – moreover so because it has become more and more distinct in Lithuanian society. The problem of social memory was always relevant; however it became of the utmost importance in the Soviet era when the regime applied powerful mechanisms of oppression and control to change the past, to recreate the history of dominated nations according to its ideological program and vision of progress which aimed to change people's minds and self-reflection. According to this program, social engineering was applied to alter Lithuanian national identity and eventually to replace it with Soviet identity and loyalty to the doctrines of the ruling Communist party and its values. It is well known that there were different forms of destruction of national identity: the severe ones (physical extermination, imprisonment, exile, persecution of dissidents, etc.) and, especially during the later period of Soviet rule, more subtle methods – creation and dissemination of new versions of history, and the infusion of new values with the help of educational systems, mass media, public organizations, art, and other possible instruments of mass propaganda. In fact all totalitarian regimes, no matter what ideologies they professed to, behaved in the same way: the project of control over the present and the future involved the goal of suppressing the collective consciousness. Thus old institutions, traditions, the cultural legacy and the feeling of the communal bond, were destroyed, and ideologically processed versions of the past were imposed. The construction of a society without memory, without a past, without an authentic history of its own – this was the ideal of social engineering applied by all known totalitarian regimes. The Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa has given insightful comments on the extinction of the history of his ancestors – the Incas. According to him, it is no longer possible to reconstruct the history of this ancient people because it was destroyed not only by European colonizers, but also by the country's own emperors who, as soon as they advanced onto the throne, immediately gave orders to the scribes to rewrite the past so that all merits of predecessors were attributed to the new ruler. In the end, the history rewritten endlessly according to the will and whims of every emperor, turned into a fiction that contains no recognizable references to real events.

The problem of rewriting the past hardly seemed of any importance in Lithuania six or seven years ago when society to a certain degree still shared a communal bond that became very strong during the period of national

resurgence, but these days attitudes toward the past become a pressing issue to anyone who maintains faith in the future of national independence. A lot of time has passed since the time when mass rallies were the expression of naturally awakened national and civic solidarity. Many of the changes that occurred during the last decade were marked by painful losses. During this period the Lithuanian society experienced various upheavals and traumas: numerous outbursts of endless trust along with an equal amount of disillusionment in former political idols, parties, and charismatic personalities that had ascended with the "velvet revolution". Since then, Lithuanian society has constantly wandered between love and hate, hysteria and apathy, naïve credulity and distrust, as well as between many other opposites, many of which do not lend themselves to any objective social register or classification even with the help of theoretical inquiry. During these years Lithuanian society experienced the influence of new instruments of post-modern social engineering. Among other things, its mental habits for interpreting reality were more strongly than ever affected by the mass communications media. This media aroused the instincts of the mob, manipulated people's feelings and minds, and in the long run reduced all civic and political activities to the level of public spectacles and entertainment for a consumer society. Contemporary Lithuanian politicians are no longer spokesmen of the ideals of a unified nation – they have become heroes of theatrical TV shows. They acquired their images and do not avoid identifying themselves with them... All of political life is transformed into media events: in all more or less relevant political actions one can see the well-known actors of popular TV shows who join rallies as their "true" characters.

To many post-communist Lithuanian people – disillusioned, impoverished, marginalized – the past like many other formerly important things seems to have lost relevance: even simple and clear words like consciousness, truth, responsibility have on many occasions been depreciated to the level of personal, subjective beliefs. Moreover, during this period a number of controversial narratives about the not too distant Soviet and post-Soviet past were created by political parties and their leaders. So, it becomes difficult to distinguish between truth and lies, between the things that really happened and the accounts given by ideologically biased interpreters of history.

The Lithuanian society of 1990 was still united by a common historical fate, common suffering, the feeling for common values and unreserved fidelity to the idea of independence that was so miraculously reawakened. Meanwhile, society is becoming consolidated for short moments only because of the hatred directed towards various forms of power and capital that in their own turn have become much more closely associated than ever before with profiting from the impoverishment of large layers of society. But in spite of syndromes indicating constant fluctuations from social hysteria to anemia, and in spite of the rise of cynical attitudes towards the common welfare, other developments are also to be taken into consideration: recently the number of people who are sick and tired of a permanently transitory state, moral corruption, and a cynical view of society has significantly risen. Due to restrictions of size, this essay will limit its scope to the problem of collective memory – a memory of utmost importance to a transitory post-communist society gradually transforming itself into a more mature civic form. Many authors who from various points of view have analyzed problems of collective memory, acknowledge that it is closely associated with individual memories: in fact they even make up the bulk of what is considered as important in someone's life and what gradually falls into oblivion. According to Tzvetan Todorov, who researched memoirs of people who survived concentration camps, memory has no power to

reconstruct the totality of the past. It only manages to store those elements that are considered most essential. Thus persons who have remained faithful to the totalitarian regime despite its final collapse, always select only those facts of the past that fit their outlook or are most useful to them. Likewise, their enemies provide totally different accounts of the past events. But, "neither wants simply to restore the past, both want somehow to make use of it in the present. There is, however, no necessary correlation between how we tell of the past and how we use it; that it is our moral obligation to reconstruct the past does not mean that all the uses we make of it are equally legitimate." ¹His statement as I understand it also implies that a use can be made of even those moments that are silenced or forgotten.

One could essentially agree with how Tzvetan Todorov interprets collective memory. Another author who reconsidered this issue, Theodore Plantinga, maintains that memories of the past, even those that are considered personal, are not and never can be not be absolutely independent because they need to be supported and confirmed in various ways by other members of society. Plantinga has offered an extremely useful though metaphoric category – "edited memories", that allows an understanding of how people remember things. In the same way as a text is prepared for publication: being edited, cleaned up, and normalized from the point of view of grammar and style, memories of the past are adjusted so that they cohere with each other and make a more harmonious picture. ² Besides, attitudes toward the past constantly change as time goes by; environment and happenstance leave a mark on our memories in their own way. He notes insightfully "embarrassing and shameful episodes are forgotten all the more readily, especially when our fellow "rememberers" are no longer around to remind us. Or, in many cases, such episodes are gradually altered so that we come to stand in a better light." ³

These observations can be considered rather universal; they define how people's attitudes toward the past change under usual circumstances. However they are especially significant to post-communist culture in which the relation to the past becomes very problematic. Memories are corrected not only by separate individuals but also by different groups, communities and society at large. In a special way, the memories are "edited" by those who experienced sufferings under the communist regime, who lost their close relatives, or were otherwise persecuted. Those who were oppressed for a long period usually remember moments that are treated as heroic from the present perspective. Such an attitude allows one to compensate psychologically for the past, to see oneself as more dignified, stronger than could be under the given conditions. Researchers of Holocaust memoirs have shown that the past is usually reconstructed and recorded in the same mode by the people who shared the same painful experiences. The same is true of the people who were tortured, imprisoned, or exiled during the first decades of the Soviet regime during which law enforcement was extremely brutal. Sometimes the form of the memoirs itself speaks out. An individual who writes down a dozen pages of supposed dialogues that were spoken half a century ago is more likely to provide an edited and adjusted version of the past that coheres with his or her current attitude toward the past and the present rather than depicting true reality. The reminiscences of which inevitably makes him introduce subtle or not so subtle changes in the memoirs. This is true of the individuals who survived different forms of totalitarianism – Nazi or Communist. In both cases, the memory stores and preserves only a part of the episodes from the past, some of which for various reasons maintain more importance, while others become insignificant and are accordingly forgotten.

Numerous examples can serve to illustrate this observation. I remember an episode from almost twenty years ago while riding a train in the Soviet Union from Tashkent to Moscow. Two elderly Russian ladies shared the same cabin with me and my friends. They were friendly, kind, and hospitable women. Throughout the whole journey, that took almost three days and nights, they were chatting for hours. At one moment I noticed that one of these women had a tattoo on her arm – six numbers or so as I recall. It struck me as very odd, since during those days tattoos were worn mostly by criminals, former inmates or soldiers of the Soviet army, and this nice, elderly woman seemed to have nothing in common with either of these rough worlds of men. While they were chatting one of them asked her fellow passenger what she did during World War II. Her companion answered that she spent four years in Auschwitz. "Was it so bad as they say?" – inquired the old lady. Her talkative companion became unusually silent and did not say a word for a long time. After a pause, they started talking among themselves about insignificant everyday things and never came back to the subject. It is the unbearable memories that the elderly woman refused to be put into words. She chose silence instead of speaking out about something that was too painful to be remembered.

Likewise the people who under Soviet rule got along with the regime and not only were reconciled, themselves, with the humiliation, but reported on their neighbors, colleagues, and personal acquaintances or in some other way participated in their persecution, chose to remain silent, of course, for different reasons. It is quite natural that reminiscences of shameful, disgraceful, or even offensive acts change their original contents in individual memories and become less significant, less dramatic as time goes by. They give way to the present view of oneself, changing one's memory so that a person looks more favorably at his or her own past. As a rule one finds many excuses for actions committed in the past. Thomas Scheff and Susanne Retzinger have provided insight into the psychological attitudes of Albert Speer, Germany's chief architect under the Nazi regime and personal friend of Adolf Hitler, who refused to admit his guilt even after twenty years of imprisonment.⁴ These are the feelings of those who neither actively supported the communist regime nor were its executive instruments, but who were to a certain degree involved in various misdoings because of their job or social status. Moreover many posts and positions openly had the nature of a compromise. Loyalty was demanded to the ruling Communist party and official state institutions. Thus many people demonstrated real or feigned devotion to Soviet power for decades. Even membership in the Communist party helped in receiving state honors or bribes given to officials in order to get housing or many other minor trifles. This still brings back unpleasant and humiliating memories. Many conformists of this period – journalists, intellectuals, scholars, present-day politicians among them – are still active. Many of them managed to maintain their institutional positions or to change previous "symbolic capital" into its present equivalents of power. In order to secure a new image of the self which inevitably falls into conflict with the old one that existed in the years of subjugation, some memories of the past needed to be destroyed in order to forget indecent or disgraceful acts or episodes. Perhaps because of that, many individuals who boldly demonstrated an atheistic outlook that signified loyalty to communist ideology, at present show the same faith in the Roman Catholic Church. Members of the former *nomenklatura*, cultural activists, and writers from the older generation contend with their fellows for state orders and other awards that independent Lithuania now allots. Such situations are neither comic nor a caricature though they might seem to be. It is not only a public spectacle but also a conscious, semi-conscious or sometimes subconscious personal program of re-writing biography. Many people would like to remain in the

memories of their children, relatives, or acquaintances, not as collaborators with the regime, sneaks or time-servers, but as dignified, noble, and responsible persons who did a great service for their homeland. The old mirrors of the past are accordingly replaced by new ones which show none of the "notches" acquired in the past. In the same way, the collective memory of younger generations is altered: the past seems to look less awful, less humiliating, less dramatic than it really was. It is even treated as somewhat comic and exotic. I cannot forget a national TV program broadcast last year that intended to discuss how the experiences of the Soviet period should be explained to young people. The excerpts of a CD commissioned by the state to be shown at public schools were shown. It struck me as if it were a cartoon, a caricature of a real past that seemed to be distant and almost exotic. I thought afterwards that this ironical treatment of the Soviet period supposedly introduced for pedagogical purposes to make the images alive and easy to consume, lacked something very important. Something that was existentially experienced by my generation was certainly missing. This "something" was the truth. Such ironical and almost postmodern attitudes toward the past, which as a total experience was neither easy nor funny no matter how innocently or sincerely they are reconstructed, in the end serve the interests of those social groups who would like the Soviet past to be remembered as a conglomerate of subjective memories that have no specific or binding meaning.

The cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel has emphasized the difference between personal (or in his own words autobiographical) and collective (or socio-biographical) memory. In spite of the fact that everything that people remember is not limited to what they experienced personally – since memory is influenced and adjusted by many social groups, different organizations, nation and other mnemonic communities) – the memory of a group is something more than simply the total sum of individual memories. It is comprised only of those elements that are common to the whole community. Thus, "collective memory" is not only shared but jointly remembered. This is why, according to Zerubavel, battles over memory are fought while trying to impose "truthful" ways of interpreting the past.⁵ He noticed insightfully that censorship over the past can become a policy of long-standing state programs with a political goal. For example, during the last decade of the past century, Israeli authorities forbade TV and radio broadcasters to refer to the Arabic names of the present territory of Israel. The idea was implanted that in spite of the historical facts, it is possible to relocate them to a "prehistoric" period that is no longer relevant.⁶ It can be concluded that memory that is censored for a long time becomes distorted, because one or another interpretation of the past dominates over large mnemonic groups. It even at last seems as if it is truthful and resistant to any alterations. Generations of young people who are educated in such a climate no longer have to get confused about personal memories and social realities: their attitudes toward the communal past are based on clear and unquestionable versions of the censored history.

Rewriting memory in post-communist Lithuania is associated with other aspects of individual and collective memory. During the last years of the Soviet era, most of its population (except small groups of dissidents) was first by force, later by other more subtle means, integrated into what can be termed as the Soviet way of life and made to adjust to its social organization. Many problems surface while trying to evaluate the experiences of this period. This statement can be supported by the obvious fact that there is so little academic interest in the analysis of the period that was called "mature socialism" (hereby I refer to the last decades of the Soviet rule), in its mental legacy and forms of collaboration. Many questions are still to be asked. Does the life lived during

the last decade of independence and the current loyalty to the new values bear any relation to the past? Is it possible to erect cognitive and meaningful bridges between these two periods? And which image of the self is more truthful: the old Soviet one or the newly acquired? None of these questions has so far been sufficiently reconsidered by the local social scientists or historians, not to mention a few exceptions that only prove the validity of the observation.

And yet in order to rewrite the history of the Soviet period, a conscious collective amnesia is not sufficient. This is why revisionists who lately interpret it as an era of "progress" that eventually developed into a striving toward national independence, are doing lip-service to the Communist party that in the last decade has transformed itself into new political conglomerations. But, they have no chance in succeeding in totally rewriting history. Many other mnemonic groups who are conscious of sufferings experienced under Soviet regime provide society with different memories. And yet, some of the attempts to introduce new versions of the past are alarming. During the last years a lot of attempts were made to destroy the archives, especially the visual ones. Leszek Kolakowski who explored the problem of historical memory in a different dimension – one of national identity – has emphasized that in order to secure communal feeling the understanding of the past is not sufficient in itself: society needs real or imagined memories that will transcend the past. And this includes not only historical knowledge, but symbols, particularities of the language, heritage, sanctuaries, etc.⁷

When one refers to other kinds of group identity, the relation of a particular group or community to symbols might be revised. Those who served the communist party have managed to destroy not only archives, but also visual symbols – monuments to Soviet power. This destruction of the symbols of the past can be interpreted as a conscious amnesia: they are demolished because they bring shameful recollections and because they do not fit as mirrors for reflecting the present selves as if these "selves" share nothing with the roles they performed under Soviet subjugation. This explains why public campaigns were launched for a few years against the construction of Grutas park^{8*}. These campaigns manipulated naïve citizens who suffered under the communist regime. It also explains why and how monuments glorifying Soviet power were either demolished or replaced by national memorabilia during the last decade. The past is reconstructed by destroying archives. Visual archives of the past are brought down also.

On the other hand, rewriting the past can be based on symbols of another type: certain historical figures that personify a continuation and meaning that evolves in time and joins different traditions. These figures help to erase some episodes of the past and bring into focus others. Recent attempts to rehabilitate Antanas Snieckus^{9**}, the leader of the post-war Lithuanian Communist party who was more or less successfully mythologized throughout several decades, can be classified as belonging to this particular type. It's no wonder his admirers and former associates made special efforts to canonize this figure. Even academic publications and conferences sought to impose the image that the past was confronted "objectively", without any emotions. The efforts to rehabilitate this idol of totalitarian believers, however, ended in failure. This burnt-out campaign proved that no matter how much social bonds and the feelings of collective identity have declined during the last years, post-communist society is hardly subject to total amnesia. It still maintains a feeling for the truthful view of the past, and at least occasionally remains resistant to ideological manipulations.

- ¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, transl. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak, New York: *Metropolitan Books*, 1996, p.257.
- ² Theodore Plantinga, *How Memory Shapes Narratives/A Philosophical Essay on Redeeming the Past*, Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992, p.189.
- ³ *ibid*, p.8.
- ⁴ See, Thomas Scheff, Susanne Retzinger, *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts*, Lexington: Lexington Books, 1991.
- ⁵ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscales*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p.90–98.
- ⁶ *ibid*, p.85.
- ⁷ Leszek Kolakowski, "On Collective Identity", *Partisan Review*, 2001 No 1.
- ⁸ Grutas park is a large, private open-air museum, built by a private owner in South-East Lithuania, close to the Polish-Lithuanian border. It contains dozens of former public memorials of the Soviet period that were moved from their original locations all over the country. In spite of local controversies, it has unquestionably become an attraction spot for Lithuanian visitors and foreign tourists.
- ⁹ Antanas Snieckus – (1903–1974) first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist party, who was detained during the period of pre-war independence as a member of the banned Communist party and Russia's agent. He headed the Lithuanian Communist party during the period of military repressions and exile to Siberia. Eventually, however, he was reevaluated by some groups as the diplomat due to whose activities the number of colonists in Lithuania was never as high as in other Baltic states.

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