

BORDERLINES

June 5, 1996

This story describes an actual series of events on the border between Lithuania and Latvia in the post-Soviet environment but where some of the habits of the Soviet era have not been entirely forgotten.

I should have known what kind of day it would be when we approached the first barricade. A surly soldier in camouflage managed to turn a traffic flow of a handful of cars per hour into a 30-minute delay – and this would only be the first of three stops on the way out of the country. We had yet to approach entry into the next country. The family in front of us was in tears since their children were not presented in their old passports according to some presumably recent regulations.

It was intended to be an easy day. A 2 ½ hour drive through rolling countryside in early spring, a tour of a furniture factory teetering on the brink of post-Soviet bankruptcy and a pleasant drive home on back roads for dinner with close friends. The next morning would be a fourteen hour marathon flight home to Canada. Last minute word that the Canadian Ambassador, based in Stockholm, would make a surprise visit to our College in Klaipeda persuaded me to add a three-hour early morning diversion. If ambassadorial enthusiasm and friendliness is an indication, the meeting went exceptionally well and Zenonas and I had driven north to the border in great spirits.

The highway is of excellent construction, connecting the two ports of Klaipeda and Liepaja, or Memel and Liebau taking Hanseatic history into account. In those days the neighboring Baltic Sea was the link. Today's road, discreetly set back a few kilometers behind the spectacular beaches had been built to connect the great fortresses along one of the most vulnerable frontiers of the Soviet empire. The Hanseatic jewels from Konigsberg to St. Petersburg, or in recent days Kaliningrad to Leningrad were a formidable chain of naval ports, airfields and garrisons. Villagers might have been troublesome so the excellent road passed through unpopulated thick forests which had provided refuge for Lithuanian partisans in their hopeless and largely unknown fight for a decade after World War II. American broadcasts had continuously encouraged them to keep fighting with the promise of aid in "just a few months". The aid never came and the scars of a population denuded of its male population through a World War and a partisan war are still evident. We struggle at the college to find enough qualified males to obtain a reasonable balance. Affirmative action can take a different meaning in different places.

The partisan war of the early fifties was also a factor in events about to unfold at the border. Zenonas was Lithuanian but had been born in Latvia since his father did not want to be drawn into the partisan fight in his homeland. He had relocated north into more peaceful Latvian territory and as a result Zenonas spoke Latvian. Zenonas also speaks fluent Russian and Lithuanian and has picked up English through the school of hard knocks – the same way he had learned everything else. With my English and German we spoke five languages (all of which were to prove useful that day) – but with minimal overlap our communication included a lot of gestures and smiles.

Zenonas managed a five-truck transport company doing business from Moscow to Western Europe. Borders were part of his everyday life. With a good car, a cellular telephone, five languages, a Canadian passport and Zenonas' street smarts we felt more than adequately prepared for a border we had both crossed many times. I had crossed this border in pre-independence days when there was not a shred of evidence that a border might exist. On each visit over the years the process seemed to become more complicated. At a Baltic summit in Vilnius four days earlier the three presidents had optimistically addressed the problem of creeping bureaucratization at the borders. Brazauskas of Lithuania admitted

that the situation at the borders was “far from satisfactory” while Ulmanis of Latvia eulogized that the borders would be “theoretical and nominal”. Would that he was with us this day!

I should have also had an inkling of trouble from the story of my friends the prior week. After carefully checking regulations with the Latvian Embassy in Canada, they had boarded an evening train in Tallinn for a pleasant overnight trip through Latvia to their destination in Lithuania. Crossing the border from Estonia into Latvia they were informed that having an Estonian entry stamp was not enough, regardless of the advice given. After refusing to leave the train in the middle of nowhere, they and their luggage were eventually physically and unceremoniously pushed off the slowly moving train into an Estonian field. The next day they determined that they did indeed have the right to enter Latvia based on regulations published two months earlier. No apologies or compensation were offered.

The burly Lithuanian soldier looked at my passport and also asked if I would be able to enter Latvia. I repeated the conventional and heretofore accurate wisdom that travel for Canadians was based on the premise of obtaining a visa for the first country we enter – then one can move freely. A few months earlier Lithuania had graciously removed the requirement that Canadians need a visa in advance and can enter the country without a visa. Most of us travelling with the luxury of a readily acceptable passport do not necessarily appreciate the difference between a visa (permission to enter obtained in advance) and an entry stamp obtained at the point of entry. Unfortunately our friends at the Latvian side of the border were about to make this distinction.

After clearing the three Lithuanian bureaucratic hurdles and two barricades we entered a 100 meter neutral zone with a pleasant bar serving coffee and soft drinks. I did not readily appreciate its strategic purpose as we rolled confidently toward the first of the Latvian barricades. Considering that this was a “theoretical and nominal” border I found it strange that it was designed by the same person who prepared the impenetrable defense of Leningrad in World War II. In the West we hear the occasional report on the evening news about the expansion of the European Union and NATO to the east and yawn as we flip channels to find something more interesting. The day before the Republican Party of the United States had recommended that Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic should be included in “the immediate expansion of NATO” and that the Baltics should be included “at the earliest possible time”. Anyone who thinks those two conditions have a remotely similar meaning has never studied theology. Anyone who believes that the Baltics will become a part of NATO probably is also a candidate for ownership of bridges over the East River. In addition to the coastal highway, the Baltics inherited a legacy of excellent east-west highways designed to permit military mobility. Since highways tend to facilitate travel in both directions, this puts the new Russian frontier within four hours of the Baltic Sea. This verbal nuance caused a huge debate in the Baltics.

Since the Latvian military leaders share a heritage with the Lithuanians and the rest of the Soviet Union, the border process was repeated in painful detail. At the first Latvian barricade our trunk was opened for the third time and we were then directed to the immigration authorities. They advised that while I could indeed enter Latvia if I had a Lithuanian visa, an entry stamp alone did not constitute a visa. We first requested they phone for confirmation of the ruling which they did. After discussion Zenonas and I decided to turn around and drive back to Palanga airport, a former Russian military airbase and now a fledgling commercial airport where I had arrived a week earlier - to see if my entry stamp could be upgraded to a visa.

Then things began to really deteriorate. The Latvian authorities said I could indeed go to Palanga, but only after they processed a ‘protocol’ which I learned was a version of border justice where several of the military officers would be prosecution, jury and judge in a process to convict me of entering Latvia

illegally. I was taken to an office and seated in front of an officer who began to fill out eight pages of detailed questions by hand. Zenonas had quietly advised that if we would slip adequate currency into the passport at an early stage we could probably enter Latvia. At this point, with everyone a party to this event, that option had vanished. The outcome was presumably that I would admit my guilt, pay a \$20 fine and be sent back to Lithuania. Since we had plenty of time and the furniture plant visit was not an urgent priority, it seemed it might be interesting to make the event a test of wills and allow it to proceed.

After a decent interval, when it was apparent that the patience of the officer with the forms exceeded mine, it seemed prudent to try Strategy B. When I had requested if it would be possible to obtain a copy of his writings he indicated that it would be a pleasure, but in the absence of photocopiers, he would volunteer to simply fill out the form a second time. He said this with a broad smile!

Strategy B. Since our cellular phone was out of range we were reduced to asking for their cooperation. Could we use the phone to contact our embassy in Riga? No. Could we use the phone to contact the Privatization office in Riga? No. Could we use the phone to call the Latvian Minister of Finance whom I had met personally several months earlier at an International Conference and we had spent a pleasant day skiing together in the Alps? This slowed them down but they settled for a phone call to Liepaja to advise the furniture factory of our delay. The phone call was productive. The director was greatly distressed at our predicament and promised to call us back shortly. She called the Privatization office who called our embassy who called our Ambassador still making the rounds in Klaipeda. She also called her friend who was advisor to the President who called Immigration who called Liepaja Immigration. A while later the phone rang – the kind of ring designed to awaken a soldier regardless of his degree of sleep or stupor – and she advised us that she would obtain a special ‘license’ and drive the 50 km to the border to meet us at 3:00pm – 1 ½ hours from the call. The officer smiled and told Zenonas in Russian that we were wasting our time – she would never come.

The interplay of languages, cultures and personalities was becoming interesting. Zenonas had wisely chosen to speak only Russian, hiding his knowledge of Latvian and allowing him to listen in on what the officers thought was private conversation. The flurry of calls had alerted the senior officer, a sergeant, to the situation and he positioned himself in the room observing and saying little. Zenonas and I assumed he understood English and we corresponded accordingly, adding a little bluff for good measure. Around this time it occurred to me that our planned lunch in Liepaja was dissolving. Could we go to the “neutral zone” for coffee? No, we were in detention. I asked Zenonas what would happen if I refused to pay the fine whenever the paperwork was eventually complete. He presumed they would search me by force and take money or put me in jail. I mused about that for a while. In all my ramblings and rumblings, I had never failed to cross a border when determined to do so or ever landed in jail. Maybe there could be two firsts on this occasion. This was also the first time when Zenonas failed to be amused. Having had the benefit of the experience, he tried to convince me that a Soviet or ex-Soviet jail experience was one thing in life which could be missed. It was possibly the hunger or the discussion about jail – but it seemed like the pine forest visible through the window was turning into a banana grove.

Given the promise of our host to come to the border we thought it was prudent to try Strategy C. Zenonas produced \$20 worth of local currency and gratuitously explained to our tormentors that they had probably succeeded in persuading a potential foreign investor to make two investments simultaneously – his first and his last. Having paid, signed many pages with the added comment “without translation”, we insisted on an official receipt for the funds, the number of the document and

the name of the senior director. We then headed back to Palanga to see if we could upgrade the entry stamp into a visa.

The Lithuanians were polite, slightly baffled but unhelpful. In spite of phone calls to several cities and a range of ministries, it was considered impossible to put a visa into my passport when a visa was officially not necessary. There was indeed some compelling logic in that proposition, but not a lot of help. We did locate a coke and a Snickers bar and with renewed energy returned to the border.

We passed through the Lithuanian defenses and parked in the neutral zone. We now understood the strategic location of the coffee bar a little better. At 3:00 pm, we observed three determined women, two with yellow badges, walking through the Latvian defenses into the neutral zone. It was our host, the regional head of Immigration from Liepaja and a younger assistant. Our host was apologetic, the senior official clearly upset that someone had created the mess which put her into such an undignified situation and the younger women seemed to enjoy the outing in the forest. Papers were produced and the front of the official black car became an immigration office. When every square was filled, the senior official would sign and the younger woman produced a felt pad and a series of variously shaped stamps. Finally, a visa was pasted into my passport and signed. My only real regret was that neither Zenonas nor I had a camera.

Zenonas was beside himself with delight. Our host from Liepaja walked back through the barricades and arranged to wait for us on the other side. Zenonas charged into the immigration office holding the two passports over his head. (Anyone who knows my friend can truly appreciate the scene.) The surprised officers sensed what had happened and immediately evaporated. The unlucky official who couldn't escape dutifully did his task while Zenonas suggested that his competence at the border would probably result in promotion to major. The rest of the clientele who were themselves being insulted in a variety of ways that day hugely enjoyed the process.

Our host, the manager of the struggling furniture plant, was trained as a chemical engineer and had 30 years of work experience. She had the delightful name of Dace, (pronounced Dawnce with two syllables). The short drive up this historic coast also revealed its history. Dace is Lutheran, the technical director has Swedish roots. Few of us realize that the Crusades were not limited to the Middle East. The Teutonic Knights invaded this area in the 14th century and established Christianity. The resulting war contributed to the union of pagan Lithuania with Christian and Catholic Poland. The Reformation followed these fault lines resulting in a Protestant Latvia.

The drive through Liepaja was depressing. This was one of the most militarized zones along the Baltic and the departure of the Russian military has left a rusting wasteland. An ineffective local administration has contributed to the mess. Liepaja ranks as the most depressed region of Latvia, which itself isn't doing so great. As we passed one ramshackle industrial installation after another they were described with a cryptic "closed". They were bankrupt and whatever was still alive was in deep trouble.

The furniture factory fitted the pattern. A huge wood-related complex had been divided into a sawmill, a match factory and a furniture plant. The sawmill was already bankrupt. Dace and her remaining 100 colleagues had struggled desperately to keep their life's work alive. The Privatization Agency had advertised the plants internationally three times, but nobody even wanted them. The Government had finally accepted a very modest offer from management but they lacked the resources to keep going. Did I really want a part of this mess?

A retired Canadian trade commissioner with Latvian roots was assisting Latvia with the privatization process and had personally contacted me suggesting that there was some beauty hidden under the wrinkles. The people we met were outstanding and sincere. A young woman, Sarmite (three syllables), recently graduated in English from Riga University assisted with translation and I was struck with the very positive role a young person with language skills could play. We had just participated in our first graduation at Lithuania Christian College a few days earlier and I could picture many of our wonderful grads playing similar constructive roles. I could speak English with Sarmite and German with Druvas, the technical director. Zenonas would speak Russian with all three of them and broken English with me. Dace would listen in English and speak Latvian and Russian as appropriate. We toured the facilities, looked at their product and sales strategy and checked the numbers. However, what really came through was the character of a group of people who had survived five years since independence and were not about to quit now. If I ever get involved, the people will clearly be the determining factor.

We graciously took a rain check for dinner and began our three-hour drive home at 9:00 pm. I was exceedingly grateful that my hostess had insisted on getting up at 6:00 am that morning to prepare my favourite cottage cheese blinis. They were still carrying me, assisted by a solid does of caffeine and sugar. It would be midnight before we returned to the same hostess and her waiting meal of ribs. Keeping in mind the lesson of the three wise men, we returned by a different route and decided to go 200 km as the crow flies on small roads and use a different border crossing. Sunset at 56 degrees latitude in early summer never seems to happen. A full moon remained directly before us as a guiding star.

We drove through fields which had lost their purpose. The large collective farms in Lithuania were broken into uneconomic fragments with no agricultural strategy. The Baltics were one of the great food sources in the Soviet empire – but the Russian market had collapsed. Western Europe hardly needs Baltic surpluses to add to their mountains of butter and cheese and the local market lacks purchasing power. The fields and forests were a beautiful green, but close observation revealed many unplanted fields. Destruction and creation are two different processes.

There was plenty of time to reflect on the day. Why did the military feel the need to humiliate so many people at the border? Why did I enjoy the contest with them so much? Is the military mind really that incapable of flexibility? Why were all the men contributing to the problem and all the women to the solution? What does it feel like to be a sergeant in the middle of nowhere and to be confronted by a foreigner with a few extra bullets in his gun? Why am I rambling around these countries anyhow? Do I really believe it will make a difference?

Why did I not pray during this episode? I tried to think what I might have prayed for. Is it really God's job to get me out of a mess of my own creation? How can I have known if it was God's purpose to prevent me from going ahead with my plans? Presumably God's will would have prevailed in any event.

We approached the border again. The Latvian three-stop exit was thorough. The Lithuanian guards, in the absence of virtually any traffic at midnight were pre-occupied with a television program. Presumably we looked Lithuanian from a distance in the dark and they waved us through. Given that my entry was legal it was somewhat disappointing not to have the legality properly acknowledged.

Zenonas later regaled my hosts with his views of the day. I recalled that all of them had experienced the sharper end of authority over the years. There is a time to weep, a time to pray and it seems that they deserved the right to have a time to laugh.

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