

## **HISTORY OF MY INVOLVEMENT WITH LCC – ART DEFEHR**

*A speech delivered to staff and students of LCC in April 2011 to help them understand how the University was started, some of the political context and the role of certain key individuals.*

I had never visited the Soviet Union prior to 1989. The stories of my childhood recalled a less than happy experience for my parents who both ended up losing family members to war and the Siberia of infamy and their families certainly lost their wealth. It wasn't a place that I felt good about and had no intention of going back to my roots or becoming involved.

In 1989 my wife and I were in Buenos Aires at a conference and one of the speakers was the number two diplomat from the Soviet Union Embassy in Washington DC. We met and after hearing my background he challenged me to return to my roots and visit the Soviet Union. Remember this is early January 1989. He said "You need to go back to the Soviet Union" – I said "Why?" Her responded "Don't blame the people for what is going on. The Soviet Union is going to change and they need people like you." I asked what I could contribute? He responded that they are going to have a market system some day and they will fail. I asked why they would fail? He said they are going to get the big corporate boys from the West - the oil companies, Coca Cola, IBM, and they are going to be no different than our Soviet monopolies. They need to learn entrepreneurship after 70 years but more important he said even if they have that, the Soviet Union after 70 years has lost what is very essential to the market system which is a certain level of trust. He said in the west the Canadian and American people don't always go to the church or the synagogue anymore but they remember because their parents did. They still remember what the moral values are. If you do a deal in the West and you shake hands on it there's a pretty good chance that it is going to work out close to what you shook hands on. But in Russia they say when the money changes hands they think the deal is finished.

On the news yesterday they talked about British Petroleum having troubles this past weekend in the Soviet Union. The comment was made that when the contract is signed the negotiations start. So it is the same idea – it hasn't really changed that much.

The result was a trip in August 1989 to the Soviet Union to explore those questions. We visited many parts of the Empire and out of those events there developed the idea for a Conference on Business Ethics. Eventually four national conferences on business ethics were held. These conferences were held in Kiev, Odessa and twice in Moscow - the last one in the post communist period. These were national conference where hundreds of young entrepreneurs came together. Most of them were from a church background. Originally I had thought they all came to learn about ethics and I hope many of them did. We discovered later why many really came. It was difficult for church groups to get together on a regional or national basis. However, our conference which was called Business Ethics somehow passed the authorities scrutiny as to what they really were. We actually used communist party buildings in several cities. We concluded that they really came to meet each other and it became a networking event. Out of that period there developed a number of relationships between them, most I don't know about. Some of the relationships that we developed during those events resulted in the formation of a number of Christian ministries across the Soviet Union. Personally we became involved in Agriculture

and other areas of business. One of the persons we met was a young pastor and a social worker from Lithuania who invited us to come here and to work with them. We never thought of it as Lithuania since at the time there was no Lithuania - there was a region referred to as the Baltics - a part of the Soviet Union. At the time we had visited or were involved in nine different Republics of the Soviet Union. That is the background as to why we became involved in what is today Lithuania.

We never thought of Lithuania as a place that was relevant to us. We had no real personal or family history but the fact that it was part of the Soviet Union and had shared the same experiences of Stalin and Communism made it somehow seem like the place where our ancestors came from and this created that very vital emotional connection. I had no emotional tie to Cambodia or Bangladesh but for other reasons we went there. But the Soviet Union had emotional ties for our family. These emotional ties existed for many of the people who came here as volunteers. It is the extra linkage that brings many us to this region. The reality is when you are sitting in Western Canada - Klaipeda or Russia sort of feel like the same place – I know that people here make a much finer geographic and cultural distinction. But back in 1989, 1990 or 1991 it was “over there” and it was all Communism and that was close enough. So we had these emotional ties to this region and certainly today we know the distinctions very well but that stage it was a critical element of our decision to engage.

The connection to Lithuania also became emotional from a personal and family perspective. Our oldest daughter was here to teach in first summer school. Our second daughter was actually here before the college started and was part of the reason the college came to exist. I was obligated to the person who took her to Lithuania for a summer ministry and then he invited me to come help work toward an English program. I did him a favor and am still here. Tara met Peter Tielmann who was working in Lithuania on a summer ministry from Germany in 1990. Later they married and today he is our son-in-law today and part of family. They decided to marry in Lithuania in the fishing village of Juadkrante. Peter’s family lived in Germany and our family in Canada. Peter and Tara thought both families would be unhappy and so they went to a third place and invited all to come. We had this big event at a hotel on the road to Nida. Peter was friends with a famous Lithuanian folk singer and it was quite the event. When the wedding was over the headline in the national paper the next day read “Canadian millionaire’s daughter gets married and nobody got drunk”.

Let me tell you about the start of LCC. Turn me off when you have had enough stories – I certainly have enough stories but it was a very interesting time. When we first visited Lithuania we came to talk about doing something in education in English. It is interesting that these people already had some ideas about actually starting a college, they were ahead of us. At the time there had been these recent violent events around the TV station and the Lithuanian Parliament. When we arrived the tanks fortunately weren’t there but the sandbags were still around the Parliament and we had to wind our way through the tank traps to go inside and talk to these young folk who were pretending to be the Government of Lithuania. As one example of the situation we had to write the agreement after our meeting and only one person had a computer. We could not locate any power to charge the computer. It only had about 2 hours left, so we used an old typewriter to actually prepare the agreement, then entered the document on the computer and with about an hour left we used the computer as the printer to prepare the multiple agreements. We could not afford any mistakes! We were watching the

power drip out as we printed the last document and that was it. The name of the City the Government had offered as the College site was Panevezys. Since we had never visited that City we could not agree to that so left the name of the City as a blank. If you look in the 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary book with regard to this history the name (on the original document) is a line and it is written by hand "Panevezys" with initials on the side. So we signed the agreement on a Tuesday, and travelled Wednesday to Panevezys. After we checked out Panevezys we filled in the blank and initialed it. That is how we got started.

A couple of the early stories may be helpful and interesting. We take many things for granted today. The start of LCC was very much a political statement about values, about democracy and a more open society. These are very important stories and I hope that going forward LCC remains a place that says we want to make a point about certain issues. We are not just one among many others. Hopefully we teach Marketing and other important courses as well as other institutions. More important we maintain an edge in terms of whatever the issues of the day are. Before we arrived to open the first summer school Dennis and Rene (Neumann) were already here. We were welcomed by a headline in the local paper that said something like "How do we answer Art DeFehr?" We had not even opened up the school! One of the local religious authorities decided that they would challenge our motives for coming. We had this remarkable meeting between the five leaders of the major church groups, the Mayor, the people from the civic society, the union and us. Everybody sat around a big board table and we had this meeting about the question "Should there be a Christian (or rather Protestant) College in the Lithuania or Panevezys." It is a long story and I am not going to get into the interfaith issues because many of you are from different backgrounds.

One of the issues raised was the fact that I am from a Mennonite background. That evening I went to see the local Bishop. Remember that this took place before independence. We had this discussion and they kept referring to the fact that I was Mennonite. I stated that the program included people of many religious backgrounds but acknowledged that Mennonite is my own personal faith. So I said to him: "So what if it was a Mennonite School why is that a problem?" To understand the events we need to recall that the term Mennonite relates to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. It refers to people who were baptized as adults. In later years the term Mennonite survived to represent certain elements of that tradition. Anabaptist is the more theological term. The translator who had studied in Chicago at that point took over the discussion - he stated in perfect English - "because if there are too many Anabaptist's (using the theological and historic term) like you" - by using that expression he meant pacifists - "if there are too many pacifists like you who will fight the Russians." It was like we were back in the early part of the Reformation.

Several months later the Science Committee of the pretend Lithuanian Parliament - all older gentlemen with long beards and Ph. D's - invited us to come to Vilnius. They wanted us to come to Parliament talk to us to gain a better understand who we were. They were receiving a great deal of pressure to prevent the establishment of a non-Catholic institution in the Country. They stated that Lithuania expected to be independent soon and would become a democracy. They wanted to know whether religious freedom was an essential part of being a democracy. Think of that. I am a business guy building furniture facing 15 very educated men and they want me to tell them about democracy and religious freedom. Then we debated the question "what does religious freedom mean in society?"

After we had this remarkable discussion they excused me and called me back in ½ an hour and said “Mr. DeFehr you and the College are welcome”.

We had another situation about 5 years later. President Jim Mininger and I were in San Francisco and received word that the Government had announced over the Christmas Holidays that they were shutting all private universities in Lithuania. We had no information as to the real background to such a decision. It turned out later that there were issues with the Polish University. If they allowed other schools such as LCC to exist they could not prevent the opening of a Polish University – so they thought they would simply close all of them. The students went home for Christmas and they and their parents learned of the University shutdown through the news. Our senior staff and administrators were afraid for the school but also their persons. There had been recent bank issues where people arrived with Balaklavas and guns and shut down many banks. It was not exactly a pretty time. We actually destroyed many of the records in the college at that time – so anything that might be comprising was burnt that night. We met in Riga out of safety considerations and planned our strategy and then flew into Vilnius. We had met many people over the years and one of them was a signatory of the Helsinki Accord. He was a very senior lawyer. We phoned him that night and met early in the morning. He agreed to join us in our meeting with the Science Committee of Parliament where we were to make our case. This old professor had been the teacher of the person who now chaired this committee – so he wanted to join us. He was probably in his 80’s – he joined us although the Committee had not invited him and just sat with arms crossed in the back of the room. Imagine you are at the peak of your career and your old professor shows up to see how you will perform in the face of a difficult decision. The chair of the Committee was perfectly aware of what was taking place and after a discussion with us and among themselves announced LCC was in good standing again.

These are some of the remarkable events of those times.

Just one more story about Klaipeda which was quite notable. I love to tell this story - not only for the story but the sense of history which we North Americans simply don’t understand or experience. We don’t have that kind of perspective. We originally came to Klaipeda because I met Mr. Lansbergis, the former President of Lithuania, in Davos at the World Economic Forum. I arranged to meet him there because we were having these existential challenges. The first question he asked was – “Are you a Mission or a College?” The night before the speaker at Davos had been the Archbishop of Milan who had talked about your Vocation as your Mission. I asked if he had heard the talk the previous night and he stated that he had been there. I noted that Marlene, and all of the others come as professors and teachers and they will teach English or whatever they are teaching with integrity. But their vocation is their mission and they come out of a certain motivation. He said that he understood but stated that if he failed to support LCC it would be against his principles. Then he added – but if I support you I will lose the next election - would you consider a move to Klaipeda. I said let me check that out. I thought that being a port city it might be okay! So we came to Klaipeda. The mayor who I think later became Prime Minister – and the council of about 20 people were sitting at a large round table in downtown Klaipeda. He said that before we begin the meeting I have a story to tell. Sometime around the year 1542 two Protestant scholars came to Memel. They came with the idea of starting a Protestant university. The authorities of the town met and they decided against a Protestant University and kicked

them out of town. They walked 100 Km's down the coast and founded what became the famous University of Königsberg. He made this remarkable comment that in 1542 we missed that chance to have a University and we will not miss the opportunity a second time. These are just some of the events that happened.

Let me just turn a little bit to the idea of volunteers. The volunteers have been a remarkable part of this institution and the numbers are well over 1,000 for teaching, for student life, building the dorms, sewing curtains or doing something else. I won't go too much into those stories but you are in a place that would not exist without that history of volunteerism. Somewhere along the line I hope that you pick that up – It's not that you do exactly the same thing but within your own life and opportunities that you ask when can I do something for others. It's not a question to do it out of debt - they did it and do it because they felt that service is part of their being and in addition they all state that they have fun and meet many new friends. LCC is a complex institution with a rich history and these are only some of the stories.