

*Written for the 20 year book about the history and development of LCCIU*

## **REFLECTONS FROM A REVOLUTION**

August, 2011

LCC is a unique private Christian University located on a tranquil campus adjacent to a small lake at the edge of the historic center of Klaipeda, the old Hanseatic Port of Memel. Students display confidence, the parking lot is crowded and conversations around cups of cappuccino speak of friends, adventures and hopes that cover Europe and the world. Faculty reflects the North American connection and the success of alumni who have returned from graduate school studies in major Universities. Invisible to the untrained eye are students from countries like Belarus or the Ukraine who hide their anxiety about political instability at home, their families, concern about the economic ability to stay in University and the discomfort of passports that few countries care to honor.

LCC is now near the eastern frontier of a stable and peaceful Europe. 20 years ago it was at the western extremity of an empire that traumatized millions including the parents of these students as well as my own family. Arriving freshmen can be forgiven for living in the present and the future, but the current tranquility was the product of great effort, enormous risk and described by many as a miracle. This book is the story of the past and the present and points to a future that will be the responsibility of those cappuccino-sipping students.

August 22, 1991 may have little meaning to most people –but that was the day the Moscow coup against Gorbachev failed with a whimper rather than a bloodbath. My wife Leona and I were inside the barricades and experienced the end of a tyranny that had shaped the lives of my parents and distorted the lives of too many others. LCC is a product of the series of events that preceded and followed this momentous change. Although billed as an educational institution it was in reality a political statement about educational philosophy, about freedom of choice but most important about the desire to end tyranny.

The story takes place on the territory of Lithuania but the events that led to the founding of LCC and the vision for the future were never intended to be captured by the boundaries of this lovely little country on the Baltic. Lithuania has been the host and hopefully the beneficiary, but the unique internal challenges of its national and religious history also framed the pace and character of the institution that finally emerged. LCC also influenced developments inside Lithuania in terms of educational philosophy and the promotion of tolerance of people and ideas that were different. The relationship has been symbiotic and this book tells that story and looks to the future.

The idea for a Christian University grew out of a series of events and a set of relationships that reflect the complicated history of people and the region. On October 31, 1990 a “Protocol of Intent” was signed by Darius Kuolys the twenty-something Minister of Education of a self-declared Independent Republic of Lithuania on one side and Otonas Balciunas the leader of The Lithuania Christian Fund, one of the first registered NGOs in the Soviet Union, Johannes Reimer of LOGOS in Germany and myself (Art DeFehr), Canadian businessman on the other side. The document was coaxed out of a dying computer

in the absence of copiers and electric power. The group entered Parliament by passing through zigzag tank traps that were intended to keep the Soviet army at bay. A bottle of chilled champagne emerged to celebrate the event.

The document was further signed the next day by Saulius Varnas the Vice Mayor of Panevezys. The Lithuanian Government had proposed Panevezys as the location for the project but since the group did not have an opportunity to visit in advance – the space for location was left blank and filled in by hand and initialed by all of us. This history and folklore has become the LCC equivalent of the words of Genesis 1 – “In the beginning” – but of course this event did not occur in a vacuum.

The three individuals who signed the document represent very different personal histories that converged to allow this event to happen. Balciunas represents the Lithuanian component of the mix and became a Christian through the intervention of Mennonite Christians who were slowly making their way west from various locations in the Soviet gulag – the Baltics had become a location that seemed more friendly to emigration to the West. Balciunas connected with the Tielmann family who subsequently emigrated to Germany. Peter Tielmann, the youngest of the clan would play a role in organizing a youth mission to Lithuania during the summer of 1990. He would spend the next few years in Lithuania and later would marry Tara Defehr – my daughter.

Reimer was born in the eastern reaches of the Soviet Union, did an unpleasant stint in the Soviet military and was later able to migrate to Germany. He is a charismatic speaker, an academic and an unusually creative organizer and activist. Reimer was part of the generation that took immense risks to smuggle bibles across borders and other adventures that would challenge the dead hand of the Soviet system. He was the speaker for the youth mission that went from Germany to Lithuania in 1990. He and Balciunas had the initial discussions with the self-declared Lithuanian authorities who were seeking ways of shifting their orientation from the east to the West.

My personal engagement with that part of the world grew out of my family roots. Both parents were of “Dutch Mennonite” background but had been born in Russia and they and their families were part of the turmoil and loss of that tragic period. I felt I owed nothing to “Russia” – the geographic term from my family history – but I met a senior and intriguing Soviet diplomat in early 1989. He suggested that the Soviet Union was on an inexorable path to a market system but would fail in its implementation. He stated that the Soviet Union needed people like myself who were entrepreneurs, but also people of faith who could assist in restoring a moral foundation without which a market system would not work. I met Reimer in early 1989, shared this story and he volunteered to take me to see “the real Russia” of everything happening in the legal and less than legal realm. That initial visit resulted in a series of 4 national (Soviet Union) conferences about “Business and Ethics” for the emerging entrepreneurs – three prior to the end of the Communist system. Balciunas would attend one of these events and completed the triangle of relationships that would lead to the signing of the document in October 1990.

Reimer and I were engaged in activities in many parts of the Soviet Union and the connection with Balciunas was initially seen as an activity located in the Baltic region – and that as part of a larger

set of projects. The sudden demise of the Soviet empire, the appearance of borders and the emergence of nationalist paranoia within many of the emerging small fragments of the former empire resulted in a University that was much more insular than the founders had intended. The challenges of the first decade reflect many of these more xenophobic factors as the people and Governments of Lithuania searched for a path from a difficult past to at that time a still uncertain future.

Questions such as the “Mennonite” background of several of the founders and many of the initial staff reflected a lack of confidence about the nature of a future society. Those who understood the meaning of the word Mennonite were at odds with the pacifist tradition and others acted out of ignorance of the group. The educational philosophy represented by the liberal arts model was unknown and is a challenge anywhere in Europe but especially to an academic establishment that was still schooled in the former Soviet era. The word Christian itself became an issue in a society that was so predominantly Catholic and had missed the benefit of positive changes in that church. These tensions produced some challenging but also historically interesting moments that have been described in greater detail in the earlier LCC book or elsewhere in this document.

There were parallel developments inside the Soviet Union and inside Lithuania that played an important role in creating the conditions for the emergence of LCC. This includes the whole complex story of perestroika and other developments in the Soviet Union and the Singing Revolution in the Baltics. These are interesting and important stories that are better told by persons from Lithuania and the region and I will defer those stories to them.

A second set of critical factors that allowed LCC to become reality was the role of the host of volunteers that emerged in the early years and continues to come with a variety of motivations to give of themselves. These include institutional leaders, faculty, student life leadership, volunteers to build the campus and a host of committed board members. The numbers, quality and sources are an amazing story in themselves and this book describes some of the individuals and the phenomenon. Volunteers are not only a financial factor. The commitment required to come this far with no financial compensation attracted unusual individuals who breathed life into a religious and political idea. Well over 1000 persons have come to serve in a great variety of capacities. They are honored at the end of this book.

Finally, LCC has no meaning without students. A total of more than 1400 have graduated from LCC and taken positions within Lithuania but also participate in a broad spectrum of challenges around the world. They bring their personal attributes – but also a unique blend of confidence that grows out of the liberal arts tradition and the western style of education plus a moral perspective that is unique in the region. Their story is already being told but they are early into their careers and the real story of the impact of LCC alumni in a challenging region will be told in the future. This book focuses on the graduates of LCC and how they are making their mark in the world and how they are different.

The founders and early participants in LCC brought different perspectives, different gifts and possibly different hopes for the future. Whatever the differences all recognized the historical moment and this shaped the risks they were prepared to take and motivated their commitment. From the

perspective of 20 years the greatest risks were possibly those taken by the initial students whose future was on the line – but they also had the most to gain.

LCC describes itself as being in the business of “transforming lives” or shaping the views and values of young people as they enter their careers. It was acknowledged at the outset that LCC was a political intervention that sought to challenge the Soviet-inspired educational system and influence in a positive way from a clearly Christian perspective the values of a society that had inherited a moral deficit. As you read the stories of students it is evident that many acknowledge they are different as a result of their time at LCC. History does not reveal its secrets quickly – but the real test of the impact of LCC will be the influence of graduates as they return to their own countries to shape those societies or become part of the new tribe of global citizens.

LCC as an institution will itself face challenges as it seeks to adjust to an environment that is anything but stable. LCC was born in a revolutionary moment and has inherited a tradition of flexibility and the mandate to challenge the status quo. The challenge for both students and institution is to adapt constructively to those opportunities. LCC occupies a unique niche in the educational and Christian world of Central Europe. When 40 years are celebrated we hope that everyone has been up to the challenge and that God has continued to provide inspired teachers, leaders and fabulous students.