

In The Beginning: Background and Vision

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On a cold and blustery day, October 31, 1990 a protocol of intent to start a Liberal Arts College in Lithuania was signed in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, by Darius Kuolys, Minister of Education and Culture, Otonos Balciunas, Johannes Reimer and myself. The location of the college was identified as Panevezys but the city name was left blank.

The Government had recommended Panevezys for this venture, but since many of us were unfamiliar with the city, we wanted to visit it before signing. Since the next day was a national holiday, it was not possible to visit Panevezys first and then return to Vilnius to sign. As a result we all signed, leaving a blank space for the name of the city. We celebrated in the Education Minister's office with a bottle of champagne and drove out to visit the proposed site. After a successful tour and meetings with local authorities, we filled in the blank and with the deputy mayor of Panevezys, Saulius Varnas, initial the addition – "Panevezys". The name of the proposed new college according to the Protocol was to be "Liberty Christian College".

Lithuania had declared its independence from the Soviet Union on March 11, 1990 and was in effect in a state of rebellion. In Vilnius the Parliament was surrounded by a wall of sandbags and we had to negotiate the zigzag tank traps to enter the grounds for our meetings. The self-declared authorities were of a generation disconnected with the past and unfortunately too disconnected from the future. The Minister of Education, Darius Kuolys, was not yet 30. We asked him why they would invite a group with an obviously Protestant religious orientation to start a college. He answered that they had studied the west and observed the societies that were more plural and more Protestant tended to be more democratic. LCC was born out of political crisis and was in many ways a political act. This would have consequences for many years to come, but, may also be the rationale for its existence. Sober second thought suggested that the name "Liberty" might be too confrontational and we changed it to "Lithuania," retaining the original initials.

Why were these people together in Vilnius on that day? Otonas and Raimonda Balciunas were involved in a local church and relief ministry in Siauliai and had active contacts with various western groups. Otonas will tell his own story but what was relevant was his long contact with the Tielmann family of Bonn who had lived in Lithuania from the 1970's to the 1980's. The oldest son Jacob had remained in Lithuania when the family emigrated because he was of military age and was not released by the Soviets. The emerging freedom of glasnost permitted Otonas to visit Germany in 1989. He observed the street ministry of Jacob's youngest brother Peter and his friends and was inspired to try something similar in his own country. He invited Peter to form a group to visit Lithuania in the summer of 1990 for a youth ministry.

The group subsequently invited Johannes Reimer of LOGOS – Germany to join them as the evangelist/speaker. Reimer also had his origins in the Soviet Union and had been active in smuggling Bibles and training leaders. During the 1990 summer ministry, Reimer was approached by the new education authorities as to whether he could help them with new education initiatives, specifically more western-style education.

The visit in the fall of 1990 was the response to this request. My wife Leona and I were travelling in Russia with Reimer during that month and Reimer asked me to join him for two days in Vilnius to be part of the discussions. Daryl McCarthy, represented a US-based academic recruitment group, was also in Moscow at the time and joined us. I was part of the group because I owed Reimer a favor.

In August of 1989, Reimer had led a group of Canadians associated with MEDA (Mennonite Economic Development Associates) on a tour that covered a great deal of the Soviet Union. Both of my parents are of Russian-Mennonite background and immigrated during the twenties. I met Reimer in May of 1989 in Canada and he offered to show me the real Russia. I had earlier been encouraged by a senior Soviet diplomat based in Washington, DC to explore my Russian roots. Between 1989 and 1992 I made over a dozen trips to the Soviet Union, many with Reimer, and this was one of those occasions.

The “favor” that I felt I owed Reimer related to our daughter Tara. In 1989, at the age of 16, she had accompanied me on that first trip back to our roots. She enjoyed the enthusiasm and charisma of Reimer and accepted his invitation the following summer to join the youth group travelling to Lithuania. She met Peter Tielmann on this trip and returned to join the group again the following summer. Tara was baptized by Otonas on August 19, 1991, the same day Gorbachev was arrested in the coup that led to the end of communism. It was in response to this interest in Tara that Leona and I agreed to include Vilnius on this particular occasion.

God works in mysterious ways: we-Johannes Reimer, Otonas Balciunas and I found ourselves together in Vilnius in the fall of 1990. Our first meeting was in the Parliament and resulted in the request that we draft a protocol of intent for review and signature by the minister the following day. The Lithuanian government group had done some advance work and were quite specific in their request to us to help start a western-oriented college in the English language located in Panevezys. They also promised that the government would grant the appropriate charter and facilities when conditions permitted – presumably when independence was achieved. Many of us had been in the Soviet Union or in other countries many times and understood that protocols of understanding or similar documents often had little real meaning, but nevertheless could become a foundation for future action. We felt that it would cost nothing to sign and might in fact lead to something useful.

We were also accompanied at this time by a Lithuanian Christian academic and Alma Liutkute, a translator. We decided to draft the agreement that evening, in English, and as we finished a section would give it to Alma for translation into Lithuanian. Daryl McCarthy had the only portable computer, but since he was unable to recharge his batteries in Vilnius, we used

computer time carefully to permit the draft to be completed. The English draft was completed shortly after midnight and the Lithuanian draft around 4:00 AM. At 9:00 AM we visited the minister and reviewed the drafts. He suggested changes that were incorporated and a final draft was printed. We then discovered that there was no functioning copier in the Ministry of Education headquarters and McCarthy coaxed another two copies of the document out of his dying machine. These became the final documents that were signed in the late morning of October 31, and celebrated with champagne and quiet prayers.

That afternoon we all traveled to Panevezys where we were hosted by Saulius Varnas, the deputy mayor of the city and director of the local theatre. We were shown the proposed building and the possibilities of future development were explained. Panevezys is a city of moderate size built around a very scenic artificial lake. The very polluted Nevezys River runs through the lake and is slightly redeemed by the aesthetics. That evening we added the word "Panevezys" to the documents and felt it had been a good and providential day.

The day was not yet over. We traveled the ninety kilometers to Siauliai and on to where Otonas and Raimonda lived. Since meals had somehow eluded us during the day, Otonas called ahead to a local restaurant that opened a private room with a giant round table to accommodate our group. We started close to midnight and somehow friends and acquaintances just kept arriving and adding to the dimly lit circle.

Peter Tielmann had remained after the summer of 1990 to work with the emerging church groups. During the evening the doors suddenly opened and Jacob Tielmann from Germany burst into the room. He and some colleagues had just arrived with a truckload of supplies. It was an amazing junction of the past, present and future.

The agreement had been signed with no provision for an organization that would start, govern or support a College. We decided that the first feasible response might be several years of summer English programs that could evolve into something more. Since English instruction would require North American support, Leona and I agreed to search for leadership. I have contact with many of the Mennonite Colleges and checked with them for suggestions. Mary Dueck of Fresno Pacific was identified as a person with both competence and interest and she quickly agreed. It happens that Mary Dueck and I grew up in the same community, same congregation, and our parents were friends. Mary then contacted Marlene Wall to join the team. Meanwhile, concerned about administration, I contacted Dennis and Rene Neumann of British Columbia. Dennis was working with me on a real estate project. Leona and I knew Dennis and Rene from our common time in Asia when we were in Bangladesh and the Neumanns in Nepal.

There was no mater plan to start a college. Along with Johannes Reimer and the Balciunases we became involved through being in the right, or the wrong, place at a point time. Others became involved in various ways and out of this has grown the network that continues to nourish and be nourished by the miracle that is LCC.

We did wish to test the idea of a college further and were not certain that Lithuanian authorities fully understood who we were and what a liberal arts college really was. It was decided to invite a delegation of four persons to tour colleges in Canada and the US.

The four persons were Aurimas Juozaitis, Deputy Minister of Education; Saulius Varnas, Deputy Mayor of Panevezys; Ligija Kaminiskiene, advisor in the Education Ministry; and Laimute Tamosiuniene. The tour covered Toronto, Winnipeg, Chicago, Indiana, Michigan and the east coast of the US.

The intention was to balance the delegates' visits to colleges with visits in our homes with opportunities for contact with the Lithuanian community in North America. The lack of response from the North American Lithuanian community remains a mystery. Leona and I filled the gap, calling on our friends to help with the hosting. As a result, the delegates' visit was dominated by persons associated with Mennonite churches, a circumstance that contributed to the later charge that LCC was a sectarian institution. The trip fully accomplished its educational purposes and laid the foundation for the later development of the college.

Leona and I returned to Panevezys in July 1991, during orientation week for the seventeen instructors in the first Summer English Institute. We were greeted by a headline in a major newspaper that asked "And How Shall We Answer Art DeFehr?" Apparently the Bishop of Panevezys had written a public letter condemning the Institute for being sectarian and suggesting that there was no room in Lithuania for an initiative that was Protestant. This caused a fair bit of controversy in the media since Lithuania was still part of the very secular Soviet Union and the new leaders were not planning "to replace a red tyranny with a black tyranny."

The first Institute was a great success, but profound questions were being asked at various levels. The chairman of the region believed that the differences of opinion could be dealt with in a rational forum and, as in the debates of the early days of the Reformation; he invited religious and political leaders together with eminent persons to sit down together. The meeting took place in the council chambers and included representatives of all identifiable religious groups, civic leaders, labor officials, media and known human rights proponents. I was asked to explain the college proposal. This was followed by responses from the religious leaders. The non-Catholic leaders all spoke in support of the new college. The Bishop of Panevezys then began his comments with a view to the future with Lithuania would be independent and democratic (the coup of August 19, 1991 was still 6 weeks away). He opined that in a democracy there was a majority and a minority and the minority did what the majority wanted. Reimer then modified this slightly; suggesting that in a democracy the majority respected and protected the minority. At that point the meeting came apart. The representative of the Reformed Church agreed that they were indeed a minority, but that was because so many of their faith had been killed by Catholics during the Counter-Reformation.

The next five hours saw a long debate in Lithuanian that had little if anything to do with the LCC. We later realized that there had been no meeting of this kind since before World War II. Furthermore, some of the participants had spent much of their lives in the Gulag, while others had remained in Lithuania and were assumed to have cooperated with the Communists.

That evening we visited the local bishop to have a discussion away from the glare of publicity. Translation was done by the associate of the Bishop who had apparently studied in Chicago and spoke excellent English. I asked why being Mennonite even if that should characterize the college, was such a big problem. The associate then answered directly and in perfect English, "If there were too many Anabaptists like you (note the change to the theologically correct term) then who would fight the Russians?" It was amazing to return to one of the core issues of the Reformation, and the basis for persecution of Mennonites.

A third ideologically-oriented event of that summer was a request by a parliamentary committee for me to testify to my views on the question "Is religious freedom a necessary condition of democracy?" The committee of some twenty highly-educated persons was polite and articulate and carried on a spirited debate first with Reimer and me, and later among themselves. After two hours they cast a ballot and unanimously concluded that LCC should be a welcome part of the future Lithuania.

LCC was a product of its time. Political considerations were close to the center of the activities of all of the persons who met to discuss the idea of a college with Lithuanian authorities. Reimer and Balciunas had adequate experience with the authorities of a Communist state. I was active in Russia organizing conferences on "Business and Ethics," and involved in various other activities with a political or ideological dimension.

The problem in Panevezys resulted in a January 1991 meeting in Davos, Switzerland between myself and the new President of Lithuania, Vytautas Landsbergis. LCC was located in his constituency. He asked if LCC was a "mission or a college?" The previous evening the very prominent Archbishop of Milan had given an address to the conference we were both attending on the subject "Your Vocation is your Mission." His thesis was that as business and political leaders we should live out our faith in our chosen professions. I answered Landsbergis's question by saying each of our teachers came to teach, but also came to live their mission. He responded by saying that if he supported LCC he would lose the next election; but his principles would not allow him to do otherwise. Why not move LCC to Klaipeda so he could avoid the dilemma?

We visited Klaipeda in early 1991. The visit began with a formal meeting with the entire city council. The chairman began with an incredible bit of history. He told us about the visit of two Protestant scholars who arrived in Memel (former name for Klaipeda) in 1542 with the intention of starting a university. The authorities of the day decided that a Protestant university would not be welcome and the two visitors left town to walk south to the nearby Hanseatic city of Koenigsberg (now Kaliningrad). There they founded one of the greatest universities of the time, a university associated today with the life and work of Immanuel Kant. The chairman

then said, "We missed our chance to have a university in 1542; we will not miss our second opportunity – you are welcome!"

LCC is not one person's story. My comments trace some of the ideological and political dimensions that shaped the institution and the lives of those who were part of it. The LCC story can be told equally through the lens of the society, the students, volunteers, or the leadership, individuals who may not have experienced the political events.

There were so many instances where the right person volunteered or intervened at the right time that I have repeatedly believed it is appropriate to call LCC a "miracle". One story will illustrate the point. I had the habit of writing "Trip Reports" following my visits to the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1992. These reports were sent to many friends to keep them up to date on developments in the evolving drama at the end of the Communist era. Among the recipients was the president of Hesston College, my former debating partner during student days. In August 1994 Leona and I returned from board meetings in Klaipeda, where it was concluded that LCC had a reasonable chance of survival, and it was time to search for long term academic leadership. Among the pile of mail waiting for me at home was a letter from Jim Mininger, Dean of Hesston College, asking about LCC and its plans for leadership. I picked up the phone to ask Jim if the message between the lines indicated a possible interest in that leadership and he said yes. Jim, his wife Virginia and I were in the same 1965 graduating class at Goshen College, but had kept no contact in the intervening years. As I returned from Klaipeda to start the search for leadership, Jim's letter was already waiting on my desk!

LCC is a product of sacrificial work, dedicated instructors, courageous students, a supportive Lithuanian community, generous donors and visionary leaders. It is also much more. The incredible series of events where the right people have emerged at the right time cause me to believe that LCC is truly a miracle of our Lord and Saviour.

