

USSR Trip Report #9

Art DeFehr
July 5 – 13, 1991

The timing for this short visit to the USSR was dictated by the opening of Lithuania Christian College and the related negotiations. I travelled together with John Esau and Mark Boyce. My schedule included one day in Riga, three and half days in Lithuania and finally an action-packed two days in Moscow. John is a Russian emigree, German citizen and has spent the past ten years completing his studies in Canada, graduating in June with an Economics degree. John will be representative of Arthur DeFehr Holdings Ltd. in the USSR, based in Moscow. Mark Boyce is a recent graduate of the Harvard Business School, has a M.A. from Fuller and worked for Microsoft until very recently. He is also a director of SUN and is considering a combined missions/business career related to the USSR.

This trip consisted of two significant components – the opening of Lithuania Christian College with its associated intrigue and dramatics plus further development of my private business interests in Moscow. After nine visits and two years it seems more appropriate to be reflective rather than spontaneous so the bulk of this report will not be written on the plane home but during the next few weeks on a more topical basis.

Riga at Dawn

Riga squats on the banks of the Daugava River, well inland from the carefully groomed beaches and pre-communist dachas of the coast. It was founded in 1301 by Teutonic knights and Hanseatic traders, 85 years before neighbouring Lithuania began its reluctant and still unfinished transition from paganism to Catholicism. Squats is an accurate term, since there are no distinguishing geographic features, suggesting it was located for trade rather than military or symbolic considerations. The old city is laced with beautiful parks and lush green growth. As one wanders among the zigzag ponds and admires the spontaneity of the rock gardens among the aromatic lindens, there is a sudden recognition that this beauty is the legacy of the landward ramparts required by a city without natural defenses.

The city shares its pastel colours and 19th century architecture with its Baltic and Hanseatic neighbours from Leningrad to Copenhagen. The beauty of summer temporarily hides the peeling plaster and empty upper floors. Riga has a heritage to match most of its Hanseatic forebears but the legacy of 50 years of scientific materialism has left it a poor and fading stepsister. Walking through the park at dawn past the remnants of old ramparts, the ducks and pigeons, past young women in shorts walking their dogs and old men on a bench lost in the reverie of a morning smoke, one enters the historic city. Approaching the old city one is rudely reminded of 1991. Every entry is barred with new ramparts of 1,000 kg blocks of concrete piled ten feet high with passages only for pedestrians. The graffiti of fish skeletons and tanks punctuated by the occasional English “Russians Go Home” does not need a translation. The millions of paving stones on the street would seem quaint anywhere else – but it is sobering to realize that they are the potential armory for some unpleasant times ahead.

In January of 1991, four Latvian youths were killed directly in front of my hotel, and I suddenly understood the flowers and photographs mounted like little Buddhist shrines in the park. Leading out of the main gate of the old city is a boulevard known as “Freedom Street”. At the edge of the old fortification, in the middle of this street, a tall monument was erected in the short interval of independence between World Wars I and II. It is a statue of a maiden holding three gold stars above her head to represent the three regions of Latvia. She faces the old city, the past, the traditions, the river. Several blocks further away from the old city, as the other end of Freedom Street is a shorter but more

massive red granite statue of the omnipresent and irrepressible Lenin. He stands with his back to the maiden of freedom, facing the newer part of Riga, facing East, facing Russia. What incredible symbolism? How long will Lenin be there, I wondered? In Lithuania they have permanent military guards beside the two remaining statues of Lenin!

Note: The statue of Lenin was taken down within months immediately after the August 1991 collapse and breaking up of the Soviet Union.

Old Riga will be hauntingly beautiful some day, but now it requires a great deal of imagination. Riga Dom is a large red brick cathedral in the centre, either built so long ago that it sunk ten feet below the prevailing pavement or the successive reconstructions of the surroundings have left it literally and figuratively in an earlier century. It was immensely disappointing to discover that this beautiful church is still a museum – closed on Sundays. The ornate black and gold clock high on the steeple spoke volumes – the clock had no hands – and Riga remains frozen in another time.

The strangest image of Riga was of three young artists sitting on the paving stones and each painting the same scene – of crumbling buildings, gnarled trees and above everything rose the tall and graceful spire of the Dom. Riga looks to the sea and to the past to search for its future.

Lithuania Christian College Opens its Doors

A special ceremony in the Panevezys Drama Theatre on July 8, 1991 celebrated the beginning of the English Institute which will hopefully be the first program of a future Christian Liberal Arts College. The Vice-Minister, Mr. Dienys, and the Co-Ordinator for Higher Schools, Ligija Kaminskiene, both of the Ministry of Culture and Education for the Republic of Lithuania, participated along with Mr. Saulius Varnas, Vice-Mayor of Panevezys. The Institute has a teaching staff of 13 (headed by Mary Dueck of Fresno Pacific) from Canada and the U.S.A. plus several administrators and an architect to work on campus development. All of the foreign staff are volunteers.

The English Institute will operate for six weeks and end with a graduation ceremony on August 16th. Twenty of the 104 students are high-school graduates who are seeking an English degree but are among the 90% who fail to capture the few English spaces in Vilnius University. The balance are English teachers from the Lithuanian School system who are up-grading their English skills and learning new teaching methodologies. Among this group are a number of Russian language teachers who are being retrained for English due to a dramatic decline in demand for the Russian language. The program is off to an excellent start with good reports from students and in the local press.

The idea for a Christian College along Protestant/Evangelical lines was conceived during meetings between the Vice-Minister of Culture and Education, Aurimas Juozaitis and Johannes Reimer of Logos in July, 1990. A protocol was signed with the Ministry in early November, 1990 by Johannes Reimer and Arthur DeFehr of the DeFehr Foundation. It is anticipated that a new organization to be known as the Lithuania Christian College Foundation will be established in the West to work together with Lithuanian Christians in the operation of the College.

The concept of the College is a Christian institution which provides a window to the West for Lithuania, a window into Lithuania for Western Christians and an alternative form of higher education with an explicit value base. Support among the various levels and organizations of government and the intelligentsia is universally very strong. The reason for this support is probably not only their desire for a Christian College, but their recognition that any institution which strengthens pluralism and choice in Lithuanian society is a positive.

The local Evangelical counterpart is the Lithuania Christian Charity Fund which represents a small but energetic and growing group of evangelicals scattered around the country. They will also be a signatory to the final agreement which is expected to be signed in conjunction with the August 16th closing ceremony. The detailed drafts of these more elaborate agreements are being drafted by Dennis Neumann, a developer from B.C., and Henry Dueck, from Fresno Pacific college. One agreement will be with the City of Panevezys regarding the availability of certain buildings and lands and the second with the Ministry regarding a charter for the school and the nature of the relationship with the Ministry. According to the draft agreement, the Ministry will provide a grant per student equivalent to what state schools receive for similar programs.

The College has received incredibly solid support from all quarters especially in finding staff. The only disappointment to date has been an apparent reversal of the original Catholic position to support the College. This change of attitude was stimulated in part by intervention from American Lithuanian Catholics during a tour of North America by the Vice-Minister in May. It may also be that the Ministry slipped it by Catholic authorities on the first round without being too explicit. In any event, the Western group arrived in Lithuania in the middle of a raging dispute in the press between nine of the ten Catholic Bishops who published a letter suggesting the College was not good for Lithuania and most of the intelligentsia of Lithuania, who saw this issue as a litmus test for the future role and intentions of the Catholic church. As one described the issue, "We don't want to replace a 'red' tyranny with a 'black' tyranny." Since I was arriving as the official person to open the College, a major article in the National Press the day prior to my arrival was headlined, "And How Shall We Answer Art DeFehr?" This set the stage for a somewhat more vigorous, intensive, but also stimulating and rewarding three days of discussions in Lithuania. I had not been quite prepared to relive the Reformation, but it certainly was a privilege to participate in a debate which will undoubtedly be a major watershed in Lithuania. A little background may be helpful.

Lithuania became (or rather started the process) of becoming Catholic in 1386 when Jogaila, King of Lithuania, married Jadwiga, a Polish princess, uniting the two kingdoms. Part of the deal was that Lithuania would become Catholic (the last country in Europe to become Christian). As a Lithuanian Catholic described it to me, "We took the best of our pagan past, the best of Catholicism and that became the Lithuanian Catholic Church." The church has been immensely useful in creating a sense of national purpose but Lithuania missed the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, plus most of the other transforming movements, including Vatican II. The church hierarchy genuinely believes that Lithuanian identity/nationalism is completely inseparable from Catholicism (stated to us in no uncertain terms by the Bishop).

Glasnost has released the ferment of democracy in Lithuania, given focus by the common desire for independence. The Catholic leadership is struggling with its own identity in a future Lithuania which will not wish to exchange the authoritarian rule of the Communists for a church hierarchy which in many respects remains medieval. The bishops stress the need for Lithuanians to remain unified in religion if Lithuania is to retain an identity. They point to the histories of Lebanon and Ireland to prove their point but ignore examples such as America or most of modern Europe. They also ignore Iran or other attempts at theocracy.

This is the background which produced a negative reaction from the bishops. They believed that they had a right to a monopoly on religion whereas much of the population recognizes that you will probably not be very successful in achieving democracy and an open economy with a repressive approach to religion. The whole matter is complicated by the fact that the local bishop enjoys enormous prestige in Lithuania since he was the only senior church official not banished to Siberia, presumably because he was a classmate of Joseph Stalin, and served as the conduit for information between Lithuania and the banished hierarchy. The local city officials are not particularly Catholic and want a Western and more liberal presence in the City. They have been very generous in their offer of some of the best real estate in the

heart of the City. It happens that President Landsbergis is also a representative in Parliament from Panevezys with a weak personal electoral mandate, thereby placing him in a difficult position between the intelligentsia and the church.

The newspaper article in the national paper reported the letter of the bishops, presented some counter arguments by the intellectual community, then raised the question in an editorial way about what kind of Lithuania the people wanted, how such a decision should be made and therefore “How Shall We Answer Art DeFehr?” My name was highlighted since it was known that I was arriving for the opening as well as to negotiate the detailed final agreement. Personalizing an issue is not at all unusual in the USSR and it also provided a useful way for responding. Since they had raised issues in a very personal way such as my membership in a narrow sect such as Mennonite, it was legitimate to respond personally – and in this case more effectively. I explained my motives in coming to the USSR (my mother was denied university education because of her faith, father a refugee, step-mother in labour camps, etc.) and that my personal good fortune demanded that I give something back to this country. Then I explained my international work in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Somalia, etc., especially our direct co-operation with Mother Teresa and other Catholics – including my daughter (Tara Teresa) who came to us via Mother Teresa’s orphanage. Finally there was some discussion about SUN and ACB and the need for moral revival in the USSR. I would also point out that it would be difficult to have freedom in the economy and in politics but monopoly in religion and ideas.

We started out with a meeting with Bronislovas Luzmikas, the Vice-President (it was actually scheduled with President Landsbergis, but he had to depart early for meetings in Strasbourg). Kuzmickas has Ph.D. in philosophy, understood the issues very well, asked pointed questions and after one and one-half hours declared it a good idea that he would support. We met at length with the Panevezys City Council (who were in favour anyhow – but needed our help in getting support from above). They set up a meeting with the Bishop of Panevezys and three senior clergy who started out, “I don’t know why we are meeting since we’ve made our decision and don’t need any information from you.” It was like a meeting with four blocks of ice – in an earlier time I would have ended up in stocks in the town square! One of the clergy was very belligerent but after hearing my personal story, the bishop visibly softened, gave instructions to his “Heavy” to lay off and handled the rest of the meeting in at least a very cordial manner. The most telling moment was when he said almost plaintively, “You realize that I do not have the power to change our decision.” We all felt like we were reliving Zurich or Geneva or Worms! One of the more interesting exchanges was why they had stated in their letter that this school would be “Mennonite” and this was presumably bad. One of them answered in articulate English, referred to Anabaptists and said they would be bad for Lithuania because “... Anabaptists are pacifists and if our people become pacifist – who will fight the Russians for Lithuanian Independence?” The second objection was that Anabaptists – then later expanded to Protestants generally – “do not participate actively enough in the political process and again this would be bad for Lithuania.” I responded it should be considered whether there was really any alternative to non-violence in a nuclear world. I then commented that American protestants had been accused of many things – but seldom of not being political enough. That drew a real good laugh all around! It was encouraging that they at least objected to what is a genuine Anabaptist distinctive, although many Soviet evangelicals are pacifist. It also pointed out how completely political the hierarchy was in its pattern of thinking.

There was a request that I remain an extra day to meet with the 16-member Committee of Culture and Education of the Supreme Council (Parliament). They had also invited the Council of Panevezys (six members came including Regional Chairman, Mayor and Vice-Mayor). The Vice-Minister and his staff were present plus three of the five elected Parliamentarians from Panevezys. Everyone was allowed to state their own positions except for the Panevezys members who were very clearly under orders from the bishop to toe the line. (This was confirmed by one of them privately after the meeting). Then I was allowed to give my pitch and was actually given an ovation. The local (Panevezys) Branch of the Kaunas

Technical University was represented by the Head of Faculty who welcomed the College and said they did not view it as a threat to their own aspirations to achieve independent university status.

The main questions asked centered about the issue of whether the College would be narrow and secretarian or if it would be more representative of the Protestant perspective. We assured them that it would be distinctly Christian in purpose, but we would define that as anyone (faculty) who shared a common religion perspective which we would prepare in writing and share with the Committee. All students would be welcome provided only that they would respect the character of the College and not be disruptive. One member had earlier expressed reservations, withdrew them and it was a unanimous “yes” with the visiting (non-committee) Panevezys members vowing to take the issue to the President. We received written approval from the Committee and later from the Ministry to proceed with final negotiations to be hopefully signed August 15, 1991.

In addition to these meetings, I was also interviewed for the Panevezys radio, the Panevezys press and the national press. There is some discussion about setting up a formal debate on national television when I return in August on the question of religious freedom. The largest USSR evangelical newspaper “Protestant” is planning to run a story on the College entitled “Christians Fight for Democracy in Lithuania”. Who ever said things would be simple in Lithuania?

See attached – last page was cut off