



**Tomas Venclova**

## Vilnius: The city as object of nostalgia

Lithuania's capital is close to the heart of many different groups and nationalities who have at one time or another called it "home". Better that they unite in their love of the city than fight for isolated fragments of its magical, multi-layered past, writes Tomas Venclova.

for V. V. Ivanov

I would like to begin my lecture<sup>1</sup> with a brief reference to a single resident of Vilnius. His destiny is particular though also typical; above all, it is sad. I am speaking about a Lithuanian poet known as Juozas Kekstas<sup>2</sup> whose real surname was Adomavicius. He came from a family which struggled to make ends meet, first in Czarist Russia then in Vilnius, where Kekstas was a pupil at Vytautas Magnus secondary school in the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s. Lessons in the huge building on Pohulianka Street, now Basanaviciaus Street, were in Lithuanian because the school aimed to train professionals for a future Lithuanian Vilnius, which was, at the time, merely a dream. Many students of the school embraced radical worldviews, including communism, which came naturally to the proletarian young Kekstas. As a teenager, he was incarcerated in the notorious Lukiskes prison where, with a number of brief interludes, he was held almost continuously until the outbreak of war, when he was released. He shared a prison cell with Belarusian Yavhen Skurko, who, under the pseudonym of Maksim Tank, would later gain fame as a poet. Kekstas also started writing; his poems were published in the Lithuanian press of Vilnius. When out of prison, he made friends with members of the Polish literary group *Zagary*,<sup>3</sup> among them Czeslaw Milosz, a founding member of the group. He also received attention from Wladyslaw Broniewski from Warsaw.



An alley near the synagogue in Vilnius, circa 1930

In 1939, the year the Soviet army seized Vilnius and Stalin gave the city to Lithuania, Kekstas was 24. The young communist did not want to stay in a bourgeois country, so he moved to the vicinity of Svencionys, at that time in Belorussia and thus part of the Soviet state; he had no idea that this same fate was about to overtake Vilnius. It is not surprising that he was soon arrested and sent to a labour camp near Vorkuta in the Komi Republic, an experience which ruined his dreams about communism, though he remained on the Left until his death. Freed, Kekstas joined the Anders Army (Polish army in the East formed from Polish soldiers and others imprisoned in the USSR after Hitler invaded Russia in 1941 Ed.) and reached Italy via Iran and

the Middle East. He fought at Monte Cassino, was wounded and awarded both Polish and British decorations.

Unable to return to either Lithuania or Poland, he eventually left for Buenos Aires, where he earned his living by hard manual labour. He continued to write poetry, founded a Lithuanian avant-garde journal *Literatūros laukai* (Fields of Literature), and published a collection of his translations of Milosz's texts. Ten years later, while working on an Argentine highway, he suffered a stroke and was partially paralysed. With the help of old acquaintances who held high positions in communist Poland, Kekstas found refuge in Warsaw as a Polish veteran. He earned money by translating South American literature, for instance Ernesto Sábato's *El Túnel* (The Tunnel), and wrote a little for publication, including some pieces in Lithuanian. I visited him in 1970 when I went to Warsaw, but our meeting was brief. Kekstas was then living in a veterans' home in the suburbs, a big construction surrounded by huge puddles of water; it was not easy to sort out the tricky numbering of the buildings, and electricity was lacking. On a shelf in his room, there was a Lithuanian encyclopaedia published in exile; I was very much interested in these volumes, but did not dare to ask him to let me leaf through them. He died 11 years later and was buried in Warsaw.

Kekstas's story is told in a book by Polish scholar Malgorzata Kasner, which, paradoxically, has only been published in Lithuanian. The paradox is symbolic of Kekstas' destiny. As Kasner rightly puts it, he was always different and could never adjust anywhere: he believed in communist ideas, but became disillusioned with them; a Lithuanian, he fought in the Polish army; a leftist from Vilnius, he remained an outcast in exile; an exile, he spent the last years of his life close to Lithuania, to which he could not — or maybe would not — return. On the other hand, he was an intermediary, a person who connected Lithuania and Poland, Vilnius and Warsaw.

Though he never returned to Lithuania and Vilnius, Kekstas always remained loyal to his homeland and wanted to be buried in Vilnius. This was not to be, but he did visit the city one last time; he was no longer able to walk and was carried along the streets by his old friends. Above all, he was looking for readers in Vilnius, readers who would only appear after his death in 1986 with the publication of his book *Dega Vejai* (Winds Are on Fire). The book included his translations of Milosz's works, the first time the latter found their way into occupied Lithuania. Kekstas himself did not write much about Vilnius but the city which he had known in his youth possessed the most important part of his imagination. This is obvious both in the most interesting part of his book and his literary *oeuvre* in general, namely, in his Warsaw letters to a friend Aldona Liobyte, a Lithuanian resident of Vilnius. These letters are mainly descriptions of his imaginary walks around the city. This is pre-war Vilnius: old street names, obsolete shops, restaurants and theatres, signboards, shop windows and posters that are no longer there but remain alive in Kekstas's memory, which has preserved even the most precise topographic directions — this is the corner at which to turn, this the direction to take, this how much time we shall need.

### **Multicultural city**

I would like to use the story of Juozas Kekstas as a point of departure for my talk about Vilnius. Each important city, from Athens, Florence or Dublin to Saint Petersburg, Krakow or Warsaw, has a similar narrative, the text of a city. This text is composed of poems and novels, essays and letters, as well as paintings, engravings, photos, films and even the lives of the people connected to the city in various ways, such as Juozas Kekstas's extraordinary destiny. In short, this text embraces everything that constitutes the aura and myth of the

city, and helps preserve it in the cultural memory as a specific and unique entity. Architecture, as well as the daily life delineated by it, is but the first layer alongside a multiplicity of others.

The text of Vilnius has been abundantly discussed on many occasions, though the term "text", now widely exploited in cultural studies, may not always be used. The text of Vilnius is undoubtedly among the most interesting in Europe and has features we would not find in other larger and more influential texts. Vilnius is often said to be mysterious and magic, eccentric and peculiar, the inspiration of myths and poetry. A particularly strong connection between the city and its surroundings is frequently mentioned, too, allowing us to see Vilnius as a pastoral city with "wild" but idyllic nature intruding into the city centre and adorning its baroque décor. Another feature of Vilnius, which has recently become particularly fashionable for its "political correctness", is its multicultural, polyglot nature, linking the Lithuanian capital to Czech Prague, Italian Trieste or Bosnia and Herzegovina's Sarajevo. The text of Vilnius is composed of smaller texts, written in different languages, sometimes rich in code-switching, as for instance the seventeenth-century Jesuit dramas, where Lithuanian cues are interwoven with Polish ones.

But there is more than just linguistics involved here. Most varied stories and cultural discourses overlay one another, letting dissimilar, even competing myths sprout from the primeval mythological trunk. The national identity of many residents of Vilnius is similarly complicated: the same person can simultaneously belong to several cultures, which is why she or he sometimes stands aloof from the rest of society, suffering from an inner conflict and an urgent need to choose. According to Milosz, a resident of Vilnius is neither Lithuanian nor Polish nor Belarusian. I would suggest that he or she is in some ways reminiscent of Kekstas — Lithuanian poet, Polish soldier and Russian prisoner.

What probably marks Vilnius most strongly is the fact that the city is almost always construed as an object of nostalgia. The text of Vilnius is created by people severed from their city and thus extremely sensitive to the particulars of its everyday life: at this point one should remember Kekstas and his extraordinary letters, but also more prominent personalities, for instance, Czeslaw Milosz or Adam Mickiewicz. There is a similarity between Vilnius and Warsaw here, but in the text of Warsaw, nostalgia surfaces either during the war years as, for instance, in Julian Tuwim's and Aleksander Wat's texts, or marks the longing for the past, for the irrevocably destroyed pre-war city. In the text of Vilnius, such emotional complexity is also present, but nostalgia here is more frequent, more deeply rooted and more multilayered. And — this is probably the most important aspect — it affects not only individuals but entire ethnic and national groups. I suggested a long time ago that the Lithuanian capital had always been a border city with its border moving from place to place over the years: Vilnius would, for instance, find itself close to the lands of the Teutonic Order (Prussia — ed.) or, in the interwar period, some 30 kilometres from independent Lithuania; now, too, it is located 150 kilometres from Poland and a mere 30 kilometres from Alexander Lukashenka's Belarus and thus at the eastern border of the European Union. This bordering frequently cut off the nation nostalgic about the city considered theirs: before World War II, these were the Lithuanians; now they are the Poles, Belarusians and Israel-based Jews.

The best scholarly work on the text of Vilnius, though it does not use the term "text", is by Israel-based Valentina Brio, originally from Vilnius. Her book

*The Poetry and Poetics of the City: Wilno -- Vilne -- Vilnius* was published only one year ago, and I shall rely heavily on it. Valentina Brio has an extraordinary and extremely rare quality: she knows four languages of Vilnius -- Lithuanian, Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew -- and is thus competent in four literatures. One should also mention a fifth: Russian, which is also deeply rooted in this city. Brio's text has been published in Russian and, on the cover of the book, the name of the city is written in Polish, Hebrew and Lithuanian. I think she also knows Belarusian, not so difficult for a person competent in Polish and Russian, though she does not discuss this exciting part of Vilnius' text. While making use of Brio's study, I shall, of course, be adding my own commentaries, especially when touching upon the main topic: nostalgia for Vilnius, of which Brio's book is itself an excellent example.

### In the beginning was the text

In the beginning, the text of Vilnius did not possess those important features above; they emerged slowly. The first inhabitants of Vilnius were Lithuanians, even though as early as the Middle Ages, the city abounded in Slavic people, not the Poles but the Ruthenians, ancestors to contemporary Belarusians and Ukrainians. It is precisely the Baltic Lithuanian narrative about the founding of the city set in Sventaragis valley, the ritual burial grounds of the Grand Dukes, with Duke Gediminas' castle rising above it and laying the foundations for a great city, that sacralises Vilnius and defines its future as the indubitable capital of the Lithuanian state. The narrative made its way into the Lithuanian chronicles, but was recorded in an Eastern Slavic language: it is a typical Vilnius paradox that the Lithuanian language was not used in written form until the sixteenth century. Equally surprising is the fact that except for the legend of Gediminas' castle, whose significance to the Lithuanian national imagination and mentality is enormous, the city of Vilnius does not play any particular role in Lithuanian folklore -- it is no more important than Riga or Tilze (Tilsit until 1946, now Sovetsk) -- and even its topographical location is not particularly clear: according to some folk songs Vilnius is situated on the Danube! In these songs, Vilnius is conceived as merely some large, rather unfamiliar territory, a city from which the Lithuanian language had been almost entirely excluded for several centuries and was used only by peasants. Lithuanian songs tell us about the green gates of Vilnius and one might suggest that the capital these songs depict is a city "behind the gates", disconnected from the rest of the country. However, professional poetry of the time offers a very different picture of Vilnius. Its authors -- Lithuanians, Ruthenians and Poland's Poles, recognisable from their surnames -- are usually related to Vilnius University. They write almost entirely in Latin though there are exceptions. Oddly enough, the first secular poem in Finnish was written in Vilnius, as was the first poem in Lithuanian, using Virgil's ancient prosody. These dignified Renaissance and Baroque texts celebrate Lithuania's aristocratic tradition and compare Vilnius to ancient Rome, whose ancient gods are said to have inspired Lithuanian leaders in their battles with the Tatars and Moscow. There are also elegies and nature poems, which portray Vilnius as a *locus amoenus*, delighting in its suburbs such as Lukiskes or Verkiai. This tradition is further developed in contemporary times, only the suburbs have changed: while the Philomaths<sup>4</sup> gazed at Belmontas, Rasos or Tuskulenai, Tadeusz Konwicki would prefer Pavilnys (Kolonija Wilenska) and Konstantin Ildelfons Galczynski, or Jurgis Kuncinas would focus on UZupis.

Returning to the Baroque period, the first piece of poetry in which Vilnius is depicted as an object of nostalgia, a fabulous city destroyed by fire is the 1610 "Threnody, or Sorrowful Plaint after the Fire of Vilnius" by Jonas Eismantas.

The poet's surname is Lithuanian; he came most probably from Samogitia but wrote in Polish. In fact, there is little point in classifying the writers of the period according to their nationality: we are speaking about the literature of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in general and this includes both Motiejus Kazimieras Sarbievijus (Sarbievski) and Daniel Naborowski from the Polish territories as well as Ruthenian Andrey Rimsa from Naugardukas and Konstantinas Sirvydas, undoubtedly of Lithuanian origin, a preacher at St. John's church and a teacher of Sarbievijus.

Nationality only becomes important at a later date, during Romanticism with its characteristic Herderian cult of folk mythology and the "folk spirit". For the Poles, this is related to Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Slowacki, who put Johann Gottfried Herder's principles into practice in their own writing. Moreover, at that same time, Vilnius saw other ethnic groups undertake similar activities, albeit more modestly, though this is still largely *terra incognita* for most Poles. Mickiewicz's contemporaries, often colleagues and friends from Vilnius University, launched "philological revolutions" which eventually allowed for the emergence of two separate states distinct from Poland, namely Lithuania and Belorussia. Jan Czeczot wrote in Belarusian. In his ode written in Lithuanian, Simonas Stanevicius celebrated Vilnius as the capital of national rebirth. Even more important, Simonas Daukantas, the first translator of Mickiewicz's works and an author of historical studies, formulated an ideology which was to become the basis for the twentieth-century quest for Lithuania's independence. These texts radiate with specific nostalgia for Vilnius: for Vilnius as the perfect capital city which had been lost in the whirlwinds of history, ranging from Czarist occupation to Polonisation. That nation's capital would be reborn as a great European city; it would belong to the nation which is now enslaved and unknown, but whose history is as distinguished as that of any other nation. Later, these ideas were taken over by more mature nationalist movements at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the Lithuanian Maironis wrote about Vilnius drowning in nocturnal darkness but illuminated by the rays of the past, while the Belarusian Maksim Bahdanovic eulogised the Vytis<sup>5</sup> of the Gates of Dawn which would save its country.

The imagination of Vilnius' Poles operated in similar ways, at least from the time of the Philomaths. They dreamed of recovering the golden age of Vilnius, though for the Poles this implied not only — and not primarily — the old epoch of the Grand Dukes Gediminas, Kestutis and Algirdas, but rather a *Rzeczpospolita*, a powerful united Republic of the Two Nations, Polish and Lithuanian. Mickiewicz began writing when the independent state, undoubtedly Polish, was still a fairly vivid memory and Vilnius' everyday life had not changed much in comparison to the free eighteenth century. Heartily spiced up with humorous details, that life is well reflected in Mickiewicz's first, somewhat undervalued poem "Winter in the City". The cult of minutiae, as mentioned before, was to become one of the most distinctive features of Vilnius' text. Still, the complexity of the nostalgia for Vilnius is first and foremost related to the Philomaths. In the beginning, the nostalgia is for the past, for the legendary Zywila and Grazyna, for King Jan Sobieski and general Casimir Pulaski; later it colours the yearning for the city from which the Philomaths had been torn away and, of course, the longing for youth. Thus Mickiewicz yearns for Vilnius first in Kaunas, later in his sonnet "The Ackerman Steppe", in Saint Petersburg, Dresden and Paris; Tomasz Zan is exiled to Orenburg, Jan Czeczot to Ufa, Onufry Pietraszkiewicz to Tobolsk, Józef Kowalewski to Kazan and Ignacy Domejko is as far away as Coquimbo and Santiago. In his Paris apartment, Mickiewicz cherishes Walenty Wankowicz's painting of Vilnius; Wankowicz also produced a copy of the

picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of Mercy of the Gate of Dawn for the Church of Saint Séverin in Paris. The situation of exile, banishment and rejection will recur repeatedly and will become an essential element in the myth of Vilnius, by no means confined to the Polish tradition.

Surprisingly, however, neither Mickiewicz nor another famous Vilnius student, Juliusz Slowacki, often remember Vilnius in their texts written in exile. For Slowacki, Vilnius is replaced by Krzemieniec and Ukraine, which, as Alina Kowalczykowska argues, may be due to the awkward story of his stepfather Augusto Bécu. For Mickiewicz, the substitute is the imaginary lands in *Pan Tadeusz*.<sup>6</sup> But for both poets Vilnius is an invisible centre of attraction, a "black hole" around which the entire Polish Romanticism movement revolves. Indeed, Tadeusz comes to the village of Soplicowo from Vilnius, "the big city", where he had studied 10 years before Mickiewicz; the invocations of the poem, too, feature both Gediminas, Grand Duke of Lithuania, and the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of Mercy of the Gate of Dawn.

Thus the legend of the university, the Philomaths and Slowacki becomes an irreplaceable part of the nostalgic myth of Vilnius. Brio shows how, from the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, Vilnius becomes an important city, a pilgrimage destination for those tracing Mickiewicz's routes; it thus turns into an almost religious space evoking the anthropomorphized past. An important role here is allotted to the essays written by Stanislaw Morawski, Gabriela Puzynina and Wladyslaw Syrokomla; their memories immortalized the image of the city both before and after the revolt of 1863–64 against Russian rule. Vilnius is the destination of Stanislaw Tarnowski's pilgrimage; Tarnowski came to the Russified Lithuanian capital from Galicia's Krakow in 1878. Sixty years later, in the wake of World War II, Vilnius still means the same for Antony Slonimski, though Slonimski also registers the city's aged, deserted and dejected face. Even the chaotic, mysterious and amusing, carnivalesque and devilish Vilnius by Galczynski, an arrival from modernised Warsaw, has the same nostalgic legend as its basis, albeit treated with a degree of jest and gibe:

"Mister Mickiewicz?"

"No, he's left for Russia..."

"Oh God, he's also a communist then..."

Galczynski's Vilnius is a parody of itself, as well as of Rome and Jerusalem. Milosz, the greatest Vilnius poet of the twentieth century — the way Mickiewicz was in the nineteenth century — argued that after 1918, the era of the Philomaths was in some way reborn. The past in Krakow, in contrast to Wilno/Vilnius, was no longer appealing or bright. This is confirmed by a small propaganda booklet published by post-war Polish emigrants in which Krakow is described as Medina, the city of death, while Vilnius is referred to as Mecca. The chronotope of Vilnius did not change much from Mickiewicz's to Milosz's times; the city and its suburbs were populated by the same provincial Polish gentry, known as *szlachta*, the memories of the free masons' lodges and the old Szubrawcy Union were still alive, as was its successor, the Academic Club of Vagabonds. Thus, the budding poet could readily feel he was entering a larger tradition. But for Milosz, Vilnius was not a sanctuary to visit on a pilgrimage; nor was it a place asking for a particular literary genre to record its magnificence, namely, the poetic Baedeker, much exploited by the lesser poets of the time, such as Szymon Czarnocki, Witold Hulewicz, Wladyslaw Arcimowicz or Tadeusz Lopalewski. Milosz was not a regional but a European poet, as was Mickiewicz. He did not share the victorious ecstasy for

independence and felt he was connected with more than just the Polish component of the territory.

According to Milosz, the Philomath tradition marked a revolt, a disagreement with reality as well as the prospect of exile, which he might have understood only later, but was undoubtedly unconsciously aware of throughout. He despised the provincial, "endecist"<sup>7</sup> mentality of the majority of Vilnius' Poles and could appreciate the booklet entitled *Eighteen Nasty Squibs for Vilnius and its people*, anonymously published by his friend Teodor Bujnicki. But for Milosz, too, Vilnius was a sacred city. In exile, at least in the beginning, he denied feeling nostalgic: he wanted to start anew and to build his poetic tower without looking back. Yet his texts soon acquired a double perspective: he would depict the city of his youth through the prism of his new Californian experiences, reviving the details of the past life with heartfelt love and skill, contrapuntally comparing Vilnius to his new surroundings. In his thoughts — in a very similar way to his acquaintance and Lithuanian translator Kekstas — he would stroll in the maze of Vilnius' streets; unlike Kekstas he did not limit himself to letters and used his memories to compose wonderful poems and essays. Milosz felt he was a witness whose duty was to save the city from death, that is, from history. He recreated the city spaces in the Proustian manner: his city is idealized because of his physical and temporal distance, but the picture is realistic enough and devoid of unnecessary sentimentality. In the cycle *Miasto bez imienia* (City without a Name) published in 1969, as well as in other poems, Milosz was approaching what he himself called *apocatastasis*, the revival of purified, primordial reality. He was greatly, probably mainly, interested in the language of that reality. In this, an obvious example and archetype for Milosz was Mickiewicz, but also the Lithuanian Konstantinas Sirvydas, the author of the seventeenth-century dictionary, to whom Milosz devoted his poem "Philology".

The peak of this poetry is manifest in the poems written after the restoration of Lithuania's independence, when Milosz could return to it. Nostalgia acquires a new shape: 52 years later, Vilnius looks like a city of the dead and Lithuania is some "other space" described in metaphysical categories. At the same time, nothing has disappeared from the landscape of Vilnius: Milosz sees the same "forests of brown gold" in October, when the weather, again, is like wine, and the familiar hills and twisted baroque gables whisper that everything passes but are also witnesses to the permanence of the world, resurrected in human memory.

Milosz seems to be creating a paradigm for the so-called literature of the margins (*kresy*) though he transcends its limits. Vilnius is probably the most important topographical location for this now extremely popular and significant part of Polish literature, though one should not forget Lviv and Ukraine. Starting with the novels of Józef Mackiewicz, encompassing numerous more minor emigrant writers such as Zofia Bohdanowiczowa or Sergiusz Piasecki, as well as countless memoirs and diaries, most notably Maria Znamierowska-Prüfferowa's text *Wilno, miasto sercu najblizsze* (Vilnius, the Place Closest to My Heart) and ending with the nostalgic but ironic texts of Tadeusz Konwicki or Tomasz Lubiński, this literature is interesting. However, at this point I would like to address a different topic related to the peculiar history of Vilnius and for this purpose shall retrace my steps.

The young Vilnius poets of the *Zagary* group, first and foremost Milosz, considered themselves successors to the traditions of the Grand Duchy of

Lithuania as opposed to the very different traditions of Poland. They would also tune in with the ideas of the *Krajowcy*,<sup>8</sup> particularly such publicists as Ludwik Abramowicz or Michal Römer/Mykolas Römeris, who had worked in Vilnius before World War I and were well known later. Milosz and his companions were interested in the history and culture of the ethnic communities which had rights to the city, namely, the Lithuanians, the Belarusians and the Jews. Together with a friend, political immigrant from the so-called Lithuania of Kaunas<sup>9</sup> Pranas Ancevicus, Milosz translated the works of the Lithuanian poet Kazys Boruta and wrote reviews of twentieth-century Lithuanian literature, his lifelong interest. In some ways he considered himself a Lithuanian who wrote in Polish; I remember how happy he was when Lithuanian translations of his poems were published before the Polish originals.

Before World War I, Lithuanian literature in Vilnius had built quite a reputation, yet during the two interwar decades it was often dismissed as inferior. But this was to change. Mythologized by the activists of the nationalist movement, Vilnius, in the minds of the Lithuanians of the time, recovered its role as the city of the Grand Dukes and thus as the unquestionable spiritual and future political capital of the state. It was seen as the power centre, the place of glory and education, and a synonym for Lithuania, more specifically, for the Lithuania referred to as "our homeland" in the Lithuanian national anthem, echoing Mickiewicz's slightly modified formula from *Pan Tadeusz*. Over the centuries, many things had changed, and the majority of Vilnius' residents no longer spoke Lithuanian; nonetheless, the Jews had lost Jerusalem but that did not mean they would never be able to return to it. One of the best known Lithuanian writers of the time, Juozas Tumas-Vaizgantas, stated that "we do not need to refuse Vilnius: we are not and cannot be stick-in-the-muds devoid of historical traditions; we need but to hail and greet Vilnius and to restore it to its primal role in the eyes of the entire country."

After the revolution of 1905, which affected vast areas of the Russian Empire, the Lithuanians of Vilnius, albeit few, succeeded in approaching this objective. It is not well known that, at the time, Lithuanian cultural initiatives in Vilnius frequently surpassed the Polish ones: the first Lithuanian newspaper, the first artistic society, the first drama performance and the first opera in post-revolutionary Vilnius were "born" a year or two before their Polish counterparts, even if the Polish ones were more mature. Vilnius was where the Lithuanian élite had accumulated, while the Poles still had Warsaw, Krakow and Lvov/Lviv. More than half of the Lithuanian writers of the time lived in Vilnius and had formed quite a strong group, maybe even more interesting than the groups of Polish writers, then not so large. Thus a certain cultural balance was established and the Lithuanians cherished hopes of eventually taking over. They were supported by the *Krajowcy*, at least by Mykolas Römeris, who had envisioned a certain synthesis: the Poles were supposed to become loyal citizens of the future independent Lithuanian state and respected collaborators in its multilingual culture. He wrote: "The reborn Lithuania will be a synthesis of a totality in which this tribe will also find its place. Vilnius will be the major and most indispensable element of this synthesis."

However, this was not to be: Vilnius was annexed to Poland which the Lithuanians found this impossible to come to terms with. Lithuanian writers, and not only they, moved to Kaunas, as did Römeris to become the rector of Kaunas University, founded as a temporary replacement for Vilnius University. This period also saw the emergence of the so-called "Vilnius

literature", popular in Lithuania, unknown in Vilnius, but a straightforward expression of the nostalgia for the lost city. A small group of Lithuanian writers stayed in Vilnius under Polish rule — our protagonist Juozas Kekstas was one of them; the majority, especially the older ones, wrote nostalgic texts though the younger generation fairly quickly fell under the influence of the Polish avant-garde, primarily the *Zagary* group. The majority of Lithuanian writers saw Vilnius as occupied and enslaved. In 1922, during the anniversary of General Zeligowski's spurious march of 1920 and the declaration of the Republic of Central Lithuania in which he proclaimed Vilnius as its capital, Petras Vaiciunas published his famous poem "Hey, world! There's no relenting without Vilnius"; the poem immediately became extremely popular and functioned as a second national anthem during the entire inter-war period. Similar poems were written by others including Liudas Gira and Kazys Binkis, who also published a fascinating album of the city. Vilnius literature also embraced famous Russian immigrant Konstantin Balmont, who wrote a rhymed letter in support of Lithuania addressed to Polish poet and diplomat Jan Lechon. Of course, this was little more than naïve rhetoric; Lithuania, 10 times smaller than Poland, was quite incapable of reclaiming Vilnius. But these texts undoubtedly expressed authentic feelings and eventually played a significant role in the history of Lithuania's capital.

### Nostalgia and identity

In this nostalgic literature, Vilnius is a symbol of Lithuanian identity, its stability and an unbreakable bond with its roots. The city is inevitably construed as sacred and mythologized, simultaneously pagan and Christian, for its symbol is not only the eternal fire but also the Gate of Dawn. The most important role here is allotted to the personalities of the Grand Dukes, especially Vytautas or Kestutis, a chivalrous pagan comparable, for instance, to Saladin, Sultan of Egypt and Syria, but by no means to Jogaila, both a Grand Duke of Lithuania and a King of Poland (Wladyslaw II Jagiello). In the 1930s, Lithuanian literature about Vilnius became more profound and artistic: one could consider Balys Sruoga's plays, his *Song of Gediminas*, for instance, poems by Jonas Aistis, Antanas Miskinis or Bernardas Brazdionis. The texts of the period are marked by bitterness and a degree of irony as they speak about an aristocratic city, thus distinct and distant from peasant Lithuania: the symbol of Vilnius is no longer Gediminas' castle or the eternal fire, but Saint Christopher wading through the mud of history.

The situation of Vilnius after 1939 and even more so after 1944, radically changed the text of the city written in Lithuanian. It was poets in exile such as Brazdionis and Aistis as well as a few younger ones such as Kazys Bradunas who continued its old tradition. In Lithuania itself things were very different. For several decades after the war, Vilnius was oppressed by Soviet rule, far more cruel and total than that of the Czars: Boruta and Miskinis, for instance, spent many years in the Gulag. But eventually all started to change, especially in the 1960s. During Khrushchev's times and later, Vilnius was the city through which western influences could seep into the rest of the Soviet empire, and the city was even envisioned as an island of freedom within that empire. Joseph Brodsky, who loved the city and contributed to the text of Vilnius, used to say that for a Russian, this city was a first step in the correct, western direction. Another significant change was the "Lithuanization" of the city, which despite the will or intention of Moscow. During Stalin's time, the dominant language in Vilnius was Russian, but the number of ethnic Lithuanians later grew to a significant majority. These were mostly people from the countryside who knew little about their capital city, even though the

myth of the Grand Dukes created during the interwar independence period was important to them. They no longer had to dream about freeing Vilnius because they now lived there. True, the city was not the national centre so longed for in the past, more the Soviet governor's headquarters, but the sense of a national capital was not altogether absent and continued to grow as people settled and took root there and perceived Vilnius as part of Lithuanian's long history.

The pre-war propaganda myth that Vilnius was a purely Lithuanian city eagerly awaiting a reunion with the Lithuanian homeland, proved to have been an illusion, but a small group of Lithuanians who had survived Polish rule played a significant role in piecing together the links in the tradition. This group was more competent in the tricky aspects of Vilnius than the newcomers. Memories were important too, as were studies of art history. In Soviet times, they were extremely scarce and strictly censored, but with the beginning of *Sajudis*<sup>10</sup> and the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990, several interesting books appeared. Rapolas Mackonis's memoirs, a somewhat biased but interesting account of the pre-war multicultural city was one, Milosz's old friend Vladas Drema's fascinating volume with the nostalgic title, *Dinges Vilnius* (Lost Vilnius) another. But mostly the challenge of continuing the text of Vilnius was undertaken by the younger generation, newcomers who had graduated in Vilnius, usually from Vilnius University, and, in spite of any obstacles, had been possessed by the aura of the city. Two names stand out: Antanas Ramonas and his perceptive depiction of how a Lithuanian "grows into" Vilnius, and the novelist Ricardas Gavelis, postmodernist, demythologizing and provocative, sometimes, extremely so. But there are two others, to my mind the most important writers of the period, who ensured the continuation and transformation of Vilnius' text in the new situation. Alas, both are dead, as are Ramonas and Gavelis.

The first one is Judita Vaiciunaite, a poet, originally from Kaunas and, coincidentally, a niece of Petras Vaiciunas, the author of the poem which proclaimed "no relenting without Vilnius". She is scarcely known outside Lithuania, though Brio's book offers an extensive and insightful discussion about her. Vaiciunaite published more than 10 poetry collections, which should be recognised as a successful attempt to integrate Vilnius into the Lithuanian mentality and imagination. She wrote poetry in a rather traditional, romantic-impressionist style and with perfect form; her work is another Vilnius Baedeker, a description of its streets, parks and squares, with many references to historical figures, including Barbora Radvilaite (Barbara Radziwill) and the Philomaths, as well as to the numerous ethnicities inhabiting the city. Vaiciunaite's books radiate with what Osip Mandelstam, one of her teachers, called "the longing for a world culture" and seek a multidimensional synthesis of various Vilnius motifs and topics.

The other writer is Jurgis Kuncinas, whose best novel *Tula* has been translated into Polish. It is a love story of a young vagabond and unfolds in Uzupis, one of Vilnius' oldest neighbourhoods. The novel's protagonist is a hippie and alcoholic, a misfit in Soviet society and unwilling to have anything in common with it, but a member of an odd multinational group, which also transcends the limits of so-called normal life. He is reminiscent of the students of Galczynski's or even Mickiewicz's times, though he drinks much more than they; he loves the city he inhabits, even if that city is dirty and derelict, full of closed circuit monitors and forbidding signs. Kuncinas' novel reconstructs Vilnius in the same way James Joyce's *Ulysses* does for Dublin: the city's crossroads and nooks, the scarps, bridges and weeds of Uzupis are depicted with fascinating precision, characteristic of the Vilnius text. Vaiciunaite and

Kuncinas demonstrate that Lithuanian literature has ceased to be rural and become accustomed to Vilnius in the same way Polish literature had done years before.

In conclusion, it is worth saying something about other parts of the Vilnius text, those written in languages other than Lithuanian or Polish. There are books — or chapters within them — about Vilnius in Russian (Jurij Jurkun), French (Romain Gary) and German (Alfred Döblin and Arnold Zweig), and these, too, are mostly nostalgic texts. Even Gilbert Keith Chesterton has a fabulous passage about the Gate of Dawn; he considered Vilnius a perfect Catholic city. But the nationalities most closely connected to Vilnius are the Jews and the Belarusians. In Jewish literature, written in Yiddish and Hebrew and in other languages, Vilnius is granted an exceptional place. For many centuries, the Jews conceived of Vilnius as a second Jerusalem, the centre of spiritual aristocracy, extremely influential and somewhat conservative. The Jewish ghetto was located in the centre of Vilnius and at one time its residents constituted almost half the city's population. The ghetto was on the margins of the Polish or Lithuanian texts of Vilnius, but for Jewish writers, it was their world, the most important and almost independent. It was the location for the *shtetl* boys' *Bildungsroman*; it was the capital of the diaspora and the place of tradition, resounding with echoes of the Bible. Brio writes about specific Jewish metaphors for the city: the city is a mother since, in Hebrew, the city is of feminine gender, while in Lithuanian it is masculine and neuter in Polish; the city is a house because the maze of the narrow streets of the ghetto seem to constitute a building; finally, the city is a book, a scroll, a Psalter or a Kabbala manuscript because letters are the essence of Judaism. It is worth mentioning two poems about Vilnius, one written by Zalman Schneur in Hebrew (1917) and another by Moshe Kulbak in Yiddish (1923). Both are nostalgic and though first and foremost this is nostalgia for the lost Jerusalem, whose twin Vilnius is, they long for Vilnius too. Vilnius is surrounded by hills as in the Psalter but is, nonetheless, distinct, a northern city. In these poems, especially Kulbak's, dreams and visions abound, probably the influence of Gustav Meyrinck's and Max Brod's expressionism. Both poems are now quite well known outside the Jewish community: Kulbak's was translated into Lithuanian before World War II and in 1997 was published in Vilnius in seven different languages.

Not only was Jewish Vilnius a metaphor and metonymy for Jerusalem but, alas, repeated its destiny, having been turned into ruins and become a place of mourning. Contemporary literature in Israel and beyond abounds in references to Vilnius. The city and its destiny have been described by Abba Kovner, Shmerke Kaczerginski, Abraham (Avrom) Sutzkever and Chaim Grade; even Marc Chagall wrote a poem for Vilnius. Probably the last piece in the chain is Grigory Kanovich; he lived in post-war Vilnius and then left for Israel, where he writes in Russian but considering himself a Lithuanian writer. Kanovich's new novel *Jewish Park* tells about contemporary times and the last Jews to leave Vilnius; they bid farewell to the city which means so much to them, each in their own compelling way.

Belarusians, too, bid farewell to Vilnius. Their nationalist movement, one of the youngest in Europe, sprouted in this city. For some time, it developed alongside the Lithuanian nationalist movement, to which it was grateful. The period up to World War I was the golden age of Belarusian culture, which continued during the 20 interwar years under Polish rule, albeit with less intensity. However, despite persecution, the problems Belarusian patriots had to face at that time cannot be compared to the reckless and cruel suppression of

the nationalist movement exercised by Stalin and his successors. Belarusians Ivan and Anton Luckevich, Yanka Kupala, Maksim Bahdanovich, Francishak Alechnovich and Natallia Arsenneva, as well as Kekstas's prison friend in Lukiskes, Maksim Tank, each left significant inscriptions in the text of Vilnius. They were supported by many Poles such as Jerzy Jankowski or Ludomir Michal Rogowski, as well as Lithuanians Marija Lastauskiene, Mykolas Biziska and Steponas Kairys. Belarusians' love for Vilnius as the spiritual and even political capital of the country can be compared to Lithuanians' love of the city: I am speaking not only about the modern nationalist movements, but also about the fact that it was in Vilnius that the old culture of the Ruthenians developed; furthermore, Belarusian patriots consider the Grand Dukes of Lithuania their own. For several weeks in 1939, it seemed that Vilnius would be annexed to Belorussia, but eventually Stalin decided otherwise. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, independent Belarus also chose *Vytis* for its coat of arms, a rare but suggestive heraldic oddity. However, everything changed with Lukashenka's ascension to power. The Belarusian text of Vilnius has always been nostalgic, both written in emigration and in Minsk; today, the contemporary Belarusian intelligentsia is probably tormented by even stronger nostalgia for Vilnius than the Poles. Despite Lukashenka, I remain optimistic about the future of Belarus. As to the Belarusian nostalgia for Vilnius, though, I can only repeat what I said recently: there will be no controversy about this if the Lithuanians accept it with understanding and remain respectful about the Belarusian heritage which has marked their capital city.

The same can be said of the Polish nostalgia as well as of many others. The text of Vilnius should not fall apart into several isolated and hostile texts: its constituent parts should continue to join, fuse, coalesce even; it is in this that its power and beauty lie. In these times of border crossings and border breakings, the ancient image of a Lithuanian who belongs to several cultures simultaneously could probably be recreated, at least in some cases. And maybe this will no longer cause any inner conflicts.

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- <sup>1</sup> The lecture was originally delivered at the Royal Castle in Warsaw on 3 May 2009.
  - <sup>2</sup> Lithuanian for "jay". *All endnotes provided by the translator.*
  - <sup>3</sup> The Lithuanian name of the group, albeit somewhat Polonized, refers to rough, dry sticks used for setting a fire: kindling or faggots.
  - <sup>4</sup> Secret anti-Czarist student society organized by Adam Mickiewicz and his friends at Vilnius University active from 1817–1823 when it was discovered by Russian authorities.
  - <sup>5</sup> The figure of a knight in full armour on horseback and holding a sword and a shield, *Vytis* is now the coat of arms of Lithuania.
  - <sup>6</sup> Mickiewicz's famous epic poem, published in 1834; the full title in English reads *Sir Thaddeus, or the Last Lithuanian Foray: A Nobleman's Tale from the Years of 1811 and 1812 in Twelve Books of Verse.*
  - <sup>7</sup> Refers to *Stronictwo Narodowo-Demokratyczna*, the Polish right wing National Democratic Party, founded in 1897. The Polish name is often abbreviated to ND or *Endecja*. The party ceased to exist at the end of World War II.
  - <sup>8</sup> Polish for the "Regionalists" or "Locals," a group of Polish-speaking intellectuals from the Vilnius area formed at the beginning of the twentieth century, who opposed the dividing of the old *Rzeczpospolita*, the Republic of the Two Nations, along ethnic and linguistic lines. Abramowicz and Römeris belonged to the democratic wing of the *Krajowcy*, mainly consisting of residents of Vilnius.
  - <sup>9</sup> After Vilnius was annexed to Poland in 1922, Kaunas served as Lithuania's provisional capital.
  - <sup>10</sup> Initially known as the Reform Movement of Lithuania, *Sajudis* was the political organization active in the late-1980s, which led the struggle for Lithuania's independence, restored in 1990.

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