I

I come from a borderland, from and area between the heritage of Rome and Byzantium, i.e. between the realms ofRoman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. It is not easy to draw here a border, for, if styles of architecture may be of help, among the main city of the area Wilno was an outpost of the Jesuit baroque and Riga a city of northern European gothic. Thus, architecture would prove that these cities belonged to the West. Yet the main work of legistration of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the so-called "Lithuanian Statutes," were written in the XVIth century in an Eastern Slaic idiom that can be called Old Byelorussian and in an alphabet of Eastern Christianity not Latin origin.

"

During my lifetime, a multitude of new borders delimiting states appeared and some of them were closed to normal, legal crossing. For instance, such was the case after 1918 of the border between independent Lithuania and Poland as the two did not maintain diplomatic relations. Wilno (today Vilnius and the capital of Lithuania) belonged to Poland after the First World War, while my mother and I lived north of Wilno and the Polish/Lithuania border. My father lived in Wilno and could not join us because of his pro-Polish Political past though, at the same time, another member of our family, Oscar Milosz, was the first representative in Paris of independent Lithuania.

In order for to travel from my grandfather's country home to Wilno, we had to go first to Riga, the capital of Latvia, using our Lithuanian passport, then to hide it and cross the Latvian-Polish border with a Polish passport. However, most often one would cross the border clandestinely following the smugglers' paths in the forests. I wandered that way several times as a child.

Many years later completely different kinds of borders were brawn. This happened while the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania in 1941 at which time it included the city of Vilnius. This new border was a well guarded one for

keeping the game inside, i.e. The populations of the Communist empire. An attempt to escape was usually punished by eight years in a gulag. I risked this and escaped, avoiding the Germans on the other side who would have sent me to a concentration camp

Europe in the XIXth century preserved some humanitarian habits growing

organically and belonging to its tradition. What was new in the next

century, was a conviction that inhabitants villages and cities of large

geographical areas have not more rights than cows, horses, or forest game.

A large part of my life was lived as a part of that human herd with which

rulers could do whatever they liked. It was this experience that enabled us

to understand the fate of slaves on other continents, an experience for a

long time forgotten on the European continent. A precious experience,

under the condition that one has it behind, as had happened to me, for I

witnessed the end of two totalitarian systems.

IV.

During the many years I lived in France and the United States I was
confronted with the problem of my historical memory, and of my
tactics as a
writer. Should I pretend that I could shut that memory off when
writing? Yet
if I made use of it, how could I communicate its contents to my
readers? A
Yugoslav colleague of mine, Danilo Kis, once said that Russians were
in a
better position, since Russian literature had left in the minds of
Western
readers at least some stereotypes. But what could we do, with our
hopeless
entanglement of languages, nationalities and denominations within the
same
limited territories?

And yet I decided to write on my small corner of Europe, exotic even
for my
Polish readers. That corner was the borderland of Lithuania, Belarus
and
Poland - the former territory of The Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

V.

Quite early, as a young man, I discovered that to be ethnocentric was a
grave mistake. It occurred in Vilnius, then belonging to Poland, where at
our university Poles, Jews, Lithuanians and Byelorussians belonged to their
own organizations and did not communicate with each other.

At first I gave in to the mentality of my language group, but later, gradually, I began to suspect that the opinions of my group were not necessarily right, and that other groups, with their very different views on
the history of our city, were also right. I must give credit to our movement, with its socialist leaning, for an evening of poetry at which
poems were recited in Polish, Yiddish, Lithuanian and Byelorussian.

VI.

The Polish population of Vilnius combined its national feeling with an
attachment to Roman Catholicism, forgetting the past when, a couple of
centuries before, Calvinists and Catholics had attacked each other in the
street with sticks and stones. At that time, let me note, the city council
was divided into partisans of the western calendar, who were either
Protestants or Catholics, and partisans of the eastern calendar, who were
Orthodox Christians. The population on the periphery of the city spoke
Polish, but a hundred years before mostly Lithuanian. As to the Jews, the
city was the most powerful center of Yiddish culture in Europe and the
second most important, together with New York, in printing books in that
language. Byelorussians considered the city as their capital at the time
when the word Lithuania meant the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Alas, the ethnic
Lithuanians came from the north and established their rule in the
city.

To complete that mosaic, we should add that catholic churches made the place
the northernmost outpost of the Jesuit baroque, but there were also orthodox
churches, synagogues, one temple of Karaims, an outshoot of Judaism and one
mosque for people of Tartar origin, descendents of war prisoners, settled
there by the Grand Duke around 1400.

Czesław Miłosz

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