

Personal Reflections on a Dear Friend

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For a brief time during the 1980s, when the Chicago Lithuanian daily *Naujienos* had already stopped publication and Lithuania had not yet reestablished its independence on March 11, 1990, *Draugas* was the only free Lithuanian daily newspaper in the world. It was free in the sense that no government anywhere told its editors and contributors what to print and what not to print. That's how it was with *Draugas* throughout the century that it existed—both at the very beginning when it was *not yet* a daily and for the many decades afterward when it wasn't *the only* daily.

This is not something for which it deserves any special praise—in the United States all newspapers are free from government control. This is why the difference between American papers and those once published in Lithuania, either in Soviet times or during the interwar independence period, is so striking. Today the situation in Lithuania is closer to that in the United States, but only as far as freedom, not quality, of the press is concerned.

While U. S. newspapers have always been free from government censorship, self-censorship (by the paper itself, its owners, and

other private interest groups) is a different matter. In totalitarian societies this takes on special importance: in addition to external censorship, internal censorship is always present, something that was well-known in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. However, even when there's no external political censorship from the government, a journalist can feel external pressure from society or an influential part of it (not to mention immediate bosses); this pressure can be internalized and turn into self-censorship. We can see this self-censorship in present-day Lithuanian newspapers, but it was evident in the emigrant press as well.

For example, *Akiračiai* would never have come into existence if it had been easy, in the mid-to-late Sixties, to voice one's dissenting opinion on certain sensitive questions either in *Draugas* or its competitor *Naujienos*, not to mention in other Lithuanian newspapers: the biweekly *Dirva*, the weekly *Darbininkas*, and the very well-received weekly *Tėviškės žiburiai* published in Canada. Most of these questions touched on diaspora-homeland relations: Is it permissible for émigré Lithuanian basketball players to go to Soviet-occupied Lithuania and to compete in specially organized games against local Lithuanian basketball players? Is it acceptable for Lithuanian students living in the West to attend special summer courses in Lithuanian language and culture at the University of

Vilnius? Should Lithuanian émigrés organize concerts for artists from Soviet-occupied Lithuania?

The difficulty was that in all cases the people who were permitted to visit the West had to be vetted by the KGB; in addition, all (or most) of what happened in Lithuania when guests from the West arrived was under close KGB supervision, not to mention the fact that only those Westerners could visit Lithuania who got a visa from the Soviet Union (which wasn't always a matter of course). The majority opinion of the main Lithuanian organizations and the newspapers at that time was that under these conditions there should be no interaction between Lithuanians living in the free world and those living in Lithuania at all, except in the form of private communication by mail.

Those who disagreed could for a long time voice their opinion only in *Akiračiai*, a monthly founded by people from various ideological groups though united by a common liberal orientation. However, as *Akiračiai* gained increased acceptance and contacts (including visits) between people on both sides of the Iron Curtain became more frequent, other newspapers, especially *Draugas*, started to discuss these topics more openly or at least not censor dissenting views as furiously as they had done up until then. Still,

editorship remained, the positions recommended by *Akiračiai* on this and other issues were frequently attacked, not least of all by *Draugas*; consequently, these two papers continued to dispute heartily with each other for at least as long as *Akiračiai* was published in Chicago.

MY STINT AT *DRAUGAS*

Even though I was an occasional contributor to *Akiraciai*, I was invited to work for *Draugas* by its editor-in-chief, Father Pranas Garšva, MIC. I worked as one of the assistant editors (responsible for one editorial a week and any proof-reading, editing or writing tasks assigned to me by the editor-in-chief or the cultural editor, or self-initiated) from 1982 to 1986. *Draugas*'s crown jewel was its Saturday Cultural Supplement, which often carried articles comparable in quality to those of the monthly *Aidai* and the semi-annual *Metmenys*. During my time it was edited by Kazys Bradūnas who eventually passed on his mantle to Aušrelė Liulevičienė. Before Bradūnas the Cultural Supplement had been edited for a long time by Father Juozas Prunskis, who stayed on as a regular contributor in charge of writing concert, theater, and other reviews (to which I also contributed).

My colleagues at the assistant editor level were Algirdas Pužauskas (in charge of the first, or foreign news, page), Irena Regienė, Emilija Pakštaitė-Sakadolskienė, and Jonas Šoliūnas. More or less close associates included Father Viktoras Rimšelis, MIC, the provincial of the Marian Fathers, who published *Draugas*; the business manager Stasys Džiugas; some of the administrators, of whom I remember Father Peter Cibulskis, MIC, and Viktoras Naudžius the best; and Father Vytautas Bagdanavičius, MIC, who headed the *Draugas* Book Club. These were probably some of the people I bumped into every day or at least several times a week in the course of work. I should not forget the women who did the type-setting and the layout (Dana Karužienė) or the men who worked in the printing shop (Brother Vincas Žvingilas, MIC, and above all the indispensable Jonas Kuprys). This was a very motley group of people, to which I no doubt should add a much greater number of contributors who received no payment from the paper but regularly wrote articles for it. (During the years I worked there I especially remember Bronius Kviklys and Česlovas Grincevičius.) If you also counted those that contributed occasionally, you'd get a roster of several hundred writers and correspondents that all together made *Draugas* the most popular Lithuanian newspaper in the world during the last few decades of the Soviet occupation.

IDEOLOGICAL VARIETY

More than a few words are in order here about *Draugas*'s ideological position, not least of all because throughout much of the 20th century the main Lithuanian newspapers in America had a clear political line or worldview, representing four rather different orientations. There were the more or less explicitly Catholic papers, usually published by religious orders, with the Marian Fathers' *Draugas* and the Franciscans' *Darbininkas* (published in Brooklyn) being the most prominent. Other papers followed what they regarded as a "national" or "nationalist" or at any rate "middle-of-the-road" line: these included the twice-weekly *Dirva* (published in Cleveland) and the weeklies *Sandara* and *Vienybė* (published in Chicago and Brooklyn, respectively). Then there were the Socialist papers, exemplified by the Chicago daily *Naujienos* and the Boston weekly *Keleivis*.

The readers of these papers often interacted with each other and considered themselves as belonging to one broad community—if not always the formal *Bendruomenė*, the Lithuanian-American Community organized in the early 1950s (part of the World Lithuanian Community, established in 1949), then at least the

ethnic Lithuanian community-at-large that had existed in the U.S. since at least the end of the 19th century. Very many people subscribed to more than one newspaper; it was considered honorable to have as many Lithuanian periodicals as possible in the house.

Ideological differences between the papers were the most prominent in the interwar decades (when the first Republic of Lithuania existed) as well as during the first two or three decades after World War II when Lithuania was Soviet-occupied and political controversies from the interwar years had not yet died down. For instance, *Draugas* frequently alluded to the fact that during the time of the second Smetona presidency the *ateitininkai*, members of the Catholic youth movement, experienced restrictions and even persecution, whereas *Dirva* found such reminders offensive, untrue, exaggerated, or at the very least untimely because they supposedly served the Soviet purpose of denigrating independent Lithuania.

It was during the 1930s, when Lithuania was governed by the Nationalist *tautininkai* and the non-Nationalist press was restricted, and the 1940s, when Lithuania was occupied, its independence abolished and all the non-Communist press banned, that the only

totally free Lithuanian periodicals were those published in the United States and Canada. It was during those fateful decades that both the Catholic and the Social Democratic papers wrote “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” about Smetona (as they saw it), while the “middle-of-the-road” papers presented their own much more sympathetic versions. *Dirva*, published by the *tautininkai*, strenuously defended the former President against all objections, while *Sandara* and *Vienybė*, which never approved of Smetona’s turn towards dictatorship (even if that was comparatively mild and objectively non-Fascist) distanced themselves from *Dirva* in this respect while rarely using harsher words against Smetona himself.

Thus the issue of how to evaluate Smetona and his regime split the moderate camp, sometimes also called the liberals. Partly because of this disagreement, the “middle-of-the-roaders” among the Lithuanian Americans were never as strong as the Catholic or conservative wing and the Socialist or left wing.

TWO FLANKS

Nevertheless, there was one issue on which all the papers mentioned so far agreed, and that was that Lithuania had to be

freed from the Soviet Communist take-over. Indeed, during World War II and immediately thereafter, the editors of *Draugas*, *Naujienos*, *Sandara*, and *Dirva* got together and founded organizations (of which the Lithuanian-American Council, or ALTas, was the most important) that sought to promote the cause of Lithuanian freedom and to get both official and popular American support on behalf of the restoration of the country's independence. It was in this campaign that the editors and contributors of *Draugas*, *Naujienos*, and *Dirva* were the most active and forceful throughout the first three post-war decades.

But there was a fourth and initially large group of Lithuanians we haven't mentioned so far. Even in the diaspora there have always been Lithuanian Communists; they were especially numerous immediately after World War I, when for a time they constituted the single largest ethnic group within the U. S. Communist movement. They had their own newspapers, of which Brooklyn's *Laisvė* and Chicago's *Vilnis* lasted the longest. They called themselves "progressive" and, especially during World War II and thereafter, they had nothing in common, and nothing to do, with the Catholics of *Draugas* and *Darbininkas*; the middle-of-the-roaders of *Sandara*, *Dirva*, and *Vienybė*; and the leftists of *Naujienos* and *Keleivis*, all of whom worked for the liberation of

Lithuania from Communist captivity. Especially bitter was the Communists' conflict with the democratic leftists, from whom they had split off in the early 1920s and who called themselves Socialists and later Social Democrats. During the 20s and 30s the Communists and Socialists argued vociferously about what it means to be truly on the left and for the workingman: Was it to reform and to humanize the capitalist system in the direction of greater egalitarianism? Or was it to take up the banner of revolution in the name of Lenin and Stalin and to overthrow the system entirely?

Thus when World War II was over the Lithuanian diaspora consisted of two totally separate flanks that neither interacted nor communicated with each other in any way. This duality was reinforced by the arrival, in the late 40s and early 50s, of the post-war refugees from the DP camps in Germany although it had been evident earlier as well: there was, on the one hand, the anti-Communist front, led by the Catholics and Social Democrats, with the middle-of-the road Nationalists playing a strong third; and, on the other, there were the Communists, whose numbers began to dwindle rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s. Amazingly, the Communist newspapers, despite the fact that their readers, editors, and contributors got older and ever less numerous, survived until

the end of Soviet rule in Lithuania. That's because the Communist government supplied them with articles and most likely financial support, too. (This question of assistance is one that calls for further research.) The only thing the Soviets couldn't control was the aging of the newspapers' readers; ultimately, there was nobody to take their places.

Draugas is a different story, even though time has taken a toll on it as well. Still, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren twenty or thirty years ago were no longer reading the pro-Soviet Communist newspapers their parents, greatparents, and great-grandparents had read and fostered. By contrast, during that same time the descendants of those oldsters who once had read or still were reading *Draugas* were also still reading it themselves. Hence our parting question: What was it that allowed *Draugas* to survive and thrive for such a long time?

A short answer is impossible, but it probably would have to include at least the following elements. First, since 1912 *Draugas* was published in Chicago, which by then had and continues to have more Lithuanian inhabitants than any other U. S. city. Second, it always held fast to its Catholic outlook and for that reason was less tormented by internal dissension than the middle-

of the-road press (torn by the Smetona issue) and the leftist papers (torn by the Socialism or Communism debate). Third, its Catholic orientation, firmly endorsed by the better half of the diaspora community, assured it steady financial backing. Fourth, most of the time it had very capable editors-in-chief and a large number of committed writers. Fifth, although periodically there were tensions and disagreements in the Catholic community, too (for example, the split between the traditional Christian Democrats and the more modern-minded Frontists), editors generally managed to keep both sides happy.

Sometimes, of course, the desire to avoid, or even deny the existence of, controversy led to the paper's sounding too bland; for a few years years *Draugas* was on the verge of becoming utterly boring for very many readers. In my time those who wanted more exciting and informative Lithuanian reading often turned to *Dirva*, *Tèviškės Žiburiai* and *Akiračiai*; but even the most inquisitive minds couldn't help but thoroughly enjoy *Draugas*'s last page, usually edited by the editor-in-chief and containing most of the local community news that was "fit to print."

ABSTRACT

In this essay I reflect not so much on the personalities I encountered while working as an editor for *Draugas* (although I touch a little bit on them, too) as on what I believe to be the overall significance of *Draugas* in the context of Lithuanian newspaper life world-wide. Some questions I discuss are the following: While *Draugas* was free from government censorship, did it engage in any sort of self-censorship? How did it relate to other Lithuanian papers that were explicitly Catholic as well as those that weren't (e.g., *Naujienos*, *Dirva*, *Akiračiai*)? How did *Draugas* and the other papers assert their ideology (worldview) and did that change with the decades? Why did *Draugas* survive so long? Answering these questions will give readers an idea of the unique importance this newspaper possessed primarily for the Lithuanian diaspora and thereby at least indirectly for Lithuania itself.

BIOGRAPHY

Educated at the University of Chicago and M.I.T., Mykolas Drunga, a journalist, translator, and philosopher, has worked for many years in Lithuanian-American and European-based U.S. media organizations. Since 2004 he lives in Lithuania, teaches at Vytautas Magnus University's Department of Public Communication, edits university-associated publications, and is a research fellow at the Lithuanian Emigration Institute (Kaunas).