

Vilnius, Lithuania Diary by Ellen Olson. Received March 28, 2002

We arrived in Vilnius on the 20th of January after a bumpy but uneventful fight from Greensboro to Pittsburgh to Frankfurt to Vilnius using USAir and Lufthansa. We had no problems with security and our flights were on or slightly ahead of time. The Vilnius airport is very small, so we got our baggage and went through customs in a flash.

Rytas, the son of a friend of a friend, met us with a mini-van taxi at the airport and took us to a small apartment in the center of the city. It was very cold and the roads were covered with snow and ice. After a shower and a brief rest we went off with Rytas to see a larger apartment to rent. The next day we saw three more apartments, revisited two the next day and Thursday signed a lease for five months. We moved in on Friday. So now we are at Skapo 5-18 in the heart of the old city. We have four good sized rooms with a kitchen, bathroom and lobby area on the third floor of a large U shaped house built in the 1700's as housing for faculty members at the University of Vilnius. When the University was disbanded by the Russians in the 1830's the building was given to the Ursuline (Sp?) Nuns. The building backs up to a courtyard of the University of Vilnius. The current owner's grandmother was given this space after her private house was destroyed by bombs in WWII. Somehow the Grandmother had the necessary documents, so that Erica (the landlady) could claim ownership of the third floor and attic of this portion of the building when the privatization law was adopted in the 1990's. Erica has restored this apartment and created an apartment in the attic for herself. So we are very comfortable with reliable heat, filtered water, a washing machine, refrigerator and very small gas stove, and the necessary wiring to support a computer with an internet connection. The stairs up to the apartment are iron and seem sturdy, but we have to unlock a door at the top of the stairs which opens towards the stairs not the hall. The rent includes maid service twice a week. The maid only speaks Russian and Lithuanian, so it is hard to communicate, but pointing goes a long way. We are on a small, quiet street which is too small at the Piles end for cars. Several of the other spaces in the building are being renovated, which is noisy during the day but interesting to watch. The walls are made of bricks with a thick coating of cement like material and then plaster. The interior and exterior walls are all at least two feet wide. The renovations include adding steel beams and recementing everything, including the floors. The workmen do have electric drills, but at the end of the day they carry out the debris in plastic bags on their backs and the cement comes in buckets the same way.

Erica has three cats, one of whom is named Tiger. Tiger was missing for 24 hours, and I got to go on a tour of a reconstructed part of the building in the dark looking for him. The stairs were in terrible condition and there was no light until

we go to the attic floor where there were a group of men working under bright lights restoring an attic space. I was very surprised.

Dave's class at the Institute of Foreign Relations and Political Science is several miles north of here on a new campus. He has to take the bus or mini bus out on a 30-40 minute ride. The bus costs 80 centas (about .20 US) and the mini bus costs 2litas (about .50US). You get the mini bus by knocking on its door and hopping in if there is room and then passing your money up to the driver. The driver lets you out on the route anytime you ask. The buses are almost always packed, and Lithuanians don't seem to mind jamming right up against each other.

Dave is teaching a course on the European Union to Master's level students. A Lithuanian friend at the Institute thinks that this is very funny because he is teaching a course on American politics. Dave's first class was cancelled because of a basketball game between the Institute and another part of the University. The students are all working full time jobs, so the graduate courses meet either early in the morning or after work. The students have a fairly relaxed attitude towards coming to class. Work and family obligations have to come first. Fortunately all the MA level students have a good grasp of English, but the one of the two Fulbright Scholars teaching undergraduate students in social work has to have translators as his students are not fluent in English. Faculty pay is very low (around \$200/month), so most of the faculty members have second or third jobs also. Only the Director and Associate Director are full time at the Institute.

Dave's Cousin, Anders Hendricksson leads the European Union's negotiating team for Lithuania and was here on Dave's Birthday. We were able to have a birthday dinner celebration with him. Anders thinks Dave's course is pretty funny too. He gave us a crash course on the EU. Apparently the biggest problem to be solved in this country before it can be accepted as an EU member is the huge nuclear power plant which was built in the Brezhnev era to supply the whole northwest region of the USSR. 72% of this country's power comes from that one plant and about 150,000 people reside in the town which was built to house workers, and support personnel. It is the same type as the Chernobyl plant and must be shut down, but no one knows what to do with the people. Security at the border with Belarus and Kaliningrad are also problems, but they may have easier solutions.

The old town is very beautiful. Because of numerous fires and destruction by Russians, Swedes, and Poles etc. over the centuries, many of the buildings in this area were built in the Baroque style at the end of that period. So, the old town resembles Prague in many ways. The many churches were used by the Soviets as storage buildings, gyms, and even a museum of atheism. Most of them have been reconsecrated and reconstructed with money from the Roman Catholic Church. There are several Russian Orthodox churches, two Protestant

churches, two mosques and one synagogue. The ghetto into which over 500,000 Jews living in Vilnius were forced during the Nazi occupation was largely destroyed and over 95% of the Jews in Lithuania perished – the highest percentage of any country. We have read that most of the new buildings in the old town are in the ghetto area.

When we first arrived it was quite cold and snowed or rained part of every day. Then it was relatively warm (above freezing) with three days of some sun. The ice and snow melted and the ice has broken up in the river. We were able to explore a little bit in the old town, and in the central business and shopping area. Since that thaw, it has snowed and/or rained almost every day. The snow hasn't stuck, but the damp and wind makes walking around very uncomfortable.

There is a supermarket (Maxima) fairly nearby, but we have to take a taxi to get there and back. The Maxima is well stocked, but everything is just a little different than in the US. For example, the canned tomatoes come in small cans or glass jars and the tomato paste comes in large cans. Spices come in little plastic bags and the contents are listed in Lithuanian, Russian and Polish. Milk is offered in liter cardboard cartons only and comes pasteurized and unpasteurized. The fresh vegetables and fruit are good but they don't keep in the refrigerator very long. The bread section takes up a huge long wall and the smoked meats have six counters. Two small markets nearby keep us in the essentials when we run out of milk and bread. One of the markets is in the old style with one U shaped counter and the goods on shelves behind. Three women preside over the counter and you have to be careful as each has a certain section and type of goods to sell. You can buy bread from the woman who is over the dairy and smoked meat. The Maxima, Media and Minimum chain is locally owned. Our experience in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic was that the supermarkets were from the West.

Since this is the tourist area, there are at least five good hotels and many restaurants close around us. We were amazed to see that when the weather is ok many, many people walk on Piles Street, which is the pedestrian shopping street near us, on Sunday afternoon. They are all Lithuanians, pushing baby carriages, and stopping in the various coffee houses for coffee and dessert, and generally enjoying themselves. Others walk in the park near us where the ruins of the old castle and the Cathedral are located. There are tennis courts and an amusement park in the park in the area too, but they are not open yet.

The musical performances in Vilnius are wonderful and inexpensive. We have attended very good concerts at the nearby Philomarnic Hall for about \$7.50 per ticket, and have seen operas at the Opera House for a similar amount. The thick hot chocolate served at intermission at the opera is an added bonus. People bring their children to most of these concerts and then there are special children's' concerts and ballets on Saturday afternoon. In addition there are numerous shorter performances in the Churches on Saturday and Sunday

afternoon which are free or cost \$2.00. We saw a wonderful performance of Carmen on March 15th at the Opera House. The singers were excellent and the staging was very innovative. At the end, two horses were ridden on stage and went into the bull ring. As Carmen was stabbed, they came out dragging a very realistic dead bull.

March 8th

We have been in Vilnius for almost six weeks now. Our one trip out of town so far has been to Kaunas to visit the Political Science faculty at the University of Kaunas. Dave spoke twice to MA and PHD level students. In between we had a quick trip around the city on foot, lunch and a cordial meeting with the Dean of the Schools of Social Sciences who is a woman. I was very impressed that several of the scholars we met were interested in women's issues and are working on a project funded by Rutgers University on NGO's (non-profits) and the civil society. They were even interested in having me come back to talk about NGO's as well as Dave. Kaunas has improved a lot since we saw it briefly three years ago. The two restaurants we went to were very good, and the pedestrian street is attractive and filled with shops. As our guide commented many of the shops sold boots and shoes. I've noticed the same thing in Vilnius. The funny thing is that the "boot" shops seem to be doing a very good business.

This past weekend was the big crafts fair. There were thousands of people jamming Piles and adjacent streets. It looked as if most of the Lithuanian population was there on one day or the other. It snowed and was cold all the time, but that didn't seem to bother anyone. I was disappointed in the "crafts." I did manage to find a few genuine crafts persons, but many of the booths had identical or nearly identical items that looked mass produced. A number of bakeries were represented as were the sellers of decorated poles which are in honor of St. Casimir and the coming of spring. There were exhibits of blacksmithing, barbecuing on the tines of pitchforks, singing groups on a stage, and a lot of musicians wandering around. The crowds would put Greensboro's festivals to shame.

We have had quite a snafu with our residency permit. Our marriage certificate which was issued by the Scarsdale Congregational Church and signed by the minister was not official enough for the Lithuanian Immigration Department. Finally an official at the American Embassy issued a sworn statement that our certificate was valid. After that was translated into Lithuanian, it was accepted along with a payment of 239 litas for the permit and the translation. We still have to present our medical cards and maybe a notarized copy of our lease. That is going to be tricky, since our landlady left for Paris and then the Dominican Republic about two weeks after we took the apartment and hasn't returned yet.

We have learned how to call a cab, get to the grocery store (Maxima), shop, and call a cab using to come get us using our local cell phone. It works like a charm, except I still can't figure out what the smoke meats and canned goods are. The important words for food products aren't in the dictionary.

That brings up the biggest problem we have, which is the language. It is different than any other language with which we are familiar. We haven't even managed to decipher the menus, which usually isn't a problem. Fortunately a lot of people in Vilnius have a little English, especially the younger ones, but clerks, taxi cab drivers and even some waitpersons, speak little or no English. Many of the menus in Vilnius and Kaunas are in English. Some times the English is comical, like stewed chicken stomachs, but usually we can figure it out.

The population here looks very diverse, no Africans or Asians, but lots of variation in height, coloration, shape of the face, etc. The young women who shop in the old town are tall, well dressed and very thin. One of the Fullbrighters thinks that Lithuania has a big problem with anorexia, but his students deny it. Some people look Slavic which is the byproduct of the centuries of domination by Russia and Poland. Many are very tall which is supposed to come from the Swedes. Since Lithuania has been marched over and conquered by quite a few armies and nations, the mixture is to be expected. However, the Lithuanians we have talked to see themselves as a unique group of Baltic people whose only close relatives are the Latvians.

Since they were the very last group in Europe to accept Christianity, there are a number of pagan practices like jumping over a fire on Midsummer Day which are still evident. The big cathedral near us was built on top of a pagan temple. There is an organized group of pagans who meet on a regular basis, and I think are recognized by the state as a religion. This is a Catholic country and the churches in Vilnius are full on Sunday. The people attending are mainly women and mainly middle aged or younger, but there are a fair number of men and younger people in attendance.

At the Gates of Dawn Street (Ausros Vartai), there is a famous shrine to the Mother of Mercy. It was refurbished in 1993 for a visit of the Pope. Polish people in particular revere this shrine and come here by the bus loads to worship in the street in front of it. The picture of the Madonna is in a small chapel over the street, and the walls of the chapel are covered by votive objects placed by pilgrims in hope of a cure. Some of the pilgrims climb the stairs to the chapel on their knees. The building it is in is the only remaining gate of the medieval city walls which were built in 1503-22. The street on either side is always lined with old women holding out their hands for money on matter what the weather.

There are a number of beggars in the old town. Most of them are pitiful looking old women who wander the streets or sit on the sidewalk with their hands out. A few are disabled men, and one is a pesky young man who speaks some English.

Lithuanian has a big problem with pensioners since the value of their pensions has decreased enormously since independence and are no longer sufficient to maintain life. However, we have been told that the begging women and men have been begging many years before independence. Most of the elderly turn to their families, take small jobs, or work at cleaning the streets with brooms for the city. It is a very difficult problem that needs to be solved as soon as possible. Unfortunately many young Lithuanians are going to the US or Western Europe, so there are more people immigrating than returning and the birth rate is very low. Thus there are not enough workers to bear the large economic burden of the old.

We are enjoying getting together with the other Fulbrighters almost every weekend for dinner. We get to share problems and successes. We have also gone to dinner with the Euro Group members who are mainly Danish scholars in economics funded by the Nordic countries. They have dinner together every Wednesday night, and are a very pleasant group of people. One Danish couple has just arrived and is living near us on Piles street. They have three young children, one a baby, and really have their hands full. Their oldest girl, nine is in the American School. She doesn't know any English having gone to a German school in Kiel after starting in a Danish school and is exhausted trying to learn her third language.

Dave is making progress with his research. The Seimas is in session now, and he has left today (March 8) to get his permit to enter at any time. He has made contact with the two people who wrote the Lithuanian chapter in his book on parliaments. Now he is trying to get some updated statistics and information on the members and operations of the Seimas. It seems that there has been a lot of turnover in the membership of the Seimas which cannot be good for the political stability of Lithuania. The conservatives were thrown out of office in the last election over the terms of the contract the government negotiated with the Williams Company, shades of Enron. The Prime Minister is a re-treaded communist.

March 16th

We had a splendid tour of the University of Vilnius led by a University Librarian. The University was founded by the Jesuits in the 14thc. It has been closed, reopened, and secularized over the centuries, but many of the old buildings remain. One of the most interesting is the Library which has several beautiful rooms with gothic vaulting, frescos, old paintings, and antique desks. Many of the original books have been destroyed by fire, and war, but a few still remain and are on display. We also got to see the original astronomy center dating from the 1600's complete with old globes and telescopes, and several old rooms which had been beautifully decorated with frescos and tapestries for a 500 year

celebration. St Johns Church which is part of the University was started in 1387 and has been renovated many times, so that it is now Baroque in style. The USSR used it as a museum to atheism which ironically kept the building largely intact.

I have joined the International Women's Association which has a mission of helping women who have moved to Vilnius to acclimatize to Lithuania. There are a few Lithuanian members, but most are from other countries with Danes predominating. The two meetings I have attended dealt with social issues and programs to help children, both of which were interesting and "right up my alley." They have a large number of lunches, conversation circles, play groups for children, etc. and I could spend all my time socializing or exercising, but you can pick and choose what I want to do. IWA is a great idea, especially for women with young children. I can't see it working in a large city like Prague, but it is perfect for Vilnius.