**Lithuanian Identity Facing Challenges of the Past in Contemporary Global World.**

Žilvinas Beliauskas

Good morning. First of all let me express my gratitude the conference organizers for all the enormous work and including our panel into the conference program.

My special thanks go to the American - Baltic Freedom Foundation which made my participation possible here.

It is so good to find myself in this AABS 50th conference marking100 years of the Restoration of the Lithuanian State as Lithuanian Republic. And for me personally this conference anniversary coincides with the the second restoration of the Lithuanian Independence and as we now it was 28 years ago and in this year I did participate in the AABS conference held in Seattle. My topic was then “The Elements of Anthropomorphism in the Structural - Semiotic Theory of Meaning by A. J. Grimes”. In short it was an attempt to demonstrate that whatever strict scientific methods and approaches are enacted and applied there is always room and role for subjective i.e., human constituent in interpretation of signs and attribution of meaning to whatever discourses, important for our existence and self-reflection, we encounter. Encountering not always forecast pleasant satisfaction of interpreting and knowing. Still, the crucial thing of a scholar is to be able to face and reconstruct the missing parts of the sign system of the past and present where we find ourselves submerged to and to seek the most possibly full representation of meaning to be conveyed on to the world and to the upcoming generations. Sorry for theoretisizing, but I hope these preliminary remarks will provide certain basis for organizing our following panel presentations into a meaningful hole relating to the current day situation in Lithuania regarding processes of national identity dynamics which includes healing of the traumatic experiences and expanding identity coverage manifested through regained signs and sign systems as, for instance, the project of the Great Vilna Synagogue.

But let’s start from the birth of the nation. I mean Lithuanian nation.

The term restoration indicates and reminds that Lithuanian state did exist some time before, namely, until 1795 before becoming a part of the Russian Empire. And the form of existence was as a constituent part of the Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth or Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Identity change and transformations in the course of earlier or even ancient history would be another attractive and highly challenging research object. Actually, its continuity has brought as to the present complex condition. It would be very interesting to compare Lithuanian national identities of the Grand Duchy and the modern state if such a thing as national identity existed in the 18th century and earlier as we articulate or define it today. The last 100 years of the Lithuanian statehood means moderns state building and development with a variety of identity connotations. Despite an inevitable continuity of the development of what we tend to call Lithuanian national identity we start here with the development or revival of the national identity providing grounds for the restoration of the modern Lithuanian state in 1918.

As Tomas Balkelis demonstrated in his “The Making of Modern Lithuania” (2011) some romantic writings in the first half of the 19th century by Simonas Daukantas might have some impact on keeping the memory alive but real and turning into modern national self-identification started in the second half of the 19th century when better to do farmers managed to send their sons to study to Moscow or Saint-Petersburg universities where apart from education they have got the perception of being somewhat different or contrasting to the rest of alumni and felt an urge to organize themselves into Lithuanian student organizations, which were the first shoots of the reflected Lithuanian self-identification. Then there came the real National Revival leaders - Jonas Basanavičius, Vincas Kudirka and others. J. Basanavičius is considered to be the national resurrector and inspirer of the national revival. In the eighties of the 19th century with his writings from Bulgaria, where he worked and made a successful career of a doctor, he was trying to awaken national consciousness and love to some glorious Lithuanian identity which was suppressed and nearly lost in the mists of history. He published dozens of articles in “Naujasis keleivis” (“The New Traveller”) and “Lietuviškas Ceitungas” (“Lithuanian Zeitung”) published in Prussian Lithuania (Mažoji Lietuva) and pointed out the threats of Germanization, , Polonization an Russification to the Lithuanian identity, encouraged Lithuanians to break free from the foreign grips of mind. His gravestone in Rasų cemetery in Vilnius bears a quote of his writings: “As we turn into dust, if the Lithuanian language will stand firm on its feet and through our works our spirit is awakened, it will be easier and pleasant for us to rest in our tombs”, (ŽB translation). In the first issue of “Aušra” (“Dawn”), the first Lithuanian newspaper for Lithuania (not just Prussian Lithuania and subscribers abroad), he wrote: “Many centuries have passed since the little star in clear Lithuanian skies stopped blazing, which used to shine for our forefathers; darkness impenetrable and brume covered our once cheerful land; various hardships and deep illness of slavery erased the memories of happier and not that wearisome life; we forgot who we had been in antiquity, and only in a rare song or fairy-tale one can find a monument of our past mentioned… yet our glorious language remains, about which we can speak out with a man of knowledge: ‘Die Sprache ist unsere Geschichte’, otherwise everything is gone, and even the only language treasure is also in decline… Oh, in the same way as night darkness on the earth is disappearing with coming of dawn let the spirit of Lithuania be enlightened”, (ŽB tranlaton). (A. Nezabitauskas, “Jonas Basanavičius”, Vilnius, 1990, p. 139). J. Basanavičius dedicated his life to the search, investigation and restoration of, as he mentions them, monuments of the glorious past through collecting and recording of Lithuanian songs, fairy-tales, folklore and finally ended up as a political leader of Lietuvos Taryba (Lithuanian Council) signing the Declaration of Independence in 1918.

Another prominent figure in the National Revival movement Vincas Kudirka, who started non less important newspaper “Varpas” (“The Bell”) and was so dedicated to the national cause that had no time to start his own family and kept saying that he is married to Lithuania. Today along with his patriotism and dedication he is also often noticed as being antisemitic and some of his early articles clearly demonstrate that (L. Donskis, V. Kavolis, S. Sužiedėlis). Literary critic, professor Vanda Zaborskaitė though admits in Bernardinai.lt (2010) that V. Kudirka early writings and especially one article is a nasty example of antisemitism but it contradicts to his later progressive and democratic views when he argued that Jews always suffered from persecutions and that caused their self isolation which should be eliminated by social education. To have Jews on the side of the country they should become involved into society, say, by mixed marriages. It would be possible only after country’s democratic legislation is ready to guarantee the freedom of religion and self-determination.

Anyway, despite this interesting and seemingly non-typical insight into the future needs V. Kudira as an activist follows the same furrow as J. Basanavičius and as the author of the national anthem is calling to seek strength “from the glorious deeds of ages”.

Tomas Balkelis in “The Making of Modern Lithuania” gives a curious example of the Lithuanian patriotic intellectuals at the end of the 19th century looking for ways to get to the national nucleus, culture, language and wisdom:

“A notable social ritual of the patriots’ community was their collective trips to the Lithuanian countryside. During these trips they went in search of the Lithuanian-speaking peasants to satisfy their intellectual curiosity. These excursions also gave them a sense of cultural bonding with the peasantry. In these encounters they tried to speak with local people in Lithuanian – a practice not typical to people of their social standing at the time. Initially peasants were afraid to speak Lithuanian with these city bourgeois, assuming they wanted to make fun of them”., p. 42. (Suny, Ronald and Kennedy, Michael D. (eds.) *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation*, Ann Arbor: Michigan Univesity Press, 1999.)

Apart from the complexity of the whole process of the National Revival we can characterize it as being directed towards the past, the roots, where the lost values lay and have to be recovered, and towards delimitation of everything what was considered as non purely Lithuanian - from Polish, Russian, German and other influences on language, religion, life style and mentality. Jewishness probably was not considered as a big cultural threat due to the fact that Lithuanian and Jewish communities generally lived a separated cultural and religious life with scarce influence on each other. Jews remained in the domain of the Other, while Polish, Russian and German (in Prussian Lithuania) were already at the core and intermixing with national identity. Surgical measures had to be taken by turning to Lithuanian identity by means of conscious self-determination while mother tongue was, say, Polish. This exclusive type of national identity building along with language systematization and building cultural foundations with strengthening patriotism or nationalism during the interwar period has made an enormous impact and in modest or more aggressive forms is pretty much observed nowadays too.

Simple truths of the cultural anthropology are that culture is always about cultural exchange, dialog, diffusion etc. The isolated cultures like jungle tribes in Amazon stay with no greater development, technological or cultural progress. And all that accelerating speed of change today, in our for good or for worse global world, is accepted as inevitable at large.

But right before the WW2 the national self-identity defined as exclusive seemed to have had established certain connection with the “glorious past”, language was systematized and literary creation started giving nice fruits, arts and sciences were developing. Even more, voluntarily or not the cultural exchange was taking place both with national minorities inside the country as well as with world cultures outside. As an example, Algirdas Julius Greimas among others was sent to Paris with a stipend to learn and to bring back some French culture, as he later wrote himself.

The existing narrative was being developed, praising the past and building national values on it, described Lithuania as heroic nation which has suffered a lot from the blood thirsty Teutonic Order, from Polish greediness, then form Russian subjugation and suppression. The heroism was mainly stressed and demonstrated through the figures of mighty Great Dukes, especially Vytautas Magnus conquering territories from Baltic the Black Sea.

And here come those enormous trials of the Soviet, then Nazi, and then Soviet occupation. Historians have investigated substantially these episodes and the research is going on. Hereby, we do not enter into factual side of the successive occupations, human victims, exiles and the Holocaust leaving it for the competence of historians. Still it is obvious that human losses and ruined lives with social, cultural, psychological consequences are still felt and the impact made can never be cleared out in totality simply because of the existence of the reason - consequence order and because everything present is the result of the past with no regard how deep the past is. And traumatic effects are said to be recorded in human DNA. We cannot break away from the past we can only try to know it, to reflect upon it, to try healing the wounds and turn history effects into better for the future.

The Soviet trauma has been examined by Lithuanian psychologists and mainly by the efforts and work of Professor Danutė Gailienė, her doctoral and master students. Her book “Ką jie mums padarė” (“What They Have Done to Us), Vilnius, 2008, her numerous articles, presentations and interviews have shed a lot of light on the way traumatic experience works and what damage it makes to society mental health. Apart from traumatic influence on family life, moral crisis, loss of immunity, alcohol and drug addiction, suicide rate and other, there can be named a serious damage on national self-identity. The traumatic after-effects later were coupled with the ban on historical truths, distortions, continuous attempts and indoctrinating a falsely created history of the soviet people and communist heroes, forbidden topics, forcing to put priorities on the collective rather than individual approach to psychological health and common good. One can wonder how it was possible to survive. Probably it is due to the flexibility and adaptiveness of human psyche and brain which helpful in the most extreme conditions for the struggle of survival.

As soon as political liberties were step by step returning to life the need of healing the wounds and regaining identity feeling showed up to the full length, the coping with traumatic past took forms of regaining the national symbols, names, monuments, rituals. Many remember those days of Sajūdis (Lithuanian National Front) as especially emotional and even ecstatic. It was probably like an oxygen to the strangled and nearly dying sense of self-identity and some national integrity. Especially important and illustrative the transportation of the casks with the remains of the dead exiles from Siberia. Another mass event -The Baltic Way was an especially loud and firm statement of the seek for regaining self sufficiency. Many participants of those emotional meetings and festivities remember those days as incomparable to anything else perhaps because of that huge self-therapeutic effects while claiming freedom, truth and justice. Everything seemed so morally pure, just, human and promising. Then the January 13th coupe d’etat by the soviet army. Another trauma and new challenges to cope with it. Everything still is going on because as William Faulkner puts it: “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past”.

And the same rules generally only with much greater degree applies to the Holocaust story and its traumatic effects. We can argue about cultural differences and the religious impact of different, although brotherly (as the present Pope pope Francis puts it) beliefs and Lithuanian case has its own Holocaust peculiarities as every country in Europe does. It looks like Lithuania is not the only country with the Holocaust history that the main nationality and Jewish have different stories about the WW2 and the Holocaust. Those narratives in certain parts go separately and in certain parts collide with absolutely contradicting or just different versions of f5existence of those different Lithuanian and Jewish narratives during a conference dedicated to the Jewish Heritage teaching in the Lithuanian National Library in March this year. We will not analyze the reasons of how those different narratives came into being. But I would like to read a poem just to demonstrate an absolutely different perspective and it is a single example drawn from countless stories weaved by the Holocaust survivors, t.e. Jewish Lithuanians. Sergey Kovarsky Korablikov was born illegally in Vilnius ghetto in 1942. His parents perished when he lay hidden in the attic covered with blanked to suppress his cry of a baby. He was smuggled out and raised by grandparents, now working as a doctor in Israel and writing this sort of very sad and touching poems.

There are two days in September

When I light up the candles

And turn silent

As an emptied ghetto

Memory convulses me

And flies away to the past

But there’s no vendetta in the eyes

Just sorrow and pain - no vendetta

Oh how plentifully blood and tears have watered the sprouts.

Today I put on my robe of Sadness

As it it were a shroud

Giving permission into the land

Sheltering now the ghetto from Vilna.

I am from a sometime wood -

A lonely unburnt bush,

Blown by fire

And surprised by staying alive.

Crackle of blackened branches

as if of broken fingers -

It’s all that remained

It’s all I hear and it’s all I see.

During those two days of mourning

the whole Earth is as if one grave!

Sky…

as if a purple cloth in a gravestone.

The bedcover -

Made of rough Lithuanian linen.

Everything soaked in blood.

While realizing this enormous difference of the generalized narratives we have no other way as to construct meaningful exchange bridges between realities which are even not articulated well but very evidently existent. It looks like there is no other way than tossed to overcome the miscommunication and to comprehend the importance of understanding the other version of the same narrative even if it sounds like threatening your self-esteem or evaluation due to the fact that it seemingly hits at the so demanded heroic side of the national identity. It seems like for many Lithuanians the Jewish Holocaust and the fact, that quite a big number (of course it is relative) of Lithuanians collaborated in the mass killings, adds to the yet unhealed trauma of the Soviet repressions. The existing different narrative which is nor full, nor absolutely objective does not help develop a dialog and to stand in each others shoes. But that can be mended.

Plenty of illustrations can be found that the framework of the Lithuanian identity constructed in the second half of the 19th century has made its job and there’s no need to defend Lithuanian culture by artificial means of isolating it from cultural exchange. It is much more effective to defend it by creation and development of literature, arts and sciences along with more healthy society able to face truth and to be responsible for its deeds like a grownup personality is able to. We argue that it is a high time to turn from exclusive culture and identity into an inclusive one being able to adopt and integrate world achievements and new trends into Lithuanian arsenal. And especially the young generation seems to be pretty well open to this approach.

Lithuanian Jewish community, world Litvaks and world Jewish community cope with the trauma very hard. In Lithuania as in the rest of the Soviet block Jews mostly were made to hide their grief, their trauma and their coping remained more complicated after the restoration of Independence in 1990 because along with the liberties they encountered the ignorance, reluctance or still existing forms of antisemitism. Legally they started exercising freedoms and liberties and got some state support but their coping with trauma and identity exercising kept being difficult because a great deal of everything had to be done in between their inner circles whereas the contextual discourse was far from being supportive or in accord to their trauma healing. They need the their rituals, their symbols, their history and justice, their self-identity and respect to it. More and more Lithuanians understand that they need it too, for both - firstly, for their common Lithuanian citizens Jews for themselves as members of the same society. The huge Jewish heritage awaits to be awakened and actualized in the forms of restored historical monuments, translated literature, commemorated events and prominent personalities. It is a long post traumatic healing process for both nationalities and for the country in general.