

A Tale of Two Cities: Writing about Vilnius in Sapporo

Theodore Weeks (Southern Illinois University, USA/Foreign Fellow, SRC, 2012)
tadeusz@siu.edu



Monument to Gediminas, Grand Duke of Lithuania, who founded Vilnius in 1323

Few people in Lithuania, I imagine, could accurately point out Hokkaido on a map and probably few Sapporo-ites know much about Vilnius. So why choose Sapporo to begin writing a long-delayed book about the Lithuanian capital? The reasons are many: personal, professional, and practical. For an American born on another Japanese island (Okinawa), the opportunity to live for a few months in Japan was immensely attractive. The Slavic Research Center of Hokkaido University has an excellent international reputation and a number of former stipend-holders praised the center,

pointing out how much work they had gotten done there. And when I mentioned the possibility of spending time in Sapporo to historians in Warsaw, they all knew that Norman Davies had written part of a book there. A high recommendation indeed!

And in fact, my expectations for the SRC were fulfilled and – to use the Soviet phrase – over-fulfilled. Both colleagues and office staff went out of their way to make my visit easy and pleasant, countering Japanese bureaucracy (yes, it exists) with wonderful Japanese politeness (happily, that stereotype is also true). The library proved to be truly excellent, even for some Lithuanian publications which I did not expect to find in East Asia. Praise also must go to the warm and friendly teachers led by Professor Yamashita at the International Student Center of Hokkaido University who help foreign students (and others, like me) learn Japanese.

My research on Vilnius looks at a city where until the mid-twentieth century no one ethnic group formed the majority of the population. I am interested in how state power, ethnic identity, and city development worked together (or clashed) in the long period 1795 to 2000 (perhaps to 2004 when Lithuania joined NATO and the European Union). The crucial importance of the city for Jews, Poles, and Lithuanians (and for the Russians before 1914) is also a major theme of my research. In the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire attempted to place at the least a Russian “veneer” on the cityscape of Vilnius (for them, “Vil’na”) by giving streets Russian names, constructing Orthodox churches, and – in particular from the 1880s onward – by putting up monuments to Russian cultural (Pushkin) and political (Catherine the Great) figures. In the end, though, when the German army entered the city in September 1915 Wilna (as the Germans call the town) remained a Polish-Jewish city and traces of over a century of Russian rule were soon erased.



St. Anne's Church (Vilnius)

In the twentieth century, Vilnius changed hands a number of times: German occupations in the two world wars, Polish rule in the 1920s and 1930s, within the USSR from the 1940s, and finally as capital of an independent Lithuanian republic since 1990. With each change of political regime, the city was also directly affected, from street names to public art to the privileging of one ethnic group over another. Most tragically, nearly the entire 1939 population of the city was either murdered (in the case of Vilnius's once vibrant Jewish community) or expelled

(the Poles) during World War II and its aftermath. The building of a Soviet Lithuanian capital is also a fascinating episode but one that most present-day Lithuanians tend to shun, preferring to see the entire Soviet period as repressive and russifying. To be sure, there is something to that view, but at the same time the communists were also eager to encourage certain aspects of national culture – after all, the leadership in Soviet Lithuania was mainly Lithuanian by ethnicity and we should not forget that in the late 1980s the Lithuanian communists wisely (if possibly cynically) cut their ties to Moscow and embraced Lithuanian sovereignty. Since 1990 Vilnius has gone from an officially bilingual Soviet Lithuanian capital to a mainly monolingual (though tolerant, with plenty of Russian and Polish still heard on the streets) city. Once again street names and public monuments to key figures of the Lithuanian cultural and political past have been erected. This is, in a nutshell, the story that I wish to tell and that I began writing in Sapporo.

Before coming to Sapporo, I knew that this was a city very different from Vilnius. Like most Americans of my generation, I knew of Sapporo mainly in the context of the 1972 winter Olympics and as Japan's northernmost big city. I did not realize, however, just how young the city is. It came as a surprise to me to learn that even after 1945 Hakodate (I will admit that I had not even heard the name of that charming town) was more prominent. The name William S. Clark was also unknown to me. Having studied and worked at European and Israeli universities, I was surprised to find a university campus very much like at home. And there were even Poplar and Elm Streets, just like in Carbondale, Illinois. In fact, the entire city reminded me much more of an American than a European city and not just because of the frequency of convenience stores with American names (Lawson, 7-11 ...).

Looking back at my five months in Sapporo, I am both astonished that my fellowship period sped by so quickly and pleased (though never, of course, entirely content) with the work that I managed to get accomplished. I left Sapporo with some kind of version of every chapter in the future book, from one on "historical beginnings" (to 1795) all the way to a consideration of the end of Soviet rule and the creation of a Lithuanian nation-state's capital (1980–2000). I met a number of pleasant colleagues in Sapporo and at talks I gave in Kyoto, and I have a much better idea (though of course still very superficial) of how higher education and research institutes in Japan work.

At my own home university during a normal semester, I spend far more time on teaching than research. One course I inevitably offer every year (sometimes every semester) is World

History 1500–2000. My stay in Hokkaido allowed me to read a few dozen books on Japanese history, to learn a bit more about the Ainu people, and to learn a bit about the Japanese language. I am grateful to Yamamoto-san at the SRC for showing me how to type phonetically (“にほん”) and get kanji (日本!) to pop up. For an American, Japan is a perplexing combination of the familiar (“バター”, “ガールフレンド,” boys in baseball uniforms) and the very foreign (signs in kanji, traffic on the “wrong” side of the road, completely baffling packaged foods at the grocery store). In my five months, I learned to like eating “fried sea monster” (as I called it), learned at least hiragana and katakana (though still confusing シ and ツ withソ), and used the phrase “お願いします” a great deal. Perhaps most importantly, I learned just how ignorant I am about history, culture, language, and everyday life in Japan. As I repeatedly say to students, education begins with a question. After five months at the Slavic Research Center of Hokkaido University, I know enough about Sapporo, Hokkaido, and Japan to have many, many new questions.

Vilnius – a city founded nearly a millennium ago and claimed by diverse national-ethnic-religious groups – could hardly be more different from Sapporo, as a major city not a century old, overwhelmingly populated by ethnic Japanese and never ruled by a foreign power. After five months at the SRC, though, both cities are part of my own life. I return to Vilnius in a few days to finish up some research and I hope to get back to Sapporo before too long. After all, it is difficult to find おにぎり and fried sea monster for lunch in Lithuania.