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Two interpretations – two continents: a reading of Algirdas Landsbergis’s play *Five Posts in a Market Place*

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ABSTRACT

In his drama, *Five Posts in a Market Place*, Lithuanian émigré playwright Algirdas Landsbergis applies the philosophy of existentialism to depict the trauma of war as a universal experience. It was initially written in Lithuanian (1957) for an audience of postwar displaced persons in the North American Lithuanian diaspora. In 1959, Landsbergis rewrote the play in English, and it was staged in New York in 1961. Drawing on the theoretical work of trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth, this article considers how the playwright’s experiences of war and postwar trauma render the play a trauma narrative, while also avoiding direct autobiographical references by adhering to the philosophy of existentialism.

KEYWORDS Existentialism; trauma; postwar anti-Soviet resistance; suicidal choice

Introduction

In his postwar drama, *Five Posts in a Market Place* ([1957] 1959), Lithuanian émigré playwright, Algirdas Landsbergis depicts the universal experience of war and conflict by providing his play with no clear physical setting that could be easily ascribed to one region or location. In the play, twentieth century politics are nonspecific. The occupying forces are referred to as ‘The New Order’ and the men and women opposing these forces are called ‘The Resistance.’ The play raises questions on how existentialist individual choice and suicidal choice play out in a conflict zone. The nonspecific setting of the play makes it universal while at the same time key details unique to the Lithuanian postwar resistance render it a historical play. Whether the playwright manages to maintain this balancing act between personal historic experience and existentialism is a question that has been discussed by both American and Lithuanian émigré reviewers since the 1950s.

By writing two versions of the play, one in Lithuanian and one in English, Landsbergis offers the possibility of two different interpretations for two different audiences. A Lithuanian audience relives Lithuania’s traumatic postwar experience through cultural cues, such as Lithuanian resistance songs sung throughout the play, or the allusion to the five posts as a symbol of the Soviet practice of intimidating the local populace by displaying the dead bodies of the guerrillas in town market squares. In the English

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version of the play, Landsbergis creates an existentialist landscape where conflict is pointless, and loyalty to one regime or another – or one philosophy or another – is meaningless. At the end of the play both sides of the conflict merge into one, unified by nothing more than their common humanity.

Drawing on the theoretical work of trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth, this article considers how the playwright's own experiences of war and postwar trauma influence the themes of the play and the characters' motivations while at the same time the playwright's application of the philosophy of existentialism (suicidal choice, individual choice, universal themes common to all of humanity) open up questions regarding the universality of the human experience of conflict and the trauma such experiences generate.

Wolfgang Iser's assertion that one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and that each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding various other possibilities (Green and LeBihan 1996, 185), serves to open discussion regarding two readings of the play, one by the Lithuanian diaspora community with its own memory of historical trauma, and the second by an American audience.

Summary of the plot of *Five Posts in a Market Place*

Five Posts in a Market Place has been staged many times over 45 years both in Lithuanian and in English. The drama depicts the final days of an armed resistance against a 'New Order.' A plot is hatched to kill the Prosecutor, who has terrorized the region for years. The Prosecutor is the originator of a plan to display the cadavers of members of the resistance in the town's marketplace by securing them to five posts that stand beside large ant hills. Local people receive a gruesome lesson about resisting 'The New Order' when they see the bodies of those who resisted slowly consumed by ants before their eyes. The leader of the resistance, Antanas, has received orders from headquarters to liquidate the Prosecutor. The plan is for a staged wedding to take place between Antanas and Aldona, a woman he was in love with seven years ago, before he joined the resistance and left for the forest. Antanas has, however, fallen out of love with Aldona, and has fallen in love with Gražina, an idealistic teenager who aids the resistance as a liaison girl. Aldona still hopes that she can persuade Antanas to give up the resistance and settle down with her. Leonas, a guerilla and a former high school student, calls the plan 'a death trap covered with a bridal veil' (Landsbergis 1968, 12). The guerillas are outnumbered, and the plot is suicidal. They still carry on, making a suicidal choice over accepting amnesty and reintegration into the society of 'The New Order.' Leonas is captured, tortured, and killed, leaving Antanas and Jonas, a former carpenter, to carry out the plan without him. Aldona is secretary to the Prosecutor. Gaining his trust, she convinces the Prosecutor to drop off his wedding gift at her flat, knowing Antanas will be waiting there to shoot him. When Antanas sees that the gift is a book that fundamentally shaped his values and that the Prosecutor was once his professor, he cannot bring himself to shoot him. The Prosecutor reveals in a conversation with Antanas that he has also grown weary of 'The New Order.'

The choice not to proceed with the execution of the Prosecutor leads to Antanas committing suicide by shooting the Prosecutor later at the wedding, knowing he will be immediately shot by soldiers. It is an act that is ironically instigated by the Prosecutor himself, who has also made a suicidal choice to provoke Antanas into shooting him first.

Their mutual deaths leave both men victims but at the same time heroes because each remains true to his principles. Neither is victorious in his ideological battle but neither quite loses his individuality, independence, and freedom to choose, rendering this suicidal choice honorable from an existentialist perspective.

After the Second World War many twentieth century European and American writers were influenced by existentialist philosophy, as expressed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, as a means of expressing through their literary work their own post-conflict disassociation and attempts at coming to terms with events too horrific for the human mind to grasp. The influence of existentialist philosophy is evident in the philosophical debates between Antanas and the Prosecutor.

These two main characters on opposing sides of the barricade are, however, not the only ones who make a suicidal choice. The two other resistance fighters, Leonas and Jonas, knowingly walk to their deaths by participating in the murder plot. A young boy brings flowers to lay at the site of the sacred five posts, invoking his own arrest and death. Through this act of trauma healing and sacred ritual, he chooses death over loss of freedom. In the final scene, Gražina, hearing that Antanas and the others were killed and that their bodies would now be eaten by ants on the five posts, walks to her own death, choosing to sacrifice herself by going to the five posts to pay her last respects. Symbolically, she becomes the real bride of death. Aldona chooses a path of compromise with 'The New Order,' representing those who choose to live, albeit with limited freedoms and rights.

Biography of the playwright

Algirdas Landsbergis was born in 1924 in Kybartai, Lithuania. He studied Lithuanian Language and Literature at the University of Kaunas until his studies were interrupted by the wartime Soviet and Nazi occupations of Lithuania (1940–1944). In 1944, he fled to the Western Allied-occupied territories of Germany with his family. While living in a displaced persons' camp he studied English at the University of Mainz. After emigrating to the United States in 1950, he studied English and Comparative Literature at Brooklyn College and Columbia University. In the early 1960s he became an Assistant Professor of History at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Landsbergis lectured widely in the New York public libraries. Landsbergis's other published plays are: *The Wind in the Willows* (*Vėjas gluosniuose*, 1958), *The School for Love* (*Meilės mokykla*, 1965), *Everyboy or The Beard* (*Kiekvienis arba barzda*, 1967), and *Farewell, my King* (*Sudie, karaliau*, 1967). His prose works include a novel, *The Journey* (*Kelionė*, 1954), and a collection of short stories entitled *The Long Night* (*Ilgoji naktis*, 1956). Together with Clark Mills, Landsbergis edited two anthologies of Lithuanian poetry and folk songs in English, *The Green Oak* and *The Green Linden*. He has written film reviews, radio scripts, articles, and essays on theater and literature. *Five Posts in a Market Place* (*Penki stulpai turgaus aikštėje*, 1957) was produced in his own English adaptation by the Gate Repertory Company in New York and several other theaters, and in 2002 by Stone Soup Theater (*Five Posts*).

During the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, Landsbergis's plays and prose were banned by Soviet censors. *Five Posts in a Market Place* was staged by the Kaunas Drama Theater in 1989, just as restrictions on freedom of speech were loosened and Lithuania was preparing to declare independence. Algirdas Landsbergis died in 2004 at the age of 80 in New York. Professor Stasys Goštautas (2005) reflected:

Fifty years ago, four young musketeers, penniless and without baggage, landed in Manhattan. Even if they lived in Woodhaven, Freeport, Long Island, Connecticut, or New Jersey, metaphorically, they lived in the shadow of Manhattan as if they had never left the magic island. They were stuck for the rest of their lives in Manhattan, the island where everything happened.

Despite economic challenges, adapting to a foreign culture, having his work banned in his native country, essentially becoming a playwright without a stage and an audience, Landsbergis lived a long and productive life in the intellectual milieu of New York.

Theoretical tools

To understand the relationship between an individual's experience of trauma and trauma experienced by a large group of people as cultural or historical trauma, it is necessary to unpack the concept of trauma theory. Trauma theory is one of the tools that allows us to enter a deeper understanding of how trauma is examined and expressed in a narrative text. One of the predominant authorities in trauma theory today is Cathy Caruth. In her seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth (1996, 10) argues that the standard textualist approach to analysis of a work, which claims that all references are indirect, should not necessarily direct our reading away from history and what she has identified as 'political and ethical paralysis.' She claims that considering history's impact on the production of a text can aid the reader in fully understanding the text in a way that would otherwise not be possible or would generate a superficial reading (10). Caruth writes, 'Through the notion of trauma [...] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at re-situating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not' (11).

Another important literary scholar in trauma theory is Geoffrey Hartman. He states that 'trauma was now the motivating "nature of the negative" that provokes symbolic language' (Luckhurst 2006). Trauma theorists argue that the experience of trauma is embedded deep within an individual's psyche and can be expressed through symbols and metaphors more easily than in obvious narratives.

According to Caruth (1996, 4) and those who have built upon her work like the trauma theorists Stef Craps (2014, 45 - 62) and Dominick LaCapra (2014, 23-44), a text written by a survivor of traumatic events, that is a retelling of traumatic events, should be read as a historical document that reveals aspects of the psychology of extreme traumatization that would otherwise be unavailable to the reader. Thus, it could be argued that the underlying cultural trauma of displacement experienced by postwar Lithuanian displaced persons and the trauma of the postwar anti-Soviet armed resistance was the actual focus of Landsbergis' dramatic work even as he strove to distance himself from his own biography and write within the realm of the universal.

Five Posts in a Market Place as a secondary witness and trauma document

Trauma occurs against the will of the one experiencing the trauma. In *Five Posts in a Market Place*, history emerges that is more significant than any individual or generation. The weight of history is expressed in the speeches of the various characters that reveal their motivations either in support of 'The Resistance' or 'The New Order.' Landsbergis shows that both Antanas, leader of the resistance, and the Prosecutor, tool of 'The New Order,' were once idealists, that they started in the same place and ended up in the same place as well – dead because of their own attempts to use violence to solve humanity's problems.

Applying trauma theory and 'permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not' (Caruth 1996, 11) one sees other elements at work in the play. At first glance, applying the analytical tool of trauma theory to the play may seem to contradict the aim of Landsbergis's existentialist style and tone. The playwright does not include direct references to Lithuania's anti-Soviet resistance but instead uses Orwellian terms such as 'The New Order.' He gives characters, who Lithuanians may identify as Soviet functionaries, vague titles such as 'The Prosecutor,' 'The Deputy,' or 'The Chairman.' Due, however, to the play's subject, which still comes through with an existentialist veneer, the play reads nonetheless as a twentieth century trauma document.

Although Landsbergis did not participate in the postwar armed resistance against the Soviet occupiers in Lithuania, it is likely that he would have heard about the details of this 'war after the war' from resistance fighters who escaped through the Iron Curtain and made it to the West. Like many of his generation, he read the resistance leader, Juozas Lukša's memoir, *Forest Brothers: The Account of an Anti-Soviet Lithuanian Freedom Fighter, 1944–1948* (Lukša 2009), which was first published by the Lithuanian émigré diaspora community in the early 1950s. Lukša's widow, Nijolė Bražėnaitė, shared her opinion of Lukša's book in an interview:

This book made an enormous impression on Lithuanians in the diaspora. Most of them learned about the resistance in Lithuania for the first time, and they became obsessed. After the War, there were many commemorations hosted by various diaspora organizations, and every single time the gatherings ended with everyone singing the partisan songs Juozas brought back from Lithuania on his mission (Vincė 2021, 389).

In an interview, Landsbergis admitted that Lukša's memoir was one of the sources for his play:

I took the "fake wedding" scene from *Forest Brothers*. I searched for any material I could find about the partisans, including Soviet commentary, but there was very little to go on. I was interested in the broader theme of resistance against totalitarianism. I read a great deal about the Polish underground. [...] I studied the French resistance during World War II. (Kuiziniė 2000, 75).

Dominick LaCapra (2014, 23-44) argues that reading texts about trauma creates a 'secondary witness.' Landsbergis's play can be read by Lithuanians familiar with their nation's cultural and historical trauma as a work about the Lithuanian postwar anti-Soviet armed resistance that takes on the role of the secondary witness. The historical context and cultural symbolism of the folk songs, the bodies in the market square, and the professor's book would have signaled to the postwar Lithuanian diaspora audience that this is a play about the Lithuanian postwar armed resistance

against the Soviet Union. In *Forest Brothers*, Lukša (2009, 127) describes how a farmer, who was tricked into giving assistance to Soviet security forces posing as resistance fighters, was tortured and murdered by being secured headfirst into an enormous ant hill and left there until his upper body was eaten away. The symbol of the ant hill in *Five Posts in a Market Place*, while gruesome to American audiences, is a very real historical detail to Lithuanian audiences. Those cultural cues would, however, not have been easily accessible to a non-Baltic audience in the pre-internet era. At that time little was known in the West about the occupied Baltic states. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia had ceased to exist historically and politically. These nations were literally wiped off the map in 1944 and absorbed into the Soviet Union.

The play seeks to integrate the existentialist concepts of individual choice, freedom, suicidal choice, and the absurd, into a universal experience of human conflict. The playwright's strategy of not making specific cultural references to the suffering of his own country and people in his play, and instead working within the realm of the universal, is successful because the play reveals the experience of individual trauma within the context of cultural trauma, as well as the effects of extreme traumatization on the human spirit and psyche. The experience of the characters in the play is, however, both local, specific, and universal at the same time. *Five Posts in a Market Square* remains politically and culturally neutral to a western audience, invoking instead the broader stage of wider human suffering, as in the concept of 'what we humans are capable of doing to one another.' To a Lithuanian postwar diaspora audience, the play is a trauma document in the Lithuanian diaspora literature canon of national loss and suffering.

A long history of staging in two languages and two realities

Five Posts in a Market Place was initially written in Lithuanian in 1957. The only possible audience was postwar displaced persons in the North American diaspora. Two years later Landsbergis rewrote the play in English. *Five Posts in a Market Place* made its debut at the Gate Theater in New York in 1961. The play ran for four weeks. Critic Theodore Melnechuk (1961, 30) noted that 'it is the first play by a Lithuanian-born author produced professionally on the English-speaking stage.' While the setting of *Five Posts in a Market Place* is easily identified through specific cultural cues by a Lithuanian audience as Lithuania at the time of the postwar anti-Soviet resistance, it is not identifiable as such by an American audience. No direct reference to location or time is made in the play. An American audience is invited into the drama through existentialist abstraction. The characters' speeches on freedom and sacrifice associate the narrative with the universal fight for freedom.

In his introduction to the English language book publication of the play, Robert Payne (1968, 7) writes, 'The play *Five Posts in a Market Place* is concerned with the butcher's block: the place where a culture comes to an end, or comes very nearly to an end, for victory can sometimes be snatched from the block at the last moment, and the dead sometimes spring to life.' Writing only six years after Stalin's death, at a time when Soviet power seemed permanent, Payne (1968, 7) comments, 'Algirdas Landsbergis has written a tragedy for our time.' Reaching back in time, Antanas's words ring prophetic, 'Brace yourself for the children of the future. They will be born from the seed of many fathers: the general's, the censor's, the executioner's. The contours of their brains will

resemble the buckle of a policeman's belt' (Landsbergis 1968, 46). Landsbergis poses an existentialist question: what type of people will arise from the ashes of totalitarianism? At a time when illiberal regimes are on the rise again, we can only look back now to where the cycle begins.

Reviews of English productions differ from reviews of Lithuanian productions – reviewers placed emphasized different parts. Lithuanians were less inclined to view conflict, sacrifice, and the fight for freedom as universal themes, instead embracing the play as a Lithuanian historical trauma narrative, though flawed because of its lack of specificity. American critical reactions tended more toward an existentialist interpretation.

Freedom is the central theme in a review by Frank Aston (1961), published in the *Long Island Sun*, 'Although Mr. Landsbergis deals in despair, he is not without hope. He finds the bacteria of dignity may be ineradicable, the germs of independence persist in the sacred heart, the ideals of liberty are surreptitiously passed down from parent to child.' The New York critic Theodore Melnechuk wrote that critics 'hailed the arrival of a new "provocative" playwright of "promising vitality" finding "nothing small about his concept of his responsibilities."' At the same time, he notes New York critics decried Landsbergis's use of a 'chorus-like Commentator' and criticized the style of the dialog, 'which is more poetically vivid than is usually attempted or achieved on New York stages' (Melnechuk, 1961, 30)). This comment suggest that New York critics and audiences seem not to have fully grasped Landsbergis's technique of distancing his characters from their own trauma.

Theater critic John McClain (1961, 17) sums up the universality of the setting in his review in the *New York Journal-American*, 'the losing battle of the underground fighters in a small unidentified country which has been over-run by a totalitarian state.' James Lynn (1961), critic for the *Long Island Star Journal*, chose to ground his interpretation in politics, 'Algirdas Landsbergis's play makes a vigorous attempt to deal with a current problem of compelling interest – the rise of totalitarianism and its dehumanizing effects even on those who oppose it most vehemently.'

Guy Savino (1961, 16) of the *Newark Evening News* accuses Landsbergis of suffering 'the same fate of the intellectual who is too busy turning over in his mind both sides of a problem to ever solve it. While he debates, the question of whether armed resistance is more to be desired than survival and quiet maintenance of the flame of freedom is never settled.' He sees *Five Posts in a Market Place* as nothing more than an intellectual's game.

A May 1975 production took place at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and was reviewed by Michael Hawley. He emphasizes the universal nature of the play's themes without grounding them in a specific country, 'Director Alfreds Straumanis has denied his production any specific time or setting to suggest the play's universal importance'. He also calls upon the existentialist concept of freedom, stating that the play 'challenges the definition of freedom' (Hawley 1975, 7). The concept of freedom in Hawley's statement, however, is abstract and not attributed to any specific historical cause.

Looking back at American reviews of the play, ranging from the first English language staging at the Gate Repertory Company to the most recent staging in 2002 by Stone Soup Theater, it is clear that critics unilaterally perceive this play as a work that speaks to their times, even as the decades keep rolling past and new human acts of barbarity and depravity replace the former ones. The typewriter, the play's symbol of

communication with the outside world, begins to fall apart just as the guerillas prepare to leave their bunker. 'Look at our typewriter,' Antanas says to Gražina, 'We can write almost nothing with it anymore; it lacks the letters "m" and "o." The same has happened to me, to all of us' (Landsbergis 1968, 21).

When *Five Posts in a Market Place* was first staged in Lithuanian in 1959 to a Lithuanian diaspora audience, émigré critics, such as Vytautas Kutkus (1959, 6), expressed disappointment in the play in the Chicago émigré newspaper, *Draugas* (Friend). He lamented that Lithuania's name was not mentioned in the play, that the play lacked heroism, and especially lacked a heroic ending, one that would be fitting for these self-sacrificing resistance fighters. Kutkus goes so far as to advocate that the play no longer be performed in Lithuanian because it disrespected Lithuanian resistance fighters by depicting them as argumentative, questioning authority, and having doubts about the armed resistance. He insinuates that the playwright propagates Communist ideology (Kutkus 1959, 6). In the Lithuanian diaspora newspaper *Dirva* (The Soil), Vytautas Alantas accused Landsbergis of working for the Bolsheviks: 'If it was Landsbergis' goal to discredit the Lithuanian armed resistance against the Soviets, then he has been successful. It wouldn't take much for this play to be staged in a Soviet theater in Vilnius' (Kuiziniene 2000, 80). The urge to invoke early twentieth century Lithuanian romanticism was, however, a temptation Landsbergis avoided. Landsbergis commented:

The theme of the Lithuanian anti-Soviet resistance grabbed me by the throat and would not let me go. I realized that if I reacted through my emotions, I would write a noisy and superficial "patriotic" play. I felt that I needed to distance myself, but not to extinguish my inner passions, but only to temper them, to find a structure for them. That is why I kept the conflict Lithuanian, but I moved the location to a small unnamed country. I also added a "neutral" and "objective" narrator who viewed the events in the way they were seen by Western intellectuals of the time (76).

Perhaps Kutkus and the other Lithuanian reviewers of that time did not understand the principles of existentialism?

A decade later, in 1967, when the play was staged in the diaspora again, Lithuanian critics demanded that the 'good guys' be clearly distinguished from the 'bad guys,' missing the point that this existentialist drama sought to show the absurdity of conflict in which no one emerges a hero. According to Kierkegaard, absurdity is limited to the actions and choices of human beings. These are considered absurd because they originate from human freedom, undermining their foundation outside of themselves. The Prosecutor explains this absurdity to Antanas in the scene in Aldona's flat:

His alliance with them was inevitable. In the rest of the world, all was autumn and dusk, small hour thoughts and middling deeds. In the empire of the New Order, a majestic flame was burning with the only worthy purpose – to change the world. And so, this man dreamt that with his genius he would shape history, would make the managers of the New Order dance like marionettes (Landsbergis 1968, 57).

Antanas quickly grasps the Prosecutor's point and exclaims, 'But was turned into a marionette himself.' The Prosecutor responds, 'The government of the New Order wasn't interested in his theories; it even found harm in them. And perfect care was taken that he doesn't have time to write, to spin his thoughts – only to act, to dance at their bidding' (57).

In this scene, both Antanas and the Prosecutor recognize each other as victims of 'The New Order.' Before the Second World War some Lithuanians initially embraced the ideology of Communism because it seemed to offer a solution to social inequality. These sentiments, however, rapidly dissipated once Lithuanians experienced the brutality of the Soviet occupation. It can be surmised that the Prosecutor symbolizes these Lithuanian prewar Communist idealists. Despite Soviet brutalities, the Prosecutor continues to believe in pure Communism until he is replaced by another functionary.

Antanas also is not a one-dimensional patriotic Lithuanian warrior-hero. He grasps the Prosecutor's essence, and tragedy, and in that moment experiences feelings of empathy, even solidarity with the Prosecutor. He cannot bring himself to shoot him. At the end of the third act, the Prosecutor, seeing that all is lost, gives Antanas an honorable way to end his life by making a suicidal choice to provoke him into shooting him, knowing the soldiers will then shoot Antanas and Jonas.

Ilona Gražytė (1967) writes in the Lithuanian literary journal *Aidai* (Echoes), 'The occupier and the occupied often wear different masks, and behind those masks hides an inner reality, the jungle of the unconscious. In that space it is difficult to differentiate between the light and the shadow, from the free and those who are imprisoned.' Gražytė grasps Landsbergis's point that it should become difficult to differentiate the two groups. Gražytė, along with Rimvydas Šilbajoris, were, however, among the few Lithuanian critics who understood Landsbergis's position. Šilbajoris interpreted the character of Gražina as a poetic symbol of the 'murdered nation.' (Kuiziniene 2000, 77). Šilbajoris wrote in the émigré journal *Santarvė* (Cohesiveness) in 1958, 'The narrator emphasizes the symbolic and mythical dimension, emphasizing a horrible truth – an idea [of] life based on poetic vision gives a person honor until it is no longer within reach. When it descends onto man, demanding that all the visions be fulfilled immediately, it destroys everyone' (Jonynas 1992, 589).

Among the Lithuanian diaspora critics few embraced an existentialist interpretation of the play. There was little room in the postwar and Cold War émigré community for a viewpoint other than the most didactic and patriotic. The diaspora community believed that to be useful to the cause of independence, literature ought to be patriotic, idealize the homeland, and express a longing for Lithuania's independence (Budrytė 2014). With the memory of war and occupation still looming when *Five Posts in a Market Place* was performed with Lithuanian actors in émigré theaters, the lack of the word 'Lithuania' in the text of the play seems to have been the first thing that émigré critics noted. These critics fail to note, however, that Landsbergis gives the viewer enough clues to place the play in postwar Lithuania, if they choose to note them. He weaves, for example, the lyrics of the Lithuanian Forest Brothers' songs into the action of the play. He depicts the hated *Stribai* (Home Guard) who informed and answered to the Soviet occupier. Lithuanian émigré critics, however, still wrote about how the events depicted in the play do not have as much power and strength as they might have had if they had been intentionally set in Lithuania, and not in a universal abstract space. Lithuanian émigré stagings of the play presented it as a political tool to continue to advocate for Lithuania's independence. This is clear from the advertisements for the play in the Lithuanian émigré press. Ironically, a 1970 production performed at the Lithuanian Youth Community Theater was advertised on the obituary page of the Lithuanian émigré newspaper *Draugas*.

Landsbergis (1968, 18) pokes fun at émigré patriotism through Jonas, who rails at Antanas:

How well you speak. Reminds me of your lecture courses in the forests. Speeches, statutes, recitations! And for us, even cursing is forbidden. Did you expect us – drenched to the skin, our stomachs glued to the backs – to break into the national anthem at a handclap. When a good curse would've been like a glass of brandy, or an hour of sleep. Instead, they try to make altar boys of us. The hell with everything!

Landsbergis shows human nature as it is. Such a frank exclamation was not consistent with the romantic accounts of the anti-Soviet resistance found in Lithuanian songs and poems of that era (Crowe 1988).

There are shades of difference between Lithuanian émigré perceptions of the play and those of Lithuanians when the formerly banned play was staged in Lithuania in 1989. On both sides of the Atlantic, Lithuanians interpreted the setting and themes as depicting the story of the postwar Lithuanian armed resistance against the Soviet occupier. In 1992, a year after Lithuania regained its independence, Jonynas and Bradūnas (1992, 589) acknowledges that the strength of *Five Posts in a Market Place* is that it just barely avoids what he calls 'hurrah patriotism.' Jonynas writes:

Because this play shows painful events that had taken place in the not too distant past, it is understandable that there are places where the play avoids just by a hair slipping into melodrama and hurrah patriotism. Landsbergis's greatest strength, however, is that the poetic nature of his play and its atmosphere does not permit this to happen (589).

Jonynas claims Landsbergis's *Five Posts in a Market Place* is as good as Jean-Paul Sartre's plays, and that the play is 'the most mature attempt in the émigré community, as well as in Lithuania, in both prose and drama, to document for posterity the horror of the postwar period in Lithuania and the nation's tragedy' (589). Ironically, in Jonynas's assessment, a play that sought to avoid a specific historic setting and written under the influences of existentialism, is considered the best literary reflection of the Lithuanian postwar historical setting. This recognition, however, comes three decades after the play was written. Perhaps during the Cold War Lithuanian émigré society was not quite ready to integrate acceptance of the universal experience of human suffering into their own trauma narratives.

War and literature

As a refugee in New York, having spent five years in postwar Germany as a displaced person (DP), the philosophy of existentialism gave Landsbergis a theoretical framework to write his first novel, *Kėlionė* (The Journey) in 1954, and then *Five Posts in a Market Place* in 1957. Landsbergis's early modernist novel was written as a stream of consciousness and composed while he was a DP in Germany, and then later published by the Lithuanian diaspora press in the United States in 1954. *Kėlionė* traces the wartime experiences of the protagonist, Julius, a young man in his early twenties, as he escapes from Lithuania to Germany by train as the Soviets invade Lithuania a second time in 1944. In Germany, Julius is conscripted into forced labor in a German machine shop, where he encounters other forced laborers from a variety of territories conquered by the Nazis and Soviets (Landsbergis 2019). This coming-of-age story shows the development of a young psyche shaped by the devastation of war. The novel does not focus solely on the experience of the Lithuanian protagonist, but also on his fellow forced

laborers, Yugoslavians, Poles, Hungarians, and people from other occupied countries. *Kėlionė* is not autobiographical but the rich details and German wartime landscape suggest the writer drew from his own lived experience of war.

In the postwar years, the playwrights Sartre and Camus portrayed human trauma on the stage through an existential lens that necessitates that the audience consider historical traumatic events in an abstracted setting within a broader universal context. That Landsbergis's work was influenced by both Lithuanian diaspora literature and world literature is evident from his literary friends' remembrances of him. While many of the Lithuanian displaced persons perceived their fate as tragic, Landsbergis, along with his close friend, the filmmaker Jonas Mekas, perceived exile as an opportunity to immerse themselves in a new culture and absorb vibrant literary ideas and styles. Tomas Venclova (2005) reflects on how the influences of twentieth century literary culture were 'an entirely living context' for Landsbergis:

We've grown accustomed to calling emigration a catastrophe, but the émigrés, in a sense, were lucky – they were pushed out of their musty surroundings, they were given the opportunity to overcome their provincial views, although they didn't always seize the opportunity. Algirdas Landsbergis was one of the people who took everything he could from his new environment. He felt that he was a part of the postwar cultural cauldron – fragmented, grotesque, and not entirely understandable world, which contained not only Brazdžionis's patriotic poetry, but also existentialism and nihilism, the novels of Camus, the dramas of Ghelderode, Durrenmatt, and Tennessee Williams, stream-of-consciousness literature, psychoanalysis, surrealism, which was on its way out but which was still alive then, and a little later Beckett and Ionesco. We in Lithuania discovered all that much later, probably two decades later – besides, my generation received only fragments, just faraway echoes. For Algirdas it was all an entirely living context. It defined his only novel, his rather few, but memorable, short stories, and the most important component of his work – drama.

Venclova observes that Landsbergis was unique because he understood what had value in Lithuanian culture without succumbing to the pathos of Lithuanian patriotic literature of the postwar and Cold War years. Landsbergis was a uniquely cosmopolitan writer while at the time able to retain his core Lithuanian identity. Venclova (2005) writes:

To survive, to settle down, and even to get rich, is relatively easy for an immigrant in America. But it is very hard to make a place for yourself professionally, especially if you choose writing as your profession (and, in particular, writing in a language no one around you understands). For all practical purposes, there was no one like Algirdas, who not only wrote in Lithuanian, but literally lived for literature alone. He completed his studies at Columbia University and, for a time, worked in politics and journalism. He broadcast on Radio Free Europe, but for twenty-six years remained in his element – teaching and discussing the art of writing with students. Even when he had retired, he did not recede from his chosen profession, delivering lectures in American libraries (he called his lecture series "The Flying University"). His participation in the PEN Club landed him in the milieu of international writers and intellectuals. He made friends with the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, the critic Michael Scammell, the political scientist Peter Reddaway. He participated in the American press. He'd learned English well enough to write plays; he spoke German and French; and also Russian, which allowed him to participate in the Russian émigré community – in the older as well as in the later one. Like no one else, Algirdas Landsbergis involved himself in projects with the goal of presenting Lithuania to the outside world. Even though he viewed "pure Lithuanianism" with sarcasm, he knew how to value that which was authentic in Lithuanian culture and to popularize it. His anthologies in English of Lithuanian literature, *The Green Oak* and *The Green Linden*, published in the early 1960s, when Lithuania was still nowhere to the outside world, I would call historical.

This cosmopolitan stance, according to Venclova (2005), freed Landsbergis from the narrow expectations of the Lithuanian émigré community:

I'd say that the play became a modern, and not just a Lithuanian classic, which resonated with the existentialist drama of Camus and Sartre. It probably isn't Landsbergis's best work, but one thing in it is really worthy of our attention – the playwright shows the exhaustion on both sides of the battle and introduces the tone of the absurd and alienation. All this predicts the demythologization of the partisan era taking place at present.

Landsbergis (1991) wrote about his personal experience of war and occupation decades later in his unpublished essay, 'The Baltic Case – A Personal Perspective:'

Constantly tempted to forget, I chose to remember. I almost fit in America after 40 years. At home in the Lithuania of my memory, I am both a native and an outsider in the Lithuania of today. My life and writing have become a balancing act between two cultures and two languages (I write both in Lithuanian and English). Sometimes I feel a pang of regret that I will never be able to write American prose as naturally and effortlessly as, say, Norman Mailer, or Joyce Carol Oates. More often I experience a deep satisfaction that I was not locked inside one culture or one language. Why bewail exile when it is a strange gift.

Landsbergis also reflected on how the Soviet and Nazi occupations affected his generation just as he was coming of age – the trauma of occupation coincided with his adolescence:

In June 1940, as a high school student, I was watching Soviet tanks roll into my city of Kaunas, in Lithuania. Red Army soldiers were putting a three-story high picture of Stalin across the front of my favorite movie theater and I had the uncanny feeling that the Generalissimo was looking right at me. A year later, following his orders, the first wave of mass deportations swept my occupied country (as one of his emissaries, Suslov, would explain right after the war: "There will be a Lithuania, but without Lithuanians"). [...] And then, my 16-year-old mind was preoccupied with other matters at that time. Obviously, what was happening was very important, but could it be as important as basketball? Or the two girls that had just entered my life? I was gathering courage to approach a pony-tailed blonde with a purposeful stride, who seemed to be a couple of years older than I. And then there was the black-haired, blue-eyed Jewish classmate of mine, who was teaching me how to dance. The tanks were intruding at a very bad time Landsbergis (1991).

According to Caruth (1996) and LaCapra (2014), a text written by a survivor of traumatic events that is a retelling of traumatic events should be read as a historical document that reveals aspects of the psychology of extreme traumatization that would otherwise be unavailable to the reader. Caruth (1996, 4) argues,

The pathology of trauma is not the event itself, or the distortion of the event in memory, but consists, rather, solely, in the structure of experience or reception: The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.

Keeping Caruth's statement in mind, one might surmise that Landsbergis was unable to write autobiographically about his own trauma experiences in the decades after the war, but by 1991 was able to address his own trauma more directly.

Landsbergis's view of occupation shifted from observer to active participant when his family learned that their names were on the Soviet deportation lists:

We found out shortly afterwards that our family was on the list for a second wave of deportation later that summer. My father, who worked in the central post office, had built a small house for us, working weekends and saving pennies from his meager salary. These activities, and the fact that he collected stamps, classified us as "class enemies" and as a dangerous species called

Lithuanians. Doomed as candidates for extinction, we were saved in the nick of time by a rift between the Hitler-Stalin Pact allies – in June 1941, the German armies sliced through Lithuania and brought us three years of the Nazi version of Utopia (Landsbergis 1991).

The adolescent Landsbergis survived:

Once again, I stood in front of my movie theater and watched German soldiers tear off Stalin's picture and hoist an even larger picture of the Führer. I happened to lay my hands on an issue of the colorful SS magazine *Das Schwarze Korps* [The Black Corps] and I read there that the fate of Lithuania was that of a "drop of water that falls on a sizzling hot stone" (a document discovered in the German Foreign Ministry archives this year confirms that the SS meant business: the Nazi government had decided that Lithuanians were not worthy of being Germanized and were to be resettled northeast of their homeland to make place for racially superior specimens.) Being told twice with utmost precision that one (and, especially, one's nation) will not be allowed to exist has a very sobering and educational impact. One of things I found out was that the Nazi uniforms were different from the Soviet ones but that the two systems were essentially alike. After this four-year seminar in totalitarianism my parents decided that our best chance was to go West, even if it meant risking more Nazi depravity and Allied bombs, because the Germans would lose the war and we could go to America. This is how it worked out – with a lot of luck. Some 200,000 Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians shared our experience as refugees (Landsbergis 1991).

While Landsbergis and his family manage to survive, many others died, including the two teenage girls he had been courting. Landsbergis concluded his essay by confiding to the reader the fate of the two girls:

But there was no miracle for the two girls I knew back in 1940. The pony-tailed blonde died from starvation in the Arctic wasteland, my blue-eyed classmate perished in a Nazi concentration camp. That Ice, that Fire, the essence of totalitarianism – they are always with me as I write, even in my sunniest pages (Landsbergis 1991).

In 1991, 36 years after he emigrated to the United States, writing this essay, Landsbergis was still reliving the trauma of the Nazi and Soviet occupations of his country. This essay reflects Caruth's (1996) view that 'traumatic experience suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness.' The deaths of the two young women he was falling in love with – one Christian-Lithuanian and the other Jewish-Lithuanian – still torment the writer's memory decades later.

Decades later Landsbergis reflected on perceptions of the Soviet Union:

Meanwhile in Lithuania mass deportations continued almost until the death of Stalin, claiming some 300,000 people or 10% of the entire population.¹ The Soviet Far North became a huge Lithuanian cemetery. A desperate guerilla war against the occupation regime ended after eight years in 1952, with about 50,000 lives lost on each side. This struggle went almost unnoticed in the West. When I arrived in the United States in 1949, some of the top literary luminaries were extolling Stalin and heaping abuse on their government for being so nasty on the great and progressive Soviet Union. When my play about the guerilla war, *Five Posts in a Market Place*, began rehearsals off-Broadway in 1961, the director pleaded with me to move the action to South America, because even an implied criticism of the Soviet Empire was considered sacrilege among many artists and intellectuals (Landsbergis 1991).

This reflection, written decades after the play was written, raises the question of whether the choice to give the play a universal setting could have also been a reaction to the politics of those times. Or was Landsbergis trying to accomplish several tasks at once – tell his nation's trauma narrative while also embracing

existentialism? Or did he choose the prevailing philosophy of the postwar era to appease American postwar liberals who would have balked at any open criticism of the Soviet Union?

Trauma is registered but remains unknown in our language and actions. Trauma survivors struggle with coming to terms with the past. Antanas, the leader of the resistance, does not like to talk about the past. He shouts at his fellow resistance fighter Leonas, 'We must put the past aside! It holds us back, and we must go on' (Landsbergis 1968, 15). Applying trauma theory, one could argue that the playwright's experience of trauma and secondary trauma renders *Five Posts in a Market Place* a trauma document. Landsbergis's experience of war and postwar trauma, the secondary trauma he relived through the stories that came to him of the armed resistance, and the struggles of those living under Soviet occupation remained preoccupations throughout his lifetime as evidenced by the 1991 essay. This underlying trauma may have become the focus of his dramatic work even as he strove to write within the realm of the universal.

As language deteriorates, as the book of 'The New Order' loses its lofty meaning and only a few copies remain in existence, the only choice left to the characters seems to be suicide. Where does one go when humanity is lost to a false ideology? Death seems like the only logical conclusion. An American audience would likely interpret suicidal choice as an absurd construct. Lithuanians would, however, recognize suicide as the only honorable way to die under the circumstances. Having been almost continually at war throughout the ages, either with Russia, the Crusaders, or other regional enemies, Lithuanian literature is ripe with characters who choose honorable suicide as an expression of patriotism. Lukša (2009, 335) writes that it was common practice when surrounded by Soviet forces for Lithuanian resistance fighters to blow themselves up with a grenade or fight an unmatched battle to the death. Those who joined the anti-Soviet resistance took an oath promising to sacrifice their lives for freedom (164). Works of literature have been created based on the story of the Siege of Pilėnai. In 1336, Lithuanian fighters were surrounded by the Teutonic Order. Rather than surrender, they burned themselves to death.

In the play, when tempted with the offer of amnesty, Jonas expresses his existentialist credo on freedom, 'Without freedom, my woman would forget how to laugh, I'd be afraid of my own children; and my lilacs – they would smell like old fish' (Landsbergis 1968, 64). Both Antanas and Jonas's choices are clear – they chose freedom over their own lives. This existentialist axiom is real life in a Lithuanian historical trauma context. Unlike the characters in his play, Landsbergis did live to experience freedom in his native land:

As Gorbachev clings to the imperial past, history moves onward. 1988, 1989, 1990. [...] Anni mirabiles! My stories have begun to appear again in Lithuanian magazines. Two of my plays are being performed in the theaters of Kaunas and Klaipėda. One of them is *Five Posts in a Market Place*, about guerillas defying a totalitarian power. Formerly an "un-person" and a "taboo" author in my native country, I exist again! And I have found out that the theater where my plays are being performed is actually a converted movie house, where I once had thrilled to Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers, and which I saw covered with Stalin's and Hitler's portraits. I close my eyes and I see the film stars and the tyrants' ghosts now on that stage, commingling with the characters I have created. Miracles do happen, cycles complete themselves (Landsbergis 1991).

***Five Posts in a Market Place* survives the test of time**

Landsbergis applied universal themes to Lithuanian concerns and entered the larger context of American literature. In August 2002, the trauma and conflict of Landsbergis' play was successfully staged again in New York in English. Renamed *Five Posts*, in post-9/11 New York, Stone Soup Theater staged five performances of Landsbergis's play with a contemporary setting in a conflict zone in the Middle East. The play was directed by Nadine Friedman. The theater group claims they found the play in an anthology of Baltic plays at the New York Public Library. In a press release the plot of the play is summarized as 'a group of resistance fighters in a small war-torn country [. . .] plan to kill an authority figure from the occupying government.' The press release, further states that the play explores 'universal choices made by characters in distinct locations' (Friedman 2002, Personal communication to Paul Landsbergis). There is no reference to Lithuania in the press release or to Landsbergis's origins as a Lithuanian. When asked why she chose this play, Friedman (2002) responds,

I was struck immediately by the relevance of the Landsbergis story to our world. You could see the events of this play, written over 40 years ago, in today's *New York Times*, and I wanted to bring its universality to a new audience. The subject of the war and the occupation in the Middle East has perpetually been in American headlines, and 'Five Posts' and 'Fun' both evoke the same questions we're asking right now: what drives people to take such extreme measures? All the characters seem to struggle with the same conflict, which is whether to create or destroy.

The performance generated discussion among New Yorkers regarding individual choice and freedom in a hopeless political situation at a time when residents of New York City were suffering the traumatic after effects of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Friedman (2002) explains an existentialist interpretation of the play in her interview, 'the guerillas in "Five Posts" have no choices at all; they are on the verge of being obliterated, and the play is centered around one act of violence that is meant to restore the principles of freedom and opportunity.'

With the concrete setting in the conflict-ridden Middle East, Landsbergis's play achieves the same thematic goal with this staging as it did in its Lithuanian productions. The playwright's strategy is, therefore, ultimately successful. If the English-language version of *Five Posts* had been specifically set in postwar Lithuania, this play would not have lent itself successfully to the Middle Eastern interpretation, which was strongly relevant in 2002, half a century after the end of the Lithuanian postwar armed resistance against the Soviet Union. In 2002, a decade had already passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Landsbergis's construct of the nonspecific aspect of place proved itself invaluable in telling an important story about the trauma and tragedy of armed conflict.

Conclusions

Five Posts in a Market Place has survived the test of time and was just as relevant to audiences in 2002 as it was in 1957. This suggests that the playwright was successful in shaping the play into a trauma narrative open to all experiences of twentieth and twenty-first century conflict. Although Landsbergis consciously omits obvious historical references from his play, Lithuanian émigré audiences in the Lithuanian diaspora in the 1950s and 1960s, who shared his experience of fleeing war, living in refugee camps, and cultural and historical trauma, nonetheless, in Caruth's sense, 'perceived history.'

Meanwhile, American audiences were more likely to identify with abstract concepts, such as freedom and choice. Both audiences viewed what would have been life or death experiences in Europe from a safe psychological and geographic distance in the United States. The ending of the play, with the death of the professor and the student (*Antanas and The Prosecutor*), and the death of the young idealists, Jonas and Gražina, expresses existentialist ideals about dying for freedom, which were important to a Lithuanian diaspora audience. This is especially true because the earliest staging of the play took place only a year or two after the end of the Lithuanian armed resistance against the Soviet Union. These ideals echo back to even older Lithuanian stories of self-sacrifice for independence (such as the Siege of Pilėnai). At the same time, ideals regarding dying for freedom generate respect in an American audience whose culture is based on the principles of the American Revolution. Landsbergis has achieved his goal of writing an existentialist play while also writing a postwar Lithuanian historical drama. His play successfully serves two audiences: Lithuanian and American.

Although symbolic images of cultural trauma are powerful in the play, Landsbergis consciously avoids creating a specifically Lithuanian cultural trauma narrative, one which would have been embraced by the Lithuanian émigré community, who tirelessly advocated for the reinstatement of Lithuania's independence. Landsbergis moved beyond the limits of the Lithuanian diaspora consciousness into a more universal understanding of the tragedy of conflict and individual trauma within cultural trauma.

Landsbergis was the first Lithuanian émigré writer of his generation to cross the linguistic divide from Lithuanian into English. By shifting linguistically from Lithuanian to English, Landsbergis embraced his new North American cultural home. Meanwhile, other Lithuanian diaspora writers of his generation continued to write in Lithuanian for a Lithuanian diaspora audience. By choosing to write about Lithuania's traumatic twentieth century experience in English, Landsbergis brought Lithuania's experience into the universal realm. Existentialist philosophy provided the playwright with a language to talk about events that an American postwar audience could only comprehend from the perspective of their limited societal context and historic experience.

Note

1. According to the Lithuanian Genocide Research and Resistance Center, and the historian Arvydas Anušauskas (1996), 118,000 people were deported to Siberia from Lithuania in the years 1944–1953 and 23,000 were killed, imprisoned, and deported in 1940–1941.

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