

## **A Story of Nonviolent Action**

In the late summer of 2001 Giedre Gadeikyte returned to Fresno Pacific University for her final year of graduate study after a summer break in her homeland of Lithuania. She brought with her a special gift for me – a commemorative Lithuanian coin minted in 1999 on the tenth anniversary of a dramatic action that she had been a part of in the waning days of the Soviet Union.

On August 23, 1989 Giedre, together with her sister and father, had stood in a “human chain” of more than one million Baltic people that stretched some 476 miles across the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

The “Baltic Way,” as it was called, happened on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact of 1939, in which Hitler and Stalin had secretly divided Europe between them. The result had been the loss of Baltic independence and occupation by the Soviet Union. Now, fifty years later, the human chain was a most dramatic demonstration of Baltic solidarity in support of their move toward independence from the Soviet Union. In the end, Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to gain its independence, and non-violently. Latvia, Estonia and others followed.

On one side of the 1999 Lithuanian commemorative coin are three sets of hands joined together in memory of this important mass action of the people of these three states. “When hands hold each other,” it has been said, “the authority is forced to realize that stones cannot be thrown.” United hands, in themselves, speak loudly.

This past summer Giedre returned to Lithuania with her master’s degree in Conflict Management and Peacemaking to join the faculty of Lithuania Christian College, from which she had earlier graduated. She now teaches in their sociology and conflict and peace studies program.

Giedre’s participation in the “Baltic Way” was part of a longer family way. She tells her story of growing up in her family during the Soviet era as follows:

“I grew up in a family where things were not discussed openly, but nevertheless, we *knew*. Whispers on the sensitive issues between parents, silence about certain things, concealment of some past events, the values taught, things that were safely hidden on remote shelves, and other subtleties witnessed to some mystery. All of it added to an atmosphere that testified there was something more to the story. And since nobody talked about it, it was our task as growing individuals to figure it out and treasure the truth we found. Of course, we had a children’s version, but it was enough to discover it was in conflict with the truth of the outside world.

“So what did we find? We discovered pre-war magazines that depicted and talked about Lithuania before the war, an independent and thriving country. We found old coins – big and made of silver, not like the small copper ones with Cyrillic words we used. The coins had beautiful impressions of ornaments and the faces of dignified Presidents. There

were books that talked about history differently than our textbooks at school, and these books were illegal. I was captivated by a silhouette of a rider on a horse in red background, the old state emblem. There was a sign consisting of a combination of vertical and horizontal stripes that dated back to the Medieval Ages – a family crest of the great dukes. A combination of colors also testified about Lithuanian statehood. The tri-color flag had yellow, green and red. These colors of fabric usually disappeared from the stores before the Independence Day, and wearing them together invited suspicion and trouble. We grew up reading literature that depicted the past of the country, a part of history nobody talked about: its old medieval glory, heroic leaders, strong and zealous people, and beautiful landscapes. The secrets of our home conveyed national roots, unveiled our true history, and shaped my personal identity in ways I was not aware of.

“The home and the family I grew up in were a school in itself. My parents, like many other people, were struggling with the scars of the occupation. I may have known only about the tip of the iceberg, but that was enough to be aware of it. My father was taken away from school and deported to Siberia with his mother and brother. He never told the story; we never asked. And yet, we knew. Both my parent’s families lost their land to the new communal system. During the years I remember, my parents resisted in a way they could – by not compromising the truth they knew, not letting history die. Neither of them belonged to the Communist party, which was very rare and daring. So, they were not the most loyal Soviet citizens. As children we took over this tone, and were not too excited in being a part of the communist machine, either. At school, my older sister and I were the only students in our classes to object to joining the pioneers [communist youth group]. Later we joined others in ‘forgetting’ to wear red pioneer scarves or pins to school.

“While we were resisting at home, there were many things about the nonviolent resistance of my nation that I did not know. I was not well familiar with the religious resistance and the role of the Catholic Church. I knew, though, that as a baby I was secretly taken to the countryside and baptized in a small church, and sensed that there must have been an important reason for such an action. I became aware that attending religious ceremonies and festivals was highly discouraged, and people struggled with practicing their faith. I also noticed the big fuss about my cousin becoming a Catholic priest and the tensions his choice created for his family. So, yes, I got a taste of resistance against the religious oppression, too.

“I am a witness of the dramatic changes in my nation’s history in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s: the gaining of independence. Together with my family I participated in the Independence Movement. With thousands and thousands of others I took part in peaceful protests and mass meetings. The hands of my father, my sister and me were one of those numerous hands in the live chain that crossed the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. We went to guard the TV tower and municipality against the Soviet militia, though without arms. We watched the national tricolor being raised for the first time in our city. We witnessed the dismantling of the Lenin statue from the central square, and many other changes. We participated actively in the transition of the country from Soviet Lithuania to an Independent Lithuania.

“...Now, as I look back a decade after the big nonviolent changes, I am eager to shed a new light on Lithuanian nonviolence – the history of my nation and myself.”

-from the introductory chapter to “Social and Cultural Factors in the Lithuanian Nonviolent Independence Movement” – master’s thesis in the Fresno Pacific University – Conflict Management and Peacemaking program, by Giedre Gadeikyte.

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