ABSTRACT

This article relates one Volunteer Administrator's experience in helping to create a climate for volunteerism in a post-Soviet Lithuania. As an American Volunteer for International Development, the writer witnessed and supported the emergence of a new tide of volunteerism, initiated by the NGO Information and Support Center in Vilnius, Lithuania. The application of time-tested principles and procedures of volunteer management resulted in a Volunteer Centre which now trains NGO managers, supports volunteers and develops pilot projects to encourage a new tradition of volunteerism.

Vilnius Revisited, May 2000

by Shirley M. Lundin, CVA

As I revisited Lithuania this past May, I was reminded of my first trip by the skin deep exposure to a country in whose blood stream I had circulated as an American volunteer years before. The American Volunteer for International Development (AVID) projects were underwritten primarily by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Months earlier, I had applied for an overseas position in this program as a consultant, then promptly forgot about it. Imagine my surprise when I received a call in mid-October 1996 telling me I was a good match for the Non-Governmental Organization Information and Support Center[1] (NISC) in Vilnius. The goals of the NISC were to improve leadership skills of civic activists in this emerging democracy and to promote volunteerism in the general population. With concern for how this type of assignment would affect my work, my home life and not to mention the language barrier, I accepted the challenge with the full support of my family.

Upon my acceptance into the program, I attended an orientation in Washington D.C. prior to leaving the United States. This orientation included meetings with Rodger Potocki from NED, Nathan Roe from the U.S. Baltic Foundation, Andrew Silski, from the State Department, Gabe Hutter from the National Democratic Institute and Julie Brennan from the International Republican Institute.

From my first meeting on November 11, 1996 with NISC director Vaidotas Ilgius, I quickly surmised that I would have to catch him on the fly and between interruptions for a meaningful conversation to determine our mutual expectations. Vaidotas, a dynamic young man of incredible energy and great dreams, paced and played Metallica CDs when he was not engaged in meetings, projects or phone calls. So, the first principle of good volunteer management—to provide a clear job description—was already defeated. Clearly, I would be trusted to figure out for myself how to spend my time.

As I read excerpts from my first journal entry at this initial meeting, I became excited and scared. Everything was overwhelming. This excerpt read, "Applying expertise relevant to the U.S.A.'s nonprofit sector to the emerging Non Governmental Organization (NGO) sector in Lithuania will require adaptation and flexibility to work within the legal and governmental environment in Lithuania. NISC maintains an ongoing relationship with selected government officials in order to act as a liaison for the NGO sector, to advocate for issues such as tax incentives for charitable giving, clearer guidelines for grant applications, better

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monitoring of grants and better coordination of procedures for filing applications, awarding grants and monitoring. Each component is managed by a different arm of government. New language must be found to convey a positive image of service to others. The Lithuanian word for volunteer has many negative implications which stem from recent history (of conscription into military service or work projects by the USSR.)

With the challenge ahead of me, I interpreted these goals from our first meeting:

1. To plan and help implement a special celebration for UN International Volunteer Day, December 5, 1996.
2. To develop a plan and proposal for initiating a Volunteer Center in Vilnius.
3. To initiate an ongoing Volunteer Club to develop leadership, support, training, fun and social opportunities, and as a recruitment strategy.
4. To assist with training of NGO staff , both paid and volunteer, including board development.
5. To assemble a volunteer manual for NISC that could provide a model to improve NGO volunteer program management.

The memories of my initial 3-month visit included gray skies, dark days and -20° C. temperatures during one of the coldest Baltic winters in memory. On this second trip, I wanted to roam freely, unimpeded by hat, scarf, boots, mittens and a down jacket. Bitter cold was happily replaced with outdoor cafes, blue skies and relaxed faces. Vilnius, a city of architectural integrity and a long history, has gained prominence as a gathering place for international conferences and meetings. On Gedimino Prospect, the main thoroughfare in old Vilnius, an upscale coffee shop replaced my favorite grocery; the grungy department store with a first floor produce market displayed Western European brand names and no fresh sausage. But street vendors on Vienuolo still sold their flowers, Amber jewelry and fresh fruit; the exchange rate was still four

Litas to $1 USD, and ballet tickets at the Opera House still cost about $5 USD for a top-notch performance. For the entire eight days, the weather was comfortable not only in Vilnius but throughout Lithuanian villages, pastures, forests, farmlands and finally, the Baltic Sea.

After Lithuania repelled the Soviet Bloc and declared her independence in the early 90s, there was an intentional movement toward democratization and the strengthening of a civil society. This peace-loving country shed the security of the collective society imposed by Russian rule and began rebuilding a society based on populist ideals. There were no paths for people to follow. Philanthropist George Soros poured millions of private dollars into the Open Society Foundation-Lithuania (OSFL) to connect Lithuania with Western organizations, governments and people. OSFL funded Internet access for many new NGOs, allowing entrance to the main stream of Western culture. Beginning in 1994, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) implemented the Action Plan for Lithuanian NGO Development. Assistance to the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia flowed from United States Aid to International Development (USAID,) United States Information Service (USIS,) PHARE-LIEN the Civil Society Development Program (CSDP) and other Western philanthropic organizations because of Baltic readiness to restructure their economies and political systems. By June 2000, Lithuania had rebounded sufficiently that USAID closed its Lithuanian office. Officially, United States aid to Lithuania appeared to have ended—the country was considered sufficiently independent to prosper on its own.

While the larger cities appeared prosperous and thriving, Peace Corps worker Madeleine von Laue reported, smaller areas are moving the other way. In (the town of) Ukmerge about 44miles/70 km northwest of Vilnius, as in much of Lithuania, the standard of living has declined since the end of Soviet occupa-

tion and the most recent years of independence have actually been harder than in the beginning (of independence.) Skilled, talented people I met when I arrived a year and a half ago are now unemployed. Many people in Ukmerge, where my friend works, are disadvantaged. According to von Laue, the official unemployment rate had steadily increased from 5.9% in 1997 to its current 11.1%. The current unofficial rate now topped 20%.

NGOs in the third sector were already budding when I arrived in November 1996. NGOs of all kinds, especially those serving and involving young people, were already on track. Many of them were staffed primarily by volunteers giving time purely from commitment and desire for change.

NISC Director Ilgius envisioned a volunteer center for Vilnius, patterned after the Centrum Woluntariatu in Warsaw, Poland which opened its doors in November 1996. I had been given the honor of attending this ceremony and that memory gave me the courage of trying to create the same success in Vilnius.

We began by creating awareness and recognizing the spirit of volunteerism or in the native tongue of this country—the spirit of savanorui. We organized an event for United Nations International Volunteer Day on December 5, 1996, complete with balloons, champagne and t-shirts. NGOs from throughout Lithuania were invited to attend the party. The days events included a forum to assess interest in a volunteer center. Continuing to write in my journal, the entry for December 5, 1996 was this: "The forum about the volunteer center project was most interesting. There was a long discussion of the word savanoriu because of its military/ enforced implications; topics included ways to make volunteering more appealing to men in an area mostly dominated by women; spontaneous volunteer systems and the need for better systems and organization; overall, there was great support for the concept. No detractors, only micro-questions. I was struck by the real-ity that the key issues are the same ones I've heard over and over in the U.S."

My new work environment required a great deal of self-direction and assessment of how best to apply my knowledge and skills to furthering NISC goals. I spent many hours researching grants, writing letters of inquiry, and developing a funding proposal for the Savanoriu Centras which included this Statement of Need: "Currently, no organization exists in Lithuania to promote citizen involvement, to prepare NGOs for effective utilization of freely-given service and/or to encourage and promote active participation by Lithuanians in addressing human needs through volunteer activities. Yet, the steady growth of community leadership is producing a flood of NGOs with a corresponding need for resources and training to these newly developing organizations. A primary goal for the Volunteer Center is to provide both resources and training to help NGOs develop ethical and effective systems for mobilizing citizens as volunteers."

When I left Lithuania February 1, 1997, the volunteer center project was still being considered. Guided by Vaidotas, he was determined to make it happen. Vaidotas emailed me later that month and told me he had a collaborator interested in the project. NISC was preparing to use my proposal for a presentation to major donors, including OSFL. They would request enough funding to hire a director for one year. In March of 1997, Vaidotas wrote again with great news. He said, "OSFL has given us the money for a salary! We are moving! I am sorry that it didn't happen when you were here. Nevertheless, your wisdom will be with this project." Soon after, Gintaras Razaitas, M.D. and psychiatrist, was hired as the director of the volunteer center project. On December 5, 1998 NISC celebrated UN International Volunteer Day with a grand opening of the Volunteer Center of Lithuania.

On May 4, 2000 I arranged to visit the Center and to shake hands with Gintaras

Razaitas and his co-worker Marijus Guscevisius. The Center facilities had been moved from central Vilnius to a lower-rent area—a car ride away. The office was spacious and bright. It was also equipped with computers and modems. The vision had come to life! Now, information about 248 volunteers and 1,200 NGOs were stored in the Center's database. The Center worked closely with almost fifty NGOs whose staff had completed the initial training sessions. A brochure produced in English stated, "The Volunteer Center in Vilnius promotes volunteerism in Lithuania among all sectors (NGOs, business, government and individuals) of emerging society. Our task is to prepare organizations to receive volunteers systematically, to recruit and train new volunteers, and to educate the society about the potential value and reward of volunteering."

The goals and objectives were:

1. To build public awareness and raise the perception of volunteerism; to attract volunteers to develop volunteer potential.
2. To lobby government to improve the legal status of volunteers, provide advice to lawmakers on the effects of pending legislation and educate employees of state institutions about the volunteer movement, its advantages and opportunities.
3. To educate NGOs and train NGO volunteer personnel to work effectively with volunteers in their organizations; to use the Center's database of information about volunteers willing to work with NGOs and to link good volunteers to successful sites.
4. To train and place volunteers in NGOs by carrying out basic or advanced training for volunteers, either working or willing to work with NGOs, and to train volunteers to assume leadership roles within their community.
5. To provide model volunteer projects and resource material to assist in establishing volunteer traditions and positively impact society's view of volun-

teerism; to organize volunteer clubs; to create model volunteer projects; and to participate in international conferences and networks of international volunteer organizations to bring new volunteer information to Lithuania.

The NGO or "third sector" in Lithuania was fundamentally a grassroots movement responding to the drastic need for change after the collapse of communism in 1990-91. Under the communist system, freedom to choose occupations was limited but the government provided jobs for all who wished to work. The transition to a free economy was traumatic with no system in place to meet human needs. In Lithuania, as in other post-Soviet countries, the third (NGO) sector arose to fill the gap. As a result, the number of NGOs mushroomed. Not all were able to achieve official status by completing the demanding registration process. Additionally, fund raising efforts were hampered by competition for foreign aid, lack of expertise in grants writing and poor organizational skills.

These non-governmental organizations, sometimes entirely volunteer-driven, were located throughout the country. Staff frequently worked elsewhere to support themselves and their families. Funding to pay for their work was scarce or non-existent. Initially, there was little or no collaboration between NGOs with similar goals. Volunteers were spontaneous—responding to appeals for help by friends or family members as needs arose, or by doing whatever work was in progress. The concept of giving service in a country with little previous history of volunteerism needed nurturing. Even though many NGOs were entirely staffed by volunteers, such freely-given service was not recognized.

When the Volunteer Center of Lithuania opened its doors, its mission was to connect people with organizations needing help. But first, NGOs must learn to appreciate the value and potential of volunteer service, then create an environ-

ment suitable for placing volunteers. This was no simple task. While some NGOs learned quickly to manage the volunteer program, the vast majority still operated spontaneously. In May 2000, there were more volunteers than open service slots because training was required as eligibility for receiving placements. Still, recruitment was ongoing, aimed primarily at the universities, high schools and trade schools. A growing number of retirees were also targeted for service.

The most outstanding situation, however, was a a pilot project to place volunteers in a childrens hospital! Their work involved direct patient contact — reading to children, providing ambulatory services and assisting with non-skilled care. When I asked this particular NGO where they found a hospital with a volunteer program, they replied,

"We created one!", The Volunteer Center staff had recruited a children's hospital that agreed, reluctantly, to try this radical experiment. However, the hospital stipulated they would not commit resources, staff time or money to the trial. The volunteer center would have to recruit, train, supervise and have ultimate responsibility for managing the volunteer project. After a few months later, the project gained speed and volunteers demonstrated their skill at relating successfully to the children. Enormous benefits to the children and staff were evident. The Stone Soup[2] phenomenon began to occur. Suddenly, space for the volunteers materialized. At first, a nursing staff member agreed to be available onsite for the volunteers. Later, responsibility for relating to volunteers became an official staff function. In an email on June 13, 2000, Gintaras reported, "We are still managing the hospital project. Last week we had a very nice event ... it was the opening of the Volunteer Room. Hospital staff are very happy about the volunteers." Now, he hopes more doors will open to this experiment.

To this project, I applaud the vision of NISC and Volunteer Center staff and their benefactors. The energy and resourcefulness of everyone involved have forged new avenues of growth and and a sense of community while building a strong new tradition of volunteerism in one post-Soviet nation. As professionals, we must continue to lend our expertise and support, not only to Lithuania but to all emerging democracies as they work to construct new worlds from the ashes of communism. They are demonstrating their understanding of the importance of volunteerism in creating a strong democratic society.

ENDNOTES

[1]In Lithuanian, Nevyriausybiniu Organizaciju Informacijos ir Paramos Centras

[2]Stone Soup is an old folk tale about a hungry soldier who visited a small village and asked for food. When the townspeople refused him, he found a large stone and a pot of water, started a fire and began cooking stone soup. Soon, the villagers began bringing vegetables and meat and there was enough soup to feed the village.

To apply for an AVID position, contact Freedom House, 1319 18th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, 202-298-5101.