

Vilnius Diaries

Lithuania Through the Eyes of U.S. Embassy Officials, Interns, Guests and Friends

Thursday, July 18, 2013

Fulbright Alumna Laima Vince: Why I Wrote *The Interpreter* (*Vertejas*)

The Post today is by guest-blogger, Laima Vince, author of the play *The Interpreter* (*Vertejas*) that will be performed in Vilnius, during the Baltic Pride Week on July 27th and 28th.

Laima Vince is a writer, poet, and literary translator. Twenty years after the independence movement began, Laima Vince returned to Vilnius as a Fulbright lecturer to document life in Lithuania's fledgling democracy. Over the past four years Laima has traveled around Lithuania's provinces and cities collecting oral histories. She has spoken with postwar partisan fighters; liaison women; Holocaust survivors; exiles to Siberia; German women exiled to Tajikistan; village verbal charmers and healers; young women who have been victims of human trafficking and the social workers who work towards their recovery in underground shelters; Chechen war refugees; gypsies; and gays and lesbians who are fighting for recognition and legal rights in Lithuanian society.



When people see or read *The Interpreter* many assume I am gay or bisexual. Why else would a woman write a play with two gay men in relationship as the main characters? And then, I've been attacked by gay friends who are outraged that I—a heterosexual woman and the mother of three children, and living a conventional lifestyle—could presume to know what it feels like to be in a homosexual relationship or to suffer prejudice or experience a hate crime because of my sexual orientation. My reply is that there are two human qualities that enable us to imagine ourselves in the lives of others: empathy and the power of the imagination.

The idea to write something (at the time I had not yet settled on the right genre) to address intolerance towards homosexuals in the Baltic States, and in reaction to the protests to prevent the first Baltic Pride parade from taking place in 2010, came to me that spring when I marched in the Baltic Pride parade in solidarity with a childhood friend. My friend, a Lithuanian-American, who had struggled with balancing his sexual orientation with a

Lithuanian Catholic upbringing, had flown to Vilnius all the way from Brazil to march in the first Baltic Pride parade. For him, this was catharsis. It was something he absolutely had to do. The parade had been cancelled for security reasons: Thousands of skinheads were planning to descend on the marchers and “teach them a lesson,” and indeed they did arrive in Vilnius to disrupt the parade, but were held at bay by the Lithuanian parade. At the last possible moment permission for the parade to take place was granted by President Grybauskaitė. The mood in Vilnius on the morning of the parade was tense. In the early morning hours, skinheads had broken the windows to the offices of the Tolerant Youth Organization and had tossed Molotov

Cocktails inside. Luckily, the home-made bombs did not detonate. Angry men wearing offensive t-shirts depicting stick figures engaged in anal sex flooded the streets of Vilnius. If they were the good Catholic youth, I thought, their aggression and their X-rated T-shirts were doing more damage to the tender minds of impressionable young children than the peaceful marchers in the parade. They wove their way down the Old Town's narrow cobblestone streets bearing rainbow flags and placards bearing messages of love and tolerance.

In my book about Lithuanian society two decades after independence, *The Snake in the Vodka Bottle*, I wrote the following about my experience marching in the Baltic Pride parade:

“As we passed through one police barricade, and then another, we saw that a second crowd had gathered in closer proximity, on the same side of the River Neris as the marchers. They were being held at bay behind police barricades. They were a crowd of a different sort. These were the skinheads. This crowd extended up the cement stairs and spilled out into the mall area and grassy field behind the shopping

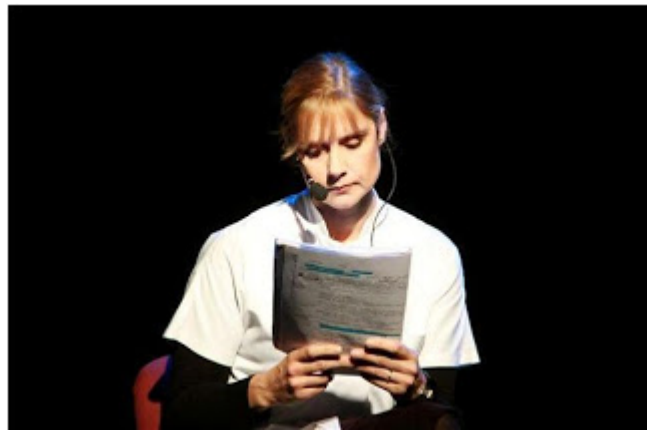


center. They were angry, unruly, and carried placards with hate slogans plastered onto them. I was saddened to see young teenagers among them—kids who looked like they came from nice families. Pacing the tops of the shopping mall on the opposite side of the road that ran along the riverbank, there were sharp shooters, guns pointed in the direction of the skinhead crowd. A helicopter flew in a circular pattern above our heads. The press had reported there would be 630 police present and 150 security personnel. Officially, 350 parade passes had been issued and 75 press passes. Adding up the numbers in my head, I counted that there were two police present for every marcher in the parade. The sea of skinheads extending up the street looked as though they could keep the police busy all afternoon.



We had arrived just as the march was beginning. The foreign dignitaries assembled at the front of the parade. Behind them various organized groups marched, beating drums, carrying whimsical banners and flags, dressed in bright colors. Most of the Lithuanian marchers were students in their late teens and early twenties. (...)

The festive mood was growing despite the helicopters swooping above our heads and the glint of the sun reflecting off of the snipers' rifles. The skinhead crowd was growing even more unruly, but were held back by the police barricade. All I could think of was the “Attack of the Orks” scene from the *Lord of the Rings*. (...) The young Lithuanian marchers behind us, dressed in bright colors and waving rainbow flags, were now playfully blowing bubbles. A love bubble, I thought. I felt good among them. I was engulfed in a love bubble. The mood was gentle, peaceful, happy, and despite the circumstances, relaxed. They had come this far and they had pulled it off. The march was happening.



The contrast between the positive, peaceful, loving attitude of the marchers and the aggressive hatred of the protesting skinheads struck a deep chord in me. That chord resonated. In the following weeks I became more curious about what it felt like to cope with that kind of prejudice and hatred on an everyday basis. I wondered about how one lived with that intense hatred and the ever-constant threat of danger. I held many

conversations with gay friends in Vilnius and abroad. When I visited my friend in Brazil and observed him working as a telephone interpreter, the idea for the play was born. I would write a play about Lithuania's contemporary problems with homophobia, gender issues, and immigrant issues as filtered through the conversations of a Lithuanian-English telephone interpreter.

As I was writing and developing the character of Julius, I knew intuitively that Julius would not have avoided returning home to Lithuania for twenty years for any other reason than a deep hurt that had not been resolved. That was when I imagined the hate crime scene that became the focal point of the play. When *The Interpreter* was performed in a staged reading in Dublin, Ireland at the Freedom Ltd. Theater Festival, a group of video artists created their rendition of how they imagined the hate crime scene. I think they saw it exactly as I saw it: A tragedy not just for the direct victim, Julius, but the indirect victim, Karolina, Julius's best friend, and a silent observer of the cruel beating. For twenty years Karolina carries the guilt of witnessing the hate crime and doing nothing to stop it and not reporting it. Her guilt is the guilt that so many of us carry in our hearts when our communities and societies tolerate intolerance and close our eyes to violence and victimization.



This is the true message of *The Interpreter*. We are all in this together.