

**It Flew Like A Shooting Star:
Glimpses from the 1965
Visit of Jean Paul Sartre and
Simone de Beauvoir**

Summary

The study is an attempt to understand what Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's visit to Lithuania in the summer of 1965 meant to the Lithuanian intellectuals. Relying on the media coverage of the event as well as the memoirs that came out later, the study aims to recreate the details of that visit. The author of the study also discusses how this visit was reflected in literature and art. Since this material is available only in Lithuanian, longer quotes from Sartre and Beauvoir's interviews, published in local press and reflected Lithuanian memoirs, are provided in the summary.

A passage about the trip to Lithuania in the Beauvoir's book *Tout compte fait* (1972, English translation: *All Said and Done*, 1974) to some extent reveals what the guests thought of their trip to Lithuania.

This visit, being of no major relevance (if at all) to Beauvoir and Sartre, was significant to the Lithuanian society: the country, occupied by the USSR in 1940 and closed to foreigners, was visited by the worldwide famous intellectuals. Lithuanian artists, mainly writers, who took part in hosting the two guests, interpreted this visit as a sign that the Lithuanian culture is unique and interesting and that despite the isolation from the West they are capable to take part in the European level intellectual discourse. Almost half a century later, the author of the study interviewed still living witnesses of this visit who were able to add scarce but significant details to their previously

published recollections. Although the study author has tried to collect as many testimonies of the visit as possible, the main goal is not to “restore the truth” (“truthful story”) but rather to discover reflections of the visit in the press, photography, memoirs.

Sartre and Beauvoir arrived in Vilnius in the evening of July 26th and left on August 3rd, 1965. The arrival date is indicated based on the information taken from the media coverage. According to the Lithuanian newspapers of that time, “the guests visited Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Palanga, Nida, Pirčiupiai, Trakai and other places in the Republic.” At the airport they were greeted with a bouquet of white marguerites. During their visit they were accompanied by their interpreter from Moscow Lena Zonina, the chairman of the Lithuanian Writers’ Union poet Eduardas Mieželaitis, who had been awarded the Lenin’s Prize in 1962, most prestigious award in the Soviet Union, for his poem *Žmogus* (*Man*), the prose writer Mykolas Sluckis and the young (merely 26 year-old) photographer Antanas Sutkus. Mykolas Sluckis kept notes of the conversation during the visit, and forty years later published its summary in Lithuanian as well as in French (*Cahiers Litvaniens*). His recollections most comprehensively reflect the content of the conversations with the guests, especially the ones with Sartre. The study’s title is derived from the phrase taken from Sluckis’s memoirs about the week-long visit of Sartre and Beauvoir: “It flew by like a shooting star that was talked about longtime afterwards, wondering what it could have been.”

However, it was the photographer Sutkus who achieved the greatest recognition during that visit: with time, his pictures increased in value; they were published numerous times and collected into a separate book in France (*Sartre*

& Beauvoir: *Cinq jours en Lituanie*, 2005). During the trip, there was a meeting organized at the Writers' Union premises where the guests met with a small group of writers and then some other writers had good fortune to have dinner with the guests in Kaunas and Palanga.

The author states that the newspapers and memoirs show that it was Sartre who impressed the contemporaries the most, not Beauvoir who was not interviewed to the same extent as Sartre and therefore did not speak much. Consequently, she came and left without really being discovered. Sartre, who less than a year before had declined the Nobel Prize, was a celebrity of the moment. The Soviet system proclaimed women as equal only on paper, but in reality women's second-class status was very obvious and that also affected Beauvoir. It is plausible that Beauvoir's reserved behavior contributed to that perception. In his notes, the writer Mykolas Sluckis mentioned a couple of times that, "she passionately supports her husband's [Sartre's – S. D.] beliefs".

The press reports gave an impression that Beauvoir was viewed primarily as Sartre's companion, his wife. The press that described the visit in 1965 was well-informed – the relationship between the two visitors was not named (except for one publication). However, the stereotypical thinking affected the memoirs wherein very often she was referred to as Sartre's wife. Since information in the Soviet society was rationed, the visit was covered in brief snippets, among them a brief piece along with a photo in the official newspapers *Tiesa*, *Komjaunimo tiesa*, Vilnius newspaper *Vakariniš naujienos*, Kaunas City newspaper *Kauno tiesa*.

A few short interviews with Sartre and Beauvoir (with both present) were published during the visit and immediately after. The August 4, 1965 issue of the daily *Tiesa* that

came out right in the wake of the visit contained one such interview which was illustrated by the drawings of the artist Erikas Varnas. In the same year, the artist made a terracotta head of Sartre and his portrait in ink, both of which are kept by the artist's family. During their stay in Vilnius, the couple was taken to the artist Augustinas Savickas' studio, and right after this visit the weekly *Literatūra ir menas* published Savickas's portraits of the two visitors. These drawings as well the portrait drawn on the same day (July 27, 1965) are currently kept in private collections.

Although Sartre's first publication in Lithuanian appeared back in 1939 (*Le mur*), he was not translated afterwards. Consequently, in 1965 Sartre was known mostly from a few publications in the Russian or Polish language. Obviously, Beauvoir was not translated either. Since their works were quite unfamiliar to the Lithuanian public, the conversations focused more on the French culture rather than on their works ("What are the favorite authors of the French reader?", "Is Mauriac popular in France?"). The author of the study draws a conclusion that Soviet people, who were painfully aware of their isolation, used every visiting Westerner to find out more about "the everyday life of people there", and thus Sartre and Beauvoir were no exception. To the daily *Tiesa's* question what impressed her the most, Beauvoir stated that, she "was touched by your country's landscape and especially by its wonderful town of Trakai, its lakes and architecture, as well as by inner unity and harmony of everything your gifted people and nature created together." To the daily's question what she, as a woman, would like to say to Lithuanian women as her farewell, Beauvoir said, that she, "hoped they will be able to preserve the equality with men provided by the state system, and of course I wish them happiness in

their lives and work.” The cultural weekly *Literatūra in menas* in its July 31 issue published an interview entitled “With Warmest Wishes”, and the picture taken on one of the main streets of Vilnius downtown. The way the visitors were introduced demonstrates an uneven treatment of the two: the weekly said that, “Last Sunday, the famous French philosopher, playwright, novelist and short story writer” Sartre and “the renowned writer” Beauvoir arrived in Vilnius (4 and 1 epithets, respectively). Beauvoir had a chance to respond to only one question in this interview, and it refers to women’s status in French culture. Beauvoir claimed that, “France has a long-established tradition of women writers. Recently many women joined the ranks of artists, cinematographers as well as film directors. In general, women continue enjoying an increasingly growing influence in social as well as cultural life. However, there are still many issues that need to be resolved in attempt to alleviate women’s situation and work.” The author of the study stresses that the Lithuanian readers of the seventies could not really assess these ideas adequately because they were unaware of the input that Beauvoir made in revealing the status of women in a patriarchal society. Without the background of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, such observations of Beauvoir did not differ at all from general declarations about women achievements and equality that were published in the press on various occasions.

The Soviet government tried to use Sartre’s visits to the Soviet Union for their own propaganda purposes, in particular by demonstrating that this country is friendly and supported by intellectuals in the Cold War atmosphere. It was for this purpose that the Moscow based peace movement was established in the events of which Sartre took part. The way a daily reporter poses his question to

Sartre already suggests an answer (“In Western countries reactionary bourgeois states that the Soviet Lithuanian nation has no independence, that Lithuania’s people are oppressed and even enslaved. What do you think about that [...]?”) Sartre diplomatically responded by saying that, “All Lithuanians I have met are free people.” He also added that, “During my visit I also encountered some Lithuanians from the USA who came to visit their ancestors’ land. It is doubtful whether they would come to an enslaved country.” Such responses prove that Sartre knew how to flirt with the Soviet regime otherwise he would not have been able to keep coming back to the USSR. It is worth noting, however, that soon he became *persona non grata* because he was spotted in a demonstration wearing a Mao badge. In 1968 after they condemned the Soviet defeat of the Prague Spring, Sartre and Beauvoir finally became Soviet enemies. Although at that time the press described the visit in short reports and interviews, later responses to the visit were more numerous. The study author examines some of these responses, exposing the expectations of Lithuanians and partly their disappointment at not seeing them come true. The best-known impressions of the visit are those by the poet and playwright Justinas Marcinkevičius which were published in his book of essays *Dienoraštis be datų* (*Diary without Dates*) in 1981. When Marcinkevičius met with Sartre and Beauvoir in Paris in 1967, he had hoped for their support in publishing translated literary works of small nations. In response to a question about the future of the literature of such nations, Sartre started talking about Joyce. For a while Marcinkevičius was under impression that Sartre did not understand his question. Yet, he finally grasped that Sartre was using Joyce as a visual aid:

he wanted to say, “Young man, start writing in English, French or Russian...” Marcinkevičius refused the suggestion finishing this episode by reiterating his determination: “I choose the Lithuanian language. I have chosen it a long time ago. I cannot comprehend how one can choose to exit his people’s destiny.” 40 years later, in the interview (*Literatūra ir menas*, March 11, 2005) Marcinkevičius brings up Sartre’s indirect advice again, and gives the rest of the story: upon his return to Lithuania, Marcinkevičius wrote the play *Mindaugas*. It was about the ruler in the Middle Ages who joined the lands of various tribes together and established a Lithuanian state. This example shows how Sartre was used in the creation of one’s own personal myth. Sluckis expressed a similar observation in his memoirs that, “Sartre, by the way, regarded literatures of small nations written in national languages with slight skepticism. This reflects the dominating tradition of France being the world’s art center.” It is plausible that Sartre was asked this question during his visit in Lithuania as well and that he expressed his skepticism, which caused major disappointment within Lithuanians. The disappointment reveals the hope of Lithuanians that Sartre, whose speeches for Algerian independence were reprinted in the Soviet press, would support the idea of cultural and even political autonomy of smaller nations of the USSR.

A much more vivid image of the visit emerges from memoirs, especially from the ones that surfaced in recent years. These memoirs show Lithuanians’ surprise at the simplicity of their guests’ attire and their unpretentious behavior (“If the gathered people were expecting to see “celebrities”, these two modest people were not “it”. It was the accompanying translator L. Zonina who was the most impressive of the three”, as Sluckis noted).

Because the guests were important, every remark they made was seen as special, worthy of remembering, and their compliments were taken not as a formal politeness but more like a validation of the significance of Lithuania. Journalist from Kaunas Marija Macijauskienė in her memoirs (*Po aukštus kalnus vaikščiojau: Memuarai*, 2002) quotes conversations that occurred during meals:

[Simone de Beauvoir:] Trakai Castle is like no other: small, intimate, narrow and yet of such tremendous suggestive power! Its location was chosen especially well.

[Jean Paul Sartre:] And now, after we met M. K. Čiurlionis, saw Trakai and Vilnius, we are under an impression that the Lithuanian nation and its people are very special; Lithuania's unique genius shines in the bouquet of European cultures as a precious stone.

At the end of dinner, J. P. Sartre added:

It would be nice to have Lithuanian cuisine in Paris!

It is not clear whether the guests really used such pompous phrases, or if they acquired such a tone through the translation from French into Russian (Zonina was the one who did the interpreting, Lithuanian was not used at all during the conversations). In the opinion of the study author, the two sides did not converse as equals, and what the French saw as a polite and non-obligating conversation, the Lithuanians took it as the acknowledgement of their unique culture; ambitious artists (such as Mieželaitis, Sluckis) who were at the peak of their career took it even further and saw it as the validation of their own importance. The author of this study poses a question as to why Lithuanians considered this visit so important. The answer to this question is that Lithuania was visited by

very few foreigners, mostly emigrants and tourists from the Socialist countries.

That summer of 1965 Lithuania, among other Baltic countries, was pompously celebrating the 25th anniversary of its incorporation into the USSR. Lithuania together with other Baltic countries had adapted to the occupation by then and started enjoying the relative peace and improving welfare. This visit increased the pride of Lithuanians. As Sluckis puts it, "Lithuania is not a provincial country, as it may seem, if intellectual people of such caliber come for a visit." Sluckis proudly continued to say that journalists kept asking him and Mieželaitis as to why Sartre and Beauvoir came to Lithuania rather than, say, to the Ukraine or Kirghizstan. And he provided the answer himself that partly it was due to the fact that Lithuania was famous at that time for its black-and white drawings, poetry, cinema, architecture and photography.

According to Sluckis, Lithuania had preserved its artistic freedom which was different from that of the other Soviet republics. This comment of Sluckis reflects the way Lithuanians used to see themselves: the belief that, along with other Baltic nations, Lithuania was the West of the USSR and therefore different from Russia and other Asian republics. However, the author of the study argues that from today's perspective it is obvious that art or other forms of culture that Lithuanians used to take such pride in was modern only in the isolated context of the USSR, but that it could have hardly competed in the open European community. In other words, Lithuanian intellectuals took Sartre and Beauvoir's visit as a mirror that confirmed the fact that "you are the fairest of them all". Lithuanians, by taking the visit as a sign of exceptional respect, ignored the fact that Sartre and Beauvoir had visited the USSR many times before and a year prior to visiting Lithuania

they went to Estonia, Crimea in 1963, as well as Georgia and Armenia, not to mention Moscow and Leningrad. The book, based on documentary texts, discusses how the Lithuanian writers perceived their hierarchies according to whether (or to what extent) they got to interact with Sartre.

The author of this study discusses the memoirs of the photographer Antanas Sutkus and his subsequent interviews focusing attention onto the history of his famous photo of Sartre in the Nida dunes: the still had both, Sartre and Beauvoir in it, but the photographer cut Beauvoir out, saying that he did not like compositions with two visible figures since, “it makes the picture very mundane. The mood changes completely. A lonely Sartre is a metaphor for philosophy.” The author contemplates that this mechanical separation of Beauvoir from Sartre can be interpreted as a metaphor of the way their work was perceived.

Although Sartre in his *Les Mots* wrote that he had been indifferent to nature since his childhood, Sutkus mentioned the philosopher’s unexpected reaction to the magnificence of the Curonian Spit dunes, “I feel as if I am standing at the entryway to heaven”, despite the wind blowing sand directly into his eyes.” Through his account of the event as well as through his photographs, Sutkus reveals Sartre in unusual circumstances. However, if we go back to the different ways the guests were treated, then Sutkus’ pictures not only complement but also distort the perception of the visit in the eyes of many Lithuanians. In the memoirs, Beauvoir always plays a secondary role, she does not seem as important or interesting as Sartre, but in the pictures both visitors almost always stay together and their unequal treatment is not apparent.

Sartre’s phrase about standing at the entryway to heaven that Sutkus overheard gave the title to Herkus

Kunčius's radio play (*At the Entryway to Heaven*, 2009). Lithuanian American writer and Communist Party member Philippe Bonosky also met with Sartre and Beauvoir during his visit to Vilnius. He described his encounter in his book *Beyond the Borders of Myth: From Vilnius to Hanoi* (1967) and used it as proof that Lithuania was thriving in the Soviet Union. However, the most interesting reflection of the Sartre and Beauvoir's visit in Lithuanian literature is found in Jurgis Kunčinas' (1949–2004) story "Waiter who Waited on Sartre: Jokūbas Švarcas Tells his Story" (1989). In his prose, Kunčinas skilfully mixes up real facts, fictional and real characters, turns everything upside down in a carnival fashion. In this particular story, Kunčinas looks at the visit of the famous philosopher and his wife through the eyes of "an insignificant person". The waiter who took care of the famous guests was also asked by the secret service to observe the behavior not only of the guests but also that of the accompanying Lithuanians. The waiter describes his side of the story with humor: his encounter with Sartre occurred when the philosopher asked him, using international gestures, where the bathroom was, and on his way back from the bathroom he patted the waiter on his shoulder. Sartre's wife (her surname is not mentioned at all in the story) is mentioned only as an episodic character. The waiter's encounter with the celebrities in the Kunčinas' story had a sorrowful ending: since he did not report on anybody to the secret service, he lost his job at that prestigious hotel; later on when working in a cheap pub he, after a drink or two, used to brag about his encounter with Sartre. Kunčinas in his story uses the visit of the famous couple to reveal the atmosphere that prevailed in Soviet Lithuania; the other characters in the story are fictional. The fact that the waiter had Sartre's

book in Lithuanian and that Sartre actually signed it (“to the kind gentleman who helped me with my dinner in Lithuania!”) also belongs to fiction.

In reality, Sartre’s first book in Lithuanian was published a year later after Sartre’s visit (*Les mots*, 1966), his *Les Séquestrés d’Altona* was staged at the State Drama Theatre in 1969; and his plays were included into various collections. And although the visit definitely prompted translations of Sartre and Beauvoir’s works into Lithuanian, her works reached Lithuania considerably later. It was only after 1990 that the more prominent works of Beauvoir such as *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1996), novels *Les belles images* (together with *Une mort très douce*, 1994) and *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (1999) were translated. It is also known that Beauvoir’s *Les belles images* was supposed to come out in 1971, but its publication was stopped due to “the events in Czechoslovakia”. In other words, Sartre and Beauvoir’s position against the USSR’s invasion to Czechoslovakia prevented the publication of Beauvoir’s book in Lithuanian.

Beauvoir in her *All Said and Done* provides an alternative description of the trip. She complains that she was surrounded by an excessive care of the hosts (“They never left us alone for a minute: once we timidly suggested that we should be allowed to stroll about the city by ourselves.”). In a museum in Kaunas, she was impressed by the “fine wooden figure of Christ”: “It is a sitting figure, crowned with thorns, and it leans upon its cheeks with its hand: it is the very picture of isolation.” It is worth adding that Lithuanians have a specific word for this wooden Christ – Rūpintojėlis (The Worrier); these sculptures were built in the cemeteries, and along the roadsides, they were kept at home to provide protection. In 1970, Mieželaitis, who accompanied the guests to the museum, published a series

of poems, *Medžio grimasos* (Grimaces of Wood). The first poem is a conversation of Sartre with Rūpintojėlis wherein the poet juxtaposes the French sophistication against the authentic natural wisdom of Rūpintojėlis.

However, it was Nida that made the biggest impression on Beauvoir even though she never mentions it by name: “Some way from Palanka¹ we saw a house where Thomas Mann stayed. (...) The position is very beautiful; but even more beautiful are the tall white dunes a few miles away.”) Beauvoir comments on her surroundings (the collective farmer workers who came to meet their American relatives; the customs of the Palanga beach; the amber fishing) in a sensitive way and is quite well informed about the situation (“At present it does not appear that the Russians are much loved in Lithuania (...)” despite a few historical and linguistic inconsistencies. Beauvoir finishes the travel episode by admiring the nature, thus further developing in French literature Lithuania’s image of being a country where wild nature still prevails (the best known work of this genre is Prosper Mérimée’s gothic short story “Lokis” (1869).

Although Lithuanians showed Sartre and Beauvoir the most beautiful parts of their country, what they really hoped for was to draw the guests’ attention to its cultural achievements. This visit provided a sense of pride for the intellectuals of Lithuania, a small country under the Soviet occupation; it gave them hope that they can be interesting to other cultures. Through the perspective of the past fifty years, this hope seems to be the most significant consequence of the French intellectuals’ visit to Lithuania in 1965.

Translated by Vilma Kurpakaitė-Berg

¹ In both, French and English, versions of *Tout compte fait* Palanga is spelled this way, and Vilnius is called Vilno.