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The Conserved East

I remember arriving at the coast of the Baltic Sea as a child and how I loved staring at the horizon. I knew that Europe was over there, and that if it weren't for the Iron Curtain of the Soviets, the shore on the other side would be clearly visible. I knew too that I would never see that world. Sad, but what could you do. I'd walk along that shore thinking I might find some thing washed up by the waves; a shoe once worn by a European – by a Swede, a Frenchman, or a German – maybe a handkerchief or a bottle, or a fragment of something, or just any old scrap of foreign garbage. I never found a thing. Strange, because these days the sea tosses out such bits of garbage every so often.

When I came to Paris for the first time I knew about the city only from books and the songs of Joe Dassin. I felt strange holding the map of the Paris underground, where all the legendary locations were marked just by underground stations: the Luxemburg Garden, Montparnasse and the Louvre... With map in hand I used to take a train and emerge like a mole in some place in Paris; I would mark it as “seen” and slip back into the underground. Some stops were disappointing. For instance, the Champs Elysées. The title was promising: fields; but there was just an ordinary street. I used to ask the passers-by where the fields were. “Here”, a woman answered, both of us standing in a noisy street.

But the greatest shock happened at the “Bastille”, where we were honestly hoping to find a fortress when we got out. “It’s not here anymore”, answered a Parisian woman. “And where is it?” “Demolished”. “When?” “In the eighteenth century”.

Back in Lithuania a friend of mine from my university years asked me whether I drank enough Calvados. Because it seemed to him that Paris was the place where everybody did nothing but ceaselessly gorge themselves on apple brandy.

Western Europe existed only in books for us then. It came to us through fragments of literature, cinema, pop culture and ideological history. The information often arrived a couple of decades or even centuries too late.

But now everything is upside-down. We consume the West fresh, and the West still requires the East conserved.

At the moment I am finishing a documentary film commissioned by German and French television. The subject of the film is quite bizarre: a local gay rights organisation has adopted a Soviet sculpture erected right in the centre of Vilnius as their symbol. The reason is that the sculpture represents two men – builders. The creator of the sculpture was quite enraged. A scandal erupted. We started to make a film. When we sent the edited material to our producers in Germany I was quite surprised by one of their comments: “In your film, Lithuanian society looks too modern; show us more ordinary people.” What does “ordinary” mean: miserable, unhappy, social outcasts begging on the streets? But we did not choose our heroes; we took those suggested by the subject matter.

It is as though someone bought a table from your shop, and says when you bring it to him: "Sorry, the one I bought was covered in dust." "But we wiped it off", you answer. "And I ordered a dusty one", your client insists.

The stereotype of tired post-communist Eastern Europe has grown deep in the minds of Western Europe, and continues to be fostered. Western people often declare their willingness to see the identity of the new European countries, but they really see only the remnants of communism. I would like to warn everybody that Lenin, Stalin and disintegrated collective farms are not our identity. This is dust, some of which still remains on the streets and in people's heads.

I have relatives in England. During Soviet times they sent us second-hand clothes. I have photographs from my childhood in which I am standing dressed in English jeans and a cap, which, at that time, meant real wealth. There are people who still send parcels to their "poor eastern European" relatives in Lithuania. When a parcel wings its way from London with worn women's tights in it, you begin to understand that our reality has changed incomparably quicker than the West's understanding of us. The worn tights were what brought us closer together, but now they separate us. A British person who sends that sort of parcel would never dare to visit us. Just like a British person who has been to Lithuania would never dare to send us worn tights.