

ACTING IN THE UNDERGROUND: Life as a Hare Krishna Devotee in the Soviet Republic of Lithuania (1979–1989)

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ABSTRACT: The article focuses on the origins and early development of the Hare Krishna community in Lithuania until 1989, when the collapse of the Soviet Union began and official registration of religious communities started. Using a historical narrative method, the authors retrace the formation of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and how the movement came to Lithuania from Moscow, Russia through Tallinn, Estonia and Riga, Latvia. The community developed in the underground under the threat of KGB repressions, where it existed until the beginning of the Sąjūdis (the Reform Movement of Lithuania), when public community activities became possible, such as public programs, book distributing and the founding of official temples. The ideas and practices of ISKCON were a form of resistance to the Soviet regime and communist ideology, and the Lithuanian ISKCON community played a significant role in the development of ISKCON throughout the Soviet Union, because after the imprisonment of Armenian activists, Lithuanian members organised the secret printing and distribution of the ISKCON literature throughout the Soviet region. The article depicts a very different ISKCON that, compared with today, lacked an organisational structure and functioned without guidance by senior foreign ISKCON members.

KEYWORDS: new religious movements (NRMs), ISKCON, Hare Krishna, Lithuania, Soviet Union, KGB.

INTRODUCTION

The article presents the research on the formation of International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and its underground activities in the Lithuanian Soviet Republic until its official registration in 1989. The aim of the work is to reveal the situation of ISKCON in Lithuania under the Soviet regime, covering the arrival of the ideas of Krishna Consciousness

in Lithuania, life as a Krishna devotee under the threat of the KGB¹ and the translation and distribution of the literature of the movement.

Due to Soviet control, most socio-cultural alternatives existed underground and religious communities could remain only if they acted in secret. A decade before the political changes in the Soviet region (1989), alternative religious movements (such as related to parapsychology, yoga, natural healing and UFOs) were experiencing repression by the authorities and only occasionally appeared in public (Kamarás 2001). During the 1970s and 1980s, a small part of the alternative religious movements in the USSR (as well as in Lithuania) was active in the underground. Examples include ISKCON (Pranskevičiūtė 2007a), groups of Tibetan Buddhism (Pranskevičiūtė 2007a), diverse circles orientated towards theosophy and parapsychology (Peškaitis and Glodenis 2000, 133) and various practices of yoga.

Generally, the attitude of Soviet authorities towards religions was negative, as atheism was the officially established ideology. Talking about Soviet Hare Krishnas, it was claimed in secret KGB documents that “[d]ogmatics of the ‘society’ (ISKCON – *auth.*) represent reactionary, ideologically harmful antimaterialistic teachings based on religious-mystic conceptions, which declare full abandonment from materialism, an ascetic life-style, the education of the masses in a spirit of mysticism, pessimism and submission to the exploitive classes” (LSA 1, 1). ISKCON was considered to be one of the widely spread international threats to the Soviet socio-political status quo which “by denying the communist ideology and the socialist state and by struggling with them seeks to withdraw its followers from participation in political and labour activities towards mysticism” (*Kommersant. Vlast’* 2009).² For example, Robert Campagnola (Harikesha Swami)³ was claimed to be an infiltrated CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) agent, specialising in ideological diversions, including subversive activities of imperialism against the socialist system and that he was sent with the mission to “destroy the country from inside” (Kassis and Kolosov 1983; Sarvabhavana das (Buniatyan) 2007, 71).⁴ Reasons such as “uncompromising fight with ideological diversions and diversionists” were considered crucial by the Soviet authorities and affected the lives of the Soviet devotees (Kassis and Kolosov 1983; LSA 1–3).

The activity of Lithuanian Hare Krishnas could be partly considered to be a form of resistance against the Soviet regime. It did not emerge as an open opposition towards the communist ideology, but its actions appeared more as an attempt to exist in a suppressive socio-cultural environment. Almost every initiative of the believers eventuated in interference by the Soviet apparatus: arrests of participants and subsequent interrogations in KGB headquarters, processes in *Komsomol* meetings and exclusion from educational institutions, work etc. Needless to say, Lithuanian (as well as Soviet) Hare Krishnas were acting closed off from the international arena and with a lack of support from the global community. Although the constant threat of KGB repressions arguably made a huge impact on the existence of the community (e.g. it created interrelationship tension among the members and cooperation of some devotees with the KGB etc.), it did not break down enthusiasm. First of all, the devotees did not intend to abandon their ideas because of the intimidation and recommendations of the KGB staff. The intimidation and argumentation – and the communist ideology in general – seemed “blunt and primitive”, compared to the philosophy of Hare Krishna. The second reason has a transcendental character. The practice of *bhakti yoga* in such hostile conditions endowed them with extraordinary spiritual experiences. Thirdly, the illegal activity of the Hare Krishnas was in itself attractive and strengthened their faith that they were walking the right path.

¹ KGB – the Committee for State Security (*Russ.*: Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti).

² Mysticism was often understood as distracting a man from real life (Kassis and Kolosov 1983).

³ The ISKCON *guru*, responsible for the region to which Eastern Europe and the USSR belonged.

⁴ Actually, the government of the Soviet Union gave this report to the United States government (R. Campagnola was its citizen) and accused it of espionage (Squarcini 2004, 19).

METHODS AND THE SCOPE OF DATA

The past events of the movement have been mainly recorded by the devotees themselves using typewritten *samizdat*⁵ magazines such as the *Hare Krishna Chronicle of the Krishna Consciousness in the USSR*, published by the Moscow devotee I. Matushkin (Indradyumna) since 1988 (CFSHK 1988, 3); bulletins of ISKCON such as *The Persecution of the Hare Krishna Movement in the USSR* (Jakupko 1986) and *Hare Krishna in the USSR* (CFSHK 1988). There were foreign magazines such as *Express Chronicle* (CFSHK 1988, 3) and *Religion in the Communist Land* (Anderson 1986). There are also unpublished manuscripts by the so-called ISKCON historians on the history of ISKCON (e.g. Piskarev 2013). The presence of ISKCON in Soviet Lithuania, as well as in the USSR, has not been thoroughly researched by scholars to date. This work contributes to the historical reconstruction of the ISKCON movement in Lithuania and the USSR, revealing ideas that have influenced the formation and spread of socio-cultural alternatives and given rise to religious groups. Specific emphasis is given to the perspectives of the Lithuanian Hare Krishna believers and to the changes that took place in Soviet society.

Fritz Schütze's (1983) semi-structured interview analysis was applied in the interpretation of in-depth life story interviews in order to reconstruct past events. This autobiographical research method focuses on how the respondents make and use stories in order to interpret their world and understand others around them. The material in the article comes mainly from interviews acquired from the personal archive of the ISKCON historian in Lithuania, David Strashunskij (Bhavananda). He interviewed almost all early community activists, 17 in total, from Kaunas, Šiauliai and Vilnius during the years 2006–2009. Several individuals were interviewed two or three times. Two of them were living in the United States and four had withdrawn from their practice. Additionally, interviews with two active members of the early community were conducted by Tadas Juras in Lithuania between 2009 and 2010. The real names of the respondents have been replaced by their spiritual names⁶ in the article. Pieces of the manuscript *The History of ISKCON in the USSR* from ISKCON historian Vladimir Piskarev (Vijitatma) were also used for this research (Piskarev 2013). Specifically, sections of the article with information pertaining Lithuania entitled "The Preachers of Absolute Truth" and "The Second Generation" from the mentioned manuscript were used. For the general history of the development of ISKCON in the USSR from the mid-1970s until about 1987, the chapters titled "Russian Mission" and "First Sprouts" were used. For information on Armenia the chapter, "The Movement of Krishna Consciousness in Armenia" was used. The authors of the article express their sincere gratitude to David Strashunskij and Vladimir Piskarev for kindly sharing the materials used in this work. Additionally, the previously secret documents of the State Security Committee of the Lithuanian SSR (KGB) on Lithuanian Hare Krishnas, which are now preserved in the Lithuanian Special Archives (LSA), were also used.⁷ Finally, photographs from the archive of Strashunskij on ISKCON events in Soviet Lithuania are presented for visual reference.

ISKCON: THE WAY TO LITHUANIA

ISKCON is rooted in the Hinduistic tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which considers God Vishnu and his incarnations, primarily Krishna, as the ultimate reality. The founder of ISKCON is Shrila Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977). He is considered to be the

⁵ Underground samizdat publications were mainly written with a typewriter and/or copied with a copy machine. They were individually produced and distributed between the late 1950s and mid-1980s.

⁶ A spiritual name is given by a spiritual teacher (*diksha guru*) in a community.

⁷ The general information on preserved documents in Lithuanian Special Archives is presented on: <http://www.archyvai.lt/en/archives/specialarchives.html>. Retrieved 22 July 2013.

initiated representative of the lineage of teachers, who continue the tradition of the 16th century reformer Mahaprabhu Caitanya (Beinorius 2002, 100–103). Since he has been a follower of Gaudiya Vaishnavism,⁸ all the ISKCON members in the West and India regard themselves as successors of this tradition. The movement from its beginning appears to be a missionary movement with an international focus. In 1965, encouraged by his teacher, Swami Prabhupada went to the United States in order to spread the ideas of Krishna Consciousness. He quite soon found supporters in the US counterculture, and that is how the first Krishna Consciousness community was established in New York on July 11, 1966.

Shrila Prabhupada formed the Governing Body Commission (GBC), which now, after his death, makes decisions for the movement. It consists of *gurus*, both appointed by him and ones that joined later, serving as spiritual leaders. Charitable activities are important and widespread among the members, and devotees have established various charitable projects such as schools and ashrams. ISKCON today is the largest active organisation in the West representing the Indian Vedic philosophy and religion, and its headquarters are in Mayapur (India, West Bengal). Currently, the number of devotees is decreasing in Western Europe and the United States but is increasing in eastern and central Europe (Pranskevičiūtė 2007).

The Krishna movement reached the USSR in 1971 when Swami Prabhupada visited Moscow in order to lecture but was refused permission to do so. Despite this, he initiated the first person into the teaching of Krishna Consciousness, the Russian Anatoli Pinyayev (known as Ananta Shanti, and later Ananda Tirtha Swami). Pinyayev spread this teaching throughout the USSR during the 1970s (Piskarev 2013a). In Lithuania, representatives of the Krishna Consciousness movement became active in the underground in 1979, but it took a decade before the first communities were registered. The Lithuanian Population Census for 2011 shows that 344 of 3,043,629 citizens (ca. 0.01 percent) affiliated themselves with the Krishna Consciousness movement.⁹ The movement in Lithuania officially consists of two active communities, situated in Kaunas and Vilnius, but there are also charity organisations such as “Hare Krishna: Food for Body and Soul” and educational associations such as the “Centre for Vedic Cultural Studies” in Vilnius and “Centre for Vedic Culture” in Kaunas.

Soviet Lithuania – The Formation of a Favourable Milieu for the Society of Hare Krishna

Beside the officially established Soviet culture, connected with the Communist Party’s aim to control all aspects of the public sphere, there was an unofficial cultural field that was very accepting of the arrival of the Hare Krishna philosophy and ideas. The “unofficial culture emerged as an autonomous field from inside Soviet society as a result of its own tensions” (Komaromi 2007, 610). The disappointment with the existing narrowness of the official communist ideology and the loss of the absolute allegiance to it led to the formation and rise of unofficial socio-cultural alternatives within the system. The underground activities, including access to alternative spiritual and esoteric ideas and practices, generally existed in parallel with, or even jointly with, the official culture and institutions (Komaromi 2007, 626; Menzel 2013).

Some of the cultural initiatives and protests that were influenced by western individualisation processes were common in this period in Lithuania. However, the individualism did not express itself at an institutional level but instead in a private personal living sphere. “Nonpolitical cultural and political activity developed simultaneously and coexisted, in varying proportions to each other at different times” (Komaromi 2007, 610). Various alternative socio-cultural

⁸ For more about Gaudiya Vaishnavism, please read *A History of Indian Philosophy* (Dasgupta 2000, 384–449).

⁹ Retrieved 22 July 2013: http://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/217110/Gyv_kalba_tikyba.pdf/1d9dac9a-3d45-4798-93f5-941fed00503f.

manifestations appeared as “signs of the formation of Lithuanian youth subculture, which was alternative to the official ideology” (Ramanauskaitė 2004, 47). There was also a cultural and political resistance against the Soviet regime: national, Catholic and human rights movements (Alekseeva 1992, 36–56), a hippie movement (Tamkutonytė 2002), the activities of hikers (Anglickienė 2003) and a movement of Ramuva (Vaicekauskas 2003).

There was “a wide range of heterodox reactions to the prescribed ‘religion of rationality’ and ‘scientific atheism’ in late Soviet Russia” where diverse groups “pursued both quests for esoteric knowledge and occult practices and explored aspects of artistic creativity, sensuality and healing” (Menzel 2013, 284). Herewith, a rise of interest in Hinduism and other eastern religious traditions and practices such as yoga, meditation, vegetarianism and diverse psycho-techniques which were supposed to help one to grow personality and develop one’s own human potential became apparent among the Soviet citizens.¹⁰

Naturally, such a socio-cultural milieu facilitated the introduction of the ideas of ISKCON to the USSR as well as to Lithuania. The benevolent soil for the ideas of Krishna Consciousness in Lithuania also influenced Mindaugas Dapkus when he started teaching artistic photography in the Kaunas Art institute of Stepas Žukus [Anirudha, Shrutadeva]. M. Dapkus practised Zen Buddhism, read and translated oriental spiritual literature and shared these ideas with his students. Students used to receive various books from him, which they copied by hand and shared with their friends (Piskarev 2013c, Part II). In 1977, he wrote a letter to the ISKCON community in the United States and asked them to send him the Bhagavad Gita. He finally received it along with an invitation to visit the community [Shrutadeva]. Circles of vegetarians and yogis also formed in other cities, usually among students of higher education [Shrutadeva, Anirudha].

The Entrance of Krishna Consciousness Ideas to Lithuania

From the existing material it can be presumed that the first and perhaps the only Lithuanian who really met A. C. Prabhupada was the filmmaker Jonas Mekas, who also created a short film about Hare Krishna.¹¹ Generally, the ISKCON ideas arrived from Moscow (Russia) to Lithuania through Tallinn (Estonia) and Riga (Latvia).¹² Initially, two individuals from Tallinn – Virya and Lilamrita – together with six Russians received the first initiations from Harikesha Swami, who visited Moscow on 25–26 May 1978 (Piskarev 2013b). Later, one of these initiated devotees, the Russian Vrindavan, moved to Tallinn and preached together with Virya and Lilamrita in local informal and bohemian circles. Soon, a group of Hare Krishna neophytes formed there. Vrindavan later moved to Riga, where an initial group of devotees formed after his preachings (Piskarev 2013c). In the autumn of 1979, devotees from Riga, together with Vrindavan, came to Šiauliai and made a program for a local group of vegetarians and yogis. When the devotees asked Anirudha if he knew of similar groups in other cities, he suggested that they visit a group of art students who were practicing yoga in Kaunas. Their practices made a huge impact on the yogis from Šiauliai and Kaunas, and they immediately started

¹⁰ The interest in eastern religions and oriental philosophy among certain individuals (e.g. philosopher Vydūnas, artist M. K. Čiurlionis etc.) and institutions for academic studies of oriental languages and cultures has been rooted in Lithuania since the 19th century (Strmiska 2013, 51–53). During the long-lasting foreign domination of Lithuania, philosophy, religions and the art of the eastern nations filled an imaginary need outside the European reality, especially for intellectuals and artists, “serving as an idealized, exoticized zone of cultural refinement and spirituality” (Strmiska 2013, 52).

¹¹ Jonas Mekas – a Lithuanian filmmaker, poet and artist, a central figure of American post-war avant-garde film community. The film on Hare Krishna celebrations is available at: <http://jonasmekasfilms.com/40/film.php?film=7>. (Date of retrieval: 10 January 2013).

¹² It is important to mention that the group of devotees from Riga directly influenced Lithuanians to join Hare Krishna practices.

practicing *bhakti yoga*¹³ themselves (Piskarev 2013c, Part II). This is how one respondent from Kaunas remembers this turning-point:

*We did yogic exercises every day at seven [o'clock] in the morning and seven in the evening; we often fasted. I was really slender... and then Jonas returned [from the first meeting with the devotees from Riga – auth.]. He said, “There is no need to do that”. “Why?” – I asked. “We need to worship... worship God. There are mantras...”*¹⁴ [Shrutadeva]

Time has affected the accuracy of the contemporary’s memories regarding how the Krishna ideas spread through the Lithuanian society, but the progression of events can be recreated. Devotees from Riga inspired students from Šiauliai and Kaunas to practise *bhakti yoga*, and individual groups of devotees formed in the aforementioned cities. All devotees in Šiauliai studied at the Faculty of Art at the Pedagogic Institute in Šiauliai. All devotees in Kaunas studied in the Kaunas Stepaš Žukas Art Institute. The latter two groups were not familiar with each other until Anirudha connected them in the spring of 1980. The groups got acquainted and began visiting each other and other Krishna groups in Latvia, Estonia and Russia.

Regular meetings of *bhaktas*¹⁵ in Kaunas started in February 1980. Devotees used to gather almost every day at the student residence of the unofficial group leader Rishikumara. They learned how to sing songs of *vaishnavas*,¹⁶ perform rituals, chant *mantra* and make *prasadam*.¹⁷ Similar activities were held in Šiauliai, where Anirudha was the biggest enthusiast. A senior devotee from Moscow, Vrindavan Prabhu, together with devotees from Riga, used to visit Lithuanians and helped teach them (Piskarev 2013d, Lithuania. Part IV). In the same year on 20 March about 20 *bhaktas* from Lithuania visited Riga devotees. The activities continued until the visit of the ISKCON *guru* Harikesha Swami in Riga in September, which ended with the arrest of Krishna participants (Anderson 1986, 316; Piskarev 2013d, Part V), and thus the reoccurring acquaintance with the KGB began. This event will be described in greater detail the section entitled *KGB Persecutions*.

LIFE AS A DEVOTEE IN SOVIET LITHUANIA

Peculiarities of the Community and Spiritual Practice

The early community of ISKCON in Lithuania functioned without any governance or organisational structure. Unlike the modern ISKCON with its clearly defined hierarchical government structure in which all responsibilities and subordinations of every level are clearly defined, the early community was an informal circle of like-minded friends who exchanged their ideas and experiences [Dhruvananda]. Later, when Perestroika rescinded previous limitations and the Lithuanian Hare Krishna community merged with the global ISKCON, some devotees went to the Swedish ISKCON centre to publish their books and were surprised: “This religion appears to be organised! I expected that it would be some elitist club of hermits” [Ramabhadrā]. The structure, inner frictions, political disagreements and stagnant

¹³ *Bhakti yoga* (‘the way of devotion’) is “one of three or four alternative routes of spiritual development (yoga) widely recognized in Indian thought. The emphasis in this mode of practice is on loving devotion and self-surrender to the deity, leading to inner transformation through grace” (Cousins 1995, 69).

¹⁴ *Mantra* – transcendental sound that purifies the mind and liberates it from all kinds of illusions.

¹⁵ *Bhakta* – a person who follows the path of love and devotion presented in *bhakti yoga*; a devotee.

¹⁶ *Vaishnava* – an adherent of Vaishnavism.

¹⁷ *Prasadam* – Lord’s grace; sanctified food offered to the deity and then distributed to the public.

philosophical doctrine of the Swedish community even resembled the Communist Party, against which the devotees had had to struggle previously [Anirudha].

The devotees remembered that they followed all the rules literally and honestly during their first years of practice. For instance, knowing that a *vaishnava* should eat only food that was prepared by other *vaishnavas* and properly offered to God, some of them even refused to eat the dishes made by their mothers [Shrutadeva]. Knowing that a *vaishnava* should wash himself every morning, they did so:

There [in Šančiai ashram – auth.] was no shower... So we used to take a bucket of cold water, go to the yard at four o'clock in the morning – winters at that time were harsh, the temperature often would be 20 degrees below zero Celsius ... we would stand outside and pour this bucket of water on our heads and backs. It seemed that this cold water was hot, because the outside temperature was much lower. In spite of that, we had to hurry up to the house; otherwise, our slippers would instantly freeze to the ground. [Dhrwananda]

Initially, ISKCON was a communal religion. Despite the absence of an organisational structure, large gatherings took place from the very beginning. The founder of ISKCON mentioned many times that the collective practices of *vaishnavas* are the most effective way to grant the practitioners the strongest experiences (Bhaktivedanta 1990, 157). It should be noted that a mystical aura surrounding all the meetings both captivated and frightened the neophytes. The impression of one individual who participated in *kirtan*¹⁸ for the first time in 1981 illustrates this well:

I came to the appointed address. It was dark, snow was falling down. I pressed the ring button near the door, and Lakshmi's brother let me in. [...] I came down to the basement that was full of incense smoke and only barely lit. Indian music was quietly played and strange people with dhoties and saris¹⁹ were all around. It made a huge impression on me. At first it was a bit uneasy, because it was the gloomy Soviet period. "I am trapped by a sect", – was my first thought. "What should I do?" But soon kirtan started. It was led by brahmin Maheshvara Prabhu from Tallinn. Devotees from Riga also participated, and other people were local [...] The sounds of kirtan mesmerised me and carried me far away. It did not last for very long, and prasadam or feast followed after. One peer devotee began to speak with me, and we exchanged telephone numbers. I left for home, but something had changed inside me during that evening. I went along the street and snow was falling down around me, but I did not see anything. Only the clangs of karatals²⁰ sounded in my ears... When I returned home, I could not sleep – all night I heard cikcik cik. In the morning, I started chanting the Hare Krishna mantra. This is how I came to this movement. [Dhrwananda]

When persecution started, large gatherings became rare and the locations and timing became even more secret and spontaneous. After the arrest at Shrutadeva, devotees began gathering in a basement on Maironis street in Kaunas, which was about 6 sq m and 1.70 m high. One of the group members rented this room from his uncle, who himself was a Jehovah's Witness, so *vaishnavas* could feel safe. The place was appropriate for such conspiratorial meetings because there were no adjacent neighbours. Nevertheless, they would always put a big sheet of foam rubber in the window frame to mute the sounds of *kirtans* [Sanatana Dharma]. Regular meetings took place there from 1981 to 1985, and many devotees say that it was the

¹⁸ *Kirtan* – chanting (mainly communal) of devotional *mantras* with the name of a deity – most often the *maha mantra* (sacred refrain): "Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare".

¹⁹ *Dhoti* – traditional Indian clothing for men used instead of trousers; *sari* – traditional long draped Indian clothing for women, fashioned from four to nine meter-long unstitched cloth.

²⁰ *Karatals* – small metal finger/hand cymbals used in *kirtan* to accompany chanting.

first ashram in Kaunas. “It is hard to understand now how it was possible that sometimes 18 persons would gather in such a small room” [Dhruvananda].

In 1985, the devotees had to abandon the basement after a routine encounter with the KGB. Following this encounter, three other devotees rented a private apartment in Aleksotas (a section of Kaunas). This place began to resemble a real ashram – the devotees regularly convened there for about a year and a half for morning programs, preparation of the *prasad* etc. However, this also ended with a sweeping confiscation of all its belongings [Dhruvananda]. Later, in 1987, the devotees settled in Šančiai (another section of Kaunas). They established a temple, started standard ISKCON programs, organised Sunday programs for guests and celebrated holidays. The devotees lived there without an actual leader (Sanatana Dharma was the one who was financially responsible). After a year and a half, local racketeers claimed they were owed money. When they were not paid, the racketeers broke all the windows. This frightened the owner, and he insisted that the devotees leave. Then *vaishnavas* bought an old house from gypsies in the centre of Kaunas in 1989, which became the first Hare Krishna temple in the former Soviet Union (Piskarev 2013e). The temple is still there.²¹

In the summertime, the devotees of Vilnius organised *kirtans* near a waterfall in the forest, close to the village of Lazdėnai.²² Later, *vaishnavas* gathered in various rented apartments. A place in Raugykla street, close to the railway station, is worth mentioning. In 1987, one family of devotees received this flat from their grandmother. At first, this family lived there with their child and at the same time accepted masses of devotees who came from all over the country (railway tickets were very cheap at that time). Later, other devotees bought this flat from them and established a temple, which is still operational today.



PHOTOGRAPH 1: The first initiation ceremony with the spiritual teacher Prabhavishnu Swami (Lazdėnai, 1989).

There were also other underground centres in Lithuania. Programs were taking place in Šiauliai, and near the end of the Perestroika period, a temple was operated in Klaipėda for

²¹ The homepage of the contemporary Kaunas “Šri Šri Nita Gaura Čandra” temple: www.nitaigauracandra.lt. Retrieved 22 July 2013.

²² This is where the first initiations in Lithuania with the spiritual teacher from the Great Britain, Prabhavishnu Swami, took place (1989).

many years. *Kirtans* were organised all over Lithuania, in both *bhakti* private and country houses.

KGB PERSECUTIONS

The majority of the devotees (~10–15 devotees from Lithuania) first became acquainted with the KGB in September of 1980 in Riga, during the public lecture of Harikesha Swami at the House of Pioneers (Anderson 1986, 316; Jakupko 1986, 9–10; Piskarev 2013d, Part V).²³ After the arrest, the spiritual teacher and his helper, Kirtiraj, were deported from the Soviet Union as *personas non gratas* (they were forbidden from coming to the country for 10 years). During this visit to Moscow, Harikesha planned to initiate about 40 devotees from the Soviet republics, including five individuals from Lithuania. Due to the deportation, initiations were postponed and were instead granted from a distance. The initiation rituals were performed by two *Brahmins* in Moscow and Riga, and the spiritual names were sent by mail (Piskarev 2013d, Part V).²⁴



PHOTOGRAPH 2: Harikesha Swami during the program in Moscow (1979–80).

The other mass arrest took place in Kaunas, at the home of Shrutadeva and Yogamaya in 1981, during a program where about 20 devotees were participating [Bhavananda]. The majority of the devotees became really frightened after the event. Their meetings became rare, and the number of participants significantly decreased to around three or four individuals, whereas earlier the meetings often included 20 devotees. Many devotees who had just joined the community were blacklisted by the KGB and were frequently interrogated and reprimanded

²³ Some members of the Hare Krishna community became acquainted with the KGB before they started practicing *bhakti yoga*. For example, the future Dhruvananda had to encounter the KGB because of his participation in the hippie movement in 1979.

²⁴ Lithuanians Anirudha and Rantideva were initiated by Ananta Shanti in Moscow on 7 October 1980; Rishikumar, Riksharaja and Devaki Devi Dasi were later initiated by Vrindavan in Riga.

for sectarian activities in institutes (Soviet higher educational institutions) [Dhruvananda]. Almost all active devotees from Šiauliai were expelled from the institute.

In 1986, a significant KGB operation was performed, during which many sweeps were made in various locations of the community all over the Republic. The KGB seized a huge amount of newly printed underground literature, a lot of paraphernalia and even personal belongings from the Kaunas temple in Aleksotas. After that, proceedings were initiated against several *bhaktas*.

The Beginning and the Strategy of the Persecutions

The people that were arrested were taken to the militia (Soviet police) offices and were registered. Later on, persecution started in their places of living. Generally, meetings with the KGB staff were similar to possible psychological suppression:

Their tactic was psychological tension. Sitting in absolute silence, he constantly knocks with the end of the pencil on a table; the sound resembles the strokes of a hammer. You are sitting terribly strained. Actually, you are so strained that you give the answer immediately. Ok... again he knocks with the end of the pencil for five minutes. Then another question and again knocking... it seems that the inquisition is going on for ages, and you cannot go to the toilet, anywhere. Finally he says: "Ok, everything is clear. I'll go to my boss, and then you will be able to go home". He goes out. Thankfully everything is over, you think. But suddenly, the door opens from the kick of a big boot and a nasty bandit tumbles into the room and begins to rail: "Oh, that is him, I shall crush you like a cockroach, I will throw you into the cellar, into the madhouse, I shall smash you up..." And then he runs away. The inquisitor returns and says: "Did you see? My boss is such a person. So quickly write everything down". Now it seems ridiculous, but then it was not like that. [Dhruvananda]

Almost all devotees who shared their memories about these days mentioned that the KGB was looking for information about other group members in order to be able to convict them. The devotees tried to speak without mentioning names and tried to evade such questions. Moreover, all devotees who had to deal with the KGB staff were forced into cooperation with them. The wide spectrum of intimidation (threats to expel them from an institute or work, false fraud or crime allegations) [Sanatana, Anirudha, Ramabhadra, Ratiprada] was usually followed by incentives to cooperate: "You know, – he says. – We need people. After graduating the institute, you will become a director. The director of a whole factory, – you understand what I am talking about? Such positions fall to our people, not casual laymen" [Sanatana Dharma]. For a devotee who was engaged in scientific activities, they promised a status of a docent (an associate professor) [Vishampayana]. In such situations, most devotees tried to avoid straight answers by asking for some time to think about it (and then win some time). Others agreed to help but explained that they did not really know how to do this, or were too afraid to do anything. Some of them confronted the harsh suppression through straightforward resistance or lies [Sanatana Dharma]. However, in all cases, all respondents mentioned that they avoided agreeing to cooperate in written form at any cost and refused to sign any documents.²⁵ It should be noted that most of the intimidation was not bluffs, and almost all original devotees had to quit their respective educational institutions (Anirudha, Ramabhadra, Ratiprada,

²⁵ Judging by the words of the contemporaries, the KGB strategy was in some cases successful, and some devotees not only agreed to be informers, but actually did provide information to the KGB. It can not be otherwise explained as to how the KGB knew in advance about future meetings of the devotees and prepared large-scale operations or how some devotees knew about arrests during a specific meeting beforehand.

Rishikumara, Devaki, Lakshmuvana etc.), and some of them lost their jobs (Vishampayana, Ratiprada, Dharmagya etc.).

The KGB claimed that the Hare Krishna organisation was harmful to health and had an antisocial character and therefore grounded its fight with ISKCON as a crucial one (LSA 1–3). According to the early members, the KGB wanted to besmirch the worshipers of Krishna, presenting them to society as antisocial people who used various drugs, organised orgies etc. For instance, four devotees (two men and two women) were forcibly hospitalised after an encounter with the militia. The official report stating that “they were found naked in the ecstasy of an orgy” [Ramabhadrā] was sent to their workplaces and educational institutions. At least one of them was expelled from her job and her institute [Ratiprada]. During interrogations, the KGB staff used to tell the devotees that they were trying to protect the members of the Hare Krishna community from the harmfulness of religious activities (*mantra*, as it supposedly damages the brain, was considered by the KGB staff to be a threat to health) [Bhavananda]. The testimony of one devotee, who explained that during his interrogation in 1981, the KGB tried to find out “who that Krishna among us was”, [Darmagya] shows that the KGB staff’s knowledge and understanding about the community (at least at the beginning) was quite limited. The KGB was mainly worried about gatherings and organised activities.

The Consequences of the KGB Repressions to the Members of the Community

The majority of the community was students, and thus the KGB tried to frighten the members and constrain the activities of the community through educational institutions. A devotee who was caught by the KGB and who refused to cooperate was processed by the board of the *Komsomol*²⁶. If this board decided (in fact, its decisions were formal, it only declared the judgment that was passed down by the KGB) to exclude a person from the list of the *Komsomol*, this person practically had no chance of staying at the institute – he was also automatically excluded from the list of students. Officially, he would be expelled because of a violation of status as a student [Anirudha]. Not only that, but anyone expelled from an institution of higher education could be recruited to the Soviet Army, where the KGB hoped to re-educate him.

As far as we know, none of the first-generation of devotees in Kaunas who studied in the Art Institute of Stepas Žukas completed their studies – as well as most devotees at the Šiauliai Institute of Pedagogy. The latter had been given an opportunity to choose between abandoning their current lifestyle or leaving the Institute:

They had me understand that I would be expelled from the Institute if I didn't reform my attitudes. They asked me if I was going to reform myself. I said that I did not see reasons why I should reform myself, I did not do anything wrong.[...] I had an inner barrier, and I could not pass it – to betray my own beliefs and say that ok, I would try to be different. And such a thing happened to all of us. [Ramabhadrā]

Most of the devotees who joined the community later succeeded in finishing their studies, but they also got strict reprimands from the *Komsomol*. However, there were still exclusions, like this young scientist who was expelled from the university even during the period of the Perestroika for the translation of an article in the community magazine, *The Desire Tree*:

“Write the application [for resignation – auth.]”, – said the dean the next day [after the sweep of the KGB at the respondent's flat – auth.] I came to work. I was already pissed off: “I won't write anything. I am a young specialist, and I have three years of ‘warranty’”. [...] in those

²⁶ *Komsomol* – youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In Lithuania, the local term *Komjaunimas* was used.

days, young specialists couldn't be expelled for three years after graduation. So I conducted this science, counted the secondary structures of proteins. My chief was satisfied. But after one and a half years, when the three-year term was finished, everyone gathered – 11 docents and professors. "You are not doing well", – they said, "There are no results". But they said that only at the beginning; most of the time they were saying that I was a CIA agent, and other crap. [...] "So there are two options," – they said, – "you go to Kairėnai botanical gardens and work with a spade, or leave the university". Dignity didn't allow me to go and dig soil, so I left. At that time, I couldn't find a better job, so I returned to Šiauliai and became a yardman. [...] That is how I finished my career. [Vishampayana]

Until the times of the Sajūdis or even with the registration of the community, the devotees had problems in their work places. For example, one devotee was expelled from his job in a big shipbuilding corporation during the uplift of the Sajūdis²⁷ [Dharmagya].

Apparently, the KGB had continuously looked for the leaders of the community in order to put them in jail or in psychiatric hospitals – like they did in Russia and Armenia (CFSHK 1988, 8–28). In Lithuania – as well as in other Soviet republics – more resolute KGB actions began in 1983. Lakshmuva, accused of being a leader of the Kaunas group, was directly brought from his home to a psychiatric hospital. "Full treatment", – such was the instruction given to a senior doctor, which meant piles of psychotropic drugs [Bhavananda]. He was treated like this for two months, but if not for the benevolence of the senior doctor, these procedures could have continued for an unlimited time.

The senior doctor tried to help, but the nurses were recruited by the KGB. They injected drugs without even asking the senior doctor. "They'll make a vegetable from you, if I don't help. They'll damage your brain and health". Finally, the doctor wrote that the course was finished, but the next day the nurses injected again. "He wrote that the course is over; I don't need any more!" "We don't care what he has written", – they said. "You'll get what you have to get", – and again, drugs were injected, and he felt terrible pains.... [Bhavananda]

Other members of the community who were hospitalised in such types of institutions (the "diagnosis" of psychic illness was often termed "pathologic development of personality" (LSA 2, 18) did not endure such challenges. In fact, only three other devotees were hospitalised, and all of them had actively worked on the translation and distribution of Hare Krishna literature. Sanaka Kumara spent six months in a psychiatric hospital where the staff was much gentler, and he just had to spit the psychotropic tablets into the toilet. Sanatana Dharma was hospitalised in 1988, but he was also lucky enough to get a benevolent doctor who did not prescribe him any medication and let other devotees visit him frequently. He and another devotee, Ramabhadra, were hospitalised because they did not want to go into the Soviet Army.

In fact, all male devotees who were expelled from institutions of higher education and who had no military ranks had to choose between a psychiatric hospital and the Army. The devotees tried to evade being recruited to the Army. For instance, one *bhakta* registered himself in Leninabad, a city in Tajikistan, Soviet Republic, so that the call-up papers would go there. This ploy gained him a lot of time, but he finally got a call-up during the first public *harinama*²⁸ in Vilnius. One of the respondents was forced into the Army, but he succeeded in following the principles of Krishna Consciousness and continued with his practice after returning home.

²⁷ He was also a member of the Sajūdis.

²⁸ *Harinama* – congregational chanting of devotional names publicly.

Due to his higher education, he succeeded in getting a good position in the Army, which prevented him from additional difficulties.

The KGB in Lithuania ruined the future of many devotees, took away their career possibilities and exhausted them with constant tension and interrogations. Nevertheless, the KGB repression in Lithuania was only moderate when compared to other Soviet Republics. Usually, the KGB interfered with the registration of members and had a small talk with them [Anirudha].²⁹

The Translation and Distribution of Group Literature

The distribution of the community books and press in Lithuania began with the underground *samizdat* magazine *The Desire Tree* (Lt.: *Troškimų medis*), published by Ramabhadrā from 1983–1984. It contained various translated articles (mainly criticising scientific theories such as evolution and the big bang theory) from the magazine *Back to Godhead* and ISKCON “scientists”³⁰ were featured. Later, from 1985 on, he printed it in massive quantities in Yerevan (Armenia).

The devotees involved in the distribution of the books recounted that there was an immense interest in the 1990s: people knew that this literature was forbidden, and this attracted attention [Bhavananda]. When street distribution began in 1984–1985, the devotees tried to avoid encounters with the KGB staff mainly by approaching people who looked intelligent or liberal, for example, those wearing a beard or long hair. They offered them the recently published magazine *The Desire Tree* and small books such as the first Lithuanian ISKCON book *Chant and Be Happy* [Sanātana Dharma].



PHOTOGRAPH 3: The distribution of the ISKCON literature during harinamas (Palanga, 1987).

In 1984, the printing and distributing of A. C. Bhaktivedanta books began on a large scale in Armenia (CFSHK 1988, 21–22; Sarvabhavana das [Buniatyan] 2007, 81–102; Piskarev 2013f).

²⁹ In order to learn more about the life of *vaishnavas* and KGB repression in other Soviet republics (especially in Russia, Armenia and Georgia) refer to Anderson 1986, 316–317; Jakupko 1986; CFSHK 1988, 13–27; Sarvabhavana das (Buniatyan) 2007.

³⁰ I.e. the ISKCON members with academic education who wrote on scientific topics.

After hearing about the mission of his *guru* to distribute these books,³¹ a Lithuanian named Sanaka Kumara started visiting Yerevan. Upon his return, he would bring about 100 books in Russian and distribute them in Lithuania. Despite the attempts of the local Armenian devotees to operate unnoticed, the KGB soon found out about this practice and put a number of activists in jail (CFSHK 1988, 20–21; Sarvabhavana das [Buniatyan] 2007, 71–80; Piskarev 2013f). Then, Sanaka Kumara took the initiative and organised the distribution of already-printed books that remained undiscovered (about 2,000 copies of the Bhagavad Gita). Soon, another Lithuanian, Sanatana Dharma, found a place in Kaunas where they began to print books in vast quantities,³² and Sanaka Kumara started to lead the whole Soviet division of the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT) Publishing Company³³ in book distribution activities (Piskarev 2013e, Part II).

Needless to say, the books were printed illegally after negotiations with, and bribes were given to, the heads of publishing houses. “There were capital consignments there. We and they [the heads – *auth.*] were astonished and laughed at how we were not revealed and arrested. What were we doing! The whole department used to work all night long”, – remembers Sanatana Dharma [Sanatana Dharma]. These books were later distributed via private cars to the biggest cities in the Soviet Union – Leningrad (currently: Saint Petersburg), Moscow, Kiev, Minsk and Tallinn – where local devotees would continue to disseminate them.

The BBT mission was not only to print the books but also to translate them into local languages. Thus, in Lithuania, a BBT department was established and a team of devotees worked on translating and editing the books. When the Perestroika reached its peak and it became possible to travel to foreign countries in 1989, all BBT workers in the Soviet Union went to Sweden and worked in publishing there. The first edition of the Lithuanian version of the Bhagavad Gita was published in Sweden.

It is noteworthy that in 1991–1992, the centre of the Soviet BBT was relocated to Druskininkai. All Soviet BBT workers as well as many foreign devotees decided to go there. The centre remained open until 1995 and then was again relocated to Sochi (Russia) due to the established visa restrictions for the citizens of former Soviet Union countries.

The Way to Legalisation and to the International Organisation

The Hare Krishna community emerged from the underground during the first organised *harinamas* in Vilnius, Kaunas and Palanga in the summer of 1987. Soon after the Indian festival in Moscow,³⁴ the first *harinama* in Vilnius was organised in Cathedral Square. According to the devotees, the militia and the KGB staff were walking around but did not know how to react. Inspired by this success, the next day the devotees organised *harinama* in Kaunas on the Avenue of Freedom. This time they were literally carried away by militia after 10–15 minutes. Despite that, *harinama* in Palanga was organised a few days later.³⁵ About 20–30 devotees participated in every one of these first *harinamas*.

³¹ The motivation for an underground distribution of the Hare Krishna literature, despite being possibly related to forbidden activities and consequences, among the Soviet devotees was initially based on the claim of their *guru* that the distribution of this sacred literature is a basic activity of a devotee and “the only aim of which he is obliged to think constantly” (Sarvabhavana das [Buniatyan] 2007, 71), where “even a small quantity of Srila Prabhupada’s books can change the demoniac face of society” (CFSHK 1988, 21).

³² According to Sanatana Dharma, they printed more than 100,000 copies of the Bhagavad Gita from 1986–1989 along with other books that were smaller in size, but not in scope.

³³ Bhaktivedanta Book Trust – International Publishing House, founded by Srila Prabhupada, that published books on the Vaishnava philosophy and culture (first of all the works of Srila Prabhupada himself).

³⁴ During this festival, devotees sang Hare Krishna *mantra* and were not arrested – the militia did not take any measures because a lot of foreigners were in the city at the time.

³⁵ Only two *harinamas* in Kaunas and Vilnius were documented by the KGB (LSA 3–43 op).



PHOTOGRAPH 4: One of the first public *harinamas* in Lithuania (Vilnius, by the monument to A. S. Pushkin).



PHOTOGRAPH 5: One of the first public *harinamas* in Kaunas.

Although in 1988 and 1989 about 10 members were still being interrogated, the community started to apply for an official registration. The first applications were rejected, for reasons related to the KBG's accusation of the harm to health and antisocial character of the Hare Krishna organisation (LSA 3–43 op). The community was officially registered in Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda in 1989. In the same year, a big group of the Soviet Union devotees received permission to visit India. Every republic had to make a list of the 10 most meritorious

vaishnavas for this pilgrimage.³⁶ This event was very important to the community because the Soviet *vaishnavas* had received an opportunity to visit the main sacred places of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, to communicate with devotees from Western countries and also meet the Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi.

CONCLUSIONS

In Soviet Lithuania (as well as in the Soviet Union), ISKCON appeared as a manifestation of underground socio-cultural alternatives. Hare Krishna philosophy and ideas arrived and were integrated into the existing unofficial cultural field acting beside the officially established Soviet culture, which was connected with the Communist Party's aim to control all aspects of the public sphere. The ideas of Krishna Consciousness in Lithuania came from Moscow through Tallinn and Riga in 1979 and spread among students in Šiauliai who were interested in yoga and soon also to similar circles in Kaunas and Vilnius. Unlike the current community, ISKCON in Lithuania existed without any organisational structure until 1989. Earlier, it was an informal circle of friends who exchanged ideas and experiences. Until the declaration of Lithuanian Independence, Lithuanian *vaishnavas* were closely associated with the devotees of the other Soviet republics.

The Krishna community existed under the threat of the repressive structures of the KGB, one of the main supporters of the communist regime, which persecuted Lithuanian citizens because of their worldview, opposition to the occupation or for belonging to ethnic, national, religious, social or political groups. The Krishna group activities were a form of resistance against the Soviet regime and communist ideology, and they were constantly suppressed from 1980 until 1989. Although the KGB persecutions were not as severe as in some other Soviet republics such as Russia, Armenia and Georgia, at least 10 community members were expelled from higher educational institutions from 1980–1989. Many of them got into trouble at their jobs or were even fired, and a few members were forcibly hospitalised in psychiatric hospitals. Lithuanian *vaishnavas* played an important role in the illegal printing and distribution of underground literature for the community. After the imprisonment of Armenian activists, members printed substantial amounts of books in Kaunas and later distributed them all over the Soviet Union.

The Krishna communities of Vilnius and Kaunas were officially registered in 1989, and the Soviet authorities gave permission in the same year for the group of *vaishnavas* to carry out a sacred pilgrimage to India.

³⁶ An interesting fact is that the first devotees in the Soviet Union were not included in this list because they were still in prison in distant regions of the country.

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