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Ericka Arvidson Raber

In May 2013 I had the opportunity to travel to Russia and the Baltics on behalf of the University of Iowa (UI) Libraries. The trip was funded in part by UI International Programs, with additional funding provided by the UI Libraries' administration. The primary purpose of the trip was to acquire materials written by former participants in the International Writing Program. My itinerary took me to Moscow for several days, then to the Baltic capital cities Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius.

The International Writing Program (IWP) is a fall residency program that brings together established and emerging creative writers from around the world. Poets, fiction writers, dramatists, and non-fiction writers are given time to pursue their literary projects in an environment that is conducive to those efforts. Writers are also provided with opportunities to participate in American university life, to present their work, and to travel. More information about the IWP can be found at its website, <http://iwpiowa.edu/>.

In 2008, the UI Libraries began to collect works of IWP writers actively. The IWP program recently celebrated its 45th year, and over 1400 writers from more than 140 countries have been in residence with the program. The Libraries' collection project is both retrospective and ongoing, which makes it extensive and challenging. An entire article could be devoted to a discussion of the scope and management of the project. For the purposes of my spring trip, the primary emphasis was to identify and locate monographs written in either English or the vernacular languages.

The UI Libraries has an established approval plan for works written by IWP authors from selected countries, including those I visited, so recently published works typically find their way to the UI Libraries without difficulty. This trip was an opportunity to locate harder to identify materials and to learn from the writers themselves about their current projects. I was also able to visit several bookstores and found a number of works to add to our collection. The bulk of my time was spent meeting with IWP authors and juggling the logistics of making those meetings happen. Many of the authors donated one or more books to the Libraries. A couple of the authors are publishers, and I was able to purchase materials written by them and other IWP authors. As a result of the

trip, the UI Libraries made valuable, lasting connections with the authors, and collected unique items that, no doubt, would not have been possible to acquire otherwise.

Moscow

I arrived at Sheremet'ev Airport after 8:00 p.m. on Friday, May 3. It was my first time back in Moscow since a brief visit in 1996, when I was traveling back to the United States with ten high school students after a three-week visit to Nizhnyi Novgorod. I was exhausted, and although I knew about the inexpensive train to Belorusskii vokzal [Belorusskii train station], I didn't want to navigate getting to my hotel from the train station late at night. Fortunately, I found an eager taxi driver who agreed to my suggested fare. En route, the taxi ride gave me a great above-ground view of how the city has changed, with its shiny, tall business centers in almost every direction. I also had a chance to practice my Russian, and I was reassured that it would be more than serviceable for the trip.

My hotel was in a very good location, on the ring road of the metro, so it was very easy to move around. I had begun to question if it might have been better to plan my travel well after the holidays; with Easter Sunday the next day, followed shortly afterwards by Victory Day, a few writers had not been able to tell me when they would be in town. I had a very loose schedule with no specific appointments, just phone numbers and ranges of dates to call and meet with the writers who had responded to my e-mails. Although about 40 writers from Russia have participated in the IWP, of those who live in Moscow, I was able to connect with only eight before my departure. Some IWP alumni are less accessible than others; Viktor Pelevin's website cautions: "S Viktorom Olegovichem Pelevinyam sviazat'sia nevozmozhno" [It is impossible to get in touch with Viktor Olegovich Pelevin]. Although, no doubt, it is not impossible to get in touch with him, it did not work out for me on this trip.

I spent my first full day in Moscow dealing with such practical matters as activating my borrowed phone, making calls, finding alternatives to the hotel's \$30 breakfast and over-\$30-per-day wireless connection, and finding shipping locations for DHL, UPS, etc. With phone kiosks in so many locations, obtaining a SIM card to activate my phone was by far one of the easiest tasks; it was also inexpensive and essential. I used the phone several times a day to connect with writers to schedule or reschedule meetings, and to meet up once I had arrived at a busy agreed-upon location. For groceries, I was first directed to the upscale grocery chain Azbuka-vkusa, but I soon found a neighborhood supermarket (Universam) that was a bit more like what I had in mind. The free wireless connection in the hotel's lobby worked well enough for my needs; it was a little awkward at times, but clearly I was not the only guest taking advantage of this option. The hotel offered DHL shipping services, which is what I finally used on my

last day in Moscow; it was expensive, but at that point in my stay, the time, additional expense, and the possibility of unknown variables in working with another shipping service seemed less appealing.

I started the week slowly on Sunday, with just one meeting with Mark Shatunovskii (IWP '93). We met at a café near my hotel. Mark donated a couple of books to the UI Libraries. Mark was one of a few writers who escaped without being photographed; it was a challenge for me to remember to document each of the meetings with a snapshot. Fortunately, those whom I had missed were kind enough to e-mail a photo upon my return.

Sunday evening was free for some cultural excursions. On my way back to the hotel, I stopped in a neighborhood church to mark Orthodox Easter; many locals had marched in the midnight service that morning, but I hadn't considered giving up valuable sleep time. That evening, playwright Sergei Task (IWP '94) arranged tickets to *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* at the new Fomenko Theater. It was a magical performance, in which the director used computer-generated effects to create images of Alice swimming in the middle of the stage and elephants marching in the sky.

The following Thursday (Victory Day, May 9) was another day for cultural programming. One of the few activities for a visitor on Victory Day is to watch the massive demonstration of military might. After the parade, I went out to Kolomenskoe Estate, a historical and architectural museum and reserve southeast from downtown. It was a beautiful, warm and cloudless day, and I arrived at the Ascension Church (1532) in time to hear an impressive display of bell ringing from the neighboring tower.

My meeting with Mikhail Butov (IWP '06) yielded contacts with a few more authors. Over the course of the rest of the week, I met with 10 more writers in various locations—coffee shops, the hotel lobby, and occasionally in the authors' homes. One of my most memorable visits was at the home of Maiia Kucherskaia (IWP '08), where we ate a gourmet meal prepared by Maiia's husband, Sasha, and talked at length about religion and politics. Although modest about her success, Maiia is receiving accolades, including the long list for the Russian Booker Prize for her recent novel *Tëtia motia* [Auntie Motia]. Maiia hopes to travel to the United States again soon.

Another memorable meeting was at the home of Dmitrii Kuz'min (IWP '04). Dmitrii founded the publishing house ARGO-RISK, which celebrated twenty years this spring. Over tea and sweets in the kitchen, we discussed the humanities crisis within the universities, the monopoly of big publishers, and Putin's decency laws. The floors of Dmitrii's apartment were covered with tall stacks of publishing stock. With so many titles to choose from, I worked to select the most meaningful items for our collection

(examples in Figure 1). I purchased over 100 titles from ARGO-RISK for the UI Libraries, selecting works of other IWP authors and complete series when possible.



FIGURE 1
Books by ARGO-RISK Publishing, Dmitrii Kuz'min (IWP '04).

While in Moscow, I also visited with IWP alumni Kseniia Dragunskaiia ('04), Ol'ga Mukhina ('98), Gleb Shul'piakov ('99), Aleksei Varlamov ('97), Andrei Bychkov ('01), Kseniia Golubovich ('06), and Alisa Ganieva ('13).

I managed to visit just a few bookstores during my Moscow stay: Biblioglobus, Falanster, and a couple of big chain stores on or near Tverskaia Street. I bought a few books that I thought might not come through our approval plans. Unfortunately, time did not allow me to visit the highly recommended bookstores Bilingua Café or Tsiolkovskii.

While preparing for the trip, I had visions of using my iPad to locate quickly all things related to IWP authors and the UI Libraries' collections, but I also knew that ink on paper would be useful. In practice, the hardcopy lists of writers and their works were all

I needed for my discussions with authors, publishers, and clerks at book stores. My iPad turned out to be indispensable for contacting writers via e-mail and Facebook, and of course, it helped me stay connected to work and family back home. I also used it for the creation of shipment lists, which saved me considerable time.

Estonia

I traveled by overnight train to Tallinn in a typical Soviet-style four-person compartment. It was an uncomfortably warm and fitful sleep. My compartment mates and I were awakened for the 4:00 a.m. border crossing check, which starred an adorable, highly focused black cocker spaniel. The train arrived around 8:00 a.m., and I took a short taxi ride to the hostel on a cobblestone street within the old town walls. Although my phone should have functioned within the Baltic States, I could not figure out how to make it work. Fortunately, it was inexpensive and easy to buy another SIM card at the local shopping center.

The three IWP alumni from Estonia, Indrek Tart ('92), Karl Martin Sinijärv ('95), and Doris Kareva ('06), all kindly agreed to meet with me. Indrek and Doris treated me to lunch at an Estonian café. Indrek has left literary pursuits to continue his work in the social sciences. He donated his Basic Human Values in Estonia and Baltic Sea Countries to the Libraries. With the authors' visits so neatly coordinated within the walking center of Tallinn, I had more time to visit bookstores, and I found some of Doris's recent and older titles in a few shops.

Karl Martin is Chair of the Estonian Writers' Union, and we met in his office in the middle of old town. Karl Martin had some unique items to offer to the collection, including some books in the form of playing cards and Eesti haiku [Estonian haiku], written in 4-6-4 syllabic pattern. Later during my stay, I was also able to locate his Poissmehe kokaraamat [The bachelor's cookbook]. (See Figure 2.)



FIGURE 2

Two books published as decks of cards (upper middle),
 Eesti haiku [Estonian haiku], with 4-6-4 syllables (lower left),
 and Poissmehe kokaraamat [The bachelor's cookbook] (lower right).
 Karl Martin Sinijärv (IWP '95).

My most notable cultural activity in Tallinn was touring the Kiek in de Kōk [Peep into the Kitchen] tower and the bastion tunnels below, which were used as bomb shelters during World War II. I also biked out to the Baltic Sea, which proved to be more challenging than my directions indicated. Tallinn is a charming medieval city with a fascinating history and welcoming people.

At the end of my stay in Tallinn, I knew that I needed to ship more books to the United States in order to lighten my load, especially with my upcoming bus trip to Riga. With address in hand, I followed directions to what should have been a UPS location, but the workers informed me that the building was being remodeled to be a day care. Outside the old town walls, the locals were less likely to have a fluent command of English. After some struggles to communicate my problem in English, a Russian-speaking worker

came to my aid and directed me to the nearest post office. The shipping rate turned out to be reasonable, and the package arrived home before I did.

Latvia

Sickness delayed me for a day in Tallinn, and it likely caused me to miss meeting with the writer Gundega Repše (IWP '96) in Riga. Attempts to meet with her publisher also failed, so I was forced to settle with the books I could find in local stores. Fortunately, I found several of her books that we did not have.

I took the Lux Express bus to Riga, and I must say that this was by far the most enjoyable bus ride I have ever experienced (warm beverages, clean bathroom, personal TV with recent movie selections, reclining chairs with foot rests, and great customer service). I stayed at a lovely boutique hotel filled with local art. Once again, I was within walking distance of the downtown, so I did not need to rely on transportation.

There had been two writers from Latvia in the IWP at the time of my trip. The second writer, Anna Auziņa, (IWP '96) met with me and updated me on her life. She was planning to finish her MA in literary theory in June, and she's working on her fourth book of poetry. She was eager to hear who might be among the IWP class of '13, and in retrospect, I wonder if she may have had some early information that the Latvian writer Tom Crosshill had been invited for the fall. Anna also guided me to a couple of book stores and to the Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka [National Library of Latvia], where I was able to take a look at her second book of poetry, now out of print.

One required stop during my visit to Riga was the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, dedicated to the history of Latvia's occupation by Nazi Germany and the USSR, 1940–1991. The exhibits were moving tributes to the lives of individuals, often nameless, who suffered greatly at the hands of those who used Latvia as their battleground. A second less intense cultural stop was St. Peter's Church (1209); the view from the steeple provided a panorama of the gorgeous city below along the Daugava River. Of course, a visit to Riga would not be complete without a trip to Alberta Street to see the Art Nouveau architecture. With its walkable parks, incredible art and architecture, and excellent food, Riga won me over.

Lithuania

Another bus ride took me to my final destination, Vilnius. There were no taxis available from the station, so I followed directions provided in Russian for public transportation. Relying on the kindness of strangers, I found the hotel without much difficulty, although later it became clear that my walking route could have been more direct.

Lithuania is home to seven IWP writers, most of whom live in Vilnius. Liutauras Degėsys (IWP '96), head of the Department of Philosophy at the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, was an attentive guide and considerate host. Liutauras arranged a meeting with Marius Burokas (IWP '01) and Donatas Petrošius, Coordinator of International Programs for the Lithuanian Writers' Union. We met in the Lithuanian Writers' Union, a magnificent building that seems to have been left unharmed by the Soviet era. The massive wooden staircase, paneled walls, and gilded dragonhead sconces make an immediate stately impression. I was able to find a couple items at the Writers' Union bookstore, tucked away in a corner of the building, impossible to locate without assistance.

My visit to Vilnius coincided with the International Poetry Festival: Spring of Poetry. This annual festival features literary events throughout the city, and I was fortunate to be able to attend an evening's poetry reading that included a beautiful violin performance requiring no translation.

Marius Ivaškevičius (IWP '09) was out of the country promoting his upcoming film *Santa*, but I was able to meet briefly with his wife, Gražina Michnevičiūtė, who kindly donated a few titles to the library.

The most productive meeting in Vilnius in terms of adding works to the collection was with Tomas Butkus (IWP '02). We met at the bell tower in Cathedral Square and walked to Knygynas eureka! [Bookstore eureka!] nearby, where I later purchased a few books for the collection. Tomas had traveled from Klaipėda, and he brought a couple of boxes of items, mostly books, for me to consider for purchase. An architect by training, Tomas is on the faculty for a newly created program in urban design and architecture at Klaipėda University. Tomas is also a book designer, the publisher and editor-in-chief for Vario Burnos, and a musician with the group Concrete Bunnies, which is known for creating soundscapes for poetry. I bought about a dozen books and CDs (examples in Figure 3), including some artist's books, and a book Tomas designed, which was written by Tomaž Šalamun (IWP '71) from Slovenia.

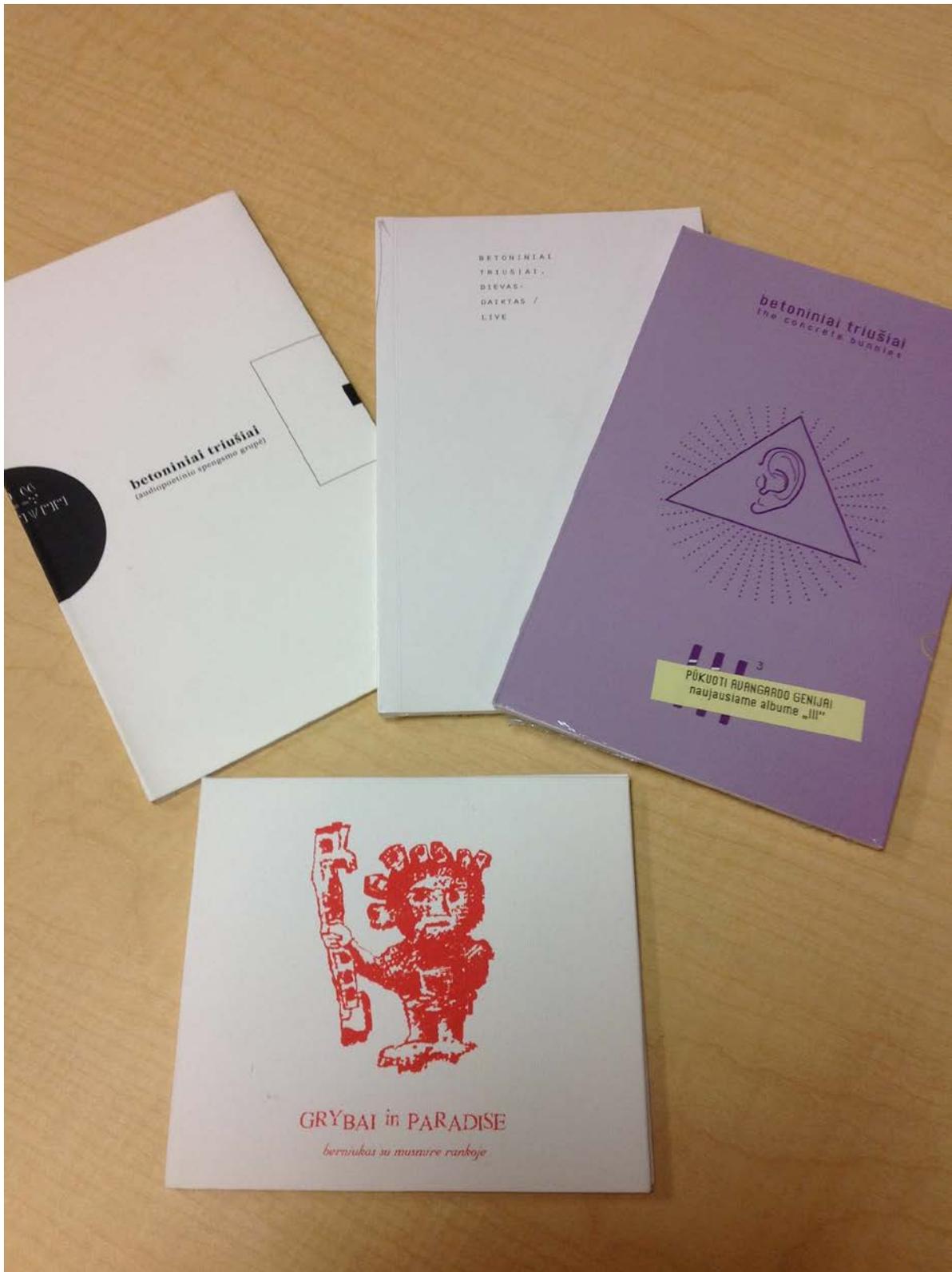


FIGURE 3
CDs with music by Betoniniai triušiai [Concrete Bunnies], Tomas Butkus (IWP '02).

While in Vilnius, I was able to meet for dinner with Anna Kurganova from MIPP International. Anna frequently travels to the MIPP office in Vilnius from her home in Belarus, and she had arranged to be in town during my visit. MIPP has been handling our approval plan for IWP materials for the past few years, and we discussed the plan as well as other potential acquisitions that might be of interest to the UI Libraries.

On the last afternoon of my stay, I was able to visit Gediminas' Tower (1409), the only remaining tower of the Upper Castle in Vilnius, which affords an amazing view of the city. I also visited St. Peter and St. Paul's Church, with its magnificent and brilliant white stucco moldings adorning the walls and ceilings throughout the massive interior.

I flew out of Vilnius through Warsaw, then on to Chicago, and back to Iowa in time for the three-day Memorial Day weekend. I spent the next few weeks catching up with work that I had missed and digging out from the mountain of receipts and paperwork generated from the trip.

Since returning, I have followed up with the writers I visited, several of whom expressed an interest in submitting works to Iowa Research Online (IRO), The University of Iowa's institutional repository. The UI Libraries created a series within IRO for IWP writers a few years ago, but until now, interest in submitting materials has been limited. Resulting from trip contacts and follow-up research, our staff has processed more than a dozen titles of IWP writers and their English translators for inclusion in IRO: http://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_alumni/. This was a very welcome and unexpected benefit resulting from the trip.

I also owe a note of thanks to Zina Somova at East View Information Services, and Alexey Trivaylo at IVIS in Moscow, who were both very helpful with pre-trip arrangements. Unfortunately, I was not able to visit the IVIS office in Moscow; I will have to save that for my next visit.

Overall, this trip was very productive for the UI Libraries, adding well over 100 books and other items to our IWP collection. Many of the items would have been difficult, if not impossible, to identify and locate without direct communication with the authors and publishers themselves. This was also an ambassador trip of sorts, an outreach to the writers on behalf of the University of Iowa and the UI Libraries to remind them that we care about their works, and that we want to preserve their writing for future generations.