

Laimonas Briedis

VILNIUS

City of Strangers



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1. Frontispiece from *La cosmographie universelle*, 1556.

PROLOGUE:

Departures

The map
pinned on the wall,
a name underlined,
the undiscovered city,
the roads to it
charted.

“Precaution,” Johannes Bobrowski

One could say that all of Europe must converge in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, for the city stands at the crossroads of the continent. In 1989, scientists at the French National Geographical Institute located the centre of Europe at 54°54' North and 25°19' East. At this point, straight lines stretching from the cartographical extremes of Europe – Spitsbergen Island in the north, the Canary Islands in the south, the Azores in the west and the Arctic Urals in the east – meet at the unremarkable mound of Bernotai, some twenty-five kilometres north of Vilnius. The mathematical computation of Europe's focal point coincided with the disintegration of the Cold War continental divisions, but it was overshadowed by revolutionary political and social changes following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-establishment of Lithuanian independence in 1990. For more than a decade, the centre-point of Europe was a hidden secret of Vilnius. Its symbolic profile increased only on the day of Lithuania's accession into the European Union. On May 1, 2004, a white granite column, crowned with a wreath of stars – the symbol of the European Union – was ceremoniously dedicated on the site.

Europe is not actually a continent, but part of the much larger geographical entity called Eurasia. The name of Europe comes from the ancient Greeks, who gave it the luscious body of a young daughter of the king of Tyre. The princess Europa fell prey to the wiles of the Olympian gods: she was seduced and then abducted by Zeus, who, for the purpose of the tryst, had transformed himself into a dazzling white bull. On his strong bovine back, Zeus took startled Europa across the sea from her native shores in Asia Minor to Crete, where, after voluptuous love making, he made her the queen of the island. The

geographical separation between Europe and Asia was born from this legend of divine transgression. While the myth gave Europe its identity, history (or, rather, a particular plotting and reading of it) bestowed it with specific geographical features. Because of the lack of any detectable physical boundaries, the delineation of Europe as a separate continent has evolved primarily as an idea of geographical distinctiveness. The map of Europe, then, speaks more about the powers of historical imagination than any force of nature. Accordingly, a search for the centre of Europe is first and foremost a journey through the mindset of Europe.

The quest for the centre always starts with the demarcation of peripheries, for no middle point can be found without first identifying and then measuring the margins. Borders uphold the centre, they give it a sense of gravity, keep it alive. A centre without borders collapses and becomes a contested space. In other words, it turns into frontier. Finding the cartographical centre of Europe faces another challenge, since it requires measuring the exact spatial parameters of an idea. Distilling a geographical vision into a series of numbers and giving it a mathematical expression turns this project into a kabbalistic interpretation of the universe. There is, however, no secret formula to be discovered behind this scientific mapping of Europe. The extreme peripheries of Europe are determined by the geographers themselves, who use history and geopolitics as their guiding stars. The French computation of Europe, which included Madeira and the Canary archipelago – technically parts of Africa but historically and politically associated with the European states – is no different. Thus, indirectly, history through geography placed the heart of Europe next to Vilnius. Yet this placement should come as a reminder that history and geography are never written by the same people. For centuries, Vilnius has lived under the shadow of Europe, and even its newly found continental significance only restates its peripheral location within Europe. The freshly demarcated and sealed off boundary of the European Union runs some thirty kilometres east of the Lithuanian capital, situating the centre of the continent very close to Belarus, at whose border the current political project of “Europe without borders” comes to a halt.

Yet the centre-periphery relationship is never just about the power of the centre and the subjugation of the periphery. The margins bleed into the centre, thereby constantly undermining its influence by bringing their own uncertainties and insecurities into play. It is the same with the marginalised centrality of Vilnius: the city gathers the history of Europe and streams it into uncharted channels. In this sense, Vilnius is more like a threshold than either a centre or periphery. The threshold, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin,



2. Wilno by J. Bułhak.

is not a border or a point, but a zone where time and space swell. It is not a place but a condition, “a fluid breaking or splitting with extremist tendencies” that “can be neither measured nor localized.”¹ Sentiments about *Wilno* (the Polish name for Vilnius) as a threshold site were expressed by Jan Bułhak, a celebrated Polish photographer of the twentieth century, who spoke of and, in his mesmerising black-and-white prints, attempted to capture its sinuous nature. Bułhak placed the city onto the fluid landscape of a human soul, and made it a challenge to the hardened, familiar parameters of European time and space. Wilno, in the photographer’s words, is a suspension of disbelief:

True Wilno remains closed and silent to snobs. Is it worth it to reveal your real treasures to souvenir-hunting vandals and ignorant blockheads? The city speaks softly of simple and noble things, and does not open up for everyone. It does not shout like a hawker or brag about its own merits – it simply leads an open-minded traveller to a discovery. There have been many visitors from distant lands who have succeeded in finding the authentic Wilno and, to many, the encounter with the city has been a great spiritual experience. These guests remain loyal to the city to the end of their lives, praising it intelligently in the languages of art. Of course, there have been plenty of indifferent guests who left the city with a mocking sneer. But they saw only its simplicity, its shortcomings and its imperfections, and they

will never know that a meeting with Wilno is a trial of the soul, a test of human perception. Such a test is alluring to some, but to others, the unenlightened ones, it is a perilous trap.

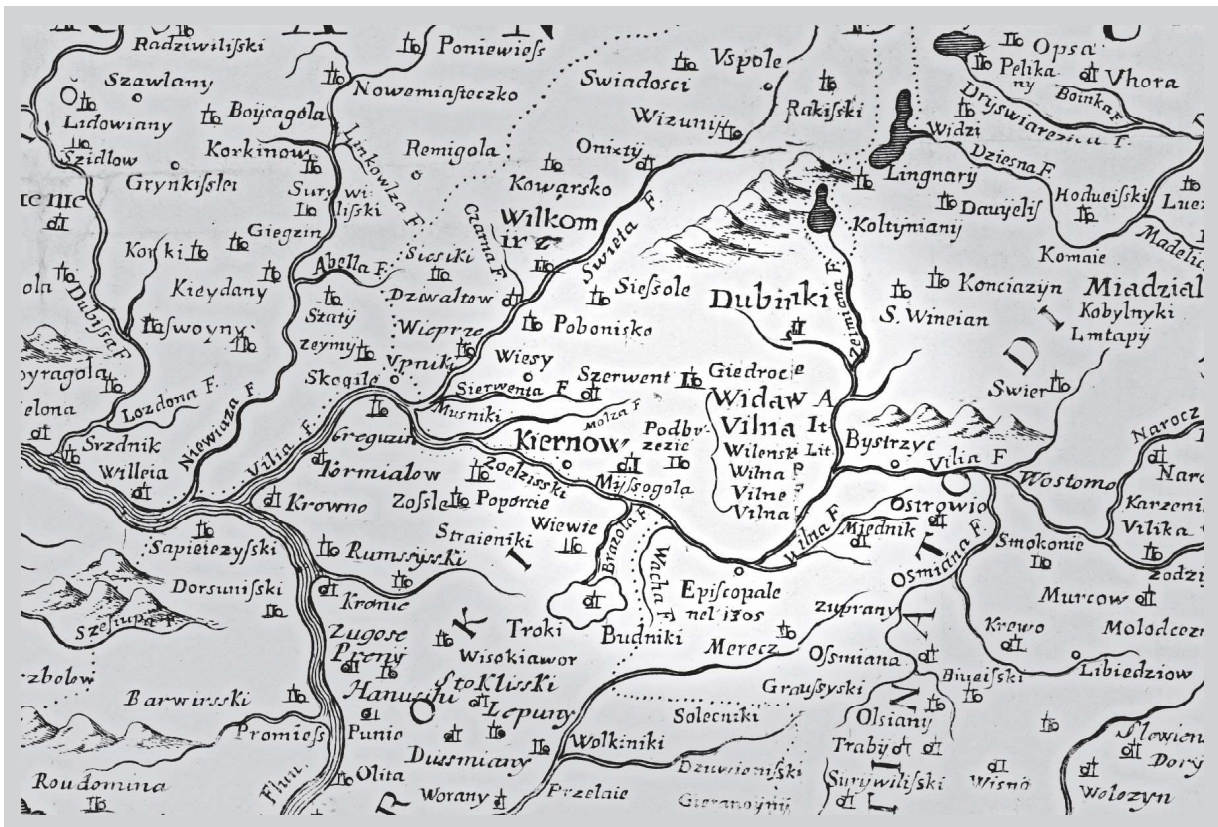
So here is our Wilno: some say the city is dirty, poor and dull; others assert that it is a lovely, exceptional and noble place. What can we say about it today? From which side we should begin our investigation of our Wilno, sunken deep in a two-river valley, surrounded by mountainous greenery and cragged with graceful church towers in the shape of spiral-like poplar trees of an old country manor?

Let us not hurry inside the city, and linger for a moment at its threshold. Wilno dwells between the hills, allowing the pleasure of a distant observation. So let us enjoy this pleasure of viewing the city from a distance.²

This book is about distance, suspension and discovery, about the threshold moment – an uncharted zone – that separates Vilnius from its foreign visitors. It is a narrative of the city from a stranger's point of view, with its history detailed by the geography of intimate reflections, official accounts, private letters, journalistic reports, military observations and the travel narratives of its various guests. Therefore, this book is not only about Vilnius, but also Europe. It is a map of the continent walked through the streets of Vilnius.

Vilnius has always offered a critical link between different components, nations and interpretations of Europe. The town has often been depicted as a bridge between East and West, but, as with any strategically ambiguous site, it has also been a highly contested place. As a result, the city has never possessed a single identity. The place speaks of Jewish *Vilne*, Polish *Wilno*, Russian and French *Vilna*, German *Wilna*, Byelorussian *Vilno* and Lithuanian *Vilnius*. These different topological realms might share the same terrain, but they lead to strikingly different experiences and memories of the place. Initially, my goal for this book was to parallel, compare and, if possible, synchronise different articulations of the city. As a historical and cultural geographer, I wanted to map out the cityscape by finding the specific narrative threads that cross its various linguistic, religious and ideological boundaries. For this purpose, I read and walked through a whole array of official and personal narratives. Yet with each new linguistic or ideological excursion, I was driven towards a different geographical trajectory of the place. My research site – the city of Vilnius – dispersed in front of my eyes, and instead of coming to the point of the city's representational intersections, I found myself exiting the city through different narrative gates.

Somewhere in the midst of my investigation, I came to realise that what I was encountering was not so much disparate interpretations of Vilnius, but centrifugal depictions of Europe. The reason I could not find the central



3. Vilnius in many languages: *Widaw* in German, *Vilna* in Italian, *Wilenski* in Lithuanian (Old Byelorussian?), *Wilna* in Polish, *Vilne* in French and *Vilna* in Latin. Detail from a map of Lithuania published in Venice in 1696.

historical theme within all these urban narratives was very simple: I was searching for the unity of the city within different maps of Europe. So, instead of leaving Vilnius by mapping out the separate trajectories of dispersed local narratives, I decided to enter the city from the different cultural points and linguistic angles of Europe. Subsequently, the epicenter of my investigation shifted from a search for the narrative nexus of Vilnius to questions concerning the changing idea of Europe.

While the analytical alteration modified the course of my research, it did not change the intention of my explorations. Vilnius, with its multilayered cultural landscape, remained the focal point of my interests, but I oriented my research towards the interplay between the geography of Europe and history of Vilnius, making it a story of interaction between local meanings and their foreign interpretations. Nonetheless, this reversal of the investigative flow inevitably changed the expositional terrain of the city: from a native, familiar and mundane place, Vilnius was turned into a foreign, strange and even exotic locale. Still, I believe that some characteristics of my indigenous comprehension of the city survived this transposition, simply because my initial analytical goal and personal knowledge of the place positioned me, so to speak, on the

native side of the representational mirror. This native search for Europe in Vilnius shed a new light on the local implications of various political battles, ideological frictions and cultural collisions of continental proportions. It also led me to new theoretical and narrative frontiers of geographical investigation by allowing me to trace and pace the experiences of travellers in a more dynamic and imaginative fashion. The book is based on written records of Vilnius, which by no means result in a verifiable map of the place. But what it does is no less real, for it enlivens local history with the voices, experiences and fantasies of travellers who made the city a stopping point on their journeys of self-discovery. In short, my narrative of Vilnius is a travel story, a history of the city charted as a passage from a familiar world into an unknown realm.

Vilnius has never been a city of travelers, and, unlike the more celebrated cities of Europe, such as Rome, Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna or Moscow, it has never acquired a narrative and representational canon which could guide foreign visitors through its history and geography. The history of Vilnius mirrors that of Europe, but only as an altered, distorted echo of its grand story. Of course, every place in Europe has its own voice, capable of setting the unifying rhythm of the continent slightly off-key. But in this polyphony of resonant variations, Vilnius comes in with its tune altogether offbeat. Although the city's history is full of dramatic and often tragic changes, local events and personalities rarely enter the shared historical vocabulary of Europe. And to this day, Vilnius stands as a continental outsider, an unfamiliar character – a trespasser – within a well-crafted storyboard of Europe.

This absence of European familiarity does not mean that Vilnius has lacked encounters with outsiders. On the contrary, during its centuries-old history the town has experienced countless invasions of strangers, mostly passing through it in times of war and foreign occupations. Because of the frontier-like character of these encounters, Vilnius has rarely been envisioned and experienced as a destination on its own – instead, it has been viewed as a gateway site, a place that leads to other ends, in other words, a threshold. The transient and inadvertent nature of Vilnius's visitors shaped the foreign knowledge of the place. Foreigners in Vilnius are more like gleaners (or, worse, foragers), who see, imagine, and often experience the place as a leftover of a far greater – European – historical harvest. Although I have used foreigners as narrators of the city, this book is not so much an attempt to change this notion, as to expose another side of it. While the opinions of foreigners tend to marginalise Vilnius, their narratives, often unwittingly, position the idea and practice of Europe at the centre of local history. In other words, what the strangers saw as peripheral, I made central.

The inversion of the representational hierarchy allowed me to ease the separation between foreigners and locals, which, in a way, corresponds with the historical transformation of Vilnius. History and geography made the city a place of migrants, fusing the experiences of strangers and locals, newcomers and residents, and expatriates and natives into a myriad of intertwined narratives and memories that can easily transgress different temporal and spatial orders. In a way, everyone in Vilnius can be a stranger, not because of her or his foreign origin, but because the city possesses so many names and histories that a single human identity can hardly embrace it all.

Different foreign voices and native tongues make it difficult to place Vilnius within a single orthographic world. Throughout the text, I tried to use the name of Vilnius as it is found in the original sources; hence, the name of the city alternates between its contemporary Lithuanian version to more historically, linguistically and personally accurate versions, such as *Wilna*, *Vilna*, *Vilne* and *Wilno*. The same goes for all other local names of places and peoples. To help readers to sail more smoothly through this archipelago of different orthographical imprints, an index with all versions of place-names is provided at the end of the book.

DESCRIPTION NOVELLE D'EVROPE.



4. "New map of Europe," from *La cosmographie universelle*, 1556. Europe is oriented to the south: Lithuania, along with Livonia and Prussia, is located on the lower left of the map, on the southeastern coast of the *Mare Germanicum*, or Baltic Sea.