

EDITED BY RON RAPOPORT



a kind  
*of*  
Grace

A TREASURY OF  
SPORTSWRITING  
BY WOMEN

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# THE LITHUANIAN LEGEND

by Jackie Krentzman  
*Santa Rosa Press Democrat*

ALL SARUNAS MARCIULIONIS WANTED TO DO WAS PLAY BASKETBALL. HE DIDN'T want to be pulled into politics. Especially when they weren't his politics.

But there he was, a trembling 22-year-old university student, standing behind a podium, speech in hand. The language was Russian. The words, which everyone would think were his, were those of a Communist Party ghostwriter whose job was to write paeans to communism and the Soviet Union, to be read by local heroes throughout the various republics.

Marciulionis was chosen because he had just been named Lithuania's athlete of the year. The basketball star for Vilnius's Statyba team was to read this propaganda sheet and pretend he revered the communist ideals it extolled.

Standing before him were his countrymen who, like Marciulionis, didn't feel the USSR was their country, or that communism was their philosophy. But Marciulionis had no choice. This was 1986, Lithuania was still under Soviet rule, and communism had yet to be discredited.

"It was a farce," recalled Marciulionis, the Golden State Warriors guard and star of the Lithuanian Olympic team. "People from the factories and all over the city were forced to come and listen. I was told if I didn't read it, I would be failed in all my final exams, and I wouldn't get an apartment. The speech was putting down the Lithuanian independence. It was all about how freedom was bad, and how the Soviet system was good.

"I read it, and it was the most embarrassing moment in my life. It was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I try not to think or talk about it anymore, it brings such bad memories."

Since then, Marciulionis has shied away from politics. His country declared its independence in February 1991, the first Soviet republic to do so. Later that year Soviet tanks rolled into the country's capital but were turned back. Scattered across Lithuania are large cement bases with gray marks on top, where statues of Bolshevik heroes once stood. Lithuanians toppled them in the frenzy of newly discovered freedom.

Lithuania now is following a democratic course and freedom of expression is permitted. No one is forced to deliver speeches denouncing communism. Even so, with the memory of political manipulation burning a hole in what has otherwise been a successful and independent life, Marciulionis does not trust politicians or governments.

What he does trust is himself. And basketball. And his ability to transcend all the sadness and evil of the world with basketball.

Friday night, Marciulionis led the Lithuanian Olympic basketball team to a stinging 116-79 victory against the Commonwealth of Independent States team in the Olympic European qualifying tournament in Spain.

Four years ago in Seoul, Marciulionis and three other members of the current Lithuanian team were the starters for the USSR team that defeated the United States in a semifinal game and eventually captured the Olympic gold medal. Marciulionis is proud of that as an individual accomplishment only.

Now, he can reunite the personal and the political. This year, Lithuania was not only expected to beat the CIS team, but is one of the favorites to win an Olympic medal.

But while the country eagerly anticipated Friday's showdown with the CIS—the president of the Lithuanian basketball federation declared the game was more important than the Olympics itself—Marciulionis was calling it just another game. He has friends on the CIS team, including Alexander Volkov of the Atlanta Hawks. While his teammates and countrymen were looking forward to a victory as payback, a symbolic step toward asserting Lithuanian manhood, Marciulionis was taking pains to compartmentalize. Sports equal pleasure. Politics equal pain.

“Even now, six years later, I don't like to talk about politics,” he said. “It's a good government when the people have enough to eat and they can express their opinions. Even though I like the political system here now much better, I don't want to be used by them either.”

That isn't to say Marciulionis is apolitical. In Lithuania, everyday life is political. When you're growing up, and you go to the bakery and there's no bread, it isn't because there are no farmers growing wheat. It's because politicians have decided the grain this week should go to Moscow instead.

Politics permeate everything. Marciulionis has plenty of opinions that are political in nature. He is critical of his country, because he doesn't like seeing his best friend earn \$20 a month as a doctor while politicians grow rich because of alleged Mafia ties. He wants to help his country, and he is in a position to do so. He probably is the richest man in Lithuania (his Warriors salary of \$2 million a year can certainly buy more in Lithuania than Patrick Ewing's \$7 million a year can buy him in New York), and arguably is more influential than all of the politicians squabbling for a piece of the pie.

To that end, Marciulionis is building two basketball schools for the young. Children will go there to play basketball and other games after

school. He will train future Olympians and keep troubled kids off the streets. He figures if he can't put food in people's stomachs, he at least can fill their souls with happiness for a few hours a day.

"Sarunas believes the future of Lithuania is in its children," said Donnie Nelson, Marciulionis's close friend and assistant coach of both the Warriors and the Lithuanian national team. "He knows if he wasn't lucky he'd be in their shoes. It's his way of giving back to his country."

Marciulionis also has knowledge. Not only has he seen how things operate in the West, he lives there. After three years in California, he is appalled by what he calls the "anti-logic" of the Lithuanian way of doing things.

"Life has no value here," he said. "Doctors here make less than cab drivers or someone selling ice cream in the street. We have what people in the United States want—universal health care. But what good is free medical care if the care is terrible? There is no budget for medicine, so if you get a headache you can't find aspirin. The hospitals are overcrowded. There aren't enough beds, so they use car doors instead. But people are just glad to get into the hospitals.

"But how can people put value on human life, when for years their government didn't? After World War II, 500,000 or more Lithuanians (including his uncle) were deported to Siberia. That sent a message that our life had no value."

With independence and the switch to a market economy, prices soared and salaries sank. The average salary fell from more than \$100 a month to \$20. Physicists are now selling books to tourists because they can earn four times as much money that way. Teachers are moonlighting as bartenders. A legacy of distrust and fatigue caused by a chronic shortage of goods under communism has been overlaid by a desperation and hunger generated by chronic shortages of cash.

The causes may have changed, but the net effect is the same. Distrust and jealousy color interaction. People on the street do not say hello or excuse themselves when they bump into you. Vilnius, a city of 500,000, and Klaipeda, a town of 10,000, seem like New York.

"When we first moved to Alameda (in 1989), the neighbors came over to greet us and bring us food," Marciulionis said. "That would never happen here. It can take years to build trust. In the U.S., people automatically assume you are good. It is the opposite here. I try to say nice things and smile at people on the street to set an example but they don't understand. People are too jealous of each other. Maybe with religion allowed again here, it will get better, as religion teaches you to care and respect others."

There is a Russian parable that is applicable. God granted a man two wishes. The man thought for a minute then said: "I wish for you to poke out one of my eyes. Then I want you to go next door and poke out both of my neighbor's eyes."

People don't have that have-a-nice-day attitude because a nice day here is when you go to the store and it has half of what you want for one-and-a-half times what you can afford.

"People here are suspicious and selfish because they have no faith in tomorrow," Marciulionis said. "In the U.S., you walk into Safeway one day, and you know everything you see will be there the next. Not here. If you see what you need in a store, you must hoard it, because it might not come back for months. There are more things in the stores now, but with the transition to the free market, they cost more. A Lada (Russian car) that cost 30,000 rubles last year, costs 500,000 now."

As a result of independence and the opening of trade with the West, the Mafia has moved in. People are so desperate, they will kill for \$10.

"In the past, you couldn't trust anybody because they may turn you in for saying the wrong thing," Marciulionis said. "Now, it's fear of crime. I feel safer in the States. The crime is much worse here."

Marciulionis, like many successful Lithuanians, says that people here are lazy. The implication is that it is a national character trait, similar to how the French are considered rude and arrogant. But to Marciulionis it is an example of "anti-logic" for people to still work half-heartedly, even though there is an open market system and much money to be made.

Marciulionis always has been driven and a hard worker. He was the exception here. Until independence in 1991, it didn't matter how hard you worked, the government would still pay you the same wage. Incentive was not part of the vocabulary.

So when Marciulionis inveighs against his country, he is really railing against the discarded Soviet system that has permeated everything here. Lithuania may have thrown off the political yoke, but it is more difficult to overthrow 70 years of brainwashing.

This is not to say that Marciulionis has rejected his country. He has a dual residence, a home in Lafayette and an apartment in Vilnius. He loves his country and feels more at home here than in California. He may sound bitter, but his criticisms are intended as constructive.

"I have some ideas I could give the politicians here, but I won't until they ask me," he said. "They are too busy fighting each other in Parliament to ask. But I can tell them how life is in the West and how they can use that as a model for improvement. I want to help, but this is not the right time."

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Marciulionis grew up in Kaunas, a city of 400,000 about 100 kilometers from Vilnius, the capital. His parents still live in the same faceless apartment building in which he grew up with his sister, Zita, 34, who works with computers.

The apartment building looks like a project in the slums of America: huge, gray, dirty, with each cubicle exactly like the next. Even on an 80-degree, sunny summer day, the monolith does not exude warmth.

Marciulionis shared a bedroom with his grandmother until he was 18 and left for college. His father, Juozas, a retired engineer, and his mother, Laima, a retired geography teacher, chose not to move when their son struck it rich in America. They have new furniture, including a large TV and VCR, as well as a second door for protection. But a split-level ranch house is not their style.

"They felt comfortable here," Marciulionis said. "People are conservative in Lithuania; they don't like change. And people here are very jealous. They didn't want to set themselves higher than everyone else. You have to be smaller than you are here. In America, when athletes get that first big contract, they buy a big house and car. That is not the mind-set here."

There is another reason Marciulionis's parents did not move. It's the same reason Sarunas drives a Russian Lada (which makes a Ford Pinto seem like a BMW) instead of the cherry-red Trans Am he brought back with him. The Lithuanian Mafia has as much or more power than the police. Within a week, his Trans Am would be stolen, he said. It stays in a garage. And his parents are easy marks because everyone knows their son.

A visit to the apartment has his parents serving tea and an array of cookies. Out come the photo albums of Sarunas's childhood. Marciulionis initially is embarrassed, wailing the equivalent of "Oh, Mom!" in Lithuanian, but soon is engrossed in his past.

Walking outside brings another jolt from the past. Behind the apartment is a small basketball court. The ground is cement blocks. The backboard is 10 pieces of plywood nailed together. Marciulionis did the nailing some 15 years ago. This is where his signature bullish drive to the hoop was formulated. He walks around the court, remembering its contours, then begins shooting, the first time he's done so here in years.

"Sarunas was always ultracompetitive," his sister, Zita, said. "When he was young I would take him to play basketball with the older boys. He didn't like the game at first, because he would lose. He had to win at everything."

He beats a reporter in a game of HORSE, then imitates a Chris Mullin dunk. His usual reserve dissipates on the court. His smile stands in stark contrast to the miles of projects stretching out behind him, the only color coming from the wash hanging on symmetric rows of clotheslines.

But Marciulionis is used to all the sameness. It is familiar to him, just like the landscape of Lithuania—miles of farmland and thin pine trees, similar to southern Ohio or Indiana, another pretty good basketball state.

“When I drive to the Oakland Coliseum on Highway 24 and go through the Caldecott Tunnel, and see that enormous panoramic view of San Francisco and the bay, it is beautiful,” Marciulionis said. “But it’s like a picture to me. It’s not real, because it’s not mine. I don’t feel I belong to that city. But here, when I drive and see something beautiful, it may not be as spectacular, but it is mine.

“My first time in the U.S., in 1983 with the Soviet junior team, I felt uncomfortable,” he continued. “All those huge buildings, trees, cars and stores. Everything seemed too big, out of proportion. I’m more used to it now, but it still feels a little strange.”

Maybe the sprawl and bravado of America is so odd to Marciulionis because blending in is important to him. It’s not easy when you’re a 6-foot-5 basketball star, but he tries. In California he drives a Mercedes, lives in a large home and shops at Safeway and the ultrachic specialty store in his Oakland suburb. He eats Chinese food out of the container with chopsticks when he’s in a rush and shops at malls. In Lithuania he drives a Lada, eats borscht and drinks beer the morning after a party to get rid of his hangover. And only in Lithuania would he reveal that he used to play the accordion.

“I’m comfortable in both places,” he said. “I adjust quickly. I remember when I first came back here, I got into a Lada, and I laughed at this cheap Russian car everyone drives. But by the next day it felt natural and I was happy to be driving it.”

Marciulionis’s friends and teammates say he hasn’t changed. A teammate on both the 1988 and 1992 Olympic teams, Valdemeras Khomicius, said that Marciulionis hasn’t rejected his Lithuanian roots.

“He is still as Lithuanian as all of us,” Khomicius said. “He could come back here and drive a fancy car and wear expensive clothes and act like we’re not worthy of him. But he hasn’t done that.”

That’s because this is his home. Marciulionis looks healthier and happier here than in Oakland. This is natural. He knows his country like we know our own bedrooms in the dark. He can move around Lithuania with his eyes closed, bumping into nothing.

Perhaps Marciulionis can adapt so well to two very different cultures because he has a strong sense of self and is not afraid of being subsumed by either. He has a streak of independence, a trait the Lithuanians say is the most important of the many that set them apart from the ethnic Russians.

When Marciulionis was drafted into the Soviet army after his third year at the University of Vilnius, he went to officers' camp. Because he was a basketball star, he was required to serve just a few months instead of the mandatory two years. He lasted just a few days.

"We had to go simulate an attack and shoot bazookas," he recalled. "Well, I shot too low over the heads of the instructors and set the grass right behind them on fire. They dismissed me right away.

"That was the idea. I wasn't built for the army. When someone gave a command, I would ask why. I questioned everything. That's my nature. In the army, you have to do as you're told, but that is against my principles."

Marciulionis, like most Lithuanians, is very nationalistic. When Warriors assistant coach Gregg Popovich, who can speak Russian, met Marciulionis in Europe several years ago, Marciulionis refused to speak with him in Russian, saying "I am not a Russian."

Most Lithuanians never bought into the Marxist ideology. The bookshelf at Marciulionis's parents' apartment was filled with Stendhal, Remarque, Dreiser, even Tolstoy. From an early age, he rebelled against the Marxist tracts force-fed him at school.

"We had to read Lenin, but to me it was like reading a play on words," Marciulionis said. "It was so far from the reality of how we lived and thought. But on the other hand, the lies were so natural, so much part of our life. My friends and I would laugh about it, quietly. I remember near the end of Brezhnev's life, he could hardly walk or talk. But we still had to listen to him and pretend he was making sense. But it made no sense."

Now life is making more sense for both Lithuania and Marciulionis. The country is struggling, but it is its own struggle. And Marciulionis has success, his own success. He no longer must pretend to believe someone else's beliefs or play on some other nation's basketball team. Now, he is setting the parameters.

Marciulionis is a folk hero here, and along with teammate Arvidas Sabonis, is the most famous Lithuanian. "He's Lithuania's version of Elvis."

But being Elvis is a tremendous responsibility. Marciulionis's friends worry that sometimes he carries too much weight on his shoulders. He is separated from his wife, Inga, because he had no time to give to his family. Besides being expected to lead his country past the Russians and to an Olympic medal, besides raising the bulk of the money for the team, besides



starting up two basketball schools, he also has opened a hotel and sports bar in Vilnius: Hotel Sarunas and the Rooney Cafe.

The immaculate 26 room hotel is probably the best in Lithuania. It has a faux marble staircase and fresh pinewood furniture. Rooney (Sarunas's nickname) was involved every step of the way, from choosing the blueprint to picking out the shoeshine machine in the foyer.

The bar is an American-style sports bar. There are framed posters of Mullin, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson and Karl Malone. There are autographed sneakers of a dozen NBA stars hanging from the ceiling. Magic's get the place of honor over the bar. There is a 4-foot long Swatch watch on the wall. The satellite TV is always tuned to MTV; that's what the teen-age boys tending bar want to watch.

There is the basketball the Warriors sent Marciulionis in 1989 when the team was trying to make him the first Eastern Bloc athlete to play for an American sports league. "Sharunas (sic)—Hope you can be with us," it reads. Corny, yet heartfelt.

Otherwise there is no mention of Marciulionis in the bar. No sneakers, no jerseys, no pictures. He is a shy man who only named the hotel after himself to attract business.

The night before the Olympic team left for Greece to play in a tournament, Marciulionis threw a party for his staff. He wanted everybody to have some fun and get to know and trust one another before they began working together. The party started at 9 p.m. and lasted all night.

At the party, the Lithuanian Sarunas emerged and the American Sarunas faded. He drank vodka, he danced, he sang national folk songs, and he tossed off toasts all night. Never in America would you see a party like this, he said proudly. This is how we do it in Lithuania.

His message: Life may not always be good, but you can always have a good time.

Rooney had come home.

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