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ARMCHAIR JOURNEY

From Russia With Lunch

By David Smiedt

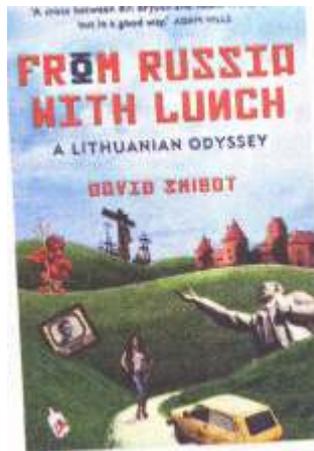
University of Queensland Press, 234pp,
\$23.95

DON'T believe the title. It may be a clever spin on a famous James Bond novel but this is actually about Lithuania and, while it is true that Lithuania was part of the USSR from 1944 until the end of the Cold War, a name call for Russia is not really an appropriate title for a book about a young Jewish man (born in South Africa, now living in Australia) who goes seeking his Lithuanian roots.

This is actually a very good travel book written with a wry sense of humour, a keen eye for the idiosyncrasies of Lithuania and a deep understanding of the history and culture of the country.

Smiedt's grandfather left Lithuania in 1925. He was fleeing ethnic persecution,

poverty and disease and, by a quirk of fate, he ended up on a ship to South Africa where, in 1959, his son married the daughter of another Jewish Lithuanian family. While this book is touted as comic travel writing – and it is funny because of Smiedt's style rather than a lot of overt gags – it is also a hugely informative look at Lithuania. The book has excellent sections on the Tsarist pogroms, the Siberian labour camps created by Soviet Russia for deported dissidents in the 1940s and 1950s and the Lithuanian love affair with basketball. It features some evocative travel writing about places and experiences.



Smiedt's reasons for writing about Lithuania may be deeply personal but his experiences are universal, his descriptions are sharp and insightful and his amusing turns of phrase can convert something dull into something remarkable. On his fascination with the Devil Museum in Kaunas he observes: "Its sheer wonder put my temporal faculties on hold. Two hours evaporated like English enthusiasm on day one of a

Test match."

A small but pleasurable bonus is that every chapter opens with a Jewish joke from the extensive repertoire of Smiedt's grandfather Moses Dibobis.

Reviewed by Bruce Elder