

# Jean-Paul Sartre's Visit to Lithuania

*26 July - 3 August 1965 — An Extraordinary Journey Beyond the Iron Curtain*

<b>Dates</b>	26 July - 3 August 1965
<b>Locations</b>	Vilnius, Trakai, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Nida, Palanga (Soviet Lithuania)
<b>Key Figures</b>	Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir, Lena Zonina
<b>Photographer</b>	Antanas Sutkus (age 26)

## 1. A Singular Geopolitical Context

On 26 July 1965, Jean-Paul Sartre — existentialist philosopher and one of the most influential intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — and Simone de Beauvoir — internationally renowned novelist and essayist — arrived in Soviet Lithuania at the invitation of the Lithuanian Writers' Union. It was Sartre's ninth trip to the USSR, but his first visit to Lithuania. After the long break following the Hungarian uprising (1956), intellectuals from East and West were slowly beginning to rebuild cultural ties.

Sartre was also accompanied by Lena Zonina — a Soviet translator he had met in Moscow in 1962, who acted as cultural mediator throughout the visit.

## 2. Arrival and Literary Encounters

Upon arrival at Vilnius airport, the guests were welcomed with daisies. Nearly the entire Lithuanian literary elite had the opportunity to meet them: Kostas Korsakas, Teofilis Tilvytis, Juozas Baltusis, as well as younger authors such as Justinas Marcinkevičius and Algimantas Baltakis. Writer Mykolas Sluckis and poet Eduardas Miezelaitis — president of the Writers' Union — accompanied the two French visitors throughout the entire trip.

Simone de Beauvoir found Vilnius only "moderately interesting". Sartre quipped: "For 550 years, the French have stopped reading the Germans" — a wry remark, given that he himself had studied in Berlin.

## 3. Kaunas: A City Open to Europe

Kaunas appeared to Sartre as more open and European than Vilnius. The itinerary included the Kaunas fort — where resistance fighters were imprisoned by the Germans — and Saint Michael's Church, which then housed a celebrated wooden Christ by sculptor Juozas Mikenas.

## 4. The Discovery of Čiurlionis

The city held unsuspected treasures: a rich collection of Lithuanian folk art and, above all, the work of painter-composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (pronounced: *Chur-lee-OH-nis*). A visionary Symbolist artist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Čiurlionis is one of the towering figures of Lithuanian culture. It was before his paintings that Sartre uttered a memorable phrase:

*“I prefer Čiurlionis to the painter Vroubel.”*

— Jean-Paul Sartre, Kaunas, 28 July 1965

## 5. Nida and the Curonian Spit — A Memorable Walk

One of the most memorable stages was Nida, a small resort nestled among the dunes of the Curonian Spit on the Baltic Sea — today a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Thomas Mann had also had a house built there. On visiting it, Sartre exclaimed: “One could not have chosen better!” — while adding, with typical irony, that he found Mann’s writing “boring”.

It was among these white dunes that Antanas Sutkus (aged 26) immortalised Sartre in an iconic portrait: dressed in black, slightly bent against the wind, walking alone across a desolate landscape — a living embodiment of existentialism. This photograph later appeared on the cover of a special *Libération* supplement marking the tenth anniversary of Sartre’s death.

A **statue of Sartre** today commemorates his memorable walk on the Curonian Spit.

Src: *Cahiers lituaniens*, M. Sluckis (2000) — [cahiers-lituaniens.org/sartre.htm](http://cahiers-lituaniens.org/sartre.htm)

## 6. The Photographer Antanas Sutkus

Sartre had refused any press coverage. But Sutkus, an avid reader of *Les Mots*, managed to join the group and took around a hundred photographs. These were published in 2005 in the book *Sartre & Beauvoir, Five Days in Lithuania*.

Src: Citizen-K, C. Guilbert — [citizen-k.com/sartre-a-la-plage](http://citizen-k.com/sartre-a-la-plage)

## 7. Exhibitions and Cultural Legacy

- **1999** — Sutkus exhibition at the French Cultural Centre in Vilnius.
- **2009** — “Sartre & de Beauvoir in Lithuania”, Lithuanian Embassy in France.
- **2024 (10 Sept. - 19 Oct.)** — Église Saint-Guillaume, 1 rue Munch, Strasbourg. Free admission. Organised as part of Lithuania’s presidency of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers.

Src: [coze.fr/2024/05/jean-paul-sartre-simone-de-beauvoir-en-lituanie-1965](http://coze.fr/2024/05/jean-paul-sartre-simone-de-beauvoir-en-lituanie-1965)

## 8. A Living Legacy

This visit remains a symbolic moment in the history of French-Lithuanian cultural relations. It helped shine an international spotlight on Lithuanian artistic genius — particularly Čiurlionis — and continues, 60 years on, to be studied by historians of cultural relations between France and the Baltic states.

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### Sources and References

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