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## TWO DAYS IN VILNIUS — JULY 1990

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One Sunday morning last July (1990), members of the Inland Press Association, standing in the lobby of their Riga (Latvia) Intourist Hotel, were surprised by three men, who invited them to go to Lithuania. The group, on a Study Mission to Russia and the Baltic States, had been denied Lithuanian visas by the Soviet government. Ten of the journalists eagerly climbed into three small cars with the men and two of their wives for the eight-hour, 180-mile trip to Vilnius. The men are publishers of *Respublika*, the first independent newspaper in Lithuania: Vitas Tomkus, 33, editor in chief; and deputy chief editors Vitas Lingys, 29, and Rytis Tarailas, 38.

We worried about crossing the border without pass-ports; we had left them in Riga as part of our hotel registration so our absence wouldn't be noted by our Intourist guides. The barbed wire/check point we expected was only a sign saying we were entering Lithuania, the first Western journalists to do so since the foreign press was expelled in March 1990.

The caravan stopped four times as the engines malfunctioned on bad gas. Water had gotten into the pipelines after the Soviets lifted their oil embargo, imposed in retaliation for the March 11 restoration of the Lithuanian state. A passing motorist recognized Tomkus, stopped and siphoned gas from his own tank for theirs — "a Lithuanian gas station," he quipped. About half way, one car and three Lithuanians were abandoned to await help, the second had to be pushed the last half block to *Respublika's* office, and the third arrived in time for the occupants to see costumed singers on their way to perform at the 13th Annual Song Festival. The three-day festival, held every five years, featured 34,000 singers, dancers and musicians.

Tomkus arranged a meeting with Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskienė in her office, quite a feat considering that *Respublika* broke the story of her connection with the KGB. Though the nation was shocked, the KGB no longer had information with which to blackmail her. Prunskiene expressed disappointment that the United States hadn't helped during the blockade and was only interested in "larger scale problems than ours." She did appreciate, however, that President George Bush met with her as that was important in gaining access to other leaders. "The world won't support us if we can't solve our problems with Moscow," she said. "Because we don't have economic or military might, the only way we can affect Moscow is through public opinion. They have the power — we in Lithuania have the hearts."

In addition to hearts, Lithuania also has problems. Among those Prunskienė discussed resulting from the blockade were its estimated 120 million rubles' cost and a 10 to 12 percent loss of harvest; more currency circulating than goods to buy, and the Soviets delaying payments for products. For instance, Lithuania produces 70 percent of the Soviet Union's television components and 30 percent of its tractor parts. Though Prunskienė said that the Soviets can no longer use the army against the people, young soldiers guarded the door to the building. Without specific orders on how Americans were to be treated, they were no match for Tomkus and the group climbed to the second floor and entered "the most secret room in a building of secrets," the meeting room. It's a starkly simple room, with chairs and tables of light wood, and a bust of Lenin on the wall. There, Justas Paleckis, a deputy in the parliament and general secretary of the Communist Party, discussed the current status of the building. Several months before, the Lithuanian Communist Party split into pro-independence and pro-Soviet wings. His pro-independence faction, the larger group, planned to invite the Social Democratic and Green Parties to share the building. The pro-Soviet Communists appealed to Moscow and soldiers were sent in to take control, an example of a basic problem in the Soviet Union — who now owns what formerly belonged to the Communist Party, or in this case, who is the Communist Party? The two factions meet here, separately; and the pro-independence group covers the Lenin sculpture with the forbidden Lithuanian flag. Paleckis, tall and distinguished looking, spoke movingly of the failure of the Communist system whose social programs and health care initiatives in the '30s influenced even the United States, but in the succeeding decades, caused the deaths of millions.

"I'm almost 50 years old" he said, "and until last year, there was no possibility for me to think, work or act independently. I was part of the Soviet system. We can now think and do what we will. It's a marvelous feeling, but it's also dangerous. The people are not politically sophisticated; they're suspicious; they're used to authoritarian methods.

"We need help from the West," he continued, "not only economic, but in building democratic processes, a free press, political parties."

Paleckis said that one of the biggest dangers for Lithuania is nationalism because of the strong feelings suppressed for 50 years. "Some people think we should go back to our pre-1939 model of one-party authoritarianism; they want to restrict demonstrations, and the free press, TV and radio," he said. "Early in this century, a country could be nationalistic without danger to its neighbors, but no more." The journalists also met Gema Lukoševičiūtė, mayor of Panevėžys and an engineer, and another deputy, Gintaras Sileikis, a history teacher—like Tomkus, young professionals now in politics.

Tomkus, a newspaper reporter and magazine satirist, said that the Leonid Brezhnev years were dangerous for him. His friends told him that his phone was obviously bugged as they could hear his conversations on the radio. He was elected to the People's Congress in Moscow and, with the other Lithuanian deputies, walked out when independence was declared.

With 75,000 rubles borrowed from the independence Sajudis Party, he published the first issue of *Respublika* in September 1989, establishing a six-day a week schedule last January. Despite its 15-kopec cost compared to the Communist papers' 3 kopecs, he had 75,000 subscriptions in the first four weeks. He will have 400,000 subscribers next year if the Communists don't ship the presses to Moscow and if he can find sufficient newsprint, a problem for all publications, not only in the Baltics, but even in Russia. Several paper mills have been closed because of pollution, there is a burgeoning demand with many publications springing up, and without hard currency, they are prevented from buying abroad. Tomkus' situation illustrates the economic disarray in the Soviet Union in several ways. Though he must pay five times the amount both for newsprint and for printing on the Communist presses that Communist publications pay, he made enough to repay Sajudis 100,000 rubles within two months. But his knowledge of business is minimal. One of the first things he wanted to know was how to organize his 80-person company — Inland publishers drew their organizational charts. He's interested in buying a failing Communist magazine; how much should he pay for it? To begin with, what was he buying — it didn't have presses or newsprint, and its circulation was disappearing.

As for what he should pay, we had found immediately upon arrival in the Soviet Union that the ruble's value was variable to say the least. The official exchange rate and what we paid in hard currency stores was 1.6 rubles per dollar. On the streets, it's six rubles to the dollar, but the waiters in our Intourist Hotel offered 12 to 20 per dollar.

Tomkus is grateful to American Lithuanians, who enabled him to begin publishing by furnishing a laser printer and Macintosh computer. Though *Respublika* had 3 million rubles in the bank within months of beginning publication, they can't buy the equipment they need; it's now not available in the Soviet Union, and again, the hard currency problem prevents a foreign purchase.

Their continuing publication of *Respublika* is tenuous because the 2,000-worker Vilnius printing presses are owned by the Lithuanian Communist Party and its two factions. Since April, Soviet soldiers and Lithuanian volunteers have kept a vigil around the dock in the plant, preventing a takeover by either group.

And business and politics aren't the only challenges. An incident took place on our return to Riga, after two days in Lithuania, that illustrates other problems just beginning for countries leaving the Soviet Union. It was midnight, most of the Americans had gone back to their rooms in the hotel, and when Tomkus tried to register, he was told by the Russian desk clerk that nothing was available. It was obvious from the keys hanging there that many vacancies existed, and with an American's protest and Tomkus' Congress of Peoples Deputies card, a suite was suddenly found. By crossing the Latvian border, this prominent Lithuanian was unwelcome in a Soviet hotel.