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## CURRENT EVENTS: THE DEMISE OF THE LITHUANIAN HELSINKI GROUP\*

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Seven years after its foundation, the Lithuanian Public Group for Furthering the Implementation of the Helsinki Agreements in the USSR ceased to exist in Lithuania. Unlike the Moscow group, which announced its disbandment on September 8, 1982, [1](#) the Lithuanian group simply disappeared as a result of arrests, deaths, and emigration. On December 4, 1983, Ona Lukauskaitė-Poškienė, the last fully active member of the group, died in Šiauliai at the age of seventy-six, and on December 18, Eitan Finkelstein, another founding member, emigrated to Israel. With that, no more members of the group remained at liberty in Lithuania.

The Lithuanian Helsinki group was founded on November 25, 1976, by five persons of quite different backgrounds who represented a broad spectrum of Lithuanian dissent. While this diversity ensured that the group did not exclusively champion a particular cause, it also prevented it from developing a broader constituency on whose support it could depend during the intensified government harassment. The five original members were Viktoras Petkus, a dissident who had already been imprisoned twice; the Reverend Karolis Garuckas, a Catholic priest; Ona Lukauskaitė-Poškienė, an elderly poet who had spent nine years in exile in Siberia after World War II; Eitan Finkelstein, a Jewish "refusenik" who had been trying to emigrate to Israel since 1970, and Tomas Venclova, the son of a prominent Soviet Lithuanian writer.

The Lithuanian group made clear its goals in a formal declaration of purpose:

"The aim of the group is to promote the observation and fulfillment of the humanitarian articles of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The group intends to concentrate on those articles that related to human rights and basic freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief, and also to contacts between people (the reunification of families, meetings with relatives, residence in other countries, etc.)."[2](#)

In the seven years of its existence the group sought to implement these goals, but its success was limited by the actions of the Soviet authorities. Nonetheless, the group became a symbol of Lithuanian dissent. Several noted dissidents asked to be made members of the group even though they were imprisoned and could not participate actively in its work. Balys Gajauskas, for example, a Lithuanian sentenced in 1978 to ten years in special-regime camps and five in internal exile, petitioned from his camp to join the group. Vytautas Skuodis, a lecturer in geology at the University of Vilnius, joined both the Helsinki group and the Catholic Committee at the end of 1979, when he already realized that his arrest was imminent.

The group had two periods of sustained activity. The first encompassed the time from its foundation to the arrest of Petkus in August, 1977, and the second began in November, 1979, and ended with the arrest in February, 1980, of Algirdas Statkevičius, who had been an active member during that period. In addition to the group's formal documents, the members individually wrote or signed many major protest statements.

In many respects Petkus seems to have been the unofficial leader of the group and its spiritual moving force. His past experiences influenced the work of the group. During earlier terms of imprisonment he had met many Latvians and Estonians, and he believed that closer relations among Baltic dissidents would be beneficial. The group's founding declaration had stated:

"We are prepared to accept statements from individuals, groups, and organizations on violations of the articles of the Final Act on the territory of Lithuania, relating to Lithuania or specifically to Lithuanian problems."[3](#)

When it became clear, however, that Helsinki groups were not going to be formed in the other two Baltic republics, the Lithuanian group decided to take up the cause of Latvians and Estonians as well. Three of its first eleven documents dealt with the plight of the Estonians Mart Nikius, Erik Udam, and Enn Tarto, all of whom were acquaintances of Petkus. The group's efforts to create more formal ties among the Baltics resulted in the formation of a Committee of the National Movement of Estonia-Latvia-Lithuania in August, 1977, but little more was accomplished in this matter, because Petkus was arrested on August 23, 1977.<sup>4</sup>

The Rev. Karolis Garuckas, a Jesuit who frequently took part in the protest actions and petitions of Lithuanian priests, had long been out of favor with the authorities. The refusal in 1961 by Bishop Julijonas Steponavičius of Vilnius to comply with an order to transfer Garuckas to another parish is thought to have led in part to the government's decision to exile Steponavičius. The importance of the role of the Catholic Church in Lithuanian dissent and the strength of Garuckas' influence within the group are indicated by the fact that the group's first two documents dealt with the situation of the Church. Document No. 1 is a statement critical of the Soviet decision to remove Steponavičius and Bishop Vincentas Sladkevičius of Kaišiadorys from their duties and to exile them to other dioceses to serve as pastoral assistants. Document No. 2 is the text of "The Regulations on Religious Associations," a decree issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR on July 28, 1976.

During this first period of sustained activity, most of the other documents issued by the group concerned the refusal of the Soviet authorities to allow people to live where they wanted. This included would-be emigrants as well as former political prisoners not allowed to reside in Lithuania after completing their prison terms. The last known document of the group to be signed by Viktoras Petkus is a statement of July 17, 1977, on the current situation in Lithuania, addressed to the Belgrade Conference to Monitor the Implementation of the Helsinki Agreements.

The statement explicitly notes the existence of national and religious persecution and of discrimination against all non-Russians in the republic.

The arrest of Petkus reduced the membership of the Lithuanian Helsinki group to three. (Tomas Venclova had been allowed to leave Lithuania only two months after the formation of the group.) During the rest of 1977 the group appears to have taken no further action, with the exception of a letter written in September by Lukauskaitė-Poškienė in which she protests against the arrest of Petkus; it was countersigned by over eighty Lithuanians.

After Petkus' trial in July, 1978, the three remaining group members in Lithuania joined other Soviet human rights groups in signing a statement dated July 15, 1978, deploring the sentence pronounced on Petkus, Aleksandr Ginzburg, and Anatolii Shcharansky. No documents issued by the group in 1978 ever reached the West, however, and the members remained relatively inactive throughout that year. Some of the group's functions were later taken over by the Catholic Committee for the Defense of the Rights of Believers, which was founded on November 13, 1978, by five priests.<sup>5</sup>

The group began to revive in 1979. In January of that year it issued its Document No. 14, on the arrest of Romas Ragaišis, a young man who had refused to testify against Petkus. Among the document's signatories was a new member, the Rev. Bronius Laurinavičius, the pastor of Adutiškės in the diocese of Vilnius. The prudence of adding to the group's membership was made clear by the subsequent death from cancer of Garuckas on April 5, 1979. In November Algirdas Statkevičius, a physician, and Mečislovas Jurevičius, a worker, also joined the group. Eitan Finkelstein evidently resigned at that time. On August 23, 1979, the fortieth anniversary of the ratification of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Statkevičius and Jurevičius, who had not yet joined the group, signed a statement protesting against the pact. Many of the signatories of this statement were questioned, and Antanas Terleckas, who was accused of being one of the primary organizers of the document, was arrested on October 30, 1979. On November 2, 1979, the Lithuanian Helsinki group issued its Document No. 18, calling for Terleckas' release.

With the expansion of its membership the group became more active again and in a short period of time issued eight additional documents, not all of which have reached the West. Among the issues protested against in the documents were the arrest of Tat'yana Velikanova, the exile of Andrei Sakharov to Gorky, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. There was even a letter to the Czechoslovak government critical of the latter's noncompliance with the Helsinki agreements. The Lithuanian Helsinki group had extended its range of coverage from the Baltic to the whole Soviet world.

The Soviet authorities reacted swiftly to the group's revitalization. On February 14, 1980, Statkevičius was arrested and confined in a psychiatric hospital. After being tried *in absentia* on August 11, 1980, he was formally committed to a special psychiatric hospital. The group subsequently issued three more documents, protesting against the detention of Statkevičius, Skuodis, Gintautas Iešmantas, Povilas Pečeliūnas, and Petras Čižikas. The last of these was dated February 28, 1981. Efforts were made to resurrect the group by adding one more member, Vytautas Vaičiūnas, but he and Jurevičius were arrested shortly afterwards on March 25, 1981. On November 25, 1981, Laurinavičius died in a traffic accident that was thought to have been engineered by the KGB.<sup>6</sup> This left Lukauskaitė-Poškienė as the sole active member. The fact that her health was very poor may have helped her to escape imprisonment.

Altogether the Lithuanian Helsinki group had eleven members. It served as a symbol of protest against the actions of the government that were in violation of the spirit if not the letter of the Helsinki agreements. The members of the group believed their activities to be in compliance with Soviet laws and thus hoped to avoid harassment and persecution by the

authorities, but most of them were arrested, tried, and sentenced for activities ostensibly unrelated to their defense of human rights. The group did not achieve its purpose of promoting compliance with the Helsinki agreements in the USSR, but, by calling attention to and protesting against some of the sordid actions of the Soviet government, it earned its place in Lithuanian history.



*ONA LUKAUSKAITĖ-POŠKIENĖ (1906-83), a poet and the last member of the Lithuanian Helsinki group.*

\* This is a *Radio Liberty Research* paper. No. 20/84, January 11, 1984.

1 See RL (Radio Liberty Research) 362/82, "The Moscow Helsinki Group Disbands," September 9, 1982.

2 AS (Arkhiv Samizdata) 2841-a.

3 *Ibid.*

4 For more information about joint Baltic dissent, see RL 364/83, "The Arrest of Enn Tarto and the Crackdown on Baltic Dissent," September 29, 1983.

5 The activities of the Catholic Committee are described in RL 431/83, "Five Years of the Catholic Committee in Lithuania: Its Achievements and Dispersal," November 11, 1983.

6 See RL 205/82, "Lithuanian *Chronicle* Charges KGB with Engineering Priest's Death," May 18, 1982.