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"The Aftermath: Picking up the Pieces"

by Ina Navazelskis

"You will live," a doctor said to a young man who lay in a half daze from pain-killers, his left arm and torso wrapped in bandages. The young man glanced warily from the tubes connected to his body to two strangers who accompanied the physician. "Don't worry," reassured the doctor, as he introduced the visitors. "These two people are here to see you; you don't need to be afraid of them." And he repeated, "You will live."

The young man, 29-year old Algis Šikas, a kindergarden worker, brightened. Those three words were perhaps the sweetest he had ever heard. For most of the past ten days, his life had hung in the balance as doctors had worked desperately to repair the massive damage done to him -- one bullet shot through his left elbow and serious injuries to his intestines and kidneys.

Šikas was one of those most severely injured by Soviet paratroopers when the latter stormed central media centers in Vilnius -- the television tower and television and radio studios -- in the early morning hours of January 13th. Fourteen people (13 protesters and one Soviet soldier) had died that night; scores had been wounded. As thousands of people watched, protesters at both sites, all unarmed, had been shot, tear-gassed, or run over by tanks. Dozens of wounded victims were scattered in four major hospitals in the Lithuanian capital.

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The aftermath of January 13th -- which quickly became known as Bloody Sunday -- has been hard on Lithuania. People are stunned as much as they are angry. That night, all the rules one normally lives by -- flawed as these are here in Lithuania -- were broken with the roar of a tank's engine. There are dead, there are wounded, there are those who are simply hurting.

A certain kind of trauma always accompanies this type of disaster. Picking up the pieces has meant many things. At its most basic, it has meant going through at least the motions of an everyday routine, even if this is sometimes done with a sense of overwhelming numbness. It takes a while for the full impact of a catastrophe to sink in; it takes an even longer while to come to grips with it.

Picking up the pieces has also meant returning to the scene of the trauma -- either physically (vigils are maintained at both sites) or in one's thoughts. The failed coup left noone untouched -- given the thousands of people at the TV tower and TV station, it could've been anybody's kids that got shot or run over. In many ways, a collective trauma demands a collective healing process. For weeks now, the most commonly heard question is "Where were you on the night of the 13th?" People tell and retell their stories; newspapers are filled with eyewitness accounts.

Picking up the pieces has meant painstaking, patient work, undertaken in the most concrete ways, in hospital rooms and investigators' offices of the Lithuanian authorities. While doctors try to patch together wounded bodies, investigators hunt for disparate pieces of a puzzle that could tell them exactly what happened, when under the cover of night, terror on a massive scale erupted.

For days afterwards -- until it got too cold -- I saw people in the streets of downtown Vilnius walk around on their daily errands with portable radios; attached, it seemed, to their very ears.

As I called and visited my friends and acquaintances, especially those in Vilnius, no one I spoke with had remained unaffected. Each had their own story. Gunshots and the boom of tank cannons had been heard in the entire city; very few people had slept through the whole night of January 13th. One friend, who lived in the center of town, a ten-minute walk away from the television station, was up all night, terrified and alone, not knowing what was going on. Cut off from the world outside her door, with neither radio nor television working, she had no idea of whether Parliament still stood or whether it was already occupied, whether the dawn would bring back the Stalinists she had hoped were gone forever.

Another friend, who lived near television tower -- located in the middle of one of those areas of town littered with square high-rise concrete apartment buildings -- had witnessed the horror in progress. "We rushed to the tower as soon as the shooting started. People were running in all directions, falling over one another, running on top of each other. I heard them: They screamed in voices that were not their own. I saw a man with an axe running towards the paratroopers." My friend shook her head. "I couldn't believe it could come to this. I wasn't alive during Stalin's time," she added as if to explain why she had been in such shock. "I had never seen anything like this with my own eyes. This was the first time."

For a week after that, she said, she stayed home, more a robot than a human. She only went through the motions of living. She works at the central art gallery in Vilnius, and a show had to be hung. "The artists all came on their own and put the show together," she recalled. "It was just a few days after the events. I was amazed how they could think of anything else at all."

On January 23rd, ten days after the shooting, I went to two hospitals to see what was going on there. Scores of journalists had already trooped through the run-down hospital wards -- at the First Clinical Hosptial in the center of town, the deputy director said there had been between 80 and 90, starting with the CNN cameraman who arrived as the first wounded were brought in just after 2 a.m. on the 13th. Patients were both tired and heartened by the attention. Repeating their stories of where they had stood, what they had seen, how they were wounded, to willing foreign listeners was a certain spiritual therapy in itself. Someone out there wanted to know how they were doing -- it was a sign that their pain was not in vain, that they were not forgotten. Some even blossomed under the attention -- one man, waiting to be wheeled into an operating room for a crushed leg, enthusiastically kept telling me about his relatives in Baltimore. Later I saw his photograph, smiling broadly, in the newspapers.

I revisited the First Clinical Hospital, where I had been during the early morning hours of January 13th. It was located in the heart of downtown, just behind Lenin Square and on the other side of KGB headquarters. Later, I also went to the Sixth Clinical Hospital in the Antakalnis section of Vilnius, where Algis Šikas lay.

Only two of the initial seven victims were still in the latter hospital -- Šikas and a 49-year-old factory worker, Vytautas Kancevičius. Both were kept in a special intensive care unit. Night after night journalists on the Lithuanian evening news program, Panorama -- now beamed from Kaunas, over one hundred kilometers away -- reported how many people were still

hospitalized in total; 36 on January 23, 33 by January 25, 31 by January 30. The reports always ended, "One patient's condition is considered critical." That patient was Kancevičius, who, as I spoke with Šikas, slept in a corner bed on the other side of the room, wisps of grey hair framing his ashen face.

"We fear for his life," the director of the hospital, Dr. Romanas Rimkevičius, said to me of the older man. Another doctor on the ward read Kancevičius' chart aloud. "He had nine separate bullet wounds caused by one centerless bullet." Repairing the damage from that one centerless bullet took almost five hours, with a team of five surgeons working on him. Luckily, Kancevičius was on the operating table in the Antakalnis Hosptial almost immediately after being wounded, just minutes after 2 a.m.

Nevertheless, speed notwithstanding, it was not enough to bring him out of the danger zone. Doctors on the intensive care ward said that while Šikas responded to treatment -- he was alert, engaging -- Kancevičius was withdrawn, depressed, deeply traumatized. Kancevičius was also burdened with an emotional handicap. Because he lived outside of Vilnius, it was harder for family members to visit him. At crucial moments, doctors said, there was no one there at his bedside to bolster his sagging spirits as they tried to heal his wounded body. (I telephoned the hospital in early February to check up on the status of both men. Šikas was fine, I was told, but Kancevičius had been in and out of a coma, more often unconscious than not, responding only occasionally to very short questions. He died on February 18, 1991.)

The weeks immediately following January 13th did not do away with danger. During the last two weeks of January, the Commandant's Hour, as a 10 p.m. curfew was called by the Soviet military, was imposed. Soviet military vehicles were stationed on main thoroughfares around the city, and were especially active on the highway between Kaunas and Vilnius. As the evenings would grow late, incidents of cars being stopped and young men being beaten up by the soldiers increased. Even a member of Parliament was held hostage by Soviet soldiers for two hours, forced to hold his hands high in the air in freezing weather. Two British journalists travelling with young Lithuanians were arrested· had $ 3000.00 stolen, and witnessed soldiers beat the Lithuanians.

There was even sadder news. At 2:30 p.m. on January 30, a 20-year old boy died in a Vilnius hosptial. His name was Jonas Tautkus. Two nights before, he had been shot by a Soviet soldier. A Soviet patrol had stopped and searched his car; at gunpoint, soldiers had ordered the young men in it to get out. At first Tautkus obliged, but then he panicked, ran back to the car, and tried to drive away. He was shot in the head.

One day later, Lithuanian television ran an interview with doctors who showed X-rays of Tautkus' skull, a bullet lodged in the back of his brain. "It's only a matter of hours," one doctor said sadly. Tautkus' death brought to 19 that total number of fatalities that the Lithuanian authorities attribute to indirect as well as direct Soviet army activities in Lithuania during January. (There were a couple of fatal heart attacks in addition to the people killed at the television tower.)

On January 30, the Lithuanian Ministry of Health released the following figures. Since January 13, 580 people had registered injuries resulting from Soviet Army activities. 152 were women. 312 reported suffering from ear traumas; 122 from combined wounds, either crushed, torn or cut. 46 suffered from bullet wounds. By the end of January, over 2 million rubles had already been spent on medical care.

But that, of course, is not the full scope of the damage. Much cannot be measured. I recall Lolija, a gentle young woman in her mid-20's, with a beatle-style haircut, who works in the only foreign book store in the city. I had known Lolija for several months. In late January, during one of the coldest days of the month, I went to the bookstore to see how everyone there had come through. Lolija sat huddled alone in one corner of the room, her coat bunched up around her. She stared at the empty shelves and seemed oblivious of the two or three browsers. I was particularly interested to hear her story because Lolija, like my friend who works in an art gallery, lived near the television tower.

It turned out that she was very close to everything indeed. Lolija had stood in one of the ten rows of people surrounding the tower. She saw tanks circling it; she saw them begin running over people. She saw how people began to fall on top of one another. Lolija fell with them. She recalled, "I already said my goodbyes to life" as the tanks began to crush those in front of her.

How is it that you are still in one piece? I asked. A tank stopped just short of her, she explained, showing a margin of about five inches with her hands. She remembers being yanked out of the heap by her hair.

Lolija, you could say, is a very lucky young woman. She escaped, quite literally, by a hair's breadth. She bears no visible bruises, has no crushed bones, no bullet wounds. But she was nonetheless violated. How is she really doing, I asked. She shrugged her shoulders a bit listlessly. She spoke softly, unable to manage more than a wan smile. "I've lost my sense of humor," she said.

Foreign journalists and native Lithuanians alike have commented on the the bravery of unarmed people who stood defiant against the tanks, who even tried to speak with the paratroopers.

Days later, I saw video footage of some of this. There were people, some with outstretched arms, who tried to appeal to the humanity of the soldiers. They called upon their mothers' honor, or anything else they could think of at those pitched moments. None of it worked. One video showed a man being smacked on the head with a rifle butt with such force that one could hear the crack on the tape. Many people later said they did not really believe that the soldiers would open fire. (That could have helped in their bravery. My friend in the art gallery said that when the crowds finally realized the bullets were for real, they ran, scattered in all directions, falling over one another.)

Still, some did not. If there is a positive side to all of what happened, it is the renewed pride that people took in one another. There was real heroism. One doctor recalled hearing from some of the wounded, "Doc, please hurry up and bandage my leg, I have to get back out again and go defend Parliament!" Even those who were too severely wounded to move, such as Šikas and Kancevičius, had their moments of heroism. "What will be with me will be," one doctor on the ward recalled Kancevičius saying. "But what about you -- you must take care of yourself. You must go on. "

In early February, a psychologist was asked over the radio what symptoms he had seen during the month of January in the population. When danger struck, he said, everyday neuroses were repressed. People complained less and less about them. A far more immediate threat was at hand, and it seemed that the normal travails of life simply melted away. But now, he added, when the immediate danger has been suspended if not yet altogether passed, these neuroses have returned with added ferocity.

Worry, whether about grand things like Lithuania's future or more personal ones, like the safety of one's children, has not abated. One of my dearest friends, a former political prisoner in his 60's, and one of the gentlest men I know, brought that home to me. His personal story is a mirror of Lithuania's history during the past half century; replete with suffering and imprisonment and deprivation. Yet he is one of those few individuals one meets who is completely without rancour. The pride of his life are his 21-year-old twin sons.

I spoke to my friend, Tomas, in early February. His voice, usually very calm, betrayed anxiety. These days he fears for his twins. Both have already served their time in the Soviet army, and so therefore should not be in danger of being abducted. But young men of their age are easy targets for the Soviet patrols wandering through the streets.

That was why Tomas was very worried. It didn't help that he was acquainted with the parents of Jonas Tautkus, the boy who had been shot in the head by a Soviet soldier. Tomas' twins had gone ice fishing in northeast Lithuania, leaving their father at home to age a decade during the week they were gone. He prayed they steered clear of any patrols. "You know how it is," he told me when we spoke on the phone in late January. "This is the Soviet army. First they beat you up and then they look at your ID later."

Yet, despite their fears and worries, people did not seem to feel isolated, forgotten by the world. Quite the reverse. Help from abroad did much to keep people going. Director of the Antakalnis hospital, Dr. Rimkevičius, emphasized that as he glanced outside his office to the hallway, where dozens of boxes of medicines were stacked. "They came from Poland", he explained. "The Poles collected the money, bought the medicines and delivered it themselves." That was not the only gesture from Lithuania's southern neighbor. Adam Michnik, the prominent Solidarity leader was in Parliament barely two days after the crisis -- on Monday, January 15th. His presence, like those of other foreigners, bolstered the shaken Lithuanians.

But there were also many bitter moments. Dr Rimkevičius recalled the morning of January 13th, when a young Soviet paratrooper who had shot himself in the foot was brought in to be treated. As he was being administered a sleeping dose, Rimkevičius remembered the soldier muttering "Oh, we worked well. Oh, we showed those bastards who we were," referring to the victims of his bullets just a ward or two away.

His face grimly set, Rimkevičius recalled, "Professionally, we did everything we could for that soldier. We treated his wound. We operated on him. But our feelings also broke through the dam. I told the other soldiers that I couldn't be responsible for his life, the other patients might tear him apart. I told them that they should change into civilian clothes and come and get him as quickly as possible."

They did, and the soldier, Gavrilov, was led down the hospital halls while the staff shouted after them, "Fascists, how can you murder innocent people!"

"We shouldn't have said that," Rimkevičius confessed to me. "But it was too much to bear -- our feelings broke through." And he added, "I wonder what way of life Gavrilov thought he was defending. He lived in a one-room apartment in Pskov (Russia) with a wife and two daughters. On Peace Street, can you imagine!"

During that first week after the 13th, fear was rampant. The second night after the attack, Monday, January 14, Virgis and I were alone in our apartment building in Turniškes. Our three

neighbors had fled, taking their families with them. They felt like sitting ducks, and they were not wrong. This government compound of some 20 buildings, set in the middle of a forest, is less than two kilometers away from a police academy building which had been stormed and occupied by some three dozen members of OMON, a special unit within the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior. The renegade members had declared their loyalty to Moscow rather than Lithuania, and during the week previous to January 13th, had occupied that police academy. As we emerge from the forest each day, we pass by this building, its front courtyard now guarded by Soviet armoured personnel carriers and masked soldiers.

People in the immediate neighborhood outside the government compound also reported tanks driving through the forest roads at night during those first nights after January 13th. They also saw OMON troops patrolling the forests. One day in late January, I tried to take a photograph of the front of the police academy. But as I got out my camera, one of the masked soldeirs started coming towards me, and my driver, already jittery, stepped on the gas...

On February 3rd, the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture released initial estimates of the damage done by Soviet military on three days alone -- between January 11 and January 13th. Total cost: 36 million rubles.

On Monday, January 15th, two nights after it had been stormed, I myself visited the television tower outside the center of town. It was here that all the fatalities occurred. The tower sits on a hill surrounded by multi-story residential apartment buildings. A building housing the tower's technical personnel -- now also stormed by Soviet troops -- is located at the foot of the hill. Despite the freezing weather that night, flowers were strewn and candles were lit both at the front of that building and at the beginning of the incline of the hill behind it. Some dozen people stood vigil, staring at the television tower some hundred yards away, where tanks now stood in front of the entrance. They watched the the shadows of the armed soldiers move in the distance.

One soldier, a thin dark-haired man, dressed in full combat gear, automatic machine gun slung over his soldier, came close to the foot of the hill where the people stood. A young woman, crying hysterically, shouted how could he, in good conscience, participate in such things. For a while, the soldier said nothing. Then he said, in broken Russian "The same thing happen to me" and pulled out a photo from his wallet (I did not see what it was) and showed it to the hysterical girl. It was of Baku, he explained. She redoubled her efforts in appealing to him.

But he didn't want to listen. He took the photograph back and disappeared in the administration buiilding, where we saw more soldiers staring at us from the darkened windows. "I think that was done on purpose" said one by-standers, referring to the soldier's behavior.

A young boy then said he saw the soldiers carry something into a truck that looked very much like body bags. For days, while there was a list of the missing, people were terrified that unaccounted for individuals could still be in the tower -- either dead or alive.

But that rumor proved to be false, laid to rest by the Lithuanian Procurator's office. I met up with one of the investigators from this office, Vytautas Valašinas, as he hurried through the last ward of the 500-bed First Clinical hospital on that chilly wet afternoon in late January when I also decided to revisit it. Assigned to investigate "particularly serious crimes", I saw Valašinas clutching four color photographs in his hand -- gruesome images of people wounded at the television tower.

He was there seeking to find a link between at least some of the wounded to people in the photographs. Together with some 15 other investigators from the Lithuanian Chief Prosecutor's office, Valašinas searched for clues that would eventually disclose who specifically crushed some of the demonstrators under tanks, who fired the deadly "centerless" bullets, which continue to travel through a body once having entered it.

"We almost know which tanks ran over people," Valašinas told me, explaining that videotapes and scores of photographs have all been major tools in trying to fit all the pieces of the puzzle together. "But," he added, "while we have the bullets, the army has the guns" and he thought it unlikely that these would be turned over to the Lithuanians for investigation. Moreover, Moscow had sent its own procurator to Lithuania to investigate events; and representatives from the Soviet Defesense Ministry have claimed that photos showing people under tanks have been doctored.

That only spurred the 15 year veteran investigator on. I followed Valašinas as he went from ward to ward, showing his photographs -- taken by an amateur photographer at the television tower -- to each of the 19 victims in the First Clinic.

25 year old Arūnas Ramanavičius, a fifth year chemistry student at Vilnius University, recognized himself immediately. The photo showed him, a lanky young man, held shoulder high by several other men who carried him, his right leg a dark red color, towards a waiting ambulance.

"I didn't even hear the bullet," Ramanavičius said. "The bone in my leg was shot through."

Valašinas then crossed the hall to where 48 year old Angele Plaudyte lay in the front left hand corner in a narrow, six-bed room. "Can you identify yourself or anyone else?" Valašinas asked her softly.

I followed Plaudyte's eyes as she stared intently at each photo. Her eyes rested on one where a tank stood in the background, and a pair of red-trousered legs with black boots -- they belonged, Valasinas explained later, to 24-year old Loreta Asanavičiūtė, who died of massive internal wounds some five hours after the tank ran over her pelvis -- stretched out in front of the right side tank track. A heap of winter coats hid not only Asanaviciute's torso but also the heads and bodies of several other people.

"That's my coat" said Plaudyte, pointing to a blue-black splotch. "There were two women under me as the tank drove over us once and then back again, and then simply stopped on top of us. I remember the women screaming. The pain," she said as she glanced down at her right leg encased in a square metal brace and swathed in bandages from ankle to knee, "was indescribable."

But Plaudyte considered herself lucky, as she was one of the first victims to be operated on less than two hours after being rescued. The bones in her leg had been crushed, and the first operation to begin repairing the damage took three hours. "I remember thinking just before I lost consciousness on the operating table -- oh, please, save my leg."

Earlier, deputy hospital director Vytautas Kamarauskas told me that while most people would eventually recover -- emphasizing that recovery could take longer than a year for several victims -- some two or three might be permanently disabled. Valašinas was blunter. "There will be amputations" he said, without referring to anyone specifically. "Lithuania simply doesn't have the technology to rehabilitate people whose bones have been crushed."

Yet Plaudyte chose to look at things as positively as she could. After handing the photographs back to Valašinas, she commented on the kindness of the hospital staff, "If there is better medicine or aspirin to be distributed, we always get it" -- and the attentiveness of total strangers as well as family friends. "Today the Red Cross visited us. Earlier (members of Parliament) Čiobotas and Andriukaitis as well as (Minister of Health) Oleka were here."

As we both left the hospital, Valašinas said that he has little hopes the guilty will ever be brought to trial. It is difficult enough, he says, "to counter the lies" that much,

though not all, of the Soviet media is disseminating about events in Lithuania.

But together with his colleagues, Valašinas continues the investigation with dogged determination -- literally under the noses of the Soviet army. I went with him as he returned to his office, and saw how his worn beige ID was filed away a by a young Soviet soldier, rifle slung over his shoulder, who was stationed at the entrance to the building. Together with the Lithuanian Chief Procurator's office next door, Valašinas' building had already been occupied by Soviet troops since the spring of 1990. As he passed the fresh-faced 18 and 19 year old soldiers, Valasinas said, "They have nothing to do with this. Earlier, women in the office used to bring them tea and biscuits."

These scenes from the aftermath of January 13th mark the end of my first year in Lithuania. I arrived at the moment when the first stage of Lithuania's road back to herself -- that idealistic euphoric two years now referred to as "The Rebirth" -- was drawing to a close. I have been here for the beginning of the second stage -- when inch by inch, Lithuania tries to regain control over her own destiny. The events of the past month testify that this struggle will be the far harder one, one that will demand a high physical and psychological price.

In witnessing and sharing what happens here, I also, time and again, come up against the things that make me different from my friends and aquaintances. No matter how much I may be affected by what I see, short of getting caught in the line of fire myself, there is still an invisible protective wall around me that they do not have.

I have another home, another life to go back to. I have a choice. I have never had tanks crash through the streets of my city or explode into my dreams. I try to imagine how I would feel if that were to happen. I try to imagine how I would feel if I had nowhere else to run.

I try to imagine this -- and I can't.

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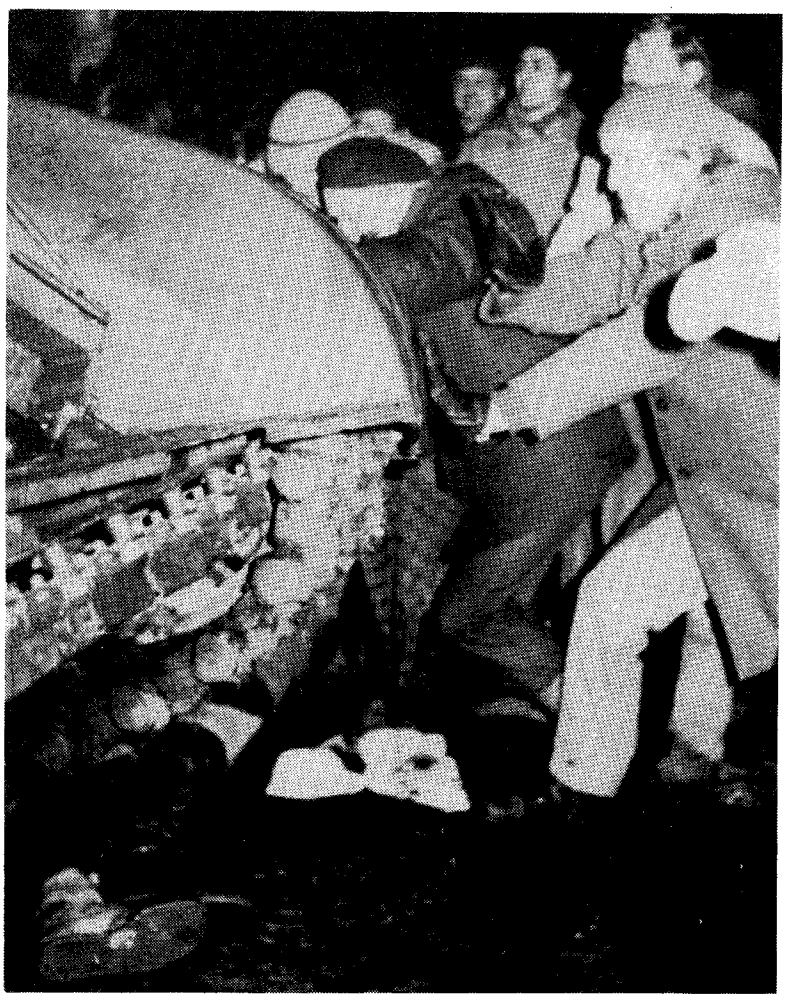
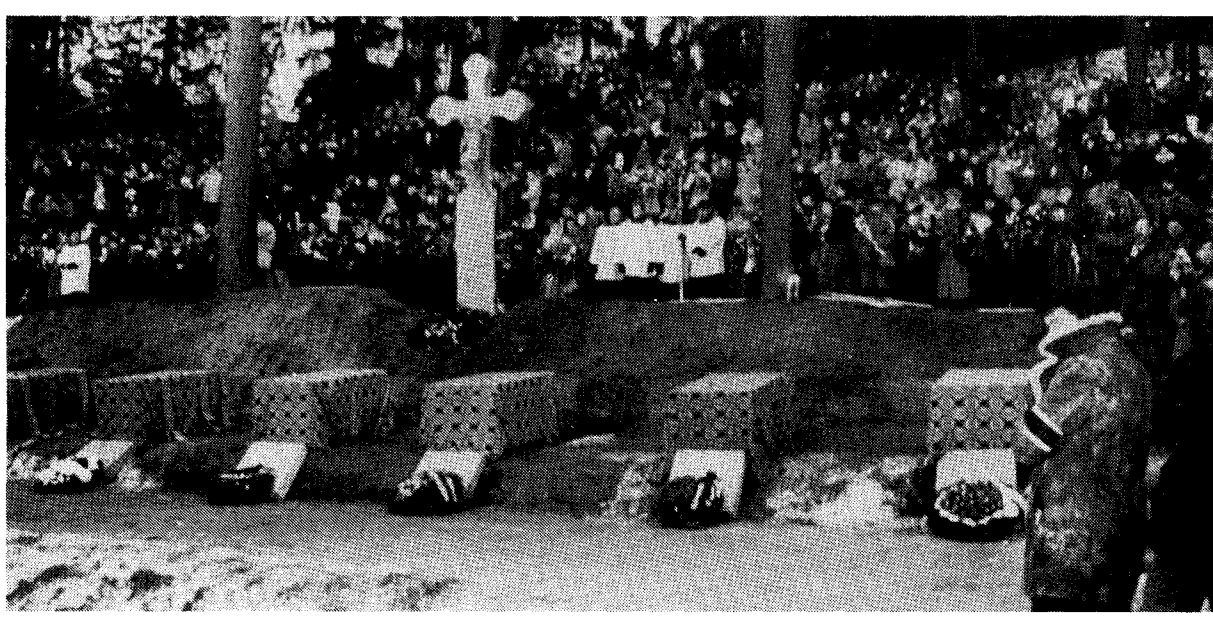


At the television tower in Vilnius the night of January 13, 1991.

People wait outside the Sports Palace for up to eight hours to pay their last respects to the victims of January 13th. Temperatures were below zero.

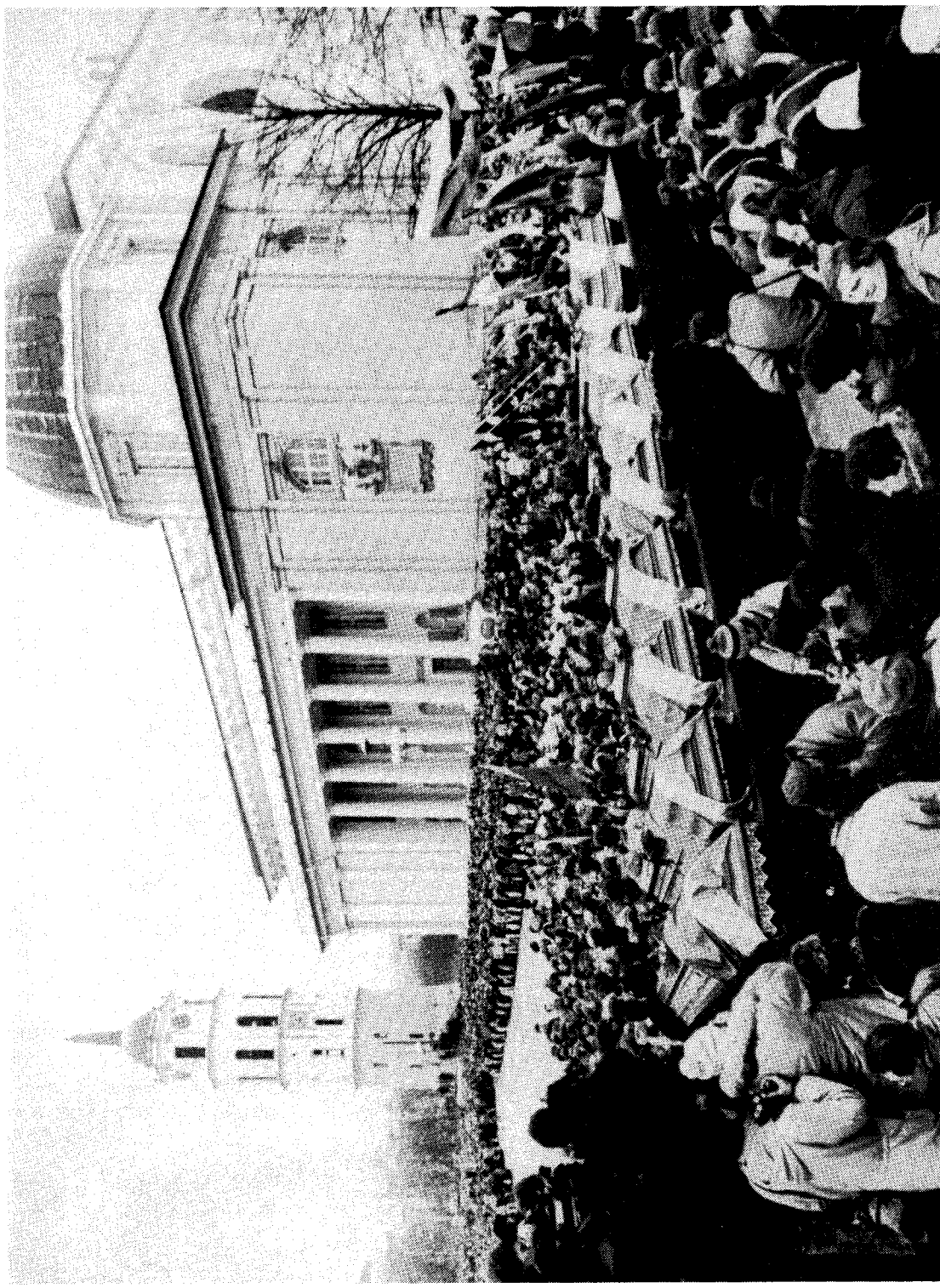
Thousands of people line Vilnius city streets, in sub-zero temperatures, as the funeral cortege goes by.

Funeral Mass is held in Vilnius Cathedral for the victims of January 13. Date: January 16, 1991.



Burial at the Antakalnis Cemetery in Vilnius; January 16, 1991.

Cross erected at the graves of victims of the January 13th attempted coup by the Soviet military forces. Antakalnis cemetery; January 16, 1991.



The funeral of the January 13th victims. Vilnius Cathedral January 16, 1991.

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All photographs are taken by Lithuanian news agency ELTA photographers.