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"Home Sweet Home"

Dear Peter,

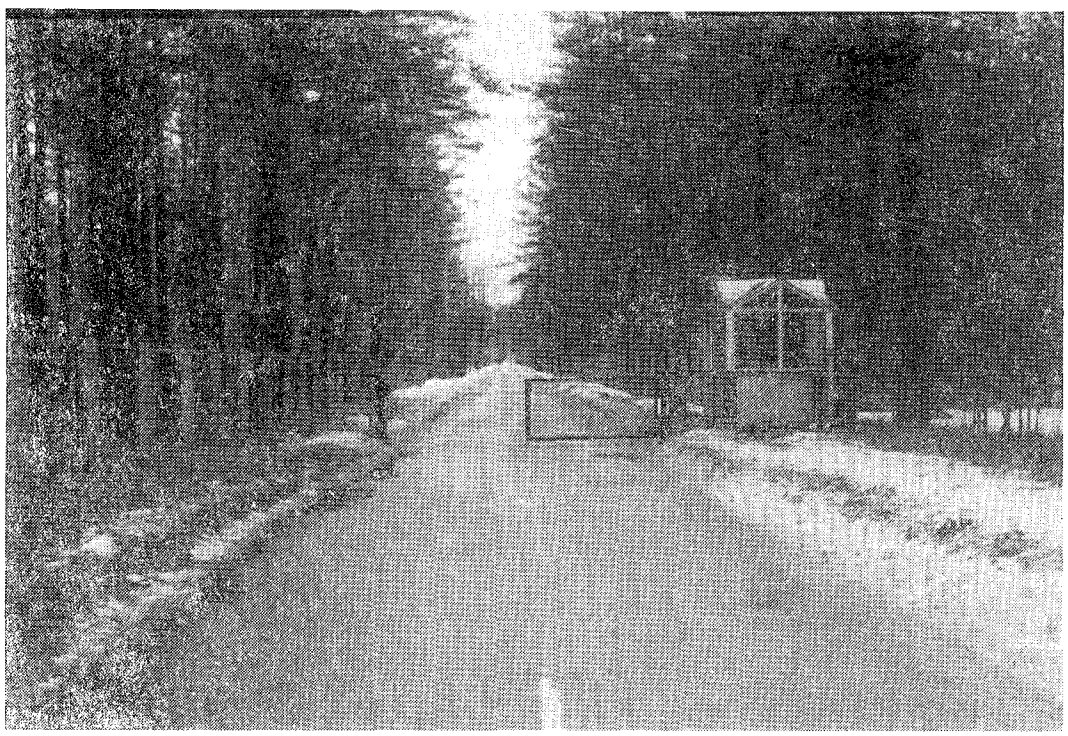
On November 1st, I moved into what is perhaps Vilnius' swankiest neighborhood. It is certainly its most exclusive one, for only a select few have ever gotten to live here. To make sure that no ordinary mortal mosies on in just to have a look around, the entire area is enclosed by one -- in some places even two -- chain link fences. Uniformed militiamen, outfitted with walkie-talkies, stand guard at its two main entrances. While they wave residents on through -- having already memorized their license plate numbers -- they stop everyone else.

So what is this place? Not so long ago, it was the summer playground of the Communist party elite. Today, it is the residential compound of the Lithuanian government. Set in a pine forest just 12 kilometers northeast from the center of town, it is so discreetly tucked away that you can get lost trying to find it. The first three times I came here on my own, that's what happened to me. Oh sure, there are street signs. But they are small, set back in the forest so you can't see them. Natural landmarks aren't much help either. In the dark -- even in daylight -- one pine tree looks much like another.

Ina Navazelskis, a journalist, has written extensively about East European and Soviet affairs. She is the author of biographies of Leonid Brezhnev and Alexander Dubcek.

This is where many of Lithuania's new political movers and shakers have come to live, particularly those from out of town who have no permanent residency in the capital. (For several months after March 11, many lived in a hotel -- rental apartments are simply not to be had -- not far from Parliament. But that was only temporary.) That is how Virgis Pikturna, a member of Parliament from the town of Kretinga (pop. 20,000) some 300 kilometers west of Vilnius happened to find himself here earlier this year, and how I, as his fiance, came to join him last month.

The locals call the compound Turniškes, after the main street that runs through it. I call it a cross between Camp David and Peyton Place.



Entrance to the Turniškes compound, the swankiest address in Vilnius.

But more about that later on.

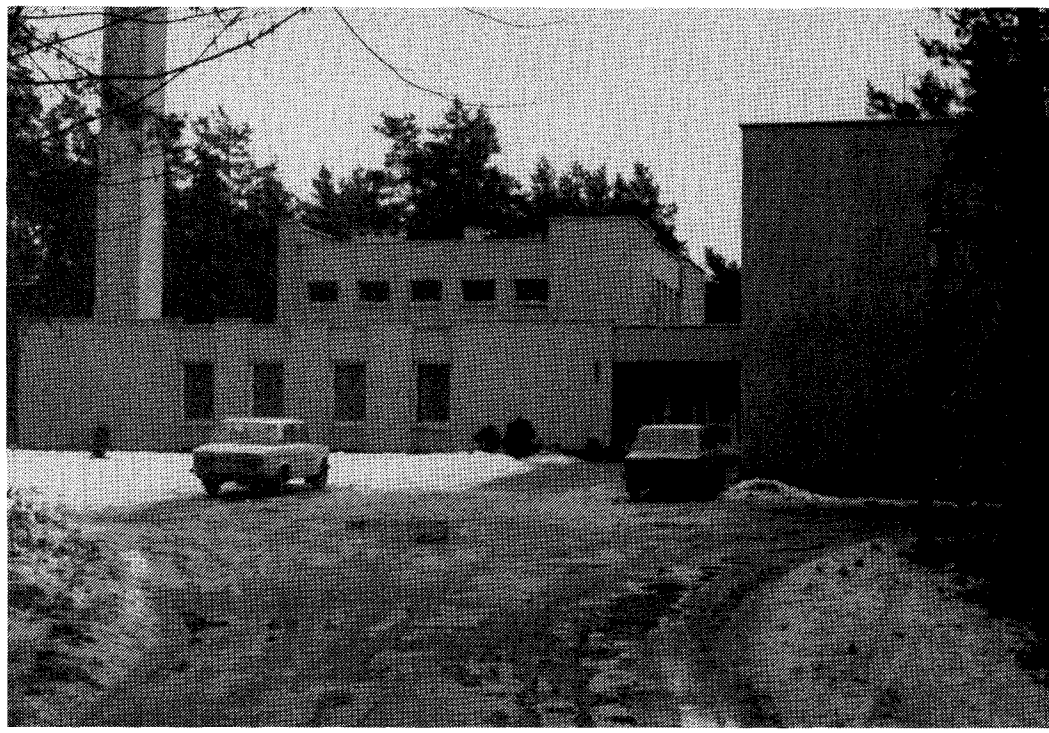
Turniškes is my fourth address in Vilnius in ten months. All that moving around has given me a chance to get to know a few of Vilnius' other neighborhoods, all far less exclusive, yet each with its own distinct characateristics. I try to look at them through the eyes of someone for whom they are home, rather than someone who is merely passing through. This, then, is what I see.

From a first glance, it is hard to imagine that any of Vilnius' 20 neighborhoods (pop. 570,000) could qualify anywhere near, well, desirable. The city is worn and dirty. Only a few dozen buildings in the entire metropolitan area have no need of some sort of face-lift. With their sooty facades, even the once elegant buildings of Vilnius's main boulevard, Gediminas Prospect, in the city center scream for a major overhaul, or at least a minor bath. The crumbling mortar of centuries-old dwellings, from simple archways to Baroque splendors, in the Old Town warn that if restoration doesn't happen today, tomorrow there will be nothing left to restore. (Restoration work is usually done by a Polish firm called Budimex; I see the firm's emblem plastered on construction sites throughout the the Old Town. Like all Eastern European companies, the firm has begun to demand hard currency for its services. Because there isn't enough of that hard stuff around in Lithuania, most restoration work is currently at a standstill.)

The streets of Vilnius are not in that much better shape than the buildings. Dust that coats sidewalks in summer turns to mud in winter. Most of Vilnius streets' are paved, but one can never take this for granted. (I know of one bedroom community in another Lithuanian city that waited for quite a long time -- 25 years to be exact -- for its streets to be paved.) But Vilnius streets, even with their coat of asphalt, are nothing to write home about. With their wide gaping shapes, the potholes -- of course strategically placed where there is the most traffic -- put those of New York City to shame.

And then there is the general aesthetic sense, the result of the overall urban planning -- if you can call it that -- of the post-war period. I have yet to hear one positive remark about those architectual abominations, the huge apartment complexes built after World War II. All are standard five or nine-story boxy concrete things, surrounded by cracked asphalt parking lots and mud. They ring Vilnius and constitute her new neighborhoods.

And yet, and yet. If you look beyond all that, you can begin to discern there are some addresses that are more "in" than others. Every city claims to have prestigious areas -- even run-down Baroque jewels like Vilnius, where it looks like there hasn't been a well-kept up block in 50 years. For example, even though most lack central heating, bathrooms, sometimes even indoor toilets, apartments in the Old Town are in hot demand. Not only that they are in the center of town -- the words of Manhattan real estate brokers "location, location, location" ring in my ears -- they offer something much more. Just step outside the (admitted) hovel, and you find yourself in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in a maze of narrow winding streets, pictaresque inner and outer courtyards, houses with gabled rooves. Many people would gladly trade their concrete sardine can of an apartment, bathroom and all, for a flat in the Old Town.



Turniškes. This building is the heart of the compound. A one-room grocery store, cafeteria and 150-seat movie theatre are under one roof.

Turniškes. The former summer residence of Lithuania's First Secretary of the Communist Party, Petras Griškevičius. (1974-1985)

Or go to Antakalnis in the eastern half of the city, built on the side of a hill. True, the place is littered with the 1960's boxy multi-apartment buildings. But there is also the winding Neris River on one side and the forest beyond the hill on the other. A few streets boast large two-story two-family stucco houses, each with its own front and back garden, relics from a more elegant, prosperous era. There is even the odd palatial villa, testifying that Vilnius, too, once had her golden age with true-blue aristocrats. Before the war, these streets were among the swankiest addresses in town.

Then there is Žvėrynai, a stone's throw from Parliament across the Neris River, where President Landsbergis lives in a new two-floor apartment. (When hot water was turned off this past summer for weeks at a time -- as it is every summer -- Žvėrynai was somehow spared. People were quick to complain that this was only because Landsbergis lived there. No sooner did the rumors begin to circulate than the hot water was turned off in Žvėrynai, too.) Žvėrynai boasts of tree-lined streets and more single family houses than anywhere else in the city -- a sleepy suburban village just a ten-minute walk to the center of town. So what if the 70 percent of the houses are in sad shape... With Lithuania poised on the brink of privatisation, Žvėrynai has the choicest plots of land around, and the word is there will be none left on the market when the market finally comes into being.

My first home in Vilnius was a tiny fifth-floor walkup studio apartment in Antakalnis. The windows looked out on the Neris River, with its green shore line and the odd building near the water. In those early months, this placid view would only occasionally be broken by maneuvers of Soviet Army soldiers from a nearby base. With backpacks and rifles, and often in camouflage, they would run back and forth along the banks of the river. Officers in greatcoats, spaced several meters apart, would hold stopwatches and count time.

During the summer months, I moved to the Old Town, into a building built at the end of the last century. The third floor apartment I lived in had high ceilings, rattling pipes, ancient linoleum, fearless mice and a sagging balcony. It was from there that I looked down on a courtyard where the full panorama of Soviet life was played out daily.

The people who lived here were mostly Russians who came to Lithuania after the war, and so Russian, not Lithuanian, echoed in the courtyard. During the day old women would sit on rotten wooden benches under the courtyard's few trees -- there was no grass, only dirt -- watching small boys playing with sticks and waiting for the delivery of inedible-looking sausage at the back entrance of an otherwise empty butcher shop. The high point of the day was the 2 p.m. arrival of the garbage truck, when people from all the surrounding buildings -- the courtyard was enclosed

on all sides -- poured forth with their buckets of potato peelings.*

As dusk would fall, the small boys would put away their sticks and go inside with the old women. Then the big boys would come out, drinking and smoking in the darkened corners of the courtyard. The friend in whose apartment I stayed -- she was gone for the summer -- was frightened to go out after dark, remarking that "the whole underclass of the Soviet system was on stage" then. Her fears were not without basis. One morning last spring she discoverd two front wheels of her car -- not just the tires, the entire wheels -- had been stolen during the night. (It is common knowledge that anyone who leaves their windshield wipers on their cars is just begging for them to disappear.)

In September, I moved from the city center to your average post-war Soviet suburb. I lived in one of the new neighborhoods, called Lazdynai, that ring Vilnius. Home was a two-room apartment in a standard five-story multi-dwelling building. Everything about this place was typical -- from the broken window in the front door of the building (it was never locked) to the smell of cat urine in the halls to the vista that my fourth floor apartment window offered me -- views of other buildings across the street much like mine. Cracks in the concrete facade outside looked like the outline of a very complicated jigsaw puzzle. It was all pretty dismal; yet the urban planners had gotten one architectural prize after another for this area.

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* The system of garbage collection here is one that I haven't been able to get used to. The idea of large bins or containers where people can dump their trash hasn't yet caught on. Instead, garbage trucks visit each neighborhood daily, sometimes twice a day. They honk to announce their arrival. Everyone then runs out of their apartments, and lines up at the back of the truck to deposit their garbage into its jaws. No fuss, little mess -- and pick-up is over within ten minutes. But there are problems. What if you are never around when the garbage man comes, or what if you just never hear that honk, loud and grating as it is? In the four months I was in Antakalnis, I never once saw or heard it, regardless of how faithfully I waited for its appearance. I then did was everyone else was forced to do in such circumstances. I tied up the garbage in neat little bundles and, as inconspicuously as possible, deposited it in the small refuse bins at most trolley stops.)

It was from there that, barely two months later, I moved to Turniškes, the most self-contained community in Vilnius. The first indication I got that life was just a tad easier here had to do with that garbage thing I mentioned earlier. There, in the back of our house, I saw the bins that I was so used to in the great metropolitan centers of the decadent West -- the kind that said, "Deposit your trash here anytime you want to and then forget it. When the garbage man comes to empty us out is our problem, not yours."

There were other small signs of comfort, noticeable only because they can't be taken for granted elsewhere to the city. Turniškes has its own water tower, independent of the municipal authorities. There is therefore little danger of the hot water being arbitrarily turned off here. (But there is nothing to prevent it from coming out of the shower nozzle a nice rusty brown color every other morning.)

Then there is the heating. In Vilnius, heating in private houses and public buildings alike is not regulated individually, but by the municipal authorities. Heat is generally turned off in the early spring (this year, the blockade nicely dovetailed with the turn-off date in late April) and is uniformly turned on again in the fall. Not so in Turniškes. While everyone in Vilnius shivered in their frosty apartments until late October, the radiators here were happily hissing away a full month earlier.

Little things like that mean a lot.

Turniškes is a relatively new community, her history stretching back only half a century. When Vilnius was still under Polish rule in the late 1930's, plans were drawn up to build a hydro-electric plant in the area, siphoning off water from the Neris River, a ten minute walk away. (Cut through the forests, clamber down the hill, pass through one of the several holes in the chain link fence, and there you find the Neris flowing by, its shores little changed in the past century. Only the odd wooden house can be seen in the distance.)

World War II interrupted everything. (From the looks of it, the interruption came very close to home indeed. When I go for a walk in the forests around here, occasionally I come across a perfectly shaped circular crater, now overgrown with foliage. That, I am told, is a physical reminder of a either a bomb or grenade explosion.)

After the war, the hydro-electric plant project never did get anywhere further. All that remained from it were four villas that had been put up to house the workers who were to have built it. Four more were built after the war, and victorious Soviet officials were the first ones to reside in them. (Today, these buildings have a different kind of occupant. A few weeks ago, for

example, the director of the Lithuanian news agency, Elta, moved into one. A young three-person family, their previous home had been a cramped two room apartment in Vilnius city center shared with her parents.)

In the 1950's, the Lithuanian government decided to turn the entire area in this northeast corner of Vilnius -- much larger than just Turniškes itself -- into a protected recreational region. Development of any kind was prohibited. (It was a wise move; for the pine forests here are simply beautiful, the sort of place one imagines from Doctor Zhivago.) The entire area, called Valakampiai, soon became the most accessible spot for the people of Vilnius to escape to. In the spring, they went berry-picking in forests blanketed with tiny wild strawberries, blueberries and raspberries. In the summer, they swam in the Neris River. In the fall it was back to the forest again to hunt mushrooms.

The natural, almost undisturbed beauty of the area is what I most like about it. In the almost two months that I have been here, I have spotted deer four times. The forests are filled with porcupines and other creatures a city dweller like I is not used to coming across. There are even traces of rootings made by wild boar. (In what other European capital city can you imagine deer roaming freely just 12 kilometers from the center of town?)

Turniškes evolved when the government decided to separate a part of this forest paradise, comprising several acres, and start building around those few houses the Poles had left. Over several years, the present compound was created. Of course, it was immediately off-limits to all but the most elite of Lithuania's Communist Party apparatus.

Who were these people? Well, in our house alone -- a solid white brick two-story building with four apartments -- the former occupants included quite a few high-ups. Upstairs, the widow of Antanas Sniečkus, Lithuania's first Communist Party Secretary from 1945 to 1974, lived until 1988. Her next-door neighbor was the head of the Lithuanian KGB. Our apartment itself was last occupied by the First Secretary of the Komsomol in Lithuania. And so on. Life was indeed quite good for the favored few. Turniškes, you see, was merely a second residence. All had apartments -- sometimes even houses -- in Vilnius itself.

Like the special stores stocked with imported goods -- there is one in Turniškes too -- chauffeured limousines, coveted trips abroad, the compound was just one more symbol of the privileges the Communist Party enjoyed, underscoring the wide chasm between itself and the workers in whose name it ruled. And the arrogance in which this was done was sometimes as petty as it was gratuitous. Director of the compound Algimantas Norkus remembers that "sometimes years would go by before some apparatchik would

condescend to say hello to me. Usually one did so only after losing a position." Adds one young woman, a worker at Turniškes, "Little kids would threaten me that if I didn't run when they snapped their fingers, they would tell their grandfather, the minister, and he'd have me fired. That's how quickly the young absorbed their status."

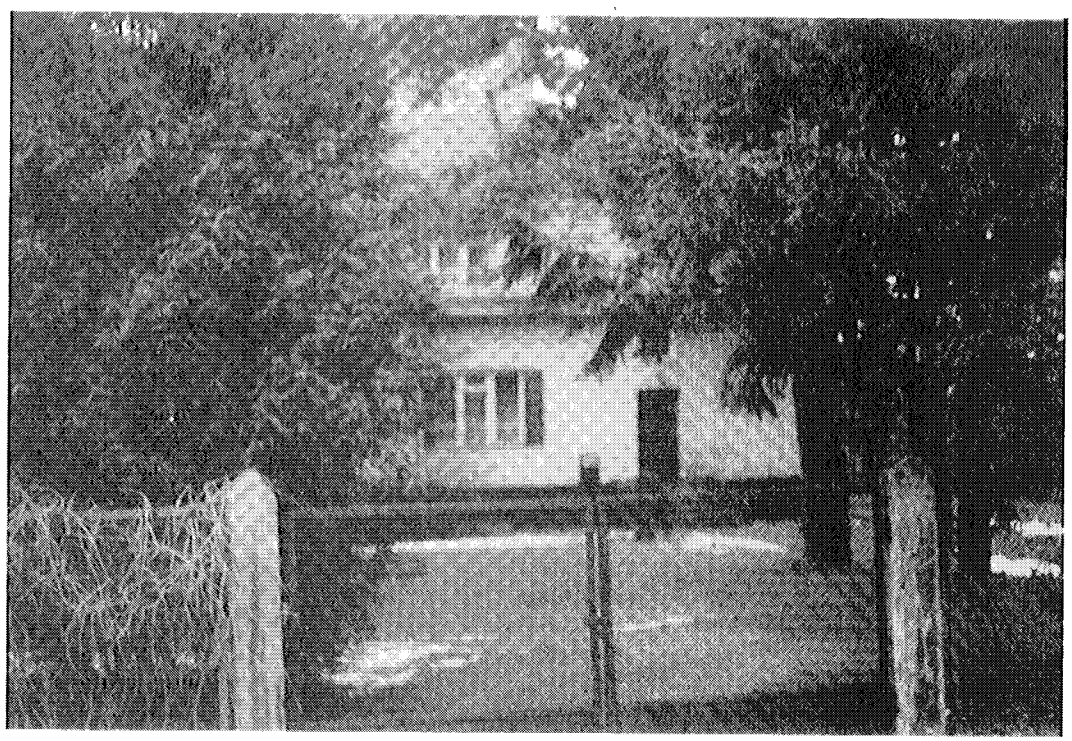
Those were the days when an apparatchik was indeed a mini-god. All a minister had to do was phone the store in the center of the compound and all the food he ordered would be brought up to his house, pronto, and delivered with a smile. There were servants to change the linens, workers to haul in new furniture into an empty apartment to ready it for new occupants. (Now there is no such thing as new furniture.) An artist friend remembers once being extended a rare invitation to go shopping in the compound's food store. "There was imported whisky, imported coffee and fresh oranges," she recalls. She left the compound barely able to carry two heavy bags filled with these goodies.

Still, Turniškes had its pecking order. One's place in the hierarchy all depended in which of the 26 buildings -- none with more than six apartments -- one happened to live. At the bottom of the list were very modest apartments in two-storey white brick houses tucked at the back of the compound. They were comfortable enough, but as they were very close to one another, there was very little privacy. Next came buildings like ours -- also modest, for the largest apartments are only three rooms -- but more solidly built, and set further apart from one another. Then came the three sprawling stucco buildings where some apartments even had fireplaces. Still more coveted were single family pre-fabricated modern cottages with steeply pitched rooves. Finally, at the top of the list, there were sprawling single family stucco villas, with their own private orchards and separate guard houses. Norkus, an eight year veteran at Turniškes, remembers, "You could always tell who was coming up and who was going down by the type of place they were given to live in the summer." In those days, he adds, everyone who worked at Turniškes -- some 50 people, most who take care of the grounds -- knew everything about everyone, "not only the ministers, but their children and their grandchildren."

And suddenly, they were all gone. With the overwhelming Sajudis victory in February 1990 to Lithuanian Parliament, the old order was swept away. After more than half a century, the Communist Party elite had to begin giving up some of their privileges. Keys to the summer residences at Turniškes began being handed over. For several months, the compound stood empty. At first, expecting immediate recognition of Lithuanian independence from the West, the new leaders thought of leaving Turniškes empty for the residences of foreign embassies. But as the weeks turned into months, and no recognition was extended, plans changed. Newly elected members of Parliament from out of

town, packed into the government hotel, began to grumble that they missed their families, they wanted to have a semblance of a normal life after a grueling day in Parliament. In addition, there were also Vilnius residents, who despite years of waiting, still had no apartments of their own in the capital. In early June, the first new occupants to Turniškes began trickling in.

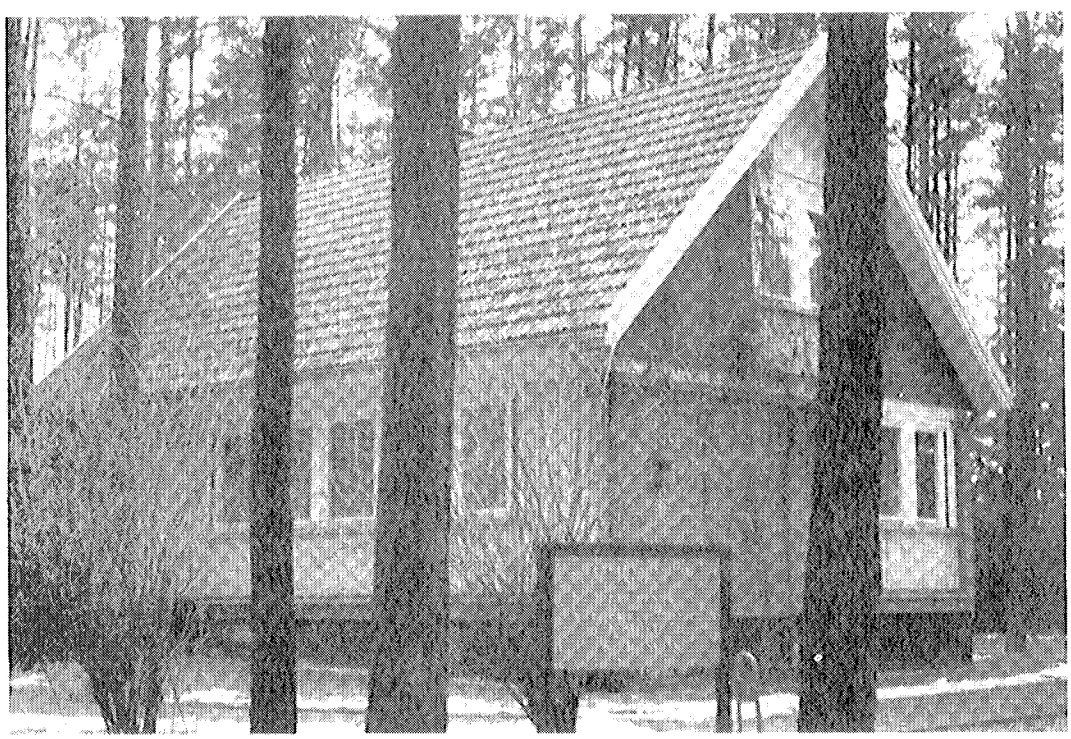
Who are the newcomers? Well, Prime Minister Prunskiene for one. She lives down the road -- at Number #3 Turniškes street, in one of those sprawling single family stucco houses with private garden, circular driveway -- I have seen a white BMW sitting there -- and separate guardpost tucked discreetly to the side under evergreen trees. On some mornings, just before 9 a.m., I see an official black Volga limousine whiz by, confidently cutting through the forest, chauffeuring the Prime Minister to her office downtown.



3 Turniškes Street. Prime Minister Prunskiene's residence.

Other neighbors include some suddenly prominent people whose former digs were very humble indeed. For example, until he moved to Turniškes, the current Minister of Culture and Education, 28 year old Darius Kuolys, use to live with his wife and baby in a one-room dormitory. He was not the only one. I visited a newly elected member of Parliament a few months ago in another one-room dormitory just as he was putting his two children to bed. Where was their bedroom? The hallway. He, too, recently moved into Turniškes.

While there are no foreign embassies yet in Lithuania, there are at least the nascent makings of some. The official Lativan and Estonian representatives to Lithuania live next door to each other here in Turniškes. Their attractive, yet standard pre-fabricated cottages serve as both offices and residences -- a mixed blessing. As residences they are more than adequate; as offices less so, for they are far removed from the center of action downtown. Noone can just stop by for a chat, and given the fences and guards, the small Latvian and Estonian communities here in Vilnius find their official represenatives much too inacessible. (A sidenote: The former occupant of the Estonian residence was once a secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party's Central Committee. Today he is one of the few Communist Party survivors who was elected to Parliament. But where once he had the cottage in Turniskes -- complete with sauna in the basement -- today he doesn't even have his own office anymore, sharing one with two other parliamentarians.)



Turniškes. The Estonian mission and residence.

Local people in Valakampiai have been quick to grumble that nothing all that much has changed in Turniškes, despite the newcomers. "At least the old masters let us come shop here; the new masters don't" is a common complaint. And that is indeed the case. But Laima Laškova, who has worked in the food store since 1970 and who quickly won the reputation of being the pleasantest salesperson in Vilnius, defends the move. "In the old days, there was something to buy," she says. "Now what is there?" gesturing towards the one of two empty deli counters in the Turniškes food store the week after Christmas. "There is not enough even for the residents here."

Laškova presides over what there is. Every Tuesday and Thursday, a special truck brings makes a delivery to Turniškes, bringing items from underground storage rooms belonging to the Lithuanian Council of Ministers. On those days, lines quickly form outside the one-room store, and within two hours, most things are already all sold out. It is here that the new Turniškes elite comes to buy, to see and be seen. And they can do so at their leisure. As there is no self-service -- Laškova stands behind the counter handing over each item to each shopper -- the line moves very very slowly.

There are usually less than 20 items in stock. This past month, butter disappeared altogether for weeks at a time. Flour, sugar and eggs were rationed, as was meat (one kilogram per person per week). A week before Christmas, on an off (non-delivery) day I saw the following in the store: tea, mayonnaise, peanuts, apples, dark and white bread, canned peas, potatoes, carrots and cabbage. On a delivery day, there were additional items such as poppy seeds, sausages, lemons and tangerines. (The last two were a special treat). That's it. But most of these products had disappeared altogether from other stores elsewhere in the city.

The fact that this is an elite store is a bitter irony. In line before Christmas, an Estonian friend told me how ashamed she was when she accepted a care package, sent from West Germany, from her local church. There was (she remembered this precisely) "two kilograms of flour, one of sugar, one package of coffee, some chocolate."

"I was so ashamed," she said. I stared at her. "But you might need it all," I said. She shook her head yes, she knew this. But it still left her feeling demeaned.

So there's no escaping it -- the empty shelves, that awful feeling of being an eternal pauper (in one's own eyes, if noone else's). That feeling haunts all of Lithuania, no matter where one lives. Even if it's the swankiest neighborhood in town...

Best wishes,

Ina

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