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"Pilgrimage to Lomža"

For much of the past decade, Pope John Paul II has expressed the desire to visit Lithuania. Regularly, the Vatican puts out feelers to Soviet officials to this effect, but the answer is always the same -- nyet.

If the pope ever does come here, he will find a Catholic country no less devout than his own native Poland. Over two-thirds of Lithuania's 3,7 million people are Roman Catholics, forming the densest enclave in the Soviet Union. Divided into six dioceses -- Vilnius, Kaunas, Panevėžys, Kaišiadorys, Telšiai and Vilkaviškis -- the presence of the church in this little country is strong. As of November 1, 1990, there were 659 churches, and 672 priests in Lithuania. Moreover, both the 80 percent Lithuanian majority and 8 percent Polish minority -- sharing little more than antipathy too much of the time -- are bound together by a fervent attachment to the same religion.

The significance of this factor has not been lost on hard-line Communist Party apparatchiks still loyal to the idea of the old Soviet Union. Usually of Russian or Polish origin themselves, they retain a stronghold in the non-Lithuanian towns and villages within the republic. Their policies -- such as declaring certain regions independent of Vilnius -- seek to keep the country's various minorities divided from the Lithuanian majority. That, of course, is not always so hard to do, particularly among Russians. But many local Poles, for example, also find little in the sentiments of Lithuania's national rebirth with which they identify. For their part, enough members of the Lithuanian government and the Lithuanian clergy are still haunted by past wrongs -- before Russian there was Polish domination -- and tend to believe that Catholicism notwithstanding, the Polish minority is a force more easily swayed by Moscow than even Warsaw. Shared faith seems to matter little in quelling such misgivings.

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In fact, it often becomes just one more arena for accentuating them. When the Lithuanian Communist Party returned Vilnius Cathedral to the church almost three years ago, for example -- the building was an art gallery for almost four decades -- the rector, Archbishop Julijonas Steponavičius*, decided that despite the many Polish Catholics in Vilnius (about 19 percent of the city's inhabitants) and the surrounding regions, no masses in Polish would be held there. He argued that with eight parishes celebrating Masses in Polish already, the spiritual needs of Polish-speaking Catholics were being satisfactorily met. (There are about 20 predominantly Polish parishes in Lithuania altogether.)

Steponavičius was following a tit-for-tat principle. When Vilnius was part of Poland between the two world wars, the Polish Catholic hierarchy had instituted the same policy regarding Lithuanian-language Masses -- and stuck to it, even when the city reverted to Lithuanian rule in 1939. In addition, for decades after World War II in Poland itself, Lithuanian-language Masses were prohibited in areas heavily populated by ethnic Lithuanians.

All this can lead one to wonder how much Christian spirit, never mind political astuteness, was imbued in either past or present decisions. In this case, having a long memory didn't make anybody wiser -- it just made them repeat the same mistake, with the same consequences. As one young Lithuanian Pole told me, "People in my village don't remember what proclamation comes from Moscow, but that there are no Polish Masses in the Cathedral -- this they remember."

The pope is not only the strongest, but perhaps also the only force capable of bringing the Lithuanians and Polish origin Lithuanian citizens together. I remember hearing (I have been unable to confirm this, however) that it was largely due to his intervention that the prohibition against Lithuanian-language masses was lifted some years ago in Poland, blunting some of the ill will that had developed between Poles and Lithuanians there over the decades. Moreover, he speaks both languages. (His command of Lithuanian, though heavily accented, is better than passable). This facility has more than just symbolic importance for Lithuanians, who have felt that over the centuries their language and culture has consistently been de-valued, in not outright scorned, by their larger neighbors, be they Russians, Poles, or Germans.

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* Archbishop Steponavičius passed away on June 18. It is believed that the "No Masses in Polish" policy will soon be reversed.

A visit to Lithuania by a pope who is already familiar with, and sensitive to, the problems of the region would undoubtedly be an event of immense political as well as spiritual importance. Perhaps too much so, for its seems that his presence here is still a risk Moscow is not yet prepared to take. And so, when the pontiff's fourth visit to his Poland took place during the first eight days of this month, no side trip to Lithuania -- so close and yet so far -- was built into his schedule.

But the faithful in Lithuania did not fret. Instead, they took matters into their own hands. If the pope could not come to them, they would go to him. In early June, for the first time ever, thousands of Lithuania's Roman Catholics embarked on a pilgrimage to see -- or at least hear -- the prince of their church.

Over 25,000 Lithuanian citizens participated in the venture. (Although, not surprizingly, Polish and Lithuanian expeditions were organized separately.) Almost 10,000 people, many with relatives in Poland, timed their own private journeys to coincide with the pope's trip. In addition, about 1,500 Lithuanian Poles headed for the towns of Bialystok and Olsztyn, where the pope appeared on June 5 and 6. But a full 15,000 believers -- the majority Lithuanians -- participated in what was for them the main event, a three-day pilgrimage to Lomža on June 3 - 5, a town of 60,000 inhabitants about 160 kilometers from the Polish-Lithuanian border.

They came from all corners of Lithuania. Throughout the entire day on Monday, June 3rd, in scores of villages and towns, some 430 specially hired busses started up their engines and headed for the Lithuanian-Soviet-Polish border post of Lazdijai-Ogorodniki. By 8 a.m. the following morning the last one had already crossed into Poland, and was on its way south towards Lomža.

During the days before the pilgrimage, I heard officials in Vilnius, weary from preparing documents for so many people to cross the border, somewhat ironically refer to them as "those pilgrims" or worse, "davatkas", a rather sarcastic term connoting a particularly fanatical kind of believer. Although there exists a typical image of a davatka -- someone usually female, usually middle-aged or elderly, usually single -- the term refers as much to a state of mind as it does to a stereotype. To be a davatka means to be fanatically devout, enthusiastically superstitious, traditional to the point of intolerant (in one small Lithuanian town, for example, local davatkas recently raised a storm when Franciscan friars began accompanying hymns by playing guitars -- in church, no less!) and of course, righteous. A davatka's highest, often only, authority is the village priest -- although he too, is not above chastisement if he strays from the proper path.

Lithuania's davatkas are a force to be reckoned with. Last summer, for example, in its first act of censorship, the Lithuanian government closed down a mildly pornographic publication called Twenty Kopecks. It did so rather unwillingly, giving in to pressure from the Lithuanian clergy. And the clergy, also unwillingly, had given in to pressure from guess who.

Yet anywhere else, comments about "davatkas" by bureaucrats would not have caught my attention. But in Lithuania -- where for two generations vicious anti-religious feeling was state-sponsored -- such snide asides left me disturbed. Many of the very same officials who today benignly prepared documents, allowing themselves these few ironic expressions, yesterday accepted the sentencing of priests to labor camps for "anti-Soviet propaganda" without a murmur.

The Communist regime in Lithuania rightly perceived the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church as its most formidable enemy, and did everything possible to eradicate it from national life. It was able to impose a repression far severer than anything -- despite her many travails -- that the stronger Polish Catholic Church experienced. In the 1940's priests and nuns were among the first to be deported to Siberia. Countless were killed. All schools, convents and seminaries (save one) were closed down. (And the KGB vetted the application process to the one seminary that was allowed to remain open.) Church property was confiscated. Teaching religion to children was illegal. Even religious rituals were restricted to the point of the absurd. When, for example, the Catholic calendar called for a procession in honor of some saint's day or other, that procession was forbidden to set foot outside church grounds. In the 1970's and 1980's, outspoken priests were harassed, arrested, even murdered. (Last summer I saw one of the remnants from these much too recent times -- a card catalogue kept by the Ministry of Cults (since disbanded) where the religious life of each Lithuanian church was monitored and recorded on a separate card.)

The Lithuanian church fought back with the limited means she had available to her. Instances of religious persecution were recorded in an underground publication, started in 1972, called the Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania. It was the only underground publication that the KGB never succeeded in closing down.

But these are only the most recent troubles. Long before the second half of this century, the Roman Church already felt embattled here. For centuries this part of the world was the easternmost frontier of the Faith in Europe, the battleground for the hearts and minds of the last souls on the continent to worship the sun and the moon and thunder, the last souls to deify earthly creatures such as the grass snake and an extinct European animal named aurochs (a type of bison).

That Lithuania is a Catholic country is partly thanks to the failure of the Teutonic Order, back in the early Middle Ages, to conquer these pagan hold-outs for Rome. In those Baltic lands where the Order succeeded -- Estonia and Latvia -- German rule was established. Two centuries later, the ideas of the Reformation more easily took root there. Today, those two countries are overwhelmingly Lutheran.

In Lithuania things were different. Her destiny as a Roman Catholic nation was determined by one of those marriages cum political alliances so prevalent in the Middle Ages.

In 1385, Lithuania's pagan Grand Duke Jogaila, (Jagiello in Polish; a statue of him stands in Central Park near the Metropolitan Museum in New York) was offered the hand of Poland's 11-year old Queen, Jadwiga, and the Polish crown, if he agreed to meet certain conditions. Jogaila, who saw Christianity as the creed of the future -- and who very much wanted to be an honest-to-goodness king -- was prepared to pay dearly for this honor. He made the following pledges: to convert to Catholicism (and to convert Lithuania as well) to unite all Lithuanian as well as Russian lands under Lithuanian control with Poland, to strive to retrieve all those Polish territories currently held by her enemies. In addition, he paid 200,000 florins to Prince Wilhelm of Austria, to whom Jadwiga had been betrothed, for breaking that marriage contract.

Jogaila

The following year, 1386, Jogaila set the whole thing in motion. He went to Cracow, converted, (taking the Christian name Wladyslaw) married Jadwiga, and founded a dynasty of Polish kings that lasted almost two hundred years. He also took the first step toward uniting Lithuania and Poland into one state; soon after his death in 1434, both countries began to be ruled by the same king. (Yet it was only after the Treaty of Lublin was signed in 1569 that the Zecpospolita, the Republic, which formally united the two countries, was established. It lasted until the first partition of Poland in the late 18th century).

In 1387, Jogaila returned to Vilnius, and oversaw 600 reluctant pagan Lithuanians wade into the Neris River in a mass ceremony and be baptized. That event marked Lithuania's official conversion to Christianity. Throughout the country, other such events soon followed. (It is said that each newly baptized soul received a shirt for his earthly reward. There are some historians today who argue that these shirts were made of linen; others say they were cotton. What is not disputed is that enough pagans knew a good deal when they saw one and got baptized more than once.) But by introducing Poland's religion, and Poland's culture, Jogaila also set the stage for Lithuanian - Polish tension for the next six hundred years, a tension that is still alive today, and will probably last into the next millenium.

The proof is in how these events are interpreted in modern times. I quote a basic history textbook for schoolchildren written in 1935. The book went into its eighth printing in 1990, attesting that its popularity -- despite 50 years of prohibition by Communist authorities -- is pretty solid.

> "The acceptance of Christianity from Rome had very important consequences for Lithuania. Lithuania entered the orbit of Western European culture -- the influence of the East, Byzantium, diminished. But at the same time the polonization of our country began, in the beginning affecting only the upper classes, later also the larger masses of people. The Polish clergy, in proselytising the Catholic faith, did not learn Lithuanian. They scorned the legacy left by paganism and forced the neophytes to learn Polish. In this way, the development of a written Lithuanian language was halted for a long time."[1]

The Lithuanians occasionally still snuck off into the forests to worship their old gods. Nevertheless, for the next two hundred years, Catholicism flourished. Threats to the church in Lithuania began to arise when the Reformation spread throughout Europe in the 16th century. Many Lithuanian nobles -- including the Radvila (better known as Radziwill) family -- converted to Protestantism. Yet the church reacted strongly, and when the newly formed Order of Jesuits arrived in Vilnius in the mid-1500's, these heretic aristocrats were brought back into line, and forced to re-convert. The "damage" was contained.

From 1795 until Lithuanian independence in 1918, the main threat to the Roman Church came from the East rather than the West; from the Russian Orthodox hierarchy and czarist Russia. (With the partition of Poland in the late 18th century, the part that included Lithuania came under imperial Russian rule.) In an indication of what was to come with even more ruthless verocity in the 20th century, enforced russification of all spheres of life, including religion, took place. Then, too, Church property was confiscated and the publication of religious texts was severely restricted. Between 1864 and 1904, all books in Lithuania, including Roman Catholic catechisms and prayerbooks, were allowed to be published only in "Graždanka"* -- that is, the Lithuanian Latin alphabet transliterated into Cyrillic.

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* History has a funny way of repeating itself. When Leonid Brezhnev was Communist Party boss in Moldavia in the early 1950's, one of his assignments was to russify the region. Taking a lesson from his czarist forebears, Brezhnev introduced "Graždanka" -- transliterating the written Romanian language from its Latin alphabet into Cyrillic. The more things change...

1. Daugirdaite-Sruogiene, Vanda. Lietuvos Istorija. (Vilnius; Vyturys, 1990).

Yet, the rise of nationalist movements throughout Europe in the 19th century gave Lithuania an ideological weapon with which to resist these measures. A new, home-grown variety of priest, who wrote and spoke in Lithuanian, emerged. Often the only educated individual in a village -- Lithuania was overwhelmingly a rural, agricultural society -- this new priest was prophet, educator, activist all rolled into one. The Lithuanian clergy became intrinsically tied to the re-awakening of Lithuania's national consciousness. It brought not only the same Catholic religion to the masses -- offering a more acceptable alternative to the Polish one -- but also instilled a deep sense of national identity. That resulted in the reestablishment of Lithuania's statehood in 1918, the statehood she had lost from her union with Poland in the Middle Ages.

I will stop here, knowing the weakness that people east of the Elbe have for history. People here, for example, talk about the Battle of Grunwald, when the Teutonic Order was finally soundly defeated on July 15, 1410, with the nostalgia and fervor as if it were only yesterday. Grunwald (literally meaning Green Forest) translates into Žalgiris in Lithuanian, and one sees the name everywhere. There is a Žalgiris soccer team, a Žalgiris basketball team, a Žalgiris stadium, a Žalgiris liquer, a Žalgiris components factory, Žalgiris living room furniture set, Žalgiris candy, and scores and scores of Žalgiris streets. Puzzled, I once asked someone why this was so, and he somewhat drily answered, "Because that was the last time that we won." Ouch.

When Lithuania's own brand of glasnost and perestroika started three years ago, the church sprang back from her defensive position. She rushed to reclaim not only many of her stolen properties, but also the prominent role she had had in everyday life in Lithuania before Communist rule. But it was not really a reestablishment of the natural order of things. Pervaded by a sense of urgency, the church rushed headlong, wanted to make up for lost time.

Half a century is a lot of time to compress into three short years. The Lithuanian church is faced with an identity crisis that she has not even recognized yet. Her image of herself is still rooted in the way she was half a century ago; for many clergy, time stopped still in 1940. Internationally, however, the church has changed. So it is arguable whether this sense of urgency is necessarily for the better. The winds of Vatican II, which did much to further the spirit of ecumenism, have yet to be felt here. For example, a Mennonite group from the United States recently made arrangements to open a college in the fifth largest city in Lithuania, Panevėžys. That caused an uproar from the Catholic hierarchy, which complained that being the dominating religion in the republic, the church should have been consulted about all these plans....

Discontent has begun to be voiced in other quarters as well. One prominent Russian Orthodox leader, for example, a man who has come under considerable attack from local Russians for his support of Lithuanian independence, just recently warned that Roman Catholicism is on its way towards becoming the state religion.

This past winter, it certainly looked like it already had. In the wake of the failed military coup on January 13, both the inside and outside of Parliament became a sort of shrine. In the front lobby of the building, a table was set up where all kinds of religious paraphanelia -- tiny portraits of the saints, mini pocket cards with various prayers, rosaries and crucifixes -- were on display. Large pictures and even larger crucifixes were hung from a central awning. It all looked like a bazaar.

That display was around for several weeks, finally removed after subdued protests from many parliamentarians who argued that this was, after all, a secular building. Yet a more fundamental problem exists. One of the most burning questions today in Lithuania is teaching religion in public schools. For the past two years, elective classes in religion -- overwhelmingly Catholic, but the law allows for other religions to be taught as well -- have already been part of the public school curriculum. (That already makes me nervous, and I have often said so. But the justification I hear is the following: because the church has not yet been able to build her own schools, where else can such classes be held?)

This spring, the church went one step further, mounting a campaign to make religion classes in public schools mandatory. Many, though far from all, of Lithuania's new law-makers are resisting, and not only because of the danger in mixing church and state. As one parliamentarian, a member of the education and culture committee told me, "In being so aggressive, the church is hurting her own interests. Where is she going to get enough properly trained teachers?" He had a point. For a society officially anti-religious for so long (those teachers of atheism are just recently unemployed) there are no qualified religion teachers. Unless of course, one counts the davatkas...

Who, if we are to believe those cynical bureaucrats, were there in full force for the pilgrimage to Lomža.

"This is a once in a lifetime experience," said our group leader, addressing the some 40 people in our bus as it pulled away from Cathedral Square in downtown Vilnius on the sunny late afternoon of June 3rd. "And," he added ominously,"I don't want any of you to mess it up."

Now what precisely did he mean by that? Never mind that it is accepted behavior in Lithuania for one adult to publicly address a group of other adults as if they were all wayward children, the gentleman did have a few concrete things in mind. There were three border stations (Lithuanian - Soviet - Polish) which had to be crossed -- each with its own rules and regulations -- and each empowered to turn the bus back if these were not followed.

Herein was the second reason why this pilgrimage was particularly significant. Although Lomža is only about 300 to 350 kilometers away from Vilnius (in any normal sense, a five to six hour drive), passing those stations was going to be the first serious experiment in 50 years to make the short 110-kilometer border between Lithuania and Poland, gateway to the west, more porous.

Only once before -- and very recently at that -- had this border been tested. During a special "Road to Europe" action last August 23 to commemorate the 51 anniversary of the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (when Hitler and Stalin divided up Eastern Europe between them), about 1000 activists from Sajudis marched across the border into Poland. What they hoped to demonstrate was that Lithuania was a part of Europe and could not be cut off from her any longer. They went about four or five kilometers inland, "walked around a bit" as one Sajudis activist remembers, and came back. Then, as stunned Soviet border guards looked on, they read aloud a manifesto about their inalienable rights to travel, and handed them a bumper sticker with "Free the Baltics" in large bold letters in English. (That bumper sticker was still prominently stuck on a window pane when we drove through the Soviet border station the night of June 3rd.)

Preparations for this pilgrimage were much more complicated than that first experiment last August. On the Soviet side, the border is controlled by a military unit under the jurisdiction of the KGB. The headquarters of this unit for the Baltic region is in Riga. Additional personnel was sent from there to handle the mass of people expected between June 2 and June 6.

For the better part of a month, Sajudis coordinated almost every step with the Soviet border officials -- agreeing on how many people would be allowed through, what kind of documents they would have to carry, how thorough those dreaded border searches would be. As we left Vilnius, I saw the carefully drawn up lists of passengers on our bus -- as on every bus -- in the hands of the bus leader. The lists were in triplicate. Everyone's name and patronymic, date of birth and passport numbers were written down -- in Cyrillic -- and three identical photographs of those minors traveling on parental passports were attached to each of the three copies. Each person on the list was assigned a number, and sat in the corresponding seat on the bus.

Each bus also received a number -- ours was # 192 -- and arrival times at the border were staggered so that they would arrive more or less in numerical order. At least, that's the way it was supposed to be.

For their part, the Soviet border guards agreed to waive many of their usual requirements.* These included the requirement that each of the 15,000 people going on the Sajudis-organized pilgrimage needed to have a separate exit stamp in their passports for Poland. Normally, in order to get this stamp -- and be issued a special passport good only for travel abroad -- a Soviet citizen needs to produce an invitation from either an individual or organization from the host country. Now, as long as the bus leader and bus driver possessed such "foreign" passports, the Soviet border guards agreed to accept the standard internal passports, minus stamp, for everyone else. (These passports for foreign travel are in critically short supply these days. There simply aren't enough printed up to meet the demand. I have heard rumors -- of course unconfirmed -- that the Kremlin has added to the problem. Special secret instructions are said to have been sent to the one factory, located outside Moscow, that manufactures passports for the entire Soviet Union. Shipments of blanks to Lithuania, according to the rumors, were to be suspended. Where there is a deficit, there is a black market. I heard that the going rate to bribe the appropriate bureaucrat -- or, in the case of those who refuse to be bought, shady intermediaries -- to get issued a standard red passport used for travel abroad is about 3000 rubles or 300 West German marks or both.)

But although coordinating all these steps with the Soviet officials was the chief obstacle, it was by far not the only one. Since last year, the Lithuanians have set up their own customs booths at over 30 crossings along the 1747 kilometers of her land border. Standing a few kilometers inside Lithuanian territory, their basic function is to enforce the republic's draconian export regulations. (Since this past spring, the export of items above 200 rubles is subject to a 200 percent customs duty. In addition, not more than two pieces of the same kind of item is allowed to be taken out at all. That means "just about everything" according to customs officials I spoke with, including textiles, furs, televisions, household appliances, vaccuum cleaners, furniture, construction materials, works of art. (All the above-mentioned goods are produced in Lithuania.) In addition, there are items that are prohibited from export altogether -- weapons, narcotics, some medicines, archives, cultural artifacts, etc.

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* The Soviets also agreed that one American -- yours truly -- would be allowed to cross the border at Lazdijai rather than Grodno (70 kilometers away), or Brest Litovsk (200 kilometers away), the usual crossing points for foreign nationals.

The whole idea is to prevent "speculation", that old Soviet sin of buying goods at state prices and reselling them at black market ones. The Lithuanian government, terrified of being bled dry, hopes to control the outflow of whatever is produced or imported into the republic.* But the result is that not only do "speculators" suffer. So too do all the nascent capitalists and newly established businessmen. (Many were your average Communist Party functionaries earlier. Today, using contacts from their previous privileged positions, they have set up private businesses).. This group has a new self-interest to turn Lithuania into a free market economy (ironic, isn't it?) -- but the new export rules have tied their hands.

"It's a barbaric law," admitted one Lithuanian customs official as he read the whole long list of prohibited items over the phone to me. "But what do you expect -- we are still barbaric ourselves."

So, for the past several months -- and until someone thinks of something better -- the Lithuanian customs officials either levy the exhorbitant duties or confiscate any item, other than clear and indisputable personal effects, of any value. These goods are then (supposedly) all turned back into the distribution network for re-sale within the republic. But there have been instances of corruption here as well, as some newly-hired customs officials (usually men in their 20's) with itchy fingers help themselves to some of those deficit items that they impound...

Taken alone, these new rules are enough to induce a mild seizure or two. But taken together with the Soviet customs rules -- enforced at, let's face it, the REAL border crossing just down the road -- the whole experience is enough to send someone completely around the bend. All that was ahead of us as we left Vilnius the evening of June 3.

We drove through the pine forests and rolling farmlands of southern Lithuania, one of the most picturesque parts of the country, arriving at Lazdijai at shortly before 9 p.m. It was still light out -- dusk fell only an hour later. After we stopped on the single lane road leading up to the border, I got out and went ahead to count all those in front of us. There were 67 busses -- such as number # 245 and # 386 (so much for numerical order) -- before we even reached the first of the three anxiety-inducing threshholds, the Lithuanian customs bureau. Still, there was a festive atmosphere. People clambered out of the busses, gathered in circles in the fields by the road, sang folk songs. Kids played tag. One man from our bus went far into the distance until he became almost a small speck in a field of tall grass, then sat down and meditated, his face turned toward the setting sun. As they waited, people joked and chatted -- not so much about the pope, as much as how many goodies the Lithuanian customs officials would uncover.

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* One of the principal trade routes is the Polish-Lithuanian corridor. Many Lithuanians have an image of Poles as heavy speculators; an image reinforced by such places as the largest black market fair outside Vilnius called Gariūnai. On weekends, it is packed with traders from Poland.

Waiting to pass through the Lithuanian-Soviet-Polish border, Lazdijai, June 3, 1991.

We found out soon enough. By about 10:30 p.m., Bus # 192 had slowly inched up toward the first control point. For the next hour and a half, Sajudis activists, together with the customs officials, climbed aboard several times to check and double-check names, and to run interference if there were any problems. We saw about three busses already pulled out of line standing on the side of the road. Young men in brown business suits -- looking more like security guards at a shopping mall than the customs officials that they were -- raced against time (after all, it was only one short night and there were over 400 busses to handle). They admitted that even with the cursory search they conducted "a mountain of vodka has already been collected". (Although the Lithuanian customs regulations allowed one bottle of vodka to be taken out of the country, Sajudis had instituted its own rule -- no booze at all. This was, after all, a pilgrimage of the devout...) No bus, including those pulled on the side of the road, was turned back (as had been threatened) but the typewriters at the customs bureau clacked long and loud into the night, writing up the inventory of goods collected. These included scores of household appliances, such as irons, and no less than five brand new television sets...

In comparison, the experience at the Soviet border station was mild. When Major Vydas Bučys, the director of operations at the Soviet border crossing at Lazdijai, climbed aboard our bus, he addressed the passengers -- in Lithuanian -- with a courtesy and respect I have never heard from a Soviet officer before. He smiled at the group and wished them well during their short stay in Lomža. Bučys was then followed by two young Soviet border guards who wordlessly went down the aisle, one checking everybody's passports, the other holding a clipboard and checking off names from the lists handed over by the bus leader. Only a cursory inspection of the bus followed.

By now, it was almost 1 a.m. When we crossed the third point -- the Polish border post called Ogorodniki -- the worst was over. The Polish inspection lasted only a few minutes --the least control of all three authorities.

But if anyone thought that security was less tight on the Polish side, they were soon dissuaded. As dawn broke -- we had stopped by the side of a road for about three hours to catch a catnap -- we saw just how extensive preparations for the pope's visit were. Still far from Lomža, we passed several points where police cars stood waiting, ready to direct traffic towards -- or avert it from -- the city.

As we drove through the countryside -- like southern Lithuania, a picturesque region of rolling hills, tree-lined roads and pine forests -- we also saw that all of Poland was celebrating. The pope's photo was everywhere; in shop windows and private houses alike. In some places, there were streamers with yellow and white triangles -- the Vatican colors -- fluttering in the gentle breeze, in others, the Polish national red and white colors. These sights accompanied us all the way to Lomža. The closer we got to the city, the denser were the decorations, the more numerous the police cars. Police had been brought into the area from all over Poland. (I was to experience the consequences of this time and again. I'd walk up to a policeman to ask directions and get the reaction, "Gee, I don't know, I'm from Lodz (or Wroclaw or Cracow)" in response. After a certain hour -- I think it was 9 or 10 a.m.-- all roads to Lomža were blocked off, and were reopened only at 3 p.m. the following day.

Once in Lomža, we somehow found our way to the central railroad station (stopping twice to ask for directions from police proved fruitless; they just smiled and shrugged their shoulders), with an enormous parking lot behind it. This was central base for the next 30 hours. Scores of busses from Lithuania were there already. In addition, I saw about five tents, four makeshift outhouses, and an old one-story brick administrative building for railway personnel -- the only permanent structure around. It was open for use by the pilgrims (and with a half-dozen open shower stalls, it was the only place where, if they wanted to, 15,000 people could have taken a cold shower.)

People fanned out. Some lucky ones (I was among them) found a place to sleep for the next night on the gymnasium floor of one of the many schools that Lomža had opened up for the purpose. Others pitched even more tents. Still others -- the least fortunate -- were destined to spend their second almost sleepless night on a bus.

The pope's agenda in Lomża on June 4 called for the consecration of the new Church of God's Mercy, ten years in construction and still not entirely completed. A red brick structure with sloping roof, it was situated in the middle of a new housing development -- those four and five story boxy concrete modern abominations that litter the landscape from Liverpool to Leningrad (progessively deteriorating the further east they go...)

A huge field, perfect for holding the approximately 200,000 people who gathered there by mid-afternoon, was adjacent to the church. A makeshift open-air altar -- with a backdrop made up completely with flowers -- stood high at the end of the field closest to the church. The field itself was divided into three or four large sections, each then subdivided into at least six or more smaller ones. Rough hewn wooden railings (giving me the rather undignified feeling of being herded into an enclosure like cattle) defined these areas. People were issued tickets -- as pilgrims from farther away, the Lithuanians got them for free, while the Poles had to pay 5,000 zlotys (just under 50 cents) -- where the section and subdivision were indicated. One was allowed to go only there, and nowhere else. Moreover, access was blocked off by 3 p.m. (The pope was due to arrive only two and a half hours later).

Some Lithuanians headed straight for the field upon arriving early in the morning, and stayed there all day. I went only in the early afternoon, and stayed all of ten minutes.

The field was a mass of dirt. The day had turned windy; the dry earth rose and swirled and coated everyone. The effect was as comical as it was uncomfortable -- dozens of young priests clad in long black cassocks looked like they hadn't been dusted for months. As the altar, far in the distance, was only partially visible anyway, I quickly made my exit. I decided that I would observe what I could from the vicinty of the school where I had found a place to sleep for the night -- located, luckily, at the very edge of the field. Heading back, I saw people crowded on balconies, lined up three deep on staircases, hanging onto lamp-posts -- anywhere that might offer a better vantage point.

At 5:30 p.m., seven helicopters appeared in the sky overhead, circling the field and then landing, one by one. The pope emerged from the last helicopter, stepped inside his special glass-encased Pope-mobile and passed the cheering crowds on the way to the altar. Then, flanked by hundreds of priests from Poland and Lithuania, the pope celebrated Mass, dedicating it to Poland's agricultural workers. He spoke primarily about the loss of moral values and the danger of promiscuity, the threat to the family unit. While I was able to hear him well -- his voice came over the many loudspeakers strong and clear -- all I could see of him was a tiny white speck in the distance.

Three hours later, Mass was over and the pope was whisked away. A few pilgrims from Lithuania remained in the field to participate in a second Mass, this time in Lithuanian, celebrated by the Lithuanian church hierarchy. Some of Lomza's shops -- although officially closed for the two days he would be in town -- now reopened for a few hours.

They were a sight for sore eyes. Food stores -- although sparse and modest by Western standards -- were well stocked by Lithuanian ones. Pasta, flour, butter -- all still rationed in Lithuania -- were freely available. There were several varieties of cheeses and cold cuts, several varieties of candies. There were fresh vegetables such as lettuce and tomatoes. I even saw fresh mushrooms. There were also what can be considered delicacies. In one store I saw cocoa from Holland, several different teas from Britain, raisins from Turkey, canned pineapple and canned peaches.

In addition, scores of vendors had descended on Lomża. They had set up their portable stands along the route from from the railway station to the field itself. Displaying their goods either on fold-up tables or the back end of trucks, they sold Western junk food. I saw at least five different kinds of soft drinks -- generally in two-liter plastic bottles -- cookies, candies, pretzels and nuts. Most of these items were from West Germany. Occasionally, there was something healthier, such as fruit-flavored joghurt, or that most prestigious of all fruits in the Soviet Union (though I have yet to figure out why) -- the banana!

Like at any event in the West, the souvenir hawkers were also there in full force, peddling everything from silver balloons with the pope's face on them to wooden plaques with the pope's face on them to small square rugs with the pope's face on them.

While I enjoyed browsing -- it was a welcome change after Lithuania's empty stores -- seeing all the well-stocked shelves also left a bittersweet feeling. The displays were proof of the basic difference between Poland and Lithuania today.

What exactly is that difference? The best way I know how to put it is by analogy. Let's say there are two patients, both afflicted with the same fatal disease, both at the brink of death. One patient gets lucky. First, he is given the opportunity to fire his quack doctors. Second, now free from their prescriptions, he can heal himself any way he wants to. He decides to take some strong, albeit bitter, medicine. He begins to recover. He is still weak, there is always danger of a relapse, but that doesn't matter. He has rediscovered hope -- hope that he will live, hope that he will be healthy again.

The other patient, seeing this, tries to do the same. But he isn't as blessed. Instead of successfully firing his doctors, he just gets them madder at him. Insulted that their authority is challenged, they decide to give him a taste of some medicine designed to worsen his condition. And indeed, it worsens. While no one has filled out his death certificate yet, many doubt that patient # 2 will survive. Even if he does, he will be an invalid forever. For now, he lingers on -- neither dead nor alive.

The disease which once made the two patients companions in misery no longer binds them. The recovering patient has different worries, different concerns now. In order to embrace life again, he needs to forget illness. The other represents everything he wants to forget. But the still sick patient doesn't understand this. He can speak of little else but his disease and those rotten doctors. The two find that they have less and less to talk about. They are two people who, both realizing one could soon die, grow awkward with one another. An unbridgeable chasm -- the chasm between hope and despair, between life and death, -- develops, and nothing, it seems, can halt it. Take me along, says the sick patient, on your road to recovery. Sorry, it's only for the survival of the fittest, says the other, nervous because he himself is not yet fully well.

Lithuanians who had been to Poland even last year told me how much had changed in the interim. Then, rundown and poor, Poland's face looked typical for the socialist world. Now she was beginning to rebuild -- renovating a building here, repainting a facade there. (Of course, Lomža was also an exception. In anticipation of the pope's visit, she had been sprucing herself up for the past half year. The narrow streets of her central old town were lined with shop after newly opened shop, looking very much like a normal Western European town. The crowning sign to me was a recently opened one-hour photo development store, which I promptly took advantage of the following day.)

Problems and all, Poland is entering the capitalist world. Lithuania, on the other hand, is still stuck in the old socialist one, with all the attendant ills. I observed these Lithuanians -- many in Poland the first time in their lives -- as they walked through Lomža's stores, silent most of the time, like poor children in front of a candy store that they knew was not and never would be theirs.* Some, apprehensive and ill-at-ease, asked vendors if the latter accepted rubles (Banks refused to change rubles into zlotys. Unofficially, when the Lithuanians first arrived, the going rate was 300 zlotys to a ruble; by the time they left, it fell to 200 zlotys to a ruble.) Most vendors refused to accept rubles altogether -- when they did, the price was prohibitive for Lithuanian pocketbooks. (A two-liter soft drink bottle, for example, cost 12,000 zlotys, or about 40 rubles, the average take home pay for one week. A kilogram of bananas cost 80 rubles -- two weeks take home pay.)

* The notion that one can have fully stocked stores and still not be able to afford what is in them is a concept that Lithuanians cannot yet accept. Poles are now forced to.

Some Lithuanians nevertheless tried to get themselves some zlotys. The following day, I saw one woman go from store to store, peddling a cheap-looking fluffy pink blouse. In every shop, she got a sympathetic look and a shake of the head. No thank you, we don't need it. I also saw other people from Lithuania, old women, spread out children's socks and other haberdashery items on large kerchiefs, hoping to find some buyers. (Now I understood why all those television sets, irons, hand-mixers and vodka had been taken along). Here was what the Soviet -- and the Lithuanian government too -- condemned as one of the heinous of all crimes, speculation. And in the case of the big-time operators, maybe they are right. But what I saw before me were the littlest of the little fish, and if there was anyone guilty of any sin, it was the governments whose addled policies forced people into such humiliating situations. Nobody likes to feel like a pauper. Nobody. In spite of the excitement of participating in this pilgrimage, I wouldn't be surprized if pretty much each of Lithuania's 15,000 pilgrims had exactly that feeling pass through them.

Day two, June 5, was the moment that Lithuanians had been waiting for. At 8 a.m. the pope, in a public forum in Lomža's St. Michael's Cathedral, met with the Lithuanian church hierarchy. A lucky five thousand people had been given special invitations to enter the church and witness the event.

The day began before dawn. By 4 a.m., our gymnasium had already come alive. People rubbed the sleep out of their eyes, rolled up their sleeping bags, gulped down a dry sandwich and some cold juice and hurried off. Soon a stream of people could be seen passing through the center of Lomža. They crossed two main boulevards, passed through several tree-lined squares, cut through back courtyards, all heading towards St. Michael's, a red brick gothic style cathedral built some 400 or 500 years ago. When they got within a block or two of the church, they came up against the first of two security cordons. Having passed through the first -- where invitations were scanned, bags were cursorily searched -- they then headed toward the second cordon, located at two of the churchyard's four entrances. And there, for the better part of the morning, they stayed.

By 5:45 a.m., I, too, was at that second security cordon. Confident that with over an hour left -- the public was allowed into St. Michael's between 4 and 7 a.m. -- I thought there would be no problem in crossing it and making my way into the churchyard, and then into the church. But I had not counted on security being as tight as it was. Several dozen police and uniformed security officials stood at the two entrances set aside for public entrance. Belongings were scrutinized with greater thoroughness than even at El-Al counters at airports.

I saw hundreds of nail files, small scissors, and other sharp instruments confiscated, piled on a heap behind the security officials. (I parted with a small Swiss Army knife that way. Security guards said that after the pope left these items could all be reclaimed. But there was no way to identify who belonged to what, and coming from shortage-ridden Lithuania, people helped themselves to what they found.)

So together with thousands of other hopefuls, I stood in a crowd in front of the churchyard for almost two hours. There was much pushing and shoving; at several points, the crowd was so densely packed together that it felt dangerous. If anyone had fainted, there wouldn't have been room for them to fall down. "If I had known about any of this, I wouldn't have come," said a woman named Julija, squished behind me. Soft-spoken, a former deportee to Siberia and deeply religious, she had been particularly disappointed that the pope had made no mention of the Lithuanian pilgrims the previous day. Being shoved and pushed now didn't do all that much to dispel her disappointment.

But Julija had spoken too soon. If they had felt little noticed the day before, on Wednesday June 5th, Lithuanian Catholics were on center stage. The streets around the cathedral could not have advertised their presence more. Banners with the Lithuanian yellow, green and red, next to the Polish and Vatican colors, were hung down from every street lamp, and framed the entrance to the Cathedral itself.

The entrance to St. Michael's Cathedral, Lomža, June 5, 1991
The Lithuanian national colors are on the left, the Polish national colors on the right, the Vatican colors are above the entrance.

Shortly after 7 a.m., Lithuanian government officials started to arrive, accorded VIP treatment by the police and security personnel. (Notably absent was Vytautas Landsbergis. He had planned to attend, but because of renewed Soviet army activities in Vilnius the day before, had decided to stay put there.) Amid applause from the crowd, at about 7:15 a.m., Deputy Prime Minister Zigmas Vaišvila and Deputy President of the Parliament Česlovas Stankevičius walked into the churchyard. At 7.20, former Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene, escorted by Lithuania's highest Catholic official, Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevičius, also arrived.

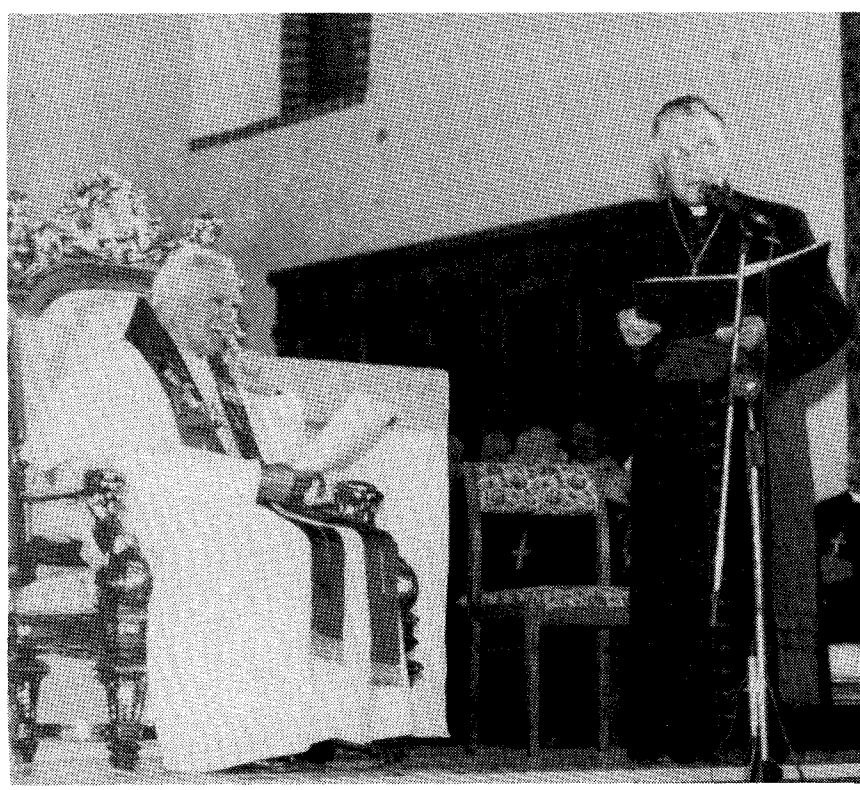
(Prunskiene's presence, however, elicited boos rather than applause from those around me. "What's she doing here?" people in the crowd whispered among themselves. "Why does she always stick her nose in where she doesn't belong?" There, I thought to myself, is that Christian spirit again... The former prime minister's popularity has plummeted since her downfall last January. If, last year at this time she was everyone's darling, this year she is everyone's demon. Prunskiene herself predicted as much when I spoke to her about this back in January. She accused Landsbergis and the more right-wing arm of Parliament of instigating a smear campaign to discredit her and knock her out of the political arena. But one of her main enemies, conservative Virgilijus Čepaitis, had a different explanation. He maintained that Prunskiene, as head of the Council of Ministers, had come to represent a post-Communist government. Most of her subordinates, said Čepaitis, were remnants of the old corrupt order, and simply had to go. That argument had a certain resonance with Lithuania's believers, who remembered only too well their sufferings under Communists. Therefore the jeers and snide asides I heard against Prunskiene, lack of Christian spirit notwithstanding, were not entirely surprizing. Still, in Lomža, Prunskiene and her political foes -- Vaišvila and Stankevičius -- had more in common with each other than they would have liked to admit. I observed them at Mass later that morning, Prunskiene sitting almost directly in front of the other two. When either hymns were sung or prayers spoken, all three stayed silent. Was it because they did not regard themselves as believers, or was it because they simply didn't know the words? I bet on the latter. How much chance do you get, being a member of the Komsomol and the Communist Party (to which all three once belonged) to learn the "Our Father" or the mournful Lithuanian hymn, "Marija, Marija?")

Just before 8 a.m. -- minutes before the pope himself arrived -- I was one of the last lucky few to make it into the churchyard. About fifteen minutes later, now inside the Cathedral, the pope, speaking both Lithuanian and Polish, addressed the gathered pilgrims.

"This meeting with you has a considerably deeper and broader content. It reaches the entire Lithuanian nation, living so close by. Can one, at this time, forget this? During this special meeting, do not the echoes of this nation's faith and hope reach (here), this nation which is so close and dear to me...

Lithuania! I hear your voice. I hear the voice of this nation which lives both near the Baltic Sea and scattered throughout the world. And I answer that voice from here, when I am so close. I believe that this meeting with Lithuanians in Lomža will bring closer the day when Lithuania will be (one of the stops) on the road of the traveling pope."

The pope might have heard Lithuania's voice, but he did not say whether he was prepared to act upon everything that was requested. For Lithuania's highest official, 71-year old Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevičius, left no doubt what he would like to see the Vatican do. Speaking after the pope, Sladkevičius said, "The celebration of the 600th anniversary (in Rome in 1987) of the baptism of the Lithuanian nation was a spiritual charter for rebirth, awakening our nation to a spiritual and national ascension. Rejoicing in the generous blessing from the Apostolic See, we harbor the hope that in the near future this will express itself (in the form of) the renewal of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the Lithuanian government."



Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevičius speaks as Pope John Paul II listens, St. Michael's Cathedral, Lomža, June 5, 1991.

Sladkevičius also used the opportunity to say what he expected from Poland. Amid phrases about the warm feelings Lithuanians had for Poles, who "became the very closest both in questions regarding the Catholic faith and cultural association," Sladkevičius added, "That is why we express to the Polish nation, as our brothers in faith, our sincere respect and love. Now, when Lithuania is undergoing her hours of great trials, we harbor the hope that, in a brotherly fashion, the Polish nation will support us (in our) striving towards national freedom and independence."

Sladkevičius laid out no concrete proposals of how he hoped that "support" from the Polish nation might be expressed. But the message was unmistakable. If there had been any doubt that the pilgrimage to Lomža had had a political as well as spiritual purpose -- perhaps the very thing that the Soviets feared in refusing the pope permission to come to Lithuania -- there was none now. In this part of the world, politics had been intertwined with matters of the spirit for centuries. Were it not so, this would not be Eastern Europe...

As the meeting drew to a close shortly after 9 a.m., the pope requested that the people sing the Lithuanian hymn "Marija, Marija", one of the best-known, most moving and dignified hymns I have ever heard. Then, security men and clergy in tow, Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Sladkevičius circled the churchyard of St. Michaels' Cathedral. I saw elderly women, their faces lined and their heads covered with white kerchiefs, silently moving their lips in prayer. Some people wept. All who could reached out from behind the metal barricades to touch the pope. He stopped several times, shaking the outstretched hands of the pilgrims. Then, escorted by Sladkevičius, Archbishop Julius Paetz of Lomža, and some two dozen other church officials down the central path of St. Michael's Cathedral, the pope was whisked away. A Mass, celebrated by Sladkevičius and all six of Lithuania's archbishops, followed. The Cathedral was packed.

By mid-morning, it was all over. The pope had gone on to his next stop -- the town of Bialystok, near the Byellorussian border. Barricades started coming down; life began to return to normal. Lomza's shops once more opened for business. A leader from one bus, a young man, later wryly reported, "I offered the little old ladies the choice of either going to another Mass or to the market. They chose the market."

Busses began leaving Lomža at 3 p.m. On their way back to Lithuania, many stopped in towns and villages in the northeast part of Poland -- such as Punsk and Seiniai -- heavily populated by ethnic Lithuanians. By the time dusk fell, most were already at the border.

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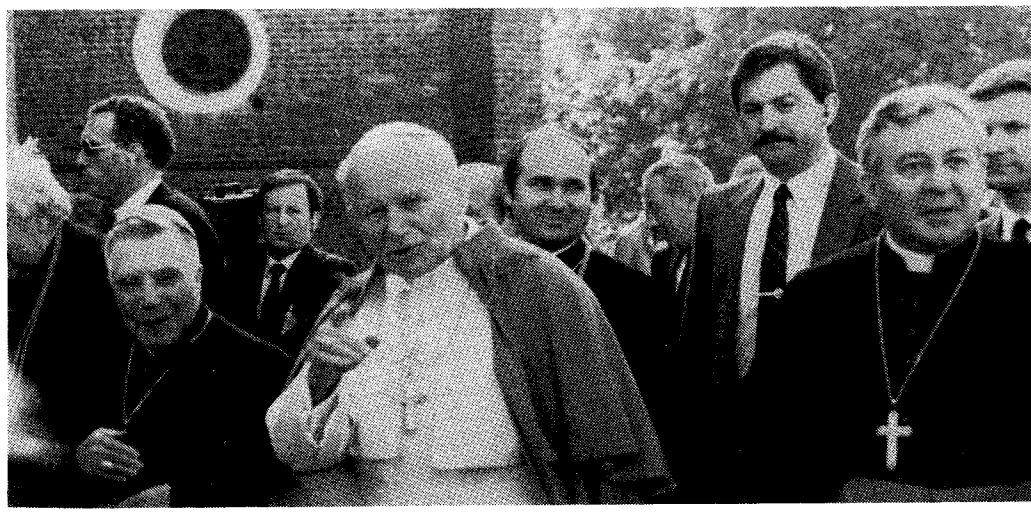

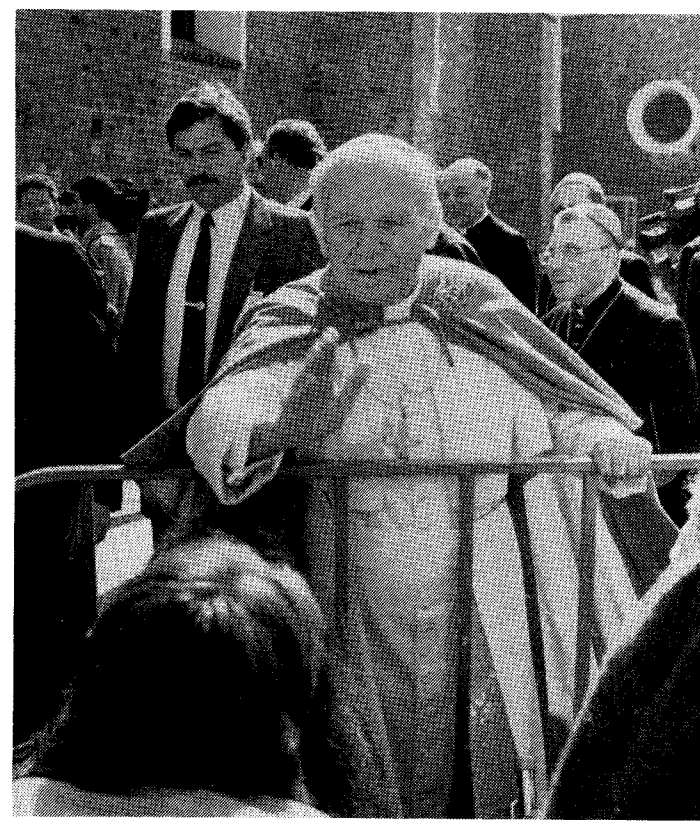

The pope meets with Lithuanian pilgrims outside St. Michael's Cathedral, Lomża, June 5, 1991.

One week later. Back in Vilnius, the after-effects of the pilgrimage to Lomža were still being felt. Česlovas Stankevičius reported to Parliament that the pope had met with Lithuanian officials for a "full quarter of an hour!" The story was front-page news in almost all newspapers for most of that week. Many pilgrims, angry and heartsick that about those who had gone on the pilgrimage strictly for "business", wrote letters complaining that many of their fellow travelers had been among the most strident Communists just a few years ago.

Such views were supported by Lithuanian customs officials who, still swamped by the goods they had impounded, couldn't yet say how many of each item they had confiscated. Those figures, they said, were still being calculated. "But I can tell you this," said the customs official that I spoke with, "that many of those who passed themselves off as believers were anything but."

Some 50 people failed to return to Lithuania when the busses rolled across the border on the night of June 5 - 6th. Most were like the woman on our bus, who casually told one other traveler that she was going to "take a trip around Poland", and then vanished. (Our bus was held up for several hours at the border by Soviet officials because of this lady. "You'll have to go back and find her," threatened the Soviet border guard, when he realized the the number of people on the list did not correspond to the number sitting in the bus. Alternatively, he suggested, we could be held all night until all other busses had passed through and it was verified that the missing lady wasn't on any of them either. Sheepishly, our bus leader -- inexperienced in this role -- barely protested, for until the Soviet border official pointed out that one person was missing, he had been completely unaware of it himself. Still, by 1 a.m., the border guards relented and let us go.)

When I spoke to Major Bučys of the Soviet border by phone several days later, he downplayed this and other incidents where the rules had been, well, stretched. The whole operation, he said, had gone most "smoothly" on the return trip, ending at 3:30 a.m., one and a half hours earlier than targeted. As for the missing passengers, Bučys said, they were coming back in dribs and drabs -- only 25 were still unaccounted for by June 11.

Even one of the principle organizers of the pilgrimage, Sajudis official Andrius Kubilius, agreed that relations with the Soviet border officials had been most cordial. By the time it was all over, said Kubilius, "we were almost ready to kiss each other good-bye".

And that, when you think about it, is no small miracle.

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Received in Hanover 08/14/91