

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Lithuania
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Executive Director
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4 West Wheelock Street
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"Murder at Medininkai"

Dear Peter,

Virgis and I were on the other side of Lithuania, almost 400 kilometers away on the Baltic coast, ready to bask in the sun when we first heard the news. It was 9 a.m. Wednesday morning, July 31. We were just about to head down to breakfast when the last two items over the morning radio news bulletin stopped us cold.

The first item -- a 3 a.m. bomb explosion in front of the headquarters of the Soviet Ministry of the Interior in a residential section of Vilnius -- was in and of itself rather ho-hum. Every once in a while, there are these strange bomb explosions in the vicinity of Soviet military buildings in Vilnius. No one is ever hurt; no culprit is ever found. The blasts themselves hardly have any effect at all, other than to knock out a few windows and to end up on the state Soviet television news program Vremya the following evening as dandy propaganda items -- one more implied act of terrorism in Lithuania against the poor innocent Soviet military. Assumed (at least in Lithuania) to be the work of that military themselves, the bomb explosions often happen in tandem with some other event -- usually of the less pleasant variety -- going on somewhere not too far away.

There was no reason why tradition should be broken now -- and it wasn't. The news item following the bomb explosion -- and the LAST item of the entire bulletin, which puzzled me to no end; I tried to imagine which great mind had determined why it shouldn't have been the FIRST news story of the hour -- was read by the newscaster in a laconic oh-by-the-way kind of voice. The bodies of eight Lithuanian officials had been discovered just a few hours previously at the Medininkai customs post on the Lithuanian-Byelorussian border. All had been shot; six were dead, two seriously wounded.

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.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Laconic soon gave way to shock, as the murders -- and their possible significance -- began to sink in. Both Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush were informed about the incident at the same time while they were, according to one Lithuanian newspaper, in Novo Ogariov just outside Moscow "admiring nature." Two emergency meetings -- one of the Lithuanian Parliament's Presidium and the other by the Council of Ministers -- were held that Wednesday. Lithuania's parliamentarians were called in for an extraordinary plenary session on Thursday, the following day.

Just hours after the incident, Vytautas Landsbergis held an unscheduled press conference. This, in part, is what he said.

"How should we evaluate this brutal act against the background of the entire past half year, (starting) from events last January? The background is the constant (attempts at) coercion through armed activities in Lithuania. These are activities whose authors are one or another armed units of the Soviet army. We very well know that behind the crimes of Soviet armed forces, and their maintained and fed gangs, stands the highest leadership of the Soviet Union, which cannot eternally pretend not to know anything, not to be able to control the situation, not to hear the demands, for example, the demands of the Lithuanian leadership to withdraw OMON* from Lithuania's territory and (to withdraw) other Soviet internal army units from the seized Lithuanian Radio and Television stations."

On Wednesday evening, Virgis and I also headed back to Vilnius.

Late the next day, I drove out to Medininkai, some 55 kilometers southeast of Vilnius. I passed through very pretty, sparsely populated countryside, with rolling hills and the fragrance of fields of clover wafting into the car windows as I drove by. The ruins of a medieval castle, just three kilometers from the border, underscored the thought that this remote corner of Lithuania is an unlikely place for the war of nerves between the Lithuanian leadership and the Kremlin to be played out on a daily basis. It seems even more unlikely as the site of a brutal execution.

* The OMON is a special crack unit, attached to the Soviet Ministry of the Interior, formed originally in 1989 to help combat the growing rate of crime. Although first set up in Moscow, soon all 15 republics had OMON units affiliated with republic-level interior ministries. OMON in Lithuania turned political this year. In January, it split in two -- some staying loyal to Moscow, others renaming themselves into "Eagle" and now pledging their loyalty to the Lithuanian republic. Since January, the Moscow-loyal OMON has engaged in scores of acts with the overall purpose of destabilizing the political situation in Lithuania and frightening her inhabitants. See Addendum.

But it is both. As one of the 24 customs posts along Lithuania's 1747 kilometer land border, set up during the past half year, Medininkai has already been a target of violence and harassment -- a not very well disguised sign of Soviet displeasure. It is still not entirely clear who the perpetrators of the earlier attack on Medininkai were -- although Lithuanian officials tend to believe that it was either the local Soviet OMON group stationed in Lithuania or Soviet paratroopers, or both. (Often the young men who attack customs posts, although always armed, are only partially in uniform, making it difficult to identify them with complete certainty.)

Set on the heavily travelled M-12 road to Minsk, Byelorussia, Medininkai was stormed last May by such a group. Its two portable trailers were fire-bombed, leaving them ochre-colored burnt hulks -- one a caved-in twisted metal heap. These steel skeletons still stand at the post, one in front and the other beside the grey metal trailer where the July 31 murders took place.

In general, attacks on Lithuanian customs posts usually involve beatings, harassment and humiliation of the guards and customs officials on duty there. Not infrequently, the customs booths are also set on fire. A typical incident was recorded two weekends ago along the Lithuanian-Latvian border. According to a Lithuanian newspaper story published on July 30, at midnight July 28, five heavily armed young men drove up to the Salocių customs post and forced the three customs officials and three national civil defense guards to lie down on the ground. They stole their belts, their money, the customs documents and three radios. Then they poured gasoline around the customs trailer and set it alight. An hour later, another customs booth at another post nearby was also bombed. At noon the same day, some 20 OMON troops, donning their signature black berets, but hiding their uniforms, returned to the first post. They ridiculed and shot at the officials on duty. Some victims managed to run away in time, but one member of Lithuania's civil defense force was not so lucky. He was undressed, forced to do push-ups, all the while saying aloud in Russian, "I love the Soviet Union." As they left, the attackers said they were sending greetings from the Riga (Latvia) OMON.

Such incidents have become part of the daily diet of news, with between 20 and 30 serious ones recorded so far this year. There have also been casualties. In late May, Gintaras Zagunis, a Lithuanian national civil defense official, was assassinated while maintaining lone watch one night at another post further south from Medininkai along the Byelorussian border. His murder is widely believed to be revenge for that of a Byelorussian militia captain, Alexander Fias, a few days previously, who had been killed during a shoot-out with Lithuanian national civil defense guards at the post.

Still, all paled compared to the the murders in Medininkai last week. As Vytautas Landsbergis noted in his weekly televised address this past Sunday, August 4, "While raging and storming around, until now OMON maybe even got our men accustomed to (certain) views or even rules: (if you) give in, you will be humiliated, robbed, but you will stay alive. Now other rules are becoming clear: if you resist, you might get many bullets, if you don't resist -- one (bullet). In the style of the NKVD and the Gestapo, the fascist method -- in all its various colors -- is to shoot one who offers no resistance in the head."

That, in short, is what happened in Medininkai. In the early pre-dawn hours of July 31 -- Lithuanian officials set the time between 3 and 5 A.M. -- unknown person(s) entered the rectangular grey metal customs trailer, forced the four customs officials and three police officers to lay on the floor, their hands on their heads. Then, at close range (not more than two matchbook lengths) each one was shot in the skull. (One police officer was shot in the head as he sat in his car outside, and his body was then dragged into the trailer.) By the time a driver from Yaroslav, wishing to fill out customs declarations forms, stumbled on the bodies before 6 A.M., six were already dead, and two were seriously wounded. (The seventh victim died Friday, two days later). The news sent people in Lithuania, not yet fully recovered from the bloodshed last January 13, when Soviet forces killed 14 unarmed people, on a renewed wave of grief and despair.

There has been an unwritten rule about the menacing incidents that have taken place in Lithuania during the past several months. They always seem to occur at the same time that other significant political events are also unfolding. When Mikhail Gorbachev went to pick up his Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in early June, for example, Lithuania's Parliament was suddenly surrounding by Soviet soldiers armed with automatic rifles, who began demanding the documents of all passersby. And when, in mid-July, Gorbachev went to London to meet with leaders of the seven industrialized nations, OMON troops occupied the central telephone exchange building, cutting ties between cities in the republic as well as to the outside world for several hours.

Likewise, the murders last week did not take place in a political vacuum. But now there were several political events to choose from. Which one tied in? Was it the treaty signed by Boris Yeltsin and Vytautas Landsbergis two days earlier on July 29 in Moscow, where the Russian republic recognized Lithuania's sovereignty? Did some political forces, loyal to the idea of the old Soviet empire, and unhappy to see it purposely dismantled, want to let their disapproval be known in no unmistakable way?

Or was it the Bush-Gorbachev summit meeting, when just hours after the murders, the two leaders signed a far-reaching nuclear arms reduction treaty, several years in the making? There are many conservative forces in the Soviet Union who believe that closer ties between the US and the USSR are to the greater

humiliation of the latter, and who would like to stop it. Was this their attempt to do so?

But maybe, for once, politics had little to do with it. Maybe this was the work of the the underground "mafia", a criminal element whose ability to move stolen goods had been hampered by the draconian customs regulations that the Lithuanian government had imposed in order to protect itself economically? Or was it this "mafia" in conjunction with some arm of Soviet officialdom, which would like to cripple Lithuania economically by flooding the republic with worthless paper rubles and depeleting its stocks of concrete goods? Lithuanian customs work over the past half year had done much to put at least a crimp into that kind of plan.

Or was it even something as banal as wanting to harass the weary Lithuanian Parliament, which had just wound up its work the day before, July 30, finally adjourning for a much-needed long-awaited vacation?

On July 31, Lithuanian Minister of the Interior Marijonas Misiukonis (who, for unrelated reasons, resigned his post later that day) said, "At this time, four scenarios are being considered -- a brutal action by an armed military group, an attack by mafia murderers, an attempt to escalate internal Lithuanian conflicts with the price of blood, and the continuation of a Fias story." (referring to that Byellorussian militiaman killed at a shoot-out in May.)

All the usual suspects -- starting with the local Lithuanian branch of OMON at the top of the list -- were quick to issue denials. On the Soviet state news program Vremya the evening of the 31st, OMON leader in Lithuania Boleslov Makutinovich said that neither he nor his men were anywhere near Medininkai that night; they were all busy investigating that mysterious bomb explosion near the Vilnius headquarters of Soviet Interior Ministry.** A few days later, the local Lithuanian KGB also issued a statement that said they had nothing to do with it. And over the occupied Soviet Lithuanian television station on Saturday night, a declaration by Mykolas Burokevičius, the first secretary of the small Moscow-loyal Communist Party, was read out. He protested that an undeserved shadow of suspicion was being cast on honorable Soviet military forces, and maintained that the real culprits ought to be sought among Lithuanian fascist ultra-nationalists. The Soviet regional Baltic military command even sent a telegram to the Lithuanian leadership expressing its outrage at the murders and offering to help solve them.

** See Addendum.

Still, hard evidence which could lead up to identifying the murderers was scanty. The Lithuanian procurator's office recovered five bullets, saying that more were probably lodged in the floor of the trailer. The automatic weapons used, officials said, were all outdated Kalashnikovs which hadn't been manufactured since 1974. The executioner(s) -- one newspaper speculated that there must have been at least ten -- had entered the customs area by way of a cornfield across the single-lane highway and apparently, had fled in one of the victim's automobiles, abandoning it about a kilometer away when it hit upon a rock. Footprints led to tire tracks -- giving rise to the theory that another vehicle had been waiting. The job, officials agreed, was professionally done. Most fingers tentatively seemed to point to a special unit of the Soviet KGB, which many also hold responsible for the January murders. (Gorbachev's appointment of the head of the KGB to investigate the murders was met with more cynical snorts than anything else here in Lithuania. It was like appointing a fox to investigate who murdered the chickens in the coop.)

The eerie deja vu of January's tragedies echoed in Vilnius last week. As in January, the dead were once more laid in wake in the huge auditorium of Vilnius Sports Palace. Last Friday evening, Virgis and I were among the tens of thousands of people who waited up to several hours in the summer heat to file slowly by the open coffins where relatives had gathered in an almost uninterrupted three-day vigil.

Saturday, which should have been the one survivor's wedding day, was the official day of mourning. As the funeral procession, led by police, customs, and civil defense units -- all donning newly designed uniforms -- wound through Vilnius streets lined with hundreds of people, that survivor, Tomas Šernas, lay in a Vilnius hospital under heavy guard, fighting for his life. Over the weekend, he was moved to a better facility in Kaunas, 100 kilometers away. At the same time, an American Army surgeon, specializing in such injuries, from Germany was flown in to conduct the delicate and complicated operation that might just result in his recovery. News that Šernas regained partial consciousness spread but remained unconfirmed. If so, he might be able to shed light on who the assassins were, and thereby lay claim to the 500,000 rubles set aside by the Lithuanian government for information about the murderers.

Work at the customs post at Medininkai resumed two nights after the murder. When I arrived there on Thursday evening, customs officials were waiting for documents to be brought down from Vilnius so that they could reopen operations.

But the grey trailer where the murders had taken place was sealed off; the lone phone was pulled outside onto the pavement, where I saw one customs official crouch to make a call. Red gladiolas and burgundy carnations stood at the door of the grey customs trailer; fresh drippings from yellow wax candles had

melted into the tarred road next to it. I peered through one of the four square windows; inside all looked in disarray. Chairs were overturned or piled on top of narrow desks. The desks stood askew or were pushed to the walls. On one desk I saw a transparent plastic bag, with half a loaf of black bread in it. There were empty coffee cups.

The Lithuanian procurator's office had officially sealed off the trailer but one customs officer briefly opened the door to let me look in. Although much had been cleaned up, the floor was still a brown color; blood had coagulated into a thickened sludge in the places where it dipped. In other places, the floor had been torn up, apparently in search of bullets. There were no blood stains anywhere higher than ten centimeters from the floor; this was the sign that had led investigating officials to conclude the shooting was done with the victims already down on the floor.

But how did those on duty in Medininkai on Thursday feel about spending the night there so soon after the killings? Although director of Lithuanian customs, Valerijonas Valickas, assured me that the tragedy only strengthened the resolve of the 1000 customs workers in Lithuania -- those who had joined, he said, were all "patriots" -- resolve on the front line was a bit more muted. When I asked three customs officials what their wives thought about their presence in Medininkai, one answered that his wife didn't know about it -- "My work is my business" -- and the other two smiled weakly. The still unarmed* customs officials, all clearly nervous, refused to give their names. One said, "You haven't seen my face, you never met me and I never gave you an interview." Another, gesturing to the forest behind the booth and the field in front of it, "It's one thing when you know where the enemy is. Here we don't know."

There is already talk of ending Lithuania's policy of peaceful resistance. In a special parliamentary session called on Thursday, National Civil Defense director Audrius Butkevičius intimated to the parliamentarians, "I think that these terrorist acts will increase. They will be used for purely political purposes. And therefore we have to prepare for this new situation, weighing all our earlier values relating to questions of peaceful methods."

In the meantime, the customs officials and their guards are little more than sitting ducks. Before driving away from Medininkai, I glanced back behind me. There were five customs officers in light brown shirts and dark brown trousers. There were five national civil defense guards in olive green uniforms, billy clubs attached to their belts. There were no weapons.

* As part of the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior, the four murdered policemen had been armed; but their weapons had been confiscated by the assassins.

I recalled a small sticker on the front door of the customs trailer that last week became a death chamber. Originally intended to calm irate passengers having their vehicles searched, it now took on a new meaning. The sticker read, "Now you don't need to go and try to scare us".

Best wishes,



ADDENDUM: Greetings from OMON

One evening last March, on the eve of Lithuania's declaration of independence, Virgis and I were stopped, at gunpoint, by a Soviet patrol less than one kilometer from our house. It was about 9:45 P.M., a chilly clear Sunday night. We had decided to make a quick run to the gas station just a few kilometers away to avoid the inevitable long lines that were sure to form the following day, the beginning of the work week.

As we drove through the deserted forest that surrounds Turniškės, the government compound where we live, dark shadows of the tall pine trees framed both sides of the potholed road. Ahead, we saw the headlights of a vehicle approaching us. Suddenly it cut diagonally across our lane and stopped, blocking the road. In the few seconds that it took for Virgis to jam on the brakes, I could see the vehicle's outlines. It was a yellow jeep with a blue ribbon painted around the middle. There was lettering on that blue ribbon, but I could not make it out. With the jeep's high beams focussed on our windshield, I saw darting shadows of what turned out to be four young men, about 20 years old, clad in camouflage uniforms. Each carried an automatic rifle, and they ran in our direction. One stopped in front of our car. His right hand held the butt of his rifle, his left cradled its circular steel barrel. He looked poised to point it directly at me, should the need arise... The other three ran to the left side of the car and in Russian, shouted "Dokumentii!" ("Documents!")

We didn't have any. I had left my handbag with money, passport, driver's license (New York and international), and all other identifying items at home. (After all, it was just a short run to the gas station; why drag all that stuff along?) Virgis had only his ID card as a member of Parliament.

So he showed his M.P. ID to one of the soldiers, who was not satisfied. Sitting inside the car, I could hear the soldier demand, in a belligerent and accented Lithuanian, "What are you staring at? We are from OMON!" Then another soldier, ready to frisk Virgis, asked, "Do you have any tear gas pistols? You must understand the situation!" In disbelief, Virgis looked at him and said, "You must be joking." The soldier, a bit mollified, refrained from the body search, but demanded instead to inspect the car to see if there were any "weapons or bombs". Virgis opened the trunk (it was empty) and I opened the side door to the back seat (no weapons there, either.) Yet another soldier went back to the jeep and read the information on Virgis' ID over the car walkie-talkie to whoever was at the other end. About ten to fifteen minutes later, the word came to let us go. As we drove off, I turned my head in time to see them quickly clamber back into the jeep and roar down that forest road, searching for some other hapless victim.

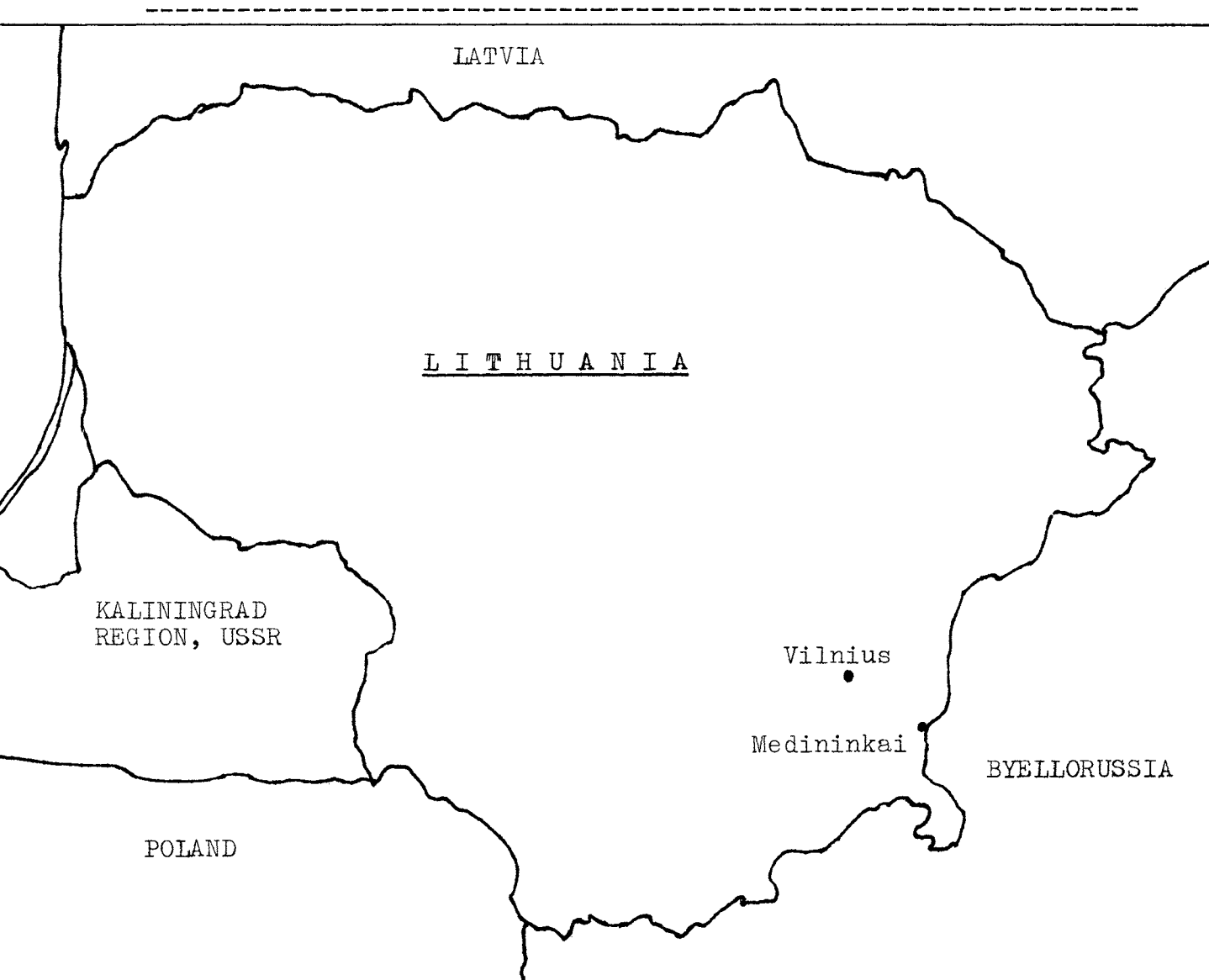
Virgis was the second member of Lithuanian Parliament to have been stopped and searched by a Soviet patrol. The first had not gotten away so easily. His name was Povilionis, who had been stopped on the road from Kaunas to Vilnius in late January. He had been held at gunpoint, hands held high, for two hours in freezing weather, alternatively ridiculed and threatened, and eventually brought to a military headquarters, where the presiding officer had apologized and returned all his papers. The soldiers, as OMON later, had broken one of the Soviet Union's own laws -- the diplomatic immunity of an elected official. No one has the right to search their car or detain its occupant.

That evening, after we returned from the gas station, our ears were more attuned than ever to the echoes in forest surrounding the government compound where we live. Several times we thought we heard the roar of jeeps or the rumble of tanks, imagining that they were either passing through the roads in the forest or were on the Nemenčinės highway.

Although Turniškes is tucked away in the forest, seemingly out of sight, it is in a very vulnerable location. There are only two entrances to the compound. In addition, we live just two kilometers away from the Police Academy, a three story yellow brick structure stormed and occupied last January by some 36 members of Soviet-loyal OMON. As we emerge from the forest every day on our way to the center of the city, we pass the building. In the first winter months, we would see the OMON soldiers standing in front of it, weapons in hand, faces covered by stocking caps or some other kind of makeshift masks. As time went on, the masks disappeared, but armoured personnel carriers stayed, blocking the front door to the building. The soldiers also built a look-out post out of sandbags, and man it. Once when I drove up there, spontaneously hoping to catch OMON leader Makutinovich for an interview, the young man in the look-out post had his automatic rifle trained on my head the whole time I spoke. (Didn't get the interview).

Most OMON shenanigans make the news -- as did the incident with us -- but some don't. Given that their headquarters is based so close, the young men from OMON have become kinda familiar in the neighborhood. My upstairs neighbor says that they have become a regular thing with her husband, who is often stopped by them. A computer specialist in Parliament, he often works until one or two in the morning. Likewise, it is not unusual to see OMON troops screech up in a jeep to do a bit of shopping at one of the local stores in the area. Another neighbor saw them recently at a grocery store outside the compound, where, of course armed, they did some horsing around -- like playing catch with their Kalashnikovs (were they loaded?) in front of startled old grannies.

Nice, huh?



SCENES AT MEDININKAI, LITHUANIA,

July 31, 1991



Inside the portable customs trailer. The two wounded officials have already been removed.



None of the victims are identified in these photographs, taken by photographers from the Lithuanian news agency ELTA. I think this is Antanas Musteikis (judging by his uniform).

SCENES AT MEDININKAI, LITHUANIA,

July 31, 1991



Judging by his uniform, slight build and haircut, I think this is Algimantas Juozakas.



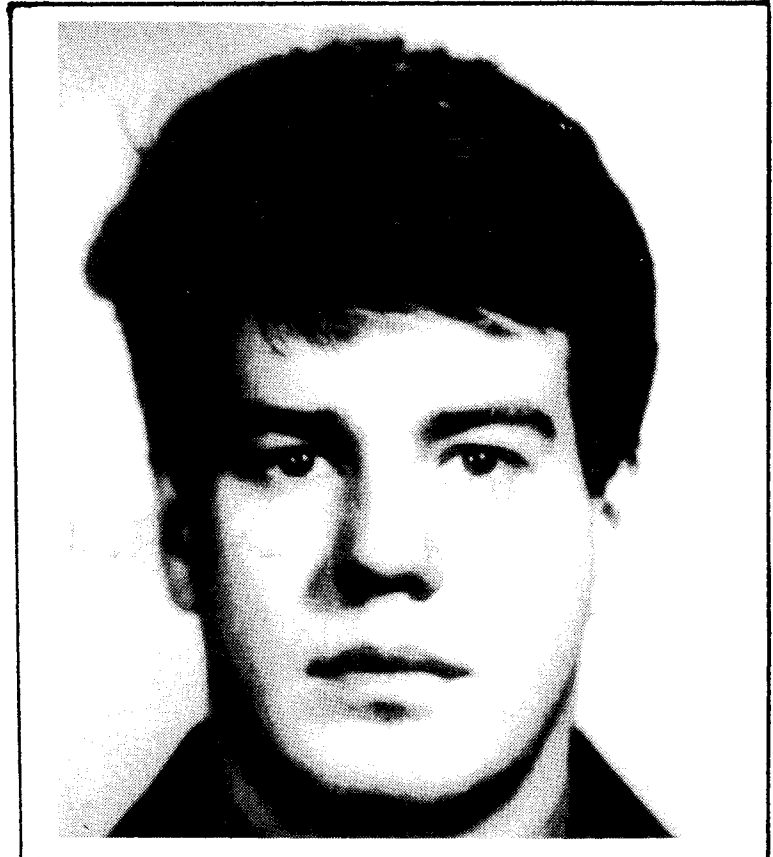
The only easily identifiable victim, Mindaugas Balavakas. Officials said one victim's watch stopped at 4:45. Could it be Balavakas' and could that be the exact time of the murders?

Mindaugas BALAVAKAS

Age: 20

Single

Member of special police unit "Eagle" attached to the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior (started work in 1990)

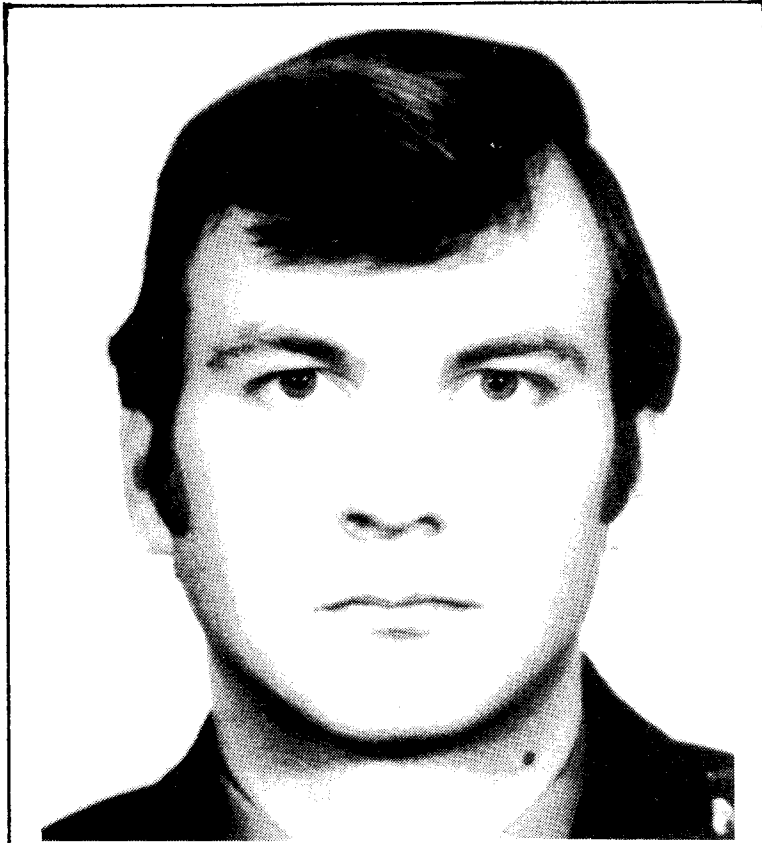
Algimantas JUOZAKAS

Age: 22

Single

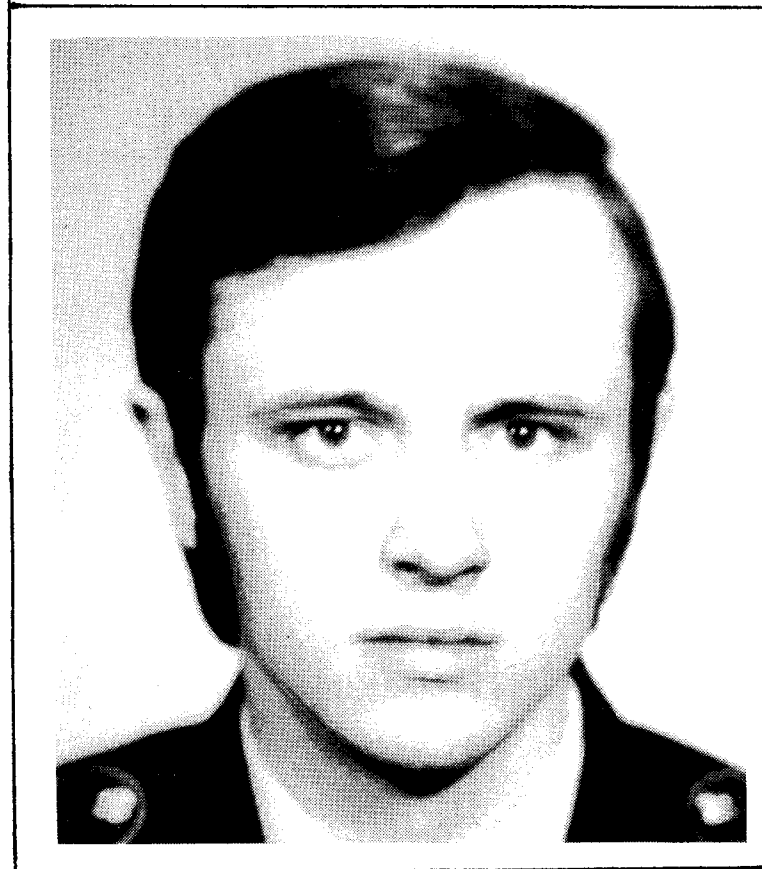
Member of special police unit "Eagle" attached to the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior (started work in April, 1991; on the job for a total of three months)





Juozas JANONIS

Age: 29
Married
One son, age 3
Highway patrol officer
(started work at the
Lithuanian Ministry of
the Interior in 1985)



Algirdas KAZLAUSKAS

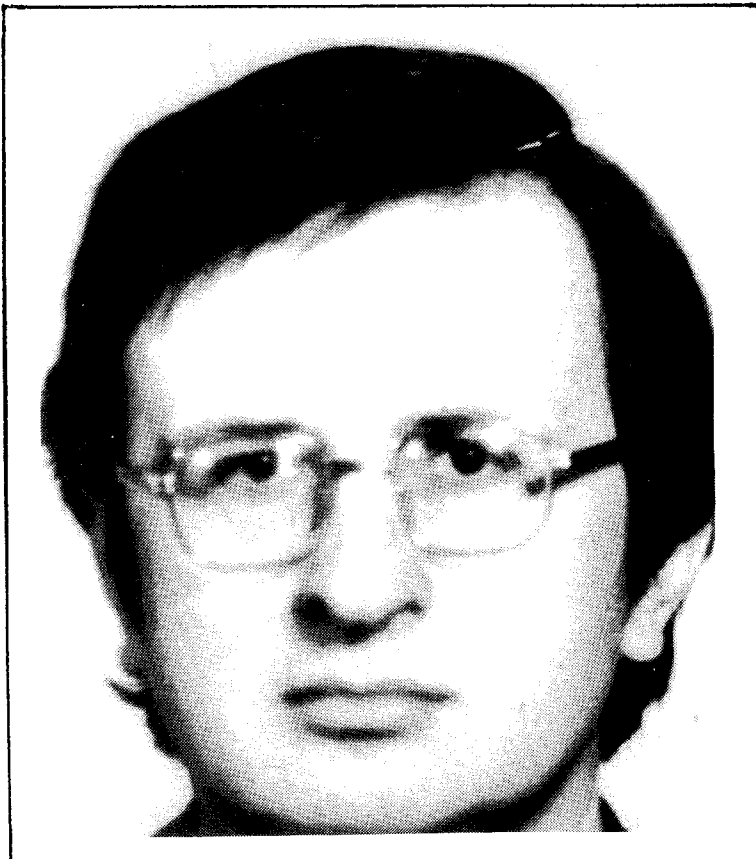
Age: 42
Married
No children
Highway patrol officer
(started work at the
Lithuanian Ministry of
the Interior in 1972;
was preparing documents
for retirement)

The oldest victim.

THE VICTIMS

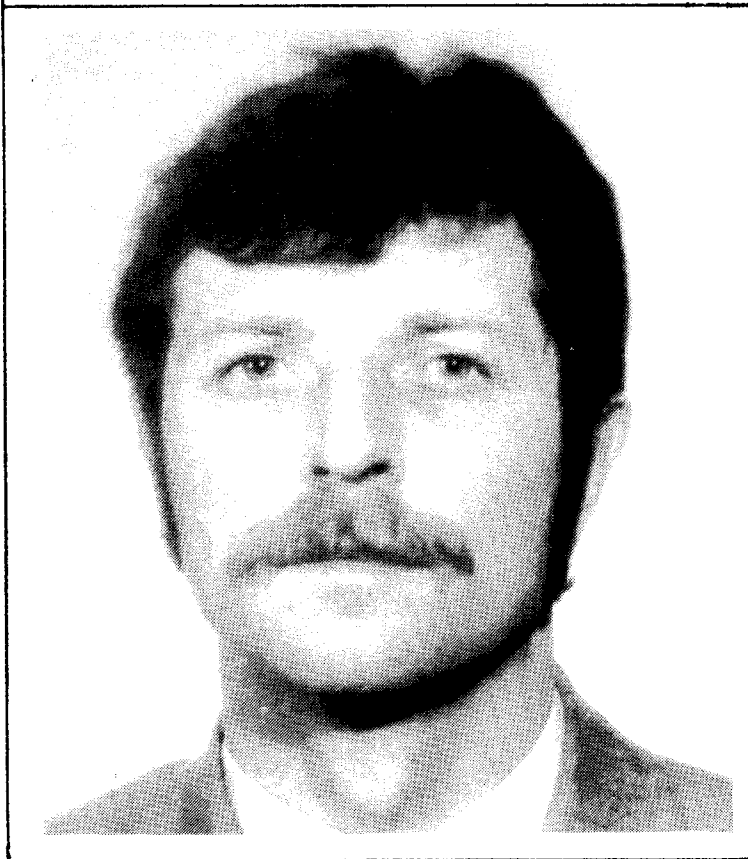
Antanas MUSTEIKIS

Age: 33
Married
One daughter, age 7
One son, age 2
(started work as customs
officer in December 1990)



Stanislovas ORLAVIČIUS

Age: 35
Married
Two daughters, one age 12
 one age 7
Two sons, one age 1
 one age 1/2 yr.
(started work as customs
officer in February, 1991)



THE VICTIMS



Ričardas RABAVIČIUS

Age: 20

Single

(started work as a customs officer on July 18, upon release from 2 year compulsory service in the Soviet army: had been on the job 12 days)

One of the two who originally survived, Rabavičius died two days later, on Friday, August 2.

The youngest victim.

The scene at the Medininkai customs post at the Lithuanian-Belorussian border, between six and nine a.m. July 31, 1991.



THE WAKE



The murdered policemen and customs officers lay in state at the auditorium of the Sports Palace from Thursday, August 1 to Saturday morning, August 3. Vytautas Landsbergis stands to the far right.



The family of murdered policeman Mindaugas Balavakas mourn their son, oblivious to the hundreds of mourners who file by just a few feet away.

THE FUNERAL
August 3, 1991



Mourners line Vilnius streets as the funeral cortege heads towards Vilnius Cathedral.



Funeral Mass for the Medininkai victims in Vilnius Cathedral.

THE CEMETERY

Burial at Antakalnis cemetery, Saturday afternoon, August 3, 1991. The seven policemen and customs officials murdered in Medininkai are buried alongside victims from January 13th. The spot where they are buried has come to be known as "the hill where the innocent children lay".

THE MEDININKAI POST

Early August, 1991

