

THE KGB BUILDING

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When the present becomes the center of human orientation in time and in the world, time and world lose their completeness as a whole as well as in each of their parts. . . Every event, every phenomenon, every thing, every object of artistic representation loses its completeness, its hopelessly finished quality and its immutability that had been so essential to it in the world of the epic "absolute past," walled off by an unapproachable boundary from the continuing and unfinished present (Bakhtin 1981:30).

One Sunday afternoon in the early spring of 1993 I waited for three hours with hundreds of Lithuanians in a line that began at the front door and curved around the side of the old KGB building in Vilnius. The week before, on TV, radio and in the papers, it had been announced that for one weekend the old KGB Headquarters, which were going to become a KGB museum, would be opened for a preliminary visit before extensive organization and construction began. This was the first time that the building would be opened to the public, and it would be the last chance to visit both the building and the museum, before the first was completely turned into the other.

During the wait the line was busy; people sang, argued, complained, told stories, and stamped their feet against the cold, which in Vilnius lingered long into the spring and kept the streets below our feet paved with ice. People moved in and out of the line, coming and going from visits and errands, holding places for those who had taken a break to eat and warm up in one the various cafes nearby. Pamphlet sellers passed by hawking their goods: the *Archive of the Freedom Wars*, which was an on-going series of reprints of Soviet-era government documents relating to the resistance movement in Lithuania after 1944, *Please Don't Cry*, which was a collection of testimonial letters written by the families of Lithuanian soldiers killed under unclear circumstances while serving in the Soviet Army, collections of partisan and deportee songs and poetry, holiday cookbooks, the newspapers associated with various small, conservative political parties, refusnik memoirs. Impatience built and dissipated as we stood immobile for long stretches of time, only to suddenly lurch forward awkwardly when those ahead of

us were let in shifts, and then come again to a halt, and again wait.

It was an ironic line to wait in; everybody mentioned it. It was so obviously ironic as to be as true and total as unusual weather; everybody commented on it, everybody agreed that it was so, and there it was, simply true, nothing more to do but repeat it to the surrounding group of nodding colleagues who all took turns declaring and recognizing this irony of waiting in line to get in to a building that until recently everyone had done their utmost to avoid ever having to enter. "Here we are, waiting in line to get in to the KGB; can you imagine?" went the refrain, back and forth, over and over, looping around a new constellation of lines people on every repetition.

Other spaces besides museums had taken on the burden of memoriality. For example, the barricades surrounding the Parliament assumed a new utility after independence as markers of a battle that some felt still needed to be fought, because it had not yet ended, in fact could never end -- the specter of imminent Soviet invasion made even more terrifying and ironically more believable given the actual disappearance of overt Soviets, only to be replaced by shadowy conspirators, unnamed powers, secret forces. Temporary banners, shrines, posters, barbed wire, haphazard mounds of cement blocks had become permanent necessities for those who, in the words of Mark Wigley, "construct edifices to make theory possible, then subordinate them as a metaphor to defer to some higher, non-material truth" (Wigley 1993:16). Soviet tanks were no longer a possibility in the same way that they had been in January of 1991, when Soviet troops had threatened the Parliament and occupied the Television and Press centers, killing 14 protesters gathered to defend the television transmitting tower, yet the temporary stockade had taken on another meaning, and served another necessity. The summer after Brazauskas' election the barricades finally came down, but one small corner of the square was redesigned as a memorial site, where selected pieces of blockades and banners and barbed wire were reconstituted into a monument to the events that had brought them into an engaged meaning. Now they sat in a

corner, the utility that had once enlivened them depleted, and their energy sapped through their reconstruction as a memorial to mark their past power, a no-longer engaged and engaging place of action.

Most everyone I talked to beforehand about the opening of the KGB building admitted to a ghoulish interest in seeing the insides of this secret place of torture and death, but not everyone actually decided to appear at the building and attend the opening. Older, modestly dressed, exchanging stories of political trickery endured and exposed, Soviet collaborators accused and revealed, singing the recognizable songs of the deportations and exile, the people who stood in line with me were the people I had come to expect at gathering such as this. They were the ones who went on hunger strikes on June 16, the Day of Mourning and Remembrance, a new holiday dedicated to remembering the Stalinist deportations. They were the ones who celebrated Independence Day on Feb. 16, the day inter-war Lithuania declared independence in 1918, as opposed to March 11, the day in 1990 when Lithuania declared its independence from the USSR. They were the crowd that waved banners and shouted slogans on the porch of the Cathedral on Inauguration Day in 1993, who refused to enter the re-consecrated¹ church as long as the new president, Brazauskas, was inside (paying homage to the Lithuanian heroes therein memorialized, before moving on to the Parliament building for his swearing-in), and damned to hell those who recognized the new presidency of the previous Party Secretary and now leader of the Democratic Labor Party.² They built the shrines commemorating those killed at the Vilnius TV Tower on January 13, 1989 by Soviet tanks and troops. They gathered every week outside the state TV station headquarters to tape episodes of their canceled political talk show, the hosts and guests framed by a backdrop of another set of memorials they had built in front of the building to commemorate the deaths of January 13, recording never-to-be-aired segments in the evening gloom every Monday at its old air-time. These were the people who continued to identify themselves with Sajudis,³ the "Movement" which began in 1988 and through which almost all action towards independence had been figured, and it was this constituency that came forward to enter the KGB building and inaugurate it as a museum, once again active in the making of one more monument, one more memorial, one more tangibly material site dedicated to the revelation of the complete

History of the engagement of the Soviet state and the Lithuanian "soul," and by doing so reveal the True natures of both entities; through their attendance here they would consecrate one more material monument to the endurance of essential Lietuva⁴ as it came under mortal danger here in this building that attempted to destroy the bodies that gave Lietuva its only site in which to bring its vibrancy into being, and thus animate not only individuals but the very nation that these individual bodies both were constituted by and themselves constituted, in that almost inarticulatable dialectic of meaning-making.

The concern for Lithuanian-ness and the concomitant concern for monuments was an almost uniquely Sajudis-dominated project. Waiting to enter the museum, I did not realize at the time that I was also waiting to witness a particularly tangible demonstration of the unique construction and engagement of bodies, places, memory, history and sentiment that one the one hand animated the Sajudis constituents' notion of Lietuviskumas and themselves, and at the same time made that animation ultimately unsuccessful, both for those who constructed themselves through it, and those they hoped to construct in their image. But I'm getting ahead of the story.

A rumor had run through the line about 10 minutes before we entered that passports would have to be shown to gain entrance. The invocation of this document invoked panic. And understandably. After independence the new government had designed and issued its own passports. All citizens were required to hand in their Soviet passports in exchange for a Lithuanian one. But there was a problem; the new document of the new State contained an error that invalidated its authority. The national symbol, the Vytis, a charging knight on a horse, was apparently incorrectly represented in the document; the tail of the horse pointed down, and by doing so implied the horse's, the Knight's, and the state's lack of vitality and thus inability to triumph and succeed.⁵ The passports were declared invalid, new ones were reprinted with a redesigned Vytis, and the distribution process began all over again. A paper shortage meant that this process took months, during which time those who had exchanged their Soviet passports for the first Lithuanian ones were left without a document that would allow them to leave the country or enter another. Those who had kept their Soviet passports found themselves in another bind. They could prove citizenship only to a country from which they

had declared their independence, and which had subsequently dissolved.

"Can you imagine having to present a passport to enter the KGB Building?" But nobody asked this question. Instead everybody searched quickly amongst their papers, a familiar gesture for old Soviets, and suddenly it seemed as if a Soviet passport would perhaps be best, here in this place, here trying to get into this building. This old bulwark of Soviet control, now beached outside its former geographic boundaries, with an aura that still managed to exude power and authority, it would seem to take more kindly to its own products, its own forces of identification. Would it perhaps be a provocation (such a loaded word in both Soviet and post-Soviet parlance) to present a Lithuanian passport to gain entry? Who would check at the door? Which papers would anger which doormen? Who were the doormen? The rumor was unfounded, however. No one checked.

We waited for hours, finally approaching the front doors, and entrance seemed imminent. And at that moment, when the possibility of actually entering the building became a more tangible reality as we felt ourselves physically close to the interior, everyone began pushing and shoving, arms and legs wedging into the prematurely closing doorway, inadvertently propping open the entry to allow one more body to slip in; a line just like any other in the city. It maintained a certain level of decorum until the end came in sight, and then it erupted into a vicious game of musical chairs: whatever there is, there won't be enough; grab it now, get what you waited for. Everyone was yelling, demanding to be let in, refusing to let the door close before they got inside, insisting on their right to gain entry before others; the self-righteous anger of patience denied its due. I squeezed in, pushed and pushing at the same time -- there was no other way to move -- and then the doors were locked shut by young men in expensive European suits who walky-talkied back and forth, standing higher than us up on the waist-high marble wainscoting that rimmed the room, directing and controlling our entry and movement in the vestibule. Once inside everyone looked at them out of the corners of their eyes, their official demeanor an eerie recollection of this building's past official presences. No one was quite sure who they were, why they were directing our entry into the museum. "They don't look like museum people, now, do they?" one woman muttered to no one in particular and to everyone around her, the suspicion of a

secret force of hidden power and authority quick to surface and find agreement amongst this community already once threatened by its own rumor declaring the need for official passports to appease official forces, and now almost entirely consumed with the desire to reveal the Truth of past terrorization and the place that this building had in that terror.

We stood pressed together in the marble entrance hall for a few moments, shifting and arranging ourselves, and then an older man in a grease-slicked leather coat stepped forward from the door-keeper's windowed office beside the steps that fronted the vestibule's door into the main building and began a 20 minute lecture explaining the workings of this building. He had been something like the gatekeeper, the doorman to the KGB, the man behind the window. He detailed the ways people were arrested, brought into the building, how they were processed, assigned interrogators, cells, tortures, how they were brought out of the building to be transported to exile, prison, death or burial. The building no longer housed the agents, the interrogators, the prisoners, the guards. We would never see the actions that invested the building with its life. Our witness to that time was the old man who guarded the threshold, and yet who seemed to know all the internal workings of the place. The anger and indignation that had pulsed through the line before we entered, the drive to occupy and reclaim the building had, in the entryway and through the direction of the tutorial, undergone a transformation as the crowd stood silently and listened to this personal testimonial.

The lecture was over. The doors into the building opened. The crowd, which moments before had pushed and shoved to get inside, now stepped back from the open doors, and spontaneously, the very old moved forward to enter first. Limping and misshapen, *their* bodies in *this* place suggested wounds inflicted by the power that had once animated this building, and their voluntary passage through its gates took on a ceremonial solemnity recognized by all those who stepped back to honor their entry, their bodies a physical witness no speaking could refute.

Once inside, however, they were overtaken almost immediately by the rest of the crowd, as we dashed into the marble hall and ran up an ornate Beaux-Arts staircase to follow hand-drawn arrows on flimsy sheets of paper tacked up on the walls that led us up and down ill-lit

stairways, through long straight white-painted corridors, the floors covered in the standard thin red carpet found in every institutional space in Vilnius, the walls lined with rows and rows of doors, most sealed shut with wax, some with the seals already cracked. All sense of direction was lost after a few turnings. But this did not matter. We were not to linger here. The office space of the KGB was irrelevant to our search. This was only the passage to some final destination. It was almost as cold indoors as it had been outside, again typical of office and institutional space in Vilnius that winter -- not enough money in the city's budget to pay for heating oil -- and the chill added to our urgency. Down a particularly narrow set of wooden stairs. And then suddenly on our right, a well-lit room, in front of us a well-lit hall. On the right, a room with a desk and a chair, odd metal boxes hanging on the wall, recording instruments sitting on the desk. Facing the beginning of the hallway, a narrow closet lined in leather, no lights, a bench built in to the cement, a grate in the floor, a windowless door. A man stood at the threshold of the door and spoke to anyone who would pass by, spoke to no one in particular; "I was here, they kept you without light, without food, you thought you would go crazy. The cold." And a hall lined with open doors, doors opened to cells, beds lined against the wall, chairs, tables, hooks for clothes. The speed was overwhelming. People ran from room to room, stood at each threshold, staring, then ran on to the next identical room, stood and stared. Amidst the hall of open doors, one locked door. We all pressed our faces up to the peephole. The room was filled with refuse: posters of Marx and Lenin, old blankets, coats, bedding, illegible papers. More cells. More hallway. The crowd ran out a door at the end of the hall to the courtyard. The darkening sky gave the only light, the courtyard windows large, dark and empty over our heads. Hurricane fencing was all around, and a big fenced cage took up almost all the space inside the courtyard. We sped up a rickety staircase and found ourselves staring down into outdoor cells. Walking in the footsteps of the guards, we looked down into rows and rows of identical fenced cubes. Around and then down, pushing aside the others still coming up the stairs, running past the doors of the cages, the walls heavy around us, the passage narrow. Like a maze, some passages dead-ended, and then the bodies already in had to force their way out through the bodies pushing in to see what was there at the end of the passage that went nowhere. More. We ran to the courtyard door. Passed through. To a side street. Suddenly outside the building. The shock of leaving before we

knew we had come to the end kept us moving, and automatically each of us turned away, moving off alone somewhere else in the cold darkness of the early spring evening.

What I found striking looking back on this event was the overwhelming sense of driving urgency and speed that gathered momentum as we moved deeper inside and down into the building, closer to the hidden secret whose discovery would finally and conclusively expose the KGB to an explanatory scrutiny of its power and its workings, and simultaneously reveal the power that vanquished it, the enduring force of the nation that enlivened the bodies of its subjects and through them brought independence to Lithuania. This public moved into the building and gained speed as they sensed their approach to where they thought the source of this place's power lay, in its cell-filled bowels. They ran to it and then they ran through it, momentarily engaging with its material only to find it lacking, and then rushing past the dead residue of this institution's past, dissatisfied with their inability to confront and engage with these simultaneously partial and overabundant objects of history so as to bring the past directly and untransformed into the present, dissatisfied with the necessity of a space between this building and what it stood for, hoping to find themselves in the midst of what Peirce called Firstness, "the mode of being which consists in its subject's being positively such as it is regardless of aught else" (Peirce 1955: 76). Peirce posits that such a mode of being can only be a possibility, but it was such a tantalizing one for these whose very subjectivity depended on a belief in the ultimate and irrefutable power of experience to reveal the Truth of History and Things for all time as it was believed to exist outside of all mediating forces such as representation and temporality, outside of the historical forces that allowed experience to take place, outside even of the individual historical bodies that were the only possible sites for Truth's revelation. When the authoritative power of experience depends for its existence on an individuated and isolatable body, a body for which isolation is both a form of torture -- to which many émigré and deportee authors attest -- and yet also a necessary state of being for the body to become a proud monument to the endurance of the nation that it animates and that animates it -- when authority is obtained through individual experience, but it is the authority to speak of Truths that exist outside of any individual, outside of any history, Bakhtin's comment, cited earlier, is here recalled and refigured, together with

Peirce, to highlight the pain of this possibility confounded, of the impossibility of having the partiality of the present bring the completeness of the past into a non-temporal being.

The building held a lingering residue that compelled entry and yet frustrated intentions. In this way it was a physical catalyst for a force inherent in these nationalists' enactment of their particular subjectivity, offering the promise of a solution it could not fulfill. This group of Sajudis supporters was the vocal minority who most repeatedly and forcefully realized what Žizek has described as "the transference illusion according to which the subject becomes at every stage what it always already was. . . something which was already there from the beginning" (Žizek 1989:104), and furthermore, will always be there till the end. This slippery trick, upon which these Lithuanians' sense of their Lithuanian-ness depended, continued to surprise me every time I saw it, and I found myself during my fieldwork always on the lookout for the moment in the prestidigitation when the water became wine, the moment when the past came into being by assuming its own recession at the same time it asserted its constant presence, when their foundational history as Lithuanian subjects under Soviet control, which defined their subjectivity, fleetingly appeared to assume what Bakhtin called a hopelessly finished quality. In trying to isolate the exact moment of transformation I'm quite sure now that I was hoping to expose the magic's secret as a fraud, and therefore expose the emptiness that had disguised itself as the heart of being, the temporal foundations of an identity dependent on its assumption of its own eternal and unchanging endurance for its very existence. In this way I was no outsider to the crowd that surrounded me. For they too were here to enact a similar revelation of fraud, although their target was different. My own search for the transformational moment in the transference illusion of national subjectivity paralleled this search in the KGB's building for the origin of assertive deception .

The projects of the Sajudis constituency came to have a pathetic poignancy in their struggle to reveal just what had really happened during the Soviet occupation, to reveal the truth of the past, to reveal it in its utter completeness, including an explanation for its existence, and to make that knowledge known. What Nora has called the "terrorism of historicized memory" (Nora 1989: 14), the imperative to preserve every indicator of memory, be

it materially, in an archive, or internally, in individuals, is one force that drove these projects. So the man outside the padded closet could only repeat over and over the horror of madness that threatened to overtake him as he stood alone in that black cell to the crowd that ran by him, searching for their own experience of his and their torture in the empty halls that refused to allow a recreation of the power that had infused them for 50 years and had directed the formation of its subjects.

Notes

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1. In fact the reconsecration of the church was one of Brazauskas' first acts upon assuming the Secretaryship in 1988. Other early acts were to reinstate the flag of independent pre-war Lithuania, and declare the official language of state to be Lithuanian.
2. I have written about this first inauguration for a paper presented at AAA 1993, "A Sacred State: Lithuania's New President."
3. Sajudis, after their stunning losses in the Parliamentary and Presidential elections in the winter of 1992-93, disbanded and regrouped, forming a new party, the Fatherland Rebirth Union, with a conservative platform and a call to battle against the "restoration of authoritarian socialism" and the rise of "neo-communism" (*Tevynes Atgimimo Sajungos Steigiamosios Konferencijos Dokumentai*, April 1, 1993).
4. There are two words often used to describe what in English I translate as Lithuanian-ness. *Lietuvybe* has a more conceptual feel, implying a distinct Lithuanian way of being in the world, and invoking the sense of distinct community that is present and accord with this way of being as an existent state. *Lietuvishkumas* has a more active feel, implying the engagement of the distinctive cultural practice that

makes Lietuivybe evident in the world through actions.

5. This intense concern for the correct presentation of the national symbol seems to be a recent one. In my research on the interwar independence I have yet to see a consistent presentation of the Vytis' tail, nor find any documents that speak to a concern for its consistency or any attempts to read the tail's placement as a index of the nation's or the state's strength or legitimacy.

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