



Vidas Dulke addresses a Baltic independence demonstration at a border post near Lithuania during the 400-mile Baltic Freedom Walk June 3, 1991.

trip fit right into my plan. Walking to Washington made sense if I made it to the White House before the president left.

While I planned the walk, Rochester songwriter Jim Griffo wrote and recorded the song, "Hope's Alive (Free Grazulis Now)." This song was translated into Lithuanian by Chicago residents Darius Polikaitis and Mykolas Drunga. After Polikaitis recorded it, both versions were played during a Voice of America interview I did during the walk. The song also served to motivate me as I trained for the walk.

On May 1, 1988, I left the Liberty Pole in downtown Rochester on foot. I reached the White House on May 24. I eventually had a meeting with a member of the National Security Council who promised to present information about Grazulis to President Reagan's advisors at the Moscow summit. As the first Lithuanian dissident sentenced during *glasnost*, Grazulis served nine months of a 10-month sentence and was released in October, 1988.

The "Walk to Washington" gave me great faith in Baltic independence. By walking 500 miles through New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland and the District of Columbia, I successfully achieved my objective to gain media attention for Lithuania and Grazulis. I later heard Grazulis himself learned of my walk in prison via the Voice of America broadcast. The power of non-violent action had manifested such a miracle!

During the three years after the walk, I developed a strong rapport with the local media. I had the opportunity to speak out regularly regarding current events in the Baltic States. On two occasions local television stations interviewed me live from Lithuanian independence demonstrations in Washington, D.C. I was also a frequent guest on local radio programs. It was an exciting time, but I wanted to do more.

The opportunity I had been waiting a lifetime for came when a relative invited me to visit Lithuania in the spring of 1991. Not only would the trip enable me to visit Lithuania for the first time, it would al-



A Lithuanian guard lies in a pool of blood after attackers killed seven guards at a customs house on the Lithuanian-Byelorussian border near Medininkai July 31, 1991.

low me to meet Grazulis, who — at the last minute — agreed to accompany me for most of the 600 kilometer (400 mile) Baltic Freedom Walk.

I had first suggested this walk to now Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis during his visit to Chicago in 1989. At that time, Landsbergis was president of the Sajudis, which literally means "movement." Sajudis is the name of the Independence Party, or as it is also known, the Popular Front. He endorsed the idea in 1989, but the Soviet blockade of Lithuania in 1990 postponed the walk until 1991.

Some of my friends felt that the Soviets would not grant me a visa or would prevent me from completing this walk. They could not accept the possibility that this walk could fail. I felt compelled to try now when the Baltic people were working so fiercely toward freedom. God gave me this opportunity and I had to take it!

I received support for my walk from the Rochester Baltic community, as well as my employer, Thomas James Associates. In addition, all three Baltic Popular Fronts helped coordinate lodging and meals during the walk scheduled from May 14 to June 14.

Originally, I planned for only four walkers to participate — one from each Baltic State and myself. Eventually, our numbers grew to a basic group of 12 made up of Estonians and Lithuanians.

We started out on May 14 at the Parliament Building in Tallinn, Estonia, where a crowd of several hundred people presented me with flowers and asked for autographs. As we walked through Estonia, people driving by would honk their horns and cheer. In Parnu, a major seaport, I spoke before a political conference and received a standing ovation when I said: "Vabadus Eestile" (Freedom for Estonia!)

Local Latvian officials greeted us when we reached Ainazi, Latvia, on May 22. Our average daily walk covered 20 kilometers or 12.5 miles. This left us time each day to meet with the media and townspeople. In Ainazi, I spoke to a local folk dance group and explained that this was a non-violent effort for Baltic independence.

Throughout our walk Baltic radio stations played the song, "About Being Free," which Canandaigua folk singer Bonnie Abrams wrote and recorded. This song emphasizes that non-violence can lead a nation to independence.

On June 3 we reached Lithuania and organized a demonstration at a recently attacked Lithuanian border post near Pasvalys. The Soviet OMON, the black beret interior Ministry troops, had burned a trailer at this border post, along with other Baltic border posts. They also killed one Lithuanian border guard near the Byelorussian border.

I told the crowd of 300 Lithuanians that the black berets will not defeat the Lithuanian people. Such violence will be forgotten, but those who gave their lives for Lithuania will be remembered.

On June 14, we reached the parliament building in Vilnius where President Landsbergis accompanied us the last kilometer to the cathedral. The Mass at the cathedral commemorated the 50th anniversary of the first deportations to Siberia.

I returned to the United States extremely satisfied with my first visit to my homeland. And I knew the Baltic people were aware of the walk and sincerely appreciated it.

Among the many tender moments that I experienced on the trip was with a bus driver in Panevezys, Lithuania. He stopped his bus when he saw our group marching into town and parked along the side of the road. Suddenly, this powerfully built, 6-foot-5 bus driver climbed off the bus and without speaking gave me a bear hug. I can still see the tears in his eyes.

When I returned to the United States in June, I was unprepared for the events that would soon occur in Russia. The Soviet coup in August initially terrified me. I was concerned about my relatives and all my Baltic friends. It certainly seemed that many bold Balts would perish defending their native land. Then Russian President Boris Yeltsin courageously opposed the coup, and we all sighed with relief.

The subsequent events leading to Baltic independence seem unexplainable, even magical. Without question, however, the Baltic focus on non-violence contributed significantly to the re-establishment of Baltic independence. Fifty years of defiance led to this brilliant and historic new beginning. I stand in awe of the brave Baltic men and women who sacrificed their lives for this new Baltic era.

Today, the Baltic States are again independent and members of the United Nations. They still face many problems, including establishing their own economies, improving means of communication and "parting" with Soviet troops.

I hope to visit the Baltics some day soon and contribute what help I can during this rebuilding period. I will continue to pray for the Baltic States and to believe that Baltic dreams can come true.

Paulius Klimas is a Lithuanian representative to the Rochester Baltic American Committee.



A girl appears to whisper into the ear of a toppled statue of Lenin in Vilnius Aug. 30.



Lithuania' has long national history

is no stranger to independence or to occupying nations.

Lithuanian Empire — also known as the Lithuanian Empire — formed in the 13th century as a confederation of tribes joined forces against the Teutonic Knights. The militaristic empire was attempting to expand its territory to the Baltic Sea.

The confederation defeated the German Empire in its own conquest of neighboring territories. The Lithuanian Empire eventually stretched from the Black seas, including Poland, Byelorussia, European Russia and the Baltic Sea.

Gradually merged with Poland as the empire tried to stave off Russian advances. In the 16th century, the two countries shared a monarch and an elected king.

In the next two centuries, Poland was re-ruled by neighboring powers — Russia and Prussia — and was gradually partitioned.

By 1795, Lithuania was occupied mostly by Russia, except for a small section belonging to Prussia.

The Lithuanians fought these occupations, organizing major insurrections in 1812, 1831, 1863 and 1905. In the aftermath of World War I, Lithuanian nationalists took control of the country. Lithuania declared its independence in 1918.

That independence was short-lived, however. The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany finished a pact granting the Soviets control over Lithuania and the other two independent Baltic republics — Estonia and Latvia. On Aug. 3, 1940, the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania. A number of nations — including the United States — refused to recognize that annexation, however.

In the decades since, Lithuanians have organized repeated protests against Soviet control. After Lithuania declared its independence in 1990, the country was finally granted autonomy following the failed Soviet coup last month.

— Lee Strong

