



THE HILL OF CROSSES

AS WE CONTINUE TO REMEMBER THE EVENTS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE TWENTY YEARS AGO LEADING TO THE COLLAPSE OF THE COMMUNIST SYSTEM, STORIES OF THE COURAGE OF ANONYMOUS CITIZENS ADD TO AN AMAZING PICTURE OF PROVIDENTIAL ORCHESTRATION.

We have written earlier about the handful of faithful Romanian Baptists who formed a human guard around their threatened pastor's house in Timisoara, which swelled into a nation-wide revolution and overthrew the dictator within a matter of days, in December 1989.

We also looked at the prayer and peace movement of Eastern Germany, centred in the Nikolai Church in Leipzig, where hundreds of Stasis agents found themselves powerless to stem the peaceful and praying crowds from growing until 'the dam burst'.

Now let's visit Lithuania, the last country in Europe to 'capitulate' to Christianity—as late as the 14th century.

In a nasty postscript to the Crusades in the Holy Land, the Teutonic Knights led more crusades against the pagan Lithuanians to force them into submission to the Cross. Little wonder that many Lithuanians still hold on to pagan practises and beliefs.

Later, heavy-handed Tsarist rule in the 19th century brutally repressed a national uprising. Many rebels were executed. Some were secretly buried on an ancient sacred site, a hill in the countryside close to the Latvian border. Crosses were set up in memory of the rebels. A century ago, a hundred crosses marked their graves on the hill's horizon.

DEPORTED

During mass repressions of Stalin's Soviet occupation, Lithuanians continued to suffer greatly. Hundreds of thousands were deported to Siberia between 1941 and 1952, leaving whole villages totally deserted.

In 1956, after Stalin's death, Lithuanians began returning home. They erected new crosses on the hill in gratitude for their return, in memory of their torture and suffering, and as memorials for those who would never return. The hill became a place of prayer for those still suffering. Passionate and openly

anti-Soviet inscriptions often adorned the crosses, making the hill an open-air museum, a mirror of human suffering and inhumane oppression.

In 1961, the authorities came with bulldozers to raze the Hill of Crosses and erase it from human memory. Wooden crosses were burned. Iron crosses became scrap metal. Stone crosses were buried. The hill was declared a forbidden place, a place of "ignorance" and "fanaticism", and was kept under surveillance.



But somehow, new crosses kept appearing at night. At first they were small, but then became bigger and bigger.

The authorities tried more drastic measures. Projects to flood the area, block the roads, and turn the hill into an inaccessible island, all failed over time. More crosses just kept appearing.

ABANDONED

Finally in 1985, the government abandoned their hopeless task. Peace came to the Hill of Crosses. Three years later the revolution was well under way to overthrow the Soviet oppression. And in 1991, independence came at last to Lithuania.

Today this 10-metre high hill is an unimaginable forest of hundreds of thousands of crosses; some even say millions! The Hill of Crosses is truly a powerful declaration of hope in the face of tyranny. Like a giant pin-cushion, it is a monument of folk art with many hand-carved crosses; some miniature, others five metres-high; some intricate and elaborate, others crude and simple. Most are anonymous, but one large wooden sculpture of Christ crucified is a treasured gift from Pope John Paul II.

There's even one there with my name on it.

Till next week, when we'll celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Pan-European Picnic!

Jeff Fountain