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AT THE KREMLIN WITH MOLOTOV

JURGIS GLIAUDA

JURGIS GLIAUDA (1906-) is a lawyer turned writer whose novels have won several Lithuanian literary prizes and whose best known novel has been listed among the books of the month by Time magazine. This novel, *House upon the Sand* (New York: Manyland, 1963), *Time* wrote, is a study "of savage ironies, belongs with the best of the literature on Nazidom."

In 1965, Gliauda published *Agony* (*Agonija*, not yet translated into English) which he regards to be a "non-fiction novel." It is an account of the last days and weeks of Lithuania's independence. Based on numerous interviews with Lithuanian participants in the events of the spring and summer of 1940, *Agony* not only has the air of authenticity, but in actuality reproduces quite truthfully a number of decisive situations. Possibly the best of these reproductions is the account of negotiations with Soviet Foreign Miniser Viacheslav Molotov, translated in the following pages. The excerpt not only conveys the atmosphere in which the conferences transpired, but also is historically quite accurate, and as such provides a good insight into Soviet negotiation techniques under Stalin.

The notes are supplied by the editor.

So this is Kremlin! Kremlin!

The walls of the Kremlin are two stories high. Nineteen towers. Seven guards in the vault of a tower. **Borovytskye vorota**, the entrance through which everyone passes, meets the guards, and the guards smile, and their officer in charge, a major, smiles, too. The smiles flash forth a threat. Above the entrance, which during the Middle Ages displayed an icon (the Iversk Madonna) and was hung with lights, now is an inscription in prominent gold letters: **Religia — opium dlia naroda**.

Inside the Kremlin, a labyrinth of streets and walks. There one always walks fast, so that the visitor would get out of breath and feel lost. Near and far in this labyrinth of walks there are openings in the walls to still other walks. They resemble the ancient passageways in the old part of Kaunas.[1] In places lamps give off a blinding light, while deeper inside the passages there is darkness. At night, if you pass through the Kremlin, these mysterious passageways seem like paths, along which are walled in history and blood that was spilled since the time of Ivan the Terrible.

Now, walking alongside Prime Minister Antanas Mer-kys, Lithuania's Envoy in Moscow, Ladas Natkus remembers a visit to Stalin not yet a year ago. It is the same Kremlin, and somewhere no one knows where Stalin is to be found. His reception room is reached only after a long and hurried journey down an interminable corridor. In his reception room stand two desks, a conference table covered in green, cigarettes, bottles of **Borzom**,[2] ashtrays. On the wall a portrait of Lenin, a set of mounted photographs, but they are small and difficult to make out. Natkus remembers that Stalin smoked during the conference. He smoked a lot, the cigarettes in very long holders. He smoked leisurely, his eyes half-closed, not looking at his conference partner.

Stalin's face is russet in color. He's older than his pictures, and graying. He is short and as though slapped together out of a heavy mass. On his face there is no expression of thought or emotion. His face is a veil. When he smiles, his face changes and becomes enlivened. Stalin remembers many faces and is always well-informed. At the time when they went to the Kremlin to confer about the "mutual" assistance pact, there had been many soldiers in the Kremlin. A loud ring was sounded when they entered. Together with the military escort they had gone along this same corridor in which the walls do not form sharp angles but rather curve as they turn.

Finally, great double doors with diminishing numbers. Room Number 2. Draperies on the windows. Conference quarters. But this is not where they're being expected. Room Number 1. Ah, there he is, Stalin: short and heavy-set, grayish face, with hardly a trace of the grandeur shown by his pictures. He looks physically tired, somehow ashen in color, his carefully pressed, strangely designed suit ,a mixture of the civilian and military, mingled, his cheeks pox-marked, his look hard and stony.

"I like **Borzom**. How about you?" he asks his visitor.

The visitor answers and through an odd association of thought perceives the most typical phenomenon in Russian history: Russia is always in need of a throne, and the throne will always be in the hands of a Rasputin. Wasn't this a member of the Rasputin dynasty?

The time set for entering Molotov's office was seemingly synchronized with the musical tower clock of the Kremlin. Everything here seemed to be synchronized: the entrance of the automobile into the recesses of the Kremlin, the encounter with the guards, the pointed bayonets on their rifles, the sudden appearance of the protocol officials (their faces frozen with severity and polite behavior), the heavy doors of-Molotov's office and the entrance through them as the clock chimed on the appointed hour. This regularity tended to repress the individuality of the person, making him part, as it were, of the same synchronization attending all the details of his visit.

Strong light flooded Molotov's office. On the right side the large room had several windows hidden behind curtains. The room's furnishings were all grouped before that window section in the wall. Two framed pictures: a charcoal drawing of Lenin and the traditional oil, appearing in all anthologies, of Stalin and Lenin by Caricin. The conference table was draped with red felt, a little further stood easy chairs covered with light brown leather. All was inanimate, cold, without any sign giving a clue to the personality and character of the statesman, who worked in this large room. In this room at the time of the conference last October, Natkus had met Stalin, and now he instinctively glanced at the other two doors, through which then Stalin alone, like a gray shadow, had come in.

Without making the visitors wait, Molotov entered the room, and behind him came Pozdniakov,[3] with an expression of concern and willingness to help. The two Russians and the Lithuanians, being already acquainted, greeted each other in an official and cool manner.

They sat down at the conference table — Merkys and Natkus on one side, Molotov and Pozdniakov on the other. The Russians had no files, no papers or folders with them. This seemed strange to the Lithuanians. Merkys laid his briefcase on the table. It contained the results cf the investigation regarding the disappearance of the Soviet soldiers.

"Viacheslav Mikhailovich," Merkys addressed Molotov in Russian, "we've brought proof of the careful investigation of all those heavy charges, which the Soviet government has made against the Lithuanian government. As you know, a special investigation commission examined the incidents. I've brought the results for you to see." Molotov's heavy face, under his bulging forehead, seemed to be filling with hate for Merkys, who, speaking courteously and as though taking no note of Molotov's expression, continued his speech. Merkys' face seemed to be suffused with the conviction that soon this obligation to explain would end, an agreement would be reached, the welcome mood that follows solved tensions would come, a release. Pozdniakov sat motionless. His face was hardened in a leaden immobility. Molotov's hand, resting on the red felt of the table, began to show impatience and irritation. His fingers were large and blunt.

Natkus felt sorely depressed by the room, where eight months ago negotiations about signing the mutual assistance pact had taken place and where Urbšys[4] fought bravely for Lithuanian interests. He recalled thé way Urbšys had spoken, the retorts Molotov had made, and how Stalin uttered that final and dictatorial "niet." It was clear to Natkus, that due to the courageous stand taken by Urbšys at the last conference, Kremlin had now demanded that Merkys, and not Urbšys, should come. A newly constituted government in our country, it occurred to Merkys, would help in strengthening relations with the Soviets.

Merkys had chosen to deliver his report in an official, bureaucratic style. He kept taking one sheet of paper after another from the pile of the investigation material and reading off the testimony of the witnesses, interspersing them with a brief summary conclusion by the investigation commission. There were even inscribed photographs of the Red Army soldiers, prepared with the true precision of the legal-minded questioner and with a naive belief that Molotov felt any need for truth and precision.

Included in the investigation material was a ridiculously characteristic incident in the Grigaičiai village in the Vilnius district, where three Red Army soldiers held a drinking bout at a farmer's home from noon to ten o'clock at night. When two of the tipsy soldiers decided to return to their regiment, the third one refused. He remained a deserter for three more days. The ones who returned told their superiors of his whereabouts. Eight Red Army soldiers came in a truck to arrest him. The deserter cursed the Red Army in their sight and trampled on his Red Army cap. They threw him on the ground, tied him up and brought him by force back to the regiment.

On May 10, three days after this incident, a misunderstanding occurred in Alytus. Two Red Army soldiers approached a Lithuanian on the street and asked him to direct them to a locale where they might get some good beer. As they stood

talking, another man from Alytus joined them. They all stopped in at a small restaurant on Vytautas Street and had dinner. Later the Red Army soldiers turned up at a prostitute's place. These soldiers returned to their regiment after a four-day bout of drinking.

Finally the case of the missing sergeant Butaev came to light, too. On May 12, early in the morning, the Vilnius police was informed that a Red Army soldier, in his attempts to hide, had been living for some time in a prostitute's apartment. Police officials went quickly to the address they had been given, arrested the deserter and ordered him to go with them to the police station. The deserter, whose hands had been left free, suddenly sprang out the window and started running. Seeing that he would not be able to escape the police, he shot himself in clear view on the Vilnius street. This happened at 11:20 A. M. His body was left unmoved with a guard posted by. Only at about 5 o'clock that evening did Red Army officials arrive. They inspected the body and took it back to their regiment. There it became clear that this had been the sergeant Butaev, who had deserted two months ago, that is, in March, and about whose desertion of the Red Army base the Lithuanian security branch had not been informed soon enough.

The Lithuanian investigation disclosed that Butaev had shot himself in the mouth. Later, when Lithuanian officials were not present, the Soviet autopsy commission declared that Butaev's body showed signs of a shot through the heart.

It was extremely difficult for the Lithuanian investigators to track down the fugitives. Therefore, establishing the identity of these deserters was an excellent attestation to the careful work of the security department.

While Merkys with pedantical clarity read off the results of the investigation commission's work, Natkus went back in his thoughts to this same room on May 25, 10 o'clock in the evening, when he had been suddenly called here by Molotov's private secretary Kozirev.

That same evening at 8 o'clock, Natkus had been issuing a visa to General Loktionov, who was going to Lithuania, and Loktionov had assured him that Russian-Lithuanian relations were excellent. Two hours later in the Kremlin, Natkus was received by Molotov without diplomatic amenities, in a sullen, rude manner. Molotov handed Natkus the Soviet Union's threats and charges concerning the alleged seizures of Red Army soldiers. Molotov awaited no answer from Natkus, he ended the audience in twenty-five minutes.

The same scene was taking place now. Molotov's blunt, thick fingers stopped their drumming on the red felt of the table and stiffened. Casting a glance of violent disgust at the courteously and easily speaking Merkys, and as though sadistically crushing his confident pose, Molotov said:

"Gospodin ministr, dovolno duraka valiat. Ja tysiachu takikh sledstvii sostriapaiu, esli eto pravitelstvu nuzhno. (Mr. Minister, let's stop playing the fool. I can cook up thousands of such investigations for you, if the government needs them."

Then, as though he were a fierce dog who had just broken his leash, Molotov broke out angrily and breathlessly with a statement of his opinion, not letting Merkys speak:

"We know well that Lithuanian intelligence agents had contacts with Butaev, and there is no doubt that he was shot. Your government presented to us two explanatory notes, and they are nothing but flimsy excuses. Our policy in regard to Lithuania is pro-Lithuanian. Can you say that your policy is pro-Soviet? Your Minister of Internal Affairs and the Director of your Security Department are clearly unfriendly to the Soviets. The Lithuanian press, which is controlled and censored by the government, is engaged in provocation of the Soviet Union. You have begun to arm the Riflemen's Association (Sauliai). That is official mobilization. Right?"

Merkys raised his hand, as though trying to stop Molotov, who was bursting with accusations. He stopped for a moment, and Merkys, turning to Pozdniakov. remarked:

"Mr. Pozdniakov, for several years now you have been in Lithuania and you know what the Riflemen and their purpose are. The new groups of the Association are forming in (the newly absorbed) Vilnius and the Vilnius district doesn't mean they have nasty intentions against the Soviet forces."

But this naive attempt to make Pozdniakov come out in support of Merkys' thesis met with no success, as was to be expected. Pozdniakov sat in his place, rigid, as of stone, not even turning his face to Merkys, who had addressed him, and as though he hadn't even heard his voice.

"Mr. Minister," Molotov interrupted Merkys with a jubilant frenzy on his face, expecting immediately to crush all attempts on the part of the Lithuanian delegate to discuss undiscussable questions, "here is your newspaper, the so-called **Revue Baltique**.[5] Second issue. In it you clearly **skolachivaete vojennyi soiuz protiv sovetskoi strany** (are forging a military alliance against the Soviet Union). You write that following closer economic ties, a complete agreement is possible. I stress 'complete'!"

Molotov pulled from his coat pocket, prepared for this psychological blow, the issue of Revue Baltique, published in Riga. Turning to a place marked by a scrap of paper, he pointed to a page, on which several sentences were underlined in red

pencil. Molotov read these sentences in French and immediately, not letting Merkys speak, he declared in a greatly indignant tone:

"Your director of military supplies visited Latvia. You assigned a military attache to Estonia. Finally, your ministers of foreign affairs held a conference. Isn't this the propagation of a secret military treaty among the Baltic countries? Against whom is this alliance? Obviously, against us. We gave you back Vilnius, and from you — not a shred of gratitude. We guaranteed your security, and you sabotage our efforts. Didn't your press come out in support of Finland, when our heroic Red Army was there shedding its blood on the battlefield? The Soviet Union shows you the sincerest and kindliest consideration, and you repay with provocations. Didn't you recently arrest ten charwomen in Alytus solely because they did work for Soviet troops? Didn't you arrest there, too, the house painter Lazarevicius and deport him somewhere, when he was needed by our troops? You dismissed General Raštikis from his post. Your paper **Dvatsatii vek**[11] printed cartoons jeering at the Soviet Union."

"But charges need proof," Merkys cried out impatiently. "And I have the evidence right here." Merkys shook the investigation documents, the refutations of earlier charges. "These new accusations of yours must be examined, and I'm certain that you have been falsely informed. Here, in regard to the missing Soviet soldiers, who supposedly were being held by our security agencies, the evidence says something entirely different. The charges did not prove true at all. Here's the testimony of a certain Savickaitė."

It was the testimony of a lady of easy virtue: the statement, that two runaway Red Army soldiers spent four days at her apartment, where they met with other women, ran out of money, and leaving debts behind them, fled from her place.

"Oh," Molotov cried painfully, "why do you read me the testimony of your prostitutes!"

Merkys lapsed into silence. The conversation had taken such a turn, that he was at a loss as to what he should do. It became clear to him that Molotov placed no value on the Lithuanian investigations and wasn't interested in them. To Molotov the work of the investigating commission was entirely worthless and needless. At the same time it was obvious that this meeting was a detail in some game that Merkys couldn't guess at. Molotov's behavior betrayed Molotov himself: he was playing a role, which must lead to the conclusion of the conflict invented by the Kremlin. In that sense, Molotov's behavior was not overly clever, for it unmasked the intentions of his government. "They won't come to an agreement, they want to continue the incidents," thought Merkys. And immediately he perceived guidelines for his own policy: "I must pay back by the same method, in the same currency — to gain time."

He rose from his chair confidently, having lost all desire to keep answering the accusations. Molotov saw that Merkys had stood up and seemed to recall suddenly that in the heated debate of the meeting, he hadn't had time to say everything, to give the reason why he had called out from Kaunas the Lithuanian Prime Minister, and had by - passed Urbsys. Molotov had thought to give a blow to the Prime Minister himself, by showing displeasure at his article in the pages of the **Revue Baltique**, but Merkys did not appear crushed. Molotov blurted hastily:

"The Soviet government proposes that the Lithuanian government bring to trial the Minister of Internal Affairs Skučas and the Director of the Security Police Povilaitis for the seizure of Red Army soldiers. And... that a new Lithuanian government be formed, which would be more friendly to the Soviet Union and more acceptable to it. Then the Lithuanian obligations to the Soviet Union would be faithfully discharged."

Looking at Molotov's proposal only as a matter for negotiation, only as a request, not a dictate, nor a threat to Lithuanian sovereignty, Merkys asked: "When can we meet for the next conference?"

Feeling that Merkys was either accessible or wasn't grasping the proposal, against which he had expected the most violent of protests, for this was interfering in Lithuanian internal affairs, Molotov, regaining his crude sarcasm, immediately replied: "That depends on you, Mr. Minister."

At two o'clock in the night, Merkys and Natkus silently got into the Lithuanian embassy limousine. In a few minutes they were at the Lithuanian legation.

Notes

1 City of Lithuania that served as the country's capital between 1920-41.
2 Mineral water.
3 Soviet envoy in Lithuania.
4 Juozas Urbšys, Lithuania's foreign minister at the time.
5 *Revie Baltique (Baltic Review)* was published in French jointly by Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.
6 *Dvatsatii Vek* was *XX Amžius* (XX Century), a Lithuanian daily newspaper of liberal Catholic orientation.