

Although Litvinov died a natural death, he feared the very real possibility of arrest in his later years, and every night slept with a gun next to his pillow—suicide was the best way to escape imprisonment and torture.

Hinsey: You spent time with the Litvinovs during the trial—can you say a bit about what you discussed?

Venclova: I stayed in my apartment along with the Litvinovs, thus our discussions were quite extensive. They mostly related to the trial itself, but we also discussed Mikhail and Flora's son, Pavel Litvinov, who was my age and who had participated in the 1968 Red Square demonstration with Natasha Gorbanevskaya. Following the protest, Pavel had been sentenced to five years of internal exile; after having served his term, he left for the West in 1974. I met and befriended him in Tarrytown, New York, where he still lives.

Hinsey: Did Sakharov's presence—and Kovalyov's support of Lithuanian human rights—help to create a feeling of solidarity between the Lithuanian and Russian dissidents?

Venclova: Quite definitely so. One might also say that it strengthened the links between the Soviet and Lithuanian human rights movements and the Jewish aliyah movement, which was represented in Lithuania by activists such as Finkelstein.

Hinsey: In the Soviet Union, the year 1976—after the signing of the Helsinki Accords—was a watershed year for dissident activity. In early spring, the physicist Yuri Orlov approached Lyudmila Alexeyeva about forming the Public Group to Assist the Implementation of the Helsinki Accords in the USSR—

Venclova: That was an idea that had taken time to mature. In the previous chapter, we spoke about how Alexander Esenin-Volpin organized the first demonstration at Pushkin Square. He was perhaps the first to discover something that was as simple and powerful as Columbus's egg. The Soviet Constitution formally recognized certain democratic rights, such as freedom of speech and free assembly, and so on, yet no one had ever thought of exercising them, as you knew that was a sure way to land in prison or, worse, a psychiatric ward. But what if one took the Soviets at their word and insisted that Soviet law be obeyed? If people were punished, this would mean that the authorities were themselves breaking the Constitution. Of course, to behave as a free human being exposes you to immense risks, but it also undermines the system, if only for a time. Vladimir Bukovsky once said: "If one out of 250 million Soviet citizens refuses to conform, he or she deprives the system of one 250-millionth part of its power." Such a fraction might seem insignificant, but it had a potential to grow exponentially. Sakharov took the same standpoint when he declared "the principle 'what is not prohibited is allowed' should be understood literally." The Helsinki Accords, namely, the third basket, opened new vistas in this respect.

Hinsey: On May 12, 1976, a press conference was held to announce the establishment of the Moscow Helsinki Group at Andrei Sakharov's apartment in Moscow—

Venclova: The initiative emerged from Sakharov's immediate circle (though he did not join the group himself, as he was already busy with several other human rights associations). Yuri Orlov was the group's leader; Lyudmila Alexeyeva, Yelena Bonner, and Alexander Ginzburg were its most visible members; it also included Anatoly (or Natan) Sharansky, a young Jewish activist who represented the aliyah movement. The group announced that its purpose was to monitor violations of the Helsinki Accords in the USSR, and to inform all the signatories regarding such cases, including the Soviet government. (It is easy to imagine the scope of these cases: censorship, persecution of religious rights, restrictions on ethnic groups, arbitrary searches and

arrests, obstructing emigration, and so forth—one could hardly complain for lack of work.) The group's philosophy was based on transparency. The names and addresses of its members were published in its founding manifesto. The group defined itself as an association working within the limits of Soviet law, and thus not involved in any clandestine activities. It was a stroke of genius: to persecute such a law-abiding body would only reveal to world public opinion the nature of the system, and no amount of demagoguery would be sufficient to hide this fact. For at least half a year the Soviet leadership was totally at a loss. The group prepared formal documents about violations of human rights, publicized them at press conferences to which Western journalists were invited, and went unpunished—even unhindered. Purely and simply, that was incredible.

The Moscow initiative was soon followed by a similar one in Kyiv: Ukrainian dissidents established their own Helsinki group. In fact, the legal right that concerned them above all was Ukraine's right to secede from the USSR. It was enshrined in the Soviet Constitution, but any attempt to put it into practice—or even any discussion of it—was treated as high treason. This was of course the same for all Soviet republics, including Lithuania, but Ukraine was considered the most sensitive case because of its size and significance. (The so-called autonomous republics, such as Chechnya, did not have such a right.) Later, the Georgian Helsinki Group was established under the leadership of the fierce nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who later became the first—and highly controversial—president of independent Georgia. In short, a kind of “socialist competition” started up between the different republics, as

one Western diplomat described it in private.

Hinsey: Let's return to your personal situation, which was being followed by your friends and fellow writers in Europe and the United States—

Venclova: After the publication of my letter to the Central Committee in *Kultura* and elsewhere, my case became internationally known. It was frequently mentioned by the Western media. At the time, as we touched on earlier, a sort of rule had emerged: there might be some hesitation on the part of the authorities to arrest or overtly harass a known person. Those who had no international profile risked perishing without a trace, as was the case with Professor Kazlauskas or Mindaugas Tomonis whom I mentioned earlier. Of course this type of protection was not infallible, but it could help, at least for a time.

My friends, above all Brodsky—who had benefited from the international stir surrounding his case—were well aware of this. Thus Brodsky issued a call for my safety in the *New York Review of Books* on April 1, 1976. In May or June of that year, someone knocked at my door. It was a foreign tourist, most likely a diaspora Lithuanian, whom I had never met. He silently handed me a clipping of Joseph's text and then disappeared. (Westerners were quite afraid of the KGB, and were therefore even more cautious than Soviet dissidents.) I read the clipping: in my opinion, Joseph had wildly overstated my merits, but perhaps that was understandable under the circumstances.

Brodsky also telephoned me, and at one point Czesław Miłosz did the same. It was the first time I had heard his voice. Luckily, by then my Polish was almost as good as my Lithuanian (and better than my English). Miłosz also wrote me a letter, which miraculously made it through postal censorship: it was written in a rather neutral tone, but it left no doubt that he knew who I was and was interested in my fate. Such letters were frequently opened by the KGB, photocopied and only then delivered to the addressee. When, during the post-Gorbachev period, I was able to have access to my secret police file, I found copies of dozens of letters, though Miłosz's was not among them. Miłosz had arranged an invitation for me to teach for a semester in Berkeley, California, where he was employed as a professor of Slavic literatures.

This invitation established formal grounds for me to once again address the OVIR, but when I did so, I was predictably sent away.

Hinsey: Were others also involved in your case?

Venclova: I also received the information that Algirdas Julien Greimas, the famous semiotician, was working on my behalf. Yet the most ridiculous story concerned Arthur Miller. His play, *The Price*, was being staged by the Vilnius State Drama Theater and was enjoying considerable success. Suddenly, without any warning or explanation, it was dropped from the repertoire. Neither the director nor the actors, to say nothing of the audience, had the slightest idea what had happened. Some of my friends and I suspected that Miller had perhaps supported my case. Years later, I met Arthur Miller at his house in Connecticut, and he confirmed our suspicions: he had indeed written a letter to Petras Griškevičius (the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party following Sniečkus's death), requesting that I be permitted to emigrate.

Hinsey: In 1976, you began to work with Eitan Finkelstein—

Venclova: As I have mentioned in relation to the Kovalyov trial, Finkelstein was a Jewish activist—a rather well-known physicist and refusenik who was not permitted to leave the USSR because of his alleged knowledge of military secrets. He moved from Moscow to Vilnius, as the attitude toward aliyah was a bit more liberal there; he also became involved in Lithuanian affairs. He helped dozens of potential émigrés—including Ida Kreingold, for example—by giving them practical and legal advice. He lived with his wife and their small daughter in a one-room basement flat, about two hundred meters from my parents' house. In 1974, Nadezhda Mandelstam stayed there for several days (I met her there, though her hosts were absent). The only decoration in the extremely modest apartment was a large map of Israel, which had been a gift from a tourist: Eitan knew every inch of the country. He had been symbolically appointed a professor at Jerusalem University by its administration, and always mentioned that in the various forms he had to fill out for the OVIR and elsewhere. Once, a policeman told him in all seriousness, "Oh, I didn't know they had established a university in Jeruzalè." (As you remember, Jeruzalè—meaning Jerusalem—was the rural suburb of Vilnius where I spent the first days of the Soviet-German war.)

Eitan's struggle for his family's right to emigrate lasted fourteen years, much longer than mine. He finally left in 1983. In the West, he became a journalist and a novelist. We remain close friends to this day.

Hinsey: Around this time you were asked by Felix Dektor to write an essay on the complex relationship between Lithuanians and Jews. You discussed this work with Finkelstein—

Venclova: Dektor was editing an underground Jewish newspaper, in which he had printed the memoirs of a Kaunas ghetto survivor. The author described in detail the June 1941 Kaunas pogroms, which were mainly carried out by ethnic Lithuanians. "This is something that must be discussed by both sides," Dektor told me. "Would you be willing to write an article about these events, from the ethnic Lithuanian point of view?" As an open dissident and "refusenik" myself, I had no qualms about contributing to the underground press. Therefore, I wrote an essay titled "Jews and Lithuanians." The article's central theme was a call for repentance. At the time, my information about the events was limited, but I strove to be entirely honest, which was not necessarily the position of many Lithuanian nationalists. All this happened, I believe, as early as summer 1975. Eitan Finkelstein read the typescript. Both he and Dektor approved it and believed it could become a bridge between the two communities. Dektor left for Israel shortly afterward: in 1976, the essay was reprinted in the Israeli press, and then in the Lithuanian diaspora press (I was still in the USSR). The Lithuanian émigré response was mixed, but

*Akiračiai*, which also printed my correspondence with Vincas Trumpa, supported my views without reservation.

Hinsey: Approximately a month after the establishment of the Moscow Helsinki Group in 1976, you were approached by Finkelstein and Viktoras Petkus who invited you to go for a walk—

Venclova: Yes, they knocked at my door and proposed that we go for a stroll. Finkelstein had previously mentioned Petkus to me, describing him as “a serious guy, a tutor of the younger Lithuanian generation.” When I saw Petkus, I remembered that we had briefly met many years before: he had been working in an office I visited during my student days because a certain pretty girl was employed there as well. But I knew next to nothing about him, and an outline of his life is well worth recounting.

Viktoras Petkus came from Samogitia, that is, western Lithuania, whose inhabitants are known for their reserve and stubbornness. (Petkus was a physically imposing man.) He was arrested immediately after the war, at the age of eighteen, for running a clandestine Catholic youth group in his high school. Such groups were abundant in prewar Lithuania and generally opposed the Smetona regime, but they were declared criminal by the Soviets. After Stalin’s death, Petkus was released, but remained true to his convictions and never concealed this fact. His life was therefore divided between jail and occasional employment. After 1965, he enjoyed a period of relative freedom. He was able to resume his previous work, gathering together groups of young people to whom he informally explained Catholic teachings and subjects related to Lithuanian history. This was quite dangerous, but Petkus managed somehow to steer clear of trouble for a time. In addition, he was a bibliophile, and was able to put together the best collection of Lithuanian poetry in Vilnius. During Kovalyov’s trial, Petkus was one of the Lithuanians who shared Sakharov’s vigil. Both he and Finkelstein were in contact with Yelena Bonner and other Russian human rights activists. I believe they discussed together the idea of establishing Helsinki groups as early as December 1975, when Sakharov visited Lithuania.

Hinsey: Where did your walk take place?

Venclova: On Tauras Hill, next to Finkelstein’s flat and very close to my parents’ house (Petkus lived in the Old City). The hill is a large, green, mainly treeless expanse slightly to the south of Vilnius’s central street—you can see a considerable part of the city from it, including, by the way, the KGB building. Information had circulated among Soviet dissidents—whether accurate or not—that eavesdropping was technically impossible beyond a distance of four hundred meters. On Tauras Hill, it was easy to detect the presence of anyone within that range, thus providing some assurance that one wasn’t being overheard. There, Petkus and Finkelstein explained to me the idea of a Lithuanian Helsinki Group and invited me to join it.

Hinsey: Why did they believe you might be a key participant for the group?

Venclova: “Your case is mentioned almost daily by Radio Liberty and other Western media,” they said, “and we need people who are known in the press.”

Hinsey: What was your answer?

Venclova: My answer was more or less the following: “This is a brilliant idea, and I wish you every success. Helsinki groups are practically the first cases of de facto democracy in the Soviet Union, which up to now has been practiced only by individuals, such as Sakharov and Amalrik. In the long run, this will probably contribute to the downfall of the system—and, God knows, that is long overdue. But, as you are well aware, the system will do everything in its power to cut short these developments. I have already put in a request for emigration. If I join the

group—which would only be natural for someone with my views—it is not impossible the authorities will throw me out of the USSR, while other members of the group may land in jail. From an ethical viewpoint, I am not sure this is acceptable, to put it mildly.”

“Well,” Petkus replied, “There is a good chance that we’ll all land in prison. On the other hand, in the highly improbable case that one of us gets thrown out of the country, that person could become our representative in the West, which is something we badly need as well. Incidentally, Eitan has also asked for permission to emigrate—perhaps he will be the one who ends up abroad. But we all have to face the fact that this is serious: each one of us has to be prepared for a sentence of ten to fifteen years. Please take this book: read it, and then we’ll meet again.”

The book was Eduard Kuznetsov’s *Prison Diary*, which had been published in Paris. In 1970, Kuznetsov had taken part in an unsuccessful attempt to hijack a Soviet plane and attract world attention to the plight of those in the aliyah movement. He was sentenced to death, but in the wake of strong pro- tests this was commuted to a long prison term. (Brodsky—who was still in Leningrad at that time—wrote a letter to the Soviet authorities on Kuznetsov’s behalf.) His prison camp diary was leaked to the West with Yelena Bonner’s help. It graphically depicted prison conditions in the USSR. After reading the book I had to face what I might really be getting myself into; for a couple of days (and nights) I experienced acute anxiety. Then I managed to overcome this, knowing that I would not be at peace with myself if fear prevented me from joining the group. Perhaps this was facile reasoning on my part, but it led to my second most important decision of that period, and was accompanied by the same slightly surreal elation. I went to Petkus’s flat and told him that I agreed to become a member. To avoid being overheard, we communicated by writing: Viktoras had a special notepad (made in the United States, I believe), where words disappeared after you lifted a filmy top layer.

Hinsey: You three decided that there should be at least five members in the group—how did you decide on this number?

Venclova: The Moscow group had eleven founding members. I told Viktoras and Eitan that our group should unite people of various backgrounds and viewpoints—a sort of miniature parliament, if you like. I then proposed the candidacy of Ona Lukauskaitė, the elderly leftist poet, and Viktoras proposed a Catholic activist, the Jesuit priest Karolis Garuckas, also of advanced age. Lukauskaitė, whom I have mentioned before, was a Socialist-Revolutionary: she had spent ten years in the Vorkuta camps, had written a samizdat book about her experiences, and was now subsisting on a meager pension in Šiauliai where I had met her during my stint at the local theater. I went to see her, and we also took a stroll together. She told me: “Of course I will join you—I have waited for this kind of project for many years. I am used to prisons, but this time, given my age, it is perhaps internal exile that awaits me—maybe even within Lithuania’s borders. Your prospects, however, may be worse.” Garuckas’s reaction was quite similar. We decided that five people were enough to begin with. In the case of arrests, other people might be needed to take their places (I thought about Romas Katilius in this respect, but I did not discuss it with him yet).

Hinsey: In October 1976, at the suggestion of Ginzburg, you went to Alexeyeva’s flat in Moscow. You had hoped she would help you transmit a letter to Joseph Brodsky. Was this the first time you had met Alexeyeva?

Venclova: Yes, it was. There was a popular joke from that time: “Revolutionaries in tsarist times arranged clandestine meetings disguised as drinking parties, and we, the Soviet dissidents, arrange drinking parties disguised as clandestine meetings.” Well, I found just this kind of meeting at Alexeyeva’s apartment. Several of my old Moscow acquaintances were there, thus I felt quite comfortable. (The letter to Joseph was transmitted later by a slightly different

network.) After an hour or two, Andrei Sakharov stopped by for a short visit. I was introduced to him, and we had a very brief exchange. It was the only time I met the great man.

Hinsey: Later in October Alexeyeva came to Vilnius as a member of the Moscow Helsinki Group to investigate a case concerning the expulsion of a group of high school boys—

Venclova: The KGB finally tracked down the circle of young people whom Petkus was instructing in Catholic doctrine and Lithuanian history. All of them were male (they were considering becoming priests) and were in their last year of the same Vilnius high school I had attended. All were summarily expelled, which meant conscription into the military somewhere in the Far North (frequently, people returned ill and broken). Expulsion from high school just before final exams was uncommon even in the USSR, and the fact that it was carried out without any formalities, made it a violation of the law. (The authorities also prepared a “smear case” against Petkus, accusing him of homosexuality—which was definitely not the case—but in the end this failed.) All that attracted the attention of the Moscow Helsinki Group, and Yuri Orlov sent Alexeyeva to Vilnius to investigate, as well as to establish closer links with the Lithuanian dissidents.

Hinsey: You and Petkus met Alexeyeva at the train station, along with Antanas Terleckas—

Venclova: Terleckas, a middle-aged man, had been a political prisoner for many years (he was of nationalist, rather than strictly Catholic, persuasion); he was an associate of Petkus's. At least a dozen members of the secret police tailed us at the station, while other KGB agents had followed Alexeyeva and her husband from Moscow. After checking both of the Russian dissidents into a hotel and showing them some of Vilnius (which they were visiting for the first time), we started to carry out our work. I made an appointment with Antanas Rimkus, Soviet Lithuania's minister of education, and Alexeyeva and I went to his office. The minister was impeccably polite and did not fail to mention that my father, whom he held in high esteem, had been his predecessor. He had never heard of the Public Group to Assist the Implementation of the Helsinki Accords in the USSR—perhaps he took it for a new meaningless invention of the Kremlin authorities. Consequently, he sent us to the high school itself to investigate the expulsion further; there, we were received by the director as “controllers from Moscow” who should be obeyed. “Well, you understand, the boys were practicing religion, that is, promoting superstitions; therefore, expelling them as quickly as possible was the only logical step to take,” he said. Suddenly, the phone on his desk rang: apparently the minister of education had been apprised of the true nature of the Helsinki Group, and warned him to cut the meeting short, which he did at once. We had nevertheless collected enough material to prove that the Soviet Constitution (ensuring freedom of religion) had been violated. We drank some champagne in a nearby bar: this was the budding Lithuanian Helsinki Group's “baptism of fire.”

Unfortunately we were unable to help the boys much then, but the story has some positive outcomes: today, one of them is a much-loved liberal Catholic priest, another an MP, and so on.

Hinsey: On the second day of the Moscow members' visit, you drove with Alexeyeva, Finkelstein, and Petkus throughout Lithuania—

Venclova: The car was provided by one of Petkus's associates. We left Vilnius around 5:30 a.m.—according to Viktoras's information, which was considerable, the KGB only started working at 6:00 a.m., thus we could leave the city unnoticed. Our trip lasted exactly twenty-four hours—we returned at 5:30 a.m. the next day, presumably also unnoticed. Our itinerary included several small towns in Northern Lithuania, as far away from Vilnius as one can imagine. We, the men, drove in shifts and did not sleep at all. Thankfully, Lithuanian roads were usually good, if narrow. Our main, though by no means only goal, was to visit the two Catholic

bishops, Julijonas Steponavičius and Vincentas Sladkevičius, who were in internal exile, that is, forcibly sent to towns outside their bishoprics without the right to leave. This had been carried out by a simple fiat of the authorities, without any due process; the length of the punishment was indeterminate. I mentioned the case before: at its origin was a conflict between the bishops and the government's Department for Religious Affairs over the right to give religious instruction to children.

We reached Julijonas Steponavičius late in the afternoon, and Vincentas Sladkevičius before dawn the next day. Petkus knew both of them very well. After a short explanation about the group's goals—which they welcomed—we interviewed them at length. Thankfully, their situations were not dire—they had been assigned living spaces and could perform their priestly duties in small local churches. From a legal point of view, however, what had happened was in flagrant violation of Article 124 of the Soviet Constitution regarding the separation of church and state.

I was particularly impressed by Vincentas Sladkevičius, a very simple and friendly (one might even say, Franciscan) man of slight stature who prepared coffee and sandwiches for us in the middle of the night. Later, in independent Lithuania, he was promoted to the rank of cardinal, and Julijonas Steponavičius became the archbishop of Vilnius. Unfortunately, both of them have now passed away.

Hinsey: After this trip, the Lithuanian Helsinki Group prepared its first two documents—

Venclova: Yes, they concerned the two cases I have just mentioned: one was about the young men who had been expelled, and the other was about the bishops' situation. We also publicized a secret government circular concerning religious communities, which was obviously in violation of the law. Releasing the circular could perhaps be compared to today's "whistle-blowers."

Hinsey: At the end of November 1976, you decided to officially announce the Lithuanian Group to Promote Implementation of the Helsinki Agreements in the USSR—

Venclova: Because Western correspondents were rarely able to visit Vilnius, and then only under very strict surveillance, we decided to hold a press conference in Moscow to present the group's manifesto. We were careful when traveling there: Petkus, Finkelstein, and I took different trains, and out of precaution, carried no materials related to the group. Theoretically, the borders between the Soviet republics were open, and one's documents were not checked on trains (at airports, one had to present one's internal passport before boarding—a rule introduced after the Brazinskases' affair). Still, dissidents were frequently taken off trains without any explanation. Well, we thought, even in the case that one, or even two of us were prevented from making it to Moscow, the last one might be successful. This proved to be overprecautious: we met up in Moscow without any problem. Lukauskaitė and Garuckas could not come, but authorized us to use their names.

Hinsey: At the beginning were the aims of the Lithuanian and Moscow groups the same?

Venclova: They were quite similar, but the Lithuanian group retained its independence from Moscow and preserved its specific goals concerning our country's situation. As you have seen, our first documents were related to the rights of Catholics, which was rather natural since they were a majority in Lithuania, but we were interested in the rights of all religions, be they Russian Orthodox, Lutheran, Jewish, Muslim—or Buddhist, for that matter; also in the rights of all the ethnic groups in Lithuania and of all individuals there. This covered all arbitrary arrests, all illegal limitations on choosing a place of residence, and so on.

Hinsey: Can you describe your mood on the morning of December 1, 1976, the day of the announcement of the Helsinki Group?

Venclova: It was “business as usual.” We had had the chance to observe the hectic and somewhat chaotic working method of our Muscovite friends in their apartments. “This is an example that should not be emulated—our Lithuanian group should act in a more orderly manner,” Viktoras quipped, impressing Alexeyeva considerably.

As we had not brought our documents with us, they had to be typed in Lithuanian before the press conference, then translated into Russian and English. That meant we had to find a Latin alphabet typewriter, which was not an easy task in Moscow. Finally, this was provided by the dissident scholar Lev Kopelev, a specialist in German literature and a former cellmate of Solzhenitsyn.

Incidentally, the date given for the announcement of the group in history books is November 25, 1976, but this is because our manifesto was slightly backdated. The reason for this is because we outlined it at the end of November, but it was only written down on December 1. Such things are not uncommon in diplomacy, and also in conspiracy.

At 4:00 p.m. we headed over to Yuri Orlov’s apartment to hold the press conference. There was a chance that the secret police might stop us on our way, but this did not happen: at that time, the KGB was still taking a “wait-and-see” attitude (which changed in early February 1977).

Hinsey: In your manifesto you stated that the Lithuanian Group would “concentrate on those articles which relate to human rights and basic freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief,” but also that “We hope, that the participant states of the Helsinki Conference will consider that the contemporary status of Lithuania was established as a result of the entrance of Soviet troops onto her territory on June 15, 1940, and will pay special attention to the observance of humanitarian rights in Lithuania.” This last sentence could be considered particularly damaging—

Venclova: Alexander Ginzburg, who was present while we were typing the manifesto, made the following remark: “Look, guys, this might be considered ‘an attempt to violate the territorial integrity of the USSR,’ which, at least theoretically, could result in the death penalty.” After some discussion, we decided to retain the statement: the chance of such grave consequences was rather negligible, and we believed our wording sufficiently cautious.

Hinsey: There were a small group of foreign journalists there—

Venclova: I remember a Reuters correspondent and a correspondent from the *Chicago Tribune*, whose presence was probably due to the fact that Chicago was the home to the United States’ largest Lithuanian diaspora community. We read the documents in Lithuanian as a matter of principle—and then switched into Russian. Orlov, Ginzburg, and Alexeyeva represented the Moscow Group. Natan Sharansky provided simultaneous translation into English, as his language skills were the best.

Hinsey: Was there a high level of tension at the press conference?

Venclova: Overall, no. It was lively and businesslike. Immediately after it was over, some Asian-looking people arrived in Orlov’s apartment—they were Meskhetians, that is, Georgian Muslims who had been exiled by Stalin to Central Asia, and were demanding the right of return. Thus, the transition to the next item on the day’s agenda went smoothly. The end of our stint in Moscow was uneventful.

Hinsey: After the press conference you traveled to Leningrad, finally returning to Vilnius around December 7—

Venclova: Yes, I decided to visit some friends in Leningrad, while Petkus and Finkelstein returned directly to Vilnius. I had no idea of the news that awaited me in Lithuania.