

The Hill of

Crosses



In the summer of 2007 I traveled to Lithuania and encountered a place both haunting and memorable - the Hill of Crosses.

In the drive up to the Hill of Crosses we had been sitting in a hot, sticky van all day. Its suspension had run off somewhere and I swear the driver's sole intention was to kill us all and claim our life insurance. But somehow we managed to step out of the van alive, straight into a place that remembers the dead.

It was crazy; in front of me was a hill, in the middle of nowhere, covered in thousands and thousands of crosses. Even though it was a beautiful sunny day the scene gave me an eerie feeling. Fascinated, I quickly wandered off on my own to walk among the crosses, so I could take it all in. And it was a lot to take in.

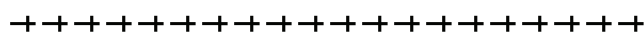
The hill itself was not very big, maybe taking up an area of two football fields in diameter. But that area contained thousands of crosses and a myriad of paths flowing through them. There were many hidden, quiet pockets to explore and respect. I don't know how long I spent there, only that I was captivated. I had spent far more time there than the rest of my extended family had desired. Eventually my dad appeared among the crosses. He was out of breath and angry. Everyone else was waiting for me in the van ready to leave and dad had been running around the hill in search of me.

The hill is sacred because it was once the site of an important, ancient fort. The first crosses appeared on the hill in 1831, after a peasant rebellion. They were placed there by the family members of the rebels killed in

the rebellion as they were not allowed to bury their bereaved. Another peasant rebellion in 1863 ensured that a few more crosses were put up. The number of crosses slowly grew, so that nearly one hundred years later, in 1940, there were four hundred large crosses surrounded by thousands of smaller ones. It wasn't until Soviet Russia took over Lithuania however, that the site really became the symbol of Lithuanian faith and nationalism that it is today.

The communist Russians were obviously not pleased with this Roman Catholic display of patriotism. To stop this 'resistance' they began, in 1961, to destroy the crosses. The wooden ones were burned, the others broken and buried and the hill itself was mutilated by bulldozers. As well as destroying the site, The Soviets cordoned off the area, placing it under tight security. There were even proposals to build a dam nearby in order to submerge the hill under water. Yet the crosses kept reappearing. People would sneak in at night to commemorate deceased loved ones and to show their defiance. The destruction wouldn't end until Lithuania finally gained its independence in 1991.

Today it is estimated that there are over 50,000 crosses on the hill; hundreds are taller than the height of an average person. On September 7th 1993, Pope John Paul II visited the Hill of Crosses and blessed the area. The hill soon became a Sanctuary and a place of pilgrimage visited by people the world over. Seeing the Hill of Crosses was an amazing experience, a haunting evocation of invasion and occupation.



narrative and photographs by phoebe gray.