

OBITUARIES

Juris Podnieks

IT WAS a bleak January morning in 1991, when, speaking by phone in a sombre, calm voice, Juris Podnieks told of the violent death of his film-maker friend and colleague Andris Slapins just hours earlier, when he and four others were killed by gunfire during an assault by the Soviet special police, OMON, on Latvia's Ministry of the Interior. With tracer bullets criss-crossing the sky over Bastejkalns park, in the centre of Riga, Podnieks picked up Slapins' blood-spattered Betacam videocamera and filmed his friend as he died. A few metres away another Latvian cameraman, Gvido Zvaigzne, lay fatally wounded by a high-velocity bullet that tore apart his abdomen.

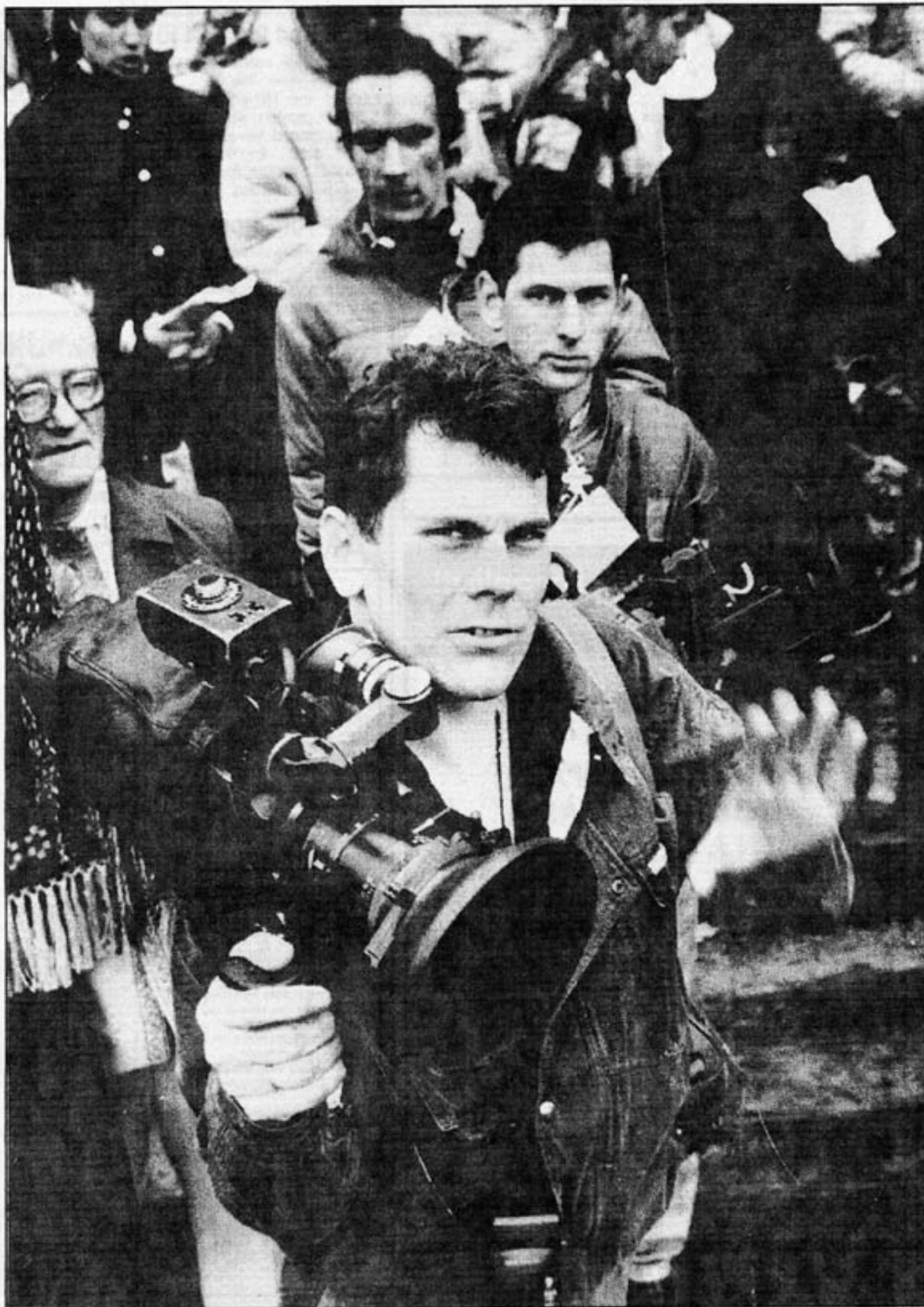
Days before, Podnieks had returned from Vilnius, where he filmed the infamous 13 January Soviet assault on Lithuania's main television station that left 14 people dead. When gunfire rang out in Riga a week later, Podnieks, his teenage son Davis, Slapins, and Zvaigzne shouldered their cameras and ran toward the shooting. Minutes later, half the people in the group were dead or dying.

Podnieks explained that it had seemed perfectly naturally to rush to the action in Riga. He said, "After all, I got out of Vilnius unscathed, I was feeling safe and confident," or words to that effect.

This boldness, in retrospect, is perhaps the only way to attempt to understand Juris Podnieks' premature and senseless death on 23 June, almost 18 months to the day after he helped me to prepare Andris Slapins' obituary. Sometime during that day, when Latvians celebrate the midsummer Ligo festival with bonfires, frolicking and song, Podnieks borrowed a friend's scuba gear and drove to Zvirgzdu lake near Alsunga, in western Latvia, reportedly to spear fish. He failed to return and his body was recovered on 1 July. Latvian authorities are still investigating the precise cause of death.

Friends in Riga described as "idiotic" the death of an internationally acclaimed film-maker who had been in many dangerous situations while filming epic documentaries on Latvia's struggle for national independence and on the death throes and collapse of the Soviet empire. "A horrid, tragic circle has closed with Juris after the deaths of Slapins and Zvaigzne," said Augusts Sukuts, president of Riga's International Center for New Cinema, of which Podnieks was a founding member.

Podnieks graduated from Moscow Film Institute's Department of Cinematography in 1975. His first documentary, in 1978, was a film about twin musicians and conductors, *Brali Kokari* ("The Brother Kokars"), but already in 1982 Podnieks ventured out on political thin ice with *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* ("The Constellation of the Riflemen"), a film about the last surviving Red Latvian Rifles, Lenin's Praetorian guard, who did not hide their disappointment with what has become of the revolution they made in their youth.



Juris Podnieks: a fearless film-maker in pursuit of truth

Photograph: Central Productions

Podnieks' international breakthrough came with *Vai viegli būt jaunam* ("Is It Easy to be Young?"), filmed on the cusp of glasnost and perestroika and released in 1986. The film showed a cross-section of Latvia's angry and troubled youth, including disillusioned Afghanistan veterans and colourfully-clad punk rockers. The international acclaim for this documentary helped Podnieks to land contracts from Central Television in Britain for a major documentary on the Soviet Union in turmoil.

Podnieks' last film, *Imperijas gals* ("The End of Empire"), was released in 1991. At the time of his death he was working on two films, one on Georgia, and another, the unfinished work of Andris Slapins, *Baltijas saga* ("The Baltic Saga"), a work combining elements of documentary and poetic surrealism and focusing on the western Latvian

province of Kurzeme (Courland), where bloody battles were fought on Latvian soil during both world wars. It was in a Courland lake that Podnieks went on his fatal dive.

Podnieks' foreign earnings made him, at least by Latvian standards, a wealthy independent film-maker. After working for the now nearly defunct Riga Film Studios since 1972, Podnieks in recent years invested heavily in his own private studio, where he hired some of the best talent in the Latvian film industry, such as the composer Martins Brauns, the film editor Antra Cilinska, and the sound engineer Anrijs Krenbergs. When the humming, state-of-the-art editing suites in "The Cat's House" (a building with a large iron cat on the roof at the edge of Riga's medieval Old Town) weren't making a Podnieks film, they were

serving German or Japanese television or any number of other clients. Scuttling about helping with the myriad tasks of this growing enterprise were some 10 young film-making apprentices.

"This has been a great tragedy for Podnieks' immediate family, but in a sense, these young talents have also lost their father and mother all in one," said Augusts Sukuts. "This is a blow to Latvian documentary film from which I fear it may not recover."

Juris Kaza

JURIS PODNIEKS had a powerful presence, emanating strength combined with gentleness, writes Robert Temple. He was unselfish, high-principled, and utterly fearless. He was passionately devoted to the pursuit of truth, which he wanted to show. He hated commentaries and preferred for his films to convey their messages by their powerful images with a minimum of verbal explanation.

He and his talented crew acted like one body connected to a single brain. And they were all courageous to an extent some would regard as foolhardy. Juris made a record for posterity of the most dramatic events of the second half of this century, and all the best footage of the disintegration of the Soviet Union shown on ITN News was shot by him. I asked him about Yeltsin: "He's a wonderful man," he said, "and all the stories about him being a drunk are KGB lies." He told me Yeltsin always greeted him enthusiastically "because, after all, I've been paying attention to him for longer than most people" — by filming him.

Juris was doing his last documentary project when he died, for he wanted to go into drama and film something by Mikhail Bulgakov. He and I had planned to be partners in a venture to make a large number of training films for the Baltic countries. His wife is the chief adviser to the Latvian President, and his old school chum now Latvian Prime Minister, so we were to have official backing. He was prepared to set aside much of his own time for creative work to benefit the country in this way.

No one who has seen a Juris Podnieks film can ever forget it. His haunting imagery, perfect editing and unrivalled eye make viewing compulsive and hypnotic. Probably his greatest work was the two-hour paean to Baltic culture, *Homeland*. It is a work of art, like a Rembrandt.

Juris took the only film of the Chernobyl reactor at the time of the disaster, from helicopter and the ground. I asked him how he dared expose himself to the radiation. He said: "It was too important an event. The world had to know. It had to be shown. Sure, we were exposed to radiation. But I only got four rads." But what about cancer? "You have to go sometime," he said.

Juris Podnieks, film director, born Riga Latvia 5 December 1950, died Alsunga Latvia 23 June 1992.