



VOICES FROM EXILE

Rare letters and photographs document the atrocities of the Stalinist regime and the suffering of those forcibly deported to remote areas of the Soviet Union

BY AUDRIUS V. PLIOPLYS

THE *HOPE & SPIRIT* HISTORY SERIES IS DEDICATED to the millions of victims of Soviet deportations—the men, women and children from all Soviet-occupied nations and of all nationalities, religions, and races—who suffered two profound indignities: the brutality of forced exile, imprisonment, starvation, torture and genocide, plus the injustice of the subsequent denial, minimization and suppression of their suffering and victimization.

This public history program was named *Hope & Spirit* in recognition of the strength of the human spirit to survive severe adversity through hope.

June 2011 was the seventieth anniversary of the beginning of Stalin's deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia. During the night of June 17, 1941, thousands of unsuspecting people were wakened from their sleep and ordered to leave their homes immediately. Most were unable to take anything with them. Cramped into cattle cars, women, the elderly and children were sent to remote

villages; the heads of families were sent to prison camps. During the first week alone, more than 18,000 Lithuanians were deported.

More than 130,000 Lithuanians were deported to remote areas of the USSR, including Siberia, the Arctic Circle and Central Asia. Over 70 percent of the deportees were women and children. By the end of the deportations, 30,000 Lithuanians had died as a result of slave work and starvation. Another 50,000 never returned to Lithuania. During this same period, an additional 200,000 were imprisoned and more than 150,000 sent to *gulags*, as the USSR concentration camps were named, situated mostly in Siberia. Most of those sent to the *gulags* died.

These tragic numbers are from a small country, Lithuania, whose population was only two million. Stalin's genocidal forces committed the same atrocities across all of Eastern Europe, deporting an estimated ten to twenty million individuals, and killing twenty million more. The



OPPOSITE PAGE: A brigade of deported Lithuanian women working on the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the Tiumen region of Siberia, 1954; **ABOVE:** This is the way deportees, men, women and children, were transported to the slave labor camps of Siberia—worse than cattle.

numbers of deaths due to Stalin's brutality far exceeded those of Hitler. His death machine functioned at the same time as Hitler's and in the same geographic location, but produced many more casualties.

I was born and raised in Toronto, Canada. My family moved to Chicago where I attended high school, college and medical school. My subsequent professional careers, medical and artistic, have spanned over three decades, in many different geographic locations. Through all of these years in North America, I noticed that the general public knows Hitler's atrocities, but nothing of Stalin's.

Both of my parents were born and raised in Lithuania. Towards the end of World War II, they fled oncoming Soviet forces into displaced persons' camps in Germany. They subsequently immigrated to Canada. Amongst my own relatives, during this time period, my great-grandfather, both of my grandfathers, and one aunt all died as a consequence of NKVD (Soviet secret police) interrogations. My grandmother and seven other aunts and uncles were deported to Siberia.

Why were these innocent individuals and families treated like criminals? Why were they deported? Why were they murdered? The majority were landowners, having small family farms. Because they might object to Stalin's new political system, they needed to be either exterminated or deported. Likewise, anyone educated or having a profession was suspect and had to be seriously dealt with. This was genocide, pure and simple, on the basis of political motives. This happened to many millions of families across Eastern Europe.

The fact that the general North American public is unaware of Stalin's brutality, while being knowledgeable about Hitler's, is a serious historical imbalance that needs to be corrected. I decided to organize the *Hope &*

Spirit program at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago, in order to remedy this imbalance.

The program consists of a large number of historical items on display at the museum and a lengthy list of public events. The items on display include 218 original photographs of Siberia, 157 original letters from Siberia, and 71 envelopes from Siberia. All of these items are extremely rare. Many of the letters had been sent to London, England; Sydney, Australia; Chicago, Illinois; Montreal, Quebec; Toronto and North Bay, Ontario from across wide swaths of Siberia. The letters and photographs are on loan from the Lithuanian Research and Studies Center in Chicago.

Original Soviet *gulag* items and photographs by Elena Juciūtė, who was herself a prisoner there, are part of the display. These items are also extremely rare.

Hand-written reminiscences of deportees and receipts for shipments sent by people living in Chicago or Boston, to their relatives in Siberia are also on exhibit.

An informative, detailed, and visually stunning summary of the events surrounding the "Black Month of June" are presented on eighteen large (3 x 6 foot) posters produced by the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, Lithuania.

There is a display of history books about the events that took place in Lithuania and Eastern Europe, along with a set of children's essays about Siberian deportations, from the A. Kazickienė Lithuanian School in Riverhead, New York.

In the audiovisual room, hangs a poster display of images from *Misija Sibiras 2010*. In this program, young volunteer professionals, mostly from Lithuania, undergo a competitive selection process, and then spend over two weeks in various Siberian locations restoring Lithuanian cemeteries. This is the sixth year of this highly competitive program: of 1,200 eligible applicants, only twenty are selected to go. One of last year's participants, Paulius Mieželis, presented his personal experience of working in this historic preservation program.

There is also a juried children's art exhibit. Fifty-two children from across the US and Canada submitted works of art inspired by what their parents or grandparents told them about Siberian deportations. The exhibit was curated and prizes awarded. The entire children's art exhibit is available for viewing on the museum's website: www.balzekasmuseum.org.

An exhibit of black-and-white, hand-printed photographs by Juozas Kazlauskas opens on September 10. In 1988 and 1989, he was one of the first Lithuanians to visit the former Siberian deportation locations to document them. When he first displayed his photographs, Russian officials were embarrassed by what was depicted and promptly cleaned up many of the locations; many

of the sites no longer exist. Kazlauskas passed away in 2002.

A special display of materials concerning the deportation of a Lithuanian president, Aleksandras Stulginskis, to Siberia also opens on September 10.

In addition to the items on display, the program includes reminiscences by Siberian deportees who grew up there, the presentation of many films about this subject, lectures, book signings, poetry readings and readings from the letters on display.

Hope & Spirit opened on June 18, 2011, at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, 6500 S. Pulaski Rd. in Chicago and continues until mid-January, 2012. All are invited to attend the quality-laden events. A slide show of the opening reception can be viewed at the museum's website. Detailed information about the program can also be found in the current exhibits section on my website: www.plioplys.com or the museum's website.

LETTERS FROM SIBERIA

We obtained a large number of original letters and photographs from Siberia that had been collected in the 1970s by Father Juozas Prunskis, the editor of *Draugas* newspaper in Chicago at the time, for his book *Lietuviai Sibire (Lithuanians in Siberia)*, which was published in 1981. It was by a fortunate happenstance that two boxes of his collected materials have been found. Most of the letters and photographs were tossed into the boxes in disarray. It took me much time and effort to sort these items.

It should be noted that we have on display only about one fourth of the material that Father Prunskis used in his book, so there should still be a large amount of original Siberian material in storage, somewhere. Every effort should be made to locate this extremely important historical material, and to conserve and protect it.

For historical conservation's sake, all of the letters, photographs and envelopes have been digitally imaged. Since the exhibit opened, I have gradually read these letters, investigated relevant historical sources, and pieced together the family tragedies that they document. I am posting my findings in the "Letters from Siberia" section of my blog, which appears on my website.

After many decades of silence, these individual family stories are being summarized and presented to the general public for the first time. Although this effort is extremely time consuming, to share in the suffering of so many families and witness how their hope and spirit kept them alive, is an honor for me.

This effort will continue until I have exhausted the material that is available. Below are some items that I have already been able to sort out.

Vyšniauskas family

Marija Vyšniauskienė, with her three young sons, was deported to Siberia for eleven years. In this letter she writes of her first days in exile. Upon arrival, she had to sell her few clothes, leaving her and her sons with only the clothes on their back, and two small pillows. She used the little money she received to buy potatoes to feed her children.

The letter was written to her husband Povilas Vyšniauskas, who was living and working in North Bay, Ontario. In fear that it would be found out that she was writing to him and that he was sending her packages, a Canadian intermediary, Mr. P. Bukis, living in Toronto assisted the family. The only reason that she and her sons were able to survive is because Mr. Vyšniauskas sent her packages totaling \$25,000 in value. Accounting for inflation and the exchange rate between the Canadian and US dollar, this amount approximates \$250,000 in current US dollars. The circumstances of why Mrs. Vyšniauskas and their sons were deported, and how Mr. Vyšniauskas came to work in North Bay, are not known.

Six letters that Mrs. Vyšniauskas wrote, along with their original envelopes, are on display.

Šukys family

In the photograph, Juozas Šukys sits with his three children, Juozukas, Aleksytė and Aldutė in Siberia. The letter was written by Aldutė to her aunt in Chicago.

In 1948, the Šukys family was deported from Lithuania to the Manski district in the Krasnoyarsk region of Siberia. In this letter, Aldutė thanks her aunt for a package in which she received shoes; her brother, a wallet; and her sister, a fountain pen. She is proud to be the second-best student in the second grade.

In the exhibit, we have two photographs of the Šukys family, twenty letters written by the parents, and eleven letters written by the children.

Gaigalas family

This is a most unusual two-page letter. Written in Russian, it appears to be a transcription of letters written by Kazimieras Gaigalas to his wife and son. He is in a *gulag* prison camp, near Krasnoyarsk, writing to his family, which is in another Siberian location, near Tomsk. The distance separating them is about 300 miles. There are a total of eight letters dating from October 21, 1942 to July 21, 1943.

It appears that his wife saved the letters he had sent, and that they were eventually taken to Poland, where they were transcribed.

In these letters, he mentions the deaths of eight people who were acquaintances of the family. He was informed that his prison term for five years would end on July 14,

1946.

He writes that he is tired and weak, and his weight is 60 kg (130 lbs). He receives 480 gm (1 lb) of bread per day along with 1.5 liters of soup. He repeatedly requests that his wife send him dried potatoes, dried fish, flour and salt. However, there is no mention that he ever received any such packages.

A portion of one letter was censored. (All mail going into and out of the Soviet Union, especially to and from Siberian prison camps, was read and censored.) He started to explain what he was assigned to do, and the rest of the explanation was censored. In the uncensored subsequent sentence, he mentions that on occasion he sweeps the prison yard.

“When you receive this letter, please write to me. The only joy in my life is receiving your letters. Dear and loving son and wife, do not forget me; write more frequently.”

“I frequently see you in my dreams. I wake up and you are gone. It was only a dream, not reality.”

“Son, it is more joyful being with your mother. But for me, alone, there is only sadness. You have grown up. Your mother has gotten older. Write more frequently. Your letters are the only joy in my life.”

There is no further information available about the Gaigalas family. Translation was kindly provided by Ms. Danguolė Pociūtė.

Stulginskis family

Rozalija Stulginskienė's son, Father Vaclovas Stulginskis, was a deacon at the Kaunas Theological Seminary. In 1941, he was murdered by the occupying German Nazi forces.

In 1947, because she owned a small family farm, she was deported to Siberia by the occupying Stalinist regime. She was imprisoned near the town of Igarka, in the Krasnoyarsk region, for seven years. Upon completing her term, she was so frail and weak that she was transferred to the Tupik Sanatorium, in the Shirinsky District of Khakassia. While there, she wrote letters to try to find her one surviving son, Alfredas.

She received a letter from her nephew, Father Jankus, of the Church of the Resurrection in Los Angeles, California, who believed that her son was still working as a lumberjack in rural Canada. Father Čekavičius, of St. Raphael's Church in Long Island, New York, found out that Alfredas was actually living in Toronto, and wrote that he would try to find a mailing address.

In the two letters written by Rozalija Stulginskienė, in 1955 from Tupik, she tremendously regrets not receiving any letters from her son. In May 1956, she returned to Lithuania, where she died within a few weeks. There is no further information available about this Stulgin-



A mother and her three sons in Siberian exile (Vysniauskas).



Some letters from the Šukys family.



A family separated in two prison camps (Gaigalas).

ferred to the Tupik Sanatorium, in the Shirinsky District of Khakassia, for one year to recover. It was while she was in the sanatorium, that she was able to write letters to one of her daughters, who were both living in Chicago.

In the early 1900s, the future Mr. and Mrs. Abroma-
vičius had both, independently, traveled to find work in the United States. They met in Braddock, Pennsylvania, where they were married in 1906. With their two young daughters they returned to Lithuania in 1913 and bought a small family farm. All totaled, they had two daughters and four sons. During the war, one son died, and the other children moved to the United States.

When she returned to Lithuania from Siberia, she found all of her farm buildings burned to the ground. She went to the nearby larger city, Marijampolė, where she lived and died ten years later. She was able to survive only because her children continued to send her packages.

In her letters from Siberia she notes that the winters are very cold, with the temperature frequently minus 40 degrees Centigrade (which is exactly minus 40 degrees F).

She is thankful to her children for the packages that she has received, and mentions the items that she needs to obtain. She notes that when a package arrives, the other residents of the sanatorium crowd around as it is opened. She gives most of the contents to other residents, keeping only the essential items for herself.

One time, her daughter made an error and sent her \$50 in cash (I am changing the actual amounts into what would be current US dollar value, given years of inflation). To exchange this currency into rubles, she had to travel to a bank in a distant city. The travel cost was \$32, leaving her very little.

In another letter, she notes how expensive even the most basic items are. According to the official currency exchange rate, one egg costs \$4 (yes, one egg, not one dozen), one kilogram of butter, \$140—which means \$70 for one pound of butter!

Ralys family

This letter was written by Ramunė Ralys to her uncle, V. Cizinas, in Paterson, New Jersey. In the letter, she details some of her own life events upon being exiled to Siberia with her family. She was attending the seventh grade at the time of deportation. In the Krasnoyarsk region's farm labor camp (*kolkhoz*) the middle school was located two miles away. Upon completing the tenth grade there, she took over the labor tasks of her mother, who was too ill to work.

The Ralys family had been living in Kaunas, where Mr. Ralys worked as a bank accountant. In 1910 and into the 1920s, he wrote general interest articles under

the pseudonym of *Vargovaikas* (Child of Misery). The family was deported to a forced labor camp to serve a six year term. Upon returning to Kaunas, the family was allowed to live in the house that they had previously owned, but in only a portion of the basement. Mr. Ralys died within a year of his return to Lithuania. He was sixty-six years old at the time of deportation.

In this letter, Ramunė details some of the tasks that she had to do: "I shoveled snow...worked as a camp cook...collected and burned straw, planted corn, weeded wheat fields, collected silage, transported logs, transported grains, cleaned grains, and so on. In all, I did 167 different jobs." During September of the second year's hard labor, she became ill with what appears to have been a form of meningitis or encephalitis. She suffered the entire winter, but was able to return to work in the spring.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM SIBERIA

Plioplys family

My grandmother, Ona Plioplienė, was deported to the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia to serve a twelve-year term at hard labor. Her husband, Motiejus Plioplys, had recently been murdered by the NKVD.

At the time of her deportation, she was seventy-one years old. She was assigned to chop trees—a seventy-year old lumberjack, who had never chopped a tree before!



A seventy-one-year-old woman lumberjack in Siberia (Ona Plioplienė).



A woman repairing the Trans-Siberian Railroad (Elena Juciūtė).

In the photograph she is resting amongst the stumps that she had been toiling at.

A work accident turned out to be life-saving. Within a few weeks, she accidentally chopped herself in the leg. She could barely walk. She was reassigned to work as a nanny for several young children. This job included preparing the children's meals, which meant that she had food to eat. She thus survived.

When I had a chance to meet her and ask her about these experiences, she recalled that, each winter, one third of all the resident exiles would die from overwork and starvation. They could not be buried until the spring because of the frozen permafrost. Their bodies were piled up like logs.

Elena Juciūtė

Elena Juciūtė was a high school mathematics teacher in Pilviškiai, Lithuania. (The Plioplys village is located near this city, where my father and his forefathers were born and raised.) In response to the mass deportations and slaughter of innocent people, she started to support the underground resistance movement. She was caught and sentenced to ten years of hard labor in a Soviet *gulag*. She was sent to Tayshet, in Irkutsk Oblast, Russia. The photographs were taken while she was repairing the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The head covering protects her from flies, as does the skirt tied around her legs. At all times she had to wear her prison number on her right knee and upper back. The death rate was so high that those who survived building this railroad said there was a body buried under each railroad tie.

After serving her sentence, she eventually immigrated to Boston, where she wrote and published her memoirs.

Her experiences in the antihuman world of Stalinist horror have been translated into English, *Footprints in the Death Zone* (2001, GEM Publishing, Huntington Beach, CA).

These original items, brought from Siberia by Juciūtė, fill three large display cases in the *Hope & Spirit* exhibit. Original material from Soviet *gulags*, especially of such historic quality and quantity, is extremely rare.

EPILOGUE

It was fully one year ago that I first approached Stanley Balzekas Jr. concerning implementing this program. During this time a number of incredible developments have taken place. It appears that I am not the only one who has been bothered by the Stalin/Hitler historical imbalance. Many others have noticed it, and made attempts to correct it.

Rūta Šepetytė wrote a book, *Between Shades of Gray*, in which she describes the experiences of a Lithuanian teenage girl deported to the Siberian far north. This book was published by Penguin books, the largest book publisher in the world. When it came out, in early 2011, it was simultaneously available in twenty-four different foreign language translations. This book was a *The New York Times* bestseller. (Editor's note: A review of Šepetytė's book appeared in the May/June 2011 issue of *Lithuanian Heritage*.)

Timothy Snyder, a history professor at Yale University, published *Bloodlands*, a book in which he compares the death machines of Stalin and Hitler. This is the first time that a US historian has tackled, in detail, Stalin's murderous campaigns. This book was declared best book of the year by the *Economist*, *The New Republic*, the *Guardian*, *Reason*, and the *Forward*, and was a *New York Times* bestseller. Professor Snyder will be presenting his research and signing his book as part of the *Hope & Spirit* program.

Above all, the movie industry in Hollywood finally produced a full-length motion picture about Siberian deportations. The film, *The Way Back*, is based on an actual escape by a group of four men from a *gulag* near Lake Baikal. They traveled 4,000 miles by foot to freedom in India. The screenplay and direction was by Peter Weir and starred Ed Harris. The film was nominated for an academy award in 2011, and will be shown as part of the *Hope & Spirit* program.

Thus, this historical imbalance is finally being addressed.

Audrius V. Plioplys, MD is both a neurologist / neuroscientist and a professional artist. His other interests include Lithuanian history, numismatic and philately. He is the author of *Čiurlionis: Mintys / Thoughts*.