

## HOPE AND SPIRIT

Dedicated to recognizing the strength of the human spirit to survive severe adversity, and dedicated to remembering, and not forgetting, the atrocities that were committed by the forces of Joseph Stalin, I have organized an extensive program of art and photography exhibits, a juried children's art exhibit, film screenings, book signings, lectures, and exhibits of original historical materials. I have entitled the program Hope and Spirit.

June 2011 is the 70th anniversary of the beginning of Soviet deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia. During the night of June 17, 1941, thousands of unsuspecting people were woken up from their sleep and ordered to leave their homes immediately. Most failed to take anything with them. Crammed into cattle cars, women, the elderly and children were sent to remote villages; the heads of families were sent to prisons and camps. During that first week, more than 18,000 Lithuanians were deported.

All totaled, more than 132,000 Lithuanians were deported to remote areas of the USSR including Siberia, the Arctic Circle and Central Asia. More than 70 percent of the deportees were women and children. By the end of the deportations, some 30,000 Lithuanians had died as a result of slave work and starvation. Another 50,000 never returned to Lithuania. During this same period, another 200,000 people were imprisoned and more than 150,000 were sent to Gulags, the name for USSR concentration camps, situated mostly in Siberia.

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 emigrated to Canada. Amongst my own blood relatives, during this time period, my great-grandfather, both of my grandfathers, and one aunt died as a result of NKVD (soviet secret police) interrogations. They were killed. What crime did they commit? They owned small farms.

My grandmother, at the age of 71, was deported to Siberia for a 10 year term. Her assignment was to work as a lumberjack! Seven of my aunts and uncles were likewise deported. These were all totally innocent people.

My grandmother explained to me that the conditions in which she lived were so harsh, that each winter fully one third of the deportees would die. Their bodies would be piled up like logs, and would be buried only in the spring, when the permafrost melted. Yet she was able to survive her imprisonment. Of my seven deported aunts and uncles, six survived and returned to Lithuania. Hope and Spirit kept them alive.

This entire program is meant to commemorate the resilience and strength of totally innocent people who had to undergo such incredible hardships. It is also meant to remember and not forget the atrocities that were committed by Stalin's forces in the name of communism.

This series of exhibits and programs will take place at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, in Chicago, between June and December 2011.

Audrius V. Plioplys April 2011

# HOPE AND SPIRIT

## Life of Lithuanian exiles in a Siberian Gulag

