

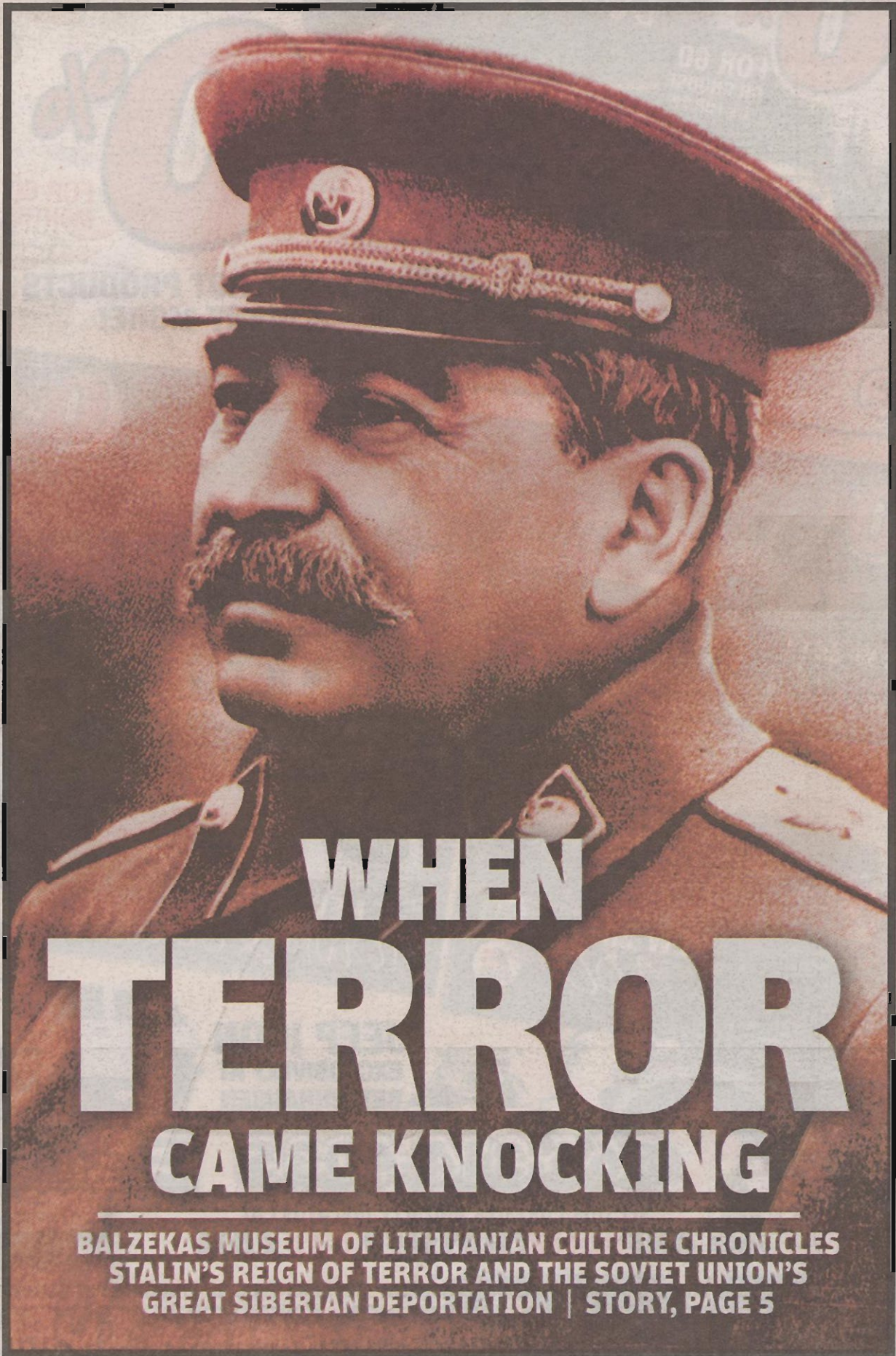
THURSDAY | JULY 28, 2011

SOUTHTOWNSTAR.COM | 75 CENTS

SOUTHTOWNSTAR

PEOPLE UP NORTH JUST DON'T GET IT

A CHICAGO SUN-TIMES publication



WHEN TERROR CAME KNOCKING

BALZEKAS MUSEUM OF LITHUANIAN CULTURE CHRONICLES
STALIN'S REIGN OF TERROR AND THE SOVIET UNION'S
GREAT SIBERIAN DEPORTATION | STORY, PAGE 5



He was there: Rimantis Mackevicius (right) talks with his son, Tomas, and daughter-in-law Asta Svedkauskaite about when he was deported to Siberia as a child. | ART VASSY-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

'FREEDOM IS SO IMPORTANT'

Approximately 150,000 Lithuanians were sent to Siberia during the Soviet Union's great deportation — and about 50,000 died. Exhibit at museum aims at making sure the stories of the people affected aren't forgotten. **PAGE 5**

PALOS SURVIVOR REMEMBERS STALIN'S REIGN OF TERROR

Exhibit focuses on deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia during Soviet Union's occupation

BY DONNA VICKROY

dvickroy@southtownstar.com

Even today, living safely in the land of the free, Rimantis Mackevicius isn't sure he would change things.

"It's what I know," the Palos Hills father of three says about the horrors and hardships his family endured during the Soviet Union's great Siberian deportation.

As his daughter-in-law Asta Mackevicius interpreted, Rimantis recently talked about his determination to not let the world forget the atrocities that Joseph Stalin inflicted on millions — the hard labor, the starvation, the families torn asunder.

Old women were ordered to chop trees. Old men were beaten to death. Children were left to fend for themselves.

Under Stalin's rule, fear was everywhere, death was commonplace.

And while the world may have turned its back while it was happening, many in Lithuanian and other Eastern European communities are determined that history will not do the same.

70th anniversary

"Hope & Spirit" chronicles the mass deportations from Lithuania to Siberia with photographs, letters and artifacts collected from that era.

Audrius Plioplys devised and organized the exhibit, which is on display through January at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture on Chicago's South Side.

"It's important to remember this atrocity of history," Plioplys said. His grandmother was deported at age 71. She was assigned to chop trees until an injury had her reassigned to a job preparing food for children.

"That injury probably saved her life," Plioplys said.

Seven other aunts and uncles also were deported, and three relatives died from the beatings they received at the hands of the secret police.

Though Plioplys grew up in the United States, graduating from St. Rita High School before going on to college and medical school, he knows the story of the great deportation. He learned most of it not in traditional school but from his

HOPE & SPIRIT

Continues through January at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, 6500 S. Pulaski Road, Chicago; (773) 582-6500; info@balzekasmuseum.org

Upcoming events include film screenings, book signings, discussions and a photographic exhibit.

parents and in Saturday sessions of Lithuania school.

"Growing up, I've always felt a tremendous imbalance. Everybody knew about Hitler but nobody seemed to know about Stalin," he said.

Last year, as the 70th anniversary of the brutality neared, he began to gather memorabilia as well as stories.

Rimantis recently shared his story at an evening event at the museum.

Speakers, films and art displays are ongoing during the exhibit's run.

When terror came knocking

Late one evening in September 1951, members of the Russian Army surrounded the farmhouse where Rimantis lived with his parents, uncle and grandparents in the village of Bernotai, Lithuania.

Rimantas was just 6 months old then and thus was spared firsthand memories of being rounded up and stuffed into a cattle car with 60 other "partisans" for the 20-day journey to their Siberian work camp.

Their crime? Being a farmer or a teacher or a landowner or anyone who could be considered a potential political opponent.

Rimantis' father and uncle were accused freedom fighters — people who objected outright to the Soviet Union's 1940 occupation of Lithuania. While the world was watching Adolph Hitler wreak terror across Western Europe, Joseph Stalin was doing the same across Eastern Europe, virtually unchallenged.

The most dangerous partisans were sent to Gulags.

Rimantis' father went to prison, the rest of the family was herded on the train. His mother, Petronele Mackevicius, told him about how her milk dried up during the



A dark time: Rimantis Mackevicius (right) talks with his daughter-in-law Asta Svedkauskaitė about when he was deported to Siberia when he was a child. | ART VASSY-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

journey and how she would chew bread and put it in cloth for him to suck. She told him how the children onboard would lick the walls of the boxcar, hoping the condensation would relieve their thirst. She told him about the single hole in the car designated as the communal toilet.

But if the trip was horrific, the destination was worse.

Families were crammed into small, sparse quarters. Adults had to work dawn to dusk, chopping trees or making bricks. His mother laid railroad ties. While she was away, Rimantis' uncle would care for him, taking him along on his driving job. When he grew old enough to fend for himself, he did, playing in the streets until his mother came home.

Their meals consisted largely of soup and grains. Rimantis did not see a piece of fruit until he returned to Lithuania 10 years later.

The promise of help

As hopeless as things seemed during the decade Rimantis spent in Siberia, many of the deportees clung to the hope that the United States would intervene, he said.

After all, the Americans had rallied against Hitler. Surely they would not stand by while Stalin exacted far more widespread terror.

But the Americans never came. After Stalin died in 1953, deportees began to be repatriated. The Mackevicius' returned in 1961 as

marked members of the community. They'd lost their land and their belongings and had gained the stigma of being criminals. They were only allowed to take jobs that no one wanted. Rimantis' mother collected garbage and carried bricks.

Rimantis struggled with the language. Growing up in Siberia, he spoke Russian. To this day, he feels a gap in his native Lithuanian.

"I had to teach myself, nobody had time to help me, they were all working," he said.

Though he saw his father, Jonas Mackevicius, once when he was 6, he didn't get to know the man until the family was reunited when Rimantis was 15.

"He was allowed to return to his village but he wasn't allowed to live with us," Rimantis said. "He had to write to Vilnius (the capital) to get permission to live with his own family."

The death toll

Plioplys' grandmother told him about the horrors of Siberia. She said that each year, about a third of the resident exiles died from overwork or starvation. Many could not be buried until spring because of the frozen ground. Their bodies were piled up like logs, he said.

About 150,000 Lithuanians were deported during the great deportation. Fifty thousand died.

But, Plioplys points out, it's important to remember that this same

atrocious was happening to other groups all over Eastern Europe.

It's estimated that Stalin was responsible for the deaths of at least 20 million people.

On to freedom

Rimantis attended trade school and worked as a mechanic. He married and had three children.

In 1998, he said, he won the green card lottery. Rimantis, his wife Danguole and their daughters, Aiste and Agne, moved to the United States. His son, Tomas, came a few years later.

Today, Rimantis, 60, works as an office manager for a Lithuanian Shipping company, Atlantic Express Corp. Tomas works in information technology. He recently married. Agne became a doctor.

And the youngest child, Aiste, a graduate of Stagg High School, served four years in Iraq.

The promise of hope must live on, Rimantis said.

Tomas carries a torch for the movement. Like his father, he is determined to keep the story alive.

"A lot of people will say well the end justifies the means because the Soviet Union became a powerful nation," he said.

"But Stalin killed millions, he starved people, he deported people, he tore families apart.

"I am proud that both my grandfathers fought for freedom," he said. "Freedom is so important."