



## LITHUANIANS BY THE LAPTEV SEA: THE SIBERIAN MEMOIRS OF DALIA GRINKEVIČIŪTĖ

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On June 14, 1941 at three o'clock in the morning mass arrests and deportations began simultaneously in all of the Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Following Moscow's orders, chekists from Byelorussia, Smolensk, Pskov, and other places were mobilized to execute this task.

One after another overfilled convoys moved eastward transporting great masses of people, the major part of whom were fated never to return.

They deported grade school and high school teachers, university lecturers, lawyers, journalists, the families of Lithuanian military officers, diplomats, various office workers, farmers, agronomists, doctors, business men and so on.

They deported people from towns, they deported people from cities, they deported people from villages. Trucks crawled in an unbroken stream towards the railroad station where men, the heads of the families, were taken aside by the Chekists and put in freight cars. They were told that they were being separated temporarily, only for the duration of the trip. But in reality their fate had already been decided in advance—they were to be sent to Krasnoyarsk and other concentration camps in the northern Urals to be liquidated, even though they had been neither questioned nor tried.

They went to those box cars, not being guilty of anything, not knowing that they were being sentenced to their deaths; that in this moment they would be saying good-bye and hugging their children, wives, and parents for the last time.

They were deceived.

Their family members, ranging from infants to grandparents who were barely able to move, were transported in boarded-up cattle cars to the depths of Siberia. Often the prisoners were not allowed to take even the most necessary belongings. The guards would not allow relatives to come close enough to pass food or warm clothing to those in the box cars; they would beat them with the butts of their rifles.

During that horrible week tens of thousands were deported from Lithuania alone.

What the true scope of those deportations was meant to be is not known even today—it was unexpectedly stopped by the war. On June 22, 1941 when the war started the NKVD organs were forced to stop the mass arrests and the deportation of innocent people to Siberia.

On the night of June 14th the Chekists started to smash our door down too. They arrested my father, Juozas Grinkevičius, the head of the Lithuanian Bank's currency commission and from 1940 onward a mathematics teacher at the gymnasium.

Exactly one year earlier, in June of 1940, when the Red Army crossed Lithuania's state borders, my father refused to leave Lithuania saying that he had worked his entire life for Lithuania, for his nation, and feels no guilt for this, and is not afraid of any trial. In the worst case he will at least die in Lithuania. But even that was not fated him. He died tortured in a

concentration camp in the northern Urals on October 10, 1943. He lies today in an unknown grave in a foreign land together with other martyrs. In his last letter written on a piece of birch bark he wrote "I am dying of starvation ..."

It did not occur to father that no trial would be needed for his death and that the extermination of his family had already been planned.

I am proud of my father. Loyally and incorruptibly, he guarded independent Lithuania's interests. He made sure that funds, which were so necessary to the young state, did not carelessly go to foreign countries, but were used locally to build hospitals, schools and highways. I am proud of his principles and conscientiousness, which even his political enemies were forced to recognize officially twenty-five years after his death.

That same night of June 14th they arrested my mother, Pranė Grinkevičienė, a housewife, my seventeen year old brother—a graduate of the gymnasium, and myself—a fourteen year old school girl. A Chekist from Smolensk read us a document stating that we were being exiled to remote regions of Siberia for our entire lives.

We lived for one year in the Altai region working a Soviet farm; then in the summer of 1942 together with several thousand other exiles they transported us even further north to Yakuty, beyond the polar circle. They transported us at a time when we (the Lithuanian exiles) were just getting used to the climate and conditions of the new place, and after we had traded our belongings for potatoes, planted gardens, and the potatoes were just starting to bloom, giving us hope that next winter we would not have to starve.

The trip north took about three months. At first they transported us in box cars in which there was not only no room to sit down, but it was impossible to shift the position of one's body. Then they brought us up the Angara river in barges; later through uninhabited forest from the Angara to Lena by truck; then again by barge from the Lena river straight north. Ust'Kut, Kirensk, Oliokminsk, Yakutsk, Kyusyur, Stolba. Further and further north. We were now 800 kilometers beyond the polar circle.

The forests became scarcer and scarcer and finally disappeared. Later the bushes disappeared too. Now there were no longer any settlements along the banks. So where were they taking us? The shoreline was no longer even visible. As far as the eye could see, there was water and more water . . . The waves were as big as in the sea.

The mouth of the Lena River. The Laptev sea. One feels the icy water's breath. It was the end of August, but it was as cold as if it were deep autumn.

We finally stop. In front of us in an uninhabited island. There is nothing. No footsteps, no houses, no yurts, no trees, no bushes or grass—just the icebound tundra eternally frozen and covered with a thin layer of moss and some Arctic expedition's wooden board with an inscription indicating that their island is called Trofimovsk.

They extended a wooden footbridge to the island's high shore and told us to get out there. Four hundred Lithuanian women, children, elderly people, and a few men.

We unloaded boards and bricks out of the barge. Then the steam boat quickly turned around and sailed back because winter was closing in.

We were left on an uninhabited island without shelter, without warm clothing, without food, completely unprepared to spend the winter in the Arctic.

Almost at the same time they brought several hundred Finns from the Leningrad area to the island. They were exiled because of their national heritage, although their parents and forefathers had inhabited those areas since time immemorial. Death started to pick them off first.

Quickly we needed to start building underground shelters, yurts, and barracks because winter was almost here.

The supervisors collected the able-bodied adolescents and men and did not let them build shelters, but sent them to another island to fish for the state.

We, the women and children, hurrying as we were best able, started to build barracks out of bricks and moss. With our bare hands we ripped moss out of the eternally frozen tundra and put it between the bricks in place of concrete: a layer of bricks, a layer of moss. The barrack had no roof. In place of a roof we covered the top of the barrack with boards covering

them with moss and sand. Each person was allotted fifty centimeters on a plank. During snow storms snow would blow in through the cracks in the ceiling and cover the people lying on the planks on the floor.

The barracks became a huge grave of ice; the ceiling was covered with ice, the walls and floor as well. Often while people were lying on the planks, their hair would freeze to the wall.

In November the polar nights began. People started to freeze to death, die of starvation, scurvy and other diseases. At that point it was still possible to save everyone. At the mouth of the Lena river, on the shores of the Laptev sea 100 kilometers away on the islands of Tumato, Bobrovsko and Sasilacko lived Evenks who survived by fishing and hunting polar foxes. They could help and they wanted to help. They had provisions of fish and enough dog sleds to bring us to their heated yurts. But our supervisors would not allow it and in this way condemned us to death.

A group of about fifteen young Finns and Lithuanians tried to get out of Trofimovsk and go on foot over the glaciers to the Evenks, but along the way every single last one of them died. They got lost in a blizzard and froze to death. Out of the fifteen I remember only one man's last name—Zobiela.

Halfway through the polar night out of thirty people in our barrack, number ten, only a few women and myself could stay on our feet to go out and work.

They would send us seven to ten kilometers into the tundra to search for logs which had been carried down from the upper reaches of the Lena river. We would chop them out of the ice, harness them into rope harnesses and drag them to Trofimovsk to be used to heat the apartments and offices of the supervisors. We did not have the right to take even one small log into our barracks.

The hardest part was dragging the sleds with the logs up the steep and frozen shores of Trofimovsk Island. We had no strength or energy; our feet, wrapped in frozen sacks tied together with ropes, would slip and slide. First bruises, then wounds from the rope harnesses would appear on our shoulders.

The others lay on their planks either swollen from starvation, or no longer able to get up because of exhaustion and scurvy. Everyone without exception suffered from scurvy. We received no vitamins. Our teeth crumbled painlessly and blood flowed from our gums. Chronic trophic ulcers, which were painless and didn't heal appeared on our calfs. Each day it became more difficult to walk because of our overall exhaustion and the hemorrhaging of blood into muscles and joints. It seemed as though dozens of needles had been stuck into your calfs and each step brought pain. It was especially difficult to stand up in the morning. You could only get up on your tiptoes. Most of the time scurvy would affect the knee caps; because of the extreme hemorrhaging it was impossible to stretch one's legs out.

Thus people were left lying on planks with their legs bent and with huge blue swollen joints. Often diarrhea followed, then death.

One time, after we had dragged up the sled with the logs, they called us into the office. We unharnessed ourselves from the ropes and went inside. They told us we were to receive our salary for half a month. They handed us each one three ruble note (at current rates worth about thirty kopeks). Immediately supervisor Travkin started to orate:

". . . we must contribute to the defense of our country, we must donate for arms. . .".

A list had been made up in advance, and by each of our last names the sum of three rubles was set down. All we had to do was sign. In front of us stood a satiated, well groomed gentleman wearing an elegant coat of American wool, light, warm sheepskin footwear, well rested, clean shaven, smelling of eau de cologne, with a healthily flushed, glowing face.

He spoke lightly and fluently as if he were discussing some trivial matter; he spoke as if he did not see those creatures standing in front of him, barely staying on their feet, half-dead with sunken eyes, waxen yellow faces, dressed in rags, infected with fleas, holding those three so hard earned rubles in their hands. He spoke as if he did not understand that without those three rubles we could not even buy our ration of bread. We signed, and each of us returned our little banknote.

The ill in the barracks asked for water. We had to melt ice and snow. There were no logs. Therefore, on frequent evenings I would sneak into the storehouse, steal a couple of boards, and drag them back to the barracks crawling. Then I would chop them up. We would then heat up a "barabana" (half of a metal barrel), boil water, warm the bricks for the sick people's feet, dry the footwear and face bandages.

From the warmth of the fire the roof would sometimes start to drip and a crust of ice would develop on the blankets.

On Christmas Eve of 1942 my mother lay on the planks unconscious with a swollen face (one couldn't even see her eyes) and swollen legs. She urinated mostly blood, which meant a threatening, sudden infection of the kidneys. She lay on a sack stuffed with wood shavings; I lay next to her, holding her in my arms, warming her with my body. I begged for her not to die and swore that I would take her to Lithuania. I prayed with all the strength of my spirit for God to perform a miracle and not let her die here. She did not hear when the corpse collectors crawled into our snow-covered barrack and asked where Grinkevičienė's corpse was.

Afterwards they brought me to trial.

Two days earlier, after I had dragged two logs back to the barrack, chopped them up and started a fire, two officials, Sventick and Antonov, crept into our barrack. By following the tracks in the snow, they easily found the thief. They wrote up an indictment and gave me over to trial.

The trial took place in the next barrack. There was a table covered with a red cloth. Burning candles stood on the table. Seven of us sat on the guilty bench. Five for boards, two for bread. Of the latter the first one was called Platinskas, the second was Albertas Janonis, a drama student at Kaunas University from Šiauliai.

Albertas' mother Janonienė, dying of starvation, begged her son for just a little bit of bread; Albertas with Platinskas snuck into the bakery at night. Everything would have ended up alright if after they took some bread, they had returned to their barrack. Perhaps his mother would not have died of starvation. But, having smelled the bread the young men could not restrain themselves and started to eat frantically. While they were eating, they grew weak and lost consciousness. They were found still lying there the next morning.

Those accused for the boards had various explanations. The first said that he had taken the wood to build a coffin for his dead child; the others said they had found the wood. I was the last on the bench for the accused. Wartime trials are quick. In half an hour the judge had questioned six and turned towards me and asked if I admitted to stealing boards, that is, socialist property.

"Yes. I did steal them."

"Maybe one of the grown-ups sent you? Tell us and we won't try you."

"No one sent me."

The court left to consult amongst themselves. We, the seven, wait for the verdict. No one thinks about the length of the punishment because it does not have any meaning. One year or ten years— it's all the same. They'll send us fifty kilometers through the snow to the concentration camp in Stolba. It is obvious to everyone and to the judges as well that not one of us will make it. Any kind of sentence is a death sentence. My poor mother is probably already dead. The end to our suffering is very near.

The verdict: for the bread Albertas Janonis and Platinskas get three years each. For the boards everyone gets one year each. I was acquitted because of my confession. Why? They defended themselves, wanting to stay alive, but they will go to die, while I am left. What for? I return to the barrack. It is cold and dark. Žukienė lights some splinters; I see a miracle: my mother is starting to regain consciousness. There is no water. Again I go out to the storehouse to steal boards. It's a bright, wonderful Christmas night.

In a few days all those who had been tried and those who were tried the next day were sent out with armed guards. Soon afterwards a blizzard began and took on full force. We considered them dead. But the next day two returned: Riekus (a farmer from Serijiai) and a sixteen year old boy, Bėra Charasas, from Kaunas, with a frozen arm. Both had been tried for boards. Riekus, completely frozen, fell onto the barrack's floor and started to lament: 'Oh Christ, Christ, could your cross have been this heavy? ..."

He told us that when the blizzard started the people lost their sense of direction. The guards threw down their guns and started to huddle against the prisoners. They decided to return, but they couldn't figure out in which direction Trofimovsk lay. Each one kept pointing in a different direction. And so each one went off in his own direction through the blizzard. All eleven accused and the guards died. In the spring, when the ice was carried downriver, we saw their corpses floating on chunks of ice into the Laptev sea.

Among the deceased were two young men from Kėdainiai: Dzikas, and Bronius Lukminas. They, like Janonis and Platinskas had also been tried for bread, only the following day. Their stories were similar, and their fate was the same. The starving young men Dzikas and Bronius Lukminas tried to get a second couple hundred gram bread ration at the store. They were not given the bread; only they were brutally beaten and handed over for trial. And paid for the bread they HADN'T EATEN with their lives. . .

Bera's frozen arm turned black, the tissue became necrotic. He lay in torment for several days and cried: "What are they going to cut my arm off for?" When the blizzard died down, they took him to the port of Tikas by dog sled where they amputated his arm up to the shoulder. That was the price he paid for the board . . .

After December of 1942 two brigades were needed to carry out the dead. Each brigade was made up of four people. They were: Malvina Abromaitienė, a teacher's wife from Merkinė, Albina Marcinkevičienė, Petrauskas, a teacher from Šiauliai, Dundulienė, the wife of a colonel of the Lithuanian army, Jonas Abromaitis, a teacher, Steponas Vitkevičius from Šiauliai (he later died of starvation), Teofilė Tamulionienė, Tamulevičius, a captain in the Lithuanian army from Marijampolė, Tautvaišienė, a Swedish woman (she later emigrated to Sweden about 1956 or 1957). The corpse bearers themselves were very starved and weak; therefore, they would tie a rope to the corpse's feet and together drag it out of the barrack. They would then put the dead on sleds, and harnessing themselves into the ropes pull them several hundred meters beyond the barracks. There they would unload the corpses into a common pile. The dead people's hair would remain frozen to the barrack walls.

When Gramzienė died, a small piece of bread was left on her chest under her clothes. As the dead woman was being dragged off the planks, one of the people noticed it, frantically pulled out the bit of bread, quickly brushed off the fleas, and ate it immediately. May the executioners who brought people to such a state be indicted and may they live to see their trial.

One time a woman, a teacher's wife, found an emptied night pail by supervisor Sventick's house. Amongst the excrement she noticed a piece of bread. The woman got down on her knees and picked the piece of bread which was frozen into the excrement out with her fingers and ate it.

When blizzards raged, the dead would lie on the planks for several days next to the living.

For three days after her death, Danilauskienė, the wife of the director of the Marijampolė Gymnasium, lay next to her son Antanas and other who would never rise again. The entire barrack was buried under snow. One could only reach it by crawling down through a narrow snow tunnel. M. Abromaitienė asked the son Antanas to look for some kind of a scarf with which to wrap his dead mother's face. But he himself was lying with his legs contracted because of heavy hemorrhaging in his knee caps and could not get up. When the deceased Danilauskienė was dragged by ropes tied to her feet up out of the frozen barrack through the snow tunnel, Antanas called out after her: "Forgive me, dear mother, that I could not see you to your grave ..."

In our barrack as well, Atkočaitienė, a printer's wife from Kaunas, lay dead on the planks next to the living for several days.

When Matulis from Kaunas died in Tit Aros, his wife hid the fact for a week and lay next to him so that she could get his ration of bread. Soon afterward, however, she too died of starvation.

The rector of the Lithuanian Agricultural Academy, Professor Vilkaitis, was assigned to be a guard. Exhausted from starvation, the professor collapsed on some barrels and died. Out of respect for the professor, whose name was known even well beyond Lithuania's borders, people built him a coffin. But a week later the coffin disappeared, and the professor lay with all the rest of the deceased in the common pile. The professor's wife, Mrs. Vilkaitis, grew ill because of her difficult emotional experiences. She later died. Her son and daughter remained alive.

Seventy-year-old Marcinkevičius from Verstaminiai, sensing his oncoming death, pleaded: "Ambromaitienė, my dear child, bury me somehow so that the dogs and white foxes wouldn't gnaw at my bones, and if you return to Lithuania tell them that we died here of starvation ..."

In Bobrovsk there were several hundred tons of frozen fish. It would have been enough to save all of the Lithuanian and Finnish exiles in Trofimovsk from dying of starvation. But the supervisor wouldn't give it to the people; they felt it was better to let it rot. In the summer of 1943 they dumped it into the Laptev sea.

One time a couple entered our barrack. They each had a bundle in their hands. It was dark, and they asked if there were any children in the barrack. There were children. When their eyes adjusted to the dark, they saw the first one—ten year old Jonukas Barniškis from Marijampolė lying on the floor, dead from starvation and scurvy. They explained that they were from Leningrad. In Leningrad their only son had died of starvation. Today was the one year anniversary of his death. In his memory the unhappy parents had collected their three day ration of bread and brought it to the starving Lithuanian children.

From under piles of rags children stretched out their thin hands withered from starvation, and the people from Leningrad placed a piece of bread in each one. After his death the little tortured victim of the Leningrad blockade stretched out his small hand to help his dying contemporaries.

When parents died, their children were taken into a separate orphans' barrack in the same ice grave. The conditions were just as horrible, and the death rate even higher. The starving children would scrape snow off the icy windows with their little hands and eat it. One after the other children died. The corpse collectors often found sacks containing the children's small corpse-skeletons placed outside on the snow in front of the barracks. No one knew how many were in a sack because the sacks were placed into the common pile without untying them.

Two Finnish boys, twelve and thirteen years old, hanged themselves in this orphans' barrack. Thirteen year old Juzė Lukminaitė from Kėdainiai, who was put in the barrack after her parents' and two older brothers' deaths, witnessed the suicide. Little Juzė cried constantly, remembering her parents and especially her sixteen year old brother's death. Dying of starvation, her brother kept waiting for his promised portion of bread. He died waiting with his hand stretched out. They put the bread into his hand, when he was already dead.

Juzė kept asking people to take her to her brother's grave. Finally, one woman brought her. She could not find her brother in the pile of corpses, only the sight of arms and legs, gnawed off by the polar foxes, the white bones, and somebody's head rolling in the wind, fixed forever into her memory.

One day she left the orphans' barrack with a little boy named Stasiūnas. They hoped to find some kind of food. In the garbage pile near the supervisors' homes it was sometimes possible to find fish guts. The exhausted girl collapsed. Because she did not have the strength to cover her hands and chest, they became frost bitten before her friend could bring people to the rescue. It was impossible for her to lie down and heal properly. Her chest was one large wound from frostbite; bed sores and trophic ulcers covered her shoulder blades, spine, and pelvic area, where her bones stuck out from scurvy and exhaustion. They hung her from the ceiling on fabric loops fastened under her underarms. She would support her feet on the cot and hang on the loops secured to the ceiling. Juzė Lukminaitė hung in this position for several months. What crime did this crucified girl have to pay for? The scars from these wounds still remain.

In the winter of 1943 we understood that we would all die. The death rate had reached its zenith. The brutal cold held; blizzards raged especially violently before the end of the polar night and the sun's appearance.

The barracks were completely unheated and the dying people's hands and feet froze. Totally exhausted, almost everyone lay and because of the scurvy excreted right onto the planks. People had become infested with fleas which harbored even in their eyebrows and in their eyelashes. The end was near.

And when no one had any hope left a man who saved everyone who was left from death arrived in Trofimovsk. This was Doctor Lazar Solomonovich Samodurov.

He picked his way through each barrack, sized up the entire situation, the half dead people, and began to work very energetically. He bravely entered into conflict with the Trofimovsk superiors who lived in warm houses built by us from logs, who dressed from head to foot in furs, wore only fur or felt footwear, ate bread, butter, sugar and canned pork sent to the Soviet Union by the allies from America to their heart's content (all products, except salt, were brought by way of the Tiks port from America). Their main occupation was sending Lithuanians and Finns to the other world as quickly as possible. Because of this "important " job Mavrin, Sventick, Travkin, Guliajev, Anoshin, and others were able to avoid being sent to the front.

The next day already each of us received one bowl of hot pea soup and half a kilogram of frozen fish which the doctor advised us to eat raw so as not to lose the ascorbic acid. He demanded several sacks of peas from the storeroom, let them germinate, and soon afterward brought sprouted peas to each barrack. Each of us would get a small measure of them—half a jar. He gave people several kilograms of Canadian flour as well. Little by little, the starvation and scurvy started to recede. Death also receded. Those who made it until Doctor Solomonovich arrived remained alive.

The bath house started to work. The corpse bearers were retrained as medical orderlies and started to bring live corpses to the bath house. Each day they bathed one barrack. Everyone bathed together: men and women. People were in such a state where sex no longer existed; they were just skeletons, toothless from scurvy with trophic ulcers and short skeletal tails.

Clothing was steamed in disinfecting chambers. With each steaming huge numbers of fried black fleas remained in clumps on the bottom of the chamber.

In the middle of February we saw a tiny edge of the sun over the horizon. The Polar night was ending. We started to believe that we had made it.

After a month Doctor Samodurov left. We heard that he was killed at the front. But maybe that's not true? We bow down to you, Doctor Samodurov.

In April the supervisors decided to clean up the piles of corpses. Able-bodied prisoners were brought in from the Stolba camp because there were no people left in Trofimovsk who had the physical strength to perform that job. Each day, before starting work, they were given a ration of hard liquor and worked half drunk. They chopped a huge hole out of the permafrost which became the common grave of the Trofimovsk martyrs—the Lithuanians and the Finns.

In the winter of 1942-1943 the death rate on the island was higher than in Leningrad under siege, during the blockade. Every second exile died, having been exiled without having committed any crime or having had the right to a trial.

Entire families died.

Of the six members of the grade school teacher Baranauskas' family, all six died.

In the Drūtis family from Kalvarija—a father and two sons—all perished.

Out of the four-member Žygelis family—the father, the eighteen year old daughter Danutė, the twelve year old son Eimutis—all died.

The forester Šiupelis' family—also all dead.

From the seven member Geidonis family—only Geidonienė remained.

Out of six people in the grade school teacher Markevičius' family (from Dzūkija) only the wife and the one daughter remained—Markevičius and three young daughters died,

In the Šurkas family the mother, two sons, Jonas and Adolfas and the daughter Emiliutė died. Out of five people the young daughter Irutė remained. Their father had remained in Lithuania. After the war he appealed to his daughter, writing: "why don't the other family members write to me, what are their addresses?"

The Lukminas family from Kėdainiai . . . out of seven people, four died: the mother, father, and both sons.

In the Dzikas family, out of six people, three died. Colonel Dundilis died in a concentration camp. His small son died in the Altai region, his sixteen year old daughter died from starvation in Trofimovsk, his son drowned in the Lena. Only his wife who now lives in Anykščiai remained.

The director of the Marijampolė Gymnasium, Danilauskas died of starvation in prison, his wife of starvation in Trofimovsk. His son Antanas is now an invalid after a stroke.

The teacher Totoraitis from Marijampolė died of hunger in prison, his wife in Trofimovsk, his eldest son, a student, died in Yakutsk.

When Vidoklierienė from Kaunas' only son (a pianist) died, she went to the pile of corpses each day. One time she did not return. She was found there frozen to death.

I remember those who died in Trofimovsk: The teacher Staniškis from Kaunas, the teacher Gediminas Balčys from Daugiai, Asmontienė, Lukoševičienė, from Šiauliai, Raibikienė from Kalvarija, Balazarienė from Kėdainiai, the twenty-five year old giant Zabuka, dead from starvation, the twelve year old Jonukas Giedrikis from Marijampolė, Barniškienė, Mikoliūnienė, young Baltokas, the Volungevičius', Geleris, Klingmanienė, Krikstanas from Kaunas. Krikstanas had not been exiled. When the war began, he left Lithuania. Not wanting to go to the front and not knowing who would win the war, he and his family joined up with the Lithuanian exiles and ended up in Trofimovsk. He had been jailed in independent Lithuania for underground communist activities. In Trofimovsk, dying of starvation in misery, he would say: "If only they would feed us the way they did in the Kaunas hard labor prison camp ..." His poor wife put his corpse on a sled and took it to the common pile.

.All of these and many others, Lithuanians and Finns whose names I don't remember, or never even knew, lay down in one common grave on which one real live flower was never placed and next to which mournful music never played.

Death certificates were not written. The teacher Petrauskas from Šiauliai, who carried away the corpses, kept a diary each day and a record of the dead. The supervisors sniffed it out and in 1946 started to interrogate him. He then quickly burned the lists and diaries. When the NKVD officers came into his dugout to conduct a search, the diary and lists had already been destroyed.

Lithuanian teachers ... Their tragic fate hurts especially. They were the educators of the nation. Most of them worked under difficult conditions in country schools. They were the first to teach children how to put syllables together and form the word for Lithuania, LIE-TU-VA. From them children learned about Lithuania's heroic past, about their forefathers who for hundreds of years protected Lithuania from conquerors from the East and from the West. They taught children to love their native tongue, one of the oldest languages in the world, which had been forbidden by the Tsar for four decades.

They were the first to tell children about revolts in 1831 of 1863 which were brutally suppressed, after which entire villages were exiled to Siberia. Lithuanian teachers . . . They worked in the name of Lithuania with loyalty and dedication.

In the summer of 1940, after Lithuania had been incorporated into the Soviet Union, the new government invited all of Lithuania's teachers to a congress in Kaunas and demanded that they educate the youth in a new spirit. After the new government's representatives gave several speeches and delivered instructions, 10,000 teachers stood up as one and sang the Lithuanian national anthem, forcing the representatives of the new government to stand up as well. In this way Lithuanian teachers openly declared that they would remain loyal to the ideals of independent Lithuania. In this way they also signed the verdict for themselves and their children. The government did not forget this and did not forgive them: their graves, and their children's graves are scattered not only over all of Yakutsk, but over all of Siberia as well.

The dead still live in my heart. Many years have passed, but I still see them, condemned and feeble, young and old, children and young people. Their deaths were so hard; they longed so much one day to be able to return to Lithuania . . . It is my duty to tell about them. Even if they weren't so many—only several hundred, their suffering wasn't any less. They wanted to live too, and one cannot forget them amongst millions of other brutally tortured victims. All the more because their executioners went unpunished. Not a single hair on their heads was touched.

Trofimovsk was not an exception. In the Yakutsk north, far beyond the polar circle, the cape of Bykov, in Tit Aras, at the mouth of the Jana river, at the mouth of the Olenioko river, in Verchojansk, at the North Pole there were Lithuanian exiles everywhere and everywhere there were many victims. For example, at the cape of Bykov the entire Pakštis family died—the father, mother, two sons, the sister Merkeliene and her small son. The teacher Haris Perlištein's mother also died there. Several thousand exiles lie in the permafrost of Yakutsk.

Tsar Nicolas had not dared to exile the Decembrists who revolted against the monarchy and monarch to those places. Stalin, however, considered the ice-covered sea the best place for Baltic women and children and for the exhausted Finns.

Once more Trofimovsk island is now empty and uninhabited. During storms the waves of the Laptev sea strike against the shore with great force and are constantly eroding it.

In 1949, when they took the last of the exiles to other places to fish the waves had already begun to destroy the edge of the common grave and it had started to crumble. It is absolutely certain that the waves have long since washed away all the corpses.

I wonder what seas and oceans they are still wandering, searching for the road to their homeland.



## PART TWO

In the polar summer of 1943 they took all the exiles to fish on other uninhabited islands, which the huge mouth of the Lena holds in uncountable numbers. The brigades would sail out in kungas (large row boats) and would cast out huge long nets. Then they would stand up to their knees or their waists in the freezing water and with all their strength drag the nets to the shore. They would work this way for ten to twelve hours a day. Completely soaked, worn out and frozen, they would run to their tents and throw off their soaked clothing. They would sleep a bit, then crawl back into the same wet clothes (there was no time or point to drying them) and fish again. Sometimes the waves would overflow the kunga and the catch would swim out again into the sea.

It was light the entire day and night—in the polar day the sun does not set. It was difficult to conceive the length of a day, if it was day or night. Therefore, sometimes the days on the calendar would be pushed forward and get mixed up.

In the winter we would set the nets under the ice and chop many holes in a row every twenty-five meters. By the end of the winter the ice was one and a half to two meters thick. Every day we would have to check the frozen ice holes, pick the ice out of them, take off our mittens and with our bare hands pull out the nets and untangle the fish. It was brutally cold. The net would freeze in a second. The fish, once taken out into the air, would freeze like logs before our eyes. Our fingers would turn white. After we threw the net back and slapped our hands with all our might, the pain would take our breath away. We would then have to repeat this procedure and check the next net. This procedure was repeated fifteen times a day—the smallest net norm for two people.

The raw fish which we ate each day saved us from scurvy, but nothing could save our hands. Inevitably our fingers suffered frostbite; blisters and wounds appeared. When you have to plunge your already wound-covered hands into the cold water, with the icy wind blowing, and pull out the nets and untangle the fish, it felt as if you were sticking your hands into boiling water. You'd be blinded by the pain. It was daily torture! If you didn't check the nets for three or four days, they would freeze under the ice. What would we fish with then? What would we eat? Fish was our main source of food, our vitamins and our medicine. So we'd go fishing on our own, without being ordered to do so, even during blizzards if we could just stay on our feet.

During the winter we'd move from one uninhabited island to the next searching for fish. We'd arrive on a new island by means of a dog sled, build yurts out of snow and tree stumps which had washed ashore. Thick chunks of ice would serve as windows. We would set nets, catch fish and then abandon the island and our yurts once the fish in that place disappeared.

That was how we wandered by dog sled along the shores of the Laptev sea, sometimes coming across footprints remaining from past expeditions, or the graves of explorers of the North Pole who had perished.

Along the way we'd sometimes get caught in blizzards. We'd then unharness the dogs, burrow into the snow and await our fate: the end of the blizzard or death.

The following people got lost during blizzards and perished: Jonas Kazlauskas from Anykščiai, the brother Petrikas from Kėdainiai, Ernestas Vanagas from Panevėžys and Algis Apanavičius, the son of a teacher from Kalnaberžis. Their corpses were never found in the endless snows.

The teacher Ona Baltrukonienė froze to death while walking to work in Trofimovsk during a blizzard when it was impossible to see one step in front of you. She was carried off into eternity beyond the last barrack. In May when the snow started to melt some hunters found her body six kilometers away. She left a four year old son Jaunutis; her husband, like most of the others, was in prison.

The teacher Stankevičius and the supervisor Smelcov were caught in a blizzard while on the road. They lay under the snow with their dogs for fourteen days. When one would doze off, the other would shake him and punch him with his fists so that he would not fall asleep and freeze. Having lost all hope, Smelcov sincerely repented and prayed to God for a miracle—a deliverance.

After thirteen days the blizzard calmed down; they barely had any dogs left. In the snow burrow their clothing had become damp from their breathing. When the two of them crawled out into the surface, in one second their clothing turned into an armor of ice, sticking away from their bodies. They started to freeze. There was not even the faintest glimmer of hope for them to be saved. For hundreds of kilometers around there was not a single living soul. Every minute death was coming closer.

And in those last few moments two spots in the endless fields of snow were spotted by an Evenk, a hunter of polar foxes, on his way to check his traps. He saved them. The chance of such a meeting in those Arctic expanses is incredibly small. Everyone considered them dead.

Once recovered and returned to his senses, Smelcov liked to tell people that only Stalin's words: "There are no fortresses which the Bolsheviks cannot conquer" gave him the spiritual strength to stay alive. He kept a modest silence about his fervent prayers, his repentance and vows to God.

In the summer of 1944 they sent us to fish in Tumat. My mother was lying in the hospital with a chronic infection of the kidneys. Following the supervisors' orders Doctor Griko signed her out of the hospital, while she was still seriously ill. We had to carry her into the barge where it was very cold and damp. Even in the summer one had to wear quilted clothing in these parts. Icy water splashed about in the hold under our bunks. It splashed onto her clothing and face.

We sailed for seven days through the 150 kilometer wide mouth of the Lena river. During that entire week I could not get one drop of hot water for her. Her face and legs swelled up again. I thought that this would be her last trip, but the last trip was still in the future.

In 1947 and 1948, little by little using different means, some of the exiles were able to move to Kiusiur and Yakutsk. They allowed me to go to Yakutsk to attend school. However, the NKVD chief Kosenkov did not give my mother permission to go with me. When the steamboat arrived, I brought her on board and hid her. The two hours of waiting seemed endless, but we finally departed.

Whatever will happen will happen, but they will not send her beyond the Polar Circle anymore.

Along the way the NKVD workers caught on that my mother was going without permission and took away my documents.

Immediately upon arrival in Yakutsk I quickly had to admit her to the hospital. The department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not return my documents and fiercely attacked me for having taken my mother with me. Their inhuman reasoning shocked me: to leave my critically ill mother in the North, knowing positively that I would never see her again to them was a normal action through which I would have proved my conscientiousness. The refusal to leave her was a crime which could not be justified and for which I could not remain unpunished. They told me that they would not let me go to school, and without letting me say good-bye to my mother, they sent me to work in the Kangalas coal mines.

There was no machinery in the mines. We worked exactly the same way people did 150 years ago—with picks and wheelbarrows. There weren't even any wagons, and no supports either. We would push wheelbarrows filled with coal through the dark labyrinths on narrow boards. It was exactly as if we were in a hard labor camp.

Many other Lithuanians were working here as well. Everywhere where there were the hardest and most dangerous jobs, the worst conditions, the worst pay (which wasn't enough to feed oneself, not to mention replacing torn clothing) the Lithuanian exiles were forced to work as free slave labor.

In Pokrovsk, about 100 kilometers away from Yakutsk, many Lithuanians worked in a brick factory. Working and living conditions there were especially hard. People worked hard there without getting any bread sometimes for several days at a time. Their ration cards had already been destroyed and no one guaranteed a ration of bread. Very little bread was brought in, and only those who pushed and shoved or weren't at work at the time would get some.

When the sea froze over, it was impossible to transport coal out and the work in the Kangalas mine ended. They allowed us to return to Yakutsk.

My mother frequently asked to be allowed to change her place of exile because of her serious illness, either to the Yakutsk region or the Altai region. The climate in those areas appeared to us to be milder. Her requests were refused, yet her health got worse, and she understood that she would die in Yakutsk. She was longing to see Lithuania again and wanted to be buried in her native land.

In February of 1949 we escaped by airplane from Yakutsk and reached Lithuania successfully.

Soon afterwards they started to search for us. We had no documents of any kind. We hid in the homes of friends and relatives. Often I was forced to change my place of shelter with my sick mother quickly, when people would get suspicious and when our presence was noticed.

After she returned to Lithuania, my mother's health noticeably improved. joy at being home, the vegetables and fruits which are so necessary to someone suffering from this disease, a doctor's care—all this helped her regain strength. She simply revived. How she treasured every ray of sun, every blade of grass, flower, tree, which she had not seen for so many years in the North! She spent hours like a bird sitting nestled in some bush picking berries or listening to the voices of her native land . . . Stalin did not have a single punishment which could make me regret these moments.

But after eight months her illness began to progress again. Dangerous uremic symptoms appeared. In the Spring of 1950 her state of health was hopeless. She asked us to bring her to our apartment in Kaunas. It was extremely risky, but we fulfilled her wish.

The doctor usually would come to see her after dark. Once she unexpectedly asked me: "How will you bury me? A jail sentence is waiting for you. Put me in the Nemunas river..."

She passed into the other world understanding that there would be no room for her in her native land even after death. She died painfully on May 5, 1950. Her last words were: "Why didn't they shoot us all then by the cattle car doors? ..."

. . . She lies laid out amongst flowers. Her face is peaceful and blissful. The end of her suffering has come. I open the window so that the soft Lithuanian breeze can stroke her face for the last time . . . My kind and peaceful mother. She did not hurt a single living creature in her life. Why were you destined so much suffering? You would notice another person's pain and suffering before anyone else did. Unnoticed, you would quietly come and help. Your greatest final wish has been fulfilled. You died in Lithuania, and your native land will shelter you. You reached her with the last of your strength. Weak, dying, persecuted, you overcame everything.

Just where is that place? Where and how to bury her?

A priest agreed to bury her without documents under an assumed name in a village cemetery eighteen kilometers outside of Kaunas. But how to carry her out of the house? How to drive her beyond the city? The carrying out and transporting of the coffin will surprise the neighbors . . . Perhaps I should bury her under the windows of the orchard? But the May nights are light; it's impossible to dig a hole unnoticed.

My aunt offers to go to the NKVD and say that her dying sister knocked on her door at night and it was impossible not to let her in, then during the day she died. I would have to disappear. They would probably perform the necessary formalities in order to establish her identity and allow her to be buried. But then I would not be able to either go to the funeral or later be near the coffin. Without a doubt it will be watched, there they will wait for me. Besides, they would not believe it and someone would suffer.

But the worst thought was that her executioners will come and stand over her and look at her, and I will not be able to be near her during those last few hours.

So what to do? Could it be that there really is no room for my deceased mother in our native land? In the cellar there is a little area which was meant to be used as a hiding place in case of war. I will bury her there.

With a hatchet and pickax I started to break the concrete floor. It was very difficult, the layer of concrete is thick'. My father did not realize when he was building the house how difficult it would be to knock out a grave for mother here. I light the cellar with a candle so that no one from outside would notice. Although I worked with all my might, the work moves forward slowly. When someone climbs the stairs to the second floor, I have to stop work immediately. Finally the concrete is broken. Further there is clay. On the second night I finish my work. In front of me there is a gaping hole. Tomorrow is the first Sunday in May—Mother's Day. This is my last present to you, Mama . . .

My aunt and I cut a wardrobe in two and make a coffin. The door will serve as the top of the coffin, we carry down the coffin and lower it into the hole. We cover it. Now we have to carry her there. Several times I start to go toward her, but my legs give way and I feel weak. This I will not be able to do. Then a trustworthy person comes to help us— the famous missionary Father Paukštis' brother. He picks her up in his arms and carries her out.

All the next week I carry pieces of concrete and clay out of the cellar at night. Later I get cement and level out the floor again. No trace of a grave is left.

The water meter was also located in the basement room. The person who would come to check it often noticed flowers and candles there, but never said a word about it to anyone.

Unknown graves . . . How many of them there were and still are in Lithuania . . .

### PART THREE

In October of 1951 they found me and arrested me. They locked me up in the Kaunas interrogational jail and presented an indictment according to Criminal Code Article number eighty-two—escape from exile. The interrogators were interested in where my mother was hiding, who was hiding her and providing her with material aid.

I could not answer a single one of these questions without incriminating the people who had helped us. Therefore, from the start I told them that I would not tell the truth and did not want to lie. That is not the way to repay kindness and generosity. About my mother I could only say that she had died May 5th, 1950. Of course, they did not believe me. They demanded that I disclose her physician's last name, which cemetery she is buried in and under what last name. I refused to answer these questions as well. After several days my interrogator "exposed" me: All death records had been checked, and it was established that on that day no woman of that age had died in Lithuania. The fact of my mother's death was rejected as a lie. It was just as well. I've come to learn that they never believe the truth. My biggest fear was that they would find out where Mother was buried because they would then excavate the remains immediately.

Because the investigation did not move forward at all, the interrogators were constantly replaced. They would bring me to be questioned every night when I had just gone to sleep. At six o'clock in the morning the signal would sound to get up; during the day you weren't allowed to doze off, even while sitting. If you did they would punish you right away. The lack of sleep was very tiring.

For weeks on end the investigators made no headway. Finally, having exhausted me and themselves, they would end the interrogation right where it had started.

The doctors who treated my mother, the people who helped us and hid us did not suffer. Most of them are still alive and living in Kaunas and Vilnius. The NKVD was convinced that my mother was still alive and actively searched for her up until 1953.

One evening about five o'clock, they ordered me to get dressed and leave my cell. The guard led me through the hallway and staircases out into the prison yard. I did not understand where they were leading me. We came up to the prison gates. By the doors, which lead straight into the street, stood a handsome, elegantly dressed man, about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, waiting for me. Smiling pleasantly, he greeted me and asked me to go with him, but not to keep my hands in front of me. In the most ordinary way he gave the doors a push and we exited out into Mickevičius street. It was an autumn evening. People were going home from work, stopping in at shops, a group of students ran out of the University buildings. We ended up walking among the pedestrians. My native Kaunas was beautiful and endlessly precious that autumn evening. We walked quietly, without hurrying. We sat down on a bench in the garden of the War Museum. I felt as if I were dreaming. Who gave me this last walk through my native town as a gift? Later we went to a building on the corner of Donelaitis and Gediminas Streets. The office workers were nowhere in sight. We entered one of the offices and sat down. My pleasant escort asked me if I wanted to live and study in Kaunas legally. It seems that this could be arranged quite simply. If I wanted, they would release me from jail in a few days. They wouldn't send my case to Moscow. I won't have to return to Yakutsk either. I'll simply enter some homes—they wouldn't need a lot from me—just a little information for their security organs.

Everything became clear: I'll probably have to enter the homes of my parent's friends and acquaintances. They'll open their doors to a friend, but in reality a snake will crawl in, ready to send them along Siberia's road of merciless suffering. Now I understood who my pleasant escort was.

When I told him that I preferred to choose three years in prison for running away from Yakutsk, he smiled pleasantly and said that I was a little mistaken about the punishment: it wasn't a three year jail term that was waiting for me, but twenty years of hard labor, and I had signed the verdict myself. He handed me a piece of paper which really did have my signature on it. Then I remembered: it had been announced to all the exiles in Yakutsk that according to the new law escape from exile would be punished with up to twenty years hard labor. Like everyone else I had also signed, indicating that I had read the decree. Not long afterward we escaped. Now the document was lying here. Twenty years hard labor... I am now twenty-three. I cannot even conceive of the end of the sentence. I return the document. The world seems to be sinking somewhere. My interlocutor waits quietly.

So this is who gave me this wonderful stroll, showed me life for a second time and let me feel the life which has been taken away from me for all time, which I will never again have, but which they are offering me in exchange for my conscience and honor.

I asked him to take me back to the jail. After I had spent six more months in the Kaunas Interrogational Jail, the verdict of a special commission came from Moscow.

They led me from my cell into the room. There stood two NKVD officers. They read the verdict: For escaping— three years in camp, once the punishment is complete, I am to return to Yakutsk.

I refused to sign under the verdict. When they asked why, I answered that the verdict has no legal basis. Exile is a punishment. For committing a crime one can only be exiled by a court. I was exiled as a child without having committed any crime or having any trial, only because I was born into this family and not some other. Therefore, I do not consider my leaving Yakutsk either an escape or a crime. I do not recognize the verdict.

"We will force you to sign" the NKVD colonel declared and called the head of the jail. But they ended up having to write a document about my refusal to sign. Soon afterward, by way of Vilnius and Moscow jails, they brought me to the Gorky region to the Suchobezvodnoj station, to Unzlag where I would have to complete my sentence.

I was surprised by the prison camp because it was filled with many wonderful intellectual people. It seemed that Stalin had locked up the country's mind, its honor, and its conscience here. Scientists, design engineers, film and theater actors, lecturers, doctors, students and others were jailed here.

After work Maria Aleksandrovna Goldman-Zeliabovskaja, a lecturer in French literature at Moscow University (she was jailed together with her husband, a specialist on children's literature) would recite a series of lectures on French literature for us from memory.

I often remember the Moscovite Boris Vorobjov who was sentenced to eight years for participating in the Moscow Aviation Institute's underground student group in which they had analyzed Russian history and the revolutionary movement. They read Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Pisarev and Lenin. They had come to the conclusion that Stalin had seized power illegally and was a criminal for having destroyed and for still destroying millions of the country's best people. The KGB wanted to inflate the importance of the trial and demand that the students produce deceitful evidence against their teachers. Beria himself participated at the trial of Boris Vorobjov. He carried a memento of this interrogation, it was one empty eye socket. For days on end they kept beating him in a brick "closet" filled with water to his knees. But the king of the bloody executioners, the NKVD Minister Drikov, lost his duel with the nineteen-year old student: he couldn't extract any untruthful evidence.

One of my favorite places in the prison zone was a corner where beautiful luxuriant grass grew like nowhere else. Here it was quiet and peaceful and birds alighted sometimes. I was amazed at why the grass was so lovely here. Then an old prisoner explained to me that between 1941 and 1945 this plot had not been prison territory, but prisoners who had been shot or killed were buried here.

Now when I went there it was with a special feeling. Each blade of grass, each flower appeared holy to me. I would rejoice when a bird would come and sing here . . .

Rest in peace, unknown martyrs . . .

In the summer of 1953 they sent me from the prison camp back to Yakutsk. For over three months they transported me in stages by train through Sverdlosk, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, and Kirensk jails. In Novosibirsk, next to the old jail, a foundation had been laid and the walls on a new jail had been started. From everything one could see what a grandiose building it had been intended to be and the hundreds of thousands of people who would have passed through it, if it hadn't been for Stalin's death. How majestic the goals of the Gulag empire had been . . .

In September they opened up the Yakutsk prison doors and let me out into so-called freedom. For the first time I went unguarded, it was strange somehow, I kept turning around to look back. I started to work. Then once again a strange twist of fate occurred: In July of 1954 I was suddenly summoned to the Yakutsk Ministry of Internal Affairs and asked if I had ever written to Beria. (Beria had already been shot at that time).

I remembered that a year ago on the way to Yakutsk in some station I had asked the prison guard to throw a letter into the mail box for me. In that letter I had asked Beria, who then was still the Minister of Security, to change my place of exile and let me live in some city in Siberia where there was a school of medicine.

One can only be astonished at how thoroughly all of Beria's correspondence had been checked after his arrest, if they found even my little scrap of paper.

"Your request was refused" they told me in the Special Section, "but we will let you study. Choose any city up to the Urals." After an hour I left the Ministry with the permission to leave in my hands.

I arrived in Omsk only nine days before the entrance exams. I presented myself to the special command bureau where they told me they would only register me temporarily, and if I was not accepted into the Institute, they would send me back to Yakutsk. Because I did not have any money, my only prospect for returning was hopping trains.

The evening before the first exams I went to the theater. At that time the Sverdlosk Opera and Ballet Theater was performing in Omsk.

Opera ... what a huge effect it had on me. I began to love it very early and from age thirteen on it replaced all my childish games and amusements. I rarely missed a performance.

The theater provided the unforgettable, the most beautiful moments of my childhood. Moments of enormous joy.

The wonderful world of beauty and goodness opened up before me, fascinating me and later becoming the great spiritual balance in my life.

The theater lights a torch in one's heart which no one can extinguish. They can do whatever they want to you—humiliate you, degrade you, torture you, but, in a person's heart a different type of music is already sounding—the belief in goodness. And you will never go over to the side of the tormenters, they cannot make you their instrument.

When they exiled us to Siberia on June 14, 1941, I was told to take my most necessary belongings. I carefully put all my theater programs into two piles and left the house firmly believing that I was carrying with me everything which is most treasured and valuable.

That evening in Omsk "La Traviata" was being performed. I had seen it many times in Lithuania, but now after so many years, deaths, and losses, everything had resounded a new meaning, an extraordinarily shocking one. Everything rose up before me which I had tried to repress and forget so that I could live. And I cried. But at the same time I gained new strength and prepared for the exams as though for an attack.

Although I passed them all with perfect grades, I knew that my fate would be decided by the Mandate Commission which, without a doubt, would be interested in certain biographical moments which I had hidden.