



CHILDREN OF SIBERIA

MEMOIRS OF LITHUANIAN EXILES

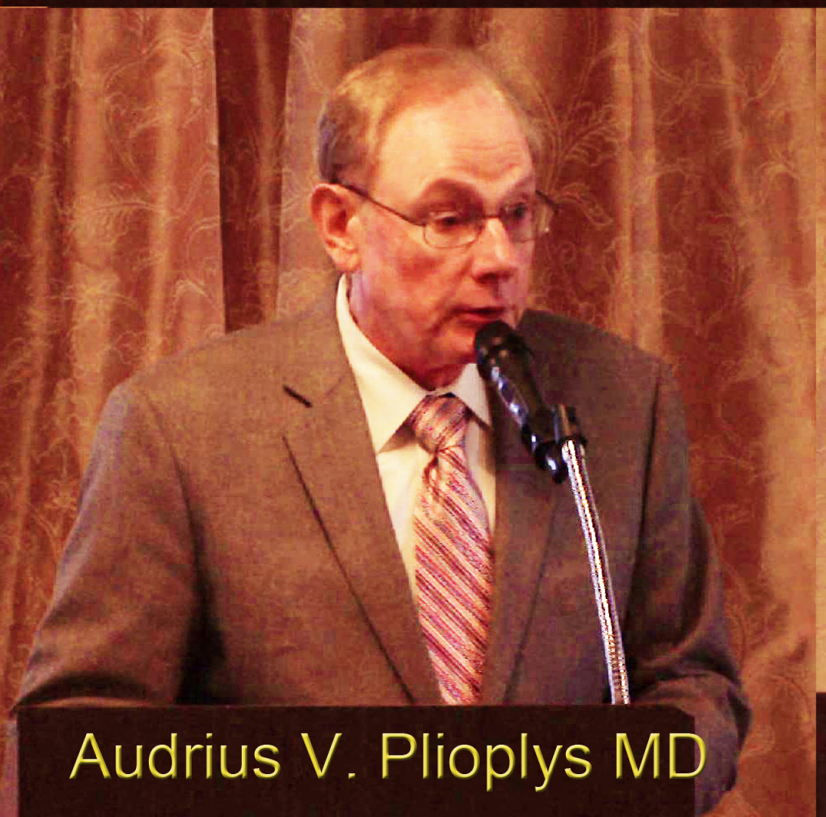




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Children of Siberia was originally published in 2011, in Lithuanian. It contained reminiscences of 16 individuals who, as children, were deported to Siberia—young victims of Stalin's genocide. These individuals, despite horrid and depraved circumstances, survived, and were eventually able to write their memoirs. The book was translated by Ms. Zivile Gimbutas and published by Naujasis Lankas (New Bow) in Kaunas, Lithuania.

On May 4, 2013, I was honored to have had the opportunity of being the master of ceremonies of this book's presentation and signing. This was the North American premier for this newly published book.

Of considerable importance is that three of the authors, individuals who were themselves deported to Siberia as children, were able to attend. All three shared their personal experiences during the years of deportation. Ms. Irena Kurtinaityte Aras flew in from California. Ms. Ausra Juskaite-Vilkiene (whose arrest photographs grace the top half of the book's front cover) flew in from Lithuania, as did Mr. Vidmantas Zavadskis, who also was the book's editor and publisher.

I was given the honor of reading a prepared note by Ms. Zivile Gimbutas, the translator of this book. Ms. Gimbutas, due to illness, was not able to leave California.

The book presentation and signing took place at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago, Illinois.

In addition, 120 newly discovered photographs, taken by Siberian deportees were shown. These document the harsh living conditions that they had to endure. I had prepared this PowerPoint presentation, and showed it as Lithuanian partisan songs were played in the background. The images were provided by the Museum of Genocide Victims, Vilnius, Lithuania, and appear as part of their newly issued poster series, "Under Alien Skies." The entire session was recorded and will be available as a DVD.

The text that Ms. Zivile Gimbutas had prepared, and which I read, follows (with some minor editing). This is a very nice summary of the major points and issues discussed in this book.

Audrius V. Plioplys MD, FRCPC

Irena Aras' foreword and afterword to Children of Siberia provide historical data and background information concerning deportations to Siberia, and losses during this terrible era of history. The memoirs are personal experiences of exile, coping with the injustices of the Soviet regime, and perseverance. The reminiscences of children describe the events of deportation, hard physical labor, hunger, and schooling—if it was available. They tell of encounters with local Russians, Khakass, Buryat-Mongols, Yakuts, and others in diverse locations, of community life in exile, and the resourcefulness of Lithuanian exiles. This is a composite historical, social, anthropological, and psychological account of an era that was shrouded in secrecy for half a century. In a child's perspective, or an adult's retrospective, even the most dire circumstances can be rendered viable. There are interesting adventures, tales of events that were perilous and challenging, even humorous, apart from the tragic experiences of death and loss.

I will briefly describe some of the recurrent themes and motifs, which vary according to the year of deportation and the locale of exile. The worst year for deportation was 1941 and the most unfortunate locale, the Laptev Sea within the Arctic Circle. Although all years and all sites were fraught with difficulty and misery.

The details of deportation for some children are obscured in memory: merely the darkness of the boxcar, the rumble of train wheels, and the sensation of hunger for several weeks. For older children, the event remains quite vivid. Even those who were four or five years old remember the arrival of Soviet agents at their home, the searches and orders, their parents' anxiety, and being hoisted onto the tailgate of a truck. Švilpienė recalls riding into other homesteads, neighbors and relatives being packed onto the truck, forcibly leaving behind their farms, carefully tended orchards, windmills, and manors in Lithuania. Laskevičius describes the scene at the railroad station, and the boxcar itself, fitted for deportation, with boards at each end, miniature railed windows, and the hole in the floor. He remembers the heavy atmosphere inside the boxcar, and the rest stops to get cabbage glop or water under the watch of armed guards. Several authors recall their arrival at the destination and being lined up as in a slave market. Supervisors of collective farms, forest farms and other officials had their

pick of a labor force: Beleckaitė in Altai, Linkūnienė in Krasnoyarsk, Zavadskis in Irkutsk.

Accounts of re-deportation, from the first site of exile to the next, are more detailed, as in Urbonienė's description of the journey in stages from Barnaul to the 82nd block in Altai, alternately riding in wagons, walking, being lodged overnight in barracks infested with lice and bugs; or Milaknytė's account of re-deportation, after a year in Altai, to the Lena Delta by the Laptev Sea: a journey of almost three months by train, ship, truck, steamboat, and barge. On this journey, exiles were deceived into thinking they were sailing to America while they were actually being taken to fish in the Arctic ice (to provide fish for soldiers at the front).

After returning from exile in Komi to Lithuania, with her cousin, Vilkienė relates her experience of re-deportation to Siberia. After a year in their hometown, 13-year-old Aušra and 14-year-old Laimutė were arrested by Soviet agents and taken via prisons in Raseiniai, Kaunas, Vilnius, Leningrad, Syktyvkar (capital of Komi), and back to Kortkeros in Komi. Their journey lasted from March to August, 1949, including three months of severe interrogations in the Raseiniai prison. This instance of re-deportation demonstrates the appalling cruelty of the Soviet regime and its agents. This cruelty was also evident in the behavior of administrators, commandants and supervisors at sites of exile.

Hunger and hard physical labor were the worst experiences. Vilkienė wrote "I remember the whole experience as persistent, gnawing hunger" while Arienė wrote, "Amid all that I might relate of my childhood in Siberia, all that I might remember, the most painful experience...was the hard labor, by no means suited for children."

The memoirs recurrently mention the meager bread and broth rations, and match-box-size pieces of bread for children. They mention decreased rations if the work quota was not fully met. They recount ingenious ways of obtaining food. In summertime, children picked berries, herbs, and mushrooms in the fields and hillsides. Zubinas recalls eating all the berries they picked before Soviet authorities came to inspect the barracks (with no pots or sugar, they could not make preserves), or burrowing in local vegetable gardens and eating raw potatoes. He compares their existence to that of wild animals, in the way they found food and ate everything on the spot. Vitamins that had

accumulated in one's body during the summer had to last until next spring. Mothers bartered items of clothing for grain, potatoes, or dairy products; they knitted scarves and sewed for local Russians to obtain food. In later years, some exiles managed to plant and tend their own gardens and raise a heifer or a suckling pig—at the risk of arousing the jealousy of local Russians and being reported to authorities.

Nevertheless, there were cases of rickets, starvation, and near-starvation, when no bread was delivered due to blizzards or inept management, or rations were cancelled because of not meeting the work quota, usually due to illness. On Trofimovsk Island, in the Laptev Sea, there was only fish, caught with nets through holes in the ice. As recalled by Abromaitis, many older exiles succumbed to illness and starvation, and passed on during the first year of exile.

Children hardly saw their parents. They worked at logging, fishing, fish-processing, forest clearing, sawing and splitting wood, farm work, field work or herding animals. Images of exhausted, wet, tired, and ragged parents returning from work are engraved in their memories, as are images of mothers doing extra work in the evenings.

Children did chores: collected firewood, tended furnaces, drew water, scavenged for food, and prepared meals. After school was out, from May through mid-fall, children did field work. For example, Zubinas recounts work in the state's oat fields, in hot weather, with no gloves, no water or food, but lots of nettles. He also recalls harvesting and transporting huge stacks of hay, with carts pulled by old nags. Arienė remembers piling hay with heavy pitchforks she could hardly lift, pulling and dragging large tangled sunflowers to produce animal fodder, and work in grain-drying rooms.

From the age of twelve or thirteen, children were conscripted into regular labor. Some youngsters combined work shifts in logging or forest work with school sessions in the afternoons, and considered themselves lucky, as did Bakevičienė and Grinkevičiūtė. Others had no opportunity to attend school. Linkūnienė herded local Khakass cows, with no dog or horse, in the Sayan Mountains for several years. Then she herded sheep, bathed and transported them with a fellow shepherd during lambing season. She also worked in a dairy, churning butter manually, in the cold, well into the night. Ambrazaitytė recalls labor in a giant sawmill in Igarka, where she began work when she was eleven years old (citation follows):

“That cold morning I hurried to my first day at work, along with cheerless grown-ups.... I waited at the labor exchange office for my assignment and soon joined a group of three workers. Our group followed the brigade leader to the rows of wood piles, referred to as “stacks”.... Pointing to the top, which seemed to merge with the clouds, and then at me, the brigade leader said, “So, get to work!” I would have to get to the top of the very highest stack, lift boards from it and throw them down to other members of our brigade, who would have to pile and align them on runners, so that the entire stack could be hauled away on a straddle truck.

“I stood there a while figuring out how I could reach the top, for I had no ladder or rope, nothing to hold on to. The day’s work quota was high—several stacks per shift—so I had to attack it without delay. I started climbing up, board by board. I had to hurry, because sluggishness by one member might cost everyone’s pay. I had to throw down as many boards as I could, as quickly as possible. With this goal in mind, I thrust myself into a battle with the enemy, the massive stack of lumber. I was suddenly transformed into a centipede; my hands and feet clutched at boards as I clambered up the vertical wall. Before I knew it, I was on the top.... The fortress was mine.

“I pried and lifted the heavy wet boards, shouting ‘Ohohoi!’ at each heave, warning those below to watch out. And so for several hours you could only hear ‘Ohohoi!’ and the falling boards crashing to the ground....”

Reminiscences of school were mostly good. Schools offered a refuge from physical labor, lunch and heated premises in some areas. However, all children had to grapple with the Russian language. They had to study all subjects in Russian, usually with no books, notebooks or supplies. They had to memorize poems of praise for the “Homeland” and listen to speeches by communist officials on Soviet holidays and the New Year. They had both good and bad experiences with local Russian children; sympathetic and un-sympathetic teachers. We read about making ink from soot or beets, making notebooks from old newspapers, of being disciplined by the Administrative Center when ink spilled on a picture of Josef Stalin in the notebook.

Memories of childhood, even in Siberia, include play and sports. In the summer, according to Zubinas, boys devised various ball games, such as “Hit and Run” (with balls made of cows’ hair); competitions with right-angled, sharp-ended sticks, which

they struck and moved in a chosen direction, to land in a goal; or “War,” which involved claiming and taking pieces of territory marked on the ground according to the slant of the blade of a knife aimed and thrown into that particular area. Zubinas relates of fun while rhubarb-picking, creating a cascade of falling rocks, and coming upon snake-mattings in the wild. He remembers the arrival of silent movies in the village of Karakuba, the Altai region, in 1946, which provided a window to the world, and a cultural revolution of sorts. Several authors recall improvising snowboards and sleds, skates and skis, modeled on local children’s equipment, to enjoy the snow and ice.

Relief from misery took place through community activities, praying, singing together, visiting with one another. Švilpienė describes the post-1951 Lithuanian community in Kargala (Krasnoyarsk), where there were dances, boys played musical instruments, men gathered for conversations, boys worked on old tractors, and girls visited their friends in other villages. Starkienė spent many hours knitting at home in the evenings. Beleckaitė recalls learning hundreds of songs from her mother. Laskevičius remembers the close-knit community in Karasuk (Novosibirsk) and friendships with local Russians.

Exiles drew strength from memories of their homeland, Lithuania, and the hope of returning. However, returning proved to be disappointing for most, because they were unwelcome in Lithuania, and re-settling was very difficult.

Those who survived the trials and hunger of the first few years of exile, adjusted to their predicament and fought for survival with intelligence and imagination. With no protection by local or international organizations and no rights deportees were left to their own resources to survive. Many coped admirably. These memoirs are a tribute to the best qualities of Lithuanian character, and humanity in general: self-control in the face of injustices, perseverance, compassion, industriousness, self-reliance, and responsibility. Several authors explicitly praise women—the mothers—who found themselves in extreme circumstances, unprepared and inexperienced, yet cared for their children successfully. I would add that the authors of these memoirs, were very bright and strong. They were helpful to their parents, they were good pupils in school and were good workers. They were observant and perceptive about the circumstances

of exile in Siberia. This book makes their experiences available to future generations and to all those interested in 20th-century Lithuanian history.