

## Hope and Spirit: Commemorating the Victims of Stalin's Atrocities

***(This is the original text submitted to Draugas News, in response to a request by the editor. This article, after editorial changes, was published in the June, 2016 issue.)***

The Hope and Spirit project was dedicated to the 20 million victims of Soviet atrocities, who suffered the brutality of genocide, and the injustice of the subsequent denial of their victimization.

Those who survived deportations and life in Gulags, did so due to the strength of their spirit, the force of their will, and endless hope. Thus, the title was Hope and Spirit, a celebration of the human spirit.

June 2016 is the 75-year anniversary of the beginning of Stalin's deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia. During the night of June 17, 1941, thousands of unsuspecting people were awakened from their sleep and ordered to leave their homes immediately. Most were unable 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 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. 30,000 Lithuanians died as a result of slave work and starvation. In addition, 150,000 were sent to Gulags, Siberian concentration camps, where most died.

These tragic numbers are from a small country, Lithuania, whose population was only two million. Stalin's forces committed the same atrocities across all of Eastern Europe, with as many as 20 million casualties. The numbers of deaths due to Stalin's brutality far exceeded those of Hitler. His death machine functioned at the same time as Hitler's, in the same geographic location, but produced many more deaths.

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 four decades. Through all of these years in North America, I noticed that the general public knows much about Hitler's atrocities, but none 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 emigrated to Canada. Amongst my own relatives, four died as a consequence of NKVD (Soviet secret police) interrogations. My grandmother, at the age of 71, and seven other aunts and uncles were deported to Siberia.

Why were these innocent individuals and families treated like criminals? Why were they deported, murdered? They owned small family farms. Because they might object to Stalin's new order, they needed to be neutralized. This was genocide on the basis of political motives. This happened to many millions of families across Europe.

The fact that the general North American public is unaware of Stalin's brutality, while being knowledgeable about Hitler, is a serious historical imbalance which needed to be corrected. I decided to organize the Hope and Spirit program in order to remedy this imbalance. If we forget history, it will repeat itself.

In addition, there is the imbalance of justice. The perpetrators of Hitler's killings have been apprehended and tried—a process which continues till today. However, none of Stalin's henchmen have faced justice.

This program took place at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago a few years ago. The purpose was to commemorate the victims of Stalin's atrocities, but much more importantly, to educate the general public of these horrific events.

## LETTERS FROM SIBERIA

At the core of the program, was an exhibit of original letters and photographs from Siberia. In total we had 226 letters from Siberia, including those from Jonas Sepetys, the grandfather of Ruta Sepetys, the award-winning author, 91 envelopes and 223 photographs. In the 1970's Father Prunskis, the editor of the newspaper Draugas advertised his request to receive original material from Siberia. Individuals across North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South America sent him materials which he used in his 1981 book Lietuviai Sibire (Lithuanians in Siberia). After repeated searches of the archives, we were finally able to find a portion of the original material that Father Prunskis had collected.

One of the most time-consuming parts of the Hope and Spirit project was reading all of the discovered letters. Many thousands of pages had to be read, and correlated with the photographs, envelopes, and available historical sources. Excerpts were taken, and a reading of Letters from Siberia took place on a cold January evening with the assistance of Ms. Luka Saparnis and Mr. Sam De Sando. The readings have been recorded and are available on YouTube.

What follows are a selection of the tragic family stories that I was able to uncover and bring to light.

## SUKYS FAMILY

In the photograph, Juozas Sukys sits with his three children, Juozukas, Aleksyte and Aldute in Siberia. The letter was written by Aldute to her aunt in Chicago. In 1948, the Sukys family was deported to the Manski district in Kronoyarsk. In the letter, Aldute 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 another letter to that same aunt, Aldute's mother explains that she is attending school against medical advice, because she has tuberculosis.

#### GAIGALAS FAMILY

This is a unique transcription of letters written by Kazimieras Gaigalas to his wife and son. He was in the Riesoty gulag prison camp, near Krasnoyarsk, writing to his family who was near Tomsk. The distance separating them was 300 miles. There were eight short transcribed letters dating from October 21, 1942 to July 21, 1943.

His wife saved the letters he had sent, and that they were eventually taken to Poland, where they were transcribed by his son. The letters were written in Russian, as was required at the time, and were heavily censored.

In these letters he mentions the deaths of eight people who were acquaintances of the family. 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 package.

A portion of one letter was heavily censored. He started explaining what he was assigned to do, and the rest of the explanation was cut out. In the uncensored subsequent sentence, he mentions that on occasion he sweeps the 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."

Kazimieras Gaigalas was 60 years old when he was deported. Before World War I, for 12 years he worked on the Siberian railroad. During the war, he worked for a relief agency providing assistance to injured Russians. Shortly after the war, he was the local alderman, and then resumed working as a farmer. The last letter that he wrote was on July 21, 1943. He died three months later, on October 13, 1943.

#### VYSNIAUSKAS FAMILY

Mary Vysniauskiene, 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 only with the threads on their backs. She used the little money she received to buy potatoes to feed her children.

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

#### STULGINSKIS FAMILY

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

In 1947, because she owned a small family farm, she was deported to Siberia 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 living son, Alfred.

She received a letter from her nephew, Father Jankus, of the Church of the Resurrection in Los Angeles, California, who wrote that her son was working as a lumber jack in rural Canada. Father Cekavicius, of St. Raphael's Church in Long Island City, New York, wrote that Alfred was actually living in Toronto and that he would try to find a mailing address.

In her letters she tremendously regrets not receiving any word from her son. In May 1956 she returned to Lithuania, where she died within a few weeks. This Stulginskis family appears not to be related to the president of Lithuania.

#### ABROMAVICIUS FAMILY

Morta Abromaviciene, at the age of 67, was deported with her husband Stasys, who was 74. Mr. Abromavicius died three years later, while Mrs. Abromaviciene was able to serve her prison term in Tinsk, in Krasnoyarsk. After seven years of hard labor, her health was broken—she was so frail and weak that she was transferred 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 was living in Chicago.

In the early 1900's, Mr. and Mrs. Abromavicius had both, independently, traveled to 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 2 daughters and 4 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 farmhouses burned to the ground. She went to the nearby larger city, Marijampole, where she lived and died 10 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 receives. When packages arrive, the other residents of the sanatorium crowd around while it is opened. She gives most of the contents to the other residents, keeping only essential items for herself.

Once her daughter made an error and sent her \$50 in cash (I am changing the actual amounts into what would be current US\$ value, given years of inflation). To exchange this currency into rubles, she had to travel a full day 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. One egg cost \$4. One kilogram of butter, \$140—which means \$70 for one pound of butter!

#### ZIMKEVICIUS FAMILY

Elze Zimkeviciene writing from the Kazachinsky district of Krasnoyarsk, to Hedy (Jadzyte) Chinik in Cicero. In these letters she describes her family's deportation to the high arctic, to the delta of the Lena River, at the Laptev Sea, a part of the Arctic Ocean. She inquires about two letters that she sent by registered airmail which never arrived, and comments that she will only send letters by ordinary air mail. Given the sensitive materials she mentions in the surviving letters, and the active censorship of all mail, one can only guess at the content of the missing registered letters. In one letter she enclosed dried flowers from Siberia. She wrote:

"We were tossed far into the north of Yakutija, near the Lena River, on the island called Tit Ary. We were there fifteen years. I think it is hard to envision the difficulties of living there. It was very difficult getting accustomed to the harsh climate. There were nine months of winter, and basically no summer. Polar nights were long and the cold was severe. We had to survive the cold."

"There was a severe shortage of warm clothing. In this climate, not having warm clothing made life extremely difficult. The primary occupation was fishing. At first it was very difficult because I was not used to this kind of work, and did not know my way around. But time heals everything. Little, by little, I got used to it. During the last year there, I was a very good fisher-woman, and even ended up on the year's honor roll."  
"We had our own transport team—12 reliable dogs and a sled. We fed them fish and porridge. We used their fur (wool) to make gloves and socks."

"There is no summer, but on warmer days, on the tundra, it is possible to find various berries—they grow right next to the earth—and are similar to raspberries."

“All vegetables here are dried. That is why we all suffer from scurvy. Fairly quickly after arriving here, we lost all our teeth.”

“My husband worked various jobs. In the beginning, he worked as a lumberjack in the Altai Region, then he built houses in the far north and remodeled them. Finally, he worked as a fisherman and studied meteorological phenomena. He has retired. But the pension he receives is very small, so he has to continue working. He can only work where it is warm, and so he stokes stoves. He works 12 hours a day, which tires him extremely. I myself have rheumatic inflammation of my joints, a consequence of ‘the good life’.”

#### NORKUNAS FAMILY

In these two photographs, Veronika Norkunas buries her two young children near the city of Barnaul, in Siberia.

In the top picture, 4-year-old, Livija-Liucija is being buried. She died on September 21, 1941, in Siberia. In the bottom picture, 16-month-old Zenonas is being buried. He died on September 22, 1941, in Siberia. On one September day, Veronika buried her four-year-old, and on the next day, her 16-month-old.

The pictures were sent to A. Norkunas who was living in Adelaide, Australia.

These young children survived only three months after their deportation in June, 1941. They only survived three months in Stalin’s new society.

#### SEPETYS FAMILY

In the photograph are Jonas Sepetys’ nephews and one niece in Siberia, children of his sister Apalione Sepetyte-Vajegiene. Standing, left to right, are Jonas, Petras, Vytautas’ wife Ale, Vytautas, Gene, Vincas and his son Jurgutis standing on the chair. The top letter was written by Jonas Vajega, the bottom one by Antanas Sepetys.

In 1977, in response to press advertisements by Father Prunskis, Jonas Sepetys sent a set of letters and photographs that he had received from relatives in Siberia. These were bound in a folder with instructions not to publish them at the time. Further instructions were to store this material for use when it would be safe to do so. He was concerned that his relatives, who had returned to Lithuania after being deported to Siberia, might be endangered. Indeed, none of this material was included in the 1981 book, Lithuanians in Siberia. This folder included nine letters, six photographs and one envelope. All of the individuals were deported in 1948 to Irkutsk Oblast. They were farmers in Lithuania and were able to return in 1958.

Reviewing this material, certain details made it clear that this Jonas Sepetys is the grandfather of Ruta Sepetys, the author of the best-seller Between Shades of Gray. In trying to uncover the history of her grandfather, Ruta found the inspiration for her book.

## PLIOPLYS FAMILY

My grandmother, Ona Pliopliene, was deported to Siberia, to serve a 12-year term of hard labor. Her husband, Motiejus Plioplys, had recently been murdered by the NKVD.

At the time of her deportation, she was 71 years old. She was assigned to chop trees—a 71-year-old lumberjack, who had never chopped a tree before! In the photograph she is resting amongst the stumps that she had been toiling at.

An 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 meals, which meant that she had warmth and 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.

## HOPE AND SPIRIT PROJECT

Besides the display of letters and photographs, the Hope and Spirit project encompassed many other exhibits, demonstrations, lectures, and personal reminiscences. A partial list follows. More of what this program accomplished can be found on the Hope and Spirit website: [www.HOPEandSPIRIT.net](http://www.HOPEandSPIRIT.net).

Ms. Elena Juciute was a high school mathematics teacher in Pilviskiai, the city near which the Plioplys homestead is located. When she started witnessing the Soviet atrocities, she volunteered to help the resistance movement by doing paperwork. She was caught, sent to a Siberian hard-labor Gulag for eight years, followed by several years of hard labor in a Lithuanian prison camp. She eventually emigrated to the US, bringing many original materials from Siberia. A summary of Elena Juciute's unique materials is on YouTube.

A set of 18 historical posters, Chronicle of Violence, (most 3 feet x 6 feet in size) were purchased from the Genocide Research and Resistance Center in Vilnius, Lithuania. This presented documentary materials about the mass deportations to Siberia, in English and Lithuanian.

The most moving portions of this program were the personal presentations by individuals who were themselves deported to Siberia when they were children: Mr. Kestutis Kepaturis from Hamilton, Ontario; Mr. Rimantas Mackevicius, Mr. Wesley Adamczyk and Ms. Irena Valaitis, all from Chicago. Mr. Adamczyk is the author of the award winning book When God Looked the Other Way. His father, a Polish army officer was one of the victims at the Katyn massacre.

52 children across North America participated in an art exhibit: what my parents and grandparents told me about deportations and life in Siberia The exhibit was juried and

awards were bestowed. Growing up in North America, children of Lithuanian descent are steeped in local culture and history, and are not being taught the tragic events of the recent past. I tried to have children refresh the memories of their parents and grandparents, and create a work of art, making it a meaningful learning experience.

Ms. Neila Baumiliene, head of the A. Kazickiene Lithuanian School in Riverhead, New York, had five students write essays about the deportation experience. A recurrent theme in these family stories is that the forefathers of these children, had come to the US to earn some wealth. In the 1920's they returned to Lithuania, purchased family farms, only to have their land confiscated and themselves deported to Siberia.

Two panels were dedicated to Mr. Alexandras Stulginskis, president of Lithuania, who was deported to Siberia. This display of letters and photographs was prepared by his granddaughter Ms. Ramune Rackauskas.

Mr. Juozas Kazlauskas, as a child, was deported to Siberia with his mother. In the 1980's, when travel restrictions were liberalized, he and others returned to the deportation sites. When first displayed, many of these photographs caused a sensation—they depicted derelict grave sites with human adult and infant bones exposed. The soviet authorities quickly sterilized all of these sites—all that remains are Kazlauskas' photographs. Over 50 of his original iconic images were displayed.

A display of photographs from the Siberian explorations of Misija Sibiras were displayed. This is a program in which groups of young professionals travel from Lithuania to visit Siberian deportation sites. The ostensible purpose is to restore Lithuanian cemeteries at these isolated locations, but actually is to educate the youth about the incredible hardships faced by their ancestors.

I was able to arrange a series of book presentations and signings. Mr. Timothy Snyder, professor of history at Yale University, presented his award-winning book Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin. The Armonas family presented the 50-year anniversary re-publication of Ms. Barbara Armonas' Leave Your Tears in Moscow and Mr. John Armonas' own book How I Became a Comrade. Children of Siberia, was premiered at the museum—in attendance were four of the authors—one flew in from Los Angeles, and two from Lithuania. Ms. Ellen Cassedy presented her book about the Lithuanian holocaust, We Are Here in conjunction with Ms. Ruta Sepetys and her award-winning Between Shades of Grey. The Snyder and Cassedy/Sepetys presentations were packed—standing room only. The museum has never had such large turnouts for book signings.

We even covered the suffering of displayed persons with the presentation by Ms. Jurate Kazickas and the signing of her father's book Odyssey of Hope.

12 film screenings were arranged. Of note was the personal presentation by Mr. Christopher Swider of his award-winning film, Children in Exile. Another notable film was academy award nominated Peter Weir's The Way Back.

Amongst the letters, I identified three poems that were written by a woman in Siberia. She had been a school teacher, and sent the poems to an acquaintance in Montreal, Quebec. She had been deported to the Sajana mountains, just west of Lake Baikal, and wrote these poems between 1953 and 1955. These previously unpublished poems were transcribed and received an incredibly positive review in Draugas—a full page was dedicated to the analysis of the literary antecedents of these gems. The author of these poems is not known. These poems served as the basis for an evening of Poetry from Siberia.

Songs from Siberia were presented by Ms. Audrone Simanonyte, with the assistance of Ms. Julija Sakalaite-Paukstine and Ms. Aldegunda. During her deportation, Ms. Simanonyte's mother collected songs, which were performed.

## HOPE AND SPIRIT: PUBLIC INFORMATION

The main purpose of the Hope and Spirit project was to inform the general public about Stalin's atrocities. In that regard, this program was a success.

The Lithuanian press covered this program extensively. But what is important, was the response of the general US press. Our local south-side Beverly Review wrote about the exhibit. The Southtown Star, which covers the entire southern half of the Chicago metropolitan area, had front page coverage with a two page, well-illustrated article. The weekly downtown Chicago magazine StreetWise also had front page coverage with a six page, well-illustrated article. The premier Chicago Tribune devoted a full two pages to this program.

Our local National Public Radio station, WBEZ, produced an eight-minute report which was broadcast repeatedly the next day on NPR's All This Considered.

During their annual meeting, the American Historical Society requested a personal lecture and tour—a bus from downtown brought a delegation of interested historians. A similar lecture and tour was given to the Board of Directors of the Illinois Humanities Council.

I was requested to give a presentation at St. Rita High School. 300 students were in attendance, and over 5,000 watched it by video-link across the Augustinian high school system in the US. This talk was registered as one of the events of the European Union Parliament's commemoration of Stalin's victims.

Hope and Spirit was incorporated into the University of Chicago's Soviet Arts Experience as one of their three exhibits—the other two being the University of Chicago and the Art Institute of Chicago.

During the year of this exhibit, I was at the museum almost daily. There were always visitors there viewing the displays. This kind of a turnout has never happened in the museum's history.

Ms. Rita Janz, Director of the museum, has extensive working relationships with the ethnic museums in Chicago. The response from these museums was that Hope and Spirit has received more press coverage than any exhibit in the history of all the ethnic museums in Chicago.

Thus, this exhibit was a success.

## HOPE AND SPIRIT: RELEVANCE TODAY

Russian militaristic nationalism, the same as Stalinism, is reasserting itself through invasions of neighboring countries, Georgia, Ukraine, and even Syria. Most ominous are threats against European countries, and the open discussion of the possible use of nuclear weapons. These recent events indicate that my Hope and Spirit concerns were truly prophetic.

## HOPE AND SPIRIT CONTINUES

Parts of the Hope and Spirit project continue to be on display at the museum. Misija Sibiras photographs are on display in the audio-visual room. A selection of Kazlauskas' photographs and a selection of Chronicles of Violence are on display in the first floor corridors.

I have been invited to give presentations about the Hope and Spirit project to the Madison-Vilnius Sister Cities annual ball in Madison, Wisconsin, on May 7, 2016, and at the bi-annual meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies on May 27, 2016, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Through the end of 2016, my color-changing light sculpture series, Siberia Souls, will continue to be on display at the museum. This installation is 14 sculptures and four prints in the first floor entrance way to the museum. It is visible day and night through the glass front doors. These sculptures incorporate Siberian photographs and letters, primarily of children, that I was able to rescue. This exhibit was declared to be Chicago Tribune's "Pick of the Week." Given all of the museum and gallery exhibits up in Chicago, to be the "Pick of the Week" is an incredible honor.

ArtPrize is the world's largest competitive art exhibit. It takes over the entire city of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Siberia Souls has been selected for display at a centrally located venue, the historic Fountain Street Church, which last year had over 17,000 visitors. ArtPrize will take place in September and October, 2016. In collaboration with The American Civil Liberties Union, Fountain Street has organized "Art to Change the World: Inspiring Social Justice." Art plays an important role as an agent for social and economic justice, and peace in the world. It is an honor to have Siberia Souls included in this exhibit.

Most importantly, much of the program is available on the Hope and Spirit website: [www.HOPEandSPIRIT.net](http://www.HOPEandSPIRIT.net). Of note is a virtual tour of the exhibit. You can visit the exhibit, and walk through it, taking in all of the items on display.

The number of individuals who assisted with this program is truly great. Those who were especially helpful were Lithuanian Research and Study Center's Ms. Kristina Lapienyte and Ms. Skirmante Migliniene, and the museum's Ms. Rita Janz, Ms. Sigita Balzekas and Mr. Stanley Balzekas Jr. A most sincere thanks to everyone who helped make Hope and Spirit a resounding success.

Audrius V. Plioplys MD, FRCPC, June 14, 2016

ILLUSTRATIONS:



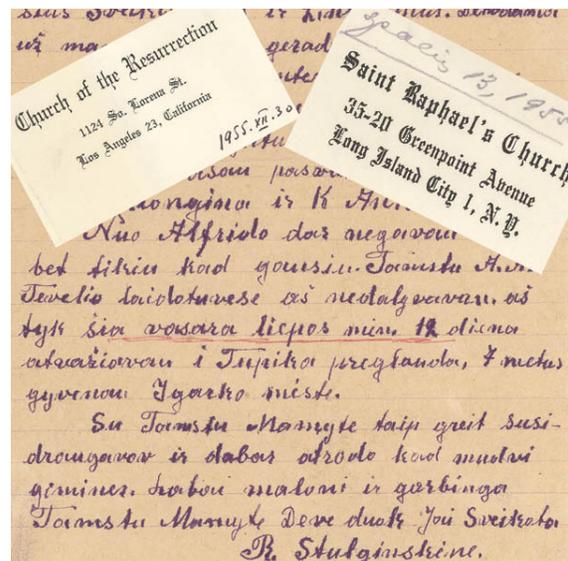
Sukys family



Gaigalas family



Vysniauskas family



Stulginskis family



Abromavicius family



Zimkevicius family



Norkunas family



Sepetys family



Plioplys family



Dr. Audrius V. Plioplys speaking about Hope and Spirit at the Madison-Vilnius Sister Cities ball, May 7, 2016, Madison, Wisconsin.



Siberia Souls: Children (details)