

The Train to Eternity

Stasys JAMEIKIS

English translation by Regina SHARE

Starting on June 13-14, 1941, the Soviet administration deported thousands of Lithuanians to Siberia and to similar remote places; and replaced them with Russian colonists. A train load of 1,505 Lithuanian men from Naujoji Vilnia was among the people destined for deportation: their train left for the icy Archangel region of Northern Russia on January 17, 1941. Thirteen years later, only eleven men returned home.

One of these 11 survivors, Stasys Jameikis, decided to write down his experiences. It took him 20 years to complete his meticulously researched book. It was published, in Lithuanian, in 2003 and the second edition appeared in 2014. For reasons unknown to us, the book was boycotted by some major bookshops in Lithuania. Nevertheless, these and other hitches were overcome, and the Lithuanian language edition of the documentary volume is now completely sold out.

Last year, the Lithuanian Studies Society at the University of Tasmania (the publishers of this Internet journal) undertook to have Stasys Jameikis's book translated into English. The giant task has since been completed, and the Society is now looking for a suitable publisher, in Australia or abroad.

The English title of the book is: The Train to Eternity. A few excerpts are reprinted below.

As I stepped into my railway wagon, it was obvious that this vehicle had only recently been used to transport pigs and had not been cleaned out. Already aboard was a crowd of families with children of all ages, even babies. There was no seating, so people sat on their bundled possessions or on the floor. I found myself a small space and settled down. I saw no one I knew. Other wagons like ours were lined up on all the Naujoji Vilnia railway tracks except one track which, from time to time, allowed trains from the direction of Kaunas to whistle past.

It was June 17, 1941. The final and hurried rearrangement of our convoy seemed to me like the Last Judgment Day in the Bible. Weeping and gnashing of teeth accompanied the separation of men and women into separate carriages; some children were separated from their parents; mothers wailed, children screamed, men moaned. Profanities flooded from the guards who were supposed to keep order, the clank of coupling and uncoupling wagons

punctuated the air... All these produced a continuous din. Everything was done at breakneck speed, so that there was no time for us to place our things or food reserves to where they belonged. Men ended up with women's and children's clothing as well as their food, and vice versa.

And in this way, on that morning of June 17, did the men and women, with or without their children, depart from Naujoji Vilnia, often with just what they stood up in. With no change of clothing and little food, we set out on our journey to Siberia. How long would it take? A week? Two? No one knew.

It was my fate to remain in "pig wagon No.16", with 62 others, squashed in, like sardines in a can. There was no seating. So, the options were either to stand or to sit on the floor between the feet of those who were standing. Even then we had to take turns. On one wall there was a grating of about 15cm X 3cm for ventilation, and at the other end, a wooden trough. This was our "toilet".

* * *

On the fifth day, just past Podporodzhye, we became aware of an unaccustomed noise. It was different from the monotonous rhythm of the train wheels on the railway tracks. This sound came from the other wagons and we soon identified it as people battering the walls with their hands. Some of our men climbed up to the grating and made out what those people were shouting. "Water! We are dying of thirst!" they cried in Russian. We had to show our solidarity, so we took off our shoes, pounded our walls with them and joined in with the chanting.

We learned later that the whole train was doing the same. The guards could not have failed to hear us all. Nevertheless, it took them another two or three hours to call a halt. Just past Petrozavodsk, in the Karelian forests, we stopped, stretched out on the tracks either side of a sharp turn – presumably so that we couldn't see how many wagons formed our convoy!

They opened the wagons at random, not all at once or in any orderly sequence. People were allowed to get out and drink from the pools of standing water lying between the embankment and the tracks. It wasn't really water, but a foul-smelling, coffee-coloured liquid typical of Karelian marshes. It was teeming with large and small living things – frogspawn, big fat tadpoles and frogs, and all kinds of water bugs that we had never set eyes on before in Lithuania. And yet, a few feet away, growing thickly in mossy mounds, were

shiny heaps of luscious cranberries. They were big, red and juicy – but out of our reach.

Alas, the few minutes we were allowed at the puddles didn't give us a chance to strain the brown 'water'. No sooner were we out of the wagon than the guards yelled, "Back aboard! Fast!" So, whoever was lucky enough to have a handkerchief, whether clean or soiled, used it to get the larger filth out, strained the stuff and swallowed it down. You who have never experienced such thirst as tormented us for five days in those humid, crowded, sun-baked wagons, you will never understand.

The humane thing to do would have been to stop at any of the various stations and get us some clean water, fit to drink. But no, in their minds, we were but a cargo of dregs, barely human, or perhaps even lower. I can still recall the actual suffering of that thirst. I am not ashamed to admit that we slurped up that 'water' greedily, straining what was alive and what was not, through our teeth.

We appreciated the chance to get a little time in the fresh air. We were also grateful to have been allowed to scoop up some of that "live' water in a bucket and take it back into our wagon. Just being the cargo in a pig transport did not make us pigs, so we made sure we thanked the guards for their... kindness.

But what we would never forgive them for, was something else that we had never before seen, heard or read about in books. What happened in this very spot in the marshes showed us how deep their contempt for us really was. What we saw stunned us, shocked us to the core, and left us an indelible memory destined to remain with us all to the end of our days.

In the final moments, as our group of 63 men was being shoved back aboard, we saw two human bodies being removed from the wagon next to ours. It was the one where the cries of "We are dying!" had come from earlier. With not the slightest appearance of shame or attempt at ceremony, the guards swung the two bodies by their hands and feet out over the water in the ditches and onto the embankment running alongside the railway line. One of the corpses landed face down in the water, the other on top of the mound. His head was back, so his eyes directed their gaze at us, as though begging "Don't leave me behind, please!" His eyes seemed to burn into us and, for all we knew, those eyes may still have had life in them.

To this very day, those eyes revisit me when I recall that day - eyes that were surrounded by the wild shining red cranberries, like drops of heart's blood.

We were obviously the last to be loaded after the "water stop" because as soon as our doors were boarded up, the train moved on. There were no more stops until we reached our final destination, which turned out to be Medvezhyegorsk. We travelled this leg of our journey in a deathly silence of exhaustion. But that silence was only our outward appearance. No one gave expression to the clamour of distress and worry about our ultimate fate. We kept all that to ourselves.

* * *

Karelia. Nine kilometres from the station, on the shores of Lake Onega, lay our concentration camp. At the camp gates they searched us very thoroughly and confiscated anything of any value at all – that is, all money, rings, watches, any rust-proof metal and knives. Even photographs were taken.

We were then herded into the camp, formed into groups of 100, and assigned to the barracks.¹⁸ Inside these barn-like structures were two tiers of bare, resin-smelling pine boards lining the walls all round. This was where we were to sleep.

By the morning of the fourth day, we were lined up in rows and marched out of the camp to work near Lake Onega. There we found huge mountains of logs, 3 – 6 metres long and very thick. These were the gold of the Karelian forests. Although they were just cut and not dried, you could see that they would provide the highest quality building material.



Typical Russian "barracks".

¹⁸ In this text, the term *barracks* refers to one building which housed prisoners. A number of such buildings (and others) made up a camp..

Of primary significance for us slaves, was that the logs were also extremely heavy. Our task was to drag them out from the piles they where they had fallen, and then take them down to the lake on our shoulders. There they had to be sorted according to their length, rolled down to the water's edge and bound together with wire. They would then be pulled out onto the water and sent floating off raft-like, some said, even as far as Petrozavodsk.

The work we now had to do was slave labour, and a shock. [*Everything had to be done by hand. There were no machines or decent tools*]. The men who carried the logs all day, returned with blistered hands and the beginnings of callouses on their shoulders. Standing at the guardhouse waiting to be checked in, our men of learning tried to put our case to those in charge. We were not criminals sentenced to penal servitude, they protested, nor had we been convicted of anything at all. Such work as we had just done was nothing but brutal exploitation, an outrage. [*Their protests were ignored*].

We were perplexed by something else, as well. Someone had been snooping in our belongings at night, while we were asleep, and now some food and other items were missing. The explanation from our barracks boss was an unlikely one. He said that friends of ours had come and taken back what they claimed was theirs, saying that they had only given them to us for safekeeping for the duration of the journey. He did not know them and would not be able to recognise them again. Well, friends or strangers, it made no difference. The barracks boss had clearly helped them steal from us. We stood as much chance of getting anything back as trying to catch the wind in nets, as the saying goes.

* * *

Just then, the war broke out (*between Germany and the Soviet Union*)... We fell to speculating and wondering what lay in store for us, how long we would be kept there, if anyone would come to rescue us. The majority opinion tended to the view that the Russians would not be able to hold out the Germans, that the Soviet Union would crumble, and that we would be home before too long. The prevailing mood was extremely positive. These were the few hours we spent entertaining bright hopes for the future, hopes that we thought held a great deal of promise.

*Instead, the prisoners were transferred to another concentration camp. At first, they travelled in a huge barge. Next, they were forced to continue **on foot**, for another 612 kilometres - and at a running pace.*

Our group was divided into two columns and ordered to set out at a run. Each left at a different time and went in different directions. We ran and ran and ran. We followed a winding route until we reached a wide road. The days were scorching hot, so it was our good fortune that we ran mostly at night when it was cooler.

After a few days of travelling at speed, our possessions became too burdensome for many of the men. They began to drop things here and there. At some distance behind us, came the procession of horse-drawn carts. The guards deliberately never offered to carry anything for anyone, because they collected the dropped things for themselves as they came across them. These men, in whose care we were supposed to be, profited greatly from this practice. They got our warmer clothing, bedding and other belongings of family members who had been hurriedly transferred to other carriages back in Naujoji Vilnia..

To vary the monotony of each day, our guards sometimes had fun with us. One of their favourite amusements was to make us go straight on through a large pool of water rather than around it. As we waded in, they would shout, "Get down!" We were forbidden to fall out of our formations, and had been warned that we would be shot as runaways if we did. So, there was nothing for it but to advance on hands and knees through the water as the guards let loose a barrage of crossfire above our heads. The next command was "Lower!" The bullets would whistle just over our heads at a lower trajectory, and force us to crawl along the bottom. Then we would hear, "Stand up!" When we stood up in all our muddy glory, the guards would roar with laughter.

It was not only extreme fatigue that we suffered. Most of us had the sort of footwear which had rubbed our feet till they bled. On softer surfaces we ran barefoot; on harder ones we took to wrapping our feet in towels or scarves. Some even tore the soles from their shoes and tied them onto their feet for protection. Those men who still had warm coats, cut the sleeves off and wrapped them round their feet.

Our commander was unpredictable and volatile. When he flared up, he could curse for half an hour without using the same swear word twice. Every

outburst would end with “*Matj, matj, matj, boga matj!*” (“Mother, mother, mother of God!”). Or he would suddenly give the order, “Faster, faster!” and we would have to run under the blazing sun while he fired shots over our heads.

It was heart-stopping for some in our company. The first one to fall in the dust of the road was, as I recall, a little old man, Professor Arbačiauskas; next was the former head of the Railway Board, a stout, grey-haired man by the name of Šatas; then Stalioraitis from Klaipėda. There were others but I did not know them and cannot give their names.

Our running procession was not permitted to stop when these men succumbed. The line just had to go round them and keep moving with not so much as a backward glance. If the wagons stopped at all, they soon caught us up, but of the fallen there was a trace. We assumed that they met the same fate as those who had been abandoned earlier, near the Karelian.

* * *

Our trial. It was not until the second half of April, 1942¹⁹, that I received my summons – at midnight, of course, as was their habit. I was taken to a room and seated on a stool fixed to the floor. In front of me sat a man at a writing desk. He was not much older than me so I guessed he was doing this to avoid war front duty.

They suspected me of belonging to a group of men preparing to escape and join the Germans. He mentioned many Lithuanian names (some of which I truly did not know) and a few Russian ones. The questions were specific and repeated: Did I know such and such? Was I friends with this one or that one? This litany was repeated several nights in a row. Notes were always taken, sometimes on a blank sheet of paper, and sometimes on a partially printed page.

I do not remember if, at the end of it all, I signed the interrogator’s pages of notes, or not. I certainly had no understanding of what the interrogator had written. If he had ordered me to, it is quite possible that I did sign, simply out of fear...

¹⁹ This means that the author was not charged with any offence, real or concocted, for 10 months after his arrest.

May 2, 1942 was a memorable day... Through the gaping doors of the isolation unit, as if out of the darkness of a dragon's maw, came ten of my fellow Lithuanians one after the other. They were: Linartas (whom they treated as the leader of our group), Merkelis, Mickevičius, Maziliauskas, Rėklaitis, Dailydė, Blochas, Vinča, Stasiūnas, Vilimas, Jameikis.

We were ushered into the hall and saw, seated at a table covered by a red cloth, three army officers who constituted a military field tribunal. To support the case against us, they had brought in witnesses to swear that preparations for the breakout really had been underway. Most of them were Russians we had never laid eyes on, before that very day in the hall.

But the principal witnesses were Gužas and Kovalčiuk, the two who had always had a hand in our troubles. They had, for example, testified against Jonas Masiliūnas and Jankus, who had been brought up on just the same trumped up charges some time earlier in the 4th OLP, found guilty and executed.



Stasys Jameikis: Before his deportation (1941), left, and after release from his last concentration camp (1954), right.



Their testimony was so fraudulent, absurd and incredible as to be downright laughable. It caused us to smile and made even the members of the tribunal actually laugh out loud. It was not a due court process. It was pure theatre.

The accused were each allowed a final word. Each denied the charges as best as they could. My single statement was "The only crime I am guilty of, is being a Lithuanian!" Blochas spoke last of all and made the strongest point. He said, "How could I, a Jew, seek to join the Germans when it is the Germans

who are shooting Jews?" We were certain that this logic was enough to clear him. (*Sadly, this was not the case*).

The military district tribunal's final decision was delivered on May 22, 1942. Judgement #449 contained the tribunal's verdict that "in the name of the USSR, and with reference to RTFSR BK 319 & 320, ten of the accused were found guilty, and the tribunal decreed that they were to receive the highest penalty under this act - execution by shooting."

The result of that monstrously fabricated case was going to be the deaths of ten more good Lithuanian men. Why not eleven? Because there was one exception - me (*Jameikis, this book's author*). I was not to be executed but was sentenced to serve ten years in camp imprisonment, with five years without rights. Perhaps...the fact that I was the youngest and least active of the group, disposed the tribunal to spare me from the same fate as the others.

When the chairman asked, "Do you all understand the verdict?" Blochas responded. He tried yet again to make them understand that it was an absurd mistake to charge a Jew with intent to defect to the Germans. The tribunal did not wait to hear him out. They left the hall before he had finished speaking.

The head guard who escorted us back to the central isolation cell, handed us over to another officer in the entrance porch. "This one", he said pompously, pushing me to the front of the rest of the group, "is for the general quarters. These ten," he shouted with a smugness he did not bother to hide, "to the death cell."

This was yet another dagger to the hearts of the hapless, condemned men.

English translation by Regina Share.

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*The above extracts are from S.Jameikis's book, *The Train to Eternity* (2017). For further information, contact al.taskunas@gmail.com.*

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