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Exposing cruelty, hoping for justice

BY WILLIAM HAGEMAN
Tribune reporter

This summer marked the 70th anniversary of the start of one of the darker chapters of recent Eastern European history: the mass Soviet deportations of Lithuanians.

More than 130,000 people — at least 70 percent of them women and children — were sent to Siberia, the Arctic Circle or central Asia by the government of Josef Stalin. By the time the deportations ended with Stalin's death in 1953, some 30,000 Lithuanians had died, and another 50,000 never returned to their homeland.

"The vast majority were landowners or educated or held professional jobs," said Audrius Plioplys. "They were threats to the new Soviet order."

The deportees' story is one that most Americans are only vaguely aware of — if they know it at all. It's a story that has haunted Plioplys.

"There's a very big history imbalance," said Plioplys, a retired Chicago neurologist who is also an artist. "The crimes of Hitler are very well known in the United States, but the things Stalin did are not. There's also a justice imbalance. The remnants of Hitler's killing machine are still being pursued. Not so with Stalin."

In an effort to correct these imbalances, Plioplys has assembled and curated "Hope & Spirit," a collection of historic and modern material on exhibit at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago. In addition to panel discussions, book signings, film screenings and lectures, "Hope & Spirit" features posters by the



ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Audrius Plioplys curated a collection of historic and modern material at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago. He found the collection, in two boxes marked "Siberia," on a shelf at the Lithuanian Research and Studies Center.

Genocide and Research Centre of Lithuania, artwork by children on the topic and, most remarkably, some 218 photographs and 157 letters from those exiled to Siberia.

Most of the items in the exhibit were originally gathered by Juozas Prunskis, a Lithuanian priest who served in the Chicago area. An author and historian, he had researched the period and put out a call for documents related to it. What he received he used in a book, "Lietuviai Sibire: Lithuanians in Siberia," published in 1981. When Plioplys began looking for material for the exhibit, he placed ads in various Lithuanian newspapers. The result: one item. Prunskis had collected it all. Or most of it. The priest had died in 2003, and the material wound up at the Lithuanian Research and Studies Center in Chicago, where Plioplys eventually found the collection, forgotten on a shelf in two boxes marked "Siberia."

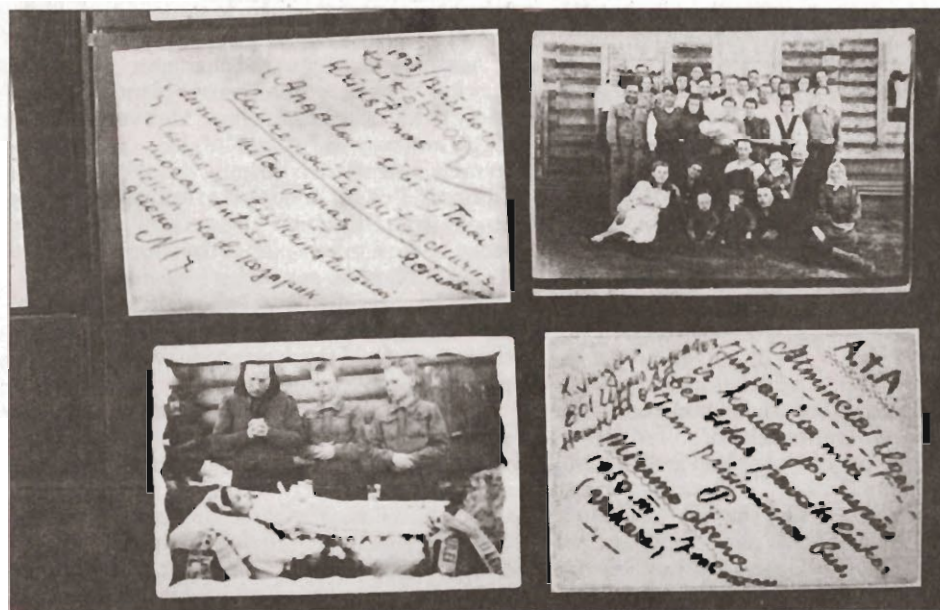
The letters, documents and photos he discovered and organized for the exhibit are amazing, and often poignant.

In one letter, a young girl writes to an aunt in Chicago, thanking her for a fountain pen, shoes and a wallet she had sent, and proudly informing her aunt that she is the second-ranked student in her second-grade class. There's also a note from her fourth-grade brother, thanking the aunt for some chocolate and cocoa. What happened to the children is not known.

There are family photos, including one of Plioplys' grandmother. At 71, she was deported and was assigned to chop trees. Her inexperience with an ax quickly resulted in a leg injury; she was reassigned as a cook and nanny, giving her access to the food that others lacked. ("A third of the deportees died every winter," Plioplys said. "That accident saved her life.") There are photos of his aunts and uncles; on the back of one is a small notation, "it is illegal to take photographs."

There is a photo of two small white dogs. On the back is a note that explains that the dogs were named Small Cricket and Small North, and that their fur was sheared to make mittens and socks. The note closes with "These were the best and most trustworthy friends that I had there ..."

One of the more fascinating displays has



Pictures of those who were exiled and life in Siberia are part of the "Hope & Spirit" exhibit.

to do with Elena Juciute. She was a high school math teacher who ran afoul of Stalin's forces.

"She saw so much of the brutality taking place," Plioplys said, "she decided to help the freedom fighters, not by fighting, but by doing their paperwork. She got caught and got sent to Siberia, sentenced to hard labor."

Among the artifacts is the number she was forced to wear, with a photo of it pinned to her shirt while she was working on building the Trans-Siberian Railway; a photo of a crude wooden sign marked "restricted zone" — and the very sign itself, which she took; the whole-head scarf she wore while working outside, designed to protect from the swarms of bugs; and her needlework, along with ornate wooden carvings by fellow prisoners and a rosary made from pieces of bread.

Also on display are drawings by 52 children from across North America, showing their interpretation of what happened.

"One thing we became aware of (in preparing the exhibit) is that kids of Lithuanian descent growing up in the United

States weren't aware of this history," Plioplys said. "The hope was the kids would talk to their parents and grandparents about this and turn it into pieces of art."

The kids seem to have gotten the message, and so have others. The exhibit has been well received and has been extended into January. There have been additions to the schedule (check balzekasmuseum.org). Most important, those imbalances may not be as pronounced as they once were.

"Since we started this, three incredible things happened," Plioplys said. "One, Timothy Snyder's book ('Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin') came out at the end of 2010. A New York Times best-seller. And Ruta Sepety's 'Between Shades of Gray,' the experience of a teenage girl deported to Siberia. That came out in English and 24 other languages when Penguin Books published it in April. Another New York Times best-seller. But the best came at the end of 2010: (director) Peter Weir's movie 'The Way Back,' about people escaping Siberia.

"It seems like a lot of other people have



The exhibit features some 218 photographs and 157 letters from those exiled to Siberia.

'Hope & Spirit'

What: Exhibitions and programs marking the 70th anniversary of the Soviet deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia

When: Through Jan. 12

Where: Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, 6500 S. Pulaski Road

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily

Admission: Adults \$5, students and seniors \$4, children 12 and younger \$2

More information: 773-582-6500, balzekasmuseum.org

been bothered by that imbalance. I'm not the only one. I feel like I'm in good company."

Author Timothy Snyder will speak about "Bloodlands" at 5 p.m. Sunday at the museum, 6500 S. Pulaski Road; \$10.

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