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Dr. Andrius Plioplys' light sculpture series, "Siberia Souls".

HOPE AND SPIRIT

The deportations started 75 years ago

DR. AUDRIUS PLIOPLYS

This June marks the 75th Anniversary of the beginning of Stalin's deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia. During the night of June 14, 1941, thousands of unsuspecting Lithuanians were awakened from their sleep and arrested for deportation. Many were unable to take anything with them. Crammed into cattle cars, women, children, and the elderly, were sent to remote Siberian villages; the heads of families were sent to prison camps. More than 18,000 Lithuanians were deported during the first week alone.

More than 130,000 Lithuanians were deported to remote areas of the USSR, including Siberia, the Arctic Circle and Central Asia. Over 70% of the deportees were women and children. Thirty thousand Lithuanians died as a result of slave labor and starvation. In addition, 150,000 were sent to the Gulags, Siberian concentration camps, where many died.

These numbers were tragic for a country the size of Lithuania, having a population of only some three million at the time. Stalin's forces committed similar atrocities across all of Eastern Europe, numbering up-

wards to 20 million victims. The number of deaths as a result of Stalin's brutality far exceeded those of Hitler. Stalin's death machine functioned at the same time as Hitler's, and often in the same geographic area, but Stalin was responsible for many more deaths.

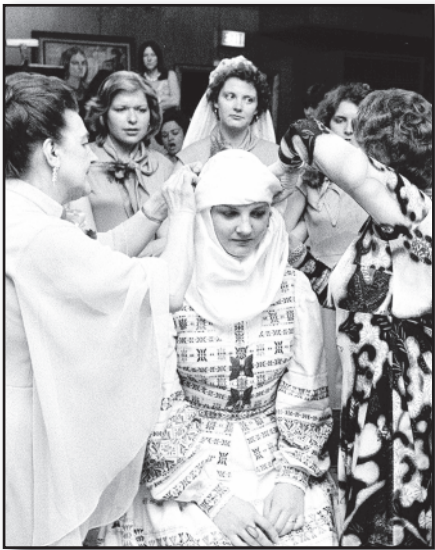
Why were these innocent individuals and families deported and murdered? Many owned small family farms. Their independent spirit and patriotism challenged the Soviet system. This was politically motivated genocide.

The fact that the public, especially in the U.S., is not fully aware of Stalin's brutality, while being knowledgeable about Hitler's, is a serious historical imbalance which needs to be corrected.

There is also an imbalance of justice. The perpetrators of Hitler's killings have been apprehended and tried, while Stalin's henchmen have not faced any tribunal to account for their treachery. Perhaps, some day, history will judge them in retrospect.

The *Hope and Spirit* program was organized to address this imbalance. It is a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary project that began at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago and continues to be developed. Its purpose is not only to commemorate the victims of Stalin's atrocities, but more importantly, to educate the general public about these horrific events.

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HOPE AND SPIRIT PROJECT

DOCUMENTING AND PRESENTING THE SIBERIAN DEPORTATIONS

DR. AUDRIUS PLIOPLYS

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 unflagging hope. Thus the title — *Hope and Spirit*, is a testimonial to the human spirit.

The initial part of the project was the collection and display of letters and photographs dealing with the deportations. Overall, the *Hope and Spirit* project encompassed many other exhibits, lectures, and personal reminiscences.

Among them was original material collected by Elena Juciūtė. She was a high school mathematics teacher in Pilviškiai, the city near which the Plioplys homestead is located. When she saw the Soviet atrocities, she decided to aid the resistance 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 about the Siberian deportations. The exhibit was supplemented by 18 historical posters, entitled *Chronicle of Violence*, which was acquired from



Hope and Spirit Exhibit at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture.



Letter from Siberia. 1956

the Genocide Research and Resistance Center in Vilnius, Lithuania. This presented additional documentary and visual materials about the deportations to Siberia, in both English and Lithuanian.

The most moving part of the program was the collected personal presentations by those who were deported to Siberia as children: Kęstutis Kepauris from Hamilton, Ontario; Rimas Mackevičius, Wesley Adamczyk and 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.

Involving our young people

Over 50 children across North America participated in an art contest entitled: "What my parents and grandparents told me about deportations and life in Siberia." The contest was a meaningful learning experience for the children. Growing up in North America, children of Lithuanian descent are steeped in local culture and

history but not enough is being taught about these recent tragic events.

Neila Baumilienė, director of the Alexandra Kazickas Lithuanian School in Riverhead, NY, submitted essays about the deportation experience written by her students. A recurrent theme in their family stories was that their forefathers had come to the U.S. for economic reasons in the 1920's. Many then returned to Lithuania, purchased farms and were productive citizens. However, after the Soviet occupation, their land was confiscated, and they were deported to Siberia.

Two panels were dedicated to Aleksandras Stulginskis, President of Lithuania, who was deported to Siberia. This display of letters and photographs was prepared by his granddaughter, Ramunė Račkauskas.

Documenting the images of history

Juozas Kazlauskas was deported to Siberia as a child with his mother. In the 1980's, when travel restrictions were liberalized, he and others re-

turned to the deportation sites to make a photographic record of what transpired there. Over 50 of his original iconic images were displayed in the *Hope and Spirit* exhibit. When first displayed in Lithuania, his photographs caused a sensation — they documented neglected gravesites with unearthed bones of deceased adults and infants. In response, the Soviet authorities attempted to quickly clean them up. Kazlauskas's photographs speak for themselves — silent witnesses to the tragic deportations.

Another section of the exhibit displayed present-day photos from Siberia. These were a photographic record from "Mission Siberia." Every year a select group of Lithuanian students travel to the lands where Lithuanians were deported. They tidy up their cemeteries, clear the brush, mend wooden crosses, but most importantly, they experience first hand the harsh conditions faced by their countrymen in Siberia and meet and converse with any survivors. When they return home they share their experiences with high school students and the press.

Book and film presentations

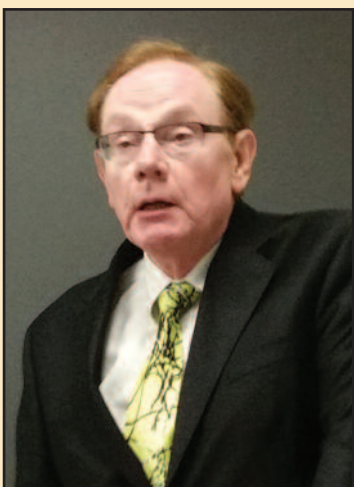
There were a series of book presentations. Timothy Snyder, Professor of History at Yale University, presented his widely acclaimed *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. The Armonas family presented the 50-year Anniversary re-publication of *Leave Your Tears in Moscow* by Barbara Armonas and *How I Became a Comrade* by John Armonas. *Children of Siberia*, was also presented—in attendance were four of the authors. Ellen Cassidy presented her book about the Lithuanian Holocaust, *We Are Here*. Ruta Sepetys and her best-selling *Between Shades of Grey* was well received. The suffering of displaced persons was addressed in the course of Jūratė Kazickas' presentation of her father's, Juozas Kazickas', book *Odyssey of Hope*.

No less than 12 films were screened. Of note was the personal presentation by Christopher Swider of his award-winning film, "Children in Exile" and Peter Weir's, Academy Award nominated "The Way Back."

Resistance in poetry and song

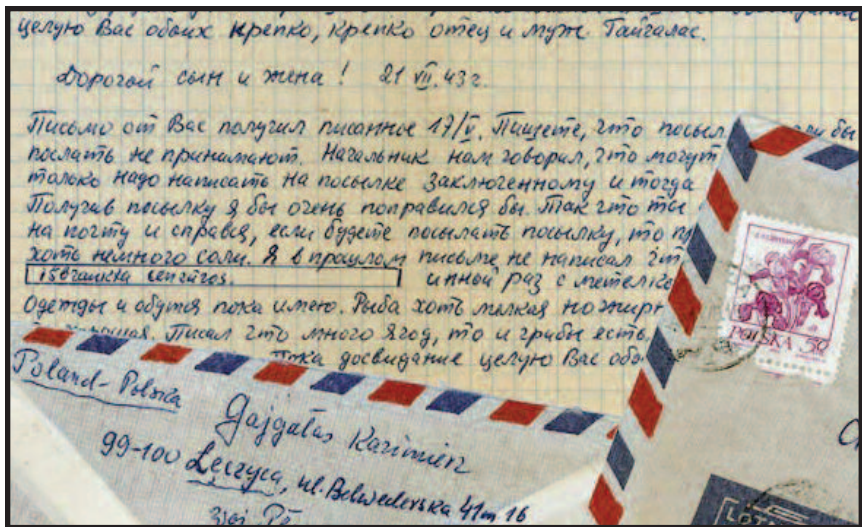
I discovered three previously unpublished poems written by a woman in Siberia. She had been a school-teacher deported to the Sajana Mountains just west of Lake Baikal. The poems, which were written between 1953 and 1955, were sent to an acquaintance in Montreal, Quebec. We had them published in the Lithuanian paper "Draugas" with a full page dedicated to their analysis. These poems later served as the basis for an evening of poetry from Siberia.

Another event Songs from Siberia was presented by Audronė Simanonytė. She was assisted by Julija Sakalaityė-Paukštienė and Aldegunda. During her deportation, Ms. Simanonytė's mother collected songs, which were performed at this presentation.



Dr. Audrius Plioplys was born in Toronto, Canada. His family later moved to Chicago where he attended college and medical school. His subsequent professional careers, medical and artistic, have spanned four decades. Over the years he has observed that the general public knows much about Hitler's atrocities, but little if any about Stalin's.

Dr. Plioplys notes, "Both of my parents were born and raised in Lithuania. Towards the end of World War II, they fled oncoming Soviet forces and moved to displaced persons' camps in Germany. Among 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."



HOPE AND SPIRIT: PUBLIC INFORMATION

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

The Lithuanian press covered this program extensively, but so did the local media. “The Southtown Star” provided front page coverage with a two-page illustrated article, the Southside “Beverly Review” reported on the exhibit, the weekly Chicago magazine “StreetWise” also had frontpage coverage with a well-illustrated six-page article. The city’s premier daily the “Chicago Tribune” devoted two full pages to the program.

National Public Radio station, WBEZ, produced an eight-minute report which was periodically broadcast on its “All Things Considered” program.

During its annual meeting, the American Historical Society requested a personal lecture and tour of the exhibit. 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 also gave a lecture to 300 high-school students at St. Rita High School. Over 5,000 students watched it by video-link across the Augustinian high school system in the U.S. 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.

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

While the exhibit was on display at the Balzekas Museum, I was at the museum almost daily. There were always visitors in attendance viewing the displays and seeking additional information.

Director of the Balzekas museum, Rita Janz, who has extensive working relationships with many of the ethnic museums, reported that the *Hope and Spirit* exhibit received more press coverage than any other exhibit sponsored by an ethnic museum in Chicago. This is due to the support the exhibit received from

Kristina Lapienyte and Skirmante Migliniene of the Lithuanian Research and Study Center and Rita Janz, Sigita Balzekas and Stanley Balzekas, Jr. of the Balzekas Museum. I am very grateful to everyone who helped make *Hope and Spirit* a success.

HOPE AND SPIRIT: RELEVANCE TODAY

Current Russian militaristic nationalism, essentially a recast version of Stalinism, is reasserting itself. We need only note Putin’s recent aggression against neighboring Georgia and Ukraine. Most ominous are the continuing threats against neighboring European countries and the brazen discussion of the prospective use of nuclear weapons. These recent events confirm the relevance and the ongoing need for projects such as *Hope and Spirit*.

HOPE AND SPIRIT CONTINUES

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. This exhibit was declared to be the “Chicago Tribune’s” “Pick of the Week.” Considering the great number of museum and gallery exhibits up in Chicago, it is a great honor to be chosen “Pick of the Week.”

ArtPrize is the world’s largest competitive art exhibit. It takes over the entire city of Grand Rapids, Mich. 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. Take a virtual tour — you can walk through it, taking in all of the items on display.

Continued on following page

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LETTERS FROM SIBERIA

At the core of the Hope and Spirit program, was an exhibit of original letters and photographs from Siberia. In total we displayed 226 letters, 91 envelopes and 223 photographs.

In the 1970's Father Juozas Prunskis, an editor of "Draugas," published a request for original correspondence from Siberia. Individuals across North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South America sent him letters 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.

Reading the letters was a time-consuming task. There were thousands of pages with accompanying photographs, envelopes, and available historical sources. Excerpts were selected, and a reading of "Letters from Siberia" took place on a cold January evening with the assistance of Luka Saparnis and Sam De Sando. The readings have been recorded and are available on YouTube.

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



ŠUKYS FAMILY

In the photograph, Juozas Šukys sits with his three children: Juozukas, Aleksytė and Aldutė in Siberia. The letter was written by Aldutė to her aunt in Chicago. In 1948, the Šukys family was deported to the Manski District in Krasnoyarsk. In the letter, Aldutė 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, Aldutė'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 near Tomsk. The distance separating them was 300 miles. There were eight short transcribed letters dating from October 21, 1942 to July 21, 1943.

Mrs. Gaigalas saved her husband's letters, which eventually found their way to Poland, where they were transcribed by their 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. There is no evidence 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. After the war, he was the local alderman and later resumed farming. His last letter was written on July 21, 1943. He died three months later, October 13, 1943.

NORKŪNAS FAMILY

In these two photographs, we see Veronika Norkūnas burying her two young children near the city of Barnaul, in Siberia.

In the top picture, 4-year-old, Livija-Liucija died on September 21, 1941, in Siberia. In the bottom picture, 16-month-old Zenonas 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. Norkūnas who was living in Adelaide, Australia.



VYŠNIAUSKAS FAMILY

Mary Vyšniauskienė was deported to Siberia with her three young sons for a term of eleven years. She describes 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 Vyšniauskas, who was living and working in North Bay, Ontario. In fear that it would be discovered 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. Vyšniauskas 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. Vyšniauskas and their sons were deported, and Mr. Vyšniauskas was working in North Bay, are not known.

ABROMAVIČIUS FAMILY

Morta Abromavičienė, 67, was deported with her husband Stasys, 74. Mr. Abromavičius died three years later, while Mrs. Abromavičienė served 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. It was while she was in the sanatorium, that she was able to write letters to one of her daughters in Chicago.

In the early 1900's, Mr. and Mrs. Abromavičius had both, independently, traveled to work in the United States. They met in Braddock, Penn., where they were married in 1906. With their two young daughters they returned to Lithuania in 1913, and bought a small family farm. 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 took up residence in nearby Marijampolė, where she 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.

ZIMKEVIČIUS FAMILY

Elzė Zimkevičienė wrote from the Kazachinsky District of Krasnoyarsk, to Hedy (Jadzytė) Chinik in Cicero, Ill. 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 15 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 fisherwoman, and even ended up on the year's honor roll."

"We had our own transport team of 12 reliable dogs and a sled. We fed them fish and porridge. We used their felted fur 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 low to the ground 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."

PLIOPLYS FAMILY

My grandmother Ona Plioplienė 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 in her life! In the photograph she is resting amongst the stumps that she had been toiling at.

A mishap turned out to be life-saving.



Ona Plioplinė.

Within a few weeks of her deportation she maimed her leg with an ax. She could barely walk. She was reassigned to work as a nanny for several young children. This job included preparing the children's 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.