

Strolling down Gediminas Street in Vilnius

The Lithuanian Museum Review

Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture Publication
July - September 2011 \$4.25 Issue #235

HISTORY REMEMBERED

Odyssey of Hope -- an Inspirational Immigrant Story

by Jurate Kazickas

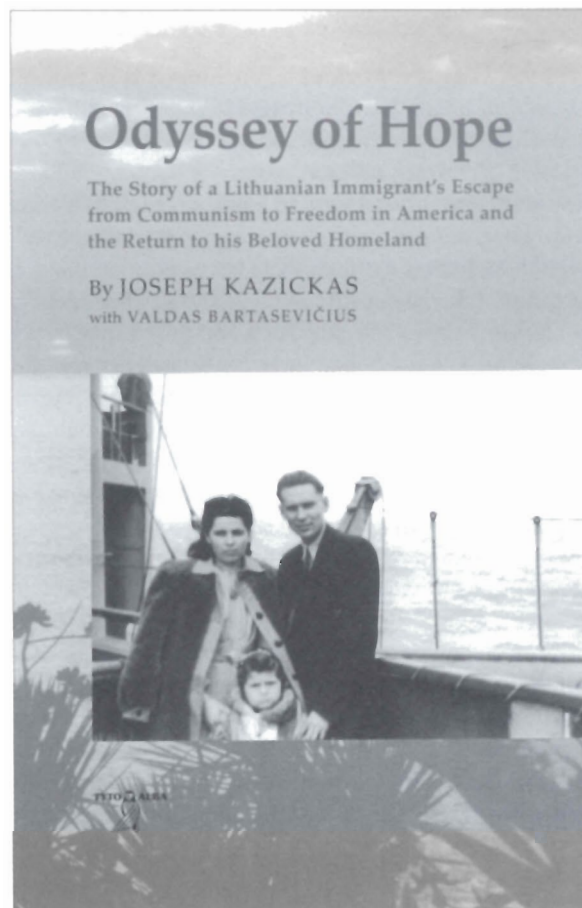
Jurate Kazickas, the daughter of Juozas and Aleksandra Kazickas, presented the book "Odyssey of Hope" at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture. We would like to acquaint the readers of The Lithuanian Museum Review with this extraordinary book and extraordinary lives of this family of immigrants.

"Odyssey of Hope" is a very inspirational story. It's an immigrant story and, of course, it is a history of what Lithuania has endured through all the dark years.

My dad, Juozas Kazickas, was approached by Valdas Bartasevicius, a journalist, who suggested that my father's story had to be published. The book first came out in Lithuanian. It was called "Vilties kelias". Then my mother said that it had to be translated into English. And so we did. Now even people who don't know me say that it was a very good story and should be a movie, because there is a lot of drama in it.

My dad was not born in Lithuania. His grandparents were sent out of Lithuania after the uprising of 1863. Cossacks exiled as many people as they could into a place that is present day Kazakhstan. The particular place where my father's grandparents settled was called Čiornaja Padina - Black Hollow. It certainly had a feeling like it was. It was the end. But as Lithuanians always do, the community got together, they started tilling the soil, planting crops, they built a school, they built a church and they kept the culture alive much to the jealousy of the neighbors around them who were poor and struggling. My father was born in 1918 in Čiornaja Padina. And what was the dream of every Lithuanian who lived there after independence? To go home! And there was in fact a repatriation and his family - his mother and his father, and his sister Victoria, who died last year at the age of 101 - returned to Lithuania. Even as a little boy in Čiornaja Padina he kept hearing that everything in Lithuania was better than there. The breeze coming from the Lithuanian side was good because it was coming from Lithuania. If they had an apple, of course, it was "not as good as" apples in Lithuania. Later, when this little boy showed up in Lithuania, it did not look much different from where he had left, but still from this early age it was instilled in him that Teyne - Motherland - was something wonderful. The love for his Motherland was instilled in him.

Then there were those terrible years when the Soviets came. My father was very active in anti-communist underground. He was fighting against Nazis too, trying to play one or the other. It looked that he would get that knock on the door and be shipped to Siberia any day for his activities. I was born in 1943 and in 1944 we actually escaped and left Lithuania. It was a very harrowing time. My father, his sister Victoria, her three children, the wagon, the cow, a few possessions that we had... All my mother took was her diary and the red dress she had. All the rest was left behind. We headed West to Germany. All those years in displaced persons camp. My father was educated, received his Master's degree in Germany. He knew



a little bit of English. Finagled to become a translator for the American soldiers in Germany, which gave him a little bit of income, a little bit of prestige, even though he was very open about that half of the time one of the people he was translating for was a Texan colonel with this southern accent and my dad had no idea what he was saying and he would just say instead of translating that he had no idea what he was saying but he thought that everybody had to applaud, because he must have said something good. He was always resourceful that way. Later it stated to become clear that returning to Lithuania would not be possible. Refugees, displaced persons started to think where would they go. Some people went to Australia, some went to Canada. My dad said: America. It was very difficult to get permission to emigrate to the United States at that time. Unless you had relatives - we did not have relatives. Unless you had a job - we did not have a job. And we were not Jewish. American government was giving an exception to the Jewish people and rightly so because they suffered enormously. So my father came up with this idea to apply to a university, because at that time they were allowing some students to immigrate who already

were accepted to a university. My father was talking to one of the Americans and he said that he was going to apply to ten richest universities in the United States, because they've got the money. Harvard, Yale, Princeton... - he took all the top ones. Meanwhile this American friend said: Oh don't you think that may be University of Pittsburgh would be more practical than the top ones? You would have a better chance there. What are you aiming at? My father said: No. And my father got accepted to all those places to get his doctorate in economics. He decided to go to Yale, because they offered him the most money. That was understandable. Not only his scholarship, but a 500 dollar a month stipend. That would support my mother and me.

My earliest memories as a child is the transatlantic voyage. February - a grim month to be crossing the Atlantic. They divided men and women - all refugees on that boat. I was with my mother who was sick throughout the entire trip. I was just a little girl and I loved the waves and I was frolicking the whole time. My father ended up playing poker and bridge - card games with some of the Jewish passengers and won a little bit of money. When we landed in New York, he had ten dollars from his winnings playing cards. We sailed into New York harbor on February 18, 1947, which was my birthday. Chef made me a cake. We went and we saw the statue of Liberty. The only thing I had with me from my years in Germany was a little rag doll and I was clinging to it. We sailed into New York harbor and the captain said that we were in America and we had to throw all out stuff overboard. Throw our suitcase, throw our clothes and get rid of all of it, because they were old and in America were to get new things.

And everybody did that. When going into the Statue of Liberty in the crown my doll's head was torn off. My mother looked at this doll and she said: "Jurate, you have to throw it overboard. It's old, it's broken now, and we are in America, and we are going to get lots of dolls." In retrospect she said: "How could I have done that. You know, a child and his blanket". And I being a good girl, always a good girl, threw it over. And I remember watching my headless doll floating on those dark waters. It was heartbreaking. However, we sailed in. Catholic Relief found us a family to live

with and the first thing they did was they gave me a doll. It was very big, plastic and horrifying. I remember that there was no way of cuddling it or sleeping with it. It was big. That was America.

And there began our amazing life. Not easy in the beginning. My father was always resourceful. He got his doctorate from Yale. He graduated in 1951 and made a choice: not Academia, but business. In those days what was the highest position in Lithuania? Professor! Businessman is nothing. A businessman sells, buys, sells... My mother was heartbroken that my father decided not to go into Academia. But my father made a very good choice. He was very practical about it. He said: "How do you succeed in Academia? By being an original thinker and a publisher. You have to distinguish himself. And he said that he was not an original thinker and he was not going to publish. He would just always be an associate professor or something. He was actually on his way to Georgetown where he was being offered a position and he turned around and came back to New York.

We settled in New Rochelle. There was a Lithuanian community in Brooklyn and my father certainly reached out to them. He and my mother could think of nothing but returning to Lithuania one day. But those were the darkest years. Lithuania was under the Soviet Union and how could anything good happen in Lithuania or for Lithuania? The Lithuanian community in New York realized that they had to keep the language alive, the culture alive. Saturday schools were open so the children could still learn to speak Lithuanian, especially since in Lithuania itself the Soviets were suppressing all that. Keeping the culture alive in Lithuania



From left: Museum President Stanley Balzekas, Jr., Jurate Kazickas, Exhibit Hope and Spirit curator Audrisu, Plioplys, M.D.

was very important. My parents had a nice home and would invite people to come. I remember everybody gathering and singing those beautiful Lithuanian songs, sad sad songs. Singing, crying, getting drunk and singing more, and crying more. I remember my father saying through all my childhood: "Lithuania will be free one day. I said: how? And he said: "Very simple. What is the most powerful human yearning? To be free. That's what everybody wants. You don't want to be enslaved, you don't want to be told what to do. Secondly, this system is so wrong, it is so evil, it will collapse of its own weight. It cannot last. It's godless, it is dehumanizing. A system like this cannot last. Well, you tell that to people in 1952, in 1965, in 1975 and they would not believe. But that's what he truly believed.

My first trip to Lithuania was in 1968. I have been journalist in Viet Nam. I decided that I was going to go back to Lithuania with Intourist. It took me a while to get a visa. What I did is I sailed to Vladivostok and then I took the trans-Siberian railroad from Vladivostok to Leningrad. Ten days. Day and night, we were not allowed to get off. I sat on that train in November. It was bleak. Rolling mile after mile after mile. Subsequently with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the KGB files were opened up. There were 250 pages on me. We are not talking about Joseph Kazickas. I suspected that I was being followed. I was in a compartment for three people, and somehow on every stop there was always an English-speaking person - a teacher, a businessman... Somehow every two days another English speaking person would come there. When I finally got to Leningrad, I went to a little restaurant, and they would take me to a table with people sitting there. The guy offered me a cigarette and it was Jurate cigarette. Oh, what a coincidence. We are Lithuanian too. So coincidence after coincidence.

Finally when I got to Vilnius, it all got out. They were literally a block behind me at all times. It was so obvious. There would be flowers on the table, and you move the flowers away and there would be a microphone. You go into your hotel room and look under the bed - microphone. It was so depressing for me. People were beaten down, depressed. The whole combination of November dreariness, grayness, everybody dressed in brown and black made me very sad. I spent three days in Vilnius. I remember when the plane took off I felt such a relief that I was escaping this very very sad country.

On the other hand, because I still spoke very little Lithuanian, something just felt like home. They showed me the house in which we lived just after I was born, I saw the balcony when my mother would put me to get fresh air, so there was something very moving for me there.

I did not come back until the 70s. So all those years there did not seem to be any hope for Lithuania. But my father did really believe that one day Lithuania would be free. Then the Gorbachev era came. Perestroika, glasnost... and then my father said: "Aha, genie is out of the bottle. You don't give somebody a little bit of freedom. Once they taste that, they want more. People see more and more of what's

happening in the rest of the world and they will not sit still. And we know that that's what happened. The first thing was the Lithuanian Communist Party breaking from the Central Committee, which was unheard of. Sajudis started independence movement, it was growing, several Lithuanian activists came to New York, my father tried to arrange press for them. Larry Summers, a former Treasury Secretary and economic advisor for Obama went to Lithuania for a week to talk about the transition to free market. I was in Lithuania with Larry in January when Gorbachev came to Vilnius to try to dissuade the communist party. He spent five days in Vilnius. He promised this, he promised that. My father was so worried that Lithuanians would fall for this autonomy. Gorbachev saw that this break of the communist party was dangerous. But Lithuanians just wave their fists at him calling him a criminal. Gorbachev left and sure enough, on March 11th Lithuania declared independence. We were back in the United States. My father had very good connections with Landsbergis, talking through fax machine. There faxes upon faxes upon faxes. Then one day he told us that something big was going to happen and we had to go back to Lithuania. We got our visas and flew into Riga and drove to Vilnius. And we made it! We were in Vilnius on March 9th and on March 11th we were sitting in Parliament when they voted to re-establish Lithuania's independence. The most moving moment was when the vote was taken and everybody stood up and they took the Lithuanian flag and covered up the soviet symbols - hammer and sickle. It was just unbelievable. It must have been one or two in the morning when this finally happened. We walked out. It was raining. People were standing there and applauding and thanking us, even me as if I had something to do with this. Then they were ripping off the hammer and sickle insignias from all the buildings. This was amazing. And the world... yawned. It made the front pages and then nothing. My dad thought that everyone would recognize Lithuania's independence, but no, nothing happened.

At that time Prime Minister Prunskiene was coming to Canada. My father got to know her during the whole work on the economy. Canadian government invited her to come and speak about this whole issue. My father asked her if she would also come to the United States. She said she was open to it. And my father's wheels started spinning. He had some connections, he knew somebody who knew President Bush. My father really believed in networking long before it became fashionable. He would keep everybody's business cards, always thinking how this or that person would be able to help Lithuania. And he called Frank Shakespeare and asked if he could be of help Prime Minister Prunskiene to see the President. He said that he knew vice-president Dan Quayle and could see if a meeting with him could be arranged. He called up Bill Crystal, the conservative commentator who was working for Dan Quayle and got an appointment to see Quayle, except Quayle was going to be out of town that one day and she could not change it. By then Prunskiene was getting a lot of press. I had many connection

sin press and I got her on the Today Show, the Washington Post interviewed her. I hired a public relations firm for this visit and they prepared briefing books that were very tick on Jessie Helms and Bob Dole. Prunskiene, however, is a force of nature. She just brushed that off and said that she knew what she wanted to say.

So there was a lot of press attention. Somehow we got a call from the White House and we were told that President Bush will meet Prime Minister Prunskiene. She went into the meeting, my father was invited with a translator. It was a very good meeting, very hospitable, but he said that they could not do anything, because Gorbachev was very important for them. He was their only hope for Soviet-American relations and this would not work. And he said that if I were you, I would really focus on European nations. On the way out President Bush asked where she was going next and my father said that Prime Minister Prunskiene was going to meet with the Lithuanian community in London. So then Bush said that why don't you go see Maggie Thatcher. My father said it would be wonderful. Bush said that he would call Thatcher.

Half an hour later my father got a call from the British embassy saying that the meeting with Mrs. Thatcher was arranged. So the word got out and the next thing you know, my dad got a call from the French embassy asking if Prime Minister Prunskiene would like to meet with Francois Mitterrand. My father said: "Let me check her schedule." And sure, ok. Then the German embassy called asking if Prime Minister Prunskiene would like to meet Chancellor Kohl.

In a couple of hours they had a whole European tour arranged. My father sat in on all those meetings. Margaret Thatcher's meeting was scheduled for half hour. The meeting lasted for an hour and fifteen minutes. Thatcher, as you know, adored Gorbachev. Loved him. She was a little ambivalent but she said: You are right, I have to work on Gorby. The meeting with Francois Mitterrand did not go very well. It lasted for fifteen minutes. He sat there and did not ask questions, did not seem to be interested in the meeting. But Jack Chirac who was at the time the Mayor of Paris met with Prunskiene and was very impressed and very supportive. Then there was a very good meeting with Chancellor Kohl because Prunskiene speaks German.

After all these meetings my father thought that something was going to happen and in the end, of course, nothing happened. Just Iceland recognized Lithuania. It took the Soviet crackdown, terrible events in January when finally all the other world recognized Lithuania. Then Lithuania became a member of the United Nations.

All those things were such a dream come true for my father. After Independence going back to Lithuania we bought a house there so we have real roots there. My father started Omnitel cellular phone company there.

But there was one bit of unfinished business - Čiornaja Padina. My father wanted to go back to his birth place. It was not so easy, because Čiornaja Padina is not exactly on the Intourist list of places to see. But he had become
Aleksandra and Juozas Kazickas

friendly with Mikhail Khodorkovsky, one of the oligarchs who wanted to invest in Lithuania and who was having trouble getting good response. He heard about my dad's connections with government. My father told him that the first thing he would have to do is support the basketball team. So then my dad thought that he might be able to use Khodorkovsky's plane to go to Ciornaja Padina and perhaps he could do all the arrangements. I remember going to the Soviet Consulate right around the corner from where I live in New York to get our visas. I said: Khodorkovsky, Khodorkovsky... and we got visas in 24 hours.

Khodorkovsky sent his plane to Vilnius. Big, beautiful plane. Champagne, caviar, two stewardesses. It flew us to Saratov, the nearest town to Ciornaja Padina. Again, it's highly restricted because there is always military installations in the surroundings. Then we had a three hour bus drive to this village which was exactly as my father remembered it. Old little wooden houses, depressed and poor as can be. There were some Kazickas still there. The old lady still spoke Lithuanian which was very sweet. They gave us lunch. My dad brought down computers, clothes and just showered this village with gifts. It was a very emotional time. There was a lady in the village who said: "I want a church". My father said: "I will build you a church". And a year later he had built them a church. Children are being baptized, people are being married. This is the slightest little rebirth of spirituality in that little village.

So that's my dad's story. He just turned 93. My mom will be 91 on Friday. They would have celebrated 70 years of marriage in August, but I don't see her making it. I am a wonderful beneficiary of their love for Lithuania. I am very committed. We have the Kazickas Family Foundation. We give scholarships to young people, we help with medical centers, we help cultural exchanges. I am delighted to still be involved in my homeland. I started a little bead store in Vilnius to introduce women to new handicraft. It's a joy to go back to Lithuania these days.

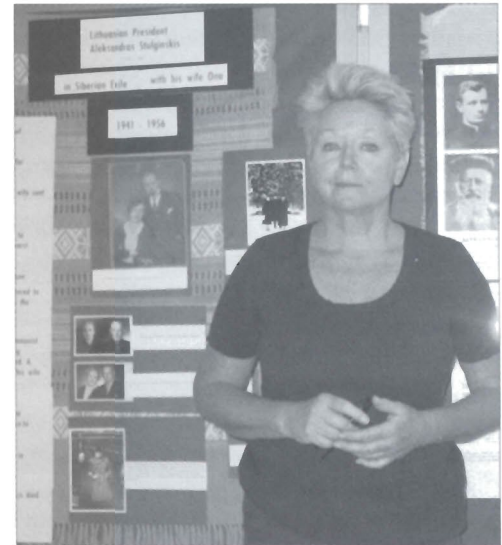


MUSEUM EVENTS

HOPE and SPIRIT SERIES EVENTS

Dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the Soviet deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia, Hope and Spirit, a series of ongoing exhibitions and programs, is being presented by the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture between June 18 and January, 2012. From 1940 to 1953, more than 132,000 Lithuanians were deported to remote areas of the USSR including Siberia, the Arctic Circle zone and Central Asia. More than 70 percent of the deportees were women and children. By the end of the deportations, some 30,000 Lithuanians had died as a result of slave work and starvation. Another 50,000 never returned to Lithuania. During this same period, another 200,000 people were thrown into prisons. More than 150,000 were sent to Gulags, the name for USSR concentration camps, situated mostly in Siberia.

Hope & Spirit offers exhibits, lectures, film viewings and book discussions commemorating this tragic chapter in Lithuania's history and remembering its innocent victims: the hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians and the millions of people from all Soviet-occupied nations--of all ages, religions, nationalities and races--who suffered persecution once, through forced exile, imprisonment, torture and genocide, and again, through the denial, minimization and suppression of their victimization and suffering. To all of these victims, the Hope & Spirit series is dedicated.



Pictured above: Ramune Rackauskas by the exhibit commemorating Aleksandras Stulginskis. Aleksandras Stulginskis was the President of Lithuania (1920-1926). In 1941, Stulginskis and his wife were arrested by the Soviet NKVD and deported to a gulag in the Krasnoyarsk region, while his wife was deported to the Komi area. In 1952 he was officially sentenced by the Soviet authorities to 25 years in prison for his anti-socialist and clerical policies in pre-war Lithuania. Released after Joseph Stalin's death in 1956, he was allowed to emigrate, yet he refused and returned to Lithuania. Stulginskis settled in Kaunas, where he died on September 22, 1969, aged 84. Ramune Rackauskas is the granddaughter of Aleksandras Stulginskis.



Pictured on the left: Museum Director Sigita Balzekas, Museum President Stanley Balzekas, Sigita Plioplys, M.D., Exhibit *Hope and Spirit* curator Audrius Plioplys, M. D., Danguolė Mackevičienė, Asta Švedkauskaitė, Kęstutis Keparutis, Tomas Mackevičius, Rimas Mackevičius. Rimas Mackevičius and Kęstutis Keparutis shared their experiences from the time when their families were deported to Siberia.

Pictured on the left, below: Exhibit curator Audrius Plioplys, M.D. and Stanley Balzekas with the winners of the art exhibit "What my Parents and Grandparents Told Me About Siberia".

This project is partially supported by Grants from the Illinois Arts Council, City Arts Program 3 City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, the Illinois Humanities Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Illinois General Assembly, Lithuanian Foundation and the ECPC

OUR VISITORS



Families with children often visit the Museum during summer. Pictured on the right: Christine Valaitis and her family visited the Museum's main exhibit "Lithuanian Through the Ages", which transports visitors through centuries of fascinating events in the history of a country, which during the Middle Ages was one of the largest and most influential in all of Europe. Visitors supplement their knowledge of Lithuania watching a film on Lithuanian culture, history, and present times in the Museum's Audio-Visual Room.



Every summer, young men and women in Lithuania are selected to travel to remote Siberian regions to restore grave sites of Lithuanian deportees who perished there. On July 9, the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture was proud to host a presentation by Paulius Miezelis, a Misija Sibiras '10 participant, who shared his photographs and thoughts about his expedition to Siberia. Pictured from left: Daine Narutyte Quinn, Tomas Quinn, Pilypas Narutis (sitting), Paulius Miezelis, Mrs. Narutis. Pilypas Narutis is a survivor of a concentration camp after World War II.



The opening of the Hope and Spirit Exhibit drew attention of many honorable guests. Pictured from left are: Exhibit Curator, Dr. Audrius Plioplys, Museum President Stanley Balzekas, Jr., former vice honorary consul of Lithuania Mary Krauchunas, Lithuania's Consul General in Chicago Skaistė Aniulienė, Poland's Consul in Chicago Robert Rusiecki.