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CHILDREN OF SIBERIA IN CHICAGO

Presentation of Memoirs of Children Deported to Siberia at the Balzekas Museum

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I would like to thank Stanley Balzekas, Jr., the President and founder of the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, as well as other members of the Balzekas family, Museum Director Rita Janz, and Audrius Plioplys for making the presentation of *Children of Siberia* possible. I would like to take an opportunity to thank everyone who helped to prepare and publish this small book of children's memoirs.

There have been quite a number of memoirs by deportees published in Lithuania. You would not call them extremely high level literary works. However, they are not supposed to be. They are testimonies, documents. Deportees, especially children, did not have an opportunity to study Lithuanian. There were no Lithuanian schools in exile. Not everyone could study in Russian schools either. Those, who turned fourteen in exile, had to quit school and go to work. However, I did not come across a single book of memoirs by a Lithuanian exile that would be written in Russian. Even though, I would say that such books would be needed in Russia.

Children of Siberia is a supplemented translation of a Lithuanian version of the book, *Sibiro vaikai*, that was published in Lithuania. It is an account of sixteen children who were deported to Siberia. They write about conditions of their daily life in exile, their schooling, hard physical labor, hunger and deprivation as well as their parents' hardships. The book has two parts. In the first one, *Hungry and Humiliated*, memoirs of children who were deported to various places of the Soviet Union are presented. In the second one, *Children on Ice*, we can read the reminiscences of children who were deported beyond the Arctic Circle, to the shores the Laptev Sea. Deportation to the territory by the

Laptev Sea was the harshest one. Families that were deported in 1941 were taken to the Naujoji Vilnia train station where fathers and husbands were separated from children and wives and taken to the camps of GULAG. Many of them died. Others were shot. Just a few returned to Lithuania alive. Women, children, and the elderly were deported to the Altai Region. One year later, in the summer of 1942, 2795 deportees (1004 of them were children younger than sixteen years old) were taken to the Arctic Ocean to fish in the Laptev Sea. The book begins with a *Foreword* and ends with an *Afterword*. In these chapters the authors briefly describe the complicated 20th century - the consequences of the building of communism, Lithuania in the history of Europe, the formation of the Russian Empire, and Siberia, the place of deportations and jails. The book was compiled by me and Vidmantas Zavadskis. Both of us spend our childhoods in Irkutsk Region. It looks like we were both deported on the same cattle car on March 25, 1949. Vidmantas has come from Lithuania to take part in the presentation of the book.

The two photographs on the cover of the book are those of Aušra Juškaitė and her cousin, Laimutė Juškaitė. Aušra was thirteen and Laimutė was fourteen at the time when their pictures were taken in the Raseiniai jail in 1949. The photographs were discovered later, after Lithuania regained its independence. The memoirs of Aušra Juškaitė Vilkienė are part of this book. It is wonderful that Aušra could come here from Lithuania together with her granddaughter, Kotryna Vilkaitė. They are relatives of general Jonas Žemaitis, the leader of armed resistance against the Soviet occupation in Lithuania after World War II.

Dark and sad drawing by Marius Zavadskis illustrate the dark and gloomy period in Siberia, which to the Lithuanian nation is a symbol of cold, sufferings, and evil. Marius was also able to come from Lithuania and take part in this presentation.



From left: Aušra Vilkienė, Stanley Balzekas, Kotryna Vilkaitė, Sigita Balzekas, Irena Kurtinaitytė Ariėnė, Marius Zavadskis, Vidmantas Zavadskis, Saulius Kuprys, Dr. Audrius Plioplys at the presentation of *Children of Siberia* at the Balzekas Museum.

Children of Siberia was translated into English by Živilė Gimbutas. It was not an easy task. There are many Russian words and various compilations in the texts. Sometimes deportees would use words that were half Russian half Lithuanian. There are many instances of various nuances, things that were left unsaid, expressions of feelings.

The book compiles reminiscences of only 16 children. However, there were a total of 55,000 of children younger than 16 years old who were deported to Siberia. Another 18,000 were born in exile. There were 127,000 people deported from Lithuania. 28,000 of them perished in Siberia. There were 198,000 people who were imprisoned, 20,000 of them were killed in GULAG camps. During the period from 1940 to 1957, in Lithuania 24,303 people were killed. They were soldiers, members of Šauliai organization, freedom fighters and their families.

French authors Stephane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panne, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek, Jean-Louis Margolin in their book, *The Black Book of Communism*, attempt to summarize the number of victims of communism around the world: the USSR - 20 million victims, China - 65 million, Vietnam - 1 million, North Korea - 2 million, Cambodia - 2 million, Eastern Europe - 1 million in Latin America - 150,000, Africa - 1.7 million, Afghanistan - 1.5 million, the international communist movement and non-government communist party system - about 10 million victims. In all - about 100 million victims. At this time, *The Black Book of Communism* is being translated into many languages of the world. Marxist ideologists try to deny the number of victims. However, according to professional historians, such a number of victims starting with the time of Karl Marx is quite possible. The 20th century was brutal. We should not forget the victims of other ideologies and the two world wars they caused. Europe was all destroyed. The only quieter continents were the Americas and Australia. We need to constantly speak about the horrific events of the 20th century in order that they would never repeat themselves. Many young people in Lithuania and in the whole world don't know anything about the horrors that took place not so very long ago. They are surprised we did not hire a lawyer to defend us. They think that we were so ignorant that we could not even think of hiring a lawyer. If they would

only know that all the lawyers were exiled to GULAGS as well. And that is besides the point. Nobody was allowed lawyers. The deportations were secret and sudden. They would come at night like thugs and with the help of soldiers would get families on lorries or wagons and take them to the train station. They would order people onto cattle cars, lock the doors and take them to Siberia. They would open the doors only after they would cross the Ural Mountains. Only then they would sometimes allow people to get off the train, to get some water or empty the buckets full of waste. There was no possibility for children to run free in the train station in Naujoji Vilnia. If children would have been able to escape on the way to Siberia, all of them would have taken the chance to run away. But there were no such possibilities on the famous Trans-Siberian railroad. I understand that Rūta Šepetytė in her book, *The Shades of Grey*, depicted the separation of families in the Naujoji Vilnia train station in 1941.

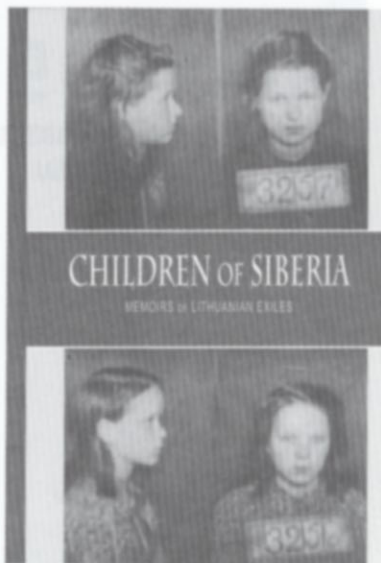
As we well know, people, families, and states tend to hide their ugly deeds and even more so crimes. They often try to make them sound not so bad. I would like to mention one example from a book by Anne Appelbaum, *Gulag: A History*. In May of 1944 the Vicepresident of the U.S.A. Henry Wallace visited Kolyma. He left that place without even understanding that he had just visited a prison. There was even a concert arranged in his honor in Magadan. Most of the performers were former soloists of the Moscow Opera House. They were prisoners arrested in Moscow and Leningrad. Vicepresident was surprised at the high artistic level of the "non-professional local artists".

One of my relatives from the United States is an ornithologist. She learned Russian and during the Soviet times would go to Russia on scientific expeditions. They would take her to Baikal Region to observe birds. Of course, they would not show her prisons and camps of deportees in Siberia. I recently asked her if she keeps travelling to Russia. She said that she was not, because Russia is just like other countries now. It is not interesting or exotic anymore.

This small book, *Children of Siberia*, is only a weak, small, childish outcry: People what are you doing! People, stop the wars! People, do good deeds!

Translated by Karilė Vaitkutė

Children of Siberia/Sihiro vaikai books are available in the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture Gift Store. To order please visit www.balzekasmuseum.org or call 773-582-6500. Books are available in English and Lithuanian. Hard cover, supplemented with photographs.



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