

StreetWise



4 million remembered in 'Hope & Spirit'

ScreenWise: Paul Meekin
review of '5 Days of War'

From the Streets: Casts of daycare
are growing higher than college tuition

Vendor Profile: Holly Smith
holds onto faith for her daughter

Photo: Nicholas Mischenko

Farmers being evicted from their homes.



Stalinist atrocities: planned mass murder

'Hope and Spirit' remembers the pain of 4 million people

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StreetWise Contributor

When Rimantas Mackevicius was an infant, Soviet soldiers forced his family out of their farmhouse in Lithuania, placed them into a cattle car, and sent them to a Siberian labor camp where they worked on railroads and coal mines for an entire decade.

"They didn't know where we were being taken, why we were being taken," Mackevicius, 60, said of his parents, grandparents and 15-year-old uncle. "They didn't even know if we'd be coming back, or if we were going to a concentration camp... an unbearable unknownness."

The constant cold, lack of food and diseases left Mackevicius ill for much of his childhood. When he was barely 4

years old, he spent an entire year in the hospital without seeing his family. For his mother, who worked 12-hour shifts building railroads, this was an agonizing burden.

"The only hope that kept them going would be that maybe they would get to go back," Mackevicius said.

It was 1951 when Mackevicius' family was deported, six years after World War II had ended with the triumph of the U.S., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union over Hitler's Germany. What the world outside of Eastern Europe didn't know, or had turned a blind eye toward, was that Stalin had not only plotted the deaths of over 4 million people in the decade between 1932 to 1941, but that he was continuing the deadly deportation and imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians who were relocated

by the Soviet Union after the war.

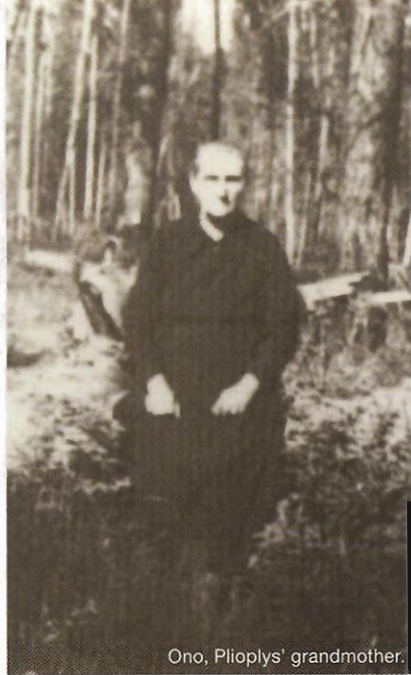
The extent to which Stalin imprisoned and murdered both his Eastern European neighbors and his own people is a fact lost to history, along with the millions of nameless victims.

However, an attempt has been made to reveal the atrocities committed by Stalin, and to give voice to those who either lost their lives or, through luck and perseverance, were able to survive.

In commemoration of the 70 years since the Lithuanian deportations began, the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture in Chicago is hosting a seven-month-long *Hope and Spirit* exhibit.

Hope and Spirit features photographs and letters from victims, artwork by children whose families survived the deportations, and informative panels from the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius,

Photo: Audrius Plioplys



Ono, Plioplys' grandmother.

Lithuania.

The curator of the exhibit is neuroscientist and neo-conceptual artist Audrius Plioplys, whose Lithuanian great-great grandfather, aunt, and grandfathers were murdered by Soviet police. Seven more of his family members were deported to the labor camps in Siberia, including his 71-year-old grandmother, Ona Pliopliene who was forced to work as a lumberjack.

"Growing up in North America, I noticed a persistent, tremendous historical imbalance," Plioplys, 60, said. "The general population knows what Hitler did, the evilness. But nobody knows what Stalin did."

Due to the working and living conditions, the rate of death among the elderly and children was high. Ona, perhaps in a moment of luck, accidentally chopped her leg and had to watch over children instead. She worked for over a decade, witnessing in horror as the bodies of other exiles piled up because they could not be buried under the permafrost.

The museum estimates over 30,000 Lithuanians died in the gulags, and 50,000 individuals never returned.

"This was ethnic quarantine in a time of peace that nobody knew about," Mackevicius said. "Their futures were pretty much erased by this regime."

In the decades of his dictatorship, Stalin launched massive propaganda campaigns to convince the world that the rumors of forced famine, deportations, and cold-blooded shootings of Poles and Ukrai-



Nicholas Mischenko's family in 1935. Mischenko sits on his father's lap while his sister, Olga, sits on their mother's. In the center is Mischenko's cousin Anna, who became part of the family when both her parents died.

Photo: Nicholas Mischenko

ans were anti-Soviet lies.

After the Allies won World War II, Stalin was also seen as somewhat of a hero. It wasn't until the Cold War that Americans began exploring the Soviet Union's oppressive role during the early 20th century.

"The world should know that you can't just kill millions of people and forget about it," museum founder Stanley Balzekas, 87, said. "Oh, let's just go to lunch. Let's kill another million, and let's go to lunch."

Although the exhibit focuses on Lithuania's struggle, Plioplys and Balzekas

hope that it can give voice to all victims whose lives were also destroyed by Stalin.

"They did that to their own people," Balzekas said. "We should not forget that."

Perhaps one of the most horrific, ruthless events of the last century occurred in Ukraine, where Stalin's forced the starvation of over 3.3 million Ukrainians between 1932 and 1933. The bodies of starved Ukrainians, many of whom were children, were scattered over streets, and reports of cannibalism were common.

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Nicholas Mischenko, the founder of the Ukrainian Famine and Genocide Foundation, was born one year after Stalin's Mass Famine, which killed two of his siblings and two grandparents. Even after the forced famine ended, Ukrainians still died from starvation, including Mischenko's infant twin brother.

The chaos of Stalin's reign and the bloodshed of World War II has left Mischenko with early memories not of school, friends or playtime, but of terror and violence. Mischenko cannot estimate how many corpses he has seen. Able-bodied Ukrainians, including his father, toiled during the day to bury the bodies of those starved or executed.

"If you lived through these atrocities, you always remember," Mischenko, 77, said. "It doesn't matter whether it happened yesterday or 70 years later. It is still with you."

As if the first forced famine wasn't enough, Hitler saw to the starvation of over 4 million more occupied Soviet citizens during the war.

The joint history of Stalin and Hitler's terrorization of Eastern Europe is chronicled in Timothy Snyder's critically-acclaimed book, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. Snyder, a history professor at Yale University, will be hosting two book discussions in Chicago on September 25. The first will be held at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art at 1 p.m., and the second will be held at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture at 5 p.m.

Although the *Hope and Spirit* series addresses the violence inflicted upon Europe by Stalin, Plioplys hopes visitors will also celebrate the human will to survive under the most harrowing circumstances.

"People did survive, and their spirit was not broken," Plioplys said. "Lithuania was the first country that broke from the Soviet Union. After that, it was a dominoes effect."

Not only did the spirit of nations lead to the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, but individuals who survived Stalin's oppression have managed to find peace.

"You live your life to the fullest," said Mackevicius, who moved to the U.S. with his family in 1998, said.

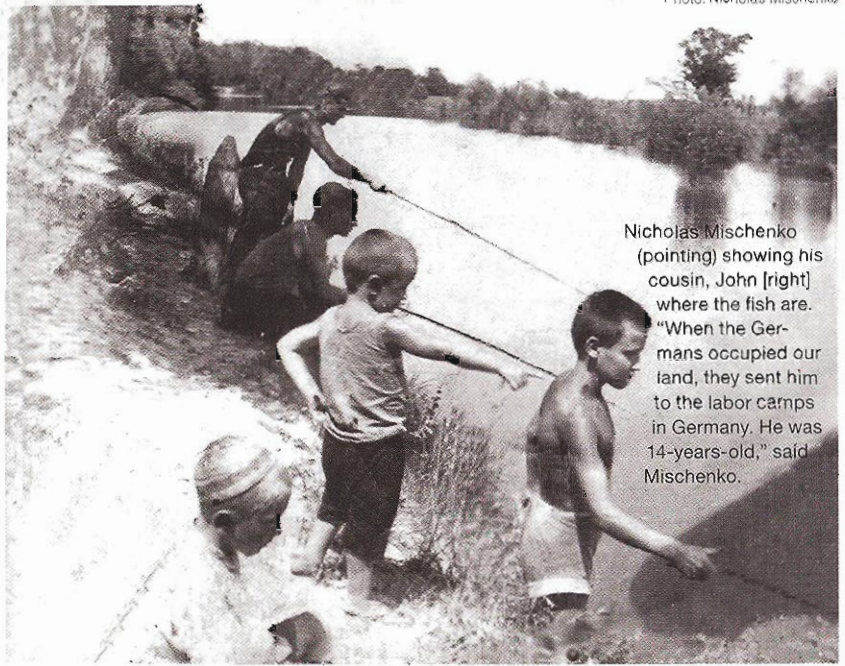
In 1959 Mischenko emigrated to Chicago where he married his fiancée from Lithuania. He became a design engineer for Motorola, and is a proud father of three.

When asked if he is content now, Mischenko smiled and said, "Definitely."

"I appreciate what I have here. I want to make sure that what I had to live through doesn't happen here," Mischenko said of his efforts to bring awareness to the Ukrainian genocide.

The *Hope and Spirit* exhibit will be shown until January 2012. The museum is located at 6500 S. Pulaski Road, Chicago, and is open daily from 4-10 p.m.

Photo: Nicholas Mischenko



Nicholas Mischenko (pointing) showing his cousin, John [right] where the fish are. "When the Germans occupied our land, they sent him to the labor camps in Germany. He was 14-years-old," said Mischenko.



Rimantas and his mother in Siberia.

Photo: Rimantas Mackevicius