

Stalin's brutal deportations affected Chicago-area families

Lithuanians remember era in exhibit

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A chapter of history largely unknown in the U.S. is being featured in an [exhibit](#) on Chicago's Southwest Side. The [Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture](#) tells the story of Lithuanians deported to Siberia. They were among millions of people across the Soviet Union who Stalin forced out of their homes and sent away to perform labor for little or nothing.

The exhibit organizer and other Lithuanians want to make sure this information lives on.

Imagine it's 1941, and the Soviet Union is trying to make itself into one country. It's just taken over Lithuania. And the Stalin regime has undertaken mass deportations, forcibly relocating millions all over the Soviet Union.

The exhibit organizer and curator Audrius Plioplys MD knows the story all too well. The Soviets deported his grandmother and seven aunts and uncles from Lithuania to Siberia.

His grandma was 71, and was forced to work preparing food and chopping down trees. His family's crime? Owning land.

"Every year, during the wintertime, about one-third of the residents would die from starvation and over-work and where they were it was all permafrost," Plioplys said. "It was frozen ground, and they couldn't bury anybody at the time, so they simply stacked the bodies up like logs. They had to wait until the springtime for the thaw before they could do any burials."

In all, starting in 1941, more than 130,000 Lithuanians were deported. Historians estimate between 10 to 20 million people died under Stalin's regime.

"The historical imbalance that I've noticed is the general public knows about Hitler and his atrocities, and they don't know anything about Stalin," Plioplys said. "And Stalin's death machine was working in the same time and the same place as Hitler's, but producing bigger casualties."

That lack of awareness has bothered Plioplys for decades.

“It’s like you have children of Jewish descent growing up in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s in the United States, and nobody knows about the Holocaust, and they know about it but nobody else did,” he said. “It’s the same kind of situation.”

Plioplys started to realize young Lithuanian-Americans didn’t know much about it either. He decided to organize an exhibit at the Balzekas Museum. It’s called [Hope & Spirit](#), in honor of people like his relatives. Seven of the eight made it back home.

“We wanted to celebrate the human desire to survive,” Plioplys said. “That hope and spirit persisted for decades, and decades later, it manifested itself in independence of the country.”

The exhibit features letters and photographs from Siberia collected for years by a local priest. Plioplys pointed out two photos of a woman standing in front of a small coffin.

“This is a sad story,” he said. “It turns out this is her 4-year-old daughter being buried. This is her 16-month-old son being buried the next day...The next day. They had died one day apart.”

He said the children only survived three months in Siberia.

Plioplys pointed to another photograph.

“This is kind of interesting,” he said. “This is a picture of two dogs up in Siberia. They’d clip the hair off the dogs to make socks and gloves. In the wintertime they would be put under the blankets under your feet to keep your feet warm.”

A man living in Palos Hills who told his story at the Hope & Spirit exhibit knows what that cold feels like. Rimantas Mackevicius’ father was imprisoned in slave labor camps called gulags because he’d fought against the Soviet occupation. The rest of the family was sent to Siberia in a cattle car when Mackevicius was 6 months old.

“My mom, because she was breastfeeding me, due to stress, her milk dried up,” Mackevicius said through a translator, his daughter-in-law, Asta Svedkauskaite. “She would give me some bread crumbs to chew on.”

Children could get water at train stations, but sometimes those stops were far apart, said Mackevicius’ son, Tomas. “It was cold, so water would condensate on the walls, so kids would come to the walls and lick the walls to get water.”

The family arrived in Siberia to find a barren, rocky land. Rimantas Mackevicius’ mother had to work on the railroad.

He didn’t meet his dad until he was six. He and his mom went to the prison, and he remembered metal doors clanging shut behind them.

“Finally when I saw my dad, I did not know how he would look or how we would meet, but I remember him squeezing me so tightly and lifting me up,” Mackevicius said. “And I was just wondering as a kid, why does he want to squeeze the life out of me?”

Mackevicius wouldn't see his father again for a decade, when the entire family was finally reunited in Lithuania. The family farm had been destroyed. They had to stay with extended family.

“People who returned from Siberia were marked people of the community,” he said. “They carried a certain stigma. They would take the lowest paid jobs, the jobs that no one wanted to do.”

Mackevicius came to the U.S. with his family in 1998. He said he wanted to know what freedom was like.

He wants the world to know about Stalin's atrocities, and he hopes events like the Hope & Spirit exhibit will increase awareness.

Still, he was surprised when they asked him to speak. In Lithuania:

“People who had been deported, they never shared anything publicly, in fear of political instability in the country, and of any possibility of being re-deported again,” Mackevicius said.

“It also could be that people did not speak about this because it was too painful of a memory – even my closest friends did not know about my past.”

For many, that silence holds true in America. And breaking that silence is what the Hope & Spirit exhibit at the Balzekas Museum is all about.

Vytautas and Gabija Staniskis didn't learn about Siberia until they created art for the exhibit.

Gabija ran across the room to see where her drawing was hanging. She's 6.

“I drew eight dogs pulling a sled,” Gabija said, describing her drawing. “They're going to get water and food.”

Her brother, Vytautas, is 10. His drawing shows a gulag with people behind barbed wire and a train bringing more people in.

“I thought that it was very sad that Lithuanians had to work and not get to be paid, and it was very cold and some of them died because of cold or starvation,” Vytautas said.

The museum encouraged children to ask their parents and grandparents about the deportations, and submit art to the exhibit. So Vytautas and Gabija's grandma told them stories and showed them books. They learned several relatives were sent to Siberia.

“My grandfather, when he was nine years old, he was almost deported to Siberia,” Vytautas said.

“But a nun warned him he and his family were on the list, and when he saw the Russian truck come, they hid in the field for three days.”

Their grandmother, Regina Jurate Variakojis said Lithuanians must share this history, so it’s never repeated.

“I want my grandchildren to be able to tell their children of what has happened and why we are here in the United States and not living in Lithuania, where we were born,” Variakojis said.

Variakojis hopes the drawings will go in the archives so future generations can learn from them.

The Hope & Spirit exhibit has been extended into April.