



## Project Update

Shovels are finally hitting the ground! Excavation of the Memorial site at the Garden of the Provinces and Territories has begun. Tribute to Liberty expects final design approval from the National Capital Commission (NCC) at their board meeting at the end of June. A sod turning ceremony at the Memorial site will be held soon after the final design approval to mark the commencement of construction of the memorial.

We are also happy to report that at the beginning of May, Tribute to Liberty Chair Ludwik Klimkowski presented a cheque for \$500,000 to the NCC, thus fulfilling our financial requirements for the Memorial.

Please don't forget about the opportunity you have to memorialize the name of a loved one on the Wall of Remembrance which will be part of the Memorial—with a donation of \$1000. We are building this Memorial to tell the stories and preserve the memory of those who witnessed Communism firsthand. Space on the Wall is limited. Visit <http://tributetoliberty.ca/contribute> or use the last page of this newsletter to donate today!

## History Unhidden

### Laima Veckalne's Story: A Tale of Forgotten Soviet Crimes

*In 1940, the U.S.S.R. invaded and occupied Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. This month marks the sixtieth anniversary of the first mass deportations from the Baltic states, when the Soviets arrested more than 60,000 people in June 1941 and sent them to prisons and labor camps in Northern Russia and Siberia. What follows is the experience of one young woman. (Editor's Note: This article first appeared in Front Page Magazine in 2001.)*

Tribute to Liberty is a Canadian organization whose mission is to establish a memorial to the victims of Communism in the National Capital Region.

Tribute to Liberty's Newsletter is published four times a year. If you would like to add an email address to our subscriber list please email [info@tributetoliberty.ca](mailto:info@tributetoliberty.ca).

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Laima Veckalne, a beautiful and high-spirited teenager, treasured her life growing up surrounded by the love of family and friends in Riga, the capital of Latvia, in northeastern Europe. She had great hopes for the future, and her goal was to become a famous ballerina. Laima studied and practiced diligently, and she gave her first public dance performance in the Riga Opera House on a glorious day in May. It turned out to be her only performance.

The next month at about two o'clock on the morning of June 14, 1941, the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, broke into the Veckalns apartment and arrested Laima, her sister, and her parents. The agents gave them a few minutes to pack their belongings and

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then marched them at gunpoint into the dark street where they were loaded onto the back of an already crowded truck.

The NKVD delivered its human cargo to Riga's Skirotava Railroad Station. What awaited in the early dawn was a sight that the Latvian people could never have imagined. As far as the eye could see, there were men and women clutching suitcases and bundles of hastily gathered clothing, the elderly and disabled searching for places to sit, and mothers comforting their crying children, all of them surrounded by Red Army soldiers brandishing weapons. Similar scenes were taking place at other railroad stations in Riga and across Latvia, and also in the neighboring Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania.



Laima's family huddled between the train tracks with the other families for many hours. They were required to be completely still and were not allowed to take even a step. Eventually the soldiers shoved the men, women, and children into filthy cattle wagons where they continued to wait without food or water. The people did not understand what was happening to them.

During the night the soldiers took out the men, including Laima's father and the teenage boys, and put them on separate trains. They lied by telling the families that their husbands and brothers would be sent ahead to prepare lodgings at an undisclosed location. Finally, by the third day, the doors of the cars were locked shut, and all the trains departed the station.

The transport containing Laima and her sister and mother and the other families moved slowly eastward across Russia during the summer heat. The people were given barely anything to eat or drink except for a little water and some inedible soup. There was scarcely any air to breathe since everyone was jammed together and the cars had only a few small windows covered with bars. A hole in the floor served

for personal necessities. Some of the people, especially the infants, became sick immediately and died in the cattle wagons. Their bodies had to be left at the side of the tracks.

After several weeks the train reached Novosibirsk in Western Siberia. Scores of wagons were transferred onto enormous barges and sent up the River Ob and then to the Vasyugan. The cars were emptied at riverbank settlements populated by previously deported Russians and Ukrainians. Laima and her family were assigned to live in a bug-infested hut, and they slept on the ground alongside cattle and chickens.

The Soviets immediately put their prisoners to work. For three years, in the early Siberian mornings, they forced Laima to march into the forest where she had to climb up into trees and cut off branches. She was obliged to carry on her back heavy birch bark and pine wood, sometimes as much as her own bodyweight, and this eventually damaged her spine. She was required to work in the deepest snow, even as the temperature plunged to minus 45 degrees Celsius.

Since she was young and unusually fit from her dance training, Laima coped better than most with the brutal demands of the labor regimen. She was even able to ascend the tallest trees without getting dizzy. It was also helpful that her mother was ingenious and made boots for her from a blanket they had brought from Latvia and some dog skins. Many of the deportees did not fare as well, and they simply collapsed as the guards pushed them along to another day of work and were left for dead in the wilderness.

In exchange for their efforts, Laima and the others received a small amount of potatoes or hard bread. They had to share their meager rations with those who could not work – the very young, the old, and the infirm. Much of time the people had virtually nothing to eat, and everyone suffered from constant hunger. Their bodies were swollen and covered with boils caused by malnutrition. Their skin was inflamed by mosquito bites.

The youngest children were affected the most by the harsh conditions, and all of them were sick. In the evenings, Laima played with the little ones and told them stories while their mothers washed their clothing in the river. She would give them small spoonfuls of water in order to ease their distress, but nothing could be done for them. Laima held the one-year olds, Andris, Adrianis, and Guntis, and caressed their heads as all three died on the same night.

The elderly were the next to pass away. The young boys were resourceful, and they scavenged for boards that they used to build coffins in which to bury their loved ones. By the next year most of the boys themselves had died from starvation and disease, and there was hardly anyone left to make the coffins. Those who remained could only struggle to dig graves in the frozen earth.



Gradually the survivors tried to adjust to life in Siberia. Laima and her family were permitted to use a patch of ground on which to grow potatoes, and they lived as best they could as exiles. In the midst of all the misery and hardships, Laima met a young Estonian man, also a deportee. Beautiful feelings blossomed between the two of them. They fell in love and committed to each other in marriage.

In 1956, Soviet Premier Khrushchev decided that the Balts and other nationalities deported over the decades would be allowed to return to their native lands. After 17 years in Siberia, Laima and her family went home in 1958. Most of the Latvians who had shared the cattle wagons from Skirotava Station did not live to see that day.

And what about Laima's father? She never saw him again after he had been removed to another train back in Riga in June 1941. In 1992, she learned that he had been sent to Solikamsk Prison in the Ural Mountains of Russia. Andrejs Veckalns was a Social Democratic leader of the Parliament of free Latvia and Chairman of the Council of Labor Unions. He was also an opponent of Communism. As a result the Soviets condemned him to death on his sixty-fifth birthday, April 18, 1942, and they shot him a month later on May 18.

How did all this happen? Hitler and Stalin were allies pursuant to the Nazi-Soviet Pact they signed on August 23, 1939. The two dictators had secretly agreed to divide between them the defenseless regions of Eastern Europe – Poland, the Baltic states, Finland, Northern Bukovina, and Bessarabia. Eight days later, on September 1, 1939, Hitler attacked western Poland, and World War II began. Two weeks thereafter, Stalin collected his spoils by grabbing eastern Poland.

In 1940, the Soviets sent their tanks into Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, annexed the three small nations, and embarked on a brutal campaign to destroy all possible opposition to Stalinist rule. A year later, Hitler double-crossed his erstwhile partner and invaded the U.S.S.R. The Nazis quickly drove the Soviets out of the Baltic area and proceeded to spread their own brand of terror, particularly targeting the Jews. The Red Army took back Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in 1944, and by 1945 the Nazis were defeated. However, the Baltic states did not regain their independence until the USSR disintegrated in 1991.

During their nearly five decades of occupation, the Soviets killed or deported an estimated one half million Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian men, women, and children. But these were only a fraction of the tens of millions of people in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe whom the Communists subjected to the midnight knock on the door, arrest, show trials, intentionally created famine, starvation, mass deportations, imprisonment, torture, slave labor, or execution.

Virtually no one has been called to account for what was done. No Communist Party bosses in Russia have ever been made to pay for their transgressions. Not one labor camp commandant has been forced to answer for his inhumanity. There is no talk of reparations. The ex-Soviets now in charge in Moscow object whenever anyone raises questions about the injustices of the past.

The West has chosen to forget these horrors. There is no grand museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C., dedicated to those whose lives were destroyed by the Communists. Hollywood has no interest in making movies about those who suffered at the hands of the Soviet Union. American high school students learn nothing about the Gulag.

The great crimes of Soviet Communism are mostly just remembered in the hearts and souls of the victims. Laima Veckalne is one of the few heroes still alive who can bear witness as she continues to honor the

memory of her father and the countless others who perished.

*By Edgar B. Anderson*

## ***History Unhidden*** **The Land Reform in North Vietnam**

The Land Reform in the 1950s in Vietnam marked a turning point in the country's history. With the fight for independence from France gaining momentum and nearing success primarily in the northern parts, the Vietnamese Communists who were leading that fight began putting in place their radical revolutionary programme involving land redistribution and class struggle. Land redistribution was a cornerstone of the communist revolutionary platform, and in practice amounted to land seizure by the communist authorities. As a promise nonetheless, land redistribution served to mobilize peasant support for the revolution, which involved both the achievement of independence from France and the "building of socialism". While it was crucial for the independence movement to garner widespread popular support during the anticolonial struggle, the movement's leadership was at the same time urged by its backers, the Soviet Union and particularly China, to demonstrate clear commitment to the communist agenda. The Land Reform thus embodied at that juncture Vietnam's leaders' unambiguous expression of loyalty to the communist camp, as well as their zealous readiness to come under the control of communist China. It was in its conception and implementation a "Made in China" programme, with little consideration for the specific conditions of Vietnamese society. Whether as intended policy, political purge, social/economic experimentation or ideological excess, the consequences of the Land Reform were the same on the Vietnamese people. It resulted in a campaign of terror where thousands of so-called landlords and class enemies were executed, with thousands more dying in detention, of starvation and other forms of mistreatment. Tens of thousands of lives were broken and families shattered due to the persecution. According to communist sources (Dang Phong, 2005) 123,266 individuals were wrongly accused as landlords or class enemies between 1952 and 1956. The number of executions was estimated by Georges Boudarel (1991) to be between 15,000 and 45,000.

The method by which individuals were classified as landlords and therefore class enemies was arbitrarily imposed by advisors from China. It was deemed from

the Chinese land reform experience that landlords made up 5% of the rural population. Vietnamese teams sent to China to be trained in land reform techniques were instructed to apply the same 5% quota to Vietnam. It was therefore decided in each commune that a specific number of individuals had to be accused of being landlords to meet the 5% quota, even though the amount of land they actually owned was negligible. There was even competition among land reform teams to outdo each other and exceed the 5% quota. According to Huy Duc (2012), the national average reached was 5.68% of the population being classified as landlords, which was an aberration for a poor country such as Vietnam. Those accused were put on trial, condemned to prison or sentenced to death, and their families were also stigmatized, ostracized, and persecuted.



The process from accusation to sentencing to punishment was the work of land reform teams that operated under the close supervision of Chinese advisors. These teams identified the targets to be accused, ensuring the quota of landlords was met for the village or commune. Following a strict script, they forced individuals who were often family members or acquaintances of the accused to come up with incriminating evidence and act as witnesses. Confessions of crimes were often obtained from the accused through threats and torture; the accused was then put on trial before a "people's court". Each trial was carefully orchestrated to ensure the witnesses clearly denounced the landlords with sufficient indignation and insulting language. The crowd of peasants watching the trial was expected to behave according to cues from cadres who coordinated the masses' expression of indignation. The outcome was inevitably a guilty verdict punishable by death or imprisonment, and in some cases house arrest. There was no legal defence allowed for the accused and no possibility of challenging the people's court's judgement because "the people could not be wrong". Death sentences were carried out on the spot. The commonly reported forms of execution involved the

firing squad, beating to death, drowning, and burying the accused alive.

Because of its large-scale denunciation character, the Land Reform instilled an atmosphere of suspicion and hatred that resulted in the destruction of the social fabric of villages and families in northern Vietnam. It also allowed many opportunists to rise to positions of power through active participation in the denunciation campaign, in the process taking over land and property belonging to those accused.

In November 1956, a revolt against the injustices and brutality of the Land Reform broke out in Nghe An province, communist leader Ho Chi Minh's native province. The authorities had to send in an entire army division of the so-called People's Army to put down the revolt. Nearly six thousand people were killed or arrested in the repression (Le Xuan Khoa, 2004).

As the Land Reform campaign neared completion, there was recognition of "errors" being committed, but the communist leadership's final assessment of the Land Reform was upbeat and positive. It was deemed to be a great achievement and a "strategic victory". Yet, over 30 years later, the Communist Party recognized that the Land Reform as it was carried out in North Vietnam had had "extremely harmful consequences" and as far as land redistribution was concerned, it "had not been necessary" (Le Xuan Khoa, 2004).

*The following is the testimony of a witness, Mr. Nguyen Minh Ngoc (Virginia, USA), whose grandmother, Mrs. La Thi Ca, died in 1955, as a victim of persecution from the communist Land Reform in North Vietnam.*

In 1952, from Son Tay province in North Vietnam, my mother and her sister decided to move to South Vietnam with their families, because they realized that, since the Communists had taken over power in Hanoi in 1945, their families had a hard time adjusting to the new regime due to its confusing arbitrary rules from the government and the gap between reality and the government's propaganda.

My grandmother, Mrs. La Thi Ca, preferred to stay in her native village of Cam Da, at Trung Thien town, Son Tay province, where she had two sons, both soldiers in the communist army, and she lived with her adoptive daughter named Yen. (Yen was saved from starvation by my grandmother at the age of 8 when all of Yen's family died in the 1945 Great Famine.)

From her husband's heritage, my grandmother was the owner of about half a hectare of land in her village. Therefore, my grandmother could not be placed in the class of "rich landlords" in accordance with Ho Chi Minh's "Land Reform Law" of 1953. But, on the request of Chinese "advisors", the Land Reform team of Cam Da village classified her in the category of "rich landlords" in order to meet the 5% quota to be "punished".

According to her sons who came to visit their sisters in Saigon after April 1975, my grandmother's sons could not do anything to save her from the "People's Court's" trial and its outcome. As witness, Ms. Yen denounced the crimes of my grandmother's: "You are a criminal rich landowner. You adopted me with the purpose to make me work for you as a slave. You have never paid me for my services, so from today, your land and your house will belong to me. You deserve to be punished by the People's Court."

Then my grandmother's house and all her properties were confiscated by the local authorities. She was spared from the death penalty, likely because there was no other "witnesses" besides her adoptive daughter to accuse her.

The authorities put her in confinement in her own house, with a ban on all visits and all communication.

In the prevailing atmosphere of terror during the Land Reform, her sons as well as other relatives and friends stayed away from her until the Land Reform team found her dead in her house, a few weeks later."

## **History Unhidden An Exceptional Witness**

Translated into English by David Levy

*Ismael Sombra is a prolific Cuban writer having to his credit a vast range of publications from laureate poetry to essays, short stories and screen-plays. He was imprisoned in 1993 after being convicted of distributing "Enemy propaganda" and received a ten-year sentence. His "crime" was to secretly print and distribute, during the 1992 general "elections" with only one party and one candidate, fliers that read: "Do not vote for Castro. Vote for Liberty". His older son, Guillermo, was sentenced to eight years for the same "crime".*

*He suffered the humiliation of being stripped of his clothes, stark naked, with a sprained knee due to the blows and the brutal force applied to it by the guards,*

locked in a punishment cell, which was flooded with cold water. The unbearable torture, suffered by him and six other political prisoners, led them, in desperation, to carry out a hunger-strike, in protest for their unjust and cruel imprisonment. It drove him close to death.

The following excerpt of Ismael Sombra's autobiographical novel *Procesado en el Paraiso (On Trial in Paradise)* titled "An Exceptional Witness" complements the one titled "A Prisoner on a Hunger Strike" that appeared in the Winter 2018 Tribute to Liberty Newsletter. "An Exceptional Witness" shows the prisoner's reaction to the news on the men, women and children who were murdered when trying to escape the island in the barge "13 de Marzo", and to the tragic ending of an escape attempt to the American military base of Guantanamo Bay as told by a fellow prisoner. —David Levy

Although the hunger-strikers did not know the details of what happened to the barge "13 de Marzo", they were sure that it had been sunk on purpose. They had heard of rafters that were bombarded with sacks of sand in the high seas with the aim of sinking them without leaving any traces. They had heard testimonies from some survivors who were serving punishing sentences in jail. They were aware of the regime's utter contempt for the life of those who tried to leave the island at any cost, who were fleeing in despair from the perennial oppression to which society had been subjected by the repressive regime.

Ismael was very distressed by the tragic news. His despair verged on helplessness, but he tried to pull himself together. He too was going through troublesome times, paying the price for his rebellion. However, the "13 de Marzo" news had the effect of further reaffirming his convictions. Absolute abuse of power. State crime.

Momentarily, he suspended his thoughts to look through the narrow window with multiple crossed bars that barely allowed some visibility. It was very hot and the intense midday sunlight flooded the patio, where a solitary man looked in vain for a piece of shadow in one corner of the enormous wall that separated Boniatico from the prison's other pavilions. He was tall, with thick arms, a broad forehead and a strong physique, but he looked like he had collapsed into the appearance of a 70-year-old man, although he might have been only turning 50. They had placed him in isolation.

Days later Ismael met him at the prison hospital where he heard his story. Alejandro Mustafá Reyes, a Palma

Soriano resident, told him in tears what had happened to him and his son when they tried to leave the island illegally from a Guantanamo Bay area.



While swimming toward the shore of the Guantánamo Naval Base, they were attacked by a maritime police boat attracted by the sound of gunfire. "They came after us and started spinning around trying to sink us." He remembered with tears what his 19-year-old son said: "Dad save me, do not let me die" after receiving the first hit from the enemy vessel.

He narrated how he saw his son sink into the water after being literally swept away by the boat. He narrated how he saved himself from drowning by holding on to a rope that hung outside the boat; and that when they saw him they tried in vain to drown him too; and when they were not succeeding doing that, he was finally lifted on deck and brutally beaten to the point of rendering him senseless.

The son died, and when his mother claimed the body, they did not let her see it. A week later, after much insistence, the state security agents took her to a cemetery on the city outskirts and showed her a grave. "That's where your son is buried," they told her. But she could never see the corpse. It was evident that they wanted to hide it because it was destroyed by the impacts. They wanted their crime to go unpunished and they succeeded.

Ismael sighed, enraged at the pain he felt as he heard the terrible story. He had never seen a man cry so much, narrating his misfortune. "Murderers!" And Ismael cried along with him.



Alejandro Mustafá was a corpulent man, but totally dejected in his wreckage. His gaze reflected his anxiety and his sadness. Although he had been a Communist Party activist, and also a high government official in the construction sector, he had decided to flee as he felt suffocated by the regime. He had become disappointed and critical about the Government-imposed ineffective procedures in his work, and had written reports describing his company's economic disaster. Consequently, he was being closely watched and he expected to be arrested at any moment. That is why he decided to escape with his son and his trusted friend Juan Ramirez, who was also captured and accused. The events narrated by Alejandro were confirmed by Juan on the day that both of them, coincidentally, happened to be in the visiting room.

They had an escape plan: sailing in a small boat across the bay, on the pretext of inspecting construction sites in the area, as they had done on other occasions without arousing suspicion. But this time there was on board an assistant who turned out to be a security guard. Although Alejandro wanted to postpone the plan, Juan drew a pistol and forced the ship captain to change course and sail toward the U.S. Naval Base. When they were very close to the target, the undercover guard pulled out a gun, but he was hit by an accurate shot from Juan. The guard was badly hurt. Then Juan, Alejandro and his son dove into the water trying to reach the Naval Base and ask for asylum. Juan and Alejandro told me about many more things that occurred while they were employed: the threats they had received, the lies they were forced to tell the workers in order to hide the disaster of the inoperative company. "That's why we decided to escape from the debacle that was coming over us".

Ismael and his friends were immersed in their own suffering, but the opportunity to denounce tragedies like these added even more incentive to their determination to continue the struggle.

Alejandro Mustafá and his tall, blond friend Juan Ramirez, of about the same age as Alejandro, were serving long sentences because they received additional unfounded charges of stealing state resources. The regime applied the same type of treatment to all those who refused to continue playing the conformity game, accusing them of being thieves, traitors, social parasites. The aim was to demoralize them. Alejandro Mustafá underwent a long hunger strike for the defamation, for his unjust incarceration and because his only son was murdered, without any trial or punishment to the direct and indirect culprits of his death. They called for justice and justice sometimes takes its time, but it arrives. Ismael and

other prisoners were exceptional witnesses of these men's pain and swore to denounce the outrage.

The hunger-strikers protest continued because it was necessary to draw international attention to what was happening in the prisons. "We felt it was our duty to rebel against the opprobrium", he said, pressing his hand tightly on the man's shoulder, and now we also do it for your murdered son". And Alejandro Mustafá shuddered all over at the inspired gesture of solidarity. "The heroes' sacrifice makes the victory greater".

Outside, the people protested. Ismael rejoiced at the news of the popular rebellion along the Malecón in the capital. Nevertheless, later his concern grew; the rebellion in the capital occupied exclusively the international media and caused the attention to be diverted away from the prisoners' protest.

He pressed his face closer to the narrow window and commented on the subject with Diosmel, who was on the top floor. "I have an idea to activate the news again," he shouted, but could not elaborate on the details. They knew that the success of the risky action depended very much on journalistic coverage. Independent journalism and the foreign press accredited on the island would play their important role. They had bet on this as the only thing that could save their lives.

They tried then to do nothing that could be seen as a provocation. They stayed on the defensive. Given the situation, it was the most sensible and advisable choice of action. The jailers could have left them indefinitely in Boniatico, all of them together, as the strikers requested. They might have settled if some of their demands were satisfied. They did not care about the excessive confinement in isolation cells. What for many prisoners was a punishment, for them was their salvation. But the repressors had their plans of harassment and torture and they would not refrain from carrying them out. That was what counted the most, that it be acknowledged that they were the strongest, those who had the power.

The prisoners already knew that the rebellion was only taking effect in three prisons of the province. Now they were weaker and more vulnerable. They had relied too much on the activist Nicolás Rosario for transporting the documents, because they had no other way. They bet everything on a single card. And that failed. On them would fall all the concentrated fury of the dictator and his lackeys. They were alone, but they felt freer in their desired solitude, while the enemies prepared their plan of attack to act with full impunity.

# Canada's National Memorial to the Victims of Communism

is about people, families, and the suffering they endured under Communism.

Memorialize the name of a loved one forever on the Memorial's Wall of Remembrance with a donation of \$1,000.

Tell the story of a victim of Communism by buying a brick on the virtual Pathway to Liberty that leads to the Memorial with a donation of \$200.

Donate today at [www.tributetoliberty.ca](http://www.tributetoliberty.ca) or use the mail-in form below.

To contribute to the Memorial to Victims of Communism in Ottawa you can:

**1. Become a Brick Donor - \$200.00**

- With each brick purchased you can submit the story of a victim of Communism, or a message or dedication
- Please email your story, message or dedication to [info@tributetoliberty.ca](mailto:info@tributetoliberty.ca) or include it on a separate piece of paper when you mail this form
- Submissions will be published on the Tribute to Liberty website along with donor's names.  
**Donors who wish to remain anonymous must indicate this in the space provided below**

**2. Donate to the Wall of Remembrance - \$1,000.00**

**3. Donations in any amount are welcome**

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## Mail-in Contribution Form

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Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Province \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

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Donation Amount: \$1000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$200 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

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