



MEMORIAL TO THE VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM

TRIBUTE TO LIBERTY



Newsletter

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Project Update

Facilitated by the mild weather this winter, the first phase of construction of the memorial has been completed! The goal of construction during the winter was to get the foundation work done which entailed excavation (including site remediation), installing the rebar and formwork, and finally pouring the concrete for the foundation for the Arc of Memory and Wall of Remembrance. These require considerable structural support. Construction on the plinth itself will resume later in the year once ground conditions are suitable. The architectural team for the main sculptural piece of the memorial has resolved the structural issues that were identified in the fall of 2019 and fabrication of the artwork is expected to begin soon.

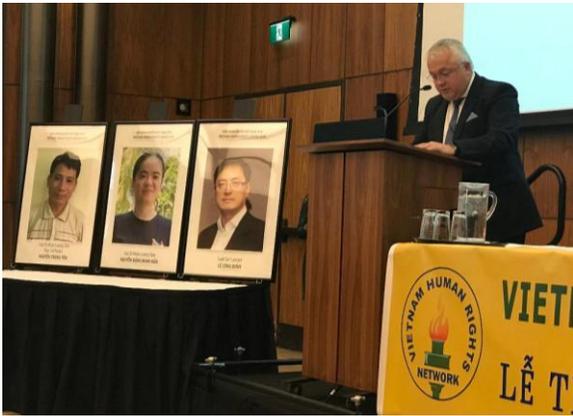


Tribute to Liberty Attends Vietnam Human Rights Award Ceremony

On December 7, 2019, Tribute to Liberty Chair Ludwik Klimkowski and Tribute to Liberty Treasurer Alide Forstmanis attended the Vietnam Human Rights Award Ceremony in Ottawa.

Since 2002, the Vietnam Human Rights Network (VNHRN) has annually presented the Vietnam Human Rights Award to prominent human rights and democracy activists in Vietnam who have made their mark in the inexorable march towards the freedom of the Vietnamese people. This year, VNHRN presented the award to: Pastor Nguyen Trung Ton, Activist Nguyen Dang Minh Man, and Lawyer Le Cong Dinh. All three recipients have been persecuted, including imprisonment,

for their courageous efforts in defending the freedom and human rights of the Vietnamese people.



History Unhidden **Polish Deportations**

February 2020 marks the 80th anniversary of a largely unknown historical tragedy: Joseph Stalin's deportation of 1.7 million Polish citizens, including 350,000 children, to slave labour camps in Siberia and

the interior of the U.S.S.R.

In the first wave of this mass deportation, my mother Christine (Krystyna Grzegorzcyk) Szkwarek, and her family were arrested and exiled to Siberia. The same fate awaited my late father, Wladyslaw Szkwarek, and his family.

History is often written by the victors of war and in post-war communist Eastern Europe what happened to my parents, and many others, was silenced by those with immense political power.

For my mother's family, the terrifying events began in the middle of the night on February 10, 1940. Soviet soldiers entered the family home and at gunpoint ordered them to pack their belongings; they had fifteen minutes to do so. They were loaded onto cattle cars (standing room only) with no food, no water and nothing but a hole in the floor as a toilet. They were in shock, frightened, and did not know where they were going or why they were arrested.

My mother's family remained in the cattle trains for 4 weeks as they made their way to Soviet slave labor camps in Siberia. They were plagued by hunger and begged for food and water through the cracks in the cattle cars when the trains briefly stopped in towns. Many died along the way, especially the elderly and the young. The bodies of those that died were discarded from the train as it was impossible to bury the deceased.

On March 17th my mother's family reached the slave labour camps; they were told they would never leave. In the camps, anyone old enough to work did so. There the imprisoned Poles would cut trees in six foot deep snow. If you didn't work, you didn't eat. Starvation, disease and death were common. From the unhygienic living conditions, my mother contracted Typhus and was expected to die. It was the resourcefulness of my grandmother that kept my mother alive. My grandmother, with the help of others, captured and killed a dog. They placed the fat from the dog on my mother's chest and back and then placed paper on top. The dog fat penetrated my mother's skin and helped her survive. Many were not so lucky including my paternal uncle who died in Siberia, at the age of 15.

When the mass deportation occurred, Stalin and Hitler were allies and their plan was to carve up and eliminate Poland. Over time, Hitler betrayed his alliance to Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union. Stalin, in desperation, turned to Churchill and Roosevelt for

assistance. Stalin, under pressure from Churchill and the Polish Government in Exile, granted "Amnesty" to the Polish prisoners in the Soviet Union.

By definition, "Amnesty" is an official pardon for people who are convicted of political offences. However, the Polish people arrested, deported and forced into slave labour had not committed any political crimes, least of all the children like my mother. The main reason for Stalin agreeing to release the Polish people was his need for more soldiers. The Polish men deported to Siberia, upon release, could join the Polish army and fight against their now common enemy, Germany.

The released Polish prisoners strengthened by the hope of freedom, set out on another arduous trek, this time out of the Soviet Union. My mother's family left Siberia the same way they entered – in cattle cars. Poles would huddle together for warmth on the trains but in the morning when they awoke they would often find the dead who never made it through the night. It is estimated that only 500,000 of the 1.7 million deportees survived and made it out. My mother's family barely survived; two died from typhoid and one is still un-accounted for.

Their first destination was to Kazakhstan. They then crossed the Caspian Sea in overcrowded boats into the Iranian Port of Pahlavi (now Bandar Anzali). Many starving Polish people died on the beaches after their stomachs burst from eating too much food too quickly. The malnourished Polish refugees were then loaded on to trucks to relocate to Tehran. As they were being transported to Tehran the Iranians threw objects at them. The frightened refugees at first thought they were being stoned, but soon noticed that the objects were not rocks, but rather dates, nuts and cookies. Amongst all the inhumanity of the deportation there were incidences like these, that showed sparks of compassion and caring. The camp in Tehran was set up by the International Red Cross with generosity from the Iranian people.

Although many Poles regained their health in Iran, it was too late for others, who were quarantined due to outbreaks of dysentery, typhus and scarlet fever. Over 2000 Poles died in Iran and are buried in a Polish cemetery just outside of Tehran, including my paternal grandfather and aunt.

In Iran, families were separated. Polish men, young and old, joined the Polish army while women and children were dispersed to several refugee camps in India, Pakistan, Mexico, New Zealand and East and

South Africa. My mother's older brother, Piotr, joined the 1st Polish Armoured Division and partook in the invasion of Normandy and the liberation of France, Belgium and Holland. While her brother was fighting on the front line, my mother, grandmother and sister were transported to a refugee camp in Uganda. Although Uganda provided a safe haven for my mother, she was one of many who contracted Malaria. She managed to recuperate from the infectious disease and slowly regain her health. At the refugee camp, huts were built for accommodation, and a school was established so children could attend classes and regain some sense of normalcy in order to balance the horrific experiences they endured in Siberia. In addition to schools, Our Lady Queen of Poland Catholic Church was built, which still stands today in Nyabyeya, Uganda.



While my mother resided in Uganda, it was the Yalta agreement that was to determine her fate and that of the Polish people. The Yalta agreement was formed by the heads of government of the United States (Roosevelt), the United Kingdom (Churchill), and the Soviet Union (Stalin), to establish how Europe was to be divided geographically and politically. Pre-War Eastern Poland, where my mother's family was from, (approximately 48% of Poland's pre-war territory), was to be given to the Soviet Union. Polish people considered this agreement to be a betrayal, especially

the many tens of thousands of Polish troops, who had fought valiantly under British command and were then being informed that they would lose their homes to the Soviet Union. In reaction, thirty officers from the 2nd Polish Corps committed suicide. Poland was not reinstated as a democratic country as it had been prior to the war.

With no home in Poland to return to at the end of the war, my mother, along with many other DPs (Displaced Persons) from East Africa, was transported to England where she briefly resided at Stovall Park, a school for refugees outside of London. In 1951 my mother's older brother, Piotr, immigrated to Canada. He then sponsored my mother and grandmother to come. In 1953, not yet 20, with one suitcase, my mother boarded a ship out of England bound for Halifax.

My mother lived in Thunder Bay from 1953 to 2016. In 2016, she moved to Stittsville to be closer to her daughter and now resides at Stonehaven Retirement Home in Kanata.

The exile of Poles to Siberia was not spoken of and never taught in schools in Poland after WWII, as the country was under Communist rule. This tragedy was also unknown to most of the Western World. Still today, many people do not know of the atrocities inflicted upon the Polish people.

The world has come to know of the heinous crimes committed in the concentration camps of Europe during WWII. Millions upon millions have respectfully and rightfully so born witness to these atrocities by walking the grounds of these death camps. However, very few have visited or been allowed to visit the grounds of the Slave Labour Camps in Siberia to learn about their role in WWII. This is an essential piece of history, more so because of an ever diminishing number of survivors alive today.

In 2003, my mother and her late husband, along with other survivors of the mass deportation, were awarded The Siberian Exiles Cross Medal. This medal recognizes the suffering of Polish citizens deported to Siberia, Kazakhstan and Northern U.S.S.R., and symbolizes their unrelenting struggle for freedom and independence. This same struggle continues today as millions of refugees risk their lives to escape persecution, bigotry, incarceration and death.

Later this year the Victims of Communism Memorial will be unveiled in Ottawa. My mother's name will be inscribed on the Wall of Remembrance and if my

mother is in good health she will be in attendance at the official Dedication of the Memorial. Today, approximately 8 million Canadians are descendants of those who fled or were forced to leave a Communist regime.

It is hoped that Canada continues to be a refuge for those displaced and oppressed people of our world and that they are welcomed, like my mother, to make their home in our country without fear or prejudice.

Written by Aileen Szkwarek

History Unhidden **Siberian Exile**

The following is an excerpt from the non-fiction book by Julija Šukys, *Siberian Exile: Blood, War, and a Granddaughter's Reckoning*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2017.

And so it happened that Ona was alone at 19 Skirgailos Street in Kaunas on the night of June 14, 1941. Normally, four and sometimes five people lived in the Spartan apartment that comprised two rooms, plus a diminutive kitchen, bathroom, and entry hall. She was sleeping when three men (a troika) knocked at the door. It was two o'clock in the morning.

"Papers."

She showed her identity documents.

"Your family."

"Gone," she said, "on vacation."

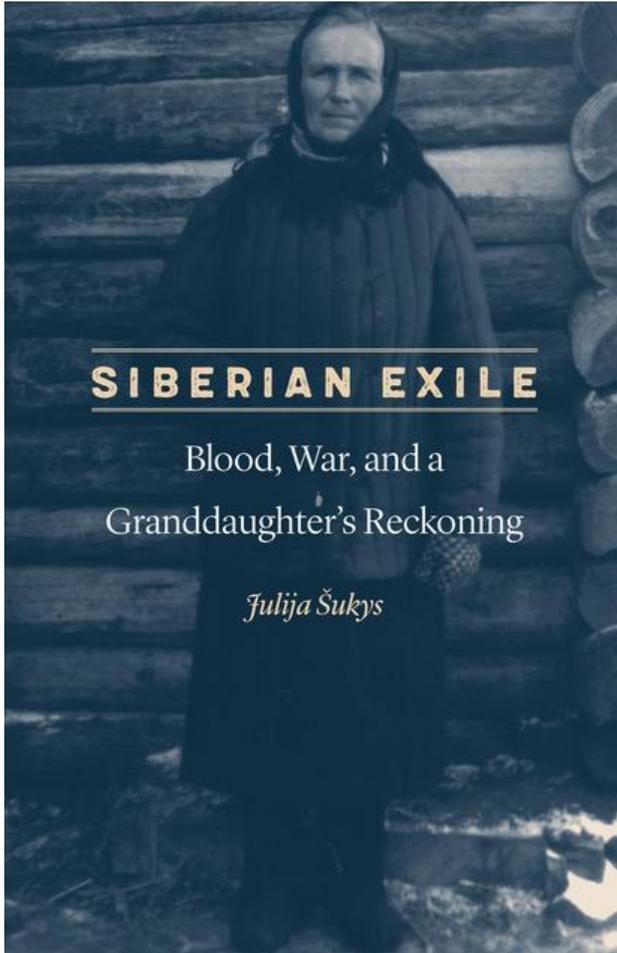
"Your husband."

"Who knows?" my grandmother answered.

All over Lithuania, similar scenes played out as soldiers knocked on doors, ordered people to pack, and took them away. Despite advance warning and rumors, some deportees were still surprised when the soldiers came for them. Flustered, they grabbed sentimental and useless belongings such as fancy shoes or finely milled hats in panic and ignorance of where they were going and for how long. A remarkable minority had foreseen these events and made the decision not to run. These prepared carefully and waited calmly. The wisest thought to gather food, linens, and dishes. The

most unfortunate traveled almost empty-handed, ending up in permafrost regions with only the clothes on their backs.

Among the deportees were newborns, pregnant women, small children, adolescents, and elderly people. Some would eventually make it back to Lithuania, but only after years and even decades in exile. Many lie buried in the Siberian tundra today.



The soldiers gave Ona twenty minutes to prepare. She could take what she could carry. They told her the state would confiscate the rest.

“Your husband will join you at the station,” they said. Among her things she folded up Anthony’s suit of fine English wool. What else she packed, I don’t know. The suit is the only thing she ever named.

[. . .]

The Kaunas station teemed. Ona stood against a wall, with a suitcase at her feet. She looked around, hoping to spot Anthony, but also praying he wouldn’t be there. He was nowhere to be seen. Women and children abounded. They carried bags and linen

bundles. A little girl watched in terror as soldiers dragged a husband from his wife.

Guards loaded everyone onto a passenger train, where they stayed for perhaps an hour, maybe two. Ona wouldn’t be able to say with certainty when the interviewer asked the question many years later. Next came roll call. She responded to her own name, and recognized no others until she heard the soldier holler for a “Father Joseph.” An elderly man answered and raised his hand but remained seated on his suitcase. He was impressive in his dignity and calm. Squeezing past a nursing mother and whimpering child, Ona made her way over to him.

“Excuse me,” she said quietly, “but aren’t you from the village of P—?” The man looked up, startled at the mention of his hometown.

“I’m from the same region,” Ona told him. “Do you have a brother? I think my mother was his Catholic Confirmation sponsor.”

“We’re family!” The priest extended his hand.

Father Joseph hailed from one of the wealthiest families in Lithuania. As rumors of coming deportations began to circulate, the priest’s twin brother sensed he was in danger and fled to the West. Father Joseph, by contrast, refused to budge. Instead, he’d packed his bags and waited for Red Army soldiers to arrive and arrest him.

As Ona and the priest talked, a string of cattle cars rumbled up a parallel track. This, not the passenger train, would take them east.

Among bits of straw and traces of manure, Ona and Father Joseph staked out an area in one corner on the car’s wooden floor. Teenagers clambered atop shelves and set up camp by the small windows above. Soon the wheels began to turn.

The car moved slowly past a prison camp with barbed-wire fences, through the church-spired capital and its new suburbs, into unfamiliar Belarus and finally Russia.

“Where are they taking us?” Ona whispered to the priest leaning against the wall beside her. She knew the answer, though, before he’d uttered it.

“Siberia.”

Written by Julija Šukys