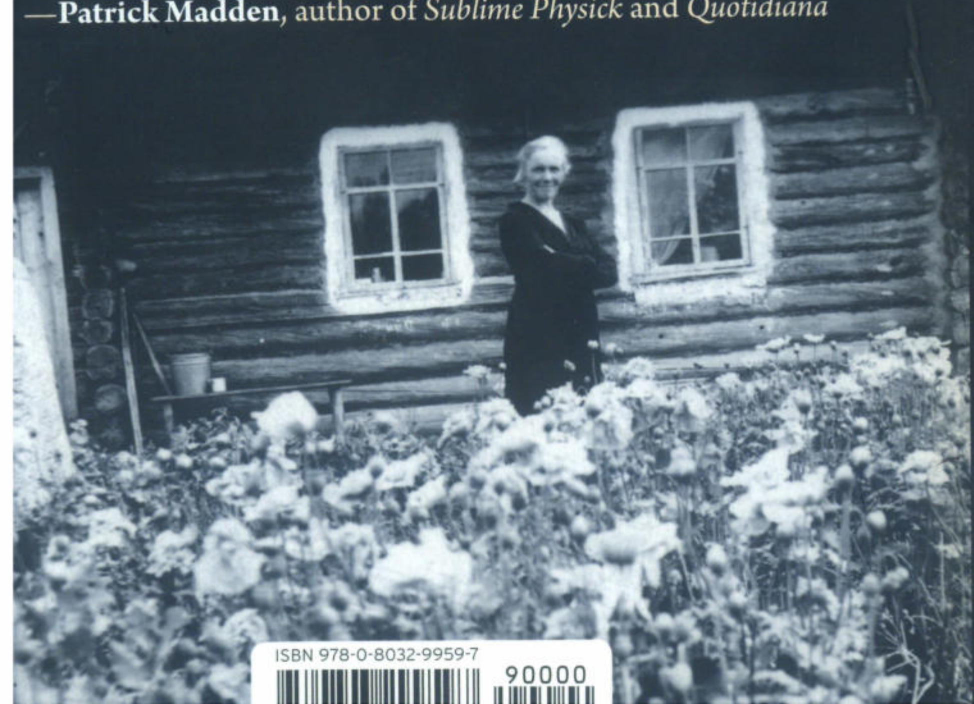
MEMOIR / WORLD HISTORY / HOLOCAUST / WORLD WAR II

"All families harbor secrets. What if, in blithe innocence, you set out to research your family history, only to discover that your grandfather was guilty of the most heinous of crimes? Šukys pursues her tragic family memoir with courage and self-examination, often propelled to her painful discoveries by what she believes is a bizarre synchronicity. This is not a book written at a safe distance."
—**Rosemary Sullivan**, author of *Stalin's Daughter: The Extraordinary and Tumultuous Life of Svetlana Alliluyeva*

"Riveting. . . . Beyond the historical and familial narrative, Julija Šukys ponders her own exile and her own complicity, allowing readers to do the same, comparing versions of selves and asking which version is truest, an impossible question, but one readers will find as enthralling as these pages."
—**Patrick Madden**, author of *Sublime Physick* and *Quotidiana*



ISBN 978-0-8032-9959-7

Šukys

SIBERIAN EXILE

NEBRASKA

SIBERIAN EXILE

Blood, War, and a Granddaughter's Reckoning

Julija Šukys

US $24.95

When Julija Šukys was a child, her paternal grandfather, Anthony, rarely smiled, and her grandmother, Ona, spoke only in her native Lithuanian. But they still taught Šukys her family's story: that of a proud people forced from their homeland when the soldiers came. In mid-June 1941, three Red Army soldiers arrested Ona, forced her onto a cattle car, and sent her east to Siberia, where she spent seventeen years separated from her children and husband, working on a collective farm. The family story maintained that it was all a mistake. Anthony, whose name was on Stalin's list of enemies of the people, was accused of being a known and decorated anti-Bolshevik and Lithuanian nationalist.

Some seventy years after these events, Šukys sat down to write about her grandparents and their survival of a twenty-five-year forced separation and subsequent reunion. Piecing the story together from letters, oral histories, audio recordings, and KGB documents, her research soon revealed a Holocaust-era secret—a family connection to the killing of seven hundred Jews in a small Lithuanian border town. According to KGB documents, the man in charge when those massacres took place was Anthony, Ona's husband.

In *Siberian Exile* Šukys weaves together the two narratives: the story of Ona, noble exile and innocent victim, and that of Anthony, accused war criminal. She examines the stories that communities tell themselves and considers what happens when the stories we've been told all our lives suddenly and irrevocably change, and how forgiveness or grace operate across generations and across the barriers of life and death.

Julija Šukys is an assistant professor of creative nonfiction at the University of Missouri, Columbia. She is the author of *Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Šimaitė* (Nebraska, 2012) and *Silence Is Death: The Life and Work of Tahar Djaout* (Nebraska, 2007).

Jacket photos are from the interior. Author photo © Shane Epping.

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln NE 68588-0630
nebraskapress.unl.edu

PART II

Ona

18

A few years after Ona's death in 1996, I began to transcribe the letters she'd written from Siberia to her children. I wanted to know everything about her life there, but I found the letters silenced more than they told. From her Spartan cabin, my grandmother wrote only about the small and mundane; cows, pigs, and gardens were among her favorite subjects. She said almost nothing of the journey by cattle car, of widespread starvation, of taxes paid in agricultural products, or of life under Stalin. This frustrated me, and I felt the creeping pangs of regret. Why had I waited so long to do this? Still, I kept at it. I transcribed in spurts, then packed up the finished product, and sent it to Ona's elder daughter to read over and, if necessary, to correct it. At the very least, I figured it would make a nice gift to my family. The corrected letters returned by courier on the morning I was leaving on a research trip (unrelated to the Siberian letters) to the Kent State University Archives in Ohio.

While tempted to bring the corrections with me, I thought better of it and left the package on my desk at home for fear of misplacing the letters during my trip. Nor could I delay my departure to read them. I'd already postponed my research a week to avoid arriving on the anniversary of the Ohio National Guard's 1970 shootings of student protestors, when the archive would be packed with journalists. I had the rare chance of both the funding and the time for travel, so I had to go and make the most of it.

When I arrived, two boxes of uncataloged papers awaited me. The cartons held unsorted piles of files, seemingly random envelopes full of yellowed clippings, and stacks of handwritten journals. While sifting through one of the boxes, I came across a notebook labeled in Lithuanian, "Father Joseph (1880–1953) in Siberia." A handwritten message clipped to its cover read, in English: "This material was found on a shelf in the Archive, unidentified, on January 2, 1994. It has been placed with these other materials in hope that the next Lithuanian researcher can identify it for us." The seventy-two-page typescript of a taped conversation recorded near Chicago in 1977 told the story of Father Joseph, a priest exiled to Siberia in 1941. The woman interviewed in the transcript, I discovered to my astonishment and even shock, was my grandmother.

A letter, written in a different hand than the one that composed the message asking for help, accompanied the notebook. It was in Lithuanian. My hands shook as I read it:

> When Ona came to visit the priest's nephew, a local journalist enthusiastically agreed to interview her and to record the conversation on tape. But when he began the task, it became clear that things were progressing with some difficulty, that he didn't have much time, and what's more it appears that the tape he used produced a very poor recording, and not everything can be understood. Ona told twice as many stories as were recorded. In short, it all ended up a bit of a mess. Later, it was necessary to transcribe the tape, which proved to be a huge job. Not everything could be understood, some parts were skipped over, and so on.
>
> In addition to all that, Ona is a peculiar character. She remained almost completely uneducated, but Siberia hardened her, she became quick-witted and wise. She survived very well and was 73 (at the time of the interview). She rejoined her husband and three children in Canada. I'll send you the text.
>
> Best wishes!
> Kazys

The first half of the transcription was mostly intact, but as the pages went on, just as this Kazys's note had warned, the text grew increasingly fragmentary, with ellipses riddling the conversation where the typist ostensibly hadn't been able to make out the recording.

Still, I marveled at how the Chicago interview found its way into Kent's archives, where it then was misshelved. After languishing for almost a decade, the interview was found by one of the few researchers who would recognize its significance. Weirdest of all, that person happened to be the subject's granddaughter. I felt as though an ineffable causality—call it the ghost of my grandmother—had guided me there. I took the notebook in my hands and said, "Okay, I get it. I'll write your book."

How likely was it for such a convergence to occur? What were the odds of my coming across Ona's interview like this, by accident? Even if, on some level, I knew these questions were impossible to answer, I decided to ask them anyway. At the university where I work, a good-natured statistician named Larry agreed to take a shot at my query. "Brace yourself," I wrote, and then I told him the story of finding the interview transcript.

Not surprisingly, Larry could offer no odds. "I do not think it is possible to arrive at any sort of reasonable mathematical calculation of this," he wrote back. Still, his answer turned out to be helpful in unanticipated ways:

> It certainly seems to be an amazingly unlikely sequence of events. However, life is full of events and, just by chance, some very unlikely things happen. Think about it this way: A "1-in-one-billion chance" is infinitesimally small. However, if there are 7 billion people on earth, then on average such an event would happen to 7 of them.
>
> Suppose I flew to New York City and went into a library archive, started flipping through documents, and found something about my paternal grandmother that had been misfiled. That seems so unlikely that I cannot imagine it could possibly happen. For one thing, my

paternal grandmother was a housewife who lived a quiet life in Pilot Grove, Missouri. I cannot imagine that anyone would have written anything about her let alone something that might be archived. It would be even less likely to be misfiled.

Now your situation is different. Your interest in Lithuanian history is probably, at least in part, due to your ancestry. That part is not completely random. You were looking at an archive at Kent State where . . . information about Lithuanians is stored, which makes it more likely that something about your grandmother might be there. You were specifically looking for information about someone [the Holocaust rescuer Ona Šimaitė] whose name was similar to your grandmother's. Thus the fact a document about her might be misfiled in such a way that you might accidentally find it is more likely. What happened is certainly more likely to have happened to you than to me (or a random person).

The email helped me see that events I had been thinking of as entirely random—first, my grandmother's arrest and deportation and, second, my finding a record of an interview with her about those experiences—were perhaps not so random after all. Larry, in his statistician's vocabulary, had described the stance that allows writers to notice points of overlap in the world. But despite being able to whittle what's random away from what's not, even the statistician appeared to be impressed by my find.

In fact, these eerie coincidences happen with a weird regularity. In *The Red Notebook*, Paul Auster strings together a series of strange and unlikely convergences. I trembled with wonder and recognition as I read his tales of travelers showing up at exactly the right moment, of phone calls from supposedly fictional characters, of siblings unknowingly marrying one another, and of a birth father's being found on what is simultaneously his birthday and the eve of his death. Were these occurrences miracles? Were they caused by something otherworldly? Could a writer really make these things happen simply by living? Or (as Larry would have it) was there a more pedestrian explanation that had to do with ways of seeing and

being? Still, even now, I can't shake this coincidence. Or rather, I can't stop it from shaking me.

In *Everything That Rises*, Lawrence Weschler too describes "being visited by similarly uncanny moments of convergence, bizarre associations, eerie rhymes, whispered recollections." It's not by chance, I think, that coincidence came into Weschler's life precisely as he committed himself more fully to his writing. That was the moment he started moving through and seeing the world differently, opening himself up to it in new ways. Writers don't create coincidence. They notice it.

But even Weschler couldn't resist wondering if there wasn't actually something more powerful, divine even, at work. While visiting Donald Judd's mammoth sculptural installation absurdly situated in the Texan desert, the author watches an insect move a straw across the earth. The ant nudges and adjusts the straw, then pulls back to appraise its work. Satisfied, the creature turns around and leaves its own (relatively speaking) mammoth installation behind, also absurdly situated in the Texan desert. What to make of such an occurrence? Weschler wonders: "Had Judd first got [the notion for his installation] from the ant, or the ant from the [sculptures], or was it that Judd had conditioned me even to be able to notice the ant, or was the ant simply God (or, at the very least, God's high priest), or *what*?"

Perhaps my work has conditioned me to notice things like the notebook. And perhaps a series of unlikely though not entirely random events put that notebook into my hands. But maybe, just as Weschler wondered as he watched the ant-sculptor, something divine was at work that day in the archive. What I didn't realize was that to write Ona's book would mean writing Anthony's as well. And that between those two lives I would find another eerie kind of fate in which the one paid for the crimes of the other—even before they had been committed.

19

June 1941.

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 how long 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."

For four days and nights, the priest and Ona slept fitfully. Each rolled over only when the other did, since they were not only huddled against each other but also squeezed between the car's wall and a mother with her three children.

As the exiles rumbled eastward, birch stands and pine forests gave way to wetlands and then to a rolling landscape dotted with scrubby brush. They passed villagers tending gardens of cabbages, beans, and potatoes. Convoys stacked with logs trundled by on a neighboring track, testifying to mighty forests somewhere close.

Soon children grew hungry and began to cry. Some deportees, including Father Joseph, had thought to bring food. Though he shared what he had, the priest warned his fellow travelers to ration carefully.

Days passed, and with each sunrise, mothers assured their children that today there would be food, but as the hours slipped by and their bellies ached, the mothers' promises showed themselves

to be hollow. The children drifted off into fitful sleep. With each kilometer, the air in the car grew closer. A nearby woman became hysterical. Ona sat. She neither screamed nor slept.

On the fifth day of travel, far from home, the cattle car's door opened with a thud to reveal a soup cauldron some yards from the tracks. The priest, who spoke fluent Russian from his St. Petersburg student days, translated the guards' instructions.

"They're letting one parent from each family off. You must leave your children on the train. Bring a cup," he said, loud enough for all to hear.

Childless adults, who had every reason to attempt an escape, had to stay put. Ona remained on the train.

Soon, all around, famished children gulped watery soup from cups, jars, and bottles. Ona felt no hunger. In the faces of the kids around her, she saw those of her own, and in their voices she heard her babies' cries. When she closed her eyes, she saw her daughters' and son's legs carrying them down the tracks as they called after her train. Father Joseph whispered prayer after prayer beside her. In time, she began to whisper too.

In Ona's train car, women organized to maintain as much dignity as they could and hung sheets around a hole cut in the car's floor, so the exiles could relieve themselves in relative privacy. The sheets are a detail that appears in virtually every deportation memoir.

Survivors also have told of bodies strewn alongside the railway. The dead, they say, were tossed out of the cars to make room for the living. Mothers, in particular, went crazy when forced to leave the body of a dead child behind. Ona, however, told nothing of such scenes—neither to us, her family, nor to the interviewer who recorded a lengthy conversation with her many years after her return. Perhaps she couldn't see out to the ground from the corner she shared with the priest? Perhaps her cohort was luckier or stronger and fared better? Or maybe these were details she chose not to recall.

20

The Soviet regime did not invent Siberian deportation. As early as the late seventeenth century, banishment to regions beyond the Ural Mountains had largely replaced the death penalty in Russia. Rather than beheading or drawing and quartering mutineers, murderers, and thieves, authorities exiled them instead. They marked the banished with slit nostrils, severed ears, brands, and tattoos so that, even if they escaped Siberia, they could never evade identification and humiliation. Eventually, punishment through exile targeted POWs, counterfeiters, military deserters, aging and infirm serfs, loan defaulters, and Old Believers deemed heretical for their rejection of post-reform Russian Orthodox dogma.

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Siberian marches took up to two years to complete. Convoys of prisoners shackled in iron walked up to five thousand kilometers eastward through snow, marshland, and insect swarms. In 1863 barges came into use to transport exiles for part of their journey, but first they had to make it to the north-flowing river system on foot.

Exile had a purpose besides simple punishment: Russia's unwanted, destitute, and criminal elements were to settle the vast open land and conquer its native peoples—the reindeer herders, hunter-gatherers, fishers, and nomads—who had lived there for millennia. Officials hoped that a lasting, more recognizably Russian society would ultimately take root and grow on the steppes and

tundra. But for this to happen, they soon realized that families—specifically, women—were needed.

Hoping to engineer family units, the Russian government attempted to procure wives for exiles. They offered to buy indigenous Siberian girls at a price of 150 rubles per head. It didn't work. Indigenous families refused to sell their daughters, though Siberia's male peasants gave up their female relatives to exiles for 50 rubles each. But despite these and other incentives—tax breaks for first marriages and cash rewards for successful matches—by 1828, Siberian settlements still failed to thrive and for the same reason: a lack of women.

Unlike Ona, who traveled over the Urals without her family, most women who ended up in Siberia in the nineteenth century were wives accompanying husbands into exile. Often these women marched with their spouses by choice, since being left behind as a convict's widow could be a much harder fate than a life in exile, so strong was the stigma of Siberian punishment. In other cases, women ended up there because of crimes they had committed, though few—around 20 percent—had been convicted for serious offenses. The journey for female exiles was far more perilous than for men making the same trip. When stopping for shelter in fetid stations along the way, both women and children risked sexual attack.

The region's long-standing gender disparity, with men massively outnumbering women, changed dramatically under Stalin. The special settlements of the 1930s through the 1950s were overwhelmingly female, since most of the wives of the so-called enemies of the people (like Ona) ended up there. Although life was very difficult on the settlements, it was still a far cry from the Gulag, and female exiles had much better chances for survival. By 1941, the year the USSR officially entered World War II, the ratio of women to men in some rural areas of the Soviet Union had widened to 6:1. Staggering Soviet military losses in World War II would only heighten the disproportion.

Ona's closest male confidant in Siberia was the elderly priest who traveled with her into exile. In contrast to my grandmother's

seventeen years, his banishment was comparatively short. Father Joseph was allowed to return to Lithuania after only four winters, when the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR intervened on his behalf. Why the chairman did so is unclear. Some say he was repaying an old favor; others are more cynical and believe the priest's release was calculated. Indeed, archived documents confirm that upon Father Joseph's return to Kaunas in 1944, authorities tried to recruit him as an informant for the KGB. When they failed, the secret police planned to exile the priest once again in 1953. Father Joseph died before it could happen.

21

For two weeks, the exiles' train rolled past shabby settlements and across scrubland until it crossed the Ural Mountains, the gateway to Siberia. From their second-story perches, the teenagers marveled at the trains bursting with soldiers and munitions that moved past them as their locomotive stopped to give way. They helped Father Joseph up to a window so he could ask a passing Russian worker what was happening. *Voina* (war) was the answer.

Nazi Germany had invaded the Soviet Union and, with it, Lithuania. The Luftwaffe had bombed the latter's capital, Vilnius, and the Wehrmacht had taken the country. From deep inside the car's throng, a woman shouted for joy at the news.

"We're saved," said Ona, helping the priest set his feet back down on the car's floor. "The army will need every train, and they'll dump us out on the tundra. We'll walk home."

But the train didn't stop. It pushed farther and farther east and then suddenly dipped south, until it finally came to a halt.

The high window framed the windblown steppes of the Altai, a region suffering through a third consecutive year of drought. Livestock milled in the distance. Skinny as fence posts, what looked to be goats revealed themselves, upon closer inspection, to be malnourished cows. With no timber to burn, the people who lived off this land made fuel by mixing together manure and straw and tamping them down.

The village of Kupina was a collection of mud huts located a little over halfway between Kaunas and Tomsk. It was peopled with Ukrainians exiled to one of thousands of special settlements starting in 1932, when Stalin deported three hundred thousand people from Ukraine to Siberia and then systematically starved the millions left behind to death.

Authorities moved exiles around Siberia, from settlement to settlement, depending on what work was to be done and on the whims of the regime. Some deportees speculated that these transfers were intended to heighten their sense of insecurity. Those taken to the Far North, near the Arctic Circle, landed on wild terrain without shelter or building materials. Though it was still midsummer, cold winds blew. New arrivals huddled under upturned boats and inside tents made of American flour sacks while they waited for lumber to arrive. Farther south along the shore, others built makeshift barracks of logs pulled from rivers. They sealed the gaps between them with mud, fashioned bricks for clay ovens by hand, and improvised thatched roofs by laying birch bark on manure. Where there were hills, exiles burrowed and created turf houses.

On the steppes of Kupina, Ona exited the train for the first time since boarding in Lithuania. When her feet hit the ground, though, she could barely stand. The earth moved under her, surging forward with an irresistible force.

"Train legs," the priest laughed, watching her stumble.

All around them stretched wide, brown, and treeless plains. No guns pointed at them here. No violence threatened. No guards glowered. But there was no escape, only wind and emptiness.

Exhausted deportees collapsed onto the floor of Kupina's schoolhouse, the sole wooden building in the village. They bedded down on top of whatever bundles they had brought with them. In the morning, seasoned and strong Ukrainian women roused the ragged travelers. They brought milk, onions, and fresh cheese for the

newcomers. It was a staggering gesture of generosity, given how little these people had themselves. Doubtless they remembered their own journeys into this land, when they too had been forced onto trains a half decade earlier. "Kindness all around," Ona would say, remembering those women.

22

For twelve days, the exiles stayed on the steppes and helped harvest the spindly wheat crop. Once the work was complete, Ona and her fellow exiles were herded onto trucks and traveled back to the train once again. They continued by rail for another two days, stopping at the docks of Novosibirsk just before dawn.

In the time they had spent in the Altai, Ona and her companions had learned of a factory that made Siberian felt boots. Everyone who could had bought a pair. Ultimately, the boots protected Ona's toes, health, and possibly her life. She put them on at the first sign of Siberian winter and didn't take them off for six months. As thick as her index finger was long, the boots came up to her knees. "It was like walking with stumps," she laughed, remembering them decades later. Besides bread and milk, the boots were the last things she would buy for many years.

At the docks of Novosibirsk, the train jogged back and forth for what seemed an eternity. Clutching their new boots, deportees shuffled and banged against one another. Finally, the convoy slunk onto a series of three connected barges, and when they emerged from the train, the exiles caught sight of a Siberian river for the first time—the massive Ob.

Rivers were key not only to the exile system but also to Siberia's economy, culture, and climate. In summer, barges moved goods

and people. All winter, even today, the frozen waterways served as ice roads for transport trucks. Those who have never visited Siberia often imagine the region to be a solid expanse of ice and snow, a wasteland in all seasons. But, in truth, the land of eastern Russia is incredibly diverse. Much of it is temperate and blanketed with birch, pine, aspen, and larch trees. Its forests teem with wildlife and mushrooms, its waters with fish, and its fields with berries. Parts of the area, such as the region of Krasnoyarsk—as one daughter of deportees described it to me—are mountainous, lake speckled, and beautiful, especially in spring when wildflowers abound.

But the north-flowing rivers result in an inescapable climactic challenge. In winter, the rivers that feed into Arctic waters freeze first at their mouths. Once this happens, ice clogs the northern flow. And as the water freezes ever farther south, the rivers spill over banks, flooding the land far and wide. The process happens every year, and as a result, much of Siberia is a swamp.

Wetlands breed insects. More than the cold or even the hunger or the hard work, it was the Siberian mosquitoes that tortured Ona in exile. On spring and summer evenings, she tied her cuffs with rags before sitting down to write letters, but even this didn't prevent insects from biting a bracelet-like ring around her hand. The smoke she used to keep them out of the house made it impossible to breathe, but without the smoke, the mosquitoes would have made it impossible to live.

As the exiles traveled up the broad and slow-moving Ob, they roamed the barges. Compared to the cramped conditions of the cattle cars, life on the water was a pleasure. They basked in the sun and breathed in the fresh air while traveling a river so wide they were also free of buzzing pests. They had what they needed to bathe and to drink, and with no work assignments, the exiles could finally relax. As she floated and watched the Ob's shore, Ona listened to the chatter of languages both familiar and strange: Bessarabian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian.

The barges eventually docked where the land was flat and fertile enough to grow vegetables. Ona and her fellow captives first made

FIG. 21. The Ob River, 2010. Photo by the author.

their way to a village in ruins for a couple of nights, and then they were inexplicably sent back to the docks for another two days. There again, with nowhere to run and no escape possible without watercraft, guards were unnecessary. Finally, a couple hundred people were taken to Krivosheino, a Russian village whose locals greeted the exiles with bread. The newcomers built fires and boiled water for the tea they had bought at the village store. After a month of travel and uprootedness, and perhaps despite themselves, the deportees had begun to establish patterns and to configure themselves. They formed family-size groups and pairings like that of Ona and Father Joseph. Another five Lithuanians, women and children, now joined them, and together the seven constituted a unit of makeshift kin.

Only three thousand Lithuanian exiles found themselves in the Tomsk region before 1945, and then another few thousand joined them in the postwar years. Most others ended up in the Altai, Novosibirsk, Kazakhstan, and the Komi region. As for accommodations, Ona was among the fortunate. She and her companions

would not live in mud huts or in improvised tents; instead, they would live in an established village.

With the country at war, farm workers were scarce, so deportees cultivated Siberia's land to feed the Soviet Union. Supervisors from various collectives arrived on horseback to choose laborers. They sought strong, capable people. One selected Ona immediately.

"We are seven," she said to the man in the saddle. "If you want me, you must take the others too."

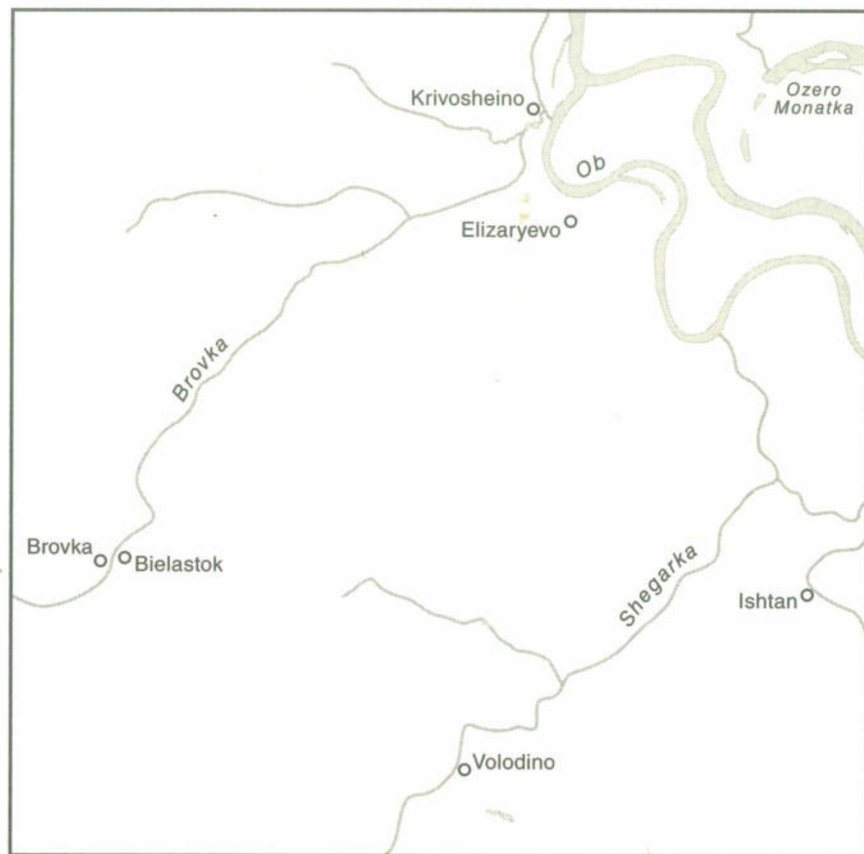
I imagine Ona came into her own in Siberia. Distance and hardship either forced or allowed her to locate a power within herself. The wife of an authoritarian and militaristic man, she must have deferred to her husband for years before her arrest. But in a strange and surprising way, Siberia made her mighty. There, Ona had no choice but to take up "men's work," as she called it in the letters she wrote over the decades that followed. She donned her husband's suit and assumed the role of protector of the weak. The first sign of this newfound strength and courage showed itself that day the workers were sorted and she dared issue an ultimatum to the man who looked her over.

Her demand worked. In August 1941 Ona and her six new kin set out for Brovka's dairy farm together.

23

In 2010 I decided to try and find my grandmother's place of exile. I hoped that in going to Siberia, the place would change in my imagination. Perhaps instead of thinking of Siberia only as a wound and a source of family trauma, I could come to see it as a real place of living people. I figured there had to be more to Siberia than Gulags and graveyards. After all, it was also home to ancient nomadic cultures of reindeer herders, lost colonies of heretical Russian Old Believers, solitary grizzly bears, majestic mountains, and modern cities. So, in preparation for my journey, I began to read and dream. Soon, instead of fear, I started to feel anticipation.

Though I initially had no idea where on the vast map of Siberia to find Ona's village, after enlisting the help of a Russian friend, Elena, Brovka turned out to be quite easy to locate. Native knowledge goes a long way, and within minutes, Elena had made her way to the home page of Krivosheino District (a place-name I'd pulled from one of Ona's letters), where she found a map. A detail from the website showed a river called Brovka. Along its shore lay a village named, in turn, Upper Brovka (there was no Lower Brovka), situated only three kilometers from a place called Bielastok (or Belostok). A memory of something I once read in Ona's letters returned to me; Bielastok—named for Białystok, the city of origin of the migrants who established the settlement—had to be the village that my grandmother described as a Polish kolkhoz.



MAP 3. Krivosheino District, Tomsk, Brovka, and the Ob River. Created by Erin Greb.

I sat down on the floor to study the maps I'd printed. One put Siberia squarely at its center, so that Lithuania lay sideways, its small territory slinking down the earth's curvature. Snaking my fingers up from the city of Tomsk, I followed the River Ob northward until I found Krivosheino and, by extension, nearby Brovka.

Of my entire family, my cousin Darius was the only one who didn't tell me I was crazy for wanting to visit Ona's village. Other relatives voiced worries about food, safety, the harsh climate, and recent environmental (nuclear) disasters. Again and again, I heard, "You can't go *there*!" Finally, with tickets booked and contacts made, I showed that I could. Only once Darius had agreed to travel with me, though, did everyone else breathe a sigh of relief.

The summer of our trip to Siberia was Russia's hottest on record, with temperatures reaching the high thirties and low forties Celsius. Forest fires burned throughout the country, but the blazes that the Russian government lamented as a "natural disaster" were nothing of the sort. They had resulted from a systematic mismanagement of the land. Wetlands were drained and mined for peat, huge territories had been handed over to private corporations, and the country's forest ministry was reduced to a skeleton staff of twelve individuals who were so swamped with paperwork they could not patrol the lands for which they were responsible. But now, the mismanagement of the countryside had begun to affect city dwellers.

When we landed in Moscow in early August, the streets outside the airport were suffocating. Smoke and smog hung heavily in the air and weighed in our lungs. Health authorities cautioned citizens to remain indoors, to air-condition their apartments, and to stay off the streets. Despite the warnings, Moscow's roads teemed with cars that spewed ever more fumes into the atmosphere. The death rate rose dramatically, and the city's top doctor reported seven hundred mortalities per day.

That evening, my cousin and I boarded the eastbound train that would be our home for four days. Already exhausted from our journey to that point, we slept deeply until morning and awoke to the sight of the birch stands and pine forests while we went rushing past. I sat in my bedclothes for hours, watching as the rolling landscape gave way to swampland and back. Darius, who lives among the redwoods of northern California, marveled at the scrawny trees. The scent of smoke still seeped into our cabin through its sealed windows.

My cousin and I had each brought copious amounts of reading material, anticipating boredom and long yawning stretches as we traveled across Russia. This was not the case. Instead, our time passed easily, and I found myself gripped by my cousin's stories about the grandmother he had known so much better than I. As

he remembered her to me, Darius described how Ona had felt to the touch, how she'd moved, and how easily she'd laughed.

That night, after our first full day of train travel, I lay on my berth, listening to the wheels rumbling against the rails. I calculated that when my grandmother had made this very trip by cattle car, Ona had been thirty-six, a year younger than I was that summer.

Would I have survived a similar fate?

On train platforms along the way, we observed elderly women selling flowers and berries by the cupful. Vendors offered beer and little homemade meals of boiled potatoes and chicken, holding their wares up to the train's windows for inspection as it slowed to a stop.

Eventually, Darius and I decided to take advantage of the platform commerce. We waited to get off the train in hope of finding some ice cream to buy. Our *provodnitsa*, the Russian "train hostess" who kept an eye on all the goings-on in the car, joined us and stood at the ready with her key. Despite my guidebook's warnings about these train women and how one must never cross them, our *provodnitsa* had a sweet disposition. She liked order and took her job very seriously, locking our cabin door whenever we left our quarters and offering to bring us mineral water to drink. She vacuumed daily and was constantly bending over to tidy the long, thin piece of linen that covered the corridor carpets. It was a sort of long dish towel that kept the actual rug from getting stepped on—a redundancy that struck me as both crazy and charming.

As the train rumbled to a stop, I noticed the *provodnitsa* had changed out of her uniform and into a roomy flowery dress, so I asked if her day was over. No, she answered, she was going all the way home to Tomsk. Then she inquired about us.

"Us too," I replied. "We're headed to a place near Tomsk where our grandmother lived for seventeen years—Brovka, near the Ob."

Though I hadn't used the word "exile," the *provodnitsa*'s face fell, and she became uncomfortable, as if I'd told her that we were going to visit the site of a family member's murder. Then she said

something about her own family (her mother, perhaps?) who had also been deported or imprisoned. I understood the word *lager* (camp), but I had a hard time following her with my meager Russian skills.

I didn't know what else to say. She opened the door, and we nodded to one another in silence.

24

Brovka's sister village, Bielastok, was the older of the two neighboring settlements. After moving to the marshy and buggy Tomsk region of Siberia voluntarily, a small group of Poles had put down stakes and named their new town after their home city of Białystok, which was part of the Russian Empire during the nineteenth-century Siberian migration. The Białystokers came east to populate the territory the czar had granted, building homes, a Polish-language school, and even a Catholic church named for Saint Anthony of Padua, patron saint of lost things—perhaps even of lost homelands and families. The Poles planted gardens, raised animals, and managed to survive on those harsh acres.

In 1937 during Stalin's Great Terror, Bielastok's Saint Anthony's Church was closed. Thieves took its organ and furniture and destroyed its icons. Reopened on the saint's feast day in June 1998, the sanctuary is now the last wooden Catholic church in western Siberia and one of only two in the entire Tomsk region. A Polish priest from the homeland celebrates Mass every Sunday. Cultural differences between Polish Poles and Siberian Poles have proven to be great, and during our days in the village Darius and I heard stories of tensions between the cleric and his parishioners.

"I don't understand a thing that priest says," ranted one elderly Bielastoker, complaining of the cleric's accent and general foreignness. "I told him, *I built that church*! Now, *you* go pray."

FIG. 22. Saint Anthony's Church, 2010. Photo by the author.

Only around 1920, several decades after the Poles had settled, did Belarusians arrive, fleeing famine and typhus. These arrivals were even poorer and more ragged than the Polish villagers of Bielastok, who called the newcomers "shlep-shoes," in imitation of the sound their birch-bark footwear made when they walked. The Belarusians built their own village, right across the river from

Bielastok, and called their new home Brovka after the waterway that separated them from their neighbors. By all accounts, Polish Bielastokers did not receive the Belarusian Brovkans with open arms, resenting these shabby Slavic cousins for sponging off their decades-long work to render the marshland of the Tomsk region arable. Conflicts arose. Children tousled in fistfights and hurled insults at one another across the river.

Over the days we spent in Bielastok-Brovka, Darius and I pieced together the origin story of these two villages. As a result, we finally began to make sense of a part of Ona's tale that we'd never really understood. She'd always told us that she'd felt more accepted by the Orthodox Belarusians (in Brovka) than by the Catholic Poles (in Bielastok), although, culturally speaking, she should have had more in common with the latter. I now suspect that the Polish villagers of Bielastok may have been less than welcoming to the forced Lithuanian exiles because, just as the Belarusians had arrived to the relatively cushy environment that the Poles had created, here now they had to accommodate a trainload of other deportees. Ona's perceived rejection wasn't personal; it was likely simply a manifestation of local culture and of the universal suspicion and resentment of old-timers toward newcomers.

The Polish and Belarusian communities lived side by side until the last house in Brovka was demolished in 1990. Any past animosities seem to have dissipated, because when I asked what had happened to Brovka's last inhabitants, my guide shrugged and replied that they had moved to Bielastok. Even their languages eventually melded. Today's Bielastokers speak a version of the Polish language that has become so infused with Belarusian and Siberian Russian that twenty-first-century linguists travel there to study the isolated community.

Though Ona traveled there by barge, Darius and I made our way to her place of exile by car. From Tomsk, our trip to Brovka and Bielastok on a surprisingly modern highway took around two hours. Off in the distance, the Ob River looked nothing like our Canadian

waterways. There were no large rocks, no brush on its banks. Men fished along its edge, and I wondered about the water's toxicity. Fallout from a nuclear accident almost two decades earlier had been the main argument my husband had used to try and sway me from making the Siberian trip.

Several months after I returned from Siberia, I read a scientific article describing contamination levels in the Ob. Much of the analysis eluded me, but I learned that its water and silt contain alarming levels of radioactive isotopes (plutonium and neptunium) from pre-1963 nuclear arms testing and from later underground tests conducted at weapons plants located on the river's tributaries. Arms production had begun in the region in 1949 (when Ona lived there), and the study described precariously stored nuclear waste in the area. The crisis came in 1993 when a waste tank exploded at the then secret installation called Tomsk-7.

As we approached the Ob, I could make out Tomsk-7's cooling towers in the distance. When I asked about the accident, our driver laughed, telling me it had been no big deal, "just a radioactive cloud." My husband later commented that this levity was probably a survival strategy. After all, what choice did Tomsk residents have but to be cavalier?

At the sign for Bielastok, we took a sharp left turn, then bumped down a winding road and past a pond that the locals jokingly called Lake Baikal. The setting sun outlined the silhouettes of two shirtless boys headed for a dip. With its blue-shuttered houses and blue fences, its kitchen gardens and carved ornamentation, Bielastok looked similar to the villages we'd passed while on the train. Aging neighbors smiled toothlessly and looked us over as they sat and chatted over tea and cigarettes, watching the day disappear over the horizon. Apart from gaining electricity and natural gas lines for heat, I imagine little has changed in these villagers' way of life since the 1950s.

But today, Bielastok is dying. This is undeniable. Already in 2010, at the time of our visit, it was a village of old women, widows for

FIG. 23. Bielastok, 2010. Photo by the author.

the most part. The youth are leaving, especially the young men. It's no longer possible to live or raise a family on the wages paid at the farm, I was told, so everyone moves on.

Buses used to run here three times a day, but service recently dwindled to three times a week. Children are present in significant numbers only during summer holidays, when they come from Tomsk to visit their grandparents. The kids we met glowed with happiness and curiosity. Darius and I watched in amazement as five-year-old Vanya rode up and down the village's main drag on a giant horse at least four times his height. (Inevitably, late in the day, the horse spooked, and the boy fell.) When their grandparents die, will these children have any reason to come to Bielastok? At the time of our visit, only forty-two children were registered at the local school, and its administration had to lobby hard to keep it open, arguing for the benefits of its distinct cultural and linguistic education. The next day, when we went from house to house, making inquiries, I found myself wondering if we were meeting the village's last inhabitants.

Never did Ona believe she would spend close to two decades in Siberia. Three years in Brovka, tops, she figured, despite the twenty-year service contract she'd been required to sign upon her arrival at the collective farm in 1941. When the war ended, she reasoned, she would be able to go home.

Brovka's exiles followed the war as closely as they could. Their tools: a propagandistic regional newspaper and an atlas borrowed from the village schoolchildren. As they tracked the front, Ona and her fellow Lithuanians rejoiced at each German advance, believing every Soviet loss moved them closer to salvation. Not one of them could imagine the ghettos and mass graves that now mired their homeland. None envisioned the bullet-riddled forests or that their loved ones might be involved in the slaughter. Only Father Joseph warned against celebration, predicting Germany's defeat.

"Once the Americans join the Russians," he said gravely, "we'll all be buried alive."

He wasn't wrong. The Red Army reoccupied Lithuania in 1944, at which point a new wave of Siberian deportations began. It ended only in 1953, the year of Stalin's death. Over nine years, 111,000 more Lithuanians were sent into exile. Although far larger in scale, these later deportations targeted more select groups than those of 1941. For example, 1947 saw the mass deportation of Lithuanian so-called kulaks, or wealthy peasants. Also targeted were families suspected of or found to be supporting the Forest Brothers—guerrilla fighters who, from 1944, waged an armed resistance against Soviet occupation. But in 1941 Soviet victory had seemed impossible to both the exiles and the local Siberians.

Even the village boys drafted into the Red Army were rooting for the Germans. They vowed not to shoot the enemy and promised to surrender as prisoners of war instead. Deeply embedded in this culture was the image of Germans as hardworking, honest, and cultured. In 1762, Catherine the Great invited ethnic Germans to settle along the Volga River. German-speaking Lutherans, Catholics, and Mennonites arrived in the eighteenth century to enjoy land grants, tax breaks, military service exemptions, and religious

freedoms offered by the Russian monarch. They came to be called Volga Germans and lived peacefully alongside Russians for centuries.

But the Siberians who went to fight (or, rather, to surrender) soon discovered that the Germans of the Third Reich were not at all like those in Russia. Young men began to return with stories from the front. They told of how they had been held and starved in pens so crowded that only the deceased could lie down. By the end of 1941, two-thirds of the three million Soviet soldiers taken prisoner by Germany were dead. According to the historian Timothy Snyder, "As many Soviet prisoners of war died *on a single given day* in autumn 1941 as did British and American prisoners of war over the course of the entire Second World War."

Back in German-occupied Lithuania, 11,500 Soviet prisoners of war had ended up in Newtown, where Anthony was working as police chief. They had been marched there from the front lines, and judging from the photographs that Romas showed me when we met in Lithuania, most had been Central Asians. Some may even have come from places not too far from Brovka and Bielastok. The Germans designed their Soviet POW camps to end life. No one in the Nazi administration disputed the fact that these holding pens were, in fact, passive killing machines. Indeed, Alfred Rosenberg once said, "The more of these prisoners die, the better for us." Captives were counted but not registered by name. Authorities made no provisions for food, shelter, or medical care. There were no clinics, toilets, or other sanitation facilities. Shelter from the elements was scarce. Daily calorie quotients fell far below survival levels.

All this was true of Newtown's POW camp. Everything we know about that city's Oflag 60 comes from German and Soviet postwar investigations. No official camp documents survived the war. There are no extant prisoner memoirs or diaries. Oflag 60, though an officers' camp by name (Oflag stands for *Offizierlager*), actually functioned as a Stalag (*Stammlager*), or camp for rank-and-file prisoners. In operation from the summer of 1941 until the summer of 1942, Oflag 60 was overcrowded from the beginning. Prisoners lived in makeshift sheds that they themselves built upon arrival.

FIG. 24. Prisoners of Oflag 60, 1941. Private collection. Courtesy of Romas Treideris.

Though the vast majority of Newtown's POWs died of starvation, typhus, and exhaustion, they faced active violence too. Each week, the camp's commando and sometimes its guards selected and executed certain prisoners. I imagine this practice was the captors' way of terrorizing and therefore exerting control over the rest. Every one of those anonymous prisoners now lies buried in a mass grave in Newtown's Jewish cemetery, alongside the victims of the city's first two massacres—the killings of Lithuanian communists and of Jewish men.

To make matters worse for the Soviet POWs, Stalin was suspicious and unforgiving of those who did not resist and were taken captive. His Order 227, issued in July 1942 and known as "Not a Step Back," declared: "Panic-mongers and cowards are to be exterminated on sight." When Soviet POWs were finally released in 1945, the tyrant sent penal brigades to hunt them down, calling them "a dangerous, fainthearted, cowardly element." After surviving the Nazi prison camps, many young soldiers were then sent to Siberia for up to twenty-five years.

25

Over the first three years of exile, Ona's life comprised a thousand tiny details of survival. She and her six companions lived in a single room and slept on narrow wooden cots. One sleeper could turn over only when all of them did. They pooled their resources and ate together. When time allowed, they told stories by the stove in the evenings. By day they went out to work.

The exiles toiled on the farm or in the forest. Tree felling—a job that most village women, including Ona, did in the early days of the war—was the most dangerous of assignments. During the war years, Soviet aircraft factories needed wood, so the collective farm sent teenage girls and adult women to harvest straight trees of specified lengths. They had no training and learned as they went. Timber often fell without warning, killing workers below. When I visited the village in 2010, an elderly Bielastoker named Anna told me how, when she was out cutting trees as a girl, a massive trunk had come down unexpectedly. It had grazed her nose as it fell, she said, brushing her fingers across her face for emphasis. When it landed with a crash on the toes of her boots, luckily, they were several sizes too big, and the tree crushed only leather and air. Anna's face lit up in a one-toothed laugh at this detail.

We talked in her immaculate house. A carpet hung on a wall beside her, and a wind-up alarm clock ticked loudly on the table. Anna wore

FIG. 25. Anna with the church key, 2010. Photo by the author.

a pink T-shirt with the words "Black Rose" emblazoned in English across her chest. She'd paired it with a tidy navy blue skirt and requisite floral headscarf. In the photograph I took at the end of our meeting, Anna displays the village key to Saint Anthony's Church.

"Your grandmother was very religious," she said. "Very spiritual. She used to tell the workers at the farm that the only way to survive was to maintain faith. That if you believed in God, everything would be all right."

For some deportees, the experience of being ripped from their homes and separated from their families shook their faith. But for others, religious practice became a symbol of resistance. In the absence of men, and especially of male clergy (for whom it was dangerous to minister openly), women formed their own prayer circles. Now, for the first time, I understood that maintaining her belief in God had been a revolutionary act on Ona's part. Whereas in every other way, she seems to have put her head down, carried

out her work diligently, and kept her opinions to herself, in this small way, she revolted. She continued to talk to God.

In addition to tree felling, Brovka's women were also assigned to wintertime threshing. Since Siberia's growing season lasts only a few short months, it was all the workers of the collective farm could do to harvest their grain by the end of summer. They left threshing for the winter. Although combine harvesters eventually came to Brovka, in wartime it was humans, not horses, that powered the threshers.

First, the workers split the straw from the grain, a process that took all day. Then they spent the night separating wheat from chaff. This job took three people: one worker poured the grain; a second walked round and round, turning the machine; and a third collected the separated kernels. The work was done far from the village, and Ona often arrived at the thresher to find the wheat frozen and covered in snow. To keep warm, they burned mountains of straw and burrowed into piles of insulating chaff during breaks.

Eventually, conditions improved. Within three years of their arrival, Ona and her fellow Brovkans turned to tending animals. Each worker specialized in one aspect of dairy farming. Ona's specialty was tending calves, a comparatively good lot for a deportee. Whereas some exiles froze their hands cleaning fish in the Arctic or choked on deadly dust in mines, Ona spent cold days among the warm bodies and soft eyes of young creatures. She gave each of them a name that they learned to recognize. In spring, when she called, her calves would come barreling from the fields to greet her. In winter, they flanked her in the barn, nuzzling up against her thighs and exhaling long streams of vapor.

Nina, one of the farm's milkers, had lived for a time in Ona's house as a young woman. Darius and I sat at her kitchen table, listening as she talked. Nina's gray hair was plaited and pulled into a low bun. Like Anna, she too was in her eighties. Out through the window, I could see haystacks and a mustard-yellow Lada. Nina's family's home had been far away, she explained, thus she'd had to set out for work in the middle of the night. Since Ona had lived

FIG. 26. Ona tending animals in Siberia, 1949. Private collection. Courtesy of the author.

very close to their workplace, she'd offered the girl a place to sleep. Nina couldn't remember hearing much about Ona's children, but when I asked her about Agnieszka, my grandmother's cow, she laughed and nodded. "Yes, she was black and white."

I pulled out a few photographs, trying to jog more memories. Nina apologized for her poor eyesight as she flipped through the pictures, predicting she would be of little help, but after an instant, she paused at an image saying, "This one looks familiar." It showed Ona sitting by her Siberian house. A few minutes later, we understood why she had recognized the image.

Above my head in the kitchen hung a picture frame filled with

black-and-white photographs. We'd seen similar collages in each house we'd visited. Often these frames hung well above eye level and were decorated with white paper doilies. Giving Nina some space to look at the photos without pressure, or perhaps just trying to take everything in, I glanced up at a frame above my head. Toward its bottom, I found a copy of the very same photograph of my grandmother that Nina had recognized. With yelps of surprise and excitement, Darius and I jumped up to examine all the frames in the house carefully, looking for more traces of our grandmother. It wasn't long before we'd found one in the next room—a group snapshot taken in Canada in 1957. It showed all of Ona's children, their spouses, and her first grandchild.

More convergences.

26

Between 1946 and 1948, close to two million people died in the Soviet Union as a direct result of starvation and malnutrition. But city dwellers perished in far greater numbers than did those in villages like Brovka and Bielastok, where both exiles and migrants shared wisdom and natural resources to survive. Some deportees carried knowledge of edible and medicinal plants with them into Siberia. They prepared dishes made from tree bark to supplement their diets during the years of famine.

In Ona's case, Brovka's long-standing villagers taught her to forage and showed her which wild plants she could eat—chickweed and nettle—and which to avoid. Some of the weeds tasted like garlic, and some were sour. "Yesterday, it was grasses with grains; today it's grains with grasses," Ona joked in her interview years later.

Still, hungry foragers made mistakes. Millions of people, not only deportees, became sick or disabled after eating toxic plants. When one Bielastok mother fell ill from a saltbush soup, a doctor prescribed as a cure three kilograms of flour, which could only be purchased with an official document. The prescription saved her.

Collective farm workers were paid in calories, according to daily production norms. Category One workers did not meet the farm's target production levels (Father Joseph, who did light work such as collecting horse bridles from field workers, belonged to this

category); thus, they received the fewest rations—between 400 and 580 calories per day. This level of sustenance was insufficient to maintain bodily functions. Without the support of their fellow exiles, no Category One workers would have survived.

Hard labor combined with malnutrition caused many deported women to stop menstruating. The difficult conditions also delayed puberty for their daughters. "Where are you supposed to find the extra blood to give up?" one nurse explained to her troubled patients.

Category Two workers, or those who achieved between 100 and 150 percent of targeted production levels, received more rations. They were enough for the people to function but not to do much else.

Finally, there were the production heroes, the so-called Stakhanovites, who accomplished more than 150 percent of targets. They received superior rations as a reward.

Without exception, every Siberian who knew her described Ona as a "good worker" and an "award winner." Her rations would have been superior to those of the priest and the mothers with children. An agrarian childhood had prepared Ona for life in Siberia—especially in this part of it, where the land was arable and livestock plentiful—in ways that nothing else could have. She knew how to make laundry soap from ash and lye, to raise and slaughter pigs, to smoke and preserve meat, to pickle vegetables and preserve fruits, to milk a cow, to make cheese, to keep chickens, and to construct a root cellar. She could bake and cook with the most modest ingredients and create festive spreads for village celebrations. Never before had she considered these skills to be valuable or special; they came from her previous life, passed down from her grandmother and mother. But in Siberia they made her both a good diplomat and friend, and they raised her standing in the community.

In 1958, her final year in Siberia, Ona was honored as a *peredovik*, a "superior worker." Stalin and his successors distributed a myriad of medals for various achievements, including distinction in teaching, accomplished mothering, and courageous military service; for dedication in the cultivation of previously uncultivated lands; for

the careful restoration of war-torn cities; and, evidently, for expert animal husbandry. Even deportees could earn such awards.

When my grandmother traveled to a conference in Tomsk to accept her prize, she left her young bovine charges for the first time. Despite Ona's assurances that the calves would come when called, the creatures missed their trusted and beloved caretaker. They wandered hungry and forlorn until her return.

27

Years after her return from exile, Ona only hinted at the emotional toll of the decades-long separation from her children. On the train to Siberia, she had felt no hunger, she said. All she had felt was numbness—or, I suppose, nothing at all. But in Brovka the loss of her family triggered an ache.

She and her children had no contact for six years. The first successful connection was both fleeting and one-sided. The postcard is a relic, its yellowing stock a witness to an improbable journey. It arrived in Germany in 1947, when Anthony and the three children were still living in a DP camp.

Before receiving the card, Ona's children had no idea if she was alive or dead or where she had disappeared. But that year mail started to travel between Siberia and Soviet Lithuania. Ona began to send news of her survival to her sister and to tell of her life in exile. Margarita reciprocated by telling Ona that her children had escaped to the West with their father.

But with diplomatic ties severed between Germany and the USSR, no mail could travel directly between the two enemy countries. Looking for a way to get word to her family, Ona remembered a cousin of Anthony's who lived in America. She wrote to her children care of him.

The postcard reads:

FIG. 27. Ona's postcard, 1947. Private collection. Courtesy of the author.

My Dear Children,

It made me indescribably happy to learn that you were alive and well. I'm healthy. I work on a farm. In my thoughts and in my heart I am always with you . . .

Your Mother

The year 1947 seems so early to me. Stalinism (along with Stalin himself) was still alive and well. It was the year Poland officially became a People's Republic. The year the Marshall Plan was born. The year they say the Cold War really began. It seems early until I remember that six years had already passed since Ona's deportation and that the little boy she had left behind was by then thirteen.

28

It was also in 1947 that a Forest Brother, code-named Aras (Eagle), was killed by the pro-Soviet paramilitary at the Lithuanian farm belonging to Margarita, Ona's sister, and her husband, Juozas. According to Soviet documents, this "bandit" had been a regular visitor there. The paramilitary claimed that Margarita's husband was a material and moral supporter of the armed resistance and specifically of Aras when he came to the farm. They arrested Juozas.

Further, in a gesture designed to humiliate both the living and the dead, they forced Juozas to sit atop Aras's corpse as he transported it by horse and carriage to the local marketplace, where he was ordered to dump it. Displaying mutilated bodies in public squares was common Soviet practice. Secret police could then see who recognized the dead or reacted with sorrow.

The Soviet courts sentenced Juozas to two years of hard labor in the Gulag, while Margarita was deported to a special settlement in Krasnoyarsk, a Siberian region some 600 kilometers east of Tomsk. Both were exiled from Lithuania in 1948.

Juozas survived his Gulag sentence, but Siberia's harsh climate, food shortages, and hard work all took their toll. He died shortly after joining his wife at her special settlement. Upon his death, Ona and Margarita petitioned for transfer on family reunification grounds. Initially, they asked that Ona be allowed to leave Brovka to join Margarita. The traces of this request highlight a rare moment of

FIG. 28. Juozas's Siberian grave, 1957. Private collection. Courtesy of the author.

humanity on the part of Soviet authorities: it was official policy to try to bring relatives back together whenever possible. The petitions attest that Margarita lived in the Siberian village of Yershovo alone and that she was unable to work. Included too are glowing character references for my grandmother. The government responded simply that it had no objection to the transfer.

In the end, it was Margarita who left her settlement to join Ona. There is no record as to how this change of plan came about, but in the autumn of 1954, the sisters set up house in Brovka together.

29

When Stalin died on March 5, 1953, the authorities embalmed his body and put it on public display at Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square. Millions of mourners came to view the tyrant's corpse. A great number of those visitors were sincere in their grief. In her biography of Stalin's daughter, Rosemary Sullivan cites a young Oleg Kalugin, who later became a general in the KGB:

> It is difficult for most people to imagine how a nation worshipped such a monster, but the truth is that most of us—those who had not felt the lash of his repression—did. We saw him as a man who led the country through the war, turned a backward nation into a superpower, built up our economy so that there was employment and housing and food enough for all. His propaganda machine was all-powerful . . . I revered Stalin.

But for Ona and other victims of Stalinist repression, the death of the tyrant was cause for celebration. Bielastok, for one, had suffered enormous losses under him. In 1938 the NKVD had gathered most of the hamlet's men and summarily executed them. Their crime, being Polish. Of some two hundred adult males, Stalin's men left only twenty alive. A monument to those murdered now stands in Bielastok, its inscription barely legible.

Nor had the Belarusians from across the river forgotten wartime outrages. When the potato crop had been poor and villagers were

starving, Soviet tax collectors nevertheless seized 90 percent of the harvest. Households that failed to meet their quotas were made to supplement their payments with grain, even though it too was in short supply. Stalin himself conceived of this practice during his final 1928 trip to Siberia. He called it the "Urals method."

For those who had suffered through his terror, Stalin's painful death had an aspect of poetic justice. By 1953 the leader's paranoia and anti-Semitism had reached absurd levels. He saw enemies everywhere, even among his healers. Ironically, on the eve of his demise, Stalin had imprisoned the very men who could have saved his life. He had accused his doctors of conspiring against him in a Zionist plot; the imagined conspiracy was dubbed "The Doctors' Plot." And so it was that no medical help was on hand when he needed it.

Stalin lay in his dacha, paralyzed, unable to speak, and incontinent after an apparent stroke. By the eve of his death, he had isolated himself so completely that even his closest associates dared not intervene in any way for fear of being punished once their leader recovered. In the end, Stalin's daughter, Svetlana, watched as her father drowned in his bodily fluids, his face and lips blackening from a lack of oxygen. With one last glance and an outstretched hand, Joseph Stalin expired. Theories of murder, some more plausible than others, abound.

Few could imagine the changes this death would bring. In Brovka and Bielastok, Ona heard people cursing Stalin openly, but she never believed they would get away with it. The loosening of speech must be a ploy, she thought, a ruse to prompt more arrests. Like so many others, she never dared show her joy at Stalin's demise.

But things did change and quickly. Soon, all fifteen men accused in the Doctors' Plot were released and declared innocent. Next, in an unprecedented move, the Ministry of the Interior released a statement that evidence against the men had been fabricated and the doctors' confessions extracted through torture. This was a sign of changes to come, a precursor to Nikolai Khrushchev's Thaw.

In his first year in power, Stalin's successor, Khrushchev, led the USSR to major criminal reforms and decreed broad amnesties,

releasing 48 percent of the Gulag population. A million people found themselves freed in one fell swoop. They included prisoners with sentences of fewer than five years, pregnant women, and mothers with children under the age of ten. That was only the beginning. Ultimately, between April 1953 (one month after Stalin's death) and January 1956, the Gulag population decreased by 66 percent.

But freedom came with challenges. Deportees and ex-prisoners faced an uphill battle when they returned home. In the minds of those they'd left behind, they remained "bandits," "gangsters," and "enemies of the people." Many found themselves both jobless and homeless. Some grew so desperate that they committed offenses (like posting anti-Soviet leaflets on ministry buildings) to ensure their rearrest and a return to the camps.

In Lithuania, it was not until the post-Soviet period of the 1990s and the publication of groundbreaking memoirs of Siberian exile that the public's attitude toward returnees began to shift significantly. Exile suddenly became a badge of honor, a mark of martyrdom, so even those who had never set foot near the Urals wanted a piece of that distinction. Fueled by the groundswell of national pride and support for the independence movement, a "myth of 'universal' deportation" appeared. According to this myth, all Lithuanians were deportees, removed if not from their land, then from their language and culture. It's easy to imagine how a nonmetaphorical deportee like Ona—one whose actual body traveled east across the tundra and back—might find such a recasting of exile questionable.

With her sentence of twenty years, my grandmother did not benefit from Khrushchev's first amnesty. Her sister Margarita, it seems, may have—almost. According to Ministry of the Interior documents, she received permission to leave Siberia in 1956, but then this permission, for reasons unknown, was revoked. It would be another two years before both women regained a modicum of their former freedom.

30

After three years of sleeping communally with six others and more than a decade living with a Belarusian family, Ona managed to procure a house in Brovka for her final years of exile. The log cabin she shared with Margarita stood beyond the village, past where its paved road now ends. Today, a sprawling new building, filled with dairy cows as in Ona's day, stands in place of the Soviet-era kolkhoz.

Darius and I followed Evdonia Vasilevna Bielyaskaya, or "Dusya," as she invited us to call her, down the winding dirt road and back up the hill. For a time, Dusya had lived in the house Ona built and then left behind. I knew we wouldn't see my grandmother's Siberian home. The cabin, only a stone's throw from the farm, had been demolished several decades before to make way for a new calving facility. After its razing, no building ever went up in its place, and no trace of it remains. Still, I wanted to see the site.

As we approached the farm, we could smell the cows, and Dusya remarked that it had been impossible to live at Ona's old place because of the odors. *But apparently not for Ona*, I thought with an edge of bitterness I didn't quite understand. But my mood quickly shifted when Dusya stopped before an open field and gestured out to a pasture. "It was there," she said. "You see those trees? That's where the garden was."

FIG. 29. Ona's Siberian house, 1958. Private collection. Courtesy of the author.

FIG. 30. Julija on Brovka's ridge, 2010. Courtesy of the author.

Across the stream from the kolkhoz and Ona's fallow garden plot, nothing of Brovka remains except a roll in the landscape. Brush and bramble have taken the former village's place, and grasses have reclaimed what were once the yards of both exiles and native-born Siberians. I found no trace of the Belarusian couple and their daughter or of my grandmother who had followed calves and sheep back and forth across these meadows. But the flowers all around grew from the seeds of the seeds of the seeds that had brushed onto Ona's pants as she walked. The flies that buzzed around my face were distant relatives of those that Agnieszka had swatted with her tail. And the Siberian sky that stretched all around was the same one Ona searched at night for stars.

Brovka was no longer. But here, at last, was I. And here, at last, was Darius, the boy Ona had raised.

Before turning back for the village, I picked up three stones: two mottled white and gray, one black. They were plain, unremarkable. Jagged and unpoetic, the stones traveled home with me and now sit atop a bookshelf beside the stone from the Newtown cemetery. I thought about the Tomsk nuclear accident as I slipped those pebbles into my pocket and wondered if rocks absorbed radioactivity. I even searched the Internet for an answer to this question upon my return home, but I found no answer.

What else might these stones have absorbed? How many exiles, young and old, had kicked them? How many hooves had scuffed them? How many Russian boys destined for deaths far too early had used them to invent games of chance and skill?

31

The sisters' log cabin featured an iron stove, thatched roof, and unpainted wooden floors. The house itself was small, with a single room for sleeping, cooking, writing, reading, sewing, sleeping, chatting with friends who came with news, and doing everything else that happens in a home. Each spring, once the last of the snow had finally melted, Ona and Margarita lined the walls with a new layer of newspaper. And every autumn, the sisters filled their root cellar with potatoes, onions, and grain. In summer, poppies surrounding the house stood tall enough to graze Ona's hips.

A 1957 photograph shows Margarita at the cabin's edge. She's swarthy, dark-haired, and wearing an apron as she gazes ahead of her, severe looking. By contrast, Ona—fair-haired and apronless in a black dress—stands smack in the middle of the image. Two windows flank her as she squints and smiles directly at the camera. She folds her arms as if taking stock of her own power.

Unseen on the table inside the log cabin lie a pair of glasses—a legacy of Margarita's late husband—awaiting that evening's correspondence. The sisters shared that single pair of spectacles to write. First one sister would compose her letters and then hand the glasses to the other so she could write. The language in the many missives Ona penned is folksy yet precise and impressively strong for one with so little formal education. Margarita, however, writes without punctuation, like this: *without taking a breath her*

FIG. 31. Margarita and Ona among the poppies outside their cabin, 1957. Private collection. Courtesy of the author.

sentences run on until she has finished what she has to say even if this means stringing several disjointed ideas together and the reader must work hard to find where to stop and take a pause.

Anthony's first letter arrived in Brovka in 1955. The Bradford postmark and the letter from her faraway family were so unexpected that Ona had to go to the farm's medical center to recover. She later wrote to her children that she'd suffered a heart attack, but I imagine what she actually experienced was shock. In my mind's eye I see her sit down to write that first reply, smoothing the paper before her. After dating it carefully, she lifts her eyes, puts down her pen and then the glasses. Ona sits like this for hours, late into the night. Finally, with a deep breath, she picks up the spectacles and starts her response.

I do not need to imagine the letter. It, along with many others, came to me after Ona's death.

MAY 1, 1955. BROVKA.

Anthony!

I received your letter on May 1. It made me indescribably happy. I'm healthy, alive, and I live together with my sister Margarita. She moved in with me last fall. Her husband is dead. Margarita's two daughters live in Lithuania with their husbands and children.

I'm working on a farm raising calves.

Spring has arrived here as well; the rivers are carrying the ice away. In some areas, layers of snow remain.

Best wishes to you and your little ones, who remain in my mind's eye every day.

I await your next letter with impatience.

I kiss you all.

At least twice a month for five years, Ona wrote to her children from her Siberian log house. She told of raising animals at the farm, haying, and chopping firewood. She described how Margarita, with her chronic bronchitis, stayed home and did "woman's work." In December 1956 she wrote:

Days go by quite quickly. I don't do anything at home. Godmother [Margarita] takes care of everything. Once I finish my work on the farm I bring home some firewood or some hay for Agnieszka. Haying is fun at first, but bringing it home will drive you to tears. Of course, this is the case for women without men. I often wonder how it would be if my men, my strong oaks, were here. But what can I do, if this is how fate wanted it for me?

The world Ona portrayed for her children was one of hard work (eighteen-hour days), of snow and ice ("in our garden you can just see the tops of the hay stacks"), of small pleasures ("those little slippers are like a dream, so cuddly and light"), and of life close to the land. She wrote of joyful harvests:

The potatoes grew very big, despite the fact that they froze in the spring. The earth renews them, and it keeps raining, which is good for them.

She also shared news of occasional festivities:

In a couple of days we will celebrate the October Revolution. The collective farm is planning a party. They're making beer. It's going to be great.

Just as important as the human cast of characters and, in some ways, perhaps even more so were the animals Ona and Margarita kept privately. There was Agnieszka the cow, Baltis the pig, and the chickens that lived inside the house during winter. Ona treasured the animals but not sentimentally. Their purpose was clear: they were life sustaining and had to be slaughtered. Only one rooster and a chicken that Ona was symbolically raising for her granddaughter (my eldest cousin) in Canada, whom she had never met, were safe and the subject of regular updates:

You ask what we feed the pigs and the chickens—potatoes and grain, of course. We slaughtered our roosters, but granddaughter's little rooster and chicken are growing. This year, the rooster isn't as necessary since we have a clock. The chickens are already sitting under the stove: it's cold in the barn.

Ona was not an educated woman. A farmer's daughter, under different circumstances, she would have left no trace.

Her stories are a reminder of countless other lives like hers, the thousands upon thousands of people who were forced to travel across the steppes. Some strove to return and found their way home. Many didn't. Some of their tales have been recorded and safeguarded, while others have been lost as the tellers died, as the languages of grandmothers were forgotten by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the West, and as the attics were cleaned out and boxes of letters like Ona's discarded. Although Ona had probably always been a storyteller, exile made her a writer. And my grandmother wrote for a very specific audience, her children. They were by now adult children, to be sure (by the time Siberian exiles were allowed to correspond with the West—this happened

only after Stalin's death—her youngest child, my father, was twenty years old). For Ona, though, they had not aged.

> Not long ago I dreamt about everyone. You were all school-aged. I can never see you as you are now, my dear children.

An audience of children requires a narrative appropriate for children, so Ona created a Brovka that seemed to be a magical winter wonderland, where women dashed off on sleighs to pick up parcels, where they told each other's fortunes with playing cards, where they bathed in saunas, where they dressed in pink long underwear before venturing outside to have their eyelashes promptly stick together from the cold, where all creatures had names, and where the walls of houses were papered in letters, pressed flowers, and drawings that arrived from overseas.

Disasters, such as Ona's teeth getting knocked out when a steel rod broke free from a combine harvester, were mentioned only in passing (with reassurances that the teeth had fallen out painlessly). Questions from the children about the hardships of the journey from Lithuania to Siberia were dealt with briefly and in scant detail:

> You ask about the journey and how long we traveled. It took about two weeks. First we stopped in the Altai region, we hadn't been there for long when we carried on, I don't know why. I like it here much better. The land is excellent and it's rich in forests and fields. It's just that the summer is short and the winter is long.

The letters did not talk about the political reality of the time or about life under collectivization but recounted instead scenes of weddings with the Siberian brides being adorned with homemade veils of muslin and paper, of tasting homebrew that was all the rage, of cinema night at the kolkhoz, of the changing seasons, and of the passage of time.

The Siberian letters have both delighted and discouraged me. On the one hand, they are vivid portraits of Ona's tiny life on the

Siberian plain. But on the other hand, silence, absence, suppression, and even self-censorship lie over the letters like a veil, obscuring essential pieces of the past. I can see and experience Ona's Siberia through her letters but only partially and sometimes only in silhouette. Ultimately, I have come to accept the distance. I have no other choice.

32

On my last night in Bielastok, I ducked into a backyard kitchen house to wash off the dust from the walk with Dusya. There, the most beautiful sight of my Siberian trip greeted me. Two swallows circled a bare light bulb hanging in the middle of the room. One bird then darted out the door, while the other perched itself on a piece of cardboard nestled in the corner behind a pile of potatoes. A starchy and earthy scent of fermenting tubers filled the air.

Whenever I entered our host's kitchen house over those Siberian days, I could never decide whether the smell that confronted me there was good or bad. Sweet, yes, but it was a bit sickly too. The odor has stayed with me as a memory. Months after my return home, I opened the door to my own kitchen cupboard to discover a soggy bag of rotting potatoes. The smell of Siberia hit me hard and caught in the back of my throat. For a moment, I was back in Bielastok.

The swallow and I watched each other for a few seconds. Silently, I bid it safe travels and held my breath as it flew out the door to join its companion.

In Ona's case, it was 1956 before she began seriously considering the possibility of leaving Siberia and hopefully reuniting with her children. A photograph taken that year shows her standing before a white curtain; one hand is behind her back and the other down at her side. She wears a dark polka-dot dress with a smart white collar, thick

tights, and mannish laced shoes. Her hair is pulled back. Though she wears a dress in almost every Siberian photograph I've seen, I know from her letters that she didn't don dresses regularly in exile. If women did opt for dresses on the farms and special settlements of Siberia, they pulled trousers on underneath them to protect themselves from the insects or the cold, depending on the season. The elderly women I saw and met in Siberia still dress this way.

In the photograph Ona is sunburned from haying and walking in the fields with grazing calves. Between tending animals, cultivating her vegetable garden, chopping wood, and carrying water, my grandmother must have spent most of every Siberian day outside.

On December 16, 1956, she wrote to her children optimistically of her initial inquiries regarding her return. In her letter she uses the word "vacation" as a euphemism for her return to Lithuania. Before even dreaming of joining her family overseas, Ona first had to secure permission to leave Siberia.

> Yesterday I talked to a big "uncle." He said that I definitely have to get "vacation" first, and only then can I start on identification papers. Once I've spent some time "on vacation" (about half a year), I should be able to attain the goal of seeing my children. But sitting here, I won't accomplish anything. He told me where I needed to submit the request, and that I would get it for sure. Once I get the time, I can stay here if I want. No one will force me to leave. So, one day soon, I'll send a request to Moscow.

Ona's file from the Ministry of the Interior records her doggedness. My grandmother sent letter after letter and request after request that her name be removed from the list of special settlers and that she be allowed to rejoin her children. The correspondence chain, similar to the one that resulted in Margarita's transfer to Brovka, begins with a character reference dated March 3, 1958. It's stamped with the seal of the Voroshilov Collective Farm:

> Since 1942 she has been working in livestock production. Each year, the kolkhoz administration and the District Executive Committee

FIG. 32. Ona in the polka-dot dress, 1956. Private collection. Courtesy of the author.

have presented her with valuable gifts for her honest work. In 1958, because of her production results of 1957, Ona was chosen to participate in the conference of top workers in agriculture that took place in Tomsk.

In April 1957 Ona wrote to Kliment Voroshilov—chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, close associate of Stalin's, and namesake of her collective farm—asking that he allow her either to join her family in England or to return to Lithuania. On September 17, 1957, came news that her request had been received and refused. More denials in 1957 bookend this one: May 11, May 25, October 31, November 27, and December 19. "My 'dad' won't let me go," Ona wrote to her children in England. "He will never agree." The official letters offer no grounds for the decision, only that there is "no reason" to end her exile.

Her determination to be reunited with her family, which is apparent in Ona's Soviet file, belies a frustration found in her letters. This one dates from October 9, 1956:

> You write that you see me in your dreams with sagging socks. It may well be that when Moscow replies, my socks will fall! I don't know what will happen, but I have this feeling of hopelessness. I often dream about all of you as well. Not long ago, I dreamed of Anthony, I think we met at some sort of get-together. I was so happy to have found him that I took him by the hand and said "finally, at least this once it's not a dream." When I told him that I only saw him in my sleep, he looked unhappy and wouldn't talk. Why are there so many misunderstandings in dreams? You two girls are always school-aged when I dream about you. I never see you as you are now.

In early 1958 she tried another approach. Instead of appealing for her release on family reunification grounds, she submitted evidence of her deteriorating health. Her conditions included myocardiodystrophy, emphysema, rheumatic polyarthritis ("my health is still holding strong, except that sometimes all my limbs hurt," she wrote to her kids), and chronic gastritis. Again Ona received the

answer that there was "no reason" to release her since she could still perform "light duties." She wrote,

> Almost every month people from here and from there are leaving on vacation, while I sit here as if nailed to the ground. It's very unsettling. I often think that I can't possibly be that much worse than all the rest. It can't be.

The Soviet files confirm that no charges had ever been filed against her. She received no official account of the authorities' decisions either to deport her or to keep her in Siberia. When asked why she'd been exiled, Ona could give no answer. The collective farm's foreman (whom she liked very much) once asked the question, and all she could do was turn it gently back on him. "You tell me," she said. "Perhaps you have some evidence against me? What did I do? I don't feel guilty of anything."

33

On July 10, 1958, Ona received word that her name had finally been removed from the registry of special settlements. Her release had nothing to do with her numerous letters and documents. It was most likely the result of the policy shift under Khrushchev. The effects of the blanket pardon of all exiles had finally reached my grandmother. She was one of eighty thousand people—twenty thousand from the Gulags and sixty thousand from special settlements—who returned to Lithuania between 1953 and 1970. The only condition for receiving permission to go home was that she sign a document renouncing her confiscated property and her rights to the apartment from which she had been deported.

But in August 1958, instead of celebrating, the sisters spent their last Siberian days in sorrow. Margarita's son-in-law had died suddenly and unexpectedly, and she wanted to return to her daughters in Lithuania as quickly as possible. Ona sold off everything in a hurry, including her beloved cow, Agnieszka. Because she could not delay her journey, she didn't get a fair price for the cow. Her one-eared cat (whose pinna had frozen and fallen off one winter, Ona explained) wouldn't come down from the roof, so she had to leave it where it stood.

The details of Ona's and Margarita's hasty departure reached England in the form of a letter.

AUGUST 12, 1958

My Dear Children!

Yesterday we received such a sad, almost unbearable letter from Godmother's daughter in Lithuania, whose words are even hard to repeat. I am enclosing that widow's letter, God forbid that anything like this happen to anyone else. Godmother won't stop sobbing, and it's difficult to comfort her. She keeps asking what she will find when she returns. A widow and orphans. Why are we faced with such torrents of tears? We always talked about how joyful it would be when we returned: we would celebrate, the children would come meet us at the station, and we would visit the rest of the family. Now, our palace of thoughts has crumbled. As they say here, our thoughts are a year ahead of us and death is at our shoulders. Godmother's son-in-law will no longer greet us.

At the daughter's request we're going to leave as soon as possible. My plan had been to depart from here around September 20. Everything is growing wonderfully in the garden, and I didn't want to leave it for someone else for next to nothing. I had planned to harvest a little early and to take it to the purchasing station for a reasonable price. But because Margarita's daughter has written like this, asking her mother to return, I can't torture them anymore. I'll sell what I can, however I can. I will sell Agnieszka to the *kolkhoz*. She was so difficult to acquire, yet here she is, so easy to sell, especially at a reduced price. It's hard to say when we will leave, though we'll try to go as quickly as possible. We'll take a steamboat from Krivosheino to Tomsk, which will take about 15–16 hours. Then in Tomsk we'll get a ticket all the way to Kaunas. We will only need to transfer in Moscow. It takes four days and four nights to travel from Tomsk to Moscow. From Moscow we'll travel a day and a night to Kaunas. They say that there's a very long line at Tomsk for tickets. People wait 8–10 days.

I received your letters a long time ago. It's nice to read happy letters and to take pleasure in my children's successes. But the sorrowful letter from Lithuania has knocked me off my life's track. My dear children, don't write to me at this address anymore, instead write to me at Godmother's daughter's house in Lithuania. I think I'll stay there for a while as well. Oh yes, we've already made a deal to sell our house for 2,500. Godmother is finding and sewing bags for our parcels. Let's hope that this letter will be your last visitor from this cold country, and bearing such painful news, my dear God.

I kiss you all with tears in my eyes. I'm with you in my thoughts and in my heart.

Your Mother

The letter from Margarita's daughter in Lithuania and with the details of the sorrowful news has perished, but its memory remains.

Ona's elder daughter told me that Margarita's son-in-law had been a chauffeur in Lithuania; his job was to drive officials around the country. One rainy day, he drove a car onto a ferry that crossed the Nemunas River in Kaunas. The ship's deck was slippery, and the son-in-law slid off the ferry's edge and into the river's frigid waters to his death.

34

Whether she knew it or not, Ona was the wife of a wanted man. Indeed, her husband remained a wanted man long after Stalin's death. His search file was only closed in 1985, the year Anthony died. As nonsensical as it seems, Ona herself was considered an enemy of the people, not only by authorities, but also by a great number of the ordinary folks she met when she returned home. In Soviet Lithuania, she found herself without a place to live, so she divided her time between the farm where her sister and nieces resided and a small apartment in Kaunas that belonged to in-laws.

For money, she was reduced to selling scarves and nylon stockings that her daughters sent from the West. Ona would have been fifty-three when she returned to Lithuania, but she was not yet of retirement age. Having worked "only" seventeen years on the farm, she was three years short of the twenty years required for a pension.

Marginal and suspect, Ona thus eked out a life and waited, as she wrote in a letter dated November 25, 1961, for "a droplet of grace." If she missed the wide-open land, friends, and animals of Brovka, she didn't say so, but in these letters, Soviet Lithuania seems dark, cold, and cramped. She often found herself stuck on the nieces' farm and longing for the city.

She wrote from the soggy countryside on December 6, 1961:

> The weather's worsened. It rained a lot and churned up a great mess of mud. And once again it's a problem to be caught out with no rubber boots. I can't even leave the front yard. I always leave Kaunas most unwillingly, but I don't want to overstay my welcome there or take up too much space.

Around the corner from the tiny apartment she shared with four others when visiting her beloved city, the nearby baroque cathedral offered Ona daily refuge.

Once again, my grandmother threw herself into the task of navigating the Soviet bureaucracy, trying to secure permission to leave the country and join her children:

> I must admit that I have no sense that I'll be successful in leaving this place for all those comforts. Such good fortune is not mine to have.

The tone of these Lithuanian letters is darker and sadder than that of the Siberian ones. Now Ona seems more acutely aware of the passage of time and of opportunities lost with each day:

> If only we could spend one more Christmas Eve together. Here we are again. Another Christmas, and I'm alone as always. They'll keep us waiting until we close our eyes and our lives are done. The years roll by like apples. Time runs without ever stopping, and we'll have long since grown old.

35

Seven years passed for Ona in Soviet Lithuania until, in 1965, she decided to change her strategy. She followed the example of a fellow exile, whom she called a "friend in suffering," and went to Moscow.

I imagine that the metropolis would have overwhelmed Ona, with its broad boulevards and majestic subway stations. It would certainly have dwarfed both Tomsk and Vilnius, the two largest cities she had ever visited before then. Thankfully, she had friends in Moscow. She knew a young party official, a Siberian who lived and worked in the Soviet capital. He had returned to his village to marry a local girl, and Ona had been a guest at their wedding. She decided to go and seek out his help.

Ona recounted the episode in the 1977 interview whose transcript I found in the archives:

> I didn't know that he was such a good person. He agreed to see me that same day. He accompanied me, saying that it was impossible to find anything at those offices. So we went up to the little window of the Ministry of the Interior. The clerk there said that the minister wasn't in. He was in a meeting and would return to the office only at two o'clock. He told us to wait. When the time came, my companion stayed in the waiting room. The minister invited me into his office and I started talking.

"What did you come here for," he asked me. "Vilnius takes care of all this."

At this point I didn't call him "Comrade." Instead I said "Chief."

"Chief," I said, "what am I supposed to make of this? Every time I go to Vilnius, I always get the answer: Moscow takes care of all this. Where can I find justice?" I told him, "I think that my fate is in your hands."

Then I showed him my prize certificate, the one I got for my work with those animals. It said I was conscientious, so I started to talk about that.

"I got this prize," I said.

"From the *kolkhoz*?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. And I took the certificate and put it down in front of him. "Chief," I said, "I worked seventeen years for the Soviet Union." I said this truthfully.

Then he asked me: "Are you alone? Where are your children?"

"It was Stalin's era," I told him. "There were deportations. They deported me. I spent seventeen years working conscientiously for the Soviet Union. I've returned to Lithuania."

He asked: "Are you working?"

"I'm not working."

"Do you receive a pension?"

"No, I don't receive anything."

"So what do you live on?"

I say: "I live on these rags. Is it easy for me, Chief," I say, "to live from those rags? Having worked this many years for the Soviet Union?"

He says, "Invite your children here."

"I don't have anything to offer them," I say. "I live as a guest with a relative. She gave me a corner. There's a room with a bed, and under that bed is my suitcase. I have nothing to offer."

He says, "We will give them apartments. We will give them jobs."

"Originally, there were three children," I tell him. "But now there are ten family members. If one comes," (I can't say this very boldly) "perhaps, one of them would come . . . But I'm a mother, I want to

FIG. 33. Ona leaving Lithuania for Canada, 1965. Private collection. Courtesy of the author.

see them all. Chief," I say, "is it easier for me to go there alone, or for all of them to come here?"

As I was talking I could feel tears flowing down my cheeks.

"Chief, my fate is in your hands. If you say yes, I will go. If you say no, then I'm buried alive."

And then like a miracle . . .

36

By the 1960s, all three of my grandmother's children had emigrated to Canada. Ona hoped to make it there in time to see her son marry, but it was not to be. Perhaps because they simply wanted to get on with their lives, or because there was little hope she would ever actually arrive, the young couple (my parents) went ahead with their plans in her absence.

One night in 1965, while eating dinner with his new wife at his Toronto home, my father received a call from Canadian Embassy officials. His mother was on a plane to Canada, that person informed him, and she would arrive at Toronto's airport in a matter of hours.

No account of how that first meeting went is very detailed, but they all indicate there was a great deal of confusion. Ona missed her connection in Montreal, and the scramble to find her seems to have dulled other emotions. Her eldest granddaughter, then a young girl, said that, above all, it was Ona's odor that struck her the first time she met our grandmother. Ona had been carrying a sausage in her handbag, nibbling at it over her multiday journey from Kaunas to Vilnius to Moscow and across the Atlantic. A nub remained, and its sweaty, meaty scent overpowered the granddaughter.

"She smelled like Russia," my cousin said, opening her eyes wide.

Though I doubt she ever voiced it to her children, my grandmother found the reunion with them disorienting. In the 1977 Chicago

interview, she recounted how while on her 1958 trip from Brovka to Lithuania, Ona had stopped in Moscow for a day to visit a Siberian-born girl named Tanya, the daughter of the elderly Belarusian couple she'd lived with in Brovka. Ona loved this young woman in part because she reminded her of her own elder daughter. Tanya had married and moved from Brovka to the Soviet capital with her new husband. I suspect he was the same man who later accompanied my grandmother to the Ministry of the Interior. In any case, when Ona arrived in Moscow en route from Siberia, the young couple greeted her at the train station and took her home to a meal of roast chicken, cognac, and cakes.

"It was like coming home to family," Ona said many years later, comparing the two reunions. "We were so happy, we cried. I felt more at home with those Siberian Muscovites than I did with my own children. When I met my children after so many years, we were strangers."

All these years after the war, when Ona finally arrived in Canada, Anthony was still living in a Bradford rowhouse. He'd never believed the Soviets would allow his wife to leave the USSR, so he refused to consider preparing for her arrival until her feet had touched Canadian soil. Once they had, Anthony put his property up for sale and began to make arrangements to emigrate. A year later, Anthony crossed the Atlantic to join Ona.

On the plane heading back from Tomsk to Moscow and then on to Frankfurt, where we parted, Darius and I talked about our family and about the sadness and misfortune that have visited us with a terrible frequency. Both my father and his mother, Ona's two younger children, died suddenly and unexpectedly—he of a heart attack when I was eighteen and she six years later of a cancer that killed her in a matter of weeks.

They had escaped deportation, but did it nevertheless kill them as adults? I wondered aloud. Had the loss of their mother in childhood damaged them so severely that it shortened their lives? Did my father literally die of a broken heart and Darius's

mother of a wound that festered until it finally transformed itself into a cancer? Was Ona's eldest child more resilient than her younger siblings, somehow sturdier, and thus better able to withstand the shock?

"I don't know," Darius said. "I never thought of it that way."

PART III

Us