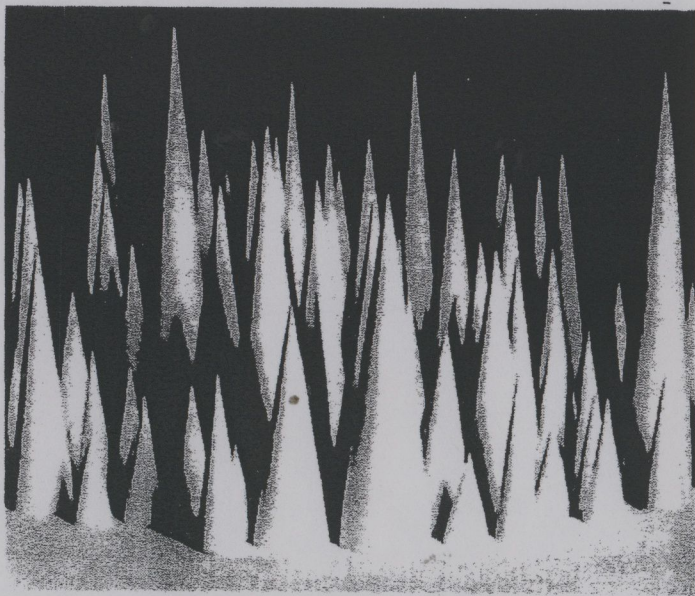


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Brovka: Reconstructing a Life in Tatters (My Grandmother's Journey)

JULIJA ŠUKYS

I

An Ordinary Day: The First Letter

May 1, 1955. She sits at the table and smoothes the paper before her, dates it carefully, and puts down her pen and then the glasses. Her brother-in-law's glasses – the only thing his wife has left of him. Her sister coughs from the next room. Ona has waited for Magrieta to finish her own weekly correspondence and go to bed before taking the glasses herself. She looks down through the lenses. The words blur a bit at the edges, but they're not bad. This letter, the first one in fourteen years of exile, arrived this morning. It was such a shock that she had to go to the medical center to recover. She now takes a deep breath and begins her response.

The house she shares with her sister is small. Two rooms: one for sleeping and one for cooking, writing, reading, sewing, chatting with Marytė or the Estonian woman when they come with news, and for everything else that happens in a home. The walls are lined with newspaper. Soon it will be time to put up a new layer, when the last of the snow finally melts and it's time for spring cleaning, their eleventh spring in this house. It is wooden, with glass windows and a stove. Sparsely furnished. A table and benches stand in the kitchen; beds and a small wardrobe furnish the bedroom. The floors of the house are earthen, and there is a root cellar accessible from indoors (Magrieta's ingenious idea) which they filled with potatoes,

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onions and grain last year, and which now stands almost empty. But spring is here, and they will begin to replenish it shortly. Soon too there will be berries to gather in the forests, and tomatoes and cucumbers to plant in the garden.

She pads into the bedroom. It's unheated, but Ona has the warm down-filled blanket that Father Vailokaitis left her before returning to Lithuania, so the cold doesn't bother her. Those with children heat their houses at night. Mothers get up to stoke their fires in the dark, but not Ona and Magrieta. Their children are far away. As her sister coughs again, Ona wonders if she should revisit this decision. Magrieta's health is getting worse, and the cold nights don't help.

She listens to the silence around her. Brovka, this Siberian forest village, is sleeping. The winters here are long and cold, and the summers are fleeting, but there is land as far as the eye can see, the earth is good and fertile, and there is an abundance of firewood. Only the mosquitoes are unbearable.

Ona sits awake for hours. She knows she will regret the lack of sleep, but images of her children prevent her from closing her eyes. She'd begun to believe that this was her life now: snow, farm animals and Magrieta. But the letter has brought it back with breathtaking force, this pain that choked her for the first three years. And even so, she worked and worked. She taught the others what she knew and helped them survive. In turn they – Father Vailokaitis, Marytė and the others – gave her stories about the world. They became her family, and slowly the pressure at her throat begins to release and migrates to the stomach, where it finally settles. She carried her children there as an ache for eleven more years. Until today. The pain has moved back up and she is again choking.

II

My Grandmother's Legacy

June 2004. As I type, the downstairs neighbor with the jumping dog has gone out to the tree to smoke. My cat lies like a sausage at the open window, lulled by my clicking keyboard. This first day of summer is warm and not too humid, as I try to cap-

ture this scene of my grandmother responding to the first letter from her family in fourteen years. But I'm stuck on the image of her from my childhood: white hair, a kind wide face and ambling walk. She served pickles with her potato pancakes, went to church regularly, laughed easily, and never learned to speak English. My father's mother arrived in Canada in 1965, after twenty-five years of separation from her three children and husband. Only one survives.

My paternal grandfather was the first to die. He died of Parkinson's when I was around twelve. About six years later it was my father's turn. His heart stopped the day he was supposed to check out of the hospital. Joana, my father's elder sister and the middle child, died two years later. And my grandmother followed after only two weeks.

I want to write Močiutė's story to understand how she came through eighteen years in Siberia without bitterness. Of all of us, she seems to have harbored the least anger. My husband, for one, occasionally accuses me of "Baltic bitterness." This is what he calls my quickness to anger, my tendency to lay blame and willingness to see the negative. And though I defend myself, I'm not completely convinced of my innocence. As an undergraduate, I studied Russian to rid myself of an inherited prejudice, and in graduate school I wrote about the Holocaust in Lithuania to fill in a terrible silence about what happened in my father's birthplace during the three years after my grandmother's deportation to Siberia. But combating an engrained bitterness is more difficult than educating away a prejudice. It's harder to diagnose and tougher to beat because it has nothing to do with the head and resides in the heart.

III

Brovka of the Letters

And my husband went to Marijampolė for some reason, and they came in the night to take us. [...] My folks lived about... four kilometers from the border, in the restricted zone. I couldn't return there. My sister had come earlier and taken the children, while the two of us [my husband and I] stayed in Kaunas for a while longer.

And then my husband went to Marijampolė, and they came during the night to take us, I was alone, so they took me away alone, and that's how my husband stayed behind. That was in 1941, on the night of June 14. That's how they took me alone. Can you imagine?

Močiūtė first began corresponding with the family in 1955, her fourteenth year in Siberia. Our family, by then split between Canada and England, had located her through the Red Cross. Once they had found her, my father wrote an open letter to Khrushchev and published it in a Manchester newspaper. He appealed for him to allow his mother, a woman alone in Siberia, to rejoin her family. Needless to say, there was no response.

The Brovka letters sketch a portrait of a world inhabited almost entirely by women. Močiūtė's cast of characters includes her sister Magrieta, or "Godmother," who writes almost without any punctuation, sentences spilling into one another; Marytė, a Lithuanian friend, also alone in Siberia, and revered for being well-traveled; and a woman who remains curiously nameless throughout all the letters, referred to simply as "our Estonian." Magrieta's husband had died in Siberia, so after a few years in exile, the two women set up house together. Močiūtė went to work, raising animals at the farm, haying and chopping firewood, while Magrieta, with her chronic bronchitis, stayed home to do "woman's work." In December 1956, Močiūtė wrote:

Days pass quickly. I don't do any housework. Godmother takes care of everything. When I finish my work on the farm I bring home firewood or some hay for Agnieša. Haying is fun, as it goes, but transporting it is so hard that it brings tears to my eyes. I mean when women have to do it without men. I often wish our men were here, strong like oaks. But what can I do, if this is how fate wanted it for me?

The world sketched out in the letters is 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 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"), of small pleasures ("those little slippers are like a dream, so cuddly and

light"), occasional festivities ("In a couple of days we will celebrate the October Revolution. [...] The collective farm is planning a party, they're making beer, we'll have a great time"), and life close to the land. Just as important as the human cast, and in some ways perhaps even more so, are Močiūtė's animals. There's Agnieša the cow, Baltis the pig, the calves at the collective farm (each of whom has a name as well), the sheep in the pastures, and the chickens who live under the stove in the kitchen during the winter. The animals are much loved and treasured, but not sentimentally so. Their purpose is clear: they are life sustaining and must be slaughtered. Only the rooster and chicken Močiūtė is raising for her granddaughter Viltelė, in Canada, whom she has never met, are safe and the subject of regular updates:

Janutė asked what we feed the pigs and the chickens – well, potatoes and grain [...]. We slaughtered our roosters, but Viltelė'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. Yesterday, I divided it in half for Agnieška and the pigs. Last year, it used to be that I would give the cow some hay, and the pigs would carry it over into their sty, and the cow chased the pigs out of the sty and lay down there herself. This year I've divided it up with an area for each of them. One of our pigs has been sick, we don't know what will happen.

In reading these letters I am struck by the minuteness of this life and the fragility of this body as it traveled across the Siberian steppes and up the River Ob. She was not an educated woman. A farmer's daughter, she had lived a small life until the events of June 1941 changed everything. Under different circumstances, she would have left no trace. And although, judging from her character, she had probably always been a storyteller, exile made her a writer. Distance necessitated writing, and Močiūtė was writing for a very specific audience: her children. Adult children, to be sure, (by the time they had begun a regular correspondence, her youngest child, my father, Algirdas or Algutis, as she called him, was twenty years old), but for Močiūtė they had not aged: "Not long ago I dreamt about everyone: [...] Algutis and the girls 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, and it is this childlike aspect of Močiūtė's Siberian letters that is so beautiful. The Brovka of those letters is like a magical winter wonderland, where women dash off on sleighs to pick up parcels, where they tell each other's fortunes with playing cards, where they bathe in saunas, getting dressed in pink long underwear before venturing outside to have their eyes promptly stick together from the cold, where all creatures have names, and the walls of the houses are papered in letters, pressed flowers, and drawings from far-away grandchildren. Disasters, like the time Močiūtė was hit in the face by a steel rod that broke free from a combine harvester and knocked her teeth out, are mentioned only in passing (with reassurances that the teeth fell out painlessly). Questions from the children about the hardships of the journey from Lithuania to Siberia are answered briefly and with few details:

Birutė, 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 very good and it's rich in forests and fields. It's just that the summer is short and the winter is long.

The letters do not talk about the political reality of the time or life under collectivization, but recount instead scenes of local weddings and how brides are adorned with homemade veils of muslin and paper, of tasting homebrew that's all the rage, of cinema night at the kolkhoz, of the changing seasons, and the passage of time. It's precisely the modesty of this life that is so instructive. Močiūtė's stories are a reminder of the infinite number of such lives lived when thousands upon thousands of people traveled across the steppes and back. Some of these stories have been recorded and safeguarded, others have been lost as the storytellers died, as the languages of grandmothers were forgotten by their grandchildren in the West, and as attics were cleaned out and boxes of letters like Močiūtė's discarded.

Močiūtė's correspondence was entrusted to me after her daughter Joana's 1993 death. The archive of yellowing letters

had resided in a china cabinet drawer for over forty years. Most are original letters sent from Siberia to Birutė, the eldest daughter then in England, and forwarded to Joana in Canada, though some are handwritten copies, sent on instead of originals. The first Siberian letter arrived in Bradford, England, where my grandfather, Antanas, worked in a factory after the war. My father rarely spoke of his adolescence there, but I remember one story of how he had to cover his mouth and nose with his school tie to filter the city's sooty air. The letter was transcribed and forwarded:

1955. V. 1. *Brovka*

Antanas!

I got your letter on May 1. It made me indescribably happy. I'm healthy, alive, and I live together with Riaubienė. She moved in with me last fall. Riauba [her husband] is dead. Juzė and Petrė [Magrieta's daughters] are living 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.

Šukienė.

IV

The Find at Kent

Spring 2002. I pull up to the side of the house whose windows and doorways are piled high with old toys, flowerpots, and hundreds of glass bottles. A dog barks inside, but I can't see anything through the slivers of glass at the top of the door, so I knock again, then make my way around to the front, past the B&B sign. A woman jogs around the side of the house.

"You must be Julija. I'm Ann. I saw your car. That dog barks at everything, so I usually ignore him. Sorry."

Inside, the house is huge and dark. A trail in the carpet leads from the front door upstairs – the grime of children, dogs and guests ground in deeper with each year. Ann puffs slightly as she heads upstairs, talking all the while.

"I put you in the pink room," she says. "There's a little desk in there."

A faint smell of cigarette smoke hangs in the air, but the room is nice. She offers me a cup of tea, which I gladly accept after my long drive from Chicago.

Ann sits down on a stool opposite me, warming her hands on a mug. She is in her early forties. I try not to stare at the scars running up her wrists: a reminder that every family has its share of pain.

"What kind of research do you do?" she asks.

I explain that I've been gathering the private writings of a woman named Ona Šimaitė who was a librarian at Vilnius University during the Nazi occupation of her city, and who saved many lives by smuggling people out of the ghetto and hiding them. Her postwar journals are archived here in Ohio, at Kent State University.

I set out early the next morning. The archive is on the top floor of the library tower. Its reading room is uninspiring, with brown walls, brown carpet and big wooden tables. The archivist rolls out two cardboard boxes full of letters and envelopes wrapped in paper and tied with string. They contain the journals and some letters, but also other materials that have nothing to do with the librarian Šimaitė: indexes of children's books and packets of Chicago newspaper clippings. All this is uncatalogued, so I am digging through a stack of notebooks, when I come across one labeled *Father Juozas Vailokaitis (1880-1953) in Siberia*. A note fixed to its cover reads: "*This Lithuanian 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 researcher can identify it for us.*" I almost fall out of my chair when I see what's inside. Bursting with my discovery, I run downstairs to call my husband, but I have no change and his university won't accept my collect call. I have to tell someone, so, clutching the notebook, I walk up to the archivist's desk.

She looks at me blankly when I explain, as if she doesn't believe me. Embarrassed at my emotion, I spin on my heel and sit back down with the document: a seventy-two-page interview with Močiutė.

The text is a transcription of a taped conversation, banded out on a manual typewriter and reproduced on an old photocopier. Its subject appears to be her friendship with a priest who was exiled together with her, but allowed to return to Lithuania after three years in Siberia. A letter accompanies the notebook:

Šukienė came to visit Vailokaitis [the priest's nephew], one journalist here very 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, not everything can be understood. [...] Šukienė told Vailokaitis 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 really big job, not everything could be understood, some parts were skipped over, and so on.

In addition to all that, Šukienė 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 seventy-three (at the time of the interview). She rejoined her husband and three children in Canada. I'll send you the text.

Best wishes! Kazys.

After a hurried first reading, I realize that the interview describes a much bigger world than the one sketched out in the Brovka letters. Here, Močiutė is pressed for details about the journey into exile, about the conditions under which the deportees traveled, about how much they ate, how many people died along the way, and so on. They talk about more than farm animals, parcels, parties and snow, and as a result, this accidental find answers many of the questions that have frustrated me since I began reading the Brovka letters.

The conversation was recorded in a Chicago suburb in 1977, when Močiutė had been in Canada for twelve years. I would have been five years old. According to Birutė, Močiutė would have been sixty-three, not seventy-three as the introductory letter indicates. As far as I know, all that is left of that interview is this transcription. Its first half is mostly intact, but as the pages go on the text grows increasingly fragmentary, riddled with ellipses marking places where the scribe couldn't make out the recording. Somehow the text found its way into the Kent archives, then, misshelved, the interview was tucked into a box containing the documents of a woman who shared the same first name and second initial as my grandmother, but to whom she otherwise had no connection. After languishing amidst another Ona's documents for almost a decade, the interview was finally found by someone who recognized it. And in a curious accident of research, that person happened to be her granddaughter.

V

The Other Brovka

Today is November 2, 1977, All Souls Day. I am at the Vailokaitis family home and we have a guest here who has arrived from Canada. She lived on the same kolkhoz as the late humanitarian, economist, political dissident, and of course priest, Father Juozas Vailokaitis, and has agreed to share some of her memories about him with us.

He rewinds the cassette and listens, making sure his words have been captured. Satisfied, he pushes the button and continues, looking expectantly at Močiutė who sits opposite, back straight, feet tucked, and knees slightly apart.

"Please state your full name."

"Ona Šukienė."

"What part of Lithuania do you come from?"

"I was born and raised in the town of Budvyliškės, in the Slavikai parish."

"What kind of schooling did you receive and what did you do afterward?"

"Almost no schooling, just elementary. And I didn't even com-

plete that, because of World War I. Before the war I couldn't go to school, and then there were four years of interruption, and then later I'd outgrown it."

"So what did you do in Lithuania?"

"I was a farmer's daughter, we worked the farm. Then I married Antanas Šukys in 1927. I moved to his farm when I was 22."

"Was it a large farm?"

"Around forty hectares."

"That's not small."

"It's average."

"And how many children did you have?"

"Two daughters and a son. My husband fought the Bolsheviks. He received two crosses for bravery and six more medals after that."

[...]

"And when did you meet Father Vailokaitis?"

"When they transferred us onto trains at the Kaunas railway station."

"Did you already know him, or was this the first time you had met?"

"I knew his brother from childhood, but I had never met the priest. When they brought me to the station, he was already on the train. It was only when they shouted out 'Juozas Vailokaitis' during roll call that I looked at him and noticed how much he looked like [his brother] Artūras Vailokaitis. When the roll call was finished and the train doors had been closed, I approached him and asked him if he came from a village called Piktžirniai. He said yes, and asked me how I knew it. I told him that I knew his brother, that we had played together, and that his mother had even been my confirmation sponsor. 'So we're family, if she was your sponsor, then that makes us family.' So we decided to put our rags into one pile and stick together."

"And how many people were in the car? Were there many, and men and women together?"

"Yes, both men and women, and as many children as they could fit ... around forty people, maybe more. It was a double-decker car."

"So, tell me about Father Vailokaitis's emotional state. How was he coping with what had happened?"

"He was in a good state, he looked at everything very coldly, objectively. I asked him, Father, why didn't you run? He laughed and said, 'I'm supposed to run because I'm a wealthy man?' He had decided not to leave his country. Whatever they decided to do with him, they could do it, he said, but he wasn't going to run. [...] He was just happy that they hadn't taken him to the Gulag. And then we started our journey to the kolkhozes."

"And how long did the journey take?"

"Over two weeks."

"And what did you do for food? Did they give you something to eat?"

"For four days they didn't give us anything, neither water nor food. On the fifth day, by which time we were quite far from home, they gave us some soup. They only let those with children off the train. The children stayed on the train so they wouldn't run away. Since I was alone, I wasn't allowed off."

"So you mean when you had, umm, private things to do... everything was done there, in the same car?"

"On the first leg of the trip, no. It was a passenger car, so it was alright. But then we were transferred to cattle cars, and then, yes, everything was out in the open. There was just a hole in the floor. Later some of the women who had blankets and sheets hung them up. So that's how it was."

"So, you say four days went by without food. Did Father Vailokaitis's spirits begin to wane at all?"

"He just prayed quietly and prayed."

"Did anyone start to lose hope at that point?"

"Not yet, no. Later on, though, some of the women started to become hysterical."

[...]

"Did the train move quickly?"

"No, not at all. Very slowly. We could see the rest of the train only on turns, because the windows were very small. It was very long, and it crawled along heavily. When we were on a turn you could see the end of it. Some said it was seventy cars long, others said ninety."

[...]

"So, did you pray, or think about your home or those left behind?"

"The only thing I could see was my children, my three children... When I closed my eyes, I could see them, my children running after that train, screaming 'Mama.' I didn't care about anything else. Nothing else mattered ... just those three kids."

The interviewer succeeds in getting answers to questions that Birutė asked repeatedly in letters to little avail. The journey through Altai, for example, is described here in some detail:

"Where in Siberia did they take you?"

"First they took us to the Altai region. The name of the station was Kupin."

"So that was the designated area?"

"It was temporary. We were there for twelve days. They divided us into kolkhozes as well. But if we'd stayed there we wouldn't have made it through the first winter."

"Why?"

"There were just steppes there, no trees, no nothing – there had been a three-year drought and everything was parched, and the people there were also starving. They used to give us bread from the storehouses, 400 grams each, so by the time a person made his or her way back from the storehouse" [Her answer breaks off.]

"Approximately how many kilometers is Kupin from Kaunas?"

"It's already beyond the Urals. [...] Maybe it's halfway [to Brovka]."

[...] [She goes into some detail about the Lithuanians in her company and the next leg of the trip which took them to Novosibirsk.]

"Wait, wait, let's stay in Kupin for a while. So, Kupin is on the steppes?"

"Yes, on the steppes."

"Are there kolkhozes there?"

"Sovkhozes."

"Are they very impoverished these sovkhozes?"

"Yes, it was very impoverished ... since there had been such a drought, and all the Ukrainians had been deported there. They had been there since 1933 when there was great bloodshed in the Ukraine."