Regina Laukaitytė

The Forgotten Breakthrough of the 1960s: The Beginning of the Emigration of Lithuanians from the USSR

Regina Laukaitytė is a senior researcher at the Department of Twentieth-Century History at the Lithuanian Institute of History (Vilnius).

One of the most persistent images of the Soviet Union is that of a country cut off from the world by the Iron Curtain. Everyone who lived there felt that way because they could not travel, and it was possible to hear more about the West through foreign radio stations broadcasting in familiar languages than anything reliable through the Soviet media. Still, the USSR was never a hermetically sealed country. Probably the largest number of migrants to the world's first socialist country came after the civil war, when thousands of supporters wanted to take part in the "great construction projects of communism". After the Second World War, there were also periods when the Soviet Union was open to migrants and re-emigrants fascinated by the image of Stalinism (e.g., Lee Harvey Oswald, who was later charged for the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, lived in Minsk from 1959 to 1962, where he worked in one of its factories). However, all migration processes were strictly controlled by the totalitarian state. Leaving the USSR was extremely complicated, especially for those who were treated by the regime as its citizens. Over the decades, Soviet propaganda instilled an attitude that efforts to leave the USSR were tantamount to the "betrayal of the socialist homeland"; the migration authorities had at their disposal a large number of legal obstacles to stop potential emigrants, including delays in the processing of their departure cases.

Migration historiography reveals a great deal about the exodus of Poles, Germans, and Jews from the USSR (and the Lithuanian SSR) in the period 1945–1990. Considering its international and economic interests, the regime occasionally approved their emigration. This study aims to find out what opportunities Lithuanians had to emigrate by legally leaving the USSR for good, namely, (1) how this right was fought for and (2) who was

allowed to leave. So far, such questions have not been formulated in the historiography, although having embarked on this research with the compilation of at least an approximate list of emigrants,[1] which includes almost 200 names of Lithuanian families who emigrated to the USA and Canada (including many minors and mothers with their children; this is by no means an exhaustive list as it does not include the Lithuanians who emigrated with the residents of the Klaipėda region;[2] besides, the destinations of emigration included the countries of Western Europe, South America, and Australia). Among the Lithuanians who legally emigrated to the USA and Canada, there were many (about 20%) repressed persons, i.e., those who possessed "sensitive" information. Numerous direct sources of recent history of Lithuania were published in the émigré press: photographs of deportees, letters, partisan songs, and the first books about life behind the Iron Curtain appeared in the early 1960s. They were widely acclaimed, published in foreign languages, and distributed in huge numbers.[3] In addition to the reminiscences of the emigrants, this study resorts to foreign periodicals and documents from Lithuanian archives.

The desire to emigrate: hopes and opportunities in the USSR

The change of borders during the Second World War forced millions of people in Central Eastern Europe to flee their home countries. The core principle of this migration – cross-border agreements on the resettlement and repatriation of foreigners – bypassed Lithuanians and other residents of the occupied Baltic countries. Their citizenship status was regulated by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of September 7, 1940 by which the citizens of the republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia automatically acquired Soviet citizenship.[4] A person could not legally, if desired, leave the USSR unless they had a foreign passport.

When the Soviet occupation began, hundreds of Lithuanians hoped to flee the USSR. First of all among them were the Lithuanians born in emigration, who had returned

---

[1] The Lithuanian émigré press and published memoirs were used for this purpose. I am grateful to everyone who helped to expand this list, in particular to Dalia Cidzikaitė, Indrė Cuplinskas, and Vitolis Vengris.
[2] Many Lithuanians left for West Germany with the Germans of Klaipėda region (almost 7800 of them between 1958 and 1960 alone); they were allowed to repatriate under the 1958 agreement between the leaders of the USSR and the Federal Republic of Germany (Arūnė Arbušauskaitė, *Gyventojų manai tarp Lietuvos ir Vokietijos pagal 1941 m. sausio 10 d. sutartį*, Klaipėda: S. Jokužio leidykla-spaustuvė, 2002, 189).
[3] For more on emigrants' books, see subsection "Emigration of repression victims".
[4] "O poriadke priobreteniia grazhdanstva SSSR grazhdanami Litovskoi, Latviskoi i Estonskoi Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik", <http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/131030-o-poryadke-priobreteniya-grazhdanstva-sssr-grazhdanami-litovskoy-latviyskoy-i-estonskoy-sovetskih-sotsialisticheskih-respublik-ukaz-ot-7-sentyabrya-1940-g>, accessed January 8, 2023.

to their or their parents' homeland after the restoration of its independence, started families, and acquired property there. When the Soviets occupied the country in 1940 and 1944, anticipating the repressions, many of them dispossessed of all their property and the intelligentsia having lost their jobs, they visited the embassies of their countries in Moscow or sent letters to them explaining the political situation and the issues of their citizenship. It is hard to tell how many letters from Lithuanians reached embassies in Moscow, because the security service not only monitored the correspondence of the population[5] but also recorded the people visiting embassies: for example, according to the MVD information, 292 Lithuanians were among those who visited the US embassy between 1945 and 1949.[6]

Some foreign nationals managed to leave the USSR (and the Lithuanian SSR) between 1945 and 1947, before the cooperation of the former allies in the Second World War was overshadowed by the Cold War confrontation. However, for the family members who remained in occupied Lithuania and aspired to emigrate as citizens of the Soviet Union, such dreams would start to dissipate as soon as they met the inspectors of the Office of Visas and Registration,[7] who processed their emigration documents. The functions of these officials were formal: for the applicants who had been born abroad and were entitled to citizenship of a foreign country, they confirmed in writing the fact of their "conversion" to Soviet citizenship (in accordance with the above-mentioned decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of 7 September 1940) and explained how such a citizen would be able to go abroad on a "general basis". The inspectors" duties did not end there: it was they who initiated the surveillance of those seeking to emigrate. They passed information about each applicant to the Counterintelligence Department of the MGB of the Lithuanian SSR, which forwarded the data to the MGB divisions according to

---

[5] It is obvious from the documents preserved in the Lithuanian Special Archive (LYA) that the mail of embassies operating in Moscow first fell into the hands of the Soviet security. The content of the correspondence would be processed and systematized using standardized "forms". These "forms" were forwarded to the security subdivisions of the republics and other administrative units of the USSR with instructions to identify the persons mentioned in the letters and to organize agent surveillance of them (the "form" of Dž. Naudžius's letter to the US embassy of April 26, 1948, LYA, col. K-43, inv. 1, f. 22, l. 6).

[6] Top secret letter of March 21, 1953, from Piotr Kondakov, minister of the interior of the Lithuanian SSR, to Bogdan Kobulov, deputy minister of the interior of the USSR, LYA, col. K-41, inv. 1, f. 439, l. 40.

[7] Documents of departure from the USSR and arrival of foreigners were handled by the Visas and Registration Division of the Ministry of the Interior. Due to the blocking of Jewish emigration, the acronym OVIR (*Otdel viz i registratsii*) became ingrained in the historiography in a similar way to *sputnik* or *perestroika*.

the person's place of residence with the instruction to organize agency surveillance and to find out how and what kind of contacts were being maintained with foreign countries.[8]

Thus, even when it was possible to establish contacts with relatives and embassies, emigration in the post-war period was prevented by the suspicion of the Soviet authorities and the principled treatment of foreign countries as "enemy territory" (especially after the Cold War gained momentum). The Iron Curtain divided hundreds of thousands of families; the numbers were especially large in the countries that underwent the Nazi and Soviet occupations of 1939–1945. To them, opening the borders could have had unpredictable consequences and lead to a desperate flight from the regime. During the period of the harshest repression and deportations, from 1945 to 1952, a citizen of the USSR could not even dream of moving to a capitalist country.

The situation changed with the death of Stalin in 1953 and the political "thaw" in the Soviet Union. The obvious changes encouraged people to look for contacts: through the Red Cross, the diplomatic missions in Moscow, the ministries of foreign affairs, acquaintances and relatives, people gained courage to look for their relatives and to exchange letters and information. The situation was changing extremely fast: in 1955–1956, correspondence and support by means of parcels became widespread, and foreign tourism to the USSR, including visits to Vilnius, began. The OVIR office on Stalin Avenue in Vilnius, which until 1955 had hardly any work (the staff was confined to one room and worked only three days a week), was no longer able to cope with the rise in the number of applicants by the end of the year, and a request was made for more spacious premises and more staff positions.[9]

---

[8] In the local MGB/KGB department, a so-called file/form would be opened for the person in which reports from agents and informants were collected. When enough "evidence" accumulated, the person could be arrested. Standard charges in such cases were formulated as belonging to the intelligence services of the USA, England, or other countries. They were based on the fact that during visits to foreign embassies, the individuals allegedly passed on intelligence or "slanderous" information on the political and economic situation of the Lithuanian SSR; in the case of the visits of Jews, on the situation of their community and the like (top secret papers of 9 July and August 15, 1947 from the chief of OVIR of MVD of the Lithuanian SSR to Filimonov, chief of the Second Department of MGB, LYA, col. K-43, inv. 1, f. 24, l. 194–195, 239, 246; top secret papers of Filimonov, chief of the Second Department of MGB: of July 27, 1947, to the departmental chief of MGB of Marijampolė district; of August 20, 1947, to the departmental chief of MGB of Varėna district, ibid., l. 196, 244).

[9] Around 1000 foreigners arrived in the Lithuanian SSR during eleven months of 1955. The ministries of foreign affairs of the USSR and the Lithuanian SSR received up to 55 inquiries per month regarding search of relatives in Lithuania and forwarded those inquiries to the OVIR (top secret document of December 19, 1955, from Kiselevičius, chief of OVIR MVD of the Lithuanian SSR to Gotsev, deputy minister of the interior, (Document Department of the Interior Ministry at the Lithuanian Special Archives, LYA VRM DS), col. L-3, inv. 3, f. 611, l. 46).

The fight for family immigration: hopes and opportunities in the West

As families, encouraged by the "thaw", made contacts, a large group of potential emigrants soon emerged: the children, spouses, and parents of those who had fled to Germany and other European countries in the summer of 1944, with the Red Army approaching. After years of miserable life in displaced persons' camps, they dispersed all over the world, with around 30,000 settling in the USA and 15,000 in Canada. Often, they and their families left behind in occupied Lithuania were unaware of each other's fates for years. As contacts were established, family members who were settled in emigration began to support their families with parcels, and quite a few of them were looking for opportunities for reunification.

Interestingly, it was Lithuanians who were the first – or among the first – in the USA to "stir" the issue of reuniting with their families who had stayed behind in the USSR (at the same time widening the opportunities for emigration from the USSR to other countries). They sought legal help, never stopped sending letters to the US State Department, to influential politicians and diplomats, to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and to top Soviet officials in the Kremlin.[10] The mass media joined their struggle by publicizing information about the fates of the families and their requests to the Soviet authorities.[11] The struggle for exit permits lasted for several years: the situation then began to change between 1955 and 1960, when, in order to normalize relations with the West, Nikita Khrushchev revised the migration policy opening the doors of the USSR to foreign tourists. The first Lithuanians – family members of foreign nationals – were allowed to emigrate in 1957.[12]

---

[10] "Po vienuolikos metų susilaukė žmonos ir vaikų iš Sibiro", *Darbininkas* (New York), November 12, 1957, 3; Jonas Vengris, *Mano kelias. Memuarai*, Osterville, 1990, 240–241, 250–253, and others.

[11] See information on the efforts of Danutė Armonaitė: "Trygve Lie Has 'Mission' in Russia", *Dayton Daily News,* April 17, 1950, 2; "Ohio Girl Calls Bluff of Red Boss", *The Cincinnati Post*, June 5, 1957, 1; "Armonams susitikti daug pagelbėjo Cleveland Press", *Dirva*, March 9, 1960, 1.

[12] In March 1957, A. Pavilanienė from Kaunas emigrated to join her daughter, who had been living in the USA since 1938; Monika Gaučienė and her children flew to her husband in Chicago in November of that year. Gaučienė, 44, arrived almost directly from Siberia, where she had spent nine years in exile deported with her children and her mother-in-law as a *kulak*, i.e., an affluent farmer. Felicita Klečkauskaitė, who had returned from the gulag, was allowed to emigrate to Austria, and Hilda Tautvaišienė-Ahlandsberg, also a deportee, was allowed to leave for Sweden. In 1957, the first Jewish families managed to escape as well ("Gyvenimas Lietuvoje: pasakoja ką tik atvykusi lietuvė" [Pavilanienė], *Keleivis* (Boston), April 10, 1957, 1; Juozas Prunskis, "Pasakoja atskridusi iš Sibiro tremtinė lietuvė" [Gaučienė], *Draugas* (Chicago), November 13, 1957, 1; "Sibiro pragare. Pasikalbėjimas su išsivadavusia iš Sibiro lietuvaite" [Klečkauskaitė], *Draugas*, June 2, 1960, 3; A. M., "In the Cemetery of Nations", *Lietuvių dienos* (Los Angeles), February 15, 1969, 19; Rachlin Rachelė ir Izraelis, *Šešiolika metų Sibire*, Vilnius: Lietuvos žydų bendruomenė, 2012).

When the first families fled the USSR at the turn of the 1960s, their names, the emotional photographs, and stories of those who embraced each other again after more than a decade made the front pages of the newspapers. What was the precursor of these events and what role did Lithuanians play in fostering the emigration process?

The US authorities and the public immediately recognized the merits of Marshall Macduffie, a lawyer from New York. It was he who took the opportunity to personally remind Khrushchev, again and again, of the dramatic stories of families torn apart by war and of people's attempts to reunite. Macduffie had known Khrushchev personally since 1946, when he headed the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) mission to Ukraine. He resigned before completing his term in Kiev because he respected the "political impartiality" of the UNRRA. When the Cold War started, this position began to run counter to official US policy with support for the Soviet Union being heavily criticized and eventually withdrawn.[13] When Nikita Khrushchev became leader of the USSR, Macduffie immediately wrote him a letter reminding him of their long-standing acquaintance and in autumn 1953 received an invitation to visit the Soviet Union. With a "Khrushchev visa", accompanied by an Intourist guide, he had the opportunity to see the Soviet Union from Leningrad to Vladivostok and Central Asia in 65 days. Before returning to America, he met Khrushchev for a few hours" talk in the Kremlin. He described his impressions of visiting cities and places that for many years had been closed to foreign tourists in a book published in 1955.[14]

Published at the height of the Cold War, the book was widely acclaimed and earned the author the reputation of "Khrushchev's friend". Therefore, when word spread that he was planning a visit to the USSR with a group of businessmen (January 1956), he was approached by several Americans asking him to mediate in obtaining emigration permits for the members of their families. The first was William Gavcus (Gaučius), who for many years had been trying to bring his wife and children back;[15] the other two individuals were

---

[13] For more on the activities of the UNRRA in the USSR, see: Andrew Harder, The Politics of Impartiality: The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in the Soviet Union, 1946-7, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (April 2012), 347–369.

[14] Marshall Macduffie, *The Red Carpet: 10,000 miles through Russia on a Visa from Khrushchev*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1955.

[15] Gavcus, who in 1951 found out the address of his family in Siberia through the US Consulate, wrote letters to President Harry Truman, the secretaries-general of the United Nations, and appealed to Georgy Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev. In 1957, his wife was allowed to emigrate to the USA with their 13-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter.

from Ukraine.[16] Macduffie, who had no children of his own, was sensitive to the requests, and his wife Rose urged him not to shy away from a conversation that would be uncomfortable for the master of the Kremlin. When he met Khrushchev, he conveyed the Americans' pleas, adding that he would be risking his marriage if he did not help them. Such an informal appeal was unlikely to leave much room for maneuver for Nikita Khrushchev, who, needless to say, valued the acquaintance of an influential US Democrat figure as an opportunity to open up political contacts and investment. After the meeting in the Kremlin, Macduffie made public Khrushchev's unprecedented promise to allow the family members of the Americans to leave the USSR if they wished.[17]

Despite this, the emigration documents and visa applications of these first families were stuck in the viscous Soviet bureaucracy. Macduffie tried to speed up their departure by telegrams to Khrushchev and Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister, and in October 1956, when he returned to the USSR with a large delegation of US and Canadian industrialists, he paid a demonstrative visit to Jacob Olin's wife in Kyiv. She confirmed that she was sitting by her suitcases waiting for permission to leave. Upon his return to the USA, Macduffie was a regular visitor to the Soviet Embassy[18] and kept sending telegrams to Khrushchev, Gromyko, and other officials. He had to seek the support of even more influential Americans: when he learned that Eleanor Roosevelt was going to the USSR, he met with her to ask her to "press" on Khrushchev and Gromyko. She managed to "tip the scales" in favor of the Gaučius's family emigration: a month after her visit to Moscow, the family finally emigrated to the USA.[19]

This success made Macduffie famous, and he began working on the cases of potential immigrants. In addition to pressuring Soviet officials and criticizing their delay policy in the press, he successfully exploited the opportunities offered by his political

---

[16] The wife of one of them, Jacob Olin, remained in Kiev after he had left for the USA in 1937. The other, Nowozheniuk and his wife, sought to bring back their daughter who had been left with her grandparents in Lithuania at the age of eleven months when they were deported to Germany for forced labor; she survived deportation to Siberia, arriving in the USA in the fall of 1960 (Reunion of families separated by World War II, *Congressional Record. Proceedings and Debates of the 87th Congress Second Session*, Vol. 108 – Part 15. September 18, 1962, to September 27, 1962, Washington: United States Government Printing Office, p. 20974).

[17] Ibid.

[18] He knew Mikhail Menshikov, the Soviet ambassador to Washington from 1953 onwards, from the time of his work at the UNRRA mission in Kiev.

[19] Reunion of families separated by World War II, *Congressional Record. Proceedings and Debates of the 87th Congress Second Session*, Vol. 108 – Part 15. September 18, 1962, to September 27, 1962, p. 20974. Later, after Macduffie sent a stern telegram to the USSR Ministry of the Interior, in which he recalled unfulfilled Khrushchev's permission for Olin's wife to emigrate, she finally left.

contacts with the US authorities. Under his encouragement, the issue of reunification of families separated by war was raised by governors and businessmen during official visits, and in 1959 by Vice-President Richard Nixon, who opened the first exhibition of USA achievements in Moscow. As there was not enough time to discuss the issue in formal and informal meetings, the vice-president outlined it to Nikita Khrushchev in a letter of 1 August. In it, he expressed his hope that the principle of non-separation of families, as recognized by both countries, would serve to improve relations between them. Along with the letter, the vice-president handed over a list of the addresses of the families of US citizens seeking reunification, stating that America would grant them immigration visas and that the US government, for its part, would not obstruct the departure of those who wished to settle in the USSR.[20] Around 200 names were included in this list. Probably there were not many Lithuanian names among them, but several families emigrated to the USA in 1960 thanks to the mediation of Richard Nixon.[21]

Intense pressure on Nikita Khrushchev over the obstacles created by the Soviet regime to the reunification of families separated by the war was organized in September 1959, when he arrived in the USA for a much-anticipated visit. During his visit, even the blocking of American radio stations was stopped in the Soviet Union. During a visit to corn farmer Roswell Garst in Iowa, his guests (including Adlai Stevenson, who had twice run for president of the United States, as well as Macduffie; incidentally, Garst had also visited the USSR on several occasions and had been on friendly terms with Khrushchev) used the full force of their eloquence to argue that reunification of the families that had been torn apart by war would be a good impression on the general public, and that it would bring closer the nations that had been divided by the Cold War.[22]

---

[20] Richard Nixon's letter to Nikita Khrushchev of 1 August 1959, USA Department of State, Office of the Historian, < https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v10p1/d104>, accessed 8 January 2023.

[21] Judging from the émigré press and memoirs, Nixon's list included Danutė Marija Sirusaitė, 16, and Laimutė Kriščiūnaitė, 18 (their parents had left them in the care of their relatives when they fled Lithuania in 1944), Regina Gaigalienė and her daughter Gražina as well as Marija Grušienė and her daughter Milda, who emigrated through the effort of their spouses ("Susitiko po šešiolikos metų. Jurgis ir Elena Sirusai susilaukė dukreles iš Lietuvos", *Darbininkas*, July 7, 1960, 4, 8; "Laimutė Kriščiūnaitė atvyko iš pavergtos Lietuvos", *Draugas*, January 7, 1960, 1; "Atvyko iš Lietuvos Regina Gaigalienė", *Draugas*, October 31, 1960, 1; Archbishop Metropolitan of Vilnius Gintaras Grušas, < https://www.vilnensis.lt/vyskupai/arkivyskupas/>, accessed February 28, 2023). The list also included the names of individuals of other nationalities living in Lithuania, e.g., Chaimas Finkelšteinas and his wife, both former political prisoners, who emigrated to their children from Kaunas ("Iš Lietuvos į Sibirą ir Chicagą", *Draugas*, June 2, 1960, 8), as well as Latvian and Estonian names ("Kaks eestlannat Eestist USA-sse", *Meie Kodu, Australian-Estonian Weekly*, December 10, 1959, no. 50, 1).

[22] Reunion of families separated by World War II, *Congressional Record. Proceedings and Debates of the 87th Congress Second Session*, Vol. 108 – Part 15. September 18, 1962, to September 27, 1962, p. 20975.

Moreover, during the Soviet leader's tour of the United States, the US administration had apparently arranged for requests for the release of the close relatives of the Americans to be personally handed to him. For example, in one of the hotels in Des Moines, Iowa, where Nikita Khrushchev was staying, there was the most sensitive scene ever photographed and filmed by a large number of reporters. When he appeared in the lobby in the morning, Elena Leonienė took advantage of this unique opportunity to address the leader of the USSR and, crying bitterly, she handed a request for the release of her children personally to him.[23] A similar scene was seen at the University of Pittsburgh when, during an official lunch, a young girl (Donna Armonas – Danutė Armonaitė) in tears sought to kiss Khrushchev's hand asking permission for the emigration of her mother and brother. This was not a spontaneous "sally": David L. Lawrence, the governor of Pennsylvania who was close by, explained to the guest why the security guards had allowed the girl accompanied by a group of journalists to approach them. Khrushchev, who was enjoying the attention of the Americans, did not delay the awkward moment and promised the girl that she would see her mother soon. "Her plea won freedom for Mrs. Armoniene",[24] wrote *Life*, one of the most popular illustrated magazines of the time, which also published the historic photograph. The American media devoted a great deal of space to these scenes, capturing the promise of a broadly smiling Khrushchev to allow family reunification.[25] It is hard to say whether immigrants from other nations behaved in a similar way. According to priest Juozas Prunskis, five Lithuanians "reached" Khrushchev personally.[26]

---

[23] When the Leonas fled to Germany from the approaching Eastern Front in 1944, they left their four-year-old daughter and two-year-old son to the grandparents (Paulius Leonas, "Mano gyvenimo pabiros", 28 October 1998, (Manuscript Department of the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania, LNB RS), col. F-28, f. 235, l. 2–3).

[24] Woman in Siberia, *Life*, 1961 05 05, p. 119. Jonas Armonas, a US citizen, left the occupied Lithuania in 1940 with his infant daughter hoping for a quick reunion with his wife and newborn son. "Woman in Siberia", *Life*, May 5, 1961, 119.

[25] Leslie Steven Rothenberg, "Two Encounters with Nikita Khrushchev", *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 295, December 19–26. 1987, 1621; "A Poignant Victory in the Cold War", *Life*, February 15, 1960, 45; Barbora Armonienė, *Palik ašaras Maskvoje,* 233. Interestingly, in a book about Nikita Khrushchev's visit to America published by a group of journalists in Moscow in 1959, there was no mention of similar "incidents" (*Litsom k litsu s Amerikoi*, Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1959).

[26] According to memoirs and press reports, Khrushchev's personal promise facilitated emigration to the USA of the priest's mother, Ona Prunskienė (journalists from *The Chicago Tribune* helped him to meet Khrushchev), also Vidmantas Brazys, 16, Erdvilis Janulaitis, 15, Barbora Armonienė and her son Jonas, and Regina and Tomas Leonas ("Sulaukė motinos iš Lietuvos", *Tėviškės žiburiai* (Toronto), April 21, 1960, 1; "Atvyko iš Lietuvos", *Darbininkas*, August 4, 1960, 1; Kerri Kelleher, "Soviet Reunion", *Cape Cod Times*, August 6, 2015, < https://eu.capecodtimes.com/story/news/local/2015/08/06/soviet-reunion/33733188007/>, accessed January 21, 2023; Barbora Armonienė, Algirdas L. Nasvytis, *Palik ašaras Maskvoje,* 233–242; Paulius Leonas, "Mano gyvenimo pabiros", October 28, 1998, LNB RS, col. F-28, f. 235, l. 2–3).

Khrushchev himself undertook his tour of America as a "family man", arriving with his wife and children. This probably also contributed to a positive attitude, and emigration got the green light. More precise statistics on emigration are not known. According to official figures, 1325 immigrants from the USSR came to the USA between May 1958 and autumn 1965.[27] The majority of them were elderly people going to their family members. Most of them were Jews, as this ethnic minority had many relatives in America.[28] American persistence opened up opportunities for emigration to other countries as well: for example, in assessing Macduffie's merits, the estimate was that some 1,000 families were allowed to leave the USSR in the first half of 1960 alone (compared with only 55 between 1953 and 1959, according to the data of Jewish organizations in the USA).[29]

According to isolated press reports, at least 40 Lithuanian families were reunited in the USA and eight in Canada in 1960 alone. Interestingly enough, the sudden cooling of relations between the USSR and the USA in the spring of 1960 after the flight of Francis Gary Powers, which ended in an aviation and political disaster, did not abruptly stop emigration. However, the momentum gained was lost, and the Caribbean crisis in the autumn of 1962 brought it to a complete halt. Due to these circumstances, the emigration of Lithuanians to the USA, successful at the start, stopped for a while and the borders of other countries also closed to them. It seems that in 1961, only eight families managed to leave for the USA, while not a single family received emigration permission in 1962. There were sporadic cases of emigration after the crisis, but it never reached the scale of 1960. Between three and twenty families or individuals emigrated to the USA each year.

The sensation of arrival

The arrival of the first Lithuanians from occupied Lithuania attracted a great deal of attention in the West. The event would be covered by both the local émigré and national media. The arrival of the first emigrants was a sensation in the true sense of the word. Along the way (at airports in Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Amsterdam), family members and journalists, also politicians and diplomats would greet them, and upon arrival, a large number of acquaintances and other curious people met them. These occasions were filmed

---

[27] International Migration News and Notes, *The International Migration Digest*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Autumn, 1965), 200.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Reunion of families separated by World War II, *Congressional Record. Proceedings and Debates of the 87th Congress Second Session*, Vol. 108 – Part 15. September 18, 1962, to September 27, 1962, p. 20975.

and photographed, and interviews were taken and recorded. For example, in 1957, when Monika Gaučienė and her children arrived at Chicago Midway Airport, at least a hundred people welcomed them, and a red carpet was laid out. Newspapers and radio stations reported the story of the happy family, and they were showered with gifts when they were recognized in shops.[30] When Regina and Tomas Leonas arrived in Chicago in 1960, the local radio kept announcing it every half-hour, and television aired several broadcasts. Police escorted the family from the airport, and a crowd of 150 people awaited them at their home. *Life* magazine published the photographs of the happy family reunited after sixteen years apart,[31] TV shows invited them, and railway companies offered them free trips. The family received great holiday offers from California and Florida (they chose Florida).[32]

The reason for this attention was not only the interest of the American public in the dramatic stories of the families and the outcome of their struggle for reunification, but also Khrushchev's name, which was not disappearing from the media, and which attracted the American public like a magnet. His tour of America that was met with immense interest, his immediate communication and his impromptu emotional speeches culminated in an ovation for the USSR leader at his departure. The follow-up to the story of this visit – his promise to allow family reunification – was the focus of global attention. In the case of the Lithuanians, the media hype could not be avoided either. Perhaps the most striking example of this was the fact that in the crowd that gathered at Chicago airport on 28 January 1960 to greet the Leonas children, no one was even aware of the arrival, on the same plane, of 15-year-old Edmundas and 17-year-old Nijolė Trečiokas, whose emigration was not made famous by Khrushchev's name and who were greeted only by their father.[33]

Later in 1960, interest in the new arrivals abated: after a few dozen emigrants had been welcomed, the sensation was over. The press wrote in the summer of that year: "Arrival from Lithuania is no longer news. Got used to it."[34] Yet even not having enough time to track all of the emigrants, the arrival of compatriots mobilized the Lithuanian diaspora. People seeking reunification with their families tried to find out the behind-the-

---

[30] McCandlish Phillips, "Refugees Arrive from Red Lands", *The New York Times*, November 11, 1957, 1; Juozas Prunskis, "Kaip gyvena lietuviai tremtiniai Sibire. Pasakoja iš ten atvykusi Monika Gaučienė", *Draugas*, November 12, 1957, 1.

[31] "A Poignant Victory in the Cold War", *Life*, February 15, 1960, p. 45.

[32] "Leonų vaikai pasakoja apie Lietuvą", *Draugas*, January 30, 1960, 6; "Ką pasakoja jaunuoliai iš anapus", *Lietuvių dienos*, February 15, 1960, 12, and others.

[33] "Iš Lietuvos atskrido dvi poros jaunuolių", *Dirva* (Cleveland), February 3, 1960, 1.

[34] "Kai atvyksta iš Lietuvos", *Vienybė* (New York), August 5, 1960, 4.

scenes of a successful emigration and searched for the addresses of influential lawyers and politicians who had helped the lucky ones. The media, politicians, and public organizations were interested in the stories of the newcomers and the life in Soviet Lithuania. Meetings and lectures were organized, and memoirs were published and disseminated. Although the emigrants arrived empty-handed (they were allowed to take only up to 20 kg of luggage with them), some of them had invaluable experience.

Emigration of repression victims

Among the first Lithuanian emigrants from the USSR to the USA and Canada, the majority were young people 13-21 years old who had been abandoned by their parents when they fled to Germany in 1944, and elderly women whose children and spouses persisted in taking care of their immigration. The emigration press noted immediately that the Soviets only let old women and children out.[35] And indeed, young people and women dominate the 1957-to-1970 list of emigrants. Not just elderly women were among them, though: the youngest was 34 years old. Several of the earliest reunited families in the emigration had children, one of them being Gintaras Grušas, Archbishop of Vilnius, whose family used to joke that he was "Khrushchev's gift to the world".[36] Probably the oldest among the emigrants was the grandmother of Rūta Kilmonytė-Lee, a young Hollywood star. A deportation survivor of about 85 years of age, she received personal permission from Nikita Khrushchev to leave the USSR when after eight years of unsuccessful attempts to emigrate, in 1964, the actress succeeded in talking to him by phone.[37] Men were also allowed to leave, some of them even held important posts in independent Lithuania.

As mentioned above, there were quite a number of former political prisoners and deportees among the emigrants. Some of them flew to the West almost directly from Siberia (such as M. Gaučienė, who returned to Lithuania for only three days). Also, among the emigrants there were several women who had escaped from places of exile and therefore were wanted as criminals for a long time after a search for them was announced across the whole territory of the Soviet Union (Ona Prunskienė, Marija Avižienienė,

---

[35] "Kodėl daugiausia atvyksta tik jaunuoliai", *Dirva*, August 5, 1960, 4.

[36] Interview of April 19, 2013: "Arkivyskupas G. Grušas: kai kam buvau Chruščiovo dovana pasauliui", <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/tavo-lrt/15/15777/arkivyskupas-g-grusas-kai-kam-buvau-chrusciovo-dovana-pasauliui>, accessed March 1, 2023.

[37] "Rūta Lee Kilmonytė pas senelę", *Darbininkas*, March 24, 1964, 1; "Hollywood Actor Rūta Lee Explores Her Family History in Lithuania", <https://lithuaniatribune.com/hollywood-actor-ruta-lee-explores-her-family-history-in-lithuania/>, accessed February 12, 2023.

Albina Balkutė, Marija Garbačiauskienė; Teklė Benotienė and her three children were found in Lithuania and deported back to Siberia).

As soon as they crossed the Soviet border, many emigrants would start talking about life behind the Iron Curtain. For example, immediately upon his arrival, Alfonsas Milukas, a former political prisoner, gave evidence before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs, which was collecting data on the situation in the occupied Baltic republics.[38] In addition to media interviews discrediting the regime, the first memoirs by émigrés appeared in as early as the 1960s, also in foreign languages. These books and first-hand testimonies entered the vanguard of the political struggle of the diaspora. As Hilda Tautvaišienė, a 1941 deportee, wrote in the introduction to her book,

> Having arrived in the free world and liberated myself from the never-ending sense of fear, I consider it my duty to testify and tell the story of the people, most of them women and children, who innocently suffered the most brutal violence, the misfortune, and the terrible fate that befell them.[39]

Similar mottos accompanied other books of memoirs,[40] and the power of authentic testimonies cannot be overestimated.

Why did the regime not prevent the emigration of repression victims? How did the selection of emigrants work? The selection was the exclusive responsibility of the MGB/KGB. The emigration of minors, the elderly, and the poorly educated villagers was approached leniently. Apparently, security officials did not expect that *kolkhoz* women, seamstresses, and teachers would become involved in the activities of anti-Soviet émigré organizations and publish their shocking life stories. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of multiethnic prisoners of war, Germans, and Polish victims of repression left the USSR after the war. Some of them reached Western countries and already spoke of their horrific experiences.

---

[38] "Mūsų buityje", *Aidai*, 1965, no. 6, 278.

[39] Hilda Tautvaišienė, *Tautų kapinynas Sibiro tundroje*, New York: Amerikos lietuvių socialdemokratų sąjungos literatūros fondas, 1962, 6; Hilda Tautvaiša, *The Cemetery of Nations in the Siberian Tundra*, London: Nida, 1968.

[40] Deported with her son in 1948 and later imprisoned in gulag, Barbora Armonienė wrote the memoirs with a co-author over a period of three months (excerpts of the memoirs were first published in magazines in English, German, Spanish, and Portuguese, and the book was reprinted several times): Barbora Armonienė, Algirdas L. Nasvytis, *Palik ašaras Maskvoje,* Cleveland: Viltis, 1961; Barbara Armonas, Algirdas L. Nasvytis, *Leave Your Tears in Moscow*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincot, 1961; eadem, *Lass die Tränen in Moskau: 1936–1960: meine zwanzig Jahre in Russland,* München: Ehrenwirth, 1966. Also see.: Stefanija Rūkienė, *Vergijos kryžkeliuose. Sibiro tremties užrašai*, Cleveland: Viltis, 1968; eadem, *Grįžimas į laisvę*, Cleveland: Viltis, 1970. More memoirs were published in the 1970s and 1980s.

The very fact of repression was ignored in the cases of Lithuanian emigration. The criminal and deportation files of those who wanted to emigrate would be reviewed and "review references" would be drawn up, but this procedure was probably still formal because those were the people who had been caught up in the whirlwind of mass repression. The leaders of the reaffirming Soviet regime were rapidly dismantling the Gulag and the system of special deportee settlements as a legacy of Stalinism. After amnesties, between 1953 and 1958, the victims of repression returned home. For several years at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Union seemed to be changing dramatically not only by distancing itself from the crimes of the Stalinist regime but also by making them public. During the "thaw", books appeared in the Soviet Union, the content of which essentially coincided with the testimonies of the Lithuanians who had emigrated to the free world (e.g., *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, about the daily routine of a prisoner in the gulag. It was published in a print run of millions of copies, for the first time in 1962, and in Vilnius in Lithuanian in 1963). The discrediting of Stalinism did not outweigh the benefits for the newly created image of the Soviet regime.

However, the seemingly liberal attitude of the Soviet regime towards family reunification at the turn of the 1960s had clear boundaries: (1) permission to emigrate was granted on a case-by-case basis, i.e., the regime did not bind itself by any principled commitment (not to restrict emigration or at least to release all members of a foreigner's family who wished to emigrate, to reinstate the stripped citizenship and the like); (2) formerly well-known personalities and fighters of the national underground were denied legal means of leaving to foreign countries. Their persecution and discrimination lasted for a very long time. Occasionally they would be given permissions to emigrate, but this may have been motivated by the operational interests of the security organs.[41] The emigration of personalities who could have made a stronger impact in the West was blocked. For example, despite all the efforts of his family and French diplomats, the diplomat Petras Klimas, who had returned from Siberia and settled in Kaunas, was not allowed to reunite with his family, although his daughter succeeded in meeting Khrushchev in 1957 and the

---

[41] The MGB/KGB of the Lithuanian SSR sent a number of agents to the West for permanent residence. Permits for family reunification were also manipulated, with conditions and recruitment attempts. For example, a Lithuanian army colonel who emigrated to his family in 1965 is mentioned in security documents as an undercover agent "Grūžė" (Top secret 1948 06 11 "The America line plan of the Counterintelligence Department of the Marijampolė district MGB", LYA, col. K-43, inv. 1, f. 24, l. 154).

name of Petras Klimas was on the list of persons of whose emigration was a matter of President Charles de Gaulle' personal concern in 1960. The negative decision was based on the arguments of the KGB of the Lithuanian SSR that the well-known high-ranking diplomat would get involved in anti-Soviet activities of the Lithuanian diaspora in the West.[42]

Conclusions

The first Lithuanians to legally flee the occupied Lithuania after the end of the Second World War were foreign nationals returning to their home countries (1945–1947) and those who achieved reunification with their family members (when such an opportunity presented itself in 1957). Their emigration to Western countries was hardly noticeable in the Lithuanian SSR (as evidenced by the lack of its traces in the historiography). It did not assume a large scale, but news of the arrival of the first Lithuanians to the West had a snowball effect in the diaspora: families shared their experiences, the addresses of influential lawyers and politicians, and looked for their own ways for the emigration of their family members.

Lithuanian families had to fight for their right to reunite. It was the "human factor" that opened the path to their reunification: direct involvement of influential Western diplomats, politicians, and journalists at the right moment when, having started reforms, Soviet leaders agreed to tolerate limited flows of tourist arrivals and emigration. The Soviets benefited from such an image of "liberalization": it boosted the regime's reputation that was essential for the successful development of economic contracts. Only the most persistent families, which had overcome bureaucratic hurdles and had not given up even after several setbacks, reunited. The very phenomenon of the arrival of compatriots mobilized the diaspora for the dissemination of up-to-date information about the repression of the Soviet regime and life in the occupied homeland. It remains one of the important signs of the "thaw" that galvanized the diaspora.

Works Cited

Arbušauskaitė, Arūnė. *Gyventojų manai tarp Lietuvos ir Vokietijos pagal 1941 m. sausio 10 d. sutartį*. Klaipėda: S. Jokužio leidykla-spaustuvė, 2002

---

[42] Vilma Bukaitė, *Nepriklausomybės akto signataras Petras Klimas*, Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, 2016, 554–558.

Bukaitė, Vilma. *Nepriklausomybės akto signataras Petras Klimas*. Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, 2016

Harder, Andrew. "The Politics of Impartiality: The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in the Soviet Union, 1946-7". In *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (April 2012), pp. 347–369

International Migration News and Notes. In *The International Migration Digest*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Autumn, 1965), pp. 180–207

Macduffie, Marshall. *The Red Carpet: 10,000 miles through Russia on a Visa from Khrushchev*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1955

Reunion of families separated by World War II, in: *Congressional Record. Proceedings and Debates of the 87th Congress Second Session*. Vol. 108 – Part 15. September 18, 1962, to September 27, 1962, Washington: United States Government Printing Office, pp. 20973-20975

Summary

The article deals with the hitherto unexplored issues of the emigration of Lithuanians from the USSR to Western countries. The main focus is on the factors that triggered the emigration process (the start of which coincided with de-Stalinization and the thaw in US-USSR relations) and the scale of emigration. It seeks answers to the questions of what means were used by Lithuanian families separated by the war to fight for the right to reunite and what resonance was caused by the appearance of the first compatriots, who escaped from the Soviet Union, in the free world at the turn of the 1960s. Only the most persistent families, who overcame bureaucratic hurdles and did not give up even after several setbacks, were reunited. The arrival of Lithuanians, including political prisoners and deportees returning from Siberia, galvanized and mobilized the Lithuanian diaspora: people shared the latest news about life in the occupied homeland and the addresses of influential attorneys and politicians; they searched for the ways for their next of kin to emigrate. The political thaw did not last long, but the limited migration and family reunification that began during that period continued throughout the Soviet era, right until 1990.

Translated by Diana Barnard