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Displacements and Relocations: An Oral History Project

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This article is based on the author's presentation at the XIV World Lithuanian Symposium on Arts and Sciences in November, 2008. The project was also presented by Dr. Dalia Cidzikaitė at the AABS Conference in Seattle in April, 2010.

Abstract

The author describes an oral history project begun in 1995. The goal was to record the remembrances of a cross section of Lithuanian- Americans who left their country in 1944 to escape the advancing Soviet Army and, after several years in Displaced Persons camps in Germany and elsewhere, emigrated to the United States and settled there. Sixty-five interviews were tape-recorded. The age of the respondents ranged from 67 to 95 at the time of the interviews. These narratives provide primary sources for research about this generation of the Lithuanian Diaspora and the complicated period of history that it experienced. Archival DVD's containing the recordings, transcripts, video tapes and other transcribed material have been placed in various research institutes and archives in Lithuania and the U.S.A.

This oral history project began in 1995, under the aegis of the Cultural Council of the Lithuanian American Community, Inc., in order to record the reminiscences of a generation of Lithuanian- Americans who left Lithuania in 1944 in flight from the advancing Soviet Army and eventually reached the United States as immigrants. The project and data collection was organized by myself, with Dalia S. Anysas handling the transcription, digitalizing and indexing of the collected material. These tape-recorded and transcribed life stories were to be placed in archives here and in Lithuania, and thus made available to scholars for future studies. Historian Dr. David Fainhauz and sociologist Dr. Grace Budrys were consulted in planning the project. Prior to beginning the project, I attended the Oral History Workshop at Vermont College of Norwich University taught by Dr. Charles T. Morrissey, former President of the Oral History Association. Financial assistance was received from the Lithuanian Foundation and the Illinois Arts Council.

The goal of the project was to collect and preserve the remembered experiences of a generation that experienced the first Soviet occupation (1940-1941) and the following German occupation (1941-1944). Having survived mass deportations, arrests, convictions and executions during the Soviet occupation and facing the threat of a second Soviet occupation, a large segment of Lithuania's population left Lithuania as refugees at the end of World War II and fled west, mostly to war-torn Germany. They found temporary residences in Displaced Persons (DP) camps and eventually emigrated to the United States, where they resettled. We hoped that these narratives from living witnesses, however subjective and filtered through memory, would contribute to the understanding of this complicated period of history and provide raw material for research and study.

In order to reach a cross-section of this population, we tried to select interviewees from varied backgrounds, with varied experiences and several levels of education. This selection we hoped would help us compare and analyze a wider range of experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the most defining events in their lives. Participants were informed in advance that the recordings would be made available for study through various archives. With very few exceptions, they or

their heirs were also asked to sign a release form. Upon request, they were provided with a copy of the topics and questions to be discussed.

The interview usually began with the date and circumstances of departure: we asked the interviewees why they left at that particular time, whether the departure was planned or spontaneous, whether they had made advance preparations, and whether they had a specific destination in mind. We asked about the impact on their lives by the Soviet and German occupations and whether, and under what circumstances, they hoped to return. We then talked about the experiences of their journey westward in horse-drawn wagons, by trains, on boats, bicycles, and even on foot, followed by descriptions of life during and after the war in Western Europe, the organization of the Displaced Persons camps, the conditions of everyday life there, treatment by residents of the host country, and their assessment of a return to Lithuania. Finally, we focused on their emigration from Europe and arrival in the United States: their expectations, first impressions, and adjustment. Summing up, they were asked to evaluate their decision to leave Lithuania from today's perspective as well as their feelings about the dislocation and losses. The interview ended with a few factual questions about date of birth, family background, education, and job history.

During the course of the project, sixty-five interviews were tape recorded. In several instances, the spouses of the interviewee also participated. Two additional brief interviews were conducted by telephone and not taped. The duration of the sixty-five tape recorded interviews ranged from 23 minutes to five hours and 38 minutes, recorded during several visits. In sum, we have about 120 hours of conversation. While most of our interviewees were from Chicago and its environs, an attempt was made to include residents of other parts of the United States. Thirty of the interviews were conducted in Chicago and its environs and 35 in Florida, New York-New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and California. We also received four videotaped interviews from East St. Louis, Illinois. I personally conducted most of the Chicago area interviews; others were conducted by unpaid volunteers from various professional backgrounds and with varied interviewing experience.

Of the primary interviewees, 38 were women and 28 were men. Their age at the time of the interview ranged from 67 to 95. Forty-three of them were 80 years of age or older, of these 10 were 90 or older. As far as we know, 27 of the recorded or videotaped narrators are no longer with us.

When we began to collect these data, we hoped to include a variety of backgrounds and experiences among our interviewees, and we did achieve this. The educational level of the informants ranged from individuals with Ph.D. or M.D. degrees received in Lithuania to others who had no or only four years of formal schooling.

The first Soviet and the German occupations impacted the interviewees in different ways and degrees. The father of one woman was arrested in 1940, soon after the Soviet Army first occupied Lithuania, because of his political affiliation. He was imprisoned, interrogated, beaten, and deported during the mass June 1941 deportations and later executed in Siberia. Another woman's husband was falsely accused of anti-Soviet activity, imprisoned and brutally killed during the Massacre in Rainiai in 1941, as the Soviet units were withdrawing and the Germans advancing. Another interviewee was arrested and imprisoned by German authorities in June of 1944 for his participation in the anti-Nazi resistance. He was imprisoned in Germany until the end of the war.

The flight westward also varied. The majority of our informants left in the summer and fall of 1944. A few crossed the Baltic by boat to Sweden, where they spent a brief time in refugee camps and were then relocated and provided with assistance in finding jobs. They were able to live a more normal life there. Most of the refugees arrived in Germany and temporarily found housing and work. However, they had to move on as soon as the Soviet Army advanced into that part of Germany. On their journey toward Germany their wagons were often bombed and strafed. The families were often separated by the German Army and the men assigned to forced labor, mostly digging of trenches. Their families had to proceed on their own without knowledge of their whereabouts. The husband of one woman never rejoined his family. Three women gave birth en route, one of them in an open wagon, in the rain, in October, because there was no possibility of stopping. The delivery was followed by complications. She received treatment from a doctor among the German soldiers retreating on the same road, and mother and infant survived. Another woman was not so fortunate. Her infant died from pneumonia during a train ride through bomb-ravaged Berlin.

During the war, one young man enlisted in the Soviet Army with the understanding that he would be stationed in Lithuania. Instead, he was sent to a training camp near Siberia. Conditions were so harsh there that he volunteered to serve on the Front because he had heard that rations were better there. As the war was ending, he succeeded in escaping and made his way to Austria. Some young men were forcibly conscripted for work in German Army support units. They were moved with their units all over Europe, under very bad conditions, and often with no apparent plan or purpose.

After the war ended and the DP camps came into existence, the residents began to establish schools and youth groups and to organize cultural and social activities despite lack of resources and poor post-war conditions. They started to publish newspapers and books and formed theatrical companies and musical ensembles that went on tour to other camps. On the whole, people tried to use their time productively: to learn new languages or new trades in preparation for the uncertain future. One of the physicians interviewed, who worked as department head in a hospital for refugees, was training as an electrician "just in case". The then young people in our sample made every attempt to complete their education whether at the high school or university level, and to continue their studies at some German or European

university or at the newly established Baltic University. The sculptor in our interviews studied at Art Academies in Florence and Rome.

When emigration began, most of our informants left directly for the United States. Others first emigrated as contract workers to Australia, Canada, South America and even Pakistan before eventually reaching the United States.

The recorded interviews were transcribed digitally using Word 2003 and PDF formats. We were able to provide minimal compensation for transcription. All other work was done gratis. All transcripts were reviewed and corrected several times. Our recording apparatus was fairly primitive and the quality of some of the recordings made them very difficult to transcribe. Nevertheless, we tried to make the transcripts as accurate as possible. We made no attempt to correct the language of the speaker and tried to preserve the dialect and pattern of speech as much as possible. Foreign terms and place names were transcribed as spoken and the correct version, as far as it was possible to determine it, was added in square brackets.

We wrote up a separate summary or description for each interviewee, which included the most pertinent biographical information, the date and length of the interview, names of other persons present, and names of interviewers and transcribers. Also listed are additional data such as photographs, newspaper clippings, obituaries, etc. Additional biographical information or explanations to the interview added to the transcript are in square brackets.

In addition to the oral narratives, our collection includes written memoirs and diaries of varying style and length, received during the course of the project. We have a total of five diaries, written during and immediately after the war, and thirteen memoirs written much later. Whenever possible, these were scanned. If not, a summary was included, as well as any pertinent letters from the writers. We also have signed releases to use this material.

To summarize, the collected material consists of sixty-five recordings, sixty-five transcripts, two telephone interviews, four videotaped interviews with five people, sixty-five interview summaries, five diaries, thirteen memoirs, photographs and other transcribed material. All of the transcribed material recorded in Word 2003 and PDF formats together with the interviews themselves in MP3 format are on one archival quality DVD disc. The videos are on separate DVD's.

The original copies of our material, along with the DVD's, are deposited in the Lithuanian World Archives at the Lithuanian Research and Studies Center in Chicago. The archival DVD's only have been deposited at the Lithuanian Emigration Institute at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania, and at the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania and the Institute of the Lithuanian Language in Vilnius, as well as at the American Lithuanian Cultural Archives (ALKA) in the United States. The DVD's can be made available to appropriate archives and institutions in the United States and elsewhere upon agreement.

In addition to the material that we collected ourselves, we received typewritten transcripts of thirty-eight interviews made by Dr. Kazys and Mara Almenas during the period from 1965 to 1977. These include recorded conversations with prominent Lithuanian-Americans who were active in the cultural, social and academic life of the Diaspora. These copies are on deposit in the Vilnius Central Archives in Lithuania and at the Lithuanian Research and Studies Center in Chicago.