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“We Didn’t Keep Diaries, You Know”: Memories of Trauma and Violence in the Narratives of Two Former Women Resistance Fighters¹

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Abstract

The goal of this essay is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of traumatic memory by focusing on the perspectives and life stories of former women resistance fighters. Although representation of women (usually as victims) is essential for construction of nationhood in war narratives, women fighters’ voices are often left out from the “grand” picture. How do women who were resistance fighters remember their roles as related to violence as well as the traumatic experiences of torture and deportation? How do they cope with traumatic memories? Are those memories transformed into empowerment through political activities? To gain insight into these questions, the essay presents the narratives of Vitalija Kraujelytė and Natalija Gudonytė.

A growing number of works focusing on collective trauma has started to acknowledge the crucial role of gender in remembering, expressing and memorializing events. In the literature focusing on the Holocaust there is a growing understanding that traumatic history would be incomplete without the addition of women as victims, perpetrators, resisters and bystanders. In the words of Yehuda Bauer, “if all human experience has a gender- related agenda, as women’s studies tells us, the Holocaust can be no exception. Indeed, it seems to me that the problems facing women as women and men as men have a special poignancy in an extreme situation such as the Holocaust.” ²

Gender approaches to the study of traumatic events focus not only on the ways in which women’s experiences differ from men’s, but they also point out how those experiences and traditional women’s roles are practiced under various circumstances. Studies of traumatic memories associated with the Holocaust and other catastrophic events suggest that women experienced imprisonment, humiliation and torture differently than men; thus, their memories and the expressions of those memories were different.

The literature focusing on the repression that took place under Stalin has only recently started paying attention to the role of gender and women’s experiences. Most accounts are about women as victims in extreme situations, such as mass deportations and widespread violence. A gender perspective has been applied to study the experiences of Baltic women deported to Siberia. In *Carrying Linda’s Stones*, an anthology of the life stories of five Estonian women who were deported to Siberia, the editors give the following reasons for applying a gender perspective to study traumatic memories: “We have chosen to focus on women because the majority of life stories written about World War II and its aftermath were published by men who often have a different perspective... Women’s and men’s lives differed considerably during this period. Women’s stories not only concentrate on themselves, but on broader family relations.”³ According to Hinrikus and Koresaar, gendersensitive perspectives compel researchers to pay attention to women’s bodies and women’s issues, such as infertility, single motherhood, and the death of children—issues that tend to be omitted from mainstream historical perspectives.” ⁴

Applying a gender perspective to the study of traumatic memories and focusing on stories told by women can help to develop a more individual, moving and personal narrative, thus decentralizing traumatic history and moving away from

imagining the nation as a fighting and suffering hero. For example, according to Violeta Davoliūtė, *Lietuviai prie Laptevų jūros (Lithuanians by the Laptev Sea [Lituanus, v36:4, 1990])*, the famous memoir by Dalia Grinkevičiūtė, is a heroic narrative of individual resistance and, as such, it departs from “the irredentist, ethnocentric historical consciousness” usually associated with deportee memoirs in Lithuania.⁵

In Baltic studies, gender perspectives have been applied, by and large, to interpret the memoirs of deportees. There is a shortage of accounts analyzing the lives, experiences and memoirs of women who were and viewed themselves as active participants in war, including the perpetrators of violence. According to Žaneta Smolskutė, women played an active role in the Lithuanian anti-Soviet resistance. She gathered factual information about two hundred and fifty women who had received the status of *kario savanorio statusas*, “volunteer fighter,” from the government. At first (in 1945), there were no strict restrictions on women joining the partisans. This situation changed in 1949, when the Lithuanian Freedom Fighters Movement (the anti-Soviet resistance) stopped accepting women as active fighters. Smolskutė concluded that during the Lithuanian war of resistance, in many ways, “women partisans were treated in the same way as men” by the perpetrators.⁶ The bodies of murdered women partisans were displayed in town squares, and they were subjected to torture. There were not many women leaders of partisan groups; they performed mostly auxiliary roles as messengers and paramedics. When arrested, women partisans tried to play down their roles in the resistance movement; however, there is evidence suggesting that they were active and brave participants in military operations.⁷

How do women who were resistance fighters remember their roles in relation to violence as well as the traumatic experiences of torture and deportation? How do they cope with traumatic memories? Are those memories transformed into empowerment through political activities? With these questions in mind, in 2009 and 2010, I conducted in-depth semistructured interviews, which allowed the free flow of narrative, with two former resistance fighters, Natalija Gudonytė and Vitalija Kraujelytė, a sister of the legendary and controversial Lithuanian partisan Antanas Kraujelis. The lives of the two women share some contours. Both were active members of the resistance movement and were deported to labor camps. They both suffered and experienced humiliation upon their return to Lithuania. Currently, they are active in the Political Prisoners' Union, and both act as “agents of memory” – they are interested in and actively involved in trying to establish the truth about the past, honoring the victims (in the case of Vitalija, her brother Antanas; in the case of Natalija, her fellow deportees) and identifying the perpetrators. On the other hand, there are significant differences as well. Natalija was born and raised in Vilnius; she had an upper-class upbringing and was involved in nonviolent resistance. Vitalija was born and raised in a peasant family in Kaniūkai (a village close to Utena), and she was part of the violent resistance.

Remembering Resistance and the Trauma of Betrayal

According to Smolskutė, women resistance fighters in Lithuania were unlikely to try to establish themselves as leaders of partisan units or political organizations. Natalija's and especially Vitalija's stories support this finding – both women saw themselves as performing supporting roles in the resistance movement:

Vitalija: After the war [World War II] was over, our whole family, including us six sisters, immediately joined the partisan movement. We made hiding places for weapons, and the whole family was involved. There were two bunkers in our house. The leader of the partisan movement in Aukštaitija lived in one of them. When I became a messenger for the partisans, my parents knew where I was going, but my parents constantly were trying to warn me; they knew that I had to join the cause, but they also warned me: try to be careful, don't get in trouble... My job was to help maintain communications [serve as a messenger] between two partisan units, one close to Skudutiškis, the other in the region of Anykščiai. I often had to deliver packets. I did not even know what was inside of them; usually I pretended to be a seamstress. I was so scared; often I could not stop trembling.

Natalija: My involvement with the underground movement started in 1939, when there was an announcement that Lithuania would be annexed [by the USSR]. At that time, I still was in school, in Marijampolė, and there was a big gathering there... where we made a pledge to stay in Lithuania and to work for Lithuania. I continued to be engaged in underground activities when I started studying French at the university in Vilnius. ... My secret name was Vosilka, “corn flower.” Our underground organization was large and popular; there were many patriots who joined it. ... I had various duties, including delivering messages, publishing [underground] newspapers and making fake documents.

Serving as messengers was not easy; sometimes the tasks were very dangerous, such as transporting and hiding weapons, even machine guns. However, it was not fear that became the most lasting traumatic memory – it was betrayal. Both women experienced the trauma of betrayal. In the words of Natalija Gudonytė, “I still do not know why there were so many traitors among us... I recall arrests, one after another. The arrests probably had something to do with promises – maybe many were promised freedom. There were many who betrayed their friends, but who later became unwanted even by their new masters; thus, they ended up in prison themselves. ... I was betrayed by another messenger, her name was Butkevičiūtė. She probably betrayed me for money. Later her mother asked her, ‘where did you get all this money from?’... Well, it was dirty money.”

Having experienced betrayal, Natalija ended up in the same KGB prison cell in Vilnius where Žemaitis (a famous partisan) was kept.

What can I tell you? I never could imagine such methods of torture and such ways of treating people. We were traitors, enemies... I heard everything... such nasty words... It is difficult to survive in those cellars [the prison cells were below ground level] without any sleep... And those nasty words. They called me a prostitute and so on. These... and it was cruel and it was disgusting... and... those investigators, speaking Russian. But then, the Lithuanians were not much better. Sometimes, I would spend the whole night without being asked anything. I was forced to sit in one place without moving; just sit, period. I had to put my hands on my thighs; you couldn't cross your legs nor anything... you couldn't lean against anything, not even against the wall... the chair was fixed to the floor. If you fell, they would pour water on your head, and so it went... the same thing over and over again. ... But, to tell you the truth, I think that women may be stronger than men... because men were traitors.

Vitalija's memory about the trauma of betrayal emerged from a story that involved a Lithuanian flag. (She demonstrated her emotional attachment to the Lithuanian flag later during our conversation, when she told me that she knew that Lithuania was truly independent when she saw a Lithuanian flag on Gediminas Hill during the time of the national revival.)

I will never forget this beautiful Easter morning in 1948. As my family and I were returning from church, we saw a Lithuanian flag in the neighboring house that belonged to a *stribelka* [an antiresistance female fighter or someone who was married to a *stribas*, an antiresistance fighter]. At that time, there were five resistance fighters hiding in the cellars of our house, among them the leader of the Aukštaitija partisans, whose name was Žalgiris. We told them what we saw [i.e., the flag]. The leader warned the partisans, put on my father's old coat and went to take down the flag. We all were watching him as he was going to get that flag. He brought it back as the most important, the most treasured thing in the world and spread it out in the room with the table prepared for Easter. Our leader [i.e., the leader of the resistance fighters] kneeled and kissed the flag, hugged it and started to cry. All of us started to kiss the flag and cry a lot; this was a solemn oath of our family, and I will never forget it. It is a pity that there was no one to take a photograph of this event.

...But after a week this celebration turned sour. We now know that a traitor raised this flag [in order to find out who the resistance fighters were]. One week later, on a Monday morning, there was thick fog outside. Our mother prepared breakfast for the men, and we went out to look around before we opened the hiding place [the bunker]. My brother Antanas was the first one to notice a commotion in the [neighboring] farmstead of our cousin; I tried to find out what was going on, and suddenly I realized that our own home was surrounded. My mother and my sister were able to warn the resistance fighters and hide the entrance to their hiding place. My brother Antanas pretended that he was sick, started to cough—thank God, they did not touch him. *Stribai* were poking everywhere with metal sticks... but this time, they did not find the bunker. Shortly afterwards, however, they found out that my sister Ona was in the resistance; they [the *stribai*] started searching our house regularly; Antanas had to leave home. I became his helper. My parents knew everything, and they never scolded me... I was not afraid to die; I was only afraid to be put in prison.

One time the *stribai* found a notebook with partisan songs and poems in our house. I told the *stribai* that this was my notebook: "give it back to me; I found it on the road..." This was my first christening... They took me for questioning, but I kept silent. They hit me. My lip was cut; it started to bleed... But then, before sunset, I came back home... and I was so young then... I was crying as I was going home. My mittens were wet; I tried to wipe my face, my lips were bloody... When I came back, I found out that the partisans were really afraid that I would be a traitor. I was not... I remember the traitors; one of them was Pranas Jasiulionis who lived in Skudutiškis. Once I even brought a machine gun to him... but later Pranas betrayed me. He knew everything. He lived in Jonava and died recently; I found out from reading our newspaper [*Tremtinys* (Deportee)]. It is a pity that I did not visit him before he died...

I was beaten severely, deported to Siberia... my head was hit so many times it is amazing that I still remember anything... But my memory is not perfect. We did not keep diaries, you know.

Vitalija's story suggests that Pranas had never been prosecuted for his betrayal. Natalija echoes Vitalija's discontent with the lack of transitional justice in post-Soviet Lithuanian society: "There were so many traitors. You would sit, talk with a person and you would never know... some traitors today are respected more than victims in Lithuania. [It is important] to know the truth; know what's black and what's white. It is a pity that our current government does not see it and does not want to talk about it."

Memories of Deportation and the Return to Soviet Lithuania

Vitalija and Natalija do not say much about the journey to Siberia ("you already know it from other memoirs"). Their stories about their experiences in labor camps in Siberia focus on food preparation and bonding with other women and children – underlining the traditional cultural roles associated with women. Food preparation is especially prominent in Natalija's story, as the routine of food preparation acquires a new meaning and importance in a labor camp: "We tried to celebrate all holidays. Oh, we have some bread – this will be for Christmas. Every day, I would put a piece of bread aside. Sometimes I hid it in snow to make sure that no one would eat it... And then later we would gather all these pieces of bread together, warm them up, mix them up, and make a 'cake' (tortas). We would think of different ways to celebrate."

Natalija's story is punctuated with memories about the lack of food in Siberia: "We got some water for tea in the morning and then many little fish... the fish were so incredibly salty. We were so hungry, but there was no water... You want to eat, and that's it. So many women ate those little salty fish, and their bodies became incredibly hairy... See, if you were working

and did not fulfill the required quota, you did not get any bread. [If you fulfilled the required quota,] then you would get 250 grams of bread. The bread looked like a cube. I remember taking that bread into my hand, smelling it—somehow this bread would disappear—and I would lose all memory of eating it.”

Survival was possible because women of different nationalities, from different parts of the world cooperated in completing “manly” tasks, such as cutting wood, pulling up stumps or working in a mica (a type of stone) factory. According to Natalija, “there was a special relationship [among women], a certain kind of love... Everyone tried to survive. If someone was ill, we tried to help them... Then there was unexpected laughter, a song – and somehow that pain would go away.”

Vitalija remembers cooperation and singing as ways of survival in the labor camp as well:

“I remember one Christmas Eve. It was morning; we were transported to work – Poles, Ukrainians and Lithuanians in the morning. And one of us, Balys, started to sing. And the Poles and the Ukrainians started to sing as well. The local Russians took off their hats to show respect... The local Russians were good people. We women had to cut wood. We had to turn pieces of wood around. Sometimes I would just hang there [from a piece of wood]. I recall one little Russian coming over and telling me, *Vika, chto ty delayesh, ne budyesh rozhat*, “Vika, what are you doing, you’ll be infertile.” Yes, the local Russians were superb people... And I loved the children; it did not matter to me whether they were Russians or not. I got a job in the boarding preschool there in Siberia. Thus, I became almost a mother to these children. When their parents came [to pick them up for the weekend], they cried and wanted to go back to their ‘mother,’ that is, me. The children of alcoholics especially did not want to go back home.”

In her story about her experiences in the labor camp and her interaction with other women, Natalija highlights her urban origins, which set her apart from the other women: “Our [Lithuanian] girls were wonderful; nice, girls from villages, you know... They were different [from me]. But we became very close there. They read very little. Having graduated from high school, I had read a lot. I used to tell them stories from novels; they loved that! Later they wrote to me in their letters: when they were listening to my stories, they forgot their pain. I gave them lessons in geography... We prayed together... We laughed together, and thus we were able to complete hard tasks [such as pulling out stumps]. So that’s why you see that we are laughing in photographs taken in Siberia. We could take photographs starting in 1954.”

In the mid-fifties, Natalija and Vitalija were allowed to go back to Soviet Lithuania. (Vitalija had to go through the trauma of deportation twice.) The stories about the return to Soviet Lithuania are similar to the stories of other former deportees and political prisoners. Their social interactions in Soviet Lithuania were poisoned by an awareness of “otherness.” They, the former deportees and political prisoners, were different. Natalija’s and Vitalija’s stories about Siberia also suggest that it was somewhat easier to be a “patriot” in Siberia than in Soviet Lithuania. (A similar point has been made by Marija Eigrejienė, a parliamentarian and former deportee.⁸ Although, unlike other former deportees, neither Natalija nor Vitalija expressed a desire to go back to Siberia, their narratives mention humiliation and disillusionment with their lives in Soviet Lithuania. According to Vitalija, “We lived in Kairėnai, in a small room, close to a psychiatric hospital. It was rough, but it was still Lithuania. Well... all of my life was rough.”

According to Natalija, she had three herrings and twenty- -five rubles on the way to Soviet Lithuania. “I had no parents, nobody, only distant relatives. There were eight of us in a small room. You know then I tried to find a job... through acquaintances.” Natalija tells a story about how she was ignored by her former classmate and good friend, Petrė, who refused to recognize her when Natalija was trying to reach out to her for help in her job search. “When I was looking for a job [in education], Petrė told me, ‘Stop looking, those like you will never find a job.’ See, she was a Communist already then. I told Petrė that I was not there to see her, but I wanted to see the Minister of Education. And then I left and started to cry. Once I ran into her, so I looked the other way. I thought to myself, ‘what a pig’ ... Eventually, my Jewish friend Kašumanaitė finally found me a job, because she knew what it was like to be deported.”

The Duties of Memory

According to Lenz and Bjerg, there is a clear division of roles in the process of constructing national metanarratives about the past. Men are assigned what appears to be a more important role in narrating, interpreting and collecting factual evidence about the past; they serve as “theme-givers.” Women, on the other hand, are likely to focus on family stories and act as “theme-takers.” Men tend to serve as the creators of a “collective encyclopedia” about the national past, while women are likely to focus on their family albums. In this gendered system, men are seen as brave warriors and resistance fighters, while women are likely to play the supporting role of helpers.

Like the stories of other women acting as agents of memory, the stories of Natalija and Vitalija demonstrate the interdependent relationship between creating a “collective encyclopedia” and gathering pictures for “family albums.” Vitalija likes talking about her brother Antanas; in fact, her identity as a woman resistance fighter is inseparable from that of being Antanas’s helper. Given the status of her brother as a famous resistance fighter, Vitalija’s stories enter the public realm and become part of “collective encyclopedic” knowledge about the war of resistance. Not surprisingly, Vitalija did not address the more controversial aspects of her brother’s partisan activities (e.g., there are stories about how Antanas, together with a fellow resistance fighter, killed an entire Lithuanian family in 1949⁹); her story is affected by and is part of the so-called “fighting and suffering narrative” about the Lithuanian war of resistance and mass deportations.

In contrast, brave male warriors are curiously absent in Natalija's story. Her narrative focuses on her traumatic experiences of being imprisoned and deported. Natalija showed me an extensive collection of memory objects well known to anyone familiar with the traumatic history of deportations – rosaries made of bread, many letters, including poems, written on birch bark, objects knitted using fish bones, and photographs, many photographs. "All this will be given to an archive," Natalija promises. "I gathered all this, she says, and I do not want to lose it. What you see here are tears, pain, love – whatever you can imagine, you will find it here. I started to collect letters [written by prisoners] – you cannot imagine! Love letters [exchanged between the prisoners in men's camps and women's camps]. Love was strange in labor camps. You could get love letters and never get to meet the person. We were isolated from men for years. Thus, one poet kept writing love letters to me. I have never met him, but I still have his letters... My drawers are full of memories. Something needs to be done. But I have so many community service duties!" Natalija's service duties include collecting objects of memory from former deportees – their pictures, their stories, and publishing them as albums and books. One of her recent books, *Naikintos bet nenugalėtos kartos kelias* (The Path of a Generation which was Decimated but not Overcome), consists of photographs from the personal albums of former political prisoners and deportees. Currently, Vitalija considers finding the remains of her brother and marking the place where he was killed as her duty of memory.

Conclusions

Despite their involvement in different types of resistance, the two women described in this essay had some things in common – their experiences of torture, betrayal and exile, the trauma of coming back from Siberia to Soviet Lithuania, and their dissatisfaction with the lack of transitional justice in post-Soviet Lithuania. Their narratives are influenced by the national metanarrative about fighting and suffering during the postwar era (this is especially true about Vitalija's story). Neither Vitalija nor Natalija played leading roles in the resistance movement; however, they understood the importance of being helpers. Being women affected the content of their narratives, especially when their experiences in the labor camps were remembered (e.g., Natalija's narrative about food). It is probably fair to say that care giving had an important role in both narratives. Natalija remembered her friendship with and the supportive relationships between women in the labor camp, as they supported each other during difficult times. Vitalija remembered her experience as a caretaker in kindergarten. (Similar observations have been put forward by scholars studying women in the Holocaust. Acts of cooperation among women were important for survival in the concentration camps. Hunger dominates the Holocaust narratives, and women's responses to hunger were different from those of men.)

Including women's stories in the discourse about resistance helps to broaden the discourse about resistance, and (hopefully) deconstructs the image of the nation as a fighting and suffering hero (i.e., the male narrative). Women's stories raise numerous other questions: How did the resistance movements function on a day-to-day basis? Which stories are still not heard? According to Judith Greenberg, who has studied women in the French resistance during World War II, one of the most important functions of including women in the study of resistance is to make sure that "a fixed idea of resistance" is resisted.¹⁰ Resistance is a complex societal phenomenon, and its participants often struggled with internal tensions, fears, anxieties and traumas. This insight can be applied to the Lithuanian war of resistance and to the discourses surrounding it as well.

Notes:

1 My thanks to Ingrida Végelytė for her help with setting up the interviews. The interview with Vitalija Kraujelytė took place in her home on July 9, 2009. The interview with Natalija Gudonytė took place in her home on July 23, 2010.

2 Quoted in *Experience and Expression*, xxvii. Article: xiii-xxxiii.

3 Malik, *Carrying Linda's Stones*, 20-21.

4 Hinrikus, *She Who Remembers Survives*, 20-23.

5 Davoliūtė, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 52.

6 Smolskutė, *Genocidas ir Rezistencija*, 60.

7 Ibid.

8 Budrytė, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 341.

9 Jurgelis, "Pagerbtas smurtas—pažemintos aukos," www. DELFI. lt., November 9, 2010.

10 Greenberg, *Experience and Expression*, 157.

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