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PARTING WASN'T SUCH SWEET SORROW

by Arėjas Vitkauskas*

Among my precious relics from Lithuania, there is a tiny homemade booklet of eight pages with a cover of brown paper, in which herrings were usually wrapped.

A peasant walking home from town carried in his hand a few dripping herrings, while sometimes in the other was a bottle, hanging on the string containing kerosene for "sparrow eye" light for long fall and winter nights. By such a light, this booklet was written.

The Lithuanian press was prohibited then, and any manuscripts found by Russian gendarmes would mean Siberia for a whole family. But still a typical Lithuanian peasant, Mataushas Slanchauskas, wrote his heart-throbs and sewed sheets together by a homemade linen thread.

The booklet, in homey handwriting, dated in a small village—Troompaychyay, 1903, is titled "*Went to America*". (I didn't use a whole hand yet for counting my years then...).

That man was one of these remarkable people—like "godmakers" (woodcarvers), story tellers, singers and humorists—who would be sculptors, writers, opera singers and actors if the fate of the Lithuanian nation wasn't one of subjugation. Men didn't even suspect their abilities. Only neighbors knew them as somewhat out of the way folks...

Mataushas Slanchauskas, a peasant and a traveling tailor all his life, found time to write down many folk tales, riddles, customs, songs and variegated curio for Lithuanian Science Society in the old capital Vilnius.

When Slanchauskas died, I was editor of the first, weekly in his county and my native town, and some of his manuscripts were given to me. And now, as I look at the picture of that greyheaded, mustached soil-tiller, I see an intelligent face, showing determination and sacrifice. Without schooling and secretly taught to read a prayer book by their mothers' knee, at the spinning wheel, such men and women sustained their Lithuanian background during the worst years of Russian oppression.

The white daisy in the lapel of Slanchauskas' homemade coat shows a plain but artistic taste, while the white kerchief, instead of a tie, makes the only difference from pictures of old professors seen in learned magazines.

Put him in a city coat, add a tie, push through an institution of learning, and he will wear Latin letters after his name... But Russian universities were for few of those who after finishing were forced to leave their native Lithuania, to take a new religion, and to work for masters of that country... Russia.

That man learned about verse only from very simple examples in secretly distributed Lithuanian papers printed in America and East Prussia.

"Isheyo e Amerika"—translated means "Went to America"—was a fruit of this peasant's Sunday repose. June 7, 1903, Slanchauskas wrote:

*American land, so far, so far
Beyond the seas, do you hear, do you hear?
There went now my dear daughters,
And I don't know what their road will be,
What their road will be tomorrow.*

*We saw them off to the road,
And where they traveled, where they trade,
I followed with eyes, as far as I saw,
And where they were lost I don't know,
Where going, where panting on the road...
My heart is so worried, so worried,
I look to that side always sorrowed,
See nothing, but look to that side,
Go and stop, through the horizon wide
I see them with my soul's eyes.*

Usually the emigrants left Lithuania secretly, led by contrabandists through the Russian-German border. Hiding in nearby woods, fields or barns, waiting for a convenient moment to cross a river or swamp, were precautions against the sharp eyes of Russian guards and cavalymen. It was enough to worry the emigrants themselves, as well as those left behind, for to be shot or wounded wasn't impossible.

After a week this father's hand, calloused from the plow, wrote:

*In this world of today and tomorrow
My heart's overtaken by sorrow;
Where are my dear daughters, nobody knows,
No news about them, no news about those
Places where they are by now...
Are they on the border, or farther already?
Or maybe were caught by the Russians, (heart, steady!),
Maybe they moan from the sorrow, tears flowing,
Or maybe they are through Prussia now going,
But, oh, when I'll know that?
I'm wailing, so waiting for every news,
I would like to know all that really soon,
But nobody has any news to relate
Until word will come, I hope not so late,
About—are they living or dead.*

Nine days more elapsed, and again he wrote:

*You're my heart, my children dear,
I'll rejoice or meet with tear
News about you, how you are,
Going to America, so far:
Maybe you wail, as bird cuckoo,
As daily tears overtook you?
I would like news in detail
And to help you to wail,
I don't know what to do,
Nobody sends me some news;
I don't get your letter, darlings,
Are you sailing distant seas;
Maybe, walking Prussian track.
You are looking often back;
Maybe you can stand no more~
You are tired, feet are sore...
I am guilty of my talk,
Putting you on that hard walk;
Maybe better be my silence—
You wouldn't have today this violence.*

A letter alone did not satisfy this father, for four days later he wrote:

*Letter came the other day
From seashores, seashores away,
Just my fears to more increase
About daughters on the seas.
Did they pass the waters, did they,
Or they are in ocean hidden?
Are they tossed by mighty blows*

*Where big wave as mountain flows...
Where they'll stop, what kind of land,
What they'll find, how they will stand,
Where from news will come to me,
I must worry, wait and see.*

When three weeks more brought no news of the daughters, the father talked with his pen:

*O, Heavenly Father, what will come to me!
Where are my children, alive or in a sea?
Everyday I just have a single thought—
Where from a little letter will be to me brought;
Time goes so slowly, as with no end,
Will some final blow make me bend?
I would like once more to hear
Where are my little girls dear?
In Philadelphia? New York, maybe?
In Pennsylvania? Where are my babies?
I'm waiting, I'm wailing, for worse or for better,
America, please, send this father a letter!*

Eleven days later:

*From beyond the distant sea
Here's the letter, now I see,
From New York, so far, I know;
But my heart still is in woe:
My dear babies, girls, today,
For how long you will there stay
In saint Joseph's home, (you wrote),
When from there? That only thought
Makes me wait for little letter,
Just to know about you better,
About accidents and health.
About your success and wealth...*

Again three weeks passed:

*Oh, my head aches from a woe,
My heart is as hurt by a foe,
That my little girls, as of old,
Still suffer hardships in the new world:
How they will there stand?
I am sorry now, but too late,
I lost both my daughters. It's fate!
And no hope anymore to embrace
Or to see little girls, touch their face,
I'm in tears.....*

Three weeks more bring no relief to a grief-stricken father:

*Elzaita, Amele, so far away,
Beyond the seas you are today,
My heart is bleeding, waiting for news,
I just don't know what to do, what to do...
Only in tears I remember you both,
My heart is aching, since you last wrote;
I can't send help anymore to you girls,
Nor reach with words through the bottomless whirls;
O, Heaven's Father, I'll cry in vain
Until sure news will come here again
From my dear daughters... Now, moaning, I
Will forget this only when I die...*

The next day the father added this:

*I can't forget you,
Are you alive?
I didn't hear about amount
Of your hardships!
I'm waiting, so waiting
For news about you.
Where are you now,
My little daughters?*

After almost four years, father made this note in his precious, herring-paper covered little book:

*I'm as a lonely crow, who cries in the woods;
As a pelican, I'm flowing in my tears;
Like a little sparrow who lost his children,
I'm sad, I'm tired, I'm so worn out.
Everyday I look into that direction
Where my children suffer hardships beyond the ocean,
I just don't know what to do,
As I can't see them anymore,
Only through letter I hear some little word;
I'm waiting, I'll wait until I'll die...
To whom America is good, let him boast it,
But I was torn away by it from my children.*

* Arėjas Vitkauskas began his writing career when a volunteer in the army in the first days of Lithuania's independence. Came to America in 1933. Until occupation of Lithuania in 1940 he was a correspondent for periodicals in Lithuania. Since 1940 he established himself as an American writer, also being an editor/manager of own World-Wide News Bureau, which, besides news and photo reporting, distributes world-wide a weekly column "American Scene"— events, theatre, movies, books, records, etc.