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Book Review:

Guilford, Irene. *The Embrace*. Toronto: Guernica, 1999. 150 pp. \$13.00 US, \$15 Canada.

The Twentieth Century was not only one of the most violent, but also one of unprecedented migration—swarms of exiles and immigrants swirling around the globe, relocating to new countries, learning new languages, new customs. Yet why does anyone leave home? Most of these migrations have been painful rendings due to political upheavals, of which our century has seen many. Each has its own variation of danger, struggle, homesickness and regret. Such stories are often found in novels—about the Jewish Diaspora, or Irish immigration during the potato famine; but other than Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, I don't recall any other novels in English that touch on the Lithuanian experience of exile or immigration.

Irene Guilford has written such a novel. *The Embrace* is about two brothers whose paths diverge during World War II. One brother, Edvardas, has a harrowing escape to the West during the Communist invasion of Lithuania, barely surviving with his life. While the other brother, Pranas, stays in Lithuania, caught behind the Iron Curtain like an insect in amber. The brothers live their different lives, separated by distance and fate, for forty years. Edvardas emigrates to Canada and has a family, while his brother, Pranas joins the Communist party and raises his family in Soviet Lithuania.

Irene Guilford tells the story of these two brothers as seen through the eyes of Edvardas's Canadian daughter, Aldona. She watches these lives unfold from her Western perspective. Lithuania, for her, is the fabled lost world, and yet it is only hers secondhand. There is an elegiac sadness that infuses this novel. Guilford shapes this story with a poetic elegance as she plays with time, back and forth, like a dance, so that we see each of the characters at different times in their lives, starting in 1985, when Aldona and her father, Edvardas, fly to Soviet Lithuania to visit her uncle, Pranas and his family. After forty years, there is no way to pick up where the two brothers left off. Forty years have left their mark and created a chasm. Aldona thinks: "our separation has been too harsh, our Cold War silence too long and deep." The reunion is further strained by having an Intourist guide at their side. Does the apparatus of the state keep them from having a true reunion, or is it a metaphor for some deeper division? The Soviets restrict the trip by not allowing Edvardas and his daughter to stay at Pranas's house, or even to go to the brothers' native village. They can only visit Vilnius. In frustration, the brothers ditch the guide and drive to their homestead. It is a brief unguarded moment. The rest of the time, each word must be weighed and feelings cannot be freely expressed. Edvardas buys twenty-seven tracksuits and twenty-seven pairs of running shoes for all his Lithuanian relatives at the local Dollar Store, a place off-limits and too expensive for Soviet citizens. For his brother, he also buys a refrigerator and a car. There is an undercurrent of resentment in the Lithuanians, while the Canadians have an undercurrent of guilt.

Edvardas finds he cannot buy forgiveness for leaving his homeland. Everyone feels awkward, unsure of what to say. When lives diverge, can they ever be brought back together successfully? Certainly, the life Edvardas left behind in Lithuania is barely recognizable. It's as if the Soviets have put a grim and gray screen over his country. And this grayness has infected his brother as well. Guilford writes: "We are separate spheres of experience, tied by letters, photos and stories, history and blood."

Five years later, in 1990, Lithuania has regained its independence after almost fifty years of Russian occupation. In another attempt to stitch together the separated families, the Canadian brother invites his Lithuanian brother to Toronto with two of his ten children. The Lithuanian family arrives with empty suitcases, which are soon filled after a shopping trip to Sears. Aldona spends months trying to understand and connect with these relatives from the other side of the world.

It is also left to the daughter to find some meaning in the senseless upheavals that have uprooted her father and separated her family from her father's homeland and the rest of her clan. The scattered lives of those who lived through those times are told in letters, bits of remembered songs, Saturday School memories and visits. The family memories, for the most part, are sad and haunting. But one quote from a Children's Saturday School Primer made me laugh: "How will you know a

Lithuanian maiden? By her modest dress, her long braids, her sparkling eyes, her pleasant voice and industrious hands, and her garden of flowers."

The part of the novel that goes back in time to 1965, to Aldona's childhood in Toronto, is fascinating. As she grows up, a quiet, thoughtful child, given to melancholy, she is susceptible to a household awash in nostalgia for the old way of life in Lithuania. Her grandmother tells her old stories, shows her photos, and teaches her the recipes from the old country. They go to bazaars, weddings, and celebrations of Lithuania's former independence at the Redemption Parish. Her father reads the Lithuanian paper for news of his homeland and urges his daughter to write to her cousins in Lithuania. She has grown up with elders who are like ghosts. They barely inhabit the land they are in because their hearts and minds are always looking backwards to the old country.

As a result, Aldona grows up with a dual identity. Where is home? Toronto or Lithuania? What is home for exiles, as opposed to immigrants? Immigrants come to a new land with bright hopes for a better future. Exiles come with a baggage of grief. These of us who grew up in the Lithuanian emigre communities felt as if we straddled two lands. The author muses; "home... is an imaginary place. A time before our births. A place we can never visit. A land where we wait, arms reaching towards embrace."

In this book, which tells so well about the difficulty of return, the author lyrically and insightfully helps the reader understand the divided loyalties that can tear at the heart. *The Embrace* is a treasure in that it is one of the few novels written in English about the lives of Lithuanian exiles. It is a powerful testament to the strength of family ties, the complexities of the heart, and the tenderness of a daughter's love. Irene Guilford has written a novel about the Lithuanian diaspora that deserves to be read and long remembered.

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