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Contesting postwar Lithuanian refugee and Soviet Lithuanian identity in Australia (1940s-1990s)

Abstract:

In my recently completed novel *Torn*, the protagonist Daina comes from Soviet Lithuania to Australia in 1986 to visit her great-uncle Algis. Daina is a product of the Soviet system while Algis and his friends had escaped the system at the tail-end of the German-Russian war. In 1944, with another 100,000 Lithuanian citizens, they crossed the German border to save themselves from killings, deportations and the Soviet rule.

Using the genre of fiction, I explore how Daina, born and bred within the Soviet Union, experiences the extent to which local postwar era Lithuanians, like Algis, in Australia question her motives for coming here. I show how, during her six-year stay in Melbourne, she learns of a political history erased from the memory of Soviet Lithuanian citizens – a ‘forbidden knowledge’ masking who belongs and who does not belong to the homeland. Daina then, begins to understand why postwar Lithuanians who migrated to Australia – ‘traitors of the state’ for leaving their homeland in the eyes of Soviet apparatchiks¹ – treat recent arrivals from Soviet Lithuania with such suspicion.

In the past I have written about such events and themes from an analytical perspective. The foray into fiction has enabled me to contest history so as to foreground the perspective of an individual – in the novel, Daina – confronting the irony of the situation in which she found herself, as an ‘outsider’ among her own people.

Biographical note:

Grazina Pranauskas completed her Choral Conducting degree at the Academy of Music and Theatre in Vilnius, Lithuania. Since 1989 Grazina lives in Australia. Here she obtained Bachelor of Arts Degree Majoring in Journalism and Literary studies (1997). In 1998 she was awarded Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree for her thesis ‘Fifty years of Lithuanian culture in Australia 1940s-1990s’ from the Deakin University, Geelong.

In 2003 Grazina was awarded her Master of Arts (by Research) degree for her thesis ‘National and cultural identity in diaspora: a study of Australian-Lithuanians’, and, in

September 2015 completed her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Creative Writing at Victoria University, Melbourne.

Grazina is an author of two books: *Eukaliptų tyloj (In the silence of the eucalypts)* (poetry and prose 2007) and *Abu krantai (Two Shores)* (poetry 2011), published in Lithuania.

Since 2009 she is also working on the publication of her book *Lietuvybė down under: constructing Lithuanian identity in Australia* based on her Honours' and Master's theses. Since 1997, her poems and short stories appear in Deakin Literary Society's anthologies.

Keywords:

War – historical and political circumstances – identity – belonging – insider-outsider

Introduction

Historian Allesandro Portelli (1988: 7) writes: ‘the most common narrative is the war narrative’ – and in case of the Lithuanian nation, the German-Russian war created the ‘common narrative’ that continues to evolve to the present day. In this paper, I address the importance of the historical evidence and individual and group accounts among postwar and Soviet Lithuanian citizens. In my novel, *Torn*, I create a narrative that challenges the boundaries of being a postwar Lithuanian exile and a Soviet Lithuanian migrant in Australia. My narrative exemplifies how and the extent to which historical and political events contribute to the construction of a particular identity. I highlight the reasons why the postwar generation of Australian-Lithuanians who escaped their homeland in 1944, were labelled as ‘traitors of the state’ by the Soviet propaganda; and why the later Lithuanian-arrivals to Australia were regarded as ‘communists’ by the postwar Australian-Lithuanians. I explore how the German-Russian war of 1941-1945 and the Soviet occupation of 1939-1990 politicised Australian-Lithuanian identities, and show the extent to which they remain fractured. I outline the relationship between the private life experience and the historical evidence – the two key points of reference for understanding Lithuanian identity or indeed the identity of any culture.

Blending personal and social history

Postwar Lithuanians

In order to determine ‘what is private and what is public in a person’s narrative’, Portelli (1988: 6) asks the questions: ‘How historical is private life? How personal is history?’ He argues that personal narratives, projected in oral history do not exist alone but rather form a larger picture of defining the balance between ‘the personal and the social history, between biography and history’ (6). My personal history is encapsulated in my family’s past. My grandparents lived through the German-Russian war and retained their silence about what they had experienced. Before my maternal grandfather passed away in the early 1990s, he revealed to his daughters that they have a half-brother. He apologised for withholding the truth from them for some fifty years. The reason behind such a lengthy silence was that he did not want to talk of his escape to Lithuania from digging German trenches in Germany; he did not want to reveal his extra marital affair while his wife and four daughters waited for him in Germany to reunite.

My grandfather’s fate coincides with the historical evidence of 75,000 Lithuanian men taken to dig German trenches during the war (Vardys 1965; Kasekamp 2010). He escaped to Lithuania and, upon being discovered, was exposed to the Committee of the State Security (KGB) for interrogations.² His story is reflective of thousands of similar stories of the Lithuanian men who had experienced forceful separation from their families. This is incorporated into my fiction writing. Like my own grandfather, the grandfather of my novel’s protagonist, Daina, does not talk about his escape from digging German trenches. I use his silence as a metaphor for forbidden truth, for hiding the unpleasant events of the past because when/if revealed, they had vital

consequences. Only in Australia, Daina learns the truth from her great-uncle, Algis, of how, after escaping to Lithuania in 1944, her grandfather lived with a young woman and fathered a son. To augment the trauma he had experienced, I picture him having a limp as a constant reminder of being injured during his escape. He tells Daina he limps because of an unsuccessful operation, thus inventing his own truth. To the American writer, John Dufresne (2003: 15), 'Truth is something like the essence of fact', but not actual fact, allowing a fiction writer, like myself, to reinvent my grandfather's story in my own way, thus adhering to Dufresne's belief that 'Facts are subject to interpretation' (15; Freeman 1993). By constructing such narrative, I make the reader aware that remaining silent or reinventing the truth can be a way of distancing oneself from the past. At the same time, I want the reader to feel sympathetic towards my characters, who continued to suffer greatly due to the consequences of the war. For me, writing, in Dufresne's words, leads to 'discovery, insight, and accomplishment' (2003: xii) in dealing with my family's hidden stories.

The discovery of my family's hidden stories helps me bridge the gap between personal experiences and historical evidence. The stories give me a point of reference for charting similarities and differences between individual and group experiences and the ostensibly accurate historical accounts. In my novel, I intertwine the historical and political events that determined the future of Australian-Lithuanians. Lithuania was incorporated into the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which was signed between the Soviet Union and Germany on the 23rd of August 1939. The Pact contained a secret protocol, partitioning Poland and transferring the Baltic States to the Soviet Union (Smith 1994; Hiden et al. 2003). My postwar generation characters, afraid of killings and deportation by the Soviet occupiers, joined some 65,000-100,000 Lithuanian citizens who fled their homeland and crossed into Germany in 1944. Historical evidence tells us how they found refuge in the Displaced Persons (DPs)³ camps of Europe (Daugirdaitė Sruogienė 1990). Using their experiences, I reveal how they fell victim to the Soviet propaganda apparatus which labelled those who managed to escape from the Soviet Union as 'traitors of the state' (Ginsburgs 1957; Garrett 1978).

In response to such accusation and to show the extent of their vulnerability, I construct an emotionally-charged atmosphere at the Lithuanian Club in North Melbourne. By describing sad facial expressions, morbid conversations, and the communal singing in their own language, I want the reader to consider what it would be like to be separated from their homeland. This helps me to focus the reader's attention on the historical accounts explaining why Lithuanians, like other citizens of the Soviet Union, were not willing to return due to fear of being interrogated, tortured, killed or sent to Siberia (Bethell 1974; Taylor 2011). My aim is to expose the reader to the impact unfulfilled dreams and desires had on refugees, and how traumatic experiences did not allow them to fully recover from what they had endured on the way to Australia. By comparison, those left behind in the homeland were forced to live under the Soviet occupation.

Soviet Lithuanian citizens

My novel aims to highlight the way that integration into the Soviet Union and the 'sovietisation' of identity was achieved through force, collaboration and submissiveness to the totalitarian regime (Kelertas 2006). As historian Nerija Putnaitė (2007) confirms, Soviet Lithuanian citizens were expected to live a quiet life and to be content with what the regime had to offer. Dissenters and rebels who resisted the Soviet regime (Remeikis 1980; Sadūnaitė 1987) found themselves in what diaspora theorist, Homi Bhabha (as cited in Rutherford 1990: 211), calls society's 'third space', where they were viewed as 'others' and were exposed to punishment.

I incorporate the story of Simas Kudirka (Kudirka & Eichel 1978) in the novel to expose the hidden narratives from the Soviet era. During her journey from Adelaide to Melbourne, Daina is taken aback learning the fate of the Lithuanian sailor she had never heard about before. An Australian teacher, George, recalls how 'In the early seventies, a sailor from your country, who worked on a Soviet ship, jumped across to an American ship begging for political asylum. His venture had a bad ending and he was sent to prison for attempting to desert his ship' (*Torn*: 123). In response, Daina feels shocked and embarrassed discovering the level of cover-up towards the mistreatment of non-conformers. By including this story into my narrative, I hope to highlight the limitations of personal freedom within the Soviet Union. At the same time, I want to point out that the news about the non-conformers, such as Simas Kudirka, continually seeped through the Iron Curtain and circulated in the West (Zake 2010).

Another aim of my novel is to highlight how people, like my character Daina, remained grateful to Michail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructure) – because these changes allowed her to visit Algis in Australia. In March 1985, Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, accelerating his new policy (Dawisha & Parrott 1995). I hope my novel captures the level of hidden oppression behind Gorbachev's *perestroika* that on the surface was designed to provide greater autonomy to countries of the Soviet Union (Smith 1994). In the novel, Daina explains to Algis and his friends how pleased she is with the relaxation of restrictions on people, like her, being allowed to venture abroad, even though others were not granted permission. In expressing her naivety towards *perestroika*, I aim to point out that like any other Soviet citizen, Daina's 'personal profile would have been carefully checked' (*Torn*: 157) before letting them to go overseas (Zake 2010). That is my way of showing the strength of the Soviet oppression on its citizens.

The examples of the individual oppression support writer Violeta Kelertas' (2006) observation that the Soviet system was totalitarian and the Soviet Union countries, like Lithuania, were greatly colonised during the Soviet rule. Kelertas purports that Soviet colonisation spread through all spheres of life, going way beyond political occupation. However, for ordinary Soviet citizens, like myself and Daina, it is not easy to relate to the notion of colonisation. Daina and I are convinced that free education, and having enough to eat after working two or three jobs, would help build a classless society (Nogee 1972). Daina says:

‘My education was free. I could easily eat my three-course dinner for a ruble while earning 130 rubles a month...I was able to have two part-time jobs on top of my main position...The reward was great – every summer my friends and I could afford to travel around the Soviet Union’ (*Torn*: 68-69).

Thus, for me, and my protagonist, the best memories remain attached to our life in Soviet Lithuania. Here I am also materialising Dufresne’s (2003) idea of fluid interpretation of the truth, blurred with fiction, and hiding the extent to which Daina’s character mirrors my own.

Testing boundaries of belonging

Throughout my novel, I integrate the observations of researchers on diaspora, such as Nira Yuval-Davis (2009, 2011) and Homi Bhabha (1993, 1994), who approach identity as shifting, multiple and subject to change. According to Yuval-Davis and Bhabha, repositioning identity is a consequence of changing life circumstances and the impact of ideologies beyond one’s homeland culture. These diaspora theorists draw attention to the migrant and refugee experience of ‘otherness’ in their host country. Yuval-Davis (2009: 129) suggests that ‘Identity politics is one form of politics of belonging’ to a particular group, that usually constructs its own rules in determining ‘boundaries of belonging, in ways that usually promote the agent’s own power within the group.’ Constructed in a particular way, previous identity boundaries in a diaspora are tested, and consequently result, as Yuval-Davis (2011: 2) explains, in migrant and refugee separation into ‘strangers’ and those who ‘do not belong’ to the other’s cultural, religious and ethnic identities.

In my novel, I describe the extent to which, viewed as ‘others’ in the diaspora, refugees and migrants sense of belonging to their homeland remains unresolved. Out of their collective experiences associated with their exodus from the homeland and living in the Displaced Persons camps of Germany, my novel’s characters maintain life-long friendships, culminating in the construction and operation of their own ‘power within the group’, as they help each other deal with their troubled past, and defend themselves against prejudice and discrimination – whether real or imagined. The idea of politicised belonging is a useful concept for understanding the barriers that separate individuals from each other’s past. Any identity, bound to historical and political circumstances, becomes politicised and complicates the sense of individual as well as collective belonging.

My family’s experiences did not help me to belong to the Lithuanian community in Australia, because the Soviet Lithuanian migrants were not among the postwar Lithuanians when the exodus to Australia occurred (Pranauskas 2003). As a professional choir conductress from Soviet Lithuania, I also experienced prejudice from some members of the Australian-Lithuanian community. Luda Popenhagen writes: ‘At the outset some Geelong Lithuanians voiced scepticism about Grazina-Burokaitė-Pranauskienė’s⁴ (236) motives for migrating to Australia and her suitability to lead the migrant community choir’ (236). To Popenhagen, the reason was, ‘Many new arrivals of the 1990s were initially regarded with suspicion, irrespective of

profession or trade' (236). In comparison, other authors have noted how Lithuanian migrants in Australia continue to be viewed with suspicion (Baltutienė et al. 1990; Varnas 2001; Baltušytė 2014; Bartkevičienė 1998; Dambrauskienė 2009; Pranauskas 2003; Cibas 2014). My selection of repertoire was regarded 'sovietised' by some postwar generation Australian-Lithuanians, and my manner of teaching and conducting too strict. These particular reasons had been enough for some Lithuanians to suspect me of being a 'communist' and a possible KGB agent. This set me apart from the descendants of the postwar cohort, teaching choirs the non-'sovietised' repertoire, brought to Australia by their ancestors. However, before their exodus from Lithuania, their parents and grandparents lived under Soviet occupation for four years, thus were also exposed to 'sovietisation'. My own experience confirms, as I became caught up in questions about who should be treated with suspicion, was the tenacity of preconceived perceptions and attitudes about what Yuval-Davis (2011: 20) calls 'them' and 'us'.

I deal with these developments by making my character, Daina, join the Melbourne Lithuanian choir, where her identity is questioned by the postwar singers. She overhears choristers' conversation, accusing her of being a KGB agent and 'capturing the information on a tape recorder hidden under her long woollen skirt' (*Torn*: 88). Her belief that she is fitting into the postwar cohort has been crushed, making her extremely upset. I use the Lithuanian Club as a place of safety and security for my postwar characters, and the place of dislocation for my Soviet Lithuanian characters. Using novelist, Garry Disher's (2001: 65) writing techniques such as 'listening to the moods they're in, recognising their personality traits and understanding how they'll respond in particular situations', I construct my characters to act 'as a barometer of the community' (Disher 2001: 29). I bring out disagreements and tensions, trapped in a sense of hostility towards people from Soviet Lithuania that, in the eyes of the postwar group, pose the direct threat to their well-being. The illustration of the postwar cohort's attitudes and perceptions towards migrants, like Daina, is a consequence of politicised belonging. Upon her arrival in Australia, she discovers what her great-uncle thinks about the Soviet Lithuania and its people: 'It's all about politics, Daina. We are traitors and you are communists, so to speak. The Russians completely control our homeland, and brainwash Soviet citizens like you' (*Torn*: 17). I want to provide the reader with a clue of what lies beneath such labels as 'traitors'. Algis' words reflect the postwar generation characters' guilt of living safely in Australia while their family members were killed or sent to Siberia (Baltutis 1996; Žemkalnis 2013; Liubinas 2003). At the same time, his words: 'you are communists, so to speak', aim to show the reader that the meaning of the word 'communist' goes far beyond being a member of the Communist Party.

As a novelist, here I am testing what fiction writer Thomas B. Sawyer (2003: 17) calls the 'the central *conflict*' of my novel, expressed in a short dialogue between two people who grew-up as part of different historical and political circumstances. This dialogue exemplifies to the reader the essence of my narrative, 'what it's *really* about' and helps me to '*communicate* it succinctly and *effectively*' (Sawyer 2003: 17) by sustaining the *conflict* between 'us' and 'them' throughout the novel. The constant

repetition of the war-time narratives only deepens the conflict between the postwar Australian-Lithuanian characters and those who settled in Australia after the 1970s.

Even though the second wave of Lithuanian migration to Australia has been insignificant in comparison to the settlement of the postwar generation of refugees, the relationship between the two cohorts remains problematic. According to Australian government data, the number of Lithuanian settlers from 1970 to 1975 was just thirty-five, and in the period 1991 to 2000 it was 152.⁵ The statistics cannot give voice to the despair and disbelief of individual and group dislocation. The years of the Soviet regime (1939-1990) left Lithuanian citizens angry, heart-broken and confused. Categorisation into 'us' – those who remained in Lithuania – and 'them' – those who escaped abroad, created a distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' (Hall et al. 1996: 597-598; 1990) identification with the homeland. One of the vital aims of 'fiction is to enable us to enter, imaginatively, experiences other than our own' (Swift 1993: 24). However, entering, imaginatively, unfamiliar experiences reinforce the fiction writer, like me, to prepare my reader for the context encoded in my writing. I attempt, using Roland Barthes' (1981: 135) words, 'to locate and classify...the forms and codes according to which meanings are possible.' The way I achieve this is through using my knowledge of the Lithuanian community in Australia experienced through the conducting of choirs and engaging in other cultural activities. My personal involvement in being part of the community for many years, act as a well-researched story-telling form of expression in constructing and interacting with characters of the same nationality but a different historical, political and cultural upbringing.

Fiction writing analyst, Anthony Bloor (2003: 7) believes fiction includes 'remembering and reflecting, imagining, focusing the imagination, and problem solving.' He relates these techniques to particular events, scenes and various points of view. As a fiction writer, I try to identify historical and political circumstances behind the problematic relationship occurring between Australian-Lithuanians. My novel, *Torn*, juxtaposes conflicting characters to each other: Algis' friend, Mėta, asking him about Daina: 'She's not a communist, is she?' (*Torn*: 65), acts as a perfect example showing the reader how Daina's presence creates fear among the postwar cohort; a Soviet Lithuanian character, Paulius, appearing like 'a drunken clown telling his Soviet jokes, and calling Algis' friends traitors' (*Torn*: 134), highlights how Soviet Lithuanian characters inflame, not smoothen the already strained relationships. The sense of unease and uncomfortable atmosphere, resulting in the ongoing conflicts between the characters, is used to engage the reader to question different life values and beliefs expressed through vocabulary and body language while asserting each other's presence. My aim is to show the reader how the past events are vital in the construction of different historiographies in Australia for the members of both groups. They associate their settlement here with a sense of freedom, necessity of survival and/or escape from the Soviet grip.

In the act of displacement, exile and migration, with my novel's characters occupying their own spaces, Bhabha (1994: 7) points to ongoing 'past-present' revision, where the past remains 'part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.' The strength of the necessity to dwell on the past in the present brings out the nostalgic longing for what

is lost, and ‘past-present’ relationship determines who are ‘us’ and ‘them’. Through my novel, I exemplify the consequences of Soviet occupation and rule after 1939 that made people experience the full impact of Soviet colonisation. Exposing a sense of belonging to a ‘power within the group’, I highlight the extent to which Lithuanian identity had been destabilised and increasingly ‘sovietised’ (Putinaitė 2007; Gailienė 2008; Švedas 2014). These historical and political developments align with Bhabha’s (1994: 173) acknowledgement of ‘complex cultural and political boundaries’, constantly shifting between the past and the present (7). *Torn* tests the boundaries of identity and belonging and acts as a first attempt in Australia to write a novel from the Soviet Lithuanian citizen’s point of view.

Conclusion

Using theoretical underpinnings of diaspora researchers, such as Yuval-Davis and Bhabha, I have argued that, in relation to postwar Lithuanian refugees and Soviet Lithuanian migrants settling in Australia between the 1940s and the 1990s that a person’s identity is subject to change, especially when it is exposed to different influences such as war or living under the totalitarian regime. I have highlighted the extent to which Australian-Lithuanians occupy their own ‘third spaces’ allowing them to ‘belong’ to a particular identity based on a Manichean or dualistic division of the world between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This division reflects different historical and political circumstances, in terms of the difficulty in accepting each other’s pasts.

Historical evidence, coupled with fiction writing, helped me capture the continuing encounters between the ‘traitors of the state’ (postwar Australian-Lithuanians) and ‘communists’ (Soviet Lithuanian migrants). Through my novel, *Torn*, I have endeavoured to reconcile historical evidence with personal experience – to balance individual and group identity. I used hidden narratives to identify the oppression of the Soviet system, and my own experiences to show the reader how the Soviet Lithuanian citizens had to renegotiate their migrant identity and their sense of belonging to the postwar Lithuanian refugee community.

The fictional form allowed me to contest history so as to foreground the perspective of individuals, like Daina, who in the novel learnt what it is like to be an ‘outsider’ among her own people. It coincided with my experience of how I felt an ‘outsider’ within Australian-Lithuanian community especially during my choir conducting practices (1990-2010) when my identity had been stigmatised by my presumed ‘sovietisation’. In writing this novel, not only did I discover the extent of politicised Australian-Lithuanian relationships, but also come to understand that people cannot be blamed for being born and bred as part of different historical and political circumstances, which are responsible for particular identity construction.

Endnotes

¹ To Roland Huntford (1972) apparatchik was an agent of the Soviet apparatus. See Huntford, *The new totalitarians*, Chapter 7, ‘The rule of the apparatchiks’, 135.

² The KGB, established in March 1954 in Moscow, comprised between 390,000 and 700,000 Soviet citizens (Brian Freemantle 1982; Roland Hingley 1970). Operating as agents within and outside the Soviet Union, they gathered intelligence and conducted counterintelligence operations not only within the Soviet Union but also in other nations ('Organisation of the committee for state security' 1997).

³ Displaced Persons (DPs) refers to an actual official term given to stateless refugees in war-torn Europe (see Jonathan L'Hommedieu 2011; Genovaitė Kazokas 1992).

⁴ My maiden and married name in Lithuanian.

⁵ Due to the fact that from 1975-76 to 1990-91 Lithuania was listed under the USSR, the figures are not available. Comparison table forwarded by Alex DeMontis, DIMA Department of Statistics, Canberra, 14 May 2001.

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