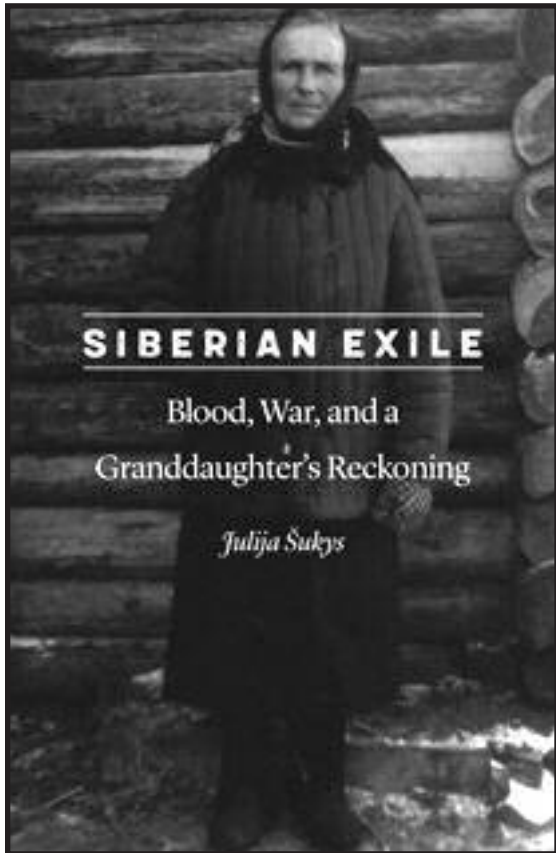


SIBERIAN EXILE

A new book by the author of *Epistolophilia*, Julija Šukys



Julija Šukys. *Siberian Exile: Blood, War, and a Granddaughter's Reckoning*. Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2017. 176 pages.

MARVIN KATILIUS-BOYDSTUN

When she was doing research at Kent State University for her book about Ona Šimaitė, the librarian who rescued dozens of Jews in Vilnius during World War II, Julija Šukys discovered a transcript of an interview with her own grandmother among the materials presented to her from the archives. The transcript had apparently been found after having been misshelved and then placed with these other Lithuanian materials in the hope that a Lithuanian researcher could identify it. The Lithuanian researcher who happened to find the interview turned out to be the granddaughter of the interview subject. This coincidence was so staggeringly improbable that it implied the working of fate, perhaps divine Providence, especially since Šukys had felt since her childhood that she was destined to write a book about her grandmother, the Siberian exile of the book's title.

There were more surprises in store for Šukys, the most disturbing of which was the discovery that her grandfather's past was as personally riveting and historically important as her grandmother's. So she had to write both the story of her grandmother's exile in Siberia and the story of her grandfather's deeply troubling experience in the darkest chapter of Lithuanian history. The resulting book falls into two parts, the story of her grandfather, Anthony (Antanas) Šukys, and the story of her grandmother, Ona Šukienė.

The book is scrupulously and thoroughly researched, drawing on the aforementioned interview transcript, personal letters, childhood memories, contextualizing books, and visits to both Siberia and Lithuania during which she conducted several interviews and took photographs. The result is a deeply felt and honest account of crucial events in 20th-century history, especially relevant though still controversial to Lithuanians. Šukys weaves her grandparents' stories into a first-person narrative of her research. So the book reads as memoir, allowing—or requiring—her to write about the impact the stories had on her as a person—and a highly skilled, sensitive writer, whose expertise as a professor of English at the University of Missouri, Columbia is creative non-fiction—always aware of her Lithuanian heritage.

Ona Šukienė was arrested in Kaunas on June 14, 1941 and crammed into a boxcar on the way to Siberia, where she was to live for seventeen years toiling on a collective farm. Ironically, she wouldn't have been exiled on her own right but because she was married to Anthony, who had been identified as an “enemy of the people” for his right-wing political activities. He escaped the mass arrests that day, and when the Germans invaded Lithuania a little over a week later he was no longer in danger from the Soviet secret police. However, as Šukys found out from recently released KGB files he had been under surveillance for decades, even after leaving Soviet Lithuania with his and Ona's children for England, then the U.S., then Canada.

In the fall of 1941, Anthony was chief of police in Newtown (Naumiestis) on the Lithuanian western border with East Prussia (now Kaliningrad), when the Holocaust began in Eastern Europe. The mass killings were organized by the Germans, but the shooting of Jewish men, women, and children was done by local men, including Lithuanians, primarily under the authority of local police. There was a massacre of Jewish men from Newtown that summer, before Anthony was police chief, but that September, when he was in charge, as many as 700 Jewish women and children were slaughtered in a forest just outside the town. Šukys interviewed a local historian named Romas and a Jewish survivor, Isaac Glick, who had been a child at the time, and both told her that Anthony had not been among the shooters, though he had to have been responsible for signing off on the massacre of hundreds of innocent people. The book is illustrated with haunting photographs of the killing site, a clearing in a forest, circled by stones.

Lithuanians are rightly proud of their resistance to the brutal Russian occupation, the thousands of young men and women who gave their lives in the guerrilla war that lasted from 1944 to 1953, and the thousands, like Ona, who were exiled to a life of hard labor, illness, and death in the frozen forests and tundra of Siberia. But alongside these events is another dark history Lithuanians have tried to forget. In the nearly 30 years since independence has been won evidence of Lithuanian complicity in the Holocaust has accumulated to the point that denial is no longer a reasonable response. Confronting that evidence is painful, and this book is sometimes painful to read. But it is also an eloquent tribute to the Lithuanian people who, like Šukys herself, can see clearly and feel deeply the implications of their tragic history.

In the concluding section of her book, Šukys writes of an incident from her girlhood when she helped her grandmother make a cake. They used sugar from a bag that had been stored in a shed behind the house in Toronto. The sugar was crawling with ants. Little Julija said nothing as her grandmother stirred sugar and ants into the batter, “sensing that Ona had eaten far, far worse” in Siberia. Later she reflects, “Anthony's crime was an overlooked stain upon the family's peace, a contaminant impossible to purify, like ants in sugar.”



Julija Šukys' grandmother, Ona, in Siberia.



Julija Šukys INTERVIEW

“my books tell the stories of lives that are in danger of being forgotten.”

Interviewed by **RAMUNĖ KUBILIUS**

Would you share some background on your new book *Siberian Exile*, your third book since 2007! How do you go about writing this book. Was it a continuous process or was it written in stops and starts?

Thank you. This book has been a long time in the making. It tells the story of my paternal grandparents, Ona and Anthony, and of their fateful separation in 1941. Ona was exiled to Siberia for 17 years. Her husband Anthony and their three children escaped to the West in 1944.

I started work on this book in 2002, when I began transcribing and translating the letters my grandmother had written to her children from Siberia. The letters, written mostly between 1953 and 1958, came to me after my aunt, the younger of one of Ona's two daughters, died. They were extraordinary letters. They related her everyday life in Siberia: the animals she kept, her work, the weather, and occasional celebrations at the kolkhoz. But the letters also lacked the kind of information I craved. I wanted to know details about her journey to Siberia by cattle car and about the early years of exile when famine was widespread in Russia. She wrote nothing on these subjects.

Later in 2002, I made a trip to the Kent State University Archives, Ohio, where I was conducting research for a different book, my second, called *Epistolophilia*. There I was surprised to find a transcribed interview with my grandmother! It was a complete unexpected. The interview touched on many of the subjects I had wanted to know more about and suddenly, with that find, a book seemed possible. I resolved then and there to commit myself to the project.

I wrote much of the first draft during a sabbatical year my husband, son, and I spent on the rural island of Gozo in 2010-2012. Then, in 2015, I was lucky enough to get a year of research leave here at the University of Missouri, where I work as a professor of creative writing.

Parts of the book that were published earlier as essays and articles. How did they evolve into this book?

The essay is a form I use a lot – so much so that I've started to identify as an essayist. In fact, I think of *Siberian Exile* as an essay rather than as a memoir.

Short pieces, like the one that appeared in a 2008 issue of *Lituanus*, “Brovka: Reconstructing a Life in Tatters (My Grandmother's Journey)” www.lituanus.org/2008/08_4_03%20Sukys.html are central to my process. I work out big ideas in these small pieces.

Writing brief essays, helps me figure out if there's enough material for a book and what the central questions of a book might be.

How would you describe the book and what is your primary audience?

The publication of a previous book, in 2012, *Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Šimaitė*, taught me a lot about my audience. Here was the story of an unknown female librarian, a radical leftist who spoke and wrote in a little known and difficult language, and who came from a forgotten part of the world. She was neither glamorous nor famous. There was no great love story to recount. I wondered if anyone besides myself would care about her. I found her life fascinating but would anyone else?

My apprehensions turned out to be unfounded. That book has reached readers of all ages, genders, cultural backgrounds, and professions. I've presented that book all over the world: to large émigré Lithuanian audiences, to Jewish audiences in both the US and Israel, to Singaporean audiences, to students at East Coast liberal arts colleges, and to Canadian high school students. Šimaitė's story resonated with each of those audiences in different ways. The book was long-listed and shortlisted for national prizes and regional literary prizes in Canada. It won a Canadian Jewish

I hope that *Siberian Exile* will also reach such a broad and diverse audience. A number of my colleagues – both historians and professors of creative writing – are already using the book in their graduate seminars.

All three of your books were published by the same publisher, University of Nebraska Press. How did you approach the Press as you proposed this third book? Or was it a given that the Press would be favorably inclined?

A literary home is one of the greatest blessings a writer can have. An editor named Heather Lundine picked my first manuscript out of the slush pile (this is what publishers call the collection of unsolicited submissions). She loved the book and offered me a contract to publish it. *Silence is Death: The Life and Work of Tahar Djout* is a strange book in its style and approach – not at all a traditional academic book – but that's what Heather loved about it. She championed both my manuscript and me, and guided us through to publication.

Then, as I was experiencing a lot of self-doubt while writing *Epistolophilia*, my editor Heather wrote to tell me that she was coming to town for a publishers' convention. We met for coffee and she convinced me to send her my manuscript despite my misgivings. Once again, I was worried that the book was too strange for a university press. Heather told me not to worry. Once again, she championed the book and guided it through publication again. That book changed my life.

By the time I had a complete manuscript for *Siberian Exile*, my relationship with the press was very solid. Though Heather Lundine has now left the press, I work with a different editor, Bridget Barry, who supports my work just as strongly.

The University of Nebraska Press has grown into a powerhouse of creative nonfiction. They publish some of the best essay collections, memoirs, and hybrid works of nonfiction around. These include the works of writers like Patrick Madden, David Lazar, Phillip Lopate, Brenda Miller, and Dinty Moore. The press provides a home for work like mine that is just

a bit too odd, possibly a bit too egg-headed, to be truly commercially profitable but that is also not strictly academic. I feel very fortunate to have developed such an enduring relationship with a quality publisher.

How did the selection of this third book's theme differ from the process that led to writing of your earlier books?

All three of my books tell the stories of lives that are in danger of being forgotten. They tell the stories of people who lived through extraordinary times and who showed incredible courage but who are, by and large, invisible to History. I'm a researcher by nature and I proceed from material traces. I used a huge press archive to write *Silence is Death* and *Epistolophilia* was based on an enormous collection of letters and diaries. At the heart of *Siberian Exile* is a much smaller collection of letters, an archival interview, KGB files, audio recordings, historical photographs, maps, and oral histories. Although *Siberian Exile* differs from my earlier work in that it's more personal, it's actually very much in a similar vein because of its engagement with archival materials and material traces.

Would you say that writing this book was more challenging? If so, in what way?

Without a doubt, the most challenging part of this book was grappling with its difficult content. My research took an unexpected turn in 2012 when I requested my family's KGB files from the Lithuanian Special Archives. When the documents arrived, I discovered that my grandfather's file contained a war crimes indictment. It accused him of having overseen the massacre of hundreds of Jews in Kudirkos Naumištis (a place I call Newtown in my book). That discovery floored me. It changed the course of the book completely. I spent the next four years sorting through those accusations. To do so, I consulted historians who were experts in that period and who could help me think through the problematic nature of KGB files. I visited Kudirkos Naumištis where I interviewed people who remembered the war and where I visited a number of mass graves – of Lithuanian Communists, of Lithuanian Jews, and of Soviet POWs – and I made a trip the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, where I found more invaluable materials. I spent a lot of time sorting through and determining what in the files was true and what was untrue. But even more than the intellectual work of research and analysis, I would say the challenge of these discoveries was emotional. This book changed me and my relationship to the past in fundamental ways.

Who were your biggest champions and supporters during the writing of the book? And who would you say were the people whose opinions you trusted if they made suggestions for changes or tweaks to the book?

My great supporter and champion in this project was my cousin Darius Zubrickas. After I published the essay about our grandmother in *Lituanus*, he was the person who told me I had to write a book about her. Even more importantly, though, he agreed to travel to Siberia with me in 2010 to find our grandmother's Siberian village. I was determined to go to Siberia but I didn't want to go alone. The idea of inviting Darius popped up: it seemed crazy but somehow right, so I phoned him up in California to see what he thought. His answer: "I thought you'd never ask."

In contrast to this book's darkest moments of writ-

ing and research, I remember my Siberian travels with Darius as the most joyous part of the process. We spent four days traveling across Russia by train and then another week or so exploring the city of Tomsk and our grandmother's village. The experience was transformative for us both as human beings and as grandchildren. It also deepened our relationship as cousins and friends.

In terms of writerly support, my husband Sean Gurd was instrumental. He was my final reader on the manuscript and he intervened in key ways, making suggestions on the level of structure, which is always tough. The book's sharpest moments result from my discussions with him.

When writing a book such as this one, that includes family history, are you concerned about the reaction of family and friends?

Yes, without a doubt, my greatest anxiety surrounding this book came from worries over the reactions of my family and friends. On this front, I've been so impressed. My friends and family have responded with love, respect, grace, and support.

Would you say your books sheds a new or different light on Lithuanian history as it relates to the World War II era?

I think it's fair to say that very little has been written about the German occupation in places like Kudirkos Naumištis, that is, far from the ghettos of Vilnius and Kaunas. The history and experience of both Jews and non-Jews on the Lithuanian-Prussian borderland and in the countryside was vastly different than what they lived in urban centers. I hope this book helps create a more nuanced portrait of wartime Lithuania.

Did you feel the book adds extra information or sheds new light for those perhaps not familiar with European or Lithuanian history of that time period?

Absolutely. Many of my readers are unfamiliar with underground interwar organizations like Geležinis Vilkas (Iron Wolf) or with the presence of "open ghettos" in the smaller towns of German-occupied Lithuania. I think too that certain aspects of Siberian life – for example, the difference between Special Settlements and the Gulag, or how Stalin-era Siberian exiles and settlers were required to pay taxes in the form of agricultural products – might be new information to many of my readers.

Do you think the book increases knowledge or raises questions for those who, like you, are of Lithuanian descent living in Canada or the U.S., whose parents and grandparents were raised there?

One of the things this book does is question the version of history that I received. It asks what parts of that history are not quite right, or what's missing and why. It tries to look at that history not just from the perspective of the Lithuanian émigré community but also from that of historians and of members of neighboring ethnic communities. It was so interesting to me, for example, to hear what Polish-Siberians had to say about the Lithuanian exiles they had known in the Tomsk region, where my grandmother lived.

You grew up in Toronto, Canada among other Canadian Lithuanians, but now live in a university town where there aren't too many people familiar with Lithuania. Do you use your books in the classes you teach at University of Missouri? If so, how? As an example of life story writing, an illumination of the historical time period, other?

I absolutely use my work for teaching. I often turn to my books as examples of process and of how I've solved a variety of writing problems. Writers of nonfiction share a number of challenges, whatever our subject matter might be. These can include problems of gaps in knowledge, questions of how to incorporate research seamlessly, how to provide context for the reader without deadening a text, how to develop a personal voice that is both intimate and authoritative.

Where do you post information on your book events? How can one get in touch with you?

I post all my events on my Facebook Page and on my website: julijasukys.com. Readers can reach me through the contact form at that site.



Sisters Margarita and Ona (Julija Šukys' grandmother) among poppies outside their cabin in Brovka, Tomsk Oblast, Western Siberia. Photo reprinted from *Siberian Exile*