



JANUARY 28, 2016

# DISSIDENCE IN OUR BLOOD: SURVIVAL IN A 1984 SOVIET BUNKER

by Laima Vince, VILNIUS

“We’ve got to have clear roles and we must stick to them,” I said to Amanda, “otherwise this exercise is pointless.”

“I agree,” Amanda said, gazing out the Honda’s window at endless kilometers of pine forests flashing past. “You, obviously, have got to play the dissident. You Lithuanian-Americans were all dissidents to the Soviets.”

I laughed. Amanda was right. “It’s in our blood,” I said. “We had our own anti-Soviet propaganda machine.”

“I will play an American who has come to the Soviet Union because I am enamored with the Soviet system: No unemployment; a flat for everyone; a chicken in every pot, and so on.”

“Good, and then we’ll compare notes later,” I said. “If we let ourselves slip out of our roles, we won’t learn much from the experiment.”

“It would be too easy to turn the whole thing into a joke, I imagine,” Amanda said.

“That would be a waste of money,” I said, thinking of the 100 litas admission ticket to the 1984 Soviet Bunker Reality Show.

Amanda was an American historian living in Vilnius on a grant from a university in the Pacific Northwest. She was working in the Special Archives, reading through the interrogation transcripts of young people arrested during the protests that took place after the self-immolation of Romas Kalanta in 1972 [a 19-year-old student who committed suicide by self-immolation in central Kaunas to protest the Soviet occupation of Lithuania]. Amanda and I had similar Cold War era histories. She also had smuggled bibles into Lithuania while taking various Intourist tours during the Soviet years.

I glanced down at the speedometer to make sure I wasn't driving too fast. It was too easy to pick up speed once you were driving through the monotonous dense pine forests outside of Vilnius. A metal sign alongside the road announced the 1984 Soviet Bunker Project: Our destination. The only Soviet-era reality show where you became a Soviet recruit for several hours.



*Protests in Kaunas in 1972 after Romas Kalanta's self-immolation [Image: Lithuanian Special Archives]*

I parked outside of the all too familiar depressing typical Soviet brick building that served as “headquarters.” As we'd been instructed on the project's web page, we placed our cameras, cell phones, GPS, and hand bags into the trunk of the car and locked it. Then we stepped inside. A scruffy looking woman dressed in a grungy gray Soviet-era quilt jacket and baggy gray pants ordered us in Russian to take off our jackets, hang them on the hooks provided, and put on one of the identical grungy gray Soviet-era quilt jackets hanging on the coat rack.

Once dressed in our new clothes, Amanda and I were almost indistinguishable from each other and from the other participants who had arrived before us and who were now standing around, giggling nervously or staring pensively into space. I had expected most of the other participants to be foreigners, but with the exception of two Italian university students, they were mostly young Lithuanian students, all of them far too young to remember the Soviet occupation. There were also a few older people, themselves relics of Soviet indoctrination. From the

joking around among the students it seemed clear to me that they had come tonight to enjoy themselves. But what was the older generation doing here? Nostalgia? Or quality control?

The gruff woman then shoved a clipboard at each of us and demanded we sign. I looked down and read the disclaimer in English and in Lithuanian. We were asked to sign that we would not hold the theater company responsible for any psychological or physical trauma experienced as a result of participating in the 1984 Soviet Bunker theater reality performance. I signed my name, but at the same time I recalled reading an article on the Internet about how when the program first began an indignant French tourist broke away from the group and ran out of the bunker. He retrieved his cell phone and called the local police to come and close down the show. The local police arrived and the show was shut down temporarily. I'd also heard from some local teachers that a school group of teenagers had been traumatized after participating in the program and that the director, Jonas Vaitkus, was warned to tone it down. After these incidents, allegedly the actors were delivering a slightly “less authentic” characterization of Soviet officers, KGB, and prison guards.



*Image: sovietbunker.com*

As soon as we had finished signing, the woman snatched back the clipboards and deposited them on a rickety Soviet metal desk. A stout young man dressed in a Soviet uniform, most likely a sergeant, muscled his way into the foyer and barked at us to follow him. He was followed by another similarly dressed men, possibly a guard, who was holding back a snarling German Shepherd on a short chain. His demeanor told us he would not hesitate letting the dog off its leash if we were to disobey orders.

All of us fell into immediate and total submission.

We swiftly grouped ourselves into a line and marched outdoors behind the stout sergeant.

We were ordered to stand in a row in a clearing in the forest. Naturally, friends grouped themselves together. I made sure that I ended up standing beside

Amanda. Our sergeant demanded that we count off by twos in Russian: *odin, dva*.

The entire performance is conducted in Russian with no exception. Either you understand or you don't. Sink or swim. The idea is to replicate what it would have been like to live as an occupied people. You were expected to know the occupier's language—he was not going to bother to address you in yours.

Because I've taken Russian language courses at Vilnius University and watch Russian television and try to converse with Russian friends in broken Russian, I could understand about eighty percent of the sergeant's orders. Amanda read and wrote Russian and understood mostly everything, but her weak point was expressing herself orally in Russian. It was hit or miss whether the other participants in this reality show understood Russian or not. The older generation of Lithuanians present did. The younger Lithuanian students, who made up about eighty percent of that day's participants, had some trouble understanding, though they intuited the orders well enough and caught the gist from a general passive knowledge of Russian common to most Lithuanians living in Vilnius. The Italians understood nothing. They asked people standing close to them for clarification in English.

“No talking, *blat! Kurva!*” the sergeant screeched at the Italians, “you talk one more time and I'll show you what's what!” He lifted his meaty fist threateningly.

The Italians immediately shut up.

“*Odin, dva,*” we counted off, now with greater enthusiasm.

“I can't hear you!” the officer shouted. “Louder.”

“*Odin,*” I shouted.

“*Dva*,” Amanda shouted.

“Now, all of you who said *odin* step forward!” the officer barked.

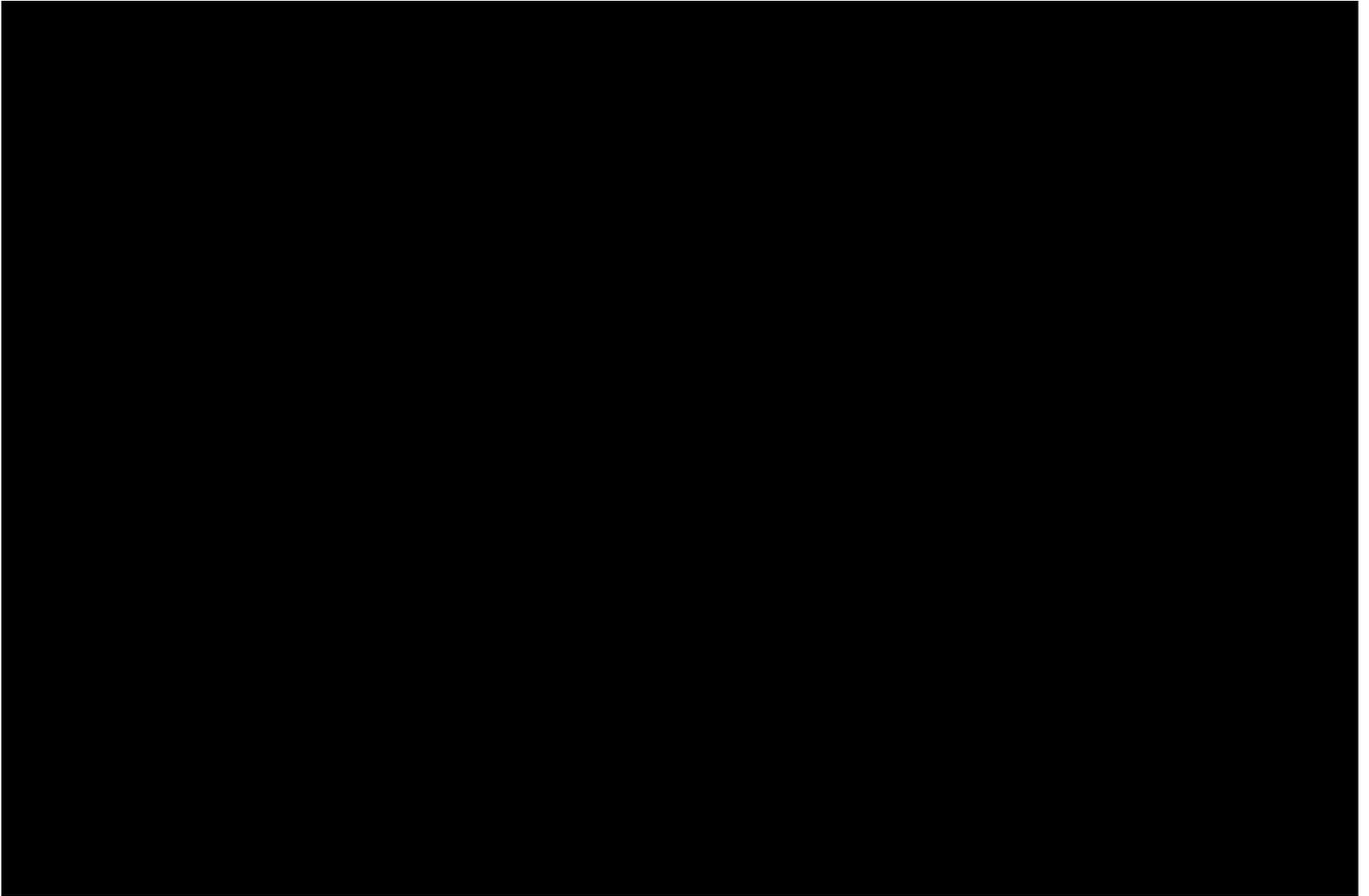
I stepped forward.

“Form a line!”

That was it. I was separated from Amanda for the remainder of the evening. I glanced back at her longingly.

“No looking behind you!” the officer shouted at me.

This was an old Soviet trick: Separate friends and family and group people in such a way as they did not know who to trust. I remembered when I had traveled to Soviet Lithuania in 1984 as part of a school trip from the Lithuanian Gymnasium in West Germany. If two students were roommates in the school dorm, then it was certain that only one roommate would be picked to go on the KGB-sponsored propaganda tour of our parents’ homeland. If you had a close friend and you had been picked to go, it was certain your friend would not be picked. We had our own informers within the school—typically recent emigrants from Lithuania who wanted to go back to study medicine, earn their degrees, and then return to work in Germany as doctors.



*Soviet-style apartment blocks under construction in Vilnius in 1980 [Image: truelithuania.com]*

“March!” the sergeant barked in a hysteric frenzy.

He turned his back on us and began to run in a trot. All of us odins trotted behind him. He demanded we chant, “*odin, dva*” as we ran and like a pack of fools, we did. We instantly lost our individuality. The dissident in me was not so much as putting up a fight. Would I really have been crushed that easily under the Soviet system?

We trotted behind our sergeant through a patch of forest and then descended into a cavernous opening in what appeared from the outside to be a man-made concrete cave. This was the bunker. Once down below, I was amazed by its size. Long corridors extended in all directions in a web like fashion. Rows of doors led inside individual rooms. We were now ordered to run behind our sergeant through the corridors. Panting to keep up as the group ran ahead of me, I was struck with a sobering thought. What if I could not keep up with the group and

lagged behind and got lost in this underground concrete labyrinth? They were not responsible for me. I had signed the disclaimer. Would anyone look for me? I am slightly claustrophobic and now the doom of those low concrete ceilings began to weigh in on me. I glanced up and noticed that not just hairline, but rather large, cracks ran across the concrete ceilings. This bunker had been built decades ago, during the Brezhnev years, by drunken Soviet workmen. Would those ceilings hold?

But there was no time for reflection now. The officer commanded that we move swiftly inside a small room. In the center of the floor stood a primitive projector and screen. The officer demonstrated how we must wait for the “dvas” to arrive. He dropped down on one knee and tilted his chin upwards in servile anticipation towards the blank screen. He indicated that we must all do the same, adding a few succulent curses to get us in the right mood. We all obeyed, dropping to our knees immediately and striking the ridiculous pose, tilting our chins up expectantly like a pack of school children waiting for a visit by Santa Claus. Our officer grunted his approval and snickered at our idiocy at the same time.

Soon the bewildered “dvas” were herded into the room by the guard with the German Shepherd. They were ordered to stand close behind us. I glanced around, looking for Amanda, but only caught a glimpse of half of her face at the back of the crowd. Because we were down on our knees and they were standing, the room could hold double the amount of the people than its normal capacity. An example of Soviet architectural ingenuity.

The ancient projector hummed to life and the year 1984 flashed onto the screen. Scenes of happy Soviets pouring out of concrete apartment complexes walking swiftly and stern-faced to their work at the Mažeikiai oil refinery flashed across the scene. A narration in Russian described a happy Utopian life in the Soviet Union in which every citizen was provided for: Amanda’s scenario. Scene after

scene of Utopian order and happy Soviet citizens enjoying lives lived in an orderly society flickered before our eyes. As I watched the film, I began to feel strangely comforted. I caught myself day-dreaming: What if such a happy orderly world could actually exist? A world in which a responsible government, like a good parent, took care of everything for you and all you had to do was fulfill your daily quota and be happy the rest of the time? The images on the screen promised a world without the worry of putting a roof over your children's head and food in their bellies. As the newsreel churned on, I forgot myself, and became lost in the propaganda. I struggled to match the happy scenes on the screen with the Soviet reality I remembered seeing during my student visits in 1983, 1984 and during the year I'd studied here in 1988-1989. It was as though someone had injected drugs into my bloodstream. I no longer cared that my knee was aching and trembling, supporting all my weight against the cold concrete floor and that the man crowded behind me was breathing hotly down my neck.

I surprised myself by feeling sad when the newsreel ground to a halt. I snapped back into my present reality.

*Propaganda film about life in Soviet Lithuania, 1977*

“Everybody up!” the sergeant commanded.

We leaped to our feet. This time we were ordered to jog through the dark tunnels. I ended up at the end of the line and often found myself just barely able to keep up with the gray-clad back retreating in front of me. The tunnel was not lit and I worried about tripping over something or making a wrong turn where the tunnel opened up and divided into two, sometimes in three directions. Again, my claustrophobic fears gnawed at the back of my mind: keep up, keep up, keep up with the crowd. Because I was so focused on keeping up, when we arrived in the gas mask chamber, I realized that I had paid no attention to how we had got there and had no idea how to get out of the labyrinth if I needed to.

In this room there were burlap bags laid out on the table. We were ordered to wait for the order to open the bags as we listened to a long drawn-out explanation. When the order was finally given, we each opened our bags and removed an authentic Soviet rubber gas mask. Our sergeant delivered yet another long drawn out explanation on how to disinfect our gas masks using a cotton pad dabbed in rubbing alcohol. He belabored every detail, emphasizing each point, as though he were addressing a pack of idiots, which to him, obviously, we were. Then, we were ordered to clean the gas masks ourselves. He paced around the room as we rubbed our cotton swabs inside the gas masks, pausing only to shout at someone, humiliate them, or insult them on their stupidity.

Once we were finished with this task, we were ordered to put on our gas masks. With the gas masks pressed firmly to our faces, we endured another long speech on how the enemy, the evil capitalist West, intends to invade the great Soviet Union with gas attacks and how we had to be prepared.

Wearing the gas masks, we were ordered to run, again, through the dark tunnels of the concrete bunker. After about fifteen minutes of running, with our gas masks fogged over, gagging for breath, we returned to the room for more training.

“You!” the sergeant barked at a young man standing in the line-up.

The young man raised his finger and tapped his chest as if to say, “Who me?”

“You!” the sergeant screamed even louder, his face red and hot with rage.

The young man stood at attention.

“Step forward!” the sergeant barked.

The young man took a step forward.

“How dare you have a hard-on during so serious an exercise!”

The man gave the sergeant a look as though to say, “Are you kidding me?”

Everyone in the room burst out laughing at the expense of the young man.

“Get the hell out of here!” the sergeant screamed, his voice reverberating against the concrete walls of the close chamber, “you’re a disgrace!”

The guard with the German Shepherd grabbed the young man by the elbow and jerked him out of the room. That was the last we saw of him until the reality show was over.

“Now I’m going to show you what to do in case of a gas attack from the Americans,” our sergeant explained in an almost pleasant, friendly tone. “I need a volunteer.”

The sergeant scanned our crowd of gas-mask clad quilt-jacketed fools. He broke into a seedy grin. With a leering flirtatious smile, he gently coaxed a stocky

young female student out of the crowd. He handed her a white cotton sheet. She took it hesitantly.

“No, I’m not asking you to go to bed with me,” he grunted, “open up the sheet and lay it on the floor.”

The girl began to giggle. She looked over at her girlfriend and snickered. The other girl giggled back. The girl’s giggle broke my concentration for a moment. Up until that point I had maintained the seriousness of the reality show. These girls were not at all trying to stay in character. They were having a good time. A good laugh. They were not fazed by the sergeant at all. Amanda had been right, it was too easy not to take this seriously.

The sergeant smiled coquettishly, but at the same time prudishly, like a prim old lady.

“*Davai, davai,*” he said gently, motioning for the girl to spread the sheet down on the concrete floor and to lie down on it.

Still giggling, the girl lay the sheet on the floor.

“Now grab the left top corner with your right hand and roll yourself up in the sheet.”

Because of her stoutness, the girl had some difficulty, but she eventually got it right and successfully rolled herself up in the sheet.

“Three times *urah!*” the sergeant called out jovially, motioning for us to cheer.

And we did.

“That is how you survive a gas attack,” the sergeant said triumphantly.

Somehow I had a hard time believing that a sheet could protect anyone from a gas attack, but if that was what I was expected to believe, I was not about to argue.

The girl unrolled herself, stood, folded the sheet, handed it back to the beaming officer, and returned to her place in the line-up.

After a brief tutorial on how to remove our gas masks and replace them into the burlap bags, we were again ordered to jog the corridors of the concrete labyrinth. Without hesitation we fell in step, jogging behind our commander, and soon found ourselves outside the Political Education Chamber—The Red Chamber. With a hushed reverence, our sergeant led us inside. The sergeant ordered us to stand at attention against both walls. Inside this small cell the walls were decorated with propaganda posters celebrating May 9, 1945. The works of Marx and Lenin were tidily arranged in a bookcase. A large desk dominated the room. Behind the desk stood a sly-looking, well-groomed middle aged man in a more formal Soviet uniform, that of a higher level officer. He was the intellectual of the operation, I gathered, the brains behind the machinery. He was the KGB officer.

After a pregnant pause, the KGB officer emerged majestically from behind his desk and paced around the room, looking each of us menacingly in the eye. He took a small book from the desk and began to read out loud: the gist of the text was that one was either for or against the Party. If you were against the Party, then you must be terminated. If you were for the Party, the Party would take care of you. The KGB officer then spoke of Siberia, of concentration camps, of a variety of possible punishments for those who disobeyed.

He stepped behind his desk and pulled a sheet of white paper from his drawer.

“You!” he demanded, pointing at a young man, “come here.”

The young man did not seem to understand Russian; the person standing beside him pushed him forwards.

“You don’t understand Russian?” the officer sneered.

The young man shook his head, “No.”

“A disgrace!” the KGB officer bellowed, “an illiterate!”

He shoved the blank sheet of paper at the young man. “Sign here!” he shouted, tapping the bottom of the page with his index finger and thrusting a pen at the young man.

The young man dutifully signed on the bottom of the blank page.

The KGB officer snatched the paper and held it aloft triumphantly.



Image: [balticadventure.com](http://balticadventure.com)

“Now I have a signed document!” the KGB officer said, pacing around the room, shoving the paper in our faces. “I can write anything I like on the top of the page and it is legal. It contains a signature.” Then he turned to the young man, “Perhaps I should write that you agree that your family are traitors and ought to be sent to Siberia? Ah? Or do you agree to come and see me every Thursday and tell me about your friends? I don’t need to know a lot, just the moods of your friends, what they are talking about, what concerns them.”

The KGB officer stopped in his tracks and gazed around at all of us with his small brown beady eyes.

“All of you have families, right? And you want your families to be safe, don’t you? You want them to be safe to study, to work in peace. Then, you ought to have no trouble agreeing to help us out.”

The officer stepped from person to person and posed the question directly to each one:

“Do you agree to collaborate?”

Person after person in the room calmly gazed back into the KGB officer’s eyes and answered, “*Da*,” yes, they would collaborate. Just like that. No one resisted. Not one so much as hesitated before answering. They were all Lithuanians. All of them agreed to inform on their associates. Didn’t they know their own history? Or, was their history a different history than mine I thought with a chill. Of course, this was only a game, but still.

I was the second to last person standing along the opposite wall from where the officer had begun asking his question. As everyone agreed to collaborate, the KGB officer moved through the room rather quickly and soon ended up in front of me. He looked deep into my eyes and calmly asked, “Will you collaborate with the KGB?”

The answer that rose up from deep within me was “*Nyet*,” No, I would not. I didn’t plan it; I hadn’t rehearsed it; the word had just come spontaneously to my lips and once there it seemed to me to be absolutely right.

“Perhaps you misunderstood my question,” the KGB officer said, “I will rephrase it.”

Again, I answered, “*Nyet*.”

The instant I said, “No” a second time, I knew my defiance was not about bravery, not about patriotism, not even about principle. It was about ego. I would not allow myself to be broken and that was final. In that moment, I was convinced that I would prefer death to buckling in to the KGB officer by saying,

“Yes, I will collaborate.” In that moment, I had learned something about myself: I was no hero.

I’d always had this nagging feeling inside when interviewing prisoners of conscience that their resistance was somehow about them. Nijolė Sadūnaitė [a Lithuanian Catholic nun imprisoned for her clandestine activities] used to play mind games with her interrogators; she wore them down. Even now she lights up when she talks about “the good old days” locked up in solitary, arguing with her interrogators, getting exiled to Siberia and taking it all in stride, like a tourist trip, she likes to say, for free and with armed guards to protect her from the local wildlife. It took not only strength of character to be a prisoner of conscience, but a healthy ego, I realized. And, in the dull gray monotonous world of the Soviet Union, it was the only fun around—to challenge the all-powerful KGB to a good fight. I had experienced that same high the moment I had said, “*Nyet*,” and there was nothing like it in the world. Nothing like the thrill I experienced in that moment of resistance.

The rest of the group gazed at me in disbelief.

The KGB officer ordered me to step forward. He made me raise my arms up high. He told one of the women who’d agreed to collaborate to search my pockets and she did. This woman pulled out a plastic baggy with white powder inside of it and handed it dutifully to the KGB officer.

“Drugs,” the officer said in mock surprise. “Just as I suspected. We have a drug addict among us.”

He held the plastic baggy containing white powder up high for all to see.

“Guard, bring her to the Med Punkt!”

The guard with the German Shepherd wordlessly led me to the closed door of the Med Punkt.

I was told to wait in the hallway. I recognized one of the Italians from the line-up when we'd first arrived. He too had been brought to the Med Punkt and was ordered to wait along with me. I whispered to him in English, "What did you do?" But the guard grunted at me to be quiet before the Italian could reply.

After a few minutes, the guard opened the door to the Med Punkt and shoved us inside. There were the dvas, lined up against the wall, looking aghast. In the corner stood a primitive Soviet dentist chair connected to a drill powered by foot pedal. The instruments laid out beside the chair looked rough, primitive, brutal. A terrified young man sat in the chair waiting for his "dental exam." Meanwhile, the doctor, who doubled as dentist, a middle-aged woman, was busy behind a screen giving a frightened young woman a "gynecological" exam.



*Image: sovietbunker.com*

After a moment, the doctor emerged from behind the screen. There was nothing soft or conciliatory about her. She barked propaganda and waved her primitive sharp implements dangerously, flaunting her power over her victim's bodies. She interjected "*pravilna*" or "*atlichna*" every few sentences to soften her harshness. She was an expert at playing mind games. She was terrifying in her cold precision, but showed that she was capable of petting you and being good to you if only you submitted to her will. She was the most dangerous type, the good cop and bad cop wrapped up in one. And she played her role exceedingly well. You can still occasionally meet her type on the trolleybuses—old women, now powerless, but once powerful during the Soviet era. The type who will give you a sharp elbow, curse at you, and when you lose your own dignity and go so low as to say something rude back, accept you immediately into their sordid ranks with a kind smile.

The doctor began a long speech about the evils of people like me who used drugs in the utopia of the Soviet Union. She demanded to know who gave me the drugs. I answered simply and defiantly, "Your KGB officer."

The doctor slammed her fist down on the desk, frightening the "dvas" lined up against the wall. She broke into a rant, spitting out her fury in a stream of superlatives. I had done the unthinkable. I had accused the KGB to her face. She finished her speech by demanding that I be placed in solitary confinement.

The guard with the German Shepherd led me into a bare windowless cell painted that ghastly Soviet pale green one sees only in prison cells and Stalin-era apartments inhabited by old people who've not been able to renovate them. Inside the cell there was an iron bed with a badly stained mattress tossed on it. A bucket stood in the corner for defecation. I glanced at that bucket and was revolted.

The most frightening part for me was that the door had no handle on the inside. That detail shocked me out of the game for a moment. My claustrophobia got the better of me. There is nothing more terrifying to me than being trapped in a closed space. As a child I had a panicked fear of elevators. I began to imagine wild scenarios in which the reality show had ended and the actors had forgotten to come back and unlock the door and release me. I assessed the bed frame. Could I lift it and knock out the door if necessary?

Stop it! I commanded out loud to myself. I knew from the oral histories I'd recorded, that the only power the political prisoner had was the power of the mind. I had to hold onto my will and I had to focus my thoughts and think positively. Locked up alone in this cell with no door handles, I could tumble into madness very quickly. Now, there was nothing left but to control myself and to think about how I would proceed from here.

I thought of what a real prisoner of conscience would have had to face in this moment: beatings, torture, interrogation. Leonora Grigalavičiute-Rubine had been beaten so severely in one of these cells by her interrogator that even now, fifty years later, her back still aches. In the late eighties the dissident Nijolė Sadūnaitė had been kept locked in one of these cells as her strength slowly drained away and her hair fell out. When she returned to her cell in 1991 days after the KGB evacuated headquarters after the failed putsch in Moscow, she found that two large x-ray machines had been set up against the outside wall. Through the wall she had been subjected to regular daily doses of radiation. Lukša [Juozas Lukša, one of the leaders of the anti-Soviet Lithuanian partisan resistance movement] wrote about how during the postwar period so many people would be crammed into one cell at a time they could not lie down, only stand upright, their bodies pressed together. When someone was brought back after torture and interrogation, the other prisoners shifted their bodies in such a way as to make room on the floor for that person to lie down.



*Nijolė Sadūnaitė, imprisoned under the Soviet regime [Image: bernardinai.lt]*

Eventually the guard with the German Shepherd did return to fetch me. I was passed on this time to a woman. She led me through the corridors and whispered to me in Lithuanian, “You can get yourself out of this mess. When you go see the interrogator, all you have to do is sign a paper explaining that this was all a misunderstanding and that you agree to work for the KGB. Everything will be forgiven.” This tactic was familiar to me from my research. There were people planted in the prisons who posed as fellow prisoners and who acted compassionately towards the prisoner who did not reveal information under torture. Their job was to gain that prisoner’s trust and to wheedle information out of them nicely.

I was led back to the Red Chamber. As I walked through the corridors I thought to myself: How far do I want to push this game? What will they do, if I continue

to resist. What other punishments have they devised for resisters like me? How far are they willing to go? I remembered the release I'd signed.

Just as I was brought back into the Red Chamber, a group was being led out and marched to the work camp. I fell in step and marched along with them. And nobody stopped me. I simply slipped away from the KGB officer. This was another absurdity of the Soviet system: Inconsistency. You are an enemy of the state, but if the show must go on, you get overlooked.

In the work room we were given shredded canvas gloves and were instructed to haul scrap metal from one table to the next. This was our work. Our commander played with us by making us go faster, then slower, as though we were dancing some absurdist polka at the mercy of a mad fiddler.

When our work quota was complete, our group was herded into another room to view the electric chair. The sergeant explained to us that if we disobeyed orders, this was where we'd be brought to meet our end.

Was this where I would have been brought—theoretically—had I continued to resist? Would my rebellious ego have been silently turned into smoke? Gazing at that chair for the first time that evening I grew truly frightened. I was knocked out of the state of mind of the game and stood facing reality. The chair was not part of a set. It was real. And it showed signs of use. What terrified me more than the chair itself, was the stove pipe leading out of the back of the chair. The ashes and smoke had to be funneled out from underground somehow, of course, hence the stove pipe. And this stove pipe was just like all the other common stove pipes one saw connected to wood stoves and masonry heaters all over the world—practical and familiar.

The sergeant took in the frightened looks on our faces and let out a long hearty chuckle. That was the signal that the show was over. We were invited to visit the

*Beryozhka*—the special shop for foreigners filled with Soviet “luxury” items. Our sergeant metamorphosed from a shouting tyrant into a great big puppy dog, laughing, telling jokes, slapping people on the back in a goofy, friendly manner. Even the German Shepherd stopped barking and began wagging its tail.

Amanda and I were reunited when both our groups were herded together into the *Beryozhka*. Our now cheerful sergeant launched into playful descriptions of all the items for sale. He had the most fun with Soviet factory-issue women’s under garments. He held up the biggest and ugliest bra I’d ever seen in my life, pressed it against his chest, and launched into a mock-propaganda speech on how, naturally, Soviet women have the biggest boobs in the whole world. Those of us who understood, laughed uproariously, partly because it was funny and partly to relieve pent-up tension.

Our sergeant concluded his narration and invited us to select a gift for ourselves from the shop’s shelves. I took a tin the size of a one-lit coin of Vietnamese Star head ache ointment.

After we had selected our gifts, we were led down the hall to the canteen for a good-bye dinner—Soviet style. We sat down in a comradely fashion on long benches pushed up against long tables covered in red table cloths.

Our KGB officer walked up to me and said gently in Lithuanian, “I was a little hard on you back there. Please forgive me.”

“It’s fine,” I said.

“Have a drink of vodka,” he said and poured me a shot.

We had a drink together and the KGB officer moved on to pour for another set of guests.

I asked an older Lithuanian man seated beside Amanda why he had come. He said it was his son’s birthday and pointed to a young man who looked to be about twenty. He said his wife bought the tickets and organized their participation as a birthday gift for their son, so that he could understand what life had been like for him and for his son’s grandparents. The man explained that he had been born in Siberia and that his parents had been exiled after the War. He had lived through the Soviet years with a constant nagging feeling of fear and this experience had brought it all back to him. He brought up the film *Smogikai*.

*Image: sovietbunker.com*

“You see those people and you realize that the choice they made to collaborate was not an easy one,” the man said. “Thank God my parents are already dead and did not see that film. I found it offensive to see those traitors, happy, well-fed, living in comfortable circumstances laughing over their evil deeds, lying into the camera. Can you imagine how the older generation must feel seeing those people on film? The people whose brothers and sisters were shot? Tortured? No, it’s a terrible thing. No justice has been done. Why are they walking around free in an independent Lithuania?”

When we left the bunker later that evening to drive back to Vilnius, I ran the experiences of that day through my head. The 1984 Soviet Bunker was a reality show and no matter how far I pushed circumstances, I had always known in the back of my mind that it was not real. I knew that my tormentors were actors. I wondered whether I was really so brave in 1988 – 1989 and in 1983 and 1984 when I visited Soviet-occupied Lithuania as a student? As an American citizen for me the Soviet Union was just one big reality show and I could always get out

if I had to. I remembered how when I came home in September 1989 my mother asked me how I had lived without big well-stocked American supermarkets. I'd told her that I could stand the bare shelves of the Soviet groceries because I could always imagine an American supermarket in my mind. But the people who lived in that system, who endured and struggled to make something of their lives, could never get out. No matter how much time I spent here and no matter who I talked to—how many prisoners of conscience and partisans and secret nuns from The Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania—I realized I would never completely understand what people here lived through. I thought of Antanas, whose instinct, when he visited Belgium in 1990, was to light out and run across an open field until it dawned on him that Lithuania was free and he could stop running.

Perhaps Amanda was smarter than me. She immediately admitted to being an American early in the show and in the Red Chamber gleefully wrote a statement saying how she wanted to emigrate into the Soviet Union because life was so good there and because people were so well provided for.

*Image: sovietbunker.com*

Header image – sovietbunker.com

**Laima Vince is a writer, playwright, poet, and literary translator. She is the recipient of two Fulbright Fellowships and a National Endowment for the Arts grant. Laima Vince has lived and worked in Lithuania for a total of eight years (1988 – 1989, 1995 – 1997, 2007 – 2011) and visits frequently. She is the author of a trilogy of literary nonfiction works about Lithuania: *Lenin's Head on a Platter*, *The Snake in the Vodka Bottle* and *Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart*. Her play about global issues and immigration, *The Interpreter*, has been running for three years at the Vilnius Chamber Theatre. Laima's novel about three generations of Lithuanian women, *This is Not My Sky*, is forthcoming this year.**

*The Soviet bunker experience is still open near Nemenčinė, 25 km from Vilnius.  
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