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Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart

11/02/2017 09:53 am ET



In September 2006 I accompanied Nijolė Bražėnaite-Lukšienė-Paronetto to Lithuania to meet Eleonora Labanauskienė, the woman who had hidden and sheltered Juozas Lukša for six months in 1950-1951, while 2,000 NKVD soldiers searched for him, combing forests and raiding farmsteads all over Lithuania. This emotional meeting came about as the result of a series of coincidences.

I had spent the spring of 2006 in Lithuania on a literary translation fellowship. One weekend I was invited by friends to participate in a hike through the countryside in Kernavė with a group of ethnographers and archaeologists. We stopped for lunch in a café. I sat down beside Rimantas and his wife, Dalia. Rimantas began telling me about how a year ago he and his three teenage sons had traveled across Lithuania on bicycles searching for “bunkers.”



meaning a secret hiding place for the underground resistance. A bunker can be a dug-out in the forest, as was usually the case, or it could be an attic or a root cellar in someone's house. It could also be a barn, an empty well, an abandoned building or any other hidden place. Rimantas told me he met a woman named Eleonora Labanauskienė in the village of Olendernė in southern Lithuania. She surprised him by telling him that during November 1950 through May 1951 she had hidden two leaders of the resistance, Juozas Lukša and Alfonsas Ramanauskas, code name Vanagas, in a bunker under the floorboards of her home.

That day in Kernavė I understood immediately that any information provided by Eleonora regarding the return of Lukša to Lithuania in 1950 would be of extreme interest not only to researchers, but also to his widow, Nijolė. Sitting that day at the long wooden table in the café in Kernavė under recast copper coats of arms and racks of moose antlers, it was clear to both me and to Rimantas that we had to bring Eleonora and Nijolė together.

Our first try to connect the two women was through Skype. However, that attempt failed. Neither would even try. Eleonora was nearly deaf and Nijolė has very limited eye sight. Not only that: both women were of the generation where no technology could replace the bond of human contact. There could be no compromise. They had to meet and speak to each other in person.

September 4, 2006 marked the fifty-fifth anniversary of the death of Juozas Lukša. Nijolė wished to travel to Lithuania to participate in a series of war memorials that would be held that week to commemorate her first husband's death. She also planned to travel to the backwaters of Lithuania to the tiny brick farm house where Lukša had hidden under Eleonora's floorboards while Soviet Interior Forces and Soviet militia informants scoured the countryside searching for him.

The only problem was that someone had to accompany her, and that someone was me. It was my fate, my Lithuanian friends told me. Lithuanians are firm believers in fate—a fate that is woven at birth by the goddess Laima and which has mystical properties that cannot be denied.

And so, I found myself on a plane seated beside my eighty-three year old travel companion on a transatlantic journey into the backwaters of the heart.

No map could lead us to Eleonora. No stranger could get us inside her door. Only Rimantas knew the road like the back of his hand. We drove out of the city of Vilnius, leaving behind that oasis of post-Soviet post-modernity and descended into a maze of unmarked dirt roads. We drove through kilometers of fields that now lay fallow. We drove past abandoned villages



years before when Lithuania joined the European Union. We drove past cows tethered to wooden stakes in the ground. We drove past elderly farmers bringing their goods to the market grounds in rough wooden carts hitched to work-worn horses. We were on a journey into the backwaters of the heart.

Eleonora Labanauskienė stood waiting on the front stoop to her yellow brick farmhouse. She was wearing a Sunday dress—dark blue with white polka dots. A blue silk scarf was knotted loosely across the front. Her neatly combed wavy gray hair blew about in the light breeze. Dahlias and black-eyed susans spilled over onto the concrete steps under her feet. The flowers provided a burst of color against the flat grassy plains that stretched towards a line of pine forests in the distance. The sky was blue, but heavy clouds tinged with gray hung low, close to the horizon line, threatening rain.

Nijolė perched anxiously on the edge of the front seat of our minivan. She did not wait for introductions. Once we'd parked, she opened the front passenger door and walked resolutely towards Eleonora. Although Eleonora was eighty-eight, when she saw Nijolė, she ran towards her with the gait of a young woman. The two women fell into a tight embrace. They stood like that for a good fifteen minutes.

Eleonora and Nijolė had waited 55 years to meet and it might never have happened if not for that chance conversation in the café in Kernavė. Seeing the two women together, I knew that bringing Nijolė here was the right thing to do.

"I saw you speak on the news on Thursday," Eleonora said finally. "When I realized it was you, I got down on my knees. My daughter Vanda came running into the room and said, 'Mama, what's wrong, get up.' I told her I'd just seen you on television. You spoke beautifully."

"They asked me to tell them about my husband," Nijolė said. "What could I tell them? Fifty-five years have gone by and it still feels like yesterday when he left on his mission. Every day when I awake my first thoughts are about him."

"It still feels like yesterday for me too," Eleonora said. "When I lay down to sleep at night, my head is filled with thoughts of the time when Lukša and Vanagas hid in the bunker in my house."

Eleonora took Nijolė by the arm and the two women walked inside the house. The rest of us followed. Eleonora's farmhouse looked the same now as it did in 1950, when Lukša hid there in a bunker under the floorboards. Eleonora and her husband, Vincas Labanauskas, built this house together in 1939 shortly after they eloped. At the age of seventeen the head-strong



owned only four hectares of land. Eleonora's parents did not approve of the match. They were wealthy farmers who had made their money in America. Like many Lithuanian-Americans of their generation they had returned to a newly independent Lithuania to put down roots. After the Soviets occupied Lithuania, Eleonora's parents were exiled to Siberia because of their wealth. They both died there.

Eleonora's daughter Vanda rushed out of the kitchen, saying "Please, come, sit down at the table."

She led us through the tiny front sitting room and into a small dining room. The plaster walls were papered with pale green wallpaper and the wooden floorboards were covered with linoleum. A tall row of dark wooden wardrobes separated the dining room from Eleonora's tiny bedroom. A picture of Holy Mary hung on one of the walls above the table. The single window in the room was covered with a curtain knit intricately from white linen. If I ever were abducted and blindfolded and released in a room, I'd know once I saw those hand knit white lace curtains that I'd ended up in Lithuania. All over the former Lithuanian-Polish grand duchy out in the countryside women knit those same lace curtains.

"Now you must sit and eat," Vanda said.

We all took our places around the table. Nijolė sat beside Eleonora. The table was covered with a white table cloth. A white table cloth is usually used to cover the table at Christmas Eve dinner or is brought out for important guests. We felt honored. There were so many platters of different varieties of meats, salads, breads, compotes, and baked goods that I could barely find a place to set down the bottle of cognac I'd brought and the large box of chocolates.

Vanda picked up a plate of herring in a sauce of onions and peppers and offered it to Nijolė. Janina, Eleonora's second eldest daughter, picked up a bowl of beet salad and began heaping generous portions into everyone's plates.

"We celebrated Christmas Eve and Easter together with Lukša and Vanagas right here at this table," Eleonora said, patting the edge of the table. "Times were rough then. It wasn't like now where you can buy everything in the store. We had to raise our own animals and all of our food. It was hard work."

"I remember how Lukša and Vanagas used to teach us how to write our letters," Vanda said, passing a steaming platter of pork chops around the table.

"Vanagas would give each of us sisters a stick of chalk and we'd go outside and he'd write the letters across the saw horse and we'd copy them."



woven fabric and put me up high on top of the shelf. Then he'd tell you to go and find me.

“And of course I never could because it would never occur to me to look for you wrapped up in a bolt of fabric high up on the shelf!” Vanda said and laughed.

“It was only years later,” Janina said, “when we girls were grown women, that Mama told us that the man who’d wrapped us in bolts of fabric and who told us bedtime stories was the legendary leader of the resistance, Juozas Lukša-Daumantas.”

Eleonora took Nijolė’s hand in hers and said, “We’d sit here in this room, Lukša and I. We’d face each other and talk from the depths of our souls.” Eleonora paused. “And I’ll tell you what he said, ‘Oh Eleonora, how sorry I am that I left my young wife, Nijolė, behind. But what could I do? It was my mission. I had to carry out my mission.’”

Nijolė gazed at Eleonora and said, “In one of his letters he wrote to me, ‘Nijolė, you must know that you have competition and that competition is my first love and my first wife, and her name is Lithuania.’ That was competition I could never overcome. I knew from the beginning that he would go back and fight. It was his duty. And I accepted that.”

“One day I was walking to the store when I saw a column of military trucks heading towards our farm,” Eleonora said. “A cold chill went through me, but I just kept walking calmly. I went to the store, bought what I needed, and went back home. The NKVD surrounded our house and conducted a raid. They had four machine guns set up at all four corners of the house. Eighteen of them decided to spend the night in our house to keep watch.”

The memory made Eleonora’s blood pressure rise. Her cheeks grew red and she began fanning her face. Vanda put her hands on Eleonora’s shoulders to comfort her and offered to take her to bed, but Eleonora declined. Determined to tell her story, Eleonora continued:

“Lucky for us, they were all hiding down in the bunker. Night came. Vanagas fell asleep down there in the bunker and he started to snore. He was snoring so loud the NKVD officer burst into our bedroom and began poking around. My husband understood immediately what was going on, so he started to snore in a loud, obnoxious manner. The NKVD officer turned around and walked out. The next day they left. That was a close call.”

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This story led Eleonora to another story.

“We’d be peeling potatoes in the kitchen, Juozas Lukša and I,” Eleonora said, “and he’d pick up the edge of the curtain and curse in Russian and say, ‘Are those the Russians coming?’ And then he’d laugh when he saw my reaction.”

In 1953, two years after Lukša walked to his death along the edge of a Lithuanian forest in Pažeriai, Vanagas was captured and tortured in the bowels of the KGB prisons in Kaunas and in Vilnius. Allegedly the KGB traced a hundred dollar bill back to him on the black market. It was Lukša’s hundred dollar bill—one of the crisp new American bills the CIA had given to him when they sent him on his mission.

“Vanagas’s misfortune,” Lukša’s brother, Antanas, had said to me in an interview, “was that he didn’t have enough time to kill himself before they took him.”

Under torture Vanagas revealed that he and Lukša had hidden in a bunker in the Labanauskas home. Vincas Labanauskas was arrested March 4, 1953, on the Feast Day of Saint Casimir. He was tortured, interrogated, and exiled to hard labor in Siberia for fifteen years. Eleonora was arrested March 14, 1953. She was tortured and interrogated in the KGB prison in Vilnius from March 14, 1953 to August 10, 1953.

“They’d put a noose around my neck and yank it,” Eleonora said. She squeezed my hand as she said it.

She was also subjected to the water cell where badly beaten and sleep-deprived prisoners were made to stand on a small metal disk submerged in cold water. When sleep overcame her, she’d slip and fall into the cold rat-infested water.

One of the most cruel tortures that Eleonora recalls was when the interrogator would shove her into a toilet stall the size of a telephone booth and let rats loose out of a cage into the stall. The interrogator would lock the door shut, leaving Eleonora for hours crammed inside the small space covered by gnawing hungry rats.

Eleonora refused to collaborate. At one point she was beaten so badly on her backside that for a week she had to crawl around on her hands and knees. Then she got the idea to play-act that she was schizophrenic. As a schizophrenic she was of no use as an informant.

“The entire time they tortured me,” Eleonora said, “all I could think about was my family, about protecting my daughters, so they wouldn’t be destroyed.” At her trial, Eleonora was



“I have a tongue, I can speak for myself,” she said.

Eleonora Labanauskiene was sentenced to five years in Siberia, but in the end she was released home to her children because they were minors and there was no one who could care for them. When Eleonora returned home she found that all of her possessions and all of her furniture, including the bed they all slept in, had been confiscated by the local communists. She was told she would have to buy back her possessions, piece by piece. Eleonora borrowed money from her brother, and alone, with her husband gone, she began rebuilding her life. She was constantly harassed by the local communist authorities. None of Eleonora’s daughters were allowed to advance their education beyond high school.

I asked Eleonora if she had to make the choice again, knowing what she knew now, would she work for the resistance. Without hesitating, Eleonora nodded and said firmly, “Yes.”

“Times were horrible,” Eleonora said, her face growing dark.

“I remember the heaps of corpses the Soviet Interior Forces would bring out of the forests after a battle. They’d dump them in the market square and make everyone walk past and look. If you reacted, they’d take you in for questioning. And the worst was that some of our own village men would join the NKVD and turn on us.”

“I don’t understand it,” Nijolė said, shaking her head, “it seems that the schools were good when we were growing up in independent Lithuania. People were civil. There was law and order. Where did this barbarism come from?”

“War,” Eleonora said with a firm nod, “war will do it.”

“To the Russians, the Forest Brothers were terrorists,” Rimantas added.

“It all depended on what side you were on,” Nijolė said. “To the Russians my husband was a terrorist. To us he was a hero.”

“When I was here before last spring,” I said to Eleonora, “you told me that Lukša would say you looked like Nijolė. So tell me now, does she look like you?”

Eleonora squeezed Nijolė’s hand and beamed. For me, the answer was obvious. The two women looked like sisters. Both were around the same height, had white wavy hair that had once been a dark blonde, and the same determined steel blue eyes. Both also had high cheekbones and angular faces, but those features were typical for this tiny country with a population of three million and a small gene pool.



something of the spirit. Both possessed the resolve and determination it took to stand up to a totalitarian regime and to pay the price—Nijolė by losing her husband after only a week of marriage—Eleonora by losing her husband to fifteen years of hard labor in Siberia and by being tortured for six months. Both women had the strength of character to come out of the experience just as determined as when they first made the decision to knowingly risk their lives for their nation's independence.



Juozas Lukša believed we would be independent again,” Eleonora said, “he would say, ‘The Russians won’t last long.’”

“Could we see the bunker?” I asked.

Eleonora led us outside, through the flower garden, and around to the side of the house.

“It’s all different now,” Vanda said, walking behind us. “After it was all over, we turned the bunker back into a root cellar.”

We opened the door to the bunker. The door was built years later, when Vincas Labanauskas returned from prison camp and kept himself busy by working on the house. A set of narrow wooden steps lead down to a dark closed space. The women had set out rows



typewriter and the men's guns, grenades, and ammunition.

“This is where they had to live, the three of them, Lukša, Vanagas, and his wife, Birutė,” Eleonora said. “They spent many long hours down here. It would be humid and then it would be cold, but that was how they lived.”

Nijolė stood beside Eleonora and took her hand in hers. They peered down at the dark, dank hole in the ground where Nijolė’s husband had lain in hiding for many long hours while the Soviet Interior Forces scoured the countryside looking for him.

“You had heartache,” Eleonora said to Nijolė, “but we lived through hell.”



SURVIVING MEMBERS OF LITHUANIA'S ARMED RESISTANCE AGAINST THE SOVIET UNION IN 2006.

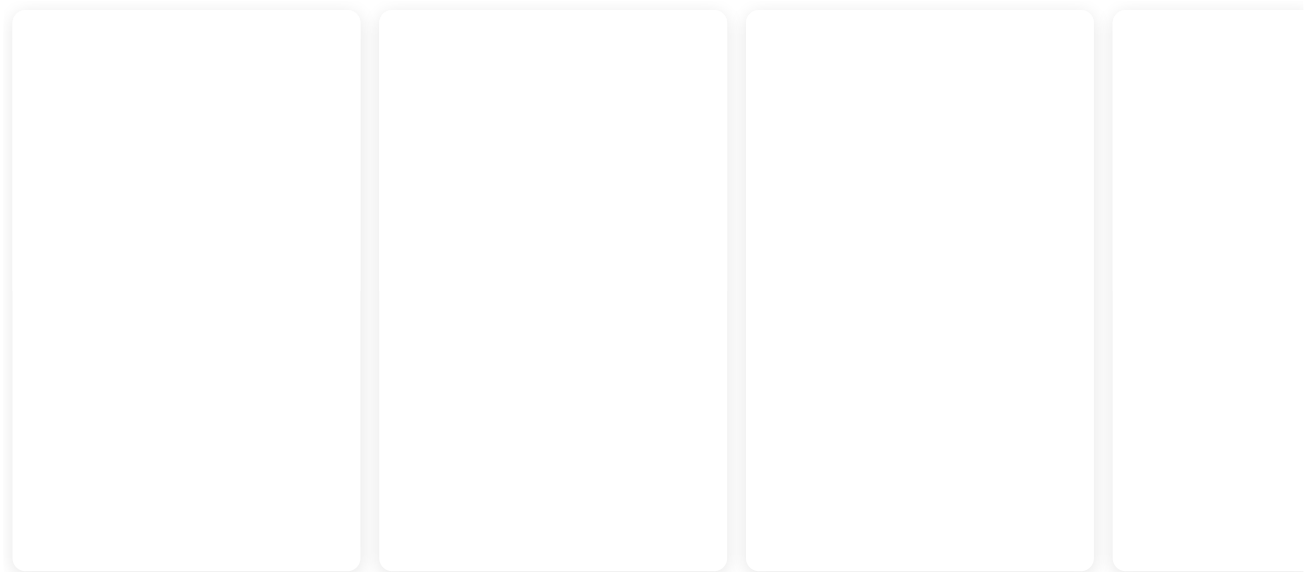




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