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PERIODICALS

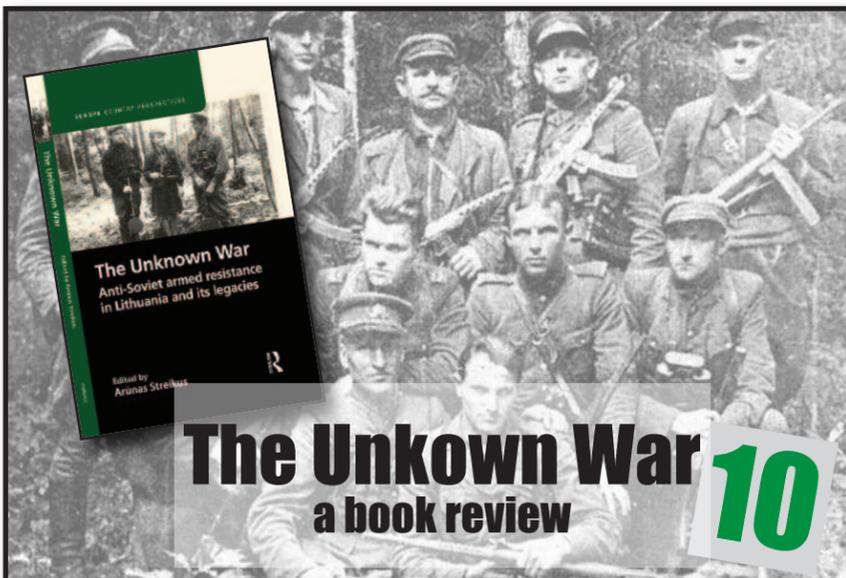
Grassroots support for Ukraine

NEWSPAPER – DO NOT DELAY – Date Mailed 11-02-2022



A small operation doing a world of good. "Support Ukraine" founders share their triumphs and struggles with author Laima Vincė.

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The Unknown War
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Author of iconic freedom poster honored

When Lithuania was struggling to regain its independence, Chicago area native Vincas Lukas designed a poster that conveyed Lithuania's yearning for freedom from tyranny. In 1990, his design of a Lithuanian tri-colored bird escaping a barbed wire cage found its way across the US – including a billboard overlooking a Chicago expressway, in Washington DC subway trains, and on T-shirts given to the Congressional staff members. Print magazine granted Lukas's design the prestigious Award of Excellence. His design bested thousands of competitors.



Vincas Lukas with Consul General Sigrida Mulevičienė.



DON'T CLOSE THE DOOR ON DEMOCRACY IN LITHUANIA
Let President Bush Know!

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Support Ukraine:

A Lithuanian Grassroots Humanitarian Aid Organization

LAIMA VINCĖ

In the early morning hours of February 24, 2022, Neringa Petrauskaitė was woken by the alarm on her iPhone. Neringa was exhausted and would have readily gone back to sleep. Instead, she reached for her phone to check her messages. Her phone's photo bank served up a memory from two years ago, on February 24, 2019. Neringa sat up in bed and took a closer look. It was a photograph of a tank painted blue and yellow, the colors of the Ukrainian flag, facing off against two Russian tanks. She had taken it while visiting Kyiv with her husband. Neringa had traveled to Ukraine to establish business ties with dynamic young Ukrainian professionals and had been impressed with their work ethic and vibrancy. After her meetings concluded, she stayed for a weekend and, together with her husband, took time to visit tourist sites and museums in Kyiv. That is when she saw the tanks – a display at The Ukrainian State Museum of the Great Patriotic War – and took the photo. With all the fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine in the previous weeks, now the image in the photograph felt chillingly prophetic.

Neringa got out of bed and turned on the news: Russia had invaded Ukraine. Airports and other targets had been bombed in the early morning hours. She wrote on Facebook: “On exactly this day two years ago I was in Kyiv, and I made this symbolic photograph. Today, this photo has become the tragic reality. Be strong, Ukraine.”

However, her concern for Ukraine did not end with a Facebook post. Since that day, she started looking for ways to support Ukraine. She noticed her former client Jurgita's post on Facebook. Jurgita was asking for medicines and other things for a humanitarian aid package she was working on with her friend Ričardas. She connected with Jurgita Kvesėlaitė, and she introduced her to Ričardas Tverijonas. Formerly just acquaintances, over the following weeks of intensive humanitarian aid work together, they would become close friends and associates.



Ričardas and Jurgita pack the third shipment of humanitarian aid to Ukraine. “We pack each shipment ourselves. That is the quickest and most efficient way of getting the aid out.”



Ričardas Tverijonas works in the automotive industry and has maintained established business ties with colleagues in Ukraine over a number of years. He also has close friends in Ukraine who stay in touch. On the morning of February 24, after he learned the news of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, he immediately got to work, using his know-how in the transportation industry to organize the trucking of necessary supplies to Ukraine. Ričardas, a graduate student in a business executive master-level program at Baltic Management Institute (BMI), reached out for help to fellow students over a WhatsApp group.



Jurgita had just returned from a trip abroad when she woke up to the news on February 24 that Russia had invaded Ukraine. She is also a graduate student at BMI. She checked her phone and found Ričardas's WhatsApp message reaching out for help to organize a shipment of medicine and other supplies to Ukraine. She knew immediately that she wanted to be involved. She responded to his message.



This is how the enterprise **Support Ukraine** came into existence.

Over Zoom, they told me more about their volunteer work:

“On February 24 we all had to look within and ask ourselves if we are morally prepared to do what it takes to end this war and to help the people of Ukraine,” Ričardas said.

“It's the least we can do,” Neringa said. “I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do

something.”

“Everyone I know in Lithuania is helping Ukraine in any way they know how,” I said. “Almost all Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania are living together with Lithuanian families in private homes.”

“Yes. We are watching in real time how Ukraine is being destroyed. There is no excuse not to help them,” Jurgita said.

“From the moment the war began, I understood immediately that time was a factor,” Ričardas explained. “I also knew that large organizations would not be able to move quickly, that they'd be bogged down by administration and logistics. On the second day of the war, February 25, we were already accepting donations for Ukraine. On the morning of February 26, we bought a minivan to transport the goods to Ukraine.”

“How much did you pay for the van?” I asked, thinking it would be difficult to come up with large funds on such short notice.

“We bought a used van for 1,500 Euro,” Ričardas explained, “but, the person who sold us the van lowered the price significantly when we told him the van would be donated to Ukrainian soldiers fighting in the war.”

Ričardas and a few of his friends repaired and tuned up the van and filled it with medical and other necessary supplies that people had donated.

“In just a few days, we collected 20,000 Euro worth of donated goods to bring to Ukraine,” Neringa said. “We keep track of all the numbers because we are careful to be transparent and maintain accountability.”

“In the first few weeks of the war many people in Lithuania were in a daze,” Jurgita said, “they were in a state of shock and didn't know what to do, but we immediately jumped in and took action.”

“When we organized the first humanitarian aid shipment, we didn't ask for money, but only for specific supplies that our contacts in Ukraine told us they needed,” Jurgita explained. “Friends entrust-



Medical supplies ready to go to Ukraine. “When we organized the first humanitarian aid shipment, we didn't ask for money, but only for specific supplies that our contacts in Ukraine told us they needed,” said Jurgita.

This article is an excerpt from the forthcoming book, *Angel of Maidan: Ukrainian Women's Voices in War* by Laima Vincė.

If you would like to support the work of “Support Ukraine,” send *Draugas News* an email at draugasnews@gmail.com. We will forward you instructions on how to make a contribution.

ed us their warehouse in the town of Vievis outside of Vilnius. People delivered donations directly to the warehouse.”

Ričardas and a few friends drove the van to the border between Poland and Lviv, Ukraine. The trip took them eight hours from Lithuania. At the border, Ričardas’s friends got out of the van. Ričardas drove the loaded van into Ukraine; he traveled alone for the next few hours of the journey.

“I knew that I was going to donate the van and that I would need to get back across the border to Poland. Our Ukrainian contacts met me in Lviv and took over distributing the supplies and medicines as needed. I handed over the keys to the van and set out on foot back towards the border. You are not allowed to cross the border into Poland on foot; you must travel in an automobile. So, I had to stop cars and ask for rides. There are several document checkpoints you must pass through to enter Poland from Ukraine since Poland is a European Union country and Ukraine is not. All the vehicles in the queue to enter Poland were filled with refugees, women, children, and the elderly, but no men. I looked into those women’s eyes, and their eyes were empty. These women had just parted with their husbands, sons, fathers. They had left them behind to fight. The pain these women were experiencing was immense, and I felt it together with them. That made me all the more determined to help them.

“We’d get to the document check points and they had to show their passports. Many had fled with just the clothes on their backs and didn’t have their passports, IDs, or any paperwork with them. So, they’d scroll through their phones, looking for photos of their passports to show the border guards. On their phones I would see photographs of a happier life they’d lived before the war. I’d see photos of happy families on vacation in Egypt, school events, family holidays. On their phones I saw the evidence of the lives they’d lost.”

Ričardas paused a moment and then said solemnly, “I wanted to apologize to all those women that we had not protected them from this.”

“Women have been the main casualties and the targets of Russia’s war of genocide against Ukraine,” I said.

“The rapes, violence, and murders against women and children are not accidental,” Ričardas said, “they are the result of Russia’s war policy. Russia is using the same playbook as they did in the occupied countries during World War II. They know that the fastest way to break a nation’s will is to break the women. That is why the Russian military is instructed to specifically target women and children. Women pass down culture and tradition. That is why Russians consider Ukrainian women their enemy and are trying to destroy them, to degrade them, to annihilate the very heart of the Ukrainian nation. Our mission is to help women, and to help the men fighting to defend them.”

Ričardas continued, “Thus far, a little over a month into this war, the Russians bombed 280 educational institutions in Ukraine. That is no accident. Russia began this war by bombing hospitals and schools. They know that by destroying education, they destroy a nation’s future. Traditionally, education is in the realm of women.

“Our organization is striving to help Ukrainian women. Our mission is to support Ukrainian families caught in this war. We know from Russian military history that Russia advocates destroying the women of their targeted enemy. All the hatred of Russia is directed towards women. That is why support for women in this war is so important.”

I asked for statistics.

“Right now, as of early April, there are 4.5 million war refugees from Ukraine, and most of them are women and children. In total, there are 9 million Ukrainian refugees because 4.5 million are internally displaced. That is the greatest number of people displaced by war since World War II. No one has discussed this, but when Russia invaded the Donbas region and Crimea two million Ukrainians were displaced internally.”

“How does your organization operate compared to other more established humanitarian aid organizations?” I asked.

“The difference between our organization and other humanitarian aid organizations is that we are small and therefore we can move quickly,” Ričardas explained. “We also respond to specific requests for medicine, supplies, and other goods that we re-

ceive directly from Ukraine. Just to give you an example, Jurgita was able to procure medication specifically for children with autism when it was needed in Kyiv. She has also been able to respond to requests for very specific types of cancer medications. We recently brought four pallets of medications to bring to Ukraine. Our volunteers inside Ukraine distribute everything.”

I asked for a list of goods delivered in a typical shipment, and Neringa sent me an itemized list over Messenger of the latest delivery, which is worth almost 100,000 Euro. The list includes: Three special forces drones from the United States, eight thermal vision goggles, one optical target finder, two electricity generators, one car, 25 bulletproof vests, 20 helmets, 30 cell phones, four pallets of medications, tourniquets, bandages and so on, specific medications for autistic children and cancer patients, insulin, 150 sets of thermal undergarments, 43 pairs of shoes, tactical mittens, 400 pairs of socks, 200 boxer shorts, boxes of sanitary napkins, Lithuanian chocolate and Lithuanian bacon.

“Our aid is important,” Jurgita said, “but to people fighting inside Ukraine it is just as important to know that we support them. They need our moral support”.

“They are thankful for that. Ukrainians send us thank you messages and happy face photos in appreciation,” Neringa explained, “and they call us personally to say thank you. They particularly appreciated and were moved by our shipment of socks in the colors of the Ukrainian flag, blue and yellow.”

“We are able to reach groups of Ukrainian fighters who are far from the front lines and those who are not receiving aid from anyone else,” Ričardas explained. “We understand their needs and we provide everything from underwear to special military equipment.”

“Our organization maintains direct contact with five defence squads in four cities of Ukraine. We are also in constant communication with mayors and citizens who stayed in Ukraine to fight for freedom. Some of these people we’ve known personally for a long time, as they are our friends, or they were our business partners before war broke out,” Neringa explained. “We have a control mechanism to ensure that every single piece of support has reached its destination. Needless to say, our support is purely based on a never-ending list of requests that we receive every day directly from the points where humanitarian aid must be delivered.”

“Our friendships inside Ukraine have been tested over years of friendship,” Ričardas said.

“How many deliveries have you made to Ukraine?” I asked.

“Thus far we have made three trips to Ukraine to deliver humanitarian aid. We always leave the vehicles we drive behind in Ukraine. We have organized getting ambulances over there as well. We donated seven minivans so far.”

Jurgita explained: “We pack each shipment ourselves. That is the quickest and most efficient of getting the aid out.”

“I should also say that we do not take any salary for our humanitarian aid work for Ukraine. Everyone who works with us does so as a volunteer,” Neringa said.

“We never even considered taking any of the donated money for ourselves,” Jurgita added. “Actually, the humanitarian aid work inspires us to work harder in our respective businesses because we wish to be financially independent so that we can donate more of our time.”

Neringa used her skills as a marketing expert to write messages for the group that were effective. “In Lithuania Facebook is an important channel for get-

ting the word out fast,” Neringa explained.

“I imagine that Ukrainian people have lost a lot of what they need to survive because of Russian soldiers looting,” I said.

“In the second week of the war,” Ričardas explained, “Russian military officers gave Russian soldiers an order that they ought to loot wherever they could and steal whatever they could from Ukrainian homes and businesses. This information was leaked and is available to those who would like to read about it.”

“This war is personal. I am concerned for my Ukrainian friends,” Jurgita said. “My close Ukrainian girlfriend is all alone now because her husband and both her sons are fighting in the Ukrainian army. That is very hard. I worry about her. I cannot imagine what that must be like. I hear terrible stories from my Ukrainian friends. In one village, fifteen girls were raped. Another friend told me her hairdresser’s story. She was driving in her car, and she thought she would be safer if she put a white flag in the car window and a sign that read, “Children.” Russian soldiers saw the white flag and the children and shot and killed them all. I wonder if those soldiers aren’t given some sort of a drug that makes them act that way,” Jurgita mused out loud.



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Neringa offered her insights, “Jurgita says that because she is a good person and has a big heart. She cannot imagine evil. She cannot imagine someone would kill children of their own free will. But I look at the statistics about contemporary Russian society. According to a Yale Daily News blog, during the first week of the war, the rectors of 185 Russian universities signed official statements saying they support Russia’s war against Ukraine. All they watch is Russian state television. They are acting on their instincts and what they’ve been taught, I believe.”

“How does it feel to live through this war right next door?” I asked.

“How does this war feel?” Neringa mused out loud. “It feels like waking up one morning to finding out that your neighbor next door is a killer.”

“We see how history is repeating itself,” Jurgita said, “and we want to do everything in our power that this time the outcome is different.”

“This week Lithuania was the first EU country to completely boycott the purchase of Russian gas and oil,” I commented. “This week Lithuanians dyed the pond in front of the Russian Embassy in Vilnius with an ecologically friendly red dye to make it look like a pool of blood in remembrance of the innocent civilians tortured and murdered by the Russian regime in Bucha and other towns outside Kyiv. The Olympic swimmer Rūta Meilutytė swam in the pond for hours, representing hope in all the bloodshed.”

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Supporting Ukraine

Continued from page 5

Considering how Lithuanian defiance of Russia and support of Ukraine is antagonizing Putin and his cronies, I wondered out loud: “Do you think that Russia will invade Lithuania?”

“Yes, I do,” Ričardas acknowledged. “Putin has made his intentions known. I have sent my wife and children to France for their own safety and so that I can do this work and not worry about Russian retaliation against my family.”

“May I publish your actual names when I write about you?” I asked.

“Yes, of course,” Ričardas said, “We are completely transparent.”

“Anyone can find us and our professional history on Facebook and LinkedIn,” Jurgita added.

“The first few weeks of the war Lithuanians were in such a state of shock that there was a lot of apathy. Many people just couldn’t get motivated to work. Our nation’s collective trauma was triggered because so many of us experienced Russian terror in our families,” Neringa explained. “My godmother was deported to Siberia by the Russians at the age of seven. My ancestors were forced to abandon their farm at midnight with empty horse-drawn carriages once the information about start of Stalin’s deportations reached them out. Other members of my family fought in the anti-Soviet resistance and died fighting.”

“There was a lot of fear in those early weeks of the war,” Jurgita said. “Many felt that the Russians could attack us in Lithuania at any time. They feared Russia would take Ukraine quickly.”

“I know the Ukrainian spirit,” Ričardas interjected, “I knew the Ukrainians would fight hard. I have no doubt that Ukraine will win this war. And if Russia attacks Lithuania, we will fight to defend Lithuania as well.”

“I was a child during the years of

the independence movement in Lithuania,” Jurgita explained. “I remember the night of January 12 – 13, when Russian soldiers attacked the television tower and our democratically elected parliament. My parents took me with them to defend the television tower. We wanted so badly to be free.”

“I was in elementary school when Lithuania declared independence from the Soviet Union,” Neringa said. “I remember when I went to school our teacher was so happy. She pulled out all these posters of Lenin and handed them out for us children to use as sleds. We then went outside and took a longer break than usual, celebrating sliding down the snowy hills on the Lenin posters. That was the best downhill sledding I ever experienced. The posters served their purpose as sleds perfectly.”

“I’m the oldest one out of our group,” Jurgita interjected, “and I still had to learn Russian in school. But that helps me now when we need to communicate with our partners in Ukraine.”

“I would like to talk about the future,” Ričardas suggested, “because the future is important, and we must prepare for it now. Personally, I have no doubt that Ukraine will win this war. Then it will be time to rebuild. That will take some time, so it is best to start planning now. The Russians have two main targets in Ukraine: Education and culture. They are seeking to destroy all civilian targets related to education and culture, to annihilate them. The first task that our organization plans to undertake is to rebuild daycare centers and schools. Ensuring that there will be functioning schools and daycare centers is one way of making it possible for refugees to return home. We are already in contact with a group of Lithuanian architects who have promised to design mobile schools and daycare centers free of charge.”



The first shipment to Ukraine. Ričardas drove the van into Ukraine, delivered the aid, and left the van behind. He returned to Lithuania by his wits.

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