

A Tale of Biblical Times

Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart. Laima Vincė, selfpublished by Amazon Create Space, 2012. ISBN: 978-14-751- 2897-0.

Laima Vincė's latest book, *Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart*, is a documentary, and yet personal, excursion into the overwhelming trauma of postwar Lithuania and the ways in which its ravages are still sorely evident. It is largely a collection of the stories of mostly, but not exclusively, "women who were former partisan fighters, liaisons, or supporters of Lithuania's armed resistance against the Soviet Union" (7), Jewish Holocaust survivors, and survivors of exile to Siberia and Tajikistan. Those stories are interspersed with Vincė's personal stories of, and reflections on, life in post-Soviet Lithuania.

In the book, Vincė tells us that she has had a long-lasting and emotionally charged relationship with Lithuania: "For fifty years my grandfather represented a nation that did not exist. He kept his film noir Consulate on the Upper West Side of Manhattan open and operating as Lithuania disappeared from maps of the world [...] Tonight we were racing through the land that was in my blood. I took after my grandfather and the people of his region" (216). Vincė's family had been victims of the Soviet regime and part of the motivation behind this project is her preoccupation with historical justice and perpetuating the memory of people who suffered injustice and whose suffering, she feels, has not yet been appropriately acknowledged: "These deportations, kept secret for half a century, are hardly mentioned in history books outside of the countries affected by them" (205). Although U.S.-born, Vincė has considerable firsthand experience of living in the country of her grandparents' origin. She is fluent in Lithuanian and made lengthy visits at the end of the 1980s as a young woman, studying Lithuanian literature, creative writing, and translation, participating in the Singing Revolution, and witnessing some of the most significant political and social changes in modern European history (those experiences are documented in her book *Lenin's Head on a Platter*). She has returned at least twice

as a Fulbright scholar, a mother of a family and a professional teacher and translator. Her own relationship with Lithuania is far from uncomplicated and settled: “I wonder 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” (351). Therefore, I feel that her desire to understand the reality and mentality of postwar, as well as post-Soviet, Lithuania is tightly entwined with her own identity quest. Vincè’s previous book *The Snake in the Vodka Bottle* also testifies to this quest.

The point of view, from which Vincè carries out her research and contextualizes it, is that of a stranger who has a native right to the knowledge and experience that is shared with her. She treats her subjects as newly discovered family members, sympathetically, with the weight of emotional responsibility. For example, “All his life Jonas Kadžionis had worked as a manual laborer. Yet, listening to his poems and his thoughts on poetry, I felt that under different circumstances, he could have been a professor of literature” (286).

The first two chapters of *Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart* provide the historical background, painted accurately, although in broad brush strokes, for the interviews that follow. In her introduction and indeed the entire book, Vincè does justice to the historical, ideological, moral, and emotional tumult that raged during the years of World War II and postwar Lithuania. She records a moving conversation between Kazys and Karolis Kadžionis, as told by their younger brother, Jonas:

I remember my two elder brothers discussing what to do. ‘I will sacrifice for my family,’ said my brother Karolis, ‘and I will join the Red Army.’ Some men joined the Red Army voluntarily to save their families. They went to the front. You can’t hold that against them.

‘No’, said Kazys, ‘I am going into the forest to join the partisans and then we will be shooting at each other.’

So they both went into the forest. (291).

Needless to say, they both died.

Vincė is also careful to explore different types of repressions against Lithuanian residents of different ethnic groups and social strata – Soviet aggression against resistance fighters and other participants of the resistance movement, the first Soviet occupation and deportations to Siberia, as well as “one of the least known of the Soviet deportations – that of Lithuania’s German population to Tajikistan” (184). She also deals with the Holocaust in Lithuania, a controversial subject given that many Lithuanians participated in it. The overall tone of the book is nonjudgemental, nondefensive, and nonideological. It is sympathetic towards all the survivors of the postwar horrors. After a visit to a *stribas*, “a man who had actively worked for the NKVD hunting down people in the resistance” (141), Vincė writes: “Listening to Pranas, I began to feel sorry for him. It was a strange sort of compassion. All these people were victims of their times, whichever side they chose” (146).

When it comes to comments on contemporary Lithuania, Vincė maintains a much more negative perspective. After a guided visit to the Museum of the Center for Genocide and Resistance (which is often criticized for not paying sufficient tribute to the Holocaust in Lithuania) and the guide’s failure to establish clear historical facts to a group of foreign visitors with little to no knowledge of Lithuanian history, and to explain to them the historical significance of the tortures that took place in the KGB basement, she reels off a string of questions that serve to channel her disapproval: “Gulag tourism is a growing industry in the post-Soviet world. [...] What is the point of this type of tourism? To gawk at the misery of others? Or to reflect and remember? What is the responsibility of the tour guides who lead the groups into a tour of hell? To educate? To indoctrinate? Honor? [...] And are these guides properly prepared to lead us into Dante’s inferno? Have they had the appropriate training? Do they know their history? And how dare the tour guides wear bright floral prints?” (151). This is an eloquent commentary. Many of Vincė’s observations on contemporary Lithuania question the way in which the complicated and painful past is being dealt with now, people’s ability to look at it directly, analyze it, understand it, take in the conflicting points of view towards it, face the ugliness of it in order to one day be free of it.

The title of *Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart* arises from the fact that all the protagonists of the book were young when the war struck and naturally their love affairs feature strongly in their stories. Furthermore, they often share how they came to make the life-or-death decisions they were forced to confront. As Leonora Grigalevičiūtė-Rubine told Vincė, “Ours was a generation that lived through times that were biblical in nature. There was good and there was evil. And there was nothing in between. It was impossible not to choose sides. Each one of us was forced to choose.” Those decisions were always hard, often damaging, and always heartbreaking.

One of the drawbacks of the book is that it lacks a strong editorial touch, both in terms of proofreading as well as content selection. Nevertheless, it is a thought-provoking testimony of the complexities of a not-too-distant past and homage to the suffering of thousands of Lithuanian residents whose lives were crushed by the forces of war and the regimes that followed. In spite of all this, the overwhelming message that Vincė is keen to retain and pass on as a result of those conversations with victims of trauma, physical, and psychological violence is this: “In order to survive, you must throw away all your bad energy. Anger takes up too much. [...] You throw away all the negative emotions, all the anger, the hurt, the jealousy. And that makes you spiritually free” (Rytė Merkytė, 43-44).

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