



Sister Gerarda, z

EVIL FEARS OPENNESS: REMEMBERING THE CHRONICLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH OF LITHUANIA ON ITS FIFTY-YEAR ANNIVERSARY

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by
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During the long oppressive decades of the Soviet occupation, the editors of the underground journal, *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania*, pledged to publish testimonies of human rights abuses until freedom of speech was restored in Lithuania. Despite arrests, incarceration, deportation to Siberia, and the murders of its editorial staff, *The Chronicle*, (*Kronika* in Lithuanian, as it was called for short) managed to publish a total of 81 editions, uninterrupted for 17 years. *The Chronicle* was the longest running *samizdat* – underground journal – in the entire Soviet Union during the late Cold War period. The editorial staff was led in its early years by two priests, Father Sigitas Tamkevičius and Father Juozas Zdebskis, and a small circle of nuns. They released a new issue of *The Chronicle* every two to three months.

The published journal was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and into the West, where each issue was translated into Spanish, French, German, English and Russian. From the United States it was distributed to university libraries, newspaper offices, radio and television stations, Catholic dioceses, convents, and seminaries in 138 countries. The entire endeavor was accomplished and funded by a small group of committed Lithuanian-American volunteers.

Father Sigitas Tamkevičius, who after Lithuania's independence from the Soviet Union, became the archbishop of the diocese of Kaunas, and is now a cardinal in Catholic Church, recalls that *The Chronicle* was born out of a growing sense of frustration over religious persecution in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. By the early seventies, only two seminarians a year were allowed to enter the Kaunas Seminary. Meanwhile, every year the number of active priests declined – some died naturally of old age while others were hunted to their deaths by the KGB. Many priests had been exiled to Siberia in the forties and fifties, but only a few managed to ever return to Lithuania.

“When three priests were tried and sentenced to hard labor for teaching catechism to children in 1972,” Tankevičius said, “I decided that I had to do something.”

He resolved to make injustice public. Enlisting the aid of two young priests, Prosperas Bubnys and Juozas Zdebskis (Zdebskis was later murdered by the KGB in a carefully orchestrated car crash) Tamkevičius resolved to start a journal using a Moscow *samizdat* publication as a model. The three young priests began collecting information about interrogations, sentences, and other injustices in Soviet occupied Lithuania. Working out of the humble rectory in the small lakeside town of Simnas, where Tamkevičius was the parish priest in those years, they published the first issue of *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* on March 19, 1972.

They made copies and passed them on to trustworthy people in different cities. Those people retyped the copies and passed them on. Then, the priests decided that they needed to smuggle *The Chronicle* out to the West. That way they could make the world aware of human rights abuses and religious repression in Lithuania. Only, they had no idea how to get *The Chronicle* out of the country and past Soviet border guards and censors.

“We typed the first issue of *The Chronicle* onto thin onion skin paper,” recalls Sister Gerarda, a softspoken diminutive nun who worked closely with Tamkevičius in his inner circle for years. “Then,” she giggled, covering her mouth with the palm of her hand, “we folded the thin paper into a small triangle and sewed it into the intimate triangle of a lady's panties.”

According to Soviet rules, during the Cold War, American citizens could not be strip searched without the American ambassador present. Their pockets could be turned out and their suitcases ransacked, but they could not be stripped nude. The editors of *The Chronicle* decided to take advantage of this rule, but they first needed to connect with an American woman who was willing to wear the panties out of the Soviet Union and into the West.

They found a Lithuanian-American tourist who was willing. The plan worked. The woman delivered the typed pages to the Religious Catholic Aid Office at the Franciscan Monastery in Brooklyn, New York. There volunteers retyped the pages, translated *The Chronicle* into English, Spanish, French, German, and Russian, published *The Chronicle* in Lithuanian and in all its translations in paperback format, and rebroadcast the entire contents back into the Soviet Union over Radio Free Europe and Voice of America.

When it came time to get the second issue out to the West three months later, the nuns sewed *The Chronicle* into a cloth baby diaper, and a baby wore the underground journal out of the Soviet Union.

Tamkevičius, however, knew that it was not sustainable to keep searching for people willing to “wear” the underground journal out of the Soviet Union. He came up with another idea. While serving in the Soviet army, Tamkevičius was trained to photograph documents and develop them as microfiche. He began photographing the typed pages of *The Chronicle*, developing the photos as microfiche, and then rolling up the microfiche into a tiny cylinder. Once the film was rolled, he would stuff it inside the finger of a rubber glove, snip off the finger from the glove, and glue the tiny bundle together. Then, he’d take the tiny roll he’d created and slip it inside a tube of toothpaste, or he would wrap it up in a candy wrapper and mix it into a bag of candies. Now when westerners had their luggage searched, the border guards never suspected that anything significant could be hidden inside a tube of toothpaste or a bag of candy.

After successfully smuggling out the first few issues, Tamkevičius organized a clandestine network of typists and couriers throughout Lithuania to retype and circulate *The Chronicle*.

Sister Nijolė Sadūnaitė described how the core editorial staff would meet.

“We would all travel by different means to our meeting place. Some of us would hitchhike, others would take the bus. We’d all be dressed in disguise. Father Sigitas had a car. He’d remove the back seats and pile sacks of carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables into the back. Then, he’d pick each one of us up at agreed upon locations. We’d climb into the back of the car, and he’d hide us under the sacks. The Soviet militia regularly checked his documents, stopping him whenever he ventured out of the rectory. But, in all those years, they never managed to find us.”

Sister Sadūnaitė described how the secret meetings would take place:

“He’d drive us to the rectory. He had built a garage onto the side of presbytery, which was connected to the kitchen. There were always men stationed outside of his house watching, but they never caught on. He’d back into the garage and begin unloading the vegetables. Meanwhile, we’d sneak out and scurry into the house and climb

downstairs into the cellar. There he kept a woodstove burning. All the windows were covered with pillows to muffle the sound.”

Sister Sadūnaitė explained: “We never spoke out loud because we suspected we were being listened to. We discussed everything by writing notes. After a note was read, we’d immediately toss it into the wood stove.”

“It was of extreme importance that we told the truth one hundred percent,” Tamkevičius said. “All names and locations had to be reported, even when that meant that people would be interrogated by the KGB after their stories were broadcast over the radio.”

In those years, 60 KGB agents were assigned to follow Tamkevičius and 113 agents were assigned to follow Zdebskis. After a while, the KGB began to understand how the system worked.

“They began to send us false testimonials through priests who were working for the KGB,” Sister Gerarda recalled. “They marked their pages with chemicals, but we could smell it immediately. That tipped us off that they were fakes. But they also sent papers that were not marked with chemicals to throw us off. However, we could also root out those fakes. That was because of the language of the testimonial – it usually contained curses and angry wording. Real people never used such harsh language, even when writing about someone who had wronged them.”

During its 17 years of existence, the editorial principles of *The Chronicle* remained strict. The editors felt that they could not risk losing credibility by printing inaccurate or incomplete information. If anything was missing or was unclear in a person’s story, or if a person had passed on a story but had not included his or her full name, the paper would be tossed into the woodstove along with the fakes.

Sister Gerarda reminisced: “We’d make the editorial decisions, and then I would begin to type. If the paper was good quality, I could get 12 copies typing with carbon paper. If the paper was poor quality, I’d manage 10.”

“Father Zdebskis provided the typewriters,” Sister Sadūnaitė added. “The KGB could track a typewriter by its typeface, so Father Zdebskis would change the typeface on that particular typewriter, making it harder to trace if copies were to be intercepted. Whenever you sat down to type, you had to have a bucket of water ready, and kerosene and matches. If you heard a signal that someone was coming, you’d burn your pages immediately.”

The original typed paper copies of *The Chronicle* also needed to be hidden. Again, the group’s ingenuity provided the perfect hiding place.

“When I was a slender young priest,” Tamkevičius said, “I’d remove the marble slab on the side altar in the Simnas Cathedral. Then, I’d pull out the relics, slip inside the inner chamber, and hide the pages deep within the altar. The KGB never found this hiding place.”

After each new edition was published, the editors faced the challenge of gathering new material for the next issue. Because *The Chronicle* resolved to use real names, dates, and locations, the people sharing their stories with the

editors had to be absolutely sure that they were ready to endure eventual interrogation and possibly imprisonment.

This modest small group of priests and nuns are proud that *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania* was known in underground circles all over the Soviet Union. Their reach extended beyond Lithuania, and they began including stories of human rights abuses from other Soviet occupied republics as well. They befriended Russian dissidents and American diplomats in Moscow. *The Chronicle* did not limit itself only to reporting on abuses against the Catholic Church, but also concerned itself with human rights in the broadest sense. For example, if a child was mistreated in a Soviet school, *The Chronicle* brought the abuse to light. Eventually, when abusers knew that there was a chance they might be called out for their actions, they began to reign in their behavior.

The Chronicle reported the Soviet government's abuses against the people, but also became a means of monitoring corrupt priests, teachers, and communist party officials. When these people heard their names and accounts of their deeds reported to the world on shortwave radio, they felt uncomfortable.

"Making human rights abuses public proved to be a very effective means of forcing people to think twice about their actions," commented Tamkevičius.

"Evil fears openness," Sister Gerarda interjected, "that was our guiding principle."

Tamkevičius's small staff proved trustworthy. Despite the many arrests over the 17 years the underground publication ran, no one broke down under interrogation or betrayed another member of the team. For safety reasons, operating on the old system of liaisons used by the postwar armed anti-Soviet resistance, the editorial staff did not know who their typists and couriers were at any given time.

"Whenever I set out to one of the editorial meetings, I'd take 50 rubles with me, because that was the amount of money you were allowed to have in prison," Sister Gerarda said. "I'd say goodbye to my loved ones as though I were leaving them for the last time. You never knew when your turn would come to be arrested. We'd joke sometimes about how after we'd all died in prison, we'd meet in heaven and share our stories about our adventures with *The Chronicle*."

"The happiest years of my life were spent in prison," Sister Nijolė Sadūnaitė admitted. "You feel God's presence. For the Church to be alive, you need to have martyrs."

"I was so timid, I really was," Sister Gerarda admitted. "I was just one of many who did what had to be done."

The Chronicle was typed mostly in rural areas, like the solitary cabin on the lake in Simnas where Sister Gerarda would sit up late at night typing in the darkness on her *Erika* typewriter with the cabin windows covered with blankets. Vilnius, with its concrete block apartment houses constructed of thin walls proved too dangerous for underground activities. The one issue that was typed in an apartment in Vilnius led to the arrest of Sister Nijolė Sadūnaitė.

On August 27, 1974, KGB agents stormed Sister Nijolė Sadūnaitė's apartment and caught her red-handed typing *The Chronicle*. She spent ten months incarcerated in the KGB basement cells in the center of Vilnius. On July 16, 1975, she was tried and found guilty of anti-Soviet activities. She sentenced to three years hard labor in Siberia and three years in exile.

“When I arrived at the hard labor camp, I was escorted in by two armed guards with dogs. They’d hung a sign around my neck that said in Russian: *Extremely dangerous criminal*. The long timers were awed. One of them whispered to me, ‘What are you in for?’ ‘I sunk a submarine’ I replied. They all cheered.”

She enjoyed a good laugh, but admitted, “I relied on survival humor to keep going. And I used humor to help those who were in worse shape than I was. I’d try to make prison and exile fun, in its own way. ‘Exile,’ I’d say, ‘how romantic! They take you to the wilderness to see the sights for free. Everywhere along the way they provide you armed guards for your protection. You stay in hotels for free. They feed you hot porridge! You meet the most interesting people. Exile is a fine tourist excursion!’”

Despite all his precautions, in 1983 Father Sigitas Tamkevičius was arrested, tried, and exiled to hard labor in Siberia. He was only allowed to return to Lithuania in 1988 when Gorbachev’s *perestroika* eased things up.

Because of the very real risk of arrest, in the early years, few came forward with their stories, but eventually more and more people began taking the risk of speaking out. After its first decade, the editors of *The Chronicle* were receiving more material than they could manage to publish. The need for people to tell their trauma stories out loud took on a momentum of its own.

“By the late eighties,” Tamkevičius recalled, “we were receiving so many testimonials that we could scarcely keep up. People became braver and braver, and that led to the population not being afraid to come out into the streets and join the first mass demonstrations in 1988 and 1989. By then, people were speaking openly in the forums of the independence movement. By the time we published our last issue of *The Chronicle* on March 19, 1989, our work was no longer necessary because we had achieved our goal. In the beginning, we vowed that we would publish until freedom of speech was restored in Lithuania and we did.”

Today, many historians agree that *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania* set the groundwork for the reinstatement of Lithuania’s independence through building an atmosphere of openness and authenticity, and for providing a space for freedom of speech, pushing back against a totalitarian system where voices of dissent were routinely silenced, as they are today in Russia and Belarus.





Sister Gerarda and her typewriter. She used it to secretly type texts of the Chronical, 20