THE FLIGHT FROM LITHUANIA

Henrietta Vepštas *née* Virkau

Introduction

Like many of my generation, I could have wished that my life had been a more simple affair. But the time and place of his birth are matters in which a man has nothing to say.

Czesław Miłosz

As time progresses, I often hark back to the times of my childhood and the life that I led after our flight from our home in Repšiai, Lithuania. Very few of my generation are still alive to be able to tell the story of what happened to between 7 to 11 million displaced people after World War II. How did refugees still living in Germany, Austria and Italy were able to to find permanent homes elsewhere? The United States President Truman asked Congress to enact legislation to allow about 200,000 refugees to resettle. By 1952 900,000 entered U.S. alone. Australia, Canada, Sweden and U.K. as well as a few other countries in Europe also invited some refugees to resettle.

As I approach the end of my years, I find myself looking back toward my past. Memories of that time remain forever a part of me. I want to be able to write down the events of my childhood to make it all more lucid for the generations that come after me.

These reminiscences are from a perspective of a five to sixteen year-old girl. Accurate diary from the time of the escape to the time of the arrival to US was kept by my brother Vytautas Virkau. For accuracy they can always be a reference point of the events as they unfolded from day to day. The following events retrieved from my memory took place in the years 1938-1945.

HAPPY MOMENTS STILL AT HOME

My birthplace in Repšiai, Lithuania. I was five years old at the time this picture was taken in 1938. My mother Vanda, my father Rufinas Virkau and my brother Vytautas are standing with me in the front to our house.

A family photo taken in a studio in Šiauliai in 1943.

The First Rumbles

Before the time I started attending school unusual events reached even my ears. By lying down on the ground I could occasionally hear the distant sound of guns. The Soviets were approaching and by August of 1940 occupied Lithuania. By 1941 the Nazis took over and stayed until 1944 when the Soviets were advancing again.

My parents managed to survive under the German occupation. Food and other resources were scarce, but living on a farm we managed to do relatively well. Since the German occupiers took away part of our staples, we attempted to circumvent their control by hiding our grain and farm animals at other farmers or even forests. We did not feel immediate danger to our existence at that time.

Our home was billeted by two German officers. They took over two rooms and shared their meals prepared by us. One anecdote was how my father, presented by a printed canvas of Hitler's portrait, was able to delay its hanging on the wall. He brought some birch logs and placed it on his table together with the portrait pretending to make a suitable frame for the portrait.

I'm not sure of the chronological context of the following memory. The entire event appeared as rather surreal. But this is how I remember it. Behind the back of our house I saw a group of soldiers resting on our lawn. Were they Soviet soldiers fleeing Germans, or German soldiers fleeing Soviets? I have no idea. All I saw was that they were very young men, almost like boys.*

The commencement of the World War II started in 1939. Poles, escaping German-Soviet invasion started streaming to Lithuania. One day two young Polish teachers appeared at our doorstep with hardly any luggage. We took them in and from that time onward my brother's and my life had changed. These young ladies commenced teaching us how to read and write in Polish. We used to sit in our veranda and recite our assigned poems from memory. We occasionally would write answers and hints to other questions on steamed up window panes.

Leaving Home

During the first Soviet occupation of 1940-1941 we still remained at home but knew that we were already included on the list of deportation to Siberia. One night we heard the sound of trucks approaching our neighborhood. My father was already away hiding with his relatives elsewhere, but my mother, my brother and I took some blankets and ran to the nearby forest. At night we heard the trucks. When we returned from the forest in the morning, our servants told us that the trucks came by searching for us. We knew that we could not remain at home, because it was just a question of time before we would be rounded up for deportation to Siberia.

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*After I wrote this I found the following description by Charles Simic, similar to mine as if our minds run parallel about the incident. “This is what I remember. If I close my eyes I still see the soldiers appearing from nowhere and dispersing on our lawn, then lying down as if blown by wind. The muddy faces very young, unshaven. Whose soldiers were they? Russian or German? It did not matter to me and I didn't know. All I can see are the bedraggled uniforms and complete fatigue of the young men on the grass.”

After the first soviet occupation of Lithuania the Germans took over and remained until the second Soviet occupation of 1944. By that time we started to prepare ourselves for departure. The artillery was within earshot and a momentous decision had to be made: my parents, Rufas and Vanda Virkau, my aunt Marylė (Sirjatavičiūtė-Jachimavičienė), my brother Vytautas and I, after tearful goodbyes to neighbors, my new friend Vale* and other friends as well as my pregnant dog Pypkutė, **left Lithuania on July 12, 1944.** I had just turned eleven on May 19th of that year.

We had packed two trunks and two suitcases. The station in Šiauliai was filled with people and we had to wait for two days on the platform taking turns watching our belongings and sleeping on the benches. We finally managed to get on one of the last passenger trains in Šiauliai which took us via Tauragė to Tilžė (Tilsit). From there we managed to get on a train to Vienna, Austria. By the time we arrived we realized that one trunk became misplaced or stolen and all my mother's and my clothing were missing. I had to wear the same outfit for quite some time—it was a woolen navy-blue skirt and a light pink crocheted top.

Moving on

Due to severe bombing of the bridges, the trains stopped running, so my father bought a pair of horses and a wagon and we proceeded to travel further west. It took us a number of days of traveling, stopping at small farms on our way and asking for night accommodations. Occasionally the farmers gave us a room to sleep in, but mostly we had to stay and sleep in their barn or other farm buildings. We had brought some of our own food like bread and smoked ham and cheese. My mother had sewn some Czarist-Russian gold coins into the hem of her dress. My father bartered some items we owned for more food, but the rest we had to ask from German farmers.

Once in a while the farmers even invited us to eat at their table with other farm help staff. I remember once how I was surprised that we had to share one large spoon that went around the table and then wipe it clean on the edge of the tablecloth.

During our trip we tried to avoid large cities, since at the time American and English allies were severely bombing cities, roads and railroad stations. Our aim was to advance further west to avoid the Soviets and to reach either British or American zones in Germany[1]*.

In order to avoid the approaching Soviets we moved, again and again on to Bavaria, Germany and there stayed for a few days in a beautiful hilly city of Passau. However, we couldn't remain there for long because of the approaching front. My father was eager to get going. Because of his decision to move ahead we evaded the bombing of the city barely by a day.

Second Phase of our Trip

Eventually we reached Austria, and settled near a small town of Marchtrenk. There we lived with a family of Austrian farmers and were given separate accommodations to stay in. My

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* Valė spoke Russian and I spoke to her in Polish. She and her mother were Jewish, hiding at one of our worker's homes.

1 *** After unconditional surrender Germany was divided into four zones of occupation in 1945—British, French, US and Soviet.** We tried to reach the American occupied zone. With the onset of Cold War this turned into a division between East (Soviet) and West (US, British, French). **The division was formalized in 1949.**

father, in exchange for room and board, was hired as a farm-hand and my brother had to occasionally herd their cattle. The Austrian family had a daughter Hannele. She became my friend and I started to learn to speak German with her.

After a stint with the farmers, we obtained two rooms near the city of Wells. Nearby was a wool factory and ammunitions factory. My parents were working in the wool factory and my brother and I started to attend a local school. I was placed in the first grade although I was already in the fourth grade at home. I was seated in the back of the classroom and felt rather awkward with the smaller kids in it. As I remember, the elderly teacher was rather kind to me. She assigned different tasks for me to perform from other students. When she came in the morning she would replace the portrait of Hitler for a picture of Christ while commenting that both were good.

At the farm I would occasionally baby sit a girl of an Ukrainian family who were working there. Once, as I was playing with her I realized that she had one extra digit on both her hands. One day a German nurse came by. After having spoken to the parents she tried to convince them to have the girl taken to the hospital to perform the operation on her hands. The mother cried bitterly and refused to give the child, but the nurse took her anyway. In retrospect I think that she was taken away for being “subnormal.” She was never returned to her parents.

During that time there was a lot of bombing by the allies nearby and the school children were led to a bomb shelter. In the shelter we continued our lessons and the teacher made us recite the multiplication table. I was too distraught to really know the right answers and to this day I know only part of the multiplication table. During bombings at night we also went to a bomb shelter, but occasionally remained in our rooms just too tired to drag ourselves to the safe place.

On Sundays we went to church and whenever a local soldier was killed in the battle, this is what was sung. [**] To this day it brings tears to my eyes.

Ich hatt' einen Kameraden,	I once had a comrade,
Einen bessern findst du nicht.	Couldn't have a better one.
Die Trommel schlug zum Streite,	The drum called us to battle,
Er ging an meine Seite	He marched by my side,
In gleichem Schritt und Tritt.	At the same pace and step.
Eine Kugel kam geflogen:	A bullet came a-flying,
Gilt's mir oder gilt es dir?	Is it my turn or yours?
Ihn hat es weggerissen,	He was swept away,
Er liegt zu meiner Fussen	He lies at my feet.
Als waer's ein Stuck von mir.	As though he were a part of me.
Will mir die Hand noch reichen,	He still reaches out his hand to me,
Derweil ich eben lad.	When I am about to reload.
Kann dir die Hand nicht geben,	I cannot hold onto your hand,
Bleib du im ew'gen Leben	You stay in eternal life
Mein guter Kamerad!	My good comrade.

[**] "Der gute Kamerad" ("The good Comrade"), also known by as “Ich hatt' einen Kameraden” ("I had a comrade") It is a traditional lament of the German Armed Forces. The text was written by German poet Ludwig Uhland in 1809.

In Marchtrenk my parents made friends with a German couple by the last name of Roehrich[**] who spoke perfect Russian. He ran the wool factory. He and his wife were intelligent and educated people and my parents became good friends. They had a villa outside of the city and once invited me to stay with them for about a week. I was very shy and was unable to relax and enjoy the good food and fresh air. My parents kept in touch with them through correspondence even after our arrival to US for many years. When Vytas (my husband) and I travelled in Germany in 1958 I met up with them again.

We stayed in Marchtrenk near the Austrian city of Wells until the spring of 1945.

Later, still in Austria, we moved again and for a while were able to settle in a farmer's granary building which had a few beds for us to sleep on. By that time we were able to meet up with my uncle Antanas Sodaitis and his wife Česė, my father's younger sister, and their small son, my cousin Tomukas (Tommy). There we hoped to wait out the end of the war.

One of the stops in June 1945 during our travels. We stayed on the second floor which was a former grain storage.

From left: I am next to uncle Antanas Sugintas, my mother Vanda, aunt Česė with Tomukas, uncle Antanas Sodaitis and my father Rufinas Virkau.

Photo on the right from top: My father and my uncle Antanas Sodaitis on the balcony. Below: My mother Vanda, aunt Česė with Tomukas. I'm standing on the stairs.

[**] Refugees from Moscow, lived in Berlin until the Second World War.

This was taken in 1945 in front of a farmer's house. My father sits on the carriage. Standing from left to right: Henrietta, my mother, my brother, two farmers, my aunt ciocė Marylė, Antanas Sugintas and three unknown farm hands.

Our First Glimpse of American Soldiers

On **April 29, 1945**, during a stay in a small village, we heard the first American soldiers arriving. The children were told to stay inside a barn and not to come out. We were watching through the gaps in the door at the first American soldiers. All we mostly saw were the backs of their tight uniforms. This was also our first glimpse of an African-American soldier. We learned later that the soldiers were distributing candy to children, but we were afraid to come out. On **May 9, 1945** The Germans have capitulated, but some shootings still continued. By then my father and my cousin started to look around for a more permanent place to live.

They went to Munich, Germany where my father found an apartment in an affluent residential district of Bogenhausen. It was near the English Garden and the river Isar on Möhlstrasse, 25 on the third floor. On July 28 of 1945 we moved into the beautiful and fully furnished apartment, though slightly damaged in multiple air raids (parts of the rococo plaster ceiling was damaged and had some cracks).

In addition to the four of us—my father and mother, brother Vytautas and me, one room was taken by our uncle Antanas Sodaitis, his wife Česė (my father's sister) and their five-year-old son Tomukas (Thomas). In 1946 Birutė, his sister, was born and became another tenant. My parents slept in the dining room which had enough space for a bed as well as an exit onto a balcony. My aunt "ciocė" Marylė (my mother's older sister) and I shared a room leading to the library (still partially stacked with books) which was appropriated by my brother. He eventually had to share it with a distant relative, Rimvydas Kaminskas. Rimvydas was an avid accordion

player of latest American jazz pop tunes. By their classmates they were known as “Kirvis” and “Kotas” (Ax and Handle), meaning they were inseparable.

Both our families shared a large living room. It had an oriental carpet on a parquet floor, paintings and some etchings, an ornate mirror on the wall, and a baby grand piano which my mother played occasionally. I still remember her attempts at “Fùr Elise” by Ludwig van Beethoven.

In addition, one room was occupied by the maid of the former owner, Frau Schabert, a widow, whose son was missing in action at the Eastern Front. Every time the doorbell rang she would run to open it with a hope of her son's return. There was a large entrance hall and we all shared one bathroom and a kitchen.

My father’s nephew Jurgis and his father Antanas Sugintas had a room in a nearby street and both were frequent visitors at our dinner table. In spite of the tight accommodations we all seemed to get along and I never heard any disagreements between our various inhabitants. But then, I was at school and really had no clue about their daily activities.

After the war ended there was a severe shortage of food. We were given ration cards with which we were able to purchase a few staples like “Zemmeln,” breakfast rolls which were baked on saw dust. I would often stand in a long line to obtain skimmed milk. Some stores had vegetables like potatoes and red beets, but no fruit. In the morning all I had for breakfast was black coffee with one of the rolls. No lunch at school, so we were hungry.

A bit later BALF—a charitable Lithuanian-American refugee organization stepped in with distribution of clothing and shoes. Local distribution centers had tables loaded with a variety of stuff. We could come one family at a time and pick up what was most needed. I chose a blue polka-dot dress and summer sandals.

This photograph was taken in April, 1948 on one of the post-war streets in the Bogenhausen district of Munich. This is pretty much what the city looked like just after the end of World War II. Amazingly, my father (age 48) and my mother (age 43) are perfectly dressed; perhaps it was a Sunday after mass. To me this image epitomizes the perseverance of life in spite of displacement from our country, various hardships during the flight from Lithuania to Austria and Germany and eventual settling down in Chicago where my father had a sister, two aunts and other relatives.[*]

"...ruins are a universal metaphor of our modern existence and imagination. It reminds us that cultures are mortal, that majestic civilizations can fall to ruin and that on the majestic rubble of civilizations flowers can grow, as if the eternity of nature and the temporality of cultures symbolizes human fragility of creation."[**]

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[*] My father's aunt Dora Magnus emigrated to US at the age of sixteen.

[**] Robert Ginsberg.

During these four years of our stay in Munich very many refugees came and were housed by the Americans in former German army barracks. The refugees were of different nationalities. A group of Lithuanians there formed a four year high-school—*gimnazija* set up in the DP* camp in the suburbs of Munich which was not too far from the place where we lived in the city. Each class had one room with wooden benches. In the winter time it was barely heated by a wooden stove. In classrooms we still wore our overcoats. My brother and I attended it until we were to leave for United States. Our first principal, whose name was Trumpa, in Lithuanian means "short." I remember my friend and I joking about his name, hoping that his school opening speech will be short.

There was a severe shortage of food after the war. We were given ration cards with which we could purchase potatoes, flour and a small amount of butter and water-diluted milk for children.

In the morning our breakfast consisted of one bread roll ("Zemmel") and black coffee. This was not nearly enough and our stomachs rumbled during the day.

We did not have any text books. Our teachers usually dictated to us and we were expected to write it all down. We kept notebooks for that purpose. We studied the Lithuanian language and literature, German and English Languages, Lithuanian and World History, Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics and Geometry. A priest conducted a Catholic religion class. In spite of all the hardships, our teachers were usually very good, since they were formerly University professors in Lithuania. At the time we were to leave Germany I had completed four years of high-school.

My mother and brother near Munich at the Nymphenburg palace.

* DP stands for "Displaced Persons." The Lithuanians named it "**D**ievo **P**aukšteliai" (God's Little Birds) and called themselves "Dypukai."

Christmas in our apartment in Munich, 1948. I am at left, my brother Vytautas, Dziuka (Jadvyga) Pacevičiūtė who lived with her mother in the attic of the same house, my mother Vanda (Syrjatowicz), my cousin Jurgis (George) Sugintas and my father Rufinas.

Note on the table a gold-plated baroque silver sugar bowl that travelled throughout our journey. I inherited it from my mother and it will pass on to Indre and then to Laima. I hope they will cherish it.

The house on Möhl Str. 25, München. We lived on the third floor under the mansard roof.

Above right: The same house after the war when I went for a visit in 1978. It was turned into an office building. I am standing by the entry gate.

Sitting on our balcony in 1948.

My father and mother on the same balcony.

Saying good-bye to my friends before departing for Bremerhaven and on to U.S.

Here with classmates in Munich, 1947. This was the second year of high school (the equivalent of sixth grade US?). I am in the second row, fourth from the right.

On the train to Bremenhafen. From top my aunt Marylė, my mother Vanda, a friend of my mother, me, a friend of my father, my brother Vytautas and my father Rufinas.

Additional Photos

My class photo. I am the fourth in the last row from right.

By the entry to the house in Poszuswie. I am on the seat at left, by the door my mother Wanda and Anula Syrjatowicz, on the bench on the right my grandmother Róża and standing behind her is my uncle Adam Syrjatowicz, 1939.

A family photo taken in a studio in Šiauliai, 1943.

My grandmother Róża Syrjatowiczowa's garden in 1938. My brother Vytautas and me standing in front of our grandmother. Behind her my mother with my cousin Henryk Syrjatowicz. Three guests I cannot identify.

Henrietta in the garden 1938.

Sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to go to the United States.

After emigration formalities were eventually approved we became a part of a large quota of Displaced Persons (DP) eligible to enter USA. In order to be permitted to emigrate to the United States we had to to be sponsored by a relative. Since my father's aunt Dora Magnus had emigrated to the United States as a young woman in 1920s, she agreed to sponsor us. Through the usual customs clearance, we finally sailed from the port of Bremerhaven (Germany) on July 14, 1949 on a German army transport ship *USS General Stuart Heintzelman.* During our nine-day sailing we were placed in communal berths, one section for women, another for men. For the first time we were served American food cafeteria style and could eat as much as we liked. After long years of shortage of food we really appreciated the bountiful tables… until large waves made us seasick! I just stayed in the cabin and could not think of food, but once I got better I went on deck and was treated to an orange by a Hungarian refugee boy who sailed together with us. He was very attentive to me and this was my “first romance” on ship. I enjoyed it tremendously and was even taken to a dance organized by the ship's management.

After nine days, on July 22, 1949 we reached Boston. A U.S. Army band greeted our transport for the occasion of the 50,000th DP (Displaced Person's) arrival. Upon arrival we were treated to coffee, milk, and cookies and led through customs. My first impression of America was the multitude of colored lights as we approached the harbor. Later the colorful dresses of the women in contrast to our faded threadbare outfits.

From Boston to Chicago

The aid organization NCWC (National Center of Victims of Crime) took care of our luggage, bought us tickets, and settled us into an air conditioned train. I seem to remember that we were also given $36.00 and some sandwiches for the trip.

Since we reached the number of 50,000 as refugee passengers,
we were met upon arrival by an army band.

Settling in Chicago

On July 23rd we arrived at the Union Railway Station in Chicago and were met by our relatives. The first stop after our long and arduous journey was at a tavern owned by my father's aunt Dora Magnus. The place was dank, filled with cigarette smoke and smelled of beer. On the counter there were bottles of soda. My father assumed it was champaign.

Afterwards we were taken to our first home—a fully furnished garage converted into three rooms that was owned by aunt Lillian, the youngest sister of my father, who emigrated to US at the age of sixteen. Aunt Lillian immediately decided that I could work in her diner on 111th and Halsted Street. So I came with a limited knowledge of English and started my first job. All went well, because her customers were eager to find out about me and test my improvement of English week by week. I must say the people were friendly even though at times I made mistakes in their order. One time, when my aunt stepped out, I was asked for pancakes. I took regular flour instead of pan cake flour and mixed it with milk. The customer claimed they were the best tasting ever.

By fall I was ready for high school. A Lithuanian friend Aldona Gudaitytė and I signed up at Fenger High School and started as a freshmen. Summers I worked at various jobs including in a laundry, ironing men's shirts, later as a salesperson at Marshall Field & Co.

A few years later I was sworn in as a US citizen.