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## The Moment the World Began to Collapse: A Reading of Five Self-Published Lithuanian American Life-Writing Memoirs<sup>1</sup>

**Summary.** Lithuanians displaced by the second Soviet Russian occupation of Lithuania in 1944, and the second and third generations born to them abroad in North America, feared Lithuanian language and culture would be extinguished under Russian domination (1944–1991). Therefore, maintaining Lithuanian language and culture was prioritized in the diaspora. Also, diaspora social activities and community provided a sense of belonging to something greater than mainstream American culture and held in check the natural process of cultural assimilation. Through collective cultural memory, Lithuanian values were passed down three and four generations in the United States and Canada. Over the past 20 years, more and more Lithuanian American women have published family memoirs of surviving war and displacement and building a new life in North America. The majority of these memoirs are self-published. Through the theoretical perspective of life-writing, autobiography, and heritage studies, this paper analyzes self-published historical memoirs by five Lithuanian diaspora women writers: *Escaping Stalin's Grasp* by Nida Dauknys, 2022; *Flight: A Memoir of Loss and Discovery by an Aviator's Daughter* by Rasa Gustaitis, 2021; *Springtime in Lithuania: Youthful Memories: 1920–1940* by Hypatia Yčas, 2000; *On the Way to America* by Aleksandra Kašuba, 2012, and a scrapbook assembled by Janė Motivans to honor her grandmother's life on her 95th birthday are spiral bound photocopied memoirs produced in a limited edition for family and friends. This paper argues that each memoirist seeks to rebuild a fragmented family narrative through structuring around the archetypical hero's myth identified by Joseph Campbell. These memoirs also reflect on aspects of culture and tradition lost through emigration. Through identifying family and cultural trauma narratives, this paper opens a dialog on how unrecognized collective trauma impacts society, families, individuals, and how memoir writing and the sharing of these memoirs can serve as a tool of healing and post-traumatic growth.

**Keywords:** Lithuanian displaced persons, life-writing, cultural memory, heritage studies, Lithuanian diaspora.

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World War II Lithuanian Displaced Persons (DPs) and the second and third generations born to them abroad feared Lithuanian language and culture would be lost under the Soviet Russian occupation of Lithuania (1944–1991). Indeed, they anticipated the challenges of passing on their Lithuanian language and culture to subsequent generations born outside of Lithuania. Therefore, maintaining Lithuanian language and cultural memory was prioritized in the diaspora.<sup>2</sup> The activities of the diaspora provided a sense of belonging to something greater than mainstream American culture. Through strict societal codes, Lithuanian values were passed down through three and four generations in the United States and Canada. The Lithuanian DPs were a homogenous collective societal group that shared a collective memory of an independent interwar Lithuania, a collective trauma memory of fleeing the Soviet occupation through war-torn Europe, and a collective memory of living together in displaced persons camps in Germany, unsure of their future, hoping to return home soon, but eventually realizing that they had no choice but to emigrate either to the United States, Canada, Australia, or South America.

Over the past 20 years, Lithuanian diaspora women—some born in Lithuania and some daughters and/or granddaughters of Lithuanian DPs—have produced self-published memoirs that depict pivotal moments in their family history as ancestors lived through war and displacement and then built a new life in North America. Some have chosen to self-publish their family histories. Each of these memoirists seeks to rebuild a fragmented family narrative and grapples with what is lost through emigration.

This paper will discuss five self-published memoirs. Three of these books are available for sale online while two are limited editions produced only for family members and close friends. *Escaping Stalin's Grasp* by Nida Dauknyš, 2022; *Flight: A Memoir of Loss and Discovery by an Aviator's Daughter* by Rasa Gustaitis, 2021; *Springtime in Lithuania: Youthful Memories 1920–1940* by Hypatia Yčas, 2000, were self-published and made available for sale on Amazon and other online sources. *On the Way to America* by the artist Aleksandra Kašuba, 2012, and a scrapbook assembled by Janė Motivans to honor her grandmother's life on her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday are spiral bound photocopied memoirs produced in a limited edition for family and friends.

Dame Hermione Lee, a biographer and founder of the Oxford Center for Life-Writing, writes that “life-writing has to do with emotions, with memory, and with a sense of identity.” She argues that life-writing is a form of cultural communication that it is concerned with “how history is captured in an individual life and how an individual life is captured in its message.”<sup>3</sup> As a genre, life-writing incorporates biography, autobiography, journals, memoirs, diaries, obituaries, recipes, and other more casual forms of writing, usually done by women, which traditionally were not considered to have literary value. The discipline of life-writing considers these forms of writing on par with the structured technical elements of formal literature. The artefacts of life-writing are often composed for personal or familial reasons.

<sup>2</sup> See: Rubchak, Marian J., “God Made Me a Lithuanian”: Nationalist Ideology and the Construction of a North American Diaspora”, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1992, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring), 117–129. See also: Novickis, Birutė, *The Lithuanian Woman*. Brooklyn, New York: The Federation of Lithuanian Women's Clubs, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> See the website of the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing at <https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/home>.

These five memoirs can be read as life-writing texts. Personal elements, such as family recipes (Motivans), letters, and diary excerpts (Gustaitis and Dauknys) are integral components of some of these narratives. These works have similarities in terms of structure and content although these five writers do not know each other personally, live in different parts of the United States, and are of different generations.

## History Lessons

In 1968, in the book, *The Lithuanian Woman*, a DP woman named Birute Novickis wrote about the role of the Lithuanian woman in preserving culture in the diaspora:

Driven from home by the ravages of war, the Lithuanian woman began a new life in the strange and harsh environment of exile. Yet, even here she remained true to her duties and ideals. Mother and child welfare, alleviation of the hard physical surroundings—these were among the immediate tasks. Preservation of the native language and cultural traditions were the means of expressing her spiritual self. But, the main objective of her work was the restoration of her country's freedom.<sup>4</sup>

In these five women's memoirs history and the act of passing on history and culture are inextricably linked. Motivans' birthday gift to her grandmother opens with a summary of Lithuania's twentieth century history on the first page along with a summary of the family tree. The placement of the history synopsis with the family tree clearly signals how these two aspects of the story are inexorably linked.

An important feature of the structure of each of the memoirs is the insertion of a background history describing Lithuania's history and the Soviet and Nazi occupations of Lithuania. Although each of the authors find different solutions to providing historical back story—some integrating history seamlessly into the narrative, others including a section describing the history—each of the writers tacitly understands that Lithuania's history is unknown to the target audience, the American or Canadian reader. It is remarkable that even in memoirs intended for family, a history lesson is woven into the narrative. Each of the writers finds creative ways of writing about the history of the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. Some seamlessly weave the history into the fabric of the memoir. Dauknys explains that she felt compelled to weave history into her family story because of the lack of common knowledge about the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States:

You really would think that so many more Americans would be aware of our story, and it's not just a Lithuanian story. Everyone was running from the Russians. There was a huge stream of people running from the Russians and no one seems to be aware of that. Their journey wasn't over when the war was over. The war was over, but they were in a zone that was Russian occupied, and they were still running.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Novickis, *The Lithuanian Woman*, 61–62.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Nida Dauknys, April 16, 2024.

The reasons why the prewar, World War II, and postwar history of the Baltic States remain little known in North America are complex; however, mostly this gap can be attributed to the fifty-year silence imposed by Soviet Russian domination over the Baltic States during the Cold War era. Because so little was known in the West about the history—or even the existence—of the Baltic States, each of the memoirists prioritizes including a synopsis of twentieth century Lithuanian history into their memoirs.

## Research and Structure of the Memoirs

All five memoirs, whether produced for the general reading public or for a small circle of family and family friends, are crafted through research combined with oral histories and interviews, documentation, historical and family photographs, and other reference materials. Documenting life experiences are a key component of each of the memoirs. Nida Dauknyš explained in an interview that her motivation for writing *Escaping Stalin's Grasp* is rooted in how she feels that she has lived her parents and grandparents experience of fleeing Soviet terror in Lithuania herself although she was born two decades later in the United States, the cultural memory of the North American Lithuanian diaspora community and its activities formed her as an individual.

My whole life was research for this book. I grew up in the Lithuanian community. There were so many different Lithuanian organizations and camps. I remember protesting for freedom for Simas Kudirka,<sup>6</sup> protesting for Lithuania's independence. That was constant throughout my life. I was very aware of the politics and not just the social aspects of being Lithuanian. It was my whole life. I loved that community growing up. All my best friends were from the Lithuanian American community. We were very close. We did a lot of things together. We were in sports groups, camps, dance groups. We were well rounded. Involved in politics. My first language growing up was Lithuanian. My father would say, "Don't mix languages. If you are speaking one language, then speak only one, and that language had to be Lithuanian." We strictly spoke Lithuanian at home. Now I don't have anyone to speak Lithuanian with anymore, although my son and daughter like to practice their Lithuanian with me. When we're together we speak Lithuanian. When I see my old friends, we fall into speaking Lithuanian together. My mother was extremely involved in the New York Lithuanian community. My mother was the head of the worldwide Lithuanian scouting organization. The Lithuanian community would have banquets in New York, and they would invite prominent people to sit at the head table, so it was always a group of men and my mom. In those days, they would invite Governor Pataki or Mario Cuomo to the banquet at the Lithuanian community center and my mother would sit with the mayor of New York City or the governor. That was back when they considered ethnic districts important. My mother was a force and a woman among men.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Simas Kudirka (April 9, 1930 – February 11, 2023) was a Lithuanian sailor who attempted defection from the Soviet Union in 1970 by jumping from a Soviet vessel onto an American fishing trawler during talks between Soviet and American officials about fishing in international waters. He was returned by the Americans and imprisoned in Perm, Siberia. Lithuanian Americans protested for Kudirka's release and eventually brought him and his family to America.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Nida Dauknyš, April 16, 2024.

Dauknys confirms that she lived inside a microcosm of a patriotic Lithuania carried over by her parents and grandparents from the interwar period.

The style of writing in these memoirs is informative and fluent. However, stylistics and quality of craft differ from memoir to memoir. Some of the memoirists, like Gustaitis, hired a professional editor to work with the manuscript, while others, like Dauknys, did not. Of this group, only Rasa Gustaitis is a professional writer with training from the Columbia University School of Journalism. Prior to publishing her memoir, *Flight: A Memoir of Loss and Discovery by an Aviator's Daughter*, which was written over a period of ten years while she was in her eighties, Gustaitis had a career as an editor and a journalist, working at the *Washington Post* and the *New York Herald Tribune*. She wrote three works of nonfiction journalism that were published with major commercial publishers at the time. *Turning On* (Macmillan, 1968) explored changed lifestyles linked to psychedelic experiences and Eastern philosophies. This book took Gustaitis to San Francisco, where she settled in 1968. In *Wholly Round* (Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1973) Gustaitis delves into the ecology movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In *A Time to be Born, A Time to Die—Conflicts and Ethics in an Intensive Care Nursery* (Addison Wesley, 1986) co-authored with Ernle Young, Gustaitis took an intimate look at the effects on families of raising extremely frail newborns, who survived only as a result of neonatal technology. That book grew out of a study Gustaitis undertook while she was a Professional Journalism Fellow at Sanford University in 1983–84. From 1986 through 2005, she was the editor of *California Coast and Ocean*, a quarterly magazine dedicated to the protection of California's coast for people and wildlife.

Rasa Gustaitis explained in an interview that she chose to self-publish her memoir because she is 90 and felt that she did not have the time anymore to go through the lengthy process of placing the book with a commercial publisher through a literary agency.<sup>8</sup> However, she did hire a professional copyeditor, concept editor, and book designer to help produce the book.<sup>9</sup> As a result of this careful attention and team work, the style and craft of the writing is professional and the book design is appealing. The memoir has now been translated into Lithuanian and will be published by the Lithuanian Aeronautical Museum in Autumn 2024. When asked about her motivations for writing her family memoir, Gustaitis explained:

I had always felt obliged, since I'm a writer, to write something about my family, especially about my father. It was sort of a moral obligation. But I was always busy doing other things. I wasn't in the mood to go into history until the magazine I edited about the California coast lost its funding. At that point, I had the time to do it. That was also the right time in my life, I think. That was about twelve years ago.<sup>10</sup>

Asked if anything has changed for her since she wrote her memoir, Gustaitis reflected:

<sup>8</sup> Interview of Rasa Gustaitis by Laima Vince, August 6, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

In a certain sense, yes, because writing the book drew me back into the past. Since then, I've been more of a split person than I was before. Now, I'm neither here nor there. The past is now more present for me than it was before. I was a child when I left. It's not that the process revived old memories, but I experienced new things going back there. I felt that I belonged there but at the same time I didn't. I think that's a very common experience for us who have been displaced against our wishes. Maybe that's true of people who are displaced by their own choice, but it's certainly true of the refugees. So, I'm American, but I'm Lithuanian. I'm not focused on the Lithuanian community at all, but I'm definitely a Lithuanian. I'm also an American I discovered when I traveled in Europe as a young person.<sup>11</sup>

Dauknys, like Gustaitis, wrote her family memoir, *Escaping Stalin's Grasp*, only after retiring from a twenty-five-year career in the defense industry. Dauknys is a graduate of Hofstra University where she majored in Computer Science with a minor in Math. Dauknys did not hire a copyeditor or content editor to edit *Escaping Stalin's Grasp* before it was published and as a result the text is riddled with English language stylistic and grammatical errors. Some chapters and scenes lack the strong sense of craft that a professional trained writer would have in her toolbox. For example, important moments in the family journey are hastily composed and delivered as exposition when carefully crafted scenes and dialog could have evoked deeper emotion and connection with the narrative, as in Gustaitis's memoir. However, the historical and family narrative is absorbing to the end of the memoir. When comparing the craftsmanship and storytelling of these two memoirs, it becomes apparent that although the urgency and the first priority of such self-published family memoirs is to tell the family story within Lithuania's historical trauma and cultural memory story and pass it down to future generations while living memory is still accessible, working with a professional editor enables the level of craft necessary to produce a professional readable publication. In the highly competitive publishing arena of the United States, often self-publishing is the only option for authors of family memoirs, especially those set in Lithuania, which is often overlooked by American publishers because of Lithuania's small size (publishers argue that there are not enough readers interested in Lithuania to successfully sell these books). However, working within the realm of self-publishing it is still possible to produce a high-quality work of literature, given the tools.

When asked why she chose to self-publish rather than work with a commercial publisher, Dauknys explained:

I did seek a commercial publisher for a very long time. I tried all the things they tell you to do. I took classes, I wrote queries to literary agents. I made sure that all the literary agencies I applied to were looking for memoirs. But I would always get the same answer: "Your story is compelling, and it sounds very interesting but it's not for us." I really didn't understand that because I made sure I was querying agents and publishers who worked with biography and memoir. It was frustrating. Then self-publishing took off. I self-published that first translation of my grandfather's book in 2014. I kept submitting to publishers, but once I retired, I felt that the memoir needed to get out into the world somehow or other. Then I finally turned to self-publishing.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Nida Dauknys, April 16, 2024.

Responses by Dauknys and Gustaitis suggest that in the complex and limited publishing environment of the United States, self-publishing their family memoirs as print on demand books has proven to be a viable solution for them because the memoirs are easily accessible to interested readers. In Gustaitis's case, self-publishing *Flight* made it available to a Lithuanian audience in Lithuanian translation as well.

## Personal Dedications

The dedications at the beginning of each of these memoirs makes it clear that these books were written with an emphasis on family histories within the context of historical memory. The tragic and dramatic historical trauma of losing one's nation, of fleeing one's country, of surviving as a displaced person, and then as an immigrant in the United States or Canada, links all these memoirs and provides important historical background that is closely interwoven with the family story.

Each of the memoirs opens with a dedication to family members: *Escaping Stalin's Grasp*: "For Matas and Krista, to help you remember Tėvuko (grandfather's) and Močiutės (grandmother's) stories"; *Flight*: "To the memory of my mother, Bronė Gustaitienė, and my father, Antanas Gustaitis"; *Springtime in Lithuania*: "Dedicated to the Memory of My Parents"; *On the Way to America*: "Dedicated To my daughter Guoda Kašuba Burr." Janė Motivan's book incorporates the dedication into the title of the book along with a photograph of herself and her grandmother in a nature scene reminiscent of Lithuania: "Miela Močiutė, Sveikinam su 95 ta gimtadieni! Aš tave myliu! Tavo, Janytė." (Dear Grandmother, Happy 95<sup>th</sup> birthday! I love you! Your, Janytė.) On the bottom on the cover, there is a note describing the creation of the book:

This book is my heartfelt gift to Močiutė to honor her 95th birthday. I have been working on this for many years, with Močiutė's help. For many years I have listened to her stories, asked questions and made notes. I have borrowed her photo albums one by one and scanned and copied every picture. Helpfully, many of the photos had dates on the back. All the handwritten notes I've included are Močiutė's own writing. Please forgive the mistakes I've made—I've tried my best to be accurate. February 28, 2011.

These dedications are a vital component of these books and serve as signposts that provide context for the narrative of the memoirs. Laborious attention to detail and accuracy, and the overall sense of "getting the story right" are linked through the dedications with the intention that these memoirs are not simply book projects, but significant family artefacts that carry an important collective historical trauma narrative. The memoirs provide descendants with an explanation of the family's origins and how and why the family was transplanted from Lithuania to the United States. The dedications serve as a source of transmission from ancestors to descendants through the intermediary of the author who is the connecting link between both. The writer possesses knowledge of the diaspora's cultural memory, Lithuanian language skills, and has done extensive historical research

on the historical trauma events of twentieth century Lithuania. These conditions place the writer of the memoir in the position of possessing the family displacement story and having the power to pass it on to descendants, who may or may not speak Lithuanian or have a sense of Lithuania's culture and history.

## Motivations

In a personal email, Janė Motivans describes her motivation for creating a record of her grandmother's life:

I made my Močiūtė's book to honor my Močiūtė and share her story with my family. I had a very special relationship with my Močiūtė and was fortunate to be able to spend a lot of time with her over the years and really get to know her and listen to her stories, look at her photo albums, read her letters from her relatives in Lithuania, and most importantly, work on this project together with her. She made this project easy! She wrote out her family tree, labeled her photos, shared her story. I was so very fortunate to do this with her for her 95th birthday and even more fortunate that she lived to just a few weeks short of her 100th birthday. The lesson is—listen to your elder's stories before it's too late! I also had the pleasure of going to Lithuania with her 4 times and meeting her family—her sister, her brothers, and even her mother—my great grandmother. Močiūtė's story was very much alive for me.<sup>13</sup>

Dauknys expressed her process of crafting her grandparents' and parents' stories of escape out of Soviet-occupied Lithuania into memoir as follows:

A lot of the stories, especially the ones about my grandparents' lives, I remembered them telling me, but with my parents I sat down and interviewed them to get all the details of their stories.<sup>14</sup>

When asked why she felt it was important to preserve her family story, Dauknys explained:

I think it's partly because it's something that happened and is not being recognized. I'm not looking for revenge. I'm not looking to express anger. I just would like it to be acknowledged. It happened. It was a horrible thing, and you can't just brush it under the rug and ignore it.<sup>15</sup>

Inside the front cover of the spiral bound memoir, *On the Way to America*, by the artist Aleksandra Kašuba, there is a post-it note affixed to the page that reads: "Gal bus įdomu—AI." (This might be interesting for you.) The hesitancy of tone in the note gives the sense that the memoirist was not entirely certain that the reader would be interested in reading her story. In total, Kašuba wrote ten memoirs in the final decades of her life. She dedicates her memoir to her estranged daughter, Guoda.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, April 18, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Nida Dauknys, April 16, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



What is apparent from these dedications is that the books were created with the intention of preserving a historical trauma narrative intertwined with familial and individual history that the writers of the memoirs felt were important. Also important was the urgency around passing on these stories to family members while also honoring and remembering the parents and grandparents who had lived them.

## Structure

In his seminal book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949),<sup>16</sup> Joseph Campbell outlines the Hero's Journey as a universal motif of adventure and transformation that runs through all the world's mythic traditions. The hero's journey plays out in basic stages that are easy to recognize in world literature. The myth begins with a sense of bliss experienced within the daily routine in the native community. Then, that ideal state is interrupted by an outside incursion, an enemy attack or war. The hero is then forced to make a choice whether to defend his or her home or whether to flee and bring the message of the injustice of the attack to a stronger greater power that may be able to intervene and rescue their land. In the final stage of the hero's journey, the hero returns home, and the routine is reestablished. Or, conversely, the hero may remain in exile and their descendants return home. Each of these five memoirs echoes the myth of Campbell's hero's journey. In some instances, it is not always the hero, but the descendant who is able to return home.

The structures of each of the memoirs is similar. Each opens with an introduction that describes the historical events of World War II and its aftermath. Then, the family narrative begins by describing the writer's ancestor—or they themselves as a child—living an idyllic life in peaceful pre-World War II independent Lithuania.

*Flight* begins with a deliciously serene childhood summer scene:

The moment the world began to collapse around me is precisely recorded in my mind. I can feel it and hear it and see it even now, more than eight decades later.

I was swinging in the rope hammock in the birch grove outside the back door of our home in Kaunas, the second-largest city in Lithuania, near the Baltic Sea. Brushing the tall grass with one bare foot, I was enjoying the soft tickle. Above the treetops, white cumulus clouds were sailing in the pale blue sky, in the shape of sheep, horses, and animals never seen before. In a chair at the foot of the hammock sat my grandmother, Baba, knitting.<sup>17</sup>

Hypatia Yčas describes her family's prewar upper-class comfortable life in Kaunas in *Springtime in Lithuania*:

All the rooms in the new house offered endless opportunities for enjoyment. The drawing room with its eight long windows facing the street had several fat white columns holding up the ceiling. It was great fun for my brother and me to chase each other, running round and

<sup>16</sup> See: Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces: The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell*. Novato, California: New World Library, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Gustaitis, Rasa, *Flight: A Memoir of Loss and Discovery by an Aviator's Daughter*. RasaTime Publishing, 2021, 1.

round the columns. I remember the laughter and shrieks of joy until out of sheer exhaustion we would collapse in a heap on the floor.<sup>18</sup>

Aleksandra Kašuba describes her last summer as an art student living and working in the countryside. It is also the summer that she fell in love with her teacher, Vytautas Kašuba, who was to become her lifelong partner.

At dusk we stopped working and our teacher would go home. I started to escort him on the path winding across a young pine forest to the sanatorium. At first Vytautas talked about his youthful escapades, then of the women in his life, observing me closely. I listened attentively, mostly in silence, until a dialogue began developing. When the path became too short for our conversations we took to walking it back and forth until night set in. One moon-lit evening I ran ahead and, arms raised to embrace the entire world, started rapping non-stop about how ancient were the whisper of pines, the shadows in their circular ways and so on and on, forgetting in the rush of words that Vytautas was there. He was standing way back, arms crossed on his chest. A bright smile was on his face when he caught up with me. We walked the rest of the path in silence, holding hands, student and teacher no longer.<sup>19</sup>

Dauknys describes her grandparents' house in Kaunas in such detail that the scene reads as though she had grown up there herself.

Brone and Vaclovas' house sat perched atop a hill in Kaunas overlooking the train station. This is where my mother grew up. My grandparents were very hard-working people and held much pride in keeping a clean and beautiful home. The house consisted of small neat little apartments, three of which were rented out to the public and one that accommodated my mother's family. The two apartments on the main floor had three rooms each—a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom. One of these bottom apartments belonged to my grandparents. In between these two bottom apartments was a pantry that opened to the outside, which was used as a cold storage area for salted meats, smoked bacon, root vegetables, and the many pickled vegetables that were stored in the summer months. The two apartments on the second floor had two rooms each. The entrance to these apartments was from an outside balcony on the second floor with one door on the right side and the other on the left. In the middle there was a door that led to a separate one room apartment. This room was also rented out, but my grandfather would always tell me mother that this room would be hers when she was older and attended college.<sup>20</sup>

This rich detail feels necessary as a counterbalance to the descriptions of the family leaving this home forever that comes later in the memoir. The tragedy that is implied at the end of this scene is that the future the grandfather repeatedly alludes to when Dauknys's mother would live in that one room apartment and attend university in Kaunas would never come. Just like Aleksandra and Vytautas Kašuba were destined to never live as a family in Lithuania, and just like Rasa Gustaitis would be forced to flee abroad with her family with

<sup>18</sup> Yčas, Hypatia, *Springtime in Lithuania: Youthful Memories 1920–1940*. Chicago: Adams Press, 2005, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Kašuba, Aleksandra, *On the Way to America*. Self-Published, 2012, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Dauknys, Nida, *Escaping Stalin's Grasp*. Self-Published, 2022, 9–10.

only a few hazy memories of her aviator father before he is arrested by the occupying Soviet Russians and assassinated in 1941. Hypatia Yčas would lose her father to a sudden heart attack in Brazil enroute to America, and she herself would never return to live in Kaunas again.

In addition to the idyllic remembrance of pre-war Lithuania, in the early chapters of each memoir there is a pre-story that sets up the family history. In the early chapters of each of the memoirs the narrator's ancestors are introduced and their lives are described. Each memoir narrates how grandparents or parents met and married. However, each memoir emphasizes how the normal traditions of married life were soon destroyed by war and reflects on that loss. Gustaitis writes:

Throughout my childhood and youth, when my mother talked about her years with my father as the happy time in her life, it never occurred to me to consider how long they were together. My mother's life seemed to be divided into before and after: before 1941, when the Soviets invaded Lithuania, and after, when she lived for her three daughters, cherishing her memories of the time before. My mother lived 101 years. She had only 13 of those with Antanas, yet as I heard my mother talk, they seemed like forever.<sup>21</sup>

Kašuba describes how she and the sculptor Vytautas Kašuba decide to flee Lithuanian together in the autumn of 1944 as the Soviet Russian army approached to occupy Lithuania a second time. They already knew that Vytautas's name was on the deportation lists because of an anti-Soviet sculpture he had made. A few months after fleeing Lithuania, after having lived together as a couple for months, in Innsbruck, Austria, they decide to marry. Only war time circumstances make the formal peacetime rite of marriage impossible:

Ten days later we stepped out of the hotel ready to sign our marriage certificate when the sirens went off. From the hotel's overview platform we saw at eye level a squadron of American planes approach the town, watched the bombs fall and explode, balls of dust rising, bursting into flames, the squadron flying away in formation as if it had nothing to do with what was happening below. The raid over, we rushed down the hill to the marriage office and found the building gutted. In the settling cloud of dust the intact staircase was leading nowhere. Someone told us it would take months before this office reopened in some other location. Anyway, our papers were now part of the rubble.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the obstacles of war that prevent the young artists from formally marrying (at this time, Aleksandra was already pregnant with their first child) the young refugees create their own non-traditional marriage ceremony to seal their bond.

That evening we got married in a ceremony we performed ourselves in our hotel room. Seated across the table, we each took a small piece of bread, solemnly fed it one to the other and chewed it, eyes fixed on the other. The words spoken were, "Yes, I will be your wife. Yes, I will be your husband," uttered almost in unison, unintended. The wedding was witnessed by my

<sup>21</sup> Gustaitis, *Flight: A Memoir of Loss and Discovery by an Aviator's Daughter*, 60.

<sup>22</sup> Kašuba, *On the Way to America*, 27.

mother's brooch pinned to my shirt and my family photographs arranged on the table to face us both. No other promises were made by either side.<sup>23</sup>

Following these first sections of the memoirs, each memoir describes the moment the family decides to flee. Kašuba records the moment as follows:

By dusk the road was empty. We were sitting on the steps still talking, when in the evening hush we heard Soviet soldiers singing, settling for the night beyond the hill. Though we never discussed it, Vytautas and I decided to go into exile together. This decision sealed our relationship.

It was dangerous for Vytautas to stay and risk deportation to a labor camp in Siberia.<sup>24</sup>

Then follows the bulk of the narrative, which describes fleeing Lithuania and the uncertainty of the journey.

Dauknys writes:

On July 18<sup>th</sup> 1944, my mother and her parents, along with several other people crossed the Lithuanian border at Kybartai and entered Prussia. Everyone in the train car was quiet, some people wept, and everyone was wondering what their future would hold. Someone posted a map on the wall of the train car and as the train advanced through Prussia, then Poland, and into Germany, they tracked their progress by marking the different places on the map.<sup>25</sup>

Each memoir concludes with a return to peace. In each memoir, the setting for this final section takes place in the United States. Then comes the rite of return journey, describing going back to Lithuania to take a look around after Lithuania becomes independent again in 1991.

## Arrival in America

An important component of each of the memoirs is a description of the moment the family arrives in America. In the memoirs written by the displaced person themselves, these scenes are particularly emotional. Kašuba describes their ship entering New York harbor:

On January 16 loudspeakers announced that we were entering the harbor of New York. Together with everyone else we grabbed our coats and ran to the deck to see the Statue of Liberty. At first sight the crowd swooned, fingers pointing, some cheering, some weeping, strangers hugging, a few falling to their knees. And a sight it was—proudly holding the torch high, Miss Liberty was truly welcoming us, the poor, the forgotten, the displaced. The ship slipped past Ellis Island and headed straight for New York dock, horn blasting full throttle to announce our arrival. Eyes were now fixed on the city skyline. A seagull shrieked overhead and faces lost in some personal reverie awakened instantly—we made it, we have arrived.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Dauknys, *Escaping Stalin's Grasp*, 101.

Vytautas, Guodele in his arms, pressed my hand. Tears spilling over my cheeks, I hugged them both.

America, here we come!<sup>26</sup>

In memoirs written by descendants to honor ancestors, as in the Motivans and Dauknys memoirs, the descendants describe their parents and grandparents' early lives in America based on how they remember family stories being told to them. The difference is that the American born descendants are more sensitive to the hardships the DPs experienced while the DPs themselves tend to be more stoic. For example, Dauknys describes the first year that her mother and her parents experienced working as farm laborers on a plantation in Louisiana upon arrival in America. As new immigrants to the United States, Dauknys's maternal grandparents and teenage mother accept a work assignment at a plantation in Louisiana. Dauknys describes a system of how the plantation workers are worked very hard but were underpaid by a certain percentage so that there was a constant lack of money to cover the basic costs of living, food, and rent, forcing the plantation workers into debt.

Their ship docked in the harbor of New Orleans, Louisiana, and they were immediately loaded onto a bus that took them to their plantation in Houma. The plantation owners were told that the displaced Europeans that were coming to work for them were basically animals. They were people that were used to living outside in a barn with animals, dirty, smelly, uneducated, and ignorant. So, when they came to greet the bus that arrived, they were shocked to see that these people were clean, nicely dressed, and intelligent. When the Polish family, who were beautifully dressed with two little girls that looked like porcelain dolls, was introduced, they greeted the owners with a customary Polish greeting. The father clicked his heels, bowed, and kissed the ladies' hands. The southern women swooned at his European manners. The new arrivals were also introduced to the plantation manager and his wife, who seemed to be nice, friendly people, and the plantation foreman, who seemed very cold and stern. <...>

The owners had thought that the new people were wild, and that it didn't really matter how they lived. But now that they had met the Europeans and saw that they were more civilized, they were very embarrassed. They had to show the new arrivals to their living quarters, which were the old shacks that had been used by slaves during Civil War times. As they pulled up to each shack and a family would go inside, they would hear screams from the people inside. This happened as they pulled up to each shack. The plantation manager could not understand what was happening and finally asked my mother, "Why are they doing that?" She explained that they were horrified with the conditions in which they were going to have to live.

Each rickety wooden shack had two small rooms. The first room was the kitchen with a small wood burning stove in the corner and an old worn table with some patched up chairs on one side. The other side of the room was meant as a sitting area with a fireplace. My mother used this corner as her bedroom. The second room was a bedroom, which was where her parents slept. There was no electricity or plumbing, but there was an outhouse. The roof was so old

<sup>26</sup> Kašuba, *On the Way to America*, 77–78.

that as my mother lay in her corner, where she had created a make-shift bed on the floor, she could see the stars twinkling in between the wooden planks that spanned the ceiling above her head.<sup>27</sup>

Later chapters in *Escaping Stalin's Grasp* depict the newly arrived immigrant family's shock at witnessing racism against people of color in the America of the 1940s and 1950s. As a young woman, Dauknys's mother observes racism against African Americans and speaks out about it in school when the family is relocated to Connecticut. Ironically, because of her stance against racism, her classmates label her a communist. In one scene set on the plantation, an African American man who lives across the street from the family falls gravely ill. Dauknys's grandmother nurses him back to health. The man was surprised by this level of simple human compassion from white neighbors. Dauknys explains why writing about racism is such an important component of her family memoir:

My mother drew that parallel between seeing how the Jews were treated in Europe and seeing how the Blacks were treated in the American South. She really saw it as one and the same thing, and that scared her. She said, "Here we are in this new country, and we thought the roads would be paved with gold and that America was wonderful, but now we're seeing the same thing we saw before in Europe." It was very frightening to them, especially initially.<sup>28</sup>

Motivans includes in her memoir a photograph of her grandmother in a factory worker's uniform with this caption: "Močiutė worked at Trunz Meat Company. Her specialty was wrapping hams. She was a union worker for almost twenty years and now receives a pension." In a private communication, Motivans shared that her grandmother found solace from the monotony of her factory job by crocheting doilies on the train to and from work. The relief and joy of the refugees expressed in the memoirs is not the same as the measured reality of American born descendants describing their ancestors start in America.

## Conclusions

Self-publishing mediums, such as Amazon's KDP and other self-publishing companies that use print on demand technologies, make it possible for Lithuanian displaced persons and their descendants to record their family stories interwoven with the historical trauma events that took place in Lithuania in the twentieth century and make these books available to readers both in the family and beyond the family circle. The memoirs that have already been self-published are mostly high-quality productions that are based on research combined with oral histories, family interviews, documentation, historical and family photographs, and other reference materials. The structures of these memoirs, almost unconsciously, follow the structure of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey. Family prehistories and descriptions of a peaceful life before World War II are an important component and

<sup>27</sup> Dauknys, *Escaping Stalin's Grasp*, 165–166.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Nida Dauknys, April 16, 2024.

serve as a counterweight to the injustice of being forced to flee their country and the hardships the family endures along the route out of worn-torn Europe into America. All the memoirs showcase Lithuania's twentieth century history as an important feature of the memoir. Each memoir opens with a dedication that honors ancestors and signifies that the memoir was created for the benefit of descendants. These women writers position themselves as the bearers of family history and of Lithuanian cultural and historical memory. They share a purpose of passing on cultural memory and historical memory and their family's role within that history to subsequent generations.

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## AKIMIRKA, KAI PASAULIS PRADĖJO GRIŪTI: PENKIŲ SAVARANKIŠKAI IŠLEISTŲ AMERIKOS LIETUVIŲ GYVENIMO MEMUARŲ SKAITYMAS

**Santrauka.** Antrą kartą iš 1944 m. Sovietų Rusijos okupuotos Lietuvos iškeldinti lietuviai ir antroji bei trečioji jų kartos, gimusios užsienyje, Šiaurės Amerikoje, baiminasi, kad lietuvių kalba ir kultūra, valdant Rusijai (1944–1991 m.), išnyks, todėl lietuvių kalbos ir kultūros išlaikymas išeivijoje buvo prioritetas. Be to, diasporos socialinė veikla ir bendruomenė suteikė priklausymo kažkam didesniai už pagrindinę Amerikos kultūrą jausmą ir stabdė natūralų kultūrinės asimiliacijos procesą. Per kolektyvinę kultūrinę atmintį JAV ir Kanadoje lietuviškos vertybės buvo perduodamos iš kartos į kartą. Per pastaruosius 20 metų nemažai Amerikos lietuvių moterų paskelbė savo šeimų atsiminimus apie tai, kaip išgyveno karą ir tremtį bei susikūrė naują gyvenimą Šiaurės Amerikoje. Dauguma šių memuarų išleisti savarankiškai. Šiame straipsnyje, remiantis gyvenimo rašymo, autobiografijos ir paveldo studijų teorine perspektyva, analizuojami penkių lietuvių diasporos rašytojų moterų savarankiškai išleisti istoriniai memuarai: Nidos Dauknys „Pabėgimas iš Stalino gniaužtų“ (2022), Rasos Gustaitis „Skrydis: aviatoriaus dukters praradimų ir atradimų memuarai“ (2021), Hypatijos Yčas „Pavasaris Lietuvoje: jaunystės prisiminimai 1920–1940“ (2000), Aleksandros Kašubos „Pakeliui į Ameriką“ (2012) ir iškarpu knygelė, kurią Janė Motivans surinko močiutės 95-ojo gimtadienio proga ir kuri yra spirale įrišti fotokopijuoti prisiminimai, išleisti ribotu tiražu šeimai ir draugams. Šiame straipsnyje teigiama, kad kiekviena rašytoja siekia atkurti suskaldytą šeimos naratyvą, struktūruodama jį pagal archetipinį Josepho Campbello herojaus mitą. Šiuose memuaruose taip pat apmąstomi dėl emigracijos prarastos kultūros ir tradicijos aspektai. Identifikuojant šeimos ir kultūros traumas naratyvus, kalbama apie tai, kaip neatpažinta kolektyvinė trauma veikia visuomenę, šeimas, individus ir kaip memuarų rašymas bei dalijimasis jais gali pasitarnauti kaip gydymo ir potrauminio augimo priemonė.

**Raktažodžiai:** perkeltieji Lietuvos asmenys, memuarai, kultūrinė atmintis, paveldo studijos, lietuvių diaspora.