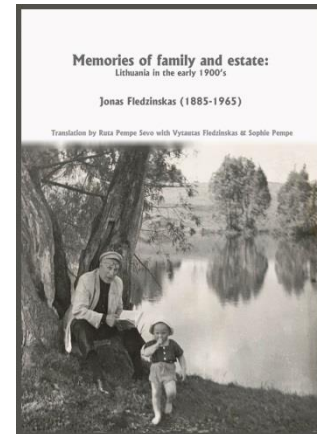


# Trip Report Lithuania 2015

Ruta Sevo

It started with my grandfather's short memoir written in Lithuanian. A big dictionary, 10 days in Vilnius in a former convent in 2006, later help from my uncle, and we had a translation into English. At the time, self-publishing was just made easy. I published the book making it "public" thinking that mostly family would access it. Much to my surprise, as of 2014 over 50 people worldwide had picked it up, including some of my professional friends.

One reader in Sweden contacted me, because her grandfather and my grandfather were close friends during the period between 1920 and 1940, while Lithuania was independent and before all hell broke loose, as WWII encroached on Lithuania from both sides.



My mother grew up on the same family estate. It was a "Downton Abbey" life style. After the Russian revolution (1920 forward), my grandfather was one of the leaders of the agricultural cooperative movement, introducing high innovation in farming methods and the development of exports. The estate was a legacy of the Russian Zubov family, a member of whom received the title of "Count" from Catherine the Great several generations prior. With the title came several properties, each of which had a manor house and farm land, with associated workers.



Best view of Girkunai estate, concrete balcony added



House in manor complex, Gruzdziiai



Girkunai building re-use as university

Like the two Swedish sisters who contacted me, I was trying to recover my family history. Our parents were too traumatized by emigration to speak much of the past. We shared a fierce curiosity for details about the life that was lost nearly overnight. Their grandparents were forced back to Sweden. Their grandmother was Lithuanian and members of her family left behind later perished in the Gulag. Neither of us had much in the way of family photos or stories, because the flights were forced. The language was a barrier to them.

The Swedes and I are a generation apart, but shared a quest. We decided to travel together and visit three estates. For economy of effort and assistance in navigating language and country, we hired a private guide.

They arrived in Lithuania for their first time. We stayed at the same former convent (Domus Maria). They explored Vilnius while I reconnected with friends. Then, one morning, our guide picked us up in an SUV and drove us to Siauliai, which took about 3 hours.



Asa, Eva, guide at Staiciunai

The drive gave us a chance to tell our stories. The guide service had already asked for specifics and arranged for us to meet people at museums (the Frenkel House in Siauliai and two school museums). The schools had been built by the Zubovs early in the 1900s.



Eva, Asa, guide looking at book in Gruzdziiai



Eva, Asa at stables? in Gruzdziiai



Asa looking in building near Bubai



Asa and Gintas (guide) at gravesite near Bubai



Asa, Eva, guide at church in Gruzdziiai



Eva checking photos in Siauliai school

Our first stop was Bubai, the home of Dimitri Zubov (brother of Vladimir). This former manor house is now the "Count Zubov Hotel and Restaurant." The proprietor was quite welcoming. The halls inside were lined with photos of the Zubovs.





In fact, she said there was a “forest grave” in the vicinity, which she’d never visited. Phone calls were made, and she joined us in the car. Through a web of back roads we came to a fairly large, nice house inside a fenced yard. There were three German Shepherd dogs in a pen in back, and a loose dog in the yard. She approached with trepidation and we saw a boy come out. They talked, she got back in the car, and we drove a few hundred feet down the road. There we saw a four-foot wide trail mowed through a field of tall grass, up the hill into the woods. We hiked. A few hundred feet into the woods, the Swedes spotted some discarded memorial candles that are put on graves. (Objects completely unfamiliar to me.) That’s all. We went further. There were crosses. On top of the hill was a fenced enclosure, about 15 feet square, in which were two large graves: Alexandra and her son Dimitri, the last Zubov residents at Bubai. The wild growth around them had been cleared and two red geraniums bloomed.



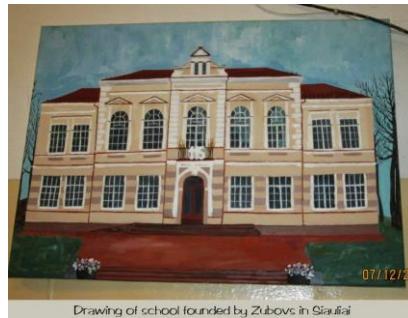
Other scattered graves were nearby. We learned they were Russian farmers and Jews. The spot may have been a small country cemetery. We learned that the Soviets wanted it out of sight and tried to make it inaccessible with overgrowth, prickly berry bushes and forest, for decades. Soviets highly discouraged respect for nobles. In fact nobles had all been “deposed” from status if not deported.

It turns out the house we’d stopped by was home to a local school director, who, seeing frequent visitors go up the hill to the “forest graves,” routinely mowed the path. Paying respects was okay now.

Respecting the Zubovs was a theme in the city of Siauliai. We visited a university building and a girls’ school built by the Zubovs, and a park named for them. Their photographs were prominent in every entry hall. That night, by chance, I came on a documentary (on TV, in Lithuanian) where a historian described the role of Zubovs in shaping the city.



School founded by Zubovs in Siauliai (back side?)



Drawing of school founded by Zubovs in Siauliai



Picture of girls' gymnasium in Siauliai, in early 1900s

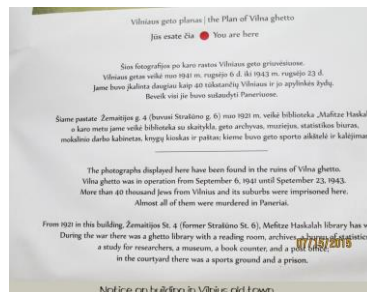
The next day our first stop was the Frenkel Museum and factory buildings. Chaim Frankel was a Jewish businessman who built the largest leather factory in the Russian Empire in early Siauliai, which became an industrial center with roads and a railway. The city was close to farms supplying leather (for example, the Zubov estate). His glorious, cosmopolitan mansion exhibits art deco and European décor. In 1909, 56% of the inhabitants of Siauliai were Jewish. There's a bike museum too. The city was one of the first to build a big network of bike paths.

We talked about the relationship between Jewish and Lithuanian communities. Although the societies were separate, the leaders were apparently in a symbiotic relationship. Our guide said, "Every Lithuanian had a Jew, and every Jew had a Lithuanian." After the Russian and German invasions, all the leaders lost their property, and the entire Jewish community lost their lives.

Memorials to Jews are ever more visible in Vilnius, by the way. There is also a trend to use large photographs from the past all over the cities we visited, to remember the past.



Building that was central in Vilnius ghetto



Notice on building in Vilnius, old town



Vilnius ghetto planas | the Plan of Vilna ghetto  
Jūs esate čia ● You are here



Photo found in ghetto, Vilnius



Group of Vilnius ghetto library patrons | Excerpt from list of Vilna ghetto prisoners 1942



Posted on outside of building in former Vilnius ghetto

We drove to the Hill of Crosses. Tour buses lined the highway. There was a gift shop. We lost each other in the paths between hundreds of thousands of crosses of every size. The Soviets had attempted



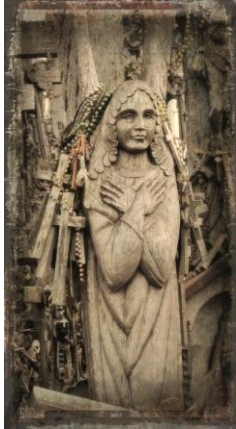
to clear it several times, and each time, the crosses “came back” overnight. Fabulous wood carvings, a favorite Lithuanian craft, make for stunning images.



Hill of Crosses, near Šauliai



Hill of Crosses near Šauliai



Hill of Crosses sample



We drove to a small lake and a grassy knoll. Apparently nobles and other leaders had long initiated annual outdoor festivals that drew thousands of people. They were agricultural expositions during independence. Under the Soviets, political and economic activity was forbidden, but gatherings continued as festivals of “folk song and dance.” Amidst the folk song and dance was the organizing of the roots of a Lithuanian independence movement, and an underground market in Lithuanian literature. (Schools were conducted only in Russian and Lithuanian literature was forbidden.) I learned that people like my family continued to be community leaders in every sense (if they hadn’t been deported).



Location of annual “folk festivals” under Soviets



Ginkūnai school museum, artifacts from estate



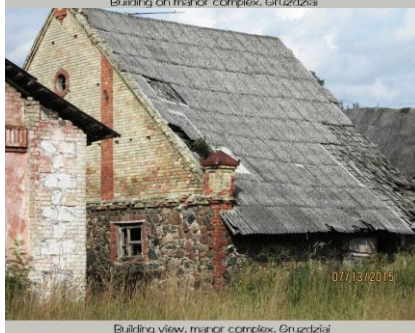
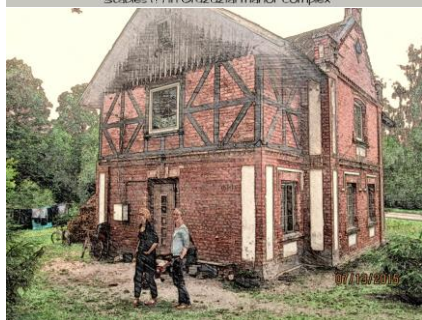
Alina Givle, school museum director

The head of the Ginkūnai school museum met us. She was exuberant, giving us a big plate of home-made cheese, coffee and tea. We photographed photos she’d pulled for us, then we toured a room full

of displays and artifacts. Then we toured the manor house itself, which is now home to an evangelical Christian foundation. The entire interior has been redone, and the exterior horribly “enhanced” with Soviet extensions in concrete. I couldn’t bear to photograph these architectural abominations. Only the basement was untouched, although it was full of old toilets.

Finally that day, we drove to Gruzdžiai for our next appointment with a school museum official. It was smaller and less focused on Zubovs, but we saw a book—four inches thick—on the city. In it, the Swedes found a description of their grandfather, the local Inspector. His life had once been threatened, for being too strict in enforcing standards, and for being a foreigner. (He protested to the hostile workers “But I married to a Lithuanian; I am one of you.”)

The manor buildings were fabulously intact although abandoned and empty. They were “unenhanced” by Soviet construction. In fact, the Swedes saw the very building where their grandparents lived.



The Swedes were particularly interested in two relationships: our grandfathers, the man of the manor (a commoner married to a Countess) and the Swedish Inspector; and their grandmother (a Lithuanian) and my great-grandmother. There is a family photo showing the two women side by side. Their grandmother (an “upstairs” maid), sitting in a chair with my great-grandmother standing over her, with an arm around her. Their grandmother must have been present in my mother’s childhood, because my great-grandmother looked after the children of the manor (which included supervising governesses).

The friendship between the historical women parallels ours: we’re a generation apart.





Every school had portrait in front hall



Bubi estate school instructors, 1922

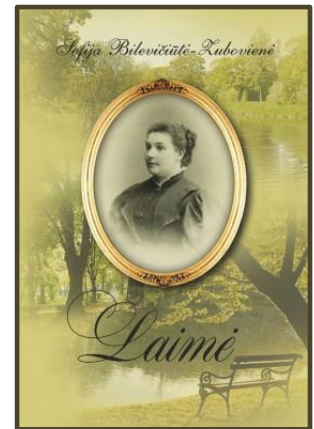


Jonas Pledzinkas, Aleksandra Zubovienė-Pledzinskaitė and others

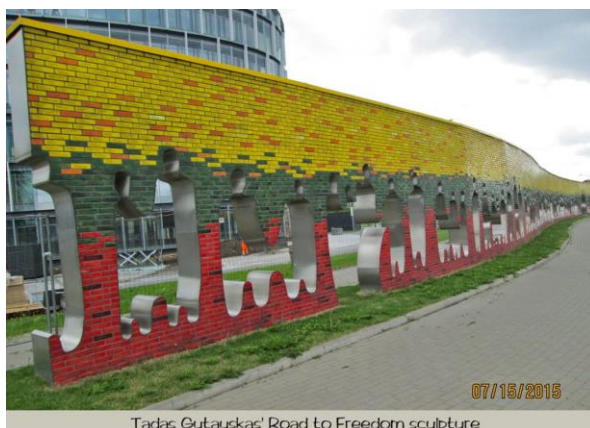
By chance we learned that my great-grandmother wrote a novel in her native language, Polish, published in 1902. Her husband (Count V. Zubov), furious about its content, collected all copies and burned them. However, she'd given a friend a copy, and that copy was just translated from Polish to Lithuanian and published (2015!), over 100 years later. We each have a copy. I might seek the rights to translate to English. We don't know what's in it yet—I have to read it. (They separated after 26 years of marriage. I think the separation was many years after this happened.)

The back cover says:

"The novel LAIME ["happiness"] was issued in 1902, well before it could garner any fateful wide public exposure. Sofija Bileviciutes-Zubovienes' husband, after reading autobiographical parts that permeated the story, bought up and destroyed the whole print run. One copy survived to this day in the library of a Ciurlionis' grandchild, Dalia Palukaitiene. Why did Count Zubov do this? A mystery of one hundred years unfolds, when you read the pages of this unique work." [my translation]



I introduced the Swedes to my friends (their age, forties) in Vilnius, all of whom speak English. One, a sculptor, by chance working on a monument to Swedish-Lithuanian friendship, in time for the Swedish King's visit to Lithuania in October. By chance both he and one of the Swedes have met the Swedish Consul in Vilnius. And, my Swedish friend happens to be an ethnographer who's written papers on public monuments and tourism, and "the shaping of public images," as well as runic traditions in the Baltic. There's a public celebration around the new sculpture in June of 2016, on the coast of the Baltic Sea. Here is Tadas' recent claim to sculptor's fame:



Tadas Gutasukas' Road to Freedom sculpture



The sculptor's wife is enthralled with Lithuanian heritage and the exotic tales of ancient Sarmatia. Her father-in-law wrote a children's book in Lithuanian, illustrated by her 13-year-old son. A daughter just finished a degree in English literature in Scotland and might translate it to English, and I might edit and publish. Another family project.



The Swedes and I will add material from this trip to the Memoir book and re-issue it properly on amazon. (It is in PDF now, for 99 cents.)

The Swedes plan to return with children in the future and do more research. All three families have a 13-year-old son among other children.



The first time I was in Vilnius was before the country joined the European Union in 2004 and before they adopted the euro--just this year (!). The place is swarming with tourists. The natives are travelling out for work and pleasure. There are better government benefits, public works. Traffic is terrible but automatic meters are everywhere, as are automatic faucets in bathrooms, hand driers, great toilet paper, and nice cars. It was July, and we constantly ran into weddings and graduations pouring out of churches and concert halls, fancy dresses, flowers, exuberant young people, booming art and night scenes. It seems in revival, again, nearly 100 years after the glory days our fore-families enjoyed together, for a while.

*Cheers, Ruta*