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THE FIRST NOTE: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL JASKUNAS

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Interview by Laima Vincė

Introducing North American Writers of Lithuanian Heritage

Over the following months, this series will introduce North American writers of Lithuania heritage who write in English but maintain ties with Lithuania and honor and reflect on their Lithuanian heritage. This series defines writers of Lithuanian heritage as people who have ancestral roots in Lithuania, whether their religious faith is Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Pagan, or agnostic. It is not necessary to have 100 percent Lithuanian blood to participate! We live in a global era and while Lithuanian-born Lithuanians are traversing borders and can be found on virtually every continent and in every time zone, Lithuanians born abroad are coming home—either in a cultural sense or literally and physically—to the Homeland. All this movement makes for some very interesting writing that I hope to explore in this series. In a word, this series aims to break down the traditional barriers of who is a Lithuanian writer and what is important to Lithuanian writers. I do not profess having any definitive answers, but instead my goal is to ask a lot of questions.

I will ask writers over the next few months to share about their ties to Lithuania and to reflect on what it is in their writing that is uniquely Lithuanian, and whether it is even possible (or relevant) to seek such a definition. To better understand North American Lithuanians, it is useful to become familiar with an overview of Lithuanian emigration to North America. There have been three major waves of Lithuanian migration to North America over the past three centuries. The first wave took place in the mid to late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century when both Christian Lithuanians and Litvakes (Lithuanian Jews) began immigrating to North America while Lithuania was part of the Russian Tsarist empire. The second wave of emigration to the United States and Canada took place at the end of World War II, when Lithuanians escaping Soviet terror and Lithuanian Jewish Holocaust survivors sought refuge in the democracies of the West. The third wave of emigration from Lithuania into the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, has been taking place since Lithuania reinstated its independence in 1991.

Laima Vincė

Interview with Paul Jaskunas

By Laima Vincė

Laima: Tell me about your Lithuanian heritage.

Paul: I grew up mostly in Indiana, first in Bloomington and then in Indianapolis. Our Aunt Estelle, my grandfather's sister, lived in Chicago. Every now and then we would get a call from her, and she would say, "I'm a half hour away from your house. Get ready." She didn't know how to drive, so she had her friend Mary Ellen drive her. They always came together, and always with Fannie May mints. She was the closest connection to our Lithuanian roots. She still lived in Chicago and remembered growing up in Cicero, Illinois where my great-grandparents settled. They had this saloon during the Prohibition era in the 1920s. It was a speakeasy and the story was that they bought all their liquor from Al Capone.

Laima: (Laughing) You never know if stories like that are true or not, but they sound good.

Paul: I think it is true because there is a story about my Aunt Estelle walking home one day and Al Capone offering her a ride home in his car, and she was a little terrified. So, apparently, they did know Capone. There's also a story about a police raid. My great-grandmother pretended she was sick in bed, and they stashed all the liquor around her

under the covers. This was near St. Anthony's Church in Cicero, where there was a Lithuanian community with several Lithuanian businesses. The masses at the church were in Lithuanian. I had the sense that when my grandfather grew up, he wanted to escape this ethnic enclave and assimilate more into American culture. He became a medical doctor, married a girl from West Lafayette, Indiana, and after the war they settled in Iowa to raise his family. He stopped speaking Lithuanian and didn't pass on much of the heritage to his children, so my father was not exposed to the language at all. When my Aunt Estelle passed away in 1990, after the funeral mass, we visited St. Anthony's. In the back of the church, we found some women who were peeling potatoes and speaking Lithuanian. That was my grandfather's mother tongue, but he had completely forgotten it and couldn't summon the words to converse with these women. That's the story of my heritage. It's very tenuous. I was always aware that my name was Lithuanian, and I'd heard the stories about Cicero, but that was about it.

Laima: What year did your great-grandparents immigrate to the United States from Lithuania?

Paul: 1903. My great-grandparents met in New York and got married and came to Chicago. My great-grandfather's surname was Jaskūnas.

Laima: You speak Lithuanian, Paul. Your wife is from Lithuania. Your family is active in the Lithuanian community in the Washington DC area. How did you return to your family's Lithuanian heritage?

Paul: I was finishing up my graduate degree in the Master of Fine Arts program at Cornell University and then I was a lecturer in the English Department for a year. In the nineties, the place to go in the world was Eastern Europe and Russia. Things were changing so fast over there and that made it interesting. One day on campus, I saw a flyer advertising the Fulbright program and I applied. Before I knew it, I was on a plane to Vilnius.

Laima: What year were you a Fulbright?

Paul: I arrived in Vilnius in January 2001.

Laima: I was a Fulbright in 1995, 1996, 1997. I went with a three-month old and three-year-old. That was the second year that they were allowing Fulbrights to go to Lithuania. When you arrived in 2001 things were a lot better already. Tell me about your Fulbright experience. What was it like to connect with Lithuania having such tenuous family ties with the place? What was it like for you?

Paul: It was very exciting. I just decided I was going to throw myself into this language and use it as much as I could. I'd never lived in a place where I needed to use another language so regularly. I took an intensive beginning Lithuanian class for English speakers at Vilnius University. There were people from all over the world in that class. There was an Egyptian who was opening a shop on Lukiškių Aikštė, a missionary couple from Alabama, a Slovenian. It was an interesting group, and the teacher was excellent, so part of the excitement was being in that course.

Before I left for Vilnius, I met with Professor Violeta Kelertas and she told me to get in contact with Loreta Mačianskaitė from the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. Before I contacted her, someone brought me to Trečias Brolis, the old bar in the Writers Union, and I tried to hold a conversation there in Lithuanian with a group of strangers I just met. It turned out the person I was speaking to was Loreta.

Laima: Did you teach in the English Department as a Fulbright?

Paul: I didn't. I focused on my own writing. I was writing a lot.

Laima: Are you are a fluent Lithuanian language speaker now?

Paul: I can hold conversations, but I'm not fluent, no.

Laima: Do your children speak Lithuanian?

Paul: Yes, they're fluent, and they make fun of my Lithuanian all the time. Compared to theirs, it's pretty bad. They speak it with their mom.

Laima: It's an interesting story that rather than Lithuanian culture completely disappearing in your family, you brought it back. How does your Lithuanian heritage impact your work as a writer?

Paul: Many of the poems I've been writing recently come out of my experience in Lithuania. *The Atlas Remedies*, a novella being published next year, is influenced very much by my time there. So is *The Collaborator*, a novel I just recently finished. Whether there is some mystical ancestral spirit speaking through me—I don't know if I prescribe to that view. As I explained, I was not steeped in the culture as a kid. It was not something that I grew up with. My parents, and in particular my father, was very much a forward-thinking person—don't look back, just keep looking ahead. We moved a fair amount when I was growing up, not like an army family, but we did move around. I was born in Texas, then we lived in Wisconsin, Bloomington, then Indianapolis, and then I left home. There was never a deep sense of community with a group of people or with other Lithuanians. But certainly, my writing over the past ten years has been deeply influenced by my Lithuanian life. It's taken a while for this to take shape. When I was living there during the Fulbright period, I was working on the novel I'd started before I went. So, it's taken some time.

Laima: Tell me about the books you've published.

Paul: My first novel is called *Hidden*. I'd describe it as psychological mystery story, partly inspired by time I spent working for a newspaper in Southern Indiana when I was in college. I started that book in Ithaca, New York. Later, in Vilnius I was rewriting and revising and working on other projects. I found an agent while living there, but didn't sell the novel until my wife Solveiga and I moved to Washington DC. That book has nothing to do with Lithuania. It was published with Free Press, an imprint of Simon and Schuster at the time.

Laima: What does the process of writing mean to you?

Paul: I like the open-endedness of that question. For me what I strive for more than anything is beauty. Language is so often messy, destructive, and unruly that to make language sing is deeply satisfying. There's this poem by Wisława Szymborska called "The Joy of Writing" in which the speaker summons a "written doe" in the first line. From the beginning, the poem calls attention to the creature's artificiality. But at the same time, she invents, out of "a drop of ink" hunters aiming their guns at the doe. For me that poem is partly about how language is vulnerable to itself; it can destroy its own creations. But Szymborska has total control the moment the doe steps onto the page, and she stops the hunters' bullets mid-flight, the poem suggests. That's writing – the cultivation of life that wasn't there before, something that's hopefully a little astonishing. I often share that poem with students.

Laima: You are a Catholic. How does Catholicism and your spirituality influence the way you write? Or even how you think about writing?

Paul: I wrote an essay about the icon of the Gates of Dawn when I was on sabbatical in Vilnius in 2016. So much of Catholicism for me is about aesthetic experience, as that piece suggests. The religion is practiced in a formal way, through poetry and song. I'm sure my exposure to the Catholic liturgy from a very young age has influenced my writing in ways I can't quite articulate or even discern. I can say, though, that I am very attentive to how language sounds, its rhythms, and I find myself attracted to writers who are both musical and interested in form.

Laima: You must love the work of the poet John Donne.

Paul: Yes, what I know of him, though contemporary poetry has been more inspiring of late. Reading poets often opens up little doors in my imagination and helps me find language for experiences I may not have thought much about before. For example, my wife spent much of her childhood at her grandparents' home in Alytus. There is a little woodshed out in the back of the house. For some reason, a Jane Kenyon poem I read made me want to go back to that place and write about it. There are a few out buildings along with the woodshed and they were all built by her grandfather. So, it's really a poem about her him and his faithfulness and toughness of character. I didn't know him well, only at the end of his life when he was in his nineties. But the poem goes through that little woodshed.

Laima: I'm listening to your thoughts on how the work of other writers will spark something in our own writerly imagination and it made me reflect on this series of interviews I've been conducting. Many of the writers I've interviewed have expressed that they felt that only other people who've lived the same experience could possibly understand their work, and that's because the culture is too foreign for outsiders. Perhaps there is a value to the writing we create as Lithuanian Americans about our Lithuanian heritage that speaks to others, even though we are a very small group. When you look at the generation of poets and writers who fled the second Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1944, they spent their entire lives in what they called exile in North America, South America, Australia. They wrote beautiful prose and poetry in Lithuanian, but as the years passed there were fewer and fewer Lithuanian speakers who could read their writing in the original language. They were basically writing for each other and other emigres. Very few of them made the transition to writing in English for an American audience. They were satisfied with their life's work and their small audience. They lived impoverished lives as a result, but they were satisfied with those lives. That makes me wonder: Who is our audience? Are we writing to tell an American reader about who we are and our experience? Or are we really writing for each other?

Paul: I think it depends on the nature of the writing. Some of my poetry is as much for myself as for anyone else, but fiction is different. I've written this novel called *The Collaborator* about an Lithuanian-American ex-pat living in Vilnius. That's partly for people like you who know the region's history and the dynamics between American ex-pats who have married into the country. But it's also a story that American readers with no knowledge of the country can relate to. In a way, that's the job of the writer—to open a door to allow readers of different backgrounds to enter into a given experience. You may have a specific community in mind, but there's always the potential to reach a broader readership. Not that I'd dare to compare myself, but a salient example in American literature of this sort of project would be Toni Morrison who, though she was writing for the descendants of enslaved people, is loved and read widely all over the world.

Laima: Ever since I was a student, I've loved Toni Morrison's work. I felt as though I could be a member of that community for the duration of reading her novel.

Paul: She opens something up. We are not so remote from each other that literature cannot begin to bridge the gaps.

Laima: What is good writing for you?

Paul: The first word that comes to mind is honest. But there's an asterisk beside that word because so much of what feels honest is a kind of lie or make believe. I recently was at a talk with a poet named Michael Salzman who quoted Walter Pater's famous line: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." This raises a question – what *is* the condition of music? For Pater, it has to do with disappearance of any distinction between content and form. So, I think this is something that writers want to achieve in their art. And maybe this has something to do with honest. With a kind of directness of voice. Do you know the percussionist Vladimir Tarasov?

Laima: Oh sure. I've been to his concerts.

Paul: Once I was at a concert with him at Symphony Hall in Vilnius. We were listening to a soloist. He made a remark to me (I'm paraphrasing), "With music I know immediately from the first note if a musician has it." And books are like that, too, aren't they? You feel an energy or power in the language, right on the first page, when the writing is really alive. A writer like Saul Bellow does that for me. As soon as you start reading Bellow, you're holding onto your hat. When I read the first page of *The Light Years* by James Salter in a used bookstore, I thought, "Good God, this is special." Writing is like that—you hear those first notes, and you know.

Laima: I completely agree with you. We both teach Creative Writing, so we know how creative writing programs in the United States are generating a lot of okay but not great writing. That's a concern in contemporary in American literature. A lot of middle-of-the-road writing is getting published and drowning out the voices of the really great writers. But in contemporary Lithuania writing is financed through government institutions. So, then, inevitably, you have a few people holding the purse strings and deciding what gets published. In contemporary Lithuanian society, as we both know, the group you are in with and who you have access to is going to help you get funding to publish. I'd like to hear your thoughts on what would be utopia for writers? How do those good writers in the United States or in Lithuania get their work out there and be heard. We are living in a time when there is so much literature is out there—and that's true of every culture and language. But how much of it is good writing? You feel as though you just want to go to those few great writers and hear them sing.

Paul: It's a glut. There's always going to be a surfeit of work and a scarcity of readers. To arrive at utopia, we need to rebalance that relationship. We need a more literary culture, one that cultivates readers. Our schools—I see this firsthand with my kids—our public schools are just not very interested in that work today. Literature is rarely introduced as an art worthy of sustained attention; it's seen more as an adjunct of social studies. And basic reading skills don't seem to be attended as they once were. I have undergraduates now who don't know the difference between an essay and a novel.

Laima: Students don't know the basic genres.

Paul: We can have all these programs and funding but without readers we have no base, and it's hard to support literature. Small presses are playing an important role, of course; so many of them are flourishing and doing wonderful things. But for us to reach 'utopia', as you say, we will need a more literary culture. I actually think that the situation in Lithuania, in this regard, is much better than in the United States. When I was living there, I recall

Adamkas or someone going to the Writers Union to announce his intention of running for a second term. In the U.S., politicians don't care what the writers think.

Laima: Have any of your stories or poems been translated into Lithuanian and published?

Paul: A few. A couple of short prose poems were translated by a Lithuanian-American poet and published some years ago in *Literatūra ir Menas*. Then Marius Burokas translated two of my poems for the Lithuanian diaspora anthology *Egzotika*.

Laima: What feedback did you get on your work in Lithuanian translation?

Paul: People seemed to like my poem "The Remnant" that Marius translated and read at the conference held by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.

Laima: Do you think this conference does enough to bridge the gap between diaspora Lithuanian and the Lithuanian reading public?

Paul: How does that gap exist?

Laima: Well, we don't exist to them.

Paul: Why should we exist? I don't live there. Of course, I'd be delighted if a translator took interest in my new novella. Much of that story takes place in today's Lithuania, in the year 1901. If someone wanted to translate it, that would be lovely. But the publisher has decided that it's a good idea, that they are going to sell copies, and that the book is worth paying attention to. *The Collaborator* is partly about how market forces and realities influence what gets written about. This is particularly true of novels. I'm sure publishers in Lithuania are under all sorts of pressures, as they are here. But I don't find it helpful to worry about such things. When I go to Vilnius, I love connecting with other writers and poets and artists. The city looms large in my imagination, and I miss it if I can't get back during the summer.

***The Collaborator*, chapter one**

Paul Jaskūnas

The grandfather died in his sleep, in his own bed, three days after Last Rites. In those final hours, he might have heard the voices of his wife and children in the other room, or the sound of water lapping against the sides of his pontoon boat outside the window. He might not have heard anything at all, for the doctors had prescribed large doses of morphine to ease his pain, and he seemed always to be half asleep.

He'd lived well, everyone agreed. He'd loved his wife for fifty-three years, had raised three gifted children, and had seen nine grandchildren embark on extraordinary American lives. George himself had worked as a physician; he'd cared for residents of a small Iowa town for three decades before retiring to California. His last years were spent in a senior community along lush fairways outside San Diego. He played countless rounds of golf and drank almost nightly at the country club, socializing energetically with other retirees. He held monthly poker nights where he and

three old men would down a bottle of whiskey and smoke. As long as anyone could remember, Dr. Kazlauskas had smoked with eagerness, as if each cigarette had its own special meaning that involved him intimately. The lung cancer had been no surprise.

So completely American had he become during his long years in Iowa and California that his children and grandchildren seldom thought of the past he'd left behind. Standing over the grill in his yard of buffalo grass in Lake San Marcos, dressed in Bermuda shorts and shades over his red face, he didn't look at all like a man who'd witnessed the Soviet occupation of his village in 1940, or the Nazi invasion the following year, or the Red Army's triumphant return a few years after that. Yet he'd been present for these events. As the war came to a close, he'd fled with his sister to Germany by train to a DP camp and, from there, to Chicago, where his sister would die from a heart attack in 1970. He would live much longer, until the year 1999, six months shy of his eightieth birthday.

If his children or grandchildren ever asked the grandfather about the war, he'd say he needed a nap, or pretend he couldn't hear them. If he did talk about the subject, he would say that the war had saved him from a life of drudgery, for his childhood home had been a farmstead in a small village in northern Lithuania, where for generations his people had tilled the land. His father and mother, who died in 1937 and 1939, respectively, when he was only a teen, had left him and his sister acres of prosperous land, two cows, a family of swine, a pair of old horses, and some chickens. It had been dreadfully hard work, running the place, cutting the grass for hay, feeding the animals, milking the cows, ploughing the fields, harvesting the potatoes, digging each bloody one up from the black earth that was his inheritance, the very meaning of his life, he being the only son, the one to carry on the family line in that obscure village. Had the war not come, and had America not taken in so many of Europe's forsaken refugees, he would have lived his life on that land, farming it for the Soviet Union, one more prole among millions....

So the war had meant liberation, his family was led to believe. It had given him license to reinvent his life as an American, to gain a profession, a new identity as a doctor, of all things, a doctor with clean hands and a many-roomed house and a brood of healthy children. The horror of what he'd fled, whatever he might have witnessed in the killing fields of Eastern Europe—he avoided the topic altogether. He did not answer the questions. He demurred, walked away, muttered insensible replies. Until, that is, the week before his passing. Then, and only then, as far as the family could recall, did he seem eager to speak about the war.

Under the influence of the morphine, he was a touch delirious yet alert enough to hold onto his son's sleeve and say, apropos of nothing, that he was sorry. Sorry for what? the son asked. We wanted to escape, he said. We wanted to leave, it was all we wanted, but they wouldn't let us, it was terrible, he said. What was? The war! But you did escape, you left, you got out with your sister! Then the old doctor shut his eyes and drifted off, only to begin again later, with his daughter, telling her, too, that he was sorry, he'd wanted to leave, but couldn't. The daughter was there, the eldest son, his wife, and the priest, and no one could learn with any clarity what the old man had needed to apologize for after all these years.

These strange deathbed utterances were spoken of at length, in hushed voices, among family members at his funeral. His widow would insist he'd been sorry, in a general sense, about the relatives he'd left behind in the old country, many of whom had been shipped to Siberia by the Russians after the war precisely because, it was always believed, he and his sister had fled to the West. One of them, his grandmother's sister, would die in the train; a cousin would succumb to an unknown illness in a frozen gulag. He'd never spoken of it.

That—and the morphine—would explain it, his children agreed at the time. He was a gentle giant of a man, after all—warm with the grandchildren, kind to his patients, faithful to his wife and Church.... Yet suspicion lingered in the minds of the children and grandchildren. They always would wonder, what had given George Kazlauskas such dire cause for remorse?

The doctor's death was the end of a fiction—the fiction of a certain kind of American life, a life of perpetual progress, growing fortunes, the promise of the golden West, the third grandchild wrote in messy script, in his leather-bound journal, while sitting in a Minsk hotel. And my grandfather's death was also a beginning, of course, the beginning of—and here Aaron's pen froze, for he already doubted what he'd begun to write—the beginning of a return to the truth...

But Aaron crossed out the line. He'd read enough critical theory that the word *truth* made him bashful. He stood and looked out the window at Gorky Park, where the trees dripped with frigid rain that would soon turn to sleet. Could he have picked a worse time to visit Minsk? His sister in America had not heard of the town. That's how far he'd drifted—right off the edge of Angela's map of the world, into a nether realm named Belarus, or Byelorussia, or White Russia, depending on whom you were speaking to, where, and when. Is that even a real country? was her question when she heard the news of his imminent journey, during their last Skype call a week ago.

Aaron had tried to show her, with his hands, where Poland was, and Lithuania, and, then, on the far side of her screen, Belarus, nestled, he'd said, against the bosom of Mother Russia. It *was* a real country, the last dictatorship in Europe, if you could call that Europe, a terribly interesting place for all sorts of reasons, he claimed, but Angela had looked displeased.

“What do you want to go *there* for?”

“It's about Gramps,” he'd told her.

She was the first person in the family to learn about his discovery. She was surprised, of course, disturbed, but not at all convinced. Yes, she admitted as a gloom came over her eyes, it would be really something if it turned out that good old Gramps, now twenty years dead, had been a killer of Jews. Did Aaron believe it, she'd asked?

He'd nodded his head gravely at the computer.

He felt guilty for having raised the prospect that their grandfather had been a Nazi collaborator, but he'd pushed ahead all the same, and now he was here, in a four-star hotel room in the Belarusian capital.

The radiator knocked pleasantly at his knees. He was pressing his legs against it, in need of heat after the walk back from the metro. The avenues here were wide and blustery and lined with buildings designed in the Stalinist imperial style, so as to make each citizen feel small and meek. Minsk was what he'd expected, only more so—a totalitarian metropolis thrown up from the rubble of the Great Patriotic War as a testament to Russian might. When his grandfather was here, the streets had been nothing like this. Earlier that day, in the war museum, Aaron had seen photographs of postwar Minsk in ruins: grainy black and white prints of tumbled bricks and jagged walls, chimneys standing stripped of their homes. In these photos, the sky over the wrecked city looked flecked with cinders; clouds rained misery upon gray figures below wielding tiny shovels and spades.

From his window, Aaron believed he could see the neighborhood where the ghetto had been, and where perhaps his grandfather had shot down Jews—with what sort of gun? What would his weapon have been? This, too, he would have to learn, as well as his rank, the design of his uniform, the name of his commanding officer, if he'd had one, and so much else. He felt a sense of excitement as he thought of all the details yet to be uncovered but which could be learned, he sensed, for this history was right here: one could step inside buildings where Jews had hid, walk across squares where they'd gathered in their last hours. There were survivors to speak with, and in the coming days, he would do all this, and more....

Yet when he tried to imagine his grandfather, the man he'd known as a boy, a man with a gentle smile, who'd smoked fragrant cigarettes on the porch of his lakeside home, followed his Dodgers game-by-game, and given the local ducks nicknames like Charlie and Frosty and Dropsy—well, it was almost impossible to imagine that man with a white armband around his coat sleeve, a rifle in his arms, and hate in his heart for the Bolshevik Jews. *Almost* impossible, just as it was difficult to imagine a genocide on the scale of the Holocaust, executed by gunfire, with sadistic cruelty, in shtetls, towns, and cities all over Poland, Lithuania, Belarus. Yet this had happened; people had seen it. And his grandfather's name had been written on a list of the murderers.

Only six years earlier he wouldn't have been able to locate Minsk on a map. He'd been an assistant professor of poetry at a state university in the Midwest, turning his dissertation on Berryman's *Dream Songs* into a book while teaching freshman comp and exacerbating a habit for hard drinking. When the book failed to materialize, he slid off the tenure track into unemployment. Facing the humiliation of adjunct professorship, he instead applied for a Fulbright to Lithuania, a move his parents had strenuously advised against. Your grandfather left for a reason, they'd said. Those reasons are still intact. It's a poor country, a country of misfortune and tragedy. Still, he got the scholarship and fled. He would teach American poetry to undergraduates in Vilnius while searching for another job in the US. That had been his plan. He could make it sound almost reasonable.

Predictably, not long after arriving, he fell in love. Her name was Agnė. One February night he spotted her in a cavernous underground club blocks from the old KGB headquarters and asked her to dance. Hardly speaking a word, they danced for hours, until his knees were sore, and that was just the beginning. Penniless, they'd hitchhiked to Croatia to spend a summer on a nudist beach with a Slovenian poet friend. They'd mushroomed in deep Baltic forests. They'd traveled by train to Petersburg and smooched in the Hermitage and made love on the sands of the Curonian spit. Sweet, beautiful months! He wrote love poems for the first time in his life, learned to speak Lithuanian like an idiot, and two years later, as the Fulbright money was drying up, they were married, Aaron and Agnė, in the chapel of a Franciscan church, by a Lithuanian friar.

Isn't this taking your roots a bit seriously? his father had joked after learning of the engagement. Well, yes, but it was love, and love was love, it could not be denied, even if the new wife refused to immigrate to America. And who could blame her? Not many years before, the U.S. government had invaded Kabul and Baghdad. Such American hubris had reaffirmed her contempt for his country, filled with arrogant, overweight, uncultured rubes as it was. Agnė was not one prone to changes of opinion; he hardly tried to sway her. So, they ploughed his meager savings into Vilnius real estate—a cramped one-bedroom flat in the old Jewish Ghetto—and promptly got pregnant. Now they were three, living hand-to-mouth on his tiny lectureship salary and the more substantial money she earned translating foreign legal documents into Lithuanian. The euro was killing them.

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“The Holocaust book” had been Agnė's idea. One night an acquaintance had invited them to a reading by a young American who'd published a memoir about his Jewish grandfather, a survivor of the Vilna ghetto. It was a quiet, earnest affair, well-attended, with representatives from the US Embassy and cultural ministry on hand; the author had been demure, soft-spoken, well-dressed; he read his lyrical prose with proper solemnity, a passage in which his grandfather described the atmosphere of Jewish Vilna before the disaster, the communal warmth, the foods, the families, the sounds of Yiddish in alleys and courtyards.

On the way home, as they walked through the dark ghetto, where she and Aaron lived, she'd had the temerity to say, “You should write a book like that.”

“Like what?”

“A book about the Jews, the Holocaust. I think it will sell.”

He recoiled inwardly at the cynicism.

“If I’m any kind of writer, I’m a poet,” he said.

“So?”

“And I’m not Jewish.”

“You live here, right here, where all the Jews used to live. This is our home. You have the right, anyone does.”

Not anyone, he’d objected. Certainly, he could not; his poems, to the extent they were *about* anything, concerned the limits of language, human speech, the impossibility of true communication between people, or even with oneself. To approach something as monstrous and complex and frankly inconceivable as the Holocaust, you had to have some human purchase, some claim, some deep-seated *need* that would give rise to language capable of capturing the horror.

At least, this is what he said to Agnè, and he repeated the argument a few days later when she asked him, only partly in jest, how his “Holocaust book” was coming along. Yet he did act, secretly, on her suggestion. The research began innocently enough: he simply borrowed a book from a friend, a newly published volume about the Lithuanian Shoah by a Brandeis historian. Much of the information in it had been familiar to Aaron; he’d read other books about this history, but he had not known so many details about the Lithuanian police battalions formed after the Nazi invasion. He’d learned, in particular, that the leader of the most notorious battalion had come from a town called Panėvezys, a detail that caught Aaron’s eye, for his grandfather had also been from there, or near there; indeed, his grandfather had been in the region in 1941, and had only escaped to the United States after the war. A footnote mentioned that the battalion’s commander Antanas Impulevičius later settled in Philadelphia, where he’d died without facing punishment, though he’d been convicted *en absentia* by a Soviet court in 1962.

On a hunch, Aaron went to the Lithuanian archives, in the old KGB headquarters, and asked to see the documents from the Impulevičius trial. An hour later, the clerk returned with a box full of microfiche rolls, on which were captured thousands of pages of witness statements, court filings, and rulings, about the battalion under his command. Many of the documents were handwritten, in Lithuanian; others were in Russian. He couldn’t make sense of them—his Lithuanian wasn’t quite fluent, and he couldn’t read Russian at all—but Agnè willingly helped him examine the documents. Together they came upon a typed list of names—the members of the battalion. They counted over three hundred listed on two pages, in neat double columns, and it included one “J. Kazlauskas”.

There was room for doubt; Kazlauskas was not an uncommon name, it could be someone entirely unrelated to him. But the accumulation of evidence pointed to his guilt. In addition to the archival document, there was the grandfather’s refusal to speak of the war, the hometown he shared with the battalion’s commander, and, according to Aaron’s father, Dr. George (Jurgis, in Lithuanian) Kazlauskas had maintained a friendship with a Lithuanian in Philadelphia whom he’d visit every five years or so. All these facts, added to the reports of his final weeks of life, thrust suspicion onto the firm ground of belief: Aaron’s grandfather had been a member of the notorious killing squad known as the Twelfth Battalion.

Sufficiently convinced, he'd drafted a three-page proposal and sent it off to agents in New York. He heard back from a Daphne Stewart, who claimed to be interested in his idea, and could help him sell it perhaps, once he had three solid chapters and a detailed outline. Her agency had inked six figure deals for any number of writers of late. Aaron could not deny it: with Agnè's encouragement, he had landed an opportunity the likes of which he had never faced as a writer of experimental poems.

But just because it had begun in this fashion, with commercial concerns in mind, with a truly cynical notion that he might somehow tap into Americans' bankable fascination with World War Two, did not necessitate that his motivations must remain so crass. They could transform over time, become genuine, differently complexed, even disinterested. Before writing the proposal, he'd studied with growing interest the annals of Lithuanian Holocaust research and had begun to envision the project as a rather philosophical exploration of guilt and atonement, of remembrance and forgetting, and ethnic belonging. It would be a personal, even a poetic journey into the heart of Eastern European darkness, his own journey, but also one that the entire Lithuanian nation, he saw now, must take—for wasn't this country, directly or indirectly, *involved* in the Jewish civilization that had once thrived on its soil? And why shouldn't he, one-quarter Lithuanian as he was, write of this?

Mother Ship

--after Katherine Bradford's painting of the same name, 2006

Ten swimmers tread the blue sea,
watching their mother
ship float off.

Each one, a Moses,
holds a commandment on her tongue
inside her closed mouth.

Nothing here can be said or known
but the mother ship soon to,
sure to, never to

reach the edge of their world.
Her hull, heavy with love, hovers on the waves,
shedding light as she plows the field of blue truth.

She leaves behind her children
to obey one lasting
commandment:

Stay afloat.



Katherine Bradford, *Mother Ship*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Collection of William Finn and Arthur Salvador. © Katherine Bradford.

The Wrong House

Here somehow I have mistaken
a long dark block in a city that is not
at all my home for a street

elsewhere, in a town
far across the sea,
a littered stretch of road

where pigeons and hookers
in heels still perhaps strut by,
and once at least there was a shop

where long ago I bought
an ounce or two of fresh
loose-leaf earl grey tea

to bring home to you.
The pot we made remains
fragrant in some chamber

of my mind, where the lamps
burn bright, the fire warms
our thighs, and we talk with pleasure

of nothing. But what's this cold
street where the tea shop is not, is
never, and the doors are locked,

and you are not? Nor pigeons,
nor light to see but the glow
from an upstairs window.

It spills out dimly over me
as I watch a pair of lovers
behind the pane, kissing

perhaps over their own pot
of tea, its bouquet afloat
in their cozy room,

scenting their tender hour.
What did we say when
it was our turn, our hour?

What were our words?
Was that even me fixing the tea?
Was that even you?

My love, I cannot any longer
see our own faces, cannot hear
our voices. Are they up there

behind that lit glass?
Is that our life steeping
in the wrong house?

Lenin Square

In the center of the square
Lenin awaits the dawn
wearing his cap of white.

Snow dusts his bronze body, ice hangs
from a raised arm that points

toward a godless future.

An old man dares approach him.
He has come to feed the pigeons.
They flutter their wings in greeting.

In the dark conservatory,
a violinist looks out the window
at Lenin. He stares back

as she lifts her bow,
and breaks the silence
with her feverish scales.

Across the square, a lone soldier
guards the doors of a locked church.
He stomps his feet to stay warm.

If you listen closely,
you can hear him whisper
an impolitic Hail Mary.

You can hear crumbs
strewn on ice for the birds,
the violin's song,

and in the prison next door,
an executioner
sliding bullets into his pistol.

Arpeggios ascend,
crumbs scatter,
a soldier prays

as the prisoner falls
into his pooling blood,
and snow fills Lenin's eyes.

Such days—innumerable—have come
and gone, forgotten, as even
the deepest snows will melt.