



Photo from personal archives. Antanas Sileika novel, Provisionally Yours, was made into a feature film in Lithuania in 2023 (Laikiniai jūsu).

THE DEATH OF TONY - A CONVERSATION WITH ANTANAS SILEIKA

Laima Vincé: Tell me about your Lithuanian heritage.

Antanas Sileika: My Lithuanian heritage is very typical for people of my generation. I had parents who fled Lithuania in the middle of 1944 and then hoped to return but didn't. I have a brother who was born in Lithuania, a brother who was born in a displaced persons camp in Oldenberg, Germany, and I was born in Weston Ontario, a suburb of Toronto, Canada. That was our exit. Although we lived a little far out, the center of Lithuanian activity was at a parish in Toronto. I lived in a colony of Lithuanians made up of a dozen scattered families in our old small town. None of them tended to join with the Lithuanian scouts, *Ateitininkai* (Lithuanian Catholic Youth), and other organizations, but we did. We were the exception.

Laima Vincé: Are you still part of the Toronto Lithuanian community?

Antanas Sileika: My new memoir, *The Death of Tony*, is very much about this. I leave the Lithuanian community every few years and I end up coming back all the time.

Laima Vincé: Why do you leave?

Antanas Sileika: Because I get sick and tired of it, that's why. When I was young, I got tired of the Lithuanian folk dance group, the Lithuanian scouts, the *Ateitininkai*, and I fled to Paris where I fell in with the Paris Lithuanians. When I returned to Toronto, I got an unlisted number because I was sick of Lithuanians. But then when my children were born and started to go to Lithuanian Saturday School that brought us back into the community. Then I got tired of Lithuanians again and suddenly Lithuania was seeking its independence and I dove into that very deeply. Then I got tired of Lithuanians once again and I started to write books, and all of those books had to do with Lithuania. Those books brought me back to Lithuania yet again.

What I did like about the Lithuanian community in the diaspora was the organization Santara Šviesa (Lithuanian Liberals). They held lectures on interesting things. I was not interested in scouts, *Ateitininkai*, folk dancing, the Lithuanian church and parish, except for when my children were involved in those activities. All of that bored me to death! Santara had meat on the bones, and that held my attention for a long time.

Laima Vincé: Do you see any differences between the culture and society of Lithuanians Canadians and Lithuanian Americans?

Antanas Sileika: There's a huge difference. The Lithuanians take on the characteristics of where they land. The East Coast Lithuanians are different from the midwestern Lithuanians, and the Canadian Lithuanians from Toronto are different from those from Montreal. When I first met Lithuanians from South America at the Youth Congress, I saw that they behaved like Latinos. We adapt to the microclimates that we grow up in.

Laima Vincé: Tell me about your new memoir.

Antanas Sileika: I have a friend who runs a small publishing house. He asked me to write a second memoir about binational life, the Lithuanian and Canadian parts of my life and how I balance these two items. I told him that it would be the typical story of immigrants, but he forced me to start, and I got into it. It's called *The Death of Tony* because I called myself only Tony until I was nineteen. Then there was a moment when a visitor from Boston said to me, "You so easily give up your heritage." So, I marched into the university registrar's office and said, "Strike Tony from my registration, from now on I will be Antanas." I told my Canadian friends that I was no longer Tony and they would mock me. They would call out, "Hey Tony!" and I would respond, "Tony is dead." So, I took that moment and explored my persistent attempts to flee my Lithuanian heritage and then my return to it. That book is an autobiographical essay and it will be published in Canada in March.

Laima Vincé: You seem to be caught in this cyclical pattern of running away but then always coming back. What emotions do you have around that?

Antanas Sileika: I've given up fleeing, I can't resist the impulse any longer. Also, especially now later in life when I am involved in literary projects in Lithuania. Although in Toronto I do cherish my childhood friends more and more in my older age. But when what draws me to Lithuania are the stories. I am always trolling for stories, for memoirs, for old books that might turn into information that I can use in a new novel. I'm doing that even now. I've been doing this for the last fifteen or twenty years.

Laima Vincé: When I think of your autobiographical collection of stories, *Buying on Time*, I remember that when you write about your Canadian life, you are very funny. However, your historical novels are quite serious.

Antanas Sileika: Many bad things happened in Lithuania, so it's hard to be funny when writing about those tragedies.

Laima Vincé: How do you feel about the quality of the translations of your books into Lithuanian?

Antanas Sileika: It's hard for me to tell because I don't have the language ability. Other people tell me, "This is a good translation, this is a bad translation." However, I remember sitting with a translator at Café Neringa going through a translation of one of my novels and I was explaining to him the parts that were funny, and he would say to me, "But that's not funny in Lithuanian."

Laima Vincé: You are very much a storyteller. So many of your books rely on historical themes and on researching those themes. So, why Lithuanian history? Why not some other aspect of being Lithuanian?

Antanas Sileika: I am a sucker for a story. When I was a child, I liked to tell stories, but I'd rather listen to your story. So, Lithuania as subject matter is utterly unknown here in Canada, generally speaking. There is an advantage and a disadvantage to that. The advantage is that nobody knows, and the disadvantage is that nobody cares. What

happens is that I try to find dramatic stories told in unusual ways that make the story fresh. The story of *Underground* (*Pogrindis* in Lithuanian) is the Juozas Lukša partisan story. Partisans are not known here in the West. It's a very dramatic story, and as we know, in life his was a very romantic story as well. This is the story that I can bring to a public that didn't know anything about it. The same is true of other stories I've found when I think of my novel, *Provisionally Yours*. While I'm searching among Lithuanian books, usually memoirs, suddenly a voice catches me and I say to myself, "There's something." Jonas Polovinskas, who became Jonas Budrys in his memoir, *Lithuanian Counterintelligence*, has a specific voice. As soon as I heard that voice I knew, "I've got something here." In a similar way, this happens to me again and again in my life. Years ago, with my novel *Woman in Bronze*, I was reading *Petras Rimša pasakoja*, his memoir of growing up and training as a sculptor in Lithuania, Warsaw, and in Paris, and I ate that book up. I could read that book over and over. It was treated like a piece of junk lying in the garbage bin where I found these old books. The point is that I find these engaging voices, interesting stories, set in places that no one is familiar with here in Canada, which makes them slightly exotic and slightly hard as well because I've got to sell a story about a place that nobody knows about. So, there's a very compressed version of my research process.

Laima Vincė: How do you get your readers in Canada and the United States caught up on a history they've never even heard about?

Antanas Sileika: Very, very tough to do that, eh? Because as you and I both know you must get the reader's attention. It's like the story of the ancient mariner who seizes the wedding guest and holds his attention. My job is to seize the reader and hold his attention in a way, so that he is fascinated but not in a hackneyed way like with a thriller or popular fiction. There are two ways of going about this. One of the ways is the method of Joseph Conrad where you start with a very high note, and you descend slowly hoping you can draw in the reader. That's tricky because many readers don't have the patience for that. The other way is to seize the reader's attention from the beginning. In my novel *Underground*, I open with a scene where people are shot dead in the middle of a dinner. That grabs people's attention. So, I need to seize their attention and hold it and hope that as the story progresses it will continue to hold them.

If I can digress for a moment, you might ask if I am I bringing the story of Lithuania to the general public. In general terms, I have to admit that no, not really. That would be a function of public relations for the country. I find Lithuania is a great wealth of stories that I can use to tell historical fiction so that I can write forever stories. In other words, stories that are set in a particular time, in a particular place, to illuminate the human condition.

There's a scene in my novel *Underground* in which my protagonist is sitting in Paris telling his wife that he is going back to Lithuania to an almost certain death. She tries to tell him not to go. I was referencing the story of the fall of Troy where Hector tells his wife he will leave Troy and she tells him, "Do not leave the gates of Troy for if you do, I will become a widow and your child will be sold into slavery." So, I'm trying to take a forever story of men endlessly going to war, endlessly dying, women endlessly weeping, children endlessly orphaned, and setting it a situation where it is a Lithuanian going back to Lithuania.

Laima Vincė: The story you based *Underground* on, the Juozas Lukša and Nijolė Bražėnaitė story, is interesting in that evidenced in her letters to Juozas and his letters to her is that she does the exact opposite. She says, "Go back and fight for both of our honor." They both accept that he might not come back. I just wonder where so much of your work is rooted in historical themes how much creative license do you feel the writer has to recreate those histories? Or, conversely, how much do you feel compelled to closely follow how the actual history plays out.

Antanas Sileika: There is a backstory to this. I was attacked in the press in Lithuania and all over North America for having taken Lukša's story and turning it around. I just got back from Italy where *Underground* has been translated into Italian, and they asked me this very same question. My response is that I am a thief! All these writers who talk about how they adhere closely to historical details, how honest and integrous they are, are not me! I tell a story. I take what's unusual for me in a story and I use it to make it stick. For example, Juozas Lukša, the historical figure, called Lithuania his first wife. For him that was a metaphor. When I read that, I thought, wait a minute, what if there was an actual first wife? Let's include two women in the novel. Furthermore, the Lithuanians of that time had a sentimental nationalistic point of view which many of us don't quite share to quite the same extent. I'm trying to interpret through modern times a story that I have stolen. I try to change that story to find what's most compelling. Let's face it, if I didn't steal that story and change it, you would still have the original. Go ahead, Lukša's story is out there, read it all you want. If you don't read it, that's not my problem. My problem is to write that story and to seize the reader's attention.

Laima Vincé: Well, at least you admit to it.

Antanas Sileika: One time while we were in Lithuania, I was waiting for a review of one of my books to come out in a Canadian trade magazine. I didn't see it for a long time and then I figured out that my wife and son were protecting me from reading it because it was a bad review. That does not upset me. I welcome all opinions of my work. I've had people come up to me at social functions and say, "You know that book of yours, *The Barefoot Bingo Caller*, I hated that book." "Oh," I say, "I don't know what your motivation was to come over and tell me that, but it's very amusing and I don't mind."

Laima Vincé: Traditionally a literary critic might like a book, dislike a book. The public relations culture and social media has turned criticism away from being an analysis of the work into a polemic of either pandering to the author or attacking the author. The literary space has become very polarized, and so I think it's healthy that you're open to all sorts of criticism. That makes dialog so much more interesting. Working with historical fiction and fictionalizing the lives of actual people is going to open up a lot of questions, especially if those people are alive or their families are alive. Going back to *Provisionally Yours*, Jonas Budrys was the Consul General when my grandfather Anicetas Simutis came to New York as a young diplomat to work in the Consulate. We actually found Jonas Budrys's shot gun in my grandfather's closet after he died.

Antanas Sileika: Now there's an interesting story as well. Lithuanians were all spread out but it's still a village here. When word got out that I was writing about Budrys I got various contacts from various relatives. One was a relative of his who asked, "What are you up to?" I wrote back, "I'm writing a novel and I'll do as I please." Then I got another call from another relative saying, "Our relative was rather sharp with you." I told them I didn't mind. Then I was teaching a course in Vilnius and one of the students had the surname Budrytė. I thought to myself: "I wonder if they didn't send one of their younger relatives to check out what I was up to." So, yes, people are protective of their family histories. But I take what I want from those histories, and I make it into fiction.

Laima Vincé: By the way, his son, Algis Budrys, was a well-known science fiction writer.

Antanas Sileika: Oh yes, I know. Initially I imagined this as a dual novel made up of two parts about the father and the son. I read some of the son's work and it has a lot of echoes of the Cold War and the Soviet Union. That's one of

the projects I never got to. I was trying to examine the science fiction of the 1950s and the young Budrys's role in it. But he made a somewhat troubling move into scientology. That's one of those projects I didn't finish, but maybe I should get back to that.

Laima Vincé: Interestingly, Algis Budrys surfaces in Stephen King's memoir, *On Writing*. As a young writer King was sending out stories and consistently received abrupt rejection letters without any guidance. At the time, Algis Budrys was an editor and sent Stephen King an encouraging letter with some good advice that King followed and after that his work started to get accepted by publishers. King writes about that in his memoir as one of those pivotal moments for him as a young writer. He writes about Budrys as the one editor who took the time to give him some guidance and help him along.

Antanas Sileika: A realbiographer could have a lot of fun with the father son story even now. Algis Budrys was hot in science fiction at one moment. His father became a chicken farmer. That's all so interesting, but the problem is who would read it outside of Lithuania and the amount of work required would be huge.

Laima Vincé: You're right that a lot of these passion projects require a lot of work and research and time and money. It's hard to get them published. Incidentally, the reason why Budrys became a chicken farmer was because after the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania the funds were frozen and the consulate had no money. They were running the consulate without receiving any wages. They came up with this idea of running the chicken farm as a way of supporting the consular offices. Up until 1991 the prewar Consul General of Lithuania in New York was located in Budrys's rent-controlled apartment. I spent a lot of time in that apartment. There was a bedroom in the back that had been Budrienė's room, and it still had her bookcase of books and some of her things. That's where guests would stay.

Laima Vincé: Why were you so fascinated with Jonas Budrys?

Antanas Sileika: Historically I have been interested in people who appear out of nowhere. I was interested in Józef Piłsudski, who was a Polish bank robber, but when Poland is on the verge of being taken over by the Red Army he takes over the army themselves and drives the Red Army so far out that they are scared into signing a peace treaty. Who was Piłsudski? He was nobody. It's just like in my novel, *Woman in Bronze*. Who were those people who became famous artists? People like Lipchitz. Who was he? The Jewish son of hotel owner who goes to Paris and becomes a world class sculptor. Wow. So, these people appear from nowhere. There is a saying in English: Comes the moment, comes the man. Here is a crisis in Lithuania and they need somebody, and that man appears. I'm fascinated by people who step into these roles. Think of Lech Wałęsa. The guy climbs the fence from the factory and takes over and becomes a leader. These people fascinate me.

Laima Vincé: Why did you decide to set *Provisionally Yours* in the interwar period?

Antanas Sileika: It's all about the character. The character was right there in the 1920s. It's frequently said that a film cannot contain as much information as a novel, but a novel, similarly cannot contain as much information as a

memoir. So, what I needed to do with that memoir was to cut significant sections from it and then decide what would be the dramatic moments. Budrys's memoir, however, did contain enough for me to make a novel out of it. Sometimes things catch my attention, and I don't know why. Among other things, I became fascinated with a book by Tadas Ivanauskas, the great biologist, the founder of the Kaunas Zoo. I read his book, *Aš apsisprendžiu* about his childhood in the manor where he grew up. His nature writing is as beautiful as the nature writing of Czeslaw Milosz in his memoir. It's outstanding evocative writing. As I was writing, *Provisionally Yours*, I knew I had to recreate the manor house in which Tadas Ivanauskas had grown up. He carefully constructed this place and described all his animals, specimens. I wrote an entire chapter based on the house Tadas Ivanauskas grew up in. I wrote the chapter thinking I'd probably have to throw it in the garbage because God only knows what I'd do with it. I don't write from a plan. I find my way as I write. Then I discovered that this manor house is critical because it is the place where the entire novel comes to its culmination. The process is somewhat mysterious to me. I'm reading widely, I'm listening to voices, I'm trying to imagine places, that I don't quite know what I'm going to do with. And then suddenly it rises up. Similarly, there was an American diplomat named Robert Heingartner who was the representative of the United States in Kaunas in the 1920s. In the novel I call him Wooly. I met his granddaughter at one of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies conferences. In his memoir, he comes across as a very fussy man, as if he belonged to gentry. He had chronic sinusitis. All he could talk about in his memoir was his nose and how horrible Kaunas was. I thought, this guy deserves a kick in the pants. So, I rename him Robert Wooly, put him into my novel and I have him talk about his nose all the time. People laugh about his nose, and then someone sleeps with his wife. So, that was my, "I'll show you."

Laima Vincė: I'm beginning to see your process here. You enjoy reading about these historical characters, writing about them, and giving them a character twist rather than trying to recreate them as they actually were.

Antanas Sileika: In my first memoir, I wrote about how when Lithuania didn't exist on the map, I felt as though I didn't exist. That's partially why I became a writer, in order to exist. So, before Lithuania was independent, you had to make Lithuania exist somehow, or remind the world of Lithuania's existence. But now Lithuania is on the map. It exists. So, what comes next? So, what comes next is how these tales of how its existence illuminate the human condition in this strange place where these where terrible things happened on a small stage. Lithuania was trapped between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. As you know, many dramatic things happened there, and many beautiful things too.

Laima Vincė: I'd like to talk about setting as character. Kaunas becomes a character in the novel. In the thirties, it was an Art Deco city, elegant, glamorous, anybody who is anybody was in Kaunas. How do you bring Kaunas alive as a writer?

Antanas Sileika: There are a few things operating at the same time. My mother went to university in Kaunas. She was from Šiauliai, but when she talked about being a student in Kaunas, she talked about it like a very cool place. I always imagine myself in those places. What would it have been like if I had been there. Beyond that, I'm not only fascinated by the characters but by the mood of the places that are brought up. Therefore, Kaunas, wow, Kaunas. I read a lot of histories of Kaunas, not narratives. It was a place where water was still being brought up from the river. There's no central water system, there's no central electrical system. There were only five automobiles in Kaunas after the First World War. At the time, Kaunas was considered a hardship posting for an American diplomat. Yet for my mother, who came from Šiauliai, it was the big city, it was like Manhattan. Everything you ever wanted is there.

I'm always looking for details. In Budrys's memoir, there is a part where he walks in a park that's located behind the Soboras, just up a hill. He talks about opening up a green gate. So, a few years ago, I went there and found that same green gate. I opened it and thought, "Wow, this is fantastic." After 80 years the same green gate was still there. It's also interesting to see how much Kaunas has changed. When Budrys was first there in the 1920s, it was not yet that beautiful Art Deco city, that comes later in the 1930s when the money starts to roll. The mood is important. Budrys and the American diplomat give you the mood of Kaunas as a happening place.

Laima Vincė: But people lived in a dream world blocking out what was happening in Germany and in Russia.

Antanas Sileika: People hardly ever know what's going on in the world.

Laima Vincė: Every writer dreams of seeing their characters and their story coming alive on the screen, but at the same time they dread it, because what if it's made into a mess. What did it feel like on the night of the premiere to sit in the theater and to see your characters come to life on the screen?

Antanas Sileika: I never expected a film to be made out of anything I wrote. I did have two years of options on *Underground*, but that didn't pan out. Interestingly, I wrote *Provisionally Yours* in the manner of Graham Greene and he wrote a lot of film scenarios and was noted for his scenarios as much as his novels. So, I imagine this caught the attention because in 2020, just days before the close down with the pandemic, Audrius Sorosevičius asked me to come meet with Alvydas Šlepikas and Rolandas Skaisgiris, and they said they wanted to make a film and a television serial out of *Provisionally Yours*. I was shocked. I never thought about it. Then Covid began and the producer handed me the contract through an open window. Then what happens is nothing. I thought because of Covid the project was over, but then in the spring of this year I was in Lithuania in April and May, and I found out that the film was a go, and the film and the serial were half shot already. I couldn't have been more surprised. They took me down to a shoot, and I met the director, Ramūnas Rudokas, and I was flabbergasted and delighted to see that this was going on. First, I didn't expect it would happen, and then when they said it would happen, I didn't think it would happen, and then it happened.

Laima Vincė: What did it feel like when all of a sudden the lights went down and you saw your characters up on the screen?

Antanas Sileika: Even before, when the ads came up across Vilnius and I saw the actors in the roles of the characters in the ads, I found them too young and too beautiful. Once the film began to roll, I saw them differently. My friends said to me, "Your problem is that you're too old." I knew ahead of time because I wasn't involved in the screenplay that the film would be different. And sure enough, the film is vastly different from the novel. Number one, it is much more of a thriller, more violent, much faster. There are scenes that have been added, like a torture scene for example, an execution which didn't exist in the novel. And then there were things that were left out, like the end of the novel, which could be a sequel. It was completely different. But little details amused me. I'd referred to Justas Adamonis, the Budrys character, as the James Bond of Lithuania. So, there's a scene in the film where they ask him who he is and in a James Bond style he answers, "Adamonis, Justas Adamonis." It was hilarious! All the names are the same as the characters in the novel. In the novel, one of the major threads is that the geopolitical threat comes from Poland, but in the film the threat comes from Soviet Russia. Who could care or imagine that Poland could have been a major threat now. So, these are dramatic changes. I had a great time. I knew that it was

going to be different, but at times the film was so different that I could not follow the plot. There was a lot of plot action, and it took me a while to catch on, so I guess that was my only hesitation. I was delighted. Also, the cinematography was outstanding. They used a lot of new technology.

Laima Vincé: What are your thoughts about AI technologies as a writer? Do you feel threatened by AI, or do you think it could be a useful tool for writers?

Antanas Sileika: I feel that I'm an anachronism to begin with. All these things will happen regardless of what I think, so I don't feel threatened, but I feel quite the opposite, I feel surprised and delighted that I exist. If anything of mine gets published and people react to it, I'm thrilled. AI generation is one thing but self-published books are proliferating in Canada. There is a great flurry of activity, but my problem is that there are so many books that I can't get to. By the way, here's a book I'm reading that's outstanding; it's *Baltieji prieš juodosius* by Danute Kalinauskaitė. I can barely keep up with all the great books I want to read, so when it comes to AI and self-publishing I wonder who has the time to sift through all this stuff.

Laima Vincé: People cannot sustain their concentration long enough anymore.

Antanas Sileika: Also, age is an issue. Writers of my generation have found that the ability to fall deeply into a novel becomes less easy to do as one ages. Nonfiction is always easier than the novel because the novel requires more of the brain. Nonfiction never has the complexity of a good novel.

Laima Vincé: Tell me about your new work?

Antanas Sileika: I had a novel come out last March in Canada called *Some Unfinished Business*. It's being translated into Lithuanian right now and will be published by Baltos Lankos. It will be launched at the Vilnius Book Fair this February. It begins with the story of Kostas Kubilinskas and with the partisans. It touches on the Holocaust. It touches on the book repository story. It ends in Vilnius in the late 1950s. I am shopping around a novel right now called *The Seaside Café Metropolis* which is inspired by the memoirs written by people who shared their reminiscences of the café Neringa in Vilnius. That's a hotel I stayed at during my first visit in 1975. I was further inspired by the film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. So, in the manner of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* I've written the novel about a Bohemian restaurant where all the coolest people hang out while the KGB listens in from a microphone in the breadbasket. I based the characters on *La Bohème*, which is actually based on a novel on Bohemian life in the Latin Quarter, and I put my four young Bohemians into my seaside café Metropolis. Then I took various historical stories from Lithuania, like Vitas Luckus the photographer who stabbed his friend to death and jumped out of a window and various other Lithuanian incidents and put them all into this café, which is darkly comic. That's being shopped now, but in Lithuania they are looking at it already before I've published it in Canada.

Some Unfinished Business

Antanas Šileika

A novel published in Canada in March of 2023. It was inspired by the lives of Kostas Kubilinskas, Lioginas Baliukevičius, Antanas Ulpis, Ona Šimaitė, Kazys Jakubėnas and other historical Lithuanian figures. The Lithuanian translation of this novel will be published by Baltos Lankos in 2024 and launched at the Vilnius Book fair.

Dedicated to the residents of Lyn Lake (Lynežeris), living and dead

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Pažaislis Monastery Asylum

Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania, 1959

Martin gingerly set his knapsack on the stone floor and winced at the clinking it made despite his care. He listened for a moment, but there was no other sound or movement in the gloom of the church. He looked up.

High in the cupola's frescoes, the Virgin Mary was being crowned and an orchestra of angels played lutes, harps, and cymbals. Other angels, from seraphim to cherubim, spilled across the heavens and the many martyrs displayed their wounds. But the light was poor and the heavens were very far above. It was hard to make out finer details.

This milling crowd of saints and sinners peering down from the frescoes in the dome of the church tended to frighten any patients who appeared below. Even a healthy mind might have trouble with this kind of divine display and scrutiny. If the uneasy souls below had demons in them, those devils became restless and began to squirm, precipitating tremors in some and shrieks of fear and rage in others.

Even simple depressives and neurotics could not resist looking and suffering the kind of moral vertigo an inexperienced alpinist suffered by looking down. As a result, none of the troubled internees could be allowed into the old baroque church of the former monastery. Far better to close that door and use the old church only for storage.

In any case, these days the heavenly hosts didn't pay much attention to what went on below. Those on the ground had to settle their own affairs now, to determine what was a sin and what was not, and to apportion reward or punishment on a scale with variable weights.

Martin had stumbled into the place while searching for a certain patient. Obviously, he wasn't in here. The rest of the former monastery complex was a useful sanatorium for its dozens of cells among several wings. The massive wooden doors and high walls contained the troubled and murmuring invalids, each assigned to a particular wing for those with a particular affliction.

Martin stood in the dim light of the church and surveyed the storage boxes, old beds, broken chairs, and stacks of manila folders bulging with histories of psychosis and tied up with black ribbons. Outside, it was a spring evening, and up at this northern latitude it would still be light for very long. Not inside the church, though. Here came only cycles of perpetual dusk followed by darkness.

Martin wore sturdy working men's clothes and a short-billed cap on his head because he had lost his hair in a fever in the gulag. He was only twenty-six. Some of the years had been difficult and made him look older, but he had borne a great deal and come out stronger for it. Others had broken, but he refused to break.

The Pažaislis Monastery was a convent no more, its nuns evicted and scattered in 1948. The Soviets went about their activities: closing the monasteries, confiscating the farms, taking away the businesses and shipping off streams of men, women, and children in a river of humanity to the far reaches of the massive prison state. The Komi Republic, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, and other locations were very far away from the newly-annexed, formerly-independent state of Lithuania.

Now Pažaislis was a crumbling asylum near Kaunas, a place where the mentally unstable were kept in the cells of former nuns who were making their precarious way as unmarried women in the Soviet world. Where once there was prayer, now there was madness. The grounds were walled to contain it, albeit imperfectly, and the madness pooled here and there and bled out everywhere, and after a while, it didn't even feel like madness any longer, just the way of life in this country.

Such an unhappy place in such an unlucky country! First came the Soviets in 1940, arresting and deporting and leaving a trail of murdered bodies as they fled before the Nazis in 1941. Then came the many tens of thousands of deaths, mostly of Jews, killed by the Germans and their local collaborators. In 1944, the Soviets returned. Those who could, those with a little education, fled west. Those caught behind had to adapt or resist. Resisters were doomed to die eventually, but those who chose to adapt were sometimes lucky. Many times not.

The asylum was not all that far from Vilnius, but it had taken Martin a day of hitching rides and then walking out to the countryside near Kaunas under light rain. He was wet, but as a former farm boy and prisoner was not greatly inconvenienced by a little bad weather. His backpack was heavy and its contents were fragile, but he had once returned across all of Russia with more weight than this.

It had not been easy to find the man he was looking for, but the gentle library director back in Vilnius seemed to know just about everything there was to know about everyone in the small country.

"No one likes to talk about Kostas much," said Director Stonkus, studying the spine of a Polish volume bound in leather. Many subjects were too risky to talk about. Silence was safest. The Lithuanians even had a saying, about the virtues of silence. *Tyla gera byla* — silence is the best defence. Maybe the idea was never to be noticed at all, to behave like a mouse and to lose the squeak.

It was a sign of the director's regard for Martin that he spoke at all about the private life of the esteemed Kostas.

"His drinking was completely out of hand. You saw him here that day when you were married, but that was nothing compared to what came later. He couldn't go out to children's events any more. He sat at the bar in the commissary in the basement of the Writers' Union all day long. Even his wife couldn't lure him home. His skin turned yellow. I expected his liver to explode at any moment. It still might, with what he put it through. And worst of all, he started to talk all sorts of nonsense after he'd been drinking for a while."

Director Stonkus stopped there like a man who decided he had said too much. Like Kostas, he had violated the rule of silence and now seemed to regret it. One must never talk too much in the Soviet Union, unless on certain subjects. Stonkus opened the book and began to read it silently, but Martin could not let it go at that.

“So Kostas is still down there at the Writers’ Union Bar?”

Stonkus looked up at him, exasperated. “Mr. Kostas is recovering in a rest home near Kaunas and I am sure the whole nation wishes him quick recovery from his illness so he can return to his valuable work.”

Pažaislis was not an ordinary drunk tank. A man of Kostas’s stature received the best treatment, and the Pažaislis rehabilitation facility was intended for party members. But even the best rehab centre in the Soviet Union had only a mouldering former nun’s cell where the man was locked in a room between injections and cleanings in order to shout, tremble, and weep his way through his withdrawal.

The asylum was imperfectly restricted territory. There were walls, but they were in poor repair and easily breached in several places. There was a doorman at the front gate, but he went for walks and napped right in his chair. It took a while for Martin to get his bearings once he was inside.

The night shift orderlies in the lunchroom didn’t care who Martin was. They told him the cell doors were locked for the night. These men were thuggish but corruptible, and one bottle of vodka was all it took to find out where Kostas was and that the windows on the ground floor of his wing were barred with hinges and clasps on the outside. After all, no one expected anyone to break *into* one of those rooms.

“Lights out” was more an aspiration than a reality in this northern climate, where the summer sky was barely willing to darken at ten in the evening. Only a skeleton crew stayed behind for the evening and night, and part of that crew could be counted upon to be sitting at the night station with a bottle of vodka. Given Martin’s donation, they now had a second one, and besides, it was Saturday night and no important administrators would be showing up the next morning. The orderlies saw no relationship between their own drinking and that of the recovering alcoholics in their cells.

The evening was still bright, but it didn’t really matter because there were no guards patrolling the property. Martin made his way through the yard past broken farm machinery unused for a very long time, a rusted-out Studebaker truck, one of the many given to the Soviets by the Americans during the war.

He made his way across the unkempt yard and peered through the window into the cell. The walls had not been painted in a long time and what paint there was came flaking off. Kostas lay on his narrow cot with his eyes closed. He twitched like someone in a dream remembering a blow or an insult. Martin smeared a little grease to loosen the pin that held the bars shut and a little more on the hinges. The metal still squeaked as he opened the bars. He pushed open the window, set his heavy bag inside, and then climbed in.

Kostas had turned on his side, and his eyes were open as he watched Martin reach back outside to pull the bars shut. Kostas’s greying hair had been cut short in the hospital, but the widow’s peak was still there. His skin was a ghastly shade of yellow that showed the damage to his liver, and his eyes were watery. He wore a stained, grey smock over underclothes.

“Close the window too,” said Kostas. “The place is drafty.” The room contained a chair and a small table with a pitcher of water on it and a tin cup. There were two buckets at the end of the bed, but thankfully, these were both empty.

“You don’t seem surprised to see me,” said Martin. “Do you know who I am?”

“I have no idea.”

“But I remember you all too well,” said Martin.