A “Forgotten” History of Soviet Deportation: The Case of Lithuanian Jews

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Introduction

Liuba Segal (b. 1927) was almost 14 years old when uniformed men took her from her home in the town of Utena, Lithuania. Her family was given thirty minutes to pack their things, and then were loaded into a lorry and driven to an unknown destination. Liuba had just completed her third and last year of pro-gymnasium (junior high school), but was not present to receive her diploma at the graduation ceremony which took place later that day on Saturday, 14 June 1941. Liuba came from the lower middle class family of a carpenter who operated a small workshop with his cousin and young son Bencel, Liuba’s older brother, deported together with her and both parents.

That same night another girl of about the same age, Dalia Grinkevičiūtė (1928–1989), was taken from her home in Kaunas along with her brother, mother and father. She came from a family of middle class teacher in Kaunas who was also a member of Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union. Dalia and Liuba were put on different trains but after a long and excruciating journey through the vast Siberian expanse, they ended up at the same camp in Trofimovsk, an uninhabited island on the icy shores of the Laptev Sea. It was one of the harshest settlements in the entire system of Soviet special settlements, north of the Arctic Circle. One third of those banished to this place died during the winter of 1942. Dalia and Liuba survived the hunger and the cold and became friends.

1 Liuba Segal, Interview by Violeta Davoliūtė, Netanya, Israel, 24 April 2015.
2 In 1939, Bencel joined an underground Communist Youth League (Komsomol). However, this did not save his family from deportation by the Soviets, since his father was accused of being a large-scale store owner “with annual turnover of 300,000 litai.” It took 11 years to secure official recognition that their deportation was a mistake – Liuba’s father Leiba Segal had been confused with another person with the same name. File on Segalis, Leiba Leizerio, Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas (LYA), f. V-5, ap. 1, b. 40779.
By then, they had both lost their fathers, who were separated from their families and sent to separate prison camps.4

The fact that Liuba came from a Jewish family and Dalia from an ethnic Lithuanian one had no bearing on their arrest, deportation or exile. They were deported because the Soviet regime classified their fathers as potential enemies of the state. However, differences of individual and collective identity would be significant at later stages of their displacement. Dalia and Liuba returned to Lithuania at different times, and both faced difficulties of reintegration. For Liuba, however, the murder of two of her sisters – those who were not deported and remained in Lithuania – in the Holocaust, along with her grandparents, friends, relatives and the entire Jewish community in her native Utena, radically conditioned her experience of return to Lithuania, her decision to leave for Israel, and indeed her entire apprehension of the experience of deportation.

Grinkevičiūtė became a dissident, and versions of her memoirs on her deportation and survival in Trofimovsk were smuggled abroad and published as samizdat in the 1970s. They were the first account of the deportation to be published openly in Lithuania, at the peak of the popular movement against Soviet rule in the late 1980s.5 Through her memoirs, and those of other Lithuanian deportees, which were widely read and discussed, the deadly winter of 1942 in Trofimovsk became part of a shared national memory, a key building block of the new post-Soviet Lithuanian identity.6 For many, Dalia and deportees like her became national icons, but Liuba Segal had, by this point, emigrated to Israel and took part in none of these developments.

The Segal and Grinkevičius families were deported in accordance with the long-established Soviet practice of using forced population transfers as a tool of social engineering.7 In this case, the objective was to secure the western borderlands of the USSR by “cleansing” the newly occupied territories of potentially non-loyal elements. The Soviet Union had invaded the Baltic States

4 Liuba’s father died in 1942 and Dalia’s father in 1943, both of starvation.
5 The first published reference to Grinkevičiūtė’s experience of deportation was in 1988, in an article written by a popular Soviet Lithuanian writer and public figure Justinas Marcinkevičius. This publication opened the public debate about deportations in Lithuania (Justinas Marcinkevičius, “Reabiliuota – 1970 metais,” Literatūra ir menas, 18 May 1988, 2–3).