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Konstancija Brazeniene. *Just One Moment More... The Story of One Woman's Return from Siberian Exile.* Boulder: Columbia University Press, 2007. 251 pp. $63.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-608-6.

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Red Tape, Tenacity, and Faith

This is a collection of letters written mostly by Konstancija Brazeniene to her children during the period 1944-66. During Germany's occupation of Lithuania Brazeniene, who had been widowed in 1933, sent her daughters Vida and Nijole to Germany to pursue their educations. Her son Algimantas had joined the Lithuanian resistance against the Soviets in 1941, and subsequently fought for Germany. In her introduction, Brazeniene's daughter Nijole Brazenaite-Paranetto confusingly describes him as having "ended up a prisoner of war with the French" (p. 21) and later emigrating to the United States. Brazeniene's youngest son, Mindaugas, was drafted into the Wehrmacht, but saw no fighting according to his several letters included here. While in uniform he helped his mother save two children from the Kaunas ghetto in 1943, for which she was posthumously awarded a Yad Vashem "Righteous Among the Nations" medal. Shortly after the war Mindaugas died from exhaustion and illness at the age of 22.

In 1949, at the age of 57, Brazeniene was deported along with thousands of other Lithuanians to Siberia. Her official crime (which the text does not make clear) seems to have been allowing the resistance to use her home as a weapons cache during the Soviet occupation that began in 1940. The point is more explicitly made that authorities punished her because of Nijole's marriage to partisan leader Juozas Luksa-Daumantas, though Brazeniene reportedly knew nothing of this marriage until after Daumantas's death. She was repatriated in 1956, but never politically rehabilitated. Officially remaining an enemy of the state, she had her house seized and was forced to shelter with friends and relatives in Kaunas.

Brazeniene spent the next ten years writing to her surviving children, who were by then in the United States or Australia, and coordinating efforts to win permission to join them. These efforts led to then vice president Richard Nixon and congressmen Charles Kersten and John McCormack championing her cause, but in the end, only a $1,000 bribe paid to apparatchiks by Lithuanian-American journalist Salomeja Narkeliunaite enabled Brazeniene, in 1966, to join Nijole's family in the US, where she died four years later.

Because almost all Brazeniene's letters were written under censorship, the amount of information they con-

vey is limited, and most of the above information is to be found in Nijole's introduction and notes. Among the more interesting letters are those Brazeniene and Mindaugas wrote before 1949 and which indicate a surprisingly quotidian existence during this tumultuous period: Brazeniene urges her daughters to keep to their studies; Mindaugas describes his boring life behind the lines. Moreover, the book's subtitle is misleading. Brazeniene wrote only seven of the letters here while in exile in the village of Chuzhyr, on OlÂ´khon Island in Lake Baikal. (This reviewer spent several days there in March 2000, and reading her descriptions of the region's natural beauty and ice-fishing brought back pleasant memories. Had I known then that Chuzhyr was a former GULag site, my memories would probably now be different.) None of Brazeniene's Chuzhyr letters date before 1956, the year she was repatriated. Presumably she was not allowed to write, or perhaps any letters she sent never reached intended recipients. Whatever the case, they tell us relatively little about exilic life. She writes that in 1954 she was declared an invalid, and so was no longer required work. But does this mean she initially had to fulfil labor quotas? Intriguingly, she writes on 8 July 1956: "Over seven years I've lived in exile with a very small income and little help. Many people are surprised that being old and alone I managed to build myself a little house, not any worse than anyone else's. As soon as they released me, I sold the house, and now have 2000 rubles for my trip [to Kaunas]" (p. 58). But we learn no more about this house nor to whom she sold it. As with her brief reference to arriving in a cattle-car, these letters raise more questions than answers about her life in exile. Nor do they say much about returning from Chuzhyr, though Brazeniene does makes clear that like other GULag returnees she suffered discrimination following repatriation.[1]

Instead of a return from exile, three different themes distinguish this book: red tape, tenacity, and faith. Though they make for repetitive reading, Brazeniene's innumerable descriptions of her dealings with the government bureaucracy highlight the extent to which red tape plagued Soviet citizens. Apparatchiks' unresponsiveness and malfeasance were of course only exacerbated in the case of a non-rehabilitated state criminal, all of which makes Brazeniene's tenacity–the second theme–that much more remarkable. Her request for an exit visa was refused six times, but she refused to give up, so strong was her desire to join her family. However, this reclusive woman's letters, mundane as they are, also chart a harrowing psychological journey through periods of self-loathing and despair. Beginning in the late 1950s, the highly devout Brazeniene entered a long period during which she blamed herself for her situation. Having been refused a visa yet again, she writes: "I am a big sinner; I've done wrong, and I've angered God himself and Mary, Mother of God. I go from one sin to the next" (p. 141). This and other letters from this dark time suggest the extent to which the Soviet bureaucracy successfully created a panopticonic system wherein individuals punished and disciplined themselves for the failures of their government.[2]

Despite translator Laima Sruoginis's argument that these letters should be interpreted through a trope that is essentially that of tragedy, and which paves the way for his inappropriate use of the term "genocide" to refer to Stalin's mass deportations, what these letters actually reveal is a woman who believed that being able to reunite with one's children was a basic human right, and who accordingly refused to succumb to a sense of victimization. Her writings movingly demonstrate that her tenacity was primarily the result of her religious faith. As such, she calls to mind Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevskii, each of whom emerged from his banishment profoundly more devout than when he began it. But unlike that of these writers, Brazeniene's devotion did not post-date her exilic travails but rather encompassed them, and throughout her life saw her through war, Mindaugas's death, her children's absence, and her deportation and later mistreatment by authorities and neighbors, so that she was finally able to join Nijole's family.

Just One Moment More… is not a history of the depredations of the Stalin regime, though it contributes to such a canon of literature. Rather, it testifies to the human spirit's ability to rise above the mind-numbing effects of a despotic bureaucracy. Though not an especially informative or compelling read, it is recommended to those hoping to derive meaning from some of the 20th century's most dehumanizing events.

Notes

[1] Nanci Adler, *The Gulag Survivor: Beyond the Soviet System* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2002).

[2] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

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