

The Child of Ice

By Rasa Goštautaitė



Photo 1: Irena Saulutė with her brother Romualdas, 28 December 1930 in Kaunas, Lithuania.

Source: Lietuvos Liaudies Buities Muziejus

Irena Saulutė Špakauskienė's story is depicted in the Lithuanian documentary film *Children of the Ice* (*Ledo Vaikai*, directed by Inga Berulienė and Justinas Lingis, 2011).¹ On her deportation day in 1941, Irena was a 13-year-old girl. Despite her young age, she still recalls some memories of how her family was torn apart.

The soldiers, who stormed into her parent's house and told everyone to get up quickly and get ready to leave, lingered into her memory for long. Her father was sat on the chair in the middle of the room and had guns pointing at him. The children were quickly rushed out of their beds, without being given any time to collect their belongings. And thus, without food or adequate clothing, Irena's family was taken to the train station, where she and her mother bid the last adieu to their father.

Her father was separated, just like many other men, from his family and taken to Krasnoyarsk region, 7th Reshotii labour camp. In 1942, Irena's father was executed in the prison and her mother with the small children found herself completely alone in

¹ An extract of this documentary is available on 'Youtube'.

the Altai Mountains. However, they did not stay there long, and their next stop was far away in north Siberia, next to the Laptev Sea in Yakutia. Irena's and her mother's final relocation spot was the Trofimovk Island.

They were taken to this ice kingdom by trains and barges. Until the last minute their foot touched the snow at Trofimovsk Island, Irena firmly believed that her family would be saved and taken to America. Everyone hoped that through the Bering Strait, they would be taken to America; however, their route was heading in a different direction.

Frozen home

Irena recalls how the place they were taken to was completely deserted. There were no traces of any livelihood. They had to build their own shelters. Furthermore, it was extremely cold there. Even inside their shelters the temperature was oscillated between -6 and 0 degrees. Their shelter was a wooden yurt – a coffin of ice and snow, with iced floor, walls and ceilings.

Irena remembers how her hair would freeze on to her bed, how orphaned children would scratch ice from walls of their shelters, in order to fill their stomachs. She remembers herself always dreaming about getting bread. She would sit and think: “If someone right now would give me a whole carriage full of bread, would I still be hungry after eating all of it?” And then she would answer to herself – “Yes... I would still be hungry.”

Alone in the snow

The deportees were assigned with various tasks and children were not an exception. The little ones had to work 12 hours during the winter and 14 hours a day during the summer. They were given the slides and were asked to find a certain amount of wood. Like this, with an axe in one hand, and the slides' hanger in the other, children were sent into the white stretches of snow. For many, it was difficult to find their way back, especially, if they happened to be caught in the storm. Therefore, many would get lost and never came back. No one counted the lost children or knew their names. Big bags with dead children bodies lay next to the children barracks' doors; but no one knew the names of the children inside of them.



Photo 2: Children were given slides and had to find wood. Drawing by Rasa Goštautaitė.

Returning home as an orphan

In 1946, Irena's mother died from hunger. The same year, expeditions, which secretly took orphans and other children to Lithuania, were organised by Lithuanian benefactors. However, life was difficult there as well, as these children were forced to

hide from the government, otherwise they might have been deported again. Through many struggles Irena managed to establish herself in Lithuania and graduate from medical school as a paramedic. Later on, Irena worked in medical centres of various factories and as a guide in a tourism office. In 1960, Irena married an engineer, Stasys Špakauskas, with whom she raised one daughter.



Cemetery in Siberia, close to where Irena was deported. In 1989, she made a trip to find her mother's grave and rebury her body in Lithuania. In the front are memorials with inscriptions in Finnish, Lithuanian and Russian languages: "Separated from our land by force, tortured, but not forgotten."
(Source: Lietuvos Liaudies Buities Muziejus)

Nowadays, Irena, who is more than 90 years old today, works in the ethnographic Rumšiškės museum. A barrack, just like the one Irena used to live in Siberia, was reconstructed and built in Rumšiškės. Irena works here as a guide. In order to get to her workplace she has to wake up every day at 5 am in the morning. Then, she has to take the bus from Kaunas to Rumšiškės and from there, she walks three kilometers by foot to the barrack. She is pleased to work there, because she can pass her story on to the others.

An extract from the documentary *Children of the Ice* is available [here](#).

Sources:

Children of the Ice (Ledo Vaikai) directed by Inga Berulienė and Justinas Lingis, 2011.

Levickaitė, Inga; Samulionytė, Janina, Gyvasis tremties liudijimas Lietuvos liaudies buities muziejuje, <http://www.llbm.lt/parodos/Spakauskienesparoda/>, [accessed 11/08/2015].