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Essential Travel

Laima Vincė Sruoginis: On Empathy, Belonging, and Looking In from the Outside

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Fiction



Photo from a personal archive

ALINA

1946

I'm no partisan. Quite the opposite – I'm afraid of a lot of things. I avoid looking directly into a dog's eyes, never mind standing around gawking at fights or drunks brawling. I try to be as distant as I can from things. I wander around on the edge of forests and only go home as it's getting dark.

I can't open the shutters, I can't even light a candle. And that's because our house is no longer our house.

Nowadays the only place to be safe is in the woods, to wander around there, to talk with the crows and the sparrows, to commune with the tomtits and the clouds. That's why I'm drawn to go deeper into the woods – to try and endure these toxic times, to get away as far as possible from the occupation, the third in four years. First it was the Russkies, then the Germans, and now the Russians again. I even have a hideout – a place in the swamps. The Russian extermination battalions¹ don't come by here, just the odd deer or an old elk on its last legs. I've tamed a fox, and that's my life. I bring it food – it doesn't look well, perhaps it's sick. It's not in the least afraid of me. It's a poor sorry creature – like everyone else. Dreaming of escaping anything that demeans us both. Once this war is over. And there's not the least sign of that. The days are being counted not in hours and not by the sunsets or sunrises. They're counted by the number of corpses. There were nine the day before yesterday. In the Ūla River colored red. They were shot while crossing the river. Their bodies were then desecrated and piled one on top of the other.² They were instantly recognizable but stripped naked. They had been surrounded, none managed to escape.

Grigoriy Vasilych, a newly appointed major, was in charge of the operation. They call the killings search or clean-up operations. I found out where they're staying and who feeds them. One of them has Marè as a lover on the other side of the road. I'll have to get hold of some snake oil or something similar. I've got everything planned out already, and I'll meet up with Marè. Only not now, but later. We must make off with the bodies and bury them like human beings, covertly bringing a cart in which

to put the bodies after dark.

It's midnight, the guard is drunk and has gone off to Rutkauskas's place to warm up.

We quickly get hold of the bodies by their legs and their heads, one after the other, and put them in the cart. This time only two, Bear and Sorrow³ – more wouldn't fit. We take them to the cemetery and hurry to put them into the earth, just below the surface. There's no time to dig any deeper.

We go back to get the others, but there's already a commotion! The paramilitaries and the police are there – we can't get to the bodies. We pretend just to be looking and they immediately ask, "What, don't you know who they are, you bitches?"

"No, no, we've never seen them before."

We find a partisan's jacket behind a spruce tree. I recognize it as Kęstutis's. And two pairs of shoes. We construct a make-shift raft and put everything on it. We light a candle – a Thunder Candle⁴. And then we let the raft drift away, the shoes disappearing into the distance, towards the eternal, unoccupied sea.

Linden

1948

As the partisans were attacking Merkinė,⁵ we were having our Russian literature lesson. Vilis and I knew the attack was going to take place today, we just didn't know when exactly.

And here I am sitting in the second row, Vilis in the last one. We exchange glances, we're pretending to be studying. But what kind of studying could that be, especially on a day like today.

Vincas the newcomer is standing in front of the class reciting Mayakovsky, yesterday's homework.

*Lenin
Lenin
Lenin,
Lenin
Lenin
Lenin –
He lived and lives on.
He lived and lives on.
We wept tears of sorrow,
We carried his body to the mausoleum –
Only a small part of Lenin lay in the grave.*⁶

Blah blah blah, blah blah blah... It's enough to drive you crazy.

Someone at the back of the classroom farts – probably on purpose. Everyone starts laughing. Ivanauskas pays no attention to the farting. He's staring out the window, looking at the snowflakes.

Vilis being Vilis, makes fun of Vincas's Suvalkian accent.⁷ The class bursts into laughter again. Ivan wakes up from his snowflake reverie, thanks Vincas, and says children like this are the future of Soviet Lithuania.

Ivanauskas tells Vilis to go to the blackboard and recite the poem – but he doesn't know it. Not a word comes out of his mouth, and everyone starts laughing again. The teacher, with an impassive look on his face, gives Vilis a grade of two.

Then the first shot can be heard outside. The class falls silent. We all run to the window with Vilis rushing up and pushing us aside. I follow him and also push past to get closer to the window. In the yard we can see a Russian limping along with a trail of blood behind him. The partisans are coming from all sides, with the sound of shots ringing out.

Vilis points someone out and whispers, "Look, it's the Nameless One!"

Yes! The Nameless One is running along the street in front, followed by a group of our people, perhaps ten of them. The Nameless One gets down on one knee, fires a volley from his Czech automatic gun, then falls on to the snow by the side of the road. I can hear the bullets shattering the walls of the school building – it seems the Russkies are retaliating.

When the firing dies down, the Nameless One and the other partisans jump up and run to the shot Russky and grab his weapon. They run down the street towards the district offices, where thick clouds of smoke can be seen, mixing with the snowflakes and covering the whole street.

We look on as if spellbound: the Russkies are getting their butts kicked!

Ivanauskas runs up and tries to push us away from the windows: “Back to your seats, all of you, get away from the windows!”

I obey, but Vilis stays glued to the window, watching, all excited.

The teacher gets really angry, “I warned you... Kubilius, I’m going to get the head master.”

Ivan turns to go towards the door, but at that very moment, as if on purpose, shots can be heard again. This time hitting the school’s windows. The teacher drops to the floor and scrambles under the table. Vincas pushes Vilis to the floor, saying, “Get down, are you stupid or what?!”

“What are you doing to me?!” The boys start throwing punches at one another.

Lynx, the Nameless One’s right-hand man, a terrible womanizer and a real dandy, runs into the classroom. Even now, with a peacock feather stuck in his cowboy hat!

“Stand up, get in line, quiet!” he shouts. “Are you all alive?”

Vilis stands up and salutes him.

“What are you all doing here? Merkinė is free!” Lynx announces and points his pistol at Lenin’s portrait hanging above the blackboard. “Well, who’s going to smash Lenin’s face in?”

Vilis gestures with his eyes towards Ivanauskas hiding under the table. The partisan goes over to Ivan, bends down, and says, “Perhaps you, sir? Hurry up, there’s a lot of work waiting for us today.”

The teacher crawls out from under the table, climbs up on a chair, and on tiptoe reaches up for Lenin. While he’s taking the portrait off the nail, blood begins to gush from his nose! Lenin clatters to the floor and shatters into pieces!

At first, we wonder if Lynx has accidentally shot Ivan in the head. But no, out of fear Ivan has snot mixed with blood coming out of his nose.

At that very moment, the Nameless One bursts into the classroom and shouts at Lynx, “Stop this nonsense! Let’s go, we’re pulling back – the Russians are coming.”

He pretends not to know me and Linden. Only on the way out, he says, “Take care of yourselves, keep studying. Soon you’ll be needed to rebuild a free Lithuania.”

MAJOR GRIGORIY TITOV

1991

Now I am at peace – I lie amongst the moss and the flowers. In Antakalnis Cemetery,⁸ where at night the wind rustles the artificial flowers. I’m not at all angry. It’s strange that nothing is left. Neither the beliefs nor the convictions that were my steel rails – straight and strong. Leading to a bright tomorrow.

Where did all this come from? From my childhood. My mother would recite poems about Lenin even while she was brushing my hair and also did that before I went to bed. My father too, even before they took him away because of his love for German music, used to repeat, “Be a man, a Soviet man. Be a wall between us and them. Because they are leeches on the healthy body of our Motherland.”

I knew my calling from childhood: “To serve the Motherland! To fight our enemies! And to protect the future from darkness!” And if necessary to sweep them all away. To sweep away the bandits⁹ as well as their families – everyone who supported or helped them. Not a trace of the bourgeois nationalists would remain here.

We deported whole families, and when necessary, tore children away from their mothers and sent them to boarding schools or to families of decent communists. To be adopted and re-educated to become human beings. How else could one change these fascists? We deported them and wrote our reports. We did everything and anything that had to be done.

They also didn’t take pity on us, not one bit. How many times did I nearly die from being shot or poisoned? Something was put in my soup. My comrades flew me to Vilnius in a helicopter– barely in time. The doctors pumped through my every orifice and flushed out my insides. I could have died at any moment, anywhere. Secretly, I even yearned for that. If I were to die, let it not be like a dog or tied to a bed. Not in a care home, but with my head held high, like a soldier. With a weapon in my hands, with a flag and a song.

When everything finally came crashing down, when it all fell apart at the seams, some funny old guy with glasses, whose surname sounded like a swear word, started to speak on TV and announced a demonstration. My heart leapt – here it was, the opportunity! I was old, but I still had a voice, and I could raise a flag. A real revolution always begins with the first corpse, with the first hero, who falls but with his will unbroken. And that hero can be me!

We’re driving, we’re marching, we’re shouting – our Yedinstvo!¹⁰ My arms may be old, but they’re strong from my days at the front. And our women are as hard as rock.

Gathered at the Supreme Council, we were given a task – to break down the doors and drive out those fascists. They promised us that if even one of us were to fall, the tanks would come immediately. There were snipers on the roofs, and the Pskov special forces were ready too. All it needed was a spark.

And I yearned to be that spark.

The gates began to give way; it seemed victory was near – one of our men pushed his way in. Then another and after him a third. It’s true that with me being the closest, I heard the third one’s voice as the door was shutting: “Guys, don’t hit me...”

What a coward! We had agreed not to take even a single step back!

We tore the door open again, but instead of shots being fired, water was poured on us. Water as cold as ice from fire hoses.

I stumbled home after midnight, soaked through and with a cold.

One of my lungs was already weak, with a piece of shrapnel, right by my spine, there from the war. It started singing its own song. I felt things would turn out badly – I had a fever, chills, and shortness of breath.

I was shaking like a dog. I poured myself a glass of vodka – it had no effect. I had another glass – I felt even worse.

I lay down and covered myself with all the blankets I had, but the shaking only got stronger.

I began to gasp for air, but the strange thing was that I started to feel better. My lung stopped wheezing, and my mother came in. She was the same as always – smelling of farm soap and bread. She put her hand on my brow, and I began to feel better. It was as if there had never been any battles, no NKVD, no Dzukian forests, no Hungary, and no Vilnius. Only my childhood. There was a small apple in my mother’s hand. She said, “Taste it, Grishenka.”¹¹ Take a bite, my child, get stronger.”

I died before dawn. They found me several days later – the neighbors noticed the smell and called the authorities. They carried me out quickly, not showing me to anyone. My coffin was closed during the funeral.

And here I am now. At peace. Under a birch tree.

If anyone were to ask if I’d choose to live the same life, I’d say I don’t know. Perhaps not. Perhaps

I would've chosen less, but more. Perhaps I would've loved more, learned to bake an apple pie. One like my mother's – even Olenka couldn't, even though she tried.

EUGENIJA

2018

My name is Eugenija, I'm fifty-two years old. Today, like every day, I'm going to the intensive care unit to visit my husband. Sometimes my daughter Algè goes instead of me, but not often. She doesn't have any great desire to visit her father. That's how they've been since her childhood, distant from one another. Even though their names are the same.

I make dumplings at home, but I have a feeling that again he probably won't eat them. Again, I'll have to eat them myself. It's the third day he hasn't wanted to eat anything.

He can hardly walk, but despite that, he won't let anyone help him to go to the toilet. I've tried to go with him, but he simply won't let me. He even gets angry. He went on his own, leaving his walking sticks outside the door, and then I hear a crash. I run in and see my Algis lying in his faeces. He's hit his head.

I sit him down, clean him up, and take him back to his bed.

"D'you remember our journey to Lourdes?" I ask him.

He nods and closes his eyes.

I stroke his hair, slowly, gently. As if he wasn't my husband but a naughty child too exhausted to fall asleep.

"D'you remember how we got lost? Past Lyon. We went into the mountains, taking a shortcut, traveling along the winding roads. We were looking for a small hotel."

My Algis smiles, but his eyes are still closed.

"But there was no hotel, as bad luck would have it. Not even a motel. D'you remember how you were driving?"

He shakes his head.

"With one hand on the wheel." I start giggling for no reason. "And where was your other hand, hey? What are you going to say now, you good-for-nothing?"

My husband's face flushes a little, but only for a second, and soon pales again, his face adorned with light blue circles around his eyes.

"When I couldn't stand it any longer, you stopped the car, d'you remember? In your hurry you even ruined my jeans! No, not my jeans, I'm talking nonsense – my zipper. We made love in the dark, right by the car. Someone drove up to us, stopped, shone a light on us, but quickly drove off. You began laughing, remember? You couldn't stop, you had a laughing fit. And you got me laughing as well."

He's no longer smiling. I take his hand and put it on my chest.

Algis looks around, twisting his head on the pillow with difficulty to see if anyone's listening.

"We've got a room to ourselves, don't worry. Rest easy."

I go on whispering, "This is how it happened the first time round, with us laughing like lunatics. I'll never forget it."

He turns his head and presses his cheek against my wrist.

"You got our sleeping bags and said, 'This'll be our hotel. On the grass.' You didn't say 'hotel,' you used another word. A vulgar one. I liked you when you were like that. And when we got up in the morning, we saw a huge vineyard. Like in a film. Two eagles were gliding in the sky. D'you remember

who woke us up? Yes, the gray-bearded old man. We stayed on with him there, we made love while the old man kept bringing us wine. It seems to me we were there for three days, don't you remember that?"

He shrugs his shoulders.

"That young boy, he was probably the old man's grandson. A stand-in for the Little Prince. And there were sheep. Are you tired? I can keep quiet – if you want me to be, just nod."

My Algis nods. A nurse comes into the bay. She hooks up the IV, fingers the tube, and goes out without saying a word. You couldn't even hear her steps – it's as if she glided through the air.

"Are you in pain?" I ask and start to stroke his temples. Gently, with my fingertips, barely touching his long-unwashed grey hair. He shakes his head.

"I can stop massaging you if you don't like it, just tell me. Show me... In Lourdes, remember, you told me to go and bathe in the miraculous spring. In St. Bernadette's cave, in that grotto... I don't know if it really was miraculous, but it was very cold. Perhaps it was a little miraculous. Don't smile, I'm serious. There is one thing you don't know. A nun there told me to take all my clothes off, wrapped a towel around me, and showed me where to kneel – in the bath. They're made of stone, brr... Marble. She told me to pray in my own language – three Our Fathers and three Holy Marys. She then took me by my armpits, lifted me a little, and then lowered me into the water up to my neck. It was ice cold! I wanted to scream but nothing came out of my mouth – just croaks like a frog. It took my voice away. The nun said, 'Make a wish. God is listening to you now.' And I blurted out that I wanted a child even though I wasn't ready for it. It was simply the first thought that came to mind, seriously. But the doctors had said, you remember, that nothing would happen. After the operation we needn't take any precautions! They were wrong. I wondered if it was a miracle or not. What do you think? Because our dear Algè was probably already in my belly. Can you hear me? Are you still listening to me?"

I put my head on his chest and listen – his heart seems to be beating. I glance at the monitor – the green snake is moving and wriggling.

"D'you want to sleep?"

I can hear a knocking at the door – it's Algè. Speak of the devil.

"How's dad?" she asks.

"The same... he can hear everything, and he smiles," I reply and turn back to look at him. "We were just talking about you."

Algè sits down on the side of her father's bed and takes his hand.

"I'll stay on, you can go, get some rest," she says to me.

"I'm fine, I might just run to the toilet."

"Take your time, you don't have to run. Get some coffee from the machine."

I get up and tiptoe to the door.

When I get back, he's already asleep. The only sound to be heard is that of the monotonous drip, drip sound of the IV – it's impossible to make out if it's in the ward or somewhere else. Perhaps it's the rain.

"You can go, there's nothing for you to do here at night," I say to Algè. "Go home."

"And what about you?"

"I can sleep here if I need to. I'm used to it."

The doctor had got me a foldaway bed, and it's in the nurses' room folded up. I go and get it, put it up, and lie down when I get sleepy.

Algè kisses dad on his forehead and tiptoes out.

After she closes the door, there's a deafening silence for a couple of minutes until there's an

annoying beeping sound. I turn to the monitor – the green cursor is no longer moving. There's only a red light flashing.

They'd told me we still had a couple of days left...

I sit down and begin to grieve even though we had long prepared for this. We had even agreed that I shouldn't cry. He would go first and prepare a place for us. We had agreed that we wouldn't bury him separately, but both of us together. Later, after both our ashes had been put into the same urn.

"Go, don't be afraid." I take his hand and kiss it.

VILIS

2019

We're walking along the beach, Saulè and I. The wind is blowing in from the sea. She's carrying a bucket, I'm not carrying anything. I'm just watching where I step. I'm no longer steady on my left leg. We're collecting stones. We discuss each one.

"This is a dinosaur skull, but half of it has been bitten off," she says.

"Who bit it off?"

"Fangy Wingy."

"And who's that?"

"Someone who flies around. And has very sharp teeth."

"And why did it bite off the dinosaur's head?"

"Because the dinosaur was bad. And you can do that to bad creatures."

"Who told you that?"

"I saw it in a film."

I nod. Saulè throws the dinosaur into her bucket. She throws it in and forgets about it.

"What are we going to do with all the stones?" she asks.

"We'll throw them out on our way home. We'll mark the way."

"Why?"

"So we can find our way back tomorrow."

"Won't the birds eat the stones up?"

"No, they won't. Nobody eats stones."

"On the way back?"

"Yes."

"But why do we need to know the way back?"

"Because there isn't any other way to get there," I say. "We always come back here."

"Where?"

"To see if I've gone off course. Before I forget everything. I'm afraid to lose my memory. My memory is already somewhere far away. The winged creature has eaten it. A lot has changed. Sometimes you don't know if what you remember actually happened or if you made it up. A picture that you've made more beautiful or perhaps the opposite – uglier."

"Have you ever shot anyone?" Saulè asks.

“Where did you get that idea from?”

“Mum said you fought. In a forest.”

“That’s not the question you should be asking. It would be better for you ask if I met the person I’d be very happy with.”

“Did you?”

“I did. You. And not just you. I met a lot of people like that. Your granny Marija was also one of them.”

“Were you sad?”

“When I thought too much about things, I was. I then tried not to think.”

“And now?”

“Now I can think.”

Saulè and I find the longest sticks we can and draw zigzags in the sand. Loops, mazes. I draw them and she walks along them. After that we switch. Now I limp along the paths she’s drawn. She laughs. Until we get too tired. She picks up her bucket with the dinosaur’s head still in it. She climbs up onto the dune.

“Draw a pig!” she shouts. “A big one.”

I draw one. Three circles, one inside the other – the nostrils, the head, and the body. Dots for the eyes and triangles for the ears. Hooves. A curly tail.

“Well, how’s that?”

“You always draw the same one.”

“I don’t know how else to do it. Come here, you can help me”

“How am I going to help you?”

“Pigs like pearls. We can decorate it with some of your stones.”

She looks at me seriously.

“That’s a hog and not a pig. Hogs don’t wear pearls.”

“Where did you get that from?”

“From wherever,” says Saulè, jumping down from the dune. She runs up and draws a moustache and a beard on the pig.

We both look at it. The sea is roaring. The hog is looking at us.

Essential Travel

21 May 2026
Reflections on Belonging



In the spring of 2020, my mother Vida and the other residents of her Toronto nursing home were sitting ducks when the virus arrived. Close living quarters and daily, intimate contact with dozens of caregivers put everyone at risk for contagion. We didn't understand exactly how the new virus was transmitted and researchers had not yet developed vaccines or reliable treatment for it.

On March 18, 2020, a Canadian air travel ban came into effect. Next, on March 21, 2020, the Canadian land border closed to all non-essential travel. What's more, as of March 13, 2020, Ontario nursing homes had banned visits, including from family members, except in end-of-life circumstances. Seven years earlier, I had accepted a rare faculty position at a large public university in Missouri, situating my mother a thirteen-hour drive and a border crossing away from my then home. Even had I been able to get to Ontario and self-isolate successfully (in a friend's basement or in a hotel I couldn't afford, for example), I still would have been barred from seeing my mother. She and I were stuck on opposite sides of the border. So, I stayed put. From a country away, I worried about Vida, while also trying to create a safe and healthy space for my own family of three. My husband, son, and I cooked, exercised, and scheduled entertainment together every evening. The child attended class at the kitchen table, while I taught graduate seminars and writing workshops from my home office. We hoped it would all blow over by summer.

But soon, things worsened significantly. My mother's longtime doctor called with news that Vida had tested positive for Covid-19. Aside from fear, what I most clearly remember feeling after that phone conversation was a sense of confusion. By then, my mother had been widowed for some thirty years. She was also an orphan; her parents having long passed. Only my brother and I remained for her. *What do I do if she dies?* I asked. Doctor G. paused. *What do you mean?* he said. *I mean...what happens? Who will take care of her?* Even now, I'm not sure what exactly I was asking, but the idea of my mother dying alone and so far from me felt impossible. I couldn't get my head around it.

Looking back, I find I can no longer place precisely when the doctor's call came, so I search my email for his name. I find a message I wrote on April 18, 2020, a day after his call. My message records the sense of rage and helplessness my brother and I felt as we inquired after our mother's well-being from afar. He and I talked about the terrifying possibility of her going on a ventilator. We worried about pain. I had nightmares about her gasping for breath.

More than nineteen years ago, I collected a series of boxes from Vida's storage locker in the basement of her Toronto condominium building. She was still relatively young then, but her multiple

sclerosis had progressed beyond what we could manage at home, so it was time to move. After four years of touring facilities and joining waiting lists, she'd accepted a spot in her first choice of care homes. Almost everything in her already pared down apartment now needed to go. For days on end, I boxed, tossed, and piled her belongings for donation to the church bazaar. By the end of it all, I'd developed a case of stress hives and no longer had the strength to sort through her trove of old photos and documents. I taped up what was left and moved it all to my Montreal apartment, unsorted. It was early in my career, and we academics must go where the jobs are, so for more than a decade, the sealed packages moved with me from apartment to house to house. I finally opened them one Missouri pandemic-era afternoon in 2021, once I'd run out of things to bake and plant.

In one box, I found a record of my grandfather Vincas's journey from East to West. Vincas was Vida's father, and his name is pronounced "Vintsas," [ˈvɪntsəs] with a c said like *tsar*. The documents included his passport, issued in 1922 by the Republic of Lithuania, during the country's first modern-era independence period (1918–1940). Next, I found a wage booklet from the Tuberculosis Dispensary in the city of Marijampolė, where Vincas had worked as chief physician between November 1943 and February 1944. At that time, the country was under Nazi occupation, so the booklet is printed in both German and Lithuanian. I found a German driver's license, issued in 1946, and tucked inside it, a stub from the Medical Council of Canada. It seems to be a receipt of sorts from an exam that Vincas had taken in 1951, presumably for his Canadian medical certification. Finally, I came across a yellowed CV, where he had reproduced the October list of successful exam candidates. His name appears among them.

A lung specialist, my grandfather spent the bulk of his career treating tuberculosis patients. He'd studied medicine in the interwar capital of Lithuania. A photograph shows him with eight other young men and three women gathered around a table. My grandfather stands in the right-hand side of the photograph. He is the only one of the eleven who looks directly at the camera. Before them lies a cadaver. Almost nothing remains of the body except bones. Those seated appear to work on it with scalpels, though I suspect the image was staged. On the back, a label reads, "Kaunas, 4-III-1926." So, Vincas is twenty in this photograph and finishing his first year of medical school. His training then took him to Vienna, where he specialized and learned x-ray diagnostic skills in 1938 and 1939, during Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria, and finally back to Lithuania, just in time for war to arrive there.

His wife, my grandmother, was Verutė, pronounced [vɛˈrʊtɐ:] or "Veh-ruh-tay," but with a flat final vowel sound that's hard for English-speakers to reproduce; it's a diminutive form of Veronika, her full name, which she hated and never used. She, Vincas, and my mother Vida, eight at the time, fled Lithuania in 1944. They ran ahead of the Soviet front, escaping an occupation that would last until 1990. My grandmother once told me that she had buried a piece of precious clothing in a chest behind the back door of their home, believing they would return soon. She was mistaken. More than four decades passed before she made it back to visit. My grandfather, however, never returned. To my surprise, I discover that immediately after the war, he'd worked for the Allies, overseeing the treatment of displaced tuberculosis patients in the Munich region. Among the papers were letters of recommendation he'd carried from Germany to Canada.

It was Verutė who impressed on me just how much the world had changed in Vincas's and her lifetimes. Both had been born under the Tsar, and both had been children (she seven and he twelve) when Lithuania finally shook off the Russian Empire. Growing up, she said, cars had been rare and central heating nonexistent in Kaunas, a city known today both for its elegant and impeccably preserved art deco buildings and for a humorous grass-roots campaign that its citizens waged in 2014 to lobby for pothole repairs. (Kaunas residents photographed themselves in all weather, lounging by water-filled road craters. They wrapped themselves in beach blankets, perched at puddle edges, as if about to dive in, and sat by the grimy water with fishing poles, looking expectant.) Verutė had met the dashing young doctor Vincas, at the Kaunas hospital, where she'd worked as a nurse—they'd met in the venereal disease laboratory, she'd specify with a laugh.

One of a few concrete memories I can conjure of my grandfather includes fishing on Ontario's Little Lake Papineau, where our family spent weeks every summer. My parents had bought a tiny off-grid cabin on an equally tiny island. My brother, parents, and I all slept in one room. Vincas and Verutė had beds in the boathouse down by the water. From our rowboat, we sometimes caught big fish—bass and pike—but our bounty was mostly sunfish, too small and bony to bother with normally, but Vincas let us keep our catch. We'd bring them back to the island where Verutė cleaned and fried them up for breakfast.

Cottage days were languid. My parents sunbathed naked on the sand, while I ran around in my mother's old t-shirt worn as a dress belted with a piece of rope. We swam, read books, and picked the wild blueberries that blanketed our island. My mother baked pies. At night, my father would take out a shortwave radio by the big stone fireplace, and we listened to Radio Vilnius, whose signal reached us over the Iron Curtain and across the Atlantic. The Soviet-era cadence sounded strange to my ears, so unlike my grandparents' gentle speech. I could barely discern where familiar words began and ended. We were safe, healthy, and strong. At least for a while. A few years after that fishing memory, my

parents sold the island along with its cabin. They did so against my brother's and my pleas to reconsider. I still mourn its loss. Nothing was ever the same again.

The documents made me long to talk things through with Vincas. I wondered what wisdom he might have to offer. What parallels would he draw between the lungs he'd treated and ours? Between the infections he'd known so well and this new, mysterious one? Had people been more used to and therefore somehow sanguine about losing loved ones to contagion in his day? Was the protection of social isolation worth its cost?

Miraculously, or so it seemed to me, my mother survived her April 2020 infection. As far as any of us knows, she was only infected that once. And although she survived, the pandemic lockdown changed my mother irrevocably. For more than a year, her home's social activities, communal meals, religious services, physical therapy sessions, and visits from families and friends ceased entirely. Vida and her fellow residents were isolated to their rooms and cared for at arm's length, with minimal human touch, scant laughter, and no common life. Though we met by video call regularly, our encounters were hit and miss. Sometimes Vida appeared smiling and bright; at other times, she looked listless or fell asleep.

Around 2010, I interviewed my mother about her life and her illness. We talked in the library of the nursing home. She was still sharp and lucid then. My son was little, so he played on a blanket on the floor as I recorded the conversation. "It started one day at work," Vida told me. She had been a high school science teacher, and one day, as she was eating lunch in the staff room, half her face suddenly went numb. Many MS patients tell horror stories of endless tests and misdiagnoses, but Vida was the exception. Her diagnosis came without delay. "When they told me what it was," she said, "I thought, well, at least it doesn't kill you." She went on to describe effects that emerged over the years: double vision, fatigue, imbalance, and unresponsive limbs.

My mother lived with MS for some forty years. Curiously, she was, at once, both the illest and most robust person I've ever known. In addition to her long—what? I hesitate to say "battle"; it was more like a cohabitation, so yes—in addition to her long cohabitation with MS, she had breast cancer, osteoarthritis, Ogilvy syndrome and, eventually, dementia. But despite countless falls, she never broke a bone. Despite being wheelchair-bound, she had great blood pressure. And weirdest of all, my mother appeared to be almost immune to colds and flus. She never seemed to get sick, even with the bugs that circulated in the nursing home. Vida had a theory about why this was the case. She figured that MS had sent her immune system into overdrive and that it had become overzealous in its protection of her. For a long time, I accepted this theory without question and considered it a reasonable explanation for how she'd survived the virus so well. By contrast, other residents on her floor had died in the same wave. But Vida hadn't just survived; she seemed to have barely felt any Covid effects at all. When the nurses set up a videoconference link for me to talk to her back in that terrifying spring of 2020, my mother laughed and shook her head when I asked her if she was having trouble breathing. "I'm fine!" she said, and she looked it.

But as I've read and learned more about multiple sclerosis and its interaction with Covid, I've found that our theory falters. Medical consensus appears to posit that MS patients are more, not less, vulnerable to Covid mortality. But while digging into Vincas's life and career, I started to formulate a new hypothesis about my mother's apparently miraculous survival.

Tuberculosis is a bacterial infection that most commonly affects the lungs. It's been around for centuries and spread to epidemic levels in Europe in the eighteenth century. Before the advent of antibiotics, London was the global epicenter of tuberculosis. It was called variously the white plague (for the pallor of those who suffered its effects) or the storytellers' illness, because of the vast number of writers who contracted it. Anton Chekhov, D. H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Katherine Mansfield, Maxim Gorky, Jonas Biliūnas, Walt Whitman, Paul Éluard, Simone Weil, Alfred Jarry, and the Brontë sisters were all tubercular. Although tuberculosis has not been completely vanquished (in 2024, for example, some 10.7 million people fell ill with TB worldwide) nor is it part of our everyday lives the way it was for Vincas and Verutė. This is especially the case in North America, where we enjoy a very low incidence of TB.

At my kitchen table in Missouri, and more than ten years after my grandmother's death, I was surprised to learn that Verutė had been tubercular at some point in her life. Among the documents in the carton, I find a German medical attestation dated 1948. There were lesions in my grandmother's lungs, it says. Signs of previous infection, but no indication of active disease. So, perhaps it stands to reason that her daughter Vida showed positive results every time they gave her a TB skin test at the nursing home. "Just send me for an x-ray!" she'd say, knowing that their worry was for nothing. Her explanation for this was that, even though she'd never had an active TB infection, she'd often visited Vincas at the Ottawa Sanatorium, where he'd worked and where she'd surely been exposed to TB bacteria repeatedly. It's also possible that she had been exposed in the DP camps or even on the ocean voyage to Canada. In any case, such exposure resulted in her turning up positive in skin tests even in the absence of symptoms. I'd never thought much about all this until recently. My mother was never

easily alarmed and appeared wholly unconcerned about the test results, so I always followed her lead and didn't worry either.

But the body keeps the score, Dutch psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk has told us. In his case, he refers to trauma, and how the body remembers disruptive, violent, abusive and otherwise destructive experiences even when the mind cannot hold on to details. But the body remembers in other ways, too. What's more, it learns. Immunologists and epidemiologists use the term "immunological memory" to describe how the body responds to pathogens it has encountered in the past. But not only does "adaptive immunity" remember such encounters; it learns to recognize new pathogens and build a response to them. Such adaptive immunity was first observed by Swedish doctors in 1934 among infants treated with the Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine, whose primary purpose is to guard against tuberculosis, and which is still in wide use across the globe today. A 2024 study (the BATTLE trial) suggested that BCG might reduce both the incidence and severity of long Covid symptoms by up to 30% in patients who had recovered from the virus. What's more, some researchers now believe that a latent tuberculosis infection (LTBI) may offer even greater protection against severe Covid than does BCG.

LTBI, it seems, might "train" the immune system, offering it tools to ward off the Covid virus. The World Health Organization estimates that a quarter of the world's population may have a latent tuberculosis infection. Although the studies I read are preliminary and their authors underscore the need for more investigation, some researchers believe that this may explain some of the curious discrepancies we saw in Covid mortality rates in the pre-vaccine stages of the pandemic. Regions with a high incidence of LTBI (like Southeast Asia) fared better than those with lower incidence of latent TB infection (like Western Europe).

I never saw my grandparents disagree or speak a sharp word to one another. In fact, Verutė once told me that they had only ever fought once. It was at a wedding, she said, and she'd just had her baby, that is, Vida. I can't remember the exact cause for disagreement, but they talked it through and never fought again. Others have told me that Vincas had been a kind man. He was funny, they said. People liked him at parties. It's a side of him I was never old enough to see and register. The documents from the box show, too, that he was trusted and knowledgeable. As kids, my brother and I called him *Tėvelis*, which translates not as *Grandfather* but as *Daddy*. It's what Vida called him, and I suspect we followed her lead. A good father beyond his own lifetime, Vincas may also have succeeded in protecting his daughter until her final years. It seems that the family's exile, his job, their closeness, and the fact that was the kind of father a girl enjoyed visiting at the office—all this unwittingly ended up giving her body a superpower, that is, both a physiological form of memory and a capacity for it to learn, and therefore to protect her decades into the future.

By the second half of 2022, I sensed that my mother might not have much time left to live, so I arranged to spend the fall semester in Toronto. My hunch turned out to be right and by November, it was clear that Vida was, indeed, finally dying. Doctor G. delivered the news again, but this time in person. As I sat vigil by my mother's bed for weeks, I studied the oil painting of our island that my godfather had made after a visit to the cottage. He'd somehow managed to depict it from a bird's-eye view. Just as I had done with the boxes, Vida had taken that piece from house to condo to nursing home room.

She died on December 6. I arrived late in the evening and sat holding her hand in the darkness. By then, she had stopped opening her eyes, eating, or responding to speech. Still, I kept talking to her. I noted aloud how cold her hand was and then got up to put on some music for us to listen to. Her favorite caregiver soon arrived to clean and change Vida into pajamas, so I stepped out of the room to give them some privacy. And then, almost as if on purpose, my mother died in my short absence. By the time I returned, she was gone. Resisting the panic and urge to run for a nurse, I sat back down. I took her hand again, kissed her forehead, told her I loved her, and said goodbye without hurry.

Finally, I walked over the window, and opened it a crack so her soul could depart.

Coda

It is 2026. I open a small box labelled "Mother," in Vida's hand. This item comes not from in the original condo cartons but from the filing cabinet in Vida's nursing home room from when I cleared it out after her death. Inside the box, among bank records and tiny prayer books, I find a scrap of folded paper. On it: Lithuanian script in blue ball-point pen. On one side, my grandmother (Vida's mother) has written two codes: one for a door and a second for an elevator. At first, I think these come from her Toronto condominium—for many years, she lived in the same building as my mother—but then I realize, no. I recognize the numbers as codes from the nursing home, where Verutė died at the age of 99. Then, I turn the paper over to read her words:

*Our wedding
took place in
1934*

*He died in
1986*

*Calculated
1986
-1934*

*=52 yrs. [this figure is circled]
And like a
dream, those
happy [days]
passed so quickly,
but I will never forget them*

Verutė's script is slightly shaky and corrected in a couple of spots, but otherwise neat. Her Lithuanian spelling and grammar are perfect. In my translation I add a word ("days") that she seems to have skipped. What is this little text, I wonder. A poem? A simultaneous reminder and vow? I leave the scrap on my desk to contemplate for a few days.

Reading and rereading her words, I formulate yet another theory. This time, I posit that my grandmother was afraid of forgetting her beloved and carried the note in her pocket by way of protection—of his memory, of herself, of their life together. To me, this scrap she carried in her cardigan pocket, therefore, is both a thing of beauty and magic. Like all good writing, it's a talisman, an incantation, a prayer, a vaccine and a fortification against forgetting. It is, in the end, a record of memory, immunity, and love more precious than a lost piece of cloth once buried for safekeeping.

Laima Vincė Sruoginis: On Empathy, Belonging, and Looking In from the Outside

12 June 2026
Interviews



Photo courtesy: personal archive.

Laima Vincė Sruoginis was born in 1966 in Teaneck, NJ. She happens to be the granddaughter of Anicetas Simutis, the long-time Lithuanian consul general for the United States, who served Lithuania as a diplomat for 65 years throughout the years of the Soviet occupation and who also became Lithuania's first ambassador to the United Nations. Raised in a Lithuanian expat family in the suburbs of New York, Laima Vincė holds degrees from Rutgers University, the University of New Hampshire, Columbia University, and Vilnius University, where she received her PhD in Humanities in 2022. As a scholar, Vincė focuses on memory, postmemory, historical trauma, and diaspora literature. She teaches creative writing and English and American literature. Vincė translates Lithuanian literature into English and is the editor of three English anthologies of Lithuanian literature. Vincė herself has authored over twenty books, with her output ranging from academic work and non-fiction essays to novels, poems, and plays. She also paints. Last but not least, Vincė is the mother of three children and splits her time between Vilnius and New York.

In other words, Laima Vincė Sruoginis is a very busy woman. I'm lucky she found the time to meet with me for a conversation at Mint Vinetu, the Lithuanian capital's premier location for hot drinks and preloved books, a charming place that has generated a cult following among Lithuanian poets and angsty teenagers. Our conversation will be focused on Vincė's life and her Lithuanian American identity as well as her most recent books: the academic volume titled *Heritage, Connection, Writing: Conversations with North American Lithuanian Diaspora Writers* published this year by Peter Lang and Vincė's 2025 independently published novel *That Unspoken Word*, based on the diary and poems of a Lithuanian Jewish poet Matilda Olkinaitė (1922–1941).

Laima, thank you so much for sitting down for an interview – *Vilnius Review* has published many of your own conversations with writers, so it's exciting to finally have you sit, so to say, at the opposite side of the table for us. But first things first. When I was reaching out to you, I was under the impression that you only visit Lithuania occasionally. I'm happy to know you've been living here for quite a while now!

Quietly, yes.

When did you relocate?

I've had my apartment in Vilnius for fifteen years. I first came to Lithuania to live while it was still occupied by the Soviet Union – that was in 1988. I came as a student and I was able to stay for a year because I had a Soviet student visa. I was able to renew the visa once to stay a few more months, but no longer. It was very tricky back then with having permission to stay, especially if you were doing things like translating for Sąjūdis.

Then I lived in Lithuania as a Fulbright scholar, and I taught at Vilnius University and Vytautas Magnus University – that was '95, '96, '97. I came with my husband (who is now an ex-husband) and our two sons. And then I came back as a Fulbright scholar with my three children from 2007 to 2010. I was then invited to teach at the American International School of Vilnius, so I stayed two more years and I taught there.

You know, I was here when I was writing my dissertation and during my postdoctoral studies, so I try to stay in Lithuania as much as I can. But there's all sorts of life realities – sometimes you run out of money, so you have to go abroad to work somewhere and make some money to be able to live. I've gone abroad and taught in Hong Kong for two years and in Beijing. And there are times that I need to spend time back in the United States for family reasons. But for the most part, I'd say my home base is Lithuania.

And how is life here?

Oh, I love life here. I really enjoy it. I mean, I'm genetically Lithuanian, I grew up in the Lithuanian diaspora in New York, so I very much identify as a Lithuanian. I would say the only problem for me is that despite my best efforts, I still have a slight accent when I speak Lithuanian, and that always pins me as the Other, the outsider. Sometimes there's some strong reactions to that.

Like what?

Like – “what are you doing here?” “Oh, why don't you go home and pick dollar bills off of trees, why are you here?” All these misconceptions and misunderstandings. But what also could be difficult in terms of building a career as a writer and academic in Lithuania is that a lot of people use my work, absorb my work into their own work – to put it politely – and then, through my work, occupy professional positions, and that makes it harder for me to get an academic professional position. It's very hard to teach in university when you're an outsider. I don't even know how to explain it. As a Lithuanian American, there is always this underlying perception of you as an outsider. There is always some aspect of jealousy – this assumption that you come from wealth and leisure, which is really not true in most cases.

There's this reluctance to allow you to participate in cultural and academic life on an even footing. For example, you might be offered to volunteer, to help out with something, but you won't be offered a position, not full-time, not half-time, not quarter-time. I think, as my mother said to me once, “You feel like you're always on the outside looking in” – you're never quite invited in. She only came to Lithuania once or twice, but she made that observation about me when I talk about Lithuania. I was born in the United States; my mother was born in the United States; my grandparents came to the United States when they were 18 and 26 years old, as diplomats. So really, my family has been based in New York City for a hundred years now, right? But we still maintain our Lithuanian identity. We feel the connection with Lithuania, but very often other people make the assumption that you're just passing through, you're a visitor, you don't belong. You can sit and admire from the distance, but you're never invited to fully participate in the culture. So, it's a very subtle thing. Maybe it's easier for the younger generation, because younger people are more open-minded, but for my generation it's a lot harder.

Do you think that's envy? Again, with the assumption that people are better off there, that you're living in the *Amerika*! Right?

Yeah, it's a very old, nineteenth-century idea.

Maybe some of these stereotypes trickle down – that you're supposed to be a different kind of person, a different kind of class.

You know, I think that a lot of people struggle. Not just in Lithuania, but in the United States,

everywhere. We've got this one percent hoarding all the wealth in the US; in this part of the world, you have oligarchs hoarding it. So your average person is struggling to earn a living and raise their family and take care of the basics. But there is the stereotype of the "American Dream," so when you come here with your primary or secondary American identity, those emotions come up.

I was at an event with a lot of recent immigrants – well, third-wave immigrants from Lithuania who have settled in the United States, some of them were there for 10 or 15 years. One of them said to me, "Oh, we so envy those of you who were born into Lithuanian American families because you've had families to pay for things and help you, while we had to struggle for everything." I'm thinking, well, here in Lithuania families do support and financially help their children and grandchildren, but that's not the tradition in the US, where many students pay for their own studies, leave home quite early, and have to establish themselves. There's no expectation that your parents will support you. I thought that was a very strange assumption – that if you're born in the US, you had a lot of access to inherited wealth. That may or may not be the case.

I love being in Lithuania. Despite the obstacles, I feel like I'm part of the culture. I feel like I belong. My family history is closely linked to Lithuania. So I feel hurt when I get that kind of feeling of being pushed away, not included. I earned my PhD doing very innovative work, which I published in my book *Vanished Lands* – on intergenerational cultural and historical trauma, on postmemory, on memoirs by Lithuanian American writers whose grandparents were collaborating with the German regime. Very sensitive work, but I feel that in Lithuania I had to work very hard to prove that my research and academic work is worthy.

A very touchy subject in Lithuania.

Extremely. I received letters telling me I had no right to do this work, that I was defaming the name of Lithuania. But then I see younger colleagues, who have absorbed entire chapters of my books into their dissertations without giving me credit, being hired to teach courses in Holocaust studies or diaspora writing here, in Vilnius University. How come I can't teach my own work? I've never even been invited to present one of my books at Vilnius University. When you're a Lithuanian American, many doors are slammed shut in your face – unless you are somebody who has a lot of money and resources and you're very generous with that money. Then doors fly open for you. I've observed that.



Laima Vincė doing research in the Lithuanian archives in Hüttenfeld, Germany.

You were raised in New York, the city of cities, some might say. How does Vilnius compete?

I don't put them in the same category. For every New Yorker, there is no other city except New York. I hate to admit that. I think that this is New York centrism? I don't know what it is. It's a mentality – we don't even say "New York." We say, "The City." There's only one city.

Like Rome, right?

Yeah. *[laughing]* Chicago? Ehh, that's not a city to New Yorkers... Nothing else is a city. But Vilnius holds a special place in my heart as a completely different kind of small, beautiful city. I know they built some tall buildings on the other side of the river, but that doesn't make it anything like New York. That's just not it. New York is a city of dreams – now it's really changing under the Trump administration, it's destroying things – but if you had a dream, you would come to New York and try to realize that dream. You had people from all over the world. I remember that walking through Manhattan on a single day, you could hear a dozen different languages being spoken, and I always enjoyed that. And all the cultural institutions, the museums, the people, that specific way of being in the world that's very much New York. It's not necessarily what's marketed to the outside world. For example, I have never once in my life gone to Times Square to see the ball drop, although I've celebrated New Year's Eve a few blocks away. There are things for tourists and things for locals.



Anicetas Simutis, Lithuania's ambassador to the United Nations, speaking at the UN General Assembly in New York. October 1991. Photo courtesy: personal archive.

Also in New York, your grandfather held a pivotal diplomatic position as Lithuania's consul general during the period of the Soviet regime in Lithuania, refusing the Soviet order to abandon the consulate. Did any of this reflect on your upbringing?

Yes, in a huge way. He was a real authority, but you have to understand – he was really a person of his generation. Now we live in a world where everyone is advertising themselves on social media – he was the complete opposite. I once wanted to write his memoirs, but he wouldn't cooperate with me – he said, "I did what was my duty to do for my country, and there is not much more to say about that." That was very much the mindset of his generation – you had convictions, you did what you felt was right, and to try to somehow memorialize what you did or to get attention for that would be wrong.

His modesty, his conviction, and the way he was always willing to help other people made the deepest impression on me. In 1991, when people were able to travel, you could invite people from Lithuania to travel to the United States, as long as you did all the paperwork and you could guarantee their cost of living. I had a good friend whose father had died, and she was having a very hard time, economically and in general. I offered to help her out and asked my grandfather whether he would give her a job at the consulate. He agreed. My grandparents even housed her. She didn't know how to type or do anything, so my grandfather paid her generously just to take the trash out. He once told me that when he was five years old, his father was taken to fight in the First World War and never came back. They were left with a farm, together with his mother and sister, and they really struggled. He said, "I will help anybody who needs my help because I know how hard life can be."

He helped everyone in New York's Lithuanian community however he could. In those days, every once in a while, there would be somebody who escaped out of Soviet-occupied Lithuania without a

passport. Simas Kudirka said to me that he felt like my grandfather was one of the few people who treated him like a human being. So he was able to help people without making them feel like they're beholden to him. His compassion, empathy, and understanding were deeply moving to me.

It was that deep sense of empathy that enabled him to work for 65 years, basically receiving only a minimal salary, struggling economically to raise his family and support my maternal great-grandparents after the war, and run the consulate general office. He knew that in terms of diplomatic laws, as long as the consular office and the embassy were continuing the work of prewar independent Lithuania, Lithuania had a legal chance to regain independence. He did that with great love and empathy. I think that from him I've absorbed into my own life a strong sense of empathy and caring, and I think that a lot of my work as a writer is definitely connected to the values my grandfather passed on to me through his vision and life's work.



Laima Vincė with her son and her grandfather A. Simutis, 1992. Photo courtesy: personal archive.

You also spent some time living in Germany, enrolled at the Lithuanian Gymnasium, known in Lithuanian as February 16 Gymnasium, a school founded by a community of Lithuanian expats in 1950.

You know, the more research I do about that postwar period, the more it surprises me – when all the displaced persons ended up in the DP camps in the Allied territories, they were having baby after baby after baby! They're having babies as they're running from Lithuania, they're having babies in these DP camps, like, I don't know what was going on! And since they had all these children running around, they developed kindergartens, schools, and high schools to educate them. The Lithuanian Gymnasium was one of those postwar, DP-camp high schools for those who weren't able to emigrate in the late 1940s and go abroad from Germany, usually because of health-related problems. The displaced persons wanted their children to be educated according to the prewar Lithuanian educational system.

But as an American citizen, why were you there?

In the early 1980s, a dynamic, brilliant, young educator named Andrius Šmitas, or Andreas Schmidt, and his wife Marytė, a Lithuanian American, both worked there, and they had this mission to really energize the school and make it something special. One of their projects was to create a parallel class for émigré Lithuanian children from all over the world – North and South America, Canada, Australia. This was really interesting, and innovative – now when I think about it, somebody should do research and write about this.

So they pulled children from all over the world?

They did. But what everybody had in common was that they were the children of displaced persons. My father was a World War II refugee. On my mother's side it was actually my great-grandparents who were the ones that were WWII refugees. I studied there with a full scholarship. But, for example, the South Americans' currency was so weak that they couldn't afford the tuition, so the gymnasium – who were always running on a shoestring budget – pulled the money from somewhere and somehow covered the tuition costs for students from South America.

The interesting thing was that all of us kids who showed up had whatever little fragments of Lithuanian we had learned at home from our families. I have to admit that my Lithuanian language was not very good. Friends of mine who knew me from childhood often laugh: "What? You write books in Lithuanian? You were terrible at Lithuanian!" Everybody came to the gymnasium with varying degrees of Lithuanian, but Lithuanian was our common language, and that is how we quickly became conversant in Lithuanian.

The parents of some of my German Lithuanian friends there had actually been what you'd call *vilko vaikai* [Wolf children or *Wolfskinder* – children from East Prussia at the end of WWII, many of whom were homeless orphans that had fled to Lithuania and were taken in by local families], and they had terrible, terrible home situations. Some had fathers who were raging alcoholics because they were so traumatized as children during the war. The gymnasium was a safe place for these kids, and that's how some of the German-Lithuanian children ended up there from grade 5 until graduation. Because the school offered safety and structure, the teachers became like their parents.

We had German-speaking Lithuanians, Spanish-speaking Lithuanians, English-speaking Lithuanians, Lithuanians who came from Lithuania. We had Lithuanians who came from Israel. So that's how we really learned the language – by talking to each other. We had lessons on Lithuanian literature, we had folk dances, the Ateitininkai, and all these other organizations there.

Your first visit to Lithuania happened during this time, on a school trip in 1983. Is it true that the local Lithuanian dissidents in Germany asked some of you kids to bring care packages to people in Soviet Lithuania?

Yes. Our teachers were the ones connecting us with the dissidents. Radio Free Europe was located in Munich – that's a few hours' train ride from where the gymnasium is. We had Poniutė Grinienė, who was a dissident, Kęstutis Girnius, and all these different people who were working there. There was this whole network of Lithuanians of that WWII generation, and some of their sons and daughters, who were running underground dissident operations and were mostly connected with Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, or Vatican Radio and who were receiving information from the Lithuanian underground and getting information back to Lithuania. They were also connected with the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* [an underground periodical that ran in Soviet Lithuania from 1972 to 1989 and documented human rights abuses] and they were very tightly connected with political prisoners and dissidents in Lithuania.

The lists would come through indicating which students were invited to come to these trips. Our dissident contacts would come to the gymnasium with packages – you know, people would come back from Siberia with very serious illnesses, and back then there was a shortage of medicine in Lithuania because of the occupation, so they needed medicines. There were also letters, banned books, Bibles.

They would write down addresses on little scraps of paper. It was like a big game for us. First we had to get through the border. Then we had to find these people and get everything to them. I had this suitcase that was kind of like a double suitcase – there were two layers, but you can't really see that second layer unless you go in and pull it out. We knew that when the train from Germany reached the border between Poland and the Soviet Union, they had to lift the train and change the undercarriage because the diameter of the tracks was different. So you would be hanging out in that train for a couple of hours – but that's also when they would come through the trains and search everybody's luggage.

We knew that they had fifteen minutes for each person. I had Bibles, I had medicines, I had all sorts of things I had to bring in, so I put them in the hidden compartment of my suitcase. But before the trip I also went out and bought all kinds of light porn magazines – you know, Germans love their porn, so even a kid could go to the local grocery store and buy it. Just girls wearing lingerie, that kind of thing, nothing too serious.

Obviously, something they didn't have in the Soviet Union.

Yes, it was banned in the Soviet Union. So I had some of my clothes and things and a few of those magazines tossed on the top layer of the suitcase. At the border we were searched by these young guys – 18, 19 years old, just conscripted into the army. They hadn't seen a magazine like this in their lives – so they're using that fifteen-minute quota to leaf through it!

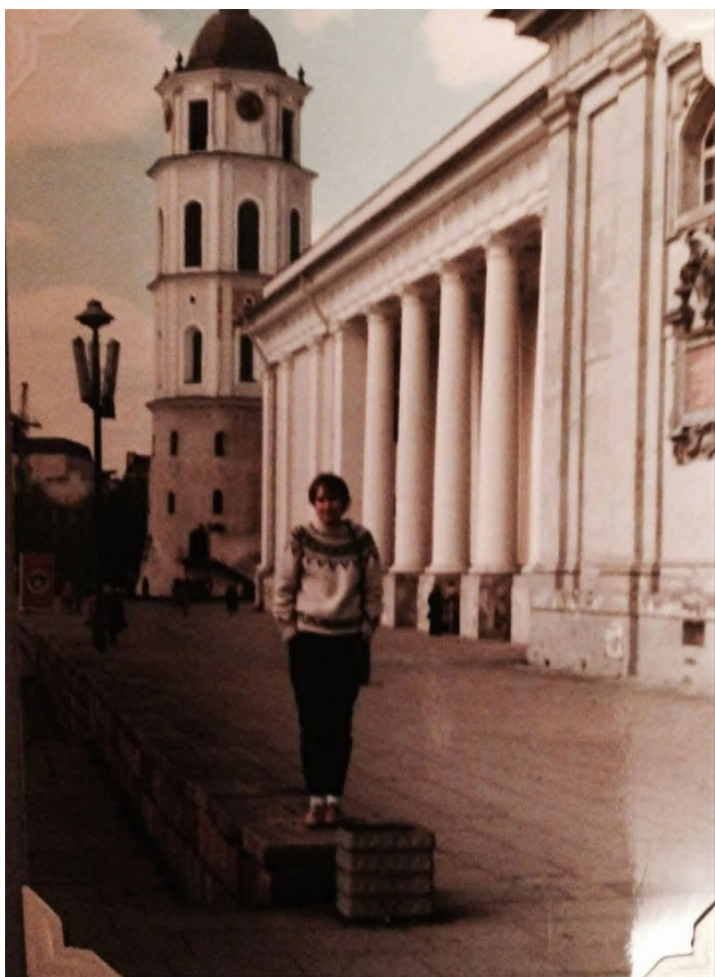
Brilliant! The trips themselves, though, in your own words, were propagandistic in nature, and you were always accompanied by KGB informants.

Oh yes. Most definitely.

So was there a network of these informants at the school?

Yes. They were mostly young people that had grown up in Lithuania and had some sort of German family connection. They were able to emigrate, but their German really wasn't strong enough for them to study in German universities, and many wanted to study medicine. So they would form connections with certain people in Lithuania and inform on their classmates. They were integral in these trips, in terms of who got to go and who didn't. We knew who they were.

I'll give you an example. I was picked to go a second time in 1984. Our dissidents gave me and a couple of other students who they trusted certain things to bring through. But in West Berlin, one of our students – she later came back to Lithuania to study medicine – together with a man in a suit approached me and another girl, cornered us in the train station, and said, "We know exactly what you have. You see those lockers over there? You have to empty your bags and put everything in those lockers. We will be watching you." They were onto me. That was disappointing.



Laima Vincė's first trips to Lithuania: 1983, Vilnius (left) and 1984, at the border crossing in Berlin (right). Photo courtesy: personal archive.

You know, there's a Latin proverb: *iucunda memoria est praeteritorum malorum* – "It's a lot of fun to sit back and laugh at past dangers." There's another story from that trip in 1984 that's quite funny. Our KGB handlers decided that they were going to take a big risk and take us to a technical college in Vilnius, where a folk ensemble would sing for us. We arrived and met young people three or four years older than us. They're dressed up in their folk dresses, while we've got long, scraggly hair, jeans, ratty sweaters – this was the end of the hippie era. After their beautiful Lithuanian folk music concert, this KGB man – the same one who made me put the books away in West Berlin – says that now it's our turn to sing a song for the students. Of course, we had nothing prepared. One teenager from Australia spontaneously crouched down and started leaping around, imitating a kangaroo. Everybody's laughing. The KGB handlers can't control the situation. They don't know whether this is a serious performance or not. In the middle of this confusion, two Lithuanian students tapped me on the shoulder and kind of gave me a signal to follow them. We go off into the hallway, and one of them starts talking to me: "This is all a farce, we're not free in the Soviet Union, we're occupied, this is how they treat us," things we already knew, but they probably thought we didn't. As I'm listening to him, at the end of the corridor I see the same KGB guy approaching us. We're caught red-handed having an unofficial conversation. The KGB handler is enraged. He immediately takes me back and tells all our students to get on the bus and that we're all going back to the hotel.

Fast-forward to 2007. I was in Lithuania with my three kids. My sons are very good friends with the Vaicenavičius brothers, whom you might know from the folk band Kūjeliai. So we're sitting in the kitchen with their family, just having tea and talking about this and that. Their father, Rimantas Vaicenavičius, who is also a friend of ours, turns to me and says, "Laima, do you remember that boy from Australia who was jumping around like a kangaroo?" And I said, "Yes! Wait a minute – was that you talking politics to me in the hallway?" "Yes, that was me!"

Incredible!

We had been friends for about 10 years until it dawned on us that we had met before under very

different circumstances! We were laughing so hard – in one lifetime, I'm like this, you know, privileged Westerner coming to see how these poor Lithuanians imprisoned in the Soviet Union live, he's explaining the realities to me, and we get caught. I always wondered what happened to that young student who was talking to me. And all these years later, we're sitting in a free Lithuania, just enjoying ourselves. It just shows how the reality shifted so dramatically for my generation.

The next time you visited Lithuania was in 1988. That was a very turbulent time – the beginning of the independence movement. What was the atmosphere like?

Yes, I went in 1988 and then stayed for another year as a student. It was incredible. It was so exciting that I remember when I would go to sleep, I could hardly wait to wake up in the morning to find out what had changed overnight. I went to every single demonstration, witnessing whatever I could. My professors at Vilnius University immediately saw that they needed help with translation, so they asked me if I could translate, and before I knew it, I was translating for Sąjūdis already at its founding assembly – I was very quickly invited into that inner circle as a translator. The foreign reporters who would come to Vilnius to cover the demonstrations and meetings were all trained in Russian. Back then, and still even now, it was assumed in the West that Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians were simply Russians and that everybody spoke Russian. You also had a lot of Russians who lived in this region and were the descendants of colonists, going abroad, saying that they're Lithuanian but speak Russian – that furthers the stereotype.

Sąjūdis realized this and had a brilliant idea at the time – the only way that they were going to make these journalists realize that Baltic states have different languages and different cultures would be through the laborious process of having everything translated. Even though it would've been so easy for Vytautas Landsbergis to meet with Bill Keller from *The New York Times* and have a fluent conversation in Russian, he wouldn't do that. He would bring me in to sit at the table and translate. Casual or off-the-record conversations may have taken place in Russian, but everything else was methodically translated because they were really trying to break this stereotype and drive home the point that the Baltics are not Russia.



Laima Vincė in Lithuania in 1989. At St. Casimir's Fair, Vilnius (left); visiting Father Stanislovas in Paberžė (right). Photo courtesy: personal archive.

So as a student in your early twenties who was visiting Lithuania for the third time, you interpreted for Vytautas Landsbergis, the man who led Sąjūdis?

Yes. There used to be a café downstairs from where the Sąjūdis headquarters were, which is where a lot of these conversations with foreign journalists would take place. There was one time when I interpreted for Landsbergis and Keller. Throughout the whole interview, Bill Keller was trying to corner Landsbergis and get him to admit that he has trouble balancing the liberal, communist-party wing of Sąjūdis with the more dissident wing of the Lithuanian Liberty League. Landsbergis was being very careful in answering each of Keller's questions – he didn't want to give the impression that he was having any trouble within Sąjūdis. He kept maneuvering out of that question in a clever way. The interview ended, we all stood up, got our coats, and were literally walking out into the street when Bill Keller said very casually, "Oh, it must be so hard for you balancing the left and right sides of Sąjūdis." So I interpreted the comment. Landsbergis chuckled and said, "Oh yes, that's one of my biggest problems." Landsbergis thought the interview was over. We all did. But that became the headline for Keller's article: "Landsbergis Says His Hardest Task Is Balancing the Right and the Left Wing of Sąjūdis."

Did you observe that tension while you were here?

Oh, yeah. Definitely. The tension was there, but everybody wanted independence.

But people had differing definitions of it?

The former political prisoners had nothing to lose. They had seen torture, hard labor camps – they had been to hell and back. They were willing to risk their lives for freedom. But if it hadn't been for them and the presence of Antanas Terleckas and the Lithuanian Liberty League, maybe it would've

taken longer to come around to independence. They were always that moral force saying, “Don’t dance around the issue.” Whereas there were some people in Sąjūdis during that time who had careers and pretty comfortable, middle-class lives, and they were nervous about losing all of that. They were considering a more moderate route to independence.



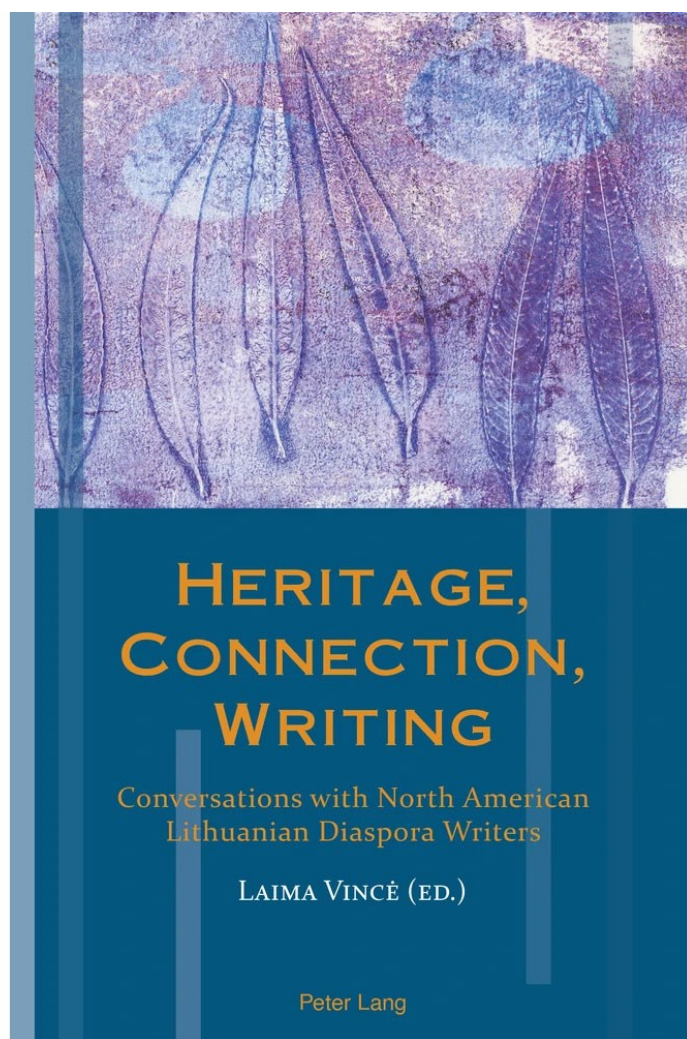
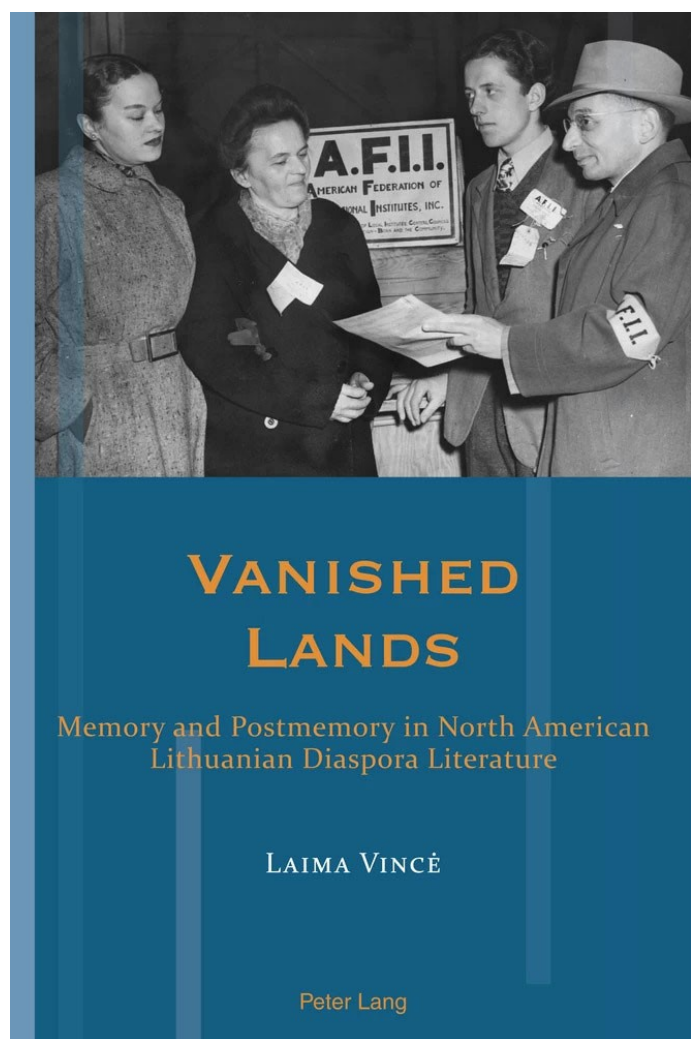
Laima Vincė with her daughter in Lithuania, 2008. Photo courtesy: personal archive.

Lithuania as a fairy-tale land and Lithuania as a real place. Does this dichotomy exist in the mind of someone raised by Lithuanian expats?

Most definitely. It was the whole basis of diaspora education. In fact, you should see some of the books we had in Lithuanian Saturday school – drawings of very idyllic Lithuania, perfectly clean little girls and little boys running around, playing dressed in Lithuanian national costumes. It was very highly idealized. But you have to understand – this was a generation of people that had been rebuilding Lithuania after centuries of tsarist oppression. And they really achieved a lot in twenty years. And then it’s all taken away from them. So you could really justify and understand that level of romanticism.

I do think that so many Lithuanian diaspora people of my generation, when they came to Lithuania, had to first overcome the shock that contemporary Lithuania is not the way it was depicted in the Saturday school primers. Everybody doesn’t live in a perfect, cute, little wooden cottage and walk around in national clothing. Although, interestingly enough, during the Sąjūdis years, because the folklore movement was so strong and such a powerful backbone for Sąjūdis, you had young people who had grown up in the city going back into the countryside to collect songs and stories and find out what life was like before occupation and bringing it all back into the city. So they were kind of doing the same thing the old DPs were doing, running around the streets of Vilnius wearing linen, singing folk songs, and idealizing village life. It’s not just the diaspora that’s guilty of that – the same process was going on with the people who were trying to break away from Soviet reality, creating an idealized,

romantic past. I think it's just human nature.



Laima Vincė's books issued by the academic publisher Peter Lang: *Vanished Lands* (2023) and *Heritage, Connection, Writing* (2025).

I think that's a good segue into literature and your most recent book – *Heritage, Connection, Writing*. Its three main parts are based on the stories of descendants of the first and second waves of Lithuanian migrants to North America (1868–1918, 1918–1940), the descendants of political refugees and displaced persons (1940–1945), and the descendants of Litvaks (1900–present). Each part is divided into sections that consist of a conversation with a particular Lithuanian diaspora writer and some samples of their work. Why did you structure the book this way?

I think what really fascinated me was the first section of the book. We all know about the DPs and their descendants, and we know about the Litvaks who are returning to Lithuania. But writers like Lidia Yuknavitch, Ken Ilgunas, or James Joseph Brown have their roots in that initial emigration out of Lithuania, which took place so long ago – over a hundred years ago. But when you're interviewing these people and spending time with them, you see their thoughts revolving around Lithuania. It's a major part of their identity and who they consider themselves to be. That really woke me up and made me think. According to sociologists, immigrants in the United States typically lose their native language and assimilate into American culture fully after one generation. So why do you still have people with strong nostalgia for Lithuania two or three generations later? That's the question I set out to answer with my book.

Why did I include samples of their work? That thought came to me later. I just thought it would be more interesting than only interviews. And those excerpts reveal so much. It's one thing to have people tell you something in an interview, but their writing reveals another side of that story.

Some people say I could've had a fourth part – the immigrants since independence who are writing in

Lithuanian. I certainly could have. But it would get to be a huge book. That needs to be a separate book. Also, that group writes in Lithuanian and publishes their books inside Lithuania. They're sending their work home to Lithuania. Whereas the people in my book, they're writing about their heritage for America and Canada. There is a difference of audience, so you need to apply different literary research tools. I have written a few articles about the literary work of this post-independence wave of immigrants, but you have to analyze it within a different literary context.

***Heritage, Connection, Writing* is a 550-page-strong book that spans more than a century of literary tradition and touches upon the lives and family histories of twenty-seven writers. Wasn't it difficult to control such a trove of information and make it work for you?**

It was. One thing was keeping track of permissions and rights. But also, because it is an academic publisher, my big challenge was making it adhere to academic standards. My editor didn't want it just to be an anthology, but to include articles that provided analysis and historical relevance. That is what really got me started looking at what do these different writers have in common. That's when I found themes that kept repeating themselves – one was a love of nature and forests. These immigrant children, as soon as they could, got out of the cities and went out into places like Alaska or Colorado, as if it's in their genes or in their bones to be close to nature. Many of them, all of them really, had this concept that they strongly associated Lithuania with freedom and the fight for freedom. More so, they weren't associating being American with freedom. I found it remarkable that Lidia Yuknavitch, who out of all these writers is the one who's a more mainstream, well-known American writer, in her latest novel names her main character Laisvė [Freedom]. The Lithuanian language, and the Yiddish language for the Litvaks, was a very strong theme. There are these aspects of identity that really repeat themselves. Whether I'm talking to someone in Alaska, or New York, or Colorado, they're kind of coming up with the same things. My introductory article in the book talks about these unifying themes.

What are some of the things that we should understand about these writers and their work?

That they're a part of Lithuanian culture, of Lithuania. What people in Lithuania need to understand is that they should be more accepting and invite them in. For example, when I came here in 1988, I could not open my mouth without getting some kind of reaction. A lot of people thought I was Latvian because of how the American accent sounds – which was fine, since it allowed me to be incognito. But when people did know I was from the United States, there was a lot of strange emotions around that.

Nothing against Russian Lithuanians, but many Russian Lithuanians who spoke in Lithuanian with a Russian accent were much more warmly embraced as brothers and sisters and considered “one of our own” in 1988 than me, a Lithuanian who was coming home. I always felt that difference. It takes a long time to really find your place in Lithuanian society. And you always have to answer awkward questions, like “Why are you here?” Curiosity is one thing, but sometimes it borders on rudeness.

What I hope my book brings about is this understanding that the diaspora Lithuanians really want to belong. We can even talk about all these very large numbers of people who have emigrated since independence. Their children are growing up abroad, and those children may want to come back to Lithuania. They will face the same challenges – they'll speak with an accent, they'll have a different cultural identity, they'll have different experiences. So, what is going to happen? Are they going to be pushed away, or are they going to be embraced and welcomed home? I think what the message is to try to be more understanding.



Laima Vincė with her son at her Columbia University graduation, 1994. Photo courtesy: personal archive.

I was approaching this book like an academic. My study was to see what these people have in common. But you could take it to another level and say that I really want readers in Lithuania to become more acquainted with the many different types of Lithuanians out there and what their lives are like. And maybe to see something of themselves in those lives.

These writers project an image of Lithuania or use some aspects of Lithuanian culture or history in their works. How does this usage change based on generation or literary influence?

It honestly doesn't change. I would've thought that myself, but it really doesn't. Like I said, these are very idealistic concepts.

Have you come across any Lithuanian Americans perfectly comfortable with forgetting their Lithuanian heritage and fully embracing being American?

Yes, surprisingly, I've met many recent immigrants from Lithuania who really knock themselves out trying to Americanize themselves. Some push very hard to assimilate and be accepted. They change their surnames and sometimes even their first names – or Americanize them. They're quick to give up their Lithuanian identity living abroad. I always wondered why.

And why?

That's my question. I'd have to interview a lot of them to find out. Is it shame? What is it?

Maybe it's because they're not forced to give anything up. It's a free choice.

It could be a question of choice, except for my generation. We'd say that they don't want something that we've had to fight so hard to regain. You know, when someone has something valuable and throws it in the trash? Why are you throwing that in the trash?! I want it so badly! That's the relationship.

Here's another side to this – what we're seeing now with the Republican party and the Trump

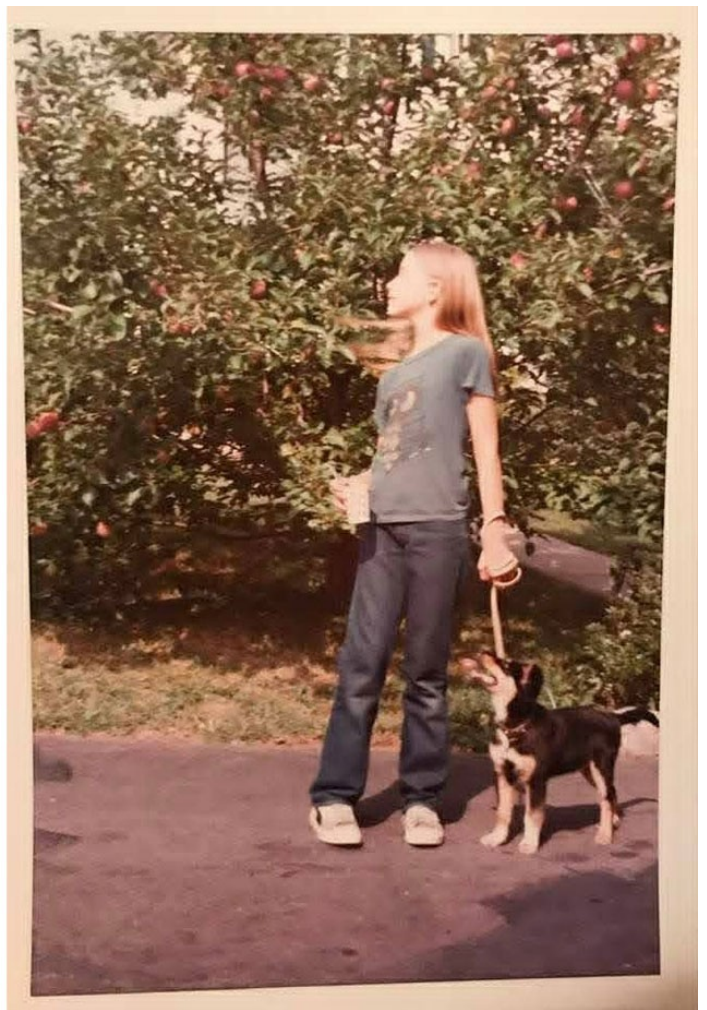
administration is this vicious criminality toward immigrants. The way immigrants are being stripped of their rights and held in these horrible detention centers, or beaten, or murdered. You look at that and think – but America is a land of immigrants! Unless you're a Native American, you're an immigrant, right? But underneath that land of immigrants you always had a resentment toward immigrants by people who had been there longer.

Growing up Lithuanian American, if you had a Lithuanian name, that name always marked you as something other. If you don't have an Anglo-Saxon name, or if there's something about the food you eat... Oh my goodness, as a little girl, I remember my father growing his own apple trees, which was very unusual in the suburbs of New York–

And very usual in a lot of places in Lithuania.

Very. So, for my school lunch, my mother would pack an apple and a sandwich. Now, an apple from a tree might have a bruise on it or an imperfect shape. All the other children in my neighborhood were getting these perfectly beautiful, genetically created apples. I would come in with my very natural, Lithuanian apple, and all the kids at the lunch table would make fun of me. "That's so disgusting! Is there a worm in your apple?! Ew!"

I started using my first and middle names, Laima Vincè, as a pen name when I was a graduate student at Columbia University. I was writing poems and having them published. The poetry editor from *The New Yorker* magazine, Alice Quinn, was one of my professors, and she wanted to publish a poem of mine. She said, "I can't publish your poem in *The New Yorker* with a surname like Sruoginis – nobody can say it. It's just a jumble of consonants and vowels – you have to change your name."



Left: Laima Vincè with her brothers Algis and Vilius in Kennenbunkport, Maine, 1970.

Right: Laima with her dog Margè in Norwood, New Jersey, standing beside her father's apple tree, 1975.

Photo courtesy: personal archive.

We used to go to Lithuanian summer camp as children, and some of the neighbors' kids would ask me where am I going for the summer. I'd say I'm going away to camp. "Oh, you're going to a *concentration* camp? With people like you, from *concentration* camps?" These children were hearing my father speak English with a terrible accent – his family had escaped deportations to Siberia. Somehow, all that got lost in translation. They thought that they're going to a happy YMCA camp in America, and I'd be going to a concentration camp. They would also call me Laima Beans because there's a type of bean, a lima bean, that Americans eat.

That's how it was back then for diaspora Lithuanians who descend from that WWII generation which was forced out of Lithuania – you don't quite fit in the United States or Canada, but then you come here and you don't fit in either. It forces you to develop a self-sufficient personality, a loner personality. This has happened to me in Lithuania. I walked into a party of poets and writers, and either nobody talks to me or they say, "Oh, hi, Laima, so when are you leaving?"

[both laughing]

Which I think is so funny! *O, labas, Laima, kada tu išvažiuoji?*

I hope that my book can break apart some of that ice here. But I also hope that it helps readers in the US, UK, and Canada get a fuller understanding of the cultural history and the historical memory of this whole context that people are bringing with them.

How do these writers feel about tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union?

Oh, they despise it. Nobody has anything good to say about them.

Being an expat in the United States, which had a lot of political biases against Russia and the Soviet Union, the whole Red Scare thing, have you – or any of these writers – ever felt the need to explain something about the USSR that people weren't getting right?

Most definitely. I think that Algirdas Landsbergis is a writer who suffered very badly from that. He's an interesting case – I write about him in *Vanished Lands*. He was about twenty years old when the family fled Lithuania. They fled because they were on the deportation lists, since his father worked at the post office and collected postage stamps, which was one thing considered suspicious by the NKVD. He studied English literature in the States and became fluent in English. He was able to write competently in English and Lithuanian. He wrote a play titled *Penki stulpai turgaus aikštėje* and then rewrote it in English – *Five Posts at the Marketplace*. He was very much influenced by existentialism, by Nietzsche and Sartre. It's basically a play about the armed resistance in Lithuania, but he never names Lithuania. He keeps it on a universal level – a group of rebels fighting a stronger power. This play was staged off-Broadway and was actually quite successful. It's been staged multiple times in English and in Lithuanian. And he suffered both from the Lithuanian diaspora community and the Americans.

When staged in English, there is no marker in the play saying that it's about Lithuania. But then it was perceived as being anti-communist, anti-Soviet Union. In interviews he talks about how directors would beg him, "Please, can you just put this in South America? We don't want to insult all the Marxists." So here's this man who escaped within an inch of his life, half of whose generation has been murdered in Siberia, and he's being told not to insult the Marxists. But then the Lithuanian diaspora attacked him because he didn't place the play in Lithuania and make it clear that this play was about the partisan movement. They felt that was insulting and unpatriotic. All this was typical for his generation of writers, who were presenting their work in the Fifties or the Sixties, even the Seventies.

Why do I call my first book with Peter Lang *Vanished Lands*? Because lands really did vanish. They were not on the maps. And while I was doing this work, I realized that we actually had different maps. In the United States, our maps showed this enormous red mass that was the USSR. You had Vilnius, Tallinn, Riga, but no outline making it clear that they were different republics. The whole thing about the "brotherly republics"? That did not exist in what was exported to the West. It was just this huge mass of Russian-speaking USSR, monolithic, everyone's the same. Whereas inside the USSR, to placate people, you had a different map that had lines tracing the Baltic States, the brotherly republic of Ukraine, and so on. It was very manipulative, what they did.

You really didn't exist outside Lithuania. We felt that. Among Americans, we couldn't say, "I'm a Lithuanian," because, well, what's that? It doesn't exist. You made it up. You know what they used to hear? "You're a Lutheran." It was so non-existent as an identity that they assumed you were saying "I'm a Protestant Lutheran."

I think writers in my book, like Antanas Šileika or Daiva Markelytė, talk about it in their work and in their interviews – about that double consciousness where you're in this very strong, intense diaspora community that's imparting this cultural memory upon your shoulders... Of a country you've never seen! And you're supposed to fight and advocate for this country, and you have nothing to point to. There is nothing there. After Lithuania declared independence, my grandfather asked me to come to the consulate office to help clean out the old files that were taking up space. Everything they had had been frozen in time since 1939 – literally, because they had no money to replace anything. You could film an old movie there. I remember going through the files. I was looking at what were the news my grandfather had been collecting over the years. He was collecting anything that had any information about Lithuania. Some of these articles had, like, one passing reference. Could be a whole article about Jewish borscht, and there might be one sentence in it, like "Jewish people lived in Lithuania for 600 years and liked to eat borscht." Just that! And that would qualify to be saved in the file.

I think that's also what *Heritage, Connection, Writing* is about – it's this struggle to hold onto identity. I think the story of Maria Williams was very interesting. She was adopted as a baby into a Lithuanian family and completely absorbed this Lithuanian identity as her own and is now writing about that. It kind of also tells you something about how much it is genetic, and how much it is something that's handed to you.

Nature or nurture, right?

Yeah. Turns out you can nurture a Lithuanian!



Left to right: Matilda Olkinaitė. *The Unlocked Diary*, a collection of texts edited by Mindaugas Kvietkauskas and translated by Laima Vincė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, 2020); *The Cerulean Bird*, selected poems translated by Laima Vincė (Arc Publications, 2023); *That Unspoken Word*, a novel by Laima Vincė based on Matilda Olkinaitė's life (independently published, 2025).

Speaking of other Lithuanian voices – Matilda Olkinaitė. When did you discover her life story and why did it inspire you?

I saw Rokiškis Community Theater director Neringa Danienė's play about the young Lithuanian Jewish poet Matilda Olkinaitė. Sitting in the audience, I was deeply moved when I heard Matilda's poems being spoken by the actress. Her poetry really spoke to me. One thing the theater group also did is they collected funds and found, based on stories of survivors in the area, the place in the forest where Matilda and her family were murdered. They cleared it out and put up a memorial honoring the family in Hebrew and Lithuanian.

I got a hold of Matilda's original diary and notebook of poems through Irena Veisaitė. I spent the following winter in China translating Matilda's texts from pictures I had taken on my phone. Together with people from the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, we published two books, in Lithuanian and in English, of Matilda's diary, her poems, and documents pertaining to her life. Then I worked with Arc Publications in England, and we put together a little chapbook of Matilda's selected poems. And then I wrote this novel. It took me five years to write.

All of that work I did researching the life of Matilda Olkinaitė was motivated by a few sentences that I read in her diary, where she expresses her disapproval of poetry by authors like Salomėja Nėris or Liudas Gira and vows that she will never write that kind of propagandistic poetry. At 18 years old, she is in despair as she realizes that she can't publish her first selection of poems, which was a dream of hers. And then her diary ends on January 31, 1941. Historians believe she was murdered in July 1941. I remembered myself at that age, when I was writing my first poems and seeing myself as a poet. If I had written my first collection of poems and was being arrested and about to be taken to the forest to be executed, I would've wanted someone to find my poems one day and publish them for me.

If you're reconstructing a real-life story as you write a work of fiction, are you more concerned with giving the story a voice, or are you taking some kind of another creative direction?

My goal was to give her life story a voice. I was very careful not to stray too far from her story, but of course there were many scenes that I made up. There were people in her life that I know very little about, only from what's in Matilda's diary, but I had to make them feel like real people, really flesh them out. I consider *That Unspoken Word* to be life writing. It's a new concept that's about reconstructing a person's life from the available fragments – you're looking at texts that were written very much in the moment, you're taking that material and you're processing it creatively to write something that could be a work of literary non-fiction, but you could also take it one step further and make it into a novel.

You spoke of translating Matilda Olkinaitė in your conversation with Jonas Zdanys. You said that “there has to be some sort of a connection, a meeting of the minds between me and the poet. Otherwise, the translation doesn't quite work.” This is interesting to me because I don't always feel like that when I'm translating someone. Aren't understanding and skill enough to make the translation work?

Probably, for a pretty good translation. But if you want to do the kind of translation that's gonna knock the socks off of your reader, you better have that deeper connection. It's like love. You fall in love – it just happens. For me poetry translation is this really uncanny thing. If I can really connect with the poet, I will read a poem in Lithuanian and hear it in my head in English and then just put it into words by listening to the original. My method only works with the poets I deeply connect with, like Nijolė Miliauskaitė, Vytautas Bložė, or Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė.

I have to say, translating Matilda Olkinaitė's poetry was challenging because on the surface level, her style of writing seems very light and girly – but it's really not. Underneath that, every symbol resonates very deeply with Jewish history as well as with her constant worry over the Holocaust and the sense of her own impending death. You have to translate those poems in a way that captures the lightness but also brings in all that shadow. I'm proud of those translations because I feel that I was able to pull it off.

Oh, how many have gathered
In my home of mourning.
I hold an infant in my arms,
And my infant—is Death.

[...]

All around me are lilies, white, white,
And faces wearing bright smiles.
But my hands are so cold.
A black ribbon is tied in my hair.

Excerpts of an untitled poem from Matilda Olkinaitė's diary, November 14, 1940.
Translated by Laima Vincė.

How did you get into translation? Was there any formal training involved?

I first started translating when I was an undergraduate student at Rutgers. I did translations of German poetry. As a graduate student at Columbia University, I took William Weaver's translation seminar and learned a lot of the principles from him. I started translating Lithuanian poetry in the 1980s and 1990s – Sigitas Geda, Marcelijus Martinaitis, Judita Vaičiūnaitė, and many other talented poets. And my MFA at Columbia was in poetry. When you know how rhyme works, how rhythm works, what happens when you vary the number of syllables in a poetic line, enjambment versus end-stop, you internalize a lot of those skills. All of that machinery is working when you're coming to translate a poem. However, to answer your question, first I started translating and publishing translations of Lithuanian poetry and then I took a few courses to help me improve my skills as a translator. In my final year as an undergraduate at Rutgers University, I worked closely with the American poet Alicia Ostriker to fine-tune my translation of *The Ballads of Kukutis* [*Kukučio baladės*] by Marcelijus Martinaitis.



Laima Vincė, Aitvaras – *Moonlight Light*. 2025, oil on linen.

Do you consider Lithuania a postcolonial society?

I know there are some Lithuanian theorists who are very much interested in that idea. I think that was true of the post-Soviet period, which I consider to be up until the early 2000s, when Lithuania joined the European Union. You could argue that those first decades of independence – when Russian culture provided a very strong point of reference and influence – as well as the writers of that time were postcolonial. But we have totally shifted to a global context since 2004. Cheaper airline tickets allowed people easier access to travel, exchange students came here and influenced local people's lives – I don't think that postcolonialism is as relevant anymore. Now we're looking at Russia not as a source of cultural stimulation, but as a menace and a terrorist country that generates great misery in many

places. We don't romanticize the colonial power, which is a part of postcolonialism. It was a relevant argument in the 1990s and early 2000s, but I don't see it anymore because the context has shifted so deeply.

I think we're in a very interesting time. Look at Poland and how strong it has become. Ten, fifteen years ago, Poland was known as the country that exported plumbers to the UK. Now, I was just reading Donald Tusk's statement that since Polish children were pulled into Jeffrey Epstein's child trafficking ring, they're going to dig through those files and prosecute criminals, which the USA won't even do. Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, the Baltic states – I think that all of these countries are coming online in a very powerful way. I think this is going to be a very strong region culturally, economically, even militarily – if we can pull together to defend ourselves.

And there's America, which used to be a really wonderful place. I love America, but I don't know how it will ever bounce back from this level of depravity that we now see.

We spoke a bit about the recent protests in Lithuania, a lot of which have to do with the ruling coalition's attempts to increase their control over the state broadcaster, and you asked me what I think about them. I see the alarmed response and the civic upheaval these parliament motions have caused in light of our shared postcolonial trauma. Centuries of oppression have repeatedly challenged our right to speak, from the tsars who punished us with a 40-year ban on all Lithuanian press, encouraging us to use a Cyrillic alphabet, even to read in our own language, to the Soviets who sought to rewrite history and silence dissenting voices, whose desperate attempt to regain control of the country in 1991 was carried out by seizing media buildings and the public broadcaster. Someone exerting control over the narrative as the public refuses to abide feels like a very familiar situation for us. That's how our memory and postmemory work. For many people, that's a hill to die on.

That's certainly true, but there's also another part to that argument. If you're following the media, you're gonna see that there's a totalitarian playbook, probably created in Russia with the help of multinational oligarchs, that pretty much follows the same progression: weaponize democracy, make people apathetic about voting, go after the national radio and television, take away that voice and replace it with propaganda, and weaken the government. We've seen it happen so many times. In the US, for example, our real source of news is National Public Radio and public television, because they're not biased. It's not like Fox News, which is basically a business. The very first thing that Trump and the Republicans went after was NPR and PBS, pulling their funding. The first step is always to go after the media.

You know, these thugs are not smart enough to come up with this by themselves. They're following a playbook. They steal precious national symbols, weaponizing them to symbolize their own bigotry and hatred.



Laima Vincė with her children in Rangeley, Maine, 2000. Photo courtesy: personal archive.

Maybe it's also up to us to sometimes set aside our own comfort level and step in and take responsibility. I think about this tiny little island off the coast of Maine, accessible only by ferry, where we lived for many years when my children were growing up. It was an old fishing island, but when we were a young family, a lot of artists and writers were moving out there, so I guess that was the attraction. In the 1990s, the local population in Maine was shifting from the traditional lobstermen and fishermen to cool, artsy people who all belonged to the city of Portland, which had governance over these islands. They would do things like raise property taxes for the residents of these islands, since they're all technically living on waterfront properties, even though the islands were underfunded, had no police, etc. The islands decided they wanted to declare independence from the city of Portland and become a town to manage their own taxes. Some of them succeeded to vote independent and some did not. The island we lived on, Peaks Island, tried to vote for it twice, but didn't succeed – too many people worked in Portland and were connected to the government.

But the island next to us became independent. I would talk to these people and see what was going on there. I learned that the population on that island was so small – like, a couple hundred people – that at some point everybody had to serve in the government office. You might just be a housewife sitting at home with your children, but your turn would come up, and you'd have to go into the government. I thought to myself, well, that's how democracy actually works! Everybody takes their turn. In a small country like Lithuania, what if all of us stepped up and said – this is my turn to go into parliament, this is my turn to be a leader? What a difference that would make. I know I'm guilty of this – it's one thing to sit back and criticize the people who are in government. But what if we started thinking about government differently? It's not "They have to do it for us," but "We're gonna go and do it ourselves."

Dainius Dirgėla

17 June 2026
Poetry



From the author's personal archive

negative and positive

negative, you're always negative
angry grunts from every which way

but dip me in the lord's developer
and my true form will become apparent

nida. sun

the afternoon sun
against my face

the north wind
against my back

the sun
checks my moles

the wind
checks my spine

nida. can(nots)

i cannot buy the house of thomas mann
in nida

i can afford a moment of

loneliness on a terrace with a view of the lagoon

i can walk the parnidis dune unphotographed
by sutkus¹ with my partner uncropped, in the frame

i cannot walk by the sea
from nida to königsberg

i can open the old maps of east prussia
and ride a postal carriage from paris to petersburg
via the curonian spit

i cannot dig my way through to the old dune-buried nida
my kids can bury me on the nida nudist beach

temporarily
for the summer
until further notice
until resurrection
until i can walk on water
until the ascent into heaven

that blends
with the horizon

that blends
with my internal

hell

the good news

there is also a bit of good news
only the one today

your nails are growing back nicely
the doctor is pleased

soon you will be able to
nail it in life, again

continue the intake
as prescribed

of the medicine,
not of life

send me a picture
in two months

of your nails
not a selfie

the memory of water

70 percent of the human body consists of water

does the water
remember the ice

is the water recalled
by the fog

what do we recall
the two of us, who used to exchange bodily fluids

your ice
my mist
our waters

evaporate

all for naught