#### Ina Kozel

# REMINISCENCES OF THE SKARDZIUS FAMILY, DISPLACED PERSONS CAMP, HER FATHER POVILAS SKARDZIUS, AND SOFIA SMETONIENE

## Having Left Lithuania

Danger... It always comes from above. Always. Small people or babies like me have no choice really. We cling to the bottom, familiar and safe, nested into the mossy earth and covered by swaddling that smells like mother. Hidden.

Above us the skies shriek with angry airplanes, birds on fire. Below them our train follows its tracks, rattling, wheezing in desperation. My body, a small sweaty ball curled into the corner of my carriage, vibrates with the nervous motion. I sleep as clouds of fear swirl around me, buzzing like summer insects, boring into me.

Not my fear, it's their fear, the ones on the train, the runners. My little hands rise to resist their feelings but the clouds just grow into giants of despair seeping, soiling the inside of my new pink baby breast.

Inside the train, the summer heat is pierced as a suitcase falls from the rack above unto the baby carriage below. The impact is sudden, jarring, but not loud. My carriage shakes as the big darkness lands next to me with a muffled thud, leaving a breath of wind and me blinking once, twice. Then their screaming starts. My mother's scream is the loudest, reminding me of sounds I heard in other worlds, raising into an awful fullness, overflowing with burning anxiety as I too explode and join her in a duet of fear.

I survived and was called the lucky little girl. Not lucky enough though. That train continued running and the war continued chasing. It was just the beginning of our painful journey.



Six month old Ina with mother Ona Skardiene left Lithuania via train, traveling into the unknown. July 1944. Photo by P. Skardzius, Skardis family archive

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As the Soviets came thundering in from the East, Povilas Skardzius was high on their enemy hit list. My father had no choice but to leave his beloved homeland to protect himself from certain death and his family from Siberia. At that time he did not know that he was leaving forever. My beautiful young parents and my strong grandmother - the only members of their large families that had fled into exile - formed a small fortress around me, their six month baby. This small family unit moved ever west, further from the Russian terror in Lithuania, further from the Allied bombing of Germany, into the calmer areas of Austria. They took a lot of trains. If the trains or tracks were bombed out, they continued on foot, pushing the baby carriage containing me and a suitcase inside. Pushed it over the Alps, Babule said. She and Tevelis were resourceful food hunters and news gatherers. Their skill along with divine intervention kept us alive. Over a year they dodged starvation, homelessness and bombs and then the

war ended. Soon we became registered war refugees, living in a Displaced Persons Camp in the American Military Zone of post-war Germany.

My first memory: I am lying in my crib looking around me in a darkened room, alone, a wall to my left and the open rails of the crib to my right. I follow the procession of vertical lines and think to myself: it looks like a train.

Though the world had fallen apart around me, I felt no neglect under the constant care of three adults who fed me, read to me, washed me and hugged me. The row of concrete buildings that we lived in for 4 years had once housed the workers of a Nazi airplane factory. We were assigned two rooms and shared a kitchen and bath with others like us. In the yard the children sang ditties while dancing in circles. The adults stood in long lines for camp food and rations. Even though they were pillars of stoicism, their survivors' grief, like a thorn, grew deeper and deeper, aching and gnawing all night long. As the years past, despair began to mingle with hope. I often heard them at night. Their frantic whispers always turned into tears, the tears turned into silence.

To support hope and sanity, the refugees organized themselves into social and educational units that reflected their previous lives and experiences. They longed for the return of continuity to their lives, the part broken by war. My father coached a basketball team and taught English at the camp high school. Having taught himself English through reading, he loved English literature, everything from Shakespeare to Somerset Maugham, and read as much as he could find. To supplement the camp's limited food rations, my father made expeditions out into the German countryside to talk the farmers into exchanging milk or eggs for a day of his labor. Some agreed; others threw rocks at him. My father told me that after the war, the Germans were defeated and hungry with very little left to share. And yet this story remains: Herr Muller, one of the kinder farmers, formed a friendship with my father and invited us to their home for Christmas Eve dinner. Their farm table, though set minimally, had some coveted meat and vegetables. We were very grateful but had nothing to offer them in return till my father pulled out his last cigarette. Lying in the palm of his hand it looked so seductive and dear. He cut it in half and gave one half to Herr Muller. For a brief moment, as they smoked, there was peace on earth, goodwill to men.



Ona and Povilas Skardzius, Australian Alps 1944. Skardis family archive



Ona Skardiene and daughter Ina, Austria 1944. Photo by P. Skardzius, Skardis family archive

My memories are curiously mostly of summer days, drenched in the colors of nature, paths through the pine forests and grain fields, the blue cornflowers, the red poppies of Bavaria. I often went out for such walks with my father. I posed amongst the wheat and daisies for my father's camera, the one that survived the war with him. But sadly even this beloved camera's pictures were black and white, making the red poppies look black. I ached for the color of summer. Repurposed old printing presses brought the community their own Lithuanian language novels, poetry, academic discourse and children's fairytales. For me, the heavy black ink drawings and the words printed on cheap brown newsprint made the Grimm fairy tales ever more frightening, even chilling. I ached for color among the ashes. Sometimes the children's stories got mixed up with other papers also printed in bleeding black. They looked the same at first but they were actually photos of naked people, dead people in piles. A parent quickly pulled the errant pictures before I could study them. It didn't matter. I already knew that something really, really bad existed around, near and all over us.



Ina and her dad at a crossroads in Graz, Austria 1944.

Skardis family archive



Ina with a gift sent by Sofia Smetona. Augsburg, Spring 1949.

Skardis family archive

Teveli, is Stalin coming here to us, Teveli? I'm scared, Teveli. Is Stalin living in the basement, Teveli? Mikas said so. Teveli, where are you? I'm afraid.

One dark winter day, I sat in the kitchen with great anticipation. The light bulb had been turned on over the table which had been wiped clean of crumbs and a package had been placed in front of me. With great ceremony, I opened the box from America, from p. S. Smetoniene. I stared at her writing on the label; it marched in even lines, like little soldiers standing very straight. The box had a foreign smell. American, I said to myself. I reached in and pulled out a box of crayons, holding my breath at the display of colors, almost tasting their waxy beauty. Next I found a big coloring book, its pages promising to fill the darkness around me. But wait, there is more in the box, a doll with golden hair and eyes that open and close. I was satiated with joy and whispered thank you into the doll's ear.

As the post-war leaders shook up the world order, the refugees crouched by their radios waiting to hear the unimaginable truth come out, crashing into their guts with blinding searing pain, because only then would they finally and truly know that they could never go home again. The reckoning was severe, merciless. Some fell into despair and hung themselves in the attic between lines of drying tobacco leaves. Some chose instead to stand in line, as did Povilas Skardzius, to sign up for a new life in America. He also signed up for a new last name: Skardis. To make it easier to pronounce in America, he told me. Our four-year wait in the camp was part of the American filtering process, not unlike the grading of gravel, to allow only the finest grade to enter the bright New World. On the other side of the Atlantic, p. Smetoniene was tirelessly attending to our immigration papers, finding appropriate sponsors to sign for us, as well as jobs and shelter once we arrive. She graciously helped many of her scattered flock, not only us, to cross the ocean and start new lives, hopefully to be near her. Finally our turn to emigrate came in June 1949.



Ina in a field near the refugee camp in Haunstetten, in the US Sector of Germany, 1947.

Photo by P. Skardzius, Skardis family archive



Already prepared for emigration to the US. Grandma Sofia Zamaliene, Ina, and parents. Spring of 1949. Skardis family archive



Ina and her dad near the refugee camp in Haunstetten, in the US Sector of Germany, 1947.

Photo by P. Skardzius, Skardis family archive

Ripping their souls in half, they bravely stepped off of the European landmass and sailed west for two weeks on an American merchant marine ship filled with human cargo. I was aware in some child-like, neutral way that we were the objects of the world's charitable impulses. I wore a pin that said so.

I was a good little girl refugee because I could stand in line for hours, entertaining myself with my eyes and my thoughts. It took days to bring us into Bremerhaven, to sort us all out and get us onboard. The women and children were separated from the men and slept in large, windowless dormitory rooms stacked with bunk beds. There below deck the sticky smell of vomit was eternal but that didn't bother me. My mother and other women, bed ridden with nausea, were getting weak from not retaining nutrients. The smell of food seeping from the cafeteria repelled my mother so my father and I went there to eat together. Morning Cheerios, the little rings that one could eat, linger as my first awareness of an American thing. I, in a state of excitement, was quite happy with this nautical adventure and never vomited.

One early morning I was awakened by my father; it surprised me that he was in the women' quarters. He scooped me up in his arms and carried me up the stairs to the deck, towards the pale dawn. A heavy mist rose from the water. Inute, Tevelis said, I want you to always remember this special moment. This is America! He made a broad arc with his arm and there above the mist stood the Statue of Liberty. It was the tallest, largest thing I had ever seen.

### Having Arrived in America

After Hitler invaded Poland,

after Stalin grabbed Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia,

after the Americans went home to forget that Eastern Europe was still bleeding.

after running West like deer out of a burning forest, they joined millions of others, the dispossessed, the homeless, the orphaned, the raped.

After crossing the alps on foot, carrying their lives in one suitcase and a baby carriage,

after sleeping on hay beds warmed by cow breath or in railroad stations warmed by nothing,

after avoiding bombed out cities where the smell of defeat rose from the cinders and mothers used their bodies as armor protecting their children, their own bodies withering, their breasts dry, after grandmother's silver spoons, initialed with a Z, laid a trail of trade for food and milk for the baby, especially milk for the baby.

After the war ended, after the victors sliced up Germany like a piece of cake, after building refugee camps for the homeless survivors of the bleeding, lands to the East,

after they arrived in the millions seeking shelter, seeking food and succor, after the trauma, they felt unmoored, dependent, devalued, with a raging longing for their families and homes.

After a painful accounting of their losses,

after staring into the eyes of self destruction, they chose to stand in line for a new life.

After the grueling, crowded crossing of the tempestuous Atlantic after presenting themselves as the tired, the weak, yearning to breathe free, they entered New York harbor.

After that, after all of that...

There he stood, Lieutenant Povilas Skardzius in America, facing Sofia Smetoniene, his future and his past, who was welcoming him with a smile and a single tear. He quickly came to attention, straightened his shoulders, clicked his heels together smartly, bent down from his waist and kissed the top of her extended hand.

Standing to the side waiting for our turn, I whispered to my mother, What is a president's wife, Mamyte? She smiled, Oh something like a queen, Inute.

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She walks towards me now, so tall. I crane my neck up to see her head, backlit by the sun, making a halo of her frizzy hair, her face invisible. Out of the shadow below, her hand reaches out to mine. I study the hand before I touch it. It has old-people skin and painted red nails. Its fingers are stacked with rings and gems that glitter in complex patterns. I hesitate. Above me a deep rolling laughter starts in her stomach, rises through her chest, throat, mouth, nose and ends lightly like a puff of smoke. Her smiling face now turns toward the light. I take her hand because I want to laugh with her. It's my first day in America. I am five years old. I could use a laughing queen.

She leads me into a room swirling with people and sparkling things. Loud excited voices greet us in my language but I can't comprehend. I hold her queenly hand tighter realizing that the voices are looking at us. A silence descends as two people come forward with a plate holding slices of dark bread and a small pile of salt. Welcome. My father starts to say thank you but starts to cry instead. My mother and I freeze.

And then that laugh starts in the queen's stomach. One by one the people release their painful thoughts and begin to laugh with her. It is only a small dining room in a humble immigrant home but for me the summer sun sparkling through lace curtains is paradise. We eat around a large table; they talk amongst themselves about people, places and things they have lost and the strangeness of what they have found. Sitting next to the queen under her calm gaze, I begin to get sleepy but those trains and ships and whistles and jeeps keep roaring past my head. I walk over to my mother who sits quietly at the end of the table. Her eyes are vacant. Touching her arm I whisper. Mamyte, let's go home now. She stares at me and begins to weep, long and deep. Home? What home? I stand there helpless.

But we did get a bed to sleep in that night and for many more nights that followed. Thanks to Sofia Smetoniene our basic needs had been anticipated. Upon arrival we were moved into an attic, unfortunately during a savage Midwest heat wave. The attic's slanted ceiling pushed down, salty rivers ran over our bodies and we couldn't sleep. In the darkness my mother was a pale small figure, her lips moving in silence. Why has god forgotten us? Is this really America? Why are we here? God help us. Suddenly we hear a loud explosion and a row of popping sounds outside. Guns! My mother cries. Disoriented they grab our bags and then put them down. They grab me and then put me down. Bombs and screeching rockets! Through a small window we see the sky change color. War, I whisper. Decisively my father hurries downstairs to assess the danger. We wait for his return anxiously. We don't know yet that it is the Fourth of July. How could we know?

Life improved. By the time our first Christmas arrived we had moved down from the attic into a normal apartment below. We were living in our own home for the first time in my life. Though furnished minimally with hand me downs, it was very clean. My father got a job in a bicycle factory and I started speaking English in school.

Kucios (Lithuanian Christmas Eve). All is peaceful, calm, little candles magically sparkling on a Christmas tree in the middle of the dark. It feels like last year's Kucios in the camp. The table, the prayers, the 12 meatless dishes, even some hay under the tablecloth. Tradition makes us feel like nothing has changed. It fools us. Everything has changed! At the Kuciu table, my parents and Babule cried with longing for their home and family but I remembered this first Christmas in America as wonderful. Sofia Smetoniene and her network of charitable angels gave me many gifts. She was good at recruiting American women who wanted to help the refugees. I was the happiest of recipients, having received more than I had ever desired or expected or even knew existed. The source of my joy came from the new revelation that life was potentially wonderful in its luxurious splendor. All I had to do was say thank you.

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From the very beginning, I was enrolled in p. Birute's piano classes. My weekly lessons in the Smetona home provided a excuse for my father's and Mamukas' weekly card game. Before he bought our first car, my father and I would take a city bus to the their house. Though tired after a day of hard work, his spirits would lift, as they always did when he was on his way to visit Sofia Smetoniene.



Ina's first Christmas in America. Cleveland, December 1949.

Photo by P. Skardzius, Skardis family archive

We stood for a minute where the bus had left us in a poof of black exhaust. In front of us stood a cluster of small, low rectangular wooden houses, naked without bushes or trees, known locally as "the projects", public housing for the low income, the disabled, the uneducated needy. The Smetona's shoebox of a house stood in the front with an almost green lawn around it, on the corner of a busy intersection. The house turned its back to the neighboring community, which neither knew nor cared what was a Lithuania. A narrow path lined with rose bushes, an ironic baronial touch, lead to the front door. We found her there in her favorite spot kneeling among the beloved roses. With a smudge of sweat and soil on her forehead and a big smile, she removed her dirty work gloves as I ran to hug her. The piano of Brahms floated out from the open windows on this summer evening. After a quick wash-up, Mamukas invited Bambino to the quiet

of her room where the card deck was waiting on her small writing table. Levity was not part of the game; they entered the room like gladiators.

Inside, the house was made up of very small crowded rooms, with a primitive kitchen for cooking and dining, small windows, low ceilings. It was a charmless building that had a highly spirited content. I wandered into the small living room that was entirely filled by one large grand piano and waited for another student to finish the Brahms and leave. By design, my lesson was always scheduled as the last one of the day at which time the windows and doors would open, all children were let out of their rooms, food smells would float freely, and sometimes, if rarely, p. Birute would unwind her bun and let down her long hair. As I struggled with the music and made slow progress, she never gave up on my abilities. For fourteen years each lesson was a force of passion and diligence. As she loudly counted the beat, or sang a phrase's form, her engagement with me was complete. Yet she did stir pots and whip cream during my lessons. In her romantic, privileged youth she had studied in Paris, both classical piano and classical French cuisine. Passion, commitment, technique flowed between the two arts. By the time my class ended, whatever confection she was preparing was ready for my pleasure, served with milk and lots of advice regarding topics like art and life. Uniquely she never talked down to us young ones. I loved her.

If the boys, Muskis and Bukis, did not want to play with me or were going to sleep, I would have to retreat to the card room and wait for the game to end. Sofia Smetoniene's door opened with a creak and a billowing cloud of smoke. The two players remained unstirred by my entry. They played in total silence; mere conversation would have trivialized the battle. Neither noticed me as I slunk up behind her chair and kissed the side of her face. She showed no surprise, took my hand in hers, and looked into my face directly with a subtle catlike smile, through those eyes, those mysterious dark slits below the hanging gardens of her eyelids. A slight grunt in her throat was enough invitation. I lean against her shoulder, petting her forearm, fingering her bracelets, rings and, my favorite, her long coral necklace. The jewelry was always the same, the group she carried out of Lithuania on her body but had not bartered off during the journey. My poking and touching did not seem to interrupt her focus on the cards. With my head on her shoulder, I stare across at my father who has just transformed into a grinning cobra ready to strike.

I am sleepy and lay down on her bed. In the darkness of the room, lit by one lamp, I study the pictures on the walls though I already know them well. Framed old photographs, most of them inscribed in foreign languages, signed portraits of important looking people, men with medals on their chests next to women with

coronets on their heads. The pictures covered every inch of the room's wall surface. In my childish way, I was beginning to understand that these people were probably not important anymore, because they belonged to our other life, the one slowly receding back into a fairy tale. I thought about this some more and fell asleep while waiting for the happy ending.

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Father Angelaitis had a parish, more a dream really, in a newer part of Cleveland, a clean and tidy neighborhood, beckoning to those fleeing the despair of city decay. A row of small green lawns with immaculate edging was interrupted by his enterprise. His church, an inappropriate but sanctified low wooden structure with old creaky floors and low ceilings, was surrounded by his own very large salvage and trash yard. It was his way of financing his future church. He worked the yard mostly by himself, scratching and mumbling his way through the mounds of twisted metal, spools of old tires, stacks of spongy brown newspapers. Crablike he scoured the neighborhoods for usable trash. If he found something he deemed of exceptional value, he would store it in the little house next door where he lived with his mother, a Lithuanian immigrant of an older era. They spoke an alarming form of pidgin Lithuanian that astounded me but did not deter Sofia Smetoniene in the least as she had big plans for Father Angelaitis.

Though an unrefined and quirky man, he formed an unlikely bond with the patrician Sofia Smetoniene. I watched them from the parked car once. She, the proper lady in the blue fox collar and veiled hat, he, the priest in worn out overalls, stood on the edge of the rusted landscape making plans. They had an understanding. He wanted parishioners and a respectable church, a beautiful church. She wanted a new Lithuanian parish and would bring him the parishioners to fill it. They both were shepherds of their flocks. She saw the need to lead her flock out of the dangerous, declining inner city, where all newly arrived refugees had settled, clinging to the old Lithuanian parish, old club and old bakery. Our family was among the first parishioners to be recruited by Sofia Smetoniene and I was assigned to the church's first communion group. To ensure my attendance at the preparatory catechism classes, Fr. Angelaitis would personally pick me up in his junk mobile along with the weekly recyclables. The return to church was never direct as multiple stops were made in driveways, alleys and parking lots. If he spied a potential treasure on the side of the road, he



First Communion at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Lithuanian parish in Cleveland, Ohio.

Ina sits at the right hand of Father Joseph Angelaitis. June 24th, 1951.

Skardis family archive

screeched to a stop, popped into reverse and investigated the item up close. It was always exciting. There was no chitchat, no priestly platitudes. I sat in the front seat facing forward, hands folded in my lap, happy inside, not talking. On a good retrieval day I would often end the ride sitting on top of newspapers. This was much more fun than staying home and it took forever to get to the catechism classes. In the early hours of that exciting morning as I was being dressed, my seven year old self felt very holy. In the mirror I certainly looked like a bride, the Bride of Jesus, they had said. The dress and veil, so white and lacy, was given to me by Sofia Smetoniene. I had to look good, she said. And so I did. My mother had curled my hair for the first time and fresh white stockings rose above my knees. I was ready to receive the body and blood of Christ though I remained slightly dubious of the concept. Before mass, the children were



First Communion at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Lithuanian parish in Cleveland, Ohio.

Being built in the back is the new church. June 24th, 1951.

Skardis family archive

arranged for a group photo with Fr. Angelaitis seated in the center. Suddenly Sofia Smetoniene appeared in the room and with brisk authority moved me into the seat next to the priest, at his right hand. She had a keen sense of where the center of power was located and I was her delegate.



Ina's First Communion, dressed in a white dress and veil, a gift from Sofia Smetoniene Cleveland, Ohio, June 24th, 1951. Skardis family archive

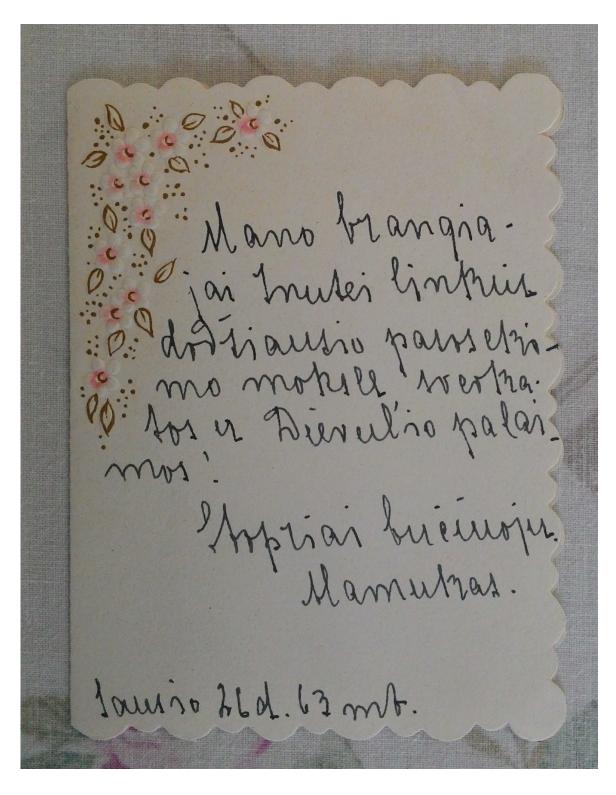
With time the new church was built. It was a distinctive, elegant structure, designed by the architect Augustinavicius. A school and convent replaced the junkyard. The parish has been the heart of the Lithuanian community in Cleveland for over 60 years now but it is still sometimes called the Nauja Parapija. Three generations of Lithuanians have come here to bless their births and deaths in their own language and tradition. Mamukas and Bambino both stopped here, in their own time, for their own funeral masses, on their way to the same cemetery where they are now not far from each other.

When my father retired he finally had the time to do what his heart had desired for so many years. He began writing down his memories of Uzugiris. He made a writing room for himself in the basement with a desk, a bookcase, and an LP record player. As he sat writing, long hand on paper, his left knee touched the side of the second drawer from the floor. Inside was a small packet of old letters, neatly tied with a ribbon. The letters of Sofia Smetoniene were cherished but lay in the darkness till my father died. At that time, I opened the drawer and brought the past to light.



From left: Ona, Jonas, Sofia Smetoniene, Ina. Cleveland, Ohio, 1956. Photo by P. Skardzius, Skardis family archive

Note: in 1954, upon achieving US Citizenship, Povilas Skardzius officially became Paul Skardis, and his wife Ona Skardis.



Sofia Smetoniene's birthday greeting to Ina in 1963. Skardis family archive