



# BROOKLYN\_BORN

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## Was Grandpa a Smuggler?

Friday, February 05, 2021



We will never know for sure, but he was certainly living in the midst of it all.

Our Lithuanian Language and Culture course has come to an end. We learned a lot about that little country determined to preserve their language and culture through more than a century of domination by powerful neighbors (Czarist Russia, Nazi Germany and later by the Soviet Union)

This is my grandfather reading a Lithuanian newspaper in PA in 1938. Although he emigrated from Lithuania in 1907, he never learned to speak English beyond a bit of the "broken" variety. He kept up with the news of the world the only way he could.



I never realized how much he and others of his era risked to learn to read and write in Lithuanian.

He was born in 1880. In 1864 Lithuanian language textbooks were banned in an attempt to Russianize the Lithuanian population and the Lithuanian press was totally banned a few years later. This lasted until 1904. It was a direct attempt to extinguish the Lithuanian language and by extension the culture.

So how did Grandpa learn to read?

There were book smugglers "knygnešiai" (literally book carriers) who transported books in the Lithuanian language across the border. They risked being shot on the spot or deportation to Siberia if they were caught

A main distribution center was in the village of Pilviškiai about 20 miles from Grandpa's village (my last blog). From there the books were delivered to stations and transported throughout the country by ordinary people ("salesmen, organists, widows, beggars, farmers and students")

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Underground schools were set up that used the smuggled books to teach proper Lithuanian. Children were taught in villages, churches, farmhouses and barns.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, book smugglers were honored in Lithuania with museums, monuments, and street names.

Kaunas is the city near my grandpa's village.

This is their monument to the "Unknown Book Smuggler"



This monument contains the names of 100 known book smugglers. One couple endured 15 years of hard labor in Siberia for their "crimes"



I will never know if Grandpa participated in the smuggling operation, but the fact that he could read and write Lithuanian proves he was a beneficiary of the resistance.

There is no reason for me to research family history before the 1800s. It is extremely unlikely I will find some famous, upper class connection in my family tree on either side. Just centuries of hard-working peasant stock taking care of their families and determined to survive in a world where the powerful classes considered them disposable.

We must never take education for granted. My goal as a teacher was to encourage my students to become lifelong learners. I intend to model that behavior.

Just a personal note:

Grandpa wasn't unusual. Nobody's grandparents from Eastern Europe spoke English beyond the broken variety. They settled in ethnic communities, built their own churches and brought priests from the "old country" to support their faith traditions. Our parents grew up bilingual and my generation is joining societies to reconnect with their roots. How ironic.

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**TOMATOCAFEGAL**

How awesome are the memories  
108 days ago



**ALIHIKES**

My paternal grandparents also grew up in an immigrant community here in the US, speaking their own language and following their own traditions (Lebanese and Syrian immigrants, speaking Arabic, worker crews who were brought here to work building the railroads). Their children (my dad and his siblings) were sent to schools where they were not allowed to speak in any foreign languages, it was English only and they were harshly punished if they didn't know the correct English word or phrase.

116 days ago



**POLSKARENIA**

Thank you for sharing some of our common history. My grandmother was, as you know Lithuanian, so I love reading more about our history. The same was happening with the Polish language at the time and indeed through the years in Siberia, when the deportees had to pray to Stalin in Russian to stay alive....

117 days ago



**AMUSICALLIFE**

  
118 days ago



**AKA\_TROUBLE**

Never stop learning - to stop learning is to start to die.  
119 days ago



**WIMSONFLOWER**

As I read your blog, two things jumped up into my thoughts:

- 1) My mother was a librarian, and my first job was helping her catalog books in the Dewey Decimal system in a small grade school library. What a story you have! Book smugglers would have been her heroes! I grew up with such a respect and love for learning!
- 2) Your family's story parallels that of mine. My ancestors (my grandfather being the first born Stateside) came to the States for religious freedoms. They got here just ahead of the terrible era you related. Grandparents spoke broken English, my father spoke somewhat broken, but pretty good English (when he went to school, he knew not a word of English), and I was an English major/teacher. What a change! (And, I'm actually bilingual--fluent in Spanish. Hubby and I are missionaries--first in Peru and now in Mexico. Sometimes I think it's sad, that I'm fluent in Spanish, but not in our mother tongue.)

My hometown was also a settlement of immigrants, speaking low-German and maintaining their culture. It remained that way until Hitler came into power. I actually found some of my ancestors on a list of "suspected German sympathizers" simply because they spoke the language! It was at that point that German was no longer spoken in the churches and schools--only in the privacy of home. It was self-preservation. Sadly, that's why I only speak a smattering of words. The language was gradually shoved into secrecy.

Thanks for remembering and honoring your ancestors . . . and for giving me a little trip of my own into memories of my ancestors who forged the way for my present.  
119 days ago



**THINCPL2004**

Never stop learning! Thank you for a walk through history!  
120 days ago



**SAMMILESSACH**

Amazing! This is truly an enlightening blog! Thank you! I agree never stop learning! I have learned so much the past two years since my job separation.

I hope you can travel soon.

120 days ago



**RACHNACH**



120 days ago





**ALICIA363**



120 days ago



**AZMOMXTWO**



what a great history lesson I love looking and researching family history the things that we can learn my favorite parts are old family Bibles they are so full of info

120 days ago



**SPEDED2**



For many years, there were those who were ashamed of their ancestry and heritage. Now we've come full circle and wear our ancestry and heritage with pride. Those who came before, forged our future and created who we are today.



Thank you for sharing such an interesting part of your history.

120 days ago



**RKOTTEK**



120 days ago



**JULIJULINN**



120 days ago



**SHERR1BEE**



Thank you for sharing!

120 days ago



**LGRIF22**



What a wonderful story! And of course it's true...those are the best! So glad you are proud of your heritage. I am too, though I have a lot to learn about my ancestors. Genealogy is an important part of my life, and my church. Most of my heritage is Scottish, German and Dutch it seems. I have few stories of the "old country" though. A few from the ancestors who moved here and what happened here... Be sure to write your personal history. I'm trying to do some of that.

120 days ago



**SPARKLINGME176**



Thank you for sharing. My Great grandparents are from the 'old country, too. They made a lot of sacrifices to come here. I am so BLESSED they did. I'm living an amazing life, because of them!



120 days ago



**KITTYHAWK1949**



120 days ago



**JUNETTA2002**



Thanks for sharing. I can't seem to find anything about my family.

120 days ago



**TEXASLYNN**



I love it. Mine was a bootlegger. 🤔

120 days ago



**RHOOK20047**



Your blogs are so educational. I know I will walk away a little smarter than I left. Have a great weekend!

120 days ago

**STRIVERONE**



You started filling a gap in my education that I didn't even know was there. Your blog was a great read. Thanks.



120 days ago



**HOLLYM48**

It is so amazing to me to know that this happened so many years ago when so many take learning for granted. It was denied to so many, whether it was their own language or even a race issue, learning and knowledge is so very powerful. I am so glad that your grandfather was a beneficiary of one of those very brave book smugglers!

120 days ago



**PHATPAT18**

Interesting.

120 days ago



**PLCHAPPELL**

Sounds like a great topic for a National History Day research paper

121 days ago



**LIS193**

Interesting history. We take education for granted and forget that for our grandparents it was not easily available.

121 days ago



**QUARTERMASTER3**



121 days ago



**MARYJEANSL**

What a powerful witness the story of the book smugglers is, to the importance of education, family, and culture.

121 days ago



**PATRICIAAK**

My ex grew up in a try-lingual family.

His mother was born in Romania. Her family immigrated when she was 2. Her father spoke Romanian.

His paternal grandfather immigrated from Ireland and spoke Gaelic.

His parents were schooled in the USA, thus spoke English.

You're right.

Many immigrants spoke their native language in the home.

However, they wanted their children to speak English.

121 days ago



**MTN\_KITTEN**

Grandpa was a smuggler!!!

Hubby's great grandfather shot and killed a man for talking bad about his daughter. He was acquitted coz he was found to be defending her honor. Oh, how things are sooooo different.



121 days ago



**NANANANA**

My Bubba died right after my parents married. Spoke some English. She was fluent in Yiddish, Russian and Polish. She could manage in Italian. Her children taught her English. My Zaida's English was satisfactory. He also spoke Yiddish and Russian. I think they learned English after arriving in the States.

121 days ago



**HARROWJET**

Your story is very interesting. I wish I remembered more of the stories my grandparents told me.

121 days ago



**SUNNYCALIGIRL**

Viva La Resistance! Your grandpa shared much in common with many oppressed cultures and occupied countries. Wonderful to know. My mother has told me that her great-aunts (Grandma's aunts) would sit together on the porch speaking a patois of Yiddish and Dutch, neither languages which she learned. They also spoke English, I don't know how well.

121 days ago



**DOVESEYES**

Awesome to know so much of your generations, " determined to survive in a world where the





powerful classes considered them disposable. " So many nations have experienced this, each one of us has the joy to receive and care for each person we know :)

121 days ago



**RAZZOOZLE**

Everything in life is a cycle.. old becomes new again. Interesting blog. I enjoyed it.

121 days ago



**LINDA!**

This is very interesting. It reminds me too of missionaries that go into countries, now, where Christianity is not allowed. They smuggle in Bibles written in the language that the population can understand. It is so interesting when we trace our ancestors and learn. We are a fortunate generation.

121 days ago



**BKNOCK**

My Grandparents immigrated from Germany but they were hard workers running a deli, so they actually learned English. My Mom was thrown out of Kindergarten because the teacher kept yelling at her in English and she could not understand her so she threw her blocks at her.

121 days ago



**CHERIRIDDELL**

This is absolutely fascinating.I loved hearing your Grandfather's story. We must also give our forefathers credit, we are blessed with the internet and numerous ways to learn a language they came to a foreign country for a better life and worked hard as well as learning as much as they could in another language.The fact that his grandchild was a teacher shows that he was successful in his mission.He raised children who integrated into their new home and took advantage of the learning available to them, no doubt with the tenacity of the family they were born into.I speak many languages but Lithuanian is not one of them .How long was your course? How difficult did you find it?

121 days ago



**WOOFERCOALBOY**

Fascinating! Of my known ancestors, I have to go back more than 500 years to find anyone who wasn't a native English speaker, & I think all of them were literate. Of course, I don't know



much about the women.

121 days ago



**BJAEGER307**

What an interesting discovery you have found regarding your ancestry. My grandparents came from Austria and migrated to the United States and Canada. My Dad was Canadian and my Mom born here in the USA. Both my parents were bi-lingual and my sister as well. I was more Americanized as my Mom used to say. The did not teach me Ukrainian. I now kinda feel left out, because all of my aunts and uncles were fluent in the language.



Tracing your heritage is a very interesting journey, and I have also spent a lot of time researching it. Someday I might get a genealogist involved cause on my Dad's side there just isn't much.

121 days ago



**MSMOSTIMPROVED**

This is so very interesting. I knew American slaves would smuggle books and it was illegal to be educated or learn to read- deadly even. The power education and reading should never be taken for granted. This is yet another reason we should all do better by our teachers and individuals dedicated to teaching our youth! Brilliant blog!

121 days ago



**UPTOIT59**

I would say I almost learn something interesting when I read your blogs- thanks for making me



a lifelong learner.

121 days ago



**WHYNOTTRY45**



121 days ago



**PATRICIA-CR**

I'm glad that what your dear Grandpa fought for is now becoming alive, finally! Shame on any country that wants to destroy an established culture and language. They have to prevail. It's their right.

121 days ago





**DARLENEK04**

Well done to your Grandfather.....and the book smugglers, whomever they were for what they did....

Very interesting blog on how larger countries try to control smaller ones and stamp out their history and languages.

Happy you have so many memories and get to go places like Lithuania again soon..fascinating.

121 days ago



**ALEXSGIRL1**

wonderful learning history Hugs

121 days ago



**PHEBESS**

That is wonderful that your grandfather was enough of a rebel to learn to speak and read Lithuanian under those circumstances - it would have been so easy to not bother, and go along with the Russianization. So good for him!

My grandparents also all came from eastern Europe, parts of what is now Russia, Poland, and Germany, though at the time they were all part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. They all arrived in the US (either New York or Texas) speaking only the language of their country, Yiddish, and one grandfather spoke Hebrew as well. They all learned to speak and read/write English, though they all retained very heavy accents until they passed away.

Last note - when I was travelling in the USSR on my home from Liberia, taking the long way home, I met up with three professors my father knew. One sent a book to my father with me, so yes, I smuggled a book out of the USSR. On the other hand, it was in Bulgarian - so when the customs inspectors asked if I was taking out any printed material in Russian, I could honestly reply that no, I was not.

121 days ago



**WATERMELLEN**

Love that monument to the "Unknown Book Smuggler"! How wonderful that people had the courage to support their cultural traditions . . and of course how wonderful that YOU are learning Lithuanian to honour that sacrifice!!

Your grandfather looks so very much like my grandfather, sitting on his verandah in Haliburton Ontario!!

121 days ago



**KOHINOOR2**

Awesome family story!

121 days ago



Thank you for sharing.



**SUSIEMT**

This was so interesting and educational. I didn't realize any of this was possible. Disgraceful really. Yes, your grandfather would be considered a hero just for learning to read and write in his own language.



121 days ago



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