

To Die
in a
Foreign Land

&

Other Stories

CHRISTOPHER MOLLER

To
Margaret
and my daughters
Cea-Cea, Lauren and Catherine

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A Chronicle

Foreword

The characters in *To Die in a Foreign Land* are fictitious except for brief mentions of generals and others involved in the progress of the Allies and the Soviets near the end of the Second World War. Although the characters are ‘made up’, as I typed I recognised bits here and there of people I know, and of those I did not then know! If the reader sees herself or himself, it is because his or her imagination has been stimulated.

The characters are fictitious but I would be the last to deny there were people who were similar to those in this volume.

Leon Uris

I also recognise the collision of fact and fiction. This story is recent history; a story that describes the experiences of one Lithuanian family settling in Australia; a story that may parallel the experiences of some of the many displaced peoples of the Second World War. This narrative, *To Die in a Foreign Land*, is an incomplete history of Birutė and Jonas Brazauskas.

It presents background information of their lives in Lithuania before and during the Second World War, and their experiences leading to their migration to Australia. Late in this war, they became Displaced Persons seeking settlement in the USA. Canada and Australia were their next preferences. After nearly two years in 'holding' and Displaced Persons' camps, and a further eighteen months in a resettlement camp near Naples, they accepted the offer to migrate to Australia.

As 'New Australians', they had not only to accept the challenges of settling in a new country; a country they often found strange, odd and bewildering, but also, at other times, welcoming (but only if they, as immigrants, 'fitted in'). Birutė, particularly, became increasingly lonely and withdrawn.

Within any family there are the collective experiences and individual experiences. For a migrant family, a 'New Australian' family, these differences can be intensified and compounded. How Jonas and Birutė confronted these challenges forms the second part of their story.

*'Home is not where you live, but where they
understand you.'*

Christian Morgenstern

'To die in a foreign land is to die as a stranger.'

Christoph Müller

The Homeland

Birutė Paulauskienė and Jonas Brazauskas met at a community picnic near Vilkija some twenty kilometres from Kaunas, at that time the capital of Lithuania. It was spring, 1933. Jonas, within minutes of their meeting, decided that he and Birutė would marry.

Birutė, the only daughter of Aras and Emilija Paulauskas (a modestly well off farming family), was outgoing, gregarious, religious, of medium height with long, braided, honey-blonde hair; she was pleasantly rounded without being overweight or appearing heavy. She was formally and informally courted by many men of, or near, her own age, and by some who were much older and widowed, the latter often thinking they could not only gain a wife but also a mother for their children. The would-be suitors were from the surrounding villages and from Vilkija. None impressed her (or her father and mother) as being suitable.

Birutė worked alongside her two brothers, Tomas and Andrius, as though she, too, was a son. Her attitude to, and participation in, the work on the farm was thought by neighbours and friends to be outside the traditional role of a daughter. Because of this, she was not always invited to participate in the more traditional women's community activities. This did not worry her as she was fully occupied working alongside her father, her brothers and her equally individual mother.

Coming up to thirty, having been born on November 23rd 1903, she did, at times, wonder whether she would marry at all given she had rejected, or at least not encouraged, most of the eligible men in the district. Birutė, little informed of the lives and broader culture of those living in the cities and larger towns, was content with her rural life. She travelled occasionally to Vilkija and had had one daytrip to Kaunas. Neither town nor city attracted her.

The family farmhouse was old and had been in the family for several generations. It had been subject to various ad hoc additions over the years, but it was comfortable and practical. The kitchen was warm in winter from the open fireplace and the stove, and there was running water piped from

a spring-fed tank into the kitchen and to the bathroom. This type of plumbing was uncommon in most similar farmhouses. The spring and summer work in the garden was willingly undertaken by Birutė.

Jonas, a minor clerk in local government in Kaunas, had been invited to the picnic by one of his few friends. Jonas was ambitious to improve his standing in society by gaining promotion in his current job and then by moving into more demanding work with higher responsibilities that would either gain him promotion to regional or national governance or into his own commercial business. He was not political. His interest was in his personal advancement through recognition from those for whom he worked as a diligent, competent, meticulous and methodical worker. He was, at the time of the picnic, twenty-three years old – eight years younger than Birutė.

Where Jonas's drive to improve himself and his lot came from is not clear. His father, also called Jonas, was a labourer and his mother, Maria, was a seasonal worker during harvest on the farms surrounding Kaunas. Their ambitions were uncomplicated (but unusual given their employment and therefore their social status); to earn enough money to provide food and lodging for themselves, their two sons (Jonas and

Petras) and their daughter (Rasa). The family avoided, as much as was possible, involvement in local committees and action groups sponsored by the supporters of the current government or by those who, openly or secretly, opposed that government. Various combinations of national and regional governments came and went but mostly with little impact on Jonas and Maria and their family.

Petras, after completing only the compulsory four years of primary school, went and worked alongside his father; Jonas, on the other hand, went on to complete four years of secondary school.

The family members were, however, enthusiastic participants in several of the local sporting competitions, particularly in football and weightlifting for Jonas Senior and Petras, while Rasa played basketball at various levels. Rasa was a member of the training squad for the 1938 European Championships but did not make the trip to Italy, where the team won the silver medal. They also trained and entered community and district track and field events. Jonas was an intermittent (not enthusiastic) participant in family games. He restricted himself to being an avid supporter of the rest of the family and for their teams. He enjoyed the sporting chatter, the

gossip and endless discussions about the representative national and regional teams and became an armchair expert on many of the sports. The family, possibly because of the enthusiasm and demands of their sporting interests and, perhaps, their poorly paid work, did not drink alcohol. However, Jonas, as a young senior school student and junior clerk, was introduced to social drinking but at a low level and without any indications that alcoholic spirits would later bedevil his life.

Lithuania, at the time of Birutė's birth, was under Russian rule. As with other of the Baltic countries, Lithuania's history was one of moving borders and occupation by Russian, German and Polish armies, interspersed at various times with self-rule, or quasi self-rule, of all or some of the country as defined by traditional ethnic boundaries. Jonas was born in 1911. The exact date was unknown but thought to be in early winter, based on oral family history and the few government documents available. He had no official birth certificate but when he applied for his first local government position, he nominated November the 2nd, the birthday of the 1918 declaration of the Republic of Lithuania.

Very little is known in relation to Jonas's upbringing. His parents may not have had the income to 'invest' in his

education but they did not stand in his way when he expressed enthusiasm and zeal for his schooling. He attended one of the few secondary schools available to him and then began first year at a higher education school before, without completing the year, he successfully applied, in early 1930, for work as a clerical assistant within the administration of the Kaunas region. He advanced quickly through the ranks so that by mid-1935, he held a minor but important position in the regional administration.

Other things had been happening too. His courting of Birutė was making progress. Jonas had very formally sought and got Aras's approval and permission to court Birutė. He impressed and surprised her parents, not because of his family, about whom he said very little, but because of the opportunities he said he had working as an administrator in regional government and due to his ambition to, eventually, become an administrator in the national government, working and living in Kaunas

Jonas's courting approach was very formal and often on his visits he would spend much of the time talking with her parents and her brothers, and only briefly conversing with Birutė herself. She, too, did not initially pay much attention to

Jonas and made no particular allowances for him, despite his having her parents' approval to visit as a suitor and prospective husband. Birutė mentally listed his many faults, mainly that he was too formal, too much of a city 'type', too aloof and too young. The age difference was never an issue for Jonas; at times his austere manner and conversation appeared middle aged by contrast with Birutė who was spontaneous, alert to her surroundings and of a joyful demeanour, even when confronted by her purposeful suitor. Even their clothing was in contrast. Jonas always dressed in conservative, public service grey and black and Birutė in the bright yellow, green and red blouses and skirts of her rural Lithuanian heritage. She wanted to dance, he wanted to talk; she lived with a joyfulness and openness suggesting simplicity and acceptance; Jonas analysed and worried.

Over time, Jonas relaxed and Birutė began to find in him an inner-self that was unlike his outward presentation. The sense of the satisfaction and achievement she gained from her farm and family life was similar, in many ways, to his focus and ambition in his work. Importantly, she recognised in Jonas a self-deprecating humour that became a part of her farm and social life each weekend.

In May 1937, Jonas formally asked Birutė's father for his permission and blessing to marry Birutė. Permission was not directly given, Aras wanted to discuss with Emilija her views about such a marriage and then to ascertain Birutė's interest or otherwise in the matter. So Jonas returned to Vilkija and waited until his visit to the farm the following Saturday for an answer.

Birutė was not averse to the idea of marriage with Jonas but did not like the prospect of not living at the farm, so she hesitated for several days before saying 'Yes' to her parents and on the proviso (made to herself) that she and Jonas would return to the farm as often as possible.

It is not noted in any family records whether Jonas asked or informed Birutė of her father's and mother's approval for them to marry. It is recorded that the marriage of Birutė Paulauskienė and Jonas Brazauskas was solemnised, at nuptial mass, on Saturday, 17 June 1937, in a small Catholic church not far from the farm, before both families and their friends. An exuberant wedding celebration party followed at the farm.

Birutė and Jonas honeymooned at a local holiday 'resort'. It was a brief three days in a cabin by the Neris River.

Much of the first and third days were taken up by travel to get there and to return to Kaunas, where Jonas had rented a small drab cottage in a tidy but rundown street, a kilometre or so from his parents.

Jonas believed he had started well. He was, after all, a clerk in the Kaunas public service and married to the attractive daughter of farmers with a small but well run farm who had brought with her a large dowry of linen, kitchenware and furniture. They had enough to make the cottage a pleasant home as they settled into married life. Birutė and Jonas were confident of their future.

The drabness of much of Kaunas at that time was balanced by the many public parks and gardens, the Neris River flowing through the city and, only a street away, his parents' home, with Birutė's family farm a short bus trip into the country. They had, they said to each other, the best of the urban facilities and the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Work was Jonas's main concern outside of his role as a provider and husband; Birutė set about creating their home, including the establishment of a vegetable garden in the small backyard. Family, religion and recreation completed and fulfilled their days.