



Born to Freedom

Lina Zilionyte

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Freedom to most Americans is an abstract concept. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall the earnest rhetoric of Marxist—Leninist ideologues has been reduced to quaint slogans found in history books. But not to Lucy Ankus the heroine of this detail-rich historical novel. Lucy is five years old in the beginning of the book and a member of a family which has lost loved ones fighting in the Lithuanian Resistance to the foreign Stalinist regime which crushed them.

In less time than you can say “martyred for the proletariat” the village of Alytus is assigned a Communist minder on an *Izh* motorcycle. Unfortunately this young man appointed by Moscow to be the Party Secretary in the village turns out to know more in theory than in practice as he collectivizes the local farmers’ pieces of land.

When Pavel mysteriously disappears one spring the villagers hope they can go back to the old ways. But the Soviet machine is too powerful. Still Lucy dares defiance in her own small ways refusing to join the *Komsomol* and learning as much as she can about the history folklore and language of Lithuania despite the dismissal by the Soviets of her Lithuanian language teacher.

Each act by Communist fanatics only strengthens Lucy’s sense of the injustice and hypocrisy of the Soviet system she is forced to live under. The vice-principal of her school beats a pupil for disobedience bloodying his face. A beautiful old church where Lucy seeks solace is whitewashed by the Soviets. And although the press is touting the Lithuanian collective farmers as achieving the highest meat production results Lucy must stand in line at the butcher’s to ensure her family receives a share of beef.

Despite countrymen who tell Lucy that Lithuania doesn’t exist anymore and that she is “living in bygone” Lucy refuses to collaborate with the forces of darkness always believing her country can someday be free.

The best way to enjoy this book is to think of it as an oral tale told by an elderly Lithuanian directly into your ear. Although the author is a gifted storyteller the book would have benefited from a native English-speaking editor; the writing sometimes contains turns of speech like “Mother looked at Lucy with scare in her eyes” or “Yes I will” Lucy replied cross-glancing at Father.”

Still this juicy story offers valuable insight into life behind the Iron Curtain during the 1960s '70s and '80s and the passion of Lithuanian patriots to free their country a passion realized by Lucy at the book’s end as walls of all sorts begin coming down and she finds someone to love as much as she loves her country of origin.

Lina Zilionyte was born in Alytus Lithuania in 1956. She received a bachelor’s degree in English language and literature from Vilnius University in 1979 emigrating to Washington D.C. in 1985. In 1991 she obtained a master’s in Linguistics from the University of Maryland. She currently lives in D.C. and works at the Library of Congress.

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