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## Book Review

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# A Lithuanian Catholic's struggle against inhuman Soviet oppression

by Cloret Carl

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### **A Radiance in the Gulag, the Catholic Witness of Nijole Sadunaite**

trans. by Rev. Casimir Pugevicius and Marian Skabeikis

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Sister Nijole Sadunaite is known to Lithuanians, at home and abroad, both old and young, as a spiritual and moral leader of the Lithuanian resistance movement. The monumental courage and faith imparted by this saintly woman's chronicle inspire anyone fortunate who reads her words.

On March 25, this writer had the honor of meeting Sister Nijole. I was impressed with her joyful spirit and illuminating grace. Her active dedication to truth and justice through love of God continue to outrage the KGB. Sister Nijole's personal recollections, *A Radiance in the Gulag*, hastily written and smuggled out of occupied Lithuania (circa 1987), document the perverse content of the Russian regime's notions of "justice" and "law."

Born 52 years ago at Kaunas, Lithuania, one year before the Hitler-Stalin Pact annexed Lithuania to Russia, Sister Nijole is the daughter of Veronika Rimkute-Saduniene, an intelligent and religious woman, and Dr. Jonas Sadunas, an agronomist who traveled extensively in Western Europe and Africa teaching scientific agriculture and functioning as a lay Catholic minister to the poor. The Sadunas family circle of friends include the martyred clergymen Bishop Vincentas Borisevicius, Canon Kemesis, and Father Franciskus Gus-

taitis, all executed at the hands of the KGB. The little Felicitas Nijole was profoundly influenced by the lives of these martyrs and was thoroughly acquainted with the brutal torture and executions which they endured.

After the outbreak of war in 1941, Sister Nijole's family, though condemned to Siberian exile, managed to escape and found refuge with the help of Bishop Borisevicius, who arranged for her father to be employed as a teacher in the seminary at Telsiai.

Throughout the late 1940s into the 1950s, Sister Nijole and her family were constantly stalked by the Cheka and its successor, the KGB. Like most Lithuanians, they supported the struggles of the partisans against the Russian occupation. The family endured great personal hardships, including malnutrition, with noble courage. Since the family refused to renounce or conceal its faith, even under direct threats to their physical existence, the Cheka and later the KGB prevented it from establishing official residence or employment for any significant amount of time. The threat of being carted off to the Siberian taiga continually plagued the family's day-to-day life.

From its inception, the Lithuanian resistance has drawn upon the Catholic cultural matrix in its uniquely Lithuanian form of expression, in the struggle for survival of a language with conceptually rich poetry and traditional music.

### **The crime: publishing a newspaper**

"In 1970," Sister Nijole writes, "when a criminal case was brought against Father Antanas Seskevicius for catechizing children, I hired an attorney for him. But to sympathize with and help those who are being persecuted by the KGB is to make oneself a target of the KGB." From this point on, Sister Nijole was placed under continuous surveillance and harassment, being forced out of her job and threatened with

eviction and revocation of her residence in Vilnius. Nonetheless, she regularly copied and passed on the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, an underground newspaper which gives accounts of the Lithuanian Catholic struggle to survive totalitarianism.

Four years after the judicial railroad and imprisonment of Father Seskevicius, Sister Nijole was also arrested.

"In my room about 2:00 p. m., I began copying the *Chronicle*. Hearing me, a neighbor woman, a teacher named Mrs. Aidietience, who was an informer I did not suspect at the time, called the KGB and told them I was typing. (Chekist Vytautas Pilelis mentioned this to me during my interrogation: 'you started typing the *Chronicle* when the woman next door immediately informed us of the fact, by telephone.' I replied, 'If she did so convinced that she was right, I respect her. And if she did it for spite, I am sorry for her.')

"When the Chekists came and surrounded the house, that same neighbor hurried at their orders to the Polyclinic to find out whether my brother would be returning home soon, since the Chekists had decided to enter the apartment at the same time as he, and so to surprise me while I was typing. And that is exactly what they did. About 4:00 as soon as my brother returned, a whole group of Chekists tumbled into our apartment. Three of them opened the door to my room, and saw me sitting at the typewriter, talking with Brone Kibickaite, my best friend, who was sitting nearby, and they began shouting, 'Don't move! Hands up!'"

Sister Nijole was charged with violating the Criminal Code of the Lithuanian S.S.R., paragraph 68—anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.

While awaiting trial, Sister Nijole was whisked off to imprisonment in the KGB cellars. The KGB cellars are the latest trend in interrogation solitary confinement methods, consisting of hot cellars where one is stifled from lack of air, and perspires ceaselessly from heat; or cold, damp cells where the marrow of the bones freezes, and the skin develops festering sores.

"The KGB cells are deep underground, and only the top of a small window at the ceiling reaches the ground outside—the pavement of the KGB yard. The little window is barred with double panes of filthy glass, and you can barely see a patch of sky. To reach that window, one must climb up on a small table, and this is strictly forbidden.

"Those under interrogation are taken outside, for a half-hour of exercise daily (it is supposed to be 45 minutes, but the soldiers cheat on the time) in the little yard, similar to a cement cave—with high cement walls and floor, and above bars with narrow apertures. The little yards are four by five paces, or a bit larger. All around are the high walls of the KGB headquarters. Throughout the interrogation period, one does not see a tree or a blade of grass."

Throughout her confinement in the hot, unventilated cell, Sister Nijole sang hymns to the violent objections of the guards.

## David and Goliath

The mere dissemination of truth and propagation of the faith by means of the hand-copied *Chronicle* strike overwhelming fear in the KGB apparatus—an apparatus which possesses "thousands of staff, hundreds of thousands of agents, informers, the best detection and eavesdropping means," which controls all of the army, militia, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, and the court system to boot.

Lacking witnesses against Sister Nijole, each of her interrogators desperately resorted to threats: "You schizophrenic!" "For that we will shut you up in a psychiatric hospital." This failing, they used forgeries and lies: "[Chekist Pilelis] wrote in the space specially left in the witnesses' depositions, after they had signed them and departed, that they had testified that I was a fanatic. . . . Not one of them had said so and some of them did not even know the meaning of the word. The Chekists charge everyone who is on trial for religion with religious fanaticism. From this it is clear that there are secret instructions from Moscow to this effect."

The sentence was sealed before the mock trial even began:

"One day, he [Chekist Pilelis] began to praise me profusely. 'Throughout my career, I have never met anyone like you, who has done so much good for people.' I asked why he was praising me so highly. 'It's not flattery, but the truth,' said the Chekist. 'And in spite of the fact that I have really tried to do only good for everyone,' I said to him, 'at my trial you are going to give me a greater sentence than you do murderers.' 'Yes, you are going to get more than murderers, because you know too much,' affirmed Pilelis."

Following 12 months of interrogation in the KGB cellars—four different interrogators, including Assistant Chief Kazys of the Interrogation Section of the KGB and Maj. Vytautas Pilelis, the much-touted Chekist—Sister Nijole finally went to trial.

## The 'trial' and the 'defense'

Securing an attorney for Father Seskevicius had made her a KGB target, and for this reason Sister Nijole served as her own attorney.

"'Don't say what you are prepared to say today, and you'll go home from trial free!' The prosecutor in the Supreme Court offered me freedom in exchange for my silence. How much they feared the truth! I replied, 'I am not a speculator and I refuse to speculate with my convictions. I will speak today!'"

Fearful lest her defense speech and final statement be leaked to the public, the authorities had Sister Nijole escorted to trial by six soldiers (murderers are guarded by one or two soldiers), while in the courtroom she was guarded by young hand-picked Russian soldiers unable to understand Lithuanian.

Aside from the accused, her guards, the prosecutor, and six Chekists, the courtroom was empty.

All witnesses were removed from the courtroom, and it was affirmed by the judge that the trial was secret! At the Sister's objections that, even in secret trials, witnesses "were supposed to be present until the end" of a trial, the "judge threatened, 'One more word, and . . . we'll sentence you *in absentia!*' " Unshaken, Sister Nijole reminded the court that to remove her, the accused, from a trial which already banned spectators and witnesses, would be triply unjust! She remained in the courtroom to represent herself.

Her lengthy defense speech juxtaposed the freedoms guaranteed in the Soviet Constitution, the law, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the KGB's unbridled perversion of the legal process into an instrument of tyrannical force imposing the arbitrary will of the Russian dictators. She eloquently expounded upon the inviolability of the Creator's law, to which they also are subject, boldly stating, "What you fear is the truth," and warning, "Your crimes are propelling you to the garbage heap of history at an ever increasing speed."

Addressing the souls of her inquisitors, she declared, "Every person has the sacred duty to struggle for human rights. . . . The most important thing in life is to free one's heart and mind from fear, since concessions to evil are a great crime.

"This is the happiest day of my life. I am being tried on account of the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, which is struggling against physical and spiritual human tyranny. That means I am being tried for the truth and love of my fellow man. What can be more important in life than to love one's fellow man, his freedom and honor?

"Love of one's fellow man is the greatest form of love, while the struggle for human rights is the most beautiful hymn of love. May this hymn forever resound in our hearts and never fall silent. I have been accorded the inevitable task, the honorable fate, not only to struggle for human rights, but also to be sentenced for them. My sentence will become my triumph! My only regret is that I have been given so little opportunity to work on behalf of my fellow man.

### **Thirsting for divine justice**

"I will joyfully go into slavery for others and I agree to die so that others may live. Today, as I approach the Eternal Truth, Jesus Christ, I remember His fourth beatitude: 'Blessed are they who thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied. . . .'"

During the two days of her remarks, her Russian inquisitors sat pale, with drooped heads and downcast eyes. They could not look her in the eye.

"On June 17, 1975, Judge Kudiriashov handed down the court's decision: 'for duplicating and disseminating the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, she is sentenced to three years loss of freedom, to be served in strict regime labor camps, and three years of exile.' "

This unbreakable woman describes at length her journey

through the hellish Gulag system: dehumanizing conditions of transport, continual mental and physical torment marking her brief stays in the transfer points en route to the Female Political Prisoners Strict Regime Concentration Camp at Mordovia.

That prisoners of conscience still existed in the Soviet Union astounded the criminal prisoners with whom she was transported. To the dismay of their watchful guards, she gave the starving her food and regularly engaged them in conversations. As time passed, even the three armed military soldiers assigned solely to guard her cage took interest in her case. Amid the wide variety of parasites, bedbugs, fleas, lice, roaches, and rats, this woman's unwavering spirit and conscience became a source of hope and strength to the most downtrodden prisoner.

During the exhausting, month-long journey to Mordovia, Sister Nijole lost 33 pounds. But her acts of love and faith in God's justness prevailed: "And how good it is that the small boat of our life is steered by the hand of a good Father. When He is at the wheel—nothing is frightening. Then, no matter how hard life becomes, you will know how to fight and how to love. And I can say that the year 1975 has flown by like the wink of an eye, but it has been my joy. I thank the good God for it."

Throughout her incarceration at the forced labor camp, she organized and participated in hunger strikes and petition campaigns, providing an invincible optimism to her compatriots within the Catholic underground network which reached both male and female political prison camps.

Although hundreds of letters sent to her were confiscated, she was able to have the details of her conviction smuggled out to the public, evading and confounding the KGB prison informers.

Following the end of her concentration camp term, without prior notice, she was shipped off to Siberian exile, spending one week each at jails in Potma, Chelyabinsk, Novosibirsk, and Krasnoyarsk. On Sept. 19, 1977, she and eight male criminal prisoners arrived in Boguchany, scheduled to be shipped to the Siberian taiga, a wilderness of forest-covered hills, largely uninhabited.

She survived her exile, despite continuing attempts to destroy her. Eventually returning to Lithuania, and resuming her underground activity, her life was shadowed with constant threats of re-arrest and assassination, which have by no means ceased to this day. Should Sister Nijole's chronicle become more widely circulated and read, it will profoundly enrich today's growing worldwide anti-Bolshevik movement, by addressing the fundamental moral crisis facing us today in such unmistakably clear and uncompromising terms.

Sister Nijole Sadunaite's written recollections capture both the cruelty of evil in the Russian "blood-and-soil" mentality, and demands of the reader to recognize the power of the divine potential within humanity as the incalculable factor for freedom which its adversaries cannot acknowledge.