

**An Original Source Interview with / Interviu su:**

**Irena Saulutė Valaitytė Špakauskienė**

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## Translation Text

I am Irena Saulutė Valaitytė Špakauskienė, born 1928 in Kaunas.

*Could you tell us the story of deportation from the very beginning?*

In the winter and spring of 1940-41, we were in hiding, not living at home, because we were afraid that father would be arrested. In those months they were arresting the men but not touching the women and children. Due to some circumstances, on the night of June 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> both my brother and father returned to that place where mother and I were hiding. That night they arrested and deported us. The apartment was filled with armed soldiers speaking Russian. They immediately sat father down on a chair and did not allow him to move at all, while pushing their rifles at him. They also woke us children from our beds with rifles and ordered us out the door. Mother, very frightened, somehow grabbed an album. But father says: "Put it away. They'll shoot us soon anyway. Maybe our relatives will find us." And so, we left the house in sandals, summer dresses, taking nothing with us, convinced that they'll shoot us soon somewhere. Since they arrested us not at home but on someone else's farm, at the house of my father's sister, I did not know the area. They drove us to the train station in trucks, and we kept thinking, they'll stop somewhere and shoot us. We drove by a farmstead, a forest, and still they did not shoot us. But we all thought they'd shoot us. And so they brought us to the station. Around the station there were already a lot of people standing in families, in groups, guarded by armed soldiers. So, they drove us to the station, directly to the train platform, not leaving us with the people already gathered there. Suddenly, a group of soldiers grabbed my father under his arms and dragged him in a different direction, to the right. Other soldiers, beating us with rifles, took us in the other direction. Everything happened so suddenly. Since I was small and the soldiers apparently didn't pay much attention to me, I managed to run up to my father, jump up on him, hug his neck, and wrap my feet around his waist. So, they beat me with rifles, trying to pry off my arms, my legs. I screamed in a crazed voice, because I still thought that I could somehow hold on to father. In other words, I wasn't thinking at all; I just shrieked and screamed and held on. Finally, they pried me off. And they put us into a completely empty train, no one was there, and locked us in. We heard how a few wagons away the doors were opened, and we understood that they had locked father inside. So, we sat on the floor for several hours and cried - mother, brother, and I, cried for our father, not for our home, not the arrest - we cried for our father. A few hours later, they brought in those people who had been brought to the station earlier. And so, the train stood there for two days. After a while, relatives started to gather, looking, crying, but the soldiers kept them away. After two days, the train started to move and stopped only in New Vilnia (a major rail interchange, about 8 miles north of Vilnius center). Until New Vilnia, the men's wagons, father's wagons, were still part of the same train. And in New Vilnia, they opened all the wagon doors once more to look for men. If they found any men, they took them out. We stood for another whole day in New Vilnia. And there, in some incredible way, I slipped out through a crack and went to look for father. How did I look for him? I ran along the train, past the people who had come from Vilnius to look for their relatives. Everyone was shouting, calling. The soldiers chased me, of course, but I ran shouting Valaitis, Valaitis. And from one wagon I got a signal. I understood that I should stop. Through a crack I saw the men, like matches, with their arms pressed down, without shirts, sweat streaming down their bodies. It was very hot and there were a lot of them in the wagon. And somehow my father

squeezed through the wet, slippery bodies. They made room for him to get to the crack. And quickly, because he saw that we would soon get separated, he pulled off his ring through the crack, so mother could get us food. He knew that we had nothing. He barely had time to say: "Eat grass, I'll eat grass, we have to see each other again. And tell Romas (the narrator's older brother) that from now on, he has to take care of..." (narrator turns away from the camera and cries) I can't... I'm sorry. I'll turn around again soon."... That from now on, he has to take care of mother and you in my place." He mentioned the grass because I was so spoiled, I didn't eat much, and was a real problem for my parents. In that terrible moment, perhaps he thought I would not eat the grass. Then suddenly father passed me a piece of ham through the crack. One of the men, someone who had a chance to take food along, gave it to father. I brought it back to the wagon because they grabbed me right after and I had to go back. That night, all night, they pushed our train back and forth. Only next day, as we were leaving Lithuania, we understood that during the night they had uncoupled the wagons with the men. From the men's wagons they had formed separate trains, from the women and children's others. And all the men were taken to the Krasnoyarsk camps, most of them to Camp Seven at Reshyoty. Many of them died there in a couple of months from hunger, probably helped along by typhus. But since they had been deported without trial, they were interrogated there, and cases were established against them. They were innocent people, deported without a trial. And then around the spring of 1942 came the verdicts. These verdicts, found in the documents at the Genocide Center, gave their sentences: 10 years, 15, 25, or execution. But some of the condemned were already dead. They had perished in the taiga, their corpses pulled out of the camps. In other words, the verdicts were pronounced several months after their deaths. My father received the death sentence. The verdict, as I read it now in the documents, states: "For active resistance against the Soviet government... I must concentrate. "...the highest punishment." At the end of October, father was taken from the camp in just his shirt and some sort of pants, something like pants, and barefoot. It is winter already in Krasnoyarsk at the end of October. In several days they collected a certain number of people who were to be shot. They brought them to the prison at Kansk and on November 5 they shot them. There is no further information. I now have all of these documents. When they interrogated my father, they asked him, "Do you admit that you fought against the Soviet government, that you actively resisted?" And father's reply is short and very clear: "I served my country and my legally elected government in good conscience." That was his whole answer; he gave no other justifications. And the mothers with their children... The train with women traveled for about a month, because it did not travel continuously. Sometimes it did not stop for a few days, then it stood a few days. Because the war had started, the army needed the tracks to move west. We had to let them pass. We saw the army trains through the cracks. When the tracks were free, we traveled four or five days without water. The whole wagon was full of people sitting on the floor, with a hole in the floor that for us was... Well, we were all normal, clean people, with a family and a home. Can you imagine... young mothers, young men and women from high schools, boys and girls, school-age children. And everyone must use that hole, without any sanitary means. It was such a humiliation; I still cannot get over it, that dehumanized feeling. When the train stopped and they opened the doors, well, we did not know Russian, but we knew what it meant. First, they yelled, are there any who croaked, not died but croaked. That meant, we had to give them the corpses. They took the bodies and threw them away, but nobody knew where. No one knew what those places were called. The second command was a strict, military-like: one person, two buckets. From every wagon one person had to jump down. And if people did not have buckets, perhaps they gave them some. That line of

people was marched under guard to the place, where steam locomotives are supplied with water. There were large faucets. So, they carried two buckets of water back to the wagons. No one knew how long the water would last. There wasn't enough water. There was no question of washing. But we had babies, and women who gave birth. There were no diapers. So, mothers who had babies, and other women who helped them, wrapped rags round their waists to dry them. Because babies need to be changed. But the babies and the older people had the hardest time surviving the trip. Children and young mothers weren't dying much in the train wagons, no, that came later. When we arrived at the last bridge at Biysk, everyone on the train had to get out at the embankment. It was raining very hard. Buyers were arriving, but we were being sold only by the wagonload. So, if they needed workers somewhere, they had to buy a whole wagon of us. The guards would not let them select individuals. That whole time it was raining and cold, and we had no roof. There were lots of children in our wagon, so no one bought us for two weeks. My brother became ill; he ran a fever, lost consciousness. My mother bent over him, protecting him with her body, at least his face, his chest. So, the beginning was already terrible. Finally, we were bought by a company in the Altai region to cut trees in the mountains. People who had fewer children in their train wagons stayed in the city, in Biysk, in some factory or kolkhoz. But we had to walk another 8 days into the mountains, and it rained the whole time. At first, as we climbed the winding road into the mountains, we still saw some houses, but we never stopped, never stopped near houses. We stopped in the mountains near caves. And all night long we sat in the rain there. I caught a bad cold, it seems, because both my knees became red and swollen. I wouldn't let anyone near me, wouldn't let them touch me. There were several wagons with horses, but no one had ever seen such horses: small, covered with sores, all bones, their sores were rubbed open - they looked awful. It's strange, because the Altai region has remarkably fertile soil. Wild flowers are taller than people. As we used to say, if you push a stick into the ground, it will grow into a tree. Unbelievable, those horses, like dogs-nothing but ribs and sores! And those wagons! So, they put me into one of those wagons and I had to ride in it. I was so afraid. The winding road frightened me; the horses could barely pull the wagon. After 8 days we reached a small town in the mountain district. This was a gold mining town; there were gold mines in the mountains. It seemed that life should be good here, but during the past month all the men had been taken away to the war front. Misery and poverty had been at home there for decades. I remember that the one-room huts of the gold miners were made of clay, whitewashed inside and out, no clothes, no wardrobes. I'll tell you in a moment, how I know what the huts looked like inside. They took us to a barrack near the forest and told us to move in. So, everyone in our train wagon settled into the barrack. It was strange - the white walls of the barrack were covered with red spots. We did not understand, never saw such a thing, did not know that those were dead bedbugs, killed by the people who were there before us. The walls were covered in blood and lit up by electricity. We were exhausted; imagine, we had spent two weeks waiting by the tracks in the rain, eight days climbing into the mountains, and a month on a train before all that. So, we all fell to the ground to sleep. Then thousands of bedbugs descended upon us. I screamed through the night, but my brother fell asleep. All night long, mother pushed the bedbugs off him, as though they were sand or gravel, while I cried and scrapped them off my body. Next day, mother asked the guard to let her find a place to live with one of the Russian families, in a hut near the barrack. And mother found a place. A Russian woman took us in, into one of those whitewashed clay huts with a large Russian stove. She had two boys, school boys like me. But there were no beds, no wardrobes. In the wall a few nails and two of those awful Russian jackets. No other clothes. And on the ground two beds with felt covers. Not real beds,

but plank-beds like we have in our sod hut here; these she had in her house. Instead of legs, they had crossed boards and a plank surface. The narrower plank-bed was for us three, while the Russian woman and her two children had the wider one. There were some bedbugs in the hut as well, but not so many. Before the cold weather came, it was possible to survive in the Altai region. Huge grasses grew there and gigantic trees in the mountains. We didn't even take those trees, didn't cut them, but chose only the kind that had sort of tar-like branches. I brought those down from the mountains. Children were not forced to work. Only those who were 14-15 went into the mountains to cut trees. Until it froze, we picked a kind of grass, an edible one most likely, since no one died of it. The Russian women loaned us pots in which we cooked that grass on a bonfire in the yard. We cooked it without salt, without anything. It was a grass porridge. But you don't die from it - we were all thin, handsome and hungry, but we didn't die. When winter came it was hard. Each family survived however it could. In February, a couple of babies were born. They were expected to die, but a miracle happened. The mothers boiled a crust of bread for a long, long time, then mashed it to a pulp. Those infants already looked like mummies. They were just little skulls and dried up skin. They were fed that pulpy liquid, although they already looked dead. Little by little their lips were rubbed with that liquid and they started to feel. They didn't die, neither the girl, nor the boy - they survived. So, in Altai, if they had not deported us further, we Lithuanians would have prospered somehow. Then came the summer of 1942. Again, they collected some of the mothers and children, not all of them. Gathered them up, and again, with those horses down the mountains to the Biysk train station. Again, in the train wagons, we set off on a very long trip that lasted about two months. At first, we traveled on trains, then the railroad ended. At the Angara river we camped like vagabonds. Then on barges, for several days, we floated on the Angara River. Again, in camps with mosquitoes and those little flies. Gradually, by truck, they drove us in groups over the mountains, not very high ones, from the Angara River basin to the Lena River basin. About the Lena, that was at Yakutsk. The Lena is a remarkably large river, but these were still the highlands; the river was large, but that was not yet the delta. When they had gathered a sufficient number of barges, then once again we climbed in. There was water at the bottom of those barges. And once again we climbed into the barges and floated down the Lena River. I'm afraid this may not be exact - perhaps we covered about 5,000 kilometers. We'd need to check on a map. At first, we all floated along happily because we had this idea that the world had rescued us, that we were being taken across the Arctic Ocean, across the Bering Straits to America. In our barge there was one elderly lady, Mrs. Stanišauskienė, whose husband had been a transportation minister in some cabinet. She kept saying: "They will unload us here somewhere, as we float along, the clouds are lower; it's colder." She says: "Wait and see, they'll unload us here." We children, and the mothers, were upset. Why does she say that and ruin our mood? We are all going to America; the world has saved us. We arrived at the Lena River delta, the Arctic Ocean, the Laptev Sea. But at that time we didn't know the names. And we began to stop at the shores, at the islands, these weren't the real shores, where they unloaded not less than 500 people each time. On the islands we discovered people standing - Finns, Karelians, who had been brought there a few days earlier. Together with each group of people who disembarked, men climbed out of the barges, how should I call them? They did not wear uniforms but were NKVD; those men were the guards. Then the column of barges, pulled by a steamboat, continued another 100 kilometers, or 60, or 90, to another island, where they unloaded other people. These disembarkations started after August 20 and ended perhaps at the beginning of September. The islands were empty, desolate, without vegetation. Some kind of little gray sticks

grew here and there - then nothing again. If you kicked a mound of dirt, you saw frozen earth gleaming underneath. But there wasn't much time to think about this. Those men, our commanders, whoever they were, immediately organized brigades and assigned work. They made it seem like we were choosing freely whether we wanted to fish, or pull logs from the water to shore, or hew those logs and build houses for the guards. There was no mention of houses for the exiles, for the mothers and children. Some of the people signed up to pull out the logs. All of this activity took place on the shore; there were no shelters on this frozen ground. My brother disappeared from shore and returned a little later. Mother and I asked him what type of work he had chosen. He answered: fishing. He chose this because they promised him food instead of money. Mother started to cry. She embraced him and begged him to give up the idea of fishing. She wanted him to pull logs from the water instead. After all, he was still dressed in his high school shirt and slacks. In Altai, where he had cut trees in the mountains, the branches had torn up his clothes. We had no needle and thread to repair them so he was all ragged. But my brother had decided on fishing, since he would get food. Father had said that he must take care of mother and me, so he was doing that. Mother pulled the logs. The work involved wading into the water, tying on ropes. Then the women, like ants, pulled the logs to shore, many meters up the bank, then on the island to where the older boys were hewing the logs and building log houses for the guards. The children's brigade also pulled things out of the water. We were school children less than 13 years old. Anyone older belonged to the adult brigade. Unless we worked, we did not get bread coupons. In the children's brigade, if we worked, we had a right to buy 250 grams of bread that day, adults could buy half a kilo. They did not give us the bread but only coupons, pieces of paper. A kilo of bread cost 4 rubles and 60 kopeks. We worked 12 or 13 hours a day; at least 12, but if they said more, we worked more. I worked like that for a month, no rest on Sundays, none on Saturdays. They paid me three rubles. I hadn't even earned a kilo of bread. I sat on the shore and cried all by myself. I thought I could help mother, help us all survive. I wanted so much to help my family, yet I didn't even earn a kilo of bread. It was hard, very hard work, especially once it started to snow in early September, frozen sludge appeared in the water, and our clothes began to ice over. At night we sat on the shore, and I think, there the mothers decided to form groups and build sod huts. However, we were not permitted to take any of the wood from the logs, used for building the houses for our guards - we could only take the bark. Those logs had been swimming in the water maybe 100, maybe 50 years, swimming perhaps 5,000 kilometers. They were wet, and then they froze on the shore, the bark was like a piece of ice. If you take a piece from that log, you can be punished with three to five years in prison. You cannot take that log for yourself, not even a block of wood chopped into firewood. But they did allow us to gather broken branches, so after work we collected branches of all kinds: long, short, thick, thin, and crooked fragments - we stacked them into piles. Some of us noticed that the unthawed ten centimeters of turf would soon freeze over. So we started to peel off that dead-looking, gray sod. All of us understood that we would soon see heaven in a structure built with just those crooked branches. By the middle of September, we pretty much finished building the frames out of those sticks. We covered them with the peeled sod. As we were putting the sod on the frames, I remember well how the dirt from the sod dropped into my eyes, onto my head. Inside, we built two levels of plank-beds. When the snow and ice came, we kept the remaining sticks for fuel; we did not use them to make a floor. During the first winter we had no sticks under our feet. Those of us who survived the first winter, the ice thaw, around the middle of July we finally put some sticks down on the path between the plank-beds. We never did put sticks underneath the plank-beds. It would have been useless, since the ground was



permafrost anyway, it was better to use them for fuel. We children chopped out pieces of ice on the shore. This was about the middle of September, already like winter in Lithuania. I remember how with my hatchet I went looking for a clear block of ice so that there would be light in our hut. We used a "freezing on" process, that is, we mixed snow and ice, which we sort of cemented or glued on the hut as it froze. But our hope that the ice would let some light in, was not fulfilled. Very soon everything was covered over with snow, it was polar night. When we opened the door of the hut, there was a hard wall of snow in front of us, crystallized into a solid mass by storm and gale. To reach the outside, we could not just dig away the snow; we had to scrap it into the hut, making a tunnel to the surface, then carry the snow outside. And we had to do this many times during the night. Coming late to work was regarded as sabotage, as though you deliberately did not come to work. And you can't tell if it is midnight or morning. We had no orientation under that snow. So many times during the night we had to exit to the surface, scrap away at the snow, carry it out, then go back in. They gave a signal to start work. At some distance on the island they beat on a piece of metal. But you are under the snow; it's polar night, and then those incredibly strong gales; whirling gusts of snow. You can't hear a thing under that snow. One winter, everyone was very weak; my mother was still alive, but so weak that she did not get out of bed. That winter I had to scrap away at the snow almost by myself.

*Can you describe how the bodies of the dead were piled up in winter?*

Where we were at, people started dying early on. We had already lost some even before construction of the yurts was completed. The polar freeze, of course, is infinitely rock-solid and terrible, but because these first deaths occurred fairly quickly, at first the deceased were being buried in the frozen ground that had been hacked open. This was the case for those who died very early on, before winter arrived. By the time winter came, people had become so debilitated, that some families weren't even able to carry their deceased out of their yurts, upward into the snow. It was an extremely uneven situation. Some families died out entirely, others hung on, some had a survivor or two. Everyone's fate was different. But during winter, with the unspeakable cold, the snow, the exhaustion, the work, you were still expected to work, dog tired, wrapped in scraps of bags and nets. The best they could manage was to pull those who had died out of the yurts and stack them in rows. First it was just a single row, then the snow drifts would cover it, then another row on top, and so on—in a word, there were many, many such stacks. There was a work brigade assigned. I even remember the name of the Russian on my island who was in charge - Bushuev. For the brigade's burial detail they would pretty much conscript those who were on their last legs, and absolutely nobody on this detail was capable of getting anybody buried. In reality, maybe that Russian managed to drag a body or two to ice-hole, but overall, the bodies of the dead were subjected to the 1943 ice-melt which started about the middle of June. There was a huge flood with incredibly powerful ice drifts that lasted almost into the middle of July. The dead were swept away, they were all swept away. You see the deaths around you, and despite having become feeble, you still have a heart, you still have feelings. Neither can you help the deceased, nor can you be very open about displaying your anguish. The living were barely hanging on and looked virtually as bad as the deceased. For example, if a child or two didn't show up for the children's brigade, the Ivan Brigade, we knew that meant they had died. But our health was so depleted by then, we didn't know which yurt, or which barracks the child was from, nor in which pile his body lay. There was never any strength to walk over the 10 or 20 or 30 meters to check things out, to visit. That first winter no one managed that walk. It wasn't

possible to find the bodies of friends who died that first winter; sometimes not even the children could locate the bodies of their dead mothers, since no one knew where their bodies lay under the snow drifts. Some of those dear to me were among these. Later on, we had to build a shelf in the barracks, and then after work, the children were forced to attend Russian language classes. So there we were, suffering from scurvy, teeth falling out, sores all over our bodies, and still having to attend Russian language school. Following a full day of work, a child would go to class; here, too, if he didn't show up, it was generally understood that he had died. I would like to describe how we instinctively protected ourselves from dwelling on sad thoughts. During my childhood in Lithuania, the punishment in my family for misbehaving was to be denied the pleasure of reading for a day, or two. Well, sometimes my brother would earn himself a five day punishment. Mine was typically one or two days, sometimes three, in other words, we really loved to read. Picture this: children are huddling together, resting for 10 minutes. Crouching together, over many breaks, over many days, we would tell each other stories. Sometimes other kids would talk, but mainly it was me, since I had the most books crammed into my memory. The story would be endlessly serialized until a whole book had been recounted. Imagine if you can: a blizzard, a group of stiff, freezing kids huddling together behind some logs, perhaps around the corner of the wall; the blowing wind, the frigid air, the runny noses, the sores. All the while, we'd be telling each other about the plays we'd gone to in Lithuania. We'd be recounting the books we had read, the movies we had seen. Not everything all at once, but spread out over many days. And if, when lying down in your yurt you recall another page, remember another event, the following day you try to remember it and incorporate it into your story when you're back on that ice. Our hair would freeze. The girls had to have their hair cut off. We'd literally be stuck to the ice! It was sub-zero temperature. The ice would drip in the evening and be white at night; we all lost our hair. But we distracted each other with stories about the theater, about movies. My parents had had box seats at the opera house in Kaunas, and even though I'd often fall asleep during the productions, I still knew the first acts of ballets. That's what I'd talk about, for example. You could say that even under those circumstances we were in a way living the Lithuanian life. It's hard to put into words; it's as if we suddenly escaped into play during that little break. Not Lithuanian games per se, but we'd divvy up various roles and pretend to be ministers and presidents and we'd govern Lithuania. Exhausted, scabby, feeble, starving children, huddling together in that blizzard: if we weren't telling stories from books, we would play at nationhood. Other than receiving work assignments and exhortations from them, we had nothing to do with the guards, if you even want to call them that; there was no place to run, so there was no necessity for guards. They arrived when we did and remained to keep us under surveillance. Nonetheless, there was occasional interaction, not so much on the part of the children, but the mothers. And thus, the question was asked: "Why did they have to take us so far away, and why was so much effort put into subjecting us to such a terrible deportation; why didn't they just shoot us instead?" The response, let's see if I could translate it from the Russian, was: "We don't need your death, we need your suffering." There was a saying: "Your home is here, so are your graves." Of course everyone's fate there was a little different, but perhaps every human being, while he's still alive, while he still has feelings and sensibility, unconsciously tries to avoid thinking about that which at any particular time is so horrible. How well I remember every night lying on my side in my 35 centimeters of space, sandwiched between my mother and my brother, my thoughts immediately turning into daydreams. I imagined that I could speak all the languages of the world; that I traveled around the world; that I completed studies in all academic fields. In a word, I was a superwoman of sorts. And you focus so hard on these fantasies that you forget how



very cold it is, you forget that you don't have a pillow, a sheet, nothing! That you're lying in ice, under ice and on top of ice. This is how I would drown myself in fantasy. (One last question: What was the narrator's hardest memory?) Two memories: Daddy being ripped away from us at the train station, and when mommy died. My mother died of starvation, though with a very joyful expression on her face. I think it's almost as if God or Mary had told her that her children would survive. Her expression became so uplifted, her cheeks turned pink, as did her lips. The women were saying: "Something has happened. We can't bury Mrs. Valaitienè, she fell asleep, she's doing better somehow." We held off burying her for two days. It was October 29, and already the polar ground was frozen. My brother hacked and hacked and hacked and hacked away at the ground until he dug a deep hole to bury our mother. Forty-three years later it took eight men with proper tools, sledgehammers and such, nearly two days to exhume her body. Think of it: my brother digging the permanently frozen winter earth by himself, contrasted with the nearly two days it took eight men working together in the middle of the summer at the end of July to uncover my mother's body. When her body was recovered, she had that same happy and peaceful expression on her face.