

Hurley: Book Review: Rowing Through the Barbed Wire Fence

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Rowing Through the Barbed Wire Fence

by Rima Karaliene

Translated by Dovydas Bukauskas. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Publishing, 2017.

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Not all sport stories have happy endings. Rima Karaliene's haunting final words of *Rowing Through the Barbed Wire Fence* leave the reader breathless. Over 428 pages, Karaliene deftly weaves together competing narratives of her father's Olympic dream with the oppressive Soviet sport system of the 1950s and 60s. A former Lithuanian international rower herself, Karaliene has been immersed in the sport – and the politics from which it is inseparable – from birth. Daughter of a rower, wife of a rower, and mother to three rowers, her work is a literary extension of the rowing museum in Trakai, which she has directed since 2009. First published in her native language in 2017, the translated work owes its existence to the patient editing of Annamarie Phelps, current vice chair of the British Olympic Association.

The work's strength lies in the deeply personal narrative. The opening chapter flies back and forth between recollections of the dominant Lithuanian men's eight-oared crew at the 1961 USSR Rowing Championships and the Soviet destruction of the author's family home in December 1945. While literature on the Soviet sport structure in the early Cold War is not new in the field of Sport History, the stunning contrast between the political destruction of a people and the reclamation of one's cultural voice through sport is made clear in *Through the Barbed Wire Fence*. Following her retelling of the first-ever victorious Lithuanian crew at the USSR championships, Karaliene thrusts the reader back to 1945 to her father's escape: "He could see before his eyes the burning homes, his mother lying in the snow in a puddle of her own blood, his father's last glance as he looked at his children ...and the terrible faces of the drunk *stribai*" (54).

Karaliene employs vivid imagery to contrast the warm human story of her father and his teammates with the cold reality of their repressive political world. This is evident when she depicts international competitions held in Western nations where Soviet control could not function as overtly. One striking example describes a 1962 race in Philadelphia where the "Russian" crew – comprised entirely of Lithuanians – beat the defending United States Olympic champion crew. Newspaper reports, on both the American and Soviet sides, praised the "Russian" athletes. Soviet coverage was quick to point out the victory's significance in the broader ideological conflict between the two nations, while American coverage merely congratulated the "Russian boys" on a fine performance (86). Setting Karaliene's work apart from a merely archival account are personal reactions gathered through extensive interviews with those who competed. She details the frustration of her father's boatmates trying in vain, through broken English, to emphatically express that they were Lithuanian and not Russian, only to be met with blank stares and responses such as "What's Lithuania? You speak Russian at home right?" (243).

Karaliene's interviews paint a powerful portrait of personal resistance to Soviet control. The sight of the tri-colored Lithuanian flag (then, an illegal symbol in the USSR) at the 1963 European Championships in Denmark brought the bronze-medal winning crew to tears (260). At the 1964 Olympic Men's coxed four-oared race, the primarily-Lithuanian USSR crew donned warmup jackets in the colors of their home flag – covering the mandated uniforms of the Soviet squad. "I'm ashamed to take these jackets off," Karaliene writes about her father's emotions regarding his blood-red racing shirt emblazoned with "CCCP" (394).

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REVIEW: ROWING THROUGH THE BARBED WIRE FENCE — HURLEY

3

While captivating, the book is plagued by some repetition and structural issues. Occasional random spacing and empty footnotes are distracting, the omission of key dates can leave readers lost, and constant references to the metaphorical “barbed wire fence” become stale.

Despite these drawbacks and possible rough patches in translation, Karaliene’s first-ever work carries an importance that overcomes them. Written to preserve a personal history, rather than as a scholarly addition to the Sport History field, the book provides compelling insights into how to compose a riveting, oral history monograph. As archives in the former Soviet satellite states continue to open, historians’ ability to combine that material with lived experience will be crucial to generating a more thorough understanding of the Cold War through the athletes themselves.

It is a work – happy ending or not – that enchants an audience and provides a worthwhile addition to the existing literature at the intersection of sport and identity.