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A Poem for Ukraine

Linus Umbrasas

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Reflection on the poem's creation by author Linas Umbrasas:

Russian aggression in Ukraine shook us Lithuanians deeply and it doesn't matter which part of the world we currently live in. As the war began, for the period of almost two weeks, I could barely sleep and almost felt numb inside from disbelief. I was watching this horror in the 21st century, reliving feelings our grandparents suffered through. And from all those feelings, a poem suddenly just poured out, as if the heavy weight of the ocean inside had to be let go.

Reflection by the translator Audra Skukauskaitė:

On March 9, as a I was scrolling through Facebook, a poem with an image of a blue cracked heart with bright yellow light shining from inside had popped up on my timeline from *Mes – Lietuviai Pasaulyje* (We – Lithuanians in the World) Facebook community. The poem made me stop, drop everything I had intended to do for the day, and feel it, live in the poem for a few minutes that felt like days. I felt it needed to be shared more broadly and immediately I set out to translate it. I needed to translate it.

I messaged the poet whom I had never met nor read before and shared my thoughts about the poem and my felt need to translate it into English. He immediately agreed and we exchanged a few messages over the translation. I tried to stay as close as possible to the wording, the layout, and the nuances of the original as I translated the poem into English. Linas and a couple people in the Lithuanian community offered some suggestions for edits, some accepted and others not upon mutual agreement. The final translation, now published on Linas', my, and Facebook pages of a few of the Lithuanian communities, has been reached through messenger-conversations, including chats about the challenges of representing nuanced potential meanings of "it hurts in blood" or lack of equivalent translation of "nine sees and lagoons" associated with the Lithuanian fairy tales but not available in English (thus I cut the "lagoons" in the translation). I thank Linas for his openness to the translation of the poem and the conversations along the way. I also want to thank the Lithuanian community members who responded to the translation, offered comments, suggestions, and affirmed the translation.

I needed to translate the poem upon seeing it because I felt it. I felt the emotions and I knew many people around the world were experiencing the shock, fear, helplessness and other feelings akin to those the poem expressed. The poem reflected my empathy, pain and horror over the violence perpetrated against the Ukrainian people and their dreams for democracy, peace, and equitable participation in Europe and global partnerships. The poem also spoke to my not-quite-suppressed anxiety and fears for my family and friends in my native Lithuania and for their many friends and colleagues in Ukraine. The horror was too real, as I had lived under the soviet

occupation; I had seen the brutality of the occupier and the fear and distrust sown among the people; I had stood in long lines of the empty stores and bathed in cold water when gas from Russia was cut off. I also lived the Freedom movements and stood in the 1989 Baltic Way human chain linking Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in our common fight for freedom, democracy, and the right for self-determination of our countries' and our own futures. Lithuania was first to declare the independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, suffered the violent, economic and political attempts at suppression of the freedom spirit, and yet prevailed and had our regained independence internationally recognized in 1991. Reading and watching the brutality of the Russian aggression in Ukraine evoked the histories of Lithuania and our fights for independence over the past millennium of Lithuania's existence as a group and nation. Lithuania has been one of the most vocal supporters of Ukrainian freedom and democracy over the past decades and many fear "we are next". Ukraine and its brave people are fighting for us all.

Standing on its long and rich history and immense belief in a better, more equitable future, Ukraine is fighting, once again, for her Freedom, her right to exist and to determine her own futures and alliances. She is bravely defending democracy when autocrats, oligarchs, billionaires, and dictators around the world, including the U.S., are seeking to take over or hold on to power at any cost, suppressing the voices of the people. Ukraine is fighting for their survival and She is fighting for us all. She writes in blood and rubble our own futures. As Linas Umbrasas so aptly said in this poem, Ukraine writes the history in blood. And it hurts the blood of all of us who believe in freedom, democracy, and self-determination. We are of the same human blood, interconnected through our histories, lives, desire for freedom and, above all, through our humanity.

The Poem

Karas užpildė	The war filled up
mano Facebooko	my Facebook
sieną	wall
lubas	ceiling
dienas, naktis	days, nights
mintis sapnus	thoughts dreams
Karas kuris	The War which
fiziškai iki	has not reached me yet
manęs neatėjo	physically
bet žudo	but kills
iš vidaus	from inside
smaugia bado	suffocates with
daugiaašmeniais	multi-bladed
peiliais	knives of starvation
šaudo kulkomis	shoots the bullets
sprogdina	bombs
traiško giluminiais	crushes with deep
vikšrais	tank treads
atrodo miřštu	it seems I die

kiekvieną dieną	every day
kelis kartus	multiple times
per dieną	a day
tėvams	as fathers
atsisveikinant	say goodbyes
su vaikais	to their children
žmonoms	wives
su vyrais	to the husbands
ir aš su	I too
kažkuo atsisveikinu	say goodbye to someone
bėgu tuščiais	I run
geležinkelio	the railroad tracks
ir tuščio	the empty road
kelio bėgiais	the broken
sulaužytais	bridges and
tiltais ir	destinies
likimais	stretching out my hands
ištiesęs rankas	too far
per toli	to comfort
kad	
priglausti	
aukštyn	as prayers
kylant maldoms	rise up
iš dangaus	missiles
ataimanuoja	moan down
raketomis	from the skies
kaip gali	how can it
taip skaudėti	hurt so much
už tūkstančių	thousands
kilometrų	of kilometers
už jūrų	nine seas
marių devynių	away
skauda krauju	it hurts in blood
skauda patį	hurts
Kraują	the Blood itself
tą patį	that same
kraują	blood

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Photo from the We-Lithuanians in the World Facebook community, with permission.

Author's Bio:

Linas Umbrasas is a Lithuanian-American poet residing in Plainfield,IL. He has been writing since grade school. His poetry book "Slibino dantys" ("Teeth of the dragon") was published in Kaunas, Lithuania in 2021. His poetry has also been published in publications and social media venues in both Lithuania and the the Lithuanian community in United States. In addition to writing poetry, Linas works in the transportation business with his brother and is actively involved in the local Lithuanian community in Illinois. He dances in the Lithuanian folk group "Suktinis" and performs as an actor in "Žaltvykslė" theatre troupe. Linas and his wife Greta are parents to two boys Vytis and Vakaris ages 13 and 8.

Translator's Bio:

Audra Skukauskaitė, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the College of Community Innovation and Education at the University of Central Florida. Audra was born, raised, and worked in Lithuanian higher education through the 1990s. Her graduate education took her to California, after which she has continued her professor and researcher career in California, Texas, and Florida. While working in the U.S., over the past 20 years, Audra has also been contributing to Lithuanian higher education and in 2021 has received a recognition for her service from the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science, and Sports. In addition to her work as a professor, Audra engages in creative endeavors of painting, photography, and writing poetry (primarily in English).