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From Silence to Voice: Writing Compelling History Through Recuperating the Exile's Voice, Historical Photographs and Photographic Image Making

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**From Silence to Voice:
Writing Compelling History Through Recuperating the Exile's Voice, Historical
Photographs and Photographic Image Making**

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Introduction

This community study concerns Lithuanians in Queensland. The refugees fled to Australia in the aftermath of World War Two due to Soviet invasion and annexation of Lithuania. Their history has been silenced, unrecognised and unrecorded. This study corrects this omission through oral history, photography, and multimodal creative writing.¹

The study focused on the shadows that emerged due to enduring twin trauma: of war and the Soviet Union's long occupation of Lithuania, until 1990;² and Australia's assimilation and discrimination policies. Assimilation expected the Lithuanians to forget their history and culture, to not associate, to speak in English, and to not speak in their mother tongue.³

¹ Eve F Wicks, "Hidden Darkness: An Exploration of the Experience of Lithuanian Immigrants to Australia," (PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2019), <http://hdl.handle.net/10072/388146>.

² A sweeping majority in the Lithuanian Parliament declared independence, 11 March 1990, John Hiden and P. Salmon, *The Baltic Nations and Europe, Europe: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Longman, 1991), 149–158; Soviet State Council recognized Baltic independence, 6 September 1991, Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 429.

³ Uldis Ozolins, *The Politics of Languages in Australia* (UK, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2–14, 57–59, 75, 77; Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations 1788–1993* (NSW, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin Australia Pty. Ltd., 1994), 157–160.

The study's genesis lies in an intermediate exhibition project, through voice, image and object: "Refuge Under a Southern Cross. The Lithuanian Migrant Experience in Queensland".⁴

In this exhibit, oral voices assumed prominence on object cards, and storyboards holding text and photographic images, with choral music playing in the background. It was a life and identity-affirming experience, the Lithuanians responding with feelings of pride for their culture, and having their story exhibited in public. This pride and prior marginalisation lie at this study's heart. Their stories required a format that could weave more nuance and expressive sentiment and a deeper story, absorbing the reader in an encounter with an enduring resonance and accessibility. It was from this position that *Saulėje ir šešėlyje. In Sunshine and Shadow* was conceived.⁵

Oral History Research-Led Creative Arts Practice. Data Gathering

Oral history interviewing and writing were influenced by Alessandro Portelli's significant multi-voiced work,⁶ illuminating a troubling event through his collaborative dialogue with numerous marginalised interviewees at the grassroots level, who were omitted from earlier investigations.⁷ Portelli's interviewing focuses on the process and its power to elicit telling accounts, and he asserts that for the oral interview to be a genuine success, ingredients such as the interviewer's effort, their "questions, dialogue, and personal relationship" are paramount.⁸

A collaborative approach was also essential to create an authentic photographic recording that captures, says John Berger, "a biographical or historic moment whose duration ideally is not measured by seconds [of exposure time] but by its relation to a lifetime."⁹ In John Sand's considered and respectful recording of rich detail and a person's enduring core through deliberate consideration and respect, the photographer's camera performs "as listener," and the process has the "ability to invite the narrative."¹⁰

In this study, oral history played a pivotal role in research-led creative arts practice. Rich oral history data was attained through extended formal and informal interviewing, and historical photograph and object-gathering and enquiry in people's homes. Shared knowledge of a person's life and character inspired trust and dialogue, and informed the photographing on return visiting: of portraiture, interior and exterior environments, and cultural and historical memorabilia.

⁴ "Refuge under a Southern Cross. The Lithuanian migrant experience in Queensland," in Monster Summer 04/05, brochure Queensland Museum South Bank, Brisbane, 2004, 4; Eve Wicks, "Refuge Under a Southern Cross: Lithuanian Memory and Identity through Voice, Image and Object," in *Dancing with Memory [electronic source]: Oral History and its Audience*, comp. R Block, P Hamilton and J Wilton, Conference Proceedings, 14th International Oral History Conference (Sydney, 2006), 6.

⁵ Eve Puodžiūnaitė Wicks, *Saulėje ir šešėlyje: pamąstymai apie lietuvių imigrantų gyvenimą. In Sunshine and Shadow: Reflections on Lithuanian Immigrant Life* (Brisbane: Eve Wicks, 2018).

⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out. History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14, 17.

⁸ Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 39.

⁹ John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, intro. Geoff Dyer (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2013), 43–45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

Former landscapes of significance were photographed to evoke the past in the present, and to connect readers with a community seeking to establish place, whilst retaining cultural connection to land, nature, and their memories. Archival research, including photographing documents, uncovered and triangulated data to build a comprehensive picture of the people's experience.

It also corroborated evidence of prejudice and discrimination to enable a fuller understanding of the loss and pain endured. Added complexity and nuance were enabled through cultural immersion, and further hints of character and experiences were observed through repeated interactions. Trust and rapport were built through participation in community cultural life, which included the practice of oral traditions.¹¹

Evoking: Writing Through a Polyphony of Voices and Photography

The research involved deep community engagement for more than a decade. It enabled analysis and interpretation of a rich dataset to be conveyed in a multimodal book that interweaves oral histories and authorial expressive prose, with historical photographs and contemporary original photography, and poetry and song. It evokes a polyphony of oral voices overcoming the silence of the past.

The multi-voiced collaborative historical study retains the integrity of each interviewee's oral history quotations and has similarities with "polyphony" as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, explaining the tensions between marginal and central voices in literary works. In *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* with reference to Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels,¹² Bakhtin describes created characters' voices that are "not made the simple objects of the author's consciousness," but remain separated from the author: "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels."¹³ This narrative, however, also includes a distinguishable authorial voice that supports and enriches the oral voices, and also narrates the author's experience. Further, the author drew on rich, earlier-life cultural and musical experiences, and felt and conceived the polyphony of men's, women's, and children's voices musically, in choral form. Nigel Krauth argues that creative writing practice is connected to the body and its alertness to human experience, and that it connects with and utilises its repository of stored bodily experiences for reference in its practice.¹⁴

Lithuanian language is the most defining and cherished feature of the Lithuanian culture.¹⁵ The book and process of oral history it derives gives the immigrants agency. The dual language text allows them to speak in English and in Lithuanian translation, in their own words, thus preserving their character and identity, and honouring their voice as it was spoken.

¹¹ Wicks, "Hidden Darkness," 42–59.

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rostel, 2nd edn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1973).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ Nigel Krauth, 2010. "The Story in My Foot: Writing and the Body." *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, 14 no 1 (2010), <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april10/krauth.htm>.

¹⁵ Danutė Brazytė Bindokienė, *Lietuvių Papročiai Ir Tradicijos Iševijoje. Lithuanian Customs and Traditions* (Chicago: Lithuanian World Community Inc., 1989), 24–30.

The Lithuanian words are for Lithuanian speakers, but also represent a visual image, symbolic of the loss of language endured in a society that was hegemonically English-speaking. Dual language text also reconciles the author's experience of language loss, hence the project's collaboration with a language translator.¹⁶ The words are also for the English-speaking society. By re-inserting Lithuanian into the public sphere through creative work, the intention is to provoke unease in English language speakers. It gives cause for such readers to pause, and to consider the difficulty experienced by non-English-speaking migrants. Thus, the dual language text is designed to enhance the reading of the cultural narrative for Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian readers alike.

Innovative design offers a polyphony of oral voices, new ways to engage, and spaces for reflection. Nine themed chapters comprise text essays of 2,500–7,000 words, curated historical and new photographic image essays, and two poems or songs.

Creative writing in text essays weaves oral history voices and photographic elements, interspersing oral history quotations with expressive authorial prose. In an oral history example of the women's early experience, in the chapter, "Honouring the Goddesses,"¹⁷ Filomena was in a migrant holding camp, separated from her husband by more than three thousand kilometres:

It was a strange country. I was frightened! Snakes come looking for water in the night. We had just come from Europe. Two weeks in Bonegilla and straight away Juozas had to go to North Queensland, to Ingham, to cut sugar cane. I was on my own with three small children ... looking everywhere for Christmas tree. Just grass, barracks. Cut gum tree, brought home, made some funny decorations. So sad celebrating Christmas with gum tree, no husband, no telephone, only letter.¹⁸

The authorial prose that follows,¹⁹ was inspired by Filomena's words and her historical photograph, Figure 1, from the chapter's historical image essay:

She was a forlorn figure in the photograph: a small child in each hand, another beside her, amidst dry, brown, sparsely treed bushland. The sacred oak and linden, maple, birch, spruce and pine of Filomena's green, fertile homeland were absent.²⁰ Like other migrant camps, Cowra was far from major cities.²¹ The people felt marooned. Greta camp, for instance, was "in the middle of nowhere:" a visit to the nearby township, Evaldas explained, "which was ten houses, and a pub, and a railway station ... took you an hour if you went by foot."²² The immigrants had been denied even a glimpse of the cities on arrival: "Everybody was going on the deck looking. What a town you can see. We want to see it but they didn't let us," sighed Filomena.²³

¹⁶ Gintautas Kaminskas translated the author's English words, and Lithuanian poems and songs into English.

¹⁷ Wicks, *In Sunshine and Shadow*, 149.

¹⁸ Filomena Luckus interview, February 2003, Brisbane.

¹⁹ Wicks, *In Sunshine and Shadow*, 150.

²⁰ Marija Gimbutas, *The Balts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), 179–204.

²¹ Cowra migrant camp was more than 300 kilometres from Sydney.

²² Evaldas Sagatys interview, February 2003, Brisbane.

²³ Luckus interview.



Figure 1. Bushland walk at Cowra Migrant Holding Camp, New South Wales, 1949. Photograph courtesy of F. Luckus.²⁴

Authorial prose holds together the many elements that speak to and enrich the interspersed oral stories. It includes writing concerning historical and contemporary images and their making, and observations gleaned in significant environments. Roland Barthes' exploration of the human condition through the photographic image and his notion of "punctum" resonates with the powerful affective response elicited when the author viewed Filomena's compelling photograph, revealing her isolation and displacement at Cowra.²⁵ The response was elevated by Filomena's words: both words and image informing the expressive authorial prose, together with cultural and historical research, enriching the narrative. Writing the extended essays expressively was influenced by social documentary photographers who write expressive words including voice, albeit briefly, to accompany photography and research with marginalised communities: William Yang, the Australian-Chinese artist, performer and storyteller, offering significant inspiration.²⁶

²⁴ Wicks, *In Sunshine and Shadow*, 159.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 21.

²⁶ William Yang, *Australian Chinese* (Canberra: National Portrait Gallery, 2001); William Yang, *Diaries: A Retrospective Exhibition: 25 years of Social, Personal and Landscape Photography* (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, 1998).

Voices in poems and songs reflect rich oral traditions and avid community practice.²⁷ The voices conceptually, historically and culturally enrich the narrative, conjure more shades of meaning and significance for readers, and heighten emotional intensity through the poetic form.²⁸ The comfort derived from cultural expression softened the pain of losses in exile and longing for homeland, and the discrimination and silences endured. Thus, cultural expression is embedded through songs and poems embedded multimodally in linen imagery, infusing a significant cultural aesthetic.²⁹ Further, the poems/songs separate a chapter's elements, creating chambers for quiet reflection, to listen to and hear the voices.

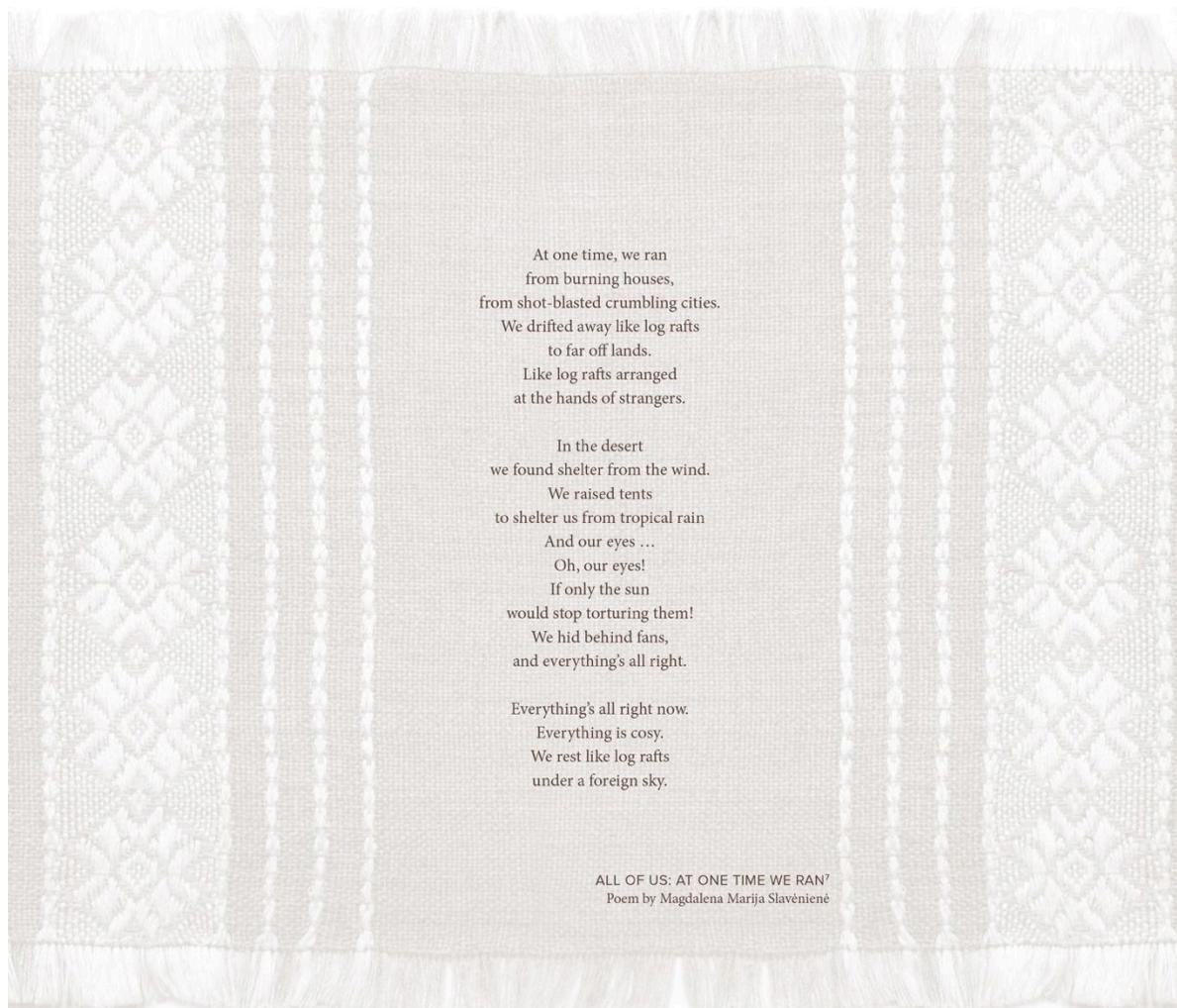


Figure 2. “All of us: at one time we ran,” poem by Magdalena Marija Slavėnienė. Photo of linen by author.³⁰

²⁷ Zita Kelmickaitė, “Why is song so important to Lithuanians?”, *Lituanus, Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2006): n.p. http://www.lituanus.org/2006/06_2_01%20Kelmickaite.htm.

²⁸ Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art. Arts-Based Research Practice* (London, New York: The Guildford Press, 2009), 63–64, 102.

²⁹ Linens remained integral to Lithuanian home and community cultural life, Wicks, “Hidden darkness,” 53.

³⁰ Wicks, *In Sunshine and Shadow*, 104–105.

In the chapter, “Sweet Beginnings,” a chorus of voices are evoked in Magdalena Marija Slavėnienė’s poem, “All of us: at one time we ran”, as in Figure 2.³¹ It elicits the harshness of the men’s lives as indentured labourers,³² and communicates the profound shock and distress experienced by the canecutters that left them feeling disenfranchised.

Hardship is reinforced in the many oral voices in the “Sweet Beginnings” text essay. Ben Aponas reveals inadequate accommodation:

We lived in barracks, in one room, with the kitchen divided off. The huts were mainly two feet off the ground, with timber walls, not lined. Some were corrugated iron with iron roofs. Imagine how hot it was!³³

Viktor Bagdonas describes the job’s excruciatingly painful physicality:

Immediately we start a day after arriving. The farmers showed us how to do the job. The start was indescribable. No one can imagine. Most of our people had education, were office workers and in higher positions, and never had done physical work before. First week, when you’re unprepared, the hands get so sore, you have to put them up so that blood would circulate easier. Blisters!³⁴

In contrast with the usually “diminished” presentation format in historical writing, as above, the oral history text quotations are enhanced through emphasis on the immigrant’s voice, as distinct from authorial prose. Quotations are in italics, with font size equal to the authorial prose. Quotes are personalised: each interviewee’s name, year and birthplace are displayed with the initial quote, and their name thereafter. Dual text columns, with character line length optimised for reading, create space and silence around the identified voices, inviting the reader to pause, engage and reflect. At a glance, a reader can pinpoint and peruse a chapter’s rich collection of oral history voices, as illustrated in Figure 3.

³¹ Gintautas Kaminskas, English translation, email correspondence, 23 April 2009, Magdalena Marija Slavėnienė, “Mes visi: Išbėgome kadaise” [All of us: At one time, we ran], in *Nežinomi keleiviai* [Unknown travellers] (Sydney: Mintis, 1973), 39.

³² Ergon Kunz, *Displaced Persons: Calwell’s New Australians* (Sydney: Australian National University Press, 1988), 40; “Memorandum for officers of the Commonwealth Employment Service: Immigration–displaced persons–policy and practice,” 1 Feb. 1949, NAA: MT72, 49.23.3068, quoted in Andrew Markus, “Labour and Immigration 1946–49: The Displaced Persons Program,” *Labour History*, 11, no. 47 (1984): 89, n. 82, viewed 21 July 2015, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27508686>.

³³ Interview with Ben Apanavičius – Aponas, January 2004, Brisbane.

³⁴ Interview with Viktor Bagdonas, June 2003, Brisbane.

SWEET BEGINNINGS



The photographs tumbled out when I visited the Lithuanian men who had worked in the Queensland sugar cane fields in the late 1940s early 1950s. They had learnt the unfamiliar job together very soon after they arrived, contracted to work by the Australian government. The photographs had been secreted in envelopes, in shoeboxes, or carefully secured in family photograph albums. Most were very small, faded with age, stained and scratched from handling many times as the men relived their experiences. Housing was very rudimentary farm accommodation amidst tropical heat and humidity:

We lived in barracks, in one room, with the kitchen divided off. The huts were mainly two feet off the ground, with timber walls, not lined. Some were corrugated iron with iron roofs. Imagine how hot it was! There were no showers, just four-gallon drums with a hose nozzle. Drinking water was from rainwater tanks. We got water from the creek for washing up. At the end of the day you finish up like a nigger, go in the creek and wash yourself off. The creek with cold running water was most convenient. We replaced the Kanakas. We were white Kanakas [Pacific or South Sea Islanders].¹

BERNARDAS – BEN APANAVIČIUS – APOMAS, BORN 1926, BĖRŽININKAI, DŪKŠTAS, LITHUANIA

It was a hard life: 'Nobody had the experience in such a life before', confided Viktor.² Bedtime was preceded by very careful scrutiny since, according to Ben, 'We didn't have proper beds. We had canvas stretchers. You had to look for black and brown snakes every night, check that they didn't get under the mosquito net. We found them in the sheets under the pillow!'³ As well

as slinking into human comfort spots indoors, the venomous creatures slithered uncomfortably close in the sunshine:

Me and my friend went fishing in the Herbert River. I was sitting and my friend was lying down asleep. A snake crawled across his chest. If you don't touch they won't bite you. I killed it on the head with a stick. Another snake crawled past and I killed it too. In the corner of the barracks was a green snake. At night he gets down. In the daytime he's on the stump and we just left him there.⁴

BALYS – BILL MALINAUSKAS, BORN 1924, ONIŠKIS, LITHUANIA

Nor were snakes the only hazard:

It was floods, and that crocodile came from somewhere else. Suddenly there appeared one. It was dangerous.... He was an Italian man, a cane cutter. He'd put his legs in the water, dangling over the mangroves. The crocodile took his leg. It was killed with a shotgun.⁵

BALYS MALINAUSKAS

Reptiles were masters of their domain until human intervention. Large and small, they are ever present in North Queensland, but there is very little remaining of the canecutters' housing. I found one dwelling at the Fairymead Sugar Mill near Bundaberg. Weathered, derelict, abandoned, it was crammed with discarded industrial material. The landscape changed when mechanical sugar cane harvesting was introduced.

Intensive labouring and classification as indentured labourers

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Figure 3. "Sweet Beginnings" text essay, first page, illustrating prominence given to voice quotations.³⁵

Connections with the immigrant community's historical and new photographic image essays spring for the reader from the text essay's oral histories and expressive prose. The images and captions speak to the reader, inviting perusal, discovery and deeper understanding. Photographs may connect with a viewer's past experience and become a "conscious" memory connecting memories to former experiences and feelings, says John Berger.³⁶ Further, voices from text essays are re-introduced multimodally as "poetic fragments" – as performance poetry – enriching the narrative. Words as spoken are placed on new lines, between pauses and inflections. Voice in this form retains its drama, poetry and silence.³⁷

³⁵ Wicks, *In Sunshine and Shadow*, 107.

³⁶ Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 74–83.

³⁷ Rosemary Block, "Voiceprint: from Tape to Page: Keeping Faith with the Voice," *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 17 (1995): 65–73; Daphne Patai, 1988, *Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

An example of poetic voice text, placed beside an historical image of the immigrants swamped by towering cane, as in Figure 4, reinforces their struggles and displacement:

Daugumas mūsų vyrų
buvo mokslus baigę ...
niekuomet
nebuvo nedirbę fizinių darbų.
VIKTORAS BAGDONAS

Most of our people
had education ...
and never
had done physical work before.
VIKTOR BAGDONAS



Cukranendrių kirtimas! Edmonton,
Queensland, apie 1948 m.

Cutting cane! Edmonton,
Queensland, circa 1948.
Photograph courtesy of S. Einikis.

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Figure 4. Cutting cane! Edmonton, Queensland, circa 1948. Photograph courtesy of S. Einikis.³⁸

Directional lighting evokes heightened emotional intensity, in an example from the “Sweet Beginnings” new image essay. The fierce afternoon sunlight framing the isolated barracks accommodation intensifies the drama and a reader’s appreciation for the difficult life endured, accompanied by searing poetic words:

³⁸ Wicks, *In Sunshine and Shadow*, 121.

The start was indescribable.
No one can imagine.
Viktor Bagdonas.³⁹

Pradžia – neapsakoma.
Niekas negali įsivaizduoti.
VIKTORAS BAGDONAS

The start was indescribable.
No one can imagine.
VIKTOR BAGDONAS



Lageris nr. 1, Fairymead cukraus fabrikas, Bundaberg, 2007 m. No 1 Barracks, Fairymead Sugar Mill, Bundaberg, 2007

Figure 5. *Lageris nr.1, Fairymead cukraus fabrikas, Bundaberg, 2007 m. No 1 Barracks, Fairymead Sugar Mill, Bundaberg, 2007.* Photo by author.⁴⁰

Thus, the reader navigates orality, image and text in a connected, evocative, multimodal reading, whilst weaving the elements in each chapter.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated lost historical narratives overcoming the darkness and silencing endured, framed by a recognition of people's agency and voice. An enhanced, synergetic narrative reading has been accomplished by integrating multiple voices through synthesising compelling oral history excerpts with evocative photographic images and poetic composite prose in the form of multimodal creative writing. It has created an innovative, expressive, nuanced, permanently accessible archive, preserving the memories of the first-generation Lithuanian community at its close, in *Saulėje ir šešėlyje. In Sunshine and Shadow*.⁴¹

³⁹ Bagdonas interview.

⁴⁰ Wicks, *In Sunshine and Shadow*, 127.

⁴¹ Eve Puodžiūnaitė Wicks, *Saulėje ir šešėlyje: pamąstymai apie lietuvių imigrantų gyvenimą. In Sunshine and Shadow: reflections on Lithuanian immigrant life*, (Brisbane: Eve Wicks), 2018.

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