

A Hero Remembered

*The Author Tells Us The Story Of An Authentic
Hero Who He Knew Well/Who Was His Ally In Resistance.*

by **Romas A. Shatas**

Thirty-five years ago, on 27 January 1957, Bagdonas Kontrimas died in the forced exile in Magadan, Far Eastern Siberia. Bagdonas Kontrimas' name is indelibly inscribed in the annals of the European Resistance against the Nazis, for he was the leading member of an underground radio broadcast group that constructed, maintained and operated, for almost one year, a scheduled short wave broadcast station right under the nose of the Nazi GeStaPo. This is a unique event in the annals of the entire Resistance. All other resistance stations either operated on a friendly territory or were on the air surreptitiously for short times only.

Kontrimas ... constructed, maintained and operated, for almost one year, a scheduled short wave broadcast station right under the nose of the ... Nazis.

The core of this group consisted of Pranas Staskonis, Bagdonas Kontrimas, Vytautas Suopys, Aleksandras Griauzde and others, including the present writer. Only two key members of this group are still alive in the United States.

The Soviet occupiers of Lithuania deemed it dangerous to have such a prominent member of the Anti-Nazi Resistance in the free. Through KGB agents-provocateurs, Bagdonas Kontrimas was arrested by Stalin's henchmen on 27 September 1947, imprisoned in Kolyma GULAG and released after Stalin's death in 1956 without the right to return to Lithuania.

He died in the Magadan hospital, on the shores of the sea of Okhotsk, on 27 January 1957 as a consequence of illnesses and injuries suffered in the GULAG.

I ask all to pray together with his classmate, graduate of Class 1939 of The Jesuit in Kaunas, His Eminence Vincentas Cardinal Sladkevicius, for the eternal repose of his soul on the day of the 35th

anniversary of his death.

Donations in his memory can be made to the *Lithuanian Foundation* honor roll number account 6432. (Editor's Note: Information about the *Lithuanian Foundation*, including address, etc., appears elsewhere in this issue of **BRIDGES**.)

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The following contains corrections to the biography of Bagdonas Kontrimas (BK) published in *Lietuviu Enciklopedija* (Boston, USA), LE vol 37 p 297. (LE 2nd Supplementary volume) ("Lithuanian Encyclopedia").

These corrections reflect the information received from Mrs. Irena Kontrimas-Labanauskas during her stay in Toronto, Canada, during 1991.

Bagdonas Kontrimas, *nome de guerre* "Kocius", was born on 20 February 1920 in Jekaterinodar (Soviet name: Krasnodar), Northern Caucasus region of the contemporary Federation of Russia, and died on 27 January 1957 in forced exile in the port city of Magadan on the shores of the sea of Okhotsk in Far Northeastern Siberia. He graduated in June 1939 from the Jesuit lycee in Kaunas. His class included the present Vincentas Cardinal Sladkevicius. Subsequently, he was admitted to the University Vytautas the Great where he studied electrical and electronics engineering in the Faculty of Technology. He joined the Resistance during the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania and actively participated in the uprising of June 1941 which briefly restored the sovereignty of the Republic of Lithuania; until the invading German Nazis liquidated Prime Minister Brazaitis' government.

Kontrimas ... died ... in forced exile in Far Northeastern Siberia ... on 27 January 1957.

During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, BK joined the Sakalas (*nome de guerre* of Pranas Staskonis) ➡

group that designed, constructed and operated the clandestine Lithuanian Resistance's short wave voice transmitter. BK was the principal designer and constructor of this transmitter that broadcast first under the name "Zalgris" and subsequently under the name of "Laisvos Lietuvos Radijas" ("Radio of Free Lithuania"). (See LE vol 37 pg 482).

After his release from the forced labor camp in 1954 ... Kontrimas ... [was not allowed] ... to return to Lithuania.

The operation eluded an intense search by the GeStaPo for almost an entire year. It should be remarked that this was the only clandestine radio broadcast station in all of the Nazi occupied Europe that succeeded transmitting according to a previously announced schedule and frequency for nearly a year within the actually Nazi - occupied territory.

After the mass arrests of Lithuanian resistance members by the Nazi GeStaPo of April 1944, the "Zalgris" transmitter was mothballed primarily because it became known that the Nazi interrogators were using third degree methods to extract the information. Of all the arrestees, only Juozas Rudokas knew the details about the "Zalgris" operation. A continued broadcast would have destroyed the Nazi illusion that they had seized the transmitter and the crew. Although severely beaten, Rudokas never revealed details, and as a consequence died in 1945 in Bayreuth, Germany, just after the American liberation from the Nazi prison.

Hardly two months after these arrests, at the end of May 1944, the Nazi war machine in Eastern Lithuania collapsed and the Resistance was thrown into the throes of the returning dictatorship of Stalin.

The change in Lithuania's occupiers in late 1944 found BK in Vieksniai where he stayed with his mother and stepfather together with his new bride, the former Irena Skaigiryte. Subsequently, the pair moved to an apartment in Kaunas on the Seinu Street. BK continued to participate in the Resistance. On 25 Sept. 1947, BK was arrested.

In 1946, Jonas Deksnys, a leader in the Resistance of disputed renown, asked BK to repair a short wave transmitter ostensibly for the purpose of communications with England. Shortly thereafter Deksnys was arrested, and the transmitter seized by the Soviet KGB. It is now evident that Deksnys shared the operational details of the Resistance with Albinas Markulis, an agent infiltrated by the KGB into the highest levels of Lithuania Resistance.

After his arrest, the KGB trial troika condemned him to the GULAG. He was transported in a prisoners boxcar to Vladivostok by train and then from

the port of Nachodka to Magadan by ship. From there, he was placed in one of the many GULAG camps in Kolyma, in the permafrost region beyond the Arctic circle. In this entire region, with slave labor, the Soviet Union was erecting military encampments and missile bases against Alaska, and the Western United States and Canada.

In the GULAG, BK was assigned linemans labor. A short while later, during the spring thaw, a telegraph pole embedded in the permafrosted ground gave way and fell to the ground with BK on it. His arm and foot were fractured and he sustained injuries to his head. He was nursed back to health in the GULAG by Hungarian and German doctors among fellow prisoners. Subsequently, an epidemic of dysentery broke out in the camp. There was no medication except large doses of potassium permanganate and a diet of dried bread and boiled water. BK barely survived but sustained diverticulitis and ileitis that flared up occasionally.

After his release from the forced labor camp in 1954 without the right to return to Lithuania, his wife rejoined him during March 1956 in Burchata, a village near the Kolyma river where he worked as an electrical engineer of a gold mining dragster.

Subsequently, in June 1956 he developed an acute obstruction in the intestines. He was operated in the nearest surgical facility in Yagodnoe; by the time he was transported there, the gangrene has set in and a 2,7 meter long section of his intestines was removed. After his operation, he was doomed to an early death due to an insufficient ability to digest food. Slowly, his life ebbed away despite the best efforts of his wife.

Bagdonas Kontrimas' name is indelibly inscribed in the annals of the European Resistance against the Nazis. Only two key members [of the group in which he participated] are still alive in the United States.

On 27 January 1957 he died in the Magadan hospital and was buried there by his wife Irena. Subsequently, Irena returned to Lithuania and in 1962 was married to Dr. Kostas Labanauskas, MD; at that time assistant professor of medical physiology at the "Kuno Kulturos Institutes" in Kaunas, Lithuania. Their daughter, Dr. Daiva Labanauskas-Norkus, MD, resides in Toronto, ONTARIO Canada.

(Editor's Note: Mr. Romas A. Shatas, author of this article, and a member of the group in which Bagdonas Kontrimas operated, resides in Sunny Hills, Florida.) □