

EASA Conference 2008 “Experiencing diversity and mutuality”  
Workshop (W067)  
“Brother- and sisterhood in anthropological perspective”

‘WAGON BROTHERS, WAGON SISTERS’: SYMBOLIC AND ACTUAL  
SIBLINGSHIP IN A SITUATION OF LIFE CRISIS

Auksuolė Čepaitienė

Department of Ethnology,  
Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius

The paper discusses the ways in which people understand and experience siblingship in its symbolic and actual sense. Drawing on ethnographic examples it analyses how people interact with each other during and after life crisis situation, what cultural and social issues bind them and transform their relations into the closeness classified as sibling tie, and how this closeness is practised after return from deportation. The paper suggests that the experience of life crisis, people’s being together and sharing of physical and mental strategies of survival creates connections comparable to familial relationships. It also assumes that deportation, external to all deportees, is a kind of symbolic ‘co-filiation’, which reinforces equality, equivalence and horizontal order among them – the features that are characteristic of sibling relationship.

The paper analyses how people interact with each other in the situation of life crisis – deportation - and after; what cultural and social matters flow among them that bind them and transform their relations to closeness classified as sibling tie; and how this closeness is practised after returning from deportation. It is based on ten years of ethnographic research. Since 1997 I was doing field studies in Lithuania on the themes of kinship and ethnicity in various towns and villages, which I visited not for once. My interviewees there were ‘ordinary’ people from community. It happened so that among them there were former political prisoners and deportees as well. At the very beginning of Soviet occupation they experienced compulsory displacement and imprisonment, and returned back to Lithuania in the period of de-Stalinization. The kernel of the talks with interviewees was centred upon the themes of kinship and ethnicity, however the conversations with the deportees were slightly different. It was not the one case that when I started to talk about kinship they interrupted me and asked to listen and to write down their or their relatives’ life stories. Their argument was that their experiences should not to be forgotten. May be due to this reason today in Lithuania there is a huge amount of literature about deportation and political imprisonment in Soviet

era. It is called ‘literature of deportation’ and it is counted in hundreds of volumes published in publishing houses as well as by political prisoners and deportees themselves. This literature includes memoirs, autobiographies and biographies, diaries, collections of articles, book series such as “Archive of deportation”, or poetry books, which were written in deportation or after and published since the period of democratisation in 1989. It is a valuable empirical material though it is specific. It deals with the ethnography of memory that holds the aspects of literature, moral, or political discourses including (Skultans 1998; Antze, Lambek 1996). But nevertheless the vital desire of my interviewees to write down their life stories, which they intended to keep for themselves and to leave for their children, and the intertwining of dramatic events with the everyday matters shows the realities of their worlds.

The focus of this paper is on people’s understanding and experiencing of siblingship in its symbolic and actual sense. This issue emerged from the field research, however without my personal intention or emphasis. It came as a result of interviewees’ stories. When listening them I noticed that they included the words of ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ as a kind of generalisation, which defines the relationship and unity that emerged between deported people. My first impression was that interviewees used those words just only as poetic expressions, but not as kinship terms that classify their relations as of sibling. Thus in the paper I would like to discuss a question – is the category of ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ in the stories about deportation a metaphor and a poetic image, or is it a fact of language that has its structural basis in the specificity of relationships that emerge in the life crisis situation?

## DEFINING SIBLINGSHIP THEORETICALLY

In my paper I look at siblingship as at a kind of kinship group, which particularity lays upon a type of relation, but not upon a type of structure of a group. There I will draw on the work of Fortes “Kinship and the social order”, 1969.

First, I will take into account his emphasis on the separability between ‘genealogical connection’ or, as he sometimes says, ‘actual connectedness’, and kinship relation. Fortes illustrates this separation with the situation from his field research among the Tallensi, and shows how a kinship word used initially to place a person in a recognized category of relationship to another person establishes genealogical connection, which later is converted into kinship relation (Fortes 1969: 54). He emphasises that this act is not the same thing as classification, but it is an attribution of a category word that assigns status with the package of definitions, rules and directions for conduct. The kinship term there appears to be both a store

of information and a tool for action (Fortes 1969: 52-54). Fortes underline of kinship terminology as of the ordering principle of social relations is significant for me in the other way – I would look at the specificity of social relations that emerge between people, and that is later named under kinship term. In such case a category word comes as a result of social relations. There ‘actual connectedness’ is established by specificity of relation, which is prior to its naming in context of kinship terminology.

Second important point where I draw on Fortes is the specificity of sibling relation as such. He emphasises that the identification of siblingship rests in the structure of lineage and within sibling group, and underlines equality of their status in both contexts (Fortes 1969). Siblings are equals in contraposition to the inequality of other relations of kinship - descent and affinity. They are also equals vis a vis each other with their mutual substitutability, e.g., in jural and ceremonial relations. Fortes stresses that siblingship as a familial and a lineage category has its distinctive feature in right of equal sharing - ‘whenever there is sharing on equal terms, there siblingship can be inferred to be the normative criterion, even if the participants are not genealogically siblings either of the same parentage or by lineage reckoning’ (Fortes 1969: 77). He contrasts sibling relations with that of parents and children, and friends. Parents and children they are not mutually substitutable in the internal arrangements of the family - parents give and children receive and make returns. Friends give and reciprocate freely in ways that look like sharing but are not, since there is no right in it. However the unity of sibling group rests in right of equal sharing and equivalence of its members. According to Fortes this relates also to the cases of non-familial contexts (Fortes 1969: 80).

Third, the sibling group is the fundamental structural unit within the familial domain (Fortes 1969: 78). Sibling relations are laid down in familial contexts, and located in a spatial arrangement of a house. House with its social and physical proximity of living, with sharing and exchange of everyday matters appears a significant ordering principle of a type of relationships. Janet Carsten in her study of kinship among Malays in the island of Langkawi speaks about ‘house based society’ of Langkawi where relation of siblingship becomes of fundamental importance (Carsten 2004: 311). Drawing on the case discussed in my paper I would also emphasise that social and physical proximity of living assists in shaping the relations within the structure of siblingship. Thus taking into consideration all this I will discuss the ethnographic case of Lithuanian deportees.

WHAT IS ‘WAGON BROTHERS, WAGON SISTERS’?

At the competition for schoolchildren on the theme of Lithuanian history that was organised in 2007 by one local Educational Centre there was one question among thirty that sounded: “What is ‘wagon brothers’, ‘wagon sisters’ (*ešelonų broliai, ešelonų sesės*)?” The right answer presented at the website of competition ([www.slovinamelaisve.lt](http://www.slovinamelaisve.lt)) includes a strophe from a famous song of Lithuanian deportees to Siberia and is added with a short historical explanation,

“Wagon brothers, wagon sisters,  
Who never betrayed our Lithuania to anybody,  
Who were imprisoned in camps, suffered in deportations,  
Who were killed for Fatherland in foreign countries.

A song of deportees

‘Wagon brothers’, ‘wagon sisters’ – they are deportees exiled from Lithuania in large trains with wagons for animals (*ešelonas*), friends of common fate. The first deportation that shocked Lithuania was on 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1941. The most active and the brightest people: teachers, doctors, military officers, and farmers were deported. According to Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania during deportations of 1941-1952 there were exiled almost 100 000 people. The 14<sup>th</sup> of June is celebrated as a Day of Mourning and Hope. (Jakimavičius V. *Gimtoji šalis Lietuva*. Vilnius: Alna litera, 1994, p. 198-200)”.

The expression ‘*ešelonų broliai, ešelonų sesės*’, which I translate as ‘wagon brothers, wagon sisters’, mainly is found in the literature of deportation – memoirs, stories, and poems. It appears in the titles of the books, such as, e.g., the reminiscences of political prisoners and deportees about their life in labour camp and deportation: *Ešelonų broliai (Wagon brothers)*. A. Venskevičienė (ed.) Vilnius: Vyturys, 1991; *Ešelonų sesės (Wagon sisters)*. A. Venskevičienė (ed.) Vilnius: Vyturys, 1994. This expression I met also among deportees when they address each other, for example, in handmade greetings cards and albums of memory. In all cases it looks like poetic metaphor employed to express friendship, loyalty and solidarity between deportees.

Structurally ‘wagon brothers, wagon sisters’ consists of two culturally meaningful components. One is the kinship term defining sibling relation; the other refers to the fact of deportation, which the ‘wagon’ and the train symbolise. I would note also that there are some other versions of this expression, however, the kinship term of ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ almost always stays stable, except a rare case when the words of ‘friends’ or ‘children’ are used instead. However it is different with the word of ‘wagon’. It is easily replaced with the other words, such as ‘fate’ and ‘hardships’. They add new aspects to this expression, although the general meaning remains unchanged and identifiable. For example, in an album of memory of

one female political prisoner and deportee Izabele I read various addresses and best wishes written in verse and inscribed by her friends before her leaving the labour camp in Karaganda.

Among them there were such as

‘!  
A lot of faces pass along the avenue of life,  
Love looses its way in the wide roads,  
Oh Lord, do we really come  
Just to be glad with the echoes of the youth.  
*To a sister of fate (likimo sesei) Izute,*  
- Rožè -  
1955.III.3.  
Karaganda’.

‘Izute!  
Fate brought us together  
Not at the nice party  
But far from Fatherland  
In this awful steppe.  
[...]  
*A sister of the days of hardship (vargo dienu sesè) Genè. P.*  
1955.III.1.’

‘Izute!!  
You are oppressed by a heavy weight  
Which press your shoulders.  
It is a hard lot of a prisoner...  
But you are strong and mighty  
And stay in a good spirit, return to fatherland to  
Your old parents.  
*A sister of fate (likimo sese) Bronè.*  
Karaganda  
1955. II. 27  
steppes’

‘Dear Izute!!!  
When you will breath the wind of freedom  
after severe and oppressive storm.  
In evenings you will dream many times near the birch tree.  
Just for a minute then visit and me.  
*A sister of fate (likimo sesè).*  
To Izutè – Klemutè.  
55. III.3.  
Karaganda. 14<sup>th</sup> brickyard.

In all those cases the words of ‘wagon’, ‘fate’ and ‘days of hardships’ stand prior to ‘brother’ and ‘sister’. I suggest looking at those words as at the principle of classification of the relation as sibling. Those three words describe the context where closeness and affection

emerge that my interviewees call ‘like kinship’ and ‘more than kinship’, ‘like brothers’. However one more example from the album of memory that I give below shows that in such ordering of social relations the difference between kin ‘sister/brother’ and ‘sister/brother of fate’ or ‘wagon sister/brother’ is retained. Those two types of sibling relations go parallel to each other,

[...]  
 Do not wait *sister (sesuo)* will not come after wake up;  
 She will not decorate either veranda, or the room of a house;  
 You will celebrate the Name Day with sorrow  
 Being alone in this steppe among the *sisters and the friends of fate (likimo sesiu ir draugiu)*  
 12.9.52’.

In my further discussion I would look at the way in which the ‘wagon’, ‘fate’, and ‘days of hardship’ become a context for establishing relatedness and connectedness among deportees.

#### A ‘WAGON’ AS AN IMPRINT OF DEPORTATION AND ‘CO-FILIATION’

The years of 1940-1941, and 1945-1953 are marked with deportations and imprisonment of citizens of Lithuania to labour camps of Soviet Union. The first massive deportation was in 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1941. Lithuanians call June of 1941 ‘the black month’. According to statistical data, which is approximate, on the 14-18<sup>th</sup> of June there were deported at least 18 500 people (Anušauskas 1999: 27). For that at the beginning of June there were prepared 1202 wagons at the 67 railway stations of Lithuania (Grunskis 1993: 6). Deportations started unexpectedly although the lists of those who had to be deported were compiled by Soviet administration since long before. At night of 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1941, soldiers and military officers arrested people taking families, men, women, elderly persons, children, and newborn babies together, putting them into trucks and carriages, and sending to railway stations. Before leaving deportees were allowed to take few things and some food.

Reading memoirs and historical works it is evident that arrest and deportation is an unforgettable event for deportees (Grinkevičiūtė 1989; Garmutė 1989; Dėdinas 1991; Grigas 1991; Kuprys 1991; Grunskis 1996). It is a crucial moment of their lives when they suddenly felt that they lost everything – their home, land, property, job, relatives, friends, their style of life (Grunskis 1996: 9-10). In deportees’ memoirs this moment is narrated in details and represented as life crisis situation. One male teacher describing this moment writes, ‘I was

standing near the door and looking at a soldier with red stripes and with a gun in his hands. I was asking him whether we would be allowed to return to Lithuania. He shook his head. It became awful for me to understand that I am leaving my family, relatives, kin and Lithuania forever. I would never see it. It is awful! A cruel fate.’ (Dėdinas 1991: 29)

Wagon and train for deportees appeared their new ‘house’ and home as they travelled to the final places of appointment for nearly a month. Those places mainly were in Siberia, Far North and East of Soviet Union. Wagon became home in the sense of physical and social being – of sleeping, eating, and communicating. But in fact the wagons were like prison cells – they were just empty places without seats, and with small holes instead of windows under the ceilings, which were fastened with barbed wire. Sometimes there were arranged plank-beds for sleeping there, sometimes people slept just on the floor. The doors were closed from outside and wagons were guarded by soldiers. Inside there was a hole in the floor for a lavatory. Originally the primary function of those wagons was the transportation of animals. For the purpose of deportation those wagons were formed into trains that were called ‘*ešelonas*’.

Wagons and trains were crowded with people – their number sometimes reached more than eighty people in one wagon. Although while arresting the soldiers take all family members men were separated from their wives and children later, and were taken into the other trains that brought them to labour camps in different places. Some people were separated from families intentionally or by chance. Thus in a wagon there were not families, but different people who sometimes new each other before, and sometimes not. During their long travel they stayed in close physical proximity to each other. They experienced the emotions of tragedy together, and all physical shortages that include water, food, air, crowdedness in a closed space, hot, illnesses, deaths, and births. Illnesses, deaths, births, christenings or decisions to take a child of a dead mother became the events of a whole wagon that seemed to be like family. During their travel people exchanged food, water, clothes, ideas about the future, dreams, prays, but first of all information – who and how many persons are in a wagon and train; why they were arrested; where are the other their relatives, neighbours, or people whom they knew; what places they are passing and what is a political situation at the moment in Soviet Union. Although contacts with the outside world were cut by soldiers there was a strong desire and activity to pass an information from a train to those who were outside or left in Lithuania and to receive it back. But since the trains moved further distancing from Lithuania people felt that they are isolated from their Fatherland and society for long or forever.

I suggest that in the situation of deportation a 'wagon' appeared the first social, emotional, and physical experience of twist of deportees' fate. The fact of arrest and deportation was crystallised in a 'wagon', and it became both the symbol and the reality of their new fate. Significantly, in a 'wagon' deportees became equal in front of the fact of deportation and in front of the future. They also became equal to each other in relation to living conditions, and to the strategies of survival. Their social worlds with previous social positions, rights and duties in a wagon were ruined and re-ordered on the basis of human survival. At the same time a 'wagon' became a place where deportees experienced reciprocity of things, practises and ideas that draw on perspective of their future. A 'wagon' and train appeared a space and a pretext where connectedness and co-filiation between deportees emerged, which was inseparable from the right of equal sharing and equivalence that physical survival required. These new relations deportees later named under kin terms of 'brother' and 'sister'.

But the society of a 'wagon' was temporal. When deportees reached the final places of their travel they as labourers were dispersed in different places and distributed among various labour settlements. Their lives and fates appeared to be also different. Difficult work, inhuman conditions, and diseases were the reason why many of them did not return to Lithuania. But there were those who lived till amnesty, and come back. My further interest is in relationships between deportees during the time of their stay in deportation and after.

### BEING AND BECOMING BROTHERS AND SISTERS

I would continue the discussion with two ethnographic examples from my research. The first shows how deportation assists in mobilising kin relations and keeping unity between family members. The other describes how friends staying together in the same labour camp became as close as siblings with the right of equal sharing that lasted lifelong period.

Zuzana, who is almost eighty years old I meet in a town of Šilalė in Western Lithuania. She lives alone as her husband died, and she has no children. She is a daughter of a farmer, and was born in a village nearby. Her parents in Interwar period of Independent Lithuania had 33 ha of land, and in 1939 due to land reform they received 10 ha more. The amount of land they had was the reason why they were deported in 1948 during the largest deportation of the farmers. They were deported six family members – a father, a brother and four sisters. Zuzana at that time was a student of gymnasium. The mother and the eldest brother died just before the deportation.



In deportation they stayed for almost ten years living at the labour settlement in Irkutsk district, Siberia, and working at a Forest Products Plant. At first they as well as the other twenty five families stayed in barracks of Polish soldiers-prisoners who were shot before. Their family was keeping jointly. They shared everything – food, clothes, sleeping places, family celebrations and sorrows. The father in this sharing was equal to the brother and the sisters. The youngest sister was too young to go for work, so she was cooking meals for all. In turn, the bread received for work they divided among six, the youngest sister including. Telling her story Zuzana emphasised the multitude of exchanges they experienced. For example, she told that sisters did not take enough dresses from Lithuania, because they thought they would be shot. So the youngest sister went to work instead of the other sister who knew how to sew, and she sewed dresses for all. When they needed they also exchanged dresses among all the sisters. The most difficult time for their family was the first year. But the brother was working as a builder and they received a room in a house. It was a small place and they had to live close to each other. They made three beds where they slept together – two sisters together, the other two sisters together, and the father and the brother also together. In this house they arranged their father's funerals who died three years later after coming to Siberia. In this house they celebrated the brother's and the sister's weddings. When they were allowed to return to Lithuania the brother with a wife and two sisters returned first. Zuzana stayed with her pregnant sister and helped her to return to Lithuania with new-born twins. She says that the brother and all sisters remained close and helped each other in the multitude of cases after return to Lithuania as well. Zuzana together with the nephew (the brother's son) brought from Siberia and re-buried the father's bones in Lithuania. She said that they wanted to keep jointly after the death either.

This example deals with the actual relations of siblings, which in life crisis situation became a ground of family. Even the father's and children's relations were transferred into relations of equal sharing and equivalence. Closeness, and the strategy of sharing and exchange maintained between siblings in deportation was continued after return from deportation, despite the fact that the brother and three sisters had their own families, and the fourth sister became a nun. Moreover Zuzana said that this kind of relations was passed to aunt and niece and nephew relationships.

Another example concerns the relationships between female friends – Monika, Jadvyga, Janina, Aldona - who stayed in special labour camp for political prisoners in Karaganda. They call themselves '*karagandiškės*' (from Karaganda). They meet each other from time to time until now, and it was one of such meetings that I attended. Women were imprisoned due to

their contacts with Lithuanian political and military underground, and stayed in prison and deportation till Kruschov era. In a labour camp they were close friends like ‘friends of heart’. On Sundays when they did not go to work they used to gather and to talk and to sing. Although it was not allowed they celebrated Easter, Christmas, New Year and Independence Day together, and made special meals saving bread, sugar, porridge beforehand. Sharing of the parcels in a prison was a significant act for physical survival in individual and group sense, and for maintaining the connections as well. My interviewees shared among those who were their close friends – it was a kind of classification of people around, and a way of expressing unity. After amnesty the women returned to Lithuania in different time and to different places, and did not know about each other. But twenty years later they organized the first meeting, and used to meet more often. Those meetings were like parties with food, partisan songs, and visiting of memorial places. Once at such gathering there were forty people. They often met at one political prisoner’s house, because she lived in a remote village as such meetings aroused suspicion. Some people were called to KGB, and they explained that it was somebody’s Name Day, or Birth Day. To my question why they made meetings my interviewees answered that they needed for that. They said that they are united in common hardships, ideas, and fate, and they are close to each other more than kin. When they meet they share reminiscences, and information about each other. Information is significant for help. Former political prisoners and deportees used to help to each other to find place of living and the job after returning to Lithuania, because they were not afraid of each other. They used to help in illness, in financial difficulties, and when somebody stays alone. They all attended funerals of their friends, former political prisoners.

To compare this story with the previous one it seems that they both are similar. Although the first speaks about the kin family, and the second about the group of friends not related as kin their relationships maintained in deportation and after are very similar. Their similarity is based on the exchanges and horizontality of relationships that make them connected as a group. Significantly the relationship of equal sharing once established among brother and sisters, or among friends remains as a rule of behaviour the lifelong period.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

To finalise I would emphasise that this analysis of the ways of people’s interaction with each other in the deportation is a retrospective one. But the naming of the relation under kinship term of ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ by deportees themselves is retrospective as well. My

male interviewee Vacys, former Lithuanian partisan and political prisoner who stayed in labour camp of gold mines in Magadan district, Siberia, said that ‘today we meet each other. [We are] As brothers, stronger than kinship. Labour camp united us, all those hardships’. This he said today recalling and drawing on the totality of his experience in the labour camp.

However in deportation people experienced their unity just being physically together in a close proximity, and solving the fundamental problems of human existence jointly. The exchange of the main things – food, water, clothes, space, cultural events, information, ideas – created the uniting tie, which manifested connectedness adequate to familial relationships. In this dynamism of horizontal order it appeared that the right of equal sharing and equivalence is the ground of people’s survival. Thus the event of deportation, external to all deportees, appeared a kind of ‘co-filiation’, which reinforce equality, equivalence and horizontal order among deportees– the features that are characteristic to sibling relationship. To conclude I would say that the expression of ‘wagon brothers, wagon sisters’ although it is a poetic metaphor it is a fact of language that describes the actual relatedness that emerge in life crisis situation of deportation and becomes enduring during the lifelong period.

## LITERATURE

Antze, P., and Lambek, M. (1996) *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*. New York & London: Routledge

Anušauskas, A. (1999) ‘Sovietinis genocidas ir jo padariniai’ In *Lietuvos gyventojų genocidas*. B. Burauskaitė (ed.) Vol. 1. Vilnius: Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras: 13-34.

Carsten, J. (2004) ‘The Substance of Kinship and the Heat of the Hearth: Feeding, Personhood, and Relatedness among Malays in Pulau Langkawi’ In *Kinship and Family: An Anthropological Reader*. R. Parkin, and L. Stone (eds) Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 309-327.

Dėdinas, V. (1991) ‘Išvežimas’ In *Ešelonų broliai*. A. Venskevičienė (ed.) Vilnius: Vyturys: 27-95.

Fortes, M. (1969) *Kinship and Social Order: The Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Garmutė, A. (1989) ‘Ešelonai’ In *Amžino įšalo žemėje*. A. Žemaitytė (ed.) Vilnius: Vyturys: 46-102.

- Grigas, J. (1991) 'Nebylio kronika' In *Ešelonų broliai*. A. Venskevičienė (ed.) Vilnius: Vyturys: 337-358.
- Grinkevičiūtė, D. (1989) 'Lietuviai prie Laptevų jūros' In *Amžino išalo žemėje*. A. Žemaitytė (ed.) Vilnius: Vyturys: 20-45.
- Grunskis, E. (1993) 'Lietuvos gyventojų deportacijos' In *1941-1952 metų Lietuvos tremtiniai*. Vol., 1. Vilnius: Vidaus reikalų ministerija: 4-20.
- Grunskis, E. (1996) *Lietuvos gyventojų trėmimai 1940-1941, 1945-1953 metais*. Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas.
- Kuprys, A. (1991) 'Ar besusitiksim?' In *Ešelonų broliai*. A. Venskevičienė (ed.) Vilnius: Vyturys: 267-336.
- Skultans, V. (1998) *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia*. London & New York: Routledge
- Venskevičienė, A. (ed.) (1991) *Ešelonų broliai*. Vilnius: Vyturys.
- Venskevičienė, A. (ed.) (1994) *Ešelonų sesės*. Vilnius: Vyturys.