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Art Exhibit Showcases 'Souls of Siberia'



By Alex Nitkin | September 18, 2015



Andy Plioplys, a retired neurologist, included images of his own neural patterns in his “Souls of Siberia” exhibit. DNAinfo/Alex Nitkin

WEST LAWN — Andy Plioplys is shedding light one of history's forgotten tragedies, and he's doing it through a subject untouched by most historians: the human brain.

His exhibit "Souls of Siberia," showing at the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, 6500 S. Pulaski Road, shows hundreds of photos of Lithuanian nationals who were sent to work in camps or gulags in remote Siberia during the 1940s and

'50s. The photos are shrouded inside sparkling polycarbonate tubes, which continuously glow and change colors.

The outsides of the tubes are covered in webs of stringy multi-color patterns. Plioplys, a retired neurologist, scanned his own brain and projected his neural networks onto his work.

"Memories are amalgamated in our brains — they're kept in our neural networks, and they make us who we are," Plioplys said. "The idea is that as long as we remember these people, in a way, they're immortal."

Born in Toronto, Plioplys tallies eight relatives who were rounded up from their homes in Lithuania and sent to live and work in miserable conditions in the heart of Russia.

Between 1941 and his death in 1953, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin displaced millions of Eastern Europeans, most of them landowners and middle class tradespeople. "Souls of Siberia," Plioplys said, is a monument to those victims.

"To me it always seemed unfair that we grow up in Canada and the U.S. hearing about Hitler and his atrocities, but no one talks about Stalin, who killed many times as many people," Plioplys said. "So the purpose of this exhibit was to pull together information and stories on some of the people affected, and present it to the public."

"Souls of Siberia" is an artistic follow-up to "Hope and Spirit," a historical exhibit on Lithuanian displacement that went on display at the same museum in 2012.

After being unveiled this March, the art fixture was recently extended for a second time. It will remain on display until the end of 2015.

"The response has just been incredible ... there have been so many people with so many positive comments," said Rita Janz, director of the Balzekas Museum. "It's attracted so many people — people with art backgrounds, and with history backgrounds — to come look at this event in history."



Plioplys included pictures and messages recovered from hundreds of letters sent from Siberia in the 1940s and 50s. DNAinfo/Alex Nitkin

An abstract work of art, Plioplys said, has the potential to draw people into a subject more than any "dry lecture" could.

"Art is attractive. It catches your eye, and it attracts your mind," Plioplys said. "It gets viewers to ask questions, and really interact with it. It's a way to make historical events visually palatable."

And getting people to interact with and understand history, he said, is the only way to prevent its darkest chapters from reemerging into the present.

"Over the past few years, we've been seen [Russian president Vladimir] Putin rehabilitate Stalin as a kind of cult of reveration," Plioplys said. "In that way, this project was a bit prophetic — if Russia continues on its trajectory, we may be seeing history repeat itself."