



2018: Irena Saulutė Valaitytė-Špakauskienė, Lithuanian Open Air Museum

Award speech 2018, Irena Saulutė Valaitytė-Špakauskienė.

NCK's pedagogical prize is annually awarded to a person or organisation from the Nordic-Baltic countries who has distinguished themselves in the field of heritage learning. It was hard to choose among the proposals for the 2018 prize since the examples showed a wide variety and exceptional quality work related to heritage learning in the North. However, one proposal stood out: We are very happy to welcome Irena Saulutė Valaitytė-Špakauskienė from Open Air Museum in Lithuania as this year's award winner!

2018 is not only the year when Irena Saulutė receives NCK's pedagogical prize, it is also the year she will celebrate her 90th birthday. However, time cannot affect her passion for her work: For twenty five years during the museum season, she has travelled each day by bus from Kaunas to the museum and then walked three kilometers to her workplace – a yurt in the Lithuanian Open Air Museum.

This yurt was erected on the initiative of the "Laptev Sea Exiles", an association of Lithuanians who were deported to the Laptev Sea in Siberia. Irena Saulutė herself was among those deportees in 1941, as a 13-year old child. Neither her father nor mother survived. Irena Saulutė credits her survival to her brother who shared his food rations with her – and we are grateful towards him too, because without him we would not have the pleasure and the honour to have Irena Saulutė here.

In 1989, Irena Saulutė travelled to the deportation sites on the Laptev Sea and became an influential advocate for preserving the memory of this dark time of Lithuanian history. From 1993 on, Irena Saulutė has worked at the Lithuanian Open Air Museum, first as a volunteer, then as a staff member. The part of the museum that deals with the history of deportation and resistance in Lithuania has since been expanded: A deportation train car, a bunker and monuments were added to the initial yurt.

In this part of the museum, Irena Saulutė coordinates thematic activities about the topic "the Daily Life of Deportees on the Laptev Sea". She recounts stories of the Lithuanian partisans and the deportations to Siberia. She has been described as "a pedagogue who teaches not only history", but who also reaches her listeners emotionally. Through her unique narrative technique, she creates strong learning experiences for young Lithuanians as well as visitors from all over the world by combining her own story with Lithuania's historical, political background.

Her exceptional way of presenting history and preserving the memory of a dark time has also made a strong impression on film makers and authors: She inspired the

figure of the female hero in the book "Between the Gray Clouds" by the writer Ruta Sepetys that even reached the New York Times bestseller list and was translated into 26 languages. Twenty American states added it to their lists of literature recommended for schools. Irena Saulutė has also received numerous medals and awards in recognition of her work.

All these honours reflect Irena Saulutė's unique ability to teach Lithuanian history in a way that allows the museum visitors to reflect on many different levels: On the personal one about surviving during hard times, on the political about civic responsibility, and the historical one about the implications of the past for our present and our future.

I wish to end this speech with a light paraphrase of the words of Swedish museum director Katarina Frost from the Open Air Museum at Vallby. She said: "All our (Open-air) museums are similar, but the fact that (the Lithuanian Open Air Museum has) Mrs Irena is something special. (They have a) diamond."

We are very happy to have Irena Saulutė among us tonight.