

STITCH AS A PRACTICE OF HOPE, SUPPORT AND PRESENCE IN A WORLD OF TURBULENCES

by Gabrielė Navickaitė and Dr. Jelena Škulis

There is something quietly defiant about a needle passing through fabric. It requires no complex tools, no audience, and almost no space. This is precisely why, across historical moments of rupture and displacement, stitching has remained available when other forms of expression have not.

Textiles as Historical Witness

What does fabric do when words are not allowed? For women under Soviet rule deported to Siberian labor camps in the 1940s–1960s and in Chile during the 1970s–1990s dictatorship, the answer was remarkably similar: it remembers, it connects, and it travels.[1]

Lithuanian deportees in Siberia made things from whatever was at hand: scraps of clothing, remnants of bedding, paper,

HANDWORK Collective with community members, *Stitching Poetry* (in-progress), 2023–present. Handwoven and embroidered pre-WWI linen, 19.7 x 393.7 inches. Photo: Mika Savičiūtė.

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satin and threads pulled from worn-out items. The scarcity of materials was a practical obstacle which shaped the aesthetics and logic of every object. **Ona Stankevičiūtė**, imprisoned at the Inta camp in Komi Republic, 60 kilometers from the Arctic Circle, deliberately worked small: such creations were easier to hide. Her surviving souvenir—a heart-shaped notebook of satin and document paper—carries a floral motif and her monogram on the cover. Inside are handwritten wishes to return to Lithuania, to freedom, to the family table.

A heart-shaped souvenir given to political prisoner **Vytautas Kiela** at the Spasko camp in Kazakhstan in 1954 carries the same logic. Its cover is embroidered in colored silk: an iron wolf, the tower of Gediminas Castle with the tricolor and oak leaves. The founding myth of Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania, was stitched onto the pocket-sized gift and passed between hands in a camp barrack. These objects circulated among prisoners as gifts, forming small but significant networks of connection which survive today in museum collections as quiet, material witnesses to that world.

Stasė Matjošaitytė-Beigienė's embroidered picture "Lithuanian Girl Behind Bars" was made in 1950 while she was imprisoned in Ust-Kut. This piece shows how stitching can become an explicitly visual narrative, like a diary on cloth. A young woman in national dress appears behind bars, framed by oak leaves, chains, and the line "You do not know what fate the steel chains are singing for me," turning a simple piece of cotton into an image which bears witness to captivity and endurance. Placed alongside the heart-shaped notebooks, it shows how deportee textiles move across a spectrum: from intimate keepsakes, which could be hidden and passed between prisoners, to explicitly figurative images.

> Tu nežinai kokią man dalią dainuoja plieno grandinės!



Stasė Matjošaitytė-Beigienė, *Lietuvaitė už grotų (Lithuanian Woman Behind Bars)*, 1950. Embroidered cotton thread on cotton fabric, 8.7 x 13 inches. Photo: Gediminas Trečiokas. National Museum of Lithuania.

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On the other side of the world, Chilean women in community workshops embroidered *arpilleras*: textile collages from fabric scraps on rough burlap, often repurposed from old sacks. Their visual surface is immediate: bright colors, simplified figures, recognizable streets and domestic scenes. But the content is dense, documenting daily life with its hardships, absences and losses, at a time when public speech was sharply constrained. Fabric became an alternative medium, carrying what could not be said aloud to people who would otherwise never have known. Through church solidarity networks and the hands of women who had left Chile, arpilleras traveled to Europe and North America, where they were exhibited, sold, and used as visual testimony in human rights discussions. Women who had never left Chile learned their works had visited countries they had never seen. The **Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos** (The Museum of Memory and Human Rights) in Santiago preserves a substantial collection of arpilleras, ensuring that testimony stitched in silence continues to be read by generations who never witnessed it firsthand.

Siberian exile handicrafts and Chilean arpilleras emerged from different geographies and circumstances but share the same logic. Objects assembled using remnants of daily life—worn fabric, salvaged thread, scrap paper—carried memory and community across borders their makers could not cross. In the corner of a camp barrack or in a church workshop, the act of making became a social space, giving people a way to hold on to connection when everything around threatened to sever it.

In understanding past craftwork that sustained life under oppression, can manual practices and tactile engagement with material can still offer hope today? In a world flooded with industrial textiles, can thread and needle once again become instruments of soft power, helping people endure war and gather communities?

Stitching a line to the present

Monika Drożyńska, PhD., an embroiderer, and activist in Kraków, Poland, founded the **Złote Rączki (Golden Hands) Collective** in 2014, collaborating with communities to make embroidered protest banners. Workshops brought people together to create hand-embroidered signs for demonstrations, while quieter actions involved leaving tactile messages in public spaces, shaping space through gestures of support. “Myślę, czuję, decyduję” (I think, I feel, I decide) (2016) addressed abortion restrictions, and “Wasza godność?”

Top: **Ona Stankevičiūtė**, *Souvenir*, 1951. Embroidered satin and document paper, 14 x 7.4 inches. Bottom: detail. Photos: Sigitas Gudaitis. Raseiniai Regional History Museum.

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Monika Drożyńska, *Terror*, 2016. Hand embroidery on fabric, 7.9 x 10.6 inches. Photo by the artist.

(Your Dignity) (2021), created for the Stop Torture at the Border protest in Warsaw, addressed the treatment of migrants at the Belarus border.

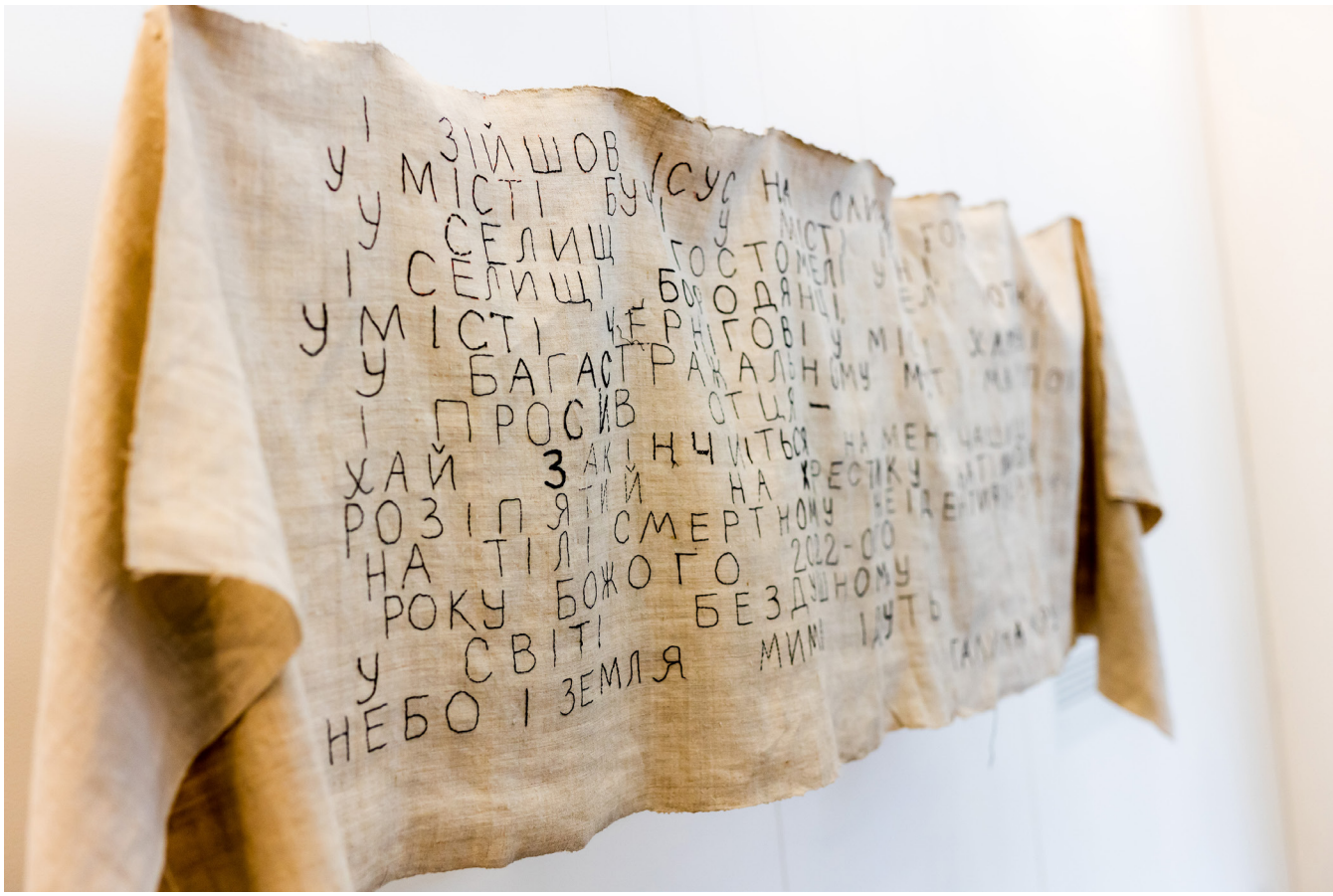
Rufina Bazlova, a Belarusian artist based in Prague, Czechia, documented the 2020 anti-government protests in Belarus, where contemporary repression echoes past histories, through a traditional red-and-white cross-stitch seven-meter textile. After the violent crackdowns, Bazlova co-initiated, *#FramedinBelarus* with Sofia Tocar 2021. The project commemorates contemporary political prisoners, inviting participants across the globe to stitch hundreds of stories. So far, the project has documented around 685 from more than 4,000 known cases of human rights abuses in Belarus, forming a patchwork of the unforgettable pain and present-day torture caused by the suppression of free thought.

And in Lithuania—a small country marked by its own traumatic histories yet also by noted forms of resilience—the collective **HANDWORK**, initiated by **Jelena Škulis** and **Dileta Deikė**, began in 2020 in response to protests in Belarus with the project "Stitching the Flag".[2] Lithuanian participants gathered to embroider a flag of freedom for Belarus, as a gesture of protest



Maker unknown, *Souvenir Notebook*, 1954. Embroidered silk and cotton threads on paper, wool and cardboard, gifted to political prisoner Vytautas Kiela, 3.5 x 4.7 inches. Photo: Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights.

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HANDWORK Collective with community members, *Stitching Poetry*, 2022. Handwoven and embroidered pre-WWI linen, 19.7 x 102.4 inches. Photo: Mika Savičiūtė

and a way of spending time together in manual practice, sharing fears, and articulating experiences of injustice.

Later, in response to Russia's war against Ukraine, HANDWORK invited people in Lithuania to express solidarity and reflect on their own historical and emotional wounds. In the *Stitching Poetry* project, many hundreds of participants embroidered verses in Ukrainian, written by the poet **Halyna Kruk** in April 2022, in response to the atrocities in Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel and other cities. The act of stitching became both symbolic and material: needles functioned simultaneously as tools of care and as quiet instruments of resistance. The linen used for the base of the embroidery carried its own history: it was handwoven by a Lithuanian family in the early 20th century and buried during World War II to protect it from Soviet soldiers.

As the philosopher **Silvia Federici** suggests, our future may depend on rethinking care as a collective practice.[3] Manual embroidery can be a tool to calm, connect and sustain one another in times marked by anxiety, war and uncertainty. Embroidery builds a bridge between the past and the future. By giving voice through hands and allowing lesser-known countries to be heard, stitchwork is a vital tool for sustaining individuals and communities across different historical moments and social contexts.

[1] Marjorie Agosín, *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Auksuolė Čepaitienė, "Resistance and Memory: The Secret Handicrafts of Soviet Deportation," *Ethnologie française*, 2018/2, p. 253–264.

[2] Jelena Škulis, "WHY NOT HANDWORK." In *Crafting Community: Essays on Fiber Arts and Belonging*, edited by Amy Smith (Jefferson: McFarland, 2024), p. 97–111.

[3] Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020).

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—Dr. Monika Drożyńska is a visual artist, embroiderer and activist. ***@monika_drozynska***

—Rufina Bazlova is a Prague-based artist who gained an international profile for her series The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka / vyzyvanka.com, which uses the traditional folk embroidery medium to depict the peaceful protests in Belarus in 2020. ***@rufinabazlova***

—HANDWORK, initiated by Dileta Deikė and Jelena Škulis, co-founded a studio in 2019 at the cultural center SODAS 2123 in Vilnius. The aim of HANDWORK is to explore handwork through practice while rethinking it within the frameworks of history, philosophy, and everyday experience, actively engaging communities throughout these processes. ***@handwork_rankudarbas***



Rufina Bazlova, *Project #framedinbelarus*, 2021–ongoing. Cross-stitch embroidery on canvas. 11.81 x 11.81 inches. Photo: Anonymous.

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