

The Silenced Muse

The Life and Words of Matilda Olkinaitė, a Murdered Poet

By

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On a beautiful hot day in the summer of 1941, at a bend in the road that leads out of the village of Panemunėlis towards Kavoliškės, a group of men, known to local people as “baltaraiščiai” or “those who wear white armbands,” essentially local Lithuanians who collaborated with the occupying Nazi forces, arrived on bicycles. They left the bicycles in the forest across the road from an isolated farmstead that belonged to the farmer, Petras Šarkauskas.

They began to dig ditches in the forest. They did not have much success because tree roots prevented them from digging very deep. So they gave it up and took their shovels to the other side of the road and began digging in the boggy land that belonged to the Kavoliškis manor.

An eight-year old girl hid behind a haystack and watched them. She was the daughter of the farmer, Petras Šarkauskas. After the hired laborer, Bronius, ran to find the farmer to tell him what was happening, the farmer came into the yard and both watched as a wagonload of people was carted over the uneven road—men and women and children. The captives’ heads were bowed and they had been blindfolded. Armed guards sat at the front and back of the wagon, holding the people at gunpoint. Many more armed men on bicycles rode alongside the wagon. In that wagon sat the Jaffe and Olkin families. They were two Jewish families who lived and operated small businesses near the train station in the village of Panemunėlis. Nauman² Olkin was the local pharmacist. He was well known to the community for his kindness, often administering medicine to the sick free of charge. He was an intellectual who read Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoyevski. He was a member of the village elite and a close friend of the parish priest, Juozapas Matulionis.

In that wagon also sat Olkin’s nineteen-year-old daughter Matilda, who had been away in Vilnius (Vilna) studying Russian and French literature, and rushed home when she heard that her parents and two younger sisters had been arrested. Matilda was well known in the region as a gifted poet – her compositions had been published in Lithuanian literary journals since she was thirteen. In her slender notebook of handwritten poems, which was found decades later, there is a poem that foretold this awful day.

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² Czarist-era records refer to him as No’ach Olkin and inter-war Lithuanian records give his Lituianized name as Noachas Olkinas.

My People

A pair of dark eyes ignite once again
With a pain that could not be extinguished or laid to rest.
And they—they just keep walking past and away.
But for me, Lord, there are no words.

Do you hear? Do hear that awful laughter?
The hills, even the hills shake with it—
And the rivers will faint, and the seas will faint—
And the stone will cry, the stone will cry.

You are laughing? You walk past and keep on walking,
But for me, Lord, there are no words for my horror.
That laughter—that awful laughter... And dark eyes flash
With an undying, relentless pain.

The wagon stopped just beyond a bend in the road. The families were ordered to climb out. At gun-point they were led to the crest of a hill. There they were ordered to undress. The farmer, his little girl, and the hired hand, soon could no longer see what was happening, but they could hear it. The screams and cries continued for a long time before the final gunshots came.

Over half a century later, after Lithuania regained its independence, local Rokiškis historian Violeta Aleknienė gathered oral histories of the killings of the Jewish families of Panemunėlis. She spoke with the little girl who had watched that day from behind the haystack. She was already by then a middle-aged woman. Aldona Dranseikienė told her:

We heard screams and cries coming from the hillock. That went on for a very long time. Who knows what went on there? Only much later, in the afternoon, we heard their final death cries and gunshots. In the evening the men came to our farm house. They demanded vodka, although they were already very drunk. Our neighbor, Kazys Vaitkevičius, gave them everything he had. In exchange for the vodka they offered us shredded pillows. Later, everyone in the village was talking that they were searching for gold hidden in those pillows. Pillows were tossed everywhere along the roadside fences, and feathers from the pillows were scattered by the wind. For a long time those men hung around and sang. Some of them even left their bicycles in the Vaitkevičius's yard. One blood-thirsty scoundrel began screaming hysterically and ran back to Panemunėlis. He never returned to his right mind again after that. When they finally left to head back into the village, they beat their horses so badly with their whips that it was terrible to watch.³

That day no one dared approach the killing site. The next day Šarkauskas and Vaitkevičius went over to take a look. They found nine bodies dumped in a shallow grave. Šarkauskas pushed in

³ Violeta Aleknienė, “Apie tragišką vaistininko Naumano Olkino šeimos likimą” (“About the tragic fate of the family of the pharmacist Naumanas Olkinas”), *Panemunėlis II dalis* (Versme 2011, ISBN 978-9955-589-27-3), pp. 1493, 1500 (“Aleknienė”). Ms. Aleknienė is the director of the Kupiškis Ethnographic Museum.

his rake handle and found that their bodies were covered with only a few centimeters of earth. He dug a deeper pit and poured lime over the bodies so the wild animals would not get to them.⁴

And what crime had the Olkin and Jaffe families committed to meet such an end? They were Jewish. That was all. That was their crime. Neither Nauman Olkin nor Mauša⁵ Jaffe had been political. Neither had ever committed a crime. Neither had joined the Communist Party.

A year earlier, in March, 1940, then eighteen year old Matilda jotted down this poem in her diary.

A Jewish Lullaby

My tiny little baby
Why can't you fall asleep?
Longing overwhelms you tonight.
Longing crouches beside your cradle.

The nights are long and dark,
And the road leads far into the distance.
On such a night you will leave me,
My tiny little baby.

And suffering with wait for you beside the gate,
Like a beloved friend.
Great suffering and hardship
Will carry you silently through long generations.

Long generations carry suffering
From the cradle to the grave—
Suffering immense and deep,
And as endless as the night.

Fall asleep now. It is a long road
That will lead you into the night...
Go to sleep. I will sing to you,
My tiny little baby.

Matilda died a poet's death.

A poet is a visionary. Every society values and loves its poets. To murder a poet is to commit murder against humanity.

The Olkin and Jaffe families were initially kept in a stable with other Jews of Panemunėlis who were being held for mass execution at Vyžuona.⁶ At some point, however, these families were

⁴ Aleknienė, *id.*, at 1500.

⁵ One inter-war Lithuanian record gives his name as Elija.

⁶ This is a remote location about 10 kilometers north-northeast of Rokiškis.

separated from the others because it was believed that they were more prosperous and thus might have had more valuables.⁷

The Olkin's eldest son, Ilya, was spared, but only for a short time. He had been studying to be a pharmacist in Kaunas (Kovno), where he was arrested and confined in the Kaunas Ghetto. He and his fiancée Liza, along with a few friends, managed to escape to the Valbininkas forest where there was a Lithuanian committee that was organized to save Jews. They hid Liza among the nuns in a convent. Ilya and a group of friends set out to buy some food in a nearby village. Ilya was shot accidentally by another group that was keeping guard in the forest, and who mistook him for one of the enemy. His friends tried to bring him to a hospital, but he'd lost too much blood. He begged his friends to shoot him, and finally they did.⁸

Growing up as a Lithuanian-American, for many years I believed that the Lithuanians who murdered their Jewish neighbors were used by the Nazis, perhaps even forced at gunpoint to commit these crimes. That was the story I'd been told. Perhaps I comforted myself with this thought because the truth was too horrific to face. But Matilda's story has forced me to face this truth—that her murderers were complicit, and they committed murder in full knowledge of what they were doing.

They killed because they believed they would gain riches for their crimes. Perhaps they killed because they were jealous of their neighbors. They hated the Jews in their community because they perceived that they had a little more than they did—a little more wealth, a little more education, children who studied in the nation's universities, and a well-lived life, a life that was harmonious and stemmed from their beliefs and traditions. Finally, they killed because they were anti-Semitic. They hated those who they perceived as the "other."

Attempts were made to save Matilda, and to save her father and family. Several attempts were made to save Matilda alone—because she was a poet and her community saw her as special. She lived, after all, at a time and in a society where people appreciated the art of poetry and respected the expression of a higher truth through poetry. And yet, she turned down every single rescuer. Facing her own death, she would not part with her father and mother and sisters. Matilda sacrificed herself for love of her family. Poetry had taught her that this love was greater than her own self-preservation. She died in the most humiliating of circumstances, and yet she died together with her family, and in the full knowledge that love and beauty transcends all.

Two friends visited Matilda in those awful days when she and her family were held prisoner with the other Jews of Panemunėlis in the village's train station. Genovaitė Šukytė Grigienė was twelve years old. Her mother would prepare kettles of soup and fruit and bread and ask her to walk

⁷ Aleknienė, at 1500.

⁸ *Ibid.*

four kilometers to Panemunėlis to bring the food secretly to the Olkin family and the others. Matilda's classmate, Juozas Vaičionis, who had become a priest, accompanied Genovaitė to see Matilda while they were still being held in the train station (later, the Olkin and Jaffe families were separated from the group and held in isolation in a stable). In his memoir he recalls:

I wanted to save Matilda Olkin. She had to live. She was such a gifted poet. When the "white armbands" went out, I snuck in and I said to her, "Run away with me! I know people who will hide you." But Matilda would not even answer me. She just kept on scrubbing the floors. I could not get her to talk. I could not get her to answer me when I insisted, "Why don't you want to run away from here?"⁹

Matilda's father, Nauman Olkin, was a close friend of Juozapas Matulionis, the priest at Panemunėlis Saint Joseph's Church. According to the memoir by Vaičionis, Olkin, although himself a practitioner of the Jewish faith, donated an oak confessional to the church.¹⁰ Every Sunday Nauman Olkin and Father Matulionis drank tea together. Father Matulionis was also a frequent guest in the Olkin's home. When the collaborators and the Nazis began arresting Jews in Panemunėlis, Father Matulionis hid Olkin in the church. However, according to Vaičionis, one late night Olkin went out for a walk and saw a notice that anyone caught hiding Jews would be executed. He immediately feared for his friend's life and weighed the moral responsibility. He turned himself in to the Germans that very night. This account was confirmed in the memoir of E. Rudokienė.¹¹

What was revealed to me by the research of historian Violeta Aleknienė, including the oral histories she collected, and the research of Holocaust survivor and literary critic Dr. Irena Veisaitė and others is that in the decades before the Second World War the Olkin family, like many Jews of Panemunėlis, respected the Catholic faith of their friends, neighbors, and community. Similarly, their friends, neighbors, and community respected their Jewish faith. What also comes through is that there was warmth and sincerity in those relationships.

That was until the war came to Lithuania in June 1941. Once the Olkins and the other Jews of Panemunėlis were arrested, friends and neighbors did come forward to help by bringing them food and by trying to rescue them by hiding them. They did this at the risk of their own death and execution. However, these people were powerless in the face of the war machine of the Nazis and their local collaborators, who were helping the Nazis control the local populations. Ultimately, the Olkins made a moral choice. They knew that those who helped them risked death and the Olkins refused to put other people in danger to save their own lives. In this moral equation they

⁹ Juozas Vaičionis, *Memoirs*. Vilnius, 2008, p. 87.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ E. Rudokienė, *Memoirs*, Rokiškio krašto muziejus (Rokiškis Regional Museum, 2001, p. 91. 1. 16.

consciously chose their own deaths over the deaths of others.

No one quite knows the circumstances, but before the Olkin family was killed Nauman Olkin managed to pass his daughter's diary and notebook of poems to Father Matulionis. The priest hid the diary under the floor beneath the church's Great Altar. Three years later, the Soviets drove the Germans out of Lithuania and soon after Father Matulionis was deported to Siberia. The diary and the notebook of poems remained hidden and unknown for many years. At some point during the Soviet period the priest's nephew, Alfredas Andrijauskas, a linguist and organist, recovered the diary and notebook and brought them for safe keeping to Irena Veisaitė, who immediately recognized the literary value of the poems.

In a conversation in October 2017, Dr. Irena Veisaitė, who is now in her nineties, told me that she managed to have a few of the poems published in the Soviet Lithuanian literary journal, *Pergalė*, by selecting poems that would be acceptable to the Soviet censors. During the Soviet era, she explained, the Holocaust in Lithuania was re-characterized as the killing of "Soviet citizens." It was not possible at the time to publish Matilda's poems in the context of her being a Jewish poet. Or to tell her story in an authentic way.

I spent a few hours in Irena's apartment reading Matilda's diary and the notebook of her poems. They were too precious to leave their custodian's vigilant eyes. Irena's apartment was reminiscent of an Old World intellectual's home, filled with books crowded into bookshelves from floor to ceiling that occupy almost every wall, interspersed with paintings and old photographs, and Irena's notes and writings. The wooden parquet floors were covered with old Persian carpets.

The diary opens with a premonition: "It's been a strange summer this year. Every time I say goodbye, it is painful. And it seems as though everything is passing and will soon be gone forever. Whenever I part with my boyfriend, I feel as though I will never see him again."

Often on the pages of her diary, Matilda ponders the meaning of life:

What a lovely evening it was beside the river. I went down to the river to help our maid do the washing. After a warm and bright autumn day we lay down on the sunny autumn fields. The evening was mild and fragrant. In the dark water of the river we could see the thin band of a stream flowing through the middle. I wanted to sing, but it seemed sacrilegious to shatter the quiet breath of the evening, its gentles whispers. The maid didn't notice any of it. She was telling me about a certain fine lady and her successes.

I'm thinking now about what a person's natural state of being is: whether it is to live a simple gray every day life, where we approach things with a light and open touch, or whether it is to live in an enlightened state of being, when between us and phenomenon a deeper feeling arises that raises the level of your thoughts, which gives everything meaning, putting it all on a higher plane. Is a person's nature gray and mundane, only very rarely rising up into a higher spiritual plane? Or is it full of light—call it sacred—and only by force pushed down into the level of gray everyday existence? And where is the true me? Is it the me that gossips about others, chatters

away, gets angry, and has little patience? Or is it the me that rises above and creates, that loves, that trembles in eternal bliss, when the evening spreads across the wide fields and the heavens overhead are wide open and endless, and when in this sacred silence you hear the word of God speaking to you.

What is the natural state of a human being? Perhaps both of these are natural to us? Just like hate and love, like destruction and creativity, like keeping watch and sleeping.

Matilda writes about love—should she break up with her boyfriend or not? Does she really love him? Does he love her? She writes about her family, their moments of warmth, their squabbles. And she writes about how society was changing around her under the Soviet occupation. Part of the diary she wrote while still at home, and then the second part when she was a student at Vilnius University, where she took classes on Victor Hugo, Semiotics, Latin Writers of Antiquity and other esoteric subjects in the Humanities.

I took photos of the poems with my phone, so that I could translate them. The poems had spoken deeply to my soul. I am a poet. I could only think that if I had died so young, just as I was beginning to find my voice as a poet, I would have wanted someone to find my notebook. I would like for my translations to breathe life back into the poems written out in a fountain pen on the now-brittle, yellowed pages of an old school notebook.

When we parted, Irena looked into my eyes and said, “Sielos susišaukė” (“Our souls have spoken to each other.”). We both knew that it was right that these poems appear in English, so that the rest of the world could share Matilda’s words.

In 2016 the playwright Neringa Daniienė, who directs the Rokiškis Theater, learned about the diaries and the notebooks. She resolved to write a play that would show both the beauty and the tragedy of Matilda’s short life, and that would educate Lithuanians about the loss of Lithuania’s Jews and Jewish cultural heritage in Lithuania.

“When people teach about the Holocaust,” Neringa said to me, “they usually show Jewish people as victims of a horrific crime. But these people lived full lives before the war. They raised families, they were active members of their communities, they lived, and they loved. With my play we wanted to show the Olkin family in the midst of their lives. I wanted to show Matilda as a young woman who fell in love, experienced heartbreak, and longed to have a baby one day.”

Neringa’s play, *The Silenced Muses*, premiered in Rokiškis on November 18, 2016. In an interview after the premiere with the online magazine, *Tema*, Neringa said, “Our theater company has a goal. We want to clear the killing site of the Olkin and Jaffe families and place a large stone there as a memorial. We’ve invited the Panemunėlis community to participate. However, I want to emphasize that our play is about life ... and not death. Our play opens with light and closes with light. No one can destroy Matilda’s amazing poetry. The poems survived, and we need to do what

we can to ensure that Matilda's poetry continues to live."¹²

The play is composed of historical documents oral histories, excerpts from Matilda's diary. The former director of the Rokiškis Theater, Rytis Saladžius, had good ties with the Jewish community and was one of Neringa's advisors.

"We discussed with the Jewish community what to include in the play. We did not want to be superficial," Neringa said.

The Silenced Muses begins with a prologue that is a short lesson about the Jews of Panemunėlis and the neighboring town of Rokiškis. Five narrators, each holding photographs of Jewish life before the war, take turns reciting facts: Before the war half of the residents of Rokiškis (like in all Lithuanian towns) were Jews. For as long as people could remember provincial Lithuanian Jews were merchants, craftsmen, and professionals. It could be no other way because during czarist times Jews were not allowed to own property in our land. An article that appeared in an edition of the newspaper *Lietuvos Aidas (Lithuania's Echo)* in the 1930s stated that "We can all be proud of how harmoniously Lithuanians and Jews live together in Rokiškis. The same newspaper noted that "Rokiškis' Jews played a key role in Lithuania's fight for independence."

In the play, a number of quotes from various prewar newspapers are read out loud, showing how Lithuania's Jews participated in Lithuanian independence and in building the new Lithuania that emerged after the First World War. The names of heroes and other exceptional regional Jewish individuals are read to the audience. There were Yiddish theaters, schools, and clubs in Rokiškis, and yet all Jewish children also spoke Lithuanian. There were three wooden synagogues in Rokiškis—each one painted in one of the colors of the Lithuanian flag: yellow, green, and red.

The play then moves into scenes of Matilda's happy childhood. The text of the play quotes directly from her poems, her diaries, and the memories of family and childhood friends.

It was a cold rainy October Saturday when my friend Saulė and I saw *The Silenced Muses* performed in Rokiškis. It would be an understatement to say that we were moved by the play. We laughed, we cried, we mourned.

Neringa presented the play in schools and museums. The object of the play is not so much to entertain as to teach and to remember. The entire cast of eleven of *The Silenced Muses* are amateur actors. They all are local people, some from Panemunėlis, others from the surrounding areas. The actors feel a deep connection with the Olkin family. To them, the Olkins are *their* people. They feel the tragic circumstances of the families' deaths as keenly as they would their own relatives' loss. When we sat down to talk with the actors, we asked them about their work off stage. We learned that they are engineers, builders, teachers, and four students – three in high school and one in elementary school. They told us that they feel it is their mission to tell Matilda's story and to

¹² Interview with Neringa Daniene, *Tema*, November, 2016.

go wherever people are willing to listen.

The staging of the play is adapted to accommodate amateur actors, and the budget for the play is miniscule. They've had to improvise with costumes and the set, donating their time and resources. However, they still bring Matilda and the Olkin family's story to life in a powerful way. The lead role, Matilda, is played by a dynamic young Lithuanian student, Viktorija Krivickaitė, who will be beginning her studies in vocal music in the United Kingdom this autumn. She weaves Matilda's poetry into her performance in a way that is astonishing. When Matilda's poems burst into life on stage, you could hear a pin drop in the theater. This young actress captures all of the youthful exuberance that can be found in Matilda's diary, as well as her experience of first love, heartbreak, and her youthful dreams for the future.

The power of the play is that it shows the Olkin family living a peaceful and full life, with friendships, community, shared meals, great books, children playing, and universal hopes and dreams. Hopes and dreams that were crushed by the Holocaust. The realization stings hard: These good people's lives were wiped out together with the lives of tens of thousands of Jewish lives in Lithuania.

Much of the play centers around the close friendship between the Olkin family and the Lithuanian Neniškis family, who lived across the yard and operated a mill. The Olkins had four children: Ilya (born 1919), Matilda (born 1920 or 1921), Mika (1925), and Grunia (1934 or 1935). The Neniškis' granddaughter Liucija would visit each summer and became the best friend of Mika and Matilda. She would also return for the Christmas and Easter holidays. All of the Olkin children would stand and wait on the platform to greet her train when she arrived. Much of the play's narrative is provided by Liucija's warm remembrances of the Olkins, which were collected by the historian, Violeta Aleknienė, who also advised Neringa on historical details of the play. Liucija was best acquainted with the daily routines, and the values, of the Olkin family. She was a close friend for ten years before their murder.

In 2006, when Violeta Aleknienė collected oral histories about the Olkin family, Liucija began with this statement:

I knew all the members of the Olkin family very well because I spent every summer of my childhood and young adulthood together with them in Panemunėlis. I was closest to Mika. We all called her, Mindočka. Or "The Amazing Mika," which is how I refer to her to this day. She was our leader. She would think of all sorts of games for us to play. We never played with dolls. We had our own games, like, "The Street Grand Opening," or "Court," or "Newspaper," and so on.¹³

Liucija Neniškaitė remembered Matilda as being different from the other children, special.

About Matilda she said:

¹³ Aleknienė, at 1494.

Matilda was a few years older than me. Her father often asked her to stay home and write poems. Only after she'd written a poem would her father let her out to play. Why he did that, I don't know.¹⁴

Nauman Olkin recognized Matilda's talent as a Lithuanian poet and encouraged her to write. In a diary entry dated, August 17, 1940, Matilda laments about the "cultured" arguments between her and her father regarding her writing. Matilda, apparently, did not devote herself to her poetry as much as her father would like:

In the evenings Papa always says: "One more day has passed." His comment is directed at me. One more day has passed and I haven't accomplished anything. I must admit, I enjoy arguing with Papa. Our arguments are cultured and rarely escalate beyond the norms of civility. Papa is worried about my future. But I just grab hold of a few cliches to make my point. Papa is deeply hurt that I am not writing now. I just find some justification, which I don't believe myself and nobody else does either.

Liucija recalled that every day the neighborhood children would eat lunch at the Olkins and dinner at her grandparents' house. Her grandparents would tease that the Olkins fed Liucija so well that she had no appetite left for dinner. Her grandmother would bring Asna Olkin cheese and butter. Every summer she would order a bolt of fabric and sew identical dresses for the three Olkin girls and Liucija.¹⁵

Every Saturday both the Jewish family and their Lithuanian friends and neighbors observed the Sabbath, which they shared together. At Sabbath dinner the children would read, put on plays, and entertain the guests. Always in attendance were Dr. Sadauskas, Father Matulionis, the teachers Jonas Simoninis and Stasė Valevičiūtė, the station master Prokapavičius, and others.¹⁶

Matilda's peers remember that she liked to be alone. And that she would react with great sensitivity to even the smallest things. She finished the Panemunėlis Elementary School with honors. She attended Middle School and High School at the Kupiškis Gymnasium and the Rokiškis J. Tomo-Vaižgantas Gymnasium. She spent two years in Rokiškis, 1933 – 1935.

Aldona Zinkevičienė, a teacher who was a classmate of Matilda's remembers her as follows:

Matilda was a pretty girl with dark hair and dark eyes, but with milky white skin. She had a cheerful personality. Although she was Jewish, she spoke Lithuanian without any accent. In Kupiškis we all knew that Matilda was a poet and that impressed us deeply. We were very interested in her and in her poetry. A few of her poems were published in the magazine *Žvaigždutė* (*Little Star*). We all read her

¹⁴ *Id.*, at 1495.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

poems. Matilda's poetry, her thoughts, her work, was all very Lithuanian. She was just like the rest of us Lithuanian children. She would write about our holidays. It made no difference to us that she was Jewish.¹⁷

Matilda was indispensable at literary evenings and other events at the Rokiškis J. Tumo-Vaižgantas Gymnasium. Her classmate, Ada Apuokaitė Gudelienė, remembers that Matilda was different from her peers because of her individuality and creativity, and because she was cultured:

Matilda was always happy and friendly. I never saw her sitting alone during the breaks studying. Her attitudes towards grades was very balanced. Her gaze always seemed to be somewhere distant, and not engaged in the petty details of school life. She always seemed to be flying above everything. Often during breaks she would stand and gaze out the classroom window for a long time with her hands tucked under her apron. What she was thinking, I don't know.¹⁸

Today, in the village green, where the Olkin children used to play, stands a memorial, a wooden totem, carved by a Lithuanian traditional folk sculptor, Vidmantas Zakarka. It is a memorial to their childhood. At the top of the totem there is a delicate carving of a Star of David. The totem incorporates symbols from Matilda's poetry, lilies and birds, but most importantly, an open book with a stanza from her poetry:

Then, someone carried off
The Sun and all the flowers.
The young sisters left
For foreign lands.

The day after we watched the play, the historian, Violeta Aleknienė, brought Saulė and me to see the totem, and also the house where the Olkin family once lived. We had not had breakfast. I spotted a small grocery across the street. I offered to run over and buy some rolls.

"No need for that," said Violeta. "We will go pay a visit with Vidmantas."

Within a few minutes, a spitting image of Santa Claus opened up the door to his home and invited us inside. He and his wife have converted the old village schoolhouse into their home and studio. A masonry stove provided a warm glow of heat, a relief from the damp and cold and never-ending rain. One entire wall was covered with Vidmantas' handmade carved decorative spoons and the other was covered with certificates of appreciation for his work as a sculptor and as an educator. Vidmantas plucked one of the pretty spoons from the wall and presented it to me as a gift. We were unexpected guests, and yet his wife hurried back and forth from the kitchen, bearing platter after platter of salads, sweets, sausage, cheese, and ultimately hot pork chops straight from the oven. Our talk centered around Matilda and the sculpture that Vidmantas had carved with such loving care.

¹⁷ *Id.*, at 1497.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

“I read Matilda's poems,” Vidmantas said, “and I saw the play and I heard her story. I was deeply moved. I wanted to create a monument to the beautiful childhood Matilda had. I wanted this child to be remembered.”

Reading through Matilda's early poems it is apparent that she lived a happy childhood. A poem from July, 1938, written when Matilda was sixteen, captures that youthful exuberance and happiness. Matilda, like many Lithuanians of her times, was a child of nature. Therefore, nature, and her relationship with nature, play a strong role in her poetry.

Good Morning!

Oh, the Sun has awoken
And is leaping from her bed.
She opens one eye, then the other,
“Good morning!”

And all the flowers rejoice,
All the flowers and the birds.
They call out one after the other,
“Good morning!”

And out into the wide dewy meadow
The girl sends the herd.
And the flowers greet her,
And the Sun, and the birds.

And everywhere it's just the Sun...
The Sun—riding in her chariot across the sky,
The Sun—diving into the brook,
The Sun—in every blossom,
The Sun—in every cup;
Every drop of dew...

But the Sun shines most
In the eyes of the little girl.
Her eyes are bright, full of light.
They greet her joyful world,
A world bursting to life and filled with sunshine.
“Good morning! Good morning!”

Matilda's notebook of poems is ninety-six pages long. It contains thirty-four of her original poems, dated between September 23, 1938, and October 9, 1940. The last entry in the notebook, dated May 12, 1940, contains her translation into Lithuanian of a poem by the Jewish poet Noah Gotlib.¹⁹ On the cover of the notebook, she wrote: “M. Olkinaitė, 1938. VI. 21.” Olkinaitė is the Lithuanian version of her surname.

¹⁹ Born in 1901 in Kovno, Lithuania, Noah Gotlib is remembered as a talented poet, writer and journalist, an individual who spoke to many through his multitude of work. Gotlib, whose father was the head of a Hassidic yeshiva, was educated in both traditional Jewish and secular schools. Gotlib also studied for and received his teaching diploma from a Soviet Normal School. Gotlib's earliest poetry was in Hebrew but he soon took to writing in Yiddish. This writing included lyric poetry and prose, essays, literary criticism and articles.

Lithuania remained at peace when German and Russian armies over-ran neighboring Poland in September 1939. In June 1940, the Russians took over Lithuania without a fight and soon after began to transform the country into a Soviet state. Still, Matilda hoped to one day publish a collection of her poems. In a diary entry, dated September 1, 1940, Matilda noted: “Today it is exactly one year since the war began. The newspapers have marked the occasion by writing the headlines all in capital letters. It is horrific, when you think about it...” On that first anniversary of the outbreak of World War II she continues to plan for her studies and for her first collection of poems:

The day that I must leave is drawing closer. This year I will need to study very hard and put all my energy into my work. I am considering taking Slavic languages as an elective. But I will give it some more thought. Maybe. Whatever I end up choosing, I would like to work very seriously at my studies this year. I’d like to improve my grade in Lithuanian language. I will need to take a few exams. And then, and then—I want to publish my book. I want to take care of all the editing and all the details. If I see that we do not have that thing that is called, “Wahlverwandtschaft,” then I will sacrifice everything and step aside.

A few days later, on September 4, 1940, Matilda expressed doubts about her collection of poems. She observed that her poems were not consistent with the dominating Soviet ideology and feared that her poems would not be published: “I write about the pain of suffering over centuries at a time when we are required to sing about how happy we are right now and about our bright tomorrow.” Continuing her thoughts, she wrote:

Today I should not write in my diary. It has been a day without sadness and without joy. I read a book in three hours, I walked around in my bathrobe all day long, my throat hurt, the battery in my radio died. What I should do is sit down and work on editing several poems. Oh, that poetry collection of mine! I am working on it with no inspiration, knowing that no one will publish it anyway. There is nothing in my poems that is relevant. I write about the pain of suffering over centuries at time when we are required to sing about how happy we are right now and about our bright tomorrow.

At a time when one of Lithuania’s most beloved poets, Salomėja Neris, had crumbled under the weight of the first Soviet occupation and began writing odes to Stalin, Matilda was true to her poetic vision. Even knowing that it was unlikely that her collection of poems would be published because she refused to change her artistic vision to suit the politics of the times, she continued writing in her own voice, never compromising her artistic or moral integrity.

As I read Matilda’s poems, I was struck by how quickly Matilda had to grow up between the autumn of 1938 and the spring of 1940. While her early poems, like “Good Morning!” reflect her happy childhood and home life and love of nature, the later poems became more reflective, darker, and indeed prophetic. The rhythms of Matilda’s poetry reflect the rhythms and cadences of

Lithuanian folk songs. This was the style of those times, but also she lived at a time when young people sang folk songs at gatherings and those rhythms were a part of the nation's life blood. Folk songs were the vernacular. In Matilda's diary there are several entries where she describes spending time singing folk songs with her friends: "We were in Vėbriai. We sang sad songs sitting beside the river. It felt good. (August 28, 1940)"²⁰

In an analysis of Matilda's poems published by the journal of Lithuania's State Jewish Museum, senior researcher Ilona Murauskaitė observed that the style of Matilda's poems is reminiscent of the poetry of her contemporaries Salomėja Neris, Bernardas Braždžionis, and Jonas Aleksandriškis (Jonas Aistis). The influence of other poets is typical for any developing poet, Murauskaitė concedes.²¹ In the prewar era the predominant topic of Lithuanian poetry was agrarian, a delight in the beauty of nature and of a simple life lived on the land. At that time most of the Lithuanian population lived in rural areas.

Yet I see that the influence of prewar Lithuanian lyric poetry is dominant mainly in Matilda's early poems. Then, at some point, she moves beyond her literary moment and finds her own voice, a voice that is both Lithuanian and Jewish.

Matilda's cultural identity was both Lithuanian and Jewish at the same time. This comes through in her poetry in a powerful way. I could understand this because I too balance two identities, one American, the other Lithuanian. Just as my two identities complement each other, so did Matilda's. As I translated her poems I put together a small glossary of symbols that appear in her work. The Sun (Saulė), for example, refers not just to the physical sun in the sky, but also to the Lithuanian Sun Goddess who in our folk tales rides across the sky in a golden chariot. The Sun Goddess is one of the most important deities in the Lithuanian pantheon of gods. She brings joy, rebirth, and happiness. The stone in Matilda's poetry is a Jewish symbol. The stone is the source of her strength as a Jew, and also represents her faith. The Three Hills in Lithuanian folklore refers to a land far away and unreachable, a land that can be dreamt of, but never reached. If one goes to the land beyond the Three Hills, one is gone forever. Dark eyes (brown eyes) refer to a Jew. Blue eyes refer to a Lithuanian.

By the Fall of 1940, Lithuania had been incorporated into the Soviet Union, which was an ally of Nazi Germany. However, the incongruity of their alliance was apparent to all, and fears of the war reaching Lithuania grew. Matilda's poems became more preoccupied with the impending doom that she sensed was coming to her country, and to the Jewish people. She longs to utter one single word that could bring all the world back to its senses.

²⁰ Vėbriai a small village near Panemunėlis.

²¹ Ilona Murauskaitė, "Širdy nepasakyta žodį aš nešu" ("I Carry and Unspoken Word in My Heart"), Lithuanian State Jewish Museum.

A Word

It is so hard for me. I would like so much to utter one word.
That unspoken word trembles within me.
I glance aside and I see processions, generations, gliding past.
And a blue longing and shivering suffering.

And joy, quivering in tiny rays of light,
And the pain of aeons of shattered hopes.
But I—am that unspoken word and shadow.
I carry that unspoken word in my heart.

It is so difficult for me. I would just like to utter that one word.
Just one word for the crowds and for the nations.
The processions would pause. Time would come to a halt.
All the generations would pause, and listen.

And my word would flutter above the mountains and the seas.
Above flowing rivers and rough waters.
And longing and trembling suffering would cease,
And the pain of aeons of shattered hopes.

Matilda's diary reveals that she was well aware of political events in her country and had firm opinions. In a diary entry dated August 28, 1940, she criticizes the Lithuanian poets who debased themselves by writing social realist verses honoring dictator Joseph Stalin.

Times are awful. The world has spilled out into the streets. People shove a red handkerchief into their pocket and shout. Salomėja Nėris, Liudas Giraš—I cannot fathom how normal people can write that way. There are banners and more banners everywhere. The biggest communist, if there were such a one who is a cultured person, would not be able to stand it. I often think about how people lack culture. It is sad. Could it even be possible for communism and its ideology to be expressed in poems that are not dominated by destruction, but by creativity, not by hate, but by love?

Unable to utter that single word, she sensed that death is drawing close. In a poem, written before the Soviet takeover, dated March 27, 1940, Matilda envisions Death as the Grim Reaper, who according to Lithuanian folklore takes on human form and comes to collect his due.

All the skiffs have floundered
And mine will sink as well.
Death is wading
Through troubled waters.

And Death bade me
Sing my final hymn.
And Death bade me
Dance my final dance.

And so I sing my hymn
To the seagulls and the waves.
The azure heavens listen,
And I sing to them too.

And the sea carries my skiff
Through a window,
Carries me away to sleep,
And will pull me under.

Tonight Death wanders
Through restless waters.
The sun has sunk already
And my skiff will too.

Matilda's sense of impending doom continued throughout 1940. On August 31st she wrote in her diary: "I went to a dance this evening. I danced and I danced, as though I wanted to dance away all the pain in my soul."

At the same time, however, throughout 1940, Matilda does not give in to the darkness she perceives around her. In a diary entry dated September 4, 1940, she reflects on how light can be found within darkness.

I read a novel called, *Kotryna*. I've noted the author's name a few times, but I keep forgetting it. I like these types of books—written by Nordic writers. Those books emanate a healthy freezing cold and inner strength. I respect a book that contains innate optimism. You can see that in writers who have a healthy soul. Their book may depict the greatest suffering and pain, and yet the reader will feel some sort of light and warmth that comes from the writer's inner soul and which reflects the writer's belief in a person's humanity. When a writer believes in humanity, and when within the writer a divine fire burns, even in the midst of the deepest suffering, the writer, perhaps without even realizing it, will lead the reader into the light, into an optimism that a subtle reader will sense.

Matilda foretells the destruction that war will bring to Lithuanians, the blue-eyed. This poem, which depicts three sisters leaving for foreign lands could be read as a premonition of Stalin's mass deportations of both Lithuanians and Jews to Siberia, and also the escape of almost a third of Lithuania's prewar population to the West at the end of the war.

Was it true, or was it a story?
I don't know...
I saw three sisters walking,
Three sisters I saw.

And they were carrying armfuls of flowers,
Much sunshine and flowers.

Their hair was blond and braided,
And their eyes were blue.

Then, someone carried off
The Sun and all the flowers.
The young sisters left
For foreign lands.

Then I saw their tears,
And their sorrow I saw...
Was it true, or was it a story?
I don't know.

In a poem dated October 19, 1938 Matilda describes a vision that the Sun, her symbol of hope, joy, and life, is carried off beyond the Three Hills by a Black Angel. Below the poem is a notation: "Written during the gnosiology lesson." I could only imagine that Matilda quickly penned this poem during a lecture, moved by intuition, or perhaps by the content of the lecture? I did not know what gnosiology is, so I looked it up: Gnosiology (Gnoseology) is the study of knowledge. It is a term of 18th Century aesthetics, meaning "the philosophy of knowledge." The term is used in regard to Eastern Christianity.

Beyond Three Hills
The Sun went down.
It was dusk
When we set out.

A Black Angel
Carried off the Sun.
Beyond Three Hills
The Sun has set.

Farewell, farewell—
We will never return—
We've already gone,
Beyond the Three Hills.

And we did not find there
Our beloved Sun.
We only found
The dark night—
Beyond Three Hills
The Sun has set.

Oh, farewell, farewell.
We will never return.
And flowers will bloom
In the early morning—
In the early morning,
We will never return.

In the last years of her life, Matilda was haunted with premonitions of her early death. This is revealed in her diary. On August 19, 1940 she writes about the birth of a baby in the community:

Fania has given birth to a son. Today we all wrote her a letter with our congratulations. We mailed her a package. I yearn to say that those things do not matter. What matters is the great joy that a mother feels. The opportunity to raise a person who will be a better person than she is.

But thoughts of birth soon lead her to thoughts of death:

I don't know why, but my future sometimes flashes before me in a way that is so sad and so painful that without even realizing it I crumple up in pain. I want to freeze. I feel helpless and lose the will to do any work or to think. I would like to return to Vilnius and resume my studies. That is the fate of restless souls like me: We wander from one place to another, hoping to find some peace.

In the same diary entry, Matilda observes that her entire family feels the underlying tension that is in the air, beneath the routines of everyday life.

I sometimes think, what does our home lack? How I suffer on those days when everyone walks around as though electrified and each one of us lets off sparks. But it passes easily. All we need to do is to lay a pretty white tablecloth down on the dinner table, set the table nicely, light the lamp—and then Papa, when he hears a Strauss waltz playing, begins conducting the music with his hands, and then invites one of us daughters to dance with him.

The theme of going away, beyond the Three Hills and never to return, emerges in another one of her last poems. Here snowflakes are alluded to as stars, which also may be read as Stars of David.

It Was Snowing

Silver stars were falling
In the blue night...
And my land drowned
In longing for happiness...

Happiness resides somewhere
Beyond Three Hills.
Tiny bells chime softly
And my heart is calmed...

And we set out on the white road,
We walked away.
We met a white visitor
From a faraway land.

Silver stars fell
Into the blue night.
A silver star I carry
In my restless heart.

Poetry speaks to us at our deepest level of humanity. Poetry speaks to our souls. To experience a poem, to live through a poem, one must access the poem through emotion. Matilda spoke the language of poetry.

One of the reasons, I believe, that many people in our times no longer connect with poetry is because in schools young people are taught to *analyze* a poem, not to *experience* a poem. A poem must be pried open and its “meaning” or “message” must be discovered and reported dutifully in a test. In this process the emotional power of a poem is stifled, replaced by impersonal rationality. It is no wonder that so many people struggle to understand why earlier generations became so attached to poetry.

To understand Matilda, to experience the full depth of her soul, it is vital to access her poems through the medium of emotion. Matilda was barely twenty years old when she was murdered. She’d only just begun to find her voice as a poet. And yet, being so young, she absorbed the horror of her times. She perceived the impending tragedy of the Holocaust and also sensed the fundamental tragedy of humanity that repeats itself age after age. But at the same time she reveled in the fragile beauty of provincial life. It was thus a time of shadow but also a time of light. It was a time of shattering contrasts—good and evil playing out on the world stage.

While translating Matilda's diary I came across a few poems penned between diary entries. This poem, written November 14, 1940, was composed eight months before her death. The handwriting appears as though she wrote the poem hastily, spontaneously, to express the emotions that were weighing on her.

Oh, how many have gathered
In my home of mourning.
I hold an infant in my arms,
And my infant—is Death.

They brought a silver sash
And armfuls of lilies, white.
And I cannot thank them,
And I cannot smile.

All around me are lilies, white, white,
And faces wearing bright smiles.
But my hands are so cold,
And there is a black ribbon tied in my hair.

Someone has trampled my love—
The whitest of the white blossoms.
And among the wilted lilies,
I see them, I speak to them.

Oh, how many have gathered
And not one will see love.
I hold an infant in my arms--
And my infant—is Death.

Matilda was ultimately a victim of evil, but she remains a survivor of good. She never gave in to evil, up to her very last moments on earth. She remained with her family and she retained her dignity. Matilda had the vision to perceive that even in humanity's darkest hour, love, beauty, goodness, and simple kindness can continue in the world.

Matilda symbolizes all that Lithuania lost forever with the annihilation of the nation's Jews and with the Soviet occupation and deportations. For many long decades her life was not spoken of – but neither was it entirely forgotten. Today, Lithuanians are beginning to rediscover this and other parts of their nation's past that were not openly discussed in the repressive periods of the Nazi and then Soviet regimes.

In 1998, seven years after Lithuania freed itself from the Soviet Union, a man from Panemunėlis named Pranas Paršonis wrote an open letter to the local newspaper, *Rokiškio Pragiedruliai*, demanding that the Olkin and Jaffe families' murder site be appropriately marked and remembered. Paršonis wrote the letter after he had read Violeta Aleknienė's article, "About the Tragic Death of the Pharmacist Nauman Olkin's Family." His letter begins by quoting a paragraph from the conclusion of the article:

If you ever travel the old road from Kavoliškis to Panemunėlis, stop and remove your hat. On the edge of the forest there is an area where the ground is sunken in. In this place, on a beautiful day in July, 1941, nine people were brutally tortured and murdered.²²

He writes, "I learned only very recently that in an out-of-the-way bog, in a grave grown over with berry bushes, lay the remains of nine people who once lived beside the Panemunėlis railroad station."²³ He explains that the resting site of the Olkin and Jaffe families was found by the ethnographer, Vladas Stašys, who confirmed his findings with eyewitness accounts from people who saw the murders and those who actually knew the perpetrators. He laments that people wanted to mark the site and put up a marker, but it was left unmarked, without even "a simple stone or fence around it."²⁴

Paršonis observes that witnesses recalled vividly that the killers were singing Lithuanian

²² Pranas Paršonis, "Tą rytą girdėjo dainuojant" ("That Morning They Heard Them Singing"), *Rokiškio Pragiedruliai*, March 6, 1998, Page 3/6.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

songs after they committed their heinous deed. He observes, “They sang in Lithuanian, although they were serving not Lithuania, but the occupiers. Apparently, their hunger for riches had rendered them completely inhuman.”²⁵

He is outraged that the Lithuanian government has done nothing to commemorate the site, although old people in that area openly will tell anyone who will listen the names of the families killed and the names of the killers. He writes, “They died only because they had brown eyes, a different religious faith, and lived just a little better than the rest.”²⁶

He explains that the Olkins suffered as much as everyone else under the first Soviet occupation. Their pharmacy was nationalized by the Soviets. He writes that Olkin was a good man, an educated man who helped the poor by giving them free medicine. Mauša Jaffe also lived a quiet life with his family and stayed away from politics.²⁷

And then comes a chilling revelation: The writer of the letter says that people knew the names of at least three of the killers — one who had died years before and two others who had escaped to the West. Local people had even composed a satirical ballad about one of the killers. He realizes that one of the killers had actually been his neighbor! But he had no idea at the time that this neighbor had been one of the murderers of the Olkin and Jaffe families. “Even today,” Paršonis writes, “I cannot fathom how a man who murdered small children could live among his neighbors and joke and chat with everyone.”²⁸

Paršonis concludes with an angry and righteous condemnation: “It is tragic that funds can be allocated for all sorts of questionable events, for special masses and for bombastic holidays, and yet no one can come up with the funding to commemorate forever these innocent victims.”²⁹

After I read this letter, I reached out to Lithuanian historian Arvydas Anušauskas and asked him why all killing sites were not marked and how did the killers manage to continue to live in their communities, and whether any serious scholarship was done by Soviet-era historians on the Holocaust in Lithuania.

Anušauskas wrote back: “During the Soviet period not all sites where Jews were executed were marked, but where they were, they were marked as sites where “Soviet citizens were killed.” They were never specifically identified as places where Jews were killed. Over 8,000 people were tried for collaborating with the Nazis. Among them some were tried for killing Jews. The Nazi occupation was studied by Soviet historians within the context of the ‘Great Patriotic War,’

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

characterizing those Lithuanians who sought independence as collaborators with the Nazis. There was never any mention about anti-Nazi groups that were not pro-communist.”³⁰

And still the questions remain.

The more I learn about Matilda’s story, the more I find questions rather than answers. Why did the farmer watch the killings and not do anything to stop the perpetrators? Why didn’t the people in the village overpower the collaborators and the Germans? Why didn’t they rise up against them to save the Jewish families?

I called the playwright, Neringa Danienė, in Lithuania to ask her these questions.

“They *knew* the names of at least three of the killers,” I say. “Why didn’t people do anything about it?”

“Three of the killers were known by name, yes,” Neringa says, “but there was a large crowd at the killing. Two men could not have stopped them. It was war, Laima.”

That stings deeply. It was war.

Nineteen years after Paršonis wrote his letter, local Lithuanians, inspired by Neringa’s play, decided they would wait no longer for the government to do something about the unmarked killing site. They organized for a memorial to be erected at the Olkin and Jaffe burial site. They wanted the memorial to appropriately reflect the Olkin and Jaffe’s Jewish faith. The solution was to erect a large stone with the names of the murdered families engraved in Lithuanian and in Hebrew. The memorial site was finally commemorated on September 8, 2017, with a large unveiling ceremony attended by crowds of local people and visitors from abroad.

“It started as our theater’s project,” Neringa said. “We wanted to commemorate the killing site. But then two local regional governments got involved—Rokiškis and Panemunėlis. A local businessman donated the stone. Then another donated the gravel. Then other people brought more stones. People donated their time to clear the site, cut down trees, and prepare the ground. Volunteers kept coming and coming. I lost count of how many. When I thanked the man who donated the stone, he said, ‘Matilda was a child of our land. They were all people of our land.’”

The relentless cold autumn rain did not let up the entire time I was in Panemunėlis. We stood in the cold rain with the dark heavy Lithuanian sky overhead and gazed at the memorial, all that was left of the silenced muse’s short life. All that was left of two Jewish families who had lived, loved, and laughed in this land. May they rest in their eternal sleep.

It was silent in the field. I remembered how precious silence was to Matilda. In one of her last diary entries, not long before her death, she described a silent moment spent with the young man with whom she was in love:

I remember one moment. We sat together and we were silent. And then in a clear

³⁰ Personal email, April 21, 2018.

and quiet voice he said: “Patinka.” (Do you like this). Oh, there is nothing more beautiful than a word spoken into silence. And in that one word there is both a question and a promise, and hope, and love, and a quiet fatherly blessing.

Matilda’s short life and her poems stand as a testament that the fragile beauty of the written word gives us strength even in humanity’s darkest hour.

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