



MAY 8, 2018

THE SILENCED MUSE: THE LIFE OF A MURDERED JEWISH LITHUANIAN POET

by Laima Vincė

The History

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 “the white armbanders,” 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. In that wagon sat the Jaffe and Olkin families—two Jewish families who lived and operated small businesses near the train station in the village of Panemunėlis. Noah Olkin [1] 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 Matelionis. On Sunday afternoons after mass, Father Matelionis and Noah Olkin would drink tea together in the rectory.

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.

Lithuania had remained at peace when German and Russian armies over-ran neighboring Poland in September 1939. In June 1940, the Soviets occupied Lithuania and soon after began to transform the country into a Soviet state. In the summer of 1941, within weeks after the Soviets engaged in mass deportations of Lithuanian intellectuals, military officers, educators, and more prosperous farmers and merchants to Siberia, the Nazis occupied Lithuania and took control of its government. By July of 1941 the Nazis had made it to Panemunėlis.

The Olkin and Jaffe families had been arrested and held in a stable near the Panemunėlis church. The other Jewish families of Panemunėlis were held at the local train station.[5] The Olkins and Jaffes were separated from the others because it was believed that they were more prosperous and might have more valuables with them. [6] The Jews of Panemunėlis were shot together with the Jews from the Rokiškis ghetto on August 15 – 16.

The Olkin's eldest son, Ilya, was spared, but only for a short time. He had been studying to be a pharmacist at Vilnius University. 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. [7]

Who Was Matilda?

In that wagon also sat the Olkins' nineteen-year-old daughter Matilda, who had been away in Vilnius (Vilna) studying Russian and French literature, but had come home for the summer holidays. 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 almost half a century later, there is a poem that foretold this awful day.

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—

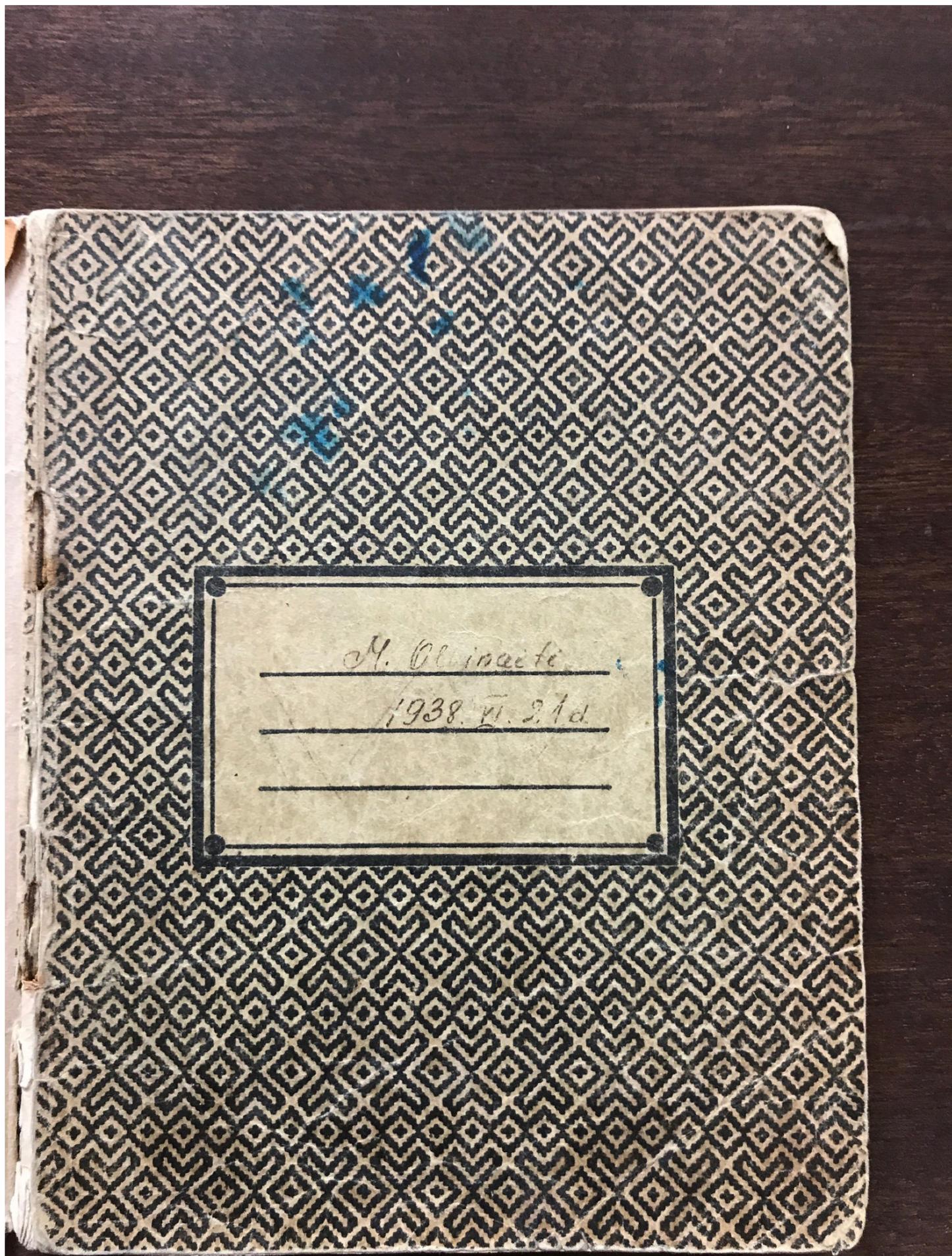
And the stone will cry, the stone will cry.

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.



Matilda's notebook of poems

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 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. [16]

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. [17]

Reclaiming History

After Lithuania regained its independence, a historian named Violeta Aleknienė gathered oral histories of the killings of the Jewish families of Panemunėlis. Violeta grew up hearing stories of the Olkin and Jaffe families's murders.

“My parents were sensitive, tolerant, peaceful people,” Violeta said. “They would talk about the Olkins, but especially my mother, who was a school teacher in the village. She graduated high school in 1948, so the Olkin and Jaffe murders were still fresh in everyone's minds and people talked about them in the village. When my mother was growing up, every day going to school and coming home she and the other children had to pass by the field where the Olkin and Jaffe families were murdered. She remembers that the girls were afraid and would run past that place, but the boys would remove their hats, hold them to their hearts, and walk past solemnly.” [30]

Violeta 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 farmhouse. 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. [2]

That day no one dared approach the killing site. The next day Šarkauskas and Vaitkevičius went over to take a look. Their bodies were covered with a mound of dirt. Šarkauskas pushed in his rake handle and found the bodies were covered with only a few centimeters of earth. The farmers covered the bodies with more dirt and branches, forming a burial mound, so that wild animals could not get to them.[3]

A year earlier, in March, 1940, the 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 will 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.

The Killers

What crime had the Olkin and Jaffe families committed to meet such an end? They were Jewish. That was all. Neither Noah Olkin nor Mauša [4] Jaffe had been political. Neither had ever committed a crime. Neither had joined the Communist Party.

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. 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.

Perhaps they killed because they were jealous of their neighbors? They hated the Jews because they perceived that they had a little more than they did—a little more wealth, a little more education. Finally, they killed because they had been indoctrinated by the hateful ideologies of their times.

According to witnesses, the Olkins and Jaffes were killed because the white armbanders had been told that they could keep whatever gold and wealth the family had stashed away. [31] At the same time, according to researchers the 23,000 Lithuanians who have been identified as collaborating with the Nazis only made up one percent of Lithuania's population at the time. [32]

Violeta Aleknienė explained that the white armbanders who murdered the Olkins and Jaffes were brought in from other villages and did not know the local people

of Panemunėlis. The Germans took over governance of towns and cities all over Lithuania and worked with local collaborators, who believed the Nazi propaganda that Lithuania's Jews were responsible for the Soviet deportations of 1941. They did most of the shooting. In order for this system to work, it was necessary that collaborators would be brought in from other regions so that they would not have local ties with the people they were ordered to kill. Violeta Aleknienė cited eyewitness accounts stating that killers were given 50 to 200 grams of vodka before they conducted executions.

“Why should the Germans get their hands dirty?” Violeta said. “Do you think it's pleasant to shoot at people?” [33]

Four of the killers were later identified, but only one was arrested by the Soviets. When the Nazis retreated, two of the others escaped to Germany and one escaped to America.[34]

Lithuanian historian Onutė Mackevičienė said that in her opinion these people killed because it gave them power over others.

“They came from the lowest social class of Lithuanian society at the time,” Onutė said, “they were otherwise powerless.” [35]

The Rescuers

Violeta learned that attempts were made to save Matilda, and to save her father, and family. 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 chose their own deaths over the deaths of others.

Matilda 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, in full knowledge that love and beauty transcends all.

Genovaitė Šukytė Grigienė was twelve years old when the Olkins were arrested. She was friends with Grunia Olkin, Matilda's younger sister. I spoke with Genovaitė at her home in Vilnius. She recalled those days when the Olkins and Jaffes were held in the stable.

“My mother thought about how there was nowhere for the families to cook their own food, so every day she prepared soup and a lunch for the Olkins and others. She would load all the food into the wagon, hitch up the horses, and send me three kilometers down the road to the stable where the families were imprisoned. Mr. Olkin would divide the food with the families. After they ate, Grunia and I would leave the stable to go out to play or to wander around the farmlands. There was only one guard at the stable. He was not from Panemunėlis and we did not know who he was. But he let me and Grunia pass, hardly even looking at us. They all could have run away, but no one thought they were in any danger, so they stayed. One day I offered to Grunia to come home with me and stay with us,

but Grunia refused, saying her mother would be worried. The last day Grunia and I went out walking together, she said to me that she heard the other women saying that they were going to shoot them. I wrapped my arm around Grunia and said, ‘Who would kill innocent children?’ And then Grunia said, ‘I also don’t think they would shoot us.’ When I went home that evening I told my father, who had been a member of the Lithuanian parliament, what Grunia had said. And my father reassured me, ‘They are innocent people. No one has the right to shoot them.’

“Not long after that, as my mother was preparing the Olkins’ lunch, a neighbor woman came and told her, ‘They’re gone. There is no one in the stable. You don’t need to make their lunch anymore.’ We could not believe it. Because only a month had gone by since the deportations to Siberia, we thought they’d been deported.”

According to Genovaitė, a few days before they were killed, Matilda was sent by the white arbanders to wash the floor in the train station. Matilda’s classmate, Juozas Vaičionis, who was studying to become a priest, recalls how he tried to rescue Matilda. Vaičionis snuck in and found her alone.

“I wanted to save Matilda Olkin. She had to live. She was such a gifted poet. When the white arbanders 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?” [8]

Father Juozapas Matelionis, the priest at the Panemunėlis Church, tried to save Noah Olkin. Olkin had donated an oak confessional to the church. [9] Father Matelionis was also a frequent guest in the Olkins’ home. When the collaborators and the Nazis began arresting Jews in Panemunėlis, Father Matelionis hid Olkin

in the rectory. 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. [10]

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 and theater 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.

Recovering Matilda's Diary and Poems

After the war two orphan girls met at the Salomėja Neris Gymnasium, Irena Veisaitė and Genovaitė Šukytė. They became friends and are close to this day, over seventy years later.

They both survived. Matilda died. But Matilda connects them still.

Irena's family has been in Lithuania 600 years. For more than 600 years before World War II Lithuania was much more tolerant towards its Jewish minority than other neighboring countries. While Western Europe fought endless wars over religious differences, from the era of the Grand Dukes Gediminas and Vytautas until the 20th century, Lithuania was a living example of a peaceful multicultural society. Even between the two world wars, when there were incidents of anti-

semitism, tolerance towards Jews was much better in Lithuania than in surrounding East European countries and Russia. [36]

Irena Veisaitė is a Holocaust survivor, literary critic, theater critic, and Professor of Literature for half a century. At the age of 13, Irena escaped the Kaunas (Kovno) ghetto with the help of Catholic friends, who hid her until the end of the Nazi occupation. She lived with the family of Lithuanian Army Officer Kazys Ladiga, who was murdered by the Soviets in 1940. She lived with the family until they were deported by the Soviets to Siberia after the war. Irena has dedicated her life to teaching a lesson of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation to Lithuanians and Jews.

“All rescuers are saints,” Irena said. “They risk everything to save a stranger.” [37] She attributes her life philosophy to the kindness of the people who saved her and helped shape her into the person she is today.

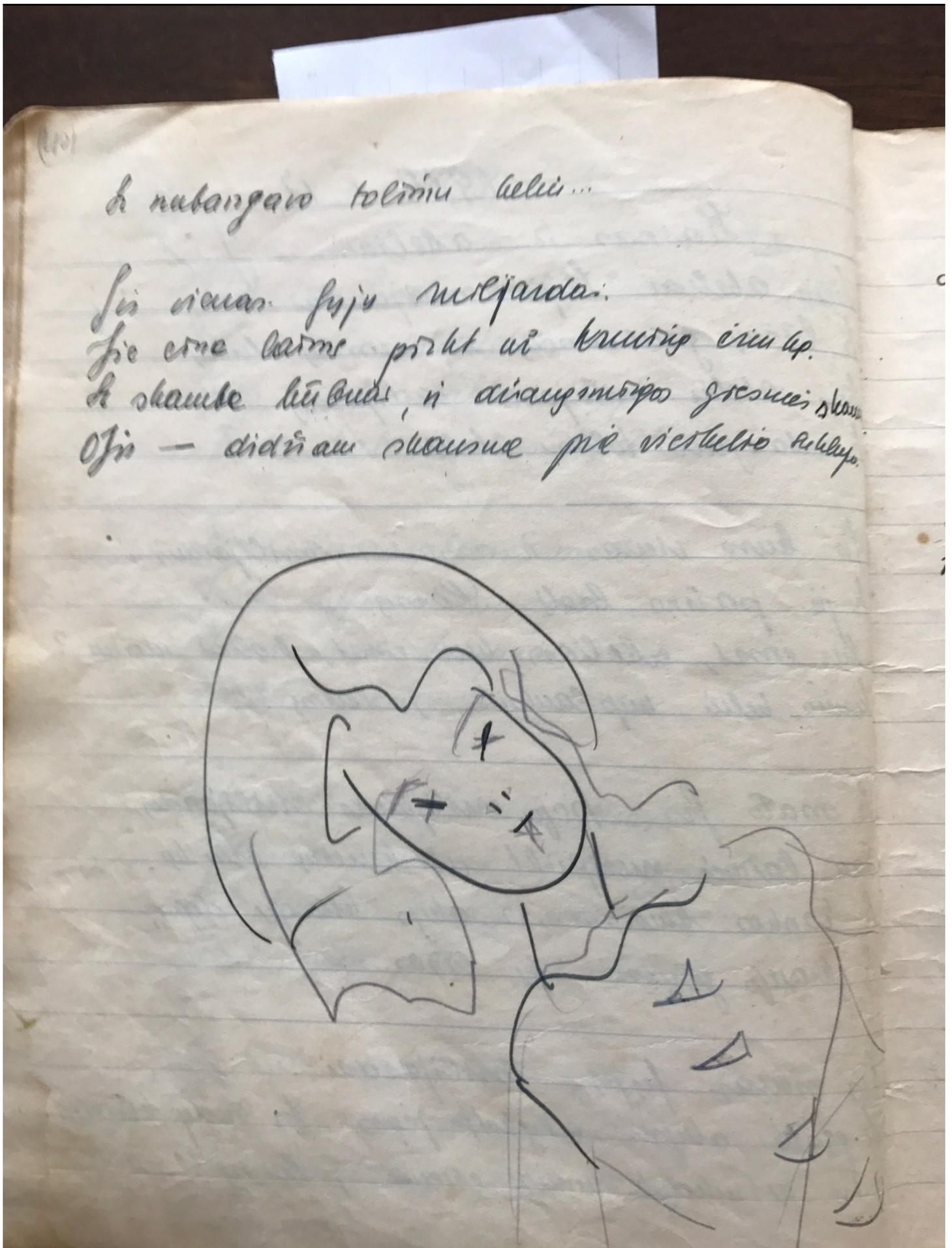


Dr. Irena Veisaitė

In her oral history *Irena Veisaitė: Life Should be Beautiful*, Irena warns us: “When talking about the first Soviet occupation it is vital to understand that at the time the existential situations of ethnic Lithuanians and ethnic Jews were very different. For Lithuanians the beginning of the war and the German occupation looked like liberation from the ‘red plague,’ from the horror of the deportations. For Jews, although they were deported to Siberia in cattle cars together with ethnic Lithuanians, a Nazi occupation meant a certain death. Meanwhile, the Soviets, and even deportation, appeared to Jews like a small chance of survival. Once we understand that we can stop blaming each other. ... Therefore, let’s not judge a different epoch based on the knowledge we have in our present age, our contemporary access to information, our morals, and our ideas.” [38]

No one quite knows the circumstances, but before the Olkin family was killed Noah Olkin managed to pass his daughter's diary and notebook of poems to Father Matelionis. The priest hid the diary in a secret compartment inside the church's Great Altar. Three years later, the Soviets drove the Germans out of Lithuania and in 1950 Father Matelionis was deported to Siberia as part of a mass deportation of the clergy and Lithuanians who had rescued Jews from the Nazis. The diary and the notebook of poems remained hidden and unknown for many years. During the Soviet occupation, in the eighties, Alfredas Andrijauskas, organist at the Panemunėlis church, recovered the notebook of poems and brought them for safe keeping to Irena Veisaitė, who immediately recognized the literary value of the poems. The diary was brought to her a few years later by Soviet General Matulionis, who was from Panemunėlis.

Irena recalled: "This man dressed as a villager showed up at my door. His hands were work worn and his clothing was ragged. But I saw in him great intellect and a purity of spirit that was rare in those days. He told me he was the organist at the Panemunėlis Church. He told me the story of how the priest had saved the handwritten poetry collection and diary by hiding them inside the altar. When Father Matelionis was arrested by the Soviets and exiled to Siberia the diary was in danger of being lost. But through a miracle the notebooks survived. I felt that Matilda's spirit had come back and was asking me to share her poems with the world. Matilda was only a few years older than me. I had survived the Holocaust. She had not." [39]



A page from Matilda's notebook

Irena kept the diary and poems safe over thirty years. This past summer, her health ailing, she donated them to the Institute for Lithuanian Literature and Folk Culture.

“When I first read Matilda’s poems,” Irena said, “I was crying. I kept thinking, ‘Why is she dead and I am alive?’ I felt guilty. This is a feeling of people who have survived the Holocaust. Everyone is dead, but you are alive.”[40]

Irena managed to have a few of the poems published in the Soviet Lithuanian literary journal, *Pergalė*, in 1989, once freedom of the press was restored. During the Soviet era, she explained, the Holocaust in Lithuania was recharacterized as the killing of “Soviet citizens.” It was not possible at the time to publish Matilda as a Jewish poet. Also, her poetry would have been considered “anti-Soviet.”[41]

“Matilda’s poetry doesn’t tell us anything about the Holocaust,” Irena said. “She wrote about the years before the war. She is so joyful and optimistic. She writes about the sun, about nature. She was full of love for Lithuania. She felt very much that she was a Lithuanian. It was with the poem ‘My People’ that she starts to realize that she is also Jewish.” [42]

In October 2017, 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. I took photos of the poems with my phone and at home typed my translations onto my laptop while referring to photos of the handwritten diary on my phone.

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 that day, 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.

Matilda’s Diary

Matilda kept her diary in 1940 and 1941. Matilda’s 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 love, I feel as though I will never see him again.” Often on the pages of her diary, Matilda ponders the meaning of life:

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 our 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.

September 11, 1940

Most of Matilda's diary is dedicated to her love for a young man, whom she refers to as "Him." It is not clear whether Matilda's beloved was Lithuanian or Jewish, but the diary itself is a clue. It is a beautiful, expensive, hand-tooled leather book decorated with Lithuanian folk symbols. At the same time, Matilda writes about a young man with the surname, Sheras. He was the son of a Jewish pharmacist in Rokiškis. Sheras was part of Matilda's Jewish community and was viewed by her parents as a potential husband. However, according to Matilda's childhood friend, Liucija, "Sheras was not very attractive to Matilda, but she was kind to him just to be polite." [43]

She asks herself: should she break up with Him or not? Does she really love Him? Does He love her? She writes about her family, their moments of warmth, their squabbles. But she also writes about how society was changing around her under the Soviet occupation.

Noah 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.

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.

Despite the Soviet occupation, 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...”

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 a 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.

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 Neris, Liudas Giras—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?

Matilda writes about how she disliked the Soviet regime because she felt they were common and because they tried to control artists. Yet her brother, Ilya, joined the Communist Youth, quite possibly out of idealism. Matilda wrote in her diary with irony: "We received a letter from Ilya. It was a patriotic letter about our Soviet homeland. Ilya is one of those enlightened people who believes in

communism.” She recounts how she had to learn how to march in Soviet parades and help register Soviet military families to vote.

Yesterday I spent the day writing down the names of families of the Red Army for the elections. All day long I suffered their stench and filthy smells. The women are ugly and have vulgar enormous chests. All the women, babies, grandmothers, when you ask them their nationality, answer the same—we are Slavs. When I returned to my room, where it was clean and bright, I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I would like to have a loving husband and a dear baby of my own.

November 20, 1940

The wish to lead an ordinary life becomes a pervasive theme in Matilda’s diary.

Yes—if only I had a baby to care for I would calm down. And not because I would beat down all my passion, but because I would have someone to give all my fire, all my love, all my life. I would like a healthy, beautiful baby, one with brown eyes, or blue eyes, like His... A healthy, beautiful baby. That would be my compensation for my difficult, heavy days, for all my days of longing, all my restless nights.

November 20, 1940

Matilda’s sense of impending doom continues throughout the diary. On August 31, 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, 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.

In the last years of her life, Matilda was haunted with premonitions of her early death. On August 19, 1940 in her diary 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.

Until her arrest in 1941, Matilda lived a free life, attending dances, going to the opera to listen to Kipras Petrauskas, reading her poems at literary evenings, and studying with Lithuania's greatest poets and intellectuals at Vilnius University. Among the professors whose lectures she attended was the poet and novelist Vincas Mykolaitis Putinas and the literary scholar Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius. Her grade book survives, showing that Matilda was a top student. In a diary entry Matilda describes how once, in a playful mood, she played a prank on Professor Krėvė-Mickevičius by hiding in an alcove in the university hallway and smiling at him as he strolled past. The only instance of discrimination that Matilda notes in her diary is when two Jewish friends chided her for singing Yiddish songs, telling her that Yiddish was an outdated language, insulting her because Yiddish was her first language. [44]

I was insulted when Galia and Fima, whose real names are Gita and Chaim, began making fun of the Yiddish language. Lord! How low. How stupid. After that we all enthusiastically sang Yiddish songs together!

February 2, 1941

The last entry in Matilda's diary is in February, 1941. There are plenty of blank pages left, so it is not clear why Matilda stopped writing at this time. Eight months before her death, Matilda wrote a poem that describes her own funeral. Her handwriting appears as though she wrote the poem hastily, spontaneously,

expressing the emotions that were weighing on her. Was this a premonition? Or was she frightened by the war that was drawing closer and closer to Lithuania?

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,

A black ribbon is 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.



Photo of diary

The Poems

Matilda's notebook of poems is 96 pages long. It contains 34 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. [18] On the cover of the notebook, she wrote: "M. Olkinaitė, 1938. VI. 21." Olkinaitė is the Lithuanian version of her surname.

Matilda's early poems reveal 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!”

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)” [19]

Matilda had to grow up quickly 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.

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.[20] 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, 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.

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.

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.

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 foundered

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.

(24)

1938. X. 19 d.

Per Geoseologijos pamokę.
#

Už trijų kalnų

Saulė leidosi ...

Vėly vakarą

Mės išėjo už.

Juodas angelas

Saulės nusiė -

Už trijų kalnų

Saulė leidosi.

Oš, sudie, sudie

Nebegysime -

Jau atėjome

Už trijų kalnų -

K neradom tui

Saulės mylimos

O atvadam tui

Vamų vakarą -

Už trijų kalnų

A poem from the original notebook

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.

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. 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 emotion. Matilda was barely nineteen-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.

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. Since

independence 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.

Childhood Remembrances

I spent an afternoon with 96-year-old Liucija Neniškytė-Vizgirdienė in her cozy bedroom in her son's house in the Vilnius neighborhood of Žvėrynas. Liucija's grandparents lived across the yard from the Olkins and operated a mill. Liucija became the best friend of Mika and Matilda and would spend summers with the family. She would also return for the Christmas and Easter holidays. All of the Olkin children would stand and wait on the platform to greet Liucija when she arrived by train.

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 her grandmother would order a bolt of fabric and sew identical dresses for the three Olkin girls and Liucija.[45]

On Saturdays 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 Matelionis, the teachers Jonas Siminonis and Stasė Valavičiūtė, the station master Prokapavičius, and others.[46]

*Mika (Mindočka) Olkinaitė. The younger sister
of Matilda. Taken in Kėdainiai, 1935*

Liucija told us about how Matilda's father encouraged creativity and self-expression in his



children. “I’m not sure whether he was serious or half-joking,” Liucija recalled, “but Olkin would say to Matilda, ‘I want to read a new poem written by you every Sabbath.’ Matilda would sit up in the attic and compose her poems. Mika came up with a plan. ‘Let’s be Matilda’s Muses,’ she said. We would dress up in long dresses and wrap ourselves in shawls and go up into the attic and twirl around Matilda, calling out, ‘We are your Muses! Your Muses! We’re here to inspire your poetry!’ I remember that so well!”

Matilda and Mika, Liucija remembers, were creative, brilliant, expressive, vocal. Liucija said that Mr. Olkin would introduce games to teach his children creativity and critical thinking. She remembers how there were a few country roads surrounding their town that had not been named. Olkin sent the girls out to take note of the landscape surrounding those roads and to give them names. When Matilda started studying in the Gymnasium, she decided that they were too old to play children’s games. She suggested they start a newspaper. And they did. Every Sabbath the guests could read the handwritten newspaper for the price of twenty cents. The girls would take their earnings to the local shop to buy *karvutės*, a caramel candy.[47]

Liucija pulled out a small leather-bound album from the 1930s. Such books are called *Atmintys* (recollections or memory books) in Lithuanian. Before the war most people kept diaries in which they recorded their private thoughts and reflections on life, but they also had a second book, a book that was passed around to friends in which they wrote poems, drew pictures, expressed their love for the owner of the book. Liucija showed us artwork by Ilya, by Mika, and then

read us an amusing rhyming poem written by Matilda when she was 14. The poem describes hayrides and other country entertainment experienced together with Liucija on her summer holiday. When she finished reading, Liucija pressed the book to her chest and said: “Matilda and Mika were my muses. They were poets. They were incredibly kind and gentle girls. Never once did we argue. Never once did an unkind word pass their lips. When I lost the Olkins, I lost everything.” [48]

Liucija recalled that the last time she saw Matilda alive she went to visit her in the room she rented across the street from the synagogue on Pylimas Street in Vilnius. Matilda told Liucija that she had dedicated a poem to her and that she should look for it in a certain magazine. [49] Liucija recited the poem to us from memory, which was not included in her notebook of poems because Matilda composed it later, possibly in 1941.

Your tiny room

Was white, filled with sunlight.

And your shutters were white too.

You dried mint on your windowsill.

Every spring you picked violets

And kept them in water on your table.

And every night you wound

Your ancient clock.

Tell me, why, that night,

The wind blew out your candle?

Who rapped on your window,

Paused a moment, then left?

It was your fate calling, knocking

Quietly on your white shutters.

It stopped your old clock.

It snuffed out your white candle.

Your tiny room

Was white and sunny.

But the world is so wide.

Where will you go, my beloved?

Liucija told us that Matilda showed her a pair of beautiful, expensive, Czech shoes. She smiled and said, “My love gave me these.” Liucija asked if Sheras gave her the shoes. “Oh no, my true love,” Matilda answered mysteriously. Liucija remembers Matilda was very happy that day. She was content with her life. That is how she likes to remember her.[50] A few weeks later, the Nazis occupied Lithuania and Matilda’s young life of love and poetry was cut short.

In the summer of 1941, Liucija received a note smuggled out of the stable where the Olkins were imprisoned. It was a note from her best friend, Mika Olkin. The note read: “I fear we will never see each other again.” [51]

Bringing Matilda Back to Life on the Stage

In 2016, playwright and director of the Rokiškis Theater, Neringa Danienė, 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.”

The Silenced Muses is a documentary play narrated through Matilda’s poems, diaries, and the oral histories and research recorded by Violeta Aleknienė.

“I wrote the play in the summer of 2016,” Neringa recalled. “I spent the summer on a lake with my children. My children swam in the lake while I lay on the grass and read Matilda’s poems and diary over and over again and cried. I spent the summer crying and writing.” [52]



The Olkinas family as depicted by the actors in the play The Silenced Muses

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 premiered on November 18, 2016 at the community center in Panemunėlis.

“It was an incredibly emotional evening,” Neringa recalled. “The people of Panemunėlis were very moved because we were acting out a story that had taken place right there. After the play this ancient woman introduced herself to me. She told me she had been the Olkins' nanny and remembers pushing Matilda around in her baby carriage.” [53]

By bringing the story of Matilda and her family back to the Olkin's home town Neringa blurred the boundaries between art and reality.

What Neringa did with *The Silenced Muses* was more than a performance. The play was an important emotional landmark for Lithuanians. The play became a way of healing and remembering the people they had lost. Through the play the people of the Rokiškis region were forging a link back to the past, before the terror of World War II, when Jews and Lithuanians lived in one community together.

“That performance in Panemunėlis was very hard,” Neringa remembered. “The entire audience was crying. We were crying. We all felt as though what was happening in the play was happening in the here and now. It was like poking an

open wound. We performed *The Silenced Muses* twenty times and every time it was the same thing. We lived the story all over again. I always come out and say a few words at the end of the performance. Every time I would be crying and trying to compose myself before speaking with the audience.” [54]

On a cold rainy October day in 2017 I saw *The Silenced Muses* performed in Rokiškis. I laughed, I cried, I mourned together with the audience.

I asked Neringa what she'd wanted to find out when she wrote the play.

“We were looking for an answer as to why so many Jews were killed in Lithuania.”

“Did you find an answer?” I asked.

“Yes, we did. And the Holocaust Museum confirmed it. It was because of the political situation of the times. The Jews were forced to chose between the Germans and the Russians. They chose the Russians. To the Jews the Germans meant death. The first year of the Russian occupation had been very hard on people in Lithuania. They lost everything—food, clothing, a place to live. Then there were the massive deportations to Siberia. The Germans twisted everything to make it seem as though the Jews of Lithuania were to blame for all that.” [55]

A Totem in Memory of Matilda's Childhood

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 the Olkin children's childhood. A Star of David is carved at the top of the totem. The totem incorporates symbols from Matilda's poetry, her favorite flower, the lily, 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.

When I visited Panemunėlis in October 2017, Violeta Aleknienė brought my friend Saulė and me to see the totem. 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 visit 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. The part of the house that was the original rectory where Father Matelionis had hid Noah Olkin is now Vidmantas’s workshop, thus connecting history in a visceral way.

Inside a masonry stove provided a warm glow of heat, relief from the damp and cold, and the never-ending Autumn 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.

“I read Matilda’s poems,” Vidmantas said, “and I saw the play four times. Every time I saw the play it was as emotional for me as it was the first time. I wanted to create a monument to the beautiful childhood Matilda had. I wanted this child to be remembered.” [56]

Once Vidmantas had conceived of his idea for the sculpture, a design that would incorporate a book and Matilda’s beloved lilies, it took him four days to carve the totem.



Sculptor Vidmantas Zakarka installs the memorial he created to Matilda

A Memorial to the Olkin and Jaffe Families

In an interview after the premiere with the online magazine *Tema*, Neringa Daniėnė 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.”[11]

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.

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.” [22] 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.” [23]

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.” [25]

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.” [27]

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 Lithuanian.

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,’ 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.” [29]

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 Olkins and Jaffes’ Jewish faith. The solution was to erect a large stone with the names of the murdered families engraved in Lithuanian and in Hebrew.

“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 memorial site was finally commemorated on September 8, 2017, with a large unveiling ceremony attended by crowds of local people and visitors from abroad.



Volunteers from the Rokiškis Theater and the local community installing the stone to remember the Olkin and Jaffe families

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 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 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.



The first on the left is Matilda Olkintaitė, behind her sits Liucija Neniškytė, the third sitting is Mika Olkinaitė. Panemunėlis Street, Rokiškis region, 1936

Works Cited

Aleknienė, Violeta. “Apie tragišką vaistininko Naumano Olkino šeimos likimą” (“About the Tragic Fate of the Pharmacist Olkin’s Family”). Monografija (Lietuvos Valsčiai) *Panemunėlis II*. 2011. Pages 1493-1501.

Murauskaitė, Ilona. “Širdy nepasakyta žodį aš nešu” (“I carry an unspoken word in my heart”). *Viltis*, 1994. Pages 132-133

Paršonis, Pranas. “Tą Rytą Girdėjo Dainuojant” (“That Morning They Heard Them Singing”). *Rokiškio Pragiedruliai*. March 6, 1998. Pages 3/6.

Veisaitė, Irena. “Keliai į Saulę” (“The Roads to the Sun”). *Krantai*. Page 88.

The diaries and notebook of poems by Matilda Olkin (Matilda Olkinaitė), 1938-1940.

Interviews

Interviews with Rokiškis Theatre actors, October 7, 2017.

Interview with Vidmantas Zakarka, Panemunėlis, Lithuania, October 8, 2017.

Interview with Liucija Neniškytė Vizgirdienė, Vilnius, Lithuania, June 25, 2018.

Interview with Irena Veisaitė, Vilnius, Lithuania, July 10, 2018.

Interview with Irena Veisaitė, Vilnius, Lithuania, July 12, 2018.

Interview with Genovaitė Šukytė Grigienė, Vilnius, Lithuania, July 12, 2018.

Interview with Neringa Danienė, Rokiškis Museum, Lithuania, July 13, 2018.

Interview with Violeta Aleknienė, Rokiškis Museum, July 13, 2018.

Interview with historian Onutė Mackevičienė, Director of the Rokiškis Museum, Rokiškis,

Lithuania, July 15, 2018.

[1] Czarist-era records refer to him as No'ach Olkin and inter-war Lithuanian records give his Lithuanized name as Noachas Olkinas. In his community he was known as Naumanas.

[2] 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.

[3] Aleknienė, *id.*, at 1500.

[4] One inter-war Lithuanian record gives his name as Elija.

[5] This is a remote location about 10 kilometers north-northeast of Rokiškis.

[6] Aleknienė, at 1500.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Juozas Vaičionis, *Memoirs*. Vilnius, 2008, p. 87.

[9] *Ibid.*

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

[11] Interview with Neringa Daniene, *Tema*, November, 2016.

[12] Aleknienė, at 1494.

[13] *Id.*, at 1495.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Id.*, at 1497.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] 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.

[19] Vėbriai, a small village near Panemunėlis.

[20] Ilona Murauskaitė, “Širdy nepasakyta žodį aš nešu” (“I Carry and Unspoken Word in My Heart”), Lithuanian State Jewish Museum.

[21] Pranas Paršonis, “Tą rytą girdėjo dainuojant” (“That Morning They Heard Them Singing”), *Rokiškio Pragiedruliai*, March 6, 1998, Page 3/6.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Personal email, April 21, 2018.

[30] Interview with Violeta Aleknienė, Rokiškis Museum, Lithuania, July 13, 2018.

[31] Interview with Liucija Neniškytė Vizgirdienė, June 25, 2018.

[32] Interview with Dovid Katz. “Lietuvos Holokaustas buvo neįtikėtinai baisus” (Lithuania’s Holocaust was especially horrific). Lietuvos Žydų (Litvakų) Bendruomenė (Lithuania’s Jewish (Litvak) Community). December 12, 2010.

[33] Interview with Violeta Aleknienė, Rokiškis Museum, July 13, 2018.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Interview with historian Onutė Mackevičienė, Director of the Rokiškis Museum, Rokiškis, Lithuania, July 15, 2018.

[36] Interview with Dovid Katz. “Lietuvos Holokaustas buvo neįtikėtinai baisus” (Lithuania’s Holocaust was especially horrific). Lietuvos Žydų (Litvakų) Bendruomenė (Lithuania’s Jewish (Litvak) Community). December 12, 2010.

[37] Interview with Dr. Irena Veisaitė, Vilnius, Lithuania, July 12, 2018.

[38] Švedas, Aurimas. *Irena Veisaitė: Gyvenimas turėtų būti skaidrus* (Irena Veisaitė: Life Should be Beautiful). Vilnius: Aukso Žuvis. 2016. Pages 54 – 55.

[39] Interview with Irena Veisaitė, Vilnius, Lithuania, July 10, 2018.

[40] Interview with Dr. Irena Veisaitė, Vilnius, Lithuania, July 12, 2018.

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] Interview with Liucija Neniškytė-Vizgirdienė, June 25, 2018.

[44] At the time there was a movement to replace Yiddish with Hebrew among Lithuanian Jews.

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Interview with Liucija Neniškytė-Vizgirdienė, June 25, 2018.

[48] Interview with Liucija Neniškytė-Vizgirdienė, June 25, 2018.

[49] *Ibid.*

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] Interview with Liucija Neniškytė-Vizgirdienė, June 25, 2018.

[52] Interview with Neringa Daniienė, Rokiškis Museum, Lithuania, July 13, 2018.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] Interview with Neringa Danienė, Rokiškis Museum, Lithuania, July 13, 2018.

[56] Interview with Vidmantas Zakarka, Panemunėlis, Lithuania, October 8, 2017.

**The Institute for Lithuanian Literature and Folk Culture plans to publish a bilingual Lithuanian and English edition of Matilda Olkin's poetry and her diary in 2019. If you would like to contribute to the publication of this book, please write to Mindaugas Kvietkauskas at the following address:
kvietkauskas@liti.lt**

Laima Vincė is a writer, playwright, poet, and literary translator. She is the recipient of two Fulbright Fellowships and a National Endowment for the Arts grant. Laima Vince has lived and worked in Lithuania for a total of eight years (1988 – 1989, 1995 – 1997, 2007 – 2011) and visits frequently. She is the author of a trilogy of literary nonfiction works about Lithuania: Lenin's Head on a Platter, The Snake in the Vodka Bottle and Journey into the Backwaters of the Heart. Her play about global issues and immigration, The Interpreter, has been running for three years at the Vilnius Chamber Theatre.

Copyright 2018 Laima Vince. All rights to the text and English translations of poems and diary entries reserved. All rights to this essay reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial

uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the author at laima.vince@gmail.com.

Copyright © 2018 Deep Baltic. All rights reserved

Like what Deep Baltic does? Please consider making a monthly donation – help support our writers and in-depth coverage of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Find out more at our Patreon page.

Share this:



Related



From Memel to Klaipėda: the Lithuania Minor Revolt 94 Years On



Living in a State of Non-History: Growing Up Lithuanian-American



The Hill of Crosses: A Monument to the Defiant Spirit of Lithuania

[ABOUT | CONTACT](#) [CONTRIBUTORS](#)

Copyright © 2020 Deep Baltic.

All rights reserved

