

# MATILDA OLKINAITĖ

POETRY 22 October 2020

## The Brief Life of the Litvak Poet, Matilda Olkinaitė, 1922-1941

By Laima Vincė

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Tree roots prevented them from digging very deep, so, they gave up and took their shovels to the other side of the road and began digging in the peat bog that belonged to the Kavoliškis manor. The grass grew lush there, but recently the farmers had harvested the hay, leaving the field flat and empty.

Then they left, only to return shortly afterwards, riding their bicycles alongside a wagonload of people pulled by two horses over the rutted road. An armed guard sat at the front of the wagon and another in the back. More armed men rode alongside the wagon on bicycles. The captives were blindfolded, their heads bowed.

When the wagon reached an incline, the captives were ordered to climb out and walk the rest of the distance. At gunpoint, they were led towards the crest of a hill where the field met dense forest. The guards beat them with clubs as they trudged and stumbled up the hill.

Hidden behind a haystack, an eight-year old girl named Aldona watched. She was the daughter of a local farmer, Petras Šarkauskas. Their hired laborer, Bronius, ran to find the farmer to tell him what was happening. The farmer came into the yard and climbed up onto the haystack. They soon could no longer see what was happening, but they could hear the screams and cries, which continued for a few hours before the final gunshots came.

That day no one dared approach the killing site. The next day Mrs. Šarkauskas and the neighbor, Mr. Vaitkevičius, walked across the field. They found a shallow grave. Šarkauskas pushed his rake handle into the earth. The bodies were covered with only a few centimeters of soil. He covered the bodies with more soil and branches, forming a burial mound. People in the village soon realized that the murdered people were the Olkinas and Joffe families, Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews) who lived beside the Panemunėlis train station. They had been separated from the other Jews of Panemunėlis—who were later executed in Rokiškis—and held in the Kavoliškis Manor stable. The villagers said that the white armbanders believed they were hiding gold in their pillowcases.

Noachas Olkinas was the local pharmacist. He was well known in the community for his kindness, often administering medicine to the sick free of charge. Olkinas would say to his customers, "Only pay me if my medicine helps you get better."

Noachas Olkinas was an intellectual who read Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoyevski. He was a close friend of the Catholic parish priest, Juozapas Matelionis. They drank tea together in the rectory every Sunday afternoon after mass. In the 1930s, as a gesture of friendship to Father Matelionis, Noachas Olkinas donated an ornately carved oak confessional to the Panemunėlis Church. The confessional is still in use today.

Father Matelionis tried to save the Olkinas family from the Nazis by hiding them in the rectory. While in hiding, late one night Noachas Olkinas went out for a walk and saw a Nazi proclamation that those who hid Jews would be executed. He feared for his friend's life and immediately he and his family left their hiding place in the rectory and turned themselves in. They made a conscious moral choice to spare Father Matelionis's life over saving their own.

Asna and Noachas Olkinas's daughter Matilda was well known in the Rokiškis region as a gifted poet. Although Matilda was fluent in Yiddish, Russian, German, French, she wrote her poems exclusively in Lithuanian. From the age of 13 she began publishing her poems in Lithuanian literary journals. She was often invited to recite at literary evenings in Rokiškis, and then later in Vilnius, when she studied French and Russian Literature at Vilnius University in 1940 – 1941, the

last years of her life. Matilda's friends recalled that Matilda was warm, sincere, but at the same time reserved. During breaks between classes she would walk the corridors deep in thought. She would pause and gaze out the window. When her friends saw her like this, they would say, "Shush, be quiet, Matilda is composing poetry."

No one quite knows the circumstances, but before the Olkinas family was killed, Noachas Olkinas managed to pass his daughter's notebook of poems to Father Matelionis. The priest hid the notebook inside the Great Altar of the Panemunėlis Church. Three years later, the Soviets drove the Germans out of Lithuania. In 1950 Father Matelionis was deported to Siberia. The notebook of poems remained hidden. During the Soviet occupation, Alfredas Andrijauskas, a linguist and organist at the Panemunėlis church, recovered Matilda's notebook of poems and brought them for safe keeping to Holocaust survivor Irena Veisaitė in Vilnius.

In Autumn 2017, I visited Irena and took photos of the pages of the poems and diary with my phone, so that I could translate them. 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 and to share my poems with the world. It is my wish for my translations to breathe life back into these poems written out long ago with a fountain pen on the brittle yellowed pages of an old school notebook.

Poetry speaks to us at our deepest level of humanity. A poem invites us to live the experience of another. Matilda absorbed the tumultuous times she lived in through the language of poetry.

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 documented the horror of her times and expressed it through poetry. She perceived the Shoah, and at the same time sensed the fundamental tragedy of humanity that repeats itself age after age. Despite it all, she reveled in the fragile beauty of provincial life. It was 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. All of that comes through in Matilda's poetry...

## Poems by Matilda Olkinaitė, 1922 – 1941

### The Cerulean Bird

Off in the distant skies  
Soared the cerulean bird,  
Flying endlessly ecstatic,  
Singing a golden hymn  
About happiness eternal,  
Joy that cannot be broken,  
A smile that never ceases.

Alongside barns, hillocks,  
Through forests, deserts,  
With heavy footsteps the giant  
Made his way with a bitter glance,



Matilda Olkinaitė

Scanning the landscape, searching  
For the cerulean bird,  
Who flew along the heavens,  
Singing a golden hymn  
About happiness eternal.

Off in the distant skies  
Soared the cerulean bird,  
And three arrows pierced her,  
Carrying black death within.  
And they tore open the breast  
Of the cerulean bird.

And the heavens were shattered,  
And not with the ecstatic hymn  
About happiness eternal,  
But with the cry of the cerulean bird,  
Her last trembling breath,  
Her bottomless longing.

Oh, the quivering bow,  
Why ever did you release  
That most poison arrow?  
Who will sing now,  
About happiness exquisite,  
Ecstasy that never ceases,  
And a hymn that rings eternal?

1940

Published in *Lietuvos žinios* (*Lithuania's News*), March 30, 1940, Number 71, page 6.

**\*\***

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, filled with sunlight.  
But the world is so wide.  
Where will you go, beloved?

Matilda Olkinaitė dedicated this poem to her friend Liucija Neniškytė-Vizgirdienė in 1940. Liucija committed the poem to memory and recited it to Laima Vincė and Neringa Danienė on July 10, 2018.



Laima Vincė, The Cerulean Bird

★★

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 white blossoms.  
And among the wilted lilies,  
I see them, I speak to them.

Oh, how many have gathered  
And no one will see love.  
I hold an infant in my arms—  
And my infant—is Death.

November 14, 1940

From Matilda Olkinaitė's diary, November 14, 1940.

### **A Jewish Lullaby**

My tiny little baby  
Why won'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,  
Like a beloved friend, beside the gate.  
Great suffering and hardship  
Will carry you silently through long generations.

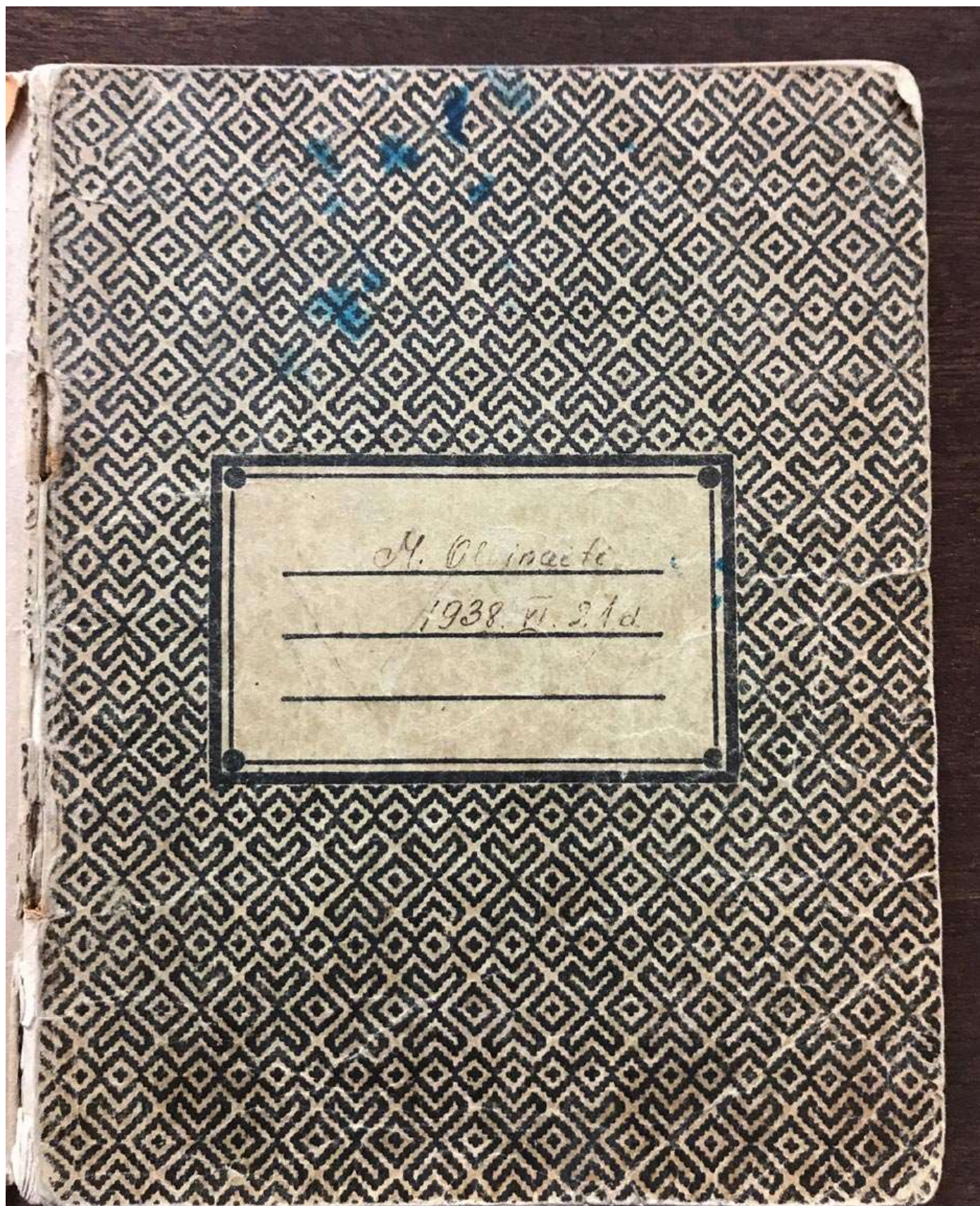
Long generations carry suffering  
From the cradle to the grave—  
Suffering immense and deep,  
And as endless as the night.

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.

March 1, 1940

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's notebook of poems, pages 82–83.





Matilda Olkinaitė poetry notebook. Photo by Laima Vincė

Night



Fall asleep. Through fields  
Darkness walks in silence.  
Heavens ablaze with stars,  
The earth ablaze in violence.

Fall asleep. In the West  
Death has dawned.  
You will not see death.  
Death will not see you.

A silver star will tumble  
Up in the heavens.  
Death will walk the earth,  
Longing for the night.

Fall asleep. Suffering  
Will languish all night,  
Lulled into a dream,  
You will not see death.

You will not see  
How the silver star falls.  
Only the night will sigh,  
And darkness will tremble.

April 6, 1940

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's notebook of poems, pages 89–90.

### **An Idle Evening**

Evening comes and howls under your window,  
Calling longing in a creaking voice.  
What to expect, you no longer know,  
When under the window sits blue longing's poise...

Evening comes carrying the ancient moon,  
And a crackling star glistens beyond the window.  
Somewhere behind the stove is the cricket's abode,  
And under the floor—lives a quick small mouse.

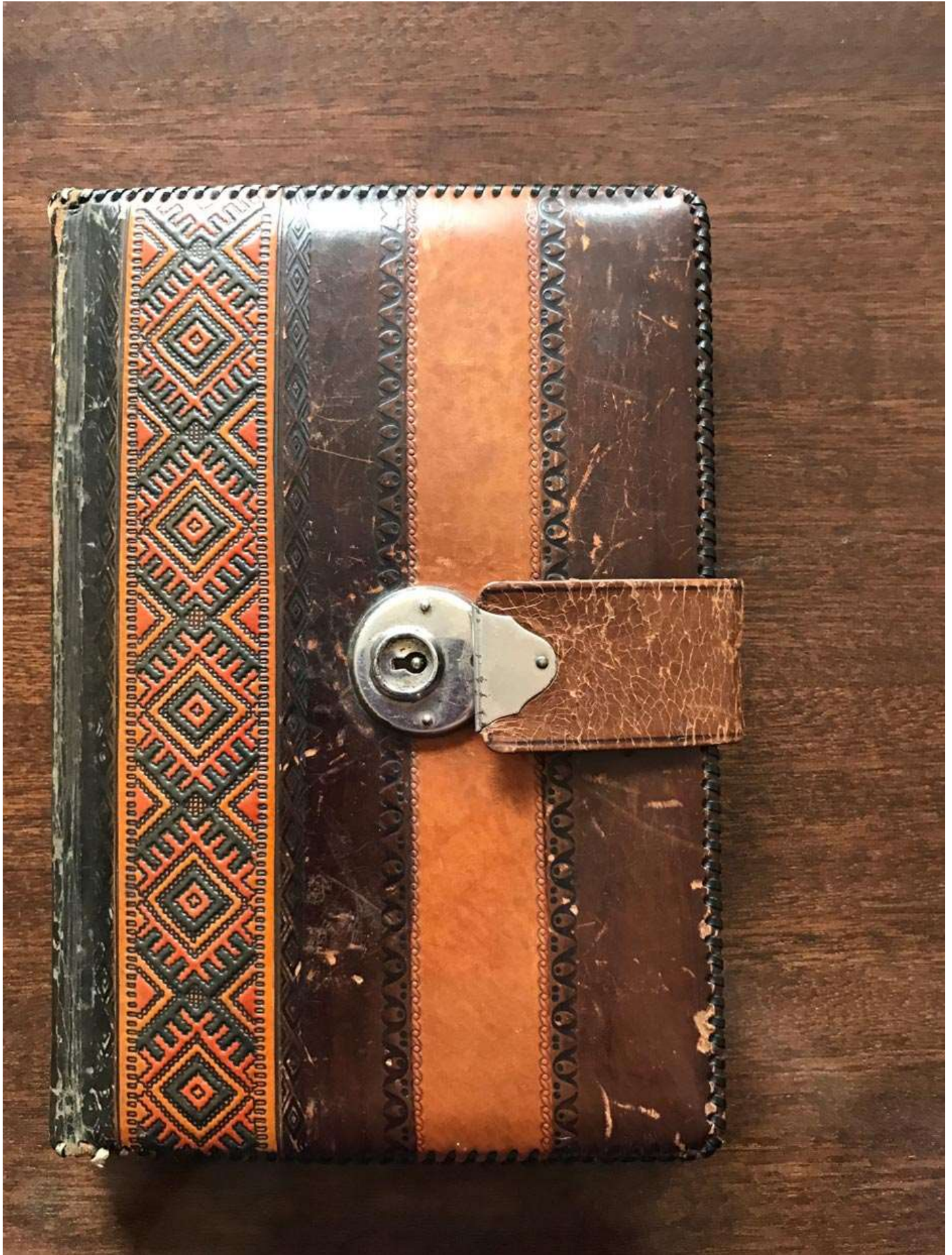
Longing comes carrying an old violin  
And plays a serenade under the window.  
And how could you ever ask him to leave  
When he is so sad and so polite?

And you feel so hopelessly sorry for yourself,  
When longing plays its song on the windowsill.  
And it all seems so ridiculous to you—  
The mouse, the moon, the cricket.

And it seems to you, that you've gone mad,  
And even turned to poetry,  
When, gazing at the moon,  
You sigh hopelessly.

October 19, 1939

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's notebook of poems, pages 61–62.  
Above the poem, Matilda wrote: "Ilya went to visit Liza. I remain all alone."



The diary of Matilda Olkinaitė. Photo by Laima Vincė

**For My Dear Idealist**

The Sun has drowned in the sea.  
And You? What awaits You?  
The world's road is bloody,  
Without love, without heart...

The Sun has drowned in the sea,  
And the night will be dark.  
Oh, but your eyes are brilliant,  
And full of love, full of heart.

The Sun has drowned in the sea  
Beyond blue hills...  
Will You return our Sun?  
Will You bring her back?

The world's path is bloody  
Without love, without heart.  
Perhaps Your brilliant eyes  
Will lead us to the Sun?

October 11, 1939

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's notebook of poems, pages 58–59.

### **Blaze in the Sea**

We will dance a wild dance,  
Between swells, surge, fire.  
Howl, waves! Cry, mothers!  
We will dance a wild dance.  
We will dance one final time for the sea,  
And then we will crumple in the burning boat.

There is no road—we will not turn back.  
There is no road—we will not go forward.



We will dance a wild dance—  
Waves twist and howl, and crash.  
Wreak havoc, storm! We will wrestle yet  
With surge, with swells, and with fire!

If we grow weary and quietly collapse,  
Our skiff will sink silently to the depths.  
If our words freeze on our lips,  
If our eyes and hearts stop dead,  
Do not say that we died not fighting  
The surge, the swells, and fire.

We danced a wild dance  
Between surge, swells, fire.  
We danced our last dance  
As our skiff sailed a burning sea  
Between swells, surge, and fire.

July 25, 1939

The poem was written in Matilda Olkinaitė's personal notebook of poems, pages 46–47.

**Translated by Laima Vincė**