

THE UNFORGOT

NEW VOICES OF THE HOL

The Translator Who Brought a Lost Jewish Poet's Words to the English-Speaking World

Raised in the U.S. but a lifelong speaker of Lithuanian, Laima Vince became enamored of Matilda Olkin's writing



Laima Vince in Lithuania in July 2018 (Joakim Eskildsen)

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Laima Vince stood up from her computer and stepped onto her balcony. It wasn't the first time during this nearly yearlong project that she felt overwhelmed by the gravity of her task: translating a book of poetry and a diary left behind by a young writer during World War II.

The work itself wasn't what troubled Vince. A writer fluent in Lithuanian and English, she's worked in translation for nearly 30 years. And as a poet, she felt comfortable matching the rhythm and musicality of the original work.

But this task was emotionally unlike any she'd undertaken before. Translating poetry requires "going deep into a person's psyche," Vince told me recently by phone from Lithuania. In this case, that meant entering the mind of Matilda Olkin, a 19-year-old Jewish Lithuanian woman who'd been killed, along with her family, by local Nazi collaborators in 1941, [as Matthew Shaer relates in the November issue of *Smithsonian*](#).

"I was trying to get a sense of Matilda's spirit and her story," Vince said. "I would ask Matilda, 'What do you want me to say now?'"

Because Olkin had been killed by Lithuanians, her death, Vince felt, was marked by treachery, and Vince was devastated by "the thought of this fragile, sensitive, beautiful soul, dying in such a brutal way." She went on, "Matilda thought of herself as Jewish and Lithuanian, and there's the sense of being betrayed by her own land."

That land is one that has endlessly fascinated Vince. She is the granddaughter of a Lithuanian diplomat who was posted in New York in 1936 and then couldn't return home after the Soviets occupied his country in 1940 and for decades after the war. Vince herself grew up in New Jersey, but her family stayed connected to their country of origin: She spoke Lithuanian at home, studied it in high school in Germany and visited the small Baltic country for the first time in 1983, when she was 17.

She returned in 1988, this time for a longer stay. "I got this idea in my head that I wanted to experience life behind the Iron Curtain, and see what it was like to live in the Soviet Union," she said. Through a Gorbachev-era program, Vince studied literary translation at Vilnius University, and while she was there she took part in Lithuania's growing independence movement by serving as a translator and interpreter at the movement's meetings. In March 1990, the country became the first to vote to break away from the USSR, although the Soviet Union did not concede to its independence until September 1991.

Participating in the movement was a defining experience for Vince: She realized, she says, that her language skills could "allow voices that had been silenced to be heard."

Since then, Vince has translated a variety of Lithuanian works into English and has edited several anthologies, including *Raw Amber: An Anthology of Contemporary Lithuanian Poetry* and *The Earth Remains: An Anthology of Contemporary Lithuanian Prose*. Vince has written a novel, plays and several nonfiction books set in the country or tied to it. And between 2007 to 2011, a Fulbright scholarship allowed Vince to travel around Lithuania interviewing mostly women survivors of the Holocaust or those sentenced to hard labor because they fought in the resistance against the Soviet Union. The project resulted in an oral history called *Journey Into the Backwaters of the Heart: Stories of Women Who Survived Hitler and Stalin*.

Now nearly 30 years after independence from the Soviet Union, Lithuania is still recovering from decades of occupation, and Vince remains drawn, she says, to subjects that "open up dialogue" about the country's past. Although she is not Jewish herself, one of her focuses has been how the country confronts its lost Jewish heritage. About 95 percent of the country's prewar Jewish population was killed during the Holocaust, by Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators. In some cases, Lithuanians incited violence against Jews before Germany's occupation, a history that much of Lithuanian society has been reluctant to acknowledge.

Last October, while visiting Lithuania from Beijing, where she was teaching English literature to American study-abroad students, Vince saw a new play called *The Silenced Muses*, about the Olkin family's murder. She felt an immediate connection to Matilda: "We speak the same language, Lithuanian, and I understand the landscape of her mind, the hopeless cruelty of her times, and her ceaseless hope and faith in humanity." After she returned to Beijing, Vince stayed in touch with the playwright, Neringa Daniene, and was determined to bring Olkin's work, never translated, to an English-speaking audience for the first time. This past spring, after researching Olkin's life and translating much of her writing, Vince published an article about Olkin and her poetry for the website Deep Baltic.

By the time Olkin was killed, at 19, she had some measure of regional fame for her verse, which was published in a variety of literary journals. And Vince was struck by the poet's use of both her national and religious identities to inform her work. Several poems were influenced by traditional Lithuanian poetry, Vince says, which follows the structure and rhythm of folk songs and venerates spirituality in nature. And throughout her work, Olkin referred to Lithuanian folklore symbols, notably a Lithuanian sun goddess who rides across the sky.

Yet Vince also noted allusions to Olkin's Judaism: her use of dark eyes to symbolize the Jewish people; stars that likely refer to the Star of David; and a stone representing her faith and strength. In several poems Vince also observed a recurring theme of entrenched national trauma. A poem called "My People," written in 1938, concludes ominously:

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

Vince interprets these lines as prophesizing the disappearance of the Jewish people from Lithuania. She says it was as if Olkin had a "deep comprehension of the tragedy" the Jewish population would soon experience.

Olkin's writing was, indeed, prophetic: A country that was home to a vibrant Jewish community going back to the 14th century has few Jews at all today. Vince sees her work as contributing to a larger effort to restore Jewish voices to the national canon, and begin to honestly confront Lithuania's past for its role in Jewish mass murder. She sees Olkin's poetry as a way for young readers to "process and understand the tragedy of the Holocaust."

In 2016, Olkin's poetry was adopted by the Ministry of Education, and excerpts of it are featured in a textbook from the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. And next year, the institute plans to publish Vince's translations of Olkin's full writings in both Lithuanian and English.

"Matilda wished to publish her collection of poems in an impossible time," Vince says. "If I can fulfill this wish for her, I feel as though it is a small thing I can do for a very talented and creative young woman who died far too young."

About Anna Diamond

Anna Diamond is the former assistant editor for *Smithsonian* magazine.