

A Mind Thinking

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Julija Šukys, *Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Šimatė*

LINCOLN: UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS, 2012. 217 PAGES, CLOTH, \$24.95.

Julija Šukys, *Siberian Exile: Blood, War, and a Granddaughter's Reckoning*

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Those of us who have followed the work of Julija Šukys have long known what a wonderful writer and rigorous researcher she is. She uncovers previously unexplored archives, finds and secures interviews throughout the world, and uses her fluency in several languages to read her way through the stacks of dozens of libraries; but more than that, she turns her search into a compelling story and braids that story with the story of the lives she's researching. I know of no one who does this better.

Šukys's 2012 book, *Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Šimatė*, is a remarkable work of research, translation, and recovery that tells the story of an unlikely, long-overlooked heroine. Ona Šimatė was unmarried, walked with a limp, and worked off and on as a librarian, what she called "the beloved profession." It was precisely her quiet ways, orderly habits, and near invisibility that made her heroism possible. Between 1941 and 1944, she smuggled food, messages, clothes, forged documents, medicine, and money into the Jewish ghetto in Vilnius, the capital and largest city of her native Lithuania. She saved scores, perhaps hundreds, of Jewish children, sometimes by sedating them and smuggling them past the Gestapo in sacks. In 1944 she was captured and

tortured by the Gestapo for 12 days before being sent to Dachau. She survived and after the war made her way to France and continued carrying what news she had to the families of survivors, trying to connect families displaced by the war, and thereby preserving the culture of her home country. She wrote thousands of letters (sometimes dozens in a day) and a like number of diary pages. She wrote in Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish, Russian, German, French, and even Hebrew. Finding and curating this material was a formidable task. For over a decade Šukys searched archives in Europe, North America, and Israel for Šimatė's writing, but more than that, she translated it and preserved it within the narrative frame of this book so that we can hear Šimatė's voice. *Epistolophilia* is a study in women's writing. When asked, Šimatė produced the occasional article, but she demurred whenever she was urged to write a memoir. As Šukys puts it, "When faced with a figure like Šimatė, who fits no categories—not even that of writer!—what do we do? How do we tell her story?" Šimatė's words were often by necessity coded and hidden, and they were almost always private and personal. She saw herself as a conduit, translator, diarist, letter writer, and friend, not as an author. *Epistolophilia* shows us that in spite of her reticence she was a writer.

As its subtitle suggests, *Epistolophilia* is also the story of Julija Šukys's writing of this book, and that story is also a woman's story. Šukys moves deftly between a distanced narrative voice that recalls what happened to Ona Šimatė before, during, and after World War II (we learn a lot about history) and more immediate scenes of this or that research trip, often rendered in present tense. She tells us how she conducted an interview, or takes us on a tense drive with her exhausted husband and young son to see just one more archive. This meta-narrative is done conversationally, seamlessly, and with humility, but at the same time we cannot fail to recognize the tremendous work that it took to bring this book together. Prize juries also recognized the magnitude of Šukys's accomplishment. The book was a finalist for the Mavis Gallant Prize for Nonfiction, long-listed for the Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Nonfiction, and winner of the 2013 Helen and Stan Vine Canadian Jewish Book Award in the category of Holocaust Literature.

Epistolophilia seemed the kind of astonishing, decade-in-the-making book that would be hard to follow, let alone top, but *Siberian Exile: Blood, War, and a Granddaughter's Reckoning* is a brave and beautiful step forward from it. This new book is much more personal. Like *Epistolophilia* it is both

biography and cultural history. As I read it I learned a lot about the politics of Lithuania during World War II and daily life in Stalin's Russia, but I learned even more about family secrets and how they keep us from knowing who we are and where we have come from. As Šukys explained in a piece in the Fall 2016 issue of *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, the book that is *Siberian Exile* finally assumed the form of an essay:

The form of my manuscript emerged when I finally accepted that it was no memoir. My book, I came to understand, was an essay: a tiny book-length essay that simultaneously looked forward and backward and that put a series of questions about guilt, inheritance, and the overvaluing of origins at its center. And because it was an essay, neither the “real I” nor my “writing I” could remain the protagonist of the book. Nor could my grandparents, for that matter. For an essay “is something that tracks the evolution of a human mind,” writes John D’Agata. It charts the mental journey of a human being through the world. So, in the end, my book’s protagonist, if I can put it this way, was a thought process and journey of understanding.

By *essay* as opposed to *memoir*, Šukys means (as I understand her) that this book is not a narrative in the sense of being either the story of her grandparents during and after World War II or the story of her uncovering their stories, but by being both; by oscillating between different times and registers, and by adding reflection and mediation, it became the story of a mind thinking. This does not mean that it ceases to be autobiographical, or tends toward the abstract or impersonal. As Edward Hoagland has put it, “A personal essay frequently is not autobiographical at all, but what it does keep in common with autobiography is that, through its tone and tumbling progression, it conveys the quality of the author’s mind.” *Siberian Exile* focuses less on what happened in Siberia or in the archives of Kent State University Library than on how that research, those facts, and the family secrets they exposed affected the narrator and how she thinks about the past, her family, and herself.

These multiple modes of narration could be confusing, but Šukys signals her move from one to another in clear but never heavy-handed ways. There are no “meanwhile-back-at-the-ranch” transitions, no awkward section or chapter breaks. We always know where we are. The publisher also deserves plaudits here. Recognizing that the book covers nearly a century of history,

three generations of a family's story, a large cast of characters, the ins and outs of World War II and Cold War history, thousands of miles of exile and migration, and life in the Lithuanian émigré diaspora, Šukys and the University of Nebraska Press have offered a number of helpful aids: a chronology, bibliography, unobtrusive endnotes, three maps, and 33 figures, including photographs of family members, interview subjects, key sites, buildings, cities, and one of grandmother's postcards from Siberia. (*Epistolophilia* also contains a wealth of maps and illustrations.)

In June 1941, during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, in the middle of what would come to be known in that country as “Terrible June,” the Red Army deported about 20,000 Lithuanians to Siberia, including, on the evening of June 14, Šukys's grandmother, Ona. According to a relative Šukys interviewed years later, Ona's husband, Anthony, had apparently gotten wind of the deportations, and the couple had decided he would spirit away their three children (two daughters and a son, Šukys's father). Ona would stay at their apartment with their possessions. Šukys describes what happened next and how it generated her book:

Anthony and Ona, I saw for the first time, had made a colossal and tragic miscalculation. They had decided to put the mother of their children in the apartment and to bet on the humanity of the arresting soldiers. That gamble turned out to be a poor one, and the repercussions have reverberated through three generations already.

Ona would remain in Siberia until long after Stalin's death in 1955. She was not able to work her way through the bureaucracy and out of the Soviet Union to be reunited with Anthony and their children in Canada until 1966. Those decades of separation and exile provide the book with one of its narrative threads, but KGB documents Šukys was able to secure after the end of the Cold War forced her to tell and ponder a second story. As she puts it,

Silence organized our family. There was always, for example, a great hush surrounding the years between 1941, the year Ona was deported to Siberia, and 1944, when her husband, Anthony, and the three children fled westward. These years demarcate the Nazi occupation of Lithuania. Anyone telling us children the story of our family history inevitably jumped from Ona's arrest

and deportation straight to her children's dramatic departure from Lithuania with their father three years later.

What the silence hid was Anthony's complicity in the massacre of Lithuanian Jews. *Siberian Exile* lifts the shroud of the silence and forces, as the book's subtitle says, a granddaughter's reckoning.

Part I of *Siberian Exile* focuses on the nature of Anthony's complicity and the fallout for Šukys and her family. Šukys began to explore the three-year gap in her family's history—the time between Ona's exile in 1941 and Anthony's escape west to England with their children during the chaos of 1944—almost by chance. Ona's 17 years in Siberia were seen as horrible but heroic, a story the family knew and could share. Šukys also knew Ona better than she did Anthony because Ona outlived him by 13 years, dying in 1996 when Šukys was in her early twenties. Years later, already the author of two biographies (the aforementioned *Epistolophilia* as well as *Silence Is Death*, about the Algerian novelist and poet Tahar Djaout who was killed by Islamic extremists in 1993), Šukys decided to tell her grandmother's story. A writer friend suggested that she might request Ona's KGB file, which the fall of the Soviet Union had made available, in order to find out more about her grandmother's deportation to Siberia. Šukys did so—"on a lark," she admitted—and was surprised to receive four hundred pages of documents, but doubly surprised to find out that about a hundred of them had to do with Anthony. For a few years Šukys continued to focus exclusively on her grandmother's story and did not get around to reading and translating Anthony's section of the file. "The question of why there should be so much material on him crossed my mind but only briefly," she admits.

When she finally began to work her way through Anthony's "search file" (as the KGB called it), Šukys found out that Soviet authorities had kept Anthony under surveillance even after he'd been able to get himself and his children to England and then Canada, closing the file only upon his death in 1985. The KGB initially viewed him with suspicion because prior to World War II he had been a member of a right-wing group called "Iron Wolf" that advocated for Lithuania to be an Aryan state. They continued to keep him under surveillance because he had served as municipal police chief in the city of Newtown for about five months between late summer of 1941 and January or February of 1942. Ona was deported to Siberia by the Soviets in the middle

of June, just two weeks before Hitler broke the non-aggression pact with Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union, including Soviet-occupied Lithuania. At precisely the time their family was torn apart, Anthony signed on with this new set of occupiers. The Nazis immediately set up ghettos in major cities (including the one in Vilnius from which Ona Šimatė, the heroine of Šukys's earlier book, smuggled so many children to safety, sometimes in sacks). Until the Red Army returned in 1944, Germans and their Lithuanian sympathizers eliminated 90 percent of the prewar Jewish population of Lithuania, which had totaled 250,000 people, including 12,000 refugees from Poland. When Anthony took over as police chief in Newtown in late August, there had already been two massacres in that town—the first targeting communists, the second Jewish men. There were no gas chambers or camps. Pits were dug in the Jewish cemetery and local men shot other local men, neighbors that they knew personally, and shoved the bodies into the mass graves. Šukys quotes Patrick Desbois, a French priest who leads forensic investigations into similar incidents, who calls these kinds of killings “Holocaust by bullets.” It was clear that as in Vichy France, collaboration was the rule of the day and Anthony was a collaborator, and yet Šukys remained suspicious of his KGB file. She took the file seriously and knew it contained some truth, but also saw it as likely “tainted and unreliable.” She had grown up in an émigré community where “the notion of Soviet justice is considered an oxymoron.” Her own experience with her earlier books had taught her that “oral history is the next best thing to documentary evidence,” especially when the documents are suspect, and so she went to Newtown.

One of the first people she interviewed was Isaac Glick, who was seven years old in 1941. With the help of some local farm families, Glick, his mother, and three other family members escaped the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators. Adopting a pseudonym and disguised as an orphan, he hid for four years in a monastery. He is the last Jewish survivor of the holocaust in Newtown and one of the few surviving witnesses of the “men’s massacre” that took place over the course of a night in early July. Here is the story he told Šukys:

Once the sun had risen, Malke Glick, Isaac’s mother, decided to venture out and investigate. She took an older daughter and young Isaac along. Buckets in hand, the three made their way over to the municipal grazing site, as if

to milk cows. From the field they could see a mound of earth piled beside the pit in the cemetery. A few Jewish men worked to bury the dead as their guards laughed and pissed in the grave. Once they completed their work, the diggers were shot. In all, 192 men were killed in that massacre.

That number included Isaac Glick's father, grandfather, and oldest brother. Šukys knew that her own grandfather did not become Newtown's police chief until two or three weeks after this event, but she did not know whether he might have collaborated in this massacre anyway. Neither did she know what killings might have happened once he became police chief, and if there were, whether he participated. Her search for answers proved tortuous. The KGB archives suggest Anthony shot a Jewish doctor named Isaac Grossman, but people she interviewed in Newtown attribute Dr. Grossman's death to the Germans. Documents show that Jews were killed in Newtown while Anthony was police chief, and a cousin with whom Šukys travels to Newtown claims to have overheard his mother and Anthony arguing about what happened years later. When his mother accused Anthony of complicity in a mass killing, Anthony offered an unconvincing response: "He said he hadn't gone to the forest that day, but that he'd stayed in his office. 'I didn't shoot anyone,' he said."

As Šukys wrestles with her grandfather's involvement, she also engages in essayistic thinking about how society grapples with these same horrors. She considers Hannah Arendt's discussion of the "banality of evil" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as well as psychologist Stanley Milgram's notorious 1960s "obedience to authority" experiments. Milgram demonstrated that subjects were willing to administer shocks to others when commanded to do so by an authority, especially when they were not in close proximity to their victims. She also considers how the horror, the secrets, and political changes over time have haunted Lithuania. When the Soviets retook Lithuania after World War II they tried thousands for war crimes, but those who were tried included anti-communist dissidents as well as Nazi collaborators. When the Soviet Union fell and Lithuania regained its independence in 1991, almost all of the Soviet-era convictions were vacated, but international pressure forced the addition of a clause to the decree that prevented pardons for "anyone who had been involved in killings or acts of genocide." Anthony had died, however, in 1985 without returning to his home country and so had avoided arrest and a possible trial. Šukys struggles to remain objective as she tells Anthony's story.

She never excuses him, but she does temper her understanding of him, never forgetting that night in June 1941 when he and Ona made their “colossal and tragic miscalculation.” At one point she even asks herself, “Would it have been better for him to be deported that June day too?” If he’d been exiled to Siberia with Ona and their children, “he would never have been faced with the choice of whether to become a cog.” Then, she quickly reverses field and labels it “an alternate and, yes, selfish history.” In order to face the secrets, the lies, and their consequences, Šukys turns to her wide reading, essayistic scrutiny, and generous empathy, finally recognizing that there is only so much she can know and understand:

In *The Book of Embraces*, writer Eduardo Galeano contemplates the fate of an Argentinian poet whose children the military took in his place. The military tortured and eventually killed the poet’s son. Galeano asks, “How does one survive such a tragedy? That is, survive without one’s soul being extinguished?” I’ve often asked the same question about my grandfather. Perhaps, in the end, only his body survived. Maybe his soul did not.

Ona may not have resented her husband for leaving her to face the soldiers alone, but what about him? Did he blame himself?

Part 2 of *Siberian Exile* explores how Ona survived more than two decades of exile. She was deported to Siberia in 1941, but it was not until 1947 that she was able to get a first postcard to Anthony and her children, and not until 1955 that she and her family were able to maintain regular correspondence. In 1958, four years after Stalin’s death, Ona was finally able to return to Soviet Lithuania, but because the KGB might arrest him, Anthony could not join her there. It was not until 1966 that the two of them were reunited in Canada. In part 2, Šukys tries to understand how Ona survived, but also how she and Anthony preserved their family despite the years, the distance, and the secrets.

Just as the discovery of Anthony’s KGB file impelled Šukys to tell his story, so was Ona’s story catalyzed and transformed by an archival surprise. A few years after Ona’s death in 1996, Šukys translated her grandmother’s letters from Siberia. She thought they would make a nice gift for her family, but was not as yet thinking seriously about writing a memoir about her grandmother. Then, while on an unrelated research trip to the extensive Lithuanian collection of the Kent State University Archives, she came across a notebook in Lithuanian

labeled “Father Joseph (1880–1953) in Siberia.” The notebook contained a 72-page transcript of an interview with a 77-year-old Lithuanian woman in which she discussed Father Joseph’s time in Siberia. The notebook had been mis-shelved and rediscovered several years later. A note clipped to its cover expressed the “hope that the next Lithuanian researcher can identify it for us.” As Šukys began reading through the typescript she discovered to her “astonishment, and even shock” that the interview was with her grandmother. As she put it, “I took the notebook in my hands and said, ‘Okay, I get it. I’ll write your book.’”

Ona’s letters to her children offered many details about daily life in Siberia—“cows, pigs, and gardens were among her favorite subjects”—but ultimately Šukys found them to be a mixed bag:

The Siberian letters have both delighted and discouraged me. On the one hand, they are vivid portraits of Ona’s tiny life on the Siberian plain. But on the other hand, silence, absence, suppression, and even self-censorship lie over the letters like a veil, obscuring essential pieces of the past. I can see and experience Ona’s Siberia through her letters but only partially and sometimes only in silhouette. Ultimately, I have come to accept the distance. I have no other choice.

Ona seems to have emphasized, even hidden behind, the quotidian in part because she was putting on a happy face for her children, but not all the censorship was self-censorship. Fear of Soviet surveillance also played a role. In letters written during the mid-1950s, she explained the process she would need to follow in order to reunite with her family—a pardon would allow a return to Lithuania, then after a time there she could apply for permission to emigrate abroad—but in these letters, she refers to a helpful bureaucrat as her “uncle,” the time in Lithuania as a “vacation,” and an official who denies her request to return to Lithuania as “my ‘dad.’” Similarly, the 1977 Chicago interview Šukys discovered at Kent State, while also helpful, focused more on Father Joseph’s experience in Siberia than Ona’s. And so, once again, Šukys decided that the documentary evidence was insufficient. She would need to go to Siberia.

When Šukys decided in 2010 to travel to the village where Ona had lived from 1941 to 1958, her family thought she was crazy: “Again and again,

I heard, ‘You can’t go *there*.’” They softened some when her cousin Darius agreed to travel with her. Russia is almost twice as big as the United States. It encompasses 11 time zones. Thinking their four-day train trip from Moscow to Ona’s village, Brovka, near the river Ob, would be long and boring, the cousins brought plenty of reading material, but Šukys found herself talking to Darius instead. He had been able to spend more time with Ona while growing up than she had. Traveling to Siberia with Darius, crossing the vast Siberian landscape, meeting people who had known Ona, and studying the historical context all helped Šukys imagine Ona’s life during exile, and doing so helped flesh out the silhouette.

Siberian deportations were not invented by Stalin. As early as the seventeenth century, tsars deported people to Siberia rather than executing them. Often these people were cut, branded, or tattooed so they could not escape and return unnoticed. Deporting them was a way to settle the vast land and displace indigenous people. Deportees included not only common criminals and those who challenged the government, but “POWs, counterfeiters, military deserters, aging and infirm serfs, loan defaulters, and Old Believers deemed heretical for their rejection of post-reform Russian Orthodox dogma.” When the Soviets deported Ona in those last days before the Nazis swept into Lithuania, it was not because she was a criminal but because her labor was needed for the war effort. In addition, Stalin feared Lithuanian nationalists, such as Anthony, would side with Hitler. She was forced to sign a 20-year service contract to work on a collective farm, though she and her fellow workers assumed they could go home once the war was over. They didn’t. Stalin’s growing paranoia and the Kafkaesque Soviet bureaucracy kept them there. Ona was on a “special settlement” where women outnumbered men six to one. Life was hard, but not as hard as it was in the Gulag, where the exiles were mainly men who were considered enemies of the people. No charges were ever filed against Ona, but neither was she offered a real explanation for why she could not return. Her foreman at the farm (whom she liked) once asked her why she was still there. “‘You tell me,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you have some evidence against me? What did I do? I don’t feel guilty of anything.’”

Šukys dots her braided tales of Ona’s exile and her own visit to Siberia with fascinating details. The rivers flow north toward the Arctic Ocean. They freeze first at their mouths as they gradually clog with ice floes back to the south; then, their waters spill over their banks causing vast annual floods. In

the spring the flooded and frozen landscape thaws, much of Siberia becomes a swamp, and the air fills with hordes of mosquitoes. Ona and her fellow workers had to wear long sleeves and keep their cottages smoky. For three years Ona shared one room with six other women, their narrow wooden cots crammed together so that one sleeper could roll over only when all of them did. They foraged for edible plants and even ate dishes made from tree bark. Years later in the interview, Ona joked, “Yesterday, it was grasses with grains; today it’s grains with grasses.” They got up early and worked hard—cutting trees, tending fields, looking after animals. When Šukys met people in Brovka who knew and worked with Ona, she became more aware of the deprivations and isolation in the village, and as a consequence came to appreciate more fully the significance of the everyday things Ona had written about in her letters—a flower garden, a black-and-white calf, a small kindness extended or received.

Five years after Stalin’s death and two years after Khrushchev’s speech to the 20th Party Congress denouncing Stalin, Ona was finally allowed to return to Lithuania—one of 80,000 Lithuanians (60,000 from the special settlements, 20,000 from the Gulag) who returned between 1953 and 1970. Then, she faced seven years in Lithuania, poor and marginalized. Her 17 years in exile stigmatized her as an enemy of the people, but ironically also left her three years short of earning a pension. She was taken in by family members and earned a pitiful living selling scarves and stockings her daughters sent her from the West. Finally, through the graces of a Party official, who was now working in Moscow and whom Ona had met when he returned to his Siberian village to marry a local girl, she was released to join her family in Canada.

In a short, moving, especially essayistic final section, Šukys ponders what Anthony and Ona’s almost 20 years in Canada must have been like. She saw them together, but was only 13 when Anthony died. She asks herself, “How did they return to one another? How much did they share what had happened in the other’s absence? How did they pick up the thread of their marriage?” He spoke English, she did not. Darius tells her they seemed to live close but parallel lives. She quotes him as saying, “They rarely touched.”

Šukys then turns her scrutiny upon herself:

For forty years, it seems, I have overvalued my origins. All my life, I have put so much stock in “where I came from” that when it turned out that the past

looked different from what I'd imagined, a crisis of identity resulted. What am I now that I've rewritten my family's history?

This is the essayistic turn. Here she tells us a story of a family's secrets and resilience, and what exposing those secrets has meant to that family, and most especially to her. As I was reading *Siberian Exile*, I began to think about what it and its predecessor mean to the field of creative nonfiction. We talk often about the essay renaissance that has flowered in the United States since the 1980s. What Julija Šukys's work reminds me is that this renaissance is, has been, and can be global in its reach. A Canadian who now writes and teaches in the United States but who was born into a family that was cast into the Lithuanian diaspora, Šukys is especially equipped to take the North American essay out into the world, and vice versa. The range of her work is stunning. It stretches across three continents, thousands of miles of travel, scores of interviews in multiple languages, and decades of history—extending from World War II through the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union to the present—but she also stops and looks at moments, boring deep into an exchange on a train or the night of a massacre. Her work is horizontal and vertical. It is historical and personal. She reveals the history of the last century through the lives of individuals, often as they faced the most dramatic moments of their lives, and she tells us the story of her own mind thinking about the history, the moments, and the people she has encountered.