

Heroine was a compulsive writer; Epistolophilia, by Montrealer Julija Sukys, honours librarian Ona Simaite

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ABSTRACT

Time after time, Ona Simaite, the subject of Julija Sukys's compelling and beautifully crafted biography, would enter the Jewish ghetto of Nazi-occupied Vilnius - or Vilna, as the Jews called the Lithuanian city - with food and money and forged documents for those forced behind its walls; she would leave with messages to deliver on their behalf, manuscripts, letters intended for her and, on occasion, sedated children in sacks. [...]she might have remained a foot-note to history if not for Sukys, who came upon her name in 2000 while browsing through card catalogues during research for a doctoral dissertation in comparative literature in which the Vilna ghetto figured in part.

FULL TEXT

Time after time, Ona Simaite, the subject of Julija Sukys's compelling and beautifully crafted biography, would enter the Jewish ghetto of Nazi-occupied Vilnius - or Vilna, as the Jews called the Lithuanian city - with food and money and forged documents for those forced behind its walls; she would leave with messages to deliver on their behalf, manuscripts, letters intended for her and, on occasion, sedated children in sacks.

Simaite (1894-1970) was a librarian at Vilnius University. The rector had secured permission for her to go into the ghetto, ostensibly to retrieve overdue books. Eventually, she was arrested by the Nazis and tortured: her back was broken, the bottoms of her feet burned and she was sent to the Dachau concentration camp in Germany, and from there, to internment camps in France.

After the war, she settled in Paris, where she held menial jobs as a maid and a cafeteria employee and lived in a squalid little room, a plain woman who walked with a limp and kept to herself.

She was honoured for her heroism by the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial authority in Israel as Righteous Among the Nations, but the price Simaite (pronounced Shi-my-teh) paid was high: the trauma, the torture and the considerable pain with which she lived; the fact that only a handful of the people to whom she was close, the writers and the leftist social revolutionaries whom she had first visited in the ghetto, survived.

"She lost everything, from her community to her potential for love," Sukys said.

And she might have remained a foot-note to history if not for Sukys, who came upon her name in 2000 while browsing through card catalogues during research for a doctoral dissertation in comparative literature in which the Vilna ghetto figured in part.

Simaite was a compulsive writer of letters and journal entries. She probably wrote more than 50,000 letters in her lifetime, to relatives and to academics, to fellow librarians and writers and Holocaust survivors all over the world. From 1945 to 1947, she wrote "promise-keeping" letters, accounts of friends who had perished, for their families and friends.

She wrote mainly in Lithuanian, a relatively obscure language spoken by about only 3.5 million people. Sukys is

one of them, the Toronto-born daughter of immigrants who spoke Lithuanian at home.

"I really wanted to know about that time and place in that language," Sukys explained during an interview at the South Shore home she shares with her husband, Sean Gurd, a professor of classics at Concordia University, their 5-year-old son, Sebastian, and Yashka, a black cat. "I had read survivor testimonies, translated from Yiddish - but the silence from Lithuanian sources was deafening."

She located collections of Simaite's writing in different places - including the YIVO institute for Jewish research in New York, Yad Vashem and the national and university libraries in Vilnius. At Kent State University in Ohio, she found Simaite's 29 postwar diaries. The style and the cadence of the writing reminded Sukys of her own Lithuanian grandmothers, she said.

Sukys, 39, believes Simaite kept and organized the letters she did because, as a librarian, she was a bred archivist, because she wanted the stories of others, "of all those whose lives were embedded in hers," preserved.

She began to imagine her research in the archives as a conversation with Simaite. "She spoke to me through her diaries and letters, and I responded to her through my writing."

Initially, Sukys believed that the trauma Simaite had endured was responsible for her never having completed the memoir friends had urged her to write. But as she pored over her letters and diaries, she came to wonder whether it was because work and the tedium of housekeeping had taken so much of her time - Simaite described both in many entries - and whether her situation was emblematic of that of female writers.

"And for me, that became an important theme after the birth of my son," Sukys said. "I was trying to carve out space in my life for my own writing. I saw how difficult it could be to make that space."

Sukys retraced the steps Simaite had taken, travelling to Vilnius, to Israel, to France - and writing about the journey in the first person.

"The journey is a way to embody a narrative for me," she said.

Rather than use chronology as a guide, she divides her book into nine parts, each a satellite in the orbit that was Simaite's world: her relationship with the Lithuanian poet Kazys Jakubenas, for instance, the experience of a mentally ill niece and time spent in Israel. The letters are a unifying theme: Epistolophilia, a term coined by Sukys's husband, is defined early on as "a love of letters and letter writing."

The technique works incredibly well, providing a full and revealing portrait of a heroic, principled if sometimes fractious woman whose life was marked by hardship and disappointment, but who left behind an invaluable archive: her own.

Julija Sukys launches *Epistolophilia* on Thursday, June 7, 5 to 7 p.m., at Paragraphe Books, 2220 McGill College Ave.

Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Simaite

By Julija Sukys University of Nebraska Press, 217 pages, \$27.95

Credit: SUSAN SCHWARTZ; The Gazette

Illustration

MAZYVDAS NATIONAL LIBRARY OF LITHUANIA RARE BOOKS AND MANUSCRIPTS DEPARTMENT / Ona Simaite was named Righteous Among the Nations by Israel's Yad Vashem.; MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER THE GAZETTE / Lithuanian-speaking South Shore writer Julija Sukys happened upon Ona Simaite's name while doing research for a doctoral dissertation in literature.; Caption:

DETAILS

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