

A CONVERSATION WITH JULIJA ŠUKYS

by Heather J. Macpherson

In *Epistolophilia*, Julija Šukys's second nonfiction book, she documents the life of Ona Šimaitė, a librarian in the Vilna Ghetto, Lithuania, who saved the lives of many Jews during the German occupation in 1941. Šimaitė not only physically rescued children and adults, but she rescued their stories, wrote letters to family members informing them, for better or worse, of the circumstances in which they lived or died. Šukys's archival and translation work in writing Šimaitė's life was no small task. Šukys writes,

Šimaitė left an impressive archive of her life's writing: thousands of letters, scores of postwar diaries and notebooks, various articles and countless press clippings... What clues are there in this mountain of documents as to how to proceed with an interpretation of this intriguing yet frustrating collection of personal writings? (21)

Mining clues from a daunting escarpment is at the heart of Šukys's writing. She has a willing openness to converse with the dead, allow their voices to come forth. In her care for the past, Šukys listens to her subjects:

Years ago I began to think of myself as having a relationship with Šimaitė, and I imagined my research in the archives as a conversation. She spoke to me through her diaries and letters, and I responded to her through my writing. As a result, my understanding of Šimaitė's life is inextricably linked to the experience of my own. (166)

In her latest book, *Siberian Exile*, Šukys explores the unexpected “convergences”: her Lithuanian grandmother, whose first name, Ona, is the same as the subject in *Epistolophilia*; and her grandfather, Anthony, whose role during the German occupation is at once a startled gasp, like the stories told by Ona Šimaitė in her documentary letters or Šukys’s unexpected encounter with photographs of her grandmother at Nina’s kitchen table during a trip to Siberia. Once again, Šukys digs through archives, documents, and letters to piece together a complex familial narrative with dramatic shifts from past to present. *Siberian Exile* is a reminder that the story we set out to tell may not be the story we end up writing; instead, we find ourselves questioning the stones in our pockets as we watch two birds circle the light.

Julija Šukys is a writer and an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Missouri, where she has taught since 2013. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Toronto (2001) and is the author of three books (*Silence is Death*, *Epistolophilia*, and *Siberian Exile*), one book-length translation (*And I burned with shame*), and more than two dozen essays and articles that have appeared in literary journals, scholarly journals, and newspapers. Her work—both a book (*Epistolophilia*) and an essay (“Alphabet Fusion”)—has appeared in Lithuanian translation. As a writer of creative nonfiction, Šukys draws on archives, interviews, bibliographical research, and observation to write about minor lives in war-torn or marginal places, about women’s life-writing, and about the legacy of violence across generations and national borders. Her honors include writers’ grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Quebec Arts Council, a University of Missouri Faculty Fellowship, a University of Missouri Graduate Faculty Mentor Award, and a Canadian Jewish Book Award for

Holocaust Literature. Šukys is senior editor at *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* and a contributing editor at *The Tusculum Review*. She is also the Director of the Missouri Audio Project, an audio storytelling initiative at the University of Missouri. I had the honor of introducing Professor Šukys for her lecture and reading at the University of Rhode Island, spring 2018. Finally, I had the opportunity to interview Professor Šukys about her writing via email.

HM: Can you talk about your introduction to Ona Šimaitė and what drew you to her story?

JŠ: When I was a graduate student at the University of Toronto, I spent a lot of time reading Holocaust memoirs and diaries, especially about the Vilna (Vilnius) Ghetto. I came across the name Ona Šimaitė once or twice and became intrigued. Who was this Lithuanian woman who they said was visiting the ghetto? I could only find the sparsest amounts of information about her. Then, in the summer of 2000, I received a small fellowship to go to Vilnius, Lithuania, to do dissertation research. I was interested in all kinds of writing about the Vilna Ghetto, and I ended up spending a lot of time in the rare books and manuscripts section of the Martynas Mažvydas National Library. Back in those days (even as late as 2000!) everything was still in card catalogues, so I searched my memory for names I'd come across in my readings and then looked them up to see if there might be corresponding collections. One of the names that came to mind was Šimaitė's. Lo and behold, there was her name and nestled behind it, I found hundreds of cards. That first day, I requested every document (most were letters) whose record mentioned the ghetto. I sat with those letters – all were written either by or to Šimaitė – for hours and

found myself totally captivated. I loved this woman, her voice, and the fragmented portrait that her letters reflected. I loved the intimacy of the letters and of archival work. My reading of those letters became a part of my dissertation. Years later, of course, they served as the foundation for *Epistolophilia*.

HM: There are moments in the book where you address women's life-writing and how difficult it is to find the time to write. Can you speak further on your experience with writing about Ona's life as well as your own?

JŠ: I was deep into my work on the book when I discovered (to my great joy) that I was pregnant with my son. Once I was over morning sickness, it was an easy pregnancy and even a pleasurable one. I continued to work and travel until the last month when my blood pressure shot up. At that point, per my midwife's orders, I abandoned my manuscript and put myself to bed. It was a long, long time – almost two years – before I managed to return to writing in a concentrated way.

The experience of feeling such a shortage of time, such exhaustion, and such invisibility completely changed my relationship to Šimaitė. I felt a connection to her that I hadn't before. That got me reading and thinking about women's writing, about writing mothers, and about women's time in ways that were totally new to me. I also found that I had a new kind of clarity in my relationship to my work: writing mattered to me in a way that felt urgent and utterly essential.

In many ways *Epistolophilia* is a snapshot of a moment in my life. Although the book took years to research and to write, it came together very quickly in the end, in a kind of flurry of energy and frustration after such a long period away from my

work. I felt like I needed to write to stay alive so I began to write as if my life depended on it.

HM: I am curious about your use of the term “invisibility.” Are you suggesting that women writers, mothering writers become obscured or unseeable by others due to pregnancy?

I wasn't prepared for the ways in which moving through the world first with a belly and then later with a baby on my hip would change the way it regarded (or, rather, refused to regard) me. The presence of the baby was somehow totalizing: again and again, I got the message that I was now only a mother and, as far as the outside world was concerned, there was nothing more to ask or know about me. Here's an anecdote that might illustrate what I mean.

My son was around 18 months old or so when a historian friend invited me to lunch. She wanted to introduce me to a colleague whom she'd told about my first book and he seemed interested, so she set it up. My friend, her colleague, and I chatted and I remember getting up periodically to corral my toddler. I also remember feeling totally ignored by this young academic, which puzzled me, since our meeting had been the whole point of the lunch. He must have forgotten or perhaps my friend had been unclear, but this guy barely looked at or spoke to me. Almost an hour had passed before my friend finally helped him put two and two together. “You remember I was telling you about my writer friend? Well, this is her,” she said meaningfully. The young academic's head snapped around in astonishment: “*You* wrote that book?” he said, incredulous.

HM: I imagine engaging with Ona as a subject was also an emotional experience—did you ever encounter spaces (public/

private/silent) where you needed to leave Ona's side?

JŠ: A number of readers have told me that they found themselves needing to put the book down from time to time in order to recover from some of its more brutal passages. I wrote the book just as some readers have read the book, that is, in short sittings, piece by piece. I wouldn't say that I ever felt the need to *leave* Šimaitė. Rather, I would say that I felt *her leave me*. There were times when my life filled to such an extent that there was no room for her. I had to make room for her consciously and invite her into my life.

HM: How did you manage and guide yourself in the process of archival research? How did you decide which letters to include in *Epistolophilia*?

JŠ: The process of finding the thread of Šimaitė's life was without a doubt the hardest part of writing the book. The first thing I needed to do was to gather all the materials: the letters and diaries. These came from archives in the US, Lithuania, and Israel. For a long time, I kept all the materials siloed according to their archive of origin. I was afraid of cross-contamination or of mixing them up and losing a sense of control over my materials. Soon, however, I realized that I needed to put them all in order, which would necessitate mixing them up. I devised a method, using different colored stickers, to identify the provenance of each document and I started to create a master chronology. This allowed me to read the master archive from beginning to end. I tracked recurring themes, silences, and watched for anecdotes, characters, and episodes that stood out.

There are no shortcuts to this kind of work, I'm afraid. At least in my case, it was simply a matter of time, attention, and of careful

note-taking. In the end, I proceeded both chronologically and thematically. Themes I tackle in the book include caregiving, correspondence, librarianship, and dailiness.

HM: I was drawn to Šimaitė's correspondence with her dear friend, poet Kazys Jakubėnas. What attracted you to Jakubėnas and have you continued doing any additional work on him as a biographical subject/poet?

JŠ: The letters to Kazys Jakubėnas were the most intimate of all the letters I collected. And although it was precisely the intimacy of that correspondence that attracted me, I was equally struck by the courage of this poet who resisted three separate regimes (the Smetona regime, the Nazi regime, and the Soviet regime) not only in writing but also in his actions. Jakubėnas is almost completely forgotten in Lithuania today and, if you look him up in the Lithuanian encyclopedia, the story you'll find there is a complete fiction. This obvious oblivion and erasure of a literary life shook me, so I decided to create a trace – small as it is – both for his sake and for the sake of his friend Šimaitė who loved him so deeply. She had begun to write a memoir about Jakubėnas, but abandoned it, claiming it was simply too painful to write. I tried to pick up the thread where she had dropped it and to finish the project for her.

I have indeed thought about returning to his story in some way since publishing the book. Shortly after the book came out, a Lithuanian writer I've never met sent me a photograph of Jakubėnas's funeral procession, which was a carefully choreographed and restricted affair. The photograph is blurry but it shows the murdered poet's bruised and battered body laid out on a horse-drawn carriage. It's a terribly moving image. I'd like to write something about it.

HM: The photograph sounds devastating, but I hope we have an opportunity to read more about Jakubėnas, his work, and his friendship with Šimaitė. If I may, I would like to shift my questions to your latest book, *Siberian Exile*, which introduces us to a different Ona— your grandmother, and your grandfather, Anthony.

When you discovered the truth about your grandfather, Anthony, did you ever consider discontinuing the project? I am curious about this because you write about a feeling of guilt as your research unveils his role during the German occupation. Also, did compartmentalization assist in separating your role as writer from your role as family member, or did the two remain intertwined during your research process?

JŠ: When I discovered the war crimes accusations against Anthony, I was stunned and felt a deep sense of shame. I couldn't bring myself to speak to anyone about it – no one but my very closest friends and my husband. It was immediately clear to me that I had a choice to make. I could either put the manuscript in a drawer for ten years or so and wait for the elders in my family and community to die or I could be courageous and find a way to write the book. Ultimately, of course, I did the latter, but it took me three years or so to find my way through it all. Before the discovery, I had believed that the fact that I was writing about my family would make this book easier to write than the previous ones had been. I wouldn't, for example, have to worry about whether or not I had the right to tell certain stories, which had been such a preoccupation when I was writing *Epistolophilia*. Of course, in the end, I learned that writing family stories brings with it a whole new set of ethical and writerly challenges. The danger of betrayal loomed very large as did that of apologia. Compartmentalization certainly helped. I

tried to distill certain questions of responsibility and complicity down to their essence and then to look at these questions from a different perspective. That, for example, is where my reading of Hannah Arendt and Stanley Milgram came into play.

HM: Interesting. In what ways?

JŠ: In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and in her essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt examines questions of complicity and guilt. She asks if a person who is at a remove from a crime, but who is nevertheless part of the machinery of the crime, bears the same guilt as one who, for example, pulls the trigger of a gun. Adolf Eichmann was a Nazi bureaucrat. He never directly killed anyone, though he was an essential part of a killing machine, that is, the death and concentration camp system. Like Eichmann, Anthony never pulled a trigger during the 1941 massacres in Newtown but he was nevertheless part of a chain that resulted in the murder of innocents. When I’m thinking about such painful questions, I find it helps to distill the question from the individual I’m writing about. I try to think about these questions not just in the terms that matter to me (so, not just as they relate to Anthony) but through a different lens, with different actors, in a different context. Reading Arendt on Eichmann helped me see Anthony more clearly.

It was the same with Milgram. Reading about the Yale experiments helped me think through questions of obedience to authority and loyalty and to formulate some conclusions about the Newtown massacres.

HM: After reading *Siberian Exile*, the images of stones and swallows stayed with me. What is the significance behind selecting the stones (why those specific colors)? I imagine

something mysterious and spiritual is at play in the birds circling the light, and your making eye contact with one of them. Do the swallows symbolize your Ona and her sister? Or you and Ona? I am most curious about these powerful yet quiet moments.

JŠ: I'm so pleased that the swallow scene stayed with you because I almost cut it! In fact, I had taken it out of the penultimate draft only to put it back in at the last minute. For me, the swallows signify a number of different possibilities. I grew up singing a song about birds returning home (from exile), so there's an echo of that melody in that scene for sure. Second, my grandmother believed that certain birds were omens and so perhaps her spirit was present that day, along with Margarita's, as you suggest. Finally, I think the birds just made me stop and hold my breath for a moment. They reminded me of where I was and of how extraordinarily fortunate I was to be there in that outdoor Siberian kitchen. The swallows reminded me that not all was in the past and to marvel at the life that continued to flourish despite everything.

HM: Lovely—

JŠ: Regarding the stones: I collect stones obsessively. Mostly I pick them up on hikes and beaches and they end up in my garden. But the three I brought home from Brovka have a place of honor in my study. Their color has no significance whatsoever. I didn't choose them in any conscious way. I simply picked up three stones that were underfoot on the path that led to the place where my grandmother's house had once stood. They are extraordinary in their utter ordinariness and randomness, I suppose.

HM: In your recent aesthetics essay, “In Praise of Slim Volumes: Big Book, Big Evil,” you write about the realization that your book [*Siberian Exile*] was not a memoir, but a book-length essay. I wonder if you consider your essay to be a documentary work? You also mention Maggie Nelson’s *Jane: A Murder* and I can see the poetics in your writing combined with source material and photographic image, almost like a documentary collage. Do you see your work in this regard?

JŠ: When I read Maggie Nelson’s *Jane* for the first time, the book absolutely rocked my world. I recognized so many of my own impulses in her work. She too sat with diaries quietly and worked to decode them. She contemplated the unknowable lives of long-dead subjects with whom she nevertheless felt a deep sense of kinship. Nelson’s *Jane* was liberating to me. It gave me permission to make all the gestures that I felt were somehow too unorthodox or too personal.

So, all that said, yes, I absolutely see my books and essays to be documentary works. I continually return to the document as inspiration, whether it’s a diary, a collection of letters, a folder of emails, a court transcript, photograph, map, newspaper clipping, or a secret police file. Collage is central to my approach. I’m continually arranging and rearranging my texts and seeing how the meaning of a fragment changes depending on what I set it against. Much of my work is based on a process of putting shards of the past into some kind of order and then stitching them together with connective tissue so that, all together, it manages to tell something new.

HM: I do apologize for the possible sensitivity of this question and of course feel free to dismiss it, but did family relationships change after the publication of your book [*Siberian Exile*]?

JŠ: My cousin Darius, who traveled with me to Siberia, has been my biggest champion from the very beginning of the project. In fact, he's the one who convinced me to try and write the book in the first place. Our trip to Siberia deepened our relationship significantly and he's been a great source of support through some of my anxieties surrounding the publication of the book.

As you've suspected, I was indeed worried about the reactions of other members of my family – my cousins, brother, and my aunt most of all. In the end, they all surpassed my expectations and have shown me only generosity, respect, and grace. I feel deeply humbled and grateful for their support and understanding.

HM: Julija, I thank you for spending so much time corresponding with me for the interview. Before we part, do you have any projects in-the-works that you want to mention?

JŠ: As you mention in my bio above, that I've started writing a new book about college campus shootings in America. I decided I needed a break from Eastern Europe and something in me was itching to write about the place where I now live. My new project is in its infancy, though I've already done substantial archival work (of course!). I'm currently finishing an essay that I hope will help me define my guiding questions and to figure out what might be at stake in this text. I will say that I'm working with English-language source materials for the first time ever and, boy, does the work ever go faster when you don't have to translate everything!