



Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Simaite

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The librarian walks the streets of her beloved Paris. An old lady with a limp and an accent, she is invisible to most. Certainly no one recognizes her as the warrior and revolutionary she was, when again and again she slipped into the Jewish ghetto of German-occupied Vilnius to carry food, clothes, medicine, money, and counterfeit documents to its prisoners. Often she left with letters to deliver, manuscripts to hide, and even sedated children swathed in sacks. In 1944 she was captured by the Gestapo, tortured for twelve days, and deported to Dachau.

Through *Epistolophilia*, Julija Šukys follows the letters and journals—the “life-writing”—of this woman, Ona Šimaitė (1894–1970). A treasurer of words, Šimaitė carefully collected, preserved, and archived the written record of her life, including thousands of letters, scores of diaries, articles, and press clippings. Journeying through these words, Šukys negotiates with the ghost of Šimaitė, beckoning back to life this quiet and worldly heroine—a giant of Holocaust history (one of Yad Vashem’s honored “Righteous Among the Nations”) and yet so little known. The result is at once a mediated self-portrait and a measured perspective on a remarkable life. It reveals the meaning of life-writing, how women write their lives publicly and privately, and how their words attach them—and us—to life.

Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Simaite Details

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From Reader Review Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Simaite for online ebook

Vaiva says

Knyga, kuri suintrigavo, bet šiek tiek (na, gal ir ne šiek tiek) nuvylė. Ir tai ne redaktoriaus ar vertėjo kaltė. Tikėjau išsamaus, jautraus, traukiančio ir asmenybę atskleidžiančio pasakojimo, o radau tik fragmentus, kurie, mano manymu, net kartais disonuoja su pačio pasakojimo, istorijos, tikslu ir esme. Džiaugiuosi, kad Onos Šimaitės gyvenimas ir veikla nebus pamirštas. Tačiau neapleidžia jausmas, kad pavyko tik akies kraštelį su jos pasauliu susipažinti. Tarsi kažkas labai svarbaus liko ir nepasakyta. Man labai pritrūko gilesnio požiūrio ir gilesnės analizės (tuo labiau, kad autorė nuolat kalba apie šėsnis laiškus, intensyvų susirašinėjimą), nes dabar pavyko tik pasiblaškyti nuo vieno pasakojimo prie kito, tarp kurių kartais nebuvo jokių perėjimų, tiltelių, siekančių juos bei praeitį su dabartimi, vedančių į ateitį.

Doriana Bisegna says

Thoroughly enjoyed discovering another great heroine of WWII. While we don't really know what she suffered through while in the concentration camps due to her resistance of wanting to write a memoir, we do know that she helped many Jews while they were detained in the Vilnius ghetto. Her letter writing was obsessive and on going throughout her life hence the title of the book. She was not a Jew but could not stand idly by while the atrocious acts towards mankind were ongoing. She has been recognized by Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous Among The Nations. I was honoured to know her through this book.

Meaghan says

Ona Simaite (pronounced Ah-na Shi-may-teh), a Righteous Gentile who saved the lives of many Lithuanian Jewish people during the Holocaust, really ought to be a lot better known than she is. The problem, as Sukys notes in this biography, is that most of the primary sources about Simaite and most of her own writings (she was an astonishingly prolific letter-writer, sometimes composing more than twenty a day) are in Lithuanian, and only about three million people can speak/read the language.

If you're looking for thrilling tales of Ona Simaite's heroic Jew-saving actions during World War II, you will probably feel disappointed by this book. Sukys chose to focus on Simaite's entire life rather than those few years, and there was never a lot of information about her lifesaving efforts to begin with. For her own safety and for those she helped, Simaite would deliberately forget names and faces. The exact number of Jews she saved isn't known, other than that it was a large one.

I see this book being in the "woman's studies" subject as in the history and Holocaust/World War II subjects. As Sukys points out, Simaite did not have a very happy life, particularly in her old age (she was in exile in France, very lonely and living in great poverty; she died in a nursing home that sounded like a dump), and a large part of that was because of the limitations imposed on her due to her gender and her unmarried status. But her being a woman probably helped when it came to saving Jewish people during the war.

This book could interest a lot of people, if they are of a scholarly bent. I would recommend it alongside

Simaite's own 88-page memoir of the Holocaust, *And I Burned With Shame*.

Ruta Sevo says

The book was very interesting to me as a emigre from Lithuania, hungry for details about what happened, where, and a case study in the miseries of World War II. It was a little repetitious and could have used more editing. I agree with the reviewer who disliked the title. However, I am glad Sukys wrote it, published it, and shared it. My interest makes me forgive many of the weaknesses.

Azabu says

Great story, awful title. A brave woman who dared to challenge the Nazis, made immortal by letters and journals.

Meredith Bahuriak says

Libraries of the Holocaust: What is Written Will Never Die

A review of *Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Simaite* by Meredith Wood Bahuriak

What we learn from our predecessors, we leave for some successor to follow. In *Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Simaite*, author Julija Sukys dances with the ghost of Ona Simaite in order to remember and honor not just the Holocaust, but Simaite's life, thoughts, views, and actions. As Sukys unravels the biography of Simaite, she struggles to understand the story she desperately seeks to find.

A treasurer of words, Simaite carefully collected, preserved and archived a written record of her life including thousands of letters, scores of diaries, articles, and press clippings. A librarian at Vilna University, she used her position to aid and rescue Jews with the excuse of retrieving overdue library books from Jewish students as an entry into the Vilna ghetto.

From 1941-1944 Simaite slipped into the Jewish Ghetto of German-occupied Vilnius to bring its prisoners food, clothes, medicine, money, and forged documents. She came out of the ghetto with letters to deliver and manuscripts to hide, carried sedated children in sacks, and stole away with a Jewish girl.

Arrested and tortured in 1944 by the Gestapo for providing aid to Jewish Holocaust victims, Simaite refers to herself as a martyr to the letter. The problem in completing her memoirs was not writers block but rather an excess of writing – a kind of letter-writing sickness – an epistolophilia – that precluded any other kind of writing.

Following Simaite's paper trail around the world for nearly a decade, Julija Sukys presents a memoir more reflective of her own relationship with Simaite as a mentor than as an objective criticism of Simaite herself. A startling paradox that while Simaite died at 76 before completing her memoirs, Sukys is able to capture Simaite's story while successfully writing an unexpected memoir of her own.

Sukys utilizes the first person in order to clarify her interest in Simaite's life, beyond the ghetto and Dachau.

“Simaite’s stories have led me to consider questions of self-sacrifice, creativity, and the feminine.” Simaite challenges Sukys to interpret her archival research as a conversation – Sukys hears Simaite speaking to her through diaries and letters and responds by writing – a correspondence that inextricably brings Sukys closer to an understanding of Simaite’s life.

As Sukys and Simaite circumnavigate the globe together, Sukys questions whether it is death that draws women to libraries and to become librarians, or writers. Libraries operate on a “harem” model, “where men lead and women facilitate their work, toiling at their sides.” Simaite, who works as a cataloguer – the lowest of the low – forces Sukys to ask herself to what extent does she refuse to experience the things she does not like. Sukys confesses her bias and adheres to the ethical code of writing an objective account of Simaite’s work. Simaite and Sukys reference the librarian as the “beloved profession” and “keepers of the human soul,” respectively. Sukys is led to the revelation, “When a library is burned, so are we.” This sentiment drives Sukys to reconstruct Simaite as library, life, writer, woman.

In “Profession for Women,” Virginia Woolfe coins the phrase “Killing the Angel in the House,” as a term used to reference the occupation and responsibility of women writers to move past a repressive, Victorian, ideal in the early 20th century – a direct response to the poem “Angel in the House,” by Coventry Patmore in 1854. On June 8, 1955 the Angel took its toll on Simaite with memories unwritten, “My spirit is suffering from my inability to work [...] the desire to strive is dying. My soul is starting to die!”

Though Sukys interprets the archival signs Simaite leaves (letters, journals, clippings, articles) and fills in the gaps to the best of her ability, she cannot document Simaite or her story in its entirety. Admitting to her own invention, Sukys confesses, “Because I do not want to lie to my reader, or to betray my friend Simaite, I cannot erase myself.”

Sukys relays the feminist ideology that women write their lives in relationship to others, searching for reason behind the lack of memoir and literary text and questioning themes of silence. Sukys and Simaite are part of a larger project led by Virginia Woolfe, “a rethinking of women’s lives and of how to write them [...]” In order for a woman to write, Woolfe suggests that she must have private space (a room of one’s own), money, and connected time (which only money can buy). “Woolfe points to a much simpler explanation for the lack of memoirs: poverty,” whereas Simaite avoids and is unable to face the past.

In addition to thousands of letters, Simaite left twenty-nine diaries covering the period from 1953 to 1970. These correspondences tell a remarkable story in which Sukys humbly recognizes the impact of her work, challenging a number of common assumptions in scholarly thinking about memory, the importance of writing as life-structuring practice, the significance of silence in a body of work, and the literacy of private and female texts.

In Diary 29, Simaite writes, “Who will tell all those good people that I don’t have the strength to write?” Sukys is that person, “She [Simaite] appears to have written it for posterity, for someone like me, who Simaite knew or hoped would one day sift through her papers.” Simaite inspires Sukys to complete what she set out to do; in writing *Epistolophilia*, Sukys depicts a divine relationship through an enlightening memoir.

Original review published for Matterhorn Literary Review
<http://matterhornliteraryreview.com/2...>

Peter says

This is a true delight of a book. Julija Sukys tells the little known story of Ona Simaite a real heroine of the Holocaust. A librarian by training and nearly obsessive about writing (letters and diaries) Simaite spent years going in and out of a ghetto and capturing the stories of people who died during the Holocaust. She survived being tortured by the Gestapo and went on to spend nearly two decades attempting to communicate the cries of anguish the Shoah produced.

This book is also a meditation on the nature of biography and the reality of women writing.

Buy this book, you won't be disappointed.

Urve Tamberg says

An extraordinary true story about a Lithuanian librarian, her writing, compassion & bravery in WWII.

Elsie K. Neufeld says

just started. i love it already!

Margaret Haerens says

On the surface, Sukys traces the life of Ona Simaite, a Lithuanian librarian who risked her life to help the Jewish men and women herded into the Vilnius ghetto by the Nazis. However, this quickly becomes a story about the author's challenge in piecing together a full account of Simaite's life and work through some of her journals and correspondence to friends, family, and the families of those she helped. How can Sukys convey Simaite's accomplishments and perspective on the horrors of what she experienced if Simaite refuses to confront it herself? Instead, Simaite focuses on her own struggles to maintain her creative life as well as her dignity in a world that does not value her contribution. The book becomes an exploration of how women perceive and represent their own experience.
