

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 47, No. 4 - Winter 2001

Editor of this issue: M. Gražina Slavėnas

ISSN 0024-5089

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BY THE GHETTO GATES

VYTAUTĖ ŽILILNSKAITĖ

Translated by M. Gražina Slavėnas

Those of us who lived in Vilnius during the German occupation have seen sights we will not forget as long as we live.

Our house stood on Arklių Street, overlooking the square and the church of All Saints behind it. On one side of the square were the gates to the so-called Small Ghetto (there were two ghettos in Vilnius). From our second-floor windows we could observe the entire area and every movement to and from the gate as clearly as the palm of a hand.

The square was ugly and desolate. Polish kids threw stones at us and called us bad names. Polish prostitutes threw trash at our school caps and called us even uglier names. They were hanging around their brothel on Subačius 3 and we had to pass them on our way to school. German soldiers were buzzing around there too. They came and left in a hurry, shamelessly buttoning up their pants and whinnying like horses. Farm carts rattled across the square on their way to the Halle market, piled high with thin bundles of firewood, long columns of Russian POWs were marched by. The men looked like skeletons. To pass food to them was strictly prohibited. One day my brother poured a bushel of apples from our roof on the men below. They scurried around trying to grab an apple. This caused a big commotion. A couple of German soldiers burst into our yard and raced up the stairs to the attic, where they opened fire. My brother, luckily, hid in time behind a wooden panel.

One day a Jewish woman walked into our back yard, her face was white as paper. She asked for yellow cloth, for without that yellow patch with the letter J on it, Jews were not allowed to be in the streets, or even walk on pavements. And then the ghetto appeared, or rather a concentration camp. Once, as I came down Pylimo Street, I heard two shots. German soldiers were firing into the windows of a two-story house not far from the Synagogue, the people there had refused to be taken to the ghetto.

The entrance to the Small Ghetto was at the corner of All Saints and Rūdininkų. A high fence went up around it, with one gate, and in the houses bordering it, doors and windows were hammered shut or filled with concrete. At dusk, we could see through cracks shadowy shapes slip in and out on the narrow Karmelity Alley.

Every morning the ghetto residents were marched out to work and in the evening they lined up by the gate for a body search. One day, passing by the church, I saw from up close what was happening. The search was done by a Jew. He had a black beard and wore a black leather coat. A German officer stood a short distance away, in a proud pose, whip in hand, and watched him closely. With each new person passing the search, the pile of confiscated potatoes, carrots and turnips grew larger. People had obviously been working in the fields. Ever so often the officer stepped forward and swung his whip at some unfortunate soul trying to smuggle in a few vegetables in a sleeve or under the armpit. Then he would fall back into his proud immobility. Suddenly something unexpected occurred. The officer stopped a woman who had already passed inspection and began to search her himself. Deep-red beets came dropping down, she must have hidden them in her underwear. With a furious scream, the officer pushed the woman aside and turned toward the inspector, hitting him full force with his whip. The wretched man fell to the ground, shielding his head with his hands, until at last the officer calmed down. He kicked the man one last time with his boot and had him taken away.

Across the square rattled farm carts toward the Halle market, poled high with thin bundles of firewood, and long columns of Russian POW's were sometimes marched by. They looked like skeletons, but it was strictly forbidden to pass food to them. One day my brother Mindaugas climbed up to the roof and poured a bushel of apples on the men below. They scrambled to grab the apples and caused a big commotion. Two German soldiers stormed into our yard and up the stairs to the attic, and opened fire. Lucky for him, my brother had slipped behind a wood panel just in time.

Once in a while we saw a canvas-covered truck leave the gates, and behind it, in an open limousine stood a soldier with a drawn gun. And then, on a September morning in 1943, the inhabitants of our building were ordered to cover all windows and to stay away from them or be shot at. Soldiers with drawn guns filled the square closely watching the windows. If they saw something move, they opened fire. Our windows were covered with heavy curtains, but through tiny slits between the panels we could see what was happening below. With gun shots puncturing the air, dreadful anticipation fell upon the square. And then—the gates swung open and a long stream of people began to spill into the square, most of them women and children, and old folks. They were dragging heavy bundles, even the kids, one old woman even collapsed under the weight of her load.

A blind couple, a man and a woman, lost their way and were stumbling back and forth, until a soldier pushed them against a wall to regain direction. A tall, old, gray-bearded man kept raising his arms up to the sky and appeared to be singing in a high voice, as if invoking God's wrath. Peoples faces seemed frozen in fear and despair, they sensed that they were led to slaughter, but they still had one last ray of hope, for they had been told to bring their belongings with them. Then there was a new round of shots—the bullets were aimed at rooftops, where a few people tumbled hopelessly, they had tried to escape.

After the ghetto was emptied, the barricades and the gate came down. But the place remained deserted for a long time to come, people didn't want to be anywhere near those doomed alleys. Some time later, my sister and I decided to go there, just to look around. Where there is now an empty square stood the Synagogue. Its doors were wide open. Inside it was empty and dark, the air was heavy, decaying straw was on the floor and an old sofa with broken springs. Somehow it seemed to me that the old gray-bearded man with the raised arms was still lying there, he was perhaps the rabbi. And all the other people also seemed to be standing there and looking at us, an invisible, mute, mysterious crowd. I remembered the kind man at the gate and thought that the people here were just as ready to shield each other with their lives as he had done. Many years later, a Vilnius Jew let me read his memoirs about life in the ghetto, and about kindness there and selfishness, humiliations and rewards, starving and thriving, giving up and surviving.

After another month or so, we were already running on Arklių Street and picking up broken bomb shells. They were shining like silver. The Eastern front was closing in on us.