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FOREST OF THE GODS

A few chapters from the English translation of "Dievų Miškai"
written by the celebrated Lithuanian author BALYS SRUOGA (1896—1947)

Translated by Aušrinė Byla

BALYS SRUOGA (1896-1947)
Lithuanian poet, dramatist, critic, theoretician in literature and drama, professor at the University of Vilnius, author of "Dievų Miškai"

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Balys Sruoga, (Feb. 2, 1896 - Oct. 10, 1947), born in the Biržai region of Lithuania, was a Lithuanian poet, dramatist, critic, theoretician in literature and drama, as well as professor at the University of Vilnius. Completing school in Panevėžys, Lithuania, he began his higher education in Leningrad, continued in Moscow, and finished in Munich with a doctorate degree in Slavic studies, minoring in art history and dramaturgy. March 16, 1943, Sruoga was arrested by the Germans and with 47 other Lithuanian intellectuals was held hostage in connection with the refusal of Lithuania's youth to join the German Army upon the Nazis' announcement of mobilization in an occupied nation. The hostages were sent to the Stutthof Concentration Camp near Danzig. With his health ruined, Sruoga returned to Lithuania where he died. Till the end, he refused to cooperate with the Bolshevik demands to write propaganda for them. *Forest of the Gods,* which is a prose work of his remembrances from Stutthof, already translated into Russian, Polish, French and Latvian, is presently being translated into English by B. Sruoga's granddaughter, Aušrinė Byla (M.A. Arizona State University). Following the short but potent comment about *Forest of the Gods,* are a few chapters from the English translation.

FOREST OF THE GODS

BALYS SRUOGA

... Of course, their (the Reds) demands to stay within "Soviet realism" were not very pleasant — but even this demand did not interfere with his greatest work of *art,* which without a doubt will make his name famous in the entire world. Such incredible brown concentration camp glimpses no one has yet given... It is difficult to believe that such a piece was written by a person sentenced to die...

Prof. Vladimiras Šilkarskis

Moors, hummocks, hills. On the white sands, sifted into hills though the hands of a superior force — tall and spindly pines in the guises of yeshiva students. On the hillsides — birch trees, so sickly, so impoverished, as if the sun herself forgot about these orphans, her foundlings. On the slopes and slants — huckleberries, blueberries, lingo berries braided, wove themselves into a succulent green carpet dotted with multicolored berries. In the furrows, pits, and cross-wings — clumps of bog grasses, sedges, and cowslips.

Once, a long, long time ago, this was the bottom of the sea. It was as if during a storm the waves unexpectedly froze, unexpectedly hardened, and the north winds sprinkled their crests with white sands.

This little place nestled itself on the shores of the Baltic Sea, forty five kilometers east from the city of Danzig. Until 1939 very few knew of this isolated corner. Next to it stagnated a, small moribund town, almost a village, Stutthof, the kind which Germany had thousands of. This little town was connected to Danzig by an asphalt highway and an obsolete railway. And herein dwelt the most boring people in Europe — Prussian Germans, submerged in everyday spiritual poverty, venerating the policeman and the kitchen, superficial order and ale; they could go without their daily bread for an entire week, if only during the holidays they would be allowed to pompously promenade though the town streets and receive a chance to bang on the big hollow drum.

On Sundays, Stutthof's citizens who wanted to splash around in the sea would have to cross that frozen sea, that sea bottom tangled with pines, birches and stumps. Even if the souls of these citizens were somehow police overwhelmed, after wading into the mossy area, they felt slightly elevated. The name of this place alone would remind them that there is still this or that in this world without a policeman, and without ale.

Forest of the Gods! — that is what the people called it since ancient times. Once, a long time ago, in this same forest dwelt the gods. Unique gods. Not Germanic in origin. Not Odin, not Thor. There lived the last of the Lithuanian gods.

Danzig's surrounding areas are all in all quite rich in myths and legends, in which personages of Lithuanian origins and with Lithuanian names work in mysterious ways. Perkūnas, Jūratė, Laumė, Patrimpas — the Danzig district sea shore, lake and forest dwellers, are often still called Germans even if these myths are repeated among Prussian citizens.

Until 1939, on weekdays, only berry picking women and mushrooming pensioners clumped through this Forest of the Gods; occasionally, a bedraggled hunter would blindly wander in. Otherwise, it was empty and barren, except for the pathetic rustlings of slender pines, as if they soughed in tearful sighs, remembering those times when the joyful gods raised their revelries. In 1939, the Forest of the Gods suddenly rallied, resuscitated, revivified as if the ancient gods had returned to it...

No, — it was not gods that returned; within it settled denizens of the deep, similar to devils.

With the end of the Polish - German war, Danzig's civil government decided to erect a concentration camp within the Forest of the Gods, for the disobedient Poles, to bring them back to the path of righteousness.

For all the concentration camps, the primary concern — the worry, that some one in the world would find out what goes on and how, behind the barbed wire barriers. News at large about life of those fenced in could stir up various unpleasantries for the camp owners. It could happen that one or another would get angry, and start to shout, and call the foreign landlords barbarians. Why is that all necessary? When someone decides that a little more comfort in the camp would be a nicety, then when all outside ears are deaf and all outside eyes are blind and do not interfere with the employee propaganda, that is the time to ingratiate oneself with the camp landlord, adulating his cultural and creative talents.

The Forest of the Gods was far from neighboring eyes and ears. There were few residents in the area and these same ones were — the reliable adorators of the powerful buffoons of this world. And most important—the geographic location of the Forest of the Gods was such, that the tenants under the pine tree arcades could not even daydream about removing themselves from the hospitality of the camp. On one side bordered the Baltic Sea, so carefully guarded during the war. On the other side — the famous gulf; on the third side —the huge two-forked Vysla with its channel and canal system; the fourth — a very narrow peninsula, which separated the sea and the gulf. A runner, breaking out from the Forest of the Gods, whichever way he turned, would still end up in the water or in the hands of the police.

In the Fall of 1939, the first new settlers transferred themselves here: a band of SS men and a few hundred desheveled striped paupers, largely Danzig area Poles sentenced to die. In the forest, about one half meter high and even with the sea, was the area where the first tattered tents were erected — officially opening the concentration camp.

Thus began the chopping of the forest, uprooting of stumps, leveling of earth, flattening of hills, filling in of marshes, transportation of gravel and rocks, assembly of barracks, erection of a giant edifice — the housing of the commanding officers and administration. The blueprints for the camp were colossal with space for more than one hundred thousand prisoners, ,so the construction was far from being finished even in 1945.

V. First Night

We arrived at the place of our unknown destination right in the middle of the night.

They rolled us out of the truck, and set us up in rows of five men by a huge red brick building overgrown with trees.

Hm... If this is where we'll live, at least they'll give us a bed... A room, probably already arranged, — they wouldn't just be preparing the rooms for us now... Germans always knew how to organize... Expecting our arrival, this place was probably notified, as was the place in Tilžė...

Our beautiful perspective dreams were suddenly shattered when appearing from the devil knows where, an SS fellow, rather tall and skinny, crooked, with a flattened nose, under which he muttered something, began to wave his fist along our noses.

— Pfu — spluttered one of our own, having gotten a first in his cheek, — what kind of customs are these?

High, wide gates are seen ahead, intertwined with barbed wire. Some sort of shed is hung on the gate. Above it is a red lamp, pushed forward. From the shed, the snout of a machine gun sticks out, or some such aberration... Behind the shed, behind the gate — a long narrow yard, lined with these funny little hovels. Shacks — not shacks, barns — not barns; at night, there's no comprehending what kind of rot this is.

Suddenly, from the depths of the yard, surface two black men. Waving fat sticks, they quickly run to get us. One is tall and stolid with a voice which stands out as the singing dragon from the German opera, "Ziegfried." The second one — shorter by half, of the bruiser species — a night beast, speaking with a strong Polish accent.

A sharp curt command drove us up to one of these funny hovel like barns which showed itself to be living quarters. The black night men stopped by the door. One on one side, the other — on the other.

The Ziegfridish mouth bellowed with relish:

— Carry the pallets from one barrack to the other!

With Jurgutis, I stood first in line — we were the first to step through the mysterious doors, guarded by two dark men.

— Hurry up, you alte Kamele — that is, you old camel! — two sticks whacked Jurgutis' back.

— Hurry up, you old carcass — I also got a label and two sticks on the neck.

Jurgutis and I were no exception — everyone got the same.

— Alte Kamele, — whack with the stick.

— Old carcass, — whack with the stick.

Everyone's rights were equal, everyone got the same except those who were sprighter and bounded like deer out of the way.

Hm... Anyway you look at it, the customs of this land are strange! I'd even prefer the old Asian greeting method, of rubbing noses with men...

Whack, whack, whack, — as many times as we went through those doors, that's how many times the sticks whacked. The third time around we already learned to stick out the pallets instead of our necks. Unfortunately, our discovery came too late: the pallets were already carried over.

Again the gargling operatic command:

— Go inside, in the barrack with the pallets; Lithuanians lay against that wall, Poles — by that one, Byelorussians — through the middle.

The sticked men, like senators of some kind, — once again by the door.

Everyone has the desire to hurry up and sneak past them and hide behind someone's back in the barrack. But when two hundred people want very much to jump through a small door very quickly — usually the door suffers. This time the sticks suffered: they broke, poor things.

— We landed in an insane asylum, or some such devil!

We tumbled, we toppled over as best we could, ignoring the ordered arrangement. Well, well, — we shall see.

The man of the bruiser species announced himself inside: he will be our boss for this night and for him, who will disobey, there will be — oho!

— There; this boss will be for one event, this — for another. He who dares look through the side window or knock on it — will be a cur's whelp, instead of being roasted like a goose.

Having established this type of order, this bruiser began tramping around the bosses. He snorted over there, snorted, swore, swore, ever slower and slower, until he became quiet.

— Is Stan finally asleep? — we sighed quietly.

Are you kidding! Suddenly he succulently cursed and again began tromping around.

— Hey, you, this and that, four legged and two legged old carcasses, bums, and curs, and another kind — he addressed himself to us — who has gold? Who has watches? Who has money? All this will be taken from you. We would be wisest to give it all to him. He'll also take bacon. He doesn't need bread — divide the bread up amongst yourselves. Well, who has gold? Who— watches?

A voice — shouting from the void. Two hundred people laying like lifeless flies. No one not only doesn't give anything but also doesn't answer.

— Hey, you, sons of all bitches, will you give me your watches?

Irate at our rudeness, he began to step through us. Strange was this man's habit of walking: he puts his foot where it lands: on someone's stomach, on someone's—chest on someone's — head. And the stick is still working — he has to lean on something: there's no light in the shed, a man could fall down.

— Hey, Judas, you're climbing on my head with your shoes, — someone shrieked in the dark.

— Dimwit, give back the watch!

Some kind of telling scuffle. The quickened panting of two men. An angry wheeze through the teeth.

— What has he thought of now?

Suddenly — some kind of breathless blow, something heavy and soft hit against the boss with good intentions and then buffeted to the floor.

— Which mongrel kicked the bruiser in the stomach? Who's kicking here like a rabid camel? Who's the bum?

Nope, there's no one like that. No one's admitting who so unroyally degraded that majestic stomach. Everyone's silent.

— For the last time, you dog crap, I'm asking: who kicked his stomach?

Look for fools somewhere else, — you'll find them in the dark! No one saw. There's no one here like that. Kickers and fools.

— Oh — so that's the way it is?! I'll show you!.. — What he threatened to do, there's no way I could write it down.

— Oh, Jesus, Mary! Oh God! — shrieking voices were heard in the dark.

The raging bruiser, no longer having the guts to step through the sprawled out forms, began clouting those laying near the boss with his stick — those which he could reach.

— From hell itself some of these arrived! — sighed my neighbor, a Pole from Bialystok, just in time to get hit on the head with the stick and now took me along with him under the pallet.

The bruiser simmered down after knocking a few more sides and necks with his stick. A human — not a machine: he tires.

He breathed with difficulty, burning with rage. For a time he talked to himself, muttering about bosses for this kind and this kind of activities, until he began to loudly snore.

His snoring was more pleasant that the warbling of a nightingale.

— Maybe that unlynched lyncher won't wake up till morning! If only the heavens wouldn't begrudge him the sweetest sleep! If only in his dreams some hangman would strangle him.

Morning wasn't far away, but...

Scientists discover dynamite... Why don't they discover an instrument which could give this night a quick little push and forever roll it away.

XII. **The Fate of Death**

— Hey, you over there! Professors, lawyers, priests, prosecutors! — yells the wild Tyrolian Toni Fabro, the secretary of our block, even his spit dribbles through his cheeks, — hey, you, with the intelligence of a dog's tail, stand here, along the fence, on the right!

So we stand for him here, along the fence, on the right. Having grumbled more obscenities and having exercised his tongue and all fours, he says to us:

— Hey, you, pig snouts, go carry the dead. From the block and from the corridor, to the hospital. Lay them down by the hospital. But watch out, don't lose them. I'll cook you a cereal from their snouts.

What can we do! We go and look for the dead. Brrr... anyway! How can this be. A poet, a lyricist — and dragging corpses around!

— Uh, uh, sons of bitches, don't make faces! No need to. In a month you'll be the same! Faster, you dog shit! — foams the wild Tyrolian Toni Fabro.

— Maybe the wild Tyrolian Toni Fabro is telling the truth, thunder only knows, — you sign silently and begin groping for the corpses' leg.

How in the world do you carry it, — you can't figure it out, this corpse is so horrible, blue, black... And these small white animals can be seen; not having had time to get away to a new body, they hurry scurry in small groups, on the surface of the clothing, not incomparable to sheep recently scared by a mean dog.

Finally, urged on by a cadged on the side, we cling to these corpses, not unlike cockroaches in jellied pigs-feet. It was all chance. Some had better luck — four men would cling to one corpse, a man on each leg and arm — and a corpse would swim away, his ass barely dragging; sometimes climbing a hill and sliding a little, — but then that's the fate of death — or isn't it the same for him? Today he is dragged by four, tomorrow I may be bounced around by one leg — for these trivialities, a corpse should not feel insulted.

I didn't fare quite as well. Two of us, my dear friend Jonas, the Calvinist from Biržai and I, remained by one corpse. Jonas hefted the front end of the corpse onto his farmworker's shoulders, I hitched myself into the corpse's feet, almost a plow to unearth the potatoes — we continue our concentration camp duties.

Along the way, our corpse sighs in a depressed distressed muffled moan.

— Uh, oh, — angrily mutters my dear friend Jonas, the Calvinist from Biržai, — why are you sighing? Once you're dead, stay dead, don't sigh for pete's sake! No one's seen such a thing: dead — and sighing!

We sway another 30 feet and our little corpse opens his eyes and speaks out in such a quiet, gentle voice:

— I'm terribly uncomfortable... Choking... Friends, let me go... I'd rather walk myself...

Jonas and I look at him. For sure. A dead man is talking. He shakes his lips, closes them rolls his eyes. He's dried like a skeleton and over the bones is stretched blue flecked skin.

Rolling along with the corpse, we carried him near the hospital which wasn't even far. By its edge with their eyes closed, others—with open eyes, naked with a number marked down with chemical pencils on the chest and belly. Exactly like on a parcel. Wasn't there perhaps some sort of former postman in our government ranks to send the corpses to heaven so neatly numbered?

Other corpses were still clothed. Others — gaped and stared. Others — shook their hands and legs, maybe even pondering on getting up and running? A few corpses sat up on the snow and with hazy eyes, as if gorged on loco weed, looked around...

It's not good for the heart to be near these corpses, but it's also not good to move away from them...

Having left the corpses, our heads hung low, my friend Jonas and I ambled away to do our chores and to wait for the time when it will be our turn to lay down on the snow by the hospital window. But there are some sort of slivers wading through the soul upon leaving the sitting and soaking corpses in that manner. What can be done now?

Having found an out-of-the-way spot behind the barracks, we hid and stared not knowing what out corpses would do next. Unrepairable poor things!

One, perhaps remembering his young days, his mother, or his beloved country, not able to brace himself, to stand up, begins groveling, crawling across the yard. Quietly, gritting his teeth as if he felt no pain, not — moaning, — as if he wasn't trampled at night in the corridor, — as if still had important business in the world!

According to his example, a second, a third started moving...

Even if they're corpses, they still want to live a little!

About man's love for his close ones, about humanism, there were once written many books... Eh, never mind! They're not worth reading!

For me and my friend Jonas, the Calvinist from Biržai, our hair stood up as in the middle of an electric current.

— The devil's shit... — he said in surprise. Even he couldn't curse more decently.

Suddenly, from the hospital door, out jumped the devil. A fact. A true devil, even if he is similar to a modern man, with a white apron across his entire belly. Spying the crawling corpses, he swore like in hell, like only the devils know how. Catching them by their feet, he vigorously pulled the naughty corpses back into the pile. He pulled them back, laid them out in rows, battered their shins and heads, checked the numbers on their bellys. Satisfied with his work, he glanced at them. For sure, his work was well done. Not a single corpse moved, blinked, stared.

— And you shitheads, bastards, what are you doing here? — my friend Jonas, the Calvinist from Biržai and I heard the bumping of a stick across our backs, — do you want me to cut your intestines loose?

Not even bothering to look up and see who offered such a friendly service, my friend Jonas, the Calvinist from Biržai, and I vanished back to our block where our other friends were already lined up and waiting for something.

Only in the spring of 1944 was a reform passed concerning the matter of corpses. It was no longer necessary to pull them out by the feet from the blocks. Instead they would be undressed in the block, a number would be written with a chemical pencil on their chests, they would be laid out on a wide board, — on the same one which is used for slicing bread, — a blanket would cover them, and four men, led by the block chief, would carry the body in an even march. If there happened to be more corpses, they would nicely pile them naked one next to the other, several layers high covered with canvas and drive them neatly and trimly as if they were a marmalade load.

Once in the neighboring block a loud uproar began in the early morning hours. Screaming, shrieking, swearing like devils, even the barrack walls barked. Nine people died in the block over night. The block secretary undressed them, wrote the numbers on their chests, lined them up neatly in the washroom, and presented the notice of the number dead with their appropriate numbers and the block chief's signature, to the camp government.

The block chief, it seems, having boxed a respectful number of ears, turned into the washroom to wash his hands. He splashes his little hands around the tap, hums "Marsz, marsz Dąbrowski." He glances over his shoulder, just in case, at his numberlings laying in the corner like Northern Pike.

— Hm... hm... what the devil? — the block chief is amazed, — crazy?!

He quickly strides over to the corpses.

— One, two, three... seven, eight... Well, yes, eight! Of course, eight... Franciszek, Franciszek! — rants the block chief, calling his secretary, — Franciszek, why don't you croak in the john!

Franciszek, the one being called, canters up breathless.

— You, son of a bitch, you stuck me a piece of paper to sign, saying that nine had died today? There's only eight left! Of counting, pig, you're incapable?

— What do you mean eight? — Franciszek is astonished — there were exactly nine, cut and dry. I counted them myself.

— Then count, idiot, how many are laying there! — the block chief gets hot — for this prank I could lay you out like a dead cow in place of the ninth corpse!

Franciszek is visibly saddened. Looks here, looks there — there's no ninth, no matter what! What retards could have stolen a corpse? Having stolen it, maybe they started eating it?!

The heads of the entire block swarmed and streamed, not incomparable to cockroaches being steamed. Milling around the room. Looking for the corpse. Looking under beds, along beds, under pallats, grappling everywhere, anywhere it's possible to grapple... looking and swearing, swearing and looking. Meanwhile from the john emerges some kind of indefinite creation of the shadows, once perhaps similar to a man. Perhaps he once was a man, who knows. Now he was out of

joint, crooked, doubled over, with protruding ribs, jutting cheek bones, naked, with a number painted on his chest... no — now he has very little left in common with a man.

The block chief, seeing him, even bent over in the corridor like a bulldog readying for an attack on a gendarme's calf.

— You, dead man's crap, where are you hanging around now? Huh? Where are you hanging around, dog shit? Where's your place?

— Panie blokowy — meaning Mister block chief — complained the ghost, once similar to a man —my stomach hurts so bad, brzuch boli, hurts so bad — hurts so bad I couldn't stand it... I went. I'm sorry... panie blokowy...

— Tch, you, pig slime, you dare to talk to me? Where's your place? March to your place! Now hurry!

— I'm very sorry, panie blokowy, — gasps the hunched up ghost, once similar to a man — soughs and sways to his place.

And he swayed away. He laid down naked on the cement next to the other eight corpses. A broom's bristles he took for a pillow. He laid down and died. What was there left for him to do?

In the concentration camp everyone obeys one law: he who is sentenced to death, dies. Oh, forget it!

Generally, in the camp, corpses were a fairly obedient group.

Another corpse had sewn on a healthy prisoner's number, not his own, and was probably getting ready to run. Or the block secretary's head aches from guzzling. It aches so bad that he isn't even able to correctly read off the number on a corpse. He writes down another number, sometimes that of a live man. The number of the corpse remains untouched in the books, crossed out is the number of the healthy and live man.

So, a citizen who ends up in the corpse count through this kind of misunderstanding, usually dies quickly in the camp, dies of all kind of diseases, or a brick is aimed and hits the top of his head, or he falls very hard somewhere so even his bones crumble, or he usually hangs himself... Of course if he wasn't smart enough to die at the right time, there turned up help. When this kind of volunteer corpse died, the other number of the first corpse is crossed out in the books — the one for whom this one laid down his head. Now, both are dead, both numbers are crossed out in the books, — the books stay clean.

Looking though the eyes of the government, this kind of citizen who by mistake lands among the corpse numbers must die. If allowed to live, he could create many unpleasantries.

The central camp headquarters in Berlin are informed that he is dead. At this point a message should be sent out that a mistake occurred, — Berlin could think that the camp administration is incapable of taking care of its responsibilities — why is this necessary, who enjoys this?! Anyway this is looked at, this type of walking corpse is a very undesirable element to the camp. For example, knowing that he is crossed out in the books as dead, he escapes from the camp. Then no one can trace who it was that escaped. Everyone will know: one is missing. Who is missing — no one knows. All the living are present, some corpse is missing! How is it possible to find out which corpse is missing?

Another, preparing to escape, deliberately makes sure that his number is written in the corpse list. Another would sew his number on a dead man's pants, and the dead man's number — on his own. This allowed him to stay dead a few weeks even with the help of others, and he is an almost free citizen: in the books he is already crossed out — in the political division, and in the work bureau, and in the administrational government. Everyone has forgotten him, — just sit back and wait for a comfortable moment and then vanish from the camp in the guises of the corpse!

No, — the live corpses in the eyes of the government could not be likable customers!

It was more comfortable for everyone when they really did die. And so they — died. They didn't care how, which disease, as long as they died.

Anyway, from the middle of the summer of 1944 there is a pause in death. They don't die — and that's that, what can you do?

The government agents are angry, they swear, cross out names in their books, send corrections to Berlin, and to the more lively of the corpses, bricks no longer fall on their heads, ribs no longer break, the ones who hang no longer have help...

On the whole, the camp changed in the summer of 1944, but who would have believed they would last until this actually came about, having been in the camp since the very beginning of 1943?