

On the Poet Matilda Olkinaitė

(1922-1941)

LAIMA VINCĖ

June 6, 2023, marks 101 years since the Lithuanian Jewish poet Matilda Olkinaitė was born in independent Lithuania, in the small agricultural town of Panemunėlis. She studied in Lithuanian schools and at Vilnius University. She spoke and wrote fluently in Lithuanian, in addition to Yiddish, German, French, and Russian. By age 9, she was a published poet in the Lithuanian language. By age 19, she was dead, killed by local Lithuanian Nazi collaborators, known as "Baltaraišči-ai" or white arm banders because of their identifying white armbands. These men were a type of home guard who were responsible for arresting and then liquidating Jewish residents. Matilda was a strong patriot of independent Lithuania, evident from her poetry and diary entries. During the first Soviet occupation, she rejected communist ideas and sided with Lithuanians, expressing empathy for Lithuanians who experienced political repressions. "And yet, for them it is an even greater catastrophe," she wrote in her diary. Matilda's poetry embodied both a Jewish and a Lithuanian worldview. Had she lived, she may have grown into a great classic Lithuanian poet.

"It's been a strange summer this year. Every goodbye is painful. And it seems as though everything is passing and will soon be gone forever. When I parted with my love, I felt as though I'd never see him again."

These words were written by the young poet Matilda Olkinaitė in the summer of 1940 when she was just 18 years old. Not even a year after she'd written this diary entry describing her haunting intuition, she and her two younger sisters, Mika and Grunė, her parents, and another Jewish family, the Joffees, were shot and their bodies dumped in a shallow grave alongside a field so barren the locals dubbed it "The Sahara."

What was the reason for their execution? They were Litvaks, Lithuanian Jews, a people whose roots in Lithuania stretched back for centuries. In 1941 the Litvaks were accused of collaborating with the Soviets. Nazi propaganda spread these lies as an explanation for Soviet brutality. The Nazis invaded Lithuania in June 1941 – the same week that Soviet occupiers deported Lithuania's intellectual and professional class, both Christians and Jews, to the Arctic regions of Siberia. Roughly 17,000 people from Lithuania were deported to Siberia within a week.

I have studied Matilda's diary and poems, publications, and have interviewed her childhood friends, who were still alive when I began my research in 2018. Since that time, I have written and published essays

about her life and poetry, have translated from Lithuanian into English her diary and all her poems – her entire body of poetic work – and have written a novel that reflects the last year of her life based on her diary and poetry. From 1938 onwards, Matilda's poems shift from pastoral expressions of her love for the Lithuanian land to visionary poems about the fate of the Jewish people. She is continually haunted by an intuition that the Jewish civilization in Europe is destined to be lost. At times, in her poems, she dreams of her escape from her own fate, only to concede that escaping her fate as a Jew is not possible.

Matilda's poem, "The Cerulean Bird" (Mėlynas Paukštis), published in *Lietuvos žinios* (Lithuanian News) on March 30, 1940, is an example of this tendency in her poetry. Matilda imagines herself as a cerulean bird "flying endlessly ecstatic/ Singing a golden hymn/About happiness eternal/Joy that cannot be broken/A smile that never ceases." This flight of joy does not last long: "Three arrows pierced her/Carrying black death within." The skies are shattered and all that is left is "Her last trembling breath/Her bottomless longing."

Who was Matilda?

Matilda Olkinaitė was born June 6, 1922, in Panemunėlis, in the Rokiškis region of northeastern Lithuania. Matilda's parents, Noachas Olkinas (1891-1941) and Asna Šliachteraitė-Olkinienė (1894-1941) met and married in Vilna (Vilnius). They settled in Panemunėlis in 1920 when they were given permission to open a pharmacy. They built their house near the train station, and their four children were born and raised there: Elijas Leibas Olkinas, also called Ilya (1919-1944), Matilda, also called Matlė (1922-1941), Mindelė, also called Mika (1925-1941), and Grunė (1930-1941). Matilda's grandmother, Lotė Šliachterienė (1865-1941?), also lived with the family. They all died in the Holocaust.

Matilda graduated from the Panemunėlis Elementary School, then attended the Kupiškis Gymnasium (1932-1935), and later the Rokiškis State Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas Gymnasium, graduating on June 15, 1939. In the autumn of 1939, Matilda began her studies in French language and literature at the Department of Humanities at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. In 1940, after the Soviets occupied Lithuania and returned the historic capital Vilnius to the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Faculty of Humanities was transferred from Kaunas to Vilnius. Matilda returned to live and study in her parents' native city, known to Jews as Vilna, the Jerusalem of the North. According to a surviving building registry, Matilda rented a room in apartment 32 at 16 Basanavičius Street. This build-



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ing is the location where the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow lived and is the childhood home of the writer Romain Gray. It is also the location where YIVO had its origins, and Max Weinreich, professor of Yiddish linguistics and director of YIVO, once lived.

Matilda's diary documents the last year of her life living under Soviet occupation. On November 18, 1940, Matilda writes: "This summer was not like summer at all. Many traditions have been dismantled. And I was living with all my sad premonitions. [...] Everything seems to be taking place in a sad dream. I must wake up, I must." At the same time, her diary documents a life full of love, youth, creativity, and the pleasures of intellectual literary pursuits. Much of the diary describes Matilda's secret love for a young Lithuanian young man from Kaunas, a student.

Matilda's Poetry

Matilda's first poem was published in 1931, when she was barely nine years old. Most of her juvenilia was published in two popular interwar literary magazines for children, *Žvaigždutė* (Little Star) and *Kregždutė* (Little Sparrow). Matilda's early poetry was published in 1935-1936 in Polish-occupied Vilnius. The editors of these two magazines recognized Matilda's talent and encouraged her to write poetry from an early age. Later, in 1940, Matilda's poetry was published in the Lithuanian newspaper, *Lietuvos Žinios* (Lithuania's News).

Although Matilda dreamed of publishing her first poetry collection, she admits in her diary that it was impossible for her to publish under the Soviet occupation. On September 3, 1940, she writes:

"Oh, that poetry collection of mine! I am working on it with no inspiration, knowing that no one will publish it anyway. There is nothing in my poems that is relevant. I write about the pain of suffering over centuries at a time when we are required to sing about how happy we are today and about our bright tomorrow."

In an entry dated August 29, 1940, Matilda expresses her frustration at Lithuanian poets collaborating with the Soviet regime: "Salomėja Nėris, Liudas Gira – I cannot fathom how normal people can write like that."



Matilda's class photo



Matilda's childhood photo, celebrating the Jewish holiday Purim.

Matilda's early poems are influenced by the Lithuanian neo-romantic poets of her childhood. Many of her earliest poems express the interwar patriotism of an independent Lithuania. The rhythms of Matilda's poetry reflect the cadences, repetitions, and rhyme schemes of Lithuanian and Yiddish folk songs. Her diary shows that Matilda loved to sing folk songs with her friends. The structure of folk songs often shapes the prosody of her poems.

In the autumn of 1938, Matilda's poems shift from nature themes to reflections on her Jewish heritage. These poems hint at the tragedy of being Jewish at a time of rising antisemitism in Europe. Matilda read the newspapers. She must have been aware of rising tensions in neighboring Germany. At the same time, Matilda's Jewish poems express an uncanny premonition. The poem, "During the Gnosiology Lesson," was jotted down in hasty handwriting in Matilda's notebook. In this poem, Lithuania's Jews – the "we" of the poem – disappear behind three hills, a Lithuanian folkloric concept of entering a mythological place "beyond the clouds," meaning beyond life. In this poem, in her consciousness and imagination, Matilda melds her dual identity as a Jew and as a young woman growing up on the Lithuanian land, replete with its own array of folk symbols and inner logic tied to the rhythms of nature.

While studying at Vilnius University, the style of Matilda's poetry shifts, and she begins to write symbolic, visionary poems that prophesize impending doom for the Jewish people and for Lithuania. In the spring of 1940, Matilda writes "A Jewish Lullaby," a poem that expresses her growing sense of foreboding about what it means to be Jewish in Europe during a time of rising antisemitism. At the same time, the poem reaches back in history, referencing the experience of the long-suffering Jewish nation.

[...]

*And suffering will wait for you,
Like a beloved friend, beside the gate.
Great suffering and hardship
Will carry you silently through long generations.*

[...]

As a student at Vilnius University, Matilda attended lectures with Lithuania's most famous professors and literary figures: Contemporary Lithuanian Literature with Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas,

World Literature with Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius, Linguistics with Antanas Salys, Lithuanian language with Pranas Skardžius, and Introduction to Philosophy with Izidorius Tamošaitis. She studied alongside a group of young poets who, in 1944, escaped to the West and later shaped the style and voice of postwar Lithuanian émigré poetry. Matilda did not survive to complete her degree at Vilnius University. On September 19, 1941, Olkinaitė was officially expelled from Vilnius University. The reason stated for her expulsion was that she was Jewish. By this time, Matilda had been dead for three months.

Matilda's Final Day

Hidden behind a haystack, an eight-year-old girl watched a horse-drawn wagon of blindfolded people, flanked by armed guards on bicycles, creak up the hill towards the desolate bog. Half a century later, this little girl, Aldona Šarkauskaitė-Dranseikienė, described what she saw in an oral history archived at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. She recalls members of the family climbing down from the wagon, being forced to strip their clothes and walk to the edge of the field. After screams and cries that the witness recalls went on for what seemed like hours, the final gunshots came, and then there was silence.

Matilda Olkinaitė's poetry survived through a series of miracles. Matilda managed to conceal her notebook of poems when she was lured out of her home by local Lithuanian Nazi collaborators and arrested along with the other Jews of her native Panemunėlis. A family friend, the local Catholic parish priest, Rev. Juozapas Matelionis, negotiated with the Nazis to take Matilda's family from their place of incarceration at the local train station to allegedly join a work brigade. Instead, he hid them in the parish rectory. However, late one night, Matilda's father, Noachas Olkinas, went out for a walk and saw a poster displayed by the Nazis threatening to kill any Lithuanians who hid Jews. Weighing the moral consequences, Noachas Olkinas hurried back to the rectory and urged his family to turn themselves in to the Nazis and spare the life of the priest.

Apparently, at that time, Matilda passed the notebook of poems to Rev. Matelionis, who hid the notebook inside a shelf beneath the main altar of the Panemunėlis church. The priest knew this hiding place because in decades past, under the rule of the Russian Tsar, it had been used to hide Lithuanian books when the Lithuanian language and Latin alphabet were banned. Now this hiding place for Lithuanian books was used to hide a Jewish girl's poems written in Lithuanian.

In 1944, the Red Army occupied Lithuania again, driving out the Nazis. People who belonged to religious orders, and those who had shown courage by hiding their Jewish countrymen, came under Soviet suspicion. In November 1950, Rev. Matelionis was arrested, accused of anti-Soviet activities, and brought to Vilnius to be interrogated in the KGB prison headquarters. In 1951, the priest was de-

ported to the Marinsk Labor Camp in Siberia. He returned to Lithuania in 1954 after Stalin's death. He served in the Utena Church, died in 1964, and was buried in the Alanta cemetery.

While serving in Utena, Rev. Matelionis befriended Alfredas Andrijauskas, the church organist. He entrusted him with Matilda's story and told him about the hidden notebook of poems. The organist returned to Panemunėlis and retrieved Matilda's notebook. He kept the notebook hidden for years. During the Soviet occupation, no mention of the Holocaust could be made. Even holding onto an old notebook from the years of independence that contained direct references to Jewish heritage could lead to a prison sentence.

Years later, in the 1980s, while writing a dissertation on Friedrich Schiller at Vilnius University, Andrijauskas found the right person to pass Matilda's notebook on to – his doctoral thesis advisor, Dr. Irena " (1933-2020). She was a theater critic and professor of literature and also a Holocaust survivor, rescued as a teenager by a Lithuanian Catholic family.

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Selected poems of Matilda Olkinaitė

Translated by Laima Vincė

Humanity

You have conquered everything—
Thunder, gales, lightning;
You have unlocked the wonders
Of the past, all the world's secrets.

And you can fly just like a bird,
Turning circles in the sky;
Only one thing you still have not learned—
You've yet to become a Mensch!

1937

My People

A pair of dark eyes ignite once again
With a pain that cannot be extinguished.
And they—they just keep walking past, away.
But for me, Lord, there are no words.

Do you hear? Do you hear that awful laughter?
The hills, even the hills shake with the sound—
And the rivers will faint, and the seas will faint—
And the stones will cry, the stones will cry...

You are laughing? You walk past and keep on walking,
But for me, Lord, there are no words for my horror.
That laughter—that awful laughter... And dark eyes flash
With an undying, relentless pain.

November 26, 1938

Blaze in the Sea

We will dance a wild dance,
Between swells, surge, fire.
Howl, waves! Cry, mothers!
We will dance a wild dance.
We will dance one final time for the sea,
And then we will crumple in the burning boat.

There is no road—we will not turn back.
There is no road—we will not go forward.
We will dance a wild dance—
Waves twist and howl, and crash.
Wreak havoc, storm! We will wrestle yet
With surge, with swells, and with fire!

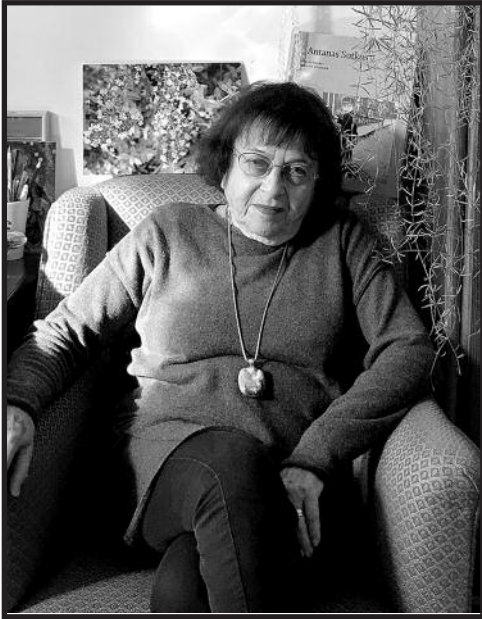
If we grow weary and quietly collapse,
Our skiff will sink silently to the depths.
If our words freeze on our lips,
If our eyes and hearts stop dead,
Do not say that we did not die fighting
The surge, the swells, and fire.

We danced a wild dance
Between surge, swells, fire.
We danced our last dance
As our skiff sailed a burning sea
Between swells, surge, and fire.

July 25, 1939

On the Poet Matilda Olkinaitė

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Prof. Irena Veisaitė in her home.

In those dark totalitarian years, trusting the wrong person could lead to imprisonment, but Andrijauskas decided to trust Irena Veisaitė. She hid the notebook of poems deep inside her dresser.

As it later turned out, the apartment Veisaitė had lived in most of her life, located at 16 Basanavičius Street, was located in the same building where Matilda had rented a room while a student at Vilnius University. Thus, the notebook of poems was returned to the exact same location where it was originally written.

A Collaboration of Women

In 2018, I went to see Veisaitė to ask permission to translate Matilda's poems and diary into English. She trusted me with her poems and diary and granted permission. The work of recovering Matilda's voice and story initially came about as a collaboration between women of different generations who believed that Matilda's voice should not be silenced.

Neringa Danienė, theater director for the Rokiškis Community Theater, adapted the diary and poems of Olkinaitė to create a documentary play called "The Silenced Muses." The plot of the play draws from research done by Panemunėlis historian Violeta Aleknienė, who began researching the story of the Olkinas family murders after hearing about it from her parents, who were just a few years younger than Matilda. Much of what we know about Matilda comes from Aleknienė's research.

I first saw "The Silenced Muses"

in 2018. Neringa asked me to translate Matilda's poetry into English and planned to publish a bilingual book of Matilda's poetry and diary. She was raising funds to finance the book's publication. I published an article about Matilda in May 2018 in the online magazine *Deep Baltic*. That article drew the attention of *Smithsonian* magazine, who then sent their reporter, Matthew Shaer, to write a version of my article for publication in the *Smithsonian*. Neringa and I felt strongly that Matilda's poetry and diary must be published in Lithuania, so we brought our research and my translations to the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and met with the director at the

time, Mindaugas Kvietkauskas. We invited Kvietkauskas to participate in the project as the Lithuanian language editor for the book. He agreed to publish Matilda's book under the title "Atrakintas dienoraštis," and invited his friend, the book designer Sigutė Chlebinskaitė, to design the book. Sigutė spent time in the archives, supplementing the photographs and documents that had been found by Aleknienė and historians at the Rokiškis Museum, and created a beautifully designed book that includes images of the original diary and poetry notebook.

Matilda spoke the language of poetry, and poetry speaks to us at our deepest level of humanity. To understand Matilda—the depth of her poetic soul—it is necessary to access her poetry through the prism of emotion. Matilda was barely 19 years old when she was murdered. She'd only just begun to find her voice as a poet. And yet, being so young, she absorbed the horror of her times, perceived the impending danger of the Holocaust, sensed the fundamental tragedy of humanity, and that this human tragedy is destined to repeat itself age after age. Despite the times she lived in, she reveled in the fragile beauty of life. She lived in a time of shadow but also in a time of light. She lived in a time of shattering contrasts. Matilda's poems show us that the beauty of the written word strengthens us, even in our most tragic hour. □



Neringa Danienė and her daughter Eva and I visiting with Matilda's childhood friend Liucija Neniskyte Vizgirdienė

viewpoints



Ukraine's NATO Opportunity is a Chance for the West

KARL ALTAI

The NATO Summit will be held in Vilnius, Lithuania, July 11-12. Depending on Ukraine's ongoing counteroffensive against Russian occupiers, we will soon find out the possible path for Ukraine's further integration with the West.

Ukraine has already been offered an EU Membership plan. The decision regarding its future NATO direction will be made clear during the NATO Summit.

Ukraine's journey toward EU membership is progressing, as it submitted its application letter on February 28, 2022, just four days after the commencement of Russia's large-scale invasion. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy requested immediate admission to the European Union under a special procedure immediately supported by eight EU countries, including the three Baltic nations. The European Parliament voted to advance Ukraine's membership following a 637-13 vote in favor, with 26 abstentions. On June 23 last year, the European Council granted Ukraine the status of a candidate for accession to the EU. It's clear that Ukraine can and will join the EU once the war ends.

But what about NATO membership? Ukraine has proven itself to be a reliable partner for three decades as it has been cooperating with NATO since the early 1990s through the Partnership for Peace program and participating in NATO-led operations and joint military exercises. Ukraine applied to receive a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2008. Still, membership was delayed later that year at the Bucharest NATO Summit, and MAPs were put on hold for both Ukraine and Georgia. NATO accession became a priority for Ukraine after the initial Russian invasion in 2014, and following the renewed Russian attack last year, Ukraine formally submitted its application to become a NATO member on September 30, 2022.

On the eve of the NATO Summit in Vilnius, there is an increasingly spirited discussion of what decisions regarding Ukraine can be expected in Vilnius to move the ball forward.

The Biden administration has been deliberate, steady, and calculating in its support for Ukraine's NATO aspirations, which is coupled with much bipartisan support in the United States Congress for the goal of Ukrainian membership. The question is no longer if or when but how soon?

Certainly, one major factor is how successfully Ukraine drives Russia out of the occupied territories, including Crimea. Other partners, including the Baltics and Poland, have been pushing forward more actively for a speedier accession for Ukraine, echoing the sentiments of Oleksii Reznikov, the Ukrainian Minister of Defense. Reznikov spoke during a May 5 forum hosted in Washington, DC. The think tank summarized:

"The Vilnius summit must deliver a concrete path for Ukraine's membership in the Alliance. But that is not all. Security guarantees and necessary military defense equipment are Ukraine's top requests from NATO, and Reznikov is hoping NATO leaders will address these needs at the summit."

Estonia, of course, has been one of the biggest supporters and material contributors to Ukraine's fight, at least on a per capita basis. The fact that Estonia will be raising its defense spending to three percent of its GDP by next year points to the country's seriousness in doing what it can to protect itself. Estonian president Alar Karis recently urged other NATO allies to strive to that level, and certainly above the current two percent threshold, which only nine NATO members reach, which again includes Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Marko Mihkelson, Chairman of the Estonian parliament's (Riigikogu) Foreign Affairs Committee, said following a June 11 gathering with the Central and East European Coalition in Washington, DC:

"The outcome of the Ukrainian independence war will determine the future of all of Europe. Therefore, it is important that Ukraine, which wins this war

of independence, immediately receives such security guarantees that would exclude a new Russian attack. Achieving lasting peace and stability in Europe is only possible through Ukraine's victory and its membership invitation to NATO. Therefore, it is important that our allies in the U.S. understand what is at stake."

In meetings with members of the U.S. Congress during the week of June 13, Mihkelson added that "we focused on the Vilnius NATO summit and the importance of giving Ukraine a clear perspective on joining NATO."

Ukraine has sacrificed much, but it has also demonstrated the strength of a free nation in protecting not just its own freedom but also the security of other nations with similar values. This message was amplified during the Ukrainian Days advocacy event on Capitol Hill on June 14-15, which the Joint Baltic American National Committee again supported.

The only NATO road is a path forward for Ukraine and away from Russia's destructive clutches. The West cannot miss this opportunity to act decisively on behalf of a good partner versus an evil destroyer and disrupter. If not at Vilnius next month, then certainly at the 75th anniversary NATO Summit in Washington, DC, in April 2024 for sure.

Join JBANC's Baltic Advocacy Day in Washington, DC, on July 20-21. For additional details and registration, please visit <https://jbanc.org/2023/06/13/baltic-advocacy-days/> □

Karl Altai is the Managing Director of the Joint Baltic American National Committee (JBANC) in Washington, D.C.