

IN MEMORIAM, IRENA VEISAITĖ, JANUARY 9, 1928 – DECEMBER 11, 2020

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By Laima Vincė

As I write, Lithuania ranks first in the world as the country worst affected by coronavirus. These numbers hurt the most when we lose someone dear to us. On December 11, 2020, just before noon, my friend and mentor, Dr. Irena Veisaitė, died in Vilnius from complications from Covid-19 and pneumonia. Irena was 92.

The pandemic has robbed those of us who survive the opportunity to mourn those we have lost with a traditional funeral or memorial service. The dangers of coronavirus have suspended the cultural rituals that have sustained us in times of grief throughout human history. In our age, marked by this merciless pandemic, it is the written word and the virtual world that must now serve as our space of mourning. Writing across the void of the internet, we create a virtual cemetery of loss. I turn now to the written word to eulogize my dear friend, who gave so much to Lithuania, and to the world, and who left me with so many precious life lessons. Irena Veisaitė was a remarkable woman, who gave of herself selflessly to her country, her students, her work, her family. She inspired all who had the honor of meeting her. With her loss, a great lady has passed out of our midst.

It feels appropriate to honor Irena with the written word. Irena often recalled that her love of literature began in her childhood home in Kaunas where the walls were lined with bookshelves filled with great books. She was born in 1928 into the home of Litvak (Jewish-Lithuanian) parents who belonged to Lithuania's interwar intellectual elites. Her father, Izidorius Veisas, was a successful businessman, and her mother, Sofija Štromaitė-Veisienė, studied law at Vytautas Magnus University. Irena's mother would travel to Germany in the thirties to listen to lectures on psychoanalysis. Irena remembered her as a warm and loving mother.

Irena grew up in a fashionable home in the prestigious Old Town neighborhood of Kaunas during the interwar years of Lithuania's first period of independence. Her character was formed by the cultural norms and morality of an independent Lithuania. At that time, through education, a new democratic society sought to instill in young people a sense of duty, integrity, honor, dedication to one's country, education, professional calling, and the absolute necessity of keeping one's word.

Irena attended a Jewish school, the Sholom Aleichem Gymnasium, from 1934 until 1941, when the Nazi occupation of Lithuania closed all Jewish schools. Her parents spoke to her in Lithuanian, Russian, and Yiddish. Growing up she moved effortlessly between these three languages. Irena liked to say, "I am a Lithuanian, a Jew, and a European." Intellectual discussions, debates, cultural evenings, the theater, were integral to the formation of her character as a child until World War II brought that world to a shambles.

In 1938, before the world of her childhood was lost by the Nazi occupation of Lithuania (1941-1944), Irena experienced a personal tragedy—her parents' devastating divorce when she was ten. Her father left the country. It was agreed that Irena would spend the school year in Kaunas with her mother and the summers with her father.

The summer of 1938, Irena's father took her on a European tour through Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and France. In Berlin, while strolling on the famous avenue, *Unter den Linden*, Irena's father invited her to sit down on a yellow bench designated for German Jews. They were Lithuanian citizens and therefore could sit wherever they wished; however, her father wanted to make a point. He told Irena that she should sit on this bench for a while and reflect on how terrible it is to be singled out and discriminated against.

Irena often told this story to illustrate the moment in her life that shaped her lifelong commitment to tolerance. "I did not completely understand this life lesson then," Irena said, "but many years later I began to understand, and I integrated it into my life."

In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, and Irena lost contact with her father. He survived the War in Belgium and emigrated to the United States in 1951. She only met him again in 1968, thirty years after their summer tour together.

In the summer of 1941, when she was 13, Irena lost her mother.

"On June 16, 1941, my mother was hospitalized and had to have an operation," Irena recalled. "While she was in the hospital, the war began in Lithuania. I heard bombs exploding and ran to the hospital to be with my mother. On July 26th, the Lithuanian home guard, the so-called White Armbanders, came to the hospital to arrest my mother. The surgeon, Dr. Vincas Kanauka, stopped them from taking my mother away, arguing that she would bleed to death so soon after surgery. Despite the doctor's warnings, they returned three days later and arrested my mother. Her last words to me were: 'Be independent. Always live with the truth, and most importantly, never seek revenge.'"

Irena hoped until the end of the War that her mother was somehow still alive. Her hopes were crushed when she learned that her mother was executed by the Nazis in the Ninth Fort in Kaunas some time in July 1941.

"I cannot say more than that. The memory is still too painful. I miss her terribly," Irena said about her mother's death in her last televised interview on November 24, 2020.

During the Nazi occupation, Irena was forced to wear a yellow star of David on her back and on the front of her jacket. While walking down the main street of Kaunas, a White Armbander stopped her. He pointed to the wristwatch that her father had given her as a gift and demanded she remove it and give it to him.

"The guard started shouting at me that Jews were not allowed to wear watches, and why didn't I know that? He could have shot me on the spot, and it would not have mattered to anyone. Instead, he took my watch and let me

go,” Irena recalled. “I was grateful he did not shoot me.”

Soon afterwards, together with her grandparents and other relatives, Irena was incarcerated in the Kaunas ghetto. As a young teenager, Irena tried to make herself look more grown-up than she was, so that the Nazis would consider her useful enough not to be shot. She was assigned to a group of women who sewed dolls made from the fabric of the clothing of Jewish people who had been executed at the Ninth Fort. The dolls were given to German soldiers to send home to their children.

Irena said that when she was in the Kaunas ghetto, when killings took place, she never saw the actual faces of the killers. She could not remember the faces. Those faces were blank. But she remembers well the faces of those who showed kindness. “Evil is faceless,” Irena would say, “but love always has a face.”

On November 7, 1943, Irena escaped from the Kaunas ghetto with the help of her parents’ Lithuanian friends, Ona and Juozas Strimaitis. Because it was too dangerous for Irena to remain in her native Kaunas, the couple arranged for her to travel to Vilnius to hide in the home of Ona’s brother, the surgeon Pranas Bagdonavičius. The director of the Marijampolė Gymnasium, Feliksas Treigys, arranged for Irena to use his daughter’s, Irena Treigyte’s, identity papers, so that she could live and work legally in Vilnius. From November 8, 1943 onwards, Irena lived in Vilnius.

Last autumn, before the pandemic, on a Sunday afternoon, while I was visiting Irena in her apartment on Basanavičius Street, she told me about how she had seen the film, *Jo Jo Rabbit*. The film is set in Germany and is about a Jewish girl hiding during the Holocaust in the home of an anti-Nazi activist with a young son, who is enamored with Hitler and is an ardent member of the *Hitler Jugend*.

“Go and see that film,” Irena urged me. “I was just the same age as the girl in the film during the Holocaust. The filmmaker caught the emotion of those times, the brainwashing. That film shows just how I felt then. I am that girl in the closet.”

Irena always said that rescuers are the most self-sacrificing people because they endanger themselves and their families to save others with no thought of compensation. It took many Lithuanians to save her life. Irena remembered each one with gratitude.

To avoid notice while in hiding, Irena was moved by her Lithuanian friends from home to home, eventually ending up in the home of Stefanija Paliulytė Ladigienė, where she lived until the end of the Nazi occupation. Ladigienė was married to Colonel Kazys Ladiga. In 1941, during the Soviet occupation, he was arrested and sent to the interior of the Soviet Union, where he was executed by gunshot in a NKVD prison.

It was her relationship with Stefanija Paliulytė Ladigienė, whom Irena called, “her second mother” that in many ways formed Irena’s resilience after the War. From the age of 19, Ladigienė was an activist, an advocate for women’s rights, editor of one of Lithuania’s first women’s magazines, a publicist, and one of the first women

elected to independent Lithuania's parliament. She was also the mother of six children. Three were still living with her when Irena came to her home.

Irena recalled that in Ladigienė's home she was surrounded with love and nurturing. On her first evening, in those times of food rationing, Ladigienė, seeing that Irena was starving, generously heaped her plate with a larger portion than her own children's. That night she blessed and kissed Irena goodnight and Irena burst into tears.

"It had been such a long time since anyone had kissed me," Irena said. "I had internalized all the hatred towards Jews. I was only sixteen. I said to her, 'How can you kiss a Jew like me?' Then she burst into tears. We talked until four in the morning. From that moment onwards she became my second mother."

Ladigienė was a deeply religious Catholic, but at the same time she was intellectual, open minded, and liberal. In those dark years of persecution, she embodied the essence of loving one's neighbor. She did not hide Irena from the Nazis by placing her in a dark cabinet but made her one of her own children, nurturing her and loving her.

Irena remembered: "No one ever left Mama's household hungry. Anyone who came to her seeking consul or assistance, always received it."

Ladigienė was arrested by the Soviets on March 14, 1946. She was charged as an enemy of the state because of her mentoring role in a Christian youth organization. Ladigienė was deported to Siberia and spent ten years in a hard labor camp where she continued to nurture young female prisoners who shared her fate.

"When I stood outside the prison and saw the black car taking Mama away," Irena remembered, "I completely lost all self-control and broke into a run behind that car, screaming hysterically. I was inconsolable for days."

When she returned to Lithuania, after Stalin's death, her health broken, Irena cared for Ladigienė until her death on September 18th, 1967.

"She died in my arms," Irena said.

All her life, Irena kept a black and white framed photograph of Stefanija Paliulytė Ladigienė in a prominent place in her living room. Her second mother's gaze filled the room— lovely, serene, dignified.

Irena lost her first mother to the Nazis and her second to the Soviets. She suffered the horrors of two totalitarian regimes. And yet, she was able to forgive, reminding us: "It is important to know how to forgive because without forgiveness there is no road to life, there is no future. You do not need to forget the past, but you must live with love."

Irena modeled herself after Ladigienė—her home was always open to all. Her lifelong friend, the poet Tomas Venclova, said: “Irena’s apartment on Basanavičius Street 16 was perhaps the most hospitable space in Vilnius. It was a significant point on the city’s cultural map. Here, almost everyday people from the arts, culture, and sciences gathered as her guests.” He reflected: “She had an incredible ability to understand, forgive, and live on.”

Basanavičius Street 16 was once the hub of prewar Jewish culture. Many important Jewish intellectuals lived there: the Jewish historian, Simon Dubnow, the writer, Romain Gray, who described the courtyard of this building in his novel, *Promise at Dawn*. This is where YIVO had its origins, and where the director of YIVO, Yiddish linguistics professor, Max Weinreich, lived.

Irena’s education was cut short in 1941 with the Nazi occupation. In August 1944, when the war ended, Irena enrolled herself at the Salomėja Nėris Gymnasium. At that time, she became close friends with Genovaitė Šukytė, whose story linked her with the story of Matilda Olkinaitė, a 19-year-old extraordinarily talented Jewish-Lithuanian poet who was murdered along with her parents and sisters by White Armbanders in her native village of Panemunėlis in July 1941. Through a miracle, Matilda’s notebook of poems survived because the parish priest, Father Matelionis, hid them under the Great Altar of the Panemunėlis Church. Years later, the church organist brought the notebook of poems to Irena for safekeeping.

Irena identified closely with Matilda. When she first read her poems, she could not sleep for days, thinking to herself: “Why am I alive, and she is dead?”

Irena graduated high school with a gold medal that ensured her a place at Vilnius University. She studied Lithuanian Literature for a year, until she was brought in by the NKVD for interrogation. The fact that her father was in the West, her association with Stefanija Ladigienė, and because she had brought food to her in prison and to also her first love, Tadas Masiulis, who was also arrested and deported to Siberia, all made her suspicious to the NKVD. Friends advised her to flee Lithuania and to hide with relatives in Moscow.

In Moscow, Irena enrolled at the M. Lomonsov University and studied German in the Faculty of Philosophy. Later, she continued her studies at Leningrad University and defended her dissertation on “The Late Poetry of Heinrich Heine, *Romanzero*.”

In an interview with Leonidas Donskis, a Jewish-Lithuanian philosopher and political theorist, Irena stated that although she is fluent in Russian, Yiddish, German, English, and Lithuanian, she felt that Lithuanian was her first language, and therefore the language she could best express herself in. I can only imagine how such a love for both halves of one’s core identity could tear you apart when your nation erupts in hatred, as it did during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania in 1941-1944. It takes true strength of character to reconcile those halves after experiencing historical trauma of such magnitude firsthand. Irena would remind people that it was wrong to hate a nation or culture or language and judge it on the actions of its worst people. She lived those words by dedicating her life to culture and education in Lithuania, and to promoting German literature and culture. For forty-two years, from 1953

to 1995, Irena taught Western European Literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, German Literature, and the History of Theater to several generations of students at the Vilnius Pedagogical University.

Irena had an enormous impact as an educator over decades. Many important cultural people passed through her classes. The famous theater director, Oskaras Koršunovas, was her student and recalls her impact on him as a professor: “I learned from Irena what tolerance was—not as a political dogma, but deep, authentic, wise tolerance. Thanks to Irena, humanism is not an abstraction to me, but something that one must strive for and always defend. That became the essence of my creative work.”

Twice, in Lithuania’s darkest hours, she was given the opportunity to flee, but chose not to. September 1, 1939, the plane that was supposed to take her to safety in Sweden never landed. On that day Nazi Germany invaded neighboring Poland. In 1974, she had the opportunity to emigrate to the United Kingdom with her husband and daughter but couldn’t bring herself to leave the country she loved. Her husband and daughter emigrated without her.

Irena experienced two great loves in her life. She met her first husband, the father of her daughter Alina, Jacob Boom, in Moscow while she was a student. In her forties, she met and fell in love with her second husband, the Estonian filmmaker, Grigori Kromanov.

“Love is given to us from heaven,” Irena said about her love for Kromanov. “Love comes to us uninvited. Love simply overwhelms.”

When Kromanov died of a heart attack in 1984, Irena spent the next few years researching his life, finally publishing a book that honors his career and memory: *Režsierius Grigoris Kromanovas 1995* (The Director Grigori Kromanov).

In the late eighties, Irena threw herself into working towards Lithuania’s independence from the Soviet Union. The Lithuanian independence movement, *Sąjūdis*, held its first Congress in October 1988. Irena recalled: “We weren’t walking on earth back then; we were flying on air. For the first time in decades, we could speak what we thought openly. *Sąjūdis* was a miracle.”

Even before Lithuania became independent, George Soros began organizing anti-Communist programs. He was a Hungarian Jew who, like Irena, had experienced the Holocaust as a child. Soros’ goal was to build a democratic society in post-Soviet countries. On October 5, 1990, the Open Society Fund of Lithuania was founded. The founders were idealists, artists, people inspired by *Sąjūdis*, who wanted to do something positive for society, but who did not want to be involved in politics. Irena noted that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, people distrusted politics.

In the 1990s, in the early years of Lithuania’s independence from the Soviet Union, Irena was integral to founding the Open Society Fund of Lithuania, initiated and funded by George Soros. She held various leadership roles within

that organization from 1993 through 2005. Irena has stated that the goal of the Open Society Fund was to “once again create a democratic, free, cultured, and European nation.” To that end, she directed a publishing program that sought to reintegrate post-Soviet Lithuania into Western civilization by translating seminal works in the Humanities and Sciences into Lithuanian. In total, the Open Society Fund published 750 books.

Irena remembers: “The most intellectual people gathered around the Open Society Fund. George Soros trusted us to do the work to change our own society. He said that we knew where our wounds lay and where we hurt. We treated people who came to us looking for funding with respect. It was a departure from the old Soviet bureaucratic system.”

The Open Society Fund’s publishing program had a huge influence on the development of publishing in Lithuania during the post-Soviet years. The enormous success of the Vilnius Book Fair is a testimony to the work of the Open Society Fund.

Irena Veisaitė was a member of the Lithuanian National UNESCO committee, the committee for the 2009 Vilnius Cultural Capital program, and one of the founders of the Thomas Mann House in Nida, and a member of the curatorial committee from 2001 through 2011. From 1963 onwards, Irena became one of Lithuania’s most competent and intelligent theater critics. In her lifetime, she published over 200 scholarly articles in the fields of literature, theater, the Holocaust and 20th century Lithuanian and Jewish relations.

It is a testimony to the Irena’s love of culture and humanity, that having lost her entire family, and almost her own life, at the hands of the Nazis, she studied German literature and dedicated her professional life to teaching the great works of German literature. Because of the animosity between Russians and Germans after the War, in the postwar period, and during the Cold War, German was considered the language of the enemy. Again, standing up for her own principles, Irena placed herself in the crosshairs of a vengeful regime. But Irena said that she could not hate German culture because of the actions of the Nazis. She recognized that culture, language, the power of literature, was greater than any narrow-minded ideology.

On June 23, 2020, the German government honored Irena Veisaitė with the German Order of Merit Grand Cross for a lifelong commitment to tolerance and for sharing German culture with the world. The award was presented by German Ambassador Matthias Sonn in a ceremony attended by all her family, dearest friends and colleagues. It was a moment that culminated all her life’s work and recognized the powerful influence for good that she had on so many people.

During her lifetime, Irena Veisaitė was honored with several important medals: The Cross of the Officer of the Order of Gediminas, 1995; The Goethe Medal for lifetime commitment to a lifetime of cultural exchange between Germany and Lithuania, and for civic courage, 2012; Award for Culture and Art from the Lithuanian Government, 2015; Grand Cross of the Commander of the Order of Merit for Lithuania, 2018; Foundation of Nations, Cultures, Arts, in the Seinai Border Region, 2019, and finally the German Order of Merit Grand Cross, 2020.

Irena pulled people together with a shared vision. I experienced this working together with her to publish the poetry and diary of Matilda Olkinaitė. I came into Irena's life rather late, just three years ago, when I came to Irena's apartment to ask her to show me the diary and notebook of poems of Matilda Olkinaitė. After I heard the poems and excerpts from Matilda's diary performed in a community theater production in Rokiškis, I was determined to publish Matilda's poetry and diary in Lithuanian and in English translation. Irena and I shared a vision that Matilda's voice, which had been brutally silenced, would be heard by the world.

Irena pulled open her heavy drawer and lifted out Matilda's diary and notebook of poems and lay them on the table before me. From that day forwards, I felt an obligation to do what I could to ensure Matilda's voice be heard. My heart was never the same again. I spent the next three years translating Matilda's body of poems, her diary, and other writings into English, and researching her life. Irena was supportive of my work over those three years and offered encouragement and advise.

“Our souls have spoken to each other,” Irena said to me as I prepared to leave.

Irena taught me an enormous life lesson: Tolerance is more than just words. Tolerance is the ability to accept another, even when it hurts. I admit, there were times when I was frustrated with Irena's principles of tolerance and forgiveness. There were times, working together with a team of people with different goals and ideas to prepare Matilda's books for publication, when I felt compelled to make my point, even at the risk of conflict. However, with Irena's passing, I have come to understand that true tolerance means finding ways to work constructively for the common good. It means letting go of the grips of one's ego. Irena always found a way to harvest the best in each person, to inspire people to work together.

Throughout Lithuania's long months of quarantine during the pandemic, Irena would call me to inquire about my health, to ask about other people she could not reach. She did not worry about her own health. She always put others first. She was concerned about her friends and family all throughout the pandemic.

Phone calls were important to Irena. Our last phone conversation was on November 24th, a week and a half before she tested positive for coronavirus and was hospitalized. We had just received news that Liucija Neniskytė-Vizgirdienė, Matilda's childhood friend, had died of coronavirus. Liucija was the last person alive who had been a part of Matilda's life. Liucija recited from memory one of Matilda's lost poems, written when the Soviets confiscated Liucija's grandparents' home, forcing the family out of Panemunėlis. The poem was dedicated to Liucija. Irena told me she was upset with herself because she had not called Liucija in time before she died.

I told her not to worry, saying, “You can speak to her in your thoughts.”

“No, it was important to call and I didn't. I must take responsibility for that,” she said firmly. Irena always stressed how important it is to call, to check in, to ask after a person, to care for one another.

Until the end of her life, Irena kept up with her reading, participated in cultural life, gathering interesting people around her, engaging them in discussion and debate. She took great joy in life and believed that life should be radiant. Irena lived her last year among the people she loved, participating in life to its fullest, despite her age and the limitations of her health. In this past year, we managed to publish the collected works of Matilda Olkinaitė in Lithuanian and in English. Irena participated in all the book events, taking pride in Matilda's poetry, sharing her story with the audience. She was tireless in her efforts to make it possible for the world to hear Matilda's poetic voice and to fall in love with that voice.

In her last televised interview on November 24, 2020, just before she became ill with coronavirus, Irena reflected: "Old age is the very last phase of life when you really know that you no longer have any great perspective ahead, when you know that the end is coming, but even then, you must learn how to live, so that you do not give up doing everything you possibly can to be useful to others." She shared what she felt is most valuable in life:

"To feel love and idealism for all."

"To be free means to be responsible."

"To teach is to fulfill a mission."

"To remember that God is your conscience."

"To have a backbone."

"To live according to the dictates of your conscience."

"To love one's neighbor and remember that God is forgiveness"

Her early life—her parents' divorce, the murder of her mother, her incarceration in the Kaunas ghetto, the loss of her grandparents and all her living relatives, her escape out of the ghetto with the help of Lithuanian friends, her close relationship with her rescuer, Stefanija Paliulytė Ladigiene, and then her loss—did not turn her against humanity, but instead inspired her to forgive, to love, and to always move forwards. Irena transformed historical horror and personal loss into a radiant life full of love and light and service. Irena treasured her relationships with people. She would say, "Respect the times that you are living in now and the people surrounding you."

I would like to end my remembrance of Irena's radiant life with her favorite poem by Matilda Olkinaitė: "A Word." Irena treasured this poem because she felt that especially during times of war and strife, the word of a poet held special significance and ought to be heeded:

A Word

It is so difficult for me. I'd like to utter just one word.

That unspoken word trembles within me.

I see processions, generations, gliding past.

And a blue longing and shivering suffering.

And joy, quivering in tiny rays of light,

And the pain of an aeon of shattered hopes.

But I—am that unspoken word and shadow.

I carry that unspoken word in my heart.

It is so difficult for me. I'd like to utter that one word.

Just one word for the crowds and for the nations.

The processions would pause. Time would come to a halt.

All the generations would stop and listen.

And my word would flutter above the mountains and the seas.

Above flowing rivers and rough waters.

And longing and trembling suffering would cease,

And the pain of an aeon of shattered hopes.

March 30, 1940