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Epistolophilia

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Epistolophilia
In memory of Ona Šimaitė’s friends:
Gershon Malakiewicz,
Kazys Jakubėnas,
Anna Abramowicz,
Tanya Shterntal,
and so many others.
**Epistolophilia** /ɪˈpɪstələˌfɪliə/ n.
Love of letters and letter writing; affection for the art of epistolography; a sickness characterized by excessive letter writing.
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Finally, to Sean Gurd and our son Sebastian: may this book be a love letter to you both.
A Note on Place Names

Most cities and villages in Lithuania have at least two names: a Lithuanian one, a Yiddish one, and often a Russian or Polish one. I use the name Vilnius to designate the city that is now the capital of Lithuania, though I refer to the Vilna Ghetto and occasionally to Vilna, if the reference is to Jewish culture and community in that city. I use its Polish name, Wilno, once, where the context is the city’s Polish history. For the most part, I have reproduced Lithuanian place names as Šimaitė used them in her writing: in Lithuanian. The only other exceptions are Vilnius old town street names (where possible, I offer the Lithuanian followed by the Yiddish equivalent), Kaunas and Kovno (I use the latter when referring to that city’s ghetto) and the mass murder site of Paneriai (Lithuanian) or Ponar (Yiddish), in which case I use both names.
1. Šimaitė, Ona. Vilnius University Library Rare Books and Manuscripts Department.
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1. Šimaite’s movements from 1939 to 1970. The map shows her journey from Vilnius to Dachau, Ludelange, La Courtine, Toulouse, and Paris. The insert shows Petach Tikva, Israel.
Part 1
The year is 2009. I am sitting at my desk at home in Montreal, daydreaming. I let my mind wander. It takes me over the Atlantic and back to the early 1950s. I often travel across time and through imagined spaces like this as I write. It's the only way I can see her, my librarian friend.

Across the street two elderly men sit on a bench together. One is bearded and wears a hat. The other, clean-shaven and bare-headed, wears thick glasses. Deep in a heated discussion, they hardly notice the summer rain. The tree behind the bench shelters them almost completely, and only the odd raindrop lands with a pop on the bearded one's brim. He speaks first, talking for a long time, as if giving a speech, his voice gradually rising to a shout. The companion listens silently, and other than minute twitches, offers no reaction. Only once his friend has finished and sits with pinched lips does he utter a word. From my vantage point I make out little of what they say. The evening breeze carries their voices away, but when then the wind changes direction, fragments of their discussion reach my ears.

“... here in Paris there’s an old Gentile lady, a... knows that in the Vilna Ghetto she saved the lives of Jews... books... sent... camp in France. Since... Jewish refugees... old revolutionist, an atheist; that is to say, she doesn’t believe in God.”
The Woman in the Park

The bare-headed one continues. He is calmer than his friend, keeping his voice steady and searching the other’s face.

“Imagine . . . the old lady . . . sitting here listening to us! . . . don’t say anything . . . only listen.”

My heart jumps. He could only be referring to her. There’s no one else. The wind blows one last sentence to me in its entirety:

“She is not Jewish, but she hid our sacred books.”

I recognize the bare-headed one as a Yiddish writer, known for his bad temper and jealousy. But he’s brilliant and, judging from the scene playing out before me, softer than his reputation suggests. Despite having once been considered for the Nobel Prize, he died years ago in the relative obscurity that his language imposed on him.

I want to stay longer to hear how the quarrel between the writer and his friend will conclude, but I have an appointment to keep. Every day she comes home by metro and crosses the park to her apartment on the rue de Courcelles. I’ve been following her for weeks.

Parc Monceau is an eighteenth-century-style garden built by a duke, who was later executed in the French Revolution. Streams run through it, and Corinthian columns still stand in a pond filled with ducks and other birds attracted to this patch of green in the heart of Paris. Willow branches hang over the water. I watch as the belly of a shiny orange fish slips through their reflections.

On weekends Monceau is full of children. Parents sit on benches and talk. They pack picnic lunches and ride with their kids on carousels. Some read quietly in the shade. Tonight the park is almost empty. The rain has now stopped and the benches are wet. A few couples walk hand in hand along paths. One woman feeds the birds and fish morsels of bread. My librarian walks slowly, stopping to admire the park’s statues. “Today that beautiful park seems calm, but in 1871 members of the Paris Commune were shot there *en masse*,” she wrote in one of her diaries. “To me, this park is both a place of restful beauty and of sanctity” (August 29, 1958, Diary 21).
The Woman in the Park

On hot days she rinses her face and hands at the green fountain by the grass. I keep my distance, observing her as I would an animal. In one arm she carries a loaf of bread, and in the other, her ubiquitous handbag. Today I learned that Claude Monet painted this park five times. Every garden, every street in this city has been marked not only by revolution but by art. The librarian loves to walk the streets that writers walked and to sit in the places that painters studied. In Paris, she often writes in her letters, even a person of the most modest means has access to great beauty.

The lacy iron gate on the far side of the park is only a short walk from her building. Exiting, we pass a curious red façade of dueling dragons and lattice before we descend the gentle slope to Number 38. The building is dated 1927. Carvings of plump peonies adorn its entrance. I hang back and watch her disappear inside as the gate clangs shut. This is as far as I go. Inside, her feet shuffle up stairs, breath heavy as she takes a rest on the second-floor landing. One of those tiny windows at the very top is hers. Eighth floor. Her first impressions of the room were not positive. After spending her first nights there in September 1957, she wrote:

*This is the worst room I‘ve ever had. I’m living like a poor clochard in a neighborhood of aristocrats. Up until the sixth floor everything is shiny and clean, with carpets laid out, and there are flowers and a fountain in the courtyard. But once you get to the seventh and eighth floors, it’s a total dump. Even if I‘d never heard or read anything about class differences — riches and poverty — I would have come up with it myself just by living here. (September 3, 1957, Diary 17)*

Plaster crumbles from the ceiling and walls, and she must carry her water down the long narrow hallways to do her laundry, washing, and cooking. She curses the landlady for her greed and lack of compassion, but the move to the new room nonetheless brings one positive development. For a year after her return from Israel, the librarian worked as a servant in return for room and board.
The Woman in the Park

2. Šimaitė’s apartment building in Paris. Photo by the author.

(On August 22, 1958, she wrote in her diary, “The French saying resonates deeply: if you give birth to a daughter and you know she will become a servant, it’s better to drown her right away.” [Diary 21]) She has spent every Thursday of the past year laundering the clothes of her employers. But not anymore. For better or for worse, she will now live alone. Though she never complains of money or food shortages in the letters to her family in Lithuania, the diaries attest to the poverty of her life in Paris:

APRIL 17, 1958
Today I washed two weeks’ worth of clothes. The carrying in and out of that water is so difficult, especially when I’m washing black or colorful things. I washed my hair too, which is also no small challenge. I made a soup for lunch and dinner — potatoes, barley, lamb’s tongue, onions, parsley. It was delicious. And I drank some tea with chocolate sent from Vilnius. I found it very moving.

I unraveled a sweater, and that alone took four hours. It’s good for the
The Woman in the Park

rich, they never have to recycle objects. But the poor waste so much time on basic necessities. This is why they have so little energy and time to do good for others and for cultural activities.

As I write, I am soaking my aching legs. And after this, I have to wash the floor and go to the bath house. The bath house is far, and I can’t get there and back in less than two and a half hours. (Diary 19)

Every night I wait outside the gates to see which room is hers. I wait for a light, for the window to open, or for her silhouette to appear, but once she passes through the gates, I lose track of her entirely.

Slipping in and out. This is what she does. An old lady with a limp and accent, she is invisible to most. Her face is not obviously that of a warrior or revolutionary, and perhaps this is why she succeeded in a situation that demanded secrecy, courage, and disguise.

We know that from 1941 to 1944 she slipped into the Jewish Ghetto of German-occupied Vilnius to bring its prisoners food, clothes, medicine, money, and forged documents. She carried letters and messages. In one case, she brought a vial of strychnine for a friend to use if suicide became his only escape. She came out of the ghetto with letters to deliver and manuscripts to hide. In one case she stole away with a Jewish girl, and on others carried out sedated children in sacks. Occasionally she spent the night in the ghetto, sharing a bed with her opera-singing friend on evenings when she attended the ghetto’s concerts, plays, and art exhibits. She supported its most desperate by listening to their fears and responding to their letters — in most cases, the last ones they ever wrote. We do not know how many lives she saved (though a 1963 article published in an Argentinean-Lithuanian newspaper writes that her actions saved “around one hundred Jewish children from certain starvation in the ghetto.” She copied the article into her diary).¹ To keep a tally would have been out of character for the librarian, and a systematic forgetting of the names and addresses of those she helped was her way of protecting herself and others. What we have instead are individual stories, anecdotes, and reminiscences of survivors.
In 1944 the Gestapo detected the librarian’s activities. They arrested her and tortured her for twelve days, then deported her to the prison camp at Dachau. She survived and moved to Paris after the war, where she worked sporadically as a librarian, a vocation she called “the beloved profession” (Šimaitė, “Lost and Found in Vilna” 313). In 1966 Yad Vashem, Israel’s official memorial to Jewish Holocaust victims, honored the librarian as Righteous Among the Nations. She died in 1970. Her name was Ona Šimaitė.

Šimaitė’s writings speak to me in a familiar voice. Her language has the cadence and vocabulary of my grandmother’s Lithuanian. But, unlike Močiutė, who now lives in a past inside her head, Šimaitė seems curiously contemporary. Wry, kind, funny, and sometimes angry, her letters are riveting and inspire an immediate feeling of kinship. When I read them I feel as though she is speaking to me directly, that these letters have been saved specifically for me, and that I have a responsibility to her, this friend from another era. But it isn’t only about what I can do for her. Through her letters and diaries, Šimaitė has answered questions about the Holocaust in Lithuania that have dogged me since my teenaged years. How was it that so many people were killed? Why was our community so silent about the German occupation? Or the Jewish community in Lithuania? Šimaitė was the first person to speak to me frankly on these subjects in the language of my childhood. And through her letters, she offered a window to a place and time that had remained frustratingly shrouded.

For almost a decade I have followed Šimaitė’s paper trail to Lithuania and Israel and across the United States, where her writings are archived. When I began this journey, this relationship with a ghost, I was still a student. After the first discovery of Šimaitė’s manuscripts in Vilnius, I started to think about what it meant to write a woman’s life, the life of this woman who, except to those who knew her and what she had done during a period of three years in Lithuania, had gone through life largely unseen. Šimaitė’s
The Woman in the Park

story has led me to consider questions of self-sacrifice, creativity, and the feminine; of what is expected of a woman and how these expectations may change her relationship to herself; how women write their lives publicly, privately, and why; and of choices we make every day between life and death.