Biography

Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Šimait?
Julija Šukys
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Many have written about those who had the courage to stand up to the Nazi regime. However, in *Epistolophilia* Julija Šukys shares the story of a complicated and largely forgotten hero. Ona Šimait? came from a family "more likely to work as domestics than to employ them," she never finished her memoirs of "those murderous times," and what she did write was mostly in Lithuanian or Russian. On top of all this, she was a woman. A figure easy to overlook or dismiss, this seemingly ordinary woman snuck into the Jewish ghetto of Vilnius, Lithuania countless times to deliver food, clothing, medicine, and counterfeit documents to the prisoners, departing with letters to loved ones, precious manuscripts, and even children hidden in sacks and coats. In 1944, the Gestapo caught up with her, tortured her for twelve days, and sent her to Dachau. She survived the war but was never able to record her experiences. Šukys attempts to piece together the life of this courageous woman from Šimait?'s numerous correspondences; and she does so with a sensitivity that honors the herione's motivations and struggles.

Šukys's is no easy task. Šimait? witnessed important world events, was herself an anarchist and revolutionary, and corresponded with notable intellectuals. However, much of Šimait?'s writing is devoted to her daily activities and challenges as a working-class Eastern European woman. Šukys notes that Šimait?'s writing is a classic example of women's life writing, although hidden beneath the mundane details is a person who did truly remarkable things. In Šimait?'s story, "we have to account for the simultaneous largeness and smallness of her time on earth. We need to reconcile her thoughts on anarchy and totalitarianism with poetic passages about her love of cats; cubism with doll-making; literature with laundry." Indeed, Šimait? continually put off writing about her experiences of the war—despite numerous requests for her to do so—by filling her time with writing letters to her many friends and family. Šukys argues that Šimait?'s compulsive letter writing may have been an excuse to avoid remembering a time she would rather forget.

Perhaps reflecting the uneven records that Šimait? left behind, *Epistolophilia*'s chapters are grouped by subject matter rather than in chronological order. This organization might be confusing at first for those looking for a more typical historical biography. Yet, Šukys's extensive research and obvious personal interest provides readers with a unique window into the multiple facets of Šimait?'s personality. *Epistolophilia* is not a typical biography, and Šimait? was not a typical World War II hero. For readers looking for an unconventional account of the World War II and post-war eras, as well as those interested in women's life writing, *Epistolophilia* is a nuanced and compelling work.

Claire Posner