



Epistolophilia: Writing the Life of Ona Simaite

Julija Sukys

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The librarian walks the streets of her beloved Paris. An old lady with a limp and an accent, she is invisible to most. Certainly no one recognizes her as the warrior and revolutionary she was, when again and again she slipped into the Jewish ghetto of German-occupied Vilnius to carry food, clothes, medicine, money, and counterfeit documents to its prisoners. Often she left with letters to deliver, manuscripts to hide, and even sedated children swathed in sacks. In 1944 she was captured by the Gestapo, tortured for twelve days, and deported to Dachau.

Through *Epistolophilia*, Julija Šukys follows the letters and journals—the “life-writing”—of this woman, Ona Šimaitė (1894–1970). A treasurer of words, Šimaitė carefully collected, preserved, and archived the written record of her life, including thousands of letters, scores of diaries, articles, and press clippings. Journeying through these words, Šukys negotiates with the ghost of Šimaitė, beckoning back to life this quiet and worldly heroine—a giant of Holocaust history (one of Yad Vashem’s honored “Righteous Among the Nations”) and yet so little known. The result is at once a mediated self-portrait and a measured perspective on a remarkable life. It reveals the meaning of life-writing, how women write their lives publicly and privately, and how their words attach them—and us—to life.

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