



Notes of the Museologists

HE WROTE MUCH, EVEN A REPORT ABOUT THE PLACE WHERE FATE PREDESTINED HIM TO MEET THE ETERNITY. JOURNALIST JUOZAS KAZYŠ BELECKAS (1905-1942)

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In 1939, at the end of August, the head of Kaunas Hard Labour Prison, apparently at the request of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Lithuania, invited the correspondents of the most important newspapers of the temporary capital to an excursion in his premises. Interesting material was guaranteed! As a result, the editorial offices were excited to send there their best staff. Among the participants of the excursion, there was a completely dull man: short, small in stature, with dark and slightly curly hair and with round thick glasses. He looked like a simple clerk of some office. On the street, no one would pay attention to him and no one would recognize him. This is what Juozas Kazys Beleckas, one of the most popular Lithuanian tabloid journalists of that time, looked like. He originated from the poor blacksmith and quarry family of Tauragė county and due to lack of wealth finished only two forms of the gymnasium. However, due to his talent and diligence, Beleckas became a legendary figure in the history of the Lithuanian periodical press. The secret of his professional success seems to lie in his preserved and perfected ability to cover serious and even very acute social topics in the style of an easy tabloid journalist. This style is partly reflected in his

article published about the division of Kaunas Hard Labour Prison, operating in the Ninth Fort of Kaunas Fortress, which was published on September 5, 1939 in the largest daily newspaper *Lietuvos aidas*. World War II had just begun. The positive and optimistic mood of the article clearly contrasted with the uncertainty that had shaken society at the time. The battles and bombings were taking place only in Poland at that time, not in the territory of Lithuania. However, everyone realized that the previously cherished illusions of security and prosperity were melting relentlessly quickly. Many sought to comfort themselves with the irrational hope of salvation, instinctively denying apocalyptic visions of the near future. For Beleckas, the Ninth Fort seemed to be a pretty nice place after the guided tour. Non-dangerous people who committed minor crimes were imprisoned here. They were working in the fields around the fort and in the garden. Nevertheless, a few years later, this rustic idyllic place turned into the real hell of a broken land, swallowing the bodies of thousands of Jews and people of other nationalities, who were shot without having any guilt. Famous journalist Beleckas was included in the list of victims, which is difficult to sum up. Who could have predicted such horrific events in the summer of 1939?..

The fateful moment comes at a certain time, but before it and during it all life passes through, as if you were watching a film. Beleckas was walking on this earth, watching people, thinking and creating for thirty-six years. He wrote much and became widely known. He took his first steps in journalism in 1924, trying to edit one of the short-lived newspapers in his region. Due to financial difficulties, he moved to Kaunas in 1927, the temporary capital of Lithuania, where he hoped to find better conditions for journalistic work. Initially, he collaborated in the respectable periodicals of the liberal left-wing party, the Lithuanian Peasants' and People's Union, because they were in line with his personal views. However, in 1930–1931, he decided to focus on tabloid and semi-tabloid press, hoping to have more creative freedom, become more popular and maybe even earn more. During that time, he was a co-founder, publisher, editor-in-chief, author and correspondent of several short-term periodicals (*Jaunuju pasaulis, Tempo, Dienos*

naujienos). Even though his newspapers were sufficiently popular, they did not pay off financially; therefore, they were published only for a year or two. Nevertheless, Beleckas did not give up and stubbornly continued his way for recognition. He became most famous for his commercial-sensational literature: in 1930–1931, he published several tabloid books, which attracted considerable attention. The first of them, the two-part *Nuodėmių gatvė (Street of Sins)*, is a dramatic and intriguing story about the life of the lowest category of Kaunas prostitutes. The book quickly became a real bestseller. It reached an absolute record of the entire twenty years of Lithuania's independence, 15 thousand copies. Encouraged by this success, Beleckas tried to repeat his triumph with another book about the case of Prelate Konstantinas Olšauskas, which attracted considerable public attention at that time. A prominent 62-year-old clergyman, a very influential figure in Catholic social structures, was sentenced for imprisonment for the murder of a slightly younger woman who was considered to be his perennial lover. The details of the case, the trial and other secrets that accompanied Prelate K. Olšauskas until the end of his tragic life were ideal material for an intriguing detective story. Beleckas managed to write such a story. Unfortunately, the book did not reach the public at that time as the government confiscated the entire circulation, preserving the "morality of society" and the authority of the Catholic church. Lithuania was an authoritarian-police state at that time; therefore, the independent media was often censored, complicating the deplorable financial situation of such newspapers even more.

The scandals with the above-mentioned books made Beleckas famous, but at the same time he was exhausted: it made him doubt whether the path he had taken so far was correct as all those difficult publishing initiatives brought him more losses than profit and did not allow him to ensure a more secure future for his family. Probably because of this, Beleckas decided to change his popularity into a more stable social status: he agreed to become the correspondent of the largest daily newspaper, *Lietuvos Aidas*, which was generously funded by the non-democratic government. This guaranteed him a decent and stable salary, but at

the same time, at least formally, forced him to renounce his left-wing views. However, even working as a reporter for *Lietuvos Aidas*, Beleckas tried to avoid obviously political topics and almost instinctively turned to his usual sphere on every occasion, i.e. the exploration of the intriguing peripheries of society or the depiction of social panorama of Kaunas and the province. In 1935–1939, he was one of the top ten writers journalists of tabloids and other newspapers. Beleckas even became a relative of one of them, Jonas Šimkus, as their wives were sisters, Simonaitytės. Seemingly, this fact became fatal for Beleckas in the near future.

Šimkus, similar to his brother-in-law, was in the circles of the Peasants Peoples' party since he was young, but later he joined more radical left-wing supporters and secretly maintained contacts even with the illegal Communist Party. As a result, in the middle of June, 1940, when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union, he was appointed as the editor of the country's main daily newspaper. Beleckas became a close assistant to Šimkus. In the eyes of the public, they became true successors of the red occupiers. However, it would be difficult to classify Beleckas as one of the most active troubadours of Stalinism. It is true that he wrote as he should have written, but, as his contemporaries claim, he did not reveal any particular enthusiasm, did not denounce anyone or did not perform any "operational activities." Working in the editorial office of the newspaper *Tarybų Lietuva* during that turbulent period of uncertainty not only ensured a stable income and a relatively high social status, but, most importantly, provided some security. The "witch-hunt" started by the Soviet occupiers became increasingly fierce with each week of the new regime. Anyone could become the "enemy of the people" because the Soviets pursued the "betrayal of the homeland," accusing them retroactively. Even the biography of the suspect, which had given rise to abstract doubts, could easily be used to create the criminal case. Beleckas was working as a journalist for *Lietuvos Aidas* for five years in the nationalist government referred to as fascist. Because of this, a number of his colleagues were deported to gulags.

It is not clear how Beleckas's further career in Soviet journalism would have developed, but everything changed radically on June 22, 1941 when the war between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union started. The Wehrmacht expelled the Red Army from Lithuania within a week. Many Soviet collaborators, including J. Šimkus, managed to move to the East. Beleckas could not do that because of unfavourable circumstances. He remained in Kaunas and was initially hiding; later, he, his wife and their new-born daughter tried to live semi-legally: he had a job as an accountant in one company. It seemed that this way, practically without appearance in public and patiently surviving day after day, he would be able to experience brighter times. Unfortunately... In the spring of 1942, Beleckas came into the spotlight of the Gestapo. He was arrested on April 6, 1942 and interrogated for several months in prison. The efforts of his wife and some rather influential colleagues to acquit the famous journalist produced no results. On June 3, Beleckas and a group of other prisoners were taken to the execution site at the Ninth Fort.

There is no clear record in the literature or in the memoirs of contemporaries of why Beleckas was sentenced to death. It does not seem likely that he belonged to the anti-Nazi underground of Kaunas or at least had any contacts with it. It is more probable that it was a kind of revenge for Beleckas's brother-in-law, J. Šimkus, who was actively working as a Soviet propagandist in Moscow: he was writing articles for Lithuanian communist newspapers and regularly participated in radio programmes. This version could be confirmed by the observation that after the war, Beleckas, unlike other left-wing Lithuanian writers and artists killed by the Nazis, was not turned into a "hero of the anti-fascist struggle." His "merits" in glorifying the Soviet regime in 1940-1941 had no significance in the press. In general, in the historical literature of the Soviet period, the name of Beleckas was seldom used. Thus, the talented self-taught journalist became only one of the thousands of ordinary "Soviet citizens" shot during the years of occupation in the Ninth Fort in Kaunas.