Close to death. Jewish rescuer Kleopas Paulavičius

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In 1941-1944, approximately 50 thousand innocent people, including about 30 thousand Jews, were killed in Kaunas Ninth Fort. The Holocaust in Lithuania is far from being an exhausted topic, and various studies are contributing to the picture of that time. Researchers are increasingly focusing on the environment of the victims, the biographies of individuals, and the success stories of those who escaped. The individuals who stood up to the dangers and helped the Jews are remembered. One of the expositions of Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum tells the story of the people who did not remain indifferent to the tragic fate of their friends, neighbours or even strangers. The people who were not Jewish but saved the Jews are recognised as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

Behind the exhibition devoted to the Righteous Among the Nations, many untold stories have remained. We found out one of them when a grandson of Kleopas Paulavičius, visiting Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum, encouraged his mother, Vitalija Glebavičienė, Paulavičius's daughter, to contact the Ninth Fort Museum. She agreed not only to tell the museum staff her father's story, but also to add to the museum's collections the Life Saving Cross and other valuable exhibits given to her father after his death.

Kleopas Paulavičius was born in 1902 in Kaunas. At the age of twelve he began to learn the tailor's trade. From 1923 to 1925 he served in the Lithuanian Army. After that he returned to tailoring. When the first Soviet occupation began in 1940, he became a driver and did this job in various companies for almost the rest of his life. In 1941, when Nazi Germany entered Lithuania, he was a driver for "Lietūkis," the Lithuanian Union of Agricultural Cooperatives. During the Nazi Germayn occupation, he helped rescue Jews from Kaunas Ghetto and transport them to Rūdininkai forest, where the partisan groups "Death for Occupiers", "Forward" and others were based. Such activities were very dangerous, as the Nazis had severe punishments for any help to Jews.

Soldiers of the 1st Infantry Regiment of the Grand Duke Gediminas of Lithuania. Kleopas Paulavičius is the second from the right, 1923-1925. Personal archive of K. Paulavičius' daughter Vitalija Glebavičienė

Kleopas Paulavičius was driving a car in which Jews from Kaunas Ghetto who wanted to enter the partisan groups were hiding and an ambush was organised. It is difficult to say who betrayed them. The name that sticks in Vitalija Glebavičienė's memory is Domantas (Jomantas). However, it is not clear whether this is a first

name or a nickname, and it is not known what his relationship to the characters in this story is. Kleopas Paulavičius was arrested. He was first imprisoned in the hard labour prison on A. Mickevičiaus Street, interrogated and later transferred to the Ninth Fort. Those arrested were transported out of the city in trucks, with their hands tied and their heads lowered, trying to avoid the attention of the locals. At that time, Kaunas was a much smaller city. People knew each other at least by sight. Therefore, when Kleopas Paulavičius raised his head, news of him soon reached his relatives.

A bonfire was burning in the first courtyard of the fort. Convicts' files and their documents were burned in front of their eyes. Kleopas Paulavičius was locked up in cell three, where now an exhibition shows what the prison cells looked like during the Nazi occupation (1941-1944). However, before entering the cell, Kleopas Paulavičius recognised one of the Nazi officers who was in charge of the fort. During the years of independent Lithuania, Lichenstein was a classmate and good friend of Kleopas Paulavičius' brother. At the beginning of the war, he went to Germany, from where he returned to Kaunas with his epaulets on. Then he was assigned to the Ninth Fort. Having recognised Kleopas Paulavičius, Lichenstein wanted to help him, but when he found out what his acquaintance had done, he told him that he could do nothing. He even added that it would be easier to release him if he had killed someone. These words aptly describe the policy of the anti-Semitism-obsessed occupiers towards those who tried to help the Jews. In many cases, the attempt to save others ended in the death of the rescuers themselves.

Vitalija Glebavičienė recalls her father's story about the tension he felt being imprisoned in the fort. If a clergyman approached a prisoner in the evening and asked him if he wanted to confess, it was a sign that he would be shot the next day. The day of judgement had come for Kleopas Paulavičius. He was taken outside with other prisoners. In total, there were 12 people: 6 were put face down on the ground and the others were taken behind a hill. The sound of shots was heard. Then Lichenstein reappeared and asked if Paulavičius was still alive. When he answered, the German allowed him to go home. At first, Kleopas Paulavičius was confused. Was he being mocked like this? The lying people were watched by Nazi

guards with dogs. They were sitting quietly and drinking alcohol. Will they not let the dogs out when he goes? However, his willingness to live was greater than his fear; thus, he decided to go. As soon as he was out of sight of the guards, he hid in the nearby rye fields, where he stayed for a day and a half. This happened on July 6, 1944.

As Kleopas Paulavičius was spotted by passers-by on his way to the Ninth Fort, his relatives foresaw his fate: they considered him doomed to die. Therefore, his return home was unexpected, like a miracle. It should be mentioned that the Soviets, who later occupied Lithuania, had little faith in such miracles. Kleopas Paulavičius's survival aroused their suspicions, and for some time he was dragged around the institutions to convince the occupiers that he was not a Nazi collaborator. Eventually, the Russian officer who interrogated Kleopas Paulavičius hired him as a driver. As he was kept close, he eventually gained the trust of the authorities. The trust in him grew to such an extent that he often saw the parties of the authorities.

Kleopas Paulavičius is posing in front of a service car, Kaunas, the 1970s. Personal archive of Vitalija Glebavičienė

Kleopas Paulavičius lived a long life. He worked as a driver until he was eighty. As a gentleman of the early twentieth century and a tailor, he always wore a tie. He was a kind and sociable man, and often won the sympathy of those around him. He was nice to people and risked his life to save others.

In 1984, when Vytautas Damaševičius was directing a documentary film about the Ninth Fort, Kleopas Paulavičius also returned to the fort and recalled the days when he almost lost his life. The film is stored in the Central State Archive of Lithuania. He died in 1993 at the age of ninety-one. Kaunas Jewish Community Council published an obituary in which Kleopas Paulavičius was called a friend and saviour of the Jewish people. In 1995, Kleopas Paulavičius was posthumously awarded the Life Saving Cross, which was handed over to Paulavičius's wife, Valerija Paulavičienė, at the Presidential Palace of Lithuania.

Kleopas Paulavičius with his wife Valerija, Kaunas, December 6, 1978. When K. Paulavičius was posthumously awarded the Life Saving Cross in 1995, Valerija Paulavičienė went to the Presidential Palace to receive it. Personal archive of Vitalija Glebavičienė

Today, many questions cannot be answered. How many people did Kleopas Paulavičius manage to transport out of Kaunas ghetto? Who were they? The documents were burnt, and only by chance the man who saved the lives of others was given life by one of his executioners. Thus, even one person can radically change the fate of another person, appearing at the right time and the right place.