



SCRATCH OF FATE ON THE PUNISHMENT CELL DOOR

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There are stories that gather dust and blend into the surroundings. Most frequently, these stories are about people who lived their lives, enjoyed them and believed in the future. I would like to start this story by emphasising that Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum has a great restorer, Martynas, who has always paid a close attention to all the doors of the punishment cells. When work was carried out, the inscriptions on the inside of the door were noted. Names, surnames and years gave confidence in the authenticity of the object. The information was written down, and then, completely unexpectedly, a person contacted us and said, "I may know the person whose name is engraved on the door of the punishment cell." This is how the museum staff got acquainted with Šarūnas Sutkaitis.

Šarūnas Sutkaitis came to the museum with a bundle of photos and documents. A couple of the photograph backs had words handwritten by his father, Kazimieras Sutkaitis. It was curious to compare the handwriting – was it possible that Sutkaitis name on the door of the punishment cell was written by the same person? Šarūnas himself was eager to share the story of his father, whom, unfortunately, he never got to know.

Among the documents brought by Šarūnas Sutkaitis, there was a copy of a court order from 1951, which reads the following: "DECIDED: SUTKAITIS Kazys,

Aleksas's son, born in 1916 is declared dead - unknown whereabouts as of the date of the ruling." The last known place was Kaunas Ninth Fort. Who was the man whose name remained engraved on the door of the punishment cell and whose life terminated in the spring of 1944 in a place which caused horror for everyone at that time?

Kazimieras (Kazys) Sutkaitis was born on September 15, 1916 in Kaunas County, Rumšiškės Rural District, in Milžinai Village. During the period of the first independent Lithuania, he belonged to the Lithuanian national youth union "Jaunoji Lietuva" ("Young Lithuania") and was actively involved in its activities. This was a youth organisation whose members were involved in strengthening national identity and other civic activities. One of these activities was radio broadcasts, which were increasing in popularity at the time. Since 1935, the members of the organization were hosting broadcasts for the youth on the state-owned radio station. Radio theatre was gaining popularity at the time. The photographs brought by Šarūnas Sutkaitis reflect this activity. They show the members of the organization dressed in costumes, young and smiling. Just a few years after these photographs were taken, the Soviet occupation that began in 1940 stopped the activities of the organization.

In 1937, Kazimieras Sutkaitis was drafted into the army and started his service in May, 1938. Soon afterwards, he became a trainee of the military police. He lived the same life as other young men of that time: serving, having fun and enjoying life. The museum guest was holding up his father's photograph and joked that he had done something wrong as young men often like to do, and that his punishment was to stand guard with a rifle. Indeed, the photographs show young faces and the uniforms of the independent Lithuanian army, painting a picture of carefree days.

Less than two months before Lithuania's occupation, on April 29, 1940 Kazimieras Sutkaitis was released from service. Later, when the Nazi occupation began, he

had to collect tribute. There was a war going on, and the war industry was not just about explosives and bullets. The invaded lands had to feed the armies; therefore, the local population had to grow food. However, Kazys did not do this diligently; probably, he was simply ticking the boxes for those who needed it more. In other words, he always did things for the benefit of his countrymen. Today, no one can find out how this could have remained unnoticed.

Even if Kazimieras Sutkaitis' dexterity in collecting tributes was not noticed by Nazi Germany, at the end of 1943 Sutkaitis, driven by curiosity, went to his neighbour Ivanauskas to listen to a soviet partisan meeting and never returned. The farm owner was shot, and the rest of the group was arrested and sent to Kaunas hard labour prison on Mickevičiaus Street. On Thursdays, relatives queued outside the prison because this was the only day the prisoners could be visited. In fact, this day should probably be more appropriately described as the day of the opportunity to hand over food to the convicts. Sutkaitis's wife also took advantage of this opportunity. She used to get up in the middle of the night in order to walk from Rumšiškės to Kaunas, where her husband was imprisoned. This way, she could not only give Kazys some food, but also communicate with him by sewing a note into his shirt collar. In response, her husband would hide his note in his shirt, which he would hand over to her to wash. Unfortunately, during Nazi Germany occupation, nobody was going to keep a prisoner in Mickevičiaus Street for a long time; therefore, Sutkaitis was moved to the Sixth Fort, and later – to the Ninth Fort. When Naujalienė, the godmother of Sutkaitis's son Šarūnas, found out about his transfer to the forts, she tried to bribe the guards with a gold watch in order to release Kazys, but it was impossible to persuade them.

When Kazimieras Sutkaitis was taken to the Ninth Fort, all contacts with him stopped. A man from a neighbouring village remained as a witness to Kazimieras's fate. This man was caught for theft and profiteering by stealing cows from people, making meat and selling it at the market. The occupation authorities were not impressed by such work. However, the Nazis managed to take

advantage of him and put him in the Ninth Fort as a prison guard, where he behaved according to his own moral sense. Therefore, when Kazimieras died, he took his passport and started using his surname. Years later, when Šarūnas Sutkaitis inquired about the person who had stolen his father's surname, the KGB replied that there was no need to look for him and that he had already paid for his work. Let this remain a moral about karma.

The museum staff were very surprised by the number of photographs and documents that the visitor brought with him. When asked how he managed to preserve everything, Šarūnas smiled that if someone had found it, he would have had to move in with the polar bears. After all, any legacy of "bourgeois Lithuania" could have been viewed very unfavourably by the Soviets. However, the interwar photographs, hidden deep in the attic, were preserved. The uniform was also preserved for a long time, but later, in times when nothing was available, it became a wedding suit. Nevertheless, returning to the topic of polar bears, it is worth noting that it was not only the Nazi regime that was merciless to the Sutkaičiai family, but also the Soviets, who were preparing to deport Šarūnas Sutkaitis and his mother to Siberia. Fortunately, they managed to escape.

Kazimieras Sutkaitis's story reminds us that the occupation regime puts a heavy yoke not only on soldiers, but also on ordinary local residents. Oppression tramples on the fate of peaceful people. Whole families perished in the Ninth Fort: Jews, both Kaunas citizens and those brought from abroad, Lithuanians, Poles and many others. These were the people who resisted the regime to the best of their ability and who did not choose to be in favour of what seemed unjust, reprehensible and unjustifiable. This story is one of many when the full stop was written too early.



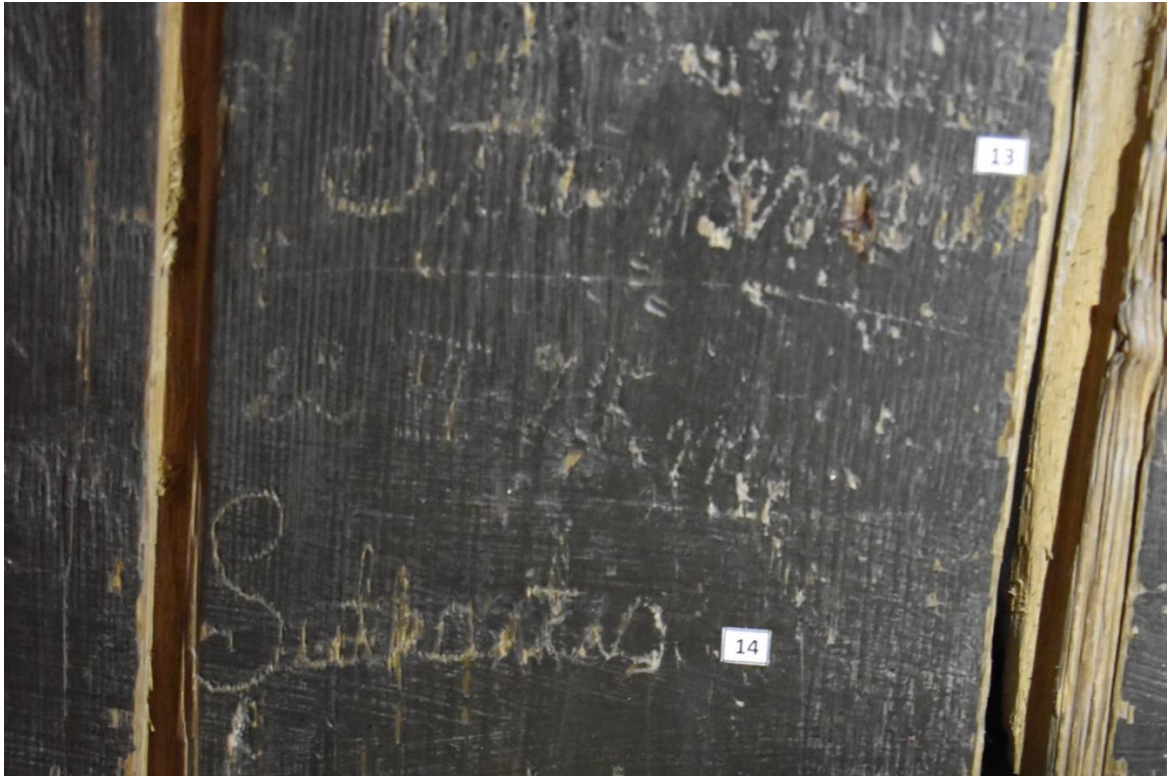
State Radiophone, Kaunas, 1935–1936. “Young Lithuanians” dressed up in suits were organising radio performances. Personal archive of Šarūnas Sutkaitis



Kazimieras Sutkaitis poses wearing the military uniform of Independent Lithuania, Kaunas, around 1938. Personal archive of Šarūnas Sutkaitis



Kazimieras Sutkaitis with a friend, both are wearing the uniforms of "Young Lithuanians", Sutkaitis is wearing a tie with national patterns, Kaunas, mid-1940s. Personal archive of Šarūnas Sutkaitis



Sutkaitis' surname is engraved on the door of the punishment cell in the Ninth Fort © KDFM / Rasa Pranskevičiūtė



Šarūnas Sutkaitis visits Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum © KDFM / Rasa Pranskevičiūtė



Šarūnas Sutkaitis visits Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum © KDFM / Rasa Pranskevičiūtė



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