



## **STRENGTH OF THE PAST FOR THE PRESENT**

*Museologist Valė Gutauskaitė*

On April 29, 1943, Vladislovas Telksnys and fifteen other Kaunas intellectuals working in the press were deported by the Gestapo to Stutthof, one of the most brutal concentration camps in Nazi Germany, where they lived through a true "hell on earth."

Thanks to Danutė Marcinkevičienė, the daughter of Rima Šimonienė and Vladislovas Telksnys, the personal archive of this resistance member, memoirist and writer was handed over to Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum. On the occasion of commemorating the 80th anniversary of the deportation of Lithuanian intellectuals to Stutthof concentration camp, we are presenting to the public an interesting historical documentary material introducing Vladislovas Telksnys, a sensitive and deeply religious personality who unconditionally loved his homeland, Lithuania. The documentary material testifies to his active participation in the activities of the Catholic organisation "Ateitininkai" during the interwar period, his experiences in Stutthof concentration camp, and the persecution by the Soviet security during the first and second Soviet occupation.

### **Part II**

#### **In the "Pit of Death"**

Vladislovas Telksnys, an active member of Catholic organisations and ardent patriot of his country, could not calmly watch the Nazi occupiers, who had

displaced the Soviet ones and were ravaging his homeland Lithuania; therefore, he joined the resistance movement consciously, as if it were his inevitable duty. In the spring of 1943, Vladislovas Telksnys was sent to the hell of the Stutthof concentration camp for his anti-Nazi activities, and was subjected to atrocities that are incomprehensible to the human mind, barbaric treatment of prisoners and senseless sadism. These shocking experiences in the Nazi camp are an example of how a person can remain courageous even in the most difficult moments, not to succumb to evil, not to lose hope and faith, to overcome adversity and to rediscover his/ her way in life.

On June 22, 1941, at the end of the first year of Soviet occupation and annexation, the majority of the Lithuanian residents greeted the German army as a saviour from Soviet terror, and hoped that Lithuania would regain its independence. However, Nazi Germany had no plans for an independent Lithuanian state: the Nazi occupation regime pursued a policy of physical terror, economic exploitation and cultural suppression. Lithuania's economy and people were subordinated to the war needs. Soon after, the inhumane Nazi sadism began with the mass extermination of the Jewish population. Recalling those days, Vladislovas Telksnys wrote the following: "Kaunas has changed beyond recognition. Columns of starving and tattered people are slowly walking along the streets. There is a yellow six-pointed star on the backs of the unfortunate. <...> They are surrounded by SS men with guns, accompanied by German shepherds barking at them, their white teeth bared. <...> The grim columns walk slowly in and out of work. They are just becoming narrower and shorter every day."

Lithuanian dissatisfaction with the policies of the occupiers grew steadily. Legal opposition to the occupation regime was impossible: the struggle, disobedience and resistance to the proposed reforms had to be carried out underground. After the Nazi defeats on the Eastern Front, in defiance of international law, the Third Reich leadership decided to replenish its military personnel reserves with SS divisions formed from the occupied territories. It was necessary to correctly inform the Lithuanian people that only the legitimate government of

the sovereign state of Lithuania could carry out a military mobilisation in defence of its people's interests.

Vladislovas Telksnys, a rebellious Aukštaitian, did not accept the subjugation of the nation, the despise of its ideals and continued his underground work against the new occupier. From the beginning of 1943, the newspaper "Į laisvę" ("To Freedom") was printed and distributed underground. The underground press published information about Nazi crimes, informing compatriots how they should behave in response to the occupiers' demands, how they should react to the decrees and orders issued, and how they should not join the actions against the Jews. The articles and information published in the newspaper "Į laisvę" helped to thwart the mobilisation of Lithuanians into the army of a foreign country.

The Third Reich blamed the underground press for the failure to establish the SS Legion. The Gestapo, in order to stop the illegal press, initiated repressions on civil society: 46 arrested Lithuanian intellectuals reached the Stutthof concentration camp on March 25, 1943. A little later, on the morning of April 29, Vladislovas Telksnys was also arrested when he came to work at the "Žaibas" printing house. Another 15 arrested journalists and press workers from Vilnius and Kaunas were brought to the Gestapo basement in Kaunas (now Kaunas Cultural Centre). After spending a few days in Tilžė, Ragainė and Marienburg prisons, Vladislovas Telksnys and 15 underground press workers reached Stutthof, a human extermination camp, on May 18, 1943. The first prisoners were brought to this concentration camp on September 2, 1939 from Gdansk in Poland, and later people were also transported from other Nazi-occupied countries to the Stutthof concentration camp.

The sight that the Lithuanians saw after arrival to the camp was shocking. They felt as if they had "fallen" into hell: a high and wide iron gate, covered with barbed wire, with an inscription above it saying "Abandon all hope, you who enter here" (later they found out that it was a passage from Dante Alighieri's "The Divine Comedy" part entitled "Inferno"), and a little further on,

there was a pile of ashes and gallows. Farther on, near the barracks, one could see very skinny and yellowed human beings with numbers who could barely move their legs and were dressed in striped and thin garments that gave both a look of horror and a pitying smile. In the group of journalists and press workers pushed through the gate of Stutthof, "A tall, strong, slightly balding and middle-aged man with a stick appeared. He was hacking away without looking where or who was in the way. <...> In voices that were not our own, we squealed, screamed and moaned. Pleading and begging for mercy was no help. He kicked, trampled on the fallen, smothered them with a stick, swung his fist left and right <...>". This was only the beginning of the suffering. The SS took away their clothes and possessions and replaced their names with the number 22916 and the letter L with a red triangle, which signified the status of a political prisoner." When they were putting on the striped uniform, "there was again <...> a clatter and clap of sticks on the back, the same and new curses, accompanied by a kick in the bottom and fists working <...>."

Every day here was terrifying, "<...> we realised that we were doomed to die and that our hope of escape was hanging by a thread and that only a miracle could save us <...>." Hunger, beatings, hard labour, lack of rest at night, parasites, stifling and stinking air as well as spiritual and physical suffering became the daily routine. Everyone fearfully looked at the chimney of the crematorium, where the stench of the burning corpses of the prisoners who had been brought in before was also present along with the smoke. Soon death entered the group of the illegal press workers, who were becoming hardly alive. Captain Vladas Čekauskas was the first to enter the crematorium. The disease that brought Vladislovas Telksnys to face death did not bypass him. He got ill with dysentery. No prisoner in the camp recovered from this disease.

Vladislovas's body without clothes was already lying among the corpses being taken to the crematorium. "<...> I barely managed to open my eyes. A few more naked people like me are thrown on top of me, mushy and slimy, one's bottom, the other's mouth around. Some of them are lying across, others

diagonally... Where am I? In the warehouse of the crematorium?... The corpses are piled up like that... Such sweet weakness... Darkness. Death was not terrible because I couldn't think about it being unconscious <...>".

A doctor and Professor Antanas Starkus, who was in Stutthof with a group of 46 intellectuals from Lithuania, was walking past a heap of dead bodies, when he saw the Lithuanian mark, the letter "L" on the naked prisoner's chest and, having noticed a slight motion, began to pull Vladislovas from the pile of condemned men. "<...> finally, he pulled him out, covered with that mucus, dragged him, carried him... The head sometimes hits the floor when it's hanging down, and everything disappears again..." Antanas Starkus dragged Vladislovas to the hospital and asked the doctor, called Gertner by all the prisoners, to take care of him. Vladislovas found out the real name of his saviour only later. He was a doctor and prisoner of the Hammerstein Nazi camp, Fyodor Soprunov.

A few days later, already in hospital, Vladislovas Telksnys received his first parcel of food from his wife, Danutė, which contained a large piece of bacon, the true miracle of his survival. Following the instructions of his doctor, Fyodor Soprunov, he sucked on a tiny piece of bacon as the world's most delicious sweet at the appointed time. The bacon gradually strengthened him for a new life. Vladislovas's release from the camp hospital and his suffering may be compared to that of Lazarus, the beggar with a deadly disease, who rose from the grave, as described in the Gospel according to John (Jn 11:17-45).

After the death of Vladas Čekauskas, the remaining group of 15 people did their best to survive. They were watching out for the deadly hard stick, endured bullying, the torments of prison labour and were putting efforts to find at least a little food to satisfy their constant hunger. Hunger and death were in front of their eyes every day. Parcels from Lithuania provided some relief. After ten months of labour in the camp, the group of press workers from Lithuania was „<...> difficult to recognise. They did not resemble the intellectuals brought from Kaunas at all as they possibly reminded of overdried locusts."

After ten months of suffering, Vladislovas Telksnys, already accustomed to the fate, found out the news, unheard of in Stutthof: the group of press workers was being released.

On February 25, 1944, Vladislovas Telksnys and a group of press workers, accompanied by SS officers, closed the gates of Dante Aligieri 's "Inferno" like the "top of a huge coffin" and moved towards Lithuania through the prisons of East Prussia. On the way to Lithuania, engineer Antanas Daniūnas died in Ragainė prison after getting sick with tuberculosis.

After the difficult and exhausting journey, Vladislovas and his friends ended up in Kaunas prison, from which he was released on March 15. However, he did not enjoy his freedom for long. A few weeks later, Vladislovas Telksnys found out that the Gestapo were looking for him because the house where he lived was under surveillance. Once again, he was in danger of being arrested at any moment. On the advice of his friends, Vladislovas Telksnys left Kaunas under a different name.



A group of press workers arrested by the Nazis on April 29, 1943 and condemned to a slow death. © KDFM, personal archives of Vytautas Zabielskis and Eglė Tiškutė



Vladislovas Telksnys. "We felt as if we had "fallen" into hell." Stutthof, Poland, the 1980s. © KDFM



Vladislovas Telksnys and Danutė Banionytė after registering their marriage at the civil registry office. Kaunas, April 29, 1942. © KDFM

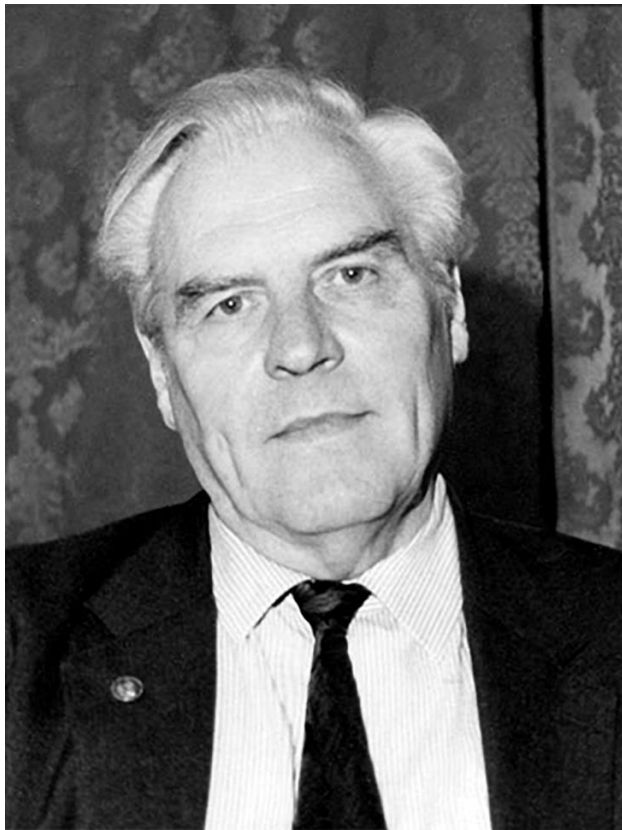


Representatives of the Nazi German occupation authorities address the civilian residents of Kaunas. The railway station, Kaunas, 1941. © LCVA



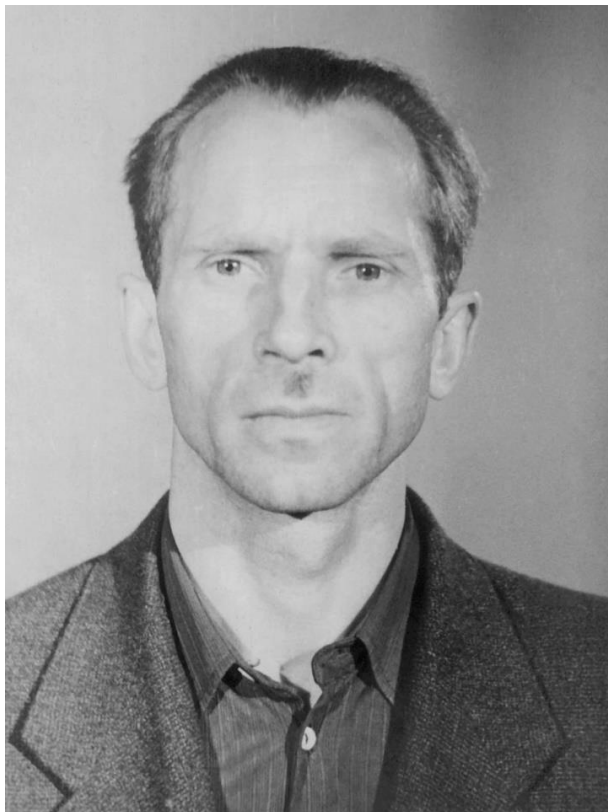
A group for forced labour in Germany is assembled by the order of the German occupation authorities. Kaunas, 1942. © LCVA





Fyodor Soprunov, Doctor, Hamerstein Nazi camp prisoner. The 1950s.

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Vladislovas Telksnys after coming back to Lithuania from Stutthof camp. Kaunas, 1944.

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