

Vladislovas Telksnys on the doorstep of his house. Kaunas, Vilijampolė, Vidurinė Str. 13-1, 1994.

From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė

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 IV

After the Restoration of Lithuania's Independence

The special day has come: the dream that Lithuania will be free one day again, that the tricolour will fly and that Vincas Kudirka's "National Song" will be sung with honour has become a reality. On that day, the words "Finally, I am free again" rang out in the heart and lips of Vladislovas Telksnys and of every Lithuanian citizen. March 11, 1990 became the threshold that opened the door to a new life with a vision of a bright and peaceful future. Unfortunately, Vladas was gripped by his past experiences, and from time to time his consciousness would unravel a whole story of dramatic experiences, bringing back the painful memories of the past. In his mind, it was difficult to come to terms with his fate and forgive those who had caused him so much injustice, inner pain and negative emotional experiences.

After Lithuania became an independent state, Vladislovas was not an active participant in public politics, but he was not a passive observer of events either: he remained rebellious, refusing to accept artificiality, the dictate of the crowd and the greyness of the world; he was also critical of the media, which, in his opinion, had pushed Christian and traditional national values into the margins.

Telksnys was prompted to take up the pen again, to express his opinion and share his insights by what seemed unacceptable, flawed, false or alien; therefore, he wrote articles for the daily newspapers published at the time. As a former active member of the Ateitininkai organisation, with strong values and national and Catholic consciousness, he negatively evaluated the statements of the head of the Education and Training Department of Kaunas, Antanas Bagdonas, against the distribution of the Catholic magazine *Kregždutė* in schools, which were presented in the article by journalist R. Jurgelaitis, "Printing kiosks are being set up in the classrooms", published in *Kauno diena* (2004, No 7). Vladas was convinced that the articles and poems in *Kregždutė* on historical or religious topics foster love of the Homeland, develop Christian values and play an important educational role at school. He agreed with the editor of the magazine, Milda Telksnytė, that "the magazine is not published for money, but because we care about children."

Visiting the garden of Vytautas the Great War Museum and seeing teenagers walking dogs and people shouting, smoking and swearing at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Eternal Flame, Vladislovas ponders: "Lithuania is an independent country, but its citizens are not the same as in 1918-1940." He expresses his experiences and feelings about the disrespect shown to his compatriots who died or lost their health in the struggle for Lithuania's independence in the article "Past in the Present" (*Kauno diena*, 1996, No. 6). Vladislovas is convinced that the garden of Vytautas the Great War Museum is a temple of all Lithuania, where peace and concentration should prevail because here the sacred spirit of the Unknown Soldier, those who died in the fights for independence, book carriers and the Lithuanian leaders looking out of bronze busts, is hovering over our heads. In the garden of the War Museum, a person should draw from the love and loyalty of the Homeland, as if from a living spring, swearing to defend it and fight for its independence and feel obliged to contribute to Lithuania's well-being through meaningful deeds.

V. Telksnys did not tolerate falsification, distortion and lies. He courageously defended Henrikas Blazas, a prisoner of Stutthof concentration camp because he had to refute the accusations of lies against his friend. Journalist and former KGB Colonel Sigitas Sinkevičius published an article entitled "Murderers" (*Убийцы,*) in the Israeli magazine *War Veteran's Word* (*Слово инвалида войны,* 1994, No. 9) in which he accused Blazas of anti-Semitism and incitement to hatred against the Jewish people. Vladislovas, disagreeing with the lies, in the articles "From Oblivion: Henrikas Blazas" (*Kauno diena,* 1994, No. 288), "Usual Fake" (*Lietuvos aidas,* 1994, No. 118), presented detailed arguments and explanations revealing the false information and demanded that the author of the article, Sigitas Sinkevičius, would publicly deny the news that demeaned the honour and dignity of H. Blazas' personality and did not correspond to reality.

In an article by Soviet journalist Marijonas Vilkelis, "Helped the Fascists" (*Gimtoji žemė,* November 25, 1986), political prisoner and priest Steponas Telksnys was accused of collaborating with the Nazis. Vladislovas stood up for his brother as he had to refute the bold-faced lie; therefore, he wrote one article after another ("Slander does not go away", *XXI amžius,* 2001, No. 19) and addressed the Jewish History Museum of Vilnius Gaon (*XXI amžius,* 2001, No. 30), revealing his brother's true biographical facts, his real life story, refuting the falsification being spread, which unjustifiably blackened priest Steponas Telksnys. The accusations were not confirmed, but it was very complicated to prove the truth.

Vladislovas, who survived the hell of Stutthof concentration camp, was left with a depressing impression by Algimantas Puipa's film "Forest of Gods" based on the novel of the same name by Balys Sruoga. In his article "After watching the Forest of Gods" (*XXI amžius, Horizontai,* 2005, No. 18), he expresses his opinion that the film "contradicts the truth" and is worse in comparison to the book by B. Sruoga. The life of Stutthof prisoners in the camp is embellished in the film: "you have time to eat, smoke and drink tea, you are not too overwhelmed, you can even throw snowballs at each other." Vladislovas asked openly: "Why do you need

such a film?" According to him, the director had no right to distort the truth. A person who had not seen and felt such suffering could not visually reflect the full horror of torture: starvation, beating and killing with sticks, shovels or whatever the executioner had at hand, hanging and kicking as well as physical and spiritual annihilation. In his article "Looking around the 'Forest of Gods'" (*Kauno diena*, October 7, 2005), V. Telksnys writes that the film "Forest of Gods" is a "mockery of the hundreds of thousands of people who were killed with sticks, who died of starvation or in the gas chambers. These were the people who loved their homeland, who defended its freedom, who did not bow down to the invaders and died in concentration camps."

Vladislovas Telksnys wrote about the humiliation, hunger, forced labour and suffering of Lithuanians and people of other nations in the Nazi hell of Stutthof in his autobiographical story "In the Shadow of the Chimney." Here, the author does not shy away from touching on the unpleasant past as if it were a wound that would never heal. The book became his memoirs, which he probably wanted to forget very much rather than to tell others.



Vladislovas Telksnys at the editorial office of *Kauno diena*. Kaunas, 1994. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė

The banal idea that history tends to repeat itself in a different space and time often becomes reality. Vladislovas hardly expected that fifty-one years later, he would have to leave free Lithuania for Stutthof, the former hell of his suffering on earth. The former Stutthof concentration camp, currently a museum, hosted a conference on May 9-11, 1995 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the liquidation of Nazi Germany's longest-running concentration camp. Vladislovas was joined by the members of Kaunas Jewish community, former prisoners of Stutthof concentration camp. They went to bow down to the victims whose names they knew, as well as to those whose names nobody knows and may never find out.

The ceremony was presided over by Janina Chalka Grabovska, Director of Stutthof Museum, who hosted the guests. During the event, the clergy of different denominations joined together in prayer, asking God that there would never be war on earth again. The conference adopted an open appeal to the world community, which is particularly relevant today, when the world's globalisation and immigration processes are not only causing intolerance, but also aggression on the basis of ethnicity, race or religion. The participants sent a message to future generations, wishing them to be united in the common goal of world peace, so that there would be no more wars, because peace and freedom are invaluable treasures; in addition, they were addressing the humanity to eliminate hatred and hostility from its consciousness and to fight against national intolerance. Former concentration camp prisoners and other participants of the meeting reminded humanity of the destructive and demonic power that hatred can have and the importance of resisting hatred based on nationality, religion or race.

Despite the solemnity of the event and the attention shown, the impression of his visit to Stutthof remained depressing and frightening for Vladislovas Telksnys. In his memoirs, Vladislovas wrote: "As I was walking in the museum, every step

reminded me of the past and suffering, and I could still hear the cursing, screaming, the cracking of sticks and the cries of the dying. Standing in front of the gas chamber and the crematorium furnaces that had swallowed thousands of lives, I could smell the stench of burning and decaying corpses in the air. The horrible images of SS soldiers' boots mercilessly kicking the hardly-alive humans, the demonic laughter of the guards as if they were mad, and the angry curses kept ringing in my ears. As if from a deep dungeon, the moans and pleas of the condemned were heard: "Don't forget us, the martyrs!"



Vladislovas Telksnys (in the first row, the third one from the left), a participant of the conference devoted to the 50th anniversary of the liquidation of the longest-running concentration camp established by Germany in Stutthof museum. Stutthof, Poland, 1995. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė



Vladislovas Telksnys is telling his horrible experiences in Stutthof concentration camp during WWII to a Polish media representative. Stutthof, Poland, 1995. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė

There is probably not a person who has not experienced dramatic events in the past, and those painful memories keep surfacing from the depths of the memory and do not give peace for a long time. The past is like a stone hanging around the neck of the present. It is difficult to free oneself from the haunting ghosts of the past, the intrusive thoughts and experiences. The interpreters of Scripture say that "[s]ome people in the world are murderers, some are freethinkers, some are predators, and some distribute their wealth among the poor. The Lord watches over all of them, and gives peace and reward to those who do good" (<https://pnb.lt/skaitykla/>). In the same way, Vladislovas's complicated life, "like an endless river of surprises," presented him with a surprise, which helped him to

free himself from negative thoughts, from the grudges in his heart and opened up a phase of a more peaceful life. Philosopher Marcus Aurelius taught the following: "Change your attitude towards the things that disturb you, and they will cease to be dangerous." Vladislovas received a letter from Mrs Elizabeth Erb, the President of the Christian Maximilian Kolbe Society in Freiburg, Germany, which said: "I will not compensate the suffering and humiliation in any way. It is not in our power to bring back and change events. <...> But we can and want to give you our love for your suffering." Elizabeth Erb invited Vladislovas to visit Germany. It was not an easy to decide, as the concentration camp experience had a strong influence on Vladislovas's emotional state. Fruma Kučinskienė, the leader and interpreter of the eight-person group going to Germany, resolutely dispelled Vldas's negative emotions and doubts, and took care of the travel documents. On November 7, 1995, at 12.00 p.m., a Boeing-737 plane took off from Vilnius airport for Germany. "Finally ... I'm going," Vldas thought, "but I'm worried in my heart, because I'm going to those whose parents, or maybe some of them, were the perpetrators of my arrest, who, without any evidence and on the basis of a single complainant dragged others into a terrible sea of suffering and pain." A couple of hours later, when the plane landed in Frankfurt, Germany's fifth largest city, Vladislovas met those who were waiting for him, those who were determined to show him different Germany and its different people, not the ones who had been tormenting or torturing him.

A group of former concentration camp prisoners stayed with German families while visiting Germany. Vladislovas as well as his travel and fate friend, Jonas Mazgelis, stayed at the home of Mrs Elizabeth Weber. Every day was full of excitement, new experiences and a genuine concern for the visitors' needs. Vldas meticulously recorded his impressions and observations in his diary.

Many German cities and towns were visited, all of which filled with antiquity and astonishing architecture, and many castles like the ones from Brothers Grimms' fairy tales. For Vladislovas, it was a wonderful country with its spectacular views,

which everyone admired as they went from one object to another. Germany's museums, churches and parks made an unforgettable impression. Vladislovas wrote in his diary about a moving visit to the cemetery of American soldiers who died in Normandy during the Second World War: "<...> The size of the cemetery, which covers 70 hectares, was overwhelming and made me realise how many people had sacrificed their lives in the meaningless war." During this trip, Telksnys saw different Germany: Germany with its rich cultural heritage, high standard of living, developed economy and the warm hospitality of the local people.

The travellers were received with hospitality, respect and attention by the Governor of Perl, Toni Hoffman, who made an official apology for the crimes committed by the Nazis during the Second World War, in front of the members of the delegation personally as well as publicly in front of all Lithuanians. Vladislovas wrote in his diary about this meeting: "Toni Hoffman's apology was very unexpected, beautiful and moving." When he visited the Christian Adult Education House in Merzig, the head of the institution, Mr. Georg Hassenmüller, regretted that "this was the first time that he had met Lithuanians, former prisoners of the concentration camps, even though there were close cultural ties with Lithuania." Mr Hassenmüller emphasised the importance of mutual understanding and cooperation: "We need to hear each other, get to know each other, cooperate, discuss and trust each other. One cannot live with hatred all the time; to be free means to be free from hatred first of all. It is important to realise that the world is not perfect; it is full of violence, fear, uncertainty and despair, and that we cannot be completely protected from evil, pain and all kinds of insults." The worldview of Georg Hassenmüller, the head of the Christian Adult Education House, was very close to Vladislovas's spiritually.

Vladislovas was a man of prayer, a man of deep faith, who believed that "Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray" (Syrach 28:1-2). He managed to get over himself and wrote in his diary: "I cannot sink any lower, I have to rise up, I cannot carry grudges for long.

I must drown the stone of hatred in the great river Rhine, so that it never rises to the top, because Jesus promised us: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matthew 6:14).



In front of the mayor's office in Perl. From left to right: Fruma Kučinskienė, Leiba Lipšicas, Fania Brancovskaja, Miriam Lisauskienė, Jonas Mazgelis, Vladislovas Telksnys and Günter Schmitz who took care of the accommodation and logistics for the guests who came from Lithuania at the invitation of the Maximilian Kolbe Christian Society. Perl, Germany, 1995. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė



Vladislovas Telksnys at Cologne Cathedral. Germany, 1995. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė



Vladislovas Telksnys (on the right) and Jonas Mazgelis on the arch bridge named after Duke Adolf. Luxemburg, 1995. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė

Vladislovas recalled his trip to Germany, full of wonderful and unforgettable impressions, with a special spiritual warmth, and the many fond memories of the people he met during his stay in Germany became a strong incentive to move forward.

In a letter to Mrs. Elizabeth Weber, who was hosting him during his visit to Germany, he wrote: "Can we forget you, the people of an unspeakably good Christian heart, who took care of us as if we were your brothers. The love you have shown is unforgettable. Words cannot express our gratitude for what we have experienced in staying at your home and communicating with you. By forgiving the wrongdoer, we cleanse the inside of our hearts from the sins of others and the pain they cause, but "unforgiveness opens the door to hatred, which is the cause of many wars and deaths (2 Samuel, Chapters 13 to 18)".

Vladislovas Telksnys's life path is the story of the life of an ordinary and extraordinary man. A man who suffered many grievances during the Soviet and Nazi occupations and experienced the fear of hiding, who suffered for his trampled human dignity, but who managed to overcome difficulties, not to give in to manipulation, to stand up for the truth, to reconcile and to forgive. He is a man with an unusually strong relationship with God, in whom he found consolation and life beauty. Vladislovas Telksnys's memoir books are not only descriptions of the author's own difficult life, but also the true history of the Lithuanian nation, marked with images of disasters and suffering. As Miguel de Cervantes claimed, history is "a treasury of our works, a witness to the past, an example and a lesson for the present, a warning for the future."



Vladislovas Telksnys at Alantos Secondary School, where he was learning in 1923-1927. He is presenting his memoir book *Nuo Kėgžlio iki Aluntos (From Kėgžlys to Alunta)*. In 2004, this school was granted a status of a gymnasium. Alanta, Molėtai Region, 1999. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė



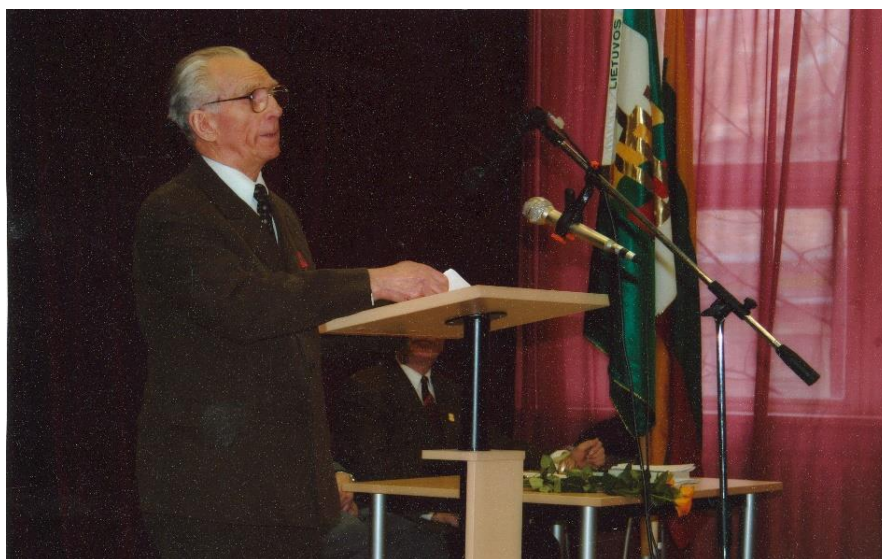
Raudėnai residents give a warm welcome to Vladislovas Telksnys during the presentation of the book *Raudėnų kraštas* (Raudėnai Region). In the chapter "Famous people and intellectuals from Raudėnai Region," the surname of V. Telksnys is also mentioned. Raudėnai, Šiauliai Region, 2007.

From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė



Vladislovas Telksnys on the occasion of his 80th anniversary with his wife Danutė. Kaunas, 1995.

From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė



Vladislovas Telksnys is giving a speech on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Lithuanian military pilot Ignas Vylius. Garrison Officers' Club, Vilnius, 2004. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė



In 2001, Vladislovas Telksnys was awarded the Order of the Knight's Cross of the Fifth Degree by President Valdas Adamkus, and in 2010 he was awarded the first-degree Santaka Honorary Medal of Kaunas City. Kaunas Town Hall, 2010. From the personal archive of Danutė Marcinkevičienė

Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum is grateful to Danutė Marcinkevičienė (Telksnytė) and Rima Šimonienė for handing over the personal archive of Vladislovas Telksnys to the museum. We are grateful for the belief that the staff of the museum will occasionally "dust off" the manuscripts, diaries and artefacts of Vladislovas Telksnys, and that they will remind the future generations of the painful periods of Lithuania's history and tell about Vladislovas Telksnys, a person who unconditionally loved his homeland, Lithuania.

The life of Vladislovas Telksnys is an example for future generations, and his credo is best expressed by the words inscribed on the bell of liberty presented by Lithuanian-Americans: "Freedom is not worthy of those who do not defend it."