



IT'S EASY ON THE HEART THAT YOU DID GOOD

Museologist Greta Ščeliokaitė

There is not probably a single person in Kaunas (or maybe even in Lithuania) who has not seen the towering monument at the Ninth Fort in a photograph. This is the best-known work of sculptor Alfonsas Vincentas Ambraziūnas. Fewer people probably know that Ambraziūnas wrote and published a book entitled "Basics of Deconstructivism." And only a few people know that the famous sculptor's aunt risked her life during the war protecting and hiding Jews. If Ambraziūnas had not written two tiny paragraphs in the book about the fact that "compassion was not alien to people who experienced the horrors of war," the story would probably have sunk into oblivion.

Vincentas Alfonsas Ambraziūnas' cousin Irena Giedrienė is eight years younger than the sculptor. She was born in the year when Nazi Germany took over Lithuania. As a little girl, Irena spent much time with her grandmother in Vilkija and grew up very close to her cousin. Her parents, Veronika (1922-2009) and Stanislovas (1908-1998) Kaminskiai, lived in the village of Karalgiris in the forest, about 10 km away from Vilkija. Later, in 1944-1953, this forest was the home of the Lithuanian partisans of Vaidotas Unit of Kęstutis Military District, Lukšys Unit of the Resurrection Military District and Žalgiris Unit of Tauras Military District. However, one night during the war years, it was not the partisans who knocked on the Kaminskis' door, but persecuted Jews seeking refuge.

Irena Giedrienė was just a child when this happened. She used to spend part of her time at her parents' house, where she had a ceramics workshop in an old granary. The Kaminskai had recently built and started to furnish a new house, while the old one served more like a warehouse. The house was built slightly up a hill, flat to the ground and with a pile of stones on the southern side. Once the stone was moved, one could get into the cellar, where the Kaminskai kept their potatoes and little Irena set up her workshop. She did not care much about playing with the clay as it was more important to make figures, dry them and then the next day go down to the cellar to see how they held up overnight. This is what happened that morning: the barefoot girl ran to see how her work had dried, but instead of seeing her work, she suddenly met a man and got very scared. It was a bearded man who smiled at her, but she immediately turned around in surprise and fright and ran back home.

Irena's parents tried to convince her that she was imagining things and that maybe it was just a mythical creature or fairy tale heroes, but the little girl could not be fooled. She became childishly angry at her parents for lying and began to seek the truth by speaking to neighbours. However, the times were troubled. Veronika and Stanislovas feared that others might believe their daughter, become suspicious or even betray them. They had to sit with the girl down and explain that people were lost in the woods, that they would just spend the night and leave. However, even this was not true. Finally, little Irena stopped talking about this when her parents admitted that this was not some mythical creature.

These people stayed more than one night. Although Irena never met them again, she knew that in the mornings her mother would bring them a basket of food, and sometimes she would hear her mother complain that it would be much better to have only a couple extra mouths, but now she had to prepare much food. Also, they did not eat everything. It was very memorable for the girl that the unexpected guests did not want to eat everything. After all, you cannot buy too much in the countryside. Her parents grew everything themselves: they had a

farm, pigs and turkeys, but the guests did not eat meat. Irena remembered how her mother used to make potato and flour buns, dry them on the stove, put them in sacks, and later stew them in milk until they were edible. Her father would go away for weeks to work, and the whole farm was on her mother's shoulders. When her father came back at weekends, he would always visit the hiding people. They would tell him that in the city documents were prepared for them and that they would be able to leave soon.

Another memory that flashes in Irena's mind is of strange men who came to their house and were looking for something when mum was alone. They checked the rooms, went through the sheds and started to sift through the hay looking for people. They also went to the old house, but when they walked through the rooms, they did not realise that there was a cellar under the house. Finally, they left. The girl saw her mother's big, frightened eyes and knew that something was wrong, and when they started to jab the hay, she thought it was so unusual and strange. As a little girl, she did not understand why her mother's eyes were so large, but now she knows that her mother was afraid that she, as a child, would not say something. If they had found the cellar where the Jews were hiding, it would have been a sad ending for everyone.

The hidden Jews kept repeating that documents were prepared and they would leave soon. Veronika Kaminskienė started to gather food supplies for their journey and packed a little parcel. These people promised to write a letter to Veronika and Stanislovas when they got to a safe place, and to let them know how the trip went. One morning, as always, Veronika went to the old house with a bag full of food. This time she didn't stay there long and came back with a full basket. There were no more people in the cellar. There was no note either. After the war, Veronika and Stanislovas still talked to each other from time to time; they were concerned about the fate of those people and were waiting to find out if they were alive and well. But they never did. Irena speculates that maybe they

wrote letters from America or somewhere else, but they never reached their parents.

We are sitting with Irena in her flat, and as soon as the coffee starts smelling, she regrets that she cannot tell me much. She was very young then and cannot remember much. She probably would have forgotten if she had not spilt the beans to her cousin Alfonsas, who kept notes. She tells me how she used to talk to A.V. Ambraziūnas as they were adults and sometimes exchanged ideas about how Irena's parents could probably have been recognised as the Righteous Among the Nations, but they never received the attention they deserved. When I asked if Veronika and Stanislovas had ever tried to tell this story and gather witnesses, Irena smiled: "They thought that they had done a good deed for people. Maybe they will be rewarded up there. My dad used to say: "Never do wrong. Always, if you did good, you did it, and it's easy on the heart that you did it."

As we sip our coffee, we also start to discuss how many other people there were who modestly did what their moral compass told them without telling anyone, and nobody will be able to collect all stories. There are 925 Lithuanian citizens on the list of the Righteous Among the Nations (2022 data). We can be proud that we are the second in the world in terms of the percentage of rescuers. But how many more stories like those of Veronika and Stanislovas Kaminskai can we hear in our circles? People whose names are not on any list and who may not even have been thanked, but whose contribution to the well-being of the world is no less.

My interlocutor just sighs. Such stories are forgotten. Now there is no one left to talk to and to ask questions while unanswered questions are multiplying. Probably, no one will be able to tell who these people were and what their fate was. It would be so good just to hear the story once again of how strangers knocked on the door one night, looking for a place to hide.



Veronika Kaminskienė with her nephew Alfonsas Vincentas Ambraziūnas in front of her house in Vilkija, 2001, personal archive of Irena Giedrienė