

little-known documents

Letters from a Librarian: Lost and Found in Vilna

ONA ŠIMAITĖ

INTRODUCED AND
TRANSLATED BY
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Introduction

The meaning of "archive," its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded [. . .]. It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place.

—Jacques Derrida

JACQUES DERRIDA'S FORMULATION THAT "ARCHIVES TAKE PLACE" POINTS TO AN IMPORTANT FEATURE OF THE VILNA

ghetto archive: an archive that "takes place" is active; it happens. Libraries are just such active archives: books leave and come back through flight lines (an especially vivid image is that of pneumatic systems that send books flying through library passages). Old books are used as the basis for new ones, which get added to the library's collection—thus, the archive is a site of production. As the collection grows, it takes up more and more space (it takes more place). The Vilna ghetto library was one such dynamic archive, as a celebration hosted by the Ghetto Theater in honor of "the lending of one hundred thousand books by the [. . .] library" attests (Biber and Konstatin, pl. 8).¹ Scholars in the ghetto preserved important manuscripts, sacred texts, and documents: Abraham Sutzkever, for one, smuggled numerous materials into the ghetto from the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in hope of saving them (Rudashevski 133–34), and Ona Šimaitė routinely smuggled rare texts out, hiding them in the university library (Friedman 23).

Ona Šimaitė is a giant in the history of the Vilna ghetto. A librarian at Vilnius University, Šimaitė was granted special privileges by the occupying regime to enter the ghetto supposedly to collect books that had been borrowed from the university library by Jewish students before ghettoization (Friedman 22); later, as the Gestapo grew impatient, she persuaded them to let her enter the ghetto to gather antiquarian books. Instead of books, the librarian more often brought out people. While individual articles on her have appeared in various languages and while her story is often included in accounts of the activities of righteous gentiles—in 1966 Šimaitė was the first Lithuanian to be honored as such (Šimaitė, Letter to Juozas Urbšys, 4 June

1966)—there is no comprehensive account of Šimaitė's activities in the ghetto. Her story can be pieced together through fragments of what others have said about her, through her letters, and, eventually, through her postwar journals (which are a project for the future). Šimaitė was a prolific letter writer and a voracious reader. Much of her correspondence centers on the exchange of books with friends and the sharing of impressions about newly appeared texts. During her entire Nazi-period correspondence, Šimaitė refers to the ghetto by name in only one letter (Letter to Kazys Jakubėnas, 21 Oct. 1941).² All the letters that follow this one refer to her activity in the ghetto as her “walks” and as “those people’s errands.” The letters of this period constitute a kind of negative archive. Conspicuous in them are what she does not mention by name and what she wants to tell but cannot: “About that which I’d like to tell you—it’s better to be silent” (Letter to Jakubėnas, 28 Mar. 1943). Šimaitė’s 1941–43 letters constitute an archive of secrets. Even Liuba Levitska, the famous Vilna ghetto opera singer, cannot be named. Only by reading in connection with other texts can we know that Levitska is the close friend whose loss Šimaitė mourns (Letter to Jakubėnas, 7 Mar. 1943).³

Fatigue, lack of sleep, and shortage of time are constant themes in Šimaitė’s letters to Jakubėnas. We see two worlds at odds in the letters of the period of Nazi occupation: the brutal world of the ghetto and Šimaitė’s world of books and letters, in which she longs to immerse herself. She writes her letters in a flurry of activity and under constant pressure, describing the effects of both on her life (exhaustion) but sidestepping their causes. Only later does the missing center of Šimaitė’s narrative begin to be filled, by others’ accounts and in her postwar letters. Ada Gensaitė, the daughter of Jakob Gens (Jokūbas Gensas),⁴ the head of the Vilna ghetto police, recounted her recollections of Šimaitė in a Vilnius newspaper interview:

We got to know Šimaitė in the ghetto. Father told us that she worked in the Vilnius University library and that she came here to study those books. He knew the kind of humanitarian work

that Šimaitė was doing—saving people—and as much as he could, he always tried to help her. Keep in mind that he couldn’t get caught doing this kind of work. And he had to be constantly vigilant, so that, God forbid, the Germans wouldn’t catch Šimaitė and begin to torture her. It was mostly my mother and her sister who helped Šimaitė. They always knew where Šimaitė was, what she was going to do, where and how. [. . .] My mother always gave her some hot food, and she would take it away with her. At that point we already knew about her difficulties in the Vilnius library. The winters were inhumanly cold, and she was keeping people in there. The biggest problem for her was the toilet. She used to have to carry out night buckets. There weren’t any facilities in the attic. To bring food in wasn’t such a problem, but to carry out night buckets [. . .]. She had to be very sneaky, so her colleagues wouldn’t catch her always taking something upstairs or dragging something downstairs. Despite all that, Šimaitė never gave up.

Did you know of any others who saved Jews?

There weren’t all that many who were willing to help.

Šimaitė loved being a librarian. In a letter to her close friend Marijona Čilvinaitė, who also was a librarian, Šimaitė called it “the beloved profession.”⁵ For Šimaitė, the library was indeed an archive that happened. Like most libraries in eastern Europe, the Vilnius University stacks were always carefully controlled; even today no browsing is allowed. Access to the archive is possible only through the mediation of a gatekeeper. Šimaitė was the gatekeeper of her time, and the closed, ghettolike structure of the stacks allowed her library to preserve not only books but people as well.

The librarians were caught up in the establishment of another kind of ghetto, in that they were called on to create lists of banned books, to be taken out of circulation. Sadly, it was those who knew Litvak literature best and loved it most who were recruited to facilitate its ghettoization, as Šimaitė reported to Jakubėnas: “Those who know anything at all about that literature are now constantly expected to hand over information about it”

(12 Apr. 1942). Working against this attempt to erase Litvak writing, Šimaitė hid not only people in the library but also manuscripts, diaries, and letters that ghetto inhabitants had written to her (Friedman 23). In addition to her efforts to preserve the words, memories, and lives of others, Šimaitė, on the urging of her friends, began to make notes for her memoirs (Šimaitė, Letter to Jakubėnas, 10 Sept. 1943). Unfortunately, the memoirs were never written.

In the spring of 1944, Šimaitė was arrested (Porudminskij 16). Initially she was sentenced to death, but unbeknownst to her, the university intervened on her behalf, and she was sent to Dachau instead. Šimaitė survived Dachau, was eventually transferred to a camp in the south of France, and spent the rest of her life working in her beloved profession in Paris (with the exception of three years during which she lived in Israel). She never knew what happened to the letters or the people that she had hidden in the library. The fate of her notes and diaries was a mystery as well. In 1957, she received the first letter from Čilvinaitė to arrive since the war. This reestablished contact gave Šimaitė a glimmer of hope that she might find out whether anything in the library had survived. She asked Čilvinaitė to search for the documents hidden there: “If you really can help, then help, and in the next letter I’ll tell you where to look. But I repeat—there’s little hope that anything survived” (2 Oct. 1957). Once Čilvinaitė agreed to help, Šimaitė sent specific instructions—letters and newspaper clippings were hidden under a staircase, and a manuscript by a ghetto prisoner was concealed in the attic:

[O]n the right, where the roof slopes down [a tiny diagram is drawn here], there’s a metal box buried, which contains G. Šuras’s notes about the Vilnius ghetto. I was told that this attic is no longer there, that it was damaged by the war. But for some reason I don’t believe it. I very much want for these things to be found, even though so many years have gone by. Try to look for them. (17 Dec. 1957)

Šimaitė was devastated when Čilvinaitė found no sign of the hidden materials.⁶ All the work Ši-

maitė had done and all the danger in which she had put herself and her colleagues, it seemed, had been for nothing. She did not know that Šuras’s manuscript miraculously survived the Nazi occupation and the fifty-year Soviet regime. Šuras’s notes were published in Lithuanian as *Užrašai: Vilniaus geto kronika 1941–1944* (“Notes: The Vilnius Ghetto Chronicle, 1941–44”) in 1997. According to a foreword by Vladimir Porudminskij, “Immediately after the war, Ona Šimaitė wrote to the Jewish museum that had just been founded: she indicated the spot in which she had hidden Grigorijus Šuras’s manuscript (under two loose boards in the floor of the University library)—and the notes saw the light of day” (16). If this account is correct, the manuscript had probably already been found when Šimaitė wrote the above letter to Čilvinaitė. Šuras’s notes were probably housed in the Jewish museum set up in Vilnius immediately after the war, but the manuscript disappeared once Stalinist persecution of Jewish organizations closed the museum down. Why Šimaitė was not informed that the manuscript had been saved remains a mystery. Despite the devastating news, Šimaitė, eternal archivist, continued to prepare her notes and send manuscripts for preservation in Čilvinaitė’s library.

The first set of letters presented here were written by Šimaitė to the poet Kazys Jakubėnas (1908–50), in Kaunas. They were composed in Vilnius during the Nazi occupation of the city while Šimaitė was entering the ghetto regularly. The second set of letters were written by Šimaitė from Paris to her friend Marijona Čilvinaitė (1900–95), in Kaunas. The Paris letters were produced after the war and after Šimaitė’s internment in Dachau.⁷

Šimaitė’s letters are handwritten. All the letters presented here are written in Lithuanian. Where a word is indecipherable, I have replaced it with “[illegible word].” Where a reading is uncertain, I have entered my guess, followed by a question mark, in square brackets: “[example?].” Text in brackets without a question mark is clarifying material I inserted. A bracketed ellipsis marks my omission; unbracketed ellipses appear in the original sources.

Ona Šimaitė's Letters to Kazys Jakubėnas, 1941–43

21/X [1941]

My dear, sweet Kazys! I got your letter and the French books a very long time ago. Thank you for everything. It's been a long time since I've written to you. But I never forgot you. I know that you are alive. And, in truth, there was never any time to write letters, even though I was getting up at 4 a.m. and going to bed at 8 or 9 p.m. Only Sundays were left. But even all of them didn't belong to me. Now that my left leg has swollen up and I'm forced to lie in bed, I will write letters to all my friends and read a few much anticipated books. Otherwise, since the beginning of the war I've only read Feuchtwanger's "Jew Süß," "Josephus," and Werfel's "Musa Dagh."⁸

Now, when I need healthy legs more than ever before, isn't it maddening that I'm forced to lie in bed.

I learned from Vitas that you're working as a bookkeeper. But this job must not be to your liking.⁹ I learned from your brother that you're living together with Mečys. Pass on my very best wishes to him, as well as to our other friends. Write me at least a few words about how you and the others are. I will wait impatiently for a letter from you.

During this period since my last letter, I've seen and experienced an enormous amount. People's brutal origins overpower their human one. On September 1st I paid 1,500 rubles to get an elderly man out of jail. And even on that day, while I was waiting for him, thousands more Jews were being led to prison. I'll never forget it until the day I die. Today I got news that the old man has disappeared once more. I'll probably never see him again. One after another, my closest confidants are dying. I'm ashamed to be alive, ashamed to have a roof over my head, ashamed to have the possibility of bathing, and so on, when thousands of people don't even have these basic things anymore, when Damocles's sword is hanging over their heads at every

hour, and when whoever feels like it can mock them and torture them. If before now I simply loved [you?], then I now worship [you?]¹⁰ and that endless suffering, because, in truth, only the chosen people can suffer that way. And how differently different people experience this.

Otherwise, I have no spiritual life. I barely manage to clean up after myself and bathe. All aspects of life are incredibly difficult now. I'm not studying any languages at all. It often happens with languages in my life that the circumstances become such that, even with the best will and intentions, there is no possibility of studying. It's painful with regard to French. On Sundays I go to the symphony. But I can't feel joy for anything with my entire soul like before. Every joy is poisoned, and I would so much like to feel joy.

A ghetto has been set up in Vilnius too. And on September 7th everyone was herded there in a single day. They were only allowed to take with them what they could carry. And on September 8th, even though it was a Sunday, fences were hurriedly nailed together during the day, so as to separate those who had been brought in from the Aryans. And yesterday the second ghetto was liquidated, and I don't know where those people went.

I'm very much afraid of the winter, because it will be a hungry and cold one. Even now I only eat like a normal person twice a week, when I get 200g. of butter and 350g. of meat. Otherwise it's just bread and potatoes. But this is already the third day that potatoes are nowhere to be found. Brutality and lethargy. Almost no cultural life left.

7/III [1942]

Dear Kazys! I received everything that you sent through Vitas. Thank you very much. It made me extremely happy to receive your letter and the new poems. They express the sentiments of

our times so well. Write more of them, dear Kazys. I will await at least a few published poems for children, and later—a collection.

Delivering the money, Vitas tells me that you've said to use it only for myself. I don't really listen to those kinds of things, when kind Bronička says them to me. But your wish will be fulfilled 100% immediately. I bought some soap, and I want to have my teeth fixed. Without your support, this last thing would have been completely impossible for me.

I'm living much better this year than last. I'm not cold, because Jonas provided me with coal. It's terrible even to remember how I froze last year right up until the New Year. And the food situation isn't as bad as last year, when there were days when there was neither bread nor potatoes, and I had to make do with salted coffee. It isn't like that now. The bread that I get with my ration cards is enough for me, and I buy potatoes at free-market prices. This year I even have a steady supply of lard. Whenever I finish one piece of lard, more appears as if falling from the sky. And this happens without any requests on my part. Even these days there are still people who think about others.

But what I most lack is time, and I don't have any strength or health left in me, while there's so much that I want and need to do. I'd like to be able to live a little more normally. To have not only responsibilities but some free time for myself as well. I know that I'll only live once in this world, which is why I so much want to live for myself a little. If only I could get a good night's sleep and then read and read. I want that so much! But when I'm confronted with the hellish sufferings of other people, the desire to live for myself disappears. It seems that I'll never again know how to feel joy with my entire soul the way I used to. It's hard for me to keep believing that "Oh the mad times shall pass, oh the autumn will pass" . . . It seems that it will continue to get worse and worse.

I'm luckier than you in one respect. My [trudgings?]¹¹ don't always end in failure. Some-

times there are successes; however, each of them, even the smallest, is bought for too high a price in energy and time. Just as the stars light up the proverbial night, each encounter through letters that we have with people who have a heart and a brain makes life brighter and easier. And there really are good people in the world. And endlessly brave and self-sacrificing ones. In this respect, life is really spoiling me. I have met so many good and interesting people. I'm very grateful to fate that I have you, dear Kazys, among my closest friends. I really wish that your life were easier, and that the people closest to you would not suffer.

Even if you were a Christian, I wouldn't want you to wish me entrance into heaven, when such a horrible hell is boiling on earth. Once there is heaven on earth, then there will be heaven in the soul and everywhere. Can anyone be happy when others suffer like this?

Lately life has been taking away everything that is so dear to me. A long time ago someone stole my "Songs of Suffering." All my efforts to find them have been fruitless. I miss them so much. Maybe you have a leftover copy? Oh, how I wish that you had one and gave it to me! Most likely you don't.

Well, take care. I kiss you. Best wishes to the friends, especially to Mečys. How is he? And Antanas and the others? Be so good as to write me a few words from time to time.

Ona

12/IV [1942]

Dear Kazys! It's rare that you spoil me with letters, but when I get one—it's a real celebration.

On the subject of paying you back, I could give you 10 rubles a month without much hardship. This wouldn't burden me at all. Thank you so much again for the help you've given me. How enormously I was in need of that money then! Alas, you're wrong when you write that for once you could help me. This wasn't the first time. In this respect you have a very short memory.

"The Archive" doesn't really interest me, because I think there's nothing worthwhile in it.

But I await Baltrušaitis's little poem, whatever it may look like. I miss new Lithuanian books, and especially poetry! None have appeared here in Vilnius yet. Maybe shipping is too expensive. You'd better send it to me by registered mail, so it doesn't disappear. With regard to "The List of Lithuanian Medicinal Plants," don't even bother yourself, because you may not find the Grybauskas at all. I think it's easier for Pranas

[page missing]

painful experiences already. Perhaps later, when these will no longer be experiences, but only chilling memories. And every day there's something new, and even more brutal.

It's good to know that you're not suffering from hunger and that you still have some tobacco, even though I'm a strict enemy of smoking. There are days here when I eat well, but there are more days when I have to make do with only bread and water. But this doesn't matter to me, and I don't bother my head about it. The hardest thing for me is the cold and the filth. I haven't yet been able to get soap, even for money. Even though I paid for firewood and I have a ration card, I never receive any, because people say that the trees are still growing in the forest. I still have enough firewood for about one more week. With all the deductions my salary is 85 rubles. That would be enough if there weren't such a need to deal with the black market. And I don't even know what kinds of sums would be necessary to satisfy the most basic needs like soap and firewood. Every ten days I buy some meat on the black market.

At work, lists of Jewish authors whose books will be taken out of the libraries are hurriedly being prepared. Also to be taken out, without exception, are Soviet books and those by progressive Lithuanian authors. Sadly, never before have people read Jewish writers as they do now. It's a shame that they didn't do this earlier and that they didn't get to know this rich literature. Those who know anything at all about that literature are now constantly expected to

hand over information about it. As people get to know this people's literature, they marvel at its richness and beauty.

A few days ago Jews were forbidden to give birth. Now the children who are born have to be killed, and women who become pregnant must have operations.

I went to a closed concert. If we meet sometime, I'll tell you about it. I miss you terribly. But there's no point even thinking about our meeting. If you go to the country, let me know your address there. Take care. I squeeze your right hand.

Ona

26/V* [1942; asterisk in orig.]

Dear, sweet Kazys!

I miss you very, very much. But it seems that there's no hope of our seeing each other. Occasionally I see you in a dream. I wonder if you are still in Kaunas, or if you have gone out to the province? Did you get the letter I wrote you before Kazys's [Kazys Boruta's] departure?¹² Well, Kazys is a pig's leg for not having brought me the manuscript. I asked him and you reminded him; he told me that you did. Maybe you can give it to Pranas to bring it.

After Kazys's return I kept meaning to write to you, but I never got down to it: either I don't have enough time, or I'm very tired.

Write me a few words at least. I'm happy that you did what Kazys has been telling me about.

Work really doesn't provide anyone with anything right now: neither food nor clothes nor shoes. I work 8½ hours and only earn two kilograms of bacon in total. But you have to search for it like some kind of hidden treasure or rarity. Because I give away half my salary, I'm only left with one kilogram of bacon. But this giving away of half my salary gives a little bit of meaning to my work. And work now is boring and uninteresting. And it's inhumanly cold both at the office and at home. But I do heat my home once a week. We start work as early as 7 a.m. I return from work at 4 o'clock, so tired that I don't even have the strength to write letters anymore: I lie

down and read. And that's when I forget my fatigue, and hunger, and everything. Over 9 whole months I can say that I've hardly read anything. Now I read a lot, because I go walking on those people's errands only when I work in the morning. After work I don't have the strength to take on any walks. I would very much like to start studying French again because I've forgotten almost everything, but since life is very difficult and cruel, it's not always possible to find the strength to concentrate and learn a foreign language. It's a different thing when you read a good book; then you forget everything.

And it's such a cold spring this year. Even so, the trees and orchards are green, which gives me so much beautiful and quiet joy. The flowers are blooming as well, even if they're late. But I don't have very many spring flowers, since they're very expensive this year. How wonderful that there are good books and flowers in the world. Otherwise, I almost never meet up with anyone, only when I have business with them, because I'm either reading or out walking or I'm at work. I still go to concerts on Sundays.

How is life treating you now? What are you thinking of doing? Write me.

I squeeze your hand firmly. I wish you as much good as is possible right now. Unfortunately, I won't write about what is most on my mind.

Well, take care and be strong.

Ona

8/XI [1942]

Dear, sweet Kazys! Two weeks ago I got your letter, which made me very happy. Thank you, Kazys, for not forgetting me. True, your letter was gloomy, as the autumn days are gloomy. But how is a letter supposed to be sunny when life is so inhumanly difficult and cruel. I am blessed with the lights of very interesting and good books and people—I'm luckier than you. But I don't have any time at all to benefit from this bounty, especially not to meet and have friendly conversations with people, when there's no business at hand. I so long for that. It's very rare that

I have a casual heartfelt conversation. Aside from time, I'm very short of money, food, and especially coal. I can bear the shortages of food and money quite easily. The worst is not having enough coal. I shudder just at the thought that I'll have to live for 6 months—November–April—in an unheated room. My room is very cold and smells of basement now already. Even now it's too cold to sleep with only the cotton blanket. In addition to that I cover myself with my winter coat and my fall jacket, and I wrap my head in a wool scarf. Covered like this I warm up; it's good. I even dream beautiful dreams in which I'm eating ham and cake. I don't know why I dream most often of these things, since even in better days I didn't eat them very often. One time, like in a story, I dreamed that my room filled up with little boxes that were made of biscuits. As soon as I started to want to eat them, I woke up. By morning I've warmed up, and once I've woken up at 3 or 3:30 a.m. I mend my clothes (as if it's a prayer that I'm compelled to complete every morning) and read and write until 7 or 6. I have a great many books both from the library and from Felna, and I get some pretty good Latvian ones. When I compare the Latvian books, I become embarrassed for ours. There they publish many quite good Latvian ones, not the garbage that we get here. A good book gives me an incredible amount of solace in these especially difficult times. You think; sometimes you argue with the author you've just read; you dream and then forget about life's hardships. Other people's troubles, suffering, and humiliations weigh heavily on my heart. But there's no way to help, even if you were willing to give your life. I suffer from the cold (there's no heat at all at the office either); however, when I go where there are little children and the room is unheated, I not only feel the cold, but my soul begins to suffer as well. One Lithuanian Vilnius newspaper is giving tips on how to protect oneself against typhus. But when there is no firewood or soap, those tips won't really help. I'm really suffering from the fact that I

can't wash, bathe, or do my laundry properly, because there are no bathhouses, and firewood is incredibly expensive. We used to get tea at work, but not anymore. So every morning I have to make do with cold coffee and bread. I only have the opportunity to boil myself some [chicory?] coffee and potatoes for lunch. As for eating, I eat every day, for I have potatoes. But to boil potatoes and coffee one has to use up 12 rubles' worth of firewood. The food doesn't vary from day to day—bread (though sometimes I'm short of it) and potatoes. A "party" happens only every two weeks when I get some butter and sugar. I'm starting to forget what meat looks like. There are huge lines in front of the butchers starting at 4 o'clock in the morning, and only the first ones in line are lucky enough to get a small amount (about 50–60 people at each butcher shop). We haven't got any barley for a long time now. In the last month we didn't receive any flour either.

I work from 9 o'clock in the morning to 7 o'clock in the evening with a lunch break. I don't like this work schedule at all. You can do even less for yourself than if you worked 8½ hours in a row, and it's more tiring. When I come home from work, I go straight to bed, because I'm so cold and tired. But early in the morning I feel good again. The symphony concerts used to give me the biggest pleasure, but because of the firewood shortage and the absurdity of life, there haven't been any for two weeks. If only there were one today! I go to the theater very rarely, because I don't have a lot of time, and the tickets are extremely expensive. In Riga it's a different situation. There, in terms of prices, a working person has access to the theater. I went to the premier of Ibsen's "Nora." I liked it. Kazys [Boruta] was working with the artists during their rehearsals and was impressed with the theater's work. I'm very happy about that. Otherwise, Kazys is no longer in control of his nerves at all. It's sad just to look at him. But where will he find another person like Ona [Kazanskaitė-Borutienė], who would give herself to him and take care of him like that? And

he needs someone; he doesn't know how to take care of himself. Kazys took an extraordinarily beautiful wreath to Ona's grave. I was at the cemetery that day as well with a colleague from work. I've never seen such artistic wreaths anywhere as those in Vilnius this year. It would be worth writing an entire monograph about them. We didn't work the day of 2/IX. So, after visiting Ona's grave, I went to the Jewish cemetery. I walked around there for about 4 hours. The monuments are smashed; the headstones are knocked over or smashed to bits; there are huge piles of shit on some of the headstones, which probably means that the toilet in the cemetery is smashed as well; the rooms in which religious ceremonies are held are also smashed; photographs are scraped out of headstones or defaced. Of course, one, two, or even 10 people didn't do all this, because they wouldn't be capable of it even if they wanted to, but . . .

I read Mazalaitė's book "The King's Fire." What a bourgeois book that's of no use to anybody. Why didn't Kruminas advise her? I'm embarrassed for such a book. Best wishes to your brother and [the rest is written up the margin of the letter and is illegible].

7/III [1943]

Dear, sweet Kazys! After your letter with New Year's greetings, I haven't heard a word from you. Though it's true that I only wrote to you in January. But the thing is that I'm so short of time. I haven't forgotten you. Recently I've become anxious whether you're alive and well. Write me a few words at least. How are you? Anything new?

I wanted to get a letter to you through Kazimieras. I imagine you watered your patron well, since the government isn't being skimpy with alcohol. It's a big loss for nondrinkers, as the price of alcohol has fallen dramatically. I didn't write you then because I was running around the whole city with my tongue hanging out to get some shoes with my ration card. It was all for nothing, even though I'm walking around in

shoes that are falling apart and beyond repair. They say that you have to have connections, otherwise you won't get anything.

This year the traditional Kaziukas's Fair was a mockery. Of course, there were no bagels or hearts; even with a [magnifying glass?] nothing could be found. There weren't even any hearts made out of fabric or wood. It's a shame. There were only some pretty dried flowers and flowers made of wood. They were very beautiful and artistic. Unfortunately, there were very few even of them. I was amazed by the miniature fiddles for children. It seems they're made by a village master, because such beautiful sounds echoed from them when played.

It's good that it's getting warmer and that the days are getting longer. Soon spring, sun, and flowers will arrive. Oh, that spring may bring peace to the tired people!

Otherwise, since January 15 one good change has been made in my life: I have firewood. Jonas gave me 2 meters, and then Sl. gave me one more meter. Then I got another meter for the government price. Except that the cutting and chopping of it put me into very deep debt. This weighs on me like the heaviest burden. In addition to that, I managed to buy a few more things at government prices. Unfortunately, though, government prices are not set according to government wages. And soap—the prices are criminal. But you can't build a new Europe without soap.

Otherwise, I suffered terribly from the cold until 15/I; I even got sick. Sometimes I go hungry, but not in the past two weeks. The worst thing is that I'm very short of time, and I'm running out of energy. Usually I get so tired that I can't even read in bed anymore. The one good thing is that no one can pluck out a person's dreams. During my long work hours and many walks, I get so carried away by my dreams of the good things to come that sometimes I even forget about present hardships.

Many interesting books are coming out in Latvia, and the musical, theatrical scene is very big. Here there's almost nothing. I read Tamu-

laitis's book for children, "One Time." Ideologically speaking, one could raise a few concerns. In general, though, it's a very good book. And "Without the Rascal Puppy" is the other of the two best children's books.

I lost a very close friend [Liuba Levitska], who died, having been brutally tortured. That was on January 22. The first day I didn't know what to do with myself. But I continue to live, because man is evidently a big beast and an egoist. I'm no longer, however, capable of experiencing joy with my entire soul like before. Oh, how wretched this life is!

I'd like to talk to you about so many things, but . . .

Take care, dear Kazys. At least write to me from time to time, and don't forget me completely.

Missing you,

Ona

Best wishes to your brother.

28/III [1943]

Dear Kazys! My deepest sympathies to you for the death of your father. And on top of that, not to be able to visit him to say good-bye for the last time. We only have one father. I had the same experience in 1922. And last year the Bolsheviks deported my sister and her child. I understand how difficult this is to experience, not to mention everything else that we have to live through right now.

Thank you very, very much for your letter and the money. It came at just the time when I needed it most, when I got a vacation. If there weren't all these things that are so hard to bear, I could enjoy it, for I'm very tired, and now I can rest a little. Now that I'm on vacation, I'm very distressed because I won't have any way of repaying the good people who lent me 75 marks or to pay for new soles for the shoes that I got fairly recently, for which I needed 30 marks. And here you took all of these worries off my head. To only say thank you would not be enough. True, I still owe 170 marks. But that's borrowed from

the office, and I'm not losing any sleep over that at all. You wrote that you have problems with your shoes, Kazys. So let me return 100 marks to you. You should have them because I can do without, since the most pressing concerns, thanks to you, have been done away with. Okay, Kazys? I have firewood, and I have potatoes because Martynas recently gave me a [illegible word]. Does one person need much?

I'd like to take at least a month off work. Working and walking a lot, I can't even get proper rest. Now above all I sleep a lot, sometimes even 12 hours at a time. Then I walk a fair bit on those people's errands. I can get those errands done better because I have a lot of time. Until recently I still had the strength to walk around before work, but after work it became so difficult to force myself. Now this has changed. Personally, I'd really like to have some vacation time for myself. I haven't even had time to write letters. I got an alarming letter from Felna, asking if I was alive and well. Of course I'm alive; there just hasn't been any time or strength to write. Today or tomorrow I'll write to him again, and I'll send you my wishes. He's a good soul of a person. I'm so happy that I was able to meet and talk with him in the fall.

I have quite a few scholarly books, but because of what appears to be an acquired anemia I can't read for more than an hour because I no longer understand what I'm reading, and I get tired very quickly. I long to read some good literary books, but our library, like the other best libraries, is closed. The symphony is also closed. The Sunday concerts used to be my biggest pleasure.

Now I'm enjoying Aspazija's new poems, "A Winter Evening's Vision."¹³ They are very profound poems written with great mastery. Each one is so dear and close to my soul. Questions of death and life are touched on in them. Perhaps in another time period those poems wouldn't touch me as they do now, because now one really wants to live but is not allowed to live and is pushed toward death and endless hardship . . . I've started to read from the Bible again.

I've already read two books. Now I'm reading the third. I've always liked them, and somehow now they've caught my eye and my heart.

Aside from sleeping and walking, little by little I've been writing letters and mending my clothes, for we've become such beggars that even a thread and patch have become a problem!

How wonderful to have some more time. I'll be able to help Aldutė write the first essay of her life—"Slavery and Freedom in an Individual's Life." The literature recommended by the school is Förster's "Know How to Live" and Pečkauskaitė's "A Moment of Quiet." I too will have to start reading those books tomorrow.

About that which I'd like to tell you—it's better to be silent.

I'll make an effort to send you Tamulaitis's book. Write me a card at least once in a while, so I at least know that you're alive and well; it's easier on me than not knowing. Take care. Best wishes to your brother if he's back.

I kiss you.

Ona

10/IX [1943]

My dear, good Kazys! It's been 3 weeks since my return. Thank you for the day that we spent together. It's a great pleasure to remember it. I had wanted to write you earlier, but I'm so inhumanly pressured for time. The long hours at work, together with errands—mine and not mine—are knocking me off my feet with fatigue. In this short period of time since my return, I've witnessed some terrible things. And all this leaves a kind of heavy, heavy sediment in my soul.

I've started making notes. I didn't think that I'd have so much material. More and more new facts emerge from my memory. But there's so little time for notes and reading, because my job and the endless walking swallow up everything. And life keeps getting more difficult, for new shortages keep popping up. But even that would be nothing, if I only had more time and if I didn't see this kind of endless human suffering.

When I returned home, I spent a whole week in bed with a fever. When I returned, I drank some unboiled water and got a bad stomach flu. But I've been completely healthy for 10 days now.

During the trip I was robbed for the first time in my life: at the station my umbrella was grabbed in the throng. Especially now, when it's raining, I understand what it means to be without an umbrella. Together with this story, there's one more characteristic detail that illustrates national antagonisms. I told the story of the robbery to the women who were traveling with me. Immediately all the blame for this was thrown onto all Poles. But when I told them about one store manager—a woman who is a big Lithuanian patriot who can't even bear to look at Poles, and who is constantly [illegible word] them and chasing them out of her store, and who had the gall to cut out all the candy and soap ration cards out of three books belonging to Lithuanians in a sneaky way—then, of course, they began to justify it in all sorts of ways and didn't cast that blame onto all Lithuanians. Sometimes it makes me very sad, and sometimes I just want to laugh at people's stupidity in their prejudices.

It's nice that the symphony has already started its concerts here. Tomorrow I'm going to my second such concert. Otherwise there's no cultural life to be found, not even with a lantern among the Lithuanians. The Poles are not allowed to show themselves in public.

I read Albrecht's "Socialism Humiliated." I expected something different. It's a shame that I hadn't read it before coming to see you; we could have discussed some things. Reading one N after

another bored me.¹⁴ I also read "Hitler's Battles for the Reich" and "Jews at Stalin's Side." As you can see, I'm keeping in step with the spirit of the times. Have you read Fouché yet?¹⁵ I'd love to know how you liked it. On September 6th I had a very interesting and long conversation with one literary scholar about S. Zweig, Werfel, and Toller.¹⁶ We told each other what each of us got from these writers. It turns out that I know more of S. Zweig's work, while in terms of Werfel and Toller, I of course am not even in the same category as he. The conversation was very interesting and gave me a great deal.

I wrote Felna a letter only yesterday. I got two very interesting letters from Birutė. Birutė writes that to her, Baltrušaitis's philosophy in "The Wreath of Tears" seems to be that of a stuffed, well-fed person.¹⁷

I have the opportunity to go to Riga for a few days. I would really, really like to do that, though financial shortages are making me think twice about it.

Thank you for everything, Kazys—for the poems, for the day spent together with you. Oh, what beautiful roses are blooming in Alytus Park. By the way, thank you and your brother for the butter and the bacon. I'm still eating them now; the butter was especially needed after my illness. I'm just craving something sweet. Unfortunately, because of that "patriot" I didn't get my sweets either.

[Written up the left margin] Best wishes to you, your brother, and the housekeepers.

Ona

Ona Šimaitė's Letters to Marijona Čilvinaitė, 1957–58

1957-X-2

Dear Marytė! Forgive me for taking so long to answer. Your letter moved me very much. A

huge thank-you to you for giving my address to Tayda. That girl brought so many moments of brightness into my life.

Dear Marytė! How much you and your loved ones have suffered! It was difficult to read

your remembrances of those terrible war years without tears. What surprises me most about that hell is people's solidarity in helping others. But you write nothing about what happened to your father. I would very much like for him to be alive and healthy, because the two of us were of one mind and one heart when it came to, as they say, the Jewish question . . . If he's alive, bow down low to him for me. If he's dead—may the sweet earth of Lithuania lie lightly on him!

There's so much I would like to write to you about, and I don't even know where to start. Of course, I won't be able to tell you everything in one letter, so the rest will remain for others. I think this is neither the first nor the last letter.

First of all, it makes me very happy that you are working in the beloved profession and that you have no material worries. May you always be well, Marytė.

The sprig of rue and the wildflower enclosed in the letter brought me great pleasure.

Did Tayda come to see you? I can imagine well how happy she was to find material about Sal. Nėris!¹⁸ We are all obligated to help her as much as we can.

I'm enclosing a few words for Chomskis. It's disgusting that there are people like that in the world. That note will only defend your honor against friends. But from everything one can see that this is the kind of person who covets another's wealth and won't give it back. He'll use any means possible to keep it. It's better for you not to get involved with him. If the form in which I've written it is not appropriate, I'll write another proper one according to your instruction.

It's difficult for me to write to you, because so many memories arise as I write . . . To this day I have no idea what happened after my arrest. Normally the Hitlerists used to confiscate everything and empty out one's room. I'm most of all concerned about some books and manuscripts—some mine, others not mine—that were left at home. Did any of these things get left behind in my room? It happened that just before my arrest I had brought home the manuscript of

my book of poetry from Petrauskaitė's. I would like to have it so much.

The stories "Cipangas's Island" (manuscript) was left with "Sakalas."¹⁹ What happened to him? I'm also sorry for the translations of Hermanija zür Mühlen's stories (in the manuscript)—where are they?—I'm sorry for a great many things. If you know anything about these things, sit down and write to me.

I didn't write any memoirs about the Vilnius ghetto while I was still in Vilnius, but I did make some notes. I actually had some material that I had collected in the ghetto, and (in my opinion) it was quite valuable, as well as 200 letters that had been written to me from the ghetto. Some other people knew where I had put them. But they informed me that the war destroyed everything. Nevertheless, I have some doubts. Perhaps they were destroyed, or perhaps someone took them. Marytė, I trust you 100%. If you could dedicate some time and at least check for what I hid in the Lithuanian philology seminar room at the university. It may all be for nothing. It would be an incredible shame if everything had disappeared. If you really can help, then help, and in the next letter I'll tell you where to look. But I repeat—there's little hope that anything survived.

While living in Paris, I started to write about the Vilnius ghetto. The problem is that I know a great deal, but I'm unable to write it all down. And now there's no great need for me to do so, since the surviving Jews will tell it, and they have already written about it to such an extent that one can only marvel.

Of what I've written, the section "My Correspondance with the People of the Vilnius Ghetto" turned out the best. It has been translated into Yiddish and Hebrew and published.

I'd like to clean up what I've written, and Mrs. Jaffa, the wife of a well-known poet in Haifa, has promised to type it for me. She will transcribe it, send it to 4 Israeli organizations, as well as to some international Jewish organizations. I'll ask her to make one more copy for the Soviet Lithuanian University Library.

I want to fix up the written material by the New Year—I don't know whether or not I'll be successful. But I won't write any more than I've already written.

Different articles of mine about the Vilnius ghetto have been published in the Jewish press in America, Argentina, Israel, and South Africa, as well as in Paris. But I don't have the originals anymore. I write them and then give them away like letters.

In Israel I was given a pension and accommodation until the day I die. But I was sick from the heat. I returned to Paris after 3 years.

At times life was indescribably difficult for me here. But since the world's artistic treasures are so accessible here, I help myself to them by the handful.

Now my life has become somewhat easier. A certain Jewish organization has given me a stipend until the New Year. So now I work at the library only 3 days, and after taking care of my health and the library work, I want to use the remaining time to clean up my notes, to write letters, and to prepare my sewing lessons. I'd like to get as much done as possible; I fear sickness more than anything. Even now the flu has taken strong hold of me.

This is a letter written in haste. Oh, Marytė, what interesting and varying libraries I've worked in. I work in one for a few months, then later on I'm recommended to another. I organized an incredible amount of material on art in those libraries; the Englishman Smith (his charcoal drawings), the German impressionists, and all the material about Goya from the time when he was alive have especially stayed in my memory. One library was organized according to the construction of a steamship. Generally, I used to visit all the big libraries in every city. But now I don't have the strength to do that anymore, except with the greatest difficulty. My legs work very badly now.

Well, take care. I plan to write again. And you write to me.

I kiss you.

Ona

1957-XII-17

Dear Marytė! I promised to write you a letter promptly. But rivers of time have flowed by and not a word. Be so good as to forgive me my long silence. On the occasion of the upcoming New Year, I want to wish you good health and many good and beautiful rays of life. In France it's tradition to give little calendars + a little something for New Year's. But I can only send you, dearest, a small little calendar. Every printed item is dear to every librarian. Therefore, accept this small calendar as sincerely as I send it to you.

I don't know how to thank you, Marytė, and how to express my gratitude for giving Tayda my address. I'm following with great tension the big cultural life that is happening in Lithuania. Having beautiful periodicals—it fills my life's days. I bow down to the people who are accomplishing such great cultural work.

She sent me one reference book called "Kaunas." I learned a lot from it and saw things I've never seen before, which once again brought me great joy. I'm especially happy that the Kaunas University Library has such a rich manuscript collection.

In February I'm entering a home for the elderly, where I will receive my meals and will have my own little room. Then I'll organize those notes that I've written and send them to the library's manuscript department. But they're written in Russian. I think that the most successful one is "My Correspondance with the People of the Vilnius Ghetto." Though it would have been more accurate to call it "Letters from People of the Vilnius Ghetto."²⁰ I would very much like for this to make it to the manuscript department. The cannibalistic past must not be forgotten. I can't undertake this work until I enter the home. I barely have enough strength to earn my daily bread and to take care of my personal health.

The text that I was telling you about above is about 41 pages long and was published in Yiddish, as well as "Liuba Levitski—Nightingale of the Ghetto,"²¹ which appeared in a women's worker magazine in Hebrew. If you write

me that it's worth keeping these in the manuscript department, I'll send you some other things I've written as well, once I've finished cleaning it up. But for now, it will have to wait.

There's little hope that anything is left of what I hid in the Lithuanian philology seminar room's library. Other people knew about it as well, and they probably removed it and perhaps, out of fear or for other reasons, destroyed it. There's little hope, but these things are very important to me. No one knows the Lithuanian philology seminar room better than you. Be so kind as to take a day off and come to Vilnius. It's possible that something's still lying there. When you exit the seminar, there's a small cellar under the stairs. There used to be all kinds of junk there. I hid the letters written to me, some of my notes—observations, as well as some newspaper clippings under that junk. If by some miracle something is left—don't throw anything away without me, and I'll explain to you why this or that newspaper clipping is included. Go upstairs to the attic—and on the right, where the roof slopes down [a tiny diagram is drawn here], there's a metal box buried, which contains G. Šuras's notes about the Vilnius ghetto. I was told that this attic is no longer there, that it was damaged by the war. But for some reason I don't believe it. I very much want for these things to be found, even though so many years have gone by. Try to look for them. If you don't find anything, don't regret your efforts. There's little hope, but there's still some sort of tiny crystal of hope—maybe something's there? I think you understand me well.

[Written up the margin] Did you succeed in fixing things with Chomskis? Take care, help me. I kiss you. Sincerely Ona.

1958-V-18

Dear Folktales-Marytė!²² I received your sweet, sincere letter written on May 7th a long time ago.

It moved me very much, because with it my final hope died. I thank you, the library's director, and dear Berzelionis for your efforts. It's

very painful for me. I thought that nothing would be left, because I was not the only one who knew where the manuscript was hidden. Maybe it was emptied out of there as soon as I was arrested. After the war one person told me that the roof wasn't even there anymore. Apparently, the seminar roof hasn't suffered at all. And to bring all that out of the ghetto was so risky. I know that the other hiding places were destroyed by bombs. Not only manuscripts perished but people as well. It makes me happy that the seminar room gave shelter to two people. Prof. Moršovičius stayed there for two days and two nights, and Salia Waksman, a student in hiding, lived there for 7½ months. Both survived. Dear Berzelionis had to scheme and convince the other library workers that I, a library employee, was under doctor's orders to sweep the seminar room and its staircase for health reasons. Somehow or other, even he, Berzelionis, contributed to the saving of one life. Let this be my best greeting to him.

Oh, Marytė, what terrible times those were. Sometimes it seems impossible that this could have happened in my life, that it's just a chilling dream. [. . .]

Take care, Dear Marytė. Love me with all my faults.

Kisses.

Sincerely yours,

Ona

NOTES

I would like to thank Violeta Kelertas for her care and attention in editing my translations of Šimaitė's letters, as well as the University of Toronto Witness-as-Study Project (Ontario Inst. for Studies in Educ.), the School of Graduate Studies, and the Aukštaitė Scholarship Fund (Centre for Russian and East European Studies), all of which helped fund the trip during which I unearthed the documents presented here. I owe Mark Clamen much gratitude for his generosity in sharing his knowledge of the Vilna ghetto archive. Without his help, Šimaitė's story would be less complete.

¹ *Vilna* (or *Vilne* [Yiddish]) and *Vilnius* (Lithuanian) refer to the same city. I use the two terms interchangeably, depending on the context. When referring to the ghetto or to Jewish life in the city, I use *Vilna*. When referring to Lithuanian life in the city or when translating from Lithuanian, I use *Vilnius*. Ona Šimaitė always refers to the city as Vilnius.

² In the 1930s the poet Kazys Jakubėnas was opposed to the Smetona regime and was sent to prison many times for his political activity. In the 1940s he came into conflict with the Soviet system when he refused to become a KGB informant regarding the activities of his friends and colleagues. During the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, Jakubėnas disseminated anonymous texts that became songs as they made their way through the Lithuanian population. He also smuggled weapons into the Vilna ghetto, while Šimaitė handed them over to the ghetto resistance (Kubilius, Samulionis, Zalatorius, and Vanagas 318). In 1946 Jakubėnas was expelled from the Writers' Union for writing anti-Soviet verses that dealt with Soviet deportations of Lithuanian citizens (322). He was then sentenced to five years' imprisonment in a Siberian camp. Jakubėnas was killed by KGB agents in the Rasos cemetery in Vilnius on 8 January 1950.

³ For slightly differing accounts of Levitska's death see Arad; Kruk; Rudashevski; and Kalisch. Arad dates the death January 1943 (321); Kruk situates her death before 27 January (454–55); Rudashevski puts it before 29 January; and Kalisch says simply January (8).

⁴ Gens is a controversial figure in the history of the Vilna ghetto. In most historical accounts, such as Arad, Gens is vilified and labeled a collaborator. Arad does not write about the connection between Šimaitė and Gens's family and has little good to say about him. Ada Gensaitė, in her interview with Jonas Morkus, attempts to cast her father in a different light.

⁵ "First of all, it makes me very happy that you are working in the beloved profession and that you have no material worries. May you always be well, Marytė" (Letter to Čilvinaitė, 2 Oct. 1957).

⁶ See Šimaitė's letter to Čilvinaitė of 18 May 1958.

⁷ The letters to Kazys Jakubėnas and Marijona Čilvinaitė are in the Kazio Jakubėno Fondas and the Marijonos Čilvinaitės Fondas of the Mažvydas Lithuanian National Library, Vilnius. The translations of the letters and all unattributed translations in the introduction and notes are mine.

⁸ Lion Feuchtwanger (1884–1958) was a German Jewish writer. The author of numerous plays, he fled Europe during World War II and lived in Los Angeles from 1941 until his death. Franz Werfel was born in Prague in 1890. He enjoyed a successful literary career until the rise of Nazism. A Jew, Werfel was expelled from the Prussian Academy of the Arts in 1933. In 1934 his novel *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh* (*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*) was banned in Germany. Werfel died in Beverly Hills, California, in 1945.

⁹ The phrase "not be to your liking" is written in Russian in the original letter.

¹⁰ Both words I have tentatively translated as "you" might be "them" instead.

¹¹ This word is difficult to make out. One possibility is that it is a Russian root coupled with a Lithuanian ending: "плес-čiai." The Russian *plestits* means to trudge, so the stutter "ples-čiai" may be rendered as "trudgings."

¹² Kazys Boruta (1905–65) was an avant-garde writer who from 1926 to 1931 found himself in Vienna and Berlin as a political émigré. On his return to Lithuania, he organized leftist publications and was a fierce opponent of the Smetona regime. As a result, the Lithuanian regime sentenced him to hard labor in Vilnius. In 1946 Boruta was also sentenced by the Soviet authorities to five years' imprisonment, and his books were banned in Lithuania.

¹³ Aspazija (Elza Rozenberga [1865–1943]) was a Latvian poet and dramatist. Her works include *Baltijas vestnesis* ("The Baltic Messenger"), *Vaidelote* ("The Vestal"), and *Sidraba škidrauts* ("The Silver Veil").

¹⁴ Presumably the letter "N" here stands for "Nazi."

¹⁵ This probably refers to Stefan Zweig's 1929 biography of Joseph Fouché, Napoleon Bonaparte's head of internal security.

¹⁶ Stefan Zweig was born in Vienna in 1881. He was the author of numerous works, including *Die Welt von Gestern* (*The World of Yesterday*; 1941), his autobiography. Together with his wife, he committed suicide at Petrópolis, Brazil, in 1942. Ernst Toller was born in 1893 in Samotschen (now Samoczin). Beginning in 1919 he spent five years in prison for leading socialist revolts. During his incarceration he wrote numerous plays. In 1933 Toller was deprived of German citizenship for his anti-Nazi activities. He committed suicide in New York in 1939, after several years of writing film scripts in California.

¹⁷ Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1873–1944) was a symbolist poet who wrote in Lithuanian and Russian. He became well known in Russian literary circles through his translations of the works of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Søren Kierkegaard, and others.

¹⁸ Salomėja Nėris (Bačinskaitė-Bučienė [1904–45]) was a neo-Romantic Lithuanian poet whose works include *Širdis mana—audrų daina* ("My Heart—Songs of the Storms") and *Sesuo žydroji, Vilija* ("Azure Sister, Vilija"). Nėris turned away from the Catholic press, where her writing career started, and began to work with the avant-garde publication *Trečias frontas* ("The Third Front"), published by a leftist group of writers who opposed the Smetona regime. In her journal entry of 30 October 1922, Nėris describes an encounter with Šimaitė, to whom she refers as "that girl": "I don't know that girl, even though she lives in our residence; I only see her from time to time in the kitchen. She comes to our room today and asks me to step outside . . . Suddenly she throws her arms around me and starts kissing me, kissing me with tears in her eyes . . . After reading my poems in A., she cried and copied them out and then came to thank me. It made me feel strange and uncomfortable" (126). After this

strange meeting, it seems Nėris and Šimaitė became better acquainted through a common friend, the poet Kazys Boruta.

¹⁹ “Sakalas” is an alias meaning “falcon.” Partisans often used such aliases.

²⁰ These two titles are written in Russian in the original letter.

²¹ This title is written in Russian in the original.

²² “Tautosaka” ‘Folktale’ is Šimaitė’s idiosyncratic term of endearment for her friend.

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