

## Neringa Markevičienė

### Aesopian Language in a Camp (Letters of Balys Sruoga from Stutthof in 1943–1945)

Neringa Markevičienė, Vilnius University

[nerutela@hotmail.com](mailto:nerutela@hotmail.com)

Forty six Lithuanian anti-Nazi intellectuals expressing their extreme resistance to the occupier's intention to establish a Lithuanian SS legion were arrested and deported to the Stutthof concentration camp on 16-17 March 1943.

Among them was Balys Sruoga, a professor at Vilnius University and the most prominent Lithuanian writer of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote the novel *Dievų miškas* (Forest of the Gods) – one of the most unique and outstanding works about a concentration camp in the world literature because of its grotesque style.

When Balys Sruoga was in the Stutthof concentration camp he wrote letters to his wife Vanda Sruogienė and daughter Dalia Sruogaitė in German. I refer to the letters of Vanda Sruogienė - translated into Lithuanian and still extant in the Foundation of professor and literary scientist Vincas Maciūnas. Balys Sruoga wrote 61 letters to his family from the Stutthof concentration camp. My aim is to show these letters and widely tell how they were written and censored.

The letters were written in blue or black ink, or simply using a grey pencil. To write his letters Balys Sruoga used either special prison and camp paper forms, or squared, ruled, and plain thick or very thin sheets of paper (with or without watermarks), or simply strips of paper. When finished the letters were folded in quarter. The letters were lightly censored and scored by thick blue or red pencils. Some passages were heavily masked in violet ink or pencil, though. But there are some lines that can still be read, especially those scored by the pencils. There are some letter examples with excised fragments. The separate parts of the letter without the text which did not suit censors were glued by sticky paper strips or the sheet was left with holes.

They used the so-called Aesopian language to talk about the Stutthof realities; those were the details, associations, cues, nicknames, various links, and figurative images which Vanda Sruogienė understood and which could help to reduce the German censorship attention or even “to throw dust in eyes”. Details reflecting mutual care and concerns of husband and wife excite us most.

Stutthof letters are interesting for their inner experience, nuances of Aesopian language, metaphorical level, and existential thoughts expressed in a subtle way. These things make the letters very poetic. Bearing in mind that the letters could be only written according to the set stencil we can see how significantly the texts deviate from the model of official letters into specific ones.

They have published only short fragments or subtle details of letters or postcards of some former Stutthof prisoners - Kazys Bauba, Juozas Brėdikis, Pilypas Žukauskas-Narutis, Zigmantas Masaitis, and Vladas Jurgutis. All letters are linked by common themes: hope to return home, to work for Lithuania and be useful this way; longing for Lithuania and freedom; mental meeting with relatives by means of a dream and prayer; the monotony of the camp life and meaninglessness; relatives' encouragement not to lose strength, keep up the hope, to survive, and comfort; joy of receiving a parcel, especially knowing it contained every last thing; details of Aesopian language.

There is no doubt that Balys Sruoga's letters are idiosyncratic from the aspects of literary expression and artistic speech, and, apparently, by all remaining structure. In the future we will set up a digital archive of Balys Sruoga's letters which would store the original texts, their diplomatic rewrites, as well as the edited and commented versions.