

# Those Unforgettable Years

The correspondence of Juozas Lukša-Daumantas and Nijolė Bražėnaitė

## SUMMARY

The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania designated 2021 as the year of Juozas Lukša-Daumantas (1921–1951): he would have celebrated his 100th anniversary in 2021. Juozas Lukša is one of the heroes of this book. The letters presented here tell the story of a deep and mature love that began and evolved against the backdrop of a destructive and dramatic epoch. The horrors of this epoch did not change the values of the heroes of this book – or the vows they made to each other and their country, which were irrevocable. It did, however, change their destinies. They sacrificed their love for a higher cause, the fight for Lithuania's independence.

Laima Vincė-Sruoginis initiated the idea to create this book a few years ago. She persuaded Nijolė Bražėnaitė-Lukšienė-Paronetto to publish not only Juozas's, but also her own letters, together in a single book. Permission to publish the letters has been granted personally by Nijolė Bražėnaitė, who lives in New York; Laima Vincė-Sruoginis brought the letters to Vilnius and allowed the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore to digitise them in autumn 2019. Vidmantas Vitkauskas, director of the Juozas Lukša Gymnasium in Garliava and the custodian of Juozas Lukša's letters, kindly forwarded the digitised copies of his letters written to Nijolė Bražėnaitė.

Two very closely related dramatic plots are entwined in this book of letters: the partisan struggle in occupied Lithuania and the love story of two young people. Juozas Lukša-Daumantas was one of the leaders of the Lithuanian armed anti-Soviet resistance. He joined the resistance

struggle in 1940, having just graduated from high school. He was arrested and convicted by Soviet authorities in 1941 and escaped imprisonment only because the Nazis occupied Lithuania very early in the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Juozas Lukša was actively engaged in the resistance against the Nazi occupation. In 1947, he crossed the Iron Curtain on the orders of the partisan leadership, and in 1950, being fully aware that only death awaited him there, he returned to Soviet-occupied Lithuania to continue fighting in the resistance. He was betrayed and shot on 10 September 1951; his death certificate was forged and his burial place kept secret by the Soviet authorities. It has not yet been found.

Juozas met Nijolė Bražėnaite, who was living in Paris, in July 1948. For the duration of their courtship, they communicated via letters. He married her on 3 July 1950. In the autumn of that same year, he was redeployed to Soviet-occupied Lithuania where he was killed eleven months later. From the beginning, Juozas made it clear to Nijolė that his duty to Lithuania was his first priority. Nijolė accepted this as inevitable; she fully understood Juozas and was supportive of him. She was unaware of Juozas's fate for several years after his death, and it was not until 1956 that the news was passed on to her by Charles J. Kersten, a United States congressman who had helped her considerably.

This book comprises 211 letters: 139 of them written by Juozas Lukša-Daumantas, 71 letters written by Nijolė to Juozas, and the last one, containing Juozas's farewell message, written and handed over by Juozas's friend Julijonas Būtėnas, after Juozas's second and last departure to the other side of the Iron Curtain, to Lithuania. The first letter is dated 24 July 1948 and was written by Juozas Lukša from Stockholm; the last, by Julijonas Būtėnas, after Juozas left for occupied Lithuania, on 9 October 1950 from Kaufbeuren, Germany. Both had promised to burn the letters but could not bring themselves to do so.

The book also includes accompanying texts: commentary by Nijolė Bražėnaite-Lukšienė 'Apie anuos nepamirštamus laikus ir žmones' (About Those Unforgettable Times and People) about the time period these letters were written and the people surrounding them, and two

long-form essays: 'Mano Brangus Juozuk... Nijolės Bražėnaitės ir Juozo Lukšos-Daumanto susirašinėjimas 1948–1950' (My Beloved Juozukas... The Correspondence of Nijolė Bražėnaitė and Juozas Lukša-Daumantas, 1948–1950) by Laima Vincė Sruoginis and 'Neeilinis partizanas' (An Extraordinary Partisan) by Kęstutis Girnius.

This is not an ordinary book. This is a dramatic narrative about love, duty, and responsibility, and about two beautiful people who bore all of it honourably.

Translated by DIANA BARNARD