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## Reflection of the events of the First World War in G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė's “Diary of the War Years”

**Słowa kluczowe:** pierwsza wojna światowa; dziennik; G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė

**Keywords:** the First World War; diary; G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė

### Introduction

Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė (1861–1943) occupies a particularly honorable place in the history of Lithuanian culture. A famous Lithuanian writer and publicist, a public figure and one of the first women who bravely entered the arena of political activity, she participated in the activities of the first Lithuanian Seimas, headed the presidium of the Constituent Seimas and even put forward her candidacy for the post of the country's President. Born into a noble family and inheriting innate intelligence and a desire for knowledge, she greedily pursued science, was constantly interested in literature, knew several foreign languages well, and completed beekeeping and paramedic courses. The deep and patriotic personality of G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė is vividly represented not only by her literary work (she wrote many short stories, the novel *Ad Astra*), but also by her especially wide-ranging pedagogical activities. From her youth in her father's estate in Puziniškis, she taught the children of the villagers, took care of adult education, distributed banned Lithuanian newspapers and books. Having

chosen the pseudonym Bitė (Bee), she diligently collaborated in this press, wrote publications for it. During the First World War, she wrote a diary in which she gave a meaning to the events of that era.

Charles Taylor in his study “The Ethics of Authenticity” quotes Johann Herder, who claimed that every person has his own original way of being human.<sup>1</sup> Tomas Sakalauskas, in his book entitled *Homo Creator*,<sup>2</sup> reveals the existential position of the Homo creator, the creative personality, his constant efforts to create worlds of light, build bridges of spiritual connections, maintain an intensive dialogic relationship with the environment and expand the zone of light and goodness. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, a creator in the broadest sense, whose fundamental and essential aspiration both in life and in literature was to help others and comprehensively spread goodness, efforts to encourage others to improve, to discover themselves, to awaken to various activities and the work of creating society, faces an unexpected challenge, the war, always accompanied by destruction, brutal violence, cruelty and painful losses. Homo creator does not get disturbed; the essential choice of Bitė remains as stable and even more determined: to take care of everyone she can. This, in C. Taylor’s words, is the authentic way of being of an individual, the desire to live his life just like this, without losing what it means to him personally to be a person.<sup>3</sup>

With more and more rumors about the coming war, Bitė had no thoughts of following the example of the richer farmers and intellectuals and retreating to the depths of Russia, where her youngest brother Leonas had gone. She stayed to live in Puziniškis. From leaving for Russia Bitė had been held back by the moral obligation to take care of her brother Vladislovas, who had a mental disability, his children, Jonas and Bronius, and several other pets that had already found a home in the house of Petkevičiai. Going somewhere into the unknown with such a group of people under her care was too risky, especially since she herself was in poor health. The decision to stay was also determined by the realization that not all the people of the region will escape, and the rest will also need her help to overcome various adversities of a difficult period. Therefore, Bitė stayed in her home, in her homeland, on her land, which would soon turn into a war field. So, the purpose of this article is to look at what reflections of this period and events are revealed in the diary of G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, what moments of the war, existential human positions does it capture.

<sup>1</sup> Ch. Taylor, *Autentiškumo etika*, Aidai, Vilnius 1996, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> T. Sakalauskas, *Homo creator*, Esė rinktinė 1990–1995, LRS I-kla, Vilnius 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. Taylor, op. cit.

## Chronicler of history

During the war, G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė's "Diary of War Years" was born. It was a significant document of the First World War period, which the author wrote in order to perpetuate and witness the tragedy that befell the world. The culture of memory was important to her, the desire to convey to society in a certain form the universal historical events that took place in her homeland at the time, were represented in their own way in the official press of Western Europe and were seen in their own ways in the countries where those events took place. In separate books, the diary was published in Lithuania during the Soviet period in volume II of "Writings" prepared by A. Vanagas,<sup>4</sup> and, in 2010, in the three-volume edition of Panevėžys A. Vaičekauskas publishing house.<sup>5</sup> In it, it was important for G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė to record everything that a person feels, experiences and faces when he enters a war zone, what external changes take place in his normal everyday life, what challenges it brings. Bitė, who previously only knew about the war from books and newspaper pages and the stories of her grandparents, unexpectedly found herself at the epicenter of the war's events and became not only an observer, but also a participant as the war directly touched her home, like that of other local residents. In Puziniškis, she had to live through the entire war years, to see the changing events, to become a living witness of history. Not far away, there were major clashes between the tsarist Russian and German armies, the echoes of which reached the peaceful Puziniškis estate. The country was occupied by the German army, and, after a while, they were pushed out by the Russians: grenade explosions, gunshots, people's shouts echoed in the immediate vicinity, blood pouring out, soldiers raging. The events seen and the experiences gathered by Bitė entered the pages of the diary, encouraging reflections on the changes in the world. Becoming a chronicler of ongoing historical events was very risky: a written testimony openly documenting real facts during the war threatened with severe punishment, so she hid notes deep in the closet, in old books covered with other publications.

<sup>4</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Raštai*, vol. 2, Vaga, Vilnius 1966.

<sup>5</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 1, Panevėžys, E. Vaičekausko knygyno I-kla 2010; G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 2, Panevėžys, E. Vaičekausko knygyno I-kla 2010; G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 3, Panevėžys, E. Vaičekausko knygyno I-kla 2010.

In her diary, G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė constantly considered various issues of the war: the reasons for its origin, the mentality, culture and military traditions of the opponents in history, the level of military capabilities, preparation for this war and the strength of positions, situations on the battlefield, biographical details of famous war commanders and individual soldiers, relations of the soldiers with the people of the region, the dramatic experience of the local residents in the war-torn territories, during which the cataclysms of the great history began to unfold, thus illuminating the course of the war from different situations and points of view, allowing different voices and viewpoints to “speak”. In all these observations, reflected situations and images of the events of the war, one can feel the madness of the terrible historical cataclysm, the descent of a person who has reached a high level of civilization into the abyss of barbarism, the decline of humanity, which Bitė indiscriminately condemns and which cannot be justified by any logic. She looks at the war and evaluates it from the position of a cultured person, Homo creator; in her eyes, war is the destruction of what has been created, achieved by the great efforts of society, many generations of people, and therefore, in its essence, the most despicable act. The only action that justifies civilization and culture at that moment is to stand against the position carried by Homo destructor and to act as Homo creator, the creative beginning against the destroyer, in all possible existential positions. The diary of the First World War is a visual illustration of Bitė’s activities: from daily efforts to take care of the loved ones, people in the neighborhood, an attempt to suppress the brutality of soldiers of foreign armies, to record testimonies of war events, with the aim of perpetuating and evaluating it as an example of the decline of humanity that cannot be repeated again, and in such a way creating a constant dialogue with the other person and the world.

“Diary of the War Years” is a chronological sequence of military actions and events recorded in the region. Since there was a lack of paper, the author wrote down her thoughts in the household expenses book found in the attic that her mother used to keep, most of which was empty.

On June 20 (July 3), 1914, there was still peace in Puziniškis: in the park surrounding the manor, “neither the rumble of the city pavement nor the whistles of factories could be heard”.<sup>6</sup> It was especially precious to her this magnificent beauty of natural space, which provided a sense of coziness, security, and invited respite: “A tall, dense, trimmed hedge with its green leaves glistening in the sun, together with the old trees of the gar-

<sup>6</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 22.

den, taken under my care, separates me from everything that happens in the world outside their green walls”.<sup>7</sup> Returning to my own space, separates the archetypal abode of peace and security from the stranger, of the outside world, full of signs of anxiety and grimaces”. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė feels very strongly the power of green, the color of life, which stands out in the environment, symbolizing the energetic pulsation of the world. However, this sense of calm does not last long as the night is filled with excitement due to the news. She tries to save herself from it by renewing the old carpet, cutting, sewing, preparing a new curtain for her window, as if returning to the spiritually safe and normal field of everyday work. However, the premonitions of an incomprehensible threat grow stronger and she records her first emotional chords in her diary (“Nothing is pleasant”).<sup>8</sup> A neighbor comes to her, a deeply agitated man, to ask if the “European war is really starting now”.<sup>9</sup> Bitė feverishly retorts that it would be ridiculous to think about such a thing, because “humanity does not stand still, its consciousness is improving, its ideals have run far away from the caveman, when he only made his way in life with his fist and teeth”.<sup>10</sup> The neighbor does not believe her words, but he also wants to believe. The news of the beginning of the war in Puziniškis is accompanied by a kaleidoscope of anxious experiences and moods, the reflections of which in the diary become the first witnesses of the history of the World War.

### **The specter of war is *here and now***

Already in the first pages of her notes, G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė reveals how quickly the horrors of the war affect the lives of local people. Not long after, the men of the neighborhood begin to be conscripted into the army of Tsarist Russia, they are forced to fight on the side of the enslavers of the land. In this way, the cruel cataclysm of history directly invades the private world of a person and prevents him from feeling like the master of his life, disturbs his calm and safe existence. Bitė records how life positions change rapidly: a free person loses his previous status, he has the role of a victim of history. Not only an individual, but the whole community is forced to experience this. In the yard, the men wonder where the war could come from?

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.



The father of manor's tenant retorts: "What happened to the Russian... [...] Is this the first time? Does he feel sorry for people? Or those animals? They will make us suffer and release, of course..."<sup>11</sup> The news of the war revives the eternal dilemma of good and evil in people's minds, makes them resent the existential injustice of the era. The drama of the author's experiences is enhanced by the nature of the native homestead, which opposes the brutal cataclysm and pulsates in eternal harmony in the diary: "Immediately behind the cottages, the dark wall of the woods grows green, the blue green of the oats is replaced by the yellow of the barley, and both, surrounded by the wind, wave like a river during a flood".<sup>12</sup> Bitė worships naturalness, thereby trying to weaken the strength of spiritually destructive states; next to the sense of loss in the diary, the beginning of life rushes in, a sense of the special value of nature, an indestructible world of harmony. Nature seems to help man maintain his sense of worth.

Although a month had passed since the beginning of the war without any external events, the inhabitants were frightened by the threat of impending battles and attacks by aggressive soldiers. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė cannot accept that. Looking at the catastrophe that is increasingly covering the world, she notices that the image of war, which functions in the deep layers of her family's memory, begins to fill up, that it is not separated from the already known old historical realities, as in previous eras, brutal war massacres are already taking place in distant areas, in which many people lose their lives: "War... War!... At this moment... After the Nobel Prize has come to life... And yet war! This is the most terrible specter of mankind! The second thousand years ends from the most noble declaration of the slogan: love your neighbor as yourself... And again, the clergy, who are the closest spreaders of that curse, will bless the weapons, those tools for slaughtering their neighbors?!"<sup>13</sup> In the memory construction strategy of G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, Lithuania is viewed as a future tragic victim: "No one expected that the waves of war could touch Lithuania, our native, dear corner..."<sup>14</sup> However, what seemed impossible is starting to happen *here* and *now*. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė expresses the resulting war as the madness of humanity by King's Lear phrase in William Shakespeare's drama *King Lear*: "There are no guilty people in the world".<sup>15</sup> Her diary is an emotion-

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.



ally colored and intertextual text, filled with various cultural, literary and historical associations, comparisons, illustrations, in order to present significant summaries of historical phenomena, interpretations and conclusions of specific events and facts. According to G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, the origins of all vicious and low acts are human ignorance, lack of education, degeneracy, and these things also have their own reasons. She is possessed by a strong power of inner protest.

All residents of the region have one or another role of victim. The people we meet are surrounded by doubts about their future and that of their children, they are ruled by emotions of anger towards the whole world because of the collapse of their culture and life, various considerations of the situation, reflections and advice do not stop. Everyone is worried about the forced necessity to choose: to stay in their country or go abroad, into the complete unknown. Going abroad is an involuntary act, a real change of location starts to raise psychological problems, depressing emotions, the individual is forced to rebuild his identity. Bitė decisively makes an important decision: to send all the children under her care to the depths of Russia with a landlady she knows, and she herself will stay with her brother Vladislavas in Puziniškis for a while until she gets everything sorted out. Bitė hopes that if the front approaches, she will quickly leave and catch up with the children.

Over time, the specter of war shows its grimaces more and more. Living conditions are becoming more complicated, more and more various inconveniences and difficult circumstances are appearing in the everyday life of local people. Bitė goes to Vilnius, and as soon as she squeezes into a first-class carriage, she is forced to ride with Russian officers. After transferring to another train, she hears the open conversations of non-commissioned officers about looting other people's property, as if it were the simplest thing", emphasizing the idea that "the officers always had a better bite".<sup>16</sup> The war is clearly penetrating deep into the country with fallen human morals, broken humanistic traditions and rules. When, on the way back, she is sitting next to the young soldiers who are coming from distant provinces of Russia to the front, Bitė asks one of them, who says he is the only son, what his mother thinks of such a young man to volunteer. He replies that his mother is very proud of his act. This seems to G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė to be the ugliest grimace of the specter of war.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.

## Considerations of intelligentsia: value characteristics of opponents

The significant contexts of the diary consist of fragments of deliberations and discussions of the intelligentsia: the thoughts of neighboring estate owners, priests, Panevėžys city officials, excerpts from conversations and disputes. In order to recreate as comprehensive a picture of the fateful era as possible, G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė sought to perpetuate not only her observations, but also those of other contemporaries of that time, social attitudes and views. The most active debates are about the two opposing sides: from the history, mentality and traditions of these nations, their dominant interests, current lifestyle, to the available resources for war and relations with other nations, their behavior in the occupied territories, their attitude towards the local population, thus presenting quite a wide range of opponents' moral, cultural historical and military characteristics. The subject of discussions is a wide range of issues: the prehistory and genesis of the war, preparation for long-term battles, the capabilities and resources of the countries, the validity of expectations of victory, the possibilities of involvement of other countries and other aspects. Local residents, estate owners, lawyers, bright and intelligent people who have received excellent education in foreign countries and are familiar with the trends of Western culture and politics, deeply consider the situation and share their insights. While presenting other people's thoughts about the opponents of the war, Bitė often extends them in her diary with her own reflections.

The assessments of the war by a considerable part of the intelligentsia reflect the thinking and attitudes of the Western European society at that time, declared in the press of that time. A Jewish lawyer from Panevėžys who visited Austria, reveals a strong discourse in the West: expressed great confidence in the power of the German army, their excellent preparation for war, abundant resources of grain, various food, huge warehouses of weapons and the belief that this army has no equal in the world.<sup>17</sup> This statement makes G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė think carefully, causes hesitation; she does not decide to boldly take one or the other side: "If the bitter fate would allow the war we are talking about to take place, is there no choice but for us, Lithuanians, to maintain complete neutrality?"<sup>18</sup> However, an independent state can choose the path, not a nation enslaved by others, without rights.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 34.

Bitė painfully experiences the depressing prospects of the Lithuanian nation in the face of war.

In discussions about Russia, the interlocutors' point of view coincides and is common: it was shaped by both the real experience of many families and relatives of the country's intelligentsia, the dramatic events of the past, uprisings, the massacres and repressions that followed them, the closing of monasteries and churches, the sequestration of estates and other events, as well as the Russian public life observed by the intelligentsia, trends of cultural and political life within the empire and the activities of the bureaucracy both in Russia and in the occupied lands. The attitude of the intelligentsia towards Russian politics, the management methods and instruments used, the personalities of officials and military commanders is negative. An imaginary image of Russia emerges in Bitė's diary: a state bent on warring and mercilessly destroying, expanding the borders of the empire, focusing everything on this need, which has become a political dominant for many centuries; Russian societies are constrained and have never known democracy and freedom; army assembled from persons who have known spiritual coercion, who perceive war as an obligatory given. This image is strengthened by the article of famous Russian philosopher and poet Vladimir Solovyov, which appeared in Bitė's memory, in which giant Russia is compared to a sphinx. No one knows what this sphinx is, nor can it be described, but one thing is clear: "it is its gigantic claws, which do not spare anything".<sup>19</sup> Such a perception of this state is typical not only of the intelligentsia, but also of people from other social strata of the country who have encountered the Russian administration in various areas of their lives.

The liveliest discussions about the progress of the war take place in the gatherings of high-ranking landowners, in large drawing rooms. Until the front approaches, merry banquets are still held in the estates, life is boiling. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė visits her nearest neighbor, landlady M. in Sujetai on her name day. Many rich guests usually came here, there was no shortage of delicious meals and demonstrative jokes in all the languages commonly used in Europe. Bitė emphasizes that this time the celebrations are different: the details of the biographies of the absent neighbors are replaced in the conversations by the fierce specter of war, which powerfully took over everyone's minds: "Hindenburg, Samsonov, Rennenkampf, Ludendorff, Vilius, Mikaloy Mikaloyevich, Foch, Marne, Lviv, Paris, submarines, zeppelins, Mazur lakes, Tannenberg. Those who gathered mentioned them..."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

This time, the focus of the gathering's attention is on reflections of living history, which are replaced by comments on recent battles, various military encounters, movements of enemy units, and discussions of the fates of famous officers. Landlady B. keeps reminding them of the Masurian lakes, where the Russian army commander Samsonov<sup>21</sup> killed the Polish and Lithuanian regiments, and then took his own life, and Hindenburg<sup>22</sup> received a crown of honor; others wondered what she was so feverish about, listened calmly and politely, because "the issue of war turned out to be too serious after all..."<sup>23</sup> The guests were delighted with the news that the German army had succeeded in pushing the Russians out of Prussia, and marveled at its wariness and ability to maintain two fronts, especially from the Baltic to the Black Sea.<sup>24</sup>

The collapse brought by the war, the destruction of everything created by human hands, the sown chaos, which is visible even in the immediate home environment, is a consequence of the actions of both warring sides. Bitė is horrified by the war as destroying life and harmony of the natural world, fundamentally contradicting the essential principle of life: love, mutual communion, creation of life. "Orchards are emptied in an instant; no barriers are seen; everything is torn, broken. No one feels sorry for people".<sup>25</sup> The editorial staff cannot forget the image of a village woman who was run over by horsemen in the field: "Horses' hooves trampled her, and no one took it into account. Her gasp still rings in the ears... The soldiers drastically destroy her beloved blooming cherry tree in a few minutes, only broken and twisted branches remain, like the hands of the dead".<sup>26</sup> Šiauliai is full of people expelled from Prussia, cows and horses. The Russians sell animals for a mere trifle, and take people to Siberia. The war is an event that unleashes the dark side of human nature and allows it to manifest itself in the most diverse forms. With abundant examples of reality, Bitė testifies to the destruction brought by war, the horror it spreads. In

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander Samsonov (1859–1914) was an officer of the army of the Russian Empire, a general who commanded the army in a particularly important First World War, the Battle of Tannenberg. His troops were surrounded and crushed by the Germans. Out of despair, the officer committed suicide.

<sup>22</sup> Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934) was a German statesman and military figure. During the First World War, he commanded the Eighth German Army. In the Battle of Tannenberg in Masuria, he defeated the larger Russian forces. In 1925–1934, was the president of Germany.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

many cases, war destroys, erases the internal moral structures of the warfighter, forces and encourages him to go beyond the limits of normal norms, to become a merciless destroyer, Homo destructor, raging in the field of all-encompassing chaos.

G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, Homo creator, in her entire way of life, in the entire scope, cannot accept what is opposite to life and its protection. On the pages of the diary, her direct rebuke to the warring people pours: “It seems that the lid of the coffin that oppressed the Middle Ages has come back, and the semi-wild gangs of hungry predators, having jumped out of that coffin, are ending up trampling Europe”.<sup>27</sup> There is no one to stop the madness of war, the superiority appears on one side, then on the other, and the nations that find themselves under these millstones suffer the fate of the sufferer. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė summarizes: “We are all left to the discretion of strangers, fierce enemies... perhaps fiercer than a blind element...”.<sup>28</sup>

### **In the midst of everyday worries**

Since the beginning of the war, Bitė’s home and everyday life with all her little and big worries have become her only spiritually cozy refuge: sewing clothes for her children, family lunches on the veranda, work in the fresh air. The home environment gives her a good sense of well-being; everything that is sustainable is here: mutual relations established over a long period of time with the people of the estate and the surrounding area, things that have served since long ago, trees that signify the permanence of existence. She realizes that everything is in danger of being destroyed, but the abundance of ordinary domestic concerns allows her to escape from the oppressive thoughts and she allows herself to enjoy the comforts and modest pleasures of ordinary life. V. Juodišius, who arrived from the editorial office in Vilnius, knocks on the door and asks for help. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė welcomes the guest kindly, gives him the opportunity to teach the children. A few days later, all the cheerful residents of Puziniškis manor participate in the first potato digging in their lives. After the work, she plays Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” to the children on the piano. This is how Bitė creates the harmony of being in a natural home, allowing its residents to feel in an oasis of security.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

<sup>28</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 67.

The daily worries of the manor are supplemented by various affairs of the residents of the surrounding area. Villagers constantly flock to the Puziniškis manor: some ask the young lady to write a letter to the son who is fighting, others come to ask what the newspapers write about the war, and still others come for medical help in case of illness or advice on how to proceed in unusual life circumstances. In the evenings, she takes a pen in hand and continues one of the most important activities of this period, the diary of the war years. Reflecting on the meaning of the daily tasks performed, she asks: “Why is the number of people who understand the bliss of the duties performed, the work performed, so small?”<sup>29</sup> Everything that is done to others, both relatives and strangers, is marked by the sign of spirituality and love for, and is directly related to the true meaning of existence and bliss. In her diary, Bitė says that she has consciously turned her life into “a hill of hard duty, where the iron hammers of work do not stop hammering”.<sup>30</sup>

The newspapers keep pouring out depressing news, testifying that the destructive destruction of everything is beginning to take hold: “It is not enough that the war itself destroys, but the Russian government also fulfills its promises, wherever it can: it burns the harvested crops and farmsteads, the inhabitants are herded like animals into the depths of Russia. The inhabitants, left without food and shelter, were dying like beasts in the fields!”<sup>31</sup> Bitė’s personal obligation is to care for the poor people of the country, so even after sending the children to Russia with the landlady, her responsibilities do not decrease; she spends hours visiting the sick, injured, suffering from various deprivations, she is influenced by a powerful moral ideal, the important aspects of which are noble behavior and self-sacrifice and help, contact with the idea of good is a necessary thing for the fullness of her being. This is self-realization, which, according to Charles Taylor, is “based on the moral ideal of being oneself in all circumstances, i.e., preserving the possibility of creating an image of a better and nobler life as possible”.<sup>32</sup> The old man who had come said “that everything around Kaunas was burned, trampled in 25–30 versts. Everything was destroyed by order of the Russian authorities”.<sup>33</sup> Bitė understands that this wanderer of the war years also needs her attention: hot food, comforting words, warmer clothes; she is always open to all kinds of help and support. According to the testi-

<sup>29</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 83–84.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>32</sup> Ch. Taylor, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 179.

mony of teacher J. Šukys, when the German army entered Puziniškis and other parts of Panevėžys district, G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, knowing the German language well, translated for the peasants of the village and conveyed all their expectations to the German administration, especially when the active requisition of farmers' cattle, birds, other material assets began in the summer of 1915. According to him, "she used to help people get out of various affairs".<sup>34</sup>

According to the teacher's testimony, her great altruism was manifested when severe diseases such as typhus and cholera started during the war, from which many people died. Since G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė had previously worked in her father's pharmacy in Joniškėlis, local residents would turn to her for medicines and advice on treatment. She was determined to help everyone, sick and neglected people.<sup>35</sup> When in 1916, a German doctor was vaccinating the children of the German gendarmerie at the Sujetai manor, "G. Petkevičaitė helped him by putting on a white coat, applying medicine to the children at the injection site, and when the mothers wanted to inquire about the children's health, translated for them. So she, a wealthy noblewoman and the daughter of a doctor, served as an unpaid nurse".<sup>36</sup>

Even in the darkest hours, nothing can dampen Bitė's fervent faith in the bright power of human nature and the possibility of overcoming the nightmare of war. In 1916, having already experienced many horrors of the war, she writes: "You really have to get out of your head so that you are not convinced that in people, no matter what ugliness, misfortunes and hardships they have to wade through, there were, there are and every day there will be more such souls, which truly abhor those ugliness, are terrified of them and, regardless of the hourly frustration, do not cease to desire the improvement of themselves and others and step, straining all their strength, towards it".<sup>37</sup>

### **On the path of humanism: "I will give to everyone who is hungry"**

One of the most striking episodes of G. Petkevičaitė-Bite's humanism and ability to sacrifice herself for the sake of others is the memory of her youth, when a dear childhood friend was dying in a luxurious palace, whom the

<sup>34</sup> J. Šukys, *Ji mus mokė. Mūsų Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė (apie G. Petkevičaitę-Bitę)*, Nepublikuotas rankraštis, Švietimo istorijos muziejus, CF-291, Kaunas 1970, p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>37</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 251.



doctors could not help. As soon as he fell asleep, he could not hold his head. When Bitė came to visit him, she held his head for two hours with outstretched hands so that the sufferer could at least fall asleep. Out of gratitude, he offered to repay. In her diary, Bitė called such a reward “the wealth of the earth” and emphasized: “Only very young, inexperienced people come together with such promises”; the true wealth is much greater, it is the “deep string of feelings that binds people”,<sup>38</sup> the sense of human love, mutual understanding, unconditional help to others, priceless in earthly materiality. Conscious commitment to the world, in Bitė’s understanding, is a feature of a real person, and especially an intelligent person, a testimony of his spiritual maturity.

Therefore, when people are transported from Prussia through Šiauliai to Siberia, she rushes to share food with them, and she is especially excited to learn that Martynas Jankus, the publisher of the first Lithuanian newspaper “Aušra”, who devoted so much of his energy to the causes of the banned Lithuanian press, is also in this column of exiles. Hoping to find hopeful, constructive thoughts that the war must stop, she reads newspapers sent by landlady M. K. in Russian and Polish, as well as the Riga German newspaper, but all the news is discouraging. She spends Christmas in 1914 depressed, “swallowing tears”.<sup>39</sup>

The previous life forms were obviously getting more and more damaged. Shocking news and events no longer about distant but close places and familiar persons began to flow. In the spring of 1915, the neighbors abandoned their work and rushed to dig trenches. In Žvirkalnis, which belonged to the Petkevičiai land, they were also dug by Bitė’s children. War storms caused a fire in Šiauliai, the city was heavily shelled. In the manor near Šeduva, German soldiers killed all the inhabitants, and on the side of the opponents there were similar incidents: Baron Leo Ropp of Pakruojis and his cousin Baron Bruno Ropp of Šeduva were arrested and taken away by the Russian authorities for giving food to German scouts who entered the manors. Pliaterytė, Countess of Kurtuvėnai, was taken to Šiauliai to be hanged for the same crime, but she was lucky: the girl’s life was saved by her relatives living in Petersburg, who managed to call an important person in the Russian government. Bitė is shocked by the horror of this knowledge, which testifies to the fact that in the war there is a universal conflict, an absolute alienation, that her own and safe, harmonious world has collapsed, and confusion and destruction stand at its epicenter. Bitė experiences great

<sup>38</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 108.

existential loneliness, isolation, a sense of insecurity and the threat of brutal attack. But she cannot give in to it: she is created to live in the spirit of love and human connection; this, in the words of Taylor, is “the ethics of her authenticity, incompatible with any demands of the external world”; she cannot find a model of her life “behind herself”, she can only find it in herself, and “such being herself means fidelity” to her originality.<sup>40</sup> Bitè’s diary entry turns into a firm written promise to support all the poor and suffering, because only God can decide who is right and who is guilty in the brutal battles of the world: “Just out of humanity, I will give to every hungry person... I will not give only when I myself have no more...”.<sup>41</sup> This is the fundamental principle of G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė’s being, the foundational point of her life, from which all her actions and deeds come. To share with another, no matter which side of the belligerents he is on, no matter what the circumstances of the war, is to affirm the determination to preserve the common human field of life, love and compassion.

This existential journey of her, *a zealous giver and guardian*, in the time and space of war begins first of all with great efforts and a conscious determination to survive the occupation, experiencing as few as possible its consequences both for the collective and for the individual person, from the readiness to intelligently model one’s behavior in various meeting situations, to choose an argumentation and to create a mutual dialogic nature of meetings in the face of every threat, trying to preserve life and personal dignity, from striving to assert humanistic values through the inner power of a woman, trying to awaken the warrior’s ethical self-concept. When a group of Russian cossacks came to the mansion in May, butter was being churned in the kitchen, a young teacher with an extremely beautiful face was standing at the table, and a maid in her twenties was next to her. The eyes of the cossacks sparkle. After riding out and saying good-bye, they suddenly come back and order to lay down for the night. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė is shaking with excitement, overcome by unpleasant feelings, but she is keeping herself together as much as she can. Then she speaks to the cossacks very kindly, calls them home guests, sits them at the table, showing exceptional politeness and helpfulness, and this is the “force that prevents them from appearing as beasts”.<sup>42</sup> She tries to awaken humanity, the universal features of human life, the feeling of home, to build a natural bridge of mutual connection in the troubled souls, therefore, showing special interest, she talks

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<sup>40</sup> Ch. Taylor, op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 137.

to everyone incessantly about the life of their families, brothers, sisters, mothers, and thus manages to control the terrible tension and suppress the breaking out the brutality of the soldiers. “In that uncomfortable hour of my life, I especially understood the importance of the family, just the sanctity of the family... [...] it’s like some powerful talisman that affects even the cossacks who have become wild in the war”.<sup>43</sup> Bitė’s words, her empathy, motherly sincerity and generosity touch the souls of the soldiers; this is how their squad is defeated by the inner light power of one woman with a physical disability.

During the war, Bitė declares an existential attitude of necessary spiritual stoicism and human altruism. The anti-heroes of life, dirty, hungry, fierce-eyed cossacks begin to infiltrate Puziniškis more and more often: for food for themselves, hay and oats for the horses. Eventually these visits become non-stop. They rob neighboring estates, attack people with swords, demanding various goods. In order to avoid similar events and at the same time fulfilling her human duty to love her neighbor, Bitė always meets those who knock at Petkevičiai’s house by herself, starting a calm and pleasant conversation from what she can now serve to eat, asking about the war and its difficulties that oppress every soldier, and so showing another possibility for a disintegrated human life. In the frenzy of the war, she thus manifests her own attitude, leading to a world built on values. After talking, it is as if she checks the humanity of the visitor, his level of self-awareness, tries to understand how important the elementary truths of humanism are to him, what made him a wanderer of the world. In her talk with the visitors, you could feel, in the words of Taylor, “a certain self-definition, a constant testimony of oneself, one’s own values, a reflection of the world”.<sup>44</sup> People from various provinces of Russia do not stop flocking to Puziniškis. Deep, sensitive souls also appear among them. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė sympathizes with the plight and difficult condition of everyone, regardless of the nationality, social status, and sophistication of the person who came, she is moved by human efforts to survive the war, to preserve their physical life and, as much as possible, their unbroken inner world. No matter what happens, food is given to everyone, because it is a war in which most people are involved against their will. “I began to see in each of them a tired, long-suffering human soul, for which I could not feel anything but sympathy. Unless deep sympathy was added to the sympathy, more so because none of

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 139.

<sup>44</sup> Ch. Taylor, op. cit., p. 51.

them knew what he was laying his head down for and what he was fighting for...”<sup>45</sup>

G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė listens attentively to personal stories of soldiers, dramatic combat episodes and survival experiences. In conversations, she constantly tries to bring the speaker back to the questions of the value of life, the essence of a person's presence in the world. Next to those exhausted by the war are the souls numbed by its ferocity. One of the Russian soldiers happily tells how they opened fire at the Germans and scared the Jews hiding in the ruins from the burning houses in Šiauliai, who had not moved out of the country; then caught them and threw them back into the fire. The diary of G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė is full of such dialogues with war participants, their confessions, testifying to the ever-expanding evil in the real world, the desecrated value of life. The stories heard break the soul; on a piece of paper, Bitė asks herself: “And how to stay in such a hell?!”<sup>46</sup> It is difficult for her to find the words of self-control for herself, but she knows well what is holy and how to be for others, for whom she unconditionally opens the deep love for one's neighbor, the fundamental code of being in the world. In the midst of chaos, Bitė remains a bright human support and a pole of spiritual values, and becomes even more significant for everyone around her than before when the storms of war overturn and destroy the foundations of life, she restores the damaged parts of it with great fervour, as much as she can. Without missing a single person she meets. Bitė always feels that she is in historical time context. News is coming of an ever-increasing line of battle. One landowner suggests that Bitė move to Utena, where there is a four-class school, where the entire board of the Kaunas Governorate has already gathered. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė is determined and wants to leave. She decides to give German language and music lessons for beginners. She took old paintings of the manor, an oil portrait of their grandmother in gold frames, an old set of silverware, wall clocks, library albums, books in the most beautiful covers, bedding, carefully hand-embroidered pillows of three generations of women. Then she asks a Polish Cossack, who looks like an intelligent scientist, for advice on which way to go on a journey. Since the battles are intensifying around, he advises her to go to the nearest forest and sit there until they stop. The senior Russian officer scolds the Pole rudely for such words, because the authorities have ordered to intimidate the population in order to get as many of them out of this country as possible. In the consciousness of her, an essential chord of resistance is re-

<sup>45</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 152.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 210.

corded: “I will not run, if so, I will not run!”.<sup>47</sup> This small scene in the yard of the manor vividly reflects the great cultural diversity of the warring parties, their different morals, ideological attitudes and common human behavior and attitudes, which differ greatly even within the same army; when the platoon leader incites Bitė to ride with the maid after the Russian army, the ragged soldiers stop her and tell her to stay away from all the dangers in the thick of the forest. This, once again, confirms to Bitė her deep belief that goodness is everywhere: “Apparently, there is no shortage of good people anywhere, only our world has established such an order that injustice even hits with the mouths of cannons, and justice is allowed to barely whisper”.<sup>48</sup>

In the morning, when she found out that the Cossacks had left during the night, she hurried to her house. At the Jakuboniai manor house, she sees potatoes that have just started to bloom, trampled gardens, cut summer plants, broken fences, chopped furniture and broken dishes in the house. The signs of the withdrawal of the army on the roads are ruts made by heavy wheels like pits, scattered papers, skeletons of cows and sheep, sheepskins. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė summarizes all this with Plato’s statement that our world is still feeding the beast, the lion; according to her, “even the blood of Supreme Love, shed on the cross, could not save our culture... Plato’s works go mouldy on the bookshelves, and Christ’s greatest sacrifice?! After all, we all call ourselves Christians, and after conscientiously digging in and examining, let’s tell ourselves where is our Christianity?... Is it in those groups driven to slaughter their own equals?... Or in that destruction of human toil?...”.<sup>49</sup> “The tension of nerves is indescribable”, she concludes the stories of those days.<sup>50</sup>

In recording and evaluating events, she followed chronology in her diary. The records of G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė vividly testify that the great tension that accompanies a person every day during the war does not subside, it becomes permanent; every day brings new challenges, unexpected life turns and experiences. Everything that happens around is incomprehensible. But Bitė is a very integral person, whose actions and deeds are born from the constant need to be for others, from an open heart for others; she does not stop looking at the world with the eyes of a humanist. According to her understanding, even in the context of bloody events, one cannot be hostile toward either one or the other belligerents, because any prejudice fades away

<sup>47</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 35.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 58.

in each specific situation. When G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, outraged and enraged by the Germans' move to start the war, hears the soldiers' carriage entering her yard, she sharply jumps up from her chair and, trembling with her whole body, shouts: "What do you need?!" However, she suddenly gets confused when she sees in front of her two young, girlish faces of guys who timidly look to the sides, one of them awkwardly clings to the stove. Bitė's hatred suddenly subsides, because it becomes clear that these young people are far from brutal robbers and cruel conquerors, but people with a different spiritual world who were forced into the brutal meat grinder of war against their will. They are also victims of war. "There was no fear left in my heart. I helped the young people, who rudely broke into other people's houses and understood this, to get out of that awkward situation and we talked like old acquaintances".<sup>51</sup> These mini-scenes documented by G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė condemn the war, which does not allow anyone to remain in the safe outskirts. There are people who are at war against each other and are forced to play the role of a soldier, often with great suffering.

Finally, doctor Jurgis Šaulys arrives in Puziniškis and gives the news that the war is over and that the state of Lithuania is being created. G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė does not dare to be happy for a long time, however, joy overcomes doubts when she reads this news in the press: "When I read about this, I rub my eyes and ask myself: am I not dreaming with my eyes open? And feelings, it seems, would not be enough to raise such happiness. [...] if I could see with my own eyes a truly free homeland, Lithuania..."<sup>52</sup> Diary entry for February 12, 1918: "happiness at peace declared". G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė did not expect that the war would separate her from the outside world for so long. When, in the summer of 1919, she had the opportunity to visit Kaunas, which had become the provisional capital, she saw a completely different life: much brighter and hopeful. It seemed to Bitė that, battered by the storms of war, she could only continue to look at life through the "veil of grief cast over the eyes of the soul".<sup>53</sup>

## Summary

Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė (1861–1943) occupies a particularly honorable place in the history of Lithuanian culture. A famous Lithuanian writer and publicist, a public figure and one of the first female politicians, who participated in the activities

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė, *Karo metų dienoraštis*, vol. 3, op. cit., p. 190.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 392.

of the first Lithuanian Seimas, headed the presidium of the Constituent Seimas, and even put forward her candidacy for the post of the country's President. An impressive part of her creative heritage is the "Diary of the War Years", secretly written notes in 1914–1919, in which she conveyed her experiences during the First World War – the events she saw with her own eyes. It is a documented living history of the time, impressive in its contrasting contexts.

G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė perceived the war as the collapse of the civilized world, which destroys the harmonious life of a person, disfigures its forms. In the prevailing chaos, which increasingly engulfed the world, she chose to stand on the side of Homo creator, the creator, not the destroyer. This was manifested in her special humanitarian attitude: through conscious efforts to help people suffering the horrors of war, to feed, shelter and calm everyone who entered her estate. In this way, she preserved her human identity, inseparable from standing in positions of good and light. The humanism of G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė had to be felt both by the soldiers of both warring sides, whom she basically considered common victims of the war, and by the population affected by the horrors of war. The "Diary of the War Years" vividly testifies that G. Petkevičaitė-Bitė is a woman whose spirit surpassed the era, whose life position and aspirations rose above the moral horizon of the society of the war years and who never stopped shining with the light of her altruism. Her ideals are those that supported the human civilizational context in the space of military disharmony.

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