

VILNIUS
WILNO
ווילנע

KRISTINA
SABALIAUSKAITĖ

VILNIUS
WILNO
ווילנע

THREE SHORT
STORIES

Translated from the Lithuanian
by Romas Kinka

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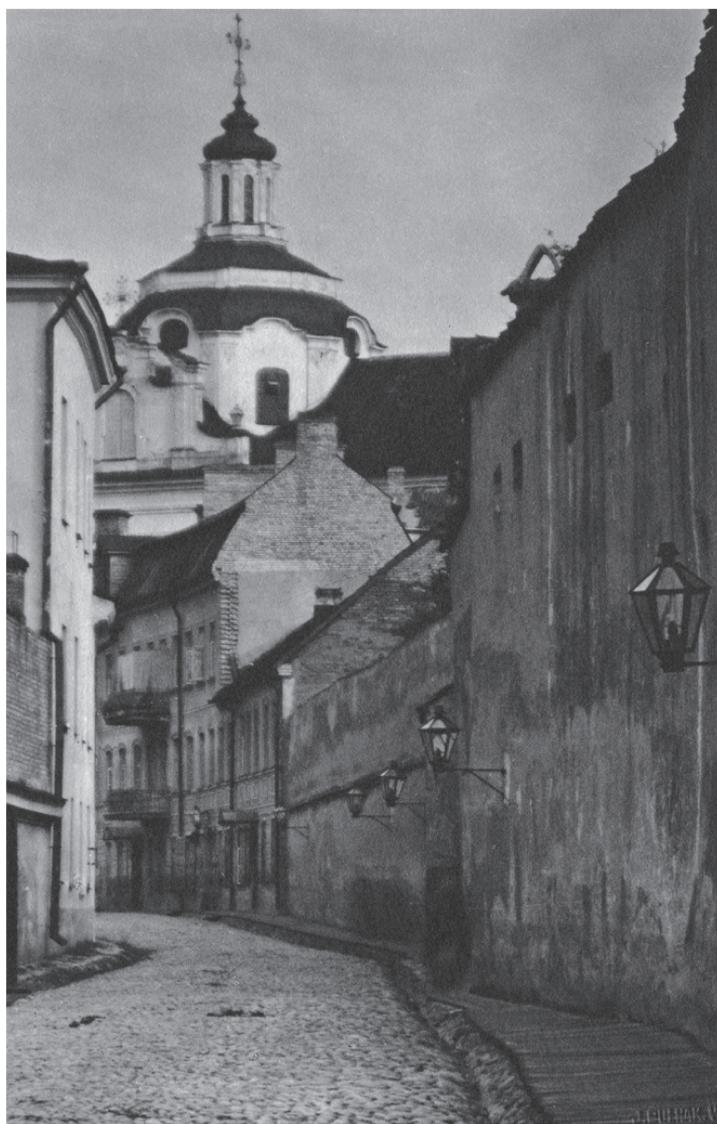
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Franco's Black Pearls

If you were to ask anyone in Vilnius today where Queen Jadwiga's School is – no one would even know what you were talking about. The only royal things left in today's Vilnius are King Mindaugas Bridge and the monument next to it, commemorating Lithuania's only crowned king, standing in such a way that, according to today's young Vilnians who are not short of wit, if you were to look at it from a certain angle it would seem he was holding not a sword but amusing himself by pulling on his royal member. But nobody would have heard of Queen Jadwiga's School. And only a guide who is a ghost, risen from a grave with a moss-covered angel leaning over it in one of Wilno's old cemeteries – the Rossa, the Bernardine or St Peter and Paul's – would have been able to have shown you the school.

Queen Jadwiga's girls' high school before World War II was in a building marked with the number 19 on St Anne's Street. By the way, no one today will be able to show you St Anne's Street either. Nor will you find it on a map of the city. Not unless you had a special map – of a completely different Vilnius that has disappeared and is no longer visible. A ghostly map of Wilno in which only dead souls reside. A city with the Bristol and George hotels, with all three Sztrall cafés – the White, the Green and the Red, the Pohulanka and the White Pillars, formerly marking an entry into Wilno, the Jewish Credit Bank, located with real Wilno irony in German Street, Stefan Batory University and its students wearing their velvet caps. So, in such a city there undoubtedly was a St Anne's Street and a girls' high school at number 19. Today none of that is there any more because the times have changed, as well as the people for whom priests have become more important than saints and for that reason St Anne's Street is now called Maironis Street after the priest Maironis; the name of the Holy Queen Jadwiga has disappeared from the map and from memory together with the high school, while almost all of the girls who attended that school

are now singing in a heavenly choir. Although, if you had known them better, you would not be so certain of that. Some of them even then were not angels, so most probably they are not singing hymns in paradise but chansonettes several levels below – in a devilish cabaret in hell. So what if romantic-looking, moss-covered angels are to be seen leaning over the graves of many of them... That means absolutely nothing – this is Wilno, where first impressions are often deceptive.

And how do you imagine those schoolgirls looked? Here they are, ten-year-olds, wound as tight as piano strings – then, around 1935, still in truth real angels – singing in their heavenly voices under the direction of the school chaplain to Marshal Piłsudski himself the Masurian folk song ‘Kukułeczka kuka’ (‘The Little Cuckoo Sings’) about a farm boy looking for a girlfriend while a cuckoo sings cuckoo and a tear is seen glistening in the Marshal’s eye because of the innocent beauty of the singers. Jadwiga, a ten-year-old, agreed to sing the solo part – but only on the condition that she would not have to stand in the front and that was why she is now standing safely in the third row of the choir. But that ploy fails. ‘And where’s the cuckoo herself,’ asks the Marshal at the end of the number.