

THE OTHER CITY

English libretto

Opera in two acts

Music: Vladimiras Konstantinovas

Libretto: Aneta Panek

Directed by: Karina Novikova & Aneta Panek

This is a translation intended for reading along, not a singable version. Repetitions and overlaps of different voices that are purely musical in nature have been consolidated. Yiddish and Aramaic passages have been translated to convey the meaning.

This libretto was created from fragments: letters, memoirs, and archival materials now preserved at the Biržų krašto muziejus “Sėla.” They are among the few surviving testimonies to Jewish life in Biržai, a community that was wiped out by persecution and murder.

The libretto opens with a letter to Dr. Abraham Zelman Levin. Bronislavas Petrauskas, a mechanical engineer whom the people of Biržai described as a “beacon of light,” wrote it in 2001—decades after Levin’s death. The letter thus becomes a belated tribute to a man whose life was violently cut short.

But the libretto does not tell only the story of Abraham Zelman Levin. The fates of other Jewish people from Biržai are also reconstructed and reimagined from the few remaining traces. From memories, letters, documents, names, and individual moments passed down through the generations, people emerge once more whose lives had nearly vanished from memory. What has been preserved only in fragments comes together to form voices, stories, and life journeys—and, for a moment, brings back to life the Jewish world that once belonged to Biržai.

Thus, the libretto does not attempt to fill in the gaps in history. Rather, it follows the traces that remain and gives them space and a voice—as a scar and a void left in nowadays reality of this country.

ACT I

1. Narrator's Monologue

NARRATOR:

Do you remember me?

I was only five years old when my father returned late one evening with logs from the Biržai forest. He didn't unhitch the horse, but instead placed me—wrapped warmly by my mother—in the sleigh and took me to your office.

Although more than sixty years have passed since then, the large wooden house with the flat roof has remained in my memory. Facing Vytauto Street, it had two entrances: one to Puodžiūnas's pharmacy and one to your practice. That's what it said on small signs on the wall.

In the summer of 1944, all the wooden houses on this street were reduced to ashes and smoke. The former "Agar" store and other privately owned shops, the photography studios of B. Michelson and Klivytė, Rabinovičius's watchmaker's workshop, and the bakery and pastry shop of a Jewish woman known as "the Godmother" now exist only in memory.

Today, a lawn grows where they once treated the sick, and linden trees and rose bushes thrive there.

I remember how my father took me inside back then. I saw a large room with a machine that I didn't recognize as an X-ray machine until much later. We took off our coats there. The consultation room was further back in a small room. Your assistant—young, warm, and beautiful, wearing a white lab coat—kindly invited us in. There I saw you alive just once: for the first and last time in my life—an unforgettable moment.

Before we left home, I had heard my parents say that I might have diphtheria. My father's older brother had died of this disease. They said it was difficult to cure, contagious, and simply "choked" the patient to death.

As they examined me, I sat on their assistant's lap and looked at them. In their eyes, I clearly saw concern and gravity, but also something extraordinary that radiated from them. It seemed as though death, which was lying in wait for me, was powerless before them, as though they were using their skill to vanquish the harbinger of death within me—and I would live.

My father picked up a vial of the diphtheria antitoxin you had prescribed from Puodžiūnas's pharmacy, which he knew well. I watched intently as you filled the syringe, while the assistant silently and gently laid me face down across her knees. The treatment didn't hurt, and yet tears welled up in my eyes. When I timidly asked for the little box in which the medicine had been packaged, you stood up, walked over to a cabinet, and took out a handful of chocolates. You gave them to me along with the box.

Dear Mr. Levin, it seems to me that all the good you have done has never been adequately repaid. I believe in the immortality of the human soul, and therefore I send you my deep and heartfelt thanks into the afterlife.

Then came the year 1941: A swastika flag flew from a flagpole in front of the main entrance to the rectory of the Roman Catholic church. Local supporters of fascism organized aid for the occupiers. One evening, several of them appeared in our yard and demanded that my father go “where he had been in 1918.” Since my father had fought as a volunteer for Lithuanian independence, this was to be understood as a demand that he join the white-ribboned militias.

My father asked, “What are we going to do?” Their answer was, “Shoot the Jews!”

In Biržai, yellow signs bearing the word “Jew” were posted at the entrances to the homes of Jewish residents. They were ordered to sew six-pointed Stars of David onto the front and back of their outer garments and were forbidden from using the sidewalks. Jews were allowed to walk only on the paved roadway. Shops sprang up that served exclusively Germans and local collaborators.

The area bounded by Dagilio, Vilniaus, Žemoji, and Apaščios Streets was enclosed by a two-meter-high fence to establish the Jewish ghetto there. The people were not meant to live there for long. Soon after the rabbi’s execution, which shook the entire city, an armed man from Biržai entered their home and drove them out onto Dagilio Street. When they refused to continue walking, he shot them in the head, killing them.

Her body lay on the street for some time near the entrance to what is now the funeral home. Many residents saw it. The executioner wanted to spread terror, especially among the Jews. Rumors circulated that after the Jews, the Poles would be shot.

Many people in the town and the surrounding area deeply mourned her death—including my parents and me, a child who had just finished fourth grade a few months earlier.

I lack the emotional strength and the words to describe what I went through during the days of the Pakamponys tragedy. When I arrived in Biržai back then, I saw a scene of horror. There were no Germans there—this horror had been created by locals.

Fifty-seven years have passed since then. Yet none of those involved in the massacre at the edge of the Pakamponys forest has publicly admitted guilt, asked the victims for forgiveness, or shown remorse.

With the utmost respect, I bow my head before you, a magnificent person, an exemplary doctor, and a patriot of your people.

2. The Market in the Shtetl

The market is bustling; everyone is shouting at once.

MERCHANT:

Gefilte fish! Look into her eyes! Yesterday she was still swimming; today it’s all over!

Cucumbers! Small and green! They crack like Grandma's joints!

One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold!

Try them! Buy them! Just take a whiff! Be curious!

If you see a magpie in the sky, tears and worries await.

Garlic! Garlic! White as bone. Hang it high, and you'll live a long life! Ward off misfortune—and old horseradish!

The market comes to life, the day breaks. Buy, buy, spend your money!

Ladies, just look! Cabbages! Cabbages! White and round—the best cabbages in town! One kopeck apiece. What are you staring at? Cook them or pickle them!

WOMAN 1: Soft? Small? What are you waiting for? My cucumber is the best! Tart, crisp, and full of life—one bite exposes every lie!"

POTATO VENDOR: Potatoes! Potatoes! Still covered in dirt! Fry them or boil them—go right ahead! As big as your dreams, as small as your wages, but at least they'll fill you up!

BAKER: Matzo, challah, bagels! Hot, soft, and still shiny! Powdered sugar, oven steam! Eat your fill and don't worry!

VOICES

Just a little, a tiny bit! Give me two, three, if they're fresh. Well? Buy, Jews, buy! Cheap and worth every penny! Look here! A delight! Very cheap! Are you crazy? Everything's in disarray!

If the days are sour, salt them. If the days are hard, cut off a slice of bread.

The day is drawing to a close, and that's enough—let's end it with a song!

3. The Narrator: Little Scenes from the Shtetl

NARRATOR:

We lived near the former fire station, at the spot where the Norfa store stands today at the beginning of Basanavičius Street. This is where I spent my childhood.

A section of Basanavičius Street—formerly Brückenstraße—and a cluster of narrow alleys were called “shop rows.” In this modest area, often referred to as the Jewish quarter, there were small shops. Until the fire of 1944, thirty-eight Jewish homes stood here. Today it is a large, empty space, a scar: a square with a monument to Julius Janonis.

We were surrounded almost exclusively by poor and modest houses. Next to us was Chackelis Ségalis's small shop.

CHACKELIS: “Haven't you seen her in a while?”

CUSTOMER: She twisted her leg badly.

CHACKELIS: “Oy vey, cholera! Take a herring from us to her so she’ll get well soon—and get her leg back on track.”

NARRATOR: Further along toward the bridge stood the small houses of Chana Berndaite, Zalman Etingas, Feiga Šusteraite, Finas, and Leiba Bernšteinas. Behind the entrance to Dagilis Square—or Pharmacy Square—lay the estate of the wealthier Jew Aron Šochenas.

AARON: “I’ll show you! I’ll show you! Oh, to hell with you all!

NARRATOR: In the alley behind the Jewish community center stood the properties of Leiba Preisas, Michelis Vidmanas, Mauša Šapyras, Dina Abelienė, and another building belonging to the Jewish community.

ENSEMBLE [in Yiddish]

Let’s all welcome the bride and groom together! Let’s all have a little glass of wine together!

NARRATOR: On the other side of the alley stood more Jewish houses: those of Simonas Epšteinas, Aronas Pručianskas, Mejeris Grinblatas, Šimcha Levitanienė, Chaimas Rigmantas, Bulė Rabinavičienė, Judelis Posveleckas, and Cipa Chaitienė.

Among these smaller houses, near the fence of the Lutheran church, lived the wealthy merchant Mendelis Dorfanas in a larger house. He represented the Jewish community.

4. Duet by Dorfanas and Rivka

DORFANAS: On Thursday, we’ll take the carriage to Riga. The wind from the Baltic Sea and its roar. A steamship—steel and steam. America. The dream of work.

RIVKA: “I don’t need dreams. I need a paycheck.”

DORFANAS: America is turning a new page. But even there, not everything is good.

RIVKA: Here, too, pages are turned. And sometimes they tear.

DORFANAS: There, they toil until they’re worn out, but they pay for the ticket. Third-class deck. You’ll be standing in line. The bunks are narrow. The air is salty.

RIVKA: “I’ve been standing in lines since I was ten—lines that take me somewhere. This street, too, is a line.

DORFANAS: The sea is far away. Do you know what awaits you? Heat in the factory. Noise. Smoke. Maybe a room. Maybe not.

RIVKA: “Maybe not.” Maybe a young man. I’ll keep my name. I’ll bring my brother over. As soon as we can, we’ll live side by side.

DORFANAS: America is lighter than what you’ll be carrying, and heavier than what you’re leaving behind.

RIVKA: I'm leaving enough behind.

SHMUELIK [offstage]: Mr. Dorfanas! It's time!

DORFANAS: Load her suitcase. Tie it down securely. Hope travels much faster when it's light. I sell the tickets. I prepare for the journey. I know the way and my role. Some return. Some write. Some disappear into the night.

RIVKA: And you? Why?

DORFANAS: I'm staying. Someone has to wave goodbye to the brave ones.

America is lighter than luggage tied with rope, but heavier than hope.

5. The Radio Store

NARRATOR

No. 160—the Epšteins; 161—the Pručanskases; 162—the Grinblats; 163—Levitaniënė; 164—Rigmantas; 165—Rabinavičienė; 167—Davidovičienė; 168—Chaitienė; 172 - Rigmantas and Nankinas; 173 - Kleinšteinas; 174 - Henkinas; 176 - Masas; 177 - the rabbi; 178 - Tabakinienė; 210 - Blombergas; 211 - Ormanas; 212 - Posvaleckis; 213 – Rubinas; 214 – Panovkienė; 269 – Bocheris; 261 – Oršis; 260 – Lapė; 258 – Michelsonas. Lot No. 123 on J. Basanavičius Street belonged to Šochenas.

Another, presumably wealthier group of Jews lived on the adjacent market square. Let's go through it according to the numbering system of that time. Firefighter Geršonas Belickas lived in house No. 1. G. Belickas and S. Chaitas were wholesalers of hides and rubber goods, while Vulfas Chenkinas and R. Novosėdis dealt in textiles. In house No. 5, Joselis Rabinas sold watches, bicycles, and radios.

Once, my mother confided in a neighbor that she would like to have a radio.

One night she mentioned it. I heard it through the wall. A radio would bring her joy. She didn't ask for it. She just said it once, casually, into the room—not to me.

JOSELIS: You'll see: Wishes that float around freely are no fun. They always settle somewhere—usually on me.

HENDLERIS: She had a tiny spark of hope, like a Shabbat candle in the dark.

JOSELIS: Then let's send her the radio. She can try it out for two weeks. She doesn't have to buy it.

HENDLERIS: For free?

JOSELIS: For the sake of hope. Don't faint. An untested dream comes at a high price.

THE BAKER'S WIFE: Oh! What is that? I just said it offhand... A foolish thought that slipped out.

JOSELIS: A foolish thought? Then let's let it play out. If it's all just folly, we'll take it back.

THE BAKER'S WIFE: It's so majestic. So immense. The dough I knead with such pride pales in comparison.

JOSELIS: It doesn't need a special place. Just a little space.

BAKER'S WIFE: Oh no! It's ruined!

JOSELIS: "No, no, no. That's just the world before it's born."

THE BAKER'S WIFE: Who's playing over there? Behind the wall?

JOSELIS: There are no walls. It passes right right through them.

THE BAKER'S WIFE: And what if I like it? What if I like it, Reb Joseli—Oy vey—what then?

JOSELIS: Then you'll pay. Or sometime. Or maybe not. We'll figure something out.

THE BAKER'S WIFE: And the rooms became less lonely.

6. The Baker's Wife's Aria

THE BAKER'S WIFE: There you are, shining thing. Hum, crackle, sing within me. I uttered a foolish, lighthearted word, and now you're here like dough beneath my hand.

Oh, what have I summoned to me? A copper box, a distant hum. It sounds like cities—vast and bright—while right here beside it the soup is simmering.

You sing of places I've never seen, of streets I've never walked. You spread out the kitchen like a vast cloth, and suddenly the walls aren't so cramped anymore.

Ay-yay-yay! You are beautiful. And that is what's most terrifying. You quench a thirst I didn't know I had—or maybe I did: a quiet longing, risen like bread I've never baked.

Two weeks, they said, without pay, as if the heart were striking a bargain. I'll just listen and then return to the silence, as if I'd learned my lesson.

But you hum so warmly and gently, filling the room and breathing into my ear. With you, I am greater than I am and smaller than a grain of sand, smaller than a dot.

Then ring out, sing—so be it. Fourteen borrowed nights are all that are given to you here. When you leave—so be it—don't take with you the world you've unfolded within me.

7. Šacharas and Sara

NARRATOR: The police station's office was located in the house at Market Square No. 7, built by Beras Pasvaleckas. Chaimas Bekeris ran a textile business there. As we continue around the market square, we pass the houses of Tabakinas (No. 9), D. Ošris (No. 14), the

raw-hide dealer Hercas Glezeris (No. 15), and M. Šacharas's radio repair shop in the courtyard of No. 16a.

ŠACHARAS: "I told you, you should have bought it from us.

SARA: We'd been saving up for a new watch.

ŠACHARAS: With the old one, at least you know what's wrong with it. With a new one—who knows?

SARA: Are you going to fix it, or do I have to go to Joselis?

ŠACHARAS: No, no. It'll all be ready tomorrow.

NARRATOR: Mauša Chaitas sold textiles at the market square, and Chaimas Rigmantas sold hardware at No. 23. At the intersection of Vilniaus Street and S. Dagilis Street, the Mariampolskis brothers had operated large wholesale warehouses since 1933. On Vilniaus Street, which begins at the market square, Samuelis Ormanas tanned furs at No. 5 and sold various goods.

8. At the Apaščia Bridge

NARRATOR: Near the Apaščia Bridge, a prime trading spot, shrewd Jewish shopkeepers welcomed the farmers coming from Parovėja on their way to the market with open arms and broad smiles.

ICEKAS: Well, well, now I see you! Ignas, slow down with the wagon!

SARA: What did you bring with you? Rain? Rain?

IGNAS: Baruch Hashem—not yet!

ICEKAS / SARA: Come on in! Come on in!

SARA: Just in time before the rain. Put it here—no, over here. I'll clear some space right away. What do you need today? First, tell me how the harvest went.

IGNAS: The harvest? You'd better ask about the debts.

LEIBA: How's your father doing?

PETRAS: He's still arguing.

LEIBA: Good. Then he's still alive.

NARRATOR: First the jokes—always the jokes. The prices can wait. The scales are wiped clean, the weights are shifted.

MOIŠĖ: Take this, little one.

BARBORA: For free?

MOIŠĖ: For a smile.

NARRATOR: Laughter drifts from one little house to the next. Yiddish blends into Lithuanian and back again. The smells of kerosene and herring mingle. A crying child gets a piece of candy; a quiet one gets two.

ŠIMONAS: “Prices have dropped again.”

ZALMANAS: Fallen? They’ve disappeared.

ŠIMONAS: Russia?

ZALMANAS: Yes. Always Russia.

ŠIMONAS: And the government?

ZALMANAS: Which one?

JADVYGA: Do these shoes come in a size smaller?

DORA: Just as much sugar as we need—and if possible, a little more.

SARA: Be careful with the kerosene!

MOIŠĖ: Help with the sacks!

ICEKAS / ZALMANAS: Put the boxes over there! The buckets! Don’t stack them!

JADVYGA: What’s that smell?

ICEKAS: Tar.

SARA: Ah, a bottle of tar.

JADVYGA: Be careful, don’t spill anything!

BARBORA: Write it down!

ZALMANAS: I remember last time.

ŠIMONAS: Now I remember! Two kilograms of flour.

BARBORA: Not with that shovel!

ZALMANAS: Yeah, with this one.

9. The Hair Salon

NARRATOR: Madame Levinienė’s beauty salon was located in the house marked number 4 on Vytauto Street.

Mme LEVINIENĖ: Still. Don’t blink or twitch. Beauty begins by defying God.

ZELDA: Just a gentle little wave, not too bold, but not too serious either. Like Harlow’s: pure and sophisticated, but not too free—no, relaxed.

Mme LEVINIENÉ: Harlow's curls come from a bottle. In America, they've been using chemicals to create them for a long time. The curls even stay in place when the men leave, and the hair keeps waving on and on.

ZELDA: Isn't it a little too thin here?

Mme LEVINIENÉ: "Thin" is very fashionable these days.

MIRELÉ: Thin means fainting twice a week.

Mme LEVINIENÉ: In Paris, slimness is considered the new trend.

GOLDA: In Biržai, it means you're working too hard.

NARRATOR: The men had their mustaches and sideburns groomed by Jankelis, who was famous throughout the city.

JANKELIS: Gently, gently! Cologne isn't pepper! We're not splashing it around—ay, ay—you're crazy!

BOY [spoken] Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir. They're as slippery as frogs.

JANKELIS: Apologies are worthless. You're not getting a tip!

RABBI LEVINAS: Just trim it into shape. Don't thin it out. A beard has to support its own weight.

JANKELIS: A modest trim. A dignified style.

RABBI LEVINAS: "Not too dignified. I'm not dead yet. Is everything even?"

JANKELIS: From right to left—like the law on the heights of Sinai.

RABBI KACAS: Keep it short. Shave your cheeks. Trim your mustache. Everything even and smooth. In Warsaw, they wear it short these days.

RABBI LEVINAS: In Warsaw, they've forgotten what's good. A haircut isn't a spark of heresy.

RABBINER KACAS: "It begins in daylight and lasts all night.

BOY [spoken] Spiritus!

JANKELIS: Only for the instruments!

RABBI LEVINAS: "Rub oil into it. A beard has to look full."

JANKELIS: You said there's no room for vanity here.

RABBI LEVINAS: Don't be boring. A rabbi's beard must fill the room.

RABBI KACAS: Or sweep it out.

RABBI LEVINAS: Take care of your own haircut.

RABBI KACAS: I'm grateful for this advice.

WOMEN: Nowadays, it's worn short, in a straight line... With a side part? A deep part, a strong sheen, waves at the temples. The back of the head is layered and carefully shaped.

MIRELĖ: Give me a bob—elegant and sleek. Let's try peroxide so it has a golden sheen. What do I have to fear?

Mme LEVINIENĖ: In this town, that's a bold move.

WOMEN: Mint, lavender blossoms, faith, powder, hope in the dark.

MIRELĖ: Will it make me radiantly beautiful?

Mme LEVINIENĖ: Beautiful enough to go to the market on your own.

RABBI KACAS: Neater. Higher. Could the line be sharper?

RABBI LEVINAS: Young people get their hair cut more often than they should.

JANKELIS: Let's put our trust in God, and everything will be all right.

BOY: They're falling like snow. It'll never stop.

JANKELIS: Sweep it all up, come to terms with it, and this, too, will pass.

10. The Photo Studio

NARRATOR: Salomonas Chodošas's textile store was located at No. 6. On the corner of Vytauto and Karaimai Streets stood the home of the Hendler family, who were influential in Biržai. In 1914, it housed a direct-current power plant. At 13 Vytauto Street stood the beautiful new home of Icikas Massas. The courtyard housed wholesale warehouses for sugar and kerosene. At No. 8, Leiba Rapeika sold watches, gold and silverware, bicycles, and radios. A mutual credit association was also located there. B. Michelsonas took photographs in the Hendlers' corner house on Ligoninė Street.

ŠMUELIK calls out: Artistic portraits! Group photos! Large ones! Small ones! Step up and pose! The latest innovation! Glossy or matte, in an evening gown, in a fur coat, or wearing a hat. We'll capture you in any light. Our prices are so reasonable, they'll make you smile.

MICHELSONAS: Don't move! Lift your chin gracefully!

GRANDFATHER: Oy!

MOTHER: Stand up straight. Count the kids again.

FATHER: I'm already standing straight.

MOTHER: One, two, three, four. Where's the fifth child?

CHILD: I'm here.

MOTHER: Oh my, what a mess!

MICHELSONAS: Closer together. Not on top of each other. Kids, stop squirming! Now hold your breath.

MOTHER: Kids, who sneezed?

CHILD 1: Not me.

CHILD 2: You did.

CHILD 1: I was just breathing.

MICHELSONAS: Good. Now stop breathing! Hold it, hold it, hold it! Now everyone breathe again! Breathe! And now everyone look just the way you look—only better.

FATHER: Are we done?

MOTHER: Did it work?

CHILDREN: Can we see it?

FATHER: Great! Wonderful! Off we go.

11. The Lemonade Factory

NARRATOR: At the “Rūta” lemonade factory at No. 12 Vytauto Street, Moisiejus Hendleris produced soft drinks for the residents of Biržai.

MOISIEJUS: Good, good, good! Ay-yay-yay! Who’s thirsty? Who’s feeling down? Who’s just fallen in love? Lemons to the left, sugar to the right—tonight we’ll make the whole town bubble over!

Grind, grind, don’t be shy. If you stand there stiff as a board, you’ll cry! See how the juice flows and drips? Squeeze, squeeze—but not angrily and not too hard. You’re not a machine!

Oh, that face! So crumpled! That’s what happens when you kiss in daylight.

Now be careful with the sugar. It’s getting too sweet, but they’ll shout, “More, Moishe, more!” What am I to you—a candy factory? One scoop, two, or three—who’s counting? Not me!

Stir quickly and skillfully, but only clockwise—that’s the custom! Now the soda—let it rise! Ah, listen to that little chorus! The bubbles are singing, “Higher! Higher!” Foam on top, but not too much. We’re creating love, not invisibility!

There! A masterpiece! A miracle! A mitzvah in a glass!

CHORUS: [tastes] Slurp! Ugh, too sharp! Rhubarb? Too sweet! Sour!

Thirsty or not, let’s create love—the city will overflow! The city is bustling, the city is alive. Moisiejus’s lemonade comforts everyone, better than champagne!

12. The End of Act I

NARRATOR:

At 21 Vytauto Street, Hana Bederienė awaited customers who wanted to buy fish, fruit, and delicacies. Chackelis Hendleris, the owner of the “Odeon” movie theater, also lived in that building. At No. 23, Chackelis Lipšicas and Roza Lipšicienė supplied the owners of small shops with various goods. My mother also bought supplies there for her tea room.

Girša Šekas lived at No. 18; he owned a truck, transported goods, and rented out the vehicle. At No. 26A, Girša Zundelevičius’s “Metropolis” Hotel welcomed its guests. Travelers could also stay next door at Basė Nankinienė’s “Komerција” Hotel.

At No. 30, the Karaite Samuelis Tinfavičius opened the “Vitaminas” store—selling fruit, wine, and groceries—in the former Lurje shop. A mechanical baker’s doll moved in the storefront window, luring passersby inside. The corner building at 32 Vytauto Street/1 Kęstutis Street belonged to Šolimas Kacas.

In the Lejetas house, Dr. Abraomas Zalmanas Levinas, a radiologist, saw patients in his practice. At 5 Karaimai Street, Mauša Hendleris sold hardware. Between 1924 and 1927, Šlioma Ferdas, Sara Vainer, Mauša Lekuniškis, and Chonė Calkovaitė also ran businesses on Karaimai Street; Lėja Schneiderienė baked bread.

Binė Kacas lived at 29 Kęstutis Street; he operated a postal horse station and worked as a contractor. In September 1928, he built a summer theater stage on the grounds of Biržai Castle, and by June 1931, the entire summer theater was completed. For a fee, Binė would drive train passengers—who were loaded down with heavy suitcases—home in his Lineika carriage.

In addition to the successful, larger merchants and shop owners on the town’s main streets, there were also small market vendors. But you’ve already seen that scene.

I sincerely apologize to everyone here for this long, tiring, and perhaps somewhat overly detailed tour. You are surely tired, and it’s not easy to keep up with everything. But this is what Biržai looked like not too long ago.

ENSEMBLE: The day is drawing to a close, and that’s enough! Let’s end it with a song!«

ACT II

[The Kaddish begins.]

VOICE [in Aramaic]: May His great name be exalted and sanctified in the world that He created according to His will. May His kingdom come in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the entire House of Israel—soon and in the near future. Amen.

SOLO VOICE: I remember warm, crispy bread, the aroma of coffee, steam on a face in the morning light, slowly melting butter, dust dancing in a ray of sunlight.

I remember a faint light falling through the curtain, pale and golden. It lay on the table, on my hands, as if it wanted to stay.

Oh, if only I could stand there once more—just once more, just this one time.

I remember silvery laughter, quick and bright, in the courtyard. A cup, a chair, a half-closed door.

I remember the smell of soap, bread, and rain; wet coats by the stove; a child's hair against my cheek; and a purring cat warming my lap.

Oh, if only I could hold on to it just one more time—just one more time, just once.

Then the sky changed color. Our prayers rose up but did not return, as if there were no longer a God up there.

The streets fell silent. Not even the dogs barked. Our neighbor didn't look at us; his face closed like a door. Hands that had once shared bread began to throw dirt on us.

We were pushed into the pit that had opened up before us.

All the houses, all the voices, the silvery laughter, the dust in the sunlight—everything vanished together, without a farewell, into a single dark void.

How could this have happened? Why didn't the sky shatter? Why didn't a voice come down from above? Had the sky turned its back on us?

We called out, but received no answer. The sun was there, I remember. It touched roofs and trees, but not us. We had vanished.

Oh, if only I could breathe just one more time!

The entire city vanished into the earth. The whole song came to an abrupt halt.

VOICES [in Aramaic]: May His great name be exalted and sanctified in the world that He created according to His will. May His kingdom come in your lives and in your days and in the lives of the entire house of Israel—soon and in the near future. Amen.

[Orchestral interlude]

ENSEMBLE: The names were whispered one last time—only the wind remembers.

Summer. The gentle cruelty of the light. The trees had held their breath for too long; a silent cry lay in the leaves.

We were still speaking in that golden silence when the earth opened wide.

MEZZO-SOPRANO: Not a single cry—only the beautiful collapse of meaning. Rage. Gentle violence. Burning in throats forced into silence.

Who speaks when the word is taken away? Who answers when the sky is so calm, so bright, and so empty?

ENSEMBLE: The bodies have forgotten what it means to be—that heavy, living nothingness. One step. Another step. A black, cold hollow.

The forest repeats itself: tree after tree after tree—a merciful indifference, as if nothing had happened. As if nothing had happened.

No one answers: neither the path, nor the delicate, indifferent leaves, nor the sky with its radiant emptiness.

MEZZO-SOPRANO: Heavy emptiness. It presses on the ribs, fills the mouth with damp, black earth. Where there was a voice, there is now air. Where there was life, there is now air over blooming graves.

BASS: Now there is no time left to understand the word “now.”

ENSEMBLE: We saw. We did not see. We saw the blinding clarity. Hands lowered. Eyes lowered. In its noble shame, history lowers its gaze.

Shame at breathing. Shame at having survived this pitiful misfortune.

We gather what cannot be gathered in these beautiful ruins: a name, another, yet another—each and every one, a tender wound.

SOPRANO: No grave is big enough. No prayer is long enough—only endless silence.

MEZZO-SOPRANO: A city wiped out is not silence, but a singing void. A beautiful, unresolved chord. Mothers without an echo, children without a tomorrow—the gentle annihilation of the future.

ENSEMBLE: The grief is vast and luminous. It flows beyond the edge of the music into the golden silence.

The forest remembers everything: the carrying on, the watching, the silence, the blows, the names cut short.

Do not listen to the voices, but to the sudden silence where they once were.

There are no words, only the shape of a word, trembling and beautiful, before it vanishes.

What happened lives on in sacred cruelty beyond the bounds of the speakable. Do not demand that it be spoken. It is a shattered whole.

In its gentle cruelty, the forest remembers everything: every step, every breath, every unfinished word, preserved in the golden silence.

Don't listen to the voices, but to the silent cry where they once were.