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Back cover: Storefront along Gedimino prospectas in Vilnius. Photo: Teresė Vekteris



Honoring Lithuania's Jewish Heritage

By Ellen Cassedy

Yankl Levin (left), Ellen Cassedy's grandfather, and an unknown young man.

My grandfather, Yankl Levin, came to America from Lithuania in 1911 as a young man, fleeing the Tsarist draft.

When my mother was alive, I could count on her to keep hold of my grandfather and all those who came before. But when my mother died, my family past seemed to be slipping out of reach. And so I set out on a journey to Lithuania. I had no living relatives there—some had died in the Holocaust, some had survived, some had emigrated. I simply wanted to walk the streets where my forebears had walked, to breathe that air.

But what began as a Jewish family roots journey soon expanded—into a historical and a moral exploration of how Lithuanians today are engaging with their country's Jewish her-

itage. It's an exploration I don't think I'll ever be done with—one that has changed my view of the past, changed my view of the future, and changed me.

My book, *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*, tells not only about the secrets I uncovered within my own family past, but also about the Lithuanians I was privileged to meet—Jews and non-Jews who are exhuming the truths of the past in an effort to build a more tolerant future.

Last year, when my book was published in Lithuanian, as *Mes esame čia*, I traveled to Lithuania again and met a new generation of educators, activists and students who are wrestling with some challenging questions:

- How does a country scarred by genocide take an honest look at its past?
- Can people honor their diverse heritages, and remember their dead, without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of the past?
- What do we gain, and what do we lose, when we seek to overcome mutual suspicions and reach out to “the Other?”

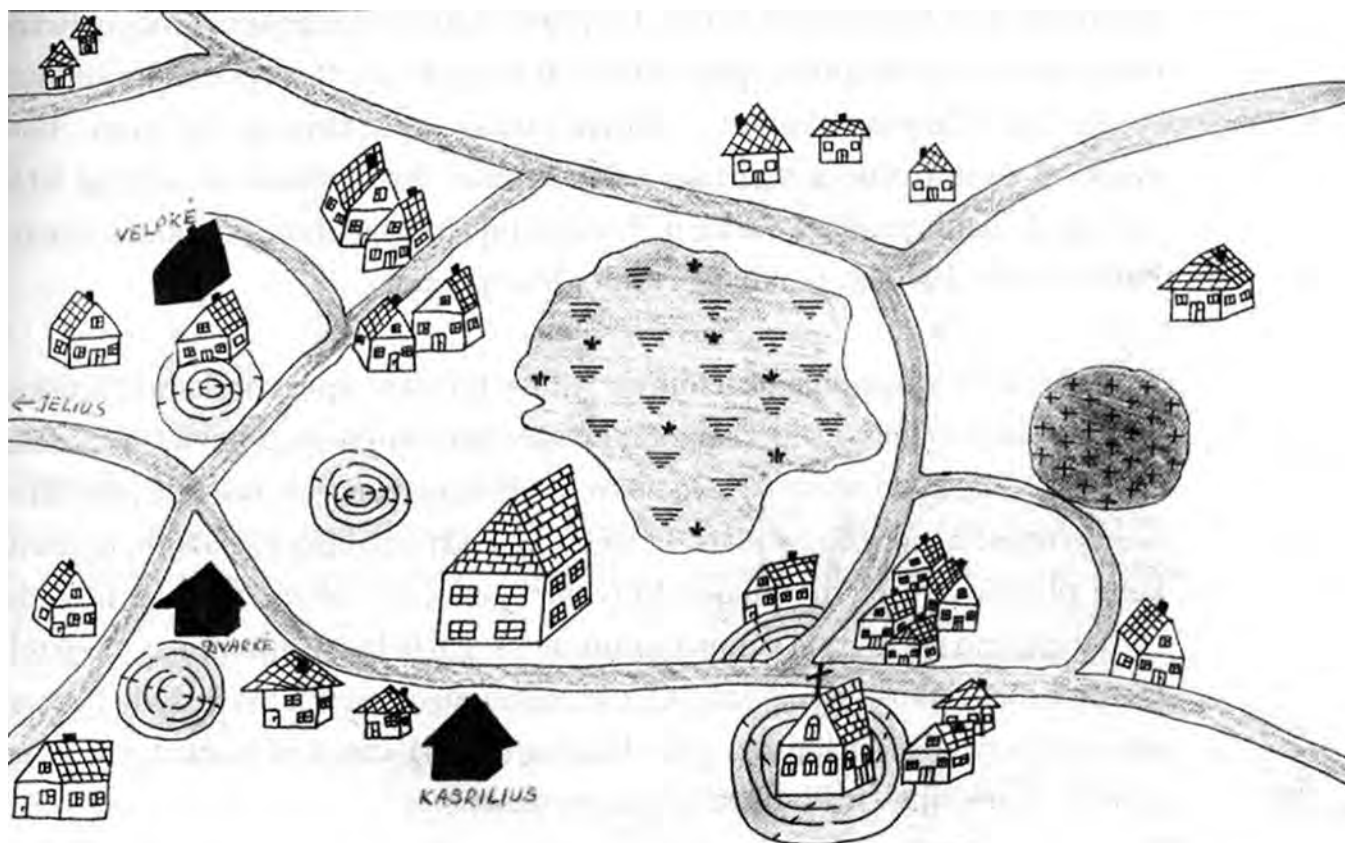
History of Harmony

Jews arrived in Lithuania in the 13th or 14th century, at the invitation of Grand Dukes Gediminas and Vytautas. By the 18th century, the area was renowned as a flourishing center of religious and cultural Judaism. Vilnius was known as “the Jerusalem of the North.”

For centuries, Jews and non-Jews lived side by side relatively peaceably. Pogroms were rare. On the brink of World War II, Lithuania's Jewish population totaled more than 220,000. Jews made up one-third of the population in the cities and about one-half in small towns.

But relations between the Jewish and the non-Jewish culture were never particularly warm. For Lithuanians, Jews were “others.” For Jews, Lithuanians were “others.” By the mid-20th century, tensions that had been simmering for many years began to increase. Nazi sympathies began to rise. And that helped to lay the groundwork for what happened next.

In 1940, Soviet tanks arrived, rolling into Lithuania in what turned out to be a futile attempt to prevent a German invasion. In 1941, just weeks before the German army did invade, Soviets authorities arrested thousands of Lithuanians and Jews and deported them to Siberia.



Schoolchildren draw maps of the old Jewish world.

Then the German army rolled in. And a multi-cultural place became a place of ghettos and a place of mass murder. Lithuania's Jews were massacred with a swiftness and thoroughness unusual for even that bloody time.

During the Nazi occupation, the political and religious leaders of Lithuania either collaborated with the Nazi regime or failed to oppose it effectively. Some Lithuanians risked their lives to help Jews. Some moved into the Jews' empty houses and took their property. Many did nothing—either they were too scared, or they couldn't figure out how to help, or they were glad that the Jews were going. And some helped to kill their Jewish neighbors.

By the end of the war, after seven centuries, Jewish life in Lithuania had been decimated. Only 6 percent of Lithuania's Jews remained alive.

Nor did the end of World War II bring peace to Lithuania. The incorporation of the Baltic nations into the Soviet Union was not an easy transition. Between 1940 and 1952, historians say, hundreds of thousands of people in Lithuania—Jews and non-Jews—were lost to massacre, war casualties, deportations, executions and emigration. Today, only 4,000 Jews live in Lithuania.

During the Soviet era, for the most part, the Jewish history of Lithuania and the reality of the Holocaust went underground.

New Discourse

As Lithuania moved toward independence from the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, a new public discourse began to take hold. The facts of the Holocaust began to emerge. In the words of Markas Zingeris, head of the Tolerance Center in Vilnius, there came an "awakening from...a long slumber of mind, spirit and conscience."

New plaques went up, about the Holocaust and about prewar Jewish culture, in both Lithuanian and Yiddish.

In the Tolerance Center, Jewish artifacts that had been saved all through the Soviet years by Lithuanian curators were proudly put on display.

At the Choral Synagogue, the one synagogue remaining in Vilnius out of a former one hundred, daily services began to be held.

"We are a tiny remnant," says Faina Kukliansky, chair of the Vilnius Jewish Community. "But it is thrilling to be heirs to such a magnificent, world-famous Jewish community. We want to work hard to maximize what we can, so that together we can build a community that one hundred years from now will be more substantial than it is today."

Irena Veisaitė, a survivor of the Kaunas (Kovno in Yiddish) ghetto, is one of Lithuania's most important tolerance leaders. During the war, she was rescued by a non-Jewish woman she

came to consider her second mother. After the war, however, this second mother was exiled to Siberia by the Soviet regime.

Yet out of this terrible suffering, Veisaitė emerged as a leader of efforts toward mutual understanding.

Remembering Lithuania's Jewish heritage, she believes, "is not simply a Jewish project. It is important equally for Jews and for Lithuanians, because as long as you are hiding the truth, as long as you fail to come to terms with your past, you cannot build your future."

Linas Vildžiūnas, another tolerance leader, believes that "confronting the reality of the Holocaust is a most serious test of the moral values and civic maturity of modern-day Lithuanian society." He created The House of Memory, a project that aimed to help schoolchildren talk to their elderly family members about the lost Jewish world.

These old people may never have talked about the Jewish past with their children or grandchildren. Vildžiūnas trusted that when the generations were brought together in a spirit of respectful remembrance, something good would emerge. As the old people began to remember and to talk, both generations found the Jewish world becoming vivid and personal. They began to question and to change.

The Gallery of the Righteous at the Jewish museum in Vilnius, another important Holocaust education project, honors more than 3,000 Lithuanians who rescued Jews during the war. Several volumes called *Hands Bringing Life and Bread* have been published in English and Lithuanian.

The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes, established by President Valdas Adamkus in 1998, carries out research and education.

The Commission has sometimes been embroiled in controversy. For several years, the Holocaust division was shut down after some members resigned in protest, stating that while the Lithuanian prosecutor's office had failed to bring former Nazi

GYVYBĘ IR
DUONĄ
NEŠANČIOS
RANKOS

HANDS
BRINGING
LIFE AND
BREAD



Documenting Lithuanian rescuers.

collaborators to justice, it instead chose to point the finger at several elderly Jews who had been anti-Nazi partisans, accusing them of war crimes over the killing of civilians during the partisan skirmishes.

Recently an agreement was reached, and the Commission was reconstituted with a proclamation explicitly emphasizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

A current initiative at the Commission, led by Ingrida Vilkiene, is a network of tolerance centers that involves teachers and students all over the country.

Laima Ardavičienė, a teacher in the city of Kedainiai, walked me through the corridors of her high school to show me the school-wide curriculum on the Holocaust that was being carried out.

Audra Čepkauskaitė, a young tolerance leader in Vilnius, told me how she and fellow activists had made yellow stars—like those that Jews were forced to wear during the Nazi occupation—and brought them to the halls of Lithuania's parliament, the Seimas. Elected members were encouraged to wear the stars in an act of



Members of Seimas, Lithuania's parliament, honor Holocaust victims by wearing yellow stars.

remembrance and solidarity. Many did, all along the political spectrum.

Valdas Balčiūnas, a businessman, talked to me about his successful effort to install a plaque honoring the murdered Jewish population in the center of the town of Žagarė, one of Lithuania's oldest Jewish communities. The plaque, he said, is "a small step forward to explain the truth to local residents." He said, "I do not want my children to grow up in a world of lies. The Jewish spirit is alive, and I and my family want to make it stronger." While visiting Vilnius, I attended a performance of a powerful new play, called "Diena ir naktis," ("Day and Night"), by Daiva Čepauskaitė, which interweaves the Holocaust past with scenes from present-day Lithuania.

Restitution

Recently, the Lithuanian government allocated \$50 million in restitution funds to support Lithuania's small Jewish community. Needless to say, there can never be full compensation. The restitution initiative is symbolic, underscoring Lithuania's moral burden. It is also practical, as it will actually support Jewish life and social services in Lithuania.

This past fall, to mark the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto, the city hosted an extensive program of commemoration. New memorial stones were installed. The mass murder site in the forest of Ponar (Paneriai) was refurbished. The Fourth World Congress of Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews and their descendants) drew participants from around the globe. And Lithuanian citizens gathered at museums and community centers to read out, one by one and hour by hour, the names of Holocaust victims.

Is anti-Semitism on the rise or on the decline in Lithuania today? It's hard to say.

In Lithuania as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, a call has arisen for greater recognition of Stalin's crimes, and that call sometimes seems bound up with an attempt to deny, diminish or distort Hitler's crimes.

In 2012, there were accusations of insensitivity to Lithuania's Jewish heritage when the Lithuanian government honored Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis, a World War II-era leader who had signed orders forcing Jews into the Kaunas ghetto.

And every year, on Lithuania's two independence days, a couple of thousand people, including neo-Nazis, parade through the streets of Vilnius and Kaunas. These demonstrations, and the defacing of Jewish sites, have drawn criticism both outside and inside Lithuania.

"It depends on you."

Last year, I was honored to speak about my book and my journey to students from the Sholem Aleichem Jewish high school in Vilnius and to non-Jewish students at high schools and universities in several Lithuanian cities.

I showed the students a picture of a billboard I saw in Vilnius, which said: "Who, if not you, will determine the future of



This billboard asks, "Who, if not you, will determine the future of Lithuania? Become socially active!"

Lithuania? Become socially active!" I asked students: Is Lithuania destined to be a place where neo-Nazi voices grow louder, or a land where people take Holocaust remembrance seriously and dedicate themselves to ensuring that such a tragedy cannot happen again? Will it be a place where people stand by, or a place where people can stand up and speak up?

I said, "It depends on you."

Ellen Cassedy is the author of We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust (Mes esame čia), which has received several literary awards. She lives near Washington, DC.